

A woman's silhouette is shown in profile on the left side of the frame, looking out over a sunset. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a bright orange and yellow glow that reflects on the water. The sky is filled with soft, wispy clouds. The overall mood is peaceful and contemplative.

# Every Sunset

KERRY TAYLOR

# EVERY SUNSET

*A STAND ALONE MFM ROMANCE*

Kerry Taylor

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# LOCATION

This book takes place in a fictional town named ‘*Grand Lake.*’ While this town is a work of my imagination, I did base it on similarly sized and located towns.

# TRIGGER WARNING

This book touches on some dark themes including child abuse (of the FMC in the past, and not detailed), abduction, violence, torture, and more. The violence is never from the MMC's towards the FMC, and most is only touched on in flashbacks, and/or nightmares.

If you have further questions about the possible triggers in this, or in any other of my books, please reach out to me via my pages on Facebook or Instagram (Author Kerry Taylor)

*“Every sunset is an opportunity to reset. Every sunrise begins with new eyes”*

-Richie Norton



# CHAPTER 1

ANNA

“MOM!”

My eyes snapped open as adrenaline surged through me at the sound of the terror in my son’s voice. Blinding lights brought me back to consciousness, and I instinctively ripped the wheel of my beat up old car to the right, to get it back on the correct side of the road, with a grimace and a cry of fear.

The other car blew past us in the opposite direction, blaring the horn angrily, and who could blame them? I’d fallen asleep at the damned wheel!

“Oh God!” I gasped breathlessly as I straightened up the wheel and slowed way down. We were on some highway, but don’t ask me which. I’d been too exhausted to care about more than heading in the right direction since about ten hours back.

“Pull over, mom. You have to take a break,” Max told me worriedly, and I turned to glance at him and sighed deeply. I was supposed to be the parent, but not one person would think it to look at us right then. I was a damned mess, and my fifteen year old son was doing all he could to hold me together.

I’d had so many plans when I found out I was pregnant with him. Not at first. Finding out I was pregnant at sixteen hadn’t exactly been in my plans for my life, not that I had any grand plans. My life to that point hadn’t exactly inspired me to imagine any future greater than escaping my crappy, and at times, terrifying home life.

My mom had split before I was even old enough to remember what her face looked like, and my dad had always been a no good drunk and gambler who barely kept the roof over our heads. I’d basically dragged myself up, rather than being raised, and it had been a fight just to do that.

I'd love to say seeing the mess that my parents were had inspired me to be a better person, and that I'd studied hard and aspired for great things, but that never happened. Between the random beatings and constant verbal abuse from my dad and his cronies, and my struggle just to eat each day, school had meant nothing to me but another hurdle I was forced to get over. I'd never been the smartest, and unpopular was an understatement to describe my social life. I'd been the deadbeat kid from the wrong side of the tracks and everyone knew it.

When I was fifteen, a one night hook up with some kid who didn't know me or my crappy reputation, at a random party of some stoner I knew through my dad, had seemed like a good idea at the time. He was the first guy to ever even look sideways at me and I liked the attention. Losing my virginity was just another hurdle I wanted to get over and out of the way too. So a slightly drunken, and distinctly unsatisfying first sexual experience, in a laundry room piled high with dirty clothes, had resulted in me finding out I was pregnant three months later, just days after my sixteenth birthday.

It changed everything for me. Not once did I consider terminating the pregnancy. Instead I packed a backpack with a few changes of clothes, some cash I'd earned over the summer at the local diner, and I left everything else behind. I was scared and so unsure of what lay ahead, but I was positive of one thing – I would give my child the childhood they deserved. I would never subject them to the life I had endured for sixteen years.

I spent some time living in a shelter while I worked every single job I could get that would pay me cash without any of the paperwork, and eventually I was able to rent a tiny apartment. I made a home for me and my child, and on the day Max was born I held him close to my body, which still trembled with the exertion and agony of the birth, and I promised him the damned world. I promised him I'd always protect him and I swore to myself I would never fail him.

“Mom?” Max placed a hand over mine on the wheel and I could feel how hard he was shaking. We both were. I'd almost gotten us into a wreck. I'd been such an idiot to think I could drive for over thirty hours straight, but then again, I was an idiot. Such a stupid fucking idiot.

“I'm okay,” I lied breathlessly.

“You’re not. You have to at least take a break. Pull over into the next rest stop, okay? For me? My legs are killing me,” he almost pleaded. I looked down to where his knees almost touched the dash in the seat beside me. He was already almost a foot taller than me. He basically had to fold himself into the seat of my tiny car. His legs probably were aching. I hadn’t even considered that as I drove non stop for the last several hours though. Another parenting fail.

“Okay, honey,” I agreed. I wanted to move my hand to cover his to reassure him, but I dare not take my hand from the wheel after what just happened. I needed to stay focused and not get us killed on the dark road. “Next rest stop.”

“Good,” he agreed as he dropped his hand from my arm. “We’re gonna be okay, you know? We can do this,” he added after several moments of silence.

“Of course we can,” I agreed with a faked easiness I wasn’t feeling inside.

All I could feel inside was guilt. We were fleeing across the country from the only home Max had ever known, and it was all my fault. I’d been selfish, and now it was costing the both of us so much more than I ever wanted my son to be forced to give up. I had never hated myself so much in my life, and considering the life I’d lived to that point, that was saying something.

We pulled into a service station a short while later and as I shut off the engine exhaustion hit me all at once. I hadn’t slept for over forty-eight hours, but it was so much more than that. I was thirty-one years old and in that moment I felt about ninety-one.

I had been so sure we were doing the right thing when I told Max to pack everything he could into a large case. I’d done the same, then I’d packed the car and we’d left with nothing but the address of a place I’d hurriedly signed a lease on via the internet. I didn’t really know what the place was like, or even where it was, except the fact that it was about an hour outside of Chicago. It had two bedrooms and a roof. That had needed to be enough, since I’d been too much of a mess to think beyond those details when I arranged it. We’d left so much behind and we really had no idea what lay ahead. I hadn’t even spoken with Max’s school. Or our landlord of the

apartment we'd lived in for the last thirteen years. I'd run, like the coward I was and I'd dragged my kid along too. He was going to be so fucked up after what had happened, after what he'd seen and...

"MOM!" Max snapped as he placed his hand on my shoulder and shook it lightly.

"What?!" I cried as fear reared its head.

"You're freaking out. Your breathing is fast again," he told me, watching me with fear I had never wanted him to live with. My childhood had been filled with fear, but I had never wanted my son to feel one iota of it. I had seriously fucked that up, and continued to do so too.

"I'm just tired. You were right," I lied again. Another promise I made to him when he was born, broken. "We should have stopped at that motel we passed."

"Mom. I'm not an idiot," he said with a roll of his eyes.

"I know you're not," I assured him as I sat up and took his hand in mine. It was so large in mine. I could remember when he used to wrap his teeny-tiny fingers around the tip of my pinky and now his hand engulfed mine. He was becoming a man and a sizeable one at that. He was already over six feet tall. All of the sports and swimming, which he spent every spare minute involved with, meant he was bulking up too. He dwarfed my tiny frame now, but he was still my baby boy. He always would be.

But the tables were turning and he seemed to think he needed to protect me, and not the other way around. He *had* protected me. I hated what it could do to him. I hated that I had failed him in such a monumental way. "I'm so sorry, Max." The words were forced out through my tight throat as I fought not to cry. If I started I was pretty sure it would prove impossible to stop again.

"Don't start all this again. I did what I had to do. We did. It wasn't your fault."

"It was though," I corrected him.

"We're starting over, right? That's why we just drove a crazy number of hours, clear across the country, right? We need to put this behind us," he

reminded me, once again sounding so much older than he was.

“Right.” I sat up straighter and took a deep breath. “You’re right. Ignore me. I’m just tired.”

“We both are. How long do we have to go?” he asked.

“About six hours, I think. I worked out we should arrive early tomorrow morning if we don’t stop for too long.”

“Then I’m driving for the next couple of hours. You have to get some sleep,” he told me firmly, just the way I used to tell him it was bedtime when he was little.

“Yeah, okay kid,” I laughed as I patted his knee.

“I’m serious, mom. I know how to drive. Matt’s older brother taught both of us and he let’s us drive his car around the parking lot at school on the weekends.”

“What the hell?” I snapped as I looked to him with shock. “You’re fifteen. You could have crashed and hurt yourself, or someone else.”

“I’m almost sixteen, and I was careful,” he defended himself. “Either you let me do this, or we stay here and you sleep in the car, but we’ll lose time that way, and this doesn’t look like the safest place.”

I looked around us and had to agree. The lot we were parked in along with one other car, was badly lit and the small gas station looked old and worn down. It resembled the kind of place that serial killers grabbed their victims from in horror movies.

“Even if you can drive, if the police stopped us...”

“What police, mom? We’re in the middle of fucking nowhere,” he sighed tiredly.

“Language!” I snapped.

“I think the situation calls for the odd curse word,” he told me and I couldn’t argue with that. “Just let me do this. You’re gonna get into a wreck if you try to keep going. You’re hurt and exhausted. You have to rest or you’re gonna get sick again.”

“Jesus Max, when did you get so grown up?”

“I’m not a kid anymore, mom, and especially not after this. I get that you want to protect me, and you always have, but you don’t need to anymore. I can protect myself now. I can look out for both of us.”

I knew he wanted to reassure me, but those words hurt so fucking much. He thought he needed to protect me. He thought, at fifteen years old, that his childhood was over, all because I had failed him and fucked everything up.

“Fine. You can do a few laps of the gas station and show me how you drive. I can’t believe I’m agreeing to this, but you’re right – I don’t want to stay here and I don’t think I should drive any more right now,” I gave in as I pushed back the guilt consuming me inside.

“Yeah, we’re totally gonna end up tied up in some basement if we stick around here for too long,” Max laughed, but it just made me shudder as memories assaulted me.

“Max,” I whispered.

“Fuck! Sorry mom. I wasn’t thinking.”

“You shouldn’t have to think like that,” I sighed. “Come on, let’s see if this dive has snacks and coffee, then you can show me your mad driving skills.”

# CHAPTER 2

ANNA

“No way! Is this it?” Max asked excitedly as I stopped outside the gates of a house that was definitely not the one I rented online. The place before us stood three stories high and colonial in style. It was like a mansion - painted in white with dark gray trim. The driveway behind the iron gates was gravel and the path that led to the house was flanked with randomly placed pots filled with bright flowers.

“‘No way’ is right. The place I rented had two bedrooms. I think that has a few more than two bedrooms,” I explained exhaustedly as I grabbed my cell from the cup holder to, once again, check the address that I’d copied down.

“There’s no other houses out here though. Are we in the right town?” Max asked. He was exhausted too. He’d driven for a few hours – very well as it turned out – while I’d tried and failed to sleep. Eventually I’d taken over again until we’d finally arrived...or at least I thought we had.

“I don’t even know. I can barely see straight. The sign we passed said ‘*Grand Lake*’ didn’t it?”

“Sure did,” Max agreed. We were about an hour outside of downtown Chicago, in what looked like a quaint little town that sat beside Lake Michigan, nestled in woodland. It was beautiful, and I had been sure it was the right place as we drove in, but now I was doubting I could afford to live in anywhere this scenic and picturesque.

Thankfully, I had been saving every spare cent for years, always wanting to have a back up pot just in case things went to shit. When they actually did I had enough saved to put down a deposit and first months rent on a new place, and to keep us going until I found work again.

“I hope I didn’t get scammed. I was in such a hurry I just filled in the paperwork and paid the money the second they got back to me. What if it

was one of those scammer things?” I panicked as I scrolled through my email for the communications.

“Mom,” Max said as I finally found the email I was looking for. I glanced up at my son and he nodded out of the window past me. I turned and saw the gates of the mansion we were parked outside of were rolling open and coming through them was a mountain of a man.

“Oh fuck.” I tossed my phone back into the cup holder and fumbled to turn my key in the ignition, desperate to move away from the fancy house before the stranger – who had to be the security – got to my car.

Finally I got my hand on the tatty old key and turned it, ready and raring to race away, but my car, which had just driven perfect for the last thirty four hours, spluttered and failed to turn over. I was trying it again, my panic rising when there was a loud rap on my window, making me jump so hard I swear my head touched the roof of my crappy, piece of shit car.

“Shit!” I gasped as I tried hard not to freak out. I hated myself for my reaction. I had grown up with some seriously bad news men in and out of my home. I had lived alone since I was sixteen. I had faced my fair share of asshole guys again and again, and I had dealt with each and every one of them. I had never feared men in general, or jumped the way I just had then, at anything. My life had made me resilient. But now I was a jumpy mess and men in general made me feel a nervousness and fear I had never known before.

“Just stay here, mom. I’ll talk to him.” Max was out of the car and slamming the door closed before I could even argue with him, and that changed everything. Fear for my son had me pushing my car door open without hesitation, and I hurried out as fast as my aching limbs and throbbing ribs would allow.

“Max!” I cried, way too dramatically as I looked up and saw him shaking hands with the stranger who towered over him by several inches. The guy was huge! He was broad too, his muscular shoulders and arms stretching the black henley that he wore, at every seam. His long, tree trunk like legs were encased in black denim and he wore white sneakers that registered in my brain as an odd choice for a security guard. Maybe they were good for giving chase or something?



*Giving chase?* What the fuck was going on with me?! I grabbed Max's arm and tried to pull him to my side, but he outweighed me by a lot, and pulling him was not an option. Instead Max led me to his side and I strategically placed myself half in front of him and before the stranger, even though I felt physically ill being so close to this man who clearly had the ability to crush me if he so wished.

"Mom, it's okay," Max told me gently. "This is Logan. He owns this place."

"I'm so sorry we're parked outside your gates," I blurted shakily. "We... we'll be out of your way in j-just a moment."

"Sounded like you're having some car trouble," the stranger said. *What did Max say his name was? Jesus, why couldn't I think straight?*

"We drove pretty far. I think the car's as desperate for a break as we are," Max laughed. He sounded so relaxed and easy going, but he also grabbed my arm gently around the wrist and was pulling me back and to his side as he spoke. I didn't like that. It was him trying to protect me again when I was the one who should be doing that.

"Where are you headed?" The stranger asked as he looked from where Max was holding my wrist, and up to me. His eyes locked on mine and the color of them had me hypnotized for a moment. They were green, but not the usual shade of dark green. No, his eyes were bright green, like the freshly sprouted leaves of the tree that used stand outside my bedroom window when I was a kid. They sparkled and almost shone as he locked them on my own. His skin was sunkissed, as though he worked outdoors a lot, and he was handsome, that was for sure. His jaw was square, covered with heavy, dark stubble, that same color as his thick head of dark brown, floppy, and messy hair. He was almost perfect, but for the fact his nose was slightly askew, as though it had been broken at some point and not quite healed right. It didn't take from his ruggedly handsome aesthetic though. He was beautiful, and definitely someone I would have dreamed of being with before. Now I just saw him for the threat he was though.

"Here. We just moved here. My mom rented a place. We were just trying to find it," Max answered, pulling me from my fears and back to reality.

"Rented a place? It wasn't by chance a small two bedroom cottage was it?"

“How do you know that?” I accused as I shook off my son’s hold and instead held onto him warily. The car may have given up on us, but we’d damn well run if we had to.

“Anna Hart?” The stranger went on, and I stepped back and pulled Max with me, but he remained where he stood. “I’m your landlord. The cottage is my guest house. It’s around back. I should have told you that in the last email.”

“Your guest house?” I questioned. “Y-you own this place?” He was hardly dressed like a man who owned a huge mansion of a home.

“I do. Me and my brother. We inherited it from our grandparents.”

“So we’re in the right place then, right?” Max asked.

“I believe you are,” The stranger agreed. “Shall I show you your new place?”

“Mom?” Max looked to me, a little unsure.

I didn’t like any of it. I didn’t like that I couldn’t see the house from the road. I hated that once we went onto the property the gates could lock behind us, locking us in. I did not like that this beast of a man would be our landlord. None of it felt safe or wise. But I’d paid the rent and deposit, and I was just so tired.

“Yeah, okay,” I gave in, which I knew may be a decision I would live to regret, but what choice did we have? The damned car wouldn’t even start.

“Logan Easton.” Our new landlord held his hand out to me and I forced myself to place my shaky hand into his. The last thing I wanted was to be touched, but I didn’t want to seem crazy to him when he may be the only option we had for a roof over our head.

“Anna Hart,” I said weakly. “And this is my son, Max.”

“Your son?” Logan questioned as he looked between us.

“That a problem?” I barked as I slid my hand from his and glared. It was a complete over reaction but I was so tired, sore, and filled with anxiety that I was sure I was about to lose my freaking mind.

“No problem,” Logan replied with a slight smirk on his face. “You just look too young is all.”

“Come on, mom. Grab your purse and phone from the front and I’ll get our bags,” Max told me, and I just agreed easily.

By the time I had my bag across my body and my phone clutched in my hand tightly, like it was my only lifeline, Max and Logan had grabbed almost all of our belongings from the trunk.

They were chatting with each other as they walked through the gates and around the side of the big house, down a driveway that ran from the front courtyard. I just followed silently, never once taking my eyes from Logan. I had mace in my bag and I’d pull it out the second he gave me cause to.

“Mom, look at this place!” Max cried and when I looked over to him I realized what he was talking about. He’d stopped and dropped the bags he was carrying so he could turn to his left. Behind him sat a two story cottage, painted white with gray trim just like the big house. The front door was flanked by two tall pots of bright flowering plants and behind it...well, the view behind it took my breath away. It was right on the lake. All that separated the cottage and the edge of the water was a deck that had to be the most magical place to sit out and just be. Off to the left of the cottage was a boat deck and to my right, where I hadn’t even bothered to look before was a vast green garden that separated the cottage from the big house. It was beautiful, and way out of our price range.

“What the...?” I gasped.

“Like I said in the ad, the place is furnished with new furniture and you’re free to use the gardens and the pool, which is accessed from the other side of the house,” Logan started to explain.

“A pool?” Max exclaimed excitedly.

“Yeah. You like to swim?”

“I was on the school team,” Max replied.

“Well it’s yours to use whenever. I swim every morning, early, but it’s pretty empty otherwise.”

“We...I...I can’t afford this. I think th-there’s been some kind of mistake,” I stuttered.

“No mistake. My brother and I know what it is to struggle to live. We agreed we’d rent this place out and only charge what it costs us for utilities and such. You’ll only pay what you agreed to,” Logan assured me.

“You know what it is to struggle?” I scoffed as I looked around us at the splendor he obviously lived in.

“I get it, but we only inherited this place a short while ago. Before that we were just normal guys with apartments and normal lives, and before that we were two kids who lived on the streets and barely survived the winter.”

“Sorry,” I instantly apologized. It had been bitchy of me to jump to conclusions when I so obviously knew nothing about Logan or his brother.

“It’s fine. Do you want me to show you around the house, or do you just want the keys so you can get settled in?” he asked.

“We’ll manage from here, thanks,” I replied.

“Here’s the keys then. The fob get’s you in the pool, and like I said the access door’s around the other side of the house. This clicker opens and closes the front gates. We’re pretty secluded out here, but please try to make sure you close the gates behind you when you come in and out. Maddox, my brother, he likes things to be secure. He’s also pretty good with cars so we’ll push your car onto the drive and he’ll take a look at it when he can,” Logan explained as he handed me a set of keys and what looked like a garage clicker. “Any other problems at all, call me. My number was on the paperwork I emailed to you, or you can come up to the house any time.”

I tried not to be dismissive as I thanked him, but I really just wanted him to go away. He was making me feel anxious and I simply didn’t have the energy for that right then. Thankfully, the years and years I drummed manners into my son worked, and he thanked our landlord much more profusely for his help. He also asked if Logan wanted his help to move our car on to the drive. I was relieved when Logan turned down the offer and told him to get some rest instead. I wanted Max where I could see him for the foreseeable future at least.

I felt as though my whole body just gave in once I was sure Logan was out of sight around the corner of his mansion. Exhausted, both physically and emotionally, I stumbled sightly, then plonked down onto one of our suitcases right there on the driveway.

“Mom!” Max gasped as he ran over to me and dropped into a crouch at my side.

“I’m okay, honey. I just need to get some rest,” I tried to reassure him. I hated him seeing me so weak and useless, but I was both of those things in that moment.

“You need to eat something and take your meds too. I should have asked Logan where the nearest store is,” he fussed as he looked towards the big house as if looking for our landlord again.

“I have granola bars in my purse. Let’s juts get inside and I’ll get myself straightened out, okay?”

“Yeah, okay,” he reluctantly agreed as he rose to his feet and pulled me up with him. We left our bags right there in the driveway, and walked up to the perfectly neat entrance of our new home. We hadn’t even gone inside yet and I already knew it was so much nicer than anywhere we’d ever lived before. The front door was freshly painted in gray, to match the rest of the trim of the cottage. Either side of the door, on the ground floor were two wide and clearly new windows. Below them hung window boxes filled with greenery and yet more flowers. I wondered if the huge burly guy we just dealt with was the one obsessed with the bright flowers, but it seemed unlikely.

Max took the keys from my hand, pocketed the clicker for the gates, and unlocked the door.

“Ho-ly crap,” he exclaimed as he stepped inside in front of me and looked around him. I followed him inside and had much the same reaction. We stood in a small entry way with hooks on the wall, and a stand for shoes beneath. Straight ahead of us was an open plan living room and kitchen, separated by a long, six seater dining table. The floors were polished hardwood and the walls were painted a bright, yet still warm shade of cream. The furniture was modern and expensive looking and the gleaming white kitchen, with solid wood counters, was obviously brand new. It was

without a shadow of a doubt a hundred times nicer than the apartment we had left behind.

“Come look out here!” Max said excitedly, and I realized he had moved across the room to a set of sliding glass doors that looked out over the decked seating area and the lake beyond. It was a stunning view.

Whoever had decorated the place had hung heavy drapes at the door in a dark charcoal color, which just seemed to frame that spectacular outlook. Modern slatted blinds covered the other windows, allowing light in, but affording us privacy from anyone looking in, not that there could be many people passing by considering the fortress we seemed to be living in.

“This place is amazing!” Max told me. I glanced over to him and something inside of me relaxed a little to see him smiling excitedly.

“It is pretty nice,” I agreed with my own smile.

“Pretty nice? Come on, mom. They have a pool! We totally just leveled up in the world,” he assured me with a chuckle.

“If you’re happy, then so am I,” I told him.

“We have to look upstairs, but you need to take your pills first. You’re already late with them,” he reminded me.

“Would you stop fussing. I can still take care of myself. I’m not broken, Max,” I snapped and instantly regretted it when his smile fell. “Shit! I’m sorry, honey. I didn’t mean to snap. I’m just tired. Why don’t you bring the bags in while I take my pills, then you can check out the pool while I get some rest?”

“Yeah, okay. If you’re sure you’ll be okay. You haven’t been alone since...” he paused and looked to me, like he didn’t know how to voice the next words.

“I’m sure.” He nodded and headed back out to start gathering our bags as guilt hit me all over again. Another lie to the child I had promised to always be honest with. But this lie was to protect him. I didn’t want him to keep worrying about me. He needed to believe that I was doing okay after everything. He could never know the truth about how messed up I really was and how truly terrified I was to be alone right then. He’d taken enough

on his shoulders. I wouldn't allow him to take anything else. Not ever again.

# CHAPTER 3

## LOGAN

I watched from my bedroom window, like a total creeper, as the kid – Max – crossed the lawn, obviously headed for the pool. He'd seemed like a good kid- polite, strong, and confident, but wary too. He clearly didn't trust easily, and he demonstrated that several times in our short interaction, especially in the way he tried to protect his mother from me – not that he would ever need to do that. I was a big guy, and I knew I looked intimidating, but I would never lay a hand on a woman or child.

I wouldn't, but someone had laid hands on that tiny little scrap of a woman. It was obvious from the way she trembled in my presence. She'd been jumpy as hell, and as determined to keep me away from her kid as he'd been to keep me away from his mom. What had they both been through? An abusive husband and father seemed most likely. It made sense when I considered how easily she had agreed to the rental lease for the guest house, and how eager, and almost desperate she had seemed to get it all finalized. Were they running? And if they were, was someone going to come looking for them?

I glanced over to the guest house where all seemed quiet and still, but I couldn't stop the stress that filled me at the thought of Anna Hart being in danger. She was so small, at barely over five feet and she'd looked so pale and exhausted. It hadn't taken away from the beauty of her small and delicate features, or the fire that burned in her deep, dark brown eyes when she showed her fire for just those couple of moments.

Anna Hart was not my usual type of woman. Being as tall and built as I was, I usually looked for taller and curvier women, but something about that petite beauty had called to me the second I laid my eyes on her, and now there I stood obsessing about keeping her safe if anyone came looking for her or her kid. I was peeking between the blinds in my room fucking spying on them both. I was losing my damned mind!



“LOGAN!” At the sound of my brother yelling irately, I rushed away from the window and out to the landing. The last thing I needed was our new tenants witnessing one of Maddox’s meltdowns. They were already jumpy. They’d flee for sure if they thought Madd was violent, which he wasn’t. He just looked and sounded it when he got worked up lately.

“I’m here! What’s all the noise about?” I asked as I hurried down the stairs, taking them two at a time.

“What the fuck is that heap of junk doing blocking our gates. I had to leave my car out front!” he snapped from where he stood just inside the doorway, clearly pissed. I had meant to move the car before he got home. He liked to be able to drive onto the property and see the gates shut behind him before he stepped out of his truck. It was understandable after what he had been through.

“That’s my bad. Sorry bro. I’ll get it moved now. It belongs to our new tenants,” I explained.

“They showed up then?”

“They did. A young mom and her teenage son. They seem nice. The son’s fifteen and a big guy for his age, but he’s harmless,” I warned, knowing Madd could freak out if he saw a six foot stranger wondering in the grounds.

“I’m not gonna hurt a fucking kid, Logan!”

“I know that. I just wanted to make you aware. You’re gonna have to go easy when you see the both of them. They seem jumpy. I think someone hurt them,” I added carefully.

“Who?” Maddox demanded as he stepped towards me with a fire in his eyes I so rarely saw anymore. If there was one thing that would bring back my heroic brother I had once known, it was anyone hurting innocents.

“I don’t know. I couldn’t exactly question them. Maybe the husband or a boyfriend? The kid was really protective of his mom.”

“You think they ran?” he asked. His whole body was tensed and his fists were balled at his sides.

“It’s possible. Just go easy around them, and keep your eyes open for anyone sniffing around, okay?”

“I’m not their fucking bodyguard!” he hissed, and I knew the new, bitter, and angry version of my brother was firmly back in place. I tried to tell myself – as I always did lately – that it wasn’t all his fault, but it didn’t make me miss the brother I grew up with any less. “Get that heap of shit moved from out front! I want to be able to drive into my own damned property!” With that he stormed past me and straight for the kitchen. I didn’t follow. I couldn’t bare to watch him reach for the bottle I knew he was going to grab. I was losing him piece by piece with every day that went by and that terrified me, but I had no idea how to even begin to bring him back. Or if that was even possible anymore.

Frustrated I left the house, slamming the door behind me, and found the front gates already open. Max stood at the trunk of their heap of shit car, pulling more bags from the back.

“Hey, need a hand?” I offered. The kid stood up from leaning in to the trunk so fast he probably gave himself whiplash, and the way he looked all around him warily only put me on higher alert. I was right about them having been through something bad.

“Oh, hey Logan. I’m good, thanks. I was just getting the last of our stuff,” he replied as he covered the fear on his face like an expert. It was there one second, and gone the next.

“Everything okay with the house?” I walked over and leaned against the pillar that stood one side of the gates, giving him some space between us. He was a huge kid for his age, standing at at least six feet and looking toned, likely from swimming on his school team, but I clearly still made him nervous.

“It’s great. Way better than our last place.”

“If there’s anything you need changed or brought in, just let me know, okay? I want you and your mom to be comfortable there.”

“Thanks,” he said with a nod. He slammed closed the trunk and threw a sports bag over his shoulder, another already held in his right hand. He stood tall as he approached me, even though he was clearly unsure, and I

respected him for that. “You need help pushing our car out of the way of the gates?” he offered.

“Yeah, actually. I was gonna ask my brother but he’s...busy. I just want to get it onto the driveway,” I explained.

“I think I saw your brother storming into the house looking pretty pissed,” Max told me as he studied me for my response.

“You don’t need to worry about Maddox. He can be an asshole, but he’d never hurt you or your mom. He used to be a cop until an injury forced him to retire,” I explained, knowing I needed to say something. There wasn’t a doubt in my mind Max and Anna would know Madd was a complete asshole the second they met him anyway. “No one here will hurt either of you.”

“Why would you feel the need to tell me that?” Max asked defensively. He dropped his bags on the sidewalk and crossed his arms over his chest.

“It’s pretty obvious someone hurt your mom, or you, or both of you. You were both pretty nervous around me. You still are,” I pointed out.

“I can protect my mom just fine, thanks!”

“I don’t doubt that, kid. I just wanted you to know that you’re safe here. You don’t have to be afraid of me or Maddox. We might be a little rough around the edges, especially Madd, but you can trust us.”

“My mom always says trust has to be earned,” Max told me, and I nodded my agreement.

“She’s right, and I’ll earn that trust, bud. Just give me a chance, yeah?”

“We’ll see,” he replied as he turned to the car. “We should get this moved, right?”

“Right,” I agreed.

“You want me to push and steer while you do the heavy lifting, *Hulk*?”

“*Hulk*?” I laughed. “Not very original.”

“I’ll work on it,” Max told me with the hint of a smirk on his face.

I became more believing of the kid's statement that he could protect his mom as he helped me push their car onto the driveway of our place. He was stronger than I expected him to be. He told me he also used to play basketball for the school team and was part of the local youth boxing gym in his old neighborhood. It explained how in shape he seemed to be, but he also seemed really smart for a teenager too. Intuitive and quick on the uptake. I liked him and respected the shit out of Anna for the great kid she'd raised.

"You sure you want to leave it here? It kinda ruins the millionaire image you had going on?" Max asked playfully as we left the car outside the double garages.

"Madd will move it into the garage when he starts working on it, but it's fine there for now. I think my image can withstand it," I chuckled.

"Okay. I should get back to my mom," he said as he picked up the two bags he'd recovered from the car once again.

"Is she alright? I can call the local doctor in if she has any injuries or anything?" I offered.

"She's just beat from the drive. I'll take care of her. Thanks though," Max assured me, and with those words he turned his back and started jogging back towards the guest house. I was desperate to follow him and push him harder for information, but I was pretty sure he wouldn't tell me a damned thing right then. He told me himself he didn't trust me, and why should he? He didn't know me yet, but he would, and he would come to trust me. Hopefully, they both would. If Maddox didn't fuck it all up and send them both running.

# CHAPTER 4

ANNA

I growled under my breath as I threw back my comforter, sat up at the edge of my new bed, and looked around me. The room I sat in was spacious and modern. The huge bed sat in the centre against the back wall, with large modern nightstands either side. Both bedrooms had walk in closets that were almost as big as our bedrooms in our old apartment, and there were two bathrooms, so we could have one each. My bathroom adjoined to my room, and inside of it was a huge clawfoot tub, that I could only have dreamt of in my regular life. There was also a large walk in shower, and the entire room was decked out in beautiful marble tiles. The whole place was luxury that I was very unaccustomed to, but I was definitely willing to try getting used to it.

We had been living there for two days so far, and things had been quiet. I hadn't seen Logan again, nor met his brother Maddox, who it turned out was an ex cop. That had terrified Max and he'd run into the house yelling at me about it the moment Logan told him. I had to admit it worried me too, but he was an ex-cop, not a current cop, and even if he were, we were a long way away from our past. I had calmed Max down by reassuring him of that, but it was just another worry to add to the growing mountain inside of my head, all of which seemed to stop me from sleeping.

I had been working my ass off to try and act normal and happy for my son for the last two days. We'd unpacked all of our stuff and made the new place home. It helped that Max was so excited by his new home, and he'd spent several hours each morning and evening making use of the swimming pool in the big house.

But It had been tough to hide the mess inside of my head from him. I was struggling to deal with the terrifying memories that stemmed from that fateful night, and the guilt I felt for failing Max as epically as I knew I had. I was worrying about finding funds to keep paying the rent and to feed us

beyond the amount I had in my savings account. I was fretting about this cop – Maddox – and about us living on the grounds of a home owned by these two strange men I knew absolutely nothing about. The big house was remote, set a few miles outside of the closest small town, and our cottage at the back of the property was even more so. If they hurt us, or killed us, no one would ever even know.

I stood and pulled on a sweater over the tiny shorts and tee pajama set I was wearing. I slipped my feet into a pair of flip flops and gathered my wild hair into a messy bun. I planned to spend the rest of my restless night as I had spent the night before, and I knew it would be windy and cool.

As I passed Max's room I silently opened his door just enough to peek inside, and I relaxed some when I found him fast asleep, star fishing across his own huge bed. At least he was sleeping soundly after everything. It was a small comfort, but still, it helped.

The cottage was silent as I moved through it, which was so odd to me, but not unnerving. We'd lived in the city back in San Diego, so even in the middle of the night you would always hear something from outside, even if it were just cars and emergency vehicles on the roads. There, in the guest house I had coined 'the cottage' it was completely silent.

I slid open the glass doors and slipped out onto the deck, closing the door behind me once again. On the deck there was a four seat table and chairs, and two sun loungers, all of which looked out over the beauty of the water. It would have been pitch black out, except for the security light that came on overhead the moment I stepped outside. It wasn't blindingly bright, but it lit the area enough for me to find one of the loungers and get settled on it.

Out there I could hear the quiet, rhythmic lap of the water against the shore and I found it settling and peaceful. I lay my head back against the soft cushion and closed my eyes. In the distance I could hear grasshoppers, and the wind whipping through the full leave of the trees. It was like another world to what I was used to in the city, and that was a reassuring feeling. It reminded me that Max and I were safe, far away from everything that had happened.

I started to doze as my mind seemed to relax some, and I might have even fallen into a deep sleep, because the next thing I knew I was awoken by the

sound of a distant crash that sounded like something breaking.

I instantly got to my feet and crept around the side of the cottage to look towards the big house, where I was sure the noise had come from. One of the security lights around the back of the big house had been triggered and was on, and under the light I could see a figure stumbling around as he tried to remain upright, but failed again and again. He staggered into some pot plants and one of them toppled over and again I heard the same smashing sound.

I knew it wasn't Logan, since this guy was slimmer and nowhere near as wide across the shoulders. So I figured it had to be his brother – Maddox. It had to be, right? Surely no one would break into the grounds and try to break into the house in that state.

I stood watching, considering going back to my room for my cell so I could call Logan to come and help his brother, when Maddox went down again, only this time he cried out loudly, and didn't get back up again.

I stood, holding my breath for several moments, unsure what to do. Why wasn't he getting back up? Had he hit his head? Was he unconscious? Should I go over there or just grab my cell and call Logan?

Then sense hit me and I set off running. If the guy had hit his head he could be bleeding out and I was just standing there watching him. I wasn't that person. If someone needed help, I helped, and these new fears weren't going to stop me from being that person right then.

I dropped to my knees beside Maddox the second I got to him. He was sprawled out on his back and his eyes were closed, but I couldn't see any blood or anything he really could have hit his head on, except the walkway he lay out on.

"Hey," I patted his face. He looked a lot like his brother with the same square chin and dark coloring. His hair was darker, and styled much shorter and neater though. He was tall, but lithe and slim. He smelled like he'd been drinking all day and night though, and his clothes were rumpled and disheveled. "Hey, wake up!" I said a little louder as I moved my hand to his shoulder and gave him a shake. When he still didn't wake I started to panic that he had hit his head and the bleeding could be internal.

Waking Logan and facing him alone was the last thing I wanted to do, but I was right beside the house. Going to grab my cell to call 911 made little sense and would only cost time this guy might not have.

So I took a deep breath, got to my feet, and ran to the steps that led up to the back of the house. I started to hammer on the glass doors as hard as I could, praying the house wasn't so big that Logan wouldn't hear me.

Finally, I saw a light come on inside, and then Logan was on the other side of the glass, looking to me with a mix of worry and confusion as he unlocked and practically ripped open the door.

"Anna? What is it? What's wrong? Where's Max?" he asked all at once. He stepped outside and so close to me I could feel the heat coming from his body. He was in nothing but a pair of checked pajama pants, his feet bare, but that didn't seem to deter him from protectively putting himself before me.

"I think it's your brother. He...I s-saw him fall and he won't wake now. I think he might have hit his head," I gasped in a panic as I grabbed his arm and pulled him down the steps towards where Maddox still laid so still.

"Fuck!" Logan hissed, then he pulled from the grip I still had on him and went to his brother, dropping to a crouch at his side.

"Maddox!" he barked as he slapped at his brother's face way harder than I had dared to. I was just relieved when Maddox stirred with a loud groan.

"Fuck off, asshole!" he added when he saw Logan leaning over him.

"You're laid out in the back yard, dipshit. Get the fuck up and get to your bed." Logan sounded exasperated as he spoke, then he looked to me. "I'm so sorry Anna. He's just drunk. He comes in through the back because he thinks I don't hear him, but of course I do when he's falling all over the place," he sighed tiredly.

"This happens a lot?" I asked,

"More often lately. It's a long story, but something happened to him and it left him with some injuries he's struggling to live with, plus it ended the career he loved."

"With the police?" I pushed.



“Yeah. He was a S.W.A.T. officer, and he loved it. After everything he was medically retired from the force and now I think he’s just a little lost.” I didn’t miss the sadness and concern in Logan’s eyes as he looked to his brother briefly then back to me. Whatever Maddox was going through, it was clearly hurting his brother too.

“Are you sure he’s okay?” I asked.

“Nothing he can’t sleep off. He’ll have the headache from hell come morning though,” he told me as he rose to his full height. “Are you okay? What were you doing out here so late?”

“I couldn’t sleep, so I was sitting out on the deck. It’s peaceful out there.”

“Yeah, it is. When we inherited this place we were determined to sell it, but when we saw the view of the lake and realized how peaceful it was, we rethought our plans. Then Maddox got hurt and this place seemed perfect for him to recover. Two years later we’re still here,” he explained.

“It really is a beautiful place to live.”

“It is. The town’s pretty quaint too. Good people and decent family owned businesses. I own and run a bar there – *Easton’s*.”

“It’s all a huge change from what we’re used to. We lived in the city before,” I told him.

“Whereabouts?” he asked, and I suddenly realized I was talking way too much. I didn’t want to give him too much information about us, especially now I knew there was a cop - well ex-cop - in the family.

“Shouldn’t you get him inside?” I asked as I nodded to Maddox on the ground. He seemed to be out cold again.

“He’s fine there. Serves him right for getting into that state.”

“I should get back home anyway. Max will worry if he wakes up and finds me gone,” I floundered nervously.

“At least let me walk you back over there,” Logan pushed.

“No. I’m fine, really, but thank you. I hope Maddox is alright.” With those rushed words I practically ran back onto the lawn and across it. I didn’t think I even dared take a breath until I was around the side of our cottage

and slipping back through the sliding doors. I locked them behind me, then slid down one of them until I landed on my ass on the floor. That had been too damned close. I needed to be a whole lot more careful about keeping my big mouth shut. I knew it was unlikely anyone would be looking for us, but if they were, the last thing I needed to be doing was advertising who we were, where we were from, and where to find us.

“Mom?” I stood as fast as I could, just in time to see Max coming down the stairs. He looked half asleep, his hair wild around his head as he rubbed at one of his eyes, and for a moment I was taken back to when he was so much younger, when he used to come into the kitchen straight from bed in search of breakfast, looking just that same way, only so much smaller.

“I’m here, honey,” I spoke up as I stepped into the kitchen and set to work making coffee. It would be sunrise soon and I had no intention of trying to return to sleep.

“What are you doing? It’s the middle of the night,” he groaned as he walked over to me and took a seat at the breakfast counter.

“I couldn’t sleep. You should go back to bed for a few more hours though. You don’t have much of the summer break left to indulge in being lazy,” I reminded him.

“We need to figure out how to get me enrolled at school here.”

“I know. It’s on my list. I need to get the car fixed first though, so we can get into town,” I said. Considering the state I’d just seen Maddox in, I doubted he’d be looking at my beat up old Honda any time soon. “I might walk into town today and see if there’s a local garage that can tow it and repair it.”

“Walk into town? It’s miles, mom!”

“Only three. I’ve walked a heck of a lot further than that before. I walked everywhere before I had you and moved to the city,” I reminded him.

“Fine, but I’m going with you. Should you even be pushing yourself that hard?” he asked with worry.

“It’s been a year since the transplant, Max. I’m fine and exercise is good for me. It’ll be fun. Like the adventures we used to go on in the park, but a

bigger one this time.”

“I’m almost sixteen now. You don’t have to make everything into an adventure for me anymore,” he groaned.

“You used to love our adventures in the city!” I defended with a smile.

I never had much money to entertain Max when he was little, so I used to turn everything into an adventure, including going to the grocery store, or an afternoon in the park. I’d make every trip into some elaborate story, and he always wanted to be a super hero who had to complete missions, even if it was usually just to find milk, or eggs in the store.

“I’m not a kid anymore,” he reminded me again, and I nodded. He was right, he wasn’t. “I might grab my stuff and go for a swim.”

“Okay honey. I’ll make some breakfast when you get back, if there’s anything left in the refrigerator.”

We had been amazed to find the cabinets and refrigerator filled with food when we moved in, provided by Logan we found out when Max texted him to ask. It had kept us going for the last two days, but we would need to find a grocery store soon. It had been incredibly thoughtful of our new landlord though. He really did seem to be one of the good guys from everything I had seen of him, but then again, who was I to judge? I had thought Callum was a good guy too, and look how that ended.

“Mom!” I looked to Max and hated the way he was studying me with worry. “You keep doing that. It’s like you zone out. Are you sure you feel okay?”

“I’m fine. I was just lost in thought. Stop fussing and go take your swim. We’ll eat when you get back, then set out on our new, exciting adventure,” I teased, hoping to make him smile. Instead he groaned dramatically and slapped his hand against his forehead in despair.

“Almost sixteen, mom,” he told me as he got to his feet and strode back upstairs.

Almost sixteen. How did that even happen? He was almost as old as I was when I had him. It wouldn’t be long before he went away to college and started a life of his own. I had no idea what I would do without him if I

were honest. I didn't even know what it was to be an adult without him, and the idea of it terrified me, but I would have to learn. I'd have to find a life and future for myself so that my son didn't feel he needed to spend his own life worrying about me. I needed to show him that what happened hadn't broken me, even if it had.

# CHAPTER 5

ANNA

“What did you think?” I asked Max as we walked out of what would be his new high school in a few weeks when the summer vacation was over. I had walked in hoping to make an appointment to get Max all signed up, but the kind receptionist had gotten him enrolled right away without any trouble, then given us a quick tour of the place.

“It’s kinda small,” Max shrugged.

“Of course it is. Have you seen the size of this town?” I laughed as I looked up at what seemed to be the central Street than ran through the center of Grand Lake. Calling it a ‘town’ was a stretch judging on the few shops and eateries that stretched out along that street before me, and judging by how few houses I had seen around as we drove in a few days before. Still, it was quaint and welcoming. It was just a very stark difference to anything Max or I were used to, having come from the city.

“It’ll be fine,” Max told me as he seemed to give himself a shake and turned to me with what I knew was a hesitant smile. “They have the swim team and I can try to get on the football team. The science department seemed pretty good too, so that’s something.”

“You’re nervous?” I guessed.

“Who wouldn’t be? I’ve never switched schools before,” he shrugged. “But I’ll be good, mom. I’ll make it work. It’s my fault we’re here.”

“Hey!” I snapped as I paused and grabbed his arm to stop him too. “Do not ever say that again. What happened was not your fault. None of this is on you. You hear me, Max? I don’t want to hear you say that again and I sure as shit don’t want you believing it. Are you listening?” I demanded as I grabbed his other arm and gave him a shake until his eyes met mine. They were filled with uncertainty and confusion. He had been hiding it all so well

from me before but I saw it now. I guessed the idea of us both finding our new 'normal' was bringing it all to the surface. "You saved me, okay?" I went on more calmly. "I wouldn't be here right now without what you did. It was the right thing. You did the right thing."

"I know," he uttered with a nod as he moved his hand to rest over mine. "I just....it'll take time, I guess, but I'd do it all over again if I had to, mom. I'd do anything to protect you."

"Jesus, Max," I sniffled as my eyes burned with tears. "You shouldn't have to say that, honey. I should be protecting you."

"We're a team. We always have been," Max told me as he squeezed my hand again.

"Yeah," I agreed, because he was right. We had always been a team. That was the way I had parented him. It was all I had known when I found myself having to raise a child, while I was still a child myself. I made it the two of us against the world, but I had never meant for him to grow up believing he needed to protect me. I never wanted us to be in the situation we seemed to be in right then, where my son, at fifteen years old, seemed every part the parent too.

"Come on. I can see a diner and I'm starving!" Max groaned dramatically as he released his hold on me. I did the same and fell into step beside him.

"What a shock!" I laughed sarcastically. "You? Hungry? Never!"

I took in more of the small, old style town as we sat eating lunch. From the outside the diner looked like a retro style place, but inside it had obviously been remodeled recently, and it was bright, warm, and modern. Max had groaned as he bit into his cheeseburger, announcing it to be the best he'd ever eaten, and I had to admit, the club sandwich I nibbled on was good too.

Outside the window I could see a hardware store across the street, and beside it was a small grocery store, which looked like it had been there for years and was likely family run. On the other side was a small bookstore, and beside that a clothing boutique that had some stunning ladies clothes adorning the mannequins in the front window.

There seemed to be everything the citizens of the town could need, including a medical clinic that looked recently built and several café's,

restaurants, and the bar I knew belonged to Logan – *Easton's*. All in all I knew Grand Lake was a place I could fall in love with. It was idyllic and I'd already imagined what it would look like in the holidays, the place no doubt dressed up to match the season by some community committee or something similar. It was a place I would never have been able to dream of living when I was a kid, and now I was there. We were there. *Maybe this didn't have to be all bad? Maybe this change could be good for Max and I?* I pondered.

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"I told you this was a bad idea. Give me the groceries, mom!" Max snapped, and I knew why he was annoyed with me. We'd been to the grocery store for supplies after lunch. My plan had been to get everything we needed for the next few days and call a cab to get back to the new house. It had been a good plan, until I called the number for the only local cab service I could find on *Google* and was told it would be a forty minute wait.

Max had wanted us to grab a coffee and just wait, worried about how far I had already walked that day. It had been quite the trek into the town from our place, and I knew I was tired, especially after how little I had been sleeping, but waiting forty minutes was ridiculous. We could be back at the house in that time. Or so I'd thought, anyway. So I'd stubbornly resolved to walk and now I was struggling. I wasn't sure we were even halfway home yet either.

"I'm fine," I told max with a wave of my hand. Except releasing my hand from the one bag of groceries -which Max had allowed me to carry, despite my protests, while he hauled the two heaviest - caused the bag to drop in my other arm, and when I jumped to grab it, I tripped for the third time in the last few minutes.

Everything seemed to go in slow motion as the groceries flew from my arms and gravity pulled me to the ground. I landed hard laid out on my front, the gravel at the side of the road scraping my hands as I tried hard to catch myself.

"Mom!" Max hurried over to me and lowered the groceries to the ground.

“Dammit!” I cried as I slammed my already throbbing hands down on the rough ground in anger. What the hell was wrong with me? This frail, clumsy, fear filled woman was not who I was!

“Mom? Are you okay?” Max asked as he knelt beside me and helped me as I pushed myself up to my knees and sat back on my heels. I pushed the wild strands of my hair, which had escaped from my ponytail, from my face, then realized my hands were bleeding and I’d likely just wiped it over my forehead too. “Mom?”

“I...I’m okay. I’m just tired and I tripped,” I tried to reassure him, but if his face was any indication, I wasn’t fooling him.

“You’re bleeding.” He grabbed my hands and pulled them between us so he could see my cut up palms.

“They’re just scraped up. I’m fine. We should gather up our shopping before the wildlife around here gets it,” I tried to joke as I looked to where our groceries were spread out before me, having fallen from the ripped bag.

“You can’t go on like this, mom. You have to take better care of yourself. I told you this was too far for you to walk today, and I know you’re barely sleeping. I hear you moving around the house at night,” he sighed.

“I didn’t realize I was keeping you awake too. I’m sorry son.”

“I don’t care about that!” he barked all of a sudden, startling me. “I’m so worried about you! Your transplant is new and the doctors all said you needed to take things easy at first. All of this...everything that happened! That’s not taking things easy! It’s not taking care of yourself! You don’t even have a doctor right now!” he cried and I realized in that moment exactly how worried he was. He was taking so much responsibility on his young shoulders and he shouldn’t have to!

“Max...” That was all I got out before we both turned at the sound of a car pulling off of the road and stopping behind us.

“Hey!” I recognized the deep voice instantly and I closed my eyes as I realized my humiliation was complete. Of course my hot and sexy landlord would drive by at the exact moment I was sat on the ground, bleeding like a kid who fell in the playground. “Everything okay?” he asked in that deep rumbling tone that did things to me I wasn’t sure I had ever felt.



“Logan,” Max swiped at his eyes as he jumped to his feet and moved behind me. “Thanks for stopping. Can you give us a ride home?” he asked, and I hated the wobble I heard in my son’s voice. He was close to tears, or had already cried and that was all on me. “Mom tripped. She walked too far. I need to get her back.”

“Max!” I snapped, embarrassed by the way he spoke of me like I really was a child. I forced my aching body to get to my feet and turned to face them both. “I’m fine! Stop bothering Logan, and help me grab the groceries!”

“It’s fine, Anna. I’m on my way home anyway. I can give you both a ride,” Logan cut in. I looked over to him and internally groaned at how damn good he looked in black jeans, and a crisp white shirt, with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows. The white contrasted perfectly against his flawlessly sun kissed skin. He was wearing a pair of aviators that only made him look sexier too, and there I was sweaty, bleeding, and with my wild hair in a state of complete disarray. The jeans and black t-shirt I’d pulled on that morning were covered with filth from the side of the road when I’d taken my spill. In short, I was a fucking mess, and one of the sexiest men I had ever encountered was looking me up and down. *Perfect! Just Perfect!*

I moved my hands to straighten up my wild hair, but stopped myself when the throbbing in my palms reminded me they were still covered in blood.

My arms fell heavily to my sides and I tried hard to keep my inner turmoil from showing on my face. I was just so exhausted. In the last week I felt like I’d aged ten years , and before that I’d already felt a few decades older than I actually was. Tears of despair filled my eyes and I fought to keep it together.

“Anna? Are you hurt?” Logan asked, and when I lifted my head he was right there before me. He caught my hands in his and lifted them between us so he could study them the way Max had.

“I’m fine!” I argued as I tried to pull my hands free, but he wasn’t releasing me.

“Mom, please. Just let Logan give us a ride,” Max pleaded and it was impossible to miss the desperation in his voice.

“It’s all good, bud. Why don’t you grab the groceries and put them in my trunk? I’ll help your mom into my car, then we can all get home,” Logan suggested and I felt this odd relief when Max seemed to take a breath, then nod in agreement. He walked away to start gathering our groceries, which left Logan and I alone, him still clutching my hands between us.

“I’m really sorry about this. I guess we really are city slickers at heart.” I laughed, but it felt forced, and Logan didn’t even crack a smile as he just looked down at me.

“Your son’s worried about you.” I didn’t need to answer that. It was all pretty obvious to anyone with eyes.

“I had a kidney transplant recently. Some genetic kidney disease in my family,” I explained, knowing I had to give him something. “Max worries too much. I’m doing okay. I might just have pushed a little too hard today, but to be fair to myself, I didn’t realize the cab company around here would be so shitty.”

“Yeah, never try to get a cab in Grand Lake,” Logan laughed. “They have a total of two cars and it’s run by an eighty year old woman.”

“I was hoping to find a garage for my car in town, but I didn’t see anything.”

“The one and only mechanic around here lives out of town, but you don’t need to call them. I told you Maddox will look at your car. I reminded him this morning.”

“Was he even conscious this morning?” I asked.

“He’ll live,” Logan shrugged. “And he will fix your car, but until he does don’t walk to town again. It’s not safe walking along the edge of this road.”

“I think I can determine for myself what is or isn’t safe,” I threw back.

“I didn’t mean it like that. I just....I can give you a ride if you need one, okay? You have my cell number. Just call me if you need anything,” he told me on a deep, almost frustrated sigh.

“I appreciate the offer, but we’re fine,” I cut in quickly. I didn’t want this guy getting too close to either Max or I. I didn’t know him, and he was way too handsome and sexy for his own good, and mine.

“You don’t like to accept help, do you?” he asked with a smirk, as he seemed to study me hard.

“I don’t need to. I’ve been on my own for a long time, and I’ve done just fine so far,” I snipped back. It was a complete lie, but he didn’t know that.

“Maybe, but you’re not in the city anymore. You’ll find out here in Grand Lake, we like to help each other out where we can,” he told me. Before I could think of anything else to say to push him away, he had his arm around me and was leading me over to his car. I was so shocked by how good it felt to feel the heat of him wrapped around me, and pressed beside me that I didn’t even argue.

It had been so long since I felt anyone close to me that way – anyone other than Max anyway. Dating with a kid in tow had never gone well for me. I had no family to help me out, and I refused to leave Max with a strange babysitter when he was younger, so dating didn’t exist back then. Then Max got older and I considered dating again, but it never seemed that big of a thing. I’d never really had it in my life, so I didn’t miss it. I’d been on a few dates in recent years with guys I worked with, or men I met through work, but they’d never gone further than a first date because it just hadn’t felt right. Then there was Callum, and look how that ended.

But Logan being so close to me made me realize that maybe I did miss the closeness of having someone in my life. It made me want someone to hold me every now and then, someone I could feel safe with and not feel guilty for that.

Logan’s car was tall, so I had quite the climb into the passenger seat, which was not easy when I was trying hard not to touch any part of the luxury interior with my bloodied hands. Logan helped me in, then pushed away my hands when I reached for the seatbelt, pulling it over me himself instead, leaning in so close that I could smell his aftershave as he fastened the thing too.

“I have first aid supplies at home. I’ll clean your hands up when we get back,” he offered.

“There’s no need...”

“Yes there is. You said you had a transplant. That means you have a weakened immune system, right? It’s important to avoid infection, I imagine,” he pointed out, and of course he was right.

I’d been horrified to learn my kidneys had failed when I was rushed into the hospital after a long and lingering illness had caused me to pass out at work almost two years ago. I was told the disease that had caused them to fail was something hereditary, but all that mattered was that my body was failing me, and I had a son I refused to die on. After a year on the waiting list for a donor organ -all of which was filled with dialysis sessions that I had attended three times weekly just to keep me alive - I had received my transplant.

It had been terrifying to leave my son as I was pushed into that operating room, the words of the doctor rattling around my head that there was risk of death on the table. Then I had awoken and waited for the kidney I had been given to start functioning, and it had after three days. The recovery had been slow and hellish, and I still didn’t feel like the active and fit person I had been before, but I was alive, and I was damned grateful for that. So grateful to the person who had died and left their organs to bring life to others – who had donated their kidney to give me my life back.

But it wasn’t as easy as that. The life I had back was different. It was filled with medications I could not fail to take and the constant and ever lingering threat that my kidney could fail again. My immune system was being stopped by pills I was taking to stop my body fighting the foreign invader that was the new kidney, and physically I felt weakened and a little broken. Working out who I was amongst all of that, and with everything that had happened since on top, was a battle I truly felt I was losing.

But Logan was right. A simple infection from a cut on my hand could take me down for weeks and I couldn’t have that. Max needed me to be okay, so I nodded my agreement anyway, despite my pride telling me I needed to keep Logan at arm’s length. I gave in because I felt too exhausted and beaten down not to.

When we got back to the house I could see Maddox leant under the hood of my car, which sat on the drive. I couldn’t help but take in how fine his ass looked in the hugging dark wash jeans he wore.

“Good. Madd finally started on your car,” Logan commented, pulling me back to sense. “He’ll have it fixed in no time.”

Maddox stood as we drove through the gates and turned to face us, raising a hand to shelter his gaze from the bright sun. And any sense that had very briefly returned to me was gone as I took him in fully.

He looked so different from the way he’d looked the night before when he was laid out unconscious. Now there was color in his face, and I realized he was almost as sun tanned as his brother. His stubble was even thicker, and with his short, but very dark brown hair, and the darkness in his eyes as he stared at us, he looked lethal, but also sexier than any man I could ever have made up in my dreams. He was tall – not quite as tall as Logan, but over six feet, and, as I had observed the night before, he was slim and lean. But today, in the hugging t-shirt he wore, I could also see the defined lines of tightly packed muscle around his biceps and shoulders. I imagined there was much more equally tightly packed muscle under his shirt too, and wished I could get a sneak peek.

“Mom?” I jumped at the sound of my son’s voice, and when I turned to look at him he was gone from the back seat. Logan had gotten out of the car too. *How lost had I gotten in the beautiful man that I didn’t even know?*

“You okay, Anna?” Logan asked, and suddenly I realized they were both at the back of the car, talking to me from the open trunk.

“Fine. I’m f-fine,” I stuttered as I moved to take off my seatbelt, then froze again when I caught sight of my blood covered hands. “I...um...I just don’t want to mess up your car with my bloody hands.” I added as I glanced behind me, hoping Max was there to come and help me out.

“What’s wrong with her hands?” A voice that could only be Maddox demanded, obviously having heard me. I looked up and was surprised to find him right beside the car now and seemingly heading my way.

“She tripped when we were walking back from town, cut up her hands pretty bad,” Max explained, and I groaned and slammed my eyes closed. Now everyone knew I couldn’t even manage to keep myself on my feet. *Go me!*

I snapped my eyes open again in alarm when the door beside me was opened violently, then startled even more when it wasn't Max or Logan I found there, but Maddox.

"Let me see!" he demanded as he held his hands out for mine. His tone was abrupt and demanding, but damn...that voice. It was deep, with a raspy note to it that instantly had me imagining him using it to utter sexily to me in the throes of...

"Anna! Let me see where you got hurt!" Maddox demanded even louder, dragging me back to reality and reminding me how scary this man also seemed.

"Madd. Don't be a dick!" Logan snapped from somewhere outside the car.

"I...I'm alright. It's just some scrapes," I told Maddox quickly, before my mind started to wander again. "Maybe we should introduce ourselves before you yell at me again. I'm Anna...though I guess you already know that since you just said..." Fuck! I didn't even finish the ramble as I realized how idiotic I sounded.

"I didn't yell. What were you doing walking back from town? It's not safe to walk that road," he grumbled a little more quietly.

"Yeah, I already had that from your brother. We were fine," I told him defensively.

"Yeah, looks like it," he scoffed. I panicked for a second when he leaned into the car and right over me, raising my hands and pushing my body as far into the seat as I could to get away from him, but I felt an idiot when he just released the seat belt and slowly slid it back from me.

"Sorry," I uttered when he looked to me with question and what I suspected was annoyance. Clearly he'd seen how violently I'd recoiled from him.

"Just helping you out of the car," he told me as he took a cautious step back and gave a little space to catch my breath again. "I'm not gonna hurt you. You're safe here," he added, and I felt like a complete idiot for giving so much away with that one error.

"You gonna patch up Anna's hands, bro?" Logan asked as he appeared behind Maddox with my bags of groceries filling his arms.

“Yeah, we’re good,” Maddox agreed. I wanted to protest, but I kept my mouth shut. I’d already offended the guy. I didn’t want to piss him off any more.

“Just be nice. I told Anna you’re not a complete asshole. Try not to prove me wrong,” Logan joked. Or at least he said it like a joke, but I didn’t miss the warning in the words too, and that just worried me more.

“Fuck you! You wanna do it yourself, go right ahead! I got better shit to do anyway!” Maddox snapped angrily. I instantly found myself scooting further along the seat away from him, alarmed by the ferocity in his bark.

“Madd! Just take care of Anna and stop being a dick. I’ll help Max get the groceries to their place, then I’ll be there,” Logan ground out, then he stormed off. Max looked to me apprehensively as he appeared, following behind Logan. I forced a smile and gave him a nod of agreement. Even though I was extremely unsure about being left with Maddox, the last thing I needed was my son seeing me scared again. Maddox seemed volatile, but Logan had assured me he wouldn’t hurt me or Max. That was the hope I was clinging to as he took my hands roughly in his and all but pulled me from the back of the car.

“Let’s go!” he snapped, and I instantly obliged, too nervous to argue.

# CHAPTER 6

## ANNA

I was almost running to keep up with Maddox as he charged through their home like he was as desperate to get this whole thing done as I was.

Inside, what I saw of their place was quite a contrast to the very traditional exterior. Inside it was modern and bright. The walls were painted white and varying shades of gray. The huge windows that seemed to line every wall were covered minimally with blinds they kept pulled up to allow in more natural light. The furniture was all made of what I guessed was very solid and chunky dark oak. It almost had a handmade look to it, but not in a bad way. It looked like the work of a real craftsman and it was beautiful. Typical of the home of two guys, a huge flat screen television hung on the wall before a black leather sectional and several matching armchairs.

Maddox ended up in the kitchen, which was a part of the huge open concept living space the entire ground floor seemed to have been modernized into. The kitchen was made up of white, glossy cabinets and solid, dark wood countertops that matched the furniture I already coveted. On the counters it was very minimalist, with just a coffee machine and a blender in sight. The whole place was immaculately clean and it smelled of some citrus cleaning product.

“This place is amazing,” I said awkwardly. I was standing in the middle of the kitchen, watching Maddox rummage through one of the lower cabinets and I just felt the need to break the silence.

“Logan did it all,” he replied flatly as he continued to search for something.

I tried hard not to ogle his ass as he dropped to his knees on the floor so he could get further into the cabinet, but it was a really good ass. I could see even more clearly now how muscular he was under that t-shirt he wore, the fabric molding to the muscles across his back as he leaned into the cabinet. He and Logan were very much alike, except where Logan had brown, kind



of wild hair, Maddox's was even darker and much shorter. He had the same strong, almost square jaw as Logan, but he also had prominent cheek bones that gave him the look of a movie star, or maybe a sports model for one of those fancy men's magazines.

In short Maddox and Logan were pretty much my idea of sex on a stick – sex that I was long, long overdue, and completely desperate for. But I couldn't have them, even if they were interested in me. I'd fucked everything up for me and for Max the last time I tried to find some kind of love life for myself and, no matter what, I could never make that mistake again.

As nice as both of these men seemed – okay, maybe Maddox wasn't exactly 'nice' but I did believe he was good, anyway – I could not risk my instincts being wrong again. Celibacy lay ahead for me and I knew it. Why change the habit of a lifetime anyway?

"Anna?" My name was said sharply, startling me, and when I snapped out of my thoughts I found Maddox on his feet stood just inches before me, a green first aid bag under his arm. He seemed annoyed and I considered just how long I had been zoned out.

"Sorry," I uttered, praying he hadn't caught me ogling him when he was on the floor.

"Did you hit your head when you fell?" he asked as he bobbed down enough to see into my eyes.

"What?" I knew I should be listening, but I was caught up in his eyes. They, like everything else about him, were beautiful. They were green like Logan's, but where Logan's were light in shade, Maddox's were the complete opposite. Green, such a deep, dark, sparkling green, just like two perfect emeralds. There was so much depth in them too. As he met my eyes I felt the need to look away before he saw everything that I worked so hard to hide in just one glance.

"You could have a concussion. Do you feel nauseous?" he asked as he gently placed his hand around the side of my face and tried to tilt my head up to look into my eyes.

A small gasp left me at the heat of his hand as it touched my skin. Just that small contact had me coming alive with tingles, which was insane! I was a thirty-one year old woman, not a horny teenager.

“No...I...I didn’t hit my head. I’m fine. I’m good,” I babbled as I fought to get myself together and reluctantly backed away from his touch.

“So it’s normal for you to space out on people like this then?” he asked as he took a step back too.

“I didn’t space out,” I argued. “I just have a lot on my mind.”

“Like the reason you’re running?” he asked as he stared hard at me, unrelenting. The comment took me so by surprise I floundered for an answer. “Come and sit here,” he told me when I just stood staring at him, likely looking like a deer in the headlights. *Way not to give the game away, Anna!*

“I...I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I managed to force out. I was such a shitty liar and I knew it.

“Yes you do,” he said nonchalantly. He took hold of my arm gently and led me around the corner of the huge central island that sat in the middle of the vast kitchen. He led me to a stool and I automatically climbed onto it and sat. Maddox sat kitty corner to me and started pulling items out of the first aid bag, which he'd set on the counter.

“You’ve barely even met me. You d-don’t know anything,” I argued.

“I’ve seen enough. You’re jumpy and suspicious. Your kid too, though he’s better at hiding it than you. I know you rented the guest house in a really big fucking hurry, and that you turned up here with only what you could pack quickly and fit in your car. I know you’re scared,” he told me as he grabbed my hand. As he spoke he seemed to assess the damage, not even meeting my eyes.

“You know all of that after meeting me once when you were falling down drunk,” I scoffed, though inside I was starting to freak out. This guy had been a cop. Would he figure everything out? Could he call some contact he had on the force and have us arrested for what we’d done?

“You live on my property. I’ve seen enough,” he shrugged. He pulled some cleaning wipes from small packets and started to wipe away some of the blood from my hand.

“So you’ve been spying on us?”

“Not spying. I’m sure Logan already told you I’m a little paranoid. I like to keep an eye on things,” he shrugged again and it was pissing me off. He was fucking with my entire life and he seemed way too damned relaxed about it.

“You know what? Thanks for your help, but I’m good. I can clean my hands up myself. I...I have to go,” I stuttered as I pulled my hand from his gentle hold and slid from the way too tall stool.

“Come back here and stop freaking out. I don’t care what you’re running from,” he sighed as he lifted his head and finally looked at me. “The only reason I pushed on the subject was because I want to know if you’re in danger. I need to know if someone’s going to come sniffing around looking for you.”

“We’re not running from any...”

“Yeah, yeah. Okay. You’re not running,” he cut me off. “Like I said, don’t care! Just tell me if I need to up security around here though, yeah? Logan is renting that place to you for a steal. Least you can do is be honest about this one thing.” He glared hard at me and I gave in. He was right. Logan was being so good to us. Maddox too in his own asshole-ish way. He was working on my car and he’d offered to give me aid. I owed them something.

“No one is going to come looking for us. There’s no danger,” I told him honestly. That danger was gone, at least in the way Maddox thought anyway.

He stared at me in complete silence for what felt like forever, and I knew he was looking for the truth in my face. Finally he seemed to see the honesty I had given him, and he nodded.

“Good,” he said. “Now get back up here and let me fix you up before your son gets back and freaks out any more.”

I stood frozen for a moment, weighing up my options. I could walk out of there, go to the cottage, grab my son, and run again. Of course our car was out of commission and we were miles from town again. I was exhausted and feeling pretty terrible, but I could make it. I would make it if I felt that was our best option. But where would we go? If we ran again right then, we'd be running forever and that wasn't the life I wanted for Max. He deserved the world and I had already failed to give him so much.

"Anna, come and sit down. I promise you're safe here. You don't need to keep running," Maddox sighed, and when I looked up to him he smiled just a little. His face was softer now and in his eyes I saw some understanding of the fear I was feeling. It was enough to have me moving back to the stool and struggling to get back up to the seat.

"Sorry," I whispered once I was seated. I dropped my gaze to the wood countertop below me and urged myself to get it together again, not that it seemed to be working for me.

"Let me see your hands," Maddox said as he held his hand palm up on the counter before me. I placed my own in it with a quick glance up to him. He was studying me, I realized, and I dreaded to think what he would find.

"How old's your kid?" Maddox asked after ten solid minutes of him working to clean up and pick out remnants of road from my hands, and me, just trying not to meet his watchful gaze.

"His name is Max, and he's almost sixteen," I answered as I lifted my head and looked at him.

"You were young when you had him?" It wasn't an accusation like I usually got, or even really a question. Just an observation, but I answered anyway.

"About the same age he is now when I got pregnant."

"That explains it," Maddox said.

"Explains what?"

"How protective he is with you."

"Yeah, I guess you're right, but it doesn't make it right," I sighed. I was exhausted, my body heavy with the need for me to just lie down and sleep. Ever since the transplant I had felt this way when I pushed too hard, and it

was frustrating. In the past, before my body failed me, I had always been fit and healthy, likely from the shifts I worked at diners and restaurants. I was constantly on my feet, and even when I wasn't working, I was always running around after or with Max. "He's a kid. I want him to enjoy that for as long as he possibly can. He'll learn soon enough how tough and unrelenting being an adult is."

"Maybe it's too late for that. He seems pretty mature for his age if you ask me."

I slammed my eyes closed as emotion filled me at those words. Was it too late for my son to enjoy his last few years just being a teenager? Had I really fucked it all up for him with my stupid, idiotic, selfish mistake? He was mature for his age. He always had been in a way, I supposed, but since that night - since he saved me - he had become a man way too fast and soon. I'd forced him to because I couldn't handle everything alone. I'd done that to him then, and every day since, as I fell apart before his eyes and forced him to worry about me.

"I failed him," I whimpered, then I lost my fight to hold back the pain of that realization all over again. Tears spilled down my cheeks as I tried to bury my face against my shoulder to hide it. Everything hit me at once. That weekend. Letting that monster into my place. The fear. The pain. The terror that at any minute Max would come home. Then he did and...

"Anna. Jesus, what'd I do?" Maddox asked. He was on his feet and beside me now. I looked up at him through tear filled eyes and I didn't even know where to begin making it all stop. The floodgates I'd been fighting to keep closed had sprung a leak and I was falling to pieces.

Maddox wrapped his arm around the top of my shoulders and pulled me into his front. My head rested just below his chin, against his chest and I didn't even resist as he wrapped his arm snug around me and just held me tightly. It was the comfort I needed in that moment and I didn't have the strength to turn him away.

"It's okay," Maddox soothed as he held me to him. My hands, which were covered in some kind of salve were just held in the air, but I desperately wished I could grab onto the solidness, and support that he was and just

hold on with everything I had. I wished, even if just for a few minutes, that I could stop worrying, even thinking, and just be held.

“I’m sorry,” I managed to squeak out between sobs, but I wasn’t sure he even heard it.

“I get it, you know? I know what it is to feel lost and afraid. All you want is to find someone or something that feels solid and safe and just cling to it as tight and as hard as you can. You can cling to me, Anna. I’m a grumpy asshole, carrying so much baggage it wouldn’t fit on a damned airport luggage carousel, but I’m here if you need me. Logan and I, we can both be here for you and for Max if you’ll let us be,” he told me.

“You don’t even know us,” I sniffled as I forced myself to pull away from him so I could meet his eyes.

“You didn’t know me when you tried to scrape my drunk ass up from the ground last night,” he reminded me.

“I thought you were hurt.”

“And you *are* hurting. You live on our property. You think either me or Logan can just walk past you on the daily and not be there when you clearly need someone? I might be a complete asshole, but I still have some human decency inside me.”

“I don’t think you’re an asshole, Maddox,” I told him honestly.

“Then you don’t know me well enough,” he laughed dryly. “Let’s get your hands dressed. I’ll put some small dressings on the deepest cuts, but they’re gonna need changing daily. I’ll come to the guest house each day to take care of it,” he told me.

“See. An asshole would never do that,” I pointed out with a watery smile.

“Everything okay in here?” Logan strode in through the sliding glass doors off to the side, Max right behind him.

“Have you been crying?” Max asked as he looked to me with utter horror. I saw his eyes dart to Maddox as his face filled with anger, and knew I had to do something.

“I’m good, honey. I just got a little emotional because I’m so tired. Maddox took care of me,” I tried to assure him. I saw Logan looking from me to his brother too with suspicion.

“Madd?” Logan spoke up.

“Like Anna said, we’re good. Chill the fuck out and get grilling. Steaks won’t cook themselves, Anna and Max are staying for dinner.” Maddox bit back.

I looked to him with confusion. I hadn’t agreed to stay for dinner, had I?

“It’s just dinner, Anna. Stay and get to know us, okay?” he uttered to me so quiet I was sure I was the only one who could hear him. I knew I should deny him, say no, and get Max home and away from these guys before they discovered too much about us, but I couldn’t. I didn’t fully understand how or why, but I felt safer when I was with these two virtual strangers, and I didn’t feel strong enough to walk away from the comfort of that safety just yet.

“You sure you’re okay, mom?” Max asked as he appeared at my side.

“Yes. I’m sure. You were right though, I over did it today. I’ll listen next time, I promise,” I assured him.

“Yeah right,” he laughed. “I’ll believe that when I see it.”

The remainder of the evening was actually pretty good. Logan grilled steaks and Maddox made a salad and potato salad to go with them. I had a couple of glasses of wine as I sat out on their patio watching Logan and Maddox toss a football around with Max after we ate. My emotional meltdown had left me raw, but strangely, being there with Logan, Maddox, and my son seemed to make me able to relax in a way I hadn’t since before everything happened. Seeing my son stress-free and smiling definitely helped. He didn’t seem so on guard all of the time when we were with these two guys and he needed that as much as I needed to see it.

We didn’t even get back to our place until almost nine that night, and by then I was dead on my feet. I don’t even remember lying in my bed, or falling asleep, but for the first time in weeks, I actually did drift off without the usual fight with my own subconscious, and without the nightmarish memories that now lived within it.

# CHAPTER 7

## LOGAN

“Are you gonna tell me what happened with Anna earlier?” I asked. I had been holding my tongue, hoping my brother would tell me himself. I hadn’t wanted to break the spell of the great evening we’d had. Maddox had been so much more like the man I knew him to truly be as he stayed for dinner, and formed a friendship I never expected to see with Anna, and more shockingly with Max. We had played football together, my brother, Max, and I. How long had it been since I saw my brother do something so normal and relaxed? How long had it been since I had seen him smile the way he had when Anna said something funny? Too fucking long was the answer to every one of those questions.

“I pushed her. Asked her who she was running from,” Maddox told me as he continued to load up the dishwasher.

“Fuck Maddox! What were you thinking? We’re lucky she didn’t just run,” I growled as I looked through the kitchen window and out to the guest house with worry. Would they run now, with the darkness for cover?

“She considered it, but I told her she was safe here. She won’t run again,” he told me confidently.

“Did she tell you anything we can use to keep them safe?” I pushed, desperate to know what Anna and Max were facing. I could tell myself all I liked that I had a duty of care because I was their landlord and they lived on our property, but the truth was that it was so much more than that. I was falling for Anna in a way I had never fallen for any woman before. A part of me felt the need to make sure she was safe and cared for.

“Not really. Just that no one would be coming looking for them. Whoever he was, I’m pretty sure he’s either dead or behind bars,” Madd told me.

“Then why was she crying?”



“She just....broke, I guess? I was just asking about Max. I told her he seemed mature for his age and she fell apart. I swear I wasn’t an asshole. I held her and she sank into me. I think she needed it, to just let out whatever she was dealing with and know she wasn’t alone.” He had paused in his task of loading dirty plates and was just staring into space as he sometimes did. I hated the pain I saw on his face.

“You’re not alone either, Madd. I’m right here and I always fucking will be. You can talk to me if you need to,” I told him. It was the same thing I had been telling him since he left the hospital a year earlier, but he’d never been receptive to it before, always just telling me to fuck off, or pushing me away in some other way.

“I know,” he said this time, as he met my eyes and gave me a single nod. To anyone else it might have felt like a brush off, but to me, after the last year of him shoving me away time and again, those words meant a fuck of a lot. “We need to keep an eye on them,” he went on, changing the subject as he nodded through the window toward the guest house. “Something bad happened to them and neither of them are as good as they’re pretending to be.”

“You’re right,” I agreed. “Anna had a kidney transplant last year. She told me earlier. I asked Max about it while we were moving the groceries and he told me he’s worried she’s not taking care of herself enough ever since. He mentioned that she’s barely sleeping.”

“I’ll do some research and we’ll keep an eye on her. Maybe we should invite them over here more often,” he suggested.

“That mean you’re gonna be around more to keep an eye on Anna?”

“Don’t fucking start with me, Logan,” he said flatly, turning back to the dishwasher and resuming stacking it. “I told Anna I’d be here for her – that we both would. I want to keep that promise, but don’t think for one second them being here and me caring is some miracle cure to all my problems.”

“Is there a cure for being an asshole?” I joked, deciding not to push him any further for that night at least. He was home and not at my bar drinking himself into a stupor. I would take that as progress.

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As soon as the clean up of the kitchen was finished Logan had headed into town to relieve his manager at the bar and shut things down for the night.

I was relieved he'd left. I couldn't stand to see the way he was constantly glancing at me with that annoying half smile and so much fucking hope in his eyes that this was me taking some huge first step into pulling myself together.

He was right when he said I was an asshole. I didn't used to be, but since the attack and my resulting injuries I had become the king of the assholes, especially with Logan who had literally done everything in his power to try and get me through it all. But he couldn't fix me, no matter how hard he tried.

No one could fix what wasn't there to fix. No one could change what had been done to me, leaving me a shell of the guy I used to be. No one but me could make me come to terms with the life and body altering repercussions I had been left with and find a way to move forward, and I wasn't ready for that. Or more like I didn't want to come to terms with it all and move forwards. I wanted my life from before back and without it I just didn't see the fucking point anymore.

I was lost, trapped in a past I could never get back to and too terrified to look for a future I didn't damn well want. That was what I had seen in Anna earlier, that lost feeling. She, like me, had no idea what she was doing or where she was going next and it terrified her just the way it terrified me.

That's what was driving me to help her and the only reason I wasn't blind drunk that night, like I usually would be and had been every night for months now. The alcohol helped me to block out the pain, mental and physical, and it made me feel numb, which was the only feeling I craved anymore. But not that night. That night I had wanted to get to know Anna and Max. I wanted Anna to believe that I could be more than the fool drunk she helped the night before, so she would come to me when she needed to.

That was why I was sat out on the steps outside the back door with the one and only single beer I was allowing myself that night. It was probably creepy that I was just sat watching the guest house, but I felt the need to be close. I just needed to know Anna, and her kid were safe. That single

thought seemed to be drowning out all of the pity and wallowing that had consumed my thoughts for so long before they came along.

I groaned as pain throbbed through my lower leg where my prothesis sat and I leaned down to rub it. I was considering taking the thing off for the rest of the night when a roaring cry came from the guest house, startling me and instantly causing my adrenaline to hit hard.

I was on my feet and moving as fast as I could across the lawn before I even registered what I was doing. More cries rang out through the small house and I saw lights flick on inside. A hundred possibilities raced through my head, but the main one was that it wasn't Anna making that sound. Someone was hurting Max and my instant conclusion was that someone had come after them and found them.

I was at the door of the guest house when I heard Max yell for his mom in such a terrified, panicked tone that I didn't even hesitate to put my shoulder right through the front door. It gave instantly, my strength increased by my pumping adrenaline.

"MOM!" Max roared again, and I heard a crash that was definitely coming from upstairs.

All of the fear and paranoia that had ruled my entire life for the last year was gone as I grabbed a baseball bat that sat in a stand near the door and moved up the stairs as silently as I could with the stupid fucking prothesis. Luckily, I had mastered getting up stairs with the damn thing, but I was nowhere near as stealthy as I had once been.

"Max, it...it's okay, honey," I heard Anna's voice cry when I reached the top. She was definitely crying and I could hear the tremble in her words even from where I stood.

Another crash from the bedroom to my right and I was moving fast. Was someone hurting Anna and making Max watch? Was Max trying to fight back. He was tall and pretty muscled for his age, but I doubted he'd have much chance against a fully grown adult.

I paused outside the closed door of the room that I knew they were in and forced myself to take a breath. My training kicked in and my adrenaline

seemed to calm some. Feeling focused and ready to handle whatever I walked in to, I kicked open the slightly ajar door and strode into the room.

Anna screamed from where she stood, close to the door, so I instantly looked for Max, expecting him to be trying to fight someone off of him with the loud crash I heard, and he was, but it wasn't a person. He was stumbling around, crashing into the dresser which had been over turned. His eyes were open but it was obvious to me he was trapped in a night terror. He was visibly shaking and tears were on his cheeks as he clutched a hockey stick which he was waving around, trying to fend off whoever he was seeing.

"Maddox?" Anna whimpered as she seemed to take me in. I turned back to her and saw fear in her stance and on her face. I instantly dropped the bat to the side of the room and tried to calm down some.

"I heard from outside. I thought you were being hurt," I tried to explain as I kept an eye on Max.

"He won't wake up. I ran in here as soon as I heard him, but I....I can't even get close to him," she gasped.

"Has this happened before?" I asked as I weighed up my options. I knew I shouldn't wake him, but he was going to hurt himself if I didn't.

"Not like this. It's not his fault. He...he's having a nightmare. He'd never h-hurt anyone!" she cried.

"I know that. I want you to go and wait in the hall for me, okay? I'm going to try and get close enough to wake him," I told her.

"I c-can't leave him!"

"He'd never forgive himself if he hurt you, Anna. It's safer if you wait outside," I explained.

"You can't hurt him."

"I won't. You know I won't." I was relieved when she nodded. At least she trusted me enough to agree with that.

I watched to make sure she went, then pushed the door closed behind her. I knew she was strong, and liked to play that she was tough too, but she was

also small and seemed so fragile right then. I didn't want her to get hurt.

Max was still wielding the hockey stick, and I was surprised that he hadn't exhausted himself yet, but he hadn't since he still gripped the thing tightly and swung it with force.

"Max," I said sharply, hoping my deeper voice might startle him enough to bring him back to reality. Instead he just turned towards me and swung harder.

"Just go mom!" he cried. "Just run!"

"Max, your mom is safe. You're both safe. You need to wake up now," I told him calmly. As I was speaking I was edging closer around his bed to him. Just before he moved to lunge for me, I leapt at him, catching his arms as I did and we landed on his bed, him beneath me and face down. The jolt did as I hoped it would and I felt him freeze beneath me.

"Max?" I said gently, not daring to let him go until I was sure he was awake.

"Maddox? What the fuck?" he panted. "Get the fuck off me!" He pushed up, lifting me with him, which again, surprised me. He was even stronger than he looked. I put my good leg on the floor and pushed myself up to standing.

"What are you....where's my mom?!" he raged as he turned over and scrambled to get to his feet.

"I'm here, Max. I'm okay. Everything's alright," Anna said as she raced into the room. She was dressed in an oversized t-shirt, her legs bare. Her rich chocolate brown hair was a wild nest atop her head and her face was red from crying, but still I couldn't deny she was beautiful. She was so petite, but she also had curves I definitely wouldn't mind getting my hands on. Her eyes were wide and framed with long, thick lashes I knew had to be natural, since she rarely even seemed to bother with makeup. I couldn't see from across the room, but I knew, from sitting opposite her earlier in the day, that they were a swirling mix of pale blue and gray. Her coloring was pale, almost like porcelain, and she had the whole 'dainty' thing going on.

Her son had inherited her dark hair and blue eyes, but his complexion was different, darker. I guessed whoever the Dad was, he was likely of

Mediterranean or maybe even Latino decent.

“Mom? What’s going on?” Max demanded as he placed himself between me and her. His protective instincts were admirable. I doubted there was anything he would not do to keep his mother safe.

“You were having a nightmare, honey. You were yelling and Maddox heard you. I tried to wake you, but...well, I couldn’t get close,” Anna tried to explain.

“I thought you were both in danger,” I added, trying to explain myself and the kicked in front door they were going to discover soon.

Max looked around his now destroyed bedroom, his eyes landing on the hockey stick on the bed.

“I did this?” he gasped.

“You were having a night terror, bud. I’ve had them myself in the past,” I told him, hoping to ease the fear I saw fill his face.

“Did I hurt you? Did I hurt my mom?” he asked as he looked from me to Anna with terror.

“No!” Anna cried. “You didn’t hurt anyone. Everything’s alright.” She moved over to him and wrapped her arms around his waist, pulling his head down and against her shoulder as he started to cry.

“Anna, take him to your room, sweetheart. I’ll tidy up here,” I told her. She smiled at me gently as she released Max just enough to lead him out of the room. I heard her speaking softly to him as they went. My heart hurt for that poor kid. He was too young to have gone through whatever he had already in his life. I had no real idea what had happened, but judging by his fear in that night terror, it was bad. It was so obvious now why they were both so cautious and wary of Logan and I. We were both big guys, and not just in height. We both liked to work out and had always kept active. We had to be intimidating to Anna and Max. I just hoped that we were already beginning to prove to them that we were safe and that we wouldn’t hurt either of them.

I grabbed a trash can from the corner of the room and moved over to the fallen dresser to start collecting the broken glass from a mirror that had also been broken in the carnage. As I knelt on the floor, I pulled my phone from

my pocket and hit dial on Logan's contact. I could try to fix the front door myself, but it was going to be a hell of a lot more secure and solid if my brother did it.

"Madd? What's wrong?" Logan answered.

"How long until you get back here?" I asked quietly.

"Just locking up now. What happened?"

"Max had a night terror. A really bad one. I heard him yelling and crying out. I just panicked. He sounded like he was being hurt. I might have smashed through the front door of the guest house to get to them."

"Fuck. Are they both alright?"

"Yeah. Kid smashed his room up pretty good, but they're both unscathed."

"Stay with them. I'm on my way now." With that Logan hung up the call and I set to work trying to straighten up Max's bedroom as best I could. Once I got the dresser upright it seemed good, but much of what had sat on top of it was destroyed, as were the pictures that he'd obviously hung on the wall. I threw out the frames but salvaged the arty prints from inside. They'd just need new frames.

"Maddox?" I looked up to the doorway and found Anna leant on the frame, just watching me. She'd pulled on jeans and a sweater, but I could see she was still shaken, her eyes red and puffy.

"How is he?" I asked as I rose from the carpet and walked towards her.

"Asleep, thankfully. He was scared that he got that violent. He's worried he'll hurt me if it happens again," she told me. Her voice was raspy and she sounded completely exhausted.

"He's not wrong. He's a lot bigger than you," I replied honestly.

"He'd never hurt me. It wasn't his fault. He...he went through something. The nightmares are to be expected."

"Did he speak with anyone...a professional, I mean, about what happened to him?"

“No. Not yet, but I’ll look into it,” she said, and they were the right words, but something about the way she looked away from me as she said it, made me question her honesty.

“You need to call me or Logan if this happens again. Let us come and deal with Max. He’s right that he could hurt you,” I said, hating the way she wouldn’t meet my eyes. I needed to move the conversation on and that did it. She looked to me with fire in those eyes.

“He’s my son! I can handle things just fine!” she snapped.

“Oh yeah? What was your plan when I walked in? Max may be your son but he’s still almost a foot taller than you and at least fifty pounds heavier. When he has a nightmare like that, he doesn’t see you. He doesn’t even know you’re there. He’s trapped in the past and if you get in his way, he will hurt you,” I warned her.

“Hey. The door was open,” Logan joked as he appeared in the doorway. “Everything okay here?”

“Logan? What are you doing here too? It’s the middle of the night?” Anna asked.

“I called him. He needs to fix the front door,” I explained sheepishly.

“The front door?” Anna looked to Logan with confusion, then she seemed to realize. “You broke in when you heard Max screaming?”

“Yeah. Didn’t think I had time to stop and find keys,” I shrugged.

“It’s fine. He just bust the lock. Luckily, the door is solid oak so it didn’t break. I can fit a new lock right now,” Logan assured her. “How’s Max?”

“He was scared and upset, but he fell asleep again, which is good, I guess.”

“You want to talk about what happened that had him that scared. He was yelling for you? Was he trying to protect you?” I asked pushily.

Anna visibly paled before us and I saw her falter as she leaned more heavily against the doorframe, like her legs had tried to buckle under her.

“No, I don’t want to talk about it!” she hissed. “Look, I appreciate you both coming to help us, but we’re fine. Max will be fine,” she went on in a



gentler tone, but it was clear I'd pushed too hard and we were being dismissed.

"You *are* fine, or you'll *be* fine? Which is it, Anna?"

"Anyone ever tell you you're a nosey, pushy bastard?" she growled as she sent me a stone cold glare.

"I'm sure he hears it plenty," Logan laughed awkwardly. "Just let me replace that lock downstairs so everything's secure, then we'll both be out of your hair."

"Might as well get used to us both though, sweetheart. We live right next door. We're not going anywhere," I added, and I had to admit I loved the fire in her eyes when she turned that glare on me all over again. It was cute. She was cute and I found I quite enjoyed firing her up. Maybe that could become my new addiction, used to keep my mind from the pity it was filled with. It did sound like fun and she looked so damned sexy when she was pissed with me.

# CHAPTER 8

## ANNA

A week had passed since the night of Max's terrifying nightmare and since then things had been calmer.

Maddox had fixed my car, so I'd been able to get into town and ask around about a job. I'd ended up with twenty hours a week at the hardware store. It wasn't anything glamorous, and mainly I just worked the register, since I knew not a damn thing about most of the products sold in the store. Neil, the store owner was an older man, likely in his sixties. He'd owned the place since his father passed decades before and he knew everything there was to know on the subject of hardware. He worked the shop floor, talking to customers while I did some cleaning, shelving, and mainly served at the cash register.

Max had also gotten a summer job at the local outdoor swimming pool. He was working as a lifeguard there five days a week and he seemed to enjoy it. He'd made friends with a couple of other kids who were working the summer there, so at least he'd know someone when he started school soon. He'd had a few more nightmares since that night, memories of the night his whole life had been turned on it's head, but thankfully none of them had been as violent or terrifying for either of us. I knew Maddox was right – my son needed some kind of therapy to help him through what had happened – but how could I send him when there were so many secrets we needed to keep about what happened? Once again I was a shitty mom, allowing my son to suffer just to protect our lies and secrets, but my fears over what would happen if the truth got out was much worse.

I'd tried to maintain some distance between Logan, Maddox, and I since the night of Max's nightmare. They were getting too close to the truth and I was terrified I would break and tell them everything. So I'd been polite when I saw them, but I tried hard to avoid them where I could.

They seemed as genuine as they'd assured Max and I they were, but that didn't mean they'd help us or even keep our secret if they knew the truth, and I couldn't risk that.

Of course, none of that stopped them from making appearances in my hot and heavy dreams, or stopped me from spying on them through the slats in my bedroom blind when they were outside grilling, or just drinking beers. I was a creeper, but who could blame me? Those guys were both as handsome and sexy as sin, and I seemed to be obsessed with thinking about them. I knew it was likely because I was beyond desperate to just get laid. It had been so long and my emotions were running high. I was pretty sure sex and satisfaction with one of those god-like men would calm me right down.

"Hello? Earth to Anna?" I startled at the hand being waved in my face, then blushed furiously when I found Cat, the owner of the diner across the street from the hardware store, grinning at me knowingly. "Dreaming about the Easton brothers were you?" she asked teasingly.

I hadn't even told her I lived on the property of Logan and Maddox, but she had known anyway the first day I met her at the beginning of the week. Ever since we had chatted when I came into the diner to grab coffees for Neil and I, or to have lunch. She was around my age, and married to Tate, who worked as the manager at Logan's bar - *Easton's*. Cat was fun and bubbly, things I needed to feel in all of the chaos, and I had found that chatting with her gave me some semblance of normality that I needed.

"No...o-of course not!" I floundered, and she just laughed as she pushed two coffees across the counter closer to me.

"Girl, every woman in this town dreams about those two brothers, even us married ones. You got nothing to be ashamed of," she told me playfully.

"I wasn't dreaming about them. I was actually thinking about my work situation. I need another job if I plan to pay rent and be able to eat next month," I said, desperate to change the subject.

"I've been asking around, but there doesn't seem to be anything else about right now. I promise I'll call you right away if I have any shifts here I can swing your way though."

“Thanks Cat. I better get back,” I said as I grabbed the two coffees and turned for the door.

“Don’t worry, hon. Something will come up,” she called after me. How I wished I could be as filled with hope and positivity as that woman was.

The store was quiet when I got back, not that it was unusual. Grand Lake was a small town with a low population. There was only so much hardware people needed. Still, I enjoyed the quiet and methodical job of emptying shelves, cleaning them, and then neatly re-stocking them. It beat my usual work, which was being run off of my feet in some crummy diner.

The sun was shining brightly when I left the store later that afternoon, my shift over. It was also almost unbearably hot and I was relieved I’d thought to wear shorts that morning instead of my usual jeans. There was no dress code at the store so I was only in my denim cut offs and a faded, but much loved, *Ramones* t-shirt. I scraped my hair up into a ponytail, allowing some air to my already sticky neck and tied it up messily. The town was quiet too, most people at work in the middle of the week, but still parents were milling around with their kids who were still on vacation, and it just seemed filled with happiness and excitement.

It was something I had definitely fallen in love with - the safety I felt and the easy going nature that surrounded me as I walked down the main street. It was so different from the city life Max and I were used to, and I had a feeling my son was falling in love with our new life even faster than I was.

After a quick trip to the grocery store for essentials and a ton of Ben & Jerry’s – my new best friends – I was driving home feeling pretty good for the first time in weeks. Things were looking up for Max and I. Apart from the landlords whose good looks seemed to drive my libido crazy, we had a great place to live. I’d found some work, and more would come, I was sure. Max was smiling and seeming so much like his old self, likely because I had found a way not to constantly freak out on him. I was really starting to think maybe making this move had been the best decision I’d ever made, even if I’d made it under the worst possible circumstances.

I was surprised when I pulled up to our little cottage, to find Logan walking around the side from the deck. He was dressed in running shorts and a sweat soaked t-shirt that did not a thing to hide how perfectly ripped and

muscular he was beneath it. He'd obviously been exercising since his face had a sheen of sweat to it, and his wet hair was pushed back from his face. I groaned quietly as just seeing him set my body alight once again in the perpetual state of arousal I seemed to be in around this man and his sexy brother.

Logan's face brightened with his wide smile as he stalked towards my car, and he was almost to the door by the time I realized I needed to do something other than just sit there staring and drooling like the desperate, horny, sex deprived woman I was.

I fumbled to undo my seatbelt with one hand as I threw the car door open with the other in my panic to move and not allow him to see how he'd had me completely transfixed with his perfect body and panty-melting smile.

"Hey!" I greeted way too loudly as I practically threw myself from the car and slammed the door closed way too hard. "What are you doing here?" I almost slapped myself at that question. It was pretty damned obvious what he was doing from his outfit and the sweat drenching it.

"Just took a run. There's a good path through the woods just down there," he turned and pointed to the wooded area behind the cottage. "It has a great beach too if you ever want somewhere peaceful to just be," he added.

He turned back towards me with his smile still in place and I just melted like some kid with her childhood crush before her. I couldn't seem to keep it together. He just looked so freaking good, and I wasn't even into the sweaty look. I always thought it was kind of weird in books when women swooned at a man drenched with sweat. I had never imagined it to be something I would find attractive, but Logan Easton wore the look so damned well. His golden skin glistened and his usually wild and messy hair just looked even hotter to me all tamed and pushed back as it was.

"Anna?"

"Huh?" I looked back up to his face and panicked as I realized I had completely spaced out from whatever he'd said, if he'd said anything. I didn't even know.

"You okay, sweetheart?" he asked as he took a step closer. His smile dimmed as he looked me over with concern.

“Yep!” I answered way too enthusiastically. “Uh-huh. Absolutely fine!” I added, only making it all so much worse. *What was wrong with me?* I had spoken with men before. Even an attractive one or two. I had never lost all sense as I was in that moment.

“Have you eaten today? You look pale?” he asked as he took the final step so he was now right before me. He slowly reached up and cupped his huge hand around my cheek. His palm felt a little rough against my skin, but in a good way, and I shuddered as goose pimples rose on my arms at his touch. It was so gentle and cautious and it felt way too good. He rubbed his thumb back and forth just below my eye and I closed my eyes and savored the sensation of his touch. It filled me with a feeling of peace and contentment that I didn’t expect, but needed more than I even knew. For some reason I didn’t fear him the way I had other men since what happened back in the city. It had been the same with Maddox too. They both just seemed to make me feel safe when they were near.

I jolted at that realization and stepped out of his reach as panic seized me. They make me feel safe, but with the secrets I had to keep, that comfort was a very dangerous thing. I couldn’t fall into the trap of feeling safe with Maddox or Logan, because I knew if I did, all of the turmoil within me would come spilling out and then what would become of Max and I? No! No matter how desperately I wanted the tenderness these men offered, I couldn’t take it. Max came first and he always would. Protecting him was what I had been put on Earth to do and I would not allow my selfish needs and wants to ever hurt him again.

“I’m fine!” I almost snapped at him. “Just busy. I need to get on.” I turned away from him and moved to the trunk of my car, fighting not to turn and look at him again as my body was begging me to.

“Anna?” I still didn’t look up, but I knew Logan had moved closer to me.

“Sorry, I need to get these groceries inside and start on dinner. Was there something you needed to talk about?” I asked as calmly as I could, while loading my arms with the groceries.

“No. Nothing important. Do you need a hand?” he offered from where he stood off to the side at the back of my car now.

“Thanks, but I’ve got it. You should finish up your run.”

“Do I scare you Anna?” he asked, shocking me so much I lifted my head and met his eyes. He looked anxious about my answer and I knew I couldn’t lie to him.

“No,” I sighed. “You don’t scare me, Logan. Nor does Maddox. I believe what you told Max and I about you being good guys, but I...I have a lot to cope with right now.”

“I could help with that if you’d let me. I’d like it if we could be friends,” he said earnestly.

“I thought we already were.”

“So did I, but you’re avoiding Madd and I, and just now you looked as though you were afraid of me,” he pointed out.

“I’m not afraid of you Logan,” I sighed tiredly.

“But you are avoiding us,” he challenged.

“It’s not that simple. My life...Max and I...things are just messy right now, and I don’t want you or Maddox getting mixed up in it all.”

“You can trust us, Anna. If you’re running from someone, or in danger for some reason, we can and will help you and Max,” he told me vehemently.

“Thank you, but we’re not in danger. No one is coming after us. We just...we need some time and space right now.”

“I understand, but please believe you can come to me if you need anything. I get that someone has made you distrustful and wary, but you can trust my brother and I, Anna, no matter what.”

“I’m starting to see that,” I replied in a small whisper, more to myself, but Logan must have heard it because he nodded, seeming pleased. “And that’s the problem,” I added. His face fell and he looked confused as I slammed my trunk shut, then turned my back on him and walked into my place without looking back.

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*I came to consciousness slowly, finding it a struggle to even open my eyes. I was laid on my back, which was odd for me, since I always slept on my side, but the stark white ceiling I was staring at proved it.*

*My head was pounding and I felt a little groggy as I turned my head to look for the time on my alarm clock, which sat on the nightstand. The red letters shone against the black background – 04:00. I groaned as I tried to recall when I had even gone to bed the night before. I felt as though I hadn't even slept. I tried to turn over completely on my side, but froze when something stopped me from doing that. I looked to where something was pulling at my right wrist and stared in horror at the rope tied around it so tightly my hand was a strange shade of purple. When I looked to my other hand with blind panic I found that wrist wrapped tightly in thick rope too. The rope was coming from beneath the mattress and gave me enough room to move my arms a little, but not enough to even sit up.*

*Fear filled me as I looked down my body and realized I was naked and also tied to the base of the bed by ropes around my ankles.*

*Fear consumed me as my heart started to beat so fast and loud that the sound rattled through my ears. I pulled violently at the ropes as I panicked in a way I never had before. I tried hard to remember what had happened to land me in the situation I found myself.*

*Max was away for the weekend. That was my first thought, and it was a reassuring one. He'd gone camping for the weekend with a couple of his friends from school, and a couple of the guys dad's. They were going to spend the weekend out on some fancy lake outside of the city, so Max was safe at least.*

*Then it came to me. The dating site. I'd signed up in a moment of weakness the week before. I was so sick of being alone, and I didn't see the harm in putting myself out there, just to see if anyone would even be interested in a thirty-one year old single mom. My son was sixteen and pretty independent. I just felt like it might be time for me to get out into the world again and find some kind of connection. It had been so long since I even got laid, let alone had any kind of a relationship. I had thought I would be safe looking through ads on my cell from the comfort of my home.*

*I'd been shocked when guys started messaging me and flirting with me. One of them had been so funny and witty, but also kind and generous with the compliments. I'd agreed to meet up with him on Friday night, knowing my son would be busy and away from home. It wasn't that Max didn't want me*



*to date, but I was just wary of bringing anyone into his life when I knew only too well what assholes men could turn out to be.*

*But the guy I chatted with...what was his name?...he'd seemed so genuine and kind. He said he was an elementary school teacher and in all of the photos he sent me he was smiling and looked so genuine and harmless. Callum! That was the guys name! I recalled.*

*That's what I'd done the night before...a date. I met him at a steakhouse I'd been to with Max before. The place had been busy when I arrived so I had thought I was safe. Callum turned up just after me and he was handsome. He looked just like every one of his pictures. I remembered us sitting down and me ordering a beer. I'd been nervous, but Callum was confident and sure. I tried to remember what happened next. Did he do this to me?*

*Then the door to my room opened and all thought left my mind as pure, adrenaline soaked terror filled me.*

*"Finally awake. About damned time!" Callum walked into the room. He was shirtless and wearing a pair of tight fitting black jeans. His feet were bare and in his hand glinted a wicked looking knife. It wasn't a kitchen knife. More like a hunting knife, and it was at least five inches long as he held it casually at his side.*

*"Wh-what is this? What do you want?" I gasped through my frenzied and erratic breaths as I still fought to get free of the ropes.*

*"Everything you have to give, little Anna," he uttered as he turned a terrifyingly chilling smile on me. He strode towards the bed and crawled onto the end, then he was over me, caging me in as he lifted the knife and pressed the tip of it into the skin on my chest, just above my breasts. I held my breath and watched on, unable to do anything to fight him, sure he was going to end me right then and there by plunging that blade into my chest. Instead he just smiled, all kindness gone from his face as he pressed the tip down harder and sliced down between my breasts and right down to my navel. I screamed at the burning pain of the knife through my flesh. I could feel the warmth of my own blood running down my skin on both sides of my body. It felt like he had sliced me clean open and I was sure it was the end for me.*

“MOM!” I felt hands grab my arms and I was shaken awake from the nightmare. “Mom, wake up!” Max was yelling at me as I opened my eyes in terror and looked all around us.

“Max!” I gasped as I grabbed his waist and tried to pull him closer to me, but he didn’t move.

“I’m okay, mom. We’re both okay. Just take some deep breaths,” he coached as he released my arms and instead perched on the edge of the bed beside me.

“Oh God! Thank God!” I cried breathlessly as I sat up and wrapped my arms around him, holding him as tight as I could. “I’m sorry, Max. I’m s-so so sorry!”

“Sshh mom. You have nothing to be sorry for. It wasn’t your fault,” Max told me as he held me just as tightly as I held him.

“It was. I was so fucking stupid!” I cried as I fought to breathe between my desperate words.

“Just stop. You have to try and calm down. You’re gonna pass out if you don’t,” he warned as he continued to hold me. He was so much bigger than me now and it terrified me. I longed for the days when he was small enough for me to wrap myself around him and protect him. Now he was the one wrapped around me.

Loud knocking from downstairs had me crying out and gripping Max as tight as I could to keep him safe with me.

“Anna! Max! It’s Logan and Madd,” A deep voice called loudly.

“Fuck!” I gasped.

“They would have heard you screaming, mom. You sounded like you were being murdered.”

“Tell them I’m okay, Max, please. D-don’t let them in here. I can’t let them see me like this,” I panicked. I felt that I had some trust in Logan and Maddox, but if I were wrong and they saw just how weak I truly was inside, they could use it to hurt us.

“They could help us...”

“Max, no! We can’t trust them. Just get rid of them, son. Please,” I begged.

“Fine, but we need to talk about this, mom. You can’t go on the way you have. You’re fooling no one with your whole ‘I’m fine’ shit show, especially not those two,” he said as he pointed to the ground indicating Maddox and Logan who knocked on the door again.

I was taken aback as Max left the room. I could hear him running down the hardwood steps, and the beep of the alarm as he entered the code to disarm it.

“Max! Is everything okay? We heard the screaming from our rooms. Is your mom alright?” Logan asked all at once seconds later.

“Sorry. My mom just had a nightmare. She’s shaken up, but she’s alright,” Max told them, and even from a floor below I could hear the worry and stress in his words.

“Are you alright, kid?” Maddox asked.

“Sure. It’s just hard, ya know? I don’t like hearing my mom like that,” Max told them in a quieter tone that I could only just hear.

“We get it. Can we come in and see your mom? Maybe stay with you both for a little while? It might make your mom feel safer after her nightmare?” Logan pushed.

“I don’t think my mom will like that. She’s okay. I’ll stay with her until she’s calmer,” Max assured them, but he sounded pretty shaken up himself and I hated myself for putting him through it. And I hated myself even more for how desperately I wanted the comfort of Madd and Logan coming into our house and staying there with us. I knew I’d feel safer if they were there and that was just foolish. I barely even knew them and I was trusting them. *Would I ever learn?*

“No offence, Max, but you look pretty shaken up yourself,” Logan told him, and even knowing him as little as I did, I heard the concern in his voice.

“I’m good. Sorry we disturbed your night. You should go now,” Max said flatly. Moments later the door closed and I heard the beeping of Max rearming the alarm.

I knew already that I had fucked up again. For a whole week I had succeeded in hiding the inner disaster that was going on within me from my son, but one nightmare and a complete and utter foolish freak out over our neighbors trying to help us, and Max once again saw just how much of a mess his mom truly was. There I went again, hurting him with my inability to just pull myself together. I was trying. I was trying so fucking hard to just be the mother my amazing son deserved. I was doing everything that I could in order to protect him and to stop him from having to experience any more turmoil and pain, but I was messing it all up and I knew it. Max was the one holding me together. I was a failure and I had never felt so ashamed and disgusted with myself.

“Mom?” Max appeared in the doorway of my room and I blinked furiously to pull back the threatening tears.

“I’m fine now. You should get back to sleep,” I told him with a forced smile that I knew was way over the top.

“You have to trust someone, you know? You can’t just keep on telling me you’re fine because I already know you’re not!” he snapped with some heat in his tone.

“How can I trust someone? We don’t even know anyone. Just one word to the wrong person and...”

“I don’t mean that, mom. I don’t mean you should spill all of the shit you went through to the first person you see tomorrow, but you need support. You need friends. I’m here for you. You know that, but I’m a kid. I don’t know what you need right now,” he sighed tiredly.

“I don’t need anything, Max. We’re safe, and things here are good, right?”

“Yeah, they are, but they could be better if you stopped avoiding Logan and Maddox like you’re terrified of them, and just let them in a little. They want to be our friends, and I think we could really use some of those right now.”

“I barely even know them,” I pointed out, but I knew it was just an excuse. I was far from terrified of Logan and Maddox Easton and that was part of the problem.

“Then get to know them, mom! I have. I work out with Logan most morning’s in his home gym now instead of swimming. He’s been helping

me to lift weights. Maddox is quieter, but I asked him to show me how he fixed our car in case it broke down again, and ever since I've been helping him fix up an old Mustang he's working on in the garage. They're good guys. They talk to me and treat me like I'm an adult. I think we can trust the both of them if you'll just stop hiding from them." Max was almost pleading now, and the desperate look in his eyes as they finally met mine had me breaking instantly. I never wanted Max to feel so much stress and worry.

"Okay," I conceded with a nod. "I'll give them a chance, alright, but we both need to keep our guards up, son. Maddox was a cop. We can't tell them what happened."

"You don't need to worry about that. I never want to talk about any of that with anyone ever again." Max turned and started to walk away.

"Max!" I cried, hating to let him walk away looking so broken. I had worked hard to build a better life for him than I had, and now almost at the age I was when I got pregnant, he looked just as lost as I had felt back then.

"Yeah?" he turned back to me from the hallway.

"I love you, honey. I'm so sorry you have to go through all of this."

"I love you too mom. That's why I need you to find a way to come through this, and you can't do that alone." With that he disappeared around the corner to his own room, closing the door quietly behind him.

As soon as I knew I was alone I jumped to my feet and started to pace back and forth, fighting the tears that wanted to come out. No more crying. No more weakness. I needed a plan because Max was right – I couldn't go on the way I had been. I thought I was hiding everything from the world, but obviously I wasn't.

I had to do better and if getting closer to Logan and Maddox would help Max to believe I was getting better, then I'd have to do that too. I could be friends with them, right? I didn't have to drool over them every time I saw them. I could fight the spell they seemed to cast over me when they touched me or even just spoke to me, right? My real fear was that those two all-seeing guys would spend just moments with me and reveal every single secret I held, and then what would happen?

# CHAPTER 9

ANNA

I leant back against my arms, my legs sprawled out in the sand beneath me. It was early, so there was still a slight breeze in the air, but the hot sun was starting to beat down already, all set for a scorching day. The trees behind me rustled with the leaves blowing in the wind, and I could hear some bird in the distance calling loudly. It was the lap of the water against the shore that soothed me most though. It was the most peaceful and beautiful place I had ever seen in my life and I had it all to myself.

Two days had passed since I woke from that nightmare and received a good talking to from my son, and I was trying hard to find myself amongst the wreckage in my head.

This little beach that Logan had told me about was definitely helping. I had attempted to find it the day before and been amazed when I walked through a rough running path in the woods and emerged from the trees to find that piece of heaven – a small sandy beach along the side of the water.

That morning I had set out in my yoga pants and a sports bra, determined to start my day with yoga as I used to before everything fell apart, and where better to do it than in that stunning location.

I had been filled with purpose when I rolled my mat out in the sand and sat on it to begin stretching, but every movement I knew like the back of my hand caused pain in my still healing body. The bright pink scar down my chest and abdomen pulled with every move. My ankle, which still caused me discomfort when I walked on it, couldn't take my body weight when I moved position, and when I tumbled to the ground, my bruised ribs throbbed angrily, reminding me everything was not as it once was. I wasn't whole and I probably never would be again.

So I'd abandoned the mat and the life I once had that I had been seeking with it, and just collapsed into the sand. I don't know how long I had been

sat there – a while – but I had no desire to leave. I had been able to calm my anger by watching the water lapping the shore, and focusing on the sounds of the nature around me. I had been able to convince myself that I had a new beginning now, and that I could find a way to move forward within it, but I feared that bubble of tranquility I had built would burst if I moved from that spot.

Instead I took a deep breath and threw my head up to the sky, closing my eyes against the bright sun. The heat of the sun's rays felt like comfort on my chilled skin. Max would have already left for his job at the swimming pool on the bike he'd borrowed from Logan, and I didn't have to start work at the hardware store until that afternoon, so I was free to just stay there and enjoy the tranquility.

I must have begun to doze slightly, because I didn't hear anyone approach me, and I was awoken sharply by the feel of a hand on my shoulder. Instantly Callum's face flashed before me and I screamed as I leapt to my feet in one move I didn't even think myself capable of. I was already running when the deep voice found its way through my terror induced panic.

"Anna!" Logic seemed to find some foothold in my mind as I recognized the voice and I stopped, almost to the trees, and looked behind me. "It's me!" Logan yelled, looking shocked and panicked in equal measure. "Just me. I...I didn't mean to scare you. I'm so sorry," he added a little more calmly once I had stopped.

"Fuck!" I gasped as I pressed a hand over my pounding heart and forced myself to take as deep a breath as I could. *Way to hide your crazy*, I told myself as I tried to calm the hell down and fast.

"Are you alright? I'm really sorry. I thought you heard me talking to you as I walked over," Logan explained as he took a couple of wary steps closer to me.

"No...that was all me. Sorry. I think I must have been falling asleep. I didn't hear you," I tried to clarify, but I was gasping for breath like I'd run for miles, not a few damned steps. Maybe I needed to try running or some other cardio, I noted in my head. *When did I get so unfit?*

“You shouldn’t fall asleep out here alone. While the property is pretty safe, this area is open from the lake,” he warned me as his voice took on a seriousness I wasn’t sure I’d heard from him. I took in another deep breath and finally looked up at him fully for the first time.

I had assumed he was out there running. It was the only reason he’d be out there, but I was clearly wrong, since he was wearing hugging dark blue jeans and a black henley that did so much to accentuate the amazing body he had beneath it. Why did he have to be so perfect? How could I ever be just friends with a man who looked like him? Even if he wasn’t interested – which he never would be in a plain Jane like me – it wouldn’t stop me from making an idiot of myself every time he was close. It was like the sight of him turned me into a foolish kid with a crush.

“I can take care of myself,” I told him in response to his warning as I forced myself to stand tall and crossed my arms over my chest. *Strong. I had to be strong*, I reminded myself.

“You know how to defend yourself?” he asked, looking surprised.

“Well, no...” I admitted. “...but I do have a Taser and mace in my purse and a baseball bat in my bedroom.”

“Well, maybe bring your arsenal with you if you’re coming out here again,” he told me, and I didn’t miss the sparkle of laughter on his face.

“Laugh it up...” I snipped as I walked back to my spot and planted myself back down in the sand. I wasn’t allowing him to make me move with his bullshit warnings. Why would anyone be out on the lake looking to attack a random sunbather? “...but that small arsenal has kept me and my son safe for the last sixteen years.” Of course that wasn’t technically true, but he didn’t need to know that, and I really didn’t want to allow myself to think about it.

Logan sighed deeply and loudly as he walked over and dropped gracefully down beside me. He sat with his arms resting on his raised knees and looked out at the water.

“Do you always assume people are thinking the worst of you when they talk to you?” he asked after several moments of silence.



“I don’t assume anything. I was a sixteen year old single mom with barely a penny to my name. When people spoke to me, and still do, they’re usually judging me and finding me lacking.”

“Well, I’m not judging you, Anna, and I would never find you lacking. You’re strong, and I see how much you love and care for Max. You might have been a young mom, but you were obviously a damned good one to raise such a good, kind, smart kid,” he told me as he turned his head and locked his beautiful green eyes on mine. “And I do believe that you can take care of yourself. You obviously did an awesome job of looking after the both of you this far, but I also want you to know I’d like to help you do that now that you’re here. Didn’t we agree we could be friends?” he asked with a knowing look.

“We did,” I nodded. It was impossible not to give in to him with the patient, but intense way he watched me. I felt like he’d see the truth even if I didn’t come out with it. “But it’s not that simple,” I added tiredly. I’d barely slept the last two nights, afraid I’d slip into another nightmare and traumatize Max further. The fatigue was definitely taking its toll though.

“Then let’s simplify it. You’re scared to get too close to Madd and I. Correct?”

“What? Why would...” he cut me off before I could finish my mock protest, which was likely a good thing, since I’d never been a good liar. I should have been after the things I’d had to do to survive my childhood, but I just hated lies. I always had. They were all I had ever heard from the adults in my life as a kid.

“Something happened to you. Something bad, that, for whatever reason, you want to keep between only you and Max,” Logan said, and I was struck silent by how close he was getting. I barely knew the man and he was already way too close to the truth.

“N-no. That’s not...” Again I was cut off.

“No lies. That’s all I ask. I know there’s something you won’t or can’t tell us for whatever reason. Maddox does too. It’s obvious you and Max went through something that has hurt the both of you, but I promise, here and now, that Madd and I will not push you on the subject, so long as you promise not to lie to us about the things you do tell us. I get that you don’t

want to trust anyone, Anna, but just give us the chance to prove we can be there for you and your son. That's all we want. If you need to leave the past in the past, then we'll agree to that as long as the two of you aren't in danger."

"We're not," I told him honestly.

"Then stop avoiding us. Get to know us. Let us all start fresh right here, right now if that's what you need, but eventually I hope you'll trust us enough to tell us everything."

"The past is the past, like you said. I d-don't think I could...I don't want to talk about what happened with anyone. It's over and Max and I...we-we're safe," I continued, knowing it was a risk even to admit that much, but I felt the need to give him something. "We came here for a new start and I want more than anything to make it work, for the both of us. Max needs some stability in his life."

"Every sunset is an opportunity to reset," Logan uttered, but I heard him.

"Where's that from?" I asked.

"I read it somewhere. It stuck with me when Madd and I were younger and struggling just to get by. I used to think about those words all of the time and tell myself things would get better," he explained. I smiled a little as I placed a hand on his knee, wanting to comfort him, since he was obviously thinking back to something that caused him pain. It was clear to see in the furrow of his brow.

"I like it," I told him. "I think I'll steal it for the tougher days."

"I'd prefer you come to Madd or I, and let us help you through the tougher days," he told me as he covered my hand on his knee with his much larger one.

"I'll try," I gave in as I gave his knee a small squeeze, hoping he'd take it as the promise I meant it to be. "I just...I find it hard to trust people. I'm not sure I ever really have, except for Max."

"Your family?" Logan questioned.

"My mom split not long after I was born, and my dad...well, let's just say I wasn't exactly the top of his priority list. I left when I found out I was

pregnant and never looked back. I wanted more for Max than I ever had.”

“What about his father?”

“Ha!” I cried loudly. “I don’t think he ever even knew my name. It was one time at some crappy party. I did track him down to tell him I was pregnant, but he was so high I doubt he even remembers. He threw a few dollar bills at me and told me to take care of it.”

“I’m sorry, Anna.”

“Don’t be. Getting away from there was the best decision I could have made, and having Max changed my entire life for the better. He gave me something to fight for, and I have, Logan. I’ve fought and worked so hard to try and give him the childhood he deserved. It was far from perfect, but he was loved and he was safe,” I told him, a little defensively. And I knew why I was being defensive – because all I had done had gone to shit the night I chose my own selfish needs and went on that fucking date. I had destroyed everything I built for my son with one stupid, selfish decision.

“He still is, Anna,” Logan said as he pulled my hand from his knee and turned it, interlocking his fingers with mine. “Stop feeling guilty for whatever happened. You’re both here now, whole and moving on. Max will be alright, so long as you are,” he told me vehemently.

“And what if I can’t be? Alright, I mean?” I sniffled as I used my free hand to dash away the tear that slipped free.

“You will be,” he told me firmly as he turned so he faced me. He lifted his big hand, cradling the entire left side of my face in it as he used his thumb to wipe at another tear that ran free. “Let me help you, please sweetheart. I don’t want you to be alone. I can see how much you’re hurting. Maddox too. It’s killing us. At least let us be around to make things a little easier,” he pleaded.

“I just don’t want to hurt my son anymore,” I sniffled as I leaned into his touch. “I’ve already put him through so much.”

“We’ll take care of him, Anna. We’ll take care of both of you, if you’ll just stop running from us.”

“I will,” I agreed as I fought not to cry. I had cried so much in the last weeks, and I didn’t want to anymore. I didn’t want to feel broken any more either, and there with Logan, I didn’t. Not so much anyway. He made me feel safe in a way no one in life ever had, and I needed that. After thirty-one years of fighting alone, I needed someone to just hold me together for a little while, whilst I found the strength I needed to fight again.

“Thank fuck for that,” Logan huffed as he pulled me closer and wrapped his arms fully around me, pressing me to his chest. I didn’t fight him or push him away, because I wanted his hug more than I wanted my next breath right then.

I don’t know how long he held me, and I didn’t care. I’d have happily stayed there with him all day if it were an option. I managed to calm my wild emotions and stop more tears from falling.

“How did you know I was down here?” I asked eventually, knowing I couldn’t make him hold me for any longer. He probably had things to do and places to be.

“I dropped Max at work, and he told me he’d followed you down here this morning. He asked me to check on you if you didn’t come back to the house by ten,” Logan explained.

“That kid,” I sighed. “He’s fifteen years old. I hate that he feels the need to take care of me.”

“He loves you, and he needs you. He’s taking care of you because he never wants to lose you. He’s an amazing kid,” Logan told me.

“I know. He really is,” I agreed. He really was an amazing kid, and I could never regret one single part of my childhood that resulted in me having him. I’d do every day of it again, survive every miserable second just to ensure I held Max in my arms in the end.

Eventually, Logan and I left the beach, Logan rolling up my yoga mat and carrying it under one arm, as he wrapped the other around me and insisted on walking me back to my cottage.

When I told him I needed to get ready for work he insisted on me allowing him to drive me into town. He was determined that I shouldn’t drive when I was upset, even though I had managed to calm myself down already, but I

gave in when he pointed out the way my hands were trembling slightly, because I didn't want to have to explain that the trembling was a near constant state for me nowadays, especially since I was sleeping so little.

We didn't talk much as he drove me into town just after lunch, and it felt awkward when I thanked him and slipped from his high up SUV, which he'd pulled up outside the hardware store, but Logan didn't seem to feel the same as he smiled brightly at me and told me we were eating dinner together at his place that night. Before I could utter a sound either way, he was driving away and I stood there on the sidewalk feeling at a loss for what I really felt right then. Logan had been so kind and gentle with me. He knew way too much, and was getting so close to the truth, which was terrifying, but at the same time I felt he had been honest when he promised not to push for information from Max and I on the topic.

God knew I wanted to be able to trust him and his brother. Max had been right when he told me we needed people around us. I had always wanted that for my son, but there had never been anyone I could get close enough to for that to happen in the city. Now these two strong, capable, and honest seeming guys were in our lives and a huge part of me felt like it not only wanted to know them, but needed to too, for the sake of my sanity.

The issue was, I wanted more than friendship and that complicated things exponentially, especially since I was pretty sure neither of them would feel the same. Hiding my feelings for them would be a true trial for me, but I would have to, I realized. Max needed someone in his life who could be there for him more than I could right then, and Logan and Maddox were there and willing. Max liked them too, which helped. I couldn't fuck it all up for him.

"Anna?" Neil's voice calling from behind me had me turning to face the hardware store with a start. "Are you coming inside?" he asked.

"Sorry!" I cried as I shook myself and hurried inside. I don't know how long I had stood there, but it had to have been a while for Neil to come out after me. Just another moment to prove I really was losing it. It wasn't the first time I had zoned out completely, lost in my head. Add to that my meltdowns, and nightmares, and I really was scared something was truly wrong with me. The trembling in my hands couldn't mean anything good, either. I was a mess. Such a huge fucking mess!

# CHAPTER 10

## ANNA

By the time I finished up my shift at the hardware store that evening, I was truly feeling the lack of sleep I had been subjecting myself to. I was feeling even more shaky than I had been earlier, and my head was pounding relentlessly. Thankfully, it had been quiet, as always, in the store all afternoon, and Neil seemed to have taken pity on me, giving me the easy role of simply dusting around the already immaculate shelves.

Perhaps the exhaustion was the reason I hadn't even considered a way to get home when Logan had insisted on driving me to work earlier on, but as Neil started to lock up, and I grabbed my purse to search out my car keys, it suddenly hit me. I had no way to get home. Walking wasn't an option, and as Logan had told us the first day, there were no cabs that far out. I could ask Neil to drive me, but I didn't even know if the man had a car. He lived above the store, so I guessed he likely didn't really need one, and even if he did have a car, how could I put him out like that? He barely even knew me. I was too scared to risk pissing him off and losing the only job I had managed to find so far.

I was actually considering calling my fifteen year old son to come and pick me up, when a small knock on the door had me looking up through the glass. Maddox stood on the other side, dressed way more relaxed than I had seen him before, wearing sweats and a t-shirt that clung in all the right ways to show his impeccable body beneath. He wore a pair of *Ray Bans* and there was a gentle smile on his face that instantly had me feeling heated. There was no denying he was a spectacular looking guy, and wasn't that just the ultimate torture for a desperately horny woman who had sworn self-imposed celibacy for the rest of her life?

"Tell them we're closed would ya, Anna? They'll have to come back tomorrow!" Neil called from the back.

“It’s okay. It’s just Maddox.” I finally shook myself and moved over to the door, sliding free the lock and opening it just enough to peer out. Was I hoping the door would act as some kind of defense mechanism against the man’s hotness? Yes! Absolutely one hundred per cent! I needed all of the help I could get.

“Hey,” I greeted lamely.

“Hey. You about finished up in there? Logan sent me to pick you up,” he explained as he leant into the doorway, getting so close to me I could smell his enticing aftershave. It was something distinctly masculine, maybe sandalwood? Whatever it was, it only made me even more needy for a man I barely even knew.

“Oh...uh, yeah...okay,” I floundered as I looked around me awkwardly.

“Come on then, beautiful. Logan fired up the grill for dinner. Max was helping him marinade the steaks when I left.”

I barely heard anything he said after ‘beautiful’ because he’d called me that! Had I heard him right? Why would he call me ‘beautiful?’ I wasn’t ugly, but I was also pretty far from that compliment he gave.

“Anna? Everything good?” Neil asked as he walked out from the back and looked to me and Maddox. Thankfully that snapped me from the insane thoughts that I had been allowing to invade my mind. Why was I freaking over being paid a compliment? I was a grown woman, not the idiotic teenage girl I was behaving as. For Christ’s sake – even when I was a teenage girl I acted more mature than I was right there in that moment, or any other the Easton brothers were close. I had to get a fucking grip!

“We’re all good, Neil. I just came to drive Anna home,” Maddox spoke up when I failed to do so. I really was losing my damned mind. *Had I zoned out again?*

“Good. Head out then. I’ll finish closing up,” Neil told me as he approached and went to press a hand to my shoulder in a fond way, I was sure. But my brain started to freak the second I realized his intention, and I jumped out of reach and practically into Maddox. He grabbed me, wrapping a steadying hand around my waist, which only made things worse. I could feel the

muscles in that arm wrapped around me loosely, and the rigidity of his tight body behind me. *How much did this man work out?*

“Sorry!” I cried as I leapt forward again, and almost into Neil this time. Neil was studying me, and my obviously crazy reaction to the threat of his touch. I dare not even turn to see Maddox’s reaction to the whole debacle. “I...I’m tired...makes me a little jumpy. I sh-should go,” I babbled as I pointed a thumb behind me and tried for a smile that had to look forced and as awkward as my behavior.

I clutched my purse against my chest and pushed past Madd, out of the door and onto the street without even looking up at him. As soon as I was outside I took deep breaths to try and calm the panic and heat raging inside of me simultaneously, and just started blindly walking. I had to get away before I made any more of a fool of myself.

“Anna! Wait up!” Maddox called, and I heard the heavy fall of his feet on the sidewalk. “Where’re you going?” he asked with some mirth. I was clearly amusing him.

“I...I called Max. He...he’ll come to pick me up. Sorry to have put you out,” I called over my shoulder as I continued power walking down the street.

“Anna,” I felt a hand gently touch my right arm, then Maddox was beside me, easily keeping pace. “Max is back at the house, and he’s fifteen. He doesn’t even have a driver’s license,” he pointed out. When I glanced up at him there was laughter on his face.

“He...he can drive. He’s a good driver, actually,” I blurted. *God, what was I doing?* I sounded insane, even to my own ears. I needed to keep my mouth shut. I was exhausted and overwhelmed, and it was making my instability show.

“I’m sure he is, but I’m already here. How about you just let me take you home for now, okay?” Maddox said, as he held my arm a little tighter, bringing me to a stop beside him. “You’re tired, Anna. My truck’s just down the street,” he added in a cajoling tone. I took a breath and looked up to meet his eyes again. This time all humor was gone from his face and he just looked concerned, his brow furrowed as he seemed to study me.



“Yeah,” I sighed as I forced myself to just calm down. “You’re right. Sorry. I just...I guess I am kinda tired. I’d appreciate a ride.”

“Are you good if I wrap my arm around you? I want to help you to the truck,” he asked softly, as if he feared he set off my volatility again.

“I’m okay. I can make it to the truck,” I assured him with a roll of my eyes. “And you don’t have to tip toe around me. I’m not actually crazy. I’m just tired and I...I guess I kinda freaked when Neil went to touch me. I’m not good with strangers touching me,” I admitted, desperate to form some reasonable explanation for my behavior.

“He’s your boss?”

“I don’t really know him though. He doesn’t talk much. Don’t get me wrong, he seems nice enough. I just...I don’t know him enough.”

“And me? Do you know me enough?” he asked as he turned and looked for me to follow as we started heading back the way we came.

“I’m not scared of you, if that’s what you mean. You already touched me and I didn’t freak. Hell, you’re the first person to hug me the way you did, other than Max since...well, I can’t even remember.”

I wasn’t sure I had ever been held the way Madd held me that day he cleaned up my hands. My father certainly never hugged me. He barely tolerated me. And there had never really been a boyfriend in my life. I guess one of my very rare hook ups over the years may have briefly held me in the moment, but if they did it wasn’t anything memorable like the way Maddox had held me. Or when Logan had held me that very morning. Those hugs made me feel safety and comfort like I had never known, and I would never forget either of them.

“Then you need more. Everyone should have someone to hold them when they need it,” he told me, then before I knew it his arm was around my shoulders and pulling me into his side as we walked. I was taken by surprise and stiff at first, but I relaxed quickly, not scared Maddox would hurt me even for a moment, which was likely fool hardy of me, but I just felt safe with him.

I wrapped my free arm around his waist and held him too. It was a mistake to let him so close and I knew it, but he offered something I had never had

before, and I wanted it too much to deny myself it. Peace. He gave me peace when he pulled me close and surrounded me with his strength. I felt safe, but more than that, I felt like I wasn't drowning just for those few moments.

And I *was* drowning the rest of the time. Always drowning. Always having to fight like hell to keep kicking to the surface for those short, desperate gasps of air that would allow me to survive. I thought maybe I was born drowning. I never remembered a time in my life when I didn't worry and fret. Even my earliest memory was of me alone in the crumbling house. I don't know how long my dad had been gone on one of his benders, but I remember the feeling of knowing hunger as I tried to find a way to climb on the kitchen counter to reach cabinets for food.

As I got older my dad took his rage out on me when he lost at whatever gambling he was into at that time. He raged at me when there was no money for his beer, and hit me if I dared to ask for money to buy food, or desperately needed clothes. Family services had visited us several times, but they obviously saw something in my dad I never got the luxury of, and left me with him.

At thirteen I managed to get my first job cleaning a local bar in the mornings. The owner paid me under the table in cash. After that I worked for every penny I could to take care of myself. Of course, my father stole what he could from me at every opportunity, and hit me for hiding cash from him. It was tough, but it was just my life.

School was no better. I was the subject of ridicule from my first day – the scruffy kid in clothes that didn't fit. To the other kids I was trash, even when I got polder and bought myself clothes that did fit, and learned to take care of myself. I worried constantly about hiding the bruises my father inflicted and I was always an academic failure, especially when I started to work shifts as a server in seedy bars and even a strip club at one time, working late into the night and never getting enough sleep.

Then I found out I was pregnant and my entire life changed, but I was still drowning, always fighting for every single breath I took, and barely managing to stay above the water. Only once Max was born I was fighting not just to keep myself above water, but my son too. I fought like hell because I was determined to give him a life where he never felt as if *he*

were drowning, but it wasn't easy. Drowning, always drowning. The struggle never seemed to end. I was thirty-one years old, but I felt so much older.

But there, as Maddox held me, I couldn't even feel the water trying to drag me under. It was like he had wrenched me free and was holding me afloat, safe and calm. It had been the same when he held me before, and with Logan that morning. I didn't understand why they could do that for me, but they just could. Maybe deep down I trusted them enough to feel safe in their hold, but I shouldn't. Not when I barely knew them. I also knew that too, And once again, the water was returning. Drowning again.

I pulled from Maddox's hold, making myself see sense. I couldn't give into peace and safety, because it wasn't real! I didn't know Maddox or Logan. I was just a mess and they seemed to be the answer that I needed to get me through. I couldn't let my guard down again. I was a fool to do it once and I would pay for that for the rest of my life. Worse still, so would my son.

"You okay?" Maddox asked as he pulled open the passenger door of his truck.

"Of course," I nodded with a calm I didn't feel. *Why did it feel like I was tearing myself apart inside?* "I climbed into the truck and settled into the passenger seat, busying myself with fastening the seat belt as Maddox closed the door. By the time he was sitting beside me, I had my stare firmly set out of the window and I was telling myself not to look at him again.

Thankfully, Maddox didn't say anything either and the drive back was silent.

I was unfastening my belt and leaping from the car the very second Maddox brought it to a stop. I had to get away from him. I wasn't strong enough to deny him if he locked those intense eyes on me and asked me what was wrong. I'd crumble and I knew it, and that I couldn't do.

I raced around the side of the house, practically running to flee Maddox and just get to the safety of the cottage before he came after me.

"Mom!" Max called, forcing me to pause just as the solace of my home came into sight. I turned, taking a deep breath as I moved, trying to find the calm I wanted Max to see. I looked towards the house. Max was jogging

towards me across the lawn, still dressed in his lifeguard uniform, from his job.

“Hey. Everything okay?” I asked him as he slowed to a stop before me.

“Great. Logan invited us to eat with them. He’s grilling steaks and they look so good! Where were you going? Did Maddox pick you up?”

“He did. I was heading home. I’m not really hungry,” I replied, trying to keep my smile firmly in place to reassure him.

“You need to eat more. Did you even eat before you left for work? There were no dishes in the kitchen when I got home?” he asked, sounding so much older than he was.

“Jesus, you sound like my dad!” I laughed, praying it looked real, “Well, not *my* dad, but you know...like a real dad.”

“Mom,” he sighed tiredly.

“I ate, Max! I also cleaned up after myself. You should try it sometime.”

“What did you eat?” he questioned, not for one second easing up on his suspicion.

“You do realize I’m the adult between us, right?” I tried for a light laughing tone, but my stress and exhaustion were showing and I knew it.

“Yeah, I do, but you’re also the woman who went through a major surgery last year and who’s life depends on her taking care of herself,” he pointed out, which took me aback. Of course what he was saying was true, but for him to almost reprimand me as he was, it was weird.

“Dammit Max! Just drop it!” I snapped. “I’m taking care of myself. I’m fine! Just stop trying to act like you’re grown. You’re not! You’re still a fucking child!”

“Hey! What’s going on?” I looked up and actually growled in frustration when I saw Logan jogging up behind Max.

“I’m not doing this right now!” I declared, then I turned and stormed towards home, just needing to get away from all of them. I knew they cared and I fucking hated it. I was falling apart at the seams and the last thing I needed was everyone around me, especially my kid, pointing it out to me.

I wasn't even at the door of the cottage as guilt filled me at the way I had spoken to my son. I had never spoken to him like that. I cursed at him. I yelled at him! It had been the last thing he deserved when he just wanted to look out for me.

I wasn't sure I had ever felt so ashamed of myself as I slammed open the door of the cottage and stormed inside, slamming the door closed behind me.

I dropped my purse to the hardwood floor and slid down the door, resting against it with my knees pulled up to my chest and my head pressed against them. Tears filled my eyes again and that just made me even angrier. I didn't used to cry. It wasn't who I was. Before what Callum did to me and everything that followed, I had been strong and tough, or at least I'd convinced myself I was anyway. Life threw handfuls of shit at me again and again, and I never let it break me. I stood tall, waded through it, and kept going because I had to. Because that was the hand I was dealt in life and I'd be damned if I let it break me.

Now I was a wreck. All I did was cry and fucking tremble! If I allowed myself to sleep, Callum was there in my nightmares, just waiting for me. I jumped if anyone touched me and I constantly felt afraid of everything around me. Of everyone! Even of my own fucking mind and decisions. I yelled at my son! How could I do that to him when I knew inside he was struggling too?

Logan and Maddox too. They just wanted to help and because of the mess I was inside, I was giving them insane mixed signals. I had been rude to both of them in the two weeks they'd known us, and there was no doubt in my mind they thought I was mentally unstable.

But I was so scared. Terrified. What if I let them in and they changed the way Callum had in that one night? What if they were monsters who hurt me and ruined my son even more than I was already doing? All I wanted was to protect Max and make the right decisions but I didn't trust myself to do that anymore. I didn't trust myself to do anything right then.

My exhaustion swept over me again and I flopped to the side, lying on the cool floor and pulling my knees tighter against my chest. Tears were still trickling down my cheeks but there was no sound. Everything just felt like

it was too much and I gave into it, allowing myself to slip under those waters that had been fighting for so long to pull me under. I stopped fighting and just let the water take me.

# CHAPTER 11

MAX

“What happened?” Logan asked as we both stood side by side, watching my mom practically sprinting to the cottage. She went inside and slammed the door behind her as I just stood there, a little in shock. My mom had never yelled at me like that before. Sure, I’d made her angry. I was no saint, but even when she did get mad, she never yelled. I was pretty sure it was because what I knew of her childhood had involved a lot of yelling and violence from her father. He’d been a real asshole, not that I knew much about him. My mom rarely spoke about her childhood, but I knew enough to know she had to have been strong as hell to have gotten through it.

“I pushed too hard,” I sighed.

“What do you mean?”

“I’m worried about her. I don’t think she’s really sleeping, and I never see her eating. She looks like she’s ill, and that’s bad. She had a kidney transplant. All of the doctors told her she needed to take care of herself, and she’s not, Logan. I can’t lose her,” I admitted quietly. She was all I had, and she was all of the family I needed too.

She had been the most amazing mom to me for as long as I could remember, even though she was still a kid herself when I was born. She’d never had anyone to rely on. No family or friends. She’d never had anyone to help her, but you would never know it. I had a childhood filled with happy memories of crazy adventures and fun times. Maybe we never had much money, but I never went without anything. She loved me enough for a mom and a dad, and I knew she would do anything to protect me, but I was becoming an adult now. I was twice the size of my mom, and I wanted to protect and care for her like she deserved. I just wished I was doing a better fucking job of it.

“That’s not gonna happen, bud. I don’t know what happened to your mom, but she’s obviously going through something right now. We just have to try and help her through it. Madd and I are trying, but she’s a stubborn woman,” Logan laughed, but when I looked over at him, the smile on his face was forced, and I could see the worry there.

I wished my mom would allow him and Maddox to get closer to her. They wanted to be there for her, and she needed that, especially right then. Logan had no idea how much of an understatement his words were.

My mom had gone through hell in that one weekend I had been away from her, and now I was pretty sure those days of terror lived in her head, replaying over and over again. Her nightmares proved that, as did the way she seemed to just space out and stare blankly. She jumped if I touched her when she was like that, and I hated the way she’d look to me with nothing but pure fear for that first second as she came back, before she realized it was just me.

“Yeah,” I laughed flatly. “That she is. I should go and check on her. I’ve never seen her act like that. My mom doesn’t yell,” I told him.

“She looked exhausted. Maybe try and get her to rest?” Logan suggested as he placed a reassuring hand on my shoulder.

I had only known him and Maddox for two weeks, but I liked them. As I’d told my mom the other night, I trusted them too. They were good, honest guys and they seemed to genuinely want to look out for my mom and I, even though they barely knew us. I just needed my mom to believe that too, because she was not in a good place, and as much as I wanted to be, and tried to be, I knew I could never be enough to take care of her the way she needed. I didn’t understand what she needed the way Logan and Maddox seemed to. She just needed to give them a chance, but who could blame her for being afraid to do that after what that fucker had done to her weeks before?

“I will,” I agreed with a nod. “I should go and talk to her.”

“Go ahead. I’ll keep your food warm. Just yell if you need anything. Madd and I will be on the patio,” Logan assured me as he nodded to where Maddox already sat at the table, on the patio outside their mammoth house.



“Thanks man.” I walked across the grass towards our new place, worried what I was going to say to my mom. She had been so pissed with me and I knew I had pushed her too far. I needed to apologize. She had been right when she said she was the adult. I did it because I was worried, but the way I had spoken to her hadn’t been fair. I’d treated her like she wasn’t capable when I knew she completely was. She was just having a hard time, like Logan said. I needed to go easier in my efforts to help her. Pushiness clearly would not work, and it had been disrespectful of me to treat her that way.

When I got to the door I hoped like hell it was unlocked, since my keys were back at Logan and Maddox’s, in my backpack. I tried the handle and breathed a sigh of relief when it wasn’t locked, but when I tried to push it open, something blocked it.

“Mom?” I called through the tiny gap I had made, and I tried to push again, but stopped when I realized the thing behind the door was likely my mom. What else could it be?

“Mom? Answer me!” I yelled louder. Terror gripped me when there was no response. Had she blacked out? Was something more serious than her just being tired going on? If she was sick it could be bad for her transplanted kidney. She took pills to suppress her immune system, so when she got sick her body didn’t do much to help her fight the illness. She’d had an infection a few months back that had almost turned into pneumonia. She’s spent a week in the hospital on intensive antibiotics just to get her over it.

I was freaking the fuck out as I turned to the big house and yelled to the guys loudly. I saw them both start running towards me as I again tried to push the door a little more, but it wouldn’t move now. I couldn’t hear any noise inside and that terrified me.

“MOM?” I yelled as loud as I could.

“What’s wrong?” Logan asked as he ran up beside me, Maddox right behind him.

“I...I think mom’s on the floor be-behind the door!” I gasped as tears filled my eyes. I slammed the heels of my hands into them and tried to rub away the wetness before it fell.

“It’s gonna be okay. Just breathe for me,” Logan said as he wrapped an arm over my shoulders and pulled me back from the door enough so Maddox could get closer. I watched as he dropped to the ground and pressed himself as close to the gap as he could.

“Anna?” he said softly. “Anna, can you hear me?”

When there was no answer again my heart started to pound even harder and more tears filled my eyes.

“What if she’s sick?” I gasped as I fought to speak through my panicked breathing. “Did she pass out?”

I couldn’t lose my mom! I had been so terrified when her kidneys failed. We’d been through so much with her having to go to dialysis while we waited for a kidney match. Then the surgery had been terrifying. The doctor had told us there was a chance she’d die on the table, all be it small. Those hours I waited for her to come out of that operating theatre had been the longest and most scary of my entire life.

Then when I found her at our place, covered in blood and screaming at the hands of that monster who tore her apart...

“Max!” Logan’s sharp call pulled me from the memories of that night and I turned to him with a gasp. “Your mom will be okay. Just breathe, kid. Please just take some breaths.”

“I’m going around the back!” Maddox called, but he was already running past us.

“I...I’m okay. Help my mom, Logan. Please...make her be okay,” I pleaded as I pushed away the arm he had around me and started to follow Maddox around the house.

I told myself over and over again that my mom was strong, and that she would never leave me. I knew I was probably over reacting, but my mom had always been so tough through everything. Even after the major surgery she underwent, even when she was too weak to walk to the bathroom, she’d reassured me she would be okay at every opportunity. For her to not answer me – not tell me she was going to be fine - it was wrong. I just needed to hear her tell me everything was okay, but she wasn’t doing that.

## MADDOX

My heart only started to pound out of my chest harder as I looked through the back window and saw Anna laid on the floor, right behind the door. She was pale and curled up tight. I could see her shaking from where I stood. She hadn't blacked out, but it certainly looked like she had checked out. She hadn't responded to me when I called to her, nor to Max, but it was clear from the tears on her red cheeks that she wasn't unconscious.

Maybe it was some kind of break down. I didn't know any technical terms, but I certainly knew what it was to just give in to the pain within you and just check out, and I was pretty sure that was what was happening to Anna.

"Madd?" Logan asked as he and Max appeared from around the corner.

"She's conscious, but she's not okay. I'm going in through the back doors. We'll fix them later." I didn't even give Logan time to respond before I moved to the sliding glass doors and wrenched the right one open so hard the lock broke.

I ran into the guest house and fell to my knees beside her, wincing at the pain of the damned prosthesis sitting awkwardly beneath me.

"Anna? It's Madd. Can you hear me?" I asked as I lifted one of her hands, both of which were holding her shins, pressing her legs folded up against her chest. I felt for her pulse and knew, without even counting, that it was way too fast. Her whole body was shaking, and silent tears trickled down her cheeks, but she didn't move or respond to me in any way, her eyes remaining scrunched up tight, her face pressed to her knees.

"Mom!" Max cried as he ran in behind me and dropped to my side. "Mom, I'm here. Look at me, please!" The kid was terrified, shaking almost as hard as his mom as he leaned in to press a hand against the top of her head.

"She'll be okay Max," I tried to reassure him. "She just needs some time. We're gonna take care of her."

"She's so cold," Max pointed out as he touched her forehead, smoothing his fingers across it, trying to soothe her but seeming afraid to touch her too much.

“Let’s get her off of the floor and back to our place,” Logan said. I looked up at where he stood behind me, and we shared a grim look. He knew what was going on too. He’d had the misfortune to find me in this very state a couple of times after I got out of the hospital after the attack.

“Your place?” Max questioned.

“I think you should both stay with us until your mom’s feeling better. That way Madd and I can help you take care of her,” Logan answered.

“What’s wrong with her?”

“Everything’s just gotten a little too much. She was exhausted and she’s been struggling, hasn’t she?” I asked as I looked up to Max. He nodded, tears trickling down his cheeks. He looked so much younger as he knelt at my side, scared to death for his mom. “She will get through it. We just need to stay close and make sure she knows she’s not alone. Once she’s had some sleep, she’ll feel a lot better.”

“Can you pack a bag with a few days essentials for you both?” Logan asked him, and I was grateful he gave the kid a task to focus on. It was painful to see him looking so upset and shaken.

“Yeah...okay. You’ll stay with her?” Max questioned.

“We’re not going anywhere,” I promised as I scooped Anna up from the cold floor and held her close to me. She was freezing cold and rigid in my hold. I hated seeing the pain and fear in her face. I didn’t know why, but this woman had gotten under my skin and I felt way more for her than I should after having known her for only a matter of weeks. Sure she was attractive and beautiful, but it was so much more than that. I felt like she truly saw me when she looked at me, and I didn’t think I had ever felt that way before. Her fractured parts saw mine, and rather than pitying me, she seemed to just click with me. It intrigued me. *She* intrigued me, and I just wanted to know her better. If only she’d stop running from me and my brother at every opportunity.

“Here,” Logan said as he pulled a plaid blanket from the back of the sofa and wrapped around it Anna in my arms. I pressed her closer to my body, hoping she would realize I was there - that we all were and that she wasn’t alone.

“This is bad,” I whispered to Logan as he came closer and held her hand in his, underneath the blanket. “She’s obviously been through so much more than either of us realized.”

“I told her we wouldn’t push her for answers about her past,” he reminded me.

“I know, and we won’t. But she needs to talk to someone if things have gotten this bad,” I sighed.

“Let’s just get them both settled at our place and get her through this first, yeah? Max is terrified, and even if Anna hadn’t checked out on us, she’s not taking care of herself enough. She might want to push us away for some reason, but I don’t think she can afford to right now.”

“I’d love to get my hands on the fucker who put Max and Anna through whatever hell made them as scared as they are,” I growled.

“Easy brother,” Logan warned as the heavy sound of Max running down the stairs alerted to his presence.

“Is she...?” Max nodded to his mom with worry.

“She’s warmer now,” I told him. It was all I had. She was far from okay.

“That’s good I guess,” he shrugged.

“Did you get everything you both need?” Logan asked as he moved to the bottom of the stairs and took one of the two duffel bags the kid held.

“I need mom’s meds and a phone charger,” Max told him. He was calmer now, all trace of his tears gone, but he wasn’t fooling either Logan or me. We saw his fear for his mom. We felt it too.

We watched as Max moved to the kitchen and scooped a ton of pill bottles from one of the higher cabinets into the open duffel bag he held.

“They’re all your mom’s?” I asked with shock.

“Yeah. Some are for the transplant, others are from stuff that happened while she was waiting for the transplant and...uh, other stuff.” I didn’t miss

the way he looked away from the both of us as he said the last part, and I worried what that meant. Had whoever abused the two of them caused Anna lasting injuries that required medication? Or was she on anxiety meds because of what she'd been through? Neither were good, and only increased my bloodlust to hunt down the fucker who laid hands on her.

"You know what she needs to take and when?" Logan asked.

"Yeah. I keep a log when we go to doctor appointments. I have it all written down. Mom hates me doing it, but she has so much to remember."

"You're a good kid, Max," Logan told him with a smile.

"Not good enough, obviously," Max scoffed as he glanced to his mom, and away again.

"Hey!" Logan said as he rounded the counter and stood opposite Max, placing a hand on his shoulder as he spoke. "None of this is your fault, bud. Your mom would be mad if she thought you were blaming yourself. Your mom...she just...she's having a tough time, and she needed some time to recoup. The tiredness won't have helped, but she'll be alright. You're an amazing son, Max, but you are only fifteen. You can't take everything on your young shoulders."

"I just need her to get through this and be okay," Max uttered as he dropped his gaze to the ground and swiped at his eyes.

"She will be. You're not alone. We're here and we want to help both of you. Do you believe me?" Logan asked.

"Yeah," Max nodded. "I do, but I'm not so sure my mom does."

"Then we'll convince her," I cut in. "Come on, kid. Grab the rest of your shit and let's get out of here. Logan can come back later to secure the back door."

I couldn't watch that poor young guy fall apart anymore. It hurt so fucking much to know he was so filled with worry and stress at such a young age. What had he been through to be so filled with terror for his mom? What had been done to him to make him so strong and wise beyond his years? He was fifteen. All he should be thinking about was school, girls, and whatever

sport he was into. That should be as far as his worries went, but he carried so much more on his shoulders and I got why Anna was so scared of giving him anything else to add to it all now.

She wanted to protect him in the way it seemed no one had ever done for her, and that made perfect sense, but she was trying to do it at the cost of herself - of her own happiness, wellbeing, and health, and Logan and I couldn't sit back and watch her do that any longer. It was time we stepped up even more and proved to her that we could and would protect them both if only she'd allow us to.

# CHAPTER 12

## ANNA

I sat up with a deep, violent gasp and looked all around me in panic. The image around me faded until there was just Callum over me with that knife, then he was gone too. The nightmare was unclear as I fought to breathe, but the fact that I was pressing a hand through my shirt to the rough and jagged scar beneath, told me I'd been tied to my bed again, at that monster's mercy.

"Anna?" I turned swiftly at the gentle voice and found Logan sat in a chair beside the bed I lay on. He looked exhausted.

"What?" I panted with confusion. I looked all around me and saw the darkened room I was in wasn't my own. The walls were white and the space around the bed was much bigger. Maddox was laid out on a sofa that sat before the floor to ceiling window, over which hung heavy navy drapes. "Where am I? Where's Max?" I demanded as my panic rose. Was I right not to trust these men? What had happened to me? I ripped back the comforter so I could glance down my body in complete, blinding panic, but my clothes were intact and my limbs were all free to move.

"Anna, calm down, sweetheart. You're in our house. Max is safe. He's fast asleep in the room right next door. He wanted to stay with you but he was exhausted," Logan told me calmly.

"Why am I here? What happened? Did I pass out?" I asked all at once as I racked my brain for my last memory. I wished I hadn't when I recalled myself screaming at my son in the garden. I remembered getting inside and slamming the door, but the rest was just a blank.

"Kind of. You were conscious, but you weren't responding to any of us. It was like you just checked out. I think everything just got to be too much," he explained, and shame filled me at realizing what I had once again put



Max through with my weakness. I was sure he'd have been terrified to see me that way.

"Max?" I uttered as tears filled my eyes.

"He's okay, Anna. He was a little shaken up at first. He was worried you were sick, but once Maddox assured him you would come around, he calmed down. We kept him close," Logan promised and I reached for him, grabbing his hand as he moved to take mine.

"Thank you," I stuttered between my still too fast breaths. "F-for taking care of him. I never should have put him through that. I'm sorry."

"Of course," he nodded as he held my hand in his much larger one on the bed between us. "We want to look after the both of you if you'll only allow us to. What happened wasn't your fault, Anna, but it may not have happened at all if you'd just stopped being so stubborn and trying to do everything alone. We're here and we don't want anything you're not willing to give. Let us in, please."

"I'm scared to," I whimpered as more tears threatened.

"I know you are, sweetheart. You told me before, but look what happened. You completely spaced out. It was like you weren't even there when we spoke to you. Whatever happened to you, it's too much for you to just lock away and push through. You've tried and it's not working, is it?" he asked as he leaned closer and ran his free hand through my hair.

"I guess not," I sniffled as I swiped at the tears that fell.

"Then give us a chance. I promise you that there's nothing to be afraid of. Madd and I won't hurt you. What you see is what you get with both of us. We have our own baggage that haunts us plenty, so believe me when I say we can help you with yours."

"There are things that I can't...and w-won't tell you," I warned him, and myself. No matter how close I may get to either of the Easton brothers, I could never tell them everything.

"Then tell us what you can and let us help you with that. Jesus Anna, I'd be happy if you'd just let me drive you to work and back at this point. Just give

us something so we don't have to sit back and feel so fucking useless, just watching you in pain and struggling."

"Max is struggling too. He's been through too much," I admitted.

"We know and we're gonna be here for him too. That's what we've been trying to do, and Max has allowed us to get to know him a little, but not you. I think you might be the most stubborn woman I ever met," he laughed dryly.

"Not stubborn," I denied as I clutched his hand between both of mine. "I...I was just scared to trust myself, Logan. I learned the hard way that I have become way too trusting over the years since Max was born."

"What do you mean?"

"I...I made a decision. It didn't seem like a big deal at the time, but it was the biggest mistake of my whole life and it almost cost me everything. Fuck, it cost my son way too much," I confessed.

"Some one hurt you both?" he pushed.

Images of what I remembered of those two days and nights played out in my mind like flashes of strobe in a club and I slammed my eyes closed to try and block them out.

"I can't...I'm sorry," I whispered tearfully.

"Sshh. It's okay. You don't have to. Just breathe. We're here, Madd and I. We'll keep you both safe now," Logan soothed as he stood and scooped me into his arms so effortlessly. He sat on the bed and set me in his lap, holding me close as I fought back those damned images and the fear they sent coursing throughout my body.

Eventually, Logan's comfort worked to push away the memories of the past and I found myself relaxing against him, my eyes getting heavy as he continuously ran his hand up and down my back, almost rhythmically.

"I'm falling asleep," I uttered to him in warning. I didn't know how long he had been holding me, but I was pretty sure his legs had to be going numb with my ass pressed against them.

"That's okay. Sleep, sweetheart. You need to rest," Logan told me gently.

“Max...”

“He’ll be fine. We’ve got him. We’ve got both of you. Stop worrying and just rest for me,” he cut in, quelling all of my arguments and lulling me to sleep with the peace he surrounded me with.

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The second I opened my eyes the next time and saw that it was light enough in the room to suggest I’d slept right through the evening and night, I felt embarrassed. I remembered waking to Logan during the night, and I remembered what he’d said about me freaking out on them all and zoning out completely. How could I allow that to happen? How *did* it happen? Was the chaos so bad in my head that my brain just shut down on me? Is that what had happened? Whatever it was, it was embarrassing to know my son and two hot neighbors had been forced to care for me the entire time.

I lifted my head from under the blanket that now covered me and looked all around the room, which was cast in sunlight beaming in around the thick curtains. The space was still dim, but light enough to be sure Maddox and Logan weren’t in there with me, much to my relief. I wasn’t sure how I was going to face them again after this.

I sat up completely and pushed back the covers. Underneath I was dressed in the jean shorts and black t-shirt I had worn to work the day before. I was covered with a sheen of sweat, though I had no idea if that was from more nightmares that had haunted my sleep, or because I was just too hot. Either way, I was a hot mess. My hair was loose and hung wildly around my face, and as I lifted a hand to push it behind my ear, I saw how badly my hands still shook before me.

It made sense of course. I hadn’t eaten the day before, despite the lies I told Max, and I’d gone into some kind of mental break down just to end the whole charade. I wasn’t okay, and I was pretty sure I wouldn’t be able to pretend otherwise that day, at least not to anyone with eyes anyway.

I slipped from the bed and buried my feet in the thickest, softest carpet that I had ever walked on. The rest of the room around me screamed luxury too, even with its stark white walls. The solid wood furniture looked like antiques, the tall headboard of the bed I had just gotten out of, carved intricately with the most detailed and perfect flowers. Even the sheets,

underneath where my hand still rested on them, were soft, almost like silk, but without the shininess. It all far exceeded anything I had ever experienced.

I was still leaning slightly on the bed, feeling a little unsteady on my feet when the door opened quietly. I froze, worried Maddox or Logan would walk in, but I breathed a sigh of relief when it was just Max.

“Mom, you’re up. How are you feeling?” he asked as he closed the bedroom door behind him then hurried over to me. I stepped back, settling myself on the edge of the bed, not wanting him to see how unsteady I felt when I stood, then opened my arms for him, desperate just to hold him.

“I’m okay now. I’m so sorry about yesterday...about the yelling and everything that happened after.”

“I was just worried about you. You don’t have to be sorry,” he told me as he leaned in and hugged me just as tight as I hugged him.

“I must have scared you though. I never should have allowed things to get to that point. You were right, Max. I have to do better at taking care of myself. I’ve just been such a mess since...well, you know.”

“Yeah,” he nodded as he pulled back and sat beside me instead. “I get that and you have every right to be kinda messed up after what happened. I’m sorry I kept getting on at you about stuff. I just wanted you to be okay.”

“I am okay. You know me. I’ll get through this. I promise I’m not gonna let things get as bad as they were yesterday, okay?” I told him, hating to see how tired he looked. There were dark smudges under his eyes and he was too pale. That was on me.

“I know I’m just a kid to you, mom, but you can talk to me, you know? I’m old enough to be here for you when you need me, just the way you’ve always been there for me.”

“I know, honey. I should never have said what I said to you. You’re so much wiser and more mature than fifteen. We’ve been through a lot together, huh?” I sighed.

“Yep. We’re a team, right?” he asked, and I smiled for real this time as I pulled him into my side. Of course he was a head above me, so he had to

duck down just to put his head on my shoulder and let me hold him the way I wanted to.

“Right, and we always will be. No matter how old you get, or how much of a giant you grow to be, I will always be here for you, Max, and I will never stop trying to protect you,” I pledged.

“I know,” he told me as he lifted his head and kissed my cheek. He smiled gently at me and once again I saw the man he was becoming overtaking the kid I knew so well. “Do you feel up to coming down for breakfast? Logan sent me to check on you and ask.”

“He cooked?” I asked with surprise.

“I think he and Maddox made every breakfast food known to man,” he laughed. “They’re worried about you too. They stayed with you all night in here.”

“You don’t have to try and talk them up to me anymore, son,” I laughed. “I’m gonna cut them a break and stop hiding from them. You’ve all got me convinced.”

“Well thank fuck for that!”

“Max! Language!” I snapped. Max just laughed as he got to his feet and faced me.

“I brought you some stuff from home so you can change. I think I got everything, but I can run back to the house if you need something else,” he explained as he nodded to a bag sitting in the corner of the room. “Your pills are all downstairs. Me and Maddox managed to bring you round enough to take the important ones last night, so you didn’t miss any.”

“Thank you,” I sighed as I realized what an idiot I was. I couldn’t afford to just check out of my life when that very life relied on me regularly taking medications. Just one missed immunosuppressant and my transplanted kidney could start to reject. The last thing I needed right then was to get sick again and face months, or even years of dialysis until another donor match came along, all because of my own selfish stupidity.

“Get cleaned up and changed. The guys said to use anything you need. We’ll be in the kitchen when you’re ready. You can call my cell if you need

me.”

“I won’t be too long,” I assured him, so amazed how grown up and strong he was right there in that moment, and throughout everything that had happened in the last month. I never would have gotten through any of it as much as I had without him at my side. Hell, without him I may never even have survived that weekend of torture.

He nodded and left the room, closing the door behind him. I forced myself to stand and find my balance. I wasn’t at my best right then, feeling weak and shaken after the events of the evening before, but I was resolved to find myself again in the chaos, even if that meant taking Logan up on that offer to allow him and Madd to help me. Maybe I couldn’t trust my own decisions, but my son was smart. Maybe I could trust his intuition, just for now. Just until I felt strong enough to trust myself again.

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I walked hesitantly down the stairs and towards where I was pretty sure the kitchen was. I hadn’t been in that section of the big house before, and it was just making me feel even more like I didn’t belong there, the more I saw of it.

I had only ever really been in the kitchen when Maddox fixed up my hands, and to help clear up when we’d had dinner there. I had never fully taken in just how grand the place really was.

Downstairs the floors were not just hardwood, but all polished parquet, and fancy. Almost chandelier like, modern light fittings hung down from the tall and vast ceilings. The furniture throughout was all matching to the high class, solid oak, handmade pieces I had seen the first time Maddox rushed me through the lounge. *How rich were Logan and Maddox?* I thought again and again. I walked down a small hallway that led off of the large open plan living space, just being nosy really, but also wanting to give myself a few more seconds before I found Logan and Maddox and had to face them.

There were a couple of doors off of that short hallway, one of which was ajar. When I peeked inside I could see it was a sizeable office, with bookshelves lining three walls, and a vast picture window overlooking the garden. It looked like a perfect place to cuddle up with a blanket, a glass of

wine, and a good book. Two other doors were closed, so I didn't open them. I didn't want to snoop too much.

Thankfully, the quick shower I took seemed to have restored me a little, and I was feeling steadier on my feet, even if the shaking wouldn't stop. I'd dressed in the plain, black yoga pants and cropped pink hoody I usually wore to work out. Clearly my son had no idea what a woman needed over night, but I was clean and decent, even if I did look pale and messy with my still wet hair scraped back and piled on top of my head. I didn't even have any shoes or socks, and definitely no makeup to hide how ghostly my complexion was.

I felt completely underdressed as I reached the end of the hall where I was pretty sure the last door led into the back of the kitchen. I had seen the door last time I was in there and pondered where it could lead to.

It was unsettling being there. It was the fanciest house I'd ever been, and I was dressed in my workout clothes, about to face the two guys who had been forced to scrape my near catatonic ass off of the floor of my home, take me in, and stay with me all night. It was far from ideal.

"I'm gonna go and check on her," I heard Maddox call loudly, then before I could move, the kitchen door thrust open and right into me, knocking me sideways into the wall with an escaped gasp of shock.

Mercifully, I managed to save myself against the wall and didn't end up on my ass as Maddox peered around the slightly open door and looked to me.

"Anna! Fuck! Sorry." He managed to slide his body through the gap in the door, not opening it any further, despite me no longer being in the path of it. He grabbed my arms and pulled me to my feet, then held me there while he looked me up and down. "Are you hurt?" he fussed.

"It's fine. I'm okay," I assured him. "Guess that'll teach me to hesitate outside a closed door," I added with a laugh that fell flat.

"What happened?" Logan asked as he opened the door all of the way and peered out at me.

"Nothing. I'm good. Sorry I took so long," I answered as I slipped free of Maddox's hold and pushed past Logan into the kitchen.

“Why were you hesitating?” Maddox asked as both guys followed right behind me. Logan went back to where he was cooking something at the stove, and Maddox sat at the counter, watching me way too closely, waiting for my answer.

“Do you really need to ask?” I scoffed as I leant back against the wall, leaving a few feet of distance between all of us. It wasn’t that I didn’t trust them, it was that I didn’t trust myself around them. I wanted them. Both of them, and that was bad. Wanting one of them would be bad enough, but both of them? That was far from a realistic prospect, even if I wasn’t celibate. Which I was.

“Don’t even start with any bullshit about last night, Anna. We’re both just glad we were there,” Logan told me.

“I don’t even know what happened, but losing my shit so badly that even my body gave up on me, isn’t exactly my finest moment,” I pointed out.

“I’m sure it wasn’t, but it did happen, and none of us want to just pretend it didn’t. We need to do everything we can to see it doesn’t happen again,” he told me, and I couldn’t exactly argue. He wasn’t wrong.

“Where’s Max?” I asked as I looked around me, not wanting to even discuss what happened in front of him. He’d been through enough.

“He went to your place to grab his bag for work. He’ll be back soon,” Maddox told me.

“Then can we not discuss this now, at least? I don’t want to upset Max anymore than I already have,” I almost pleaded.

“Fine, but after he’s gone to work we need to talk,” Maddox sighed like an exhausted parent. It wasn’t even like I could be annoyed with him for it though. I hadn’t really been doing my best impression of a responsible adult since either of them met me.

“Why do I feel like I’m in trouble?” I asked with a smirk.

“Maybe because you are,” Maddox threw back and when I turned to him he was looking at me with his eyebrows raised and no sign of humor on his face. “You scared us all last night, It’s not happening again,” he added, and it sounded like a warning, not a promise. It should have scared me, but



instead it had heat flooding my body and flushing my cheeks as he once again wrapped his spell all around me. It was a reminder of how dangerous it was to get close to either of these brothers. My feelings for them ran deeper than anything I had ever felt, romantically, for any guy I ever knew, and I was finding it harder and harder to push back against. But I had to, didn't I?

Keeping men at arm's length was the only way I could see to protect myself and my son from the danger they had proven to be in my life thus far. Surely with the strength of my feelings for the Easton brothers, giving into them could only lead to more pain and betrayal for me and for Max when they realized that I truly was trash, and tossed me aside. I didn't want to put myself through that, and I damn well refused for my son to suffer it. Friends. That's all Logan and Maddox Easton could ever be. Nothing more. No matter how much I craved more.

# CHAPTER 13

ANNA

Max left for work as soon as we were all finished eating. He said a friend was picking him up, and I was both pleased and surprised when I peeked out of the window to see the ‘friend’ who picked him up was a young girl, though she was obviously older than Max if she was driving.

“Is that his girlfriend?” Maddox asked, startling me. When I dropped the slat of the blind I’d been spying through and turned, I found him right behind me, so close I almost smashed into him.

“Max has a girlfriend?” I asked as I instantly took a step back, and then walked around Madd to get away from him. I couldn’t be that close. It was too much. *He* was too much - but in all of the best and most sinful ways.

“Don’t know,” Maddox shrugged as he started following me back to the kitchen. “He talks a lot about some girl he works with. I don’t remember her name.”

“Jade. She works as a lifeguard too. Max told me they’re just friends, but he definitely has a major crush on her,” Logan added, obviously having heard our conversation.

“I didn’t know,” I admitted. Max had barely spoken to me other than to tell me how worried he was about me since we moved there. Part of me was relieved he had been talking to the guys at least, but a part of me was wracked with guilt that he had felt he couldn’t come to me with the things going on in his new life. He had always told me everything, and now he felt he couldn’t. That had to change.

“It’s not a big deal, Anna. She’s just a friend,” Maddox told me, his eyes, filled with sympathy, locked on mine.

“I’ve been a useless mom to him lately. He used to tell me everything,” I sighed, sinking down into a stool at the island counter that filled the center

of the huge open space.

“He’s a fifteen, almost sixteen, year old kid. I really doubt he told you everything,” Logan chuckled as he closed the dishwasher.

“Max is fine, Anna. You need to stop dragging yourself through that guilt trip over and over again,” Maddox told me as he took the seat kitty corner to me and placed his much bigger hand over mine. His olive skin tone contrasted so deeply against my own pale coloring.

“He’s not fine. He’s just doing much better at hiding what he’s been through than I am.”

“Maybe if we knew exactly what happened, we could help him through it. Help both of you through it,” Madd pushed.

“No,” I said flatly, ripping my hand out from beneath his and crossing my arms over my chest. “That’s not going to happen, so if that’s what you want, you’re gonna be shit out of luck,” I told him snarkily, turning a glare to Logan for good measure too.

“You know that’s not what we want, sweetheart,” Logan sighed as he approached and took the stool beside me, leaning in to me as close as he could without touching me. “We just want to be here for you, and for Max. We don’t have any ulterior motives here.”

“I need to know you’re safe,” Maddox added, and when I turned to him his face looked filled with concern.

“But why?” I demanded. “I don’t even get this. You don’t know me, yet you rent that beautiful place to me for a fraction of what it’s worth, look out for my son and me from the day you met us, and now all of this. Why?”

“We both care about you, Anna,” Logan answered, his hand finding mine on the counter and intertwining our fingers. “You know that, don’t you?”

“She knows,” Maddox cut in before I could utter a word.

“You...you mean you want to get in my pants? Is that it?” I asked with irritation. That had to be it, right? They were obviously wealthy, and very clearly panty-meltingly hot and handsome. They could get pretty much any girl they turned those spectacular smiles on. Why would they want me, except for the fact that it was convenient? Maybe they made a bet or

something. It wouldn't be the first time for me. In high school I was the butt of many a joke, and several idiotic bets, as the trailer trash kid with scruffy clothes and a bad attitude. Guys seemed to think it would be quite the conquest to get me into bed. Thankfully, life with my father had made me smart and street wise enough to never fall for it.

"No!" Logan cried at the exact same time his brother smirked my way. Logan looked horrified when he saw his brothers face. He grabbed my hand and pulled it closer to his body, snagging my attention. "No, Anna. Maddox doesn't want that either, he's just being an ass."

"The fuck I don't," Maddox bit back. "Of course I want to get my hands on your body, Anna. What red blooded man wouldn't? You're gorgeous." I turned to him with an exaggerated roll of my eyes.

"Madd!" Logan snapped.

"What? You don't think she's perfection, brother?"

"No! I mean....yes, of course. But what I was trying to say is that's not why we care about you, Anna. Of course you're beautiful and sexy, and what Madd said is true, we're both into you, but that's not why we're trying to help. Not the only reason, anyway." Logan floundered.

"Yeah, what he said," Maddox agreed, with another smirk that had heat rushing through me.

"You're into me?" I uttered with complete confusion. "Both of you?" I had to have taken what Logan said the wrong way.

"Shit. I probably shouldn't have worded it like that. I know it's sounds odd, but Madd and I, we have had relationships like that in the past. It feels kinda normal to us I guess?" Logan shrugged as he watched me like he feared I'd flee.

*Was I going to? The jury was still out. Both of them and me? In one relationship?*

"How would that...do you...I mean, you're brothers?" I stuttered as I tried to take it all in.

"It was a while ago now, but the couple of short relationships we had together involved us being with the same woman, but never at the same

time....not when it comes to sex. Does that make sense?" Logan asked, seeming a little flustered himself.

"Yeah, I guess," I nodded. "I just...this is crazy, you know? I've been here two weeks. Is that what you want...with me? Both of you? Is that why..."

"Jesus Anna, just breathe. We're not asking you to join our sex cult or anything. We're not asking for anything but the chance to get to know you, and for you to know us. We're just being upfront with you because you asked," Maddox told me, and I realized I was freaking out slightly. And maybe overreacting a little too. But seriously? Did they just say they wanted to be in some kind of ménage relationship with me?

"I shouldn't have asked," I uttered more to myself, but it came out loud enough for them both to hear, and Logan just chuckled.

"How about for now we just table those questions and answers?" Madd offered and I eagerly nodded. Anything to change the subject before my head exploded.

"Let's talk about last night," he went on, and I looked up to him with resignation.

"I'm so sorry," I told them both with some shame. "I honestly don't know what happened. I swear I've never done that before."

"Like I told you last night, you have nothing to apologize for, so please don't. We're just worried about you. I know you don't want to talk to us about the past, but maybe you should talk to someone."

"There's no need. I really am all good. It was just a rough day yesterday," I lied. What else could I do? I was a long way from 'all good' and I knew it, but I wasn't going to tell that to two men I barely knew. And even if I wanted to, I wouldn't. I couldn't.

"We already told you we won't make you tell us anything, beautiful, but please don't lie to us. We both saw you last night, so we know you're far from 'all good,'" Maddox sighed tiredly.

"You barely know me. You have no idea what I am and am not!" I snapped defensively. It was easier than breaking down and telling them how right they were.

“I know what happened to you last night though, Anna. I’ve been through what happened to you more than once after the attack,” Maddox admitted and I felt Logan’s whole body tense at my side.

“The attack?” Maybe I shouldn’t have pushed when I refused to give them anything of my past, but I needed to know. I needed to understand the pain I saw in Maddox’s face sometimes when he looked at me. I needed to understand his fear that seemed to mirror my own almost exactly.

Logan had told me, during the night I found Maddox drunk in the garden, that there had been an incident that ended Maddox’s career. I suspected this was that incident.

“Yeah. I lived in Los Angeles before this. I was S.W.A.T with the LAPD,” Maddox started, but it felt like it pained him to speak every word and I found myself seeking out his hand, which sat in his lap, and sliding my own into it, just needing him to know I was with him. “I’d always wanted to be a cop, which was ironic considering how we grew up,” he laughed and looked to Logan. I did too and Logan explained,

“Our parents were criminals. White collar criminals. Our dad ran a con basically that duped people out of money with promises of investments in these elaborate hotel developments. He was convincing, especially with our mom on his arm, selling the tale right along with him. They moved from town to town, mixing with high society and carefully getting wealthy clients invested in their schemes, all of which were nothing more than the paper they were printed on.

“It was easy for them, since they both came from wealthy families. This place belonged to our grandfather on our mom’s side. Our Dad’s family were pretty wealthy too.”

“But why? I mean, if they were wealthy...?”

“Our mom was cut off from her family when she chose to marry our dad. They met in college and fell in love, but our grandfather never approved of dear old dad, and he told mom she wouldn’t get a single cent if she chose to marry him. She did anyway and never spoke to her family again. Dad got a monthly allowance from the estate of his wealthy parents for life until they died, then he’d inherit everything, but our grandparents were pretty young. I

think they're still alive now to be honest," Maddox went on, looking to Logan for confirmation.

"Were last I checked," he agreed with a nod.

"Last you checked? You don't see them?" I asked.

"No. We've never even met them. I guess they meant it when they told my mom they'd never wanted anything else to do with her," Maddox shrugged.

"Anyway, mom and dad eventually got caught by a potential investor who looked into the hotel development plans a little deeper than usual. They were arrested when I was ten and Madd was eight. Our parents never stood a chance of fighting the charges when the cops uncovered countless people they'd stolen from across the country. They went to jail and we went into the system."

"Your grandparents?" I questioned.

"Didn't want anything to do with us," Maddox cut in.

"At first we were put in a foster family together. It was a shock to the system for both of us, coming from the wealth we were used to, instead living in a place that barely fit anyone in and leaked when it rained. The foster parents weren't abusive or anything, but they could care less about anything more than making sure we ate enough to survive," Logan explained.

"When I hit my teens they decided I was too much trouble after I got into a fight at school. I was taken away from there and from Madd." I could hear the pain in Logan's voice as he spoke of being separated from his brother. I could hear it so clearly I felt the pain of it myself. Maybe that was why they were so close? Maybe why they did everything together, including relationships, apparently.

"How long were you separated for?" I asked reluctantly.

"Too long," Logan almost growled. "I got bounced between group homes for a while, until I decided enough was enough. I split and managed to hitch hike to LA, far enough from my past for anyone to come looking for me to drag me back again. I managed to get some work unloading deliveries, and

restocking bars. Paid under the counter shit. Thankfully, I was pretty big for my age so no one even realized how young I really was.”

“And how young were you?”

“Almost fifteen. Once I had enough money I jumped on a bus back to the foster home I left Madd in. He was still there, thank fuck. We ran that night, and I had the money to get us both back to L.A.”

“You both survived alone after that?” I gasped. Logan wasn’t even as old as Max and he was responsible for his little brother. How did they manage that?

“It wasn’t easy, but it was so much better than being apart from each other. Logan found work and he brought me along to the places I could earn something at too. Sometimes we’d have enough to find a hotel or motel to sleep in. Most of the time we slept rough. We survived, and we even finished high school with some extensive lies about our parents working away a lot.

“When Logan left high school he worked days at a diner, and nights at this club in the city. He made enough to get us an apartment and things got better after that. I worked my way through college, with a few scholarships along the way, then I joined the academy. I think I wanted to be a cop because I felt this need to do some good, I guess. Maybe to counteract what our parents did, or maybe just to try and catch thieves and criminals like them. I’m not sure, I just know it’s all I ever wanted.”

“What happened?” I asked, in little more than a whisper, unsure I really wanted to know. Logan and Maddox had clearly been through enough in their lives before they even got to adulthood. I didn’t want to hear about anything else happening to either of them. It wasn’t fair, but then I knew only too well that life never was.

“I made it. Even made it into S.W.A.T. I had a team that felt like family to me, and a career I loved and planned to do until I was too old to keep going. Logan was in the city too, managing the club he started working at straight out of school. We lived in a converted warehouse apartment we loved, close to the beach and things were good, weren’t they?” Maddox asked his brother, who just nodded with a look of sadness. “Then I fucked it all up,” Maddox sighed.



“Madd. Don’t. You didn’t do a damned thing wrong,” Logan growled, and I suspected he had said those same words countless times to his brother since whatever had happened.

“I was an idiot. I should have realized.”

“Realized what?” I asked.

“One night after my shift I went to the bar across the street for a drink. I was headed to meet Logan at the club, but it was early,” Maddox began, and when I looked at him, his eyes were no longer on me or Logan. He was staring blankly past me, clearly reliving what happened that night. “This cute woman came over and sat beside me at the bar. She started talking to me and she seemed nice. I wasn’t really interested in it going anywhere, since Logan and I had just split with a girl we’d been seeing together for a few months.”

“We were a little burned from the break up, since we’d both really liked the girl we were seeing, Hannah, and we thought it was going well. It really knocked us when one night she turned up at our place, and simply told us she was seeing someone else. I’m still not sure what went wrong to be honest, but she just left after announcing that, refusing to explain any further, or even talk to us. She walked out and we never saw her again,” Logan explained.

“Sounds like a lucky escape if you ask me,” I told them both confidently. Why would anyone walk away from Maddox and Logan? Well, anyone who didn’t live in the midst of the shit show I was caught in right then, anyway? If I were free and able to pursue the relationship the guys had mentioned to me earlier, you can bet your ass I’d have dived on them. Things were just too complicated though.

“Yeah, probably,” Logan chuckled.

“Anyway, I chatted to the woman at the bar for around an hour. She bought me a drink and I bought her one, but I made it pretty clear I wasn’t looking for anything and she seemed good with that. I was half watching the game on the screen over the bar and listening to her talk about the salon that she worked at, when all of a sudden she leapt into my lap and smashed her lips against mine. I had no idea what she was doing, but I pulled away and

stood, putting her on her feet so I could get away, but she got what she wanted.”

“What? To kiss you?” I asked confused. It was not cool that the girl took liberties with Madd when he’d made things clear to her, but I didn’t understand how it ended his career and left him as jumpy and paranoid as he sometimes became.

“To kiss me at the exact moment her husband walked in to the bar,” Maddox replied angrily. “She’d caught her husband cheating on her, checked his cell or something. I don’t really know, but she decided to get revenge. Her husband was a detective with narcotics, and he and his buddies always came into the bar at the same time on a Friday night. She set me up, timed it all perfectly so the second she saw him coming, she could jump into my lap and make it look like I was all over her.”

“No way!” I gasped. “That’s insane. What happened?”

“I tried to explain the second the guy charged forward and started yelling, but he wasn’t listening. He went to hit me and I dodged him, still trying to explain it wasn’t what it looked like. The husband went for me again, spoiling for a fight as his wife just stood aside happily watching. I managed to get the upper hand, since I was way fitter than him, and his buddies pulled him away. I grabbed my shit and left the bar as quickly as I could, not wanting to get into shit for fighting with another cop. My career was everything to me and I refused to have it fucked up by what had happened.”

“But it wasn’t over?” I guessed, and Maddox shook his head as he lowered his gaze and absently ran his hand back and forth through his hair.

“Madd came to the club to meet me. He walked because he’d had a few drinks, and it was only a few blocks. He made it two of those blocks before that fucker smashed into Madd with his car on a quieter back street.”

“He followed me from the bar. I didn’t realize. I think I was still trying to make sense of what the fuck just happened and I was distracted. The car...it hit me head on, but he wasn’t going that fast. I bounced off of the windshield and into the street hitting my head pretty hard as I landed on the concrete. I must have blacked out because...because when I opened my eyes that guy...the woman’s husband...was over me, beating the shit out of me. I managed to get out from under him and get a few hits in, but I could

barely see straight and my left shoulder was dislocated. I hit the guy a few times and I heard him run. His car door slammed and I thought that was the end of it. I collapsed onto the sidewalk, my head fucked up and my vision a mess. I pulled my cell out to call Logan, but I never even unlocked the screen before I heard the car coming towards me again. I tried to roll out of the way, but I was too slow. He ran me clean over with the car, but I only remember the impact of it hitting me before I blacked out. Apparently he reversed back over me when I was down.”

“Oh God!” I cried as tears, which had filled my eyes, ran free down my cheeks. “I’m so sorry, Madd,” I whispered as I got to my feet and went to him, wrapping my arms as tight as I could around his waist. “Please tell me he was caught,” I pleaded as I clung to Madd but looked to Logan.

“He was arrested the next day when Maddox woke up and managed to tell the detectives everything. He was charged with attempted murder and he’s in jail right now, but he got off too fucking easy if you ask me.” Logan hissed angrily.

“A cop will not fare well in the system. Trust me, he’s paying for what he did,” Maddox said.

“Not enough. It’ll never be enough for what him and his bitch wife did to you!”

“Did she get charged with anything?” I asked.

“Nah. Nothing they could charge her with,” Maddox shrugged.

“So that’s what ended your career?” I pushed.

“Losing a leg, and a brain injury that makes me paranoid and prone to violent outbursts lost me my career. I was medically retired from the force and given a shitty pension to live on.”

“You lost a leg?” I was crying pretty hard now. One woman’s idiotic idea of revenge against her asshole husband had cost Maddox so much. He was such a good man, and he never deserved any of what happened to him. I hurt for him. Suddenly, the way he’d been since we met him, the drinking, and the mood swings, the way he looked at me so knowingly, and seemed to see me so clearly, it all made so much more sense.

“Below the knee amputation. They tried to save it, but after that fucker went over me twice, there wasn’t much left to save. I have a prosthesis now,” Maddox sighed, almost like he was ashamed to admit to it.

“I didn’t even realize. Does it hurt?”

“It did when I first got out of the hospital, but then the old man died and left us everything. I was able to get a consultation with a private specialist and get a whole new prosthesis. That helped a lot. There’s still some pain, but not as much.”

“The old man? Your grandfather?”

“Yeah. Apparently he had an attack of conscience about abandoning his only kid when she married our Dad. Since mom was gone, he left the house and all of his inheritance to Maddox and I. We moved here after everything and decided to start over. I bought the bar to keep me busy and Maddox worked on the guest house to get it fixed up. Renting the place out at the price we did was about us wanting to help someone who needed a hand, just like we had needed so many times in our early lives.”

“And your parents?”

“Mom died of a heart attack in prison about five years ago. Dad got out just after that, but we haven’t spoken to either of them since the day they were charged in court, and they never reached out to us,” Logan replied.

“They weren’t exactly parent material. They gave us everything we ever needed or wanted, but that was where it stopped. There wasn’t any love or affection from them. Logan and I were basically raised by nannies and each other,” Maddox added.

“I’m so sorry for everything you’ve both been through,” I sighed as I returned to my seat between them. “What happened to you, Madd. I...I can’t even...there aren’t words for how terrible it was. That woman...the wife...she should have been sent to prison too.”

“Couldn’t agree more,” Logan announced.

“Anyway...” Maddox said, pulling our attention back to him. “...the reason for this long and depressing tale of woe was to make you see that you’re not alone in what happened last night to you. I suffer with PTSD after what

happened to me, and I've zoned out on Logan more than once when the memories and my own destructive thoughts just become too much for me to deal with anymore. I've had panic attacks and I'm paranoid as fuck about security and keeping the people I care about safe. I have issues, Anna. A fucking ton of them. We get what you're going through, even if we don't know why."

"He's right, sweetheart. You don't have to worry about us seeing what you're dealing with, because it won't be anything we haven't already dealt with."

"You guys are too nice," I sighed with a sad smile to each of them.

"Not sure anyone has ever called Maddox 'nice,'" Logan laughed.

"He is nice, to Max and I anyway," I defended. "I guess what I meant to say was thank you. Thank you for being here for me and Max, and for giving us a place to live that's beautiful and feels safe. Thank you for being honest with me, and patient. I know I've been a bit of a bitch since we moved here, but I just...I wanted to be careful. There's only me, you know? There's only ever been me to keep Max safe and to give him what he needs. I was doing okay at it until recently, but I...I fucked up and I can't ever allow myself to do that again."

"You don't need to protect your son from us, baby. We'd never hurt either of you," Maddox told me firmly.

"I think I'm actually starting to believe you," I told them honestly. I shouldn't. I knew I absolutely should not, but God help me, I really was beginning to trust them. It was like a part of that spell they seemed so able to ensnare me in, and try as I might to pull away, and maintain a distance, I just couldn't seem to make it happen. They were luring me closer and closer to them, and I wasn't sure I even wanted to fight it any more, which terrified me.

# CHAPTER 14

ANNA

I wasn't sure exactly how I left the hardware store after my shift that afternoon. Confused was definitely in there, along with anger too. Anger for Maddox and all he'd been through at the hands of that insane couple he hadn't even known. Anger for both Madd and Logan, and the family that should have loved them, instead abandoning them to a care system that separated them and ultimately led to them living for years on the streets.

I was confused by what they said about being into me. Don't get me wrong, I didn't believe I was hideous or anything, but I was no supermodel either. I was short, and too thin after the last month or so of barely being able to eat. I left pale as a skin tone a few weeks back too, and was getting more to the 'deathly pale' kind of pallor. Even without all of that, I wasn't curvy or sexy. I did have a good pair of boobs for someone as slight as me, but that was about it. Logan and Maddox...well, they were like models, and not those too slim pretty boys on catwalks, but like models on the covers of those fancy sports magazines, all muscle, bronzed skin, and sexy, alluring smiles. It wasn't an exaggeration when I said they could have their pick of women, so I had no idea why they would be drawn to me.

Then there was the whole ménage relationship thing. Was that even a thing? I thought I remembered reading something like that in a romance novel before, but it wasn't anything I had ever known of in real life. The guys had told me they'd had relationships like that before, so obviously they made it work to some extent, but long term? I wasn't so convinced. What would people think of me if I were in a relationship with two guys? What would Max think about it? Hence the confusion I was also feeling.

By the time I pulled the car in through the gates of the house I was giving myself a headache with the inane but constant thoughts about what the guys had said to me. Did I even want to pursue a relationship right then? I had sworn off men, and rightfully so after what happened, but it was becoming

so hard to deny myself the feelings that were building between Logan, Maddox, and I.

I could see that Logan and Maddox were cooking on the grill out on the patio again as I drove around the side of the main house, towards the cottage. Max was with them, laughing uproariously at something, and I smiled at seeing him so filled with happiness and light once again. I may be questioning if the Easton brothers were good for me, but I had no doubt they were helping my son. He was so much more relaxed and at ease when he was with them, and I wanted that for him.

He'd had no male role models in his life, which is why, I suspected, he had latched on to Madd and Logan as fast as he had, but it was good for him. I was pretty sure Logan and Maddox were about the best men I had ever known and I was good with them getting to know Max.

Maddox came jogging across the perfectly cut lawn to me before I had even pulled into our parking spot outside the cottage. By the time I stepped out he was almost to me, and I marveled at how easily he ran, knowing that he was doing so on a prosthesis and not his own lower leg. I didn't even know which leg it was, and I only watched close enough right then, trying to figure it out, because he had told me about it. I guessed it was his left leg since he took slightly shorter steps on that side, but it was tough to tell when he had it covered in his perfectly fitting black jeans.

"Hey," I greeted with a smile. He'd paired his black jeans with a hugging white t-shirt that clung in all the best ways to his muscular frame beneath. Him jogging towards me with a relaxed smile on his face and his focus solely on me would definitely replay in at least part of my dreams that night, I was sure.

"Everything okay?" he asked when he reached me and slowed to a stop. I was taken aback when he leaned in and softly kissed my cheek, the sensation of his coarse stubble against my skin making me instantly come alight inside.

"Good," I nodded. "Are we grilling again?"

"That's pretty much the only way Logan and I know to cook anything other than breakfast," he laughed. "It'll be the red meat that gets us in the end, for sure."

“It’s gonna get me too if I keep eating those monster steaks you buy. You should let me cook sometime. I’m not amazing or anything, but I know a few recipes and the break from steaks might unclog some of your arteries,” I joked.

“Maybe at the weekend, when you don’t have to work,” he suggested. I smiled as I grabbed my purse from the back of the car, then locked it up.

“I only work four hours a day, Madd,” I reminded him.

“I know that, but I also know you’re barely sleeping or eating right now, so I don’t want you to push yourself, okay? You need to rest when you can. Logan and I want to see you get stronger.”

“‘I want’ never gets,” I threw back at him as we both walked across the lawn towards the big house. I wasn’t exactly thrilled with the patronizing tone Madd had taken with me, but I did know he and his brother were worried about me, and I didn’t really have a leg to stand on when it came to arguing I was okay. They knew the truth of it.

“Fine smart ass,” Maddox laughed as he wrapped his arm around my shoulders and pulled me into his side playfully. “Please could you stop pushing yourself, and rest as much as possible? Logan and I would very much like if you got a little stronger and healthier.”

“I’ll take your request under advisement,” I joked again as I leaned into his side, desperately seeking just a little of the comfort I felt when he or Logan held me.

“Hey mom!” Max yelled animatedly as he came closer with a wide smile on his face. “I got invited to a party tonight. It’s gonna be kids from my new school and some of the people I work with at the pool. I can go, right?” he asked, throwing me his best puppy dog eyes for good measure.

“Where is it?” I asked.

“This other kid’s having it at his house. Jade said he has a deck right near the water.”

“*We* have a deck right near the water,” I reminded him with a roll of my eyes. “Will the party be supervised?”



“For sure. His parents will be there. Please mom. It’s the perfect chance for me to get to know more people before school starts,” he pleaded.

“Fine, but I want the address of where you’ll be, and you’d better answer your cell if I call you. No drinking,” I told him. I trusted him to be responsible, and it would be good for him to make some friends before school started the next week.

“Thank you! I have to text Jade!” With that he ran to me and slammed a kiss on my cheek, then he was gone, racing for our place, presumably to change his clothes from the lifeguard t-shirt he still wore.

“This place isn’t known for wild, out of control teen parties, right?” I asked, only half joking as I looked between Logan and Maddox, both of whom now stood near the grill.

“He’ll be fine. There’s not much trouble kids can get in to around here,” Logan assured me.

“Plus, I already told him I’d drop him off and pick him up. I’ll make sure to talk to the other kids parents before I leave him there,” Maddox added.

“You don’t need to do that, Madd. I can take him, but thanks.”

“I already offered. You need to take things easy. You look pretty done in already,” he told me.

“Gee, thanks,” I laughed as I awkwardly started to try and straighten the wild knot my hair was pulled into on top of my head.

“He didn’t mean it like that, Anna. You look beautiful. You always look beautiful,” Logan assured me.

“Doubtful,” I deadpanned. “Will there be wine at this meal, or shall I go and raid my stash?” I asked, changing the subject.

“There’s wine,” Maddox laughed as he headed inside the house.

“We have some friends coming over tonight. I thought it’d be good for you to get to know someone other than the two of us and boring Neil at the store,” Logan told me.

“Neil’s not boring. He’s just...he’s quiet. He’s a good boss.” I defended, even though I did secretly agree the man should do more than run his store

and then head up to his apartment every evening, where he seemed to do nothing but watch recordings of day time quiz shows. “Who did you invite? Should I go and clean myself up a bit?” I asked as I looked down at the tatty skinny jeans I wore with a white tank top that I’d spilled just a little coffee on that afternoon.

“You don’t need to change. It’s just the guy who manages my bar, Tate, and his wife Cat.”

“I know Cat,” I announced, relieved it was at least one person I actually knew coming to eat with us. I was too tired to face too many people, and if I were honest, I wasn’t sure how I would have reacted to a ton of other guys turning up. “She works at the diner across the street from the hardware store. She’s the supplier of my life force while I’m working.”

“Your life force?” Logan repeated with a raised eyebrow.

“Coffee! It’s the only thing that gets me through those boring shifts,” I laughed.

“See. I told you Neil was boring.”

“I wouldn’t mind if he would chat a little more, that’s for sure,” I acquiesced. “But beggars can’t be choosers and without that job Max and I would be begging on the streets.”

“Anna, you know you don’t have to pay us the rent if you’re struggling. We don’t even need it...”

“Don’t Logan!” I cut him off. “I have always paid my way, and I always will. We don’t need charity, and things aren’t really that tight. We’re fine.”

“Well if you ever aren’t....”

“I know. Thank you, but I’ll find some more work soon.” I told him firmly.

“You should ask Cat. She might have some shifts at the diner,” he suggested as Maddox reappeared with a glass of white wine for me, and two beers.

“Ask me what?” We all turned to see Cat walking hand in hand from around the side of the house, with a tall, blond guy, who I guessed was Tate, her husband.

“Hey guys,” Logan greeted. “Come take a seat. Maddox is on drinks.”

“Anna! I’m so happy I can finally talk to you for more time than it takes to make your boring coffee order,” Cat cried with a huge smile as she hurried over to me and wrapped her arms around me without warning.

Except for my son, who I liked to shower with affection and always had, I wasn’t much of a hugger. I never had been. Growing up with an abusive father and little in the way of friendships made you that way, but after what Callum did to me, I really didn’t like to be touched, except, it seemed, for when Logan and Maddox touched me. They’d both held me several times now and I’d never felt anxious or even really jumped at their contact. It was a fact I was very much aware of, but choosing not to question too deeply.

It seemed the fact I knew Cat didn’t make her immune from my ‘cringe when touched’ freakiness though, because I froze the second she made contact with me, my heart pounding way too hard almost instantly and my breaths getting faster and faster the longer she held on.

I reached a hand around to her back and tentatively set it down in what I hoped seemed like a human response to being hugged, but I knew I’d failed when Cat pulled away and looked to me with a little confusion. I was eternally grateful she didn’t say anything though, instead stepping back to introduce her husband to me.

Tate stood just behind his wife, shaking hands with Maddox in a friendly way that made it clear they knew each other pretty well.

“Hi,” I offered quietly as Tate released Maddox and turned his full attention on me. I knew my instant reaction to him was ridiculous. Tate was Cat’s husband and clearly a friend of Maddox and Logan. He was smiling and relaxed in the way he stood, but he had too many features that reminded me of Callum, and with my adrenaline already rising from Cat holding me, I was starting to lose it and I knew it. Callum’s image flashed through my mind – short, blond hair, a trim, tall frame – all the same as the man before me.

“It’s good to finally meet you, Anna. Cat’s been proclaiming you’re gonna be her new bestie for weeks already,” he joked with a gentle chuckle. I watched as he stepped over to Cat and wrapped his arm around her waist, pulling her into his side. I tried to focus on the differences. He looked more

muscular than Callum, and his eyes – they were dark, not those cold gray ones that had haunted my every thought ever since...

“Not sure that’s a good idea.” Maddox’s voice cut through the fear I was trapped in and I felt his strong arm slide over my shoulders, surrounding me in the familiarity of his spicy, almost citrus scent that I was sure was a mix of the body wash he used, and his cologne. “You gotta watch out for Cat, Anna. She’s nothing but trouble,” Maddox laughed, but I knew he was covering for me, because I could hear the tense note in his voice, and the way he slowly and carefully pulled me closer and closer into his side. He knew I was freaking out and he was worried.

Much to my relief, having him so close did the exact opposite to Cat hugging me. Instead of freaking out I relaxed and moved the last tiny gap between Madd and I myself, sinking against his side and taking the breath I had been fighting to get in at the feel of his warm body pressed against mine.

“Maybe I am, but it’s the best kind,” Cat told the guys, turning to me with a smile and a wink.

I moved my shaking hand up to where Maddox’s sat on my shoulder and placed it over his, needing more contact with him. I wrapped the other arm around his back until I was clinging to him as tightly as I could without making it obvious. Thankfully, Tate had moved over to the grill, to chat with Logan so he was out of my eyeline as I fought to just get myself together.

“I...I might like to get into the oc-occasional bit of trouble,” I told Cat, hoping it came off as playful as I meant it. The stuttering didn’t help, but Cat smiled widely anyway.

“See babe! I told you she was the perfect bestie,” she cried loudly.

“Why don’t you ladies grab a seat and I’ll get some more drinks,” Maddox offered. I panicked at the idea of him releasing me, but I knew I had to let him go if I didn’t want to seem entirely crazy to Cat and Tate.

Cat took a seat at the large round table on the patio, and Maddox led me over to the chair opposite her, with the table between us. My hands were

shaking as I forced myself to release my grip and reached for the table to steady myself as I sat.

“Breathe, baby,” Maddox whispered into my ear, leaning down so no one else would hear. “You’re safe. I’ll be right back, promise.”

I nodded subtly, then watched as he stood with a smile and turned to Cat. As Maddox asked what they wanted to drink I looked to my left to where I knew Logan stood. I found him watching me, and he smiled reassuringly, obviously having noticed my near breakdown too. I gave him a nod in an attempt to tell him I was good, but he simply raised an eyebrow, making it clear he didn’t believe me. It was so strange the way I could read them both, and it seemed they read me too, when we’d only known each other a matter of weeks. I’d never had that with anyone before, but it felt so natural.

“So, what did you wanna ask me?” Cat asked.

“Oh nothing,” I answered, relieved my voice sounded less shaky. “Logan was just saying I should see if you had any shifts at the diner.”

“Funny you should bring that up actually. I was going to ask you if you’d work a late shift for me tomorrow. Carol, one of my servers, took a spill when she was out hiking. She called me on the way here to say she’d be out tomorrow, and maybe for the next few days. She thinks she sprained her ankle pretty badly.”

“Ouch. I’ll happily take any shifts you can give me though, Cat. I can work anytime over the weekend, then mornings and evening during the week,” I told her eagerly, relief sweeping over me at the opportunity to earn a little more cash.

“Really? That would be amazing. Carol is my best server and I’m gonna be rushed off of my feet without her.”

“I’m grateful for any work you can throw my way, Cat, so thank you.” At least that would ease one of the weights trying to crush me, even if just for a short while.

# CHAPTER 15

ANNA

“Sure you’re doing okay?” Logan asked. It was dark out now. Dinner had been fun in the end. I’d struggled to engage with Tate much but I got to a point where I didn’t see Callum’s face in my mind every time I looked at him. Cat was great fun, even if she didn’t seem to have much of a filter. Three glasses of wine had seemed to be enough to have her pretty wasted, but not drunk enough to stop her demanding we all head into the pool house when the weather turned a little cooler.

I’d been reluctant to swim, since I worried about my scars showing in a swimsuit, but I had found an old one piece from when I used to take Max swimming when he was younger that covered almost everything but the top of the puckered, red line between my breasts. Beaten down by Cat’s demands that I join the fun, I had donned the plain black suit with Max’s hoody pulled over it, and trudged back to the pool house good naturedly.

Maddox had dropped Max off at his party around eight, so I was child free for the night, Maddox having not drank a drop of alcohol since his one and only beer, had reassured me I could relax because he’s go and pick Max up the second Max called him.

I had been reluctant to let go at first, the consequences I paid last time for doing something for myself playing on a loop, like a warning, in my head.

But one glass of wine had turned into three, and I’d got caught up in the fun of us all playing volleyball over the net Logan pulled out. Luckily for me, we had played our side on the shallow end of the pool, so I hadn’t needed to admit to anyone that I didn’t swim, which would have been embarrassing.

Logan and Maddox had kept me close enough throughout, that my anxiety had been soothed and I had been able to relax, and I just felt safe, and even a little care free for the first time, maybe ever.

Now Cat was passed out on one of the sun loungers beside the pool in the huge conservatory room that housed the vast pool. Maddox and Tate had wandered inside to play a game of pool in the games room that the guys apparently had in their enormous, palatial home.

That just left Logan and I in the pool. I was tired and a little buzzed from the wine, but I was in no hurry to get out. I'd never just had the chance to fool around and relax in a pool before. I used to take Max when he was little, but most of that time had been filled with him learning to swim, then when he was older, he was such a daredevil that I never dared take my eyes from him.

"Did you have fun, sweetheart?" Logan asked.

"Yeah," I sighed happily, a gentle smile on my face. "I needed this," I admitted.

"I noticed that Tate makes you nervous, but I've known him for years, Anna. He moved here when I offered him a job. He used to work for me in Los Angeles before that. He and Cat, they're good people. They can be good friends if you'll let them be," he told me. He was sat on the edge of the pool now, just watching me as I leant my back against the wall opposite him, holding the edge and kicking my legs lazily before me back and forth in the water. It was so relaxing and I was already considering coming back to use the pool more.

I'd never really considered it when we moved in. Why would I? I didn't swim. The only reason my son could, was because I had put him into swim lessons when he was three years old, determined that he would learn the vital life skill I had never been taught. When I used to take Max swimming myself, I never allowed him to leave the shallow end, where I could keep my feet on the ground.

Before that, living the life I did, swimming hadn't been an option, and learning to do so was far from the top of my priorities. But Logan and Maddox's pool gradually got deeper from the shallow end, and I felt that I could maybe take a dip every now and then, as long as I stayed where I could reach the bottom.

"I know," I nodded. "It's just...well, Tate...he reminds me of someone. I'll get over it, but it'll take time," I admitted. "I don't think I have much choice

about being friends with Cat,” I added with a laugh as we both glanced to where she was sleeping curled up tightly on the lounge near the door into the house. Tate had covered her over with his hoodie and she seemed to be out cold.

“Is that a problem for you?” he asked.

“Of course not. I like her, and it would be nice to have a friend.”

“You have me and Madd.”

“That’s different though, isn’t it?” I asked boldly, looking up at him with what I knew was lust. Being in the pool with him for the last two hours, him wearing nothing but a pair of navy swim shorts that fit him perfectly was killing me. The only thing that would have perfected my dream was if Cat and Tate left, and Madd got on his swimming shorts, revealing all his own sculpted, tanned body just the way his brother had.

But Madd hadn’t gotten into the pool, and no one had nagged and attempted to persuade him the way they had me. I already knew Maddox was conscious, and maybe even a little embarrassed of the fact he’d lost his leg, and I guessed that was why, but I hated that he missed out because of it.

All thoughts of Madd ceased as Logan slid down the wall into the water. I didn’t take my eyes from him as he stalked towards me, the water that had splashed up his body just a little when he slid in, sliding down his rippled, tight body guiding my eyes to take in every single inch of his perfectly tanned skin. His shoulders were so wide, also hard with muscle. A tattoo wrapped around from his back and down over his sculpted bicep on his right arm. I had been trying to work out what the tattoo was earlier, but the image had been too unclear when he was in the water, Now I saw that the part that came over his shoulder and down his arm looked like some kind of vine, barbed, and gnarled looking, with leaves so dark green they almost looked black. That just made me curious about the tattoo on his back even more.

“Anna?” I snapped my eyes up to meet his and adored the playful smirk on his face. Clearly I’d been caught staring.

“Yeah?”



“I asked you a question, sweetheart,” he chuckled, and then he was there, right before me, his arms holding the wall either side of me and caging me in, his body so close to mine I could feel the heat coming from him.

“A question?” I repeated, my tongue tied as all of his perfection surrounded me and held me rapt.

“Yes. I asked you how mine and Madd’s friendship is different? You don’t like us the way you like Cat?” I moved my eyes up to meet his and became lost in the way he was watching me, with so much heat and desire. I had never even seen that look before, but it was so glaringly easy to read in that moment, mainly because I felt exactly the same way.

“I like you,” I told him, a little breathlessly. Why were we talking? I didn’t want to talk. I wanted...no I needed him to kiss me. All of my promises to myself, all of my fears and worries that I could never seek any kind of relationship ever again were forgotten right then. Or silenced at least, because all I could think in that moment was that I wanted Logan.

“You do?” he asked, and I was sure he was toying with me now. The smile on his face was filled with devilment. He was enjoying this.

“You know I do.”

“Tell me what you want, Anna,” he whispered as he leaned in so close I felt his breath fan over my right cheek.

“I shouldn’t,” I floundered as panic started to return. This, this desire and want was what had led to...to everything that went wrong. Me being selfish almost cost Max and I everything.

“You should. I know you’re scared, but I would never hurt you, and neither would Maddox. You know that deep down,” he told me gently. He placed his hand on my shoulder and softly traced his fingers down my arm, causing me to shiver at such a gentle touch. More. I wanted more of that. I wanted to feel loved like a woman for once. I had been a mom for so long, but had I ever truly just been me? Had I ever had the chance to just be adult Anna. I’d gone from being a kid who barely made it in life, to being a struggling mom. Just for once I desired to take what I wanted and not feel bad about it.

Before I could think anymore into it, I pushed forward and wrapped my arms around Logan's neck, smashing my lips against his as I clung to him tight enough to shuffle up his body and wrap my legs around his waist. It wasn't me in that moment. I wasn't forwards or brave, but Logan was right. Somewhere deep inside I knew he wouldn't hurt me, and I couldn't fight my feelings anymore.

Logan wrapped his arms around me, one cradling my ass to hold me up while the other wrapped tightly around me. He took control of the kiss fast, his tongue finding mine and locking us in a fire filled, passionate kiss that I didn't even know existed outside of fiction. I'd kissed before of course, but they all paled to nothing in comparison to that moment with Logan.

Every nerve ending in my body came to life, filling me with energy that shot straight to my core, and I found myself writhing against Logan's body, in search of so much more than he was offering right then.

"Logan," I squeaked, not even thinking of the fact we weren't alone in the room. I needed more. I felt like I'd lose my mind if he didn't touch me.

"Sshh, sweetheart. We gotta keep quiet," he whispered as he moved his lips to my ear, then he was kissing me there, nibbling the skin down to my neck, then returning up the same path with soft kisses. "You want more, Anna?" he asked in that breathy whisper that only heightened my desire.

"Yes, please. God, yes!" I gasped desperately.

"Lower your legs for me then. Keep your arms around my neck," he instructed and I instantly complied, even more needy for him at his gentle command.

He slid his hand under the edge of my swimsuit at my thigh, and I gasped as that fire within me burned blindingly bright at simply the touch of his huge hand so close to my center.. I gasped as he used his hand to cup me then squeaked with need when he simply held there for way too long for my liking.

"So eager, sweet girl," he uttered against my ear, then he was kissing down my neck again.

"Please Logan!" I breathed. His lips found mine and he kissed me slowly and gently as he finally moved his hand, his wide fingers strumming over

my clit exactly the way I needed him to. He barely even had to apply any pressure to set off the climax of my life. It had been so long, and I had been so worked up by the time he touched me. He smothered my gentle cries of release with his kisses as I clung to him desperately, afraid to let him go as my body convulsed with an orgasm unlike any I had ever experienced.

I don't remember when we stopped kissing, but as I came down from the high and back to reality I found my face pressed against his neck, my head resting on his shoulder as he continued to hold me, both of his arms wrapped back around me.

"Okay, sweetheart?" he asked gently as he started to rub his hand up and down my back.

"Yeah," I sighed happily, then it hit me what we'd just done, and worse—where we'd done it. Cat was laid down just feet from us, and her husband and Maddox were close by. What if they'd have walked in?

I sat up and looked around the pool with panic, but Cat was still out cold and the others were nowhere in sight.

"No one saw us," he chuckled as he pulled me close again and pressed a hand on the back of my head until I settled back to the way we were, with my head on his shoulder. "Are you sure you're alright?" he asked again.

"I'm sure," I whispered. I lifted my head and kissed him chastely. "I just can't believe I did that here. I'm not....I mean, I wouldn't usually....not so publicly," I stuttered nervously. I really wasn't sure what I was supposed to say now. I was used to the handful of guys I had slept with taking what they wanted and usually walking away right after. That had been the first orgasm I ever even had that wasn't by my own hand. Not that I was about to admit that.

"Sshh, it's okay. Like I said, no one saw us."

"I should go home. I must look a real mess now," I laughed awkwardly.

"You look just as beautiful as you did when you came for me so perfectly," he smiled as he smoothed some loose strands of my wet hair behind my ear.

"You're gorgeous, Anna, and so fucking sexy."

“You can’t say that,” I gasped as I glanced over to Cat again, relieved she was still out.

“Why not, it’s true?” I couldn’t hold my smile in as he just watched me, waiting for my argument. But I didn’t want to argue. I had never been called beautiful, gorgeous, or sexy in my life, and even though I thought he exaggerated, I liked the way he made me feel.

“Anna?” I startled from the bubble Logan had me wrapped in and looked up startled to see Madd walking into the pool room. I tried to move away from Logan, but he wasn’t letting me go.

“What’s wrong?” I asked when I saw the tight set of his jaw. He had his cell in his hand which worried me more. Max. It had to be Max.

“Max called. I have to go and pick him up. A fight kicked off at the party,” Madd told me.

Oh God. I pushed away from Logan and backed away as nausea rose in my stomach. I’d done it again. I’d been mixed up in my own selfish needs, and I’d let my son down again!

“Is he hurt? Is he okay?” I gasped as I tried to run through the water over to the ladder to climb out. I lost my footing almost instantly and would have crashed into the water if Logan hadn’t been there to grab me, fast as lightning.

“Easy, sweetheart. Let me help you out, okay?” Logan soothed.

“Maddox! Is he okay?” I cried as I ignored Logan and looked to his brother.

“He’s fine, Anna. Just breathe. He managed to break the fight up, but the parents called an end to the party. That’s all. He told me he wasn’t hurt,” Maddox told me firmly as he knelt at the side of the pool with a towel in his arms. Before I even knew what was going on, Logan had lifted me into the air and Maddox grabbed me, wrapping me in the towel, then standing with me pressed against him.

I grabbed the edges of the towel and started to dry off as fast as I could, pulling away from Madd in the process. I was already half on with the hoody I arrived in when Logan climbed out and stood beside me.

“I’m coming with you,” I told Maddox flatly.

“There’s no need, Anna,” Madd argued.

“I’m coming, Maddox.”

“We’ll all go,” Logan spoke up, We both pulled on clothes hurriedly, me not even stopping to shed my wet swimsuit beneath. I just needed to get to my son. I was already regretting letting him go to the damned party.

“You’re not even dry, Anna,” Maddox said as I struggled to putt my jean shorts up my wet legs, but I didn’t care. All I could think of was that night at our apartment weeks before. All I could see was my son, stood terrified and in shock and that terror filled look on his face.

“We have to go!” I cried frantically as I finally got the shorts up and ran for the door, assuming it would be faster to go through the house to get to the car on the drive.

“Everything okay, man?” I gasped and skidded on wet tile as I tried to stop at the appearance of Tate in the doorway. I managed to remain on my feet, but only just.

“We just need to go and pick Max up,” Logan spoke up as Maddox came right over to me and took my shaking hand in his.

“I guess I should probably get sleeping beauty home too,” Tate laughed as he moved past me and went to gather Cat up into his arms.

“You okay to drive?” Maddox asked.

“All good. I only had a couple of beers.”

“Can we just go?” I demanded, knowing how rude I seemed, but I needed to get to my son. Adrenaline was surging within me and I knew it wouldn’t settle until I laid eyes on Max and saw for myself he was safe.

“We’ll meet you at the car,” Maddox said to Logan, then he was ushering me from the pool room and through the house.

“Jesus, you’re shaking like a leaf,” Maddox remarked as he reached for me when I stumbled out of the front door, and pulled me into his side. “Just try to calm down. I spoke to him, and he’s okay. The parents there won’t let him leave until we get there to pick him up.”

“I never should have let him go. I have to stop screwing up!” I hissed more to myself than to Madd.

“You didn’t screw anything up. He’s a teenager. He’s going to want to go to parties and shit. You can’t keep him home with you forever, Anna.”

“I just want to keep him safe!”

“Of course you do, but he’s a teenage boy. Even as responsible as Max is, he will get into scrapes like this. It’s what teenagers do. I think you should be proud that he was the one breaking the fight up, instead of one of the ones starting it. He’s a good kid and he has a smart head on his shoulders. You raised him right.”

I didn’t reply, because I didn’t know what else to say. Instead I got into the passenger seat of the car with a little help from Maddox, and buckled my seat belt. My anxiety wouldn’t abate and I was wringing my hands almost painfully as Maddox got into the car too, and we waited for Logan to join us.

I knew Maddox was right about Max being responsible and smart. I trusted my son to make good decisions, but Maddox didn’t know what Max had been through. No one but me did. Max was traumatized and who knew how a fight breaking out could have affected him after what he had been through?

It was my fault. All my fault. Had Max called me first? I didn’t know because I didn’t even know where I’d left my cell. I hadn’t seen it since I went home to get changed into the swimsuit, so I’d likely forgotten it there. How could I do that? I’d had too much to drink and I’d shirked my responsibility to my kid in my selfish pursuit of what exactly? Having fun? Getting off? I was so angry with myself for fucking up again. Max deserved so much better than me.

# CHAPTER 16

## ANNA

Finally, Logan jumped into the back of the car and we set out. It was silent and tense in the car the entire drive to the house where the party had been held. I was beating the crap out of myself mentally and I was relieved Madd and Logan weren't trying to calm me any longer. I was too angry with myself to be calmed.

Maddox had barely even parked the car when I threw open the door and jumped out. The drive of the large, gated house, much like Logan and Maddox's place, was filled with cars already, and I saw kids around max's age jumping into them

"Anna, wait up!" Logan called behind me, but I ignored him as I looked around for Max, knowing I was way too panicked, but unable to stop myself.

A woman who was about a decade older than me, obviously hurriedly dressed in sweats and a baggy t-shirt walked past with me with her arm around a kid who was bleeding from his nose and already looking bruised around the left side of his face, and my fear just ratcheted up. What the hell had happened?

"Max!" I yelled urgently as I hurried towards the entranceway of the house, and saw my son leant against the wall beside the door. He was sitting on the ground, his head lowered and his hand over his face. I started to run, sure he was crying, but when he looked up at the sound of my call I realized he was holding a piece of gauze against his mouth.

"Mom? What are you doing here?" he asked as he quickly stood and moved towards me. I was already up the stone steps at the front of the house and running to him. There were several other parents stood around with several other teenagers who had obviously been hurt during whatever happened.

“Max! What happened?” I demanded as I got to him and pulled his hand away from his mouth, the gauze going with it. He had a split lip and the left side of his face looked red and a little swollen. “Oh God!” I gasped as I realized he really was hurt. “What the hell is this?” I barked.

“Mom, calm down,” Max uttered as he tried to corral me away from the other parents, who were watching us with interest.

“I will not!” I growled as I pulled away from his hold. “This was supposed to be a supervised party! How the hell did this happen? Who hit you?” In retrospect I would realize how out of control and embarrassing I had to have been, but I was angry and terrified. I never wanted to see my son hurt, but to see him bleeding and bruised so soon after what had happened with Callum – it broke me.

“Mom!” Max hissed, embarrassed.

“Excuse me?” I turned and found a man stood way too close to me for my comfort. He was tall, maybe even taller than Logan, but wiry thin and older too. His head was bald and he wore perfectly pressed chinos with a navy linen shirt. He was already looking at me like something he stepped in. It was a look I knew well, and I was also aware that the fact I wasn’t looking my best didn’t help matters.

“Who the hell are you?” I snapped, my back already up at the snooty way he looked down on me and my son.

I took a step back so I knew I was between this asshole and my son.

“I’m Paul St Clair. My son threw the party this evening,” he explained as he crossed his arms over his chest and glared down at me. He had to be at least a foot and a half taller than me, and even as thin as he was, he was intimidating.

“So you’re the one to thank for this shit show then?” I growled.

“Now, just hold on a minute!” he rumbled as he took a step closer to me. He unfolded his arms and I jolted at the quick movement, instinct screaming at me that he was going to hit out at me.



“Hey!” Maddox snapped loudly, then they were both there, pushing me backwards as they formed a wall between Max and me, and the asshole. “Back the fuck up!” Maddox growled as Logan turned to check first on me, then Max.

“You okay, bud?” he asked.

“Yeah. This is nothing,” Max replied as he waved a hand at his face.

“You wanna explain what happened to your mom, before she really let’s rip on this entitled asshole?” Logan asked with a smile.

“It was just a fight between these two guys,” Max said as he looked to me sheepishly. “I tried to break it up as soon as it started, but I caught a punch. They went for each other and knocked a few other kids over in the chaos. I managed to pull one of them back and Jarod grabbed the other one. Then he showed up and it stopped.” He nodded towards the guy Maddox seemed to be in a standoff with, both of them listening to Max’s explanation.

“Where was the dad before? I thought he was supposed to be supervising things?” I asked angrily.

“I don’t know. He didn’t show until a girl who got pushed over, screamed.”

“In other words, you weren’t supervising shit,” Maddox accused.

“They’re fifteen and sixteen years olds!” The dad snapped. “What was I supposed to do, stand and watch them all night?”

“Yes!” I raged. “That’s the fucking definition of supervising!” I tried to push around Maddox but Logan caught my arm and pulled me back, placing me behind him.

“Who the hell even are you people? Don’t you own that bar in town?” The dad asked as he nodded to Logan.

“We’re here for Max, who got hurt doing what you should have been damned well doing!” Maddox replied with a snarl.

“Madd, please. Can we just get out of here?” Max asked dejectedly.

“Yeah kid, let’s go,” Maddox sighed as he turned to us and opened his arms to direct us all back down the steps. He also kept himself between us and the asshole throughout.

“Just so you know, your troublemaker kid is not welcome in my home ever again!” The asshole barked just as we got to the bottom of the steps.

“Troublemaker!” I was at the top of the steps again before anyone could even stop me. I stood opposite that tall, bald asshole, shaking with my anger. I wanted to punch him in the balls so badly. “How dare you?” I growled instead. “My son is likely the only reason more kids weren’t hurt in this disaster of a party! Did you check on things even once, you self-righteous prick?!”

“What would you know about parenting? How old were you when you had that kid? Fourteen? Fifteen? Sounds about right though, doesn’t it, for foul mouthed trailer trash like you?” he sneered at me and stepped closer. I balled my hand into a fist, ready to follow through on that junk punch plan, but I never got the chance. Logan was between me and the asshole in seconds.

“One more word from your mouth right now, motherfucker, and I promise you’ll never speak another single syllable ever again,” he threatened so menacingly it sent a shudder up my spine.

The guy visibly paled as he took a step back. Logan might have been a little shorter, but it was obvious he had the power in his body to crush the other guy like a bug.

“Leave it now, brother. Fucker’s not worth it,” Maddox called when it was clear Logan wasn’t backing off, instead just stood staring menacingly.

“He’s right,” I told Logan as I smoothed my hand down his back. Much as I wanted to hit Mr. asshole St, Clair, it would only make things worse and I needed to get Max home and ice his face. “He’s definitely not worth any more of our time,” I agreed.

I was glad when Logan nodded and relaxed enough to wrap his arm around me and lead me away and back towards the car.

I wasn’t a damsel in distress. I’d never been the type, and I had certainly never once in my life ever expected or even hoped for some white knight to ride in and save me. But I could admit to myself, in that moment, how amazing it had felt to have someone stand up for Max and I. I allowed myself to revel in the feeling of someone actually caring about me and

taking my side for once. Not having to stand alone and fake a bravado I didn't really possess as I trembled with fear on the inside, had been astounding,

"Why the fuck did you bring my mom?" Max snapped at Maddox as we all neared the car in the driveway.

"What's that supposed to mean?" I demanded.

Max turned to me and looked a little guilty. I suspected he had thought Logan and I were further behind than we were, and that I wouldn't have heard his question, but I did and it hurt.

"Don't look at me like that, mom. You just made a huge scene for no reason. Now everyone at school is going to hear about it and think I'm trailer trash, just like Mr. St. Clair said," he replied angrily.

"No reason?" I scoffed as I marched around Maddox's SUV over to my son and pushed him back a little. He stumbled back into the car and looked to me with shock.

"What is wrong with you?" he asked as he looked to me with open hostility.

"What's wrong with me? What's wrong with you?! Why would you want me to keep my mouth shut when that stuck up nobody stood and called you a trouble maker? Did you really want me to just stand by and take that?"

"I didn't want you here at all. I don't need you to protect me, mom! Not any more. You just ruined everything!" he yelled at me. It was the first time I had ever seen my son genuinely angry with me, and it struck me silent for a few moments as I just stared at him.

"Max, that's enough, kid," Maddox said gently as he appeared beside the both of us and set a hand on Max's shoulder. "Your mom was just standing up for you, and for herself. That guy was a complete asshole. He shouldn't have spoken to either of you the way he did."

"He's lucky he still has all of his front teeth," Logan growled.

"Yeah, well maybe he had a point the way mom was yelling and making a huge scene. None of the other parents acted that way. She looked crazy!" Max argued and I actually flinched back at his words. Was he right? I knew

I'd made a scene, but I refused to stand back and listen to that hoity sonofabitch labeling my son when he barely even knew him.

"Max!" Logan snapped.

"What did you want me to do, Max?" I cried at the same time.

"I wanted you to not embarrass me! I start school next week and I'm going to be a total outcast because of you!"

"He called us trash!" I bit back.

"Yeah he did," Max nodded. "And he wasn't wrong was he? You were a kid when you had me and you're not exactly parent of the year right now are you?!" Max opened the rear door of Maddox's car and jumped in, slamming it closed violently behind him, all the while I just stood frozen. I couldn't have been more shocked or hurt if Max would have slapped me. It felt like he did.

"Anna..." Maddox tried to wrap his arm around me, but I pushed away from him and moved around the car. I didn't want comfort. "Can we just get back?" I asked as I reached the other rear door and opened it.

"He didn't mean it," Logan told me from where he was now opening the front passenger door at the same side as me.

"How could he not mean something that's true?" I asked quietly, then I climbed into the car and slammed the door shut behind me. Max was in the back seat too, sat as far against the door, away from me, as he could get. I did the same and stared out of the window blindly the whole way back, my tears silently tracking down my cheeks as my whole world seemed to implode around me. My son now saw the truth. He too saw me for the trash I had always been, just like the rest of the world.

Maddox had barely parked the car in the driveway back at the house before Max was jumping out, slamming the door behind him. Logan opened his door, jumping out just behind him, calling after him, but Max just started running around the side of the house away from all of us.

"Leave him, Logan!" I called as I stepped out of the car and saw Logan going after him. Logan paused and turned to me.

"Someone needs to talk to him," he told me, but I just shrugged.

“He’s upset, and maybe he has a right to be. Just let him be for tonight,” I sighed deeply. I was exhausted and my mind was a swirling mess. It had been an insane night, and I had no clue what any of it meant for the next day.

“You didn’t do anything wrong, baby,” Maddox said as he rounded the car and came straight to me. He opened his arms and I wasn’t strong enough to deny myself the comfort he offered. I stepped into the hug and clung to Madd as I fought not to fall apart again. I had done enough of that and it had proven futile in helping to resolve any of my issues, not that I ever thought it would.

“He’s right, Anna. All you did was try to protect Max from that fucker’s stuck up opinions. I’d have punched him out if there weren’t so many kids stood watching,” Logan told me and I felt his hand press into the small of my back as his heat surrounded my right side. They were cocooning me between them, protecting me within a bubble of only them and I wanted to stay there forever. Unfortunately, that wasn’t an option.

I gave myself another few seconds of the peace I felt with them, then took a deep breath and stepped back, forcing both of them to release me.

“I should go,” I sighed reluctantly.

“Why don’t you stay with us tonight? I can go and get Max so he can stay here too? I don’t want you to be alone after everything,” Logan offered, but I was already shaking my head.

“No. I need to go home and handle this myself, but thank you, both of you, for the offer, and for being there for Max and I tonight. I’m not sure I’ve ever had anyone have my back before and it....well, it was nice,” I admitted.

“You can always count on us to have your back now, sweetheart,” Logan promised.

“I know,” I nodded with a shaky smile.

“I want you to call us if you need anything tonight, okay? No matter the time. You and Max aren’t alone anymore,” Maddox said firmly.

I smiled even more shakily as tears filled my eyes. “Where did you guys even come from?” I sniffled. “You’re way too good and kind to be real.”

“We’re real, baby, and we’re all yours if you want us,” Maddox reminded me, and I knew I was blushing as heat filled me at his words. *Mine*. That did sound like perfection, didn’t it?

“I should...” I floundered and just pointed a thumb behind me in the direction of my cottage, having no idea how to even reply to Maddox’s proclamation.

“Go, sweetheart. We’re close if you need us,” Logan told me. I managed a nod, then I turned and walked shakily around the house, disappearing almost as fast as my son had, in my haste to get away. I knew exactly what I wanted, but taking it was not an easy decision, and talking about my feelings felt impossible. It was easier to run away from that issue, and try to deal with my son instead, for that night at least.

There was just one problem with that theory though, I realized as I walked into my home. I didn’t want to face Max. The things he had said had ripped through me and I was terrified he’d have more to say. I knew I had failed him, especially in the last weeks, but to hear him actually say that – to know he knew I was useless as his one and only parent – it was like he was reaching inside of me and squeezing my heart in his hand.

It hurt so much to know absolutely that I had failed in my one and only focus in life for the last sixteen years – to do everything required to always protect my son and give him the carefree childhood I never got to have. I had fought so hard, for so long to give him that. I had done everything I could to make sure he always had a safe, comfortable home to feel secure in, and good, healthy food in his stomach. I had showered him with love and affection so that he would never know the terror of realizing you had no one to love you in your life. I had given him everything I had to give, always praying that I would be enough for him. Now I knew the truth. It had all been for nothing because my son saw me for the fraud I was. When he had needed help that night he’d reached out to a man he had known for mere weeks, over calling me and that was a wakeup call I had never wanted to receive.

# CHAPTER 17

## LOGAN

As I suspected he would be, Max was already in the gym at our place, working out hard when I walked in there early the next morning.

I'd barely slept all night, worried about Anna, and constantly checking my phone in case she tried to call or text me. I had seen how hurt she was by the words her son threw at her without thought the night before. I had seen the way he had just confirmed ever insecurity and fear she had been carrying on her shoulders since the day I met her – that she had done something to hurt, or fail her son in whatever had happened to them both before they came to us.

I had been desperate to step in the night before, but I'd done my best to hold it back not wanting to interfere and upset either Anna or Max further, but the things that kid had said to his mom last night were out of order, and I was hoping Max had come to the same conclusion overnight.

“Hey,” I greeted Max as I walked in and sat down on the weight bench.

Our gym took up a huge space on the lower ground floor of the house. The rooms had been used for storage when we moved in, but knowing Maddox needed to do extensive physio to get strong again after the attack, and having a love of the gym myself, I had knocked the rooms through and had them transformed into the large space I now sat in.

There were no windows, but one wall was lined with floor to ceiling mirrors to make the space lighter. I had bought every piece of equipment I liked to work out on, and a few others I thought would aid Maddox in getting his strength back in the beginning, then later allow him to build more upper body muscle to help him learn to live with his amputation. Now he had his strength back, and had learnt to move well with the prosthesis, he mainly used the gym to work out his anger, and some days his anxiety.

It had been a wise investment, since both Madd and I spent more time in that gym than we did the rest of the house. My anger at what had been done to Maddox had been vented hundreds of times in that room, as had his, I was sure. Maddox perfected walking on his prosthesis in there, then he worked his ass off to get as strong as he could to make sure he would always be ready for anything. I hated that he always feared where the next attack would come from after what he'd been through, and I hated knowing that he likely always would, but he'd been better since Anna arrived with us. She had this way of calming and centering him in a way that no one or nothing else could. She was good for him – for both of us, actually.

I was falling for her in a way I had never even thought was possible. She pulled me in, not just with her beauty and her perfect body, but with her strength, and her vulnerability. I loved the fire she had within, and I had seen that shine the night before as she defended herself and Max from a guy who had been twice her size. She was brave, and she was street smart like I had never known a woman to be. In contrast to all of that she could also be vulnerable at times, and I enjoyed the fact she needed me from time to time. I liked to be needed, and I had a feeling that the longer Madd and I knew Anna, the more she would allow herself to lean on us. I not only wanted her to do that, I needed it, and I knew my brother did too. We were both protectors at heart, and we had missed having someone to care for and protect. In short, she was my ideal woman and I wanted her. The fact that Maddox was head over heels for her too, just sealed the deal. She was everything we had always wanted.

“If you’re gonna lecture me, don’t bother. I already know I was a complete dick with my mom last night. I’m going to apologize when she wakes up,” Max told me, pulling me from my thoughts. I looked over to him as he stepped off the treadmill, which he’d been running flat out on when I walked in. He grabbed a towel and wiped his sweat soaked face, then sat on the bench beside me.

“How’s your face feeling?” I asked as I pointed to the bruise that had turned purple over night. It spread across his cheek, right up to his eye, but it looked less swollen than it had the night before.

“It’s good. Mom brought me and ice pack last night.”

“Did you talk to her?”



“No,” he shook his head, then moved to rest his elbows on his knees, lowering his head. “I was still mad. I think she was too.”

“I doubt that she was mad, Max. I think she was more hurt. She only did what she did last night because she was terrified for you when you called, then she got there and saw you hurt. I think that that asshole calling you a troublemaker, when you’d been one of the guys stopping the fight, was the last straw for her,” I explained.

“I know. I fucked up,” he sighed deeply. “That guy called her trailer trash, and not only did I fail to stand up for her, but I also fucking agreed with him, Logan!”

“You were upset too, Kid. I know how hard it is at your age. You want to fit in and have friends. I get why you got so angry, but I think you really hurt your mom. She already feels like a failure as a parent as a result of whatever you’ve both been through. What you said last night...it just confirmed her worst fears.”

“She’s not a failure. She’s an awesome mom, and I know how lucky I am to have her. What happened...it wasn’t her fault, and she...she went through so much worse than I did. I did what I had to. I can live with that, but she doesn’t seem to get that.”

“It’s hard for her to accept that you’re almost an adult. For the last sixteen years she’s dedicated her life to trying to make yours special. Every decision she made, every sacrifice and fight she faced was all for you. I don’t think she’s finding it easy to accept that you are getting old enough and tough enough to protect, and make decisions for yourself now. She was a kid when she had you, Max. Being a mom is all she has ever known.”

“I hate myself for the things I said last night. I was being such a selfish shit,” he growled as he pushed his hands into his hair and pulled at it.

“Hey!” I said as I pressed my hand to his shoulder to try and comfort him. “Everyone fucks up sometimes. It’s how you handle things afterwards that counts. Talk to your mom. Apologize and tell her what you told me. She loves you so much Max. She’ll forgive you anything.”

“I let her down so badly last night.”

“You did,” I agreed wholeheartedly. “But you are still just a kid, Max. I know you feel like an adult right now, but you’re not. Not yet. You’re allowed to be selfish and stupid. It doesn’t take away from what a good kid I know you are, and more importantly, your mom knows you are.”

“My mom needs me to be an adult right now, Logan. She’s not okay, and she can’t handle me being selfish or stupid. I know that.”

“You don’t have to carry everything on your shoulders alone, son. Your mom matters to Madd and I too, and we’re here for her. You can stop trying to shoulder the burden of everything and let us take a little of the weight. We can get your mom through whatever comes, together, okay?”

“Are you in love with her?” he asked bluntly as he finally lifted his head and met my stare.

“We barely know her, but yeah, I have feelings for her, and I’ve told her as much.”

“Maddox too, right? What do you even want from her? Some kind of freaky threesome?”

“We want to be able to take care of her, and get a chance to know her. Yes, Maddox has feelings for her too, and we would both like to date her when or if she feels ready for that. But there would be no threesomes, freaky or otherwise. We’re serious about your mom, Max. We want a relationship with her eventually. We want to be a part of both of your lives.”

“That’d be weird though, right? My mom with two guys?”

“It would be unusual, but it’s not unheard of. Relationships like that, and in many other combinations exist in the world,” I explained.

“Just don’t hurt her, okay? I don’t get what’s going on between you all, but my mom...she’s been through too much already. If you can’t take care of her the way she deserves, then just leave her the hell alone,” he warned.

“We would never purposely hurt her, Max, and I can promise we’ll do everything in our power to always try and take care of her, whether we’re in a relationship or not. You too, bud. We care about you too, you know?”

“Whatever,” he shrugged as he busied himself wiping at his face with the towel once again. “I’m not looking’ for a dad, and I sure as hell don’t need

two.”

“We’re not looking to be your dad either. You’re too old for that, but we want you to trust us and know that we will always be here for you.”

He stood quickly and I knew the conversation was making him uncomfortable, but I didn’t miss the way he glanced at me with question. I knew he was trying to decide if I meant what I said, and that was okay, because I fully intended to back my words up with actions, and I knew Madd would too. We’d show him, and Anna, that we would always be there for them, no matter what the future held.

## ANNA

I hated the way I flinched when the front door of the cottage slammed loudly, but I couldn’t stop myself. It meant Max was home, and he still hadn’t spoken a word to me since the night before. I dreaded the idea that he still felt as angry towards me as he had the night before, but maybe he had a right to feel that way.

I had been thinking about it all night, as sleep eluded me. I had realized how embarrassing my outburst, the night before, had to have been for my son. I’d started the entire shit show by getting too worked up over the whole thing and yelling at that dad for not supervising things properly. While I still believed he had failed to supervise the party correctly I understood in retrospect, that I could have handled the situation much more calmly, and without cursing at the man. I cringed when I thought of how much I had sounded like my own father, raging and cussing. I understood why Max had said I’d looked Crazy. I was sure I had.

“Mom?” I stood from where I had been perched on the edge of the bed since I gave up on sleep at four A.M., and instead showered and dressed.

I left my room and moved down the stairs slowly. The fact I hadn’t slept was making me feel stiff and slow that morning.

“Hey,” I greeted when I got halfway down the stairs and saw Max stood in the kitchen with a bottle of water in his hand. “Good work out?” I asked as I descended the last few stairs and walked over to one of the tall stools at the breakfast bar. I sat and hid my shaking hands in my lap.

“Not really, but I spoke to Logan,” he told me as he set the water down and leant back against the cabinet directly opposite me. He rested his weight on his hands against the counter and crossed his ankles. “I owe you a major apology.”

“Don’t feel like you have to apologize just because Logan guilted you into it,” I argued.

“Logan didn’t guilt me into anything. I already knew I messed up last night. I would have apologized first thing, but I didn’t want to wake you. I was a real dick to you last night, mom. I said some really shitty things and I didn’t mean any of them. I really am sorry.”

“Some of them were true though, Max. I haven’t been a good parent recently. Hell, I’m not sure I’ve been a parent at all,” I admitted. “And I know I embarrassed you last night. I should never have reacted like that. I haven’t changed my mind about the lack of supervision at the party, but I could have, and should have handled it much better than I did. I’m the one who needs to be sorry, honey, and I am. So sorry. You deserved so much better than the unhinged version of me that showed up for you last night.”

“Don’t mom, please,” he pleaded as his eyes met mine. “I already feel so shitty. I let that ass call you trailer trash. I let him say you were a bad parent, and I fucking agreed with him. I should have had your back, just like you always have mine, and I didn’t. Thank fuck Logan and Madd were there.” His voice was so tight as he spoke, and I could see the glassiness in his eyes.

“No Max. It’s not your responsibility to look out for me, that’s not how this works. I protect you. You didn’t do anything wrong, you hear me? And I don’t need anyone to back me up. I’ve been taking care of myself my entire life. I’d have handled things myself last night if I needed to.”

I know,” he nodded. “But I’m glad they were there for you. I don’t like you always having to handle everything. You deserve someone who cares about you too. I think Logan and Maddox do.” He looked to me pointedly, but I wasn’t replying to that comment. There was no way I was discussing my messed up love life with my fifteen year old son. “And as for the other thing, I should always back you up, mom. We’re a team, like you always

say, and I was far from a team player last night. That won't ever happen again."

"How about we just start over this morning, huh? Forget about last night? Logan told me something. He said every sunset is a chance for a fresh start. How about we take that fresh start this morning and run with it?" I suggested, knowing we wouldn't get anywhere with the back and forth we were entering into. Max wanted to protect me and I wanted to protect him. Neither of us were going to back down on that.

"Yeah, okay," he agreed. "But mom. I love you. I know how lucky I am to have you. You have always been, and will always be, the best mom I could ever wish for. I'm sorry if I made you doubt that last night."

"I love you too, honey," I told him as I got to my feet and went to him, wrapping my arms tightly around him. Maybe it was time I accepted that he was almost a grown man, instead of constantly fighting it. I was just so afraid though. I dreaded the day that he wouldn't need me any longer. I'd always be there for him, of course, but I didn't know who I was without taking care of him constantly.

# CHAPTER 18

ANNA

It was after ten that night when I finished up the late shift Cat had given me at the diner. Greg, the cook, had told me he would lock up as he walked me to my car. I hadn't argued because I was exhausted. It had been a while since I last worked a shift waitressing and I had forgotten how much hard work it could be. Not that I was complaining. The work had been familiar and comfortable, and Cat's diner was one of the cleanest and most modern I'd ever worked in. As I'd told her the night before, I would happily take any shift she could offer me.

But it had been a long twenty-four hours with the events of the night before, and me not sleeping. Max and I had eaten a late breakfast together, and things between us had seemed to feel normal again, but I think we were both carrying guilt, not just about our actions the night before, but about everything that had happened in past weeks. It was like this enormous, ever increasing bubble of tension between us. I was desperate to break it, but I just didn't know how.

Then there was what had happened between Logan and I in the pool before Max's call. I'd given in to my desires and it had been so much more than I thought it could be, and that had just been a taster of what I could have with Logan and Maddox if I chose to give things a go with them. My resolve to keep pushing them both away had definitely crumbled down a whole lot more since Logan had given me a taster of how amazing sex could be. I hadn't known what I was missing out on before, but now that I did, I just wanted more.

Clearing my mind of all of the noise that had been trying to distract me all day, I started my car and set off for home, wanting nothing more than to just fall into my comfortable bed and just sleep.

I was about halfway home, out on the now deserted road that led out to home, when some asshole sped up behind me and shone his high beams through my back window. Cursing I slowed down and pulled further over to the edge of the road so the asshole would just go around. I was too tired to drive any faster, not that I was much below the speed restriction on that road anyway.

“Fuck me!” I growled when he didn’t go around, but instead just got even closer to the tail end of my car. I slammed my hand on the horn, worried he was going to drive right into me, then started lowering the window to wave him past me. I was wondering if he was drunk. It would make sense with the way he was driving.

I’d just wound my window down with the old and creaky lever - no fancy electric for me in my relic of a car - when finally the asshole behind me slowed up enough to pull back from my rear slightly. He moved to go around and I sighed with relief, working to roll my window back up as he started around me.

But he didn’t go around me. Instead of driving past, he veered his car towards mine violently, hitting the rear driver’s side so hard the whole car spun out of my control. I cried out as I grabbed the wheel with both hands and tried to correct the course, but it was too late. The car ran off of the edge of the road straight into a tree, head on. I was wrenched forward, as the metal of the car screeched, and bent in front of, and around me. The windscreen had smashed and glass rained down over me as my head bounced off of the steering wheel. The seat belt was the only thing that held me in place and I could feel it digging into my shoulder and chest as my hands flailed around to find purchase anywhere I could.

Then there was silence, other than the frantic gasps of breath coming from me. I lifted my head and instantly regretted moving as pain tore through me. Blood was trickling from my forehead and my right leg felt as though it were pinned in by the mangled front end of my car. Branches from the tree I had hit were pointed in through the smashed windscreen, and apart from the overhead light that had come on in my car, I sat in utter darkness. Even the headlights of my car were out, likely destroyed by the impact.

I listened for the car that had hit me, but all I heard was sounds from the woods around me, and there were no lights on the road from the car either.

“Drunk asshole!” I groaned as I reached for the handle on my door and pulled on it, praying it would open. Visions of the car catching fire and exploding like they always did in the movies were playing in my mind and I was desperate to get out of there.

Luckily for me, the door opened with a loud creak and I lifted my left leg out, placing it down on the rough verge that ran the edge of the road. My head was throbbing, as were my chest and shoulder from the seatbelt, but the bleeding from the cut on my head was slowing, and nothing else was hurting more than a dull ache. I had to wrench my other leg free of the twisted metal holding it in place, but I got it free and studied it closer, relieved when all I found was a deepish scratch that was bleeding a little. All things considered, I knew I’d gotten off lightly.

I grabbed my purse from where it had fallen into the footwell of the passenger seat, then got out of the car and collapsed onto the ground around ten feet from the wreckage.

I pulled out my cell as I sat trying to catch my breath and calm the adrenaline coursing through me. I should call the cops, but I couldn’t do that. The last thing I wanted was to garner interest of any type from the cops. Instead I found Logan’s contact and dialed it. I hated to call him when it was so late, but I needed a ride, and I’d need help to get the wreckage of my car towed before the police found it and started asking questions.

“Hey Anna. You just getting home?” Logan asked the second he picked up my call. I hadn’t seen him or Maddox that day yet and to say I missed them was just too pathetic for me to even admit to myself, but I couldn’t deny the relief and emotion that flooded me at just the sound of Logan’s deep voice.

“Er, no. Not quite,” I answered a little shakily.

“Everything okay?” he asked.

“It’s been better,” I sighed as I readjusted my position to try to ease the pain in my chest. “Some drunk asshole ran into me not far from your place,” I told him.

“What? Who? Where are you? Are you hurt?” he asked all at once as his tone completely changed into one of panic and a little anger.



“I’m okay. I’m on the road, about a mile from your place. Can you come pick me up please? I’m sorry to call you, but I...”

“Stop, Anna. Don’t you dare start that bullshit. I’d have been pissed if you didn’t call. I’m on my way. What happened?”

“This asshole. I don’t know. He was up my ass, shining his high beams, then when I tried to wave him past he drove right into the back end of my car and I lost control. I think he just drove off. He’s not here now,” I explained as I dabbed at the blood trickling down my face with the hem of my t-shirt.

“And you don’t know who it was?” he asked.

“I only know you guys, Neil, Cat, and Tate and I don’t think it was any of them,” I replied with a roll of my eyes that only made my head hurt more.

“Madd!” Logan yelled, making me jump at least a foot in the air.

“Fuck Logan!” I groaned.

“Sorry. Madd was in the gym,” he told me.

“What’s up?” I heard Maddox ask in the background.

“Anna was in an accident. We need to go,” Logan said, just as my cell started beeping in my ear. I pulled it away and studied the screen.

“Shit!” I cursed as I put the phone back to my ear. “Logan, my phone’s almost dead,” I told him.

“Just stay on the line until....” The three beeps that cut Logan off indicated my phone was completely dead, then I was sat in silence again as the screen of my cell went black.

“Great,” I sighed annoyed. “Just fucking great!” I looked around me and shuddered at how dark and silent everything was. It was creepy as hell and I did not want to be out there alone. What if whoever ran me off the road came back this way? It wasn’t likely to be an upstanding citizen, seeing as he’d run me off of the road, then sped off as fast as he could.

I don’t know how long it took before I saw headlights approaching – minutes only, I was sure – but it had felt like hours. Despite the warm evening I couldn’t seem to stop shivering and my head was pounding ever harder as

the bright lights that approached and slowed to park before me, shone way too brightly in my eyes. I held out a hand to try and block them from my sensitive eyes, but then two hulking figures rushed from the car and blocked the light for me as they rushed to my side.

“Anna! Jesus, you said an accident. You didn’t say you wrecked!” Logan growled as he dropped to his knees beside me and started poking at the wound on my head.

“We need to call 9-1-1,” Maddox spoke up as he ripped his cell from his jeans pocket, clearly pissed. I just hoped it wasn’t with me. “You need an ambulance.”

“No!” I panicked as I shoved away Logan’s hand and tried to stand. “You can’t do that, Madd!”

I managed to get my feet under me, but when I tried to jump up, my body gave up on me and I ended up back on the ground again.

“Why not? He’s right. You’re hurt pretty badly,” Logan pushed.

“I’m not. It’s just this cut and a few bruises. I don’t want the police getting involved!” I almost pleaded as I looked up to Maddox, hoping he could read the desperation in my face.

“What about the fucker who caused this? We can’t just let him away with it?” Maddox asked.

“He was probably wasted, Madd. I didn’t even really see the car. It all happened too fast. The chances of anyone catching him are small anyway,” I argued.

“Why don’t you want the police involved, sweetheart?”

“I just don’t, okay? Please. You said you wanted me to ask you both for help when I needed it. I’m asking you now,”

“Are you and Max wanted for something?” Maddox asked as he studied me.

“No! Of course not!”

“Then why are you scared of the police?”

“I’m not scared. I just don’t want them to make it official in any paperwork where we are. It’s better if Max and I just stay hidden,” I explained.

“You told us you were safe. You said no one would come after you. Is that what this is? Did someone from your past cause this accident?” Logan demanded as he too studied me.

“No! Jesus! No one is coming after us. There’s no one from our past who could. This was just an accident, but I don’t want Max or I to have our location reported anywhere it shouldn’t be, okay? Just in case. It’s just better if we stay under the radar.” I tried to explain, desperate for them to just give in. I couldn’t tell them anymore than that, but as tired and shaken as I was, I knew I’d spill if they pushed too much harder.

“Is he a cop? The asshole who hurt you? Is that it?” Maddox asked.

“You promised,” I reminded Logan as I looked to him. “You promised the past could be the past. You said you wouldn’t push me.” Tears filled my eyes and I tried furiously to blink them back.

“I did. You’re right,” he nodded. “Let’s just get you home, okay? I can call a guy to tow your car in the morning too. No police, no hospital,” he agreed, much to my relief.

“Logan...” Maddox began, but Logan looked to him and just shook his head.

“I promised her, brother. She says no one is coming after her. Everyone’s safe.” Logan reassured him.

“I wouldn’t have stayed if I thought I could be bringing danger to your doorstep, Madd. Please believe that. No one will ever come after me or Max. I promise.”

“I just want to keep you both safe,” Maddox told me as he looked to me with pain filled eyes.

“I know that, but we’re safe. This was just the handiwork of some prick who thought he could drive his fancy car after getting wasted,” I assured him.

“Why don’t you help Anna into our car while I grab the stuff from hers, okay?” Logan suggested, looking to Maddox. I was relieved when Maddox

nodded, then came closer to me. I reached out a hand for his help to stand, but he bypassed that and gathered me up from the ground, standing with me bridal style in his arms. I squeaked in surprise and reached for his shoulders to steady myself, not that I had any concerns he would let me fall. He'd never do that and I knew it.

I looked up into his eyes when he just stood still, and found him watching me with so much stress and worry in his face, his brow wrinkled and his eyes alight with concern.

"I'm all good, Madd," I told him as I slowly moved my hand to his cheek – giving him chance to pull away if he wanted to – but he didn't. Instead he pushed against my hold on his stubbled cheek and seemed to finally take a deeper breath.

"You're not. You got hurt and I can't stand to see you bleeding," he told me softly. "It can't happen again."

"It probably will though. I'm a klutz," I tried to joke, but Maddox looked anything but amused.

No more driving alone at night. From now on Logan or I will drive you to work and back. No more risks. I don't want to lose you when I just found you, Anna. I can't," he told me so earnestly it made my heart pound even harder in my chest.

"You won't," I promised him as I lifted my other hand, framing both sides of his face now. I pulled him closely and laid a soft, poignant kiss on his lips, loving the way his stubble brushed against my skin as I did so.

When I tried to pull away he followed me with his lips and crashed them down over mine, kissing me more passionately, but he was gone again before I could even get into the kiss.

"This everything in your car, sweetheart?" Logan asked, startling me. I turned to look at him and nodded when I saw the groceries I picked up earlier under his arm, and Max's spare gym bag in the other hand.

"Yeah. I...I think so," I agreed shyly. Had he seen me kissing Maddox? Was he angry after I'd been with him just the night before? But they were the ones to suggest the ménage relationship with both of them. Surely that meant they were good with seeing me show affection to the other, right?

“Let’s go home. You’re too cold,” Maddox told me as he pulled me closer, then moved to the back seat of their car. I might have still been shivering on the outside, but inside I was burning hot for the both of them.

Logan had only just started the car when his phone started to ring over the loudspeaker.

“It’s Max,” Logan said just as the call picked up.

“Logan?”

“Hey kid. Everything good?”

“No...maybe. I...I don’t know. My mom. She was working at the diner and she said she’d be home a half hour ago, but she’s not here. I don’t know...”

“I’m here, Max. Breathe, honey. I’m okay,” I spoke up, hating the clear panic in every word he spoke.

“Thank fuck! I was worried. I thought you were coming straight home?” Max questioned, making me smile at how parental he sounded.

“Your mom got into a bit of a fender bender on the way home,” Logan said, and I turned a glare on him. Max didn’t need to know that. The last thing I wanted to do was scare my son any further than I already had.

“What? Mom?”

“I’m fine Max. Just a few cuts and bruises. I’m on my way home now,” I tried to reassure him.

“Don’t you need to go to the E.R. or something? You could have more serious injuries? Internal bleeding o-or a brain bleed? Did you hit your head?” he panicked all at once.

“Max...” I started, but was cut off by Maddox.

“She’s okay, Max. Just take a breath and calm down. Why don’t you head over to our place? I’m gonna take care of the cuts your mom has and check her for signs of a concussion, but I’m confident she’ll be just fine.”

“Yeah. Yeah, okay. I’ll meet you out front. What about the car?” he asked.

“I don’t think we’ll be able to fix it back up, kid. Let’s put it that way,” Maddox replied as he glanced to me with a strained look. “Your mom was

lucky to walk away from the crash.”

“Jesus mom!” Max hissed.

“I’m fine. I was lucky, so you can quit your worrying. Just head to bed. I’ll be home soon. You don’t need to come to the guys place,” I told him as steadily as I could. My adrenaline surge was still causing me to shake, and I was freezing cold too, which wasn’t helping.

“I’ll meet you guys out front,” he said after a deep sigh that we heard down the phone line.

“Be there in a couple,” Logan told him, then he hung up.

“Why did you tell him? Now he’s just gonna be worrying about me again. I don’t want him to do that,” I growled looking between the two of them.

“He’s your son, Anna, and he’s almost grown. He’s gonna worry about you now, and I think you have to just get used to that,” Logan sighed.

“It isn’t like he wouldn’t have worked out something happened anyway. The cut on your head is deep, and he’d definitely be asking questions when your car was missing,” Maddox asked.

“He’s fifteen!” I snapped. “He’s a kid! He should get to be a kid. Its not his responsibility to look out for me. I can take care of myself and my son.”

“You’re gonna have to accept the fact he’s almost an adult one day soon, Anna. I know you want to shelter him but you can’t. It’s too late. Your kid is smart, and whatever he’s been through, it’s made him open his eyes to the reality of how shitty life can be. That’s not your fault, but it’s happened and you can’t change that. Maybe instead of trying to pretend he’s still a child, you need to embrace what a good man he’s growing into,” Maddox told me, somewhat brutally. I knew it was all true, but it still hurt.

I didn’t speak again for the last few minutes of the drive. I didn’t know what to say. I couldn’t argue with the truth. My mistakes were what had forced my son to realize the shitty realities of this world, and Maddox was right that there was nothing I could do to go back and change that.

My son had been forced to grow up in a matter of moments that night at our apartment, and ever since I had been attempting to take that back. To make my child a child once more. But that was never going to happen, and having

that pointed out so clearly made me pull my head from the sand I had been trying to bury it in for weeks, once and for all. It was time to stop trying to push my son to go backwards and be a kid again. It wasn't going to happen. All I could do now was embrace the amazing man my mess had proven him to be, and pray he found his way. Nothing would stop me from being at his side, but he wasn't going to let me stand before him as I had for so many years until that night. Even knowing it was the truth didn't cause me to feel any less terrified for my boy.

# CHAPTER 19

## LOGAN

“She okay?” I asked as I saw Maddox peeking into the guest room we had basically had to strongarm Anna into sleeping in the night before. The only reason she had finally given in was because Max pleaded with her to listen to us. The fact he was already upset and visibly shaken by the state of his mom had been enough for her to give in and stay the night.

We’d wanted them both close after what had happened. Maddox hadn’t seen any signs of Anna having a concussion, but that didn’t mean she didn’t. She was also pretty shaken up herself and she was moving stiffly, the bruises across her chest and her slightly swollen shoulder, all caused by the seat belt, clearly bothering her.

After the scare of seeing her car wrapped around that tree as we drove towards it, Madd and I weren’t ready to let her out of our sight. Max too. He was really shaken up and anxious. We knew if they went home Max would never sleep a wink, worrying about his mom all night. They were better off with us, under our roof where we could take care of them both and keep them safe.

“Still sleeping. Max is in there with her. He must have gone to check on her and fallen asleep,” Madd replied. “Leave them for now. Anna needs to rest, and Max was exhausted.”

“Do we need to keep waking Anna?” I asked. Madd and I had been taking it in turns to go in every hour through the night to wake Anna enough to ask a few questions and check she was still with us. She’d shown no signs of confusion, but plenty of annoyance. Clearly, interrupting her while she slept would not be advisable in the future.

“Nah. She’s good. I want to go out and look at her car in the daylight while she’s still out,” he said.



“I can call a tow company to come move it. I guess it needs to go straight to the scrap yard.”

“It does, but I want to take a look at it first. I know Anna said no one is coming after her and Max, but something doesn’t feel right. The angle the car was hit at looked deliberate to me, and I want to check it out properly.”

“She said the guy was likely drunk. He probably just swerved into her,” I reasoned.

“Maybe, but if he was drunk enough to do that, how the hell did he keep control of his own car when they crashed? He should have wrecked too, but he didn’t. Anna said there wasn’t any sign of the other car by the time she looked out at the road. Something doesn’t add up.”

“You think someone hit her deliberately?”

“I hope I’m wrong,” he sighed as we both started down the stairs and headed for the kitchen.

“Anna promised us that no one is coming after them.”

“I know, and I believe she believes that, but she could be wrong. We don’t even know what happened to her. Maybe whatever it was, it isn’t as dead and buried as she thinks it is. I just...I think we should be cautious, is all. Last night was too fucking close. She could have been killed in that wreck.”

“Don’t say that, Madd,” I growled. I still didn’t understand how, but my feelings for Anna were insanely strong in just the matter of weeks I had known her, and I knew Maddox felt the same. We had both fallen for her so much faster than I ever would have believed possible. But it had happened now, and even if Anna didn’t realize it yet, she was already ours.

“Just stay here with them both and call me right away if Anna starts vomiting or acting oddly. I’ll just go and take a look at the crash site before the road gets too busy,” Maddox told me. Even though he was the younger brother of us both, he was usually the one dishing the orders out nowadays. I was good with it though. Maddox was smarter than me. He had always been, and he knew what he was talking about in this situation. He’d dealt with countless crime scenes in the years he was with LAPD.

I had my own strengths, but none of them were relevant in that situation. The best place for me was at home, caring for Anna and Max, and that was exactly where I wanted to be too.

## ANNA

I was distracted at work at the store that afternoon. My son and the guys had tried to convince me not to go in, but I was feeling fine except for the throbbing of the bruises across my chest, and my aching shoulder. Even the thudding headache I'd had the night before was gone, and the only sign of what had happened the night before was the dressing on my forehead, under which sat the deep cut Maddox had closed with butterfly strips.

If I were honest, it was a relief to be in the peace of the store. Neil was out back checking inventory and the store was quiet. It was a pleasant relief from Max, Logan, and Maddox fussing over me as they had all night and that morning too.

The issue was that all of that peace and quiet was giving me time to think, and that was a bad idea right then. I was so confused about everything. Literally everything. My son. The Easton brothers and their confusing flirting. The past I was so sure Max and I had left behind.

Could the accident the night before really have been intentional?

That was what Maddox had been worried about when I finally woke late that morning and went down to the kitchen. I knew something was going on the second I saw Maddox's face as I opened the door and stepped in. He looked right at me and searched my face like he was looking for every secret I held inside.

Logan had been more relaxed, but I saw the tension in his face too, and by the time we had all sat with coffee in hand, I had been ready to burst if they didn't tell me what was going on. That was when Maddox had finally opened his mouth. He'd been out to the place where my car hit that tree and looked around. He said he couldn't be sure from what he could see, but he seemed pretty sure that the car that ran into me had done so on purpose, like they preplanned it. He explained that there were no skid marks in the road other than mine, which meant the driver who hit me hadn't even tried to brake and stop us from colliding. I tried to point out that the driver was likely wasted, but Maddox told me if the driver was sober enough to speed

away from the accident as fast as he or she did, they would have been sober enough to try and brake to stop the collision all together.

I had scoffed at his theories, telling him he was wrong – that there was no one who would have cause to run me off of the road like that, and that was true.

The life Max and I had left behind had been a pretty lonely one for me. I didn't have any friends, let alone enemies. The only person who could, and maybe would have come after me, couldn't possibly do that. Callum was not the one who had tried to end me last night. At least that was what I had told myself a hundred times since Maddox gave me his theory. I was just really damned grateful my son hadn't heard any of the conversation. The last thing he needed to worry about was that psycho coming looking for either of us.

But if I was so sure, then why was it weighing so heavily on my mind? Was it possible? Would Callum even bother to come after me if by some miracle he was able? Surely I was just another one of his victims?

The sound of the bell over the door ringing loudly startled me from the fast approaching memories of that evil monster looming over me. I took a deep breath and turned to the door with a fake smile.

“Aftern...” My greeting died out when I found no one standing there. The door was closed again and the store was still empty.

Confused I walked around the counter and went to the window beside the door, peering past the display of mowers, which Neil had set up there, to look out onto the street.

It was quiet in town too, just an old couple exiting the diner, the husband clutching his wife's hand and helping her down the small step and down to the side walk. I didn't see anyone outside the store, and certainly no one close enough to be messing with the door. Deciding I was just exhausted and imagining things, I moved to step away, when suddenly a figure appeared right outside the window, so close I could see the color of his eyes – eyes I'd never forget, and never stop seeing in my nightmares.

My body jolted as a scream ripped from me and I dropped down so he couldn't see me.

“Anna?!” Neil yelled, then he was there, running towards me. He looked as though he was going to reach for me, but he stopped himself just before he made contact. “What is it? What happened?” he asked instead.

I was already shaking so hard my teeth were chattering, and my eyes were blurry with tears as I curled into myself tightly. It was him. He was right there, outside the store, in the street. I felt the ghost of every injury he had inflicted on me, pain ricocheting through my body as my mind fought through the adrenaline surging into me. Then one clear thought came to mind. Max. I had to get to Max!

I shot to my feet so fast Neil stumbled backwards from where he had been crouched beside me.

“Anna? What’s wrong?” he asked, but I was already halfway out of the store and in the street. I looked around me frantically as I started to run. I had to get home to Max. I had to make sure he was safe!

I heard Neil yell my name loudly, then everything happened at once. A car was speeding towards me, and I realized too late I had run into the road without even looking. I thought I heard someone else yell my name, but it was too late. I closed my eyes, ready for the impact, but instead strong arms banded around my waist like iron and I knew I was in the air. There was a loud grunt as I hit something hard with a cry of my own.

I could hear people yelling around me, but I dare not open my eyes for a second as I tried to catch my breath, which had been knocked out of me by the impact of landing hard on top of something hard.

“Anna? Fuck! Are you hurt?” a deep voice asked. I quickly came back to reality, and realized I was laid out on top of someone, not something, and whoever they were, they were still holding me tight. Fear instantly filled me again and I opened my eyes, frantic now that I remembered why I had been running in the first place.

It was like my worst nightmares when I finally focused and saw blond hair. I started to fight instantly, sure Callum was the one holding me. I had no idea how it were possible, but he was back. He grabbed me and it was going to happen all over again.

“TATE!” The high pitched wail had me calming a little though, and I looked up for just a second to see Cat running from the diner towards us. She came right over and knelt on the floor as whoever held me sat up and moved me easily so I sat across his lap.

Finally, sense hit me and I looked up again and realized it was Tate who held me, not Callum. A car was parked in the middle of the road off to the side and I realized it was the car that had almost hit me. Tate must have leapt in and gotten me out of the road in the nick of time before I could be run down.

“I’m okay, Cat. I’m fine,” he assured his wife as he wrapped his hand around the back of her head and pulled her in for a quick kiss on her forehead.

“Tate?” I questioned as I looked between them.

“Oh my God!” Cat gasped. “Are you hurt, Anna?”

“No,” I shook my head as I took stock of my body. Nothing hurt past what I woke with that morning. Tate had taken most of the impact and kept his body wrapped around me. “I...I don’t think so. I’m okay.”

“You both scared the shit out of me!” Cat cried as she hit out at Tate playfully.

“Thank you,” I whispered as I looked up at Tate and smiled a little. He had dove in to save me with no thought of his own safety, and I knew he had just saved me from severe injury or even worse.

“I’m just glad I was here,” he puffed out as he smiled gently. “You sure you’re okay? We landed pretty hard.”

“I’m fine. Are you? You hit the side walk. I only hit you,” I reasoned, and he just smiled.

“Just a few scrapes. I’m okay.”

“Anna? Do you need anything?” A voice asked, and when I looked up Neil was above me looking concerned. Just seeing him reminded me of what had happened and I looked to Tate again.

“W-were you outside the store a few minutes ago? The hardware store?” I asked. Had he been the person I saw and my brain created the rest? It was certainly way more likely than Callum being stood there.

“No. I came straight from the bar. I was heading over to grab some lunch from the diner,” he explained, seeming puzzled. “I hadn’t even made it to the hardware store when I saw you and just ran.”

“I...I need to call the guys. Can I use your cell?” I asked urgently. Something didn’t feel right and I needed to know for sure my son was safe.

“Why don’t you both come into the diner and sit? You can call the guys from there,” Cat suggested. I didn’t want to wait that long, but I also didn’t want to look anymore unstable than I already did, so I stumbled to my feet, grateful when Cat grabbed for me and wrapped her arm around my shoulders. The adrenaline was making my legs shaky. I looked to Tate as he jumped up way too easily. He had crashed into a concrete sidewalk and absorbed the impact of my weight landing on him, yet it seemed he was pretty much untouched by it.

“I’ll get your things and bring them over for you, Anna,” Neil called after me, and I just nodded with a tight smile. *What the hell was going on? Had I really seen Callum?* Seeing him after Maddox telling me he didn’t think my crash was an accident just seemed like too big of a coincidence, and it had me breaking out into a sweat all over as fear consumed me. It couldn’t be him. It just couldn’t!

“Who was in the car?” I asked shakily as we entered the quiet diner.

“Some old man. He’s not from around here. He was driving way too fast. Neil said he’s really badly shaken. They’ve called an ambulance for him,” Cat explained. She led me over to the closest table and helped me into a chair.

I sighed with relief that Callum couldn’t have been in the car trying to hit me purposely. But that didn’t mean he hadn’t been outside the store. My heart was racing and I was sweating hard. My adrenaline was at an all time high as I tried not to let my anxiety spiral.

“Anna, it’s Maddox,” Tate said, startling me. When I looked up Tate was close to me, holding out his cell. I lifted a shaky hand and took it, desperate

to hear Maddox's voice.

"Madd?" I uttered shakily.

"I'm here, baby. Tate told me what happened. I'm on my way now, and Logan's coming too. Are you alright?" he asked.

"Max," I said instead. "I n-eed you to go to Max. I need to know he's safe, Maddox."

"He's at work. I'm sure he's fine. It's you I'm worried about."

"No! Please listen to me. Max might not be safe. I need you to go and pick him up right now! I think I was wrong. I...I think someone is coming after us." My words were more of a whimper by the end, and I didn't miss the way Tate stepped a little closer to me.

"Shit! Logan's in the city. He's an hour out at least," Maddox growled as he finally seemed to grasp the seriousness of what I was telling him.

"I...I'm okay. Go to Max, please. He's all that matters right now."

"I'll stay with you, Anna. Tell him you're safe for now," Tate told me, obviously having heard everything.

"You hear that?" I asked.

"Yeah, okay. Stay with Tate then. I'll get Max and I'll be there as soon as I can. But it's time, baby. Logan and I need to know everything if we're gonna keep you safe," he warned, and I knew he was right.

"I'll tell you," I agreed. I trusted them to protect Max – not that any of my earlier fears really mattered if Callum really was there. It was time for the truth.

# CHAPTER 20

## MADDOX

“How is she?” Logan demanded after answering my call on the first ring. I’d already text him while I was talking to Tate, telling him we needed him back here and what happened briefly. At the time I had just wanted him home so we could both be there to comfort and take care of Anna after she’d likely been hurt again, but now I needed him back so we could do everything in our power to protect Anna and Max.

“I don’t know. I’m not with her. It’s bad, Logan. She wants me to get Max. She said someone’s coming after them,” I explained hurriedly. I was swerving down the last street to the outdoor pool where Max worked. I didn’t have a weapon on me if anything went wrong, but as terrified and angry as I was for both Anna and Max, I was confident I could handle whatever I may encounter with my fists alone.

“Who?” Logan demanded.

“I don’t fucking know! Just get your ass back here. Anna’s with Tate for now, but that’s not enough. I want to get them both home where I know it’s secure. Whoever this fucker is, he’s not getting near them.”

“I’ll meet you at the diner. Keep Tate close until I get there. Tell him to close the bar up for now,” Logan told me and I agreed, then hung up.

I swerved into the lot of the swimming pool and barely shut off the engine before I was out and jogging, as fast as my prosthesis would allow, to get to Max. My heart was racing, my fears not just for Anna, who I was already falling in love with, but for Max too. I had come to care for him so much in the weeks I had known him, and I felt just as strong a need to keep him safe, as I did his mom.

I walked into the small building that housed the changing rooms, reception, and a snack bar, and actually sighed in relief when I saw Max sat behind the



reception desk with another guy, the both of them laughing at something.

“Max,” I interrupted as I strode to the desk and stopped before it.

“Madd? What are you...No! Is it my mom?” he gasped. “Is she okay?”

“No. We have to go. Grab your stuff, fast as you can,” I told him, not giving him chance to panic.

I followed him into a back room where he ripped his backpack from one of the lockers in the small ‘staff only’ area.

“What happened?” he asked as he threw his bag over his shoulder and slammed the locker closed again.

“We have to get to your mom. She can explain the rest, to both of us,” I told him. I had been happy to respect Anna’s privacy up until that point, but now that she was in danger, and Max too, we needed to know everything. It was the only way we could protect them.

We both left the reception and jumped into my car wordlessly. I knew Max was worrying by the way he was rubbing his hands anxiously up and down his thighs.

“Madd?”

“What?” I glanced to Max. We were almost to the diner, and getting there was all I could concentrate on. Max was safe and I needed to be sure Anna was too. Tate was a good guy, and in shape too, but he was more of a lover than a fighter. I worried he wouldn’t be enough to protect Anna if anything happened.

“Please tell me what the fuck is going on?” he pleaded.

“I don’t really know. Something happened with your mom in town. I spoke to her on the phone and she was panicked. She told me you could be in danger and that I needed to come get you. She thinks someone is coming after the both of you. Any idea who that could be?”

“Last night? Th-the crash?”

“I don’t think it was an accident,” I told him bluntly. “I went back out to the crash site this morning and things don’t add up. I think someone hit your mom on purpose last night.”

“No,” he started shaking his head hard. “It...it couldn’t be. It’s not possible.” Max was starting to gasp for breath and his hands had frozen on his knees where his nails now dug into his bare skin.

“Max!” I snapped as I put my hand over his and squeezed it, desperate for him not to hurt himself.

“It’s not possible,” he repeated numbly.

“It’s gonna be alright, kid. Logan and I are going to handle whatever’s going on and we’re gonna keep you and you mom safe too,” I told him firmly.

“My mom, she w-won’t tell you. She wants to protect me...but you need to know, right? To protect us you need to know who’s after us?” he asked as he turned to me. His eyes were glassy and he had gone so pale. As desperate as I was to know what he could tell me, I didn’t want to cause him any more despair. He was in enough pain. I reached up and wrapped my hand around the back of his neck squeezing a little, hoping it would give him some comfort, as it did me when Logan did the same thing.

“Nothing will stop my brother and me from protecting you, Max. You matter to us, son. You’re family now,” I promised him.

“I...I killed a man, Maddox. He h-hurt my mom and I...I had to save her. I killed him...or at least I thought I did,” he sniffled as he buried his face in his hands, then he started to sob, deep mournful sobs that killed me. “Is it him? Is he back?” he asked shakily.

I was shocked silent for a moment. I didn’t see Max having it in him to kill anyone, but then I thought about how protective of his mom he had been since I met him and it made sense. If someone was laying hands on Anna, I could believe Max would have done whatever it took to protect her. Was that why Anna refused to tell us? It all started to make sense. She wasn’t protecting herself. She was protecting Max.

“I don’t know, but if he is, he won’t be coming anywhere near you this time.” I’d be the one killing that bastard this time, and I’d enjoy the fuck out of it too. Anna and Max deserved revenge for all they’d been put through, and if it was at the hands of whoever was coming after them, he’d deserve everything I did to him.

## ANNA

I had moved over to sit in one of the booths beside the window of the diner as soon as I hung up the call with Maddox. Since then I had been watching the street outside non stop for any sign of Maddox pulling up with my son.

Tate and Cat were hovering close. The customers who had been in the diner when I walked in, had now left and Cat had closed the place up at Tate's request, so we were locked inside the building now, which had eased my fears for myself slightly. But it wasn't me I was most scared for. It was Max.

Knowing that maniac – Callum – was out there somewhere when my son was alone terrified me. I just needed Max to be with me, where I could keep him safe.

"Here, hon. Drink this," Cat said, startling me. I looked to my right and found her stood at my side, holding out a glass of amber liquid. "It's whiskey. It might stop you from shaking quite so much."

I didn't usually drink hard liquor. The smell of it reminded me of my father, and those were not memories I wanted to relive, but I took the glass anyway, and drank it all down in one gulp. I was a mess and I'd try anything to force me to pull myself together.

"They're here," Tate said, and I whipped my head around to look outside again. Sure enough Maddox was already parked up right outside the window and climbing out. A sob of relief slipped from me when I saw my son round the car and follow right behind Madd. He looked anxious, but he was unharmed and safe.

By the time I got to my feet on my shaky legs, Tate had unlocked and opened the door.

"Hey man? Everything good?" Tate asked as Maddox walked in.

"Yeah. You see anyone hanging around?" Madd asked. I didn't hear what else was said, because the second my son walked in I ran to him and had him wrapped tightly in my arms.

"Max! Are you alright?" I cried as I clutched him. He hugged me back just as tight and I could feel how tense his whole body was.

“Is it true?” he asked unsteadily. “Is...is he here? Is he alive?”

“I...I saw him, Max. I saw him outside the store. He’s here,” I sniffled as I tried to fight back my overwhelming fears. Max just held me even tighter as a sob escaped.

“Hey,” I felt another body surround my back, and realized Maddox was holding the both of us. “Everything’s gonna be fine. Logan and I aren’t gonna let anything happen to either of you,” he told us as he pulled us both against his body and held us tight.

“How can this be happening? I...I killed him, right mom? He...he was dead. You said he w-was dead, right?” Max questioned, and I hated the waver in his voice. I knew he was either crying, or very close to it.

“I thought he was,” I replied as I lifted my head and looked up at Maddox. He was going to be confused, and likely alarmed by this conversation... except he didn’t look either of those things.

“Max told me some of it,” he told me. “We’ll discuss the rest back at the house. Let’s just keep things quiet until Logan get’s here, okay?” he suggested as he glanced to where Cat and Tate sat at a table close enough to hear us if they tried to.

“Madd’s right. We shouldn’t talk about any of this here,” I told Max, and I was relieved when he lifted his head and looked at me, then nodded. I was right, he was crying and he looked sickly gray. I reached up and placed my hand over his cheek, hoping to soothe him. I was somewhat relieved when he forced a wobbly smile for me. “You’ll be fine, Max. I won’t let it be any other way,” I promised him.

“It’s not me I’m worried about, mom,” he sniffled as he looked at me with so much unmasked fear.

“You’ll both be fine. Logan and I will see to that,” Maddox cut in, his words firm and sure.

“You shouldn’t get mixed up in all of this,” I sighed as I turned enough to meet his gaze. “This is my mess. I don’t want anyone else getting hurt.”

“Enough,” Madd growled as he moved his arm from around me and gently cupped my cheek in his huge palm. “I don’t want to hear this crap, Anna,

and neither will Logan. You guys are our family now, and that means we will do whatever we need to do to always keep you both safe.”

“But...”

“No, baby. No but’s, and no arguing. You know what you mean to Logan and I. We want you to be ours, and that means we want Max to be ours too. We love you both. Whoever this guy is, whatever is going on, we’ll handle it together.”

“What does that mean? Are you guys...is it serious now?” Max asked as he took a step back and looked to Maddox with confusion. “Mom?” He turned his look on me and I had no idea what to say.

“Later, kid. We can talk about everything once we get home. For now let’s just sit down and wait for Logan to get here. Your mom’s pretty shaken up,” he pointed out, and I was grateful that he chose not to mention the fact Max looked just as shaken as I did.

Max took a deep breath as he swiped at his eyes, then he took my hand and led me over to sit in one of the leatherette booths near the window. Maddox followed us over and settled his hand on my thigh as he slid into the seat beside me. The heat of his skin on mine made me feel a comfort I needed desperately in that moment, and I found myself leaning to the side and against his warm body. Max slid into the seat opposite us. Madd had told me that he and Logan loved me and my son. Maybe that should have scared me, but it didn’t because I could feel it too, even if I dare not fully admit it yet. I could feel the strength of my trust in those two men, and the intensity of my feelings for the both of them every time they were near. I knew the feeling I got when they touched me – that complete sensation of safety and comfort – had to be love. Nothing else could feel so strong and unbreakable.

## **LOGAN**

I knew my driving was reckless as I sped through town and came to a screeching halt outside of the diner, but I didn’t have it in me to care about that, or about anything other than seeing for myself that Anna and Max were safe. Even the text from my brother assuring me he had the both of

them, hadn't settled my racing heart, or stopped my hands from sweating against the wheel of my truck as panic and fear filled me.

It had only been a matter of weeks that Anna, Max, Madd, and I had known each other, but those weeks had been enough to convince me that Anna and Max were meant to be with Madd and I. I had no doubts about that. I was in love with Anna, which was such a crazy thing for me to admit to myself when I had only ever loved my brother in my entire life, but Anna – she was just special. It was like she was made for me – for Madd and I. She made me feel an inner peace and contentment I had never known before when I held her close and was surrounded by everything she was.

Knowing she had been in danger, and Max too, had made every macho, alpha instinct that I had within me, come roaring to life, and all I wanted was to get to the both of them and know they were protected and whole.

The first thing I saw as I all but threw myself through the door of the diner, was Max. He was sitting in a booth opposite my brother. He was pale...too fucking pale, and his eyes were red and puffy. I was sure the way he was biting his bottom lip was his attempt not to cry any further and it ripped me apart to see him hurting and afraid. He was just a kid – sure he seemed smart, and wise beyond his years, but he was only fifteen really – and I couldn't stand to see him looking so afraid.

"Max," I gasped as I rushed over to him. I couldn't see Anna, but I knew she was there somewhere because Maddox had told me so.

I was relieved when Max got to his feet and allowed me to embrace him as I felt I needed to. His body was shaking as I wrapped my arm around the top of his back and pulled him close.

"It's gonna be alright, bud. I promise you," I tried to reassure him.

"I know," he agreed as he pulled back from my hold and swiped at his eyes with some unnecessary embarrassment.

I patted him on the shoulder as he furiously swiped at more tears in his eyes. He was obviously badly shaken up, and I wondered what, or who, could have him so terrified.

As Max backed away and slid back into the seat he'd been in before, I noticed Anna for the first time. She was sitting on the seat opposite her son,

her knees pulled up to her chest and making herself so small I hadn't been able to see her around Maddox when I walked in. She was pale too, and I could see her entire body trembling even from where I stood. She looked up at me, and the fear I saw reflected at me from her red, puffy eyes hit me like a physical punch. She was trying to hide the fact she was terrified for the sake of her son, but she wasn't doing a very successful job of it.

"Jesus, sweetheart," I gasped as I moved closer and leaned over the table to get closer to her. "What happened?"

"I'm okay," she squeaked tearfully, then she dropped her head to her knees, hiding from me.

"Is she hurt?" I demanded as I looked to Madd.

"I don't think so, but we should get them both home," he told me quietly.

"Home?" Max gasped. "We can't! Tell them, mom! We can't go back there. He'll know...he's been watching us and he has to know where we live, right mom?"

"I..I don't know," Anna floundered as she lifted her head and looked between Madd and I, almost as though she were a little dazed. I wondered if she were in some kind of shock. She'd almost been hit by a car, swept violently from the road by Tate, and seen a ghost from her past. It made sense she'd be struggling.

"Our house is the safest place you guys can be right now," Maddox told her as he turned in the seat so he faced her a little more. He took her hand in his and rubbed it between his own like she was cold.

"No. We should go. We have to run, mom. If that fucker came this far to follow us, it's bad. It's really, really bad. He'll hurt you again. We have to get away from here and from him," Max panicked as he struggled to his feet again and looked poised to flee.

"How about we just get back to our place for now? Your mom's in no condition to do anything but rest right now, Max," I pointed out as calmly as I could. "Madd's right. Our place is very secure. We'll know the second anyone tries to break in, and we can handle this guy, whoever he is. We can and will protect you and your mom."

“He’s right, Max. Us running off alone right now seems like a bad plan. As much as I hate dragging the guys into my mess, I think they’re the only ones who can protect us right now,” Anna spoke up, her words sounding exhausted and shaky.

“We could go to the cops,” Max suggested, but Anna just shook her head vigorously.

“I won’t risk your future, honey. The cops aren’t an option,” she told her son as she looked up to him and forced a smile. “Just try to trust me, okay? I made this mess. I’ll find a way to fix it.”

After thanking Tate and Cat for all of their help, and telling Tate to keep the bar closed and take a much needed night off after what he did to save Anna earlier, we all left the diner. Max was exhausted and terrified, and Anna was in such a state I ended up scooping her up and carrying her out to Madd’s car, which we all decided to ride in together. I’d get my truck later. Right then, when Madd and I really weren’t sure who or what we were dealing with, staying together was the best option we had.

Both Maddox and I were resolute in our need to keep Anna and Max safe, and the second we left that diner and set off home, we were both in protector mode, our heads on a swivel the entire drive back. We had meant the words we had said – there was nothing we wouldn’t do to protect the both of them. It would just be a whole lot easier to do that if we knew who we were protecting them from.



# CHAPTER 21

ANNA

“I should be down there with you when you tell them, mom,” Max protested again from where he was sat on the end of the large bed in one of the guest rooms in the big house. Logan and Maddox had already made it clear to me and to Max that we could no longer stay in the guest house, or my cottage, as I had dubbed it. They wanted us close in the main house, where they said the security was better and where they’d be with us. I hadn’t argued because I was terrified to be alone with Max knowing that mad man was alive and coming for us.

“No,” I shook my head. “I can handle telling the guys everything. You don’t need to hear it all, honey. You’ve been through enough.”

“I haven’t been through anything like as much as you have, mom. Just stop trying to protect me! You can’t! I’m not a kid any more. If that bastard is coming for us, I can help keep you safe,” he argued, but the redness around his still glassy eyes was enough to have me sticking to my guns. Maybe Max wasn’t a kid anymore. Maybe he was growing into a strong, protective, amazing man, but I was still his mom, and it would always be my job to protect him as much as I possibly could. This – the recounting of everything that had happened with Callum – Max could be spared all of that at least.

“You’re right,” I agreed as I sat on the bed beside him and wrapped my arm around his back. “You’re not a kid. I know that, but I will always be your mom, Max, no matter how old you are. Please just let me spare you this talk. I can’t stand to see you upset again today. You may be grown, but you’ll always be my baby, and I need to be able to protect you too sometimes,” I pleaded as I ran my hand in soothing circles over his broad back.

“I don’t want you to be upset again either though. You’re the one who’s been through enough. I want to be there for you.”

“You are, Max. You have always been, since the day you were born and I held you in my arms. Having you at my side has gotten me through so many days that I thought I’d never survive. You are always here for me, but I can handle this. It’s just a conversation,” I assured him. I was relieved when he let loose a deep sigh that I was sure was him giving in.

“Is it true? What they said? Logan said he loved you,” he asked instead.

“He can’t love me. He barely knows me,” I scoffed, but deep inside I knew the feelings I had for both Logan and Maddox were stronger than any I had ever known, and the ‘L’ word wasn’t that crazy.

“Are you dating them? Like, both of them?”

“No!” I cried. “When would I have time to date them?”

“Mom.” Max just stared me down knowingly and I knew I wasn’t fooling him.

“Fine. I like them. We’re not dating, but I...I have feelings for them. Both of them. I tried not to, after everything. I didn’t want to fuck up again, Max, but I just...I can’t seem to stay away from them.”

“Both of them?”

“I know, okay? It’s weird, right? But it just kind of happened,” I explained lamely.

“It’s weird,” Max agreed with a nod. “You with two guys kinda freaks me out.”

“Then I’ll stop it, son. I care for them, but I never want to do anything that will hurt you. You are, and always will be my priority.”

“I didn’t say that, mom. Just take a breath,” he told me as he reversed our roles, wrapping his huge arm around me and pulling me into his side in a half hug. “I don’t want you to stop anything because of me. Logan and Maddox are good, kind, and honest men. They care about you, and they want to protect you. That’s what you deserve. I can learn to live with the three of you being together if it makes you happy. That’s all I want for you.

After everything you did to raise me, all of the sacrifices I know you made, and the struggles you faced, I just want you to find happiness and be content. If Logan and Madd can do that, then don't even think about walking away from them."

"I'll think about it," I agreed with a nod. "Right now we have bigger things to focus on."

"How could he still be alive, mom?" Max asked, his voice lowering to little more than a whisper.

"We were terrified and high on adrenaline. I was a state. I couldn't find a pulse on him, but maybe...I don't know. Maybe his heart was just slow or something? The car didn't go far after we pushed it. It's possible, Max. I'm sorry, honey. I fucked up again," I admitted shakily. I couldn't seem to stop shaking since I saw Callum outside the store earlier. I was frozen through to my bones and the constant shivering was vibrating my entire body.

"Please just stop blaming yourself for everything," Max pleaded as he wrapped his other arm around me and hugged me even tighter against his side. "You didn't do anything wrong, mom. He did. He was the monster. We just did what we had to, to survive."

"I just w-want you to be safe," I pushed out through my tight throat. Tears filled my eyes as I clutched his waist and hugged him too. "I tried so hard to always keep you safe Max, but now...I'm so scared you'll be hurt in all of this mess."

"You did it. You kept me safe. I'm here and I'm whole. I'm gonna stay that way too. I kicked this fucker's ass last time. I'll do it again if I have to," he pledged, sounding so much stronger now, but it just terrified me.

"No!" I gasped as I looked up at him. "You have to stay out of this now. Please, Max. I n-never want you to have to do what you did ever again. It... It's not who you are."

"I'll be whoever I need to be to protect you. Can't you see that yet, mom? I can't lose you, and I sure as hell will never stand by and watch anyone hurt you. I'm at least twice your size already, and I'm not done growing yet. I think it's sorta time you stopped trying to shelter me behind you. I don't even fit there anymore," he told me with the hint of a smile on his face.

“I’ll never stop,” I told him flatly.

“Then I guess it’s a good thing we have Logan and Madd to back us both up now, huh?” He smiled fully for the first time, and something inside of me uncoiled at the sight of it. “Go and speak to them. Tell them everything. You can trust them. I know you can. We can.”

“I know,” I agreed. Everything was crazy around me, but I knew that to be the truth. Logan and Maddox meant what they said when they promised to keep Max and I safe. I just prayed it wouldn’t get either of them hurt in the process.

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I found Logan and Maddox in the living room. Someone had lit the log fire, despite it being the middle of summer. The room was lit warmly with several lamps and it looked so inviting. All I wanted to do was lay out on the huge sectional with them both, and lose myself in a movie.

Instead Maddox was sat in one of the armchairs with his laptop open on his knee, staring intently at whatever he had on the screen, while Logan was pacing anxiously back and forth behind the sofa. They looked stressed out and worried, and I hated that I knew it was all on me.

“Hey,” I greeted quietly as I walked in. Instantly they both froze and looked right at me.

“How is he?” Maddox asked.

“Shaken up, but a little better now we’re here. You made him feel he’s safe in the house, so thank you,” I replied as I stood frozen, just inside the doorway.

“He is. You’re both safe in this house. I have an amazing security set up. Logan and I will be alerted if anyone even touches a window or door around the house,” Maddox assured me.

“And to do that they’d have to get past the security and cameras we have set up around the perimeter of the entire property. Maddox has us all covered here when it comes to security,” Logan added, and I just nodded. I didn’t know very much about the brain injury Maddox had been left with after he was attacked, but Logan had mentioned to me that it had made his brother

paranoid about safety and security. I guessed that was why they had so many measures in place to protect their home.

“Come and sit down, beautiful. You look wiped out,” Maddox told me as he placed his laptop down on the coffee table, then patted his lap.

I knew I should just take a seat on the sofa and try to maintain the appearance that I wasn’t a complete emotional wreck, but the second Maddox’s eyes met mine, I knew he already saw the turmoil inside of me. He read me so easily. So the pretense all seemed pointless and I found myself hurrying around the sofa to get to him. I just needed him to hold me. I always felt safer when he or Logan held me.

I was barely even before Maddox before he had his hands on my hips and lifted me into his lap. I sat sideways and naturally fell against him, resting the side of my head against his chest, in search of the soothing beat of his heart. Tears slipped down my cheeks as he pulled me even snuggler against his front and wrapped his arms tightly around me, resting his chin on the top of my head.

“You’re alright, baby. We’re here. We’ve both got you and Max now. Everything’s gonna be okay,” he soothed as he started to slightly rock me back and forth. I turned my body enough to press my whole face against his soft cotton t-shirt as I clung to the fabric at his sides. I wanted to break down and sob like the frightened child I felt coming out inside of me, but I forced myself to keep it together. The conversation we all needed to have was waiting. There wasn’t time for me to have another epic meltdown.

I heard Logan come closer, his soft steps against the hardwood floor echoing in the silence of the room, then I felt his hand on my right arm, running up and down my bare skin comfortingly.

“Jesus, sweetheart. You’re frozen through,” he hissed, and seconds later I felt a soft blanket being wrapped around me.

“I’m okay,” I tried to reassure them as I lifted my head and looked between them both. Logan was crouched opposite Maddox, right beside me, and they were both watching me with so much concern it was startling to see. I wasn’t used to anyone other than my son caring that much about me.

I took a deep breath and pushed the wild strands of my hair that had escaped my ponytail back from my face. I had no doubt I looked a complete mess, but again – bigger problems.

“We don’t have to talk tonight, Anna. You look so tired right now,” Logan told me as he ran a thumb over the tear tracks down my cheeks.

“It’s just the crash from the adrenaline. I’m good,” I assured him, but it wasn’t too convincing when the words came out weak and shaky. “Let’s just get it over with, okay?” I added when they both looked unsure.

“Okay, but just tell us if it get’s to be too much,” Logan agreed reluctantly.

“His name is Callum,” I dove right in, just desperate to get it all out in the open so I could close it down in my mind once again. Just knowing I needed to tell them what happened that one weekend was awakening every horrible second of it in my memory. “The last name on his ad said ‘Smith’ but I doubt that was his real name.

“His ad?” Madd questioned.

“On a dating site. It was stupid, but I was lonely and I just...I wanted a connection, you know? I just wanted to find someone who would want me and care about me. I love my son more than anything and I have never for one second regretted having him, but being a very young, single mom didn’t make for a great dating life.”

“We get it, Anna. You were allowed to have a social life, sweetheart,” Logan told me.

“I never wanted Max to get mixed up with anyone I dated, not that it ever really happened anyway, but that weekend he was away. He went camping with some friends and their dads, so I...I thought it would be okay. I thought I could just have some fun,” I explained. “Callum started sending me messages as soon as I posted my profile on the dating site. He was funny and he seemed nice. We chatted for a while through the site, then I gave him my number and we were texting most of the day on the Friday. When he asked to meet me, I agreed. He picked a restaurant that I knew, and that I was sure would be crowded. I was so sure I’d be safe there.”

“Tell us what happened, baby,” Maddox urged after several minutes of me zoning out, lost in my nightmarish flashbacks. It was the feel of Maddox

pulling me tight against his body once again that brought me back to reality. I looked between them with watery eyes.

“The date was on Friday night. Kind of rushed, but it suited me since I only had that weekend while Max was away. When I met him...Callum...at the restaurant, he...he was nice. He looked just like his photo on the website, and he was charming and funny. I wasn’t sure he was really my type, but I was enjoying the company and the meal was good. It was nice to just let my hair down, I guess.

“I remember eating the main meal. I had a couple of beers, but I was nowhere near drunk. We ordered dessert. I remember that, but I...that’s the last thing I remember. I think he must have drugged me...my drink, maybe when I went to the restroom.”

“Sonofabitch!” Maddox hissed as he held me so tight it bordered on painful, but I needed that hold to keep me grounded in that moment, and not lost to the memories of that terrifying night I was recalling.

“Next thing I knew I woke up back at my apartment. I was naked and I... he...he’d bound me to the corner posts of my bed. He w-was stripped down to just his jeans when he walked in, and he was a completely different person. He had a knife...l-like a hunting knife. He c-cut me...right here. I thought that was it,” I said as I rubbed absently at the scar that was still red, angry, and barely healed, down my chest and to my navel. “I th-thought he’d cut me enough to kill me then, but he hadn’t, obviously. After that he...he hurt me more. I kept on expecting h-him to...to r-rape me, but he... he didn’t. It was my pain. He l-liked the pain he inflicted. He t-tortured me and he enjoyed every scream and cry he tore from me,” I whimpered.

“Jesus Anna. I’m so sorry. So fucking sorry,” Logan gasped as he rose on his knees and wrapped himself around me and Maddox, so I was squeezed securely between the two of them.

I turned enough to grab a handful of Logans shirt and tried to pull him even closer to me, where I huddled against his brother. He pushed closer against me and snaked an arm in between my side and Maddox, so he was holding me tightly too.

“I’m gonna kill him, Anna. He will never get near you or Max ever a-fucking-gain,” Maddox raged in a low menacing tone.

“Tell us the rest, sweetheart. Get it all out, then we can take you upstairs and just hold you all night, the way we both need to,” Logan told me.

I nodded and sat up, forcing them both to back off enough for me to sit up straight and take a much needed cleansing breath.

“I didn’t know how much time passed. I started to drift in and out of consciousness. I had some damaged ribs and burns. The blood...there was s-so much blood. I w-was cut up pretty bad and he’d beaten me a few times so my head felt fuzzy. I never thought...I w-was so sure he’d kill me before Max ever came home. He h-had the knife again. He’d moved me so I was tied to the bed but laid on my front. I screamed as he cut me again, but it... the sound...it barely came out. I’d already screamed myself hoarse by then. “I didn’t hear the door open and close. I didn’t hear anything, but then suddenly my son made this sound...this deep, pained roar. A heavy weight landed on me and when I tried to turn to look, I saw him...Callum. He w-was stumbling to get up off of me, and Max...” My voice broke as a sob burst from me. “...he...he’d heard me cry out and grabbed his baseball bat. He h-hit Callum to get him off of me, but not hard enough. Callum got to his f-feet and went for Max. I...I tried to get free...a-and I was screaming, even though the sound barely came out. Callum knocked Max to the floor and picked up the knife he’d been using o-on me. I...I w-was so sc-scared,” I stuttered hysterically.

“Breathe for me, Anna. Max is safe. You’re both safe,” Maddox whispered as he pressed my head against his chest again and ran a hand over my hair soothingly.

“What day did Max come home, Anna?” Maddox asked.

“Sunday...late on S-Sunday.”

“He held and tortured you for days,” Maddox hissed, and I just nodded. I hadn’t known how much time had passed at the time, but it had felt like years, not just days.

“Max managed to get the upper hand again, I’m guessing?” Logan asked, and I nodded, but didn’t lift my head from the safety of Maddox.

“I...I didn’t see it all. I could barely move to look over my shoulder and my head...everything was so fuzzy. Max was so fast though. He was bigger



too...stronger th-than Callum. He...he shot to his feet and Callum wasn't expecting it. Max smashed the bat down hard against his side this time and Callum stumbled. Max hit him again and he fell, but as he went down he smashed his head against the corner of this old, oak dresser I bought at a thrift store. It was solid and he...Callum, was out cold by the time he hit the floor. The blood....there was so much blood."

"Max did so good. He saved both of your lives," Maddox told me, sounding proud of my son.

"He did, but h-he never should have been forced to do it," I squeaked tearfully. "He c-cut me free. I...I was a real mess. Bleeding and I c-could barely breathe because...well, my ribs. It hurt so much just to breathe in and out. Max wanted to call the cops, and I should have let him, but I...I was s-so scared they'd arrest him for hurting Callum. I m-managed to get to the floor to check Callum was alive and he...he wasn't. There w-was no pulse, a-and the carpet around him...it w-was soaked with his blood. I thought he was d-dead. I was so sure."

"Head injuries always bleed a ton, and you were probably in shock, not to mention, likely concussed. It would have been easy to miss a pulse," Logan told me.

"I t-told Max we couldn't call the cops. I couldn't take the risk. We worked to roll the body in the rug he was l-laid on, then we moved him into the hallway. I...I t-took a shower and got dressed. Some of the cuts were too deep and they wouldn't stop bleeding, but I...I wasn't thinking straight and I just left them."

"You could have fucking bled out!" Maddox growled, and I gripped him harder to try and soothe him.

"I didn't. I'm here," I told him. "Max took Callum's car keys and found his car. It was the middle of the night by the time he moved the car to the front of our building. Getting Callum down to the car was h-hard. Max did most of it and I...I know it fucked him up, dragging a body wrapped in carpet down three flights of stairs. How could it not?"

"He did what he needed to do, Anna. You both did," Logan reminded me.

“W-we got him into the trunk and I dr-drove the car out of the city. I d-don’t even remember where I drove. I was too focused on not passing out. Eventually we ended up on a back road, miles from the city. There was a ravine and it was surrounded by woods. The head wound...Callum’s head wound...it was at the front of his head so I...I thought a car accident would look real, you know? Max got the bastard into the driver’s seat with the engine running and the hand brake off. We pushed the car...o-or Max did mainly, anyway. The slight hill down the small ravine took it fast enough that it hit a tree head on.”

“The car would have been covered in yours and Max’s finger prints, baby,” Maddox pointed out.

“N-no,” I gasped, feeling out of breath. “I w-was careful. We s-sat on plastic in the seats and wore rubber dish gloves. I wiped everything in the car down anyway before we pushed it over. I w-was so careful, but I...I never considered he wasn’t damn well dead!”

“What happened then?” Logan pushed.

“We s-set off walking. Max was carrying the rolled up, bloody rug. Once we made it about a mile away we walked into the woods and set it on fire. We waited for it to burn to ash, then covered it with dirt and debris from the forest. My plan was for us to walk to a gas station, then order a cab from a public phone. I h-had cash to pay for it. I planned everything, but I...I should have taken care of the cuts...the bleeding. I passed out before we got near the city. Max...he had to carry me the rest of the way. I was in the cab when I came back around. It dropped us a block from our place and again Max had to carry me to our apartment. He was so scared about how hurt I was, but I knew we couldn’t go to the hospital.”

“You should have called the cops right away. What max did was self-defense, Anna. He wouldn’t have faced charges. You could have killed yourself doing all of that when you were in such a bad state,” Maddox admonished.

“I couldn’t take that risk!” I snapped as I lifted my head and glared at him. “It was my mess! My fucking idiotic mistake! I would never do anything that would cause Max to pay for my selfishness. I’ve seen the way these things go, Madd. What if that guy was the son of someone important? Max

could have been hung out to dry and spent the rest of his life behind bars! I would never chance that. I'd have happily died that night so long as I knew Max was safe and in the clear!"

"None of what happened was your fault, Anna," Logan sighed.

"Yes, it damn well was, and I will never change my mind on that. I was an idiot. I allowed myself to be selfish and I got what I deserved, but Max should never have had to face the consequences too. He should never have had to deal with what we did that night!"

"Anna..."

"Anyway," I cut Logan off. Nothing he could say would ever ease the terrible guilt and shame I felt over my stupid, selfish mistakes. "It took me a few days to get enough strength to move around. We managed to keep the wounds clean and dressed and Max got some strong painkillers from a friend who had broken his leg the summer before and hadn't finished the supply. I told school Max had mono and he stayed with me. We both spent most of the time flicking between news networks and checking online for news of the body being found, but nothing ever came up. We bleached the whole apartment like six times, top to bottom, then we started packing. I knew we couldn't stay there. Two weeks later I signed the contract online for your guest house and a few days after that we arrived here. I thought that was it. I thought we'd be safe from it all here. We're so far away now."

"And you're sure you saw that sonofabitch today outside the hardware store?" Maddox asked.

"Yes," I nodded, but then I thought about the way I had questioned Tate, wondering if it had been him who I saw and just panicked. "No. Maybe," I shrugged.

"What do you mean, sweetheart?"

"I was so sure when he stood opposite me through the glass. My fear, the way my heart pounded almost out of my chest and that desperate need to flee, it was all so real. I was so sure it was him, but then when Tate pulled me out of the road I...I wondered if it had just been him I saw instead. Tate said he hadn't been outside the store, but if I had doubts then, maybe Callum wasn't really there at all," I tried to explain, knowing I sounded like

I was losing my mind. “I...I have flashbacks sometimes. I see his face. He’s in my nightmares every time I close my eyes. Maybe I just started to see him in my real life now too,” I sniffled.

“Sshh baby. It’s okay. We’ll figure it out,” Maddox promised.

“Neil has a ton of surveillance cameras around the store. Maybe one of them caught something. We can ask him for the footage tomorrow, okay?” Logan added, and I nodded gratefully. I was terrified to have it confirmed that Callum was alive and after us, but I was also terrified to have it confirmed no one had been there at all, and that I really was losing my mind.

# CHAPTER 22

## ANNA

“That’s him!” I cried as I pointed at the screen of the laptop Maddox had open on the kitchen counter before himself, me, Logan, and Max. I felt the instant tremble of my legs as adrenaline kicked in, my heart rate ratcheting up until it beat so hard I felt light headed.

“She’s right. That’s definitely the fucker,” Max agreed solemnly.

It was the next morning and Maddox had contacted Neil for all of the surveillance footage his cameras had caught of the store, the previous day. One of the cameras covered the front door of the store, but also the side of the display window, and right in the left hand side of that shot, stood Callum Smith, watching me. Taunting me. He really had been there.

I felt all of the calm the guys had given me the night before torn from me in an instant. Panic rose within me at knowing for a fact I had been right and Callum was still alive.

I didn’t even remember falling asleep the night before. After the ordeal of me telling Madd and Logan everything, Logan had taken me from Maddox’s arms and carried me up to his room, Maddox right behind us. We hadn’t spoken much as we’d all crawled on top of the covers on the bed and just cuddled up in a huddle – me pressed exactly where I wanted to be – between the two of them. They urged me to try and sleep, and reassured me again and again when I told them I was too tired to close my eyes. They promised not to leave me, and they hadn’t. I had woken that morning in the exact same spot I must have eventually fallen asleep – too exhausted to fight it any longer. They had both held me between them all night, and I hadn’t had a single nightmare knowing they were there with me. It had been the best nights sleep I thought I may have ever had in my entire life, but now all of that peace and calm I had gained was gone at the sight of that monster on the computer screen.

Maddox pulled out his cell phone after pausing the image on a pretty clear shot of Callum's face. With his cell phone he snapped a photo of the screen.

"I'm sending this to a contact in LAPD. He's agreed to run the image to try and get an identity for us," he explained when he looked over to where I was stood behind him, leaning heavily against the back of the chair he sat in. Logan was in the chair beside him and Max was at my back. We were all crowded around the screen of the laptop.

"No Madd, please. I d-don't want the police involved in this," I cried as fear consumed me.

"Easy baby," Madd said as he set down his phone and turned to face me. "My bud is running the search unofficially. There'll be no record of it."

"You're sure?" I worried.

"Trust me. You know I'd never do anything to put you or Max at risk," he told me with a raise of his eyebrows, daring me to disagree.

"I know. Sorry. I do know that, and I do trust you," I agreed easily.

I had to trust them to have given in to them as I had. They were the only thing standing between Max and I, and the crazy psycho who had almost killed me. I was doing everything they asked of me because I was sure they knew better than I did what would keep Max and I safe, but it was a huge leap for me. I had never trusted anyone to take care of me or my son in the thirty years I'd been alive. It had always been down to me to make the right choices and keep myself, and my son safe. I'd failed plenty of times, but I never had any choice but to brush myself off after I made a mistake, and keep fighting. I never had anyone I could trust to take care of me and Max. Now I was trusting Maddox and Logan because they had earned my trust. I knew they cared for me and my son, and I felt safe when I was with them. My instinct was that they would never intentionally let us down. I just had to trust my own instincts now. Easier said than done though.

"I trust both of you," I said, making it clear as I looked between Madd and Logan. "I just...trusting people, and relying on them in anyway...it's new, I guess. It's always just been me looking out for myself, then Max came along and it was just us. I'm not saying I was any good at any of it, of course, but I was all I ever had to rely on before."

“We know, sweetheart, but you’ve got us now. It’s alright to allow yourself to lean on us sometimes. We’ll always be there to catch you if you need us to.” Logan promised

“What do we do about *him*?” I asked, nodding to the screen. Nausea filled me at the sight of those cold eyes that haunted me night and day.

“We find out who the hell he is and where he’s staying, then Logan and I pay him a little visit,” Maddox replied threateningly.

I knew I should be protesting, and telling them that I didn’t want them both getting mixed up in my mess. I knew I should be strong enough to handle the situation alone, but the truth was that I wasn’t strong enough – not nearly. Callum terrified me. Just the sight of him outside the store had frozen me in utter horror, and the fact he had essentially risen from the freaking grave to come after me and my son only intensified my fears a hundred fold. I needed Logan and Maddox’s help and I knew it.

“Are you okay, mom?” Max asked as he placed a hand on my arm, and looked to me with so much worry. I knew he’d be able to feel the way my body was trembling as adrenaline coursed through me at just the sight of Callum.

“I’m good, honey,” I reassured him as I turned to face him fully and gave his forearm a squeeze that I hoped comforted him. “We’ll handle this. Everything’s gonna be just fine.”

“Your mom’s right, kid. You don’t need to let this worry you,” Madd agreed with me as he and Logan both got to their feet and stood either side of Max and I.

“What do I do about school? It starts in two days?” Max asked.

“We’ll drive you there and back. You’ll be safe inside the school building. You just can’t leave during the day. It’s too dangerous, Max. Do you understand?” Logan explained, and Max nodded.

“Yeah. I get it,” he agreed. “You guys are gonna keep my mom safe right? When I’m not here, you’ll stay with her?”

“Yes. One hundred percent, Max. We told you we’d keep you both safe and we meant it,” Maddox assured him, and again Max nodded.

“Why don’t you go and lie down? You look exhausted. Did you get any sleep last night?” I suggested as I reached up to brush his wild hair from his face so I could see the dark rings under his eyes.

“I’m fine, mom,” Max groaned as he stepped back out of my reach. “I’m gonna go swim some laps,” he added as he waved a thumb behind him in the direction of the pool.

“Okay, honey. Just don’t work too hard. It’s been a tough twenty-four hours,” I reminded him.

“And let us know if you need to go outside the house. The grounds are pretty safe, but I still don’t want either of you out there alone,” Maddox added.

“Then I’m gonna need one of you guys to come with me, if that’s okay? I need to go to the cottage to pick up some more of our stuff,” I said, trying to ignore the part about Maddox suggesting we could be in danger right outside the door, and keep my mind focused on the mundane instead. If we were going to be staying with the guys for a while, we were going to need more of our belongings. That should avert my mind from the panic it was desperate to spiral into for a while at least.

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“Shall I take this one downstairs?” Maddox asked as he placed a hand over the closed duffel bag on my bed. I had already filled it with my own clothes and essentials. I hadn’t known how long we would need to stay with the guys, and since I dare not ask, for fear of the answer, I had just packed almost everything I had brought with me.

I was trying hard to hold myself together, but I knew I was doing a pretty piss-poor attempt at it. Callum was alive and he was coming after us. That was all that was running through my mind continuously. He had tried to kill me. That meant he wanted me dead. Was he going to try and kill Max too? Was this about revenge because we tried to get rid of him? Was it about him needing to win? Or was it just about us knowing who and what he was? Whatever it was, there was no denying he was coming after my son and I. How long had he even been in town? Long enough to know where I worked apparently, and likely where Max and I lived too, since he had known the way I would drive home the night he tried to run me off of the road. What



else did he know about me? About Max? What if he already worked out a way onto the guys property?

“Anna?”

I cried out when a hand landed on my shoulder, and was halfway to throwing myself to the ground to better protect myself when I realized where I was, and that the voice was just Madd.

“It’s me! Just me, Anna!” he called to me when I let out a huge gasp of fear and teetered on the brink of falling over. Thankfully, he just grabbed my arm in time before I went down and pulled me to his side, supporting my shaky body against his.

“Oh God! Sorry...” I breathed, between panicked gasps for breath.

“Just breathe, baby. You’re okay. I’ve got you,” Madd soothed as he just held me.

“I don’t know wh-what’s wrong with me...” I panted as tears filled my eyes. “I f-feel like I’m losing my fucking mind, Madd.”

“You’re scared, Anna, and you have a right to be after what you went through. You’re not losing your mind. You’re dealing with trauma in the best way that your brain knows how.”

“This isn’t me though. I don’t freak out. I don’t live like this all of the time....scared and fucking crying. I’m so sick of it all, Maddox. I was strong before and I need to be strong again, damn it!”

“You will be, baby, but it’s gonna take time. It doesn’t matter how much you want to just put the memories of what you went through behind you – it’s just not that easy, and trauma doesn’t work that way. Trust me, I know.”

“I just feel so out of control. It’s like my emotions aren’t even my own half the time. I just want to feel like myself for a while – like I’m in control of something, you know?” I sighed, tiredly.

“You’re exhausted, Anna. How about we get done here so you can rest a while? You’ll feel better when you’re not so tired.”

“I don’t want to sleep anymore, Madd. It’s all so much worse when I close my eyes.” Tears ran silently down my cheeks and in an instant Madd had

moved to grab me at my hips and lifted me in his arms. He led me to wrap my legs around his waist, and I automatically linked my arms around his neck and nestled into him. He was so warm against my chilled skin, and he smelled so comfortingly familiar. Home. He smelled like home and safety.

“Tell me what you need, Anna,” Madd coaxed gently.

“This,” I sighed as I pressed my face against the soft skin at the nape of his t-shirt. “You. The fear all gets so much quieter when you hold me like this. Your touch lets me feel just a little like myself...for a while at least.”

“I’m right here, baby. I’ll hold you as tight as you want me to, for as long as you need me to,” he promised.

“And what if I want more than that?” I asked shyly as I lifted my head just enough to glance up and meet his eyes. Madd took in a deep breath and seemed to hold it a moment before blowing it out loudly.

“You’re tired, Anna...” He lowered me down, setting my feet on the ground, but I refused to let him go from my hold around the back of his neck.

“Don’t, Madd. Please don’t. I wouldn’t ask you if I weren’t sure. Please don’t make me question what I know, without doubt, I both want and need right now. Everything else is so messed up. I need this. I need you. Us. That’s one thing I do see clearly. You, me, and Logan. I want that. I want us.” Before he could utter a reply, or more likely an argument, I pulled back just enough to press up onto my tiptoes, then I pressed my lips over his and kissed him hard and fast.

For the first moment he seemed unsure how to respond, and I thought he was going to push me back, worried I wasn’t thinking clearly, but when I grabbed his forearms and clung to them almost desperately, he instantly responded, wrapping his arms around me and pulling me closer as he passionately returned my kiss.

I moved my hands to his shoulders and pushed as close to his body as I could, needing to feel his strength and warmth all around me as he drove me higher with need. I squeaked in protest when I just couldn’t seem to get close enough, and Madd must have heard me, because before I knew it I

was in his hold again, my legs wrapped around his trim waist and clinging to him like he was my life raft in a wild sea.

I felt almost frantic as I grabbed onto his arms, his shirt, his shoulders... anywhere I could touch. I wanted him closer, despite the fact I was already clinging tightly to his top half and writhing against him with no regard to how frenzied and desperate I had to look. I just wanted to hide from the world with Maddox in tht moment. I wanted the two of us to come together in a way that would block out everything but us, and that moment.

“Easy, Anna. Just slow down a little. I’m gonna give you what you need,” Maddox soothed after tearing his lips from the frantic kiss I had us locked in.

“I need you Maddox,” I panted.

“You’ve got me already. I’m right here,” he told me as he moved over to my bed which sat in the center of the room and held me in one arm while he used the other to move the bag, which I had been in the middle of packing, to the floor.

“That’s n-not what I mean and you know it,” I gasped as he started to kiss down my neck, as if he were trying to distract me from his quick movements to clear the bed.

“I do know,” he chuckled a little between kisses against my flushed skin, then he lowered me onto the center of my mattress and took a step back from the bed. “Take your clothes off for me, beautiful,” he told me, before I could protest his stopping touching me.

I didn’t hesitate to pull off the sweater I was wearing, and I made quick work of shucking off my yoga pants too. The whole time Madd just stood off to the side watching me with so much heat and need in his eyes it was just making my need even more desperate.

I didn’t even pause enough to think until I started to pull off the cami I wore. I barely touched the hem before I froze and looked back up to Madd with some uncertainty.

“What’s wrong?” he asked as his expression turned to one of worry and he bent to sit on the edge of the bed beside me. “It’s alright if you’re not ready for this, Anna.”

“I...I am. It’s just....my body. The scars....they’re not even scars yet. They’re red and angry and s-so ugly, Madd. I sh-should keep this on,” I explained shakily as I released the hem on my cami and resolved not to remove it.

“Hey,” he said as he caught my chin with his fingers before I could completely lower my gaze. He angled my chin so I had no choice but to meet his eyes. “No part of you is ugly. You’re beautiful and sexy. That’s all I’ll ever see you as. Whatever is under here...” he said as he skimmed the tip of his finger under the hem of my cami, his soft touch reigniting the sparks of need that had started to flame out with my own misery and self-loathing. “...it’s part of you. It’s a part that will only ever remind me of how amazingly strong and tough you are, and how fucking lucky I am that I get to call you mine.”

“It’s not pretty, Madd. They’re not faint, neat little scars... not yet. I...I’m scared you’ll see them and not want me,” I admitted.

“Anna, you’re about to see me and the very obvious fact that I have half of one of my legs missing. You think I’m not completely terrified of you feeling the exact same way when you see that?” he asked with a sigh.

“Madd...” I didn’t even know what to say. I hadn’t even thought about Madd’s missing limb. The fact was that I never thought about it. It wasn’t obvious that he used a prosthesis in every day life. He walked with confidence. I’d even seen him jogging and he had no issue that I had noticed with stairs or anything like that. I had pretty much forgotten about it and I felt terrible about that. How could I be so selfish? Everyone had hang ups, I realized. I shouldn’t have made such a big deal about my own when poor Maddox was plenty worried about his own insecurities.

“How about we just get back to the fun part, okay? Our worries will resolve themselves in the process, I think,” he suggested with a playful smile. I moved onto my knees and reached up to kiss him hard.

“I’m on board with that plan,” I agreed between kisses. The thought of Madd seeing the mess that was my back and torso still terrified me, but it helped me to know he was equally as terrified too. I knew there was no way me seeing his amputated leg, which he always kept hidden beneath his

trousers until then, was going to change the way I felt about Maddox, so why should I fear my body would put him off of me?

I was relieved when things between us heated up quickly once again, and in moments we were both naked from the waist up and tangled in our frantic kiss and touches.

“Madd!” I cried when he brushed both of his thumbs feather light over my nipples – teasing me, toying with me. It was too much. I was already right on the edge and I didn’t want to wait. I didn’t want to draw it out. All I wanted was Madd to be inside of me. I needed him as close as we could possibly be.

I moved my shaking hands down between us, where Maddox was on all fours over me, caging me in. I found the fly of his jeans and fumbled with the button, desperate to have him naked and one step closer to being inside of me,

“Let’s just take things slow, beautiful, okay? There’s no rush here. We have all of the time in the world, and I want to take my time with this perfect body,” Maddox said as he tried to still my frantic actions.

“No, please. We can do slow later but right now I need you. Please, Madd. Don’t make me beg. I want this!” I panted breathlessly.

“Never gonna make you beg, baby,” he promised as he rose up onto his knees, then stood so he could unbutton his own fly, then his jeans were gone, along with his boxers too, all in one move.

I couldn’t stop my eyes from glancing down to where his prosthesis met his knee joint. It was like a cup that fit to his knee, then below that was a metal rod that obviously supported his weight. His shoe was on the foot, so I didn’t see that, but the whole prosthesis barely caught more than a moment of my attention compared to the rest of his sculpted, tanned, perfectly muscled body that was naked before me. Maddox was ripped, but not as broad and built as his brother. His frame was leaner, but corded with muscle. He had hair on his chest and a trail down his stomach leading to where his cock stood proudly against his abdomen, hard, ready to go, and big. So much bigger than any cock I had ever seen before. Not that I’d seen many.

“Eyes are up here, Anna,” he teased when I stared too long, and I knew I was blushing as I forced myself to meet his gorgeous, heat filled eyes once more.

“You said you wouldn’t make me beg, Maddox,” I reminded him as heat set me alight like an inferno and I found myself crawling across the bed to him.

“And I meant it,” he assured me. He bent down to grab his jeans from the floor, then pulled his wallet out. He pulled a condom from inside, then tossed everything else back to the floor again. I squeaked in anticipation as I watched him tear it open and slide it down his long length. “So impatient,” he teased as he looked to me with a wicked smile that only made me even needier, if that were possible.

He leaned in and scooped me up from the bed. I ran my hands up his muscular chest and up to his shoulders as he held me against him with one hand under my ass. I moaned in desperation as he whipped off my panties and tossed them aside, then I was wrapped around him again, my legs gripping around his waist and holding on tight in the hope his abs pressed between my thighs would ease some of the desperation I felt there. “You sure about this, Anna?” he asked. I reached up and slammed my lips over his, kissing him hard and hoping it was answer enough.

Much to my relief, he took my kiss for the answer he needed and in seconds I found myself lifting just enough so he could position himself at my entrance. I was so desperate for him I was soaked and he slid in so easily, even with his size. As soon as he was fully seated I breathed out in relief, my exhale shaky and satisfied all at once.

“You feel so fucking perfect, baby,” Madd uttered as he held onto me tightly and started to move just the way I needed him to.

“Yes!” I cried as every small movement sent thrills of sensation right to my core. “So perfect,” I agreed.

I felt out of control in the best way as I clung onto Maddox and moved with him, trying desperately to keep up with his wild kisses and the punishing pace he began to set as we got closer and closer to that peak.

It was unlike any sex I had ever known. The closest I had ever come to feeling anything that spectacular was what Logan had done for me in the pool, but there with Maddox inside of me, it was so much more. It was like something magical unfolding inside of me as I got closer and closer to that edge. I got lost in him. There was nothing but the two of us in that moment, just as I had longed for, and it was everything.

“Maddox!” I cried as he slammed hard into me twice and it seemed to be the final push I needed. I went crashing over that edge I had been teetering on with a force like I had never known. My whole body became taut with overwhelming sensation that flooded me, then it passed and left behind this haze of peace and just floating. I was floating.

When reality started to creep back in, I found it wasn’t so bad since I was still wrapped tightly around Madd, my head resting on his shoulder and in the crook of his neck. We were both sweaty and gasping, but the hand he ran up and down my back softly was soothing and brought me back to myself gently.

“Anna?” he spoke after a while.

“Hmmm?”

“You okay, beautiful? Was I too rough?” he asked cautiously.

“Definitely okay,” I assured him, still feeling a little dazed in the best possible way. I didn’t ever want to come down from the sex high he had given me.

“You even with me right now?” he asked with a hint of humor.

“Sort of,” I hedged. “Madd?”

“Yeah, baby?”

“I wanna stay like this, okay? Never let me go. Promise?”

“Much as I like that idea, I don’t think us staying like this will work long term,” he chuckled. “But I will promise to never let you go, Anna. You hear me? No matter what, I have you now and I will never leave you. I’ll be waiting to hold you just like this whenever you need or just want me to, okay?”

“I love you, Maddox. I tried not to let it happen, but it happened anyway. I love you,” I admitted, never once moving. My words were spoken into his neck, but he heard them.

“I love you too, Anna, so fucking much.”



# CHAPTER 23

ANNA

“Let him go, sweetheart. He’s gonna be fine,” Logan told me, not for the first time. I had been doing nothing but holding my son in any way I could since the moment I saw him that morning. It was his first day at his new high school, now that the summer vacation was over, and I was terrified to let him out of my sight.

There had been no sign of Callum anywhere in town or near the guys house since that day almost a week ago that I had seen the monster lurking outside of the hardware store. Logan and Madd had spread the word amongst their friends in town, and the picture they pulled from Neil’s surveillance cameras, and asked everyone they knew to be vigilant and contact them if Callum was spotted anywhere. Madd had also been checking the cameras, which he’d already had set up outside of the house, recording down over the road that led right past the front gates, almost hourly, and there had been no sign of Callum anywhere, and no sightings of him in the town either.

That was why we had all agreed when Max had all but begged to be allowed to start school all week long. It seemed foolish to make him miss out on starting the year with his classmates when there really seemed to be no danger to worry about. Of course, we’d still taken precautions. Logan and I had a meeting with the school principal on the Friday before to discuss our fears. Logan had told the principal that I had an ex who was stalking me, which was pretty close to the truth. The principal had been supportive and accommodating, happily assuring us he would make all of Max’s teachers aware, and promising us Max was secure on school grounds throughout the day.

Now, as I sat clutching onto Max in the back seat of Madd's truck, I could see the principal stood out front of the school waiting to walk Max into the building, as he had promised he would do every morning until the threat was over.

But despite the principals reassurances, and those of Logan and Maddox too, I was still regretting ever agreeing to Max starting school. It didn't matter to me that Callum seemed to have disappeared. He'd been there that day over a week before for a reason, and he wasn't just going to walk away without confronting me, or Max, or whatever else he had come to do to the both of us. I couldn't stand the risk I knew I was taking by letting Max out of my sight.

"Mom. Logan's right. You know I'm gonna be safe in there, and I already promised I won't leave the building until Madd or Logan come to collect me. I have to do this. I don't want to spend any more time hiding or being scared," Max told me as he pulled himself from my arms and studied me too hard.

"I know. I'm sorry. I just hate this," I sniffled as I wiped furiously at the tears in my eyes. I didn't want them to fall, and for my son to see me breaking apart all over again. That was pretty much all he had seen me do in recent weeks, and it was why he always looked to me with instant concern instead of a smile now. I missed his smile.

"We all hate it, baby, but Max is right. You guys can't just hide from this fucker forever. We have to work together to keep you safe and allow you to try and go on as normal, as much as possible," Madd spoke up from where he sat in the driver's seat.

"I have to go, mom, or I'm gonna be late for my first class," Max reminded me.

"Okay," I nodded. "Yeah, of course. You should go, but please just be safe though, okay?"

“I promise, mom.”

“Call us right away if anything happens, or even if you just feel uneasy about anything,” Maddox added.

“I will. Jesus. Don’t you two fucking start,” Max groaned.

“Max! Language!” I scolded, but Max just laughed as he opened the back door of the car and jumped out, slamming it closed behind him.

“Do you really th...” I began, but Logan cut me off.

“Yes, Anna. We’re sure. He’s safe. He’ll be fine,” he told me.

I sat back in my seat again and pulled on my seatbelt as Maddox started to turn the car around. As desperate as I was to stay right there in the high school parking lot, as close to my son as I could be, I knew I couldn’t. Max would kill me for the embarrassment I would cause him. I knew I had to trust that my son was safe. We’d done all we could to ensure it was so. Now I just had to believe in my own decision to trust in others, especially Logan and Madd when they had told me Max would be protected.

I did trust them, I reminded myself – Maddox and Logan. I didn’t question that decision in my head any longer. They had proven to me again and again in the weeks that I had known them that they would never do anything that would hurt or endanger Max or I. They had told me they had feelings for me – hell, they’d told me they loved me, and I already knew I loved them too. I may not have known them for very long, but I had been falling for the both of them since the moment I met them, and no attempt to fight those feelings had succeeded. The feelings between the three of us were too strong to fight, or ignore.

I had been intimate with both of them now. Maddox and I had slept together several times since that first desperate night, and I usually ended up asleep in his bed, or with him in mine.

Things with Logan seemed to be moving slower between us, and I knew that was because Logan was holding back with me, probably for my benefit – because he feared I wasn't ready for more between us, but I was. I was so ready to step things up with him too. Even in all of the chaos around me at that time, just being close to Logan or Maddox could soothe my fears and frazzled nerves and bring me calm and peace I had never known. I liked to think that I gave them a similar feeling when we were together. I had noticed the way they each seemed to relax more, or breathe a sigh of relief when we touched, or kissed, even if it were just a quick peck between us. I felt like I was always meant to be with them, and so my doubts about them were long gone, and they had my unquestioning trust.

“Anna?”

“Huh?” I lifted my head in surprise and looked to the front of the car. I hadn't realized how lost I had become in my thoughts.

“What's wrong, sweetheart?” Logan asked gently.

“Nothing.” I gave my head a shake to clear it. “I was just thinking about us, all of us, and how far we've come since I met you. I was terrified of the both of you in the beginning.”

“We noticed,” Madd laughed.

“You were brave to stand up to us both the way you did, especially after what you'd been through. Just reinforces what we always knew – that you're a tough cookie,” Logan added.

“*Our* tough cookie,” Madd corrected him.

“I might be yours, but I'm far from tough. I have no idea why either of you put up with me and my hysterics,” I sighed. “But since neither of you seem in any hurry to be rid of me, I'm not letting either of you go either.”

“Hey, we talked about this,” Madd scolded me, and when I glanced to him he was watching me in the rearview mirror with that intense look in his

eyes. “Stop talking like that. There’s nothing wrong with you, baby. You’re perfect and you’re ours. We’re not going anywhere.”

“How about we all spend some time together today while Max is at school?” Logan suggested.

“Good idea brother. We could all do with having some fun for a change,” Madd heartily agreed.

“What would you like to do, sweetheart?” Logan asked me as he turned in his seat to look at me again.

“Could we go down by the water when we get back to the house? I got used to going out there, and I’ve missed it this week,” I told them.

It had been amazing in almost every way to be staying in the big house with the guys, not least of which because I could relax a little when we were all there together, knowing Max and I weren’t alone if anything happened. It was also a truly beautiful home to live in, and with the four of us there, it had been filled with noise and laughter, which I’d never really had before, and had discovered I loved. But I did miss my little cottage at the end of the garden. Even though we’d only lived there briefly, it had been the nicest home Max and I ever had, and it too had been beautiful, cozy, and so comfortable. It had also allowed me to be so close to the calm and peace that the water could offer me, and the small and tranquil beach that had been just a very short walk behind our cottage. I missed going out there to do yoga, or even just to think when everything became too much for me.

“Sure sweetheart, I think we can manage that,” Logan agreed.

“We could pack up a picnic to take with us. Spend the day out there. It’s gonna be pretty warm today and it’s years since I had a swim in the lake,” Madd added.

“Swimming?” I laughed. He was right, it was a warm day, but summer was beginning to pass, and the long, hot days were over. There was already a

chill in the air now, even though the sun still shone. “You’re crazy. That lake’s gonna be freezing,” I laughed.

“It’s still summer!” Madd protested.

“Barely. Just so you know there’s no way I’m donning my swimsuit. It’s too cool,” I told them both firmly, but I was smiling and feeling relaxed again. They did that for me – Madd and Logan. They made everything seem so much better just by being near me. Just one smile from them and my worries started to ease. One touch and I felt safe. They could make me smile when I was sure there was nothing but darkness before us, and make me laugh even when things were terrifying. I had no idea if those things were a part of what made you love someone, but those things definitely added to the many reasons that I loved the both of them.

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I was screaming at the top of my lungs from where Maddox had thrown me over his shoulder. I’d been shouting and bawling at him since the moment he walked out of the water - his perfect, sun-kissed skin dripping wet and on full display in nothing but his swim shorts - scooped me up from the picnic blanket, which Logan and I had been happily laid out on, and threw me up there. I knew what he was going to do. He’d been trying to convince me to go into the lake since we arrived there hours earlier. He and Logan had happily dived in off of the jetty and swam around, but there was no way I wanted to. It was just too cold with the strong breeze that was blowing, and I’d been more than happy enough relaxing on the small sandy beach and just watching the two of them. They’d both dried off to join me for lunch as we ate the food we’d worked together to pack before we headed down there, then Madd had dived right back into the water.

“Madd! Don’t you dare! Don’t you...” That was the last wail I got out before Madd picked me up from his shoulder, adjusted me in his arms, then tossed me into the lake like I weighed little more than a damned football. I

screamed as loud as I could as I flew through the air, then I hit the water, and I was right - it was freaking freezing!

But that was the least of my concerns because Madd had obviously thrown me some distance and I was deeper in the lake than I thought I would be. By the time I realized my feet didn't reach the bottom I was panicking about the fact I couldn't breathe, and that just had me flailing and panicking more.

I was in the middle of trying to calm the fuck down and remember how to swim when strong arms wrapped around me and thrust me upwards out of the water. I felt the sun hit my face as I gasped in desperately for air, then choked on the water I'd swallowed. I was still panicking, my arms and legs kicking and flailing to push me up towards the surface, even though I was already at the surface.

"Anna? Anna, stop! Anna, it's me. You're okay. It's me!" I heard Madd. I felt the arms around me tighten a little and sense started to prevail. I stopped fighting and instead grabbed onto the arm around me with both hands, clutching the tanned skin tightly.

"Madd?" I gasped.

"I'm here. I've got you. Don't you swim, baby?" he asked. He had my back pressed to his front so I couldn't see him, but I heard the note of panic in his voice.

"Not really. I...I never really learned," I replied between coughs. My chest was burning as I continued to bring up water. *How much had I even swallowed?* "I t-told you n-not to throw me in."

"Jesus, Anna. Why the fuck didn't you say you can't swim instead of screaming?" he demanded.

"Madd? Is she okay?" That was Logan. Madd turned and then I could see the beach, and Logan stood at the edge of the water watching us.

“I’m fine!” I called back.

“She can’t fucking swim!” Madd added, then we were moving as Madd strode through the water towards his brother and the safety of dry land.

“I can swim a little. I...I just....I was in shock and I c-couldn’t touch the ground,” I defended myself.

“Come on, sweetheart. Let’s get you dry,” Logan said as we finally reached him. He had a towel in his hand, and I found myself wrapped in it, and transferred into his arms fast.

“You should have told us, Anna. We needed to know you can’t fucking swim when we’re all down by the water like this,” Madd grouched as he strode all of the way out of the water and grabbed a towel from the blanket further up the beach. “You could have drowned. I could have killed you!”

“Madd...” I said, hating the way I knew he was already beating himself up.

“She’s fine, brother. You got to her in time, and we know now, right?”

Logan cut in, and I was grateful, because he sounded way more convincing than I would have with all of the coughing.

“We need to go back to the house,” Maddox said after a moment of silence.

“She shouldn’t be out here. Anna, don’t come down here without us again, okay? Not until you learn to swim.” He looked to me and his expression was so unlike the cool, calm, and collected man I had come to know. He looked panicked and anxious. He had the towel he’d used thrown over his shoulders and he was anxiously fidgeting with the corners of it. He looked unsure for the first time ever since I met him, and vulnerable too. *Was that his injury?* I worried.

“Put me down, Logan,” I said, and I was glad when Logan gently set me on my feet in the sand. I grabbed the towel and wrapped it around myself, tucking the end underneath so it would stay put over my soaked shorts and sweater, and I moved over to Maddox as fast as I could.



“I promise, okay? I won’t come out here alone,” I tried to reassure him.

“I’m okay, Maddox. I’m right here and I’m completely fine.” I tentatively moved forwards and slowly slid my arms around his waist. It wasn’t that I was scared of him. I knew he would never hurt me. It was that I was scared of hurting or upsetting him further. But as I settled against him and clutched my arms around him tightly, he seemed to relax his tense body, then his arms wrapped around me and he settled even more. I felt his fast breaths slow down and even out, then he laid his head on top of mine.

“I’m so sorry, beautiful,” he whispered.

“You didn’t do anything.”

“I should have been more careful with you. I was an idiot,” he sighed as we both remained exactly as we were.

“You don’t have to be careful with me. I won’t break, Madd. I’m made of tough stuff.”

“I don’t care what you’re made of, or how tough you are. It will never stop me from wanting to take care of you. I can’t believe I was so reckless,” he hissed as he lifted his head and tried to back away from me.

“Hey!” I snapped as I looked up at him, refusing to let him go. “You didn’t do anything wrong. Stop saying that, okay? I never want you to think that you have to be so careful with me, that we never have fun and do wild things together. We have a long future ahead of us, and it’ll never work if you think you have to treat me like something delicate. Believe me, babe, I’m far from delicate,” I told him with a smile.

“I love you so much,” he whispered as he leaned in and placed a kiss at the center of my forehead.

“I love you too.”

“Come on. I grabbed everything already,” Logan said as he walked up behind us. “Let’s get back to the house so you can both dry off and

change.”

I looked up at Madd for his answer. There was no way I was leaving without him.

“He’s right, baby. You’re shivering. Let’s go,” he told me.

They each wrapped an arm around me as we started down the small trodden path that led to the back of the guest house from the small beach, and even though my teeth were chattering with the cold, I was happy squeezed between them both as we moved. There was no place on earth I would rather have been.

“How about we order a few pizzas and pick a movie for us all to watch when Max get’s home?” Logan suggested as we got to the lawn and approached the main house.

“Max would like that,” I agreed.

“Sounds good to me,” Maddox agreed, and I was relieved to hear his voice was back to normal, and he seemed to be back to himself except for the fact he was still holding me pretty tightly.

I looked to Logan, feeling unsure about what had happened and Madd’s whole reaction to it, but Logan just smiled reassuringly and squeezed his hand, which he had wrapped around my hip.

Before either of us could utter a word though – not that I knew what to say anyway – Logan and Madd’s phones both started beeping with a loud and continuous alert. I wasn’t too worried at first, but when they both paused and looked at each other, I started to worry right away. Their smiles were gone and instead they looked pissed.

“What? What’s happening? What is that?” I cried all at once.

“It’s the perimeter alarm. It means someone is outside the house and has tripped one of my sensors,” Maddox explained, but he didn’t look up from his phone, which he was busy clicking away on.

“Is it *him*? Is he...is it him?” I gasped as I instantly felt breathless. Heat raced through my body like a sweeping wave, but in it’s wake it left me so cold. My heart jolted in fear, then raced so hard I felt like I couldn’t breathe through the relentless pounding that I could hear so deafeningly.

“Anna?” I could hear Logan’s voice, but he sounded so far away, and my whole body was so frozen I couldn’t make myself respond to him. “Anna? I need you to look at me,” he persisted.

“Logan, just get her inside. Something’s wrong with the surveillance app. It won’t fucking open!” Madd snapped.

“I’m gonna pick you up and get you inside, okay sweetheart? You’re gonna be okay. Madd and I are here. We’re not gonna let anyone hurt you. We’ve got you,” Logan said as he released the hold he had on me and instead grabbed me under my arms like I used to pick Max up when he was tiny. He tucked me against his top half and wrapped my legs around his waist. I tried to snap out of the terror induced stupor I was in to help him, and I managed to hold my legs around his waist, and cling to his shoulders to get closer to him, but still I couldn’t make myself speak. All I could think was that Callum was coming, and I couldn’t let him get to me again. I wouldn’t survive him hurting me like before. Not again.

I pressed my face against the front of Logan’s shoulder and pulled my body against him as tightly as I could. I knew it made me a coward to hide behind the men I loved, but I was scared. No. Scared wasn’t the right word. I was petrified and I didn’t have it in me to try and be brave. After the things that monster had done to me, the idea of him even being close to me had me breaking apart at every seam.

“Max?” I managed to force out.

“He’s safe at school, Anna. As soon as we handle things here I’ll call the principal to check on him, okay?” Logan told me as we moved through

their house. Logan was moving at pace, and I realized why when it became clear Madd hadn't followed us inside.

"Where's Maddox?" I asked as I forced myself to lift my head and meet his eyes.

"Checking the perimeter of the house. I need to get out there with him. We don't know what we're dealing with and he's alone..."

"Go, Logan. I...I'm okay," I cut in as I unwrapped my legs from his waist and dropped my feet. They didn't reach the ground. Logan was too tall.

"Anna..."

"Put me down and go, Logan, please! I d-don't want Madd getting hurt. I don't want anyone hurt. Just go! I'm good!" I cried desperately, and completely breathlessly.

"Go to my room and lock yourself in my bathroom for me, okay? Don't open that bathroom door until you hear me or Madd," he told me as he set me down, but didn't relinquish his hold on me.

"Logan," I whispered when he just stood frozen, staring at me, clearly torn about whether to leave me. "You have to go. I'll go to your room. I'll be okay. Just get out there!" I ordered. I pressed my hands against his shoulders to try and shove him a little. If Callum was out there, I didn't want either of my guys out there with him but I definitely didn't want either of them to be alone with that monster.

"Promise me you'll be safe," he almost pleaded as he gripped my arms even tighter.

"I promise. You too, okay?" A single nod, and a kiss on the top of my head were what I got, then he was gone and the huge house around me and its silence suddenly felt terrifying. It made me think straight enough to get me moving up the stairs. I ran right to Logan's room and almost had the door closed behind me, when I heard Madd's voice call through the house.

“Anna? It’s safe, baby. I need you to come down here.”

Even though I knew it was Madd’s voice I was still vigilant as I walked back out of the room and stepped cautiously into the hallway. My fear was too great and it couldn’t be easily quashed. I tiptoed to the banister that overlooked the hallway and looked down. My heart was still racing and I couldn’t remember ever feeling as cold as I did in that moment. I didn’t even know if I was shivering, or if adrenaline was causing me to tremble.

When I looked down I saw Maddox stood at the bottom and Logan was even closer, halfway back up the stairs towards me.

“Logan?” I uttered shakily as tears filled my eyes.

“It’s gonna be okay. It was just some people at the gates. Everything’s okay,” he assured me as he quickened his leaps up the stairs to me. I ran along the hallway and met him at the top of the stairs, throwing myself into his arms. Relief flooded me when he picked me up just as he’d held me before, and I instantly wrapped my legs around his waist and my arms around his neck.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered as I fought to get myself together now he held me. “I was j-just so scared.”

“I’ve got you. It’s gonna be just fine, sweetheart, but I need you to listen to me now, okay?” Logan whispered close to my ear as he held me. There was something in his tone that had me looking up into his face, and what I saw there didn’t settle me. He looked worried.

“What?” I questioned.

“It’s the FBI. They’re investigating some murders and they’ve been looking for you. We think they’re searching for Callum, but they probably don’t know that yet,” he told me in a whisper.

“Murders?” I gasped.

“Anna, listen to me. You have to tell them what happened, but don’t tell them about you trying to get rid of Callum, okay? Tell them Max hit him, saved you, and you both ran. When you went back to your place Callum was just gone, okay? You understand, sweetheart?”

“Max...” I whimpered.

“He didn’t do anything wrong. He was just defending you. Tell them what I told you to, okay? Max will say the same. Madd will tell him,” Logan assured me.

“I’m scared, Logan,” I admitted.

“We won’t let anything happen to either of you,” Logan promised, but I still found myself clinging to him even harder when he started to descend the stairs. “How do they even know? Did he go to the cops? Callum?”

“They’re investigating a series of murders. I’m guessing they linked the victims to Callum. It’s gonna be okay, sweetheart. Just tell them what I said to, okay?”

“Yeah...okay,” I nodded.

I was a ball of tension and nerves by the time we reached the living room where Madd now sat in an armchair, directly opposite two strangers who were side by side on the sofa. I paused in the doorway and just stared at the strangers, too afraid to walk in there and make things any worse than they already were. It wasn’t just the cops, it was the FBI. What if I messed up and said something to get Max into trouble?

“Deep breaths, Anna,” Logan prompted quietly, then he wrapped his arm around my shoulders and led me further into the living room. I could feel my whole body shaking and my heart was pounding so hard it was making me feel lightheaded.

Logan led me to sit on the other sofa, opposite the agents, and I almost cried in relief when Madd stood and instantly took the seat at my free side. I

found myself squeezed in between them, the both of their bodies making contact with my own at every possible point.

“Miss Hart?” One of the agents asked the second we were all settled across from them.

There was a male and female agent. It was the woman who had spoken. She looked around my age, slim, with short dark hair, wide rimmed plastic glasses and dressed neatly in a fitted navy suit, with a paler blue shirt beneath. The lanyard hanging from an ID around her neck identified her as FBI. Her partner had the same ID around his neck, but he also wore a thin jacket with the letters emblazoned across the back. Underneath he wore slacks and a white shirt. He was older than the woman by some years, his grey hair thinning slightly at the front. They both looked friendly, but it didn’t matter when I was so worked up.

“Yep,” I replied with a single nod, even that one word quivering as it came out. Madd took my hand in his and clutched it tightly.

“We need to keep this short. Anna underwent transplant surgery last year, so we can’t risk her making herself ill with this,” Madd said firmly, looking to the two agents.

“I...I’m okay, Madd.”

“We’ll try to keep it short,” the male agent agreed as the female looked to me with sympathy, which I hated. Yes I was shaken up, and likely looked a state, but I didn’t need her damned sympathy.

“This is about Callum, isn’t it?” I asked.

“Callum?” the male agent questioned.

“The man who I...who h-hurt me,” I admitted.

“Is that the name he used to message you? Callum?”

“Yes,” I nodded. “Callum Smith. He...he t-told me he was a teacher.”

“We’re here about a string of murders, miss Hart. The oldest one dates back four years and the most recent was two weeks ago. There have been six in total, all in different states. The connection was made between them all after a murder in San Diego three months ago, and since they took place across state borders, we have taken over the case,” the female agent explained.

“A-and you think...Callum? You think he killed those people?” I uttered as horror filled me at just the thought of being at that monster’s mercy.

“Women, Miss Hart. They were all women, around your age, and with very similar looks to you too. We made the link to a dating site recently, and we were able to link messages to what appears to be the same man, with each of the victims. They each spoke to someone with a different name, and all of the accounts were deleted after the murders, but our tech team were able to recover enough information to prove the messages all came from one person on the same computer. We’ve been unable to recover any images of him, but we did find messages to and from you to this man. We’ve been searching for you since.”

“I...I went on a date with him. He drugged me and I...he held me for several days. Tortured me. He enjoyed causing p-pain,” I stuttered emotionally.

“Easy, baby. Just take your time. You’re here with us, safe,” Madd whispered to me as he used my hand to pull me closer into his side and wrapped his arm around me. I went easily, pressing my face into his arm as I fought not to fall apart.

“We can take a break if you need to?” the male agent offered, but I shook my head. I just wanted it all over and done with. I took one deep breath, then lifted my head from Madd so I could look to the agents, but my body remained firmly pressed against him. Logan was right beside me too, and running his hand up and down my back soothingly.

“Thanks, butt I...I’d rather just finish up now,” I told the agents.



“Can you tell us how you escaped?” the female agent asked.

“My son...Max. He was away that weekend...camping with h-his friends. He came back on Sunday evening and he...he heard me crying out. He...he was scared. He came in with his bat...from baseball. He hit Callum and then he freed me. There was a struggle and I hit Callum with the bat. He went down and hit his head on a dresser,” I lied. There was no way I was telling them Max hit him more than once. Who knew what they would do with the information? Where I grew up, you never trusted the cops, no matter what, and I couldn’t get that out of my head. If anyone was going to jail for hitting that fucker, it was me, not my son. “I wasn’t thinking straight. I was in a bad way, and we were both scared. I just grabbed Max and we ran away. We hid out for a while, but when we went back to our place, Callum was gone.”

“So your son saw him too?” the male agent asked. They were both taking notes in little notebooks as I spoke, which was fine by me. I didn’t want to have to tell them it all again.

“Maybe. It all happened so fast,” I hedged.

“Do you think you’d both be able to sit down with a sketch artist? We really need an image of this man before he strikes again. As far as we know, you are the only person who has escaped him so far, Miss Hart,” the man told me, and my eyes instantly pooled with tears. If Max hadn’t have come home when he did...

“Anna, you have to breathe for us, sweetheart. You’re here. You and Max are both safe, and you’re gonna stay that way,” Logan told me. I didn’t even feel myself being moved, but when I looked around for him, I found myself sitting in his lap, both of his arms wrapped around me and Maddox was gone.

“Max...please, Logan. I n-need him home I need him to...to be safe,” I whimpered shakily.

“I’ll go and pick him up, Anna. Try to drink some juice for us, okay?” Maddox said, and when I looked behind me he was standing there with a tall glass of orange juice held out to me. I realized he must have passed me to Logan so he could go to the kitchen, and I hadn’t even noticed any of it. *What was wrong with me?*

“You’ll be careful?” I panicked.

“Always am, baby. Stay with Logan. I won’t be long.” With that he leaned in and kissed my lips chastely, then handed the glass off to Logan.

“I have to go and collect Max, but before I head out you should know you don’t need that sketch artist. I have images and video footage of this scum bag,” Maddox told the FBI.

“How?” They both asked in perfect synchronicity.

“He turned up here a little over a week ago, stalking Anna. He tried to run her off of the road when she was driving home from work. I managed to find him on the surveillance footage from the store Anna works in,” Maddox explained.

“He’s here?” The female agent asked, but the male was already pulling out his cell phone.

“He hasn’t been spotted since that day, but yes, I think he’s still here somewhere,” Madd agreed.

“Makes more sense now,” Logan spoke up, and I looked to him with question. “He wanted to finish what he started, Anna. If you are the only victim who managed to escape him, he knows you’re also the only person who can identify him. He was trying to tie up loose ends.”

“Oh God,” I gasped as I sat up and clutched my lurching stomach. “Max!”

“I’ll go now, baby,” Maddox told me, then he rushed from the room and out of the house with a slam of the front door behind him.

“He’s safe at school, sweetheart. No one can get to him there,” Logan reminded me. “Try to drink some juice. You’re shaking so hard I feel like we’re on some strange carnival ride,” he joked. I couldn’t bring myself to smile, but I did take the glass of juice from him. I only managed a small sip before it started to shake so hard in my grip I panicked I’d drop it. Thankfully, Logan grabbed it and set it on the table for me.

“That’s enough for now. Anna needs to rest,” Logan told the agents who were watching me like a bug under a microscope. I couldn’t stand them staring at me that way, so I turned my face and hid against Logan. I knew it made me look like a child, but I was done.

It was one thing to go through being held and tortured by that monster, but to find out he had planned to murder me too – that he had already murdered so many other women – it was all just so much more than I could take. And knowing that Callum was a murderer just increased my fear for Max by about a million times. If Callum got a hold of my son...

“We need those images, Mr. Easton, right away,” the male agent spoke up, startling me from my nightmarish thoughts.

“Here. I have images on my cell. You can do what you need to with those, but I need to take care of Anna right now. Anything else you need can and will wait,” Logan snapped, his tone brokering no argument.

“Mr. Easton. We will need to speak further with Miss Hart as soon as possible. We can take a break, however...”

“No,” Logan cut off the male Agent’s argument. “Miss Hart is done speaking to you today. She’s been through enough and I’m not going to allow you to push her any further. Any other questions you have will not be asked tonight, so please either leave, or wait quietly for my brother to return, so that he can give you the surveillance footage that you want.”

With those final and very clear words of dismissal, Logan gathered me up in his arms and stood like I weighed nothing. I didn’t even look up as he

carried me from the living room and started up the stairs. I knew I was being a coward, and that I should be doing all I could to help the FBI find Callum, And I would. Tomorrow. First I needed time to shore up some strength from somewhere. I had no idea from where, since I felt completely drained and empty, but I would find some. I always did. I'd take the night to get myself together and tomorrow I would do what I could to make sure that monster was found and locked away for all he had done. I would help them to make my son safe once and for all and I would find a way to end the living nightmare I had been trapped in ever since I made that stupid, selfish decision to go on that date.

# CHAPTER 24

## MADDOX

The relief that flooded me when I walked into the school office and found Max sat on the seats in there was so great it took me aback for a second. I liked Max. Of course I did. He was a good kid – loyal and caring. He took amazing care of his mom, despite him still being so young. Anna had brought him up so amazingly, and even though he was still a kid, anyone could see the kind of good man he would be in a few years.

Logan and I had both grown close to him in the weeks that he and Anna had lived with us. It helped that the kid was pretty mature for his age, and had a great sense of humor. We hadn't lied when we told Max and Anna that we cared very much about the both of them. They'd become important to us in the time they had been with us. Anna was ours, and that meant Max was ours too. But I never really thought when I told Anna multiple times how much I loved her, that I was growing so attached to Max too.

But seeing him sat there whole and safe – it showed me for damned sure that I was starting to feel more than just responsibility for the teenager. It was more than me simply caring about him too. What I was feeling in that moment had to be something paternal – the love of a parent. I knew that may be jumping the gun. Anna barely knew me, let alone Max, and it would take time for them both to come to trust me enough to see me, and Logan too, as a father figure to Max. None of that changed the fact that Max was already feeling very much like he was my kid though.

“Madd? What happened? Is my mom okay?” Max demanded the second he looked up and saw me walking through the door. He was already on his feet and in an instant he was at my side.

“Yeah, bud. Your mom’s alright. She just needs you home right now, okay?” I assured him as I placed my hand on his shoulder and gave it a squeeze of support. It helped calm my fears too, to place my hand on his wide shoulder and assure myself without a doubt that he was there and safe.

“Did she pass out again?” he asked.

“Let’s get to the car and then I can tell you everything.”

Max barely allowed me to get my seatbelt into place before he was demanding answers from me once again. I abandoned starting the car and looked to him. I hated seeing the stress on his young face again. It seemed like that was the only feeling he ever had since he arrived with us. He was too young to be carrying all that he had on his shoulders.

“The FBI turned up at our place this afternoon,” I started.

“Oh fuck!” he gasped as he dropped his head into his hands. His breathing started to pick up right away. “Do they know? Did that fucker report us? Because if he did, we didn’t do anything wrong! He drugged my mom and he...he hurt her so bad, Madd. He could have killed her! I just wanted to stop him. I just...I had to save my mom!”

“Take a breath, Max. It’s all gonna be just fine. Callum didn’t report you. The FBI are investigating a series of murders and the investigation led them to your mom. They think Callum is the murderer, though they had no idea who he was until they spoke to your mom,” I explained as I held the back of his neck in an attempt to calm him down.

“Murderer?” he gulped.

“Yeah. They already found six bodies – women who looked a lot like your mom, apparently. You probably saved her life that night, Max.”

“Oh God!” Max wrenched the door of my truck open and all but threw himself out of it. I heard him vomiting, but before I could get out of the car he appeared at the passenger side and reached into the car for his back pack.

“Better?” I asked as he tried to catch his breath again.

“Not even nearly, Maddox. That fucker is a murderer! What if...if I hadn’t gotten there when I did? What if I’d stayed at Joey’s for dinner before I went home? I c-could have lost her!” he cried.

“You didn’t though, Max. You got to her in time and you saved her.”

“That’s why he came here, right? It didn’t make any sense that he’d come after her, but it does now. She survived. He doesn’t want her telling the cops, right?”

“You’re too smart for your own damn good,” I sighed.

Silence descended in the cab of my truck as Max pulled a bottle of water from his backpack and swilled out his mouth several times. Finally he closed up his backpack, threw it into the back seat, then climbed back into the passenger seat, slamming the door closed.

“How is she?” he asked.

“She told the FBI what she could, but it took everything she had left in her. She was pretty shaken up when I left. Mainly she was terrified for you,” I replied.

“When isn’t she?” he asked with an eyeroll, but the small smile on his face told me how much he loved his mom and the way she tried to always protect him.

“Let’s get back to her. I’m guessing the FBI will still be there when we get home, so they’re probably gonna want to talk to you.”

I started the car and reversed, desperate to get back home and see Anna myself. I wasn’t comfortable leaving her when there were strangers at our place, even if they were FBI.

“What do I tell them? The truth?” Max asked.

“Up until you first hit him and he went down, you tell the truth. After that, your mom lied and said you freed her, so she was the one to knock him out with the bat. He fell and hit his head, then you both ran out of the apartment. When you went back, he was gone. Don’t mention getting rid of his body or car. Understand?”

“God dammit, Mom! Is she ever gonna stop trying to protect me?” he cursed.

“What do you think? She’s your mom. She loves you.”

“I know. Sometimes I just wish she’d see that I’m growing up now, and I can take care of myself too.”

“She will, to some extent. But I doubt she’ll ever stop trying to stand between you and any threat in your life. I just hope that in the future Logan and I will be stood either side of her too,” I admitted.

“I’d be good with that,” Max agreed easily.

## **ANNA**

The FBI stayed at Logan and Maddox’s house well beyond their welcome. They took the footage Madd had from Neil’s hardware store, then they wanted all of Neil’s details so they could talk to him, despite Maddox telling them he already had all of the footage taken outside the store that day.

After Max had come up to Logan’s room, where Logan had made me lie down to rest, to assure me and show me that he was safe and home where I needed him to be, it had been his turn. Maddox had stayed by Max’s side the entire time as the FBI took a statement about what Max recalled of the night he saved me – or of what Madd had told him he could recall anyway.

The agents had also tried hard to argue with Maddox, Logan, and even Max that they needed to question me further too, but all three had stopped that from happening, and eventually the FBI had left with what they had –



which was a hell of a lot more than they had arrived with. Of course, I was kept out of all of it, sequestered upstairs safely in Logan's room. Maddox or Logan were with me throughout, and Max came and laid with me for a while too when the agents were done with him.

I calmed down a lot when Max was home and safe, but my mind was still a jumble of nightmarish flashbacks, and horror filled thoughts of what could have happened to me if Max hadn't come home when he did that night. I'd been lucky back then, and I'd been lucky the week before too when I escaped Callum's attempt to run me off of the road and kill me. Then he'd been in town too. The more I thought about it all, the surer and more terrified I was in the knowledge that the FBI agents were right – Callum's plan had been to eliminate me before I could identify him to any authorities. And that meant my son too – because Max saw that fucker's face. I knew it, and Callum knew it. Neither of us were safe while that monster was alive.

After the FBI cleared out and everything had calmed down, the guys, Max, and I had ended up down in the living room, lounging out on the huge sofa and comfy armchairs with a comedy movie. We didn't talk about Callum, The FBI, or any of what was going on, We all just seemed to have come to some silent agreement to just try and forget about it all. The guys ordered pizzas and a ton of sides, then opened a bottle of wine, and cracked open some beers. I even agreed Max could have a beer, which was pretty chilled out of me, I thought.

As it got later and we all settled into a comfortable silence in front of the movie I finally felt able to relax completely. Of course the wine helped with that too, as did the fact I was pressed between Logan and Madd on the sofa. I was curled up, with my legs underneath me, my head resting on Logan's chest. Madd was crowded in at my other side, and between them they were keeping me toasty warm. I loved their calming touches over my clothes, and the way they soothed the fears that seemed to now live inside me, until all of the chaos seemed to be muted in the background.

“Anna?” I was awoken by soft kisses on my forehead, light and teasing. I opened my eyes, only to find the room around me was almost dark, the only light coming from a small table lamp in the corner. “Hey sleepy head,” Logan whispered and when I turned my head enough to look up, I realized I was still laid on his chest, and he was watching me with a gentle smile on his face.

“Hey. I must have dropped off,” I told him. I looked to my other side for Madd, but he was gone. The armchair was empty too, where Max had been sitting before.

“Maddox and Max went to bed a while ago. You looked too peaceful for me to wake,” Logan explained.

“But you woke me anyway,” I pointed out.

“You were starting to stir. I was worried you were going to have a nightmare.”

“Maybe,” I shrugged as I lifted my head and stretched my back a little. “I don’t remember.”

“Let’s get you up to bed, where you’ll be more comfortable,” he suggested, but I barely heard the words as I just took him in. He always looked amazing, but in the light coming from that lamp, he seemed to be perfectly back lit. I could see the silhouette of his wide, muscular shoulders, and the sharp, strong angles of his face. His eyes seemed to sparkle when he looked to me with a smile.

I rose up onto my knees on the sofa beside him and pressed my hands to his chest. Beneath all I could feel was tightly packed muscle. He placed his hands lightly around my forearms as if to steady me.

“Always worrying about me, aren’t you?” I asked teasingly as I smiled up at him.

“Damn right. Gotta keep you safe and whole. Madd and I have plans to spend the rest of our lives with you.”

“You really mean that, don’t you?” I questioned as I studied his face.

“You doubt it?”

“No,” I shook my head. “Not really. I just...it’ll take some getting used to, I guess. Someone – no, two someone’s – wanting me like that.”

“Not someone, sweetheart. Me. I want you in every way I can have you. Maddox does too. We want to share the rest of our lives with you. We want you to share your life with us. We want you. We want Max. We love you, Anna. You don’t need to have any doubts about that. We love you so fucking much,” he promised.

“I love you too. I want all of that, Logan. I want it so much,” I admitted a little tearfully, but this time the tears were good. They were tears of hope and happiness. Of a future I could almost reach out and touch for me and my son. A future I desperately wanted.

“You have it. Once the FBI clear up this whole thing we can start looking to our future. You can decide where you want to live and what you want to do. We can work out what Max needs and wants too, and we’ll make it happen. No more fighting alone anymore. You’ll never have to face any battle ahead alone, sweetheart.”

I didn’t know what to say to any of that, so I allowed my instincts to take over instead. I lifted up onto my knees and swung my left one over Logan’s thighs so I were straddling him. I braced my hands on his unbelievably wide shoulders and slanted my lips over his before he could utter a word of question. I kissed him gently a few times, until finally Logan took over, wrapping his arms around my body and dragging me closer to him as he kissed me hard and fast. As the kiss intensified I found myself pushing closer to Logan’s front, my breasts pressed against his chest and my center against his abdomen. I practically had my legs wrapped around him as I

fought to keep up with the fire and need in his hungry kiss. I wound my hands through the short strands of his hair as I clung to him, desperate for more.

“We...” Logan gasped as he pulled back from the kiss almost like he’d been forced to rip himself from it. “...we should slow down. We don’t need to rush this.”

“We’re not slowing down,” I growled, then before he could say anything else foolish, I slammed my mouth over his and started kissing him just as wildly as he’d been kissing me.

“Anna...” he gasped again as he pulled away. I forced myself to take a breath as I sat back a little and studied Logan’s face. He looked concerned and I hated it.

“Don’t Logan,” I almost pleaded. “Don’t look at me like I’m broken. I’m not fucking broken! I love you. I trust you. Isn’t that enough?”

“I just don’t want to push you if you’re not ready.”

“I’m ready. More than ready! Just stop worrying and make love to me, Logan,” I wasn’t above begging if it came to it. He had set me alight and there’s no way he was leaving me burning and walking away.

I was taken completely by surprise – in the best way – when Logan gripped my hips and in one swift movement lifted me up, slid from under me and set me back down until I lay on my back on the wide sectional, and he was straddling my thighs, his hands caging me in at either side.

“God, Anna. You have no idea how long I’ve wanted you laid out like this, underneath me,” he uttered as he slowly trailed kisses down my neck, making me shudder with need as each soft touch of his lips, juxtaposed by the harsh brush of his short beard, brushed over the sensitive skin of my face and neck.

“That feels so good,” I whispered. Every nerve in my body seemed to have come to life, and they were all sending signals to my desperate center.

“You feel so good, Anna. You’re perfect, sweetheart, so fucking perfect,” he whispered as he continued trailing kisses down the neckline of the vest top I was wearing. “Can I take this off?” he asked as he slid a finger under the strap at my shoulder.

“Yes. Take it all off, Logan. Yours too. I want to see you,” I pleaded. I was already feeling out of breath with need, and my body felt like it was buzzing for what it needed so desperately.

I lifted up to a sitting position and helped Logan lift off my cami, then he pulled off the lounge shorts I changed into earlier, my panties gone with them. I made short work of the bra, and as I tossed it aside I was relieved Logan had started stripping away his own clothes too.

Watching him strip, every inch of his spectacular body on display and all for me, took the fire that had been lit within me, and threw a gallon of gasoline over it as my need intensified to the point that I couldn’t be still as I stared at Logan. His boxers were the last thing to go, then he was stood before me, deliciously naked.

“You just gonna stand there?” I asked him breathlessly. I didn’t even stop to worry about my scars that had to be clear to see as I lay before him, stark naked. Suddenly there was no place for insecurity between us. The way Logan was looking at me erased any sort of fear that he’d find me lacking. There was nothing in his gaze but desire.

“Impatient, aren’t you?” he teased as he moved closer to me and covered my body with his, caging me in.

“No. I’m eager,” I corrected him with a huge grin on my face.

“Eager, I can work with.” Logan smiled too as he leaned in and kissed me. Our teeth knocked together as we both continued to smile, but that changed as the kiss turned more intense, then almost frenzied. Logan supported his weight over me with one arm on the back of the sofa while he started to slowly caress the other down my body in languid strokes that only served to rile me further.

“Logan,” I gasped, almost desperately. My entire body felt out of control, writhing with my need for more of his touch and not just up and down my side, which he seemed to be teasing me at.

“Steady, sweetheart,” he whispered close to my ear, then he leaned over me again, kissing his way down my chest, between my breasts and down my stomach. I was about to growl with frustration when finally his kisses moved upwards again, and then he was lavishing my nipples with the same attention he’d given the rest of my body, nibbling the hard peaks, then soothing them with his tongue.

I arched my back, pushing my breasts closer to him in the hopes he’d never stop. The sensations shooting right to my core were becoming overwhelming, but it felt so good.

I cried out in protest when he stopped and moved up to sip at my lips gently. He seemed to be studying my face with every touch of his lips and I knew he was worried about pushing me past what I could handle.

“Love you, Logan,” I panted between kisses, knowing he needed my reassurance that everything was still good.

“Love you too, sweetheart. You still with me?” he asked as he paused and pulled back just enough to see my face.

“Always,” I whispered. “I feel so good. Please don’t stop.”

“I won’t,” he promised as he trailed his kisses down my neck once again and teased my nipples, moving back and forth between them.

I was pretty sure I was going to have a heart attack right there on the spot if he didn’t ease the wild need and pressure that I could feel throbbing at my core, but he must have sensed that too, because finally his hand trailed down my body between us until he came to my aching core. His fingers toyed with me, gently teasing my clit, taking me right to the brink of the release I needed, then pulling back, again and again until I was not only writhing, but I was also crying out in desperation for him to just give me what I needed.

“More! Please Logan...need more!” I gasped.

Thankfully, he heard my desperation and he slid two fingers deep inside of me as his thumb brushed over my clit with the perfect amount of pressure. Just as I was about to come and get everything my body needed and wanted I pushed up onto my elbows so I could see Logan more clearly.

“Wait!” I cried. It killed me when I was so close, but I wanted to take things between us further and I was done waiting.

“What’s wrong, sweetheart?” Logan asked as he pulled his hand free of my pounding core and moved up my body so we were face to face.

“I...inside me....I w-want you inside me! I want to feel you everywhere when I come for the first time with you, Logan, please,” I begged.

“Fuck, Anna. You really are perfect,” he uttered as he pushed up onto his knees and moved between my legs. He leaned over to the side table beside the sofa, opened a little drawer and pulled out a condom.

“Do I even want to know why you guys keep condoms there?” I asked as I tried to calm down a little.

“Only for you, gorgeous. Madd put them in every room since you and he had sex for the first time,” he explained.

“He told you?”

“We’re brothers,” Logan shrugged. “We tell each other everything, but not details. Not like that, not about you, okay?” He paused in opening the condom and looked to me for my answer.

“I can live with that,” I nodded. Now get that thing open and on before I explode here!” I laughed as I nodded to the condom packet.

Logan let out a chuckle, then he used his teeth to tear open the condom.

“Make sure you talk to me if you need me to slow down or stop,” he told me as he slid the condom onto his long, thick cock. I knew it was going to be a struggle to take all of him, but it didn’t scare me. All I could honestly think about was feeling how full he would make me feel.

“Logan...Please,” I squeaked as I gave him my best pleading look.

The relief was overwhelming as he lined himself up and started to slowly ease his length inside of me, little by little. He was a tight fit, but the fact I was very much ready helped and within moments he was fully seated inside of me. He lifted me up so I was straddling his thighs and I pressed myself against his warm and hard front as I gripped his shoulders.

“You feel so right, sweetheart,” he breathed close to my ear.

“We do. We fit together,” I panted as I clung to him and started to move up and down on his lap. My orgasm didn’t take long to build up again once Logan started to move too, back and forth, setting a rhythm of pleasure I was trying hard to keep up with.



My body tensed up as the need within me built and built. I wrapped one of my arms around Logan's neck needing to hold on to him as I became overwhelmed with the strength of the orgasm I could feel building inside. Part of me was scared of it, but the bigger part of me was moving frantically on Logan to chase it.

"I've got you. Let go, Anna. I've got you," Logan ground out, his own jaw tense with what I suspected was his orgasm building too. He thrust a little harder into me several times and it was exactly what I needed. My pleasure crashed down over me like a tidal wave and I gripped onto Logan tight, just trying to hold on as I lost all sense of everything but him and my own pleasure.

Logan grunted his own release moments later, then he lowered his weight down over me and I loved it. The sensation of his weight and his warmth pressing down on me as he stilled, the both of us breathless and panting – it just felt so right. Being laid with him there, spent, and feeling so peaceful and free, it was home, just as it had felt when I'd had sex with Madd before too. The two of them, and my son, they were my home now, I realized. They were the thing I had never truly had in my life to that point – my safe place, my sanctuary.

# CHAPTER 25

## ANNA

I woke up late the next morning feeling like a new person compared to the walking zombie I seemed to have been for so many weeks. Of course my fears were there, and still very real when the reality was that Callum was likely still very closeby somewhere and waiting for his chance to get to me and Max, but they were somewhat muffled inside of my head as I showered and got ready.

Maybe waking up beside Logan had helped. We'd slept in each other's arms all night and I'd slept so much better being close to him like that. I hadn't wanted to wake him when the sun shining in through the gaps in the blinds had woken me, so I snuck from the bed and left him to sleep.

When I looked at myself in the mirror before I stepped into the shower I had laughed at my crazed sex hair that stuck up in all directions, but I also had some color in my cheeks and I was smiling. Even when I tried to tame that smile, I found I couldn't. Madd and Logan loved me. They wanted not just me in their lives, but my son too, and that was like a fairytale ending for me. One I had never dared even dream of for myself, and there it was coming true.

My positivity hadn't dulled at all as I gotten ready for the day, and I'd even dressed up a little in a short floral sundress. I wanted to look good for the guys for a change, so I'd picked the dress, despite the weather being a little too cool for it now. I'd also put on a little mascara and lipstick, and taken the time to blow dry my hair into some sense of smooth waves.

Maybe it was crazy to feel happy when all around me was so much chaos, but the FBI were looking for Callum now. They had his image and they knew he was close. I was pretty sure it was only a matter of time until he was caught. I'd do whatever I could to help them achieve that, and I would get justice for what that monster had done to me, and for all of those young woman he had killed, but at the same time I knew I had to be grateful for the fact that I escaped. A serial killer drugged and tortured me as he did six other women at least. I should be dead and I knew it, but Max had saved me. I had a future and it was shaping up to be a wonderful one. I wasn't going to take any of that for granted anymore.

"Neil, I swear to you, man. Anna is safe. She's here with my brother and me. We have her covered, and the FBI will be turning up in an hour or two," Maddox was saying as I walked into the kitchen and found him on his cell phone, sitting at the counter.

He turned on the stool to face me the second I walked in. I didn't miss the way he looked me up and down, and I very much appreciated the smile that spread across his face as he took me in.

"I have to go. Just call me if you hear anything, okay?" Madd went on.

"Thanks, Neil. Appreciate it." With that he ended the call and set his cell down on the counter.

"Morning," I greeted. Madd didn't say anything in reply as he stood from the tall stool and started to slowly stalk towards me. I stood frozen as I tried to work out what he was doing, then his lips landed over mine and I caught on eventually. I wrapped my arms around his neck and pushed up onto my tiptoes so I could kiss him just as thoroughly as he was kissing me.

"Morning," he told me with a smile as he pulled back after an intense kiss. He had his arms wrapped around me, holding me against his body, and I could feel his erection pressed between us.

"What was that for?" I asked him innocently.

“That is what I want to do every single time you walk into a room, baby, but this morning you look fucking amazing and I couldn’t hold myself back,” he explained.

“Well I liked it, so you don’t have to hold yourself back anytime for me,” I told him playfully.

“I’m holding you to that,” he told me as he leaned in to kiss me again, then released one arm from around me, and led me into the kitchen with the other around my back. “Did you sleep?”

“Yeah, really well actually. Where’s Max? He didn’t go to school did he?” I worried.

“No. I explained to him last night that he’d need to stay home until this was all cleared up. He went to take a swim. I warned him not to leave the house,” Maddox assured me.

“Thank you,” I sighed gratefully. “Neil called you?”

“Yeah. The whole town is flooded with FBI agents and when they went to talk to Neil about what happened last week, he was worried about you. He just wanted to check in,” Madd explained. He led me to the seat he had vacated, then moved to the kitchen and started pouring coffee he’d obviously made in the machine before.

“They’re looking for Callum then?”

“I guess so,” he shrugged.

“Let’s just hope they find the fucker,” I added.

“I’m pretty confident they will, and if they don’t, it’ll be because the coward knows he’s fucked, and has already taken off to get far away from here. Either way you guys should be safe very soon.”

“I don’t want him getting away, Madd. I don’t want to spend the rest of my life checking over my shoulder for him,” I sighed.

“It’ll all work out. You’ll see,” Maddox assured me. “You want coffee?” I nodded and he passed me the mug he had just poured, along with some creamer.

“You said the FBI will be here again this morning?” I questioned.

“They want to ask you some more questions, but I have no problem turning them away if you’re not up to it,” he assured me as he grabbed his own coffee and came to sit in the seat right at my side.

“I should just get it over with,” I groaned. “I just...I felt good when I woke up this morning, but reality’s just kicked back in.”

“Then allow me to kick it firmly back out again,” he said as he set down his coffee, then lifted me clear off of my seat and into his lap. I squealed in surprise, but I was laughing as he set me down so I was straddling his thighs on the narrow seat.

“What are you doing?” I laughed.

“Reminding you about the good parts of your reality, and kicking out the negative shit for a little longer,” he told me simply, then he pushed my hair back behind my right shoulder and started to kiss slowly and softly down my neck and behind my ear. I shivered as goosebumps broke out across my skin. Maddox’s touch was so warm against my own chilled skin, and his kisses were playful and teasing, erasing everything from my mind except for my need for him to keep on going.

I pressed even tighter against him and lifted my face, desperate for him to kiss my neck more. I loved the tingles that ran through my body every time his lips touched my skin there, and with every brush of his stubble against my skin, I wanted more from him.

“That feels so good, Madd,” I groaned.

“Maybe we can make it feel even better.” I looked up startled by Logan’s voice coming from so close to me, but before I could react in any way,

Logan leaned in and started kissing along my jaw at the opposite side to Maddox.

Being kissed by the both of them was overwhelming in the greatest possible way. They set me alight with need instantly. The intensity of both pairs of their hands touching me simultaneously, almost in perfect rhythm with each other, it was so intense I almost couldn't take it, but I never ever wanted it to stop. My head was thrown back and my eyes were closed tight as I just allowed myself to enjoy the sensations of utter perfection.

"Oh God!" I whined as a hand slipped under the hem of my dress and moved torturously slowly past my needy core, and up towards my right breast. At the same time, another hand landed high on my thigh and started to smooth slowly up and down. I was so close to begging them to strip me naked so I could feel more of their hands on my bare skin.

"Mom?" Thankfully, my son was yelling for me before he came bursting through the kitchen door, so there was time for the guys to back away hurriedly and for me to get a breath in to try and get back to reality as I straightened up my dress hurriedly.

"I'm here," I told Max, my voice strained as he looked around the large space for me. Logan and Madd had moved across the kitchen and were in there looking like nothing had even happened, while I was totally freaking out Max could see what had just happened written all over my face.

"Everything okay, bud?" Logan asked as he turned from the counter and looked to Max.

Max had obviously just gotten out of the shower, his hair wet and nothing but a towel around his waist.

"I just need my hair products. Did you bring them from the guest house, mom?" Max asked me. I was relieved his attention was half on his cell phone in his hand and not fully on me and how flustered I was.

"They're under the sink in the bathroom, in your room," I answered.

“Right. I’ll check there,” he agreed distractedly. “What are we doing today anyway? I can’t go to school, right?” Max locked the screen of his cell and looked up at me fully.

“Right. No school until they catch Callum,” I nodded.

“I talked to your principal last night. He’s gonna set up some work online for you from next week, so you don’t get behind, but you have the day off for today,” Logan added, and I smiled at him gratefully. Calling Max’s principal had been on my to-do list, but I hadn’t gotten around to it yet.

“I might hit the gym for a while then,” Max said as he looked to me for permission.

“Let’s do something else. Have some fun,” Maddox suggested.

“Like what?” Max asked.

“We have two jet skis and some paddle boards in the garage out back. Let’s hit the water while it’s still warm enough to do it. That sound good to you?” Madd asked my son, and Max nodded eagerly, then looked to me.

“Anna?” Logan questioned when I didn’t answer.

“What about the FBI? You said they’d be back again this morning?” I looked to Maddox.

“I’ll know if they show up. My cell will get alerts from the security system.”

“They’re probably pretty busy tracking that bastard down,” Logan added.

“Come on, mom. You need a break from all of this. Let’s just have some fun for a bit. Please?” Max pleaded.

“Fine. Let’s do it,” I nodded. I didn’t feel like getting in the water myself. It was way too cold for me, but Max looked excited and I didn’t want to ruin that. Plus if the others were having fun, I would too I hoped. At least

worrying about Max flying around on a water ski would stop me from thinking about all of my other very real fears.

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I laughed as Max sped past me on the jet ski, whooping and hollering, and seemingly having the most fun I think I'd ever seen him have. Logan was right behind him on the other jet ski, staying close enough to make sure my son didn't get too carried away and do anything foolish. He and Madd had both reassured me they would watch out for Max while he was on the water. I'd been worried at first, especially when I saw the size of the jet skis, but the guys had taken time to show Max how to drive the thing, and laid out rules Max had been keen to listen to. Now he seemed to be keeping himself pretty sensible as he had a ton of fun doing it.

I could see Madd out on the water too from where I was sunbathing on the jetty. He was laid out on the paddleboard he had been using for the last half hour. I hadn't seen him give up paddling to just lie on the thing, but he looked settled and peaceful laid on it now, his legs draped off of the end and into the water as he rocked a little every time Logan and Max went close to him, but not too close.

I was more than happy where I was. The guys had brought the sun lounge out for me, along with a little table, on which sat a glass of cold juice and a plate of snacks. I was laid out in shorts and a tank top. The sun was shining bright enough to keep me warm, and I was enjoying alternating between watching them all have fun on the water, and reading a gossip mag on the reading app on my cell. It was peaceful and calm, and I was enjoying doing absolutely nothing. It had been a long time since I had the opportunity to just relax in such a soothing environment.

We'd already been out for a couple of hours and, thankfully, there hadn't been any interruptions from the FBI as yet. They hadn't even called Logan or Madd, despite having both of their phone numbers, and I was surprised about that after how persistent they had been to question me the night



before. Not that I was complaining. The last thing that I wanted was to have to leave the bliss of that perfect day with my son and the men I was in love with, to sit in a room and recall the worst weekend of my entire life to strangers. I was still unsure if I were even strong enough to relive every detail of that weekend that Callum held me prisoner. I had been working so hard to push it all back behind me so I could move on, not just for my own sake, but for my son too, and bringing it all back felt like a terrible thing to do. What if doing that left me even more destroyed than I already felt?

“Anna?”

I opened my eyes and lifted my head, using my hand to shield my eyes from the bright sun. I must have zoned out because Maddox was now out of the water and walking towards me, the paddleboard, which he'd been laid on, now pulled out of the water and up on to the jetty. He was wearing a pair of board shorts and nothing else as he walked down the deck towards me, water sliding down over his bronzed skin and dripping behind him. He was utter perfection, as was his brother. I would never get over the shock of knowing they both chose me and my complicated life that came along with me.

“You okay, baby? Are you warm enough?” he asked as a grin spread across his face. I loved how relaxed and care free he looked in that moment. He was showing his prosthesis and he didn't seem to have any concerns about it like he had when I first met him. He wasn't jumpy or looking over his shoulder. He was just happy. We all were in that moment.

“I'm perfect. It's gorgeous in the sun,” I told him with my own full and bright smile. “You coming to sit with me for a while?” I was already moving over so he could share my lounge with me. Just when I thought the day couldn't get any better, he was going to snuggle up with me in that beautiful spot.

“I need warming up,” he told me.

“I think I can manage that. Let me just grab you a towel.” I sat up on the edge of the lounge and leaned into the beach bag I brought to grab one of the towels I packed. “I don’t want you making me soaking wet,” I told him as I pulled one out and turned to hand it to him.

“You sure about that, beautiful?” he asked me with a mischievous grin, then a wink.

“Madd!” I cried as I instinctively looked for Max, praying he hadn’t heard that little quip, but Max was right across the other side of the water, the engines of the loud jet skis surely drowning every sound around them both out. “You can’t say things like that with Max around,” I scolded Madd as I tossed him the towel. He was chuckling as he unfolded it and wrapped it around his shoulders. He opened his mouth to speak again, but before he could I saw movement behind him. At first I thought it was Max or Logan coming out of the water, but that didn’t make sense, they’d been across the water, pretty far away just a moment before.

I looked again, moving sideways enough to see around Madd’s huge frame, but I’d been too slow.

“MADD!” I screamed as I shot to my feet and plowed into him with the full weight of my body. He lost his balance and we both went down as the sound of a gunshot rent the air. I scrambled to get off of Madd and back to my feet while also trying to turn so I wouldn’t take my eyes from Callum. He had come out of the water. That much had been obvious when I saw him behind Madd with a hand gun aimed right at him.

“Stay down!” Madd yelled at me as he grabbed my shoulder and pushed me down flat on the wooden boards of the jetty. I was breathless and shaking like a leaf as I tried to make sense of what was happening, but by the time I could think even a little clearly, Maddox had leapt up, his weight leaving me laid out on my front on the ground.

“Maddox!” I cried. I turned over and sat up enough just in time to see Maddox throw himself into Callum. A shot rang out, then they both went right off of the edge of the jetty with a loud splash. I didn’t even try to stand. I didn’t want to waste the seconds it would take. Instead I crawled across the jetty to the edge, terrified for Maddox. That gun had to have been between him and Callum when it went off.

My worst fears were realized when I reached the edge and found the water stained red, no sign of Maddox, and Callum halfway up the ladder to climb back out.

“Where is he?” I cried as I glared at the monster from my nightmares.

“Dead, and you’re next, you little bitch!” he hissed. He reached for me, but I threw myself backwards away from him. The time it took him to get up the last of the ladder rungs gave me time to get to my own feet and stand. I looked to the blood stained water again, but there was no sign of Maddox coming up to the surface. I looked across the water to where Max and Logan were some distance away. They obviously hadn’t seen or heard anything, the both of them seemingly racing through the water.

“MADD?” I yelled into the water, but when he didn’t appear I knew I had to go in after him. I couldn’t swim well, but I had to try.

I was about to jump right in when Callum appeared behind me and grabbed my ponytail, wrenching it back so hard I fell on my ass. I rolled to get away from him as he tried to grab me again, but I managed to evade his grab for my arm.

“LOGAN!” I screamed as loud as I could as I shuffled backwards as fast as I could possibly move away from Callum, but he was right on me, and before I even finished screaming for Logan I was cut off with a swift and sharp kick to my side that left me gasping for breath and in dizzying pain.

“You should have kept your fucking mouth shut!” he hissed as he used my incapacitation as his chance to lean in and grab me by my hair, ripping my

head backwards until my eyes met his wild and crazed ones. “I might have let you live if you had!”

I cried out in pain as he ripped my hair up hard, the whole time I was clawing at his hands with my nails in an attempt to make him let go. He didn’t seem to have the gun, so I assumed he’d lost it in the scuffle with Madd, but he was still so much bigger and stronger than me. Realizing his grip on my hair wasn’t going to relent I lowered one of my hands, balling it into a fist, then I hit out at his crotch as hard as I could. He grunted and recoiled back, releasing my hair enough that I could move my head. He still held some hair in his fist though, and it was ripped out as I fought to escape him. Ignoring the burning pain in my head I tried to run to the water. I had to get to Maddox! Why hadn’t he come up? He couldn’t be dead! I refused to accept that.

I didn’t even make it close to the edge before Callum grabbed a hold of my arm and wrenched me backwards so hard that I found myself sprawled out on the wood again. The wind was knocked from me and I was finding it hard to breathe as I scrambled to roll to my front and get back to my feet. Staying down wasn’t an option. I was too vulnerable on the ground. I wanted to scream for Logan again, but I knew I wasn’t going to be able to with how hard I was fighting to breathe through my racing adrenaline and the pain I was in. I pushed up onto my hands and knees with all of the energy and fight I had left in me, conscious that I could hear Callum’s wet footsteps coming towards me. He was wearing sneakers and they were squelching with water from the lake. I had no idea how he had gotten to the house from the water, since access to it was pretty restricted in the neighborhood the guys lived in, but I didn’t have time to worry about it right then.

I pushed up onto my knees and looked around me frantically for Callum. I gasped when I found him stood right behind me, and before I could even cry out in fear he had a hold of my arm and was pulling me to my feet. I

didn't even work out what he was doing until it was too late. I barely had a chance to struggle in his grip before he jumped off of the side of the jetty and into the freezing cold water, his grip on me never letting up for a second. I gasped as the coldness of the water hit me, but that was the only breath I got in before Callum was forcing my head down under the water. He kept a hold of my body with one arm, and held my head under with his other hand. I fought to get free, panicking and taking in water by the mouthful as I scrapped and flailed to get free, but Callum was so much stronger than me and nothing I did seemed to make him release me even a little.

Water filled my lungs and black spots danced in my vision as my fight started to die down, and I knew that was it. I was losing consciousness and my life. With my last tiny bit of fight I reached for his hand at my waist and dug my nails into his flesh as hard as I possibly could, ripping into his skin with everything I had left inside of me. But it didn't work. His hold on me never wavered and I was starting to fade. Everything became fuzzy and images of my son played in my thoughts. He'd be safe with Logan and Madd, I assured myself with my veery last thought. They'd take care of him just as they'd promised me they would.

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"MOM!" My eyes snapped open at the terror in my sons anguished cry. Pain radiated through my body as I started to cough hard. Water came out with every cough, and I felt arms lifting me so I was half sat up as I spit up so much water.

"Max?" I gasped the second I managed to get a breath in.

"I'm here, mom. I'm right here," he gasped, and when I looked up just a little, I realized he was the one propping me up. He was sat on the jetty with me laid out, supporting my top half in his arms.

“Max? Talk to me, kid!” Logan yelled from somewhere. I tried to look around, but I couldn’t see him or....

“MADD!” I cried, followed by more sputtering coughs. I fought to sit up and looked to the water below us in terror.

“She’s back, Logan. She’s back,” Max uttered shakily.

“Where are they?” I asked shakily, my voice barely coming out. “Madd! He w-was shot?”

“Logan’s got him. We called 9-1-1.”

“Is he alive? Logan?” I cried tearfully.

“Mom, you have to calm down and freaking breathe! You were dead! I had to do CPR!” Max cried almost hysterically. I made myself take a breath and pushed up to sitting, despite the pain it caused.

“I’m r-right here, honey. You...you saved me...again. I’m okay,” I told him as I reached up an arm and wrapped it around his neck, pulling him closer to me for a hug while I coughed and tried to find the strength to keep talking. “I...I need to see him though. Madd...I have t-to know,” I pushed out emotionally.

Max nodded and took a calming breath, then he scooped me up and started walking down the jetty towards the grass. Off to the side I could see Logan leaning over Maddox’s prone body laid on the ground. It was obvious Logan had pulled him out onto the grass bank.

“Madd?” I gasped as I realized he wasn’t moving at all.

Logan turned briefly to glance over his shoulder at Max and I, then he looked right back to his brother. Even in that brief glance I had seen the panic all over his face.

“He’s gonna be okay. An ambulance is coming and they...they’ll help him. They can fix him up,” Logan called to me shakily. I wanted to take his

words for what they were, but his tone made it clear that what he had said was nothing more than wishful thinking.

“Put me down, Max,” I said, and Max did. He wrapped his arm around me as I stood shakily, then he helped me as I walked around to Maddox’s other side. As soon as I saw him, a sob burst from me. His abdomen was covered in blood and Logan was holding a blood soaked towel down over Madd’s stomach with force. Madd was out cold and as pale as I had ever seen anyone look. I swallowed back the next sob and forced myself to breathe as I dropped heavily to the ground beside Maddox.

“He has to be alright,” Logan uttered.

“Is he still br-breathing?” I stuttered, terrified of the answer.

“Slowly, but yeah. His chest....it’s still moving, right? Tell me you see it moving, Anna, please!” he cried.

I placed my hand on Maddox’s chest and held my breath for a moment as I waited for the smallest kernel of hope.

“Yes. There. His chest’s still moving, Logan,” I cried with relief. I looked behind me to Max and tried to make myself stay calm. I had to try and keep control of the situation. “Max, what happened to that motherfucker?” I gasped as I fought to calm myself.

“He’s dead. Logan...he...he took him down. He’s dead,” Max bumbled. He hadn’t taken his eyes from Madd’s lifeless body, and tears were silently streaking down his face.

“Good,” I nodded. “Okay. Go to the front gates and let the ambulance in, okay? Show them where to come.”

“Huh?” Max finally moved and met my gaze.

“Go to the gates, Max. Show the ambulance where to come, okay? C-can you do that?” I repeated.

Max didn't even answer, he just set off running. I placed my hand back on Maddox's chest and held my breath as I waited to feel it move up and down again. I couldn't hold in my cry of relief when it did.

"Hold on, Madd. You hear me? You h-have to hold on and you....you've got to come back to us. We n-need you. We all need you so fucking much," I told him firmly. I wasn't even sure Logan knew I was there. He was just staring at his brother with all of the loss and devastation I could feel inside of myself. I wanted to say something to soothe him. I wanted to promise him that Maddox would never leave us, but how could I do that when Maddox looked as though he was already gone? It was taking every scrap of life I had left in me not to completely crumble to pieces too. I couldn't lose Maddox, not when I only just found him. I couldn't lose either of these amazing men who I loved more than I ever thought it possible to love a man, but I knew if Maddox didn't survive this, then Logan wouldn't either, and neither would I.



# CHAPTER 26

ANNA

“Logan realized what was going on first. We...we’d been racing on the jet skis, so we didn’t hear anything at first. Logan yelled at me, and when I heard him I looked around and saw Maddox’s body...floating...he was just floating in the water near the jetty. I couldn’t work out what was happening at first, but Logan was already across the other side by then, and he leapt off the jet ski a-and right on top of that guy,” my son explained shakily. We were at the hospital and had been for some time.

Maddox was in surgery and Logan was up in the waiting room on the floor above us waiting for news. The FBI had already taken his statement, and mine. Now it was Max’s turn and I had been allowed to be with him because of his age. While I was relieved I was able to sit with Max as he was forced to relay everything he’d seen, I was also feeling extremely anxious about leaving Logan alone upstairs. He had barely spoken a word since the ambulance arrived and Maddox had been loaded into the back of it. He had completely shut down on everyone, and his terror of losing his brother seemed to be more than he could come back from.

I felt that terror too. I knew if I lost Maddox, I would never be whole again. I didn’t think any of us would, so I was praying with every breath that left my body, for Maddox to just hold on and come through this for all of us.

“You mean the man you knew as Callum?” the agent clarified.

“Yeah,” Max nodded. “As I got closer and Logan started fighting with him, I saw her...my mom...her body floated up in the water. She wasn’t moving...just like Madd. I...I rode the jet ski closer, then shut it off and

dove in. I...I managed to get my mom out of the water and onto the jetty, but she...she wasn't breathing," he explained shakily. I reached over and grabbed his hand, pulling it onto my knee and holding it tightly in both of mine. We were all still wearing the wet clothes from the lake. Logan and Max had pulled on their t-shirts when the EMT's were working on Maddox, but otherwise there wasn't time to do more. Max was shivering harder than I was as we sat in the air conditioned room the FBI had led us into.

I knew I would have to do something about getting us all warmer and dry clothes when this was over. Focusing on keeping control and managing the mundane details was the only thing stopping me from falling apart right then.

"I'm here, Max. I'm fine now," I tried to reassure him. I had been checked over when I arrived at the hospital. My ribs were x-rayed, but they were just bruised, not fractured. Other than that I had some other bruises and a few scrapes and cuts. I'd been a little low on oxygen and doctors had wanted to keep me over night to monitor me after I had been drowned, but I had declined that offer quickly. I needed to be with my son and my guys. Reluctantly, they'd discharged me with instructions of symptoms I needed to be watchful for, because of the water I'd taken into my lungs. Thankfully, my son had missed all of that though, and he'd calmed a lot when I walked out and assured him the doctors had cleared me. It was another lie and I hated telling it, but Max was shaken up enough, and I was sure I'd be fine.

My body ached from being thrown around and my throat and chest felt raw and painful with every breath, as well as my ribs which jolted me with the agony of every miniscule movement, but it really was the least of my worries with Maddox fighting for his life, Max terrified and traumatized, and Logan falling to pieces.

"I...I did CPR. I couldn't hear Logan and the guy fighting in the water, but I blocked it out. My mom...I had to get my mom back," Max went on.

“Do you know what happened between Logan and Callum?” the agent asked.

“Not really,” Max shrugged. “The splashing stopped and everything went quiet, then Logan was yelling at me as he ran to Maddox, telling me to talk to him, but I...I couldn’t. I was s-so scared.”

“I think that’s enough,” I told the agent as I wrapped my arm around Max and pulled him in for a half hug. He was doing amazing at being strong, but he was badly shaken by what had happened and I didn’t want him being put through any more. “Max revived me then and I’ve told you everything that happened after that. Logan saved my life, and likely my son’s too. Callum, or whatever his real name was, was there to kill us. We wouldn’t be here now if Logan hadn’t done what he did,” I added angrily. I already knew Logan had drowned Callum in that water, just the way the monster had drowned me just moments before. I’d overheard Logan tell the agents that, when he’d been giving his statement. He and Callum had struggled in the water and Logan had over powered him and drowned him. He really had saved our lives – of that I had no doubt.

“That’s not in question here, miss Hart. We just need accurate statements from everyone before we can file our reports,” the agent told me.

“Well if that’s all you need I’d like to get back upstairs to the waiting room. Maddox should be out of surgery soon,” I told her.

“Of course. We may contact you with further questions at a later time, but you can go for now,” she agreed.

I jumped up immediately and grabbed Max’s hand, pulling him after me as I sped as fast as I could from the room we’d been in and around to the elevator. I felt unsteady on my feet, and the fast movements were a bad idea with bruised ribs, but nothing was stopping me from getting back to Madd and Logan,

“How are you doing, honey?” I asked as I waited impatiently for the elevator.

“I’m good, mom. You’re the one who died!” he snapped.

“I didn’t die though. You brought me back, and I’m fine. The doctor said I was good to go, didn’t he?” I pushed.

“Please never try to leave me again, okay? I can’t lose you.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” I promised.

Finally, the elevator arrived and we both stepped in. I was fidgety as we waited for the climb to the third floor, anxious to get back to Logan and check on him, and completely terrified about what the doctor would tell us when he next came to update us on Maddox.

“Madd will be okay, mom. He’s the toughest guy I think I ever met,” Max told me as the elevator finally landed on our floor.

“You’re right,” I agreed with a nod, and I tried hard to believe it too. I had to. The alternative would leave me shattered into millions of pieces and that wasn’t an option right then. Max and Logan needed me to hold it together.

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I was relieved to find Max asleep when I walked into the waiting room of the intensive care unit. We had been there for so many hours that I’d lost count, ever since Maddox came out of surgery and was moved there for close observation.

The bullet that hit Madd’s abdomen had ricocheted around and caused a ton of internal bleeding. His surgery had been almost six hours long and the surgeon had explained to us that there were still no guarantees when he spoke to us afterwards, but he also assured us that Maddox was stable for the time being.

We were all exhausted. Logan had tried to tell me and Max to go home but there was no way I was leaving him or Maddox, and after what happened, Max refused to leave me, so we were all still there, running on fumes, just waiting for Madd to wake up.

Max had been dead on his feet when I sent him to at least lie down in the waiting room. That was why I was so relieved to see him resting and looking peaceful. I grabbed the coat that Cat had brought for me and draped it over my son, wanting him to sleep for as long as possible. Luckily, it was late and the small waiting room seemed little used, so I was pretty confident Max wouldn't be interrupted.

We were at least all now in clean, warm, and dry clothes. I had called Cat and told her what happened, asking her to collect us all some things from the house and bring them to us. She and Tate had been by just an hour later, with everything we all needed and some much needed comfort from friends. They'd stayed with us all for a couple of hours and even offered to bring Max and I home to stay at their place for the night before they left, but we were going nowhere. Cat and Tate had promised to return the next day, and I was glad for it. It was new, but wonderful to have friends who actually cared, and I felt all of us would need those friends in the coming weeks.

Satisfied that Max was settled, I left the waiting room, closing the door quietly behind me, then walked back down the corridor to Maddox's room. Logan was exactly where he had been for the last five hours – seated in an uncomfortable plastic chair on the right side of Maddox's bed, loosely holding his hand and just watching him almost unblinkingly.

"Is Max okay?" he asked me quietly, though he didn't look at me. He'd been making an effort to talk to Max and I a little, in the last few hours, seeming to have come out of the fearful daze he'd been trapped in before, but he still couldn't take his eyes from his brother, and he was nothing like the Logan we knew. He looked exhausted and pale. He hadn't touched any

of the food I'd brought him, and I'd only convinced him to drink some water because I had broken down, unable to hold it back, and cried a little because I was so worried about him.

"He's asleep down the hall. He was exhausted," I replied as I sat in the other hard chair opposite Logan, at Maddox's other side.

Maddox was laid in the bed, hooked up to monitors and I.V. bags with tubes that seemed to run everywhere. The machines beeped and made noises constantly and there was the hum of the blood pressure cuff being inflated every half hour like clockwork. Apart from a bruise on the left side of his face, Maddox looked unharmed, but he was so pale and the stillness of him was terrifying. All I wanted him to do was open his eyes and scold Logan and I for looking so worried about him, just the way I knew he would if he could see us.

"So are you. You need to rest too," he told me flatly.

"I could say the same to you," I pointed out.

"I'm good. I won't leave him."

"Neither will I, so it looks like we're both staying right here," I told him. I so wanted him to look at me. I wanted to go to him and wrap my arms around him, but when I had tried earlier, he had virtually pushed me away. I was pretty sure he was blaming me for what had happened, and who could blame him? I was the one who had brought Callum to their door. I was the one who had gotten Maddox shot, and put Logan at risk. It was all my fault. If I'd never gone on that damned date...

Tears filled my eyes and I hurried to swipe them away before they could fall. It was all my fault, and if Maddox and Logan never wanted anything to do with me again, I would understand completely. It would destroy me, but I would get it. But I needed Maddox to wake up. I needed to know he would be okay before I could walk away from the only good men who had ever come into my life – other than my boy of course.

I felt numb as I sat there. I don't even know how much time passed. Logan didn't speak to me again, and Maddox wasn't waking up. The doctor had told us he might not, since he was on some very strong pain meds and other drugs, but still, I had hoped. More than anything I just needed to see his eyes. I needed to tell him how sorry I was. I knew I should tell Logan now. Apologize for ever getting either of them mixed up in the nightmare of my own creation, but it was very clear Logan didn't want to speak with me at all, so I kept my mouth shut. Opening it was a bad idea anyway, because I was terrified if I started speaking, I'd break down and all of the hell inside of me would come pouring out, along with the breakdown I was working so hard to hold in.

"Mom?" I startled badly when a hand gently settled on top of mine. I lifted my eyes and found Max crouched beside the chair. He looked to have some color back and he was forcing a small smile for my sake. "You need to get some rest now, okay? You don't look good," he told me quietly.

"I'm okay. I don't want to leave Madd," I replied, but even my voice failed me, coming out as little more than a harsh croak.

"You're shaking...like a lot. You have to lie down at least," Max told me as he nodded to my free hand that rested on the edge of Maddox's bed, and I realized he was right. It was shaking badly. My whole body was. I sat up and lowered my legs which had been curled into my chest. They were aching and I suddenly felt freezing cold. "Come on. Come to the waiting room. I'll stay with Madd and Logan, and I promise I'll come get you if Madd starts waking up, okay?"

"I d-don't want to leave him," I whimpered as I fought not to cry.

"Tell her, Logan. She needs to take a break," Max pleaded as he glanced up to where Logan still sat frozen in the exact position he'd been sat before.

I held my breath when Logan finally turned his head and glanced at me, but that was all it was – a glance.

“Yeah,” he nodded. “He’s right. You should go, Anna,. We don’t need you here,” he told me, his voice sounding rough and a little hoarse.

His words hit me hard. They were so cold and flat. He wanted me to go. He was nothing like the Logan I knew and I missed him so much already. I knew he was terrified for Maddox. We all were, but it was more than that. It was like he had completely given up on me and it just solidified what I had spent the last countless hours telling myself – he blamed me and didn’t want me any longer. And while that knowledge broke me, I also knew he was right, so how could I argue?

“Okay,” I sniffled. “I’ll go for now, but I...I need to see him when he wakes up.”

“I’ll come and get you, mom. I promise. It’ll all be okay,” Max told me. I nodded and didn’t even look to Logan again. It hurt too much to look at him when he was trying so hard not to look back.

I placed my hands on the arms of the chair and used every tiny ounce of energy I had left to push myself up to standing. As soon as I was upright I felt lightheaded though, and instantly Max had grabbed me and was holding me against his taller frame.

“Mom? What is it?” he asked with worry.

“I’m okay. Just tired,” I whispered as I leant into him, grateful for once that he was so much bigger than me. I usually hated the idea of him being so grown up and adult, but right then I needed him.

“Maybe I should get a doctor?” Max worried as he looked to Logan, but Logan didn’t even seem to know we were still there.

“Just give me a hand, son. I’ll feel better once I lie down for a while,” I assured him, just desperate to get out of that room and away from Logan’s cold shoulder. I didn’t want to let it, but it hurt more than I could say.



Max ended up all but carrying me to the waiting room. By the time we got there I knew he had been right about me needing to rest. I was running on empty and then some. My body had been through so much with the whole dying thing, and the emotional turmoil had been unbearable. I felt weak and shaky, not to mention heartbroken.

“Your meds!” Max suddenly panicked as he helped me lower down into one of the hard leather covered chairs that were bolted to the wall in a line.

“I took them,” I hurried to tell him. “I asked Cat to bring them and I took them at the right time. I’m okay, Max.” I pulled him close and kissed the top of his head. “I love you so much, honey. You’re everything I will ever need. You know that, right?”

“I know, mom. I love you. Just lie down now, okay? I’m worried about you. You’re exhausted,” he told me as he folded a sweater he picked up from the bag, which Cat had packed for us, and folded it like a small pillow. I laid down and rested my head on it. The chairs weren’t comfortable at all, but lying down felt good.

“Wake me if Madd stirs, won’t you?” I worried.

“I will. Just try to sleep,” Max told me. He laid my coat over me, just as I’d laid it over him hours before, then he went to the door and lowered the lights a little before he left the room and closed the door behind him.

I closed my eyes and tried not to let my thoughts stray to any of what had happened, or what was to come when Madd woke up and blamed me too. I tried even harder not to allow myself to consider what happened if Madd didn’t wake up, but it all came back anyway, and I found myself crying into Max’s sweater until exhaustion overrode emotion, and I passed out.

# CHAPTER 27

## MADDOX

“Logan? Are you even listening to me?”

It was Max’s voice that roused me. Not just his voice, it was the pain and panic in his words. I clung to them and fought the unconsciousness that was trying hard to pull me under. I couldn’t remember what the hell had happened the get me there, but I knew for sure I was in the hospital. I could hear the beep of machines around me, and the stiffness of the rough sheets over me where I lay on the too soft and small mattress. I was also in considerable pain, which was a big giveaway. I tried to remember what happened, then it came back to me – Anna laid out on the lounge on the jetty. She screamed my name and I was...shot? Was I shot?

“Logan!” Max snapped. He sounded angry, which was so unlike him.

“What the fuck is wrong with you? I get that you’re terrified about Madd, but we all are. Mom and I...we care about him too you know? You can’t just ignore my mom. Can’t you see how scared she is? She needs you right now!” Max cried.

*Anna! What had happened to her? Was she hurt? And why wasn’t Logan taking care of her? Why the fuck was he sat with me if Max was desperate enough to beg him to be with her?* Max sounded distraught too and I worried he was hurt. *I had to wake up!*

“I can’t...” Logan uttered, and he sounded completely broken. *Was I dying? It kind of felt like it!*

“You said you loved her, Logan. You said you’d take care of her and now...” Max’s voice broke and it almost killed me. I was going to kill my

brother for putting the kid through this when I woke up. “You blame her, don’t you? You won’t look at her because you think this was her fault?”

“I don’t blame her!” Logan growled. “I just.... I can’t lose my brother and if...if we hadn’t have met her...met both of you...”

“She told you!” Max cried. “She pushed you away to keep you out of this! She almost broke her own heart to keep you out of it, but you said you loved her! You told her, and me, that you would protect her! It’s not her fault, Logan. She didn’t do anything wrong. I won’t let you hurt her like this. She’s been through so much and now you’re going to break her heart too!”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about, kid,” Logan scoffed, and I hated the way he was acting. He was so wrong. Max was right. None of what happened was on Anna, and if I’d have died in that water, I would have gladly accepted it to know she was safe, because I loved her. She was everything to me, and I thought she was to Logan too.

“Fuck you, Logan! I’ll tell you what I know for sure - the second Maddox wakes up and my mom knows he’s out of danger, I’m getting her the fuck away from you!” Max hissed.

“I just...I need time. Madd, he’s all the family I have. I need time to process this. I don’t want you both leaving though,” Logan sighed.

“You lied to us, you asshole! You told us you cared about us. My mom told you to stay out of our past, but you pushed. You didn’t let us leave when I said we should. You told her you wanted to protect her! You made us believe we had a future with you guys. I can’t believe I actually believed you!” Max raged, and he was right to. Logan was being a complete asshole and fucking everything up.

I was done listening. I pushed harder to open my eyes and finally they started to move, light fluttering in and out as I blinked a few times.

“Madd? Madd, you hear me?” Logan asked and I saw his silhouette move in front of me. My vision was blurry and fuzzy, but I knew it was him.

He squeezed my hand and I realized for the first time that he was holding it. I squeezed back and Logan let out a cry of relief.

“Come on, brother, wake the fuck up now,” Logan pleaded.

“I’m getting my mom!” Max cried. I couldn’t see where he was, but I heard a door slam and presumed he’d left the room.

“Anna?” I managed to force out roughly.

“She’s sleeping down the hall. Do you want her in here?” Logan asked. Finally my eyes stayed open and I glared hard at Logan before I could even fully focus on him.

“Asshole,” I growled, but it was followed by a coughing fit, since my throat was dryer than the fucking desert. Logan released my hand and instead appeared right beside me with a bottle of water. He tipped it to my lips and I took a few small sips.

“Just take it easy. That bullet did a real number on you.”

“What happened?” I asked as I lifted my head a little and looked around the small private room I was in. The light outside the windows was red, suggesting it was sunrise, or close to it. I wondered how many days I had been out.

“That fucker’s dead.”

“Anna...was she h-hurt?” I rasped.

“She’s okay. It’s you I was worried about. I almost fucking lost you this time, Madd,” Logan admitted. His eyes met mine and he looked exhausted. He was pale too, and his eyes were red. He’d obviously been crying.

“I’m still here,” I told him firmly as I moved my hand and patted his where it rested on the bed beside me. “It wasn’t o-on Anna. Don’t fuck up what

we h-have.”

“I’m just so angry, Maddox. You’ve already been through so much, and now this. It’s my fault. If I’d never have rented the guest house to her…”

“No!” I cut him off. “Don’t. Meeting her was the b-est fucking thing that ever happened to us and you know it, ass-hole,” I ground out.

“Madd!” Anna cried as the door was thrown open, then she was rushing towards me. She was paler than I had ever seen her, and I could see how badly she shook from where I lay. She had bruises and cuts on her face and she was walking like every step hurt her.

Max walked in right behind her, and he grabbed her when she wobbled as she tried to cross the room. He helped her ease down into the seat beside the bed, then he was glaring at me, daring me to fuck things up too. *I loved that kid!*

“Madd, I’m so so-sorry,” Anna sniffled as she grabbed my hand and held it both of hers. Her pain filled eyes were locked on mine and I didn’t miss how hard she tried not to look up to where Logan stood beside me. “I never meant…I shouldn’t have stayed. I’m so sorry. It’s all my fault!”

“No.” I moved my hand so it was wrapped around the both of hers and I squeezed them with all of the strength I had. “Don’t Anna. This wasn’t your fault. I d-don’t want to hear you blame yourself. You hear me?”

She closed her eyes, and when she opened them again she looked up very briefly to Logan, then away again just as fast. Pain and guilt filled her exhausted face and I knew that was in part my idiot brother’s fault.

“How do you feel? Should I get a nurse for you?” She asked, changing the subject as her attention returned to me.

“I’m good. I have everything I need right here,” I told her as I looked from Anna, up to Max, and then over to my brother – even if I was pissed with him. “Max? You okay?” I asked.

Yeah,” Max nodded. “I’m glad you didn’t die,” he added with just the hint of a smile on his face. “Mom dying was enough for one day.”

“What?” I snapped as I looked from Max to Logan. He’d told me Anna was fine.

“We don’t need to talk about that. It’s all over now and I’m still here,” Anna said, trying to avoid the topic all together.

“Max?” I looked to him with question and he glanced nervously from Logan to me and back.

“That guy...Callum...he w-was drowning my mom. Logan and I...we didn’t even know what was going on. By the time we did and Logan ripped him off of mom, and I got to her, she wasn’t breathing,” Max sniffled and I turned to see tears running down his face.

“That’s enough now, honey. You don’t need to keep reliving this. You saved me and Callum is dead. Madd’s awake. It’s all over now. We’ll be okay,” Anna told him as she reached back and grabbed his hand, holding it against her shoulder.

“Fuck,” I gasped as I turned a glare on my brother. “Why the fuck isn’t she in a hospital bed attached to monitors?” I demanded.

“Don’t be crazy. I’m alright, Madd.” Anna hurried to tell me.

“The doctor checked her over. He cleared her to go home. She had some cuts and bruises and her oxygen was a little low, but he said she’d be fine as long as she got some rest, right mom?” Max explained.

“Right,” Anna nodded, but I didn’t like the way she didn’t meet anyone’s eyes when she did so. Was she lying? Had she actually been cleared?

“Why the fuck weren’t you with Anna and Max?” I accused Logan angrily. If he’d been with Anna when the doctor saw her, as he should have been, then he’d know what she really needed right then.

“I was with you!” Logan cried.

“You shouldn’t have been. Anna and Max needed you!” My outburst caused more coughing, and the coughing was agony all through my torso, where I’d obviously been operated on.

“Madd, please just calm down. Logan needed to be with you, and Max and I were fine. Everything’s all right now. Just lay back and rest, please!” Anna begged as Logan rushed to hand me some water. I took a few sips and things settled down some. Exhausted, I laid back and tried to take some deep breaths. Whatever drugs I was on were strong and I was having to fight to remain conscious.

“Anna?” I turned my head and found her sat beside the bed, her eyes glassy with tears.

“Just rest now, okay? Your body needs time and sleep to recover. Max and I are good, and Logan will be too, now that you’re awake. Just close your eyes and sleep,” Anna told me. I wanted to argue. I needed to stay awake long enough to make sure she and Max were really alright. I wanted to tell her she had to go home and get some real rest herself. I wanted to look to Logan and make him promise me that he would take care of our family, but it was a losing battle as my eyes became heavy. I used the last of my consciousness to turn to Logan. I tried to speak but the words didn’t come, so all I could do was hope that he saw enough in my eyes to see sense and remember what Anna truly meant to him.

## **ANNA**

I just sat for a while, watching Maddox as he settled back into sleep. His face relaxed and all of the worry that had been there before left him.

“He’ll be alright, Logan,” I said when I glanced up and saw Logan watching his brother with the same devastation that had been on his face before Madd woke up. He looked so lost and I wished there was something I could do to make it better for him.

“He better be,” Logan returned and when he looked to me, there was nothing but blankness in his face. All of the love that he had looked at me with before, was gone, as was his light and his strength. He just looked cold, and it make me feel ill to have him look at me that way.

“Come on, mom,” Max intervened before I fell apart all over again.

“Maddox will sleep for a few hours now. Let’s get out of here so you can rest for a while then we can come back later,” he suggested. I took a deep breath and blinked the tears from my eyes. My heart was shattered on the inside, but I couldn’t afford to let it break me on the outside. My son still needed me, and maybe Madd would too, but losing Logan was killing me.

“Is that okay?” I asked shakily as I looked to Logan again. “If we c-cone back, I mean? Is it okay if I visit him?”

“Anna, you don’t have to be like that,” Logan sighed deeply.

“I’m not being like anything. I just...I didn’t want to upset you anymore. I’m sorry if...”

“That’s enough, mom,” Max cut in abruptly. “You have nothing to apologize for, so don’t. Maddox wants you here. That’s all of the permission you need to come back. Let’s go.”

I wanted Logan to argue. I wanted him to tell me that we would sort this all out when things calmed down and that we’d be alright. I wanted him to tell us not to leave without him. I just wanted some signal from him that we’d get over this, but he wouldn’t even look at me again.

Max just growled angrily, then he helped me up from the chair and led me from the room. I’d like to say that I held it together well, but I didn’t. I crumbled. I was exhausted, in pain, terrified for Madd, and traumatized from Logan’s treatment. I felt like my life had fallen down around me, and Max was the only thing holding me up – both figuratively and literally in those moments.



I didn't really remember leaving the hospital. Max got me into a cab at some point, then I remember being laid on a bed, curled tightly into myself and crying as my son held me and told me we'd be okay with out Logan and Maddox if it came to that. He was there with me until I eventually cried myself to sleep once again, the pain of the last twenty four hours pouring from me now that I finally felt able to allow it to happen.

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"Mom?" I groaned and cracked my eyes open. The room around me was light and modern, but definitely not home – or the guys place as I should probably think of it again now.

"Max? Where are we?" I asked, my voice coming out as a quiet rasp.

"A hotel. I didn't want to go back to *their* place. I paid for the night with the money I saved over the summer," he told me, and I didn't miss the way he hissed 'their' with utter hatred.

"Don't be like that. It's not their fault. Logan was right to blame me. I was the one who got Maddox shot," I told him as I rolled over and sat up. Pain ricocheted down my back and side, and my head felt like I'd spent the entire night before downing shots. My chest was still burning when I breathed and my throat was clearly raw if my voice was any indication.

"This is why I'm pissed, mom!" Max snapped. "You already blame yourself for every single thing that has ever gone wrong in your life and mine. I don't want you blaming yourself for what happens to the two of them too, and fuck them for making you feel that way."

"Madd said he didn't blame me, and Logan was upset, as he had every right to be. I don't want you being rude to them when we go to the hospital later," I told him as firmly as I could.

"You're going back there?" he questioned as he turned to face me with shock.

“I have to check on Maddox. He wasn’t out of danger last night when we left him. I need to know he’s going to recover from this. I’m worried about Logan too. I get that things between us have changed, but I still love him, Max. I love both of them and I can’t leave until I know they’ll be okay,” I argued. I left out the fact that walking away from them was going to break me in a way nothing else ever had, and so I wanted to put it off for as long as I could.

“You need to take your pills. That’s why I woke you. I ordered some breakfast for you too,” Max told me with a huff as he nodded to a covered plate on the small dining table across the room. It was a fancy looking hotel, the décor bright and modern. There was a sofa and two armchairs near the entrance, and I guessed Max had slept on the sofa, since I could see blankets and a pillow on it.

“Thanks Max,” I sighed as I once again marveled at how much he had grown up in such a short space of time recently. He really was growing into quite the man.

“I brought the stuff Cat packed for us too, It’s all in the bag near the bathroom,” he added as he nodded to a closed door of to my left, beside which sat the hold-all that Cat had delivered to the hospital.

“Did you eat something?” I asked as I swung my legs from under the comforter and slid from the bed. Once I stood I felt much steadier than the day before. The sleep I had gotten had obviously been much needed.

“Yeah. I had breakfast earlier.”

“Where’s my cell? Have we heard anything from the cops?” I asked. I walked over to the small table and sat, grabbing the carafe of coffee that sat there and pouring myself a mug full.

“*They* haven’t called, if that’s what you really wanted to know,” he sniped. I looked up at him in shock. I didn’t remember my son ever speaking to me that way before and it hurt. I hated him being angry with me.

“Max, I know you’re pissed off right now, but I don’t know what you want me to do,” I sighed tiredly. How could I already feel so exhausted once again already? “I can’t just pack up and walk away from Logan and Madd without a word. I love them. Do you understand that? Even if this is it, and it can’t work after what happened, I have to at least say goodbye to them. Maddox told me he loves me last night. He loves you too. Didn’t you see the way he looked at you when he woke up? How worried he was?”

“But Logan was an asshole to you. I don’t want you putting up with that shit. You did nothing wrong!”

“Logan and I need to talk. Emotions were high yesterday. We were all exhausted and terrified for Madd. He thought his brother was going to die. He wasn’t exactly in the greatest place.”

“You can’t just forgive him, mom. You can’t forget how easily he turned on you when it came down to it.”

“He didn’t turn on me,” I scoffed. “But I understand your worries. I’m a big girl, son. I can look out for myself.”

“I just can’t sit back and see you get hurt again. You have been fighting all your life. I just want you to be able to stop and find some happiness for once. I’m not sure Logan can give you that any more. Not after yesterday.”

“I won’t let anyone hurt me again, Max. Not again. And I don’t need anyone else to feel happiness in my life. I have you. You’re the happiness in my life and you always will be. I will get through it if we have to leave here, and them behind. I’ll be okay. I’ll always be okay.”

And I would be, for Max’s sake. But I didn’t tell him that if I left that place and the men I loved behind, I would also be leaving two huge parts of myself behind too – parts I would never get back without Logan and Maddox.

**LOGAN**

**ANNA: Is it ok if I come to visit Madd?**

I sat beside Maddox's bed, in the private room that he had been moved to, after leaving the ICU, that morning just staring at the message on my cell. I hated that there were no heart emojis, or kisses on the end of the text like I always usually got from Anna, but I also knew I only had myself to blame for that. I was the one who had been a complete dick and pushed her away.

I replied with a thumbs up emoji, then felt like an ass all over again for doing it. I could have just replied with words, Kind, gentle words, And maybe a kiss.

"That Anna?" Madd asked. He was sitting up and he had some color back in his face. He looked so much more like himself that morning and the doctors were pleased with how his incision site looked when they did rounds. They told him he'd probably be good to go home in the next couple of days if all continued going as well as it was.

"Yeah. She's on her way," I replied as I locked the screen of my cell and pushed it into the pocket of my sweats. I needed to go home to shower and change. I was still wearing the clothes Cat had brought for us the day before, and I knew I smelled pretty rough too.

"Are you going to apologize to her?" Madd asked.

"Don't start again," I groaned. It was all I had heard from him for hours since he woke that morning. I'd almost begged the doc to give him some drugs just to knock him out and shut him up, but the doc had instead lowered the pain meds so Madd was well and truly awake. And pissed. So pissed with me.

"She might not even forgive you if you do apologize. You realize that, right? You were a complete and utter bastard with her and Max. I still can't believe you told her it was her fault!"

"I didn't say that. I just...I suggested it might be better if we never met them, is all," I argued, and I knew it was pathetic. Madd just stared me

down. “I know, okay? But I thought you were going to die! Again! I was wracked with guilt for failing you again and I just...I needed to vent. Anna was there.”

“That is not an excuse, Logan! She fucking died and you weren’t even there to take care of her. You left her and her kid to manage alone. Max was still terrified when I woke up last night. That’s why he was so pissed with you. He needed you and you fucking failed him, just like you failed Anna. Did you see the state she was in last night, and you didn’t even try to help her? Max had to take care of her!” Madd roared. “Get over this stupid fucking guilt, Logan, before it costs you everything you have in your life. You couldn’t have saved me yesterday, just like you couldn’t have saved me that night in the city. None of it was on you, and none of it was on Anna either. You fucked up, bro. You really, really fucked up and if it costs us Anna and Max, I will never forgive you!”

“Neither will I,” I uttered, more to myself, but Madd heard me.

“Just fix it. Do whatever she needs you to do to show her that you didn’t mean a word of the shit you spouted yesterday, and that you love her as much as you told her you do.”

“I do love her, Madd,” I sighed. I hated myself for the way I had acted the day before, and I couldn’t stop worrying about where Anna and Max had even stayed the night before. They hadn’t been home. I knew that much because the cameras at the gates never once notified me on my cell that anyone arrived there after the FBI finished up earlier in the evening. Was Anna alright? I didn’t know because I hadn’t even been with her the night before when the doctor had checked her over. I worried about whether she had her meds with her. She couldn’t skip a dose of them. They were too important.

“Then show her that, because I’m pretty sure she was doubting it last night,” Madd pointed out and I knew he was right. I also knew I had some

work to do if Anna was ever going to forgive me for how epically I had failed her the day before, and let her and her son down.

# CHAPTER 28

## ANNA

I saw Logan waiting outside the department we had been directed to from the I.C.U. I was already pissed with him for not bothering to tell us when I texted him, where Maddox had been moved to. I'd been horrified when Max and I walked into the room we'd left Madd in the night before, only to find it completely empty. For one awful minute I'd thought I'd lost him, and Logan hadn't even bothered to tell me. Thankfully, a nurse who recognized me from the previous night, had calmed me down quickly by explaining Maddox had been moved out of the I.C.U. because he was improving speedily.

Of course, knowing I'd reached out to Logan earlier and he'd mentioned nothing, had only served to fuel Max's rage, and he had plainly told me the only reason he was staying was to look out for me. He told me he didn't care about Logan or Madd anymore, but he wasn't fooling either of us. I knew as well as he did that he was just hurting because of the way Logan had acted the day before.

"Anna." Logan stood and started towards us the second he saw us.

"Nice work keeping us updated, asshole. Mom freaked when we got to the other room and found it empty, but maybe that's what you wanted?" Max barked right away. His chest was heaving with fury as he yelled at Logan, and I had to grab his arm to pull him back, scared he was actually going to hit the man.

"Max!" I cried.

“Fuck. I didn’t think. I’m so sorry, sweetheart. Max’s right. I should have told you they moved Madd,” Logan rushed to apologize. “I’d never hurt your mom knowingly, Max.”

“Then what the fuck do you call what happened yesterday?” Max threw back.

“Okay, that’s enough,” I stepped in and I pushed myself in front of Max, “We all just need to calm down.”

“Madd’s doing much better this morning. The doctors said he’s out of danger, and they think he’ll even be able to go home in the next couple of days. He’s been sat up and eating this morning. I’m so sorry I scared you,” Logan told me more calmly. “You can go in and see him if you want to, but I was hoping we could maybe talk a little first, if that’s okay?”

“About what?” Max demanded before I could utter a word.

“Max! That’s enough now,” I hissed as I grabbed his arm once again and pulled him to my side. “We talked about this. I said I didn’t want you being rude,” I reminded him in a lowered voice.

“I want to apologize, Max, to your mom and to you too. I’d like to talk with the both of you if you’ll give me a few minutes?” Logan requested, and when I looked over to him he looked almost scared that I would deny him. It was hurting me to see him looking so pained, especially on top of how exhausted and pale he was.

“Let’s go and get a coffee,” I suggested. I wanted to try and make sure Logan ate something, and despite Max’s anger, I was eager to hear Logan out. I was desperate for him to give me some explanation for his behavior the day before, that would allow not just me to forgive and forget, but my son too. More than anything I just wanted things to go back to the way they had been between us all before Callum crawled out from under that jetty and destroyed everything.



There was silence between the three of us as I led the way back down to the café that sat near the main entrance of the hospital. When we walked in things became more awkward as we all looked to each other and tried to decide what happened next. Max was glaring at Logan, his jaw tense and his fists clenched. Logan was trying not to meet his gaze, but it was obvious he could see and likely feel how pissed my son was with him.

“Max, grab a table, honey. You want a coffee?” I asked, desperate to do something to ease the tension.

“No. I’m good, thanks, mom.” With that he finally turned his glare from Logan and went to sit at a table in the back corner of the dreary café. It was pretty empty, the decor white and stark and not a single window in the whole space.

“I’m sorry. He’s just angry and feeling pretty protective after what happened yesterday,” I told Logan as we both walked towards the counter.

“He’s right to be angry with me. I failed you both yesterday. I should have taken care of you guys and I didn’t.”

“Let’s just get some coffee. When’s the last time you ate anything?” I asked, not ready to dive into deep conversation just yet, and I wasn’t sure Logan was ready to either. He looked dead on his feet.

“Please don’t, Anna. I already feel shitty enough about the way I treated you, without you being nice and worrying about me,” he almost pleaded as he lowered his gaze to the ground.

“Hey!” I said as I placed my hands either side of his face and lifted it until his eyes met mine. “I’m not going to say you didn’t hurt me yesterday, but I don’t want you beating yourself up over it. You were entitled to feel the way you felt, and you still are. I’m a big girl. I can handle it.”

“I didn’t...I...I don’t...” It was the first time I had ever seen Logan struggle to find his words and I took mercy on him.

“Food and coffee, then we can talk, okay?” I said, cutting him off. He just nodded and moved behind me as I went over to the counter. I ordered us all coffees and three different sandwiches. I wasn’t hungry, but I was hoping if the food was on the table, Logan would realize how starved he was and would eat it. Logan dove in to pay for the order before I could, and when I looked up at him to argue he just gave me a pleading look, which I instantly gave in to. If it made him feel better to pay, I could give him that.

Logan insisted on carrying the tray filled with our order when it was ready, so I followed him over and we both took a seat with Max. I handed Max a coffee, despite him saying he didn’t want one, then laid out the sandwiches on the table. Relief flooded me when Logan grabbed half a cheese salad sub and took a bite. I noticed as he brought it to his mouth that his hand was trembling slightly, which was so unlike him.

Max busied himself stirring sugar and creamer into his coffee, which was what I was hoping he would do when I bought him the coffee – a distraction from just glaring at a clearly beaten and battered Logan.

“Maybe we should take Maddox up a coffee? I don’t suppose he’ll enjoy the sludge they serve with the crappy food,” I said after a few tense moments of silence.

“Yeah, he’s been complaining about the coffee and food all morning. I told him I’d go and get him a burger and decent coffee while you were with him,” Logan replied.

“Is he in a lot of pain?” I asked.

“He says not, and he’s refusing any painkillers the nurses offer him. He doesn’t like to take strong drugs. They mess with his head and since the head injury...well, he says his head is messed up enough,” Logan explained. “That’s why I acted that way yesterday, not that it’s a valid excuse, but I...I saw Logan laid out and bleeding and all I could think of was before...when I found him before...”

“After he was run over and attacked, you mean?” I questioned.

“I found him that night, you know? He was late meeting me, which wasn’t like him and he wasn’t answering his phone, so I tracked his location with this app we had. I walked out of the club and around the building and there he was, laid on the ground, covered in blood, his leg barely attached below his knee anymore. He wouldn’t wake up then either. I was so sure he was going to die, just like I was sure I was going to lose him yesterday too. Fucker keeps surprising me and holding on though, thank fuck,” Logan gasped. He was breathless, like talking was too much exertion on his exhausted body, and his eyes were filled with tears. He pushed his shaky hand through his hair as he glanced nervously to Max.

“I know what happened to Madd before,” Max told him. “He told me when I asked about his leg.”

“It was bad. The brain injury caused him these horrific symptoms at first. He’d have these night terrors that broke him, and he’d wake up yelling and crying out every time he slept. His paranoia was really bad too. When he was in the hospital he refused to trust anyone but me. He would go through days when he wouldn’t allow any of the medical staff to come anywhere near him, and if they tried he got violent. But it was his fear that was the worst thing. He was so scared and traumatized after what had happened to him, and because of the his own brain messing with him. He’d try to hide if he were ever left alone, and when I was there he’d hold on to me the way he used to when he was a terrified kid, like I were the only thing that could keep him safe.

“What happened to him...it destroyed him. Even when I got him home he refused to leave the house, and his fears and paranoia just got worse. I had to sleep in his room with him every night for over three months, because if he woke up alone he’d get so scared that I feared he’d end up hurting himself.

“It took so long for his doctors to get his meds right to help him, and once they did and he started to come back to who he’d been, he realized how much he’d lost and sank into depression. His leg. His career. His future as he knew it. It was all gone. So was my brother. I only started to get him back when the two of you came into our lives.”

“So yesterday it brought it all back, seeing him laid out and bleeding. You thought it was happening all over again?” I pushed.

“Yeah, and I was so fucking angry and scared, but I wasn’t really mad with you, Anna. I turned it on you, and I don’t know why I did that, but it was myself I was blaming. It was me who failed my brother all over again.”

“You failed my mom too. She died, Logan! She wasn’t breathing for all the minutes it took me to get her out of the water and the time it took to resuscitate her. She was in pain, scared, and blaming herself for all of it, and you made that worse. You left us! You promised us you’d always be there, but you left us when we needed you! You blamed my mom when she was already in pieces and you broke her!” Max cried as he swiped angrily at his teary eyes.

“Max, don’t. Logan needed to be with Maddox. I get that. I’m not angry with him for that,” I argued.

“Well I am! You needed him, and he was nowhere. He didn’t even care to ask if you were alright? He didn’t even check on you when you were rushed in here! If he loves you like he said, he’d have at least acted like he cared!”

“You’re right, Max. Everything you’ve said is right. I was a complete asshole yesterday, not just to your mom, but to you too. I’m not trying to make excuses. I never should have behaved the way I did. Trust me, Maddox will kick my ass for it as soon as he’s back on his feet,” Logan said. “I just...I need you both to know that I wasn’t thinking straight, not at all. I was lost in memories of what Maddox went through before, and terror of losing him completely this time. He’s literally the only family I have, and

have had for years now. I can't lose him and I...I got too caught up in that fear. I let it take over all of my sense and reason and I abandoned the both of you when you needed me. I'm so fucking sorry for that. Please never doubt how much I care for both of you. I was just...I was selfish yesterday, completely and utterly, and I hate myself for that. I always will."

"I don't want you to feel that way, Logan. I understand how scared you were yesterday. I'd have been the same if anything had happened to Max. They're all we have. I get that completely, and I'm sure Max does too, especially after yesterday and what happened to me, right?" I looked to Max and he reluctantly nodded.

"I never blamed you, sweetheart. I was just freaking out and I...I couldn't be with you without him. I said things I didn't mean because I just n-needed you to stay at arm's length. I just couldn't even contemplate being with you without Madd, and being close to you...well. It just would have made it all so much more terrifying. I'm so sorry for everything though. I was a complete idiot, and Maddox has told me as much too. He's really pissed with me for letting the both of you down. Even if you can't forgive me, please don't walk away from him. He needs you."

"And you don't?" I asked, rather brazenly, but I had to know.

"Yes! Jesus Anna, yes! I need you too, damn it. I need you and Max in my future desperately, but I know how badly I messed up, and I'll understand if you can't get past that," Loga admitted as he looked nervously between Max and I. "Please don't tell me I fucked everything up. I love you both. I want you in my life, Madd and I both do. I never meant...I just...yesterday was so messed up!"

"Yeah, it was," Max agreed. "You're right about that."

"It was a horrendous day and we all went through more than we should ever have to," I also agreed.

“So maybe we put it behind us? Move on and try to overcome it all?” Max suggested, taking me completely by surprise. That was not what I expected him to say. I wanted to forgive Logan, but I was worried about Max’s reaction if I did. I never expected him to be willing to forgive too.

“I second that,” I agreed as I sent a grateful smile to my son, then looked to Logan and covered his trembling hand with mine. “I love you too Logan. I want to move on from this and find our future again too.”

“Max?” Logan looked to my son.

“I agree that we should move on. Yesterday was a shit show and I get why you were so messed up, but if you ever hurt my mom like that again...”

“I won’t!” Logan cut in. “I swear I won’t, Max. I learned my lesson. I almost lost everything. I won’t let that happen again, ever.”

“Then we’re good,” Max nodded.

“Thank you. I won’t let you down again, Max. I’ll keep my promise to be there for you too son, always. I know I need to prove that to you again after yesterday, but I swear I will.”

“Can we go and see Maddox now?” Max asked instead of replying to Logan’s words, but I didn’t miss the way he glanced to Logan with hope. Logan had hurt him too yesterday and I knew it would take time for Max to let his guard down with him again, but he would, eventually. I had faith in Logan that he would earn Max’s trust again.

“You go on ahead if you want, honey. We’ll be right behind you,” I suggested, knowing Max may want a little breather after the heavy conversation. I also wanted some time with Logan too.

Max nodded and practically fled from the table and the café. As I suspected, he obviously needed to get away to process.

“Is he okay?” Logan asked.

“It’ll take time. He trusted you, Logan. He never thought you’d turn your back on him like you did yesterday,” I told him. This needed to be said.

“I’m sorry, Anna. I never meant...”

“I know,” I cut him off. “I know you were hurting and scared and you reacted badly and I get that. I’m an adult who can forgive and forget and trust that you won’t do that to me again, but Max – he’s just a kid. It will take him longer to forgive and he may never forget. It will take him time to trust you again too.”

“I’ll gain his trust back, Anna.”

“I know that too,” I nodded. “But this is your one chance, Logan. You hurt me again, I can handle it. I’ll deal with the situation at the time and we’ll go from there, but if you ever hurt my son, or give him cause to distrust you ever again, it’s over. He’s been through enough. I can’t allow people to hurt him anymore. Do you understand? I love you and Maddox so much, but Max will always come first for me. He has to.”

“Of course he does. We know that, Anna. I won’t let him down again, ever. I swear to you I’ll care for him and treat him like he’s my own if he gives me the chance to.” Logan pledged.

“He will. Just make sure you don’t squander it,” I warned.

“I won’t. I love you so much. Thank you for giving me another chance. I swear I won’t fuck it up again. I can’t lose you Anna. I was nothing before you came along and if you leave me now, I’ll be less than nothing.”

“Enough now,” I told him. “Let’s just start over, okay? I love you too,” I told him as I leaned in and pecked his lips. He lifted his hands and cupped my face between them as I tried to pull away. He leaned closer and pressed his lips to mine again. The kiss turned heated, but we kept it short, mindful that we were sat in a café with children close by. “We’ll be okay, Logan. It’s all in the past now. I want us to enjoy the present, and look to the future, all four of us together.”

“I want that too, sweetheart. The four of us together,” he agreed and a smile finally filled his tired face. “Let’s go and find the rest of our family, shall we?” he asked as he rose to his feet and held his hand out to me.

“Our family. I like the sound of that,” I told him happily as I set my hand in his.

Family. That was all I ever wanted for myself and my son. I had tried to make the two of us a family, and we’d done okay for a long time, but there with Maddox and Logan in our lives, I finally felt like we were a part of a real family – one where my son could be as loved and protected as he deserved to be. One where more than just me would be there to take care of and guide him as he continued to grow into a man. And when he found his own life and moved away from me, as I once feared most, I wouldn’t be alone any more. I’d be left with two men who I loved more than words could say, and a future we were yet to write together.

Maddox and Max were laughing together when we walked in. They both looked to Logan and I as we entered hand in hand and I was relieved when Maddox smiled even wider.

“You forgave the asshole then, baby?” he asked me. He looked so much better than he had just the night before. There was color in his cheeks and he was sat up on the bed, dressed in lounge shorts and a t-shirt. Most of the wires and tubes were gone and he seemed to be only hooked up to a couple of monitors now.

“We’re moving forward,” I told Madd as I released Logan’s hand and went to him. He reached for me and I instantly pushed against his side, cuddling into him as he encircled me in his hold. “You look so much better,” I told him.

“I’m gonna be just fine. We all are. The threat’s over and gone. The FBI got their bad guy and are packing up. You forgave Logan for being a complete



douche, and now here we all are. We can start planning our future now, right?"

"Right," I agreed happily.

"Starting with our dog," Max spoke up.

"Our dog?" I questioned.

"Yep. I asked Max what he had always wanted and he told me a dog, so we're getting one. As soon as I get out of here we're gonna start looking for our new family pet," Madd explained.

"Are you sure about this?" I asked nervously.

"Yes," Madd replied easily. "You and Max belong with Logan and I. We're going to be a family."

"We already are," Logan said as he stepped forward and patted Max on the shoulder. Max looked up to him with a wobbly smile. It was progress and I'd take it. I knew it would take time for Max to fully trust Logan again, but he was trying.

"I love you, Anna, so much. I'll never stop thanking whoever is listening that you came back to us yesterday," Madd told me as he reached up and kissed my cheek. I turned my face and kissed his lips, just chastely, not wanting to gross Max out.

"Ditto," I whispered as I cupped his stubble covered cheek in my hand and looked deep into his eyes. "I love you too, so much."

Logan leaned over me and wrapped his arms around me and Madd. We all looked up to Max, who just groaned dramatically, but eventually he gave in and walked to the other side of the bed where he leaned in and wrapped his arms around us all too.

"This is so fucking cheesy," he moaned as we all hugged.

“I think it’s perfect,” I spoke up, and I couldn’t have wiped the huge smile from my face if I tried. I was right where I wanted to be.

# THANK YOU

Thank you so much for reading 'Every Sunset' and following Anna as she found the happy ending she and her son deserved. I hope you have enjoyed their story. If you want to see more from these characters, then keep an eye out for updates on my upcoming releases, because Anna, her guys, and Max will appear in future books.

You can find updates and information on my books and new releases on my social media pages on Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok.

If you have a moment, I would be incredibly grateful if you could leave a review for this book, even if it's just a few words to tell me what you most enjoyed.

Thank you so much!

Kerry

# ALSO BY KERRY TAYLOR

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Something Other than Fear

Something Other than Pain

Something Other than Darkness

## **Pieces Of Us Series (Reverse Harem):**

Handfuls of Shattered Pieces

Shadows of Shattered Souls

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## **Milite Series (Reverse Harem):**

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Break My Fall (Nico's story)

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Strength From Courage

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**Fighting For Tomorrow Series (Reverse Harem):**

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Keep Healing

**Lost Series (Reverse Harem):**

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Forever Found

**Rise By Sin Series (Reverse Harem):**

Rise By Sin

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**Every Sunset** (Standalone MFM Romance)