The Return

by peacockgirl

Summary

A post season three fix-it that explores an alternate origin of the Troubles. Without a driver, the Barn returns 25 years ahead of schedule. Reunited, Audrey and Nathan must find another way to stop the Troubles while rebuilding the trust between them. Do you wish season four had mentioned their son or any of the issues that plagued them in season three? Then this might be the fic for you! Fluff with a side of family time and a sprinkling of angst abounds.
Chapter 1

I started this fic after the season three finale. It was only meant to be a little fluff to help me through the cliffhanger. It became monstrous season four (and maybe five) fix-it that comes up with alternate explanation for Audrey’s backstory. No William and Mara here, folks. But please enjoy and I’d love to know what you think. I’ve got 30 chapters written already, and I’ll try to post one a day until I catch up (there are still 5 chapters to be written).

I’d absolutely love your feedback. If you like it, please let me know. Thanks and enjoy.

Audrey stepped into the barn and waited for something to happen.

She didn’t know what the next twenty-seven years held for her. Would she simply close the door and blink out of existence? Would she die, as she so often described it? Would she go to sleep and wake up as another person, everything she’d felt and experienced as Audrey Parker gone just like her memories of Lucy Ripley and Sarah Vernon and who knew how many others?

Would it be over soon, or would she live those twenty-seven years? Perhaps her memory wasn’t taken until it was time to leave the barn again. Perhaps she had twenty-seven years to remember and plan and mourn and ache, and none of it would matter because when she went back to Haven it would all be gone.

A few days ago she had hoped for the former scenario. Some last goodbyes and then a quick end. She didn’t know how she could live twenty-seven years knowing when she saw Nathan and Duke again they’d be aged and she wouldn’t remember them. Didn’t like to think about how that’s what they would go through regardless.

But James being in the barn changed things. How could she wish away an opportunity to get to know her son? Her son – with Nathan. There had hardly been time to wrap her mind around that. She wished she could remember how it had happened. Sure, Howard had shown her, but watching like a voyeur with Nathan embarrassed by her side had been a poor, awkward substitute for firsthand experience. All she truly remembered from her past lives were a few minutes as Lucy in a crappy haunted house.

If she had a chance to spend twenty-seven years with her son, even if they’d both forget by the end, then surely she could live with every painful reminder of his father.

The inside of the barn looked the same as it had before – more like a sterile laboratory than an agricultural building. Nothing was this clean in Haven. Nothing was so cold.

“James,” she called, and her voice echoed. There were so many doors and she had no idea where he could be. Maybe she had time to check every one and find him. Maybe she didn’t.

“James, are you here?”

There was something strange about the air, but she ignored it.

She had just reached for the first door when her son came out of another one down the hall.

He looked at her warily, and there was something about his expression and posture that was heartbreakingly familiar.
“Mom?” The word was uttered like a question, and she was surprised by how quickly his tentative tone brought tears to her eyes.

“James.”

“Why are you here?”

She took a few slow steps toward him as if approaching someone Troubled. After all, wasn’t this really just another case - one there hadn’t been enough time to solve?

“Because that’s what I do, right?” she answered him. “I go into the barn.”

“You could have stopped it.”

“I wasn’t going to kill Nathan!” That had never even been an option. What good would it be to avoid the barn if she had to live in a Haven without him in it – knowing full well that he should have been there? Maybe she should have considered it, if it would have ended the Troubles for good. But she hadn’t. She’d sacrifice herself for this town and the good of everyone in it. But not him.

“I wasn’t going to kill anyone.”

He didn’t say anything, but she could guess what he was thinking. He’d spent twenty-seven years thinking she’d been willing to kill her own son.

“Look, I know we got off to kind of a bad start. And I don’t even know why that happened because I honestly don’t remember what I did as Lucy. But I know that it wasn’t me who tried to kill you, because I wouldn’t do that. I wouldn’t sacrifice anyone else for me. Especially someone I loved. Whatever happens I need you to believe that.”

“I can’t just flip a switch, you know. But I’ll try.”

She found herself nodding. Hopefully there would be time to convince him. If not, maybe they could get things right the next time around.

“So, do you know what happens next? Because I have no idea, except that in twenty-seven years I’m going to turn back up in Haven with someone else’s memories, a new haircut and no idea that I’ve been there before.”

“I think I was mostly asleep the last time. But it didn’t smell like this.”

“Yeah. It does smell like something’s burning right?”

He nodded.

“Maybe we should figure out why?”

They started down the hallway together. As the smell grew stronger Audrey touched the doors to see if she could find a source of heat. She couldn’t detect any change in temperature, but when she touched one the white flickered into weathered wood beneath her hand.

“Whoa! Did you see that?”

“No.”

“Touch the one nearest you.”
James did. For a few seconds nothing happened. Then the white door appeared to be replaced by a wall which might have been part of an actual barn.

“Did this ever happen before?”

“No.”

“Okay. Not following the plan. Great.”

Soon the walls started to shift without being touched. After a couple of minutes the endless facility was gone, replaced by a large, colonial looking barn – which also happened to be on fire.

Perhaps she would be dying today after all.

“What do we do?” James asked her, panicked. She wished she had an answer, but she was out of her depth. The rules of the natural world didn’t apply here, and her day had been filled with so much adrenaline and loss that she wasn’t adapting as quickly as she normally did.

You have the strongest intuition of anybody I’ve ever met. Suddenly Nathan was before her, hands on her shoulders, looking unusually dapper in a black fedora. He was so close and so intense it took her breath away, and when she answered there was a strange cadence to her voice that wasn’t her own.

“Audrey! Audrey, wake up.” The hands around her now weren’t Nathan’s. James looked terrified, and Audrey tried to figure out why they were both on the floor, which was now covered in musty hay.

“What happened?” she asked groggily. Her head was killing her.

“I was hoping you could tell me! You just collapsed. And now your nose is bleeding.”

When she wiped her hand under it her fingers came away dark and sticky. “A memory,” she realized. “One of Sarah’s memories. Something your father told me once.” Seeing Nathan’s devotion had filled her with resolve. She wasn’t going to die without understanding exactly how this miracle beside her came to be – their child. This wasn’t the end. “When we get out of this I’m going to tell you all about your father.”

And then something came barreling into the barn.

Audrey pushed herself up and reached automatically for her gun. But it was gone. She’d left it with Duke. She stepped in front of James anyway, falling automatically into a defensive stance, and watched as the man pulled himself off the floor.

“Duke?”

“Audrey! Thank God. Are you okay?”

“You’re not supposed to be here!” If she’d had a gun she wasn’t sure that she’d lower it. She wouldn’t let Nathan come into the barn with her. She certainly wasn’t going to let Duke give up his life either. “Damn it, you were supposed to keep Nathan out. Not follow me yourself.”

“There was a change of plans. Howard’s dead, so no one’s driving this thing. And if you hadn’t noticed, it seems to be crashing. So Nathan sent me to get you out.”

She could see the flames now, licking at hay that wasn’t supposed to be there. Above her a beam
creaked as the fire traveled upwards.

“Why didn’t he come himself?” she asked.

Duke’s face crumbled and she was sure her heart stopped beating for a few seconds. “Damn it Duke! Tell me what happened.”

“After you went in the barn, Nathan pulled a gun on Howard, asked what would happen if something happened to him. I don’t think he was planning to kill him – he just wanted answers. But then Jordan showed up and started shooting at Nathan. So he shot Howard, and I shot Jordan. And then this light started coming out of Howard and the barn started to break apart – and Nathan told me to get you out. So I jumped in.”

“How bad were his wounds?” she demanded. She knew they had to have been bad to keep him from following himself, especially since he couldn’t feel them.

“I don’t know. Everything happened so fast. But he’s tough. You know that. Bastard isn’t going to give up easy. He’ll be just fine as soon as he sees you again.”

They had to get out of there, but all Audrey could see was Nathan bleeding out on the ground, suddenly able to feel the agony of his wounds, dying alone because even Duke had abandoned him.

“The two of you were supposed to take care of each other while I was gone!”

“Damn it Audrey, stop being mad at me and come over here.” She wasn’t sure if the barking sound she made in response was a laugh or a sob, but in a few quick steps they’d met each other halfway and she collapsed in his arms. There was blood on his shirt, but she closed her eyes and tried not to picture how it had gotten there. “Women!”

“Don’t make me regret saying those nice things about you,” she said, breathing him in and letting the familiarity steady her.

“I was so afraid you had forgotten already,” he whispered.

“This is touching and all, but perhaps we can refocus on not burning to death.” James voice cut through the moment and Audrey pulled away and looked back toward her son, who was scowling.

“That’s actually a really good plan,” Duke agreed. “Smart kid you’ve got there.”

“I can’t leave the barn. The Troubles won’t go away if I do. Maybe this is what’s supposed to happen.”

Duke grabbed her shoulder. “Audrey, it’s not. I told you. Something went wrong. The barn’s breaking apart, and Howard is dead. If you stay here you may never come back at all. You might just die. You, James, and me. Even if we don’t, I did not sign up to flash forward twenty-seven years and then lose all my memories. I came here to get you out, because that’s what Nathan asked me to do. So that’s what I’m doing. There’s no time to argue.”

“What happened to this being my choice?”

“I’m sorry we got in the way of that. Okay, honestly I’m not, because I think you having to disappear every twenty-seven years just to help a bunch of freaks with strange supernatural afflictions is a cosmic load of crap. But I think it’s even stupider for you to throw your life away when it may not even help. What if you die here, and you never come back, and the Troubles don’t
go away? Who’s going to help all those people then?”

And even though he didn’t say it, she knew what his next sentence was going to be. Who’s going to help Nathan?

“You don’t fight fair, Crocker.”

“I know. It’s part of my charm.” He gave her a crooked smile, and she felt her resolve cracking. “There’s got to be another way. Let’s find it. All of us. Together.”

She thought of the three of them in rare moments of calm, drinking beers down at The Gull or bickering at the police station. It was the only time she’d ever felt like she had a family. When she’d found out her days were numbered, that was the first thing she’d known she’d miss.

“Together,” she repeated. No more of this every man for himself philosophy she’d tried since Duke had told her about the Hunter. Trying to keep Nathan at arm’s length to make her disappearance easier. Spending time with Duke but rarely letting him in. Suffering alone.

“So how do we get out?” James asked.


“How did you get in?” Audrey asked.

“The barn was breaking up. I just ran toward it. Got sucked in, I guess. Not the weirdest thing that’s happened to me since I met you.”

“Arla told me she tried to get in last time. She banged on the door but couldn’t go through.”

“That’s what Nathan did. But the door was gone by the time I tried.”

Audrey surveyed their surroundings. If it had been a natural fire they should have been roasted long ago. The flames had spread, but they didn’t seem to be creeping much closer, even though the whole place looked like wood and straw. It had been something else entirely when she’d entered. Duke had said it had been breaking apart back in Haven, but the structure seemed relatively sound, considering. If it had been breaking apart perhaps they could have just forced themselves through.

“Howard told me the barn would only appear when I was ready to enter it,” she said. It was hard to believe that he was dead. She had no idea where his allegiance lied in this twisted drama she was starring in, but once upon a time she’d thought he was her boss. Turns out he’d been manipulating her for decades. “And once I closed the door, it wouldn’t open for anyone else. Arla. Nathan. Every other time I’d wanted to stay inside. Or had decided to, anyway. But maybe I’m still in control. Maybe I just need to tell it that I want to get out.”

“So tell it that,” Duke encouraged.

She thought of Haven, devastated by meteors, waiting for the Troubles to end, knowing peace and hope were only minutes or hours away – only to have that hope shattered when they didn’t go. The Guard would be incensed. They’d want someone to pay. Would it be Vince, for making them leave instead of guaranteeing Audrey went away like she was supposed to? There would be panic, and the panic would cause more Troubles to manifest, and there’d be even more panic. And more Troubles. The Rev’s men would see this as a sign from God that it was time for those who were Troubled to be destroyed instead of saved. And the only one left to pick up the pieces would be Nathan. Injured, devastated, alone. He was the strongest man she’d ever met, but he shouldn’t have to carry this burden on his own. She remembered the way he’d felt when she kissed him, the
conviction in his voice when he’d sworn he’d die before letting her go. No one had ever cared about her that much before, not in her false life as Audrey Parker and not in any of her previous incarnations – she was sure of that in a way she could not explain. Maybe that was the difference this time around. Maybe that could be enough to break the cycle and find another option.

“Please,” she whispered, closing her eyes and letting herself imagine what it would be like to see Nathan again, how she would finally stop hiding and give him everything he deserved.

When she opened her eyes there was a door directly in front of her, and the flames around it had receded.

“Come on,” she commanded, no longer afraid. There was no handle on the door, but she pushed and it opened without resistance, sending her stumbling into the cool night air.

She turned back once they all had left and watched the barn start to burn in earnest, the structure collapsing in on itself.

“That was kind of too easy,” Duke said. She didn’t know if it was his puzzled tone or just relief, but Audrey started to laugh and couldn’t stop until she was out of breath and tears ran down her cheeks.

When she finally calmed down Duke pulled her into a tight hug. “Don’t you ever do that to us again, you hear,” he whispered, and she was shocked by how close he seemed to tears.

“Yeah, I’ll try not to.”

She pulled away and saw James lingering awkwardly in the distance. She wanted to hug him too, but wasn’t sure how he’d take it. What kind of relationship had he had with Lucy, before he thought she’d tried to kill him? How had they discovered each other? How many good memories did they have before they’d been poisoned?

“Hey.” She settled with clapping a hand to his shoulder. He didn’t shrug her off. “We’re going to talk, and figure all this out. And I am going to tell you about your father. I just have to find him first.”

“Wait. You know who his father is?” Duke asked.

Audrey nodded, gnawing on her bottom lip. Now that she and James were back, she was in for a ton of awkward conversations. “Ah huh.”

“And?”

“Nathan,” she mumbled.

“What?” he asked, though she wasn’t sure if he really hadn’t heard or was just deliberately drawing this out.

“It’s Nathan.”

The shock on Duke’s face almost sent her into hysterics again. “Nathan? But you were Sarah and … oh. That dog! Are you kidding me? You have no idea how much he lectured me on how we couldn’t change anything. That we would break the whole space/time continuum! And then he leaves me with my grandfather and goes off – to find you. I cannot believe it.”

“You can give him hell about that later. Just as soon as we know he’s okay.”

It was a starry night, but none of them seemed to be falling. The Barn appeared to have dropped them off at the same place it had picked them up, but Nathan was nowhere to be found. Jordan, Arla, and Howard’s bodies were missing too.

“Hope they left us a boat,” James said.

There were a few, as if Dwight had never bothered to finish cleaning up after the shootout, which bothered Audrey more than she dared admit. If the meteors had been hitting town she supposed a few stray boats were the least of his worries. Still, he was rarely anything but thorough, and someone had to come back and remove the bodies.

As long as Nathan wasn’t one of those bodies.

“Hey,” Duke said after they’d docked outside The Gull. It must have been late because the evening crowd was gone and the bar was dark and quiet. Audrey knew she could pull out her cell phone and find not just the time, but the date. But she wasn’t ready for that yet. “Do you want me to take you to the hospital?”

“No.” That would be the logical place to check first, but something was telling her it wasn’t the right one, and Nathan had told her to trust her intuition. “I’m going to go to his place. If I don’t find him – I’ll come back here. We’ll look together.”

“Need a ride?”

“No. My car’s here. Look after James for me?”

“Course.” She didn’t like the way she saw her uncertainty written all over Duke’s face. “I meant what I said. Nathan’s tough. He’s still waiting for you.”

She wanted so desperately to believe that. “Yeah.”

She turned toward her son. “Hey kid,” she called, unsure where the endearment came from when they looked nearly the same age. But it felt right. James looked up and gave her a puzzled smile.

“I need you to stay with your Uncle Duke for awhile. I’ll be back in the morning.”

“Uncle Duke?” the newly christened relation asked with raised eyebrows.

“Yeah. You were the fun uncle once before, remember? Just don’t go tumbling off any balconies this time, Mr. Pirate.”

“I’ll have you know that I was the fun uncle! Only some of that was the mind control. And I make an awesome pirate.”

She gave him a patronizing nod, and he pushed her toward the car parked outside her apartment. “Go take care of him.”

She nodded, waved to them both, and fished her keys from her jacket pocket.

Of all she’d seen and been through since she’d come to Haven, very little had terrified her as much as the drive to Nathan’s house. The car’s clock told her it was after two in the morning, and the vehicle seemed to run all right. She tried to tell herself it probably wouldn’t if it had sat unused for twenty-seven years. She searched the darkened streets for reassurance that the Barn hadn’t stolen
that much time. There were definitely subtle changes which might have resulted from rebuilding after a meteor shower – which certainly would have taken more than a few hours. But it didn’t seem drastically different.

Even if he waited twenty-seven years for her it wouldn’t change how she felt – just as long as he was alive.

When she saw his Bronco parked in the driveway she tried to bite back a sob. Unsuccessful, she pulled her legs to her chest and buried her head in her knees. Whatever he’d been through, no matter how long it had been, he didn’t need to see her such a mess. But God, what a day it had been.

She’d never expected to see the end of it. To survive it.

She was done living in the shadow of her destiny. She’d stop the Troubles if they weren’t gone, do everything she could to save the town. But she was done considering her life as collateral.

Her legs shook all the way to Nathan’s door, but her knock was strong and certain.

Good thing too, because even so it took nearly five minutes to rouse him.

She was just starting to panic when she heard footsteps and a low, familiar growl on the other side of the door. “Damn it. Don’t you know what time it is?”

She heard the locks being thrown. The door jerked open and there Nathan stood, barefoot in a pair of flannel pants and a grey t-shirt. He looked like hell. His hair was slightly longer and disheveled, but she couldn’t see any grey. There were bags under his bloodshot eyes, and a faint scar across his forehead he’d never had before. He was pale and unshaven and smelled slightly of whisky. He was still the most beautiful thing she’d ever seen.

“Nathan,” she breathed. She wanted to crack a joke to let him know everything was going to be okay, but she was too overwhelmed by the sight of him physically whole and emotionally broken. All she could manage was to utter his name like a prayer to a God she didn’t believe in.

She watched his eyes widen into the shocked Wuornos expression she’d come to know so well. “Parker.” No one called her that but him and she wondered, not for the first time, how he could make her last name feel more personal than her first.

But it wasn’t long before he clenched his jaw and she could see his hope shutting down, just like every time she’d pushed him away when she’d really wanted to pull him forward.

“Are you real?” He was looking at her like he was a drowning man and she was a mirage, which in Haven was probably more likely than the truth. He sounded like a lost little boy, and she knew her fate was sealed. If the barn came for her now she’d never step into it again without him.

“Yes.” When he didn’t immediately believe her she reached out to run her fingers lightly across his scruffy cheek. He closed his eyes and leaned in slightly to her touch.

“Duke and James are at The Gull. After the shootout the Barn started to burn, and Duke convinced us we had to go. I guess the Barn had to listen to me. It let us out. But Duke told me what happened with Jordan. I was so worried about you.”

He reached up a hand to cover hers where it was still resting on his cheek. “Dwight came back. Got me patched up. But you were gone.”
Much as she wanted to, she couldn’t apologize for something she still thought probably should have happened. But she did regret the agony it had cost him.

“How long has it been?” she asked. She couldn’t run from that any longer, as much as she feared the answer.

His eyes opened, and she could feel the anguish radiating from them. She’d never meant to do this to him. It was why she’d fought so hard to keep him away when all she’d wanted for so long was to sink into his arms. “Two years.”

It could have been worse. She’d do everything in her power to make it better.

“Then let’s not waste any more time.” With one hand already on his cheek it was easy to pull him down for a kiss. It was desperate just like the last time, but instead of shattering her heart seemed to be mending. There was no need to memorize each sensation, because this wouldn’t be the last time they would do this. She tried to infuse him with the hope she now felt fluttering through her veins, the promise that no matter how lonely the last two years had been the next two would be filled with love.

When she ran her fingers along the nape of his neck his whole body trembled. When she finally needed to pull away to breathe she rested her forehead against his.

“The Troubles aren’t gone, are they?”

“Nope.”

“We’ll need to fix that.”

“Yeah.”

He took a deep breath and she felt it shudder through him. “Can you fix me first?” he whispered.

She threw her arms around him, pressing as much of herself against him as she could, hoping he could feel it through their clothing. “I promise,” she whispered into his neck. As the tension began to drain from his body, relief filled her heart and settled in her bones.
Chapter 2

Exhaustion hit her while she was standing in Nathan’s arms. Her day had already been seemingly endless before her deranged daughter-in-law kidnapped her and forced her to start another one – which had then fast forwarded two years and kept on going. She felt like she could sleep for days. The way things were, six or seven hours would probably have to do. But her body was reminding her it wanted to start now, as nausea started to swirl in her stomach while heaviness pulled on her limbs.

When she tried to step back from Nathan’s embrace he held on.

“Inside,” she mumbled. Enunciating her words suddenly seemed like a monumental task. “Need rest.”

He reluctantly released her. When she glanced back at him he looked so forlorn she grabbed his hand and linked their fingers together.

The contact was like a spark that drove him forward. He followed her into the house.

“Need a little help here,” she said, standing in the dark hallway. She’d never been in Nathan’s house before, but it was nearly impossible to make out anything in the dim light. She’d have to search for his decoupage collection in the morning. In the meanwhile the situation made her a pretty poor leader.


She could see his eyes go wide, and she rolled hers in response. “For sleeping. I don’t know where your bedroom is.”

She watched his Adam’s apple bob as he swallowed. “Right.”

Now it was his turn to lead her down the hallway to a door on the right. He pushed it open and she took in the surroundings. Spartan in furnishings, but she’d never expected anything different. A bed. A nightstand. A dresser. She frowned at the half finished bottle of whisky on the nightstand. She’d have to pour that down the sink in the morning. There was also a picture frame. She picked it up and was shocked to see a faded image from the *Haven Herald* - a candid shot of the two of them, taken for the coverage of one of their early investigations. They were smiling a little more widely that was probably appropriate for two cops on duty. She remembered that he’d been regaling her with some ridiculous story of small-town Maine living. Hadn’t even been the Troubles that had made it so amusing.

“All I could find,” he said, and she startled at the sound of his voice so close behind her. She hadn’t noticed him follow her across the room.

It was sad to think that was true. She’d never been too concerned with photography. Before coming to Haven she’d never had much worth documenting. Well – the real Audrey Parker hadn’t, anyway. Who knew if she had ever had an existence outside of Haven? But this time around, those precious six months, were definitely photo worthy. Nathan had been her first friend, and then Duke her second. There had certainly been times when a normal person would have pulled out her phone and had a stranger snap a picture to capture a moment – but it had never occurred to her. By the time she knew her days were literally numbered their camaraderie was broken. There were hardly any photo ops when Nathan was sneaking off with Jordan and she was going off with Duke and
they were deliberately speaking as little as possible. But it was sobering to think that she’d vanished and this was the only proof Nathan had that she had ever existed.

“We’ll take more this time around,” she resolved, putting the frame down. “Starting tomorrow.”

She took a few steps back to yank off her shoes and jacket. Nathan stood still as a statue, and when she caught his eye and flashed him a perplexed look he cleared his throat.

“I, uh, should go sleep on the couch.” He ran a hand through his hair and exhaled a shaky breath. “But I really don’t want to.”

She couldn’t decide if his chivalry was annoying or endearing. All she knew was it wouldn’t fly tonight. “I think we’re a little beyond that. I’m not letting you out of my sight.”

She turned around to pull off her t-shirt and shuck off her jeans, leaving herself in a camisole and panties. She pulled the elastic from her hair as she spun back around, letting it escape from its bun and fall around her shoulders.

Nathan’s jaw was practically on the floor, and she swallowed a snort as she advanced on him.

“Shirt off,” she commanded, tugging at the hem.

It was fascinating to watch the blush creep up his neck. “We’re not going to…” The sentence died in the air but its meaning struck straight to her core.

If only she wasn’t so damn tired! But she’d be barely functional in a few minutes, and after all the time they’d spent dancing around each other – all the time he waited – their first time deserved to be better than anything either of them was capable of at the moment. She fully intended to blow his mind – and quite possibly short-circuit his sensation starved body. They just needed to be patient a little bit longer.

“Not tonight,” she said, walking her fingers up his chest. She pushed herself up on her tiptoes and whispered, “Later,” in his ear, deliberately blowing on his earlobe.

“Tease.” She could hear his smile. It was the first time things had felt normal between them in months, and the coil of tension that had sat stalwart in her chest for nearly two months began to loosen. She had sorely missed their banter.

“You like it.” She pressed her lips to his cheek, briefly, just because she could. “Now off.”

“Why?”

“You’ll find out. Now come on. Or I’ll do it myself.”

That wouldn’t be wise, considering her resolve for later, not now. But damn if the image wasn’t now in her mind. It seemed to be in his too, but after a few seconds he relented, pulling the shirt off with an easy gesture.

Leaving her eye level to a shirtless Nathan Wuornos, proving she hadn’t exactly thought this through. It was a pretty fabulous view – all pale skin and well defined abs, an inch or so of the waistband of his black boxers visible above the pajamas slung low on his hips. But the number of scars made her ache, especially the bullet wounds on his shoulder and chest. Even if he hadn’t felt them, the thought of anyone hurting him made her livid and heartbroken simultaneously.

“You’re staring.” His voice was so dangerously, deliciously low.
You’re exhausted, Audrey, remember that? Exhausted.

She wanted so badly to forget.

“Like you weren’t looking at my legs earlier,” she joked, breaking the tension.

Later.


He regarded her somewhat warily as he slipped under the covers, turning slightly onto his side to watch her.

She practically leapt at him, pressing as much of her body against his as she could. He froze, but she could feel his heart racing under her ear.

“This is why.”

“Good plan,” he croaked.

She shifted her head slightly to look up at him. He was blinking slowly, as if his mind couldn’t quite make sense of all the sensations, so she gave him some time to process. But she knew she’d be asleep soon, so she didn’t give him too long.

“Now I know it’s probably been awhile, but usually the guy puts his arm around the girl.” She reached out to pull on one of his arms to demonstrate, but quick as lighting he snaked them around her, and the strength of his grip took her breath away for a second.

When they were properly situated she tangled her legs with his, drawing her right foot across his toes and up the opening of his pant leg, inordinately pleased with the way it made his breath hitch and drew a low moan from this throat. She wondered if he could feel her bare legs against his flannel pajamas, her cami covered back on his bare chest, or whether it was only skin to skin contact that reached him. There’d be plenty of time to experiment later. We’ve got time, that strangely accented voice in her head whispered, but instead of making her nose bleed it made her smile.

“You okay, partner?” she asked, unable to stop the yawn at the tail end of the question.

“Better than okay.” He sounded like himself again, not that broken thing drowning on his front porch a few minutes ago.

“Thank you,” he whispered. His reverence wrapped itself around her, like his comfortable mattress and soft sheets and warm, strong arms. She was finally safe, and her body welcomed the bliss of finally being able to rest as her mind finally accepted that it could shut off for a few hours and the world wouldn’t crumble without her or steal her away.

“We’ve got time,” she told him as she let herself sleep.
Chapter 3

Nathan drifted back to consciousness feeling pleasantly warm. He shifted deeper into the covers and kept his eyes tightly closed. Maybe he’d blow off the station and go in late today. Dwight was constantly telling him to take some time off but he never listened. He was long overdue a break.

He couldn’t remember the last time he felt this comfortable. His blanket was particularly soft today, and he was completely relaxed underneath it. He savored how the weight of it smothered his body with warmth, cocooning him.

But something was tickling his nose. He had just started to reach up and scratch it when he realized what was wrong with this scenario – or right.

He forced open his eyes and discovered that his blanket was Audrey Parker.

Shock sent him reeling upright, which dislodged his sleeping partner. His body immediately protested. Without her covering him he wasn’t cold – he was simply nothing, and that absence was worse than the bitterest frostbite.

She blinked awake, eyes shifting around her surroundings until they locked on his. Her confusion melted into a soft smile and he thought he might hyperventilate, the way his lungs were seizing.

“You’re here.” This wasn’t a dream. He never felt in his dreams.

“Thought we established that last night.”

Last night. He blushed at his state of undress even as he searched for a memory. Surely they hadn’t … because surely he wouldn’t forget that, even for a second.

But no. He’d been asleep and she’d showed up on his doorstep with some story about the Barn and all he could care about was that her hair was the same color and she knew his name and he hadn’t been expecting her for twenty-five more years. And then he’d been fairly useless as she led him to bed and wrapped herself around him.

“About last night…” He’d never meant for her to see him so shattered. But Haven had been hell since she disappeared. Everything hurt but he couldn’t feel a damn thing. Not the bullets lodged in his body or the chair leg he’d taken across the head when he’d gotten in a bar fight with a member of the Guard who wasn’t pleased he’d kept the Barn from taking the Troubles away.

She reached for one of his hands that was braced against the mattress. Suddenly he was alive again.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

He swallowed. They’d gotten out of the habit of being honest with each other. “I wasn’t. Will be now. Long as you stay.”

She pushed some of her hair out of her eyes with her free hand. It was a tangled halo and there were dark smudges on her face but he’d never seen anything nearly as beautiful. He couldn’t quite fathom that she was actually here. That after two year of absolute misery and two months before that of losing himself trying to keep her here she was – in his bed – not mad about Jordan or James or Duke. Just looking at him like she wanted to take away all his pain. Not realizing that she already had.

“Plan is to try,”
“I won’t let anyone take you again!” he swore. “I love you. I should have told you that every day, no matter how you pushed me away. I should have kept telling you and we should have worked together to figure out how to stop the Barn. It doesn’t matter if you feel the same. I love you, and I will not let you sacrifice yourself for this town. We’ll find another way.”

“I do, though,” she whispered.

He was so wrapped up in his diatribe he wasn’t quite sure what she was responding to. “Do what?”

“Feel the same,” she admitted. “Love you.” She took a deep, shaky breath, and the hand covering his tightened. “I love you.”

The joy he felt at her words was too much to be contained. He pulled her toward him, marveling at the warmth of her skin, the silkiness of her hair when he fistèd a hand in it, and the softness of her lips as he instigated a kiss for the first time. She seemed to melt into him, and his brain was overwhelmed by the emotions and the sensations flowing through him simultaneously. Nothing in the world mattered but her. Her and the way she made him feel – which went so far beyond the physical, as outstanding as that was. His emotions hadn’t been stolen by his Trouble, but he’d mostly lost them anyway when she wasn’t around.

He wasn’t entirely sure how it happened, but soon he was hovering above her, pressing her down into the mattress, and he suddenly realized where exactly this was going.

“Audrey,” he breathed, the most coherent request for permission he could manage.

She smiled up at him, ran a hand feather light across his check, and said the unthinkable. “Whoa. We need to stop, babe.”

“Stop?” he choked out. He was nearly certain that was what she said, but that was not what her body had been implying. “Are you serious?”

“Like a heart attack. Which I might start having right about now, by the way.” She pulled her camisole down to cover her stomach and tried to put some distance between them, but she was still trapped between his arms.

“Why?” The gentleman in him knew he needed to respect Audrey in this, but part of him couldn’t decide whether to be annoyed or just disappointed.

“Because we have to go see Duke.”

It was like she had thrown a bucket of water over him – back in the days that would actually have worked. He rolled away from her with a groan. “Please never mention Duke again when you’re in bed with me.”

She laughed, the minx, and he couldn’t help but return her smile.

“He’s waiting for us at the Gull. If we show up too late he’ll know exactly what we’ve been doing. And you know we’ll hear all about it. Do you really want to give him that satisfaction?”

He groaned at her choice of words. He didn’t, of course, but the teasing would certainly be worth it. “Maybe,” he growled, and her smile widened.

“Our son’s waiting for us too.”

“Our son,” he repeated. He’d tried not to dwell too much on that while she was gone. It was
another lost opportunity. He didn’t know James Cogan enough to miss him, but the thought of having a child with Audrey that he’d never get to know and never get to raise with her rubbed salt into his already shredded heart.

“Yep. We’re going to have to talk about that, you know.”

“Yeah.” He wasn’t looking forward to that conversation. He didn’t regret what happened with Sarah – not the way he regretted Jordan – but he was sorry Audrey had found out through Howard, of all people. And he still wasn’t sure he could explain exactly why it had happened. He didn’t want her to be mad or jealous. The reason he’d let things get so far with Sarah was because he’d been convinced that under the hair and the accent every iteration of Audrey Parker was exactly the same person.

“But not now, right?” he continued. “Because we need to get to the Gull.”

“Right.”

When she made no move to get out of bed his mind began replaying the last few minutes, trying to process retroactively. Something caught his attention that he’d originally missed.

“Did you call me babe?”

She blushed the most adorable shade of red. “That was weird, wasn’t it? No more babe. Baby?”

He snorted, and she scrunched her nose and shook her head. “Definitely not. Honey? No! Sweetheart?”

She pushed herself into a sitting position and he could almost see the way her mind was racing. Her amusement enthralled him, even if it was at his own expense. “Muffin? No, muffins are overrated. Oh, I’ve got it. Cupcake!”

He couldn’t stop the bark of laughter that tore from his throat. “Please no.”

“Spoilsport. Cupcakes are amazing. Hmmm. How about stud?”

Truth be told, he didn’t hate it. “Well, that is significantly more manly than any of the other options.”

“This conversation isn’t over, Wuornos.”

He found himself actively hoping that it wasn’t. He was certain that any moment she would force them to rise and face the day that was sure to be less blissful than this.

But instead of getting out of bed she scooted back toward him, laying her head on his chest. His arms came around her instinctively.

“Thought we had to go,” he teased, both perplexed and relieved by this clinginess.

“We have a few minutes. We just don’t have a few hours.” Her final word was heavy with implication which buzzed through him like electricity. Parker had always known how to push his buttons. Apparently she was discovering a few new ways to use that talent. He found himself looking forward to it.

If the patterns she was tracing on his arm were supposed to be soothing they were having the opposite effect, but he didn’t mind that either.
They spent a few minutes in silence, and Nathan couldn’t remember the last time he had felt so absolutely content. He had almost drifted back to sleep when he heard Parker’s voice somewhere near his heart.

“I never liked cuddling.” He started to move his arm, thinking this was her way of telling him to let go, but she grabbed it and pulled it back in place. “Always used to make me feel trapped. I never had time to just lay around – I didn’t like that it was expected of me. But this … makes me feel safe. And wanted. I could stay just like this for the rest of time and I don’t think I’d mind.”

He’d rarely heard her sound so vulnerable, and something compelled him to respond with an admission of his own. “I woke up this morning feeling warm. Such a little thing to anyone else – but I haven’t felt warm in years.” There were no words to convey how much that meant to him. But he didn’t want her to think that was the only reason this was happening – because she was the only one who could touch him and make him feel. Because that was just some miraculous gift that he didn’t deserve. He’d started to fall for Audrey long before she’d kissed him on the cheek. It had been impossible not to. Her compassion, her spunk, her humor. The little ways she’d watch out for him and never treated him any differently when he obviously wasn’t normal. There were times when he was by her side that he’d forget about his Trouble. Before she’d come to town there wasn’t a waking moment that he wasn’t aware how different he was.

“Audrey…” He wasn’t given to long speeches, but he wished that he could write sonnets for her. He just didn’t know how to string the words together. But something about the way she was smiling at him made him think that she already knew.

She grabbed one of his hands and placed it over her heart. “Do you feel that?” she asked.

He took a moment to savor it. “Yeah.”

“So it doesn’t have to be skin to skin?”

“That’s stronger. But I can feel the cotton and your heart pounding beneath it.”

He tried to sum up everything she made him feel in one single word. “Incredible,” he said reverently, wishing she fully understood what that meant. One day he’d find a way to tell her. One day soon. “You’re incredible.”

He ran his fingers up her arm, starting at her wrist. It wasn’t just that she made him feel. He could feel her. The way her soft skin turned to goose pimples under his fingers. The fine hairs and the absolutely intoxicating warmth that she gave off. Once he reached her shoulder he brushed her hair away and pressed a kiss to the juncture of her throat.

“How did you get to be so perfect?” she practically purred, her eyes heavy lidded.

No one had ever thought him worth much at all. Perfection was certainly never before used in the same sentence as Nathan Wuornos. “I’m really not.”

“Close enough for me.”

He had just decided that he was never going to let her out of his bedroom when she seemed to snap out of her trance. “And on that note …” She moved away before he could stop her and everything inside of him protested the distance, causing him to stand too. She took a few steps backwards, away from him.

“Time to go. But first you need a shower, mister.”
“Join me?” The words fell from his mouth without thought. It didn’t take him long to realize they weren’t appropriate.

He looked down and shuffled his feet. “Sorry.”

He was afraid of what the silence meant, but he couldn’t bring himself to look at her until he felt her fingers on his chin. “Don’t be. It’s a great idea. One I really, really wish I could agree to. It just won’t get us where we need to go anytime soon.”

She brought her forehead to his, and it had the gravity of something monumental. Every time they got close there was always so much else happening. This morning it had felt like just the two of them, and he didn’t want the world to intrude.

“Whatever happens today, tomorrow, next week, we’ll face it together. We can’t hide from what’s going to happen – but we don’t have to hide from each other either. When I say I don’t want to be alone you just need to listen to me – and this time we will finish what we started here. I promise.”

And just like so many times since they’d met, Audrey’s presence gave him the resolve he needed to face the day.
Duke watched Audrey drive away before turning to the kid, who was eyeing him with a distrust so
familiar he wasn’t sure how he hadn’t guessed his parentage immediately. He could see Nathan so
clearly in his clenched jaw and scowl.

“Sure you should just let her go like that?”

“Your mother’s a big girl. And damn closest thing I’ve ever seen to a superhero. She’ll be fine.
Trust me, she doesn’t need a third wheel when she finds Nate.”

“What if she doesn’t find him? You said he was shot. And who knows how long ago that was.
First time I went into that Barn it was twenty-seven years until I came out again.”

“Well aren’t you a ray of sunshine. You get that from your father.”

“How do you know my father?” he demanded.

“Nate and I grew up together here in Haven. He’d either tell you I’m the devil or someone good to
have your back in a gunfight – depending on the day. Let’s just say it’s complicated.”

“And my mother?”

Duke was used to dark tones conveying hidden meanings. “Are you asking me if I’m a threat?”

James shrugged his crossed arms. “Maybe.”

Part of Duke wanted to be. The part that had grown up believing that you should grab whatever
you want as quickly as possible however you can, and if you hold on then you deserve it. Nathan
had fallen down on the job and Duke had been there when Audrey needed a shoulder to cry on and
someone to fly across the country with. For the first time in his life he had wanted to take care of
someone else, and he knew he could do it.

It would be easy to wish that they were too late and Nathan was gone. Audrey would be
inconsolable for awhile, but he’d be there to pick up the pieces. With Nathan out of the way Duke
was fairly certain he could charm her. He’d turn her grief into something constructive and wouldn’t
let her wallow. And one day maybe she’d look at him the way he wanted her to. The way he’d
pretended she was looking at him in Colorado.

Except that against all odds and reason he didn’t wish that. Audrey loved Nathan; he’d heard the
words from her lips and he’d known long before then. He didn’t understand why she’d fall for
Wuornos’s awkwardness instead of his smooth moves, but she obviously had. And although it
cycled more frequently than the Troubles, he currently held no ill feelings toward his old friend.
He’d wanted to shake him for pulling away from Audrey when obviously the two just needed to
make out and make the most of the time she had left. But Duke had seen his devotion in his
determination to keep her from disappearing and he knew Audrey’s feelings were returned. Even as
it killed him to know that Audrey would never be his, he was kind of glad for his friend. Because
Nathan deserved happiness, and he’d had so little of it in his life.

Turned out being selfless was kind of a bitch. But so was everything Audrey had been through for
the sake of this god-forsaken town. Least he could do was try it for her.

“No. The way those two dance around each other – it’s like Shakespeare. They’ve got star-crossed
lovers written all over them. Look at you – they’ve even got a cross-generational lovechild born before they were. It’s pointless trying to get in between them. I know bad odds when I see them.”

“And if the odds weren’t so bad?”

“You know, I’m sensing a lot of hostility and I don’t think it’s warranted.”

“Not warranted? Not warranted?” James started to pull at his hair and Duke caught a glimpse of the madness that had gripped Nathan once when Audrey had left him on Duke’s boat and he’d started ranting about not being able to feel. “My wife, the love of my life, is dead! Not only is she dead, it turns out she was a serial killer who cut off people’s skins and wore them. She sewed a bunch of people together, like a quilt, so she looked like herself. Before that, someone killed me, and then I spent twenty-seven years asleep in a barn, resurrecting or something, and then when I wake up my wife tells me it was my own mother. But she was a monster, and a liar, so I don’t know who killed me, or why, and I have no idea what I’m supposed to do. And now some random man with a ponytail who has a crush on my mother tells me I don’t have a right to be angry!”

“Okay,” Duke said placatingly, drawing out the syllables as he raised his hands in surrender. “You definitely have a reason to be angry. Sorry. All of that totally sucks. But none of it is my fault. Except for the hair, which is cool nowadays, by the way.”

James looked at him like he was the crazy one, but his breathing began to slow and he didn’t launch into another rant, so Duke accepted it as a victory.

“Why don’t we start over? Pretend we just met. Hi. My name is Duke. Duke Crocker.”

“Crocker!” James sneered, and Duke realized his mistake too late – this man had spent time with Lucy.

“Geez. Yes. Look. I know—”

“Your father—”

“I know! My father tried to kill Lucy, and my grandfather tried to kill Sarah. And technically I’m supposed to kill Audrey. That was so, like, three months ago. But here’s the thing – my old man was an ass. I didn’t like him much when he was alive, so when he showed up as a ghost and told me I was supposed to kill my best friend I decided, ‘hey, I have free will, and that’s stupid, so no thanks.’ And me and your parents have been through all this already. Audrey trusts me, and Nathan trusts me – sometimes – and you can ask them about this tomorrow.”

He didn’t know how he expected James to respond. But it wasn’t the way he did. “Lucy used to babysit you.”

Duke laughed. Sometimes he remembered that – the strange woman with the long, dark hair who would occasionally show up instead of Vanessa who always told him that he could be anything he wanted – but if he didn’t specifically search for the memories they seemed to hide in his subconscious. “I know. This town is so weird.”

It was a monumental understatement, but exhaustion was beginning to hit him and he was finding it hard to be clever. “Look, it’s late. I don’t think Audrey will be back tonight, but she’ll call me if she needs us. We should get some sleep. I’m sure the shit will hit the fan tomorrow. That’s usually how things go around here.”

“We’re going to sleep in this saloon?”
“Hey. The Grey Gull is a restaurant, not a saloon, and I happen to own the place. Legitimately. Audrey rents the apartment upstairs. I don’t think she’d mind if you stayed there. I’ll crash on the couch in my office.”

James followed silently as Duke retrieved his spare key from inside the restaurant and then led him up to Audrey’s apartment. “I really hope there’s not still a dead guy in here,” he muttered as he unlocked it, remembering finding Mario on the floor and Audrey gone.

But the apartment was undisturbed, and Duke allowed himself to survey it quickly, letting the Audrey-ness of it all soothe him. She wasn’t much for decorating or accumulating stuff but she’d still made the space her own. They’d spent a lot of nights out on her deck, nursing a couple of beers while he searched for ways to distract her from her destiny and make her smile.

He had to stop thinking of that. Shaking himself from the reverie, he gave a brief tour. “Couch, bedroom, bathroom.” It was a small space, and self-explanatory to navigate.

Duke was about to leave when he realized what had been bothering him since the two of them had been left alone together. “Hey, do you feel all right?”

James looked back at him skeptically, as if trying to figure out how that was a trick question. “Uh, yes. Why?”

“Because you didn’t, last time. You got sick, and Arla had to bring you back to the Barn. But I don’t think that’s going to be an option anymore.”

“I feel fine. A little tired, that’s all.”

“How long did it take before?”

“I didn’t feel quite right when I woke up. After three or four hours I could barely move.”

“It’s only been what – an hour? Maybe I should stay close.”

“That isn’t necessary,” James protested.

“Look, if anything happens to you Audrey will kill me. Not literally,” he clarified. “But first she’ll yell at me, and then she’ll make me feel so guilty that I’ll wish I was dead. So if you start feeling strange – at all – you need to come down and wake me up and we’ll have to figure out what to do.”

“Yes, Uncle Duke.”

Duke chuckled. “So you do have a sense of humor after all. I’ll keep that in mind. Good night.”

He’d never felt so excited to sleep on a couch. It had been an endless day, and like he’d told James he had a feeling things in Haven were going to be even dicier than usual for quite awhile. He was still worried about Nathan, still anxious about how much time had passed while they’d been gone. But such concerns would have to wait until the morning.

He awoke to his cell phone buzzing and snatched it groggily from the table. The message was from Nathan’s number, but the smiley face after: “We’ll be over in 30 mins. Breakfast, please?” seemed like Audrey’s handiwork.

“Anything 4 u, sweetheart,” he texted back, hoping Nathan would see it. He’d tried to put on a brave front for Audrey, but he’d been worried about Nathan. He wasn’t sure he’d ever be able to
forget the way he’d collapsed in his arms, eyes wide with shock and desperation. He wasn’t sure which was more frightening – all the blood or the fact he’d charged Duke with rescuing Audrey instead of attempting to go after her himself. Without pain to stop him, he must have been in bad shape not to fight his wounds.

But if Audrey was swiping his phone and using emoticons then surely everything was well. He re-read the message, just to reassure himself, and noticed the timestamp in the bottom corner.

“Shit!”

They’d been gone two years. Duke ran a hand through his hair and tried to fathom that. He’d left Haven for longer than that back before the Troubles returned, but he’d traveled the world in that time – smuggled, swindled, even gotten married. This time he’d spent half an hour in a burning barn, and that was it.

Nathan had spent two years alone, picking up the pieces.

He didn’t envy the guy one bit.

Feeling unsettled, Duke made a few calls before going upstairs to check on James. He was half afraid he’d find him passed out and feverish. Instead he found him sitting on the couch halfway through one of Audrey’s vampire novels.

“Bet they didn’t have those in the eighties,” Duke said with a laugh. James blushed and shut the book, turning it over so Duke couldn’t see the cover. But the damage was done. Duke knew the kind of drivel Audrey read. He’d teased her about it more than once.

“Is it normal now for women to idolize falling in love with monsters?”

“Apparently. Though everyone should just move to Haven. They’d get over that real fast.” Duke shook his head. “How you feeling?”

“Fine. Normal.”

“Great. I got a text from Audrey. She found Nathan. They’ll be over soon.”

James cocked his head. “A text?”

“Man. Someone’s going to have to give you a lesson on the twenty-first century. It’s like a note, on my phone.”

“Your phone sends you notes?”

James confusion was too funny. “Just wait until someone shows you the internet.” Duke realized that would probably be him, and found himself not minding.

“I’m going to make us some breakfast. Come down when you want.”

One of his contacts had dropped off some rations while he was upstairs, and he grabbed the bags and headed to the kitchen. He was a little afraid to see what state the place would be in after two years, but the kitchen was tidy, albeit a bit dusty. He’d told the kid he’d owned the place – but that had been two years ago. He had a few loans, and after two years of missed payments surely the bank had come calling. It was curious they hadn’t bothered to clean out the apartment upstairs. But it was quite likely if they lingered too long they’d run into the new owners. The uncertainty of that excited him—he’d be sure to cause a scene—but he’d have to figure out a way to get the place
back. Maybe he was going soft, but he was fond of the Gull, even if he had other ways to stay afloat.

Assuming he hadn’t lost his boat too.

The cooking soothed him, as it always did. Sometimes, as Audrey pulled him deeper and deeper into the nonsense with the Troubles he’d disappear into the kitchen for the night and help the chef with the orders just to clear his mind.

Everything was nearly ready when he heard the restaurant door open and Audrey call, “Anybody home?”

Duke turned off the griddle and emerged from the kitchen to find Nathan and Audrey hand and hand in the doorway. She was grinning so widely it was impossible not to smile back, but Nathan was surveying him with some intense, awkward gaze he couldn’t interpret. But he looked whole and fairly well, and Duke figured maybe it wouldn’t be a bad day after all.

“Morning.” It was early afternoon, actually, and Duke considered making a comment about what had kept them occupied for so long, but he decided to let it pass just this once. Truth was they deserved some time alone together, and he’d been asleep until she texted him anyway, so it’s not like he’d expected an early start.

Audrey stepped forward and Nathan followed until they both settled on stools at the bar. “It’s good to see you, Nate.”

“Likewise.” His gaze may have held volumes of meaning, but he had apparently reverted to his typical monosyllables.

Audrey rolled her eyes and leaned her head on his shoulder. “Please tell me breakfast is ready, because I’m starving!”

They were interrupted by the door opening again as James entered. Nathan and Audrey turned around to look at him and everyone froze.

Duke got the feeling everything was going to be extremely awkward for a very long time.

“Hello,” Audrey said in that tentative tone she always used when approaching someone who was Troubled.

“He’s okay then?” James asked, staring pointedly at Nathan.

“Yep,” Nathan answered.

The discomfort was palpable, and Duke wanted so badly to laugh. “Okay. Breakfast, coming up!” he chirped, turning back into the kitchen.

When he emerged again with three plates of waffles James had taken a seat next to Nathan. He set them down in front of James, Audrey, and the empty place beside her and watched as Audrey’s face lit with delight and James’s turned into a scowl. “I prefer pancakes,” he sulked.

Duke couldn’t stop his laughter at that. “Course you do,” he said before turning back again.

He emerged with a pitcher of maple syrup and a heaping stack of pancakes, which he set in front of Nathan. He turned to James. “Maybe your old man will share.”
“You told Duke,” Nathan said in an even tone that didn’t betray how he felt about that.

“Yep,” Audrey replied.

Duke was about to take a seat and start his own breakfast when Nathan reached out and grabbed his wrist. “Thank you,” he said, and Duke shied from the sudden heaviness of his tone.

“I’m going to let you in on a little secret,” he said, leaning close. “It’s the same batter.”

To his right, Audrey snorted.

“Not for the pancakes.” The admission hung in the air, and Duke couldn’t retreat because Nathan was still holding on. “For bringing Audrey and James back.”

A year ago Duke would have had a smart-ass comment waiting on deck, but this morning his wit deserted him in the face of Nathan’s raw honesty. He stood gaping for a few beats too long before managing a sincere, “You’re welcome.”

Nathan released him and he scurried back to his seat.

Audrey’s grin was wide and a little bit cheeky. “My guys, getting along. Must be a day for miracles.” She slipped a hand into her jacket pocket and pulled out her cell phone. She put her arms around both men and held the phone out in front of them. “Smile,” she commanded, and the phone was flashing in his face before he really knew what was happening.

“What was that for?” Duke asked, trying to blink the spots from his eyes.

“Just something I want to remember.”

Suddenly he wanted to pinch himself for not putting it together sooner. “I’ve got some pictures of the last eight months, you know.” He pulled out his own phone and flipped through the photos. “You at your birthday party, before people started getting killed. Nathan showing off the worse dance moves ever the day he got demoted. The two of you sitting at my bar, making goo goo eyes at each other.”

“That isn’t—” Nathan started, but when Duke pushed the phone in front of him and he saw the photo in question he couldn’t deny it. They’d come by for drinks after a long case, and the way they’d been looking at each other Duke had expected to find Nathan’s Bronco still there the following morning. But apparently Wuornos was incapable of making a move even if the opportunity was looking him right in the eye.

He brought out a pot of coffee and watched as Audrey pulled it from Nathan’s hands, pouring him a cup and then testing it before setting it in front of him. “Give it a minute,” she advised, and Duke was struck by the intimacy of the gesture. Yet there was no awkwardness in it, as if it was something they’d already done countless times. Duke had forgotten that Nathan wouldn’t be able to feel temperature.

They spoke of trivial things while they ate, and Duke appreciated the levity that had become so hard to come by. At one point he caught Audrey silently snickering, and from the glances she kept sneaking his way he got the strange suspicious she was laughing at him.

“What’s so funny?”

She giggled, and then covered her mouth with her hand and shook her head. “I’m sorry. It was an awful day, but I keep thinking about how excited you were to make Chris Brody waffles over and
Duke scowled, even though it was good to see Audrey laugh. “I cannot believe neither of you told me about his Trouble.”

“That’s because it was hilarious,” Nathan deadpanned.

Nathan still had half a pancake left. He slid it over to give to James, but once their plates touched James reached out a hand to stop him. “It’s okay. You eat it.”

But Nathan’s eyes had gone wide and he’d frozen in his tracks.

James narrowed his. “Are you okay?”

“I felt that.”

“Yeah. Sorry. But I’m full. You should finish those.”

“No. You don’t get it. I don’t – I can’t feel anything.”

Now Audrey’s eyes had gone wide and she clutched onto his shoulder.

“What?” James asked.

“That’s my Trouble.”

“You can’t feel anything? Just me?”

“And your mother.”

There were a lot of comments Duke could have made about that, but Audrey blushed and he let it go.

“You’ve never lost your sense of feeling? Even temporarily?”

“No,” James answered.

“Thank God,” Nathan said, voice thick with relief. “Troubles usually run in families. They kick in during times of emotional stress. But if everything with Arla and the Barn didn’t set you off then maybe you’re okay.”

“Maybe he got Audrey’s Trouble instead of yours,” Duke suggested.

“I asked Howard if I was Troubled,” Audrey said. “He said I wasn’t.”

“He also said he was your boss at the FBI. Are we really believing that guy now?”

“One way to know for sure.”

Nathan reached out to stop her but Audrey was too quick. She ripped off a scab on the top of her hand and then pressed the bleeding sore against Duke.

The reaction was instantaneous. He felt the surge of adrenaline, the power coiling in his muscles and the weird pressure in his eyes. He gripped onto the bar and took steadying breaths, waiting for it to pass.

“Don’t like that,” he finally muttered when his head began to clear.
“Sorry,” Audrey said

“What’s going on?” James asked.

“Duke gets like that when he touches the blood of a Troubled person.”

“So if Audrey’s Troubled, did she come to Haven that way?” Duke pondered.

“No. The shadow killer,” Nathan said. “He had her and the Teagues cornered, and she called me for backup. It was after that I noticed I could feel her. She tackled me when we first met, and I didn’t feel anything. And Hannah’s boy wrapped her in a cocoon on our second case. She didn’t come here with the Trouble. It kicked in, like with everyone else.”

“So what does that mean?”

“No idea. But I know the first people I’m going to ask.”

“They won’t talk to you,” Nathan warned. “They’ve been pretty mad ever since everything with the Barn went south. Vince is in hot water with the Guard, and Dave’s barely speaking to him.”

“Well, they’re going to talk to me, one way or another. Cause this time I’ve got an answer for them.”

“Before you head off on that crusade I’ve got a present for you,” Duke said. “Close your eyes.”

“Really?” Audrey asked.

“Really.”

He made sure she wasn’t peeking before he went back into the kitchen and returned with a white pastry box. She felt out the dimensions before opening her eyes and flipping it open with a squeal: one dozen perfectly frosted cupcakes from Rosemary’s.

She hopped off the stool and threw her arms around him. “Thank you! This has been such a cupcake week.”

“I kinda figured,” he said, taking advantage of the rare opportunity to breathe her in. If nothing else he could still make her smile.

She’d devoured two of them quicker than he thought humanly possible before she realized courtesy dictated she should share. Duke declined the offer; he’d had enough sugar in his breakfast to last all day.

“Cupcake?” Audrey asked Nathan, but when he told her “No thank you,” she started giggling. He let her go on for a few moments, caught between a frown and a smile. “Shut up,” he finally said.

Duke was obviously missing something. And he so didn’t want to know.

When Audrey passed a cupcake to James he took it. He removed the wrapper carefully and then turned back to Audrey with a searching look. “Lucy loved cupcakes,” he said.

“There are certain things that are always the same, no matter her memories,” Nathan said, and Duke was shocked by his certainty. He’d met Sarah, but he couldn’t honestly say she and Audrey were the same. The hair and the accent and the fact she and his grandfather were trying to kill each other had all been a little distracting.
“Well, it’s nice to know that I always have good taste.”

He wasn’t sure how she lived with the knowledge that she’d been so many people, caught in a perpetual cycle of borrowed time. It was no wonder she’d begun to unravel once he’d found out about the Hunter – but she still always tried to act so strong.

“I’m going to head upstairs. I need a shower and a fresh change of clothes – feels like I’ve been in these forever.”

He could already see her mind racing, ready to launch her into the next crisis the Troubles presented. He didn’t feel ready for that; he didn’t know how she could possibly be. “You can take a day off, you know. Maybe spend it in bed.”

Nathan choked, and Duke appreciated the opportunity to laugh. “I’m sorry guys, I tried to be good – but really.”

Audrey shook her head, but she wasn’t smiling. “I’ll have you know the last time I took a day off Haven did get caught in a time loop, so the theory that the world won’t crumble if I’m not working is not necessarily sound. And we may be back but this is far from over. We have to figure out how to stop the Troubles – and that means finding a lot more answers than we were able to before.”

She grabbed her cupcakes and practically stomped off. Duke waited until she’d shut the door and was definitely out of earshot before turning to Nathan. “Is she okay?”

“Think so.” Nathan stared at the door she’d left through. “She’s worried about what happened in Haven while she was gone.”

“What did happen?”

Nathan shook his head. “Nothing good.”

Duke would help them pick up the pieces but he didn’t envy them the responsibility. If not for Audrey he’d get the hell out of this town, his father’s last request be damned. There had been some allure in Arla’s promise that if Audrey was gone, the Troubles would stop. He didn’t want Audrey gone, but he did want life to go back to normal almost as much as he wanted her to stay. It wasn’t right that he’d been in far more danger in his tiny hometown than when he’d been smuggling contraband around the world.

“Let me know what I can do.”

“You know, after two years those parking tickets are going to be pretty outrageous.”

“This isn’t about that.” He was surprised that he was able to admit it, but it seemed like time he and Nathan stopped bullshitting each other. “Audrey got them all thrown out a few weeks before we left, anyway.”

“Then what’s it about?”

“If we’re going to stop this thing we need to work together this time. All of us.” He glanced significantly at James, who was trying to look inconspicuous as he eavesdropped. “We made a real mess of it last time. Not trusting each other. Keeping secrets.” He couldn’t stop his gaze from going to Nathan’s arm, where he knew that damned tattoo was hidden under his shirt. There had been few things in his life that had hurt more than seeing it on his friend’s arm.

Nathan covered the offending area with his other hand, as if that could hide what he’d done. “I had
my reasons."

“And so did she. Doesn’t matter. It didn’t work out so well. That Jordan. She turned out to be a classy broad. Shooting you in the back. Literally.”

“That’s none of your business,” Nathan growled.

“When Audrey came crying to me about it, it kind of became my business. And it was my business when I had to catch your bleeding body and leap in after her because you couldn’t.”

He expected Nathan to slug him. Normally he was all for a good brawl to work out some aggression, but fighting with Nathan was so unsatisfying since Duke was the only one who felt the repercussions.

But Nathan just stared at him with his jaw clenched, daring him to continue.

“Just don’t hurt her again. That’s a warning.”

He held Nathan’s gaze for a few tense seconds. Once he was convinced he got his point across he turned to gather up the dishes.

“Look, I need to figure out what happened to the Gull while I was gone, but really, call me if there’s anything I can do.”

“You don’t have to worry about the Gull.” There was something odd about Nathan’s voice, like someone was pulling a confession from him.

“I think the laws of modern economics would say differently, but don’t worry, I’ll figure it out. No one came to kick us out to start the grills for lunch, so maybe it didn’t get sold. Though really, not sure why anyone wouldn’t want to buy my baby – unless they thought it was haunted or something.”

“Can’t buy something when the owner’s not selling.”

“Yeah, but banks tend to get in a selling mood long before two years pass.”

“Not if they’re getting their payments.”

The truth clicked and left him staggering.

“Nathan…” Because no one did things like that for him. Sure, his father had given him a boat once, in a roundabout way, but that had come with a charge to continue the family legacy as a Trouble killer. He was sure Nathan’s strings wouldn’t be nearly as dastardly.

“You went after Audrey. For me. Least I could do was make sure your life was still in order when you got back.”

“Even if it took twenty-seven years?”

“Hope you negotiated better terms on your loans than that. I know how much you overcharge for booze.”

Duke ran a hand through his hair, unsure of what to say. A few minutes ago he’d read this man the riot act and now he owed him so much more than pancakes.

“I can write a check but I don’t know how to run a restaurant, so I had to close the place down.
Your staff had a damn good end of the season party, though. And the *Rouge* is down at the docks. Someone checks on her every once in a while to make sure she’s still seaworthy.”

“Thank you.” There was really nothing to say besides that, but he was aware how insufficient it was.

“You watched out for her when I couldn’t.” And it was more than that moment with the Barn. It was Jordan and the Guard and Colorado, and changing her locks and bringing her cupcakes and making her smile while he was buried in some infiltration mission that got him nowhere.

“We’ll keep her here this time,” Duke swore, because it would always come down to Audrey now, and he realized he was fine with that. He’d never before had anything to fight for except himself. Between the two of them there was nothing that could tear her away again.
Chapter 5

Duke left shortly after Audrey, claiming a need to clean up the kitchen. Nathan had never known Duke to leave anything for honest work, but he could understand why he’d want to flee the heaviness of the understanding that had passed between them.

And then there were two.

His fully grown son studied him over a few forlorn pieces of pancake. It was almost enough to send him back into the kitchen with Duke. “Well, this is still awkward.”

He was hoping it would make the kid crack a smile. But Nathan rarely got what he hoped for.

“Look, I’m not some orphan who grew up dreaming of the perfect parents.” Nathan couldn’t help but think of Audrey’s rare vulnerability when she had told him of that very fantasy. “I had a normal, happy childhood. The Cogans raised me as their own. I was twenty-five before they told me about the woman who showed up out of the blue and gave me to them.”

“Sarah.” The reverence with which he said her name was automatic. The realization of how lonely and scared she must have been, unwed and pregnant – because of him – came a few moments later. But the shame was counteracted by the sight of the man sitting next to him. The man they’d been searching for before Nathan had ever gone to the 1950’s. As if he and Sarah had been inevitable. He wasn’t sure he liked that. But if he was bound to her, throughout the ages, would he really mind the sacrifice of free will?

“Yeah. Sarah.” James reached back to rub his neck, and Nathan recognized the gesture he couldn’t kick even though he didn’t feel it. “They said all she’d asked was that I come looking for her in 1983. Not earlier. Not later. Had to be 1983. And I had a perfectly fine life in Colorado, but the whole thing was so mysterious, I couldn’t not go.” He started to laugh, but it was a bitter sound that caught in his throat. “Some mystery all right. Now that’s all I have left. I don’t need parents. I just want some answers.”

Nathan recognized the broken desperation, and he hated to see it in someone he was going to love. He also knew it wasn’t easy to dispel – especially since there would be no miraculous return of everything his son missed. But he’d never had much use for patronizing. “We don’t have many of those. But we could use help finding some.”

Their eyes locked, and Nathan couldn’t help cataloging every bit of Audrey and himself that he could find. He had a son, and that son was almost his own age, and a former version of Audrey was his mother, and that was all staggering. But what he found more striking than any similarity in gestures or features was that while James was willing to let him off the hook for parenting he didn’t want to take the out.

“What year is it now?” James looked away first and Nathan let him retreat.

“2012.”

“Guess it isn’t likely my folks are still alive.”

It hurt to hear him refer to someone else as his parents, and that was ridiculous and illogical but still true. “June Cogan is. Least she was about a year ago.”

Hope and confusion made him look younger. A boy on the brink of manhood, needing his father’s
guidance. He would have given it. Always. “Why do you know that?”

“I went to Colorado to look for a way to bring you and Audrey back. But I didn’t learn anything. Alzheimer’s has her pretty far gone. She had no idea what I was talking about. Except when I mentioned you.”

Nathan didn’t tell him how she was convinced he was dead. Whatever conclusions he’d drawn – or hadn’t – couldn’t really be worse than reality.

“I could get you a ticket to fly out and see her. We’re not likely to solve this any time soon. I’m sure Audrey would go with you. Or I could, if you want.”

But they hadn’t established such level of intimacy. The gesture was too much, too soon.

“And my father?”

It was like a stab to the gut, in a time when he could feel it.

Nathan swallowed, tried not to let the pain show. Not his place to make the kid feel guilty. He’d lived his life, and Nathan hadn’t been there. Hadn’t been born yet.

“Died a couple years ago. Seems like they were running a safe house for the Troubled, which makes me think they did know something about all this. But I don’t know what.”

James didn’t respond, and the silence quickly turned suffocating. Nathan had never been one for empty words but he felt the strongest need to say something. “They seemed like good people. I’m glad they were there for you, and I’m sorry that you’ve lost them.”

“How many people did Arla kill?” James interrupted, and the sudden change of topic made Nathan wish the silence would return.

He hadn’t thought of her in a long while, but the mention of her name brought it all back – that final, terrible, almost unsolved case. The revulsion when they’d found the vats of skin and mass grave. The grief at the deaths that hadn’t been anonymous. The terror every time she’d attacked or taken Audrey. How distraught Audrey had been as Rosalyn’s death. How that had been when they’d started to unravel. He couldn’t help but wonder how things would have been different if he’d shown up for pancakes and found Audrey waiting for him like they’d planned. If they would have been able to face the truth about the Hunter together or whether she still would have pushed him away when she learned her days were numbered.

His son shouldn’t have to carry the guilt of all of that. “I’m not sure you really want—”

“Don’t bullshit me! I didn’t ask Lu-Audrey because I didn’t want her to sugarcoat it—”

“I’m not sure that she would.” Audrey had lost more to the Bolt-Gun Killer than he had, and she was as protective as a black bear.

“Then I will ask her.”

“Thirteen,” he answered. Audrey didn’t need to relive that horror, and his son deserved to hear the truth so he could start to move past it. “That we found, anyway. Could have been more. And a couple were friends.”

“Why?” Nathan’s heart broke at the way the word seemed to strangle James. But he needed to be honest.
“Best we can figure, she was trying to get to you.”

James turned away, clutching both hands to his head, and Nathan let him be even though he could see his shoulders shake with not so silent sobs. Nathan had learned at a young age that this world was a cruel place, but knowing that didn’t make it any easier.

When James turned back his eyes were red but his tears had dried.

“There’s one thing I can’t understand. Supernatural barn? Sure. People who can control the weather or make your nightmares come to life – why not? I saw a lot of weird stuff spending time with Lucy. *There are more things in heaven and earth than can be seen in your philosophy.*”

“Didn’t take you for a Shakespeare guy.”

James’ response started shaky, but gathered vehemence, like a snowball rolling down a hill. “Arla was an English teacher. She used to make me read Hamlet with her when she was writing her lesson plans.” He closed his eyes for a moment before he continued. “We grew up together. I’ve known her since we were four. I can’t pinpoint the moment I fell in love with her. It just became … implied. We got married a couple years out of high school. And we were happy. When I told her I had to go to Maine she finished the school year and then she followed me. She wasn’t even from Haven. I don’t understand how the town did this to her. I don’t understand how the woman I loved could kill so many people – and take their skins. If she was always a monster how could I not have seen it?”

In that instant he wished James had ignored Sarah’s plea and never come to Haven. Even if it meant he never knew that he had a son, Nathan would have saved him from the truth of this ugly town if he could.

“That’s what the Troubles do. They take normal, decent people and make them capable of despicable things. I’ve seen it time and time again. And it’s usually not even the Troubled person’s fault, but people die anyway. You can’t blame yourself. Maybe we can’t even blame her.”

“Then who do we blame?”

“Your mother will find out.” Maybe it was weird to call Audrey that when they still hadn’t talked about Sarah, but he couldn’t help it. The thought flooded him with warmth just like her hand on his face. He’d been too numb for too long not to take what was offered.

He looked down, giving James a chance to reason that out without scrutiny. When he spoke again he was far more composed, with the curiosity of an FBI agent dropped into a bat-shit crazy town which all the locals claimed was normal. “You say the Troubles change people. What did they do to you?”

Audrey never let him shy from the hard questions. She thought to ask the things no one else cared to know. And here she was, shining out of their son’s eyes and Nathan had never thought himself a lucky man but this was something he’d never seen coming.

“I was eight the first time the Troubles started. At first I thought I was invincible. Nothing hurt. I could play as hard as I wanted. Didn’t matter if I broke bones. But it didn’t take long to learn that people are afraid of what they don’t understand. The other kids made sure to remind me I was different. The adults were worse, talking about sin and curses. And once the novelty wore off I missed what I’d always taken for granted. A damp breeze off the beach. The warmth of my mother’s chicken noodle soup. I got sullen, and tried to stay away from people, and then the Troubles went away. But I was terrified that they would come back – that I would go back to being
a freak. It was always there, the feeling that there was something wrong with me that I couldn’t fix. That the Rev was right – that I was being punished by God for something I hadn’t even done. Then they did come back, and it was worse than I remembered. Every day it felt like I was dying from the outside in. That I was already a corpse, but no one had bothered to put me in a grave. At first I was so angry. But that faded. All my emotions did. There was no use railing against fate, or whatever caused the Troubles. There was no use in anything. But I kept getting up, going to work, because all I could do was hold on and hope that maybe they’d go away again, and I wouldn’t still be alive when they came back. And then your mother came, and she saved me.”

“Because you could feel her.” There was something disapproving and protective in his tone. Nathan was glad for it; Haven wasn’t safe, and he would need help looking after Audrey. But he’d come to terms with this issue long ago. Much as he craved her touch, that wasn’t the reason he loved her.

“No. I didn’t know that for months. It was because she felt awful about slamming my fingers in the car door even after I told her it didn’t hurt. I was cocky and dismissive and she didn’t let me get away with it. She saw people affected by the Troubles and she had no idea how any of this was possible but she didn’t judge them – she helped them. She cared. She liked the weirdness everyone else shied away from. I bought her a ridiculous outfit as a joke and she wore it just to make me smile. I’d forgotten that I could still do that. That I could have a reason to laugh. When she’s around I forget how different I am. She reminds me how to live. And it’s like you said. I don’t know when I fell in love with her. I just am.”

He wasn’t sure why he could tell this to his son – practically a stranger – when he’d never admitted nearly as much to Audrey. But he needed his son to understand that there was nothing manipulative in his feelings. Audrey would never think so poorly of him, even if he had questioned himself. But James had to know.

“And you think that’s enough to keep her here?”

He had to think that. That theory was the only thing holding him together. What he hadn’t mentioned was life post Audrey had been infinitely worse than life before her. He wasn’t strong enough to bear it a second time.

“It was enough to bring her back. I won’t let her go again.”

“I’ll help. Any way I can.” He shrugged, self depreciating. “Not like I have anything better to do.”

Nathan reached out and covered one of the hands resting on the bar with his own. Warmth flooded through his instantly, though he tried not to let it show. This man was a piece of him, and that was a wonder. He was exceedingly grateful that he’d inherited Audrey’s affliction instead of his own.

“You may not need parents. But if you need friends, Audrey and I are here.”

The corner of James’ mouth twitched upwards. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

A flash interrupted the moment, and Nathan turned to find Audrey standing a few feet away with her phone raised. His heart seemed to turn in his chest, and it took all his self control not to rush over and kiss her just to convince himself that she was actually here.

Instead he smirked at her, spurred by the reminder of their early days when their relationship had been filled with banter and teasing and far less heartbreak. “You’re not going to let that go, are you?”
“Nope. You wanted photos and that’s what you’re going to get. Lots and lots of photos. So many you can make me a collage.”

“Ha ha.”

“You still owe me a tour of your house. I want to see these decoupage masterpieces. Then maybe you can teach me how to golf.”

“Just because you don’t have any hobbies besides reading vampire love stories…”

James cleared his throat. “So … cameras got smaller in thirty years.”

“Yeah.” Nathan watched in delight as she floundered for a recovery. “This is a phone, actually. And no one uses film anymore.” Audrey handed the phone over and gave a brief demonstration. While James was distracted she turned to Nathan.

“Film?” he mouthed.

“Shut up,” she mouthed back, smacking him on the shoulder.

He caught her hand and pulled her closer, resigning himself to nothing more than pushing a few strands of hair behind her ear she must have missed when she pulled her hair into a ponytail. Making out in front of their son probably wouldn’t win them any points.

“You okay?” he asked.

“Yeah.” Her soft exhale was hardly convincing, but she was dressed as no-nonsense Agent Parker and he understood the way she used work as a shield.

He placed a hand on her shoulder. Though she didn’t leap into his arms she didn’t shrug it off either. “It’s just a lot, you know? We’ll talk about it later.”

He’d make sure they did. But right now they had the world to face.

Audrey stepped away and retrieved her phone from James. “We have to go to the Herald, and then this one should probably stop playing hooky and check in at the station. You’re welcome to come.”

“I think I need some time to process all of this.”

“Oh. That’s fine. You can stay at my apartment and we’ll be in touch, I guess.”

“I’ll get him situated,” Duke offered, emerging once more from the kitchen with his sleeves rolled up and a dishcloth tossed over his shoulder. “Cell phone. Motel room. General understanding of the past few decades. Say hello to the Teagues for me. I gotta say, I’m not sure how I feel about Vince right now. I’m glad he didn’t let anyone with that tattoo kill me, but I still feel kind of betrayed.”

“Call if you run into any trouble,” Nathan advised.

“Why would we run into any trouble?”

“Just call. And be careful.”

“Yes Chief. Look at me, taking orders from the police. I’m like a new man. Remember when I wouldn’t even talk to cops?”
Rolling his eyes, Nathan followed Audrey out of the Grey Gull.
“You and James seemed to be getting along,” Audrey said as Nathan eased his Bronco toward the center of town. The familiarity of the cab helped to soothe her frazzled nerves, but not enough. She felt like she’d drank seven cups of coffee but she’d only had two. And four cupcakes. But who was counting.

Nathan’s smile was so uncharacteristically boyish that it calmed her for a moment as her heart sped up for an altogether different reason. He looked unburdened – proud – and she couldn’t help falling in love with him just a little bit harder. “He’s amazing.”

She wanted that with James – easy affection and expected closeness – but she’d never been any good with kids and skipping right to the adult stage hadn’t seemed to help either. “I wish I could remember the time we spent together when I was Lucy. Or whatever time we’d had when I was Sarah.”

He reached out and found her hand across the seat, interlacing their fingers and resting them on her thigh. It was a comforting weight; an intimacy they’d never been allowed. “You found him a safe home. The Cogans took good care of him. He was happy.” His thumb traced a soothing pattern across the back of her palm and she knew he was her lifeline in this whole confusing mess.

“What else did he tell you?”

“He said that Sarah asked that he come to Haven in 1983 to find her.”

She sighed. “But he found Lucy instead. And we know how that went. He’s still kind of freaked out from thinking she killed him.”

“He’ll come around. He was very concerned I was using you to feel something, so that’s a start.”

He said it lightly, like a joke, but she picked up on his uncertainty even before he continued a few moments later. “You know that isn’t true, right?” He was awkward, tentative, like a teenager already half-certain of rejection and the thought was so absurd she laughed and smacked him lightly on the shoulder with her free hand.

“Of course! If you were selfish like that you would have made a move much sooner. Which I wouldn’t have minded, by the way.”

She couldn’t imagine a world where he’d take advantage of her like that. This wasn’t the appropriate time or place to tell him how much she looked forward to giving him back all the sensations he’d lost. She wished she could take his affliction away completely, but if he could only feel one thing in the entire world she was glad that it was her.

But they didn’t say such serious stuff in the Bronco. They teased and bantered – or at least they used to before they started taking separate cars to crime scenes. She had absolutely no desire to retrieve her car from Nathan’s apartment and take it anywhere.

“Of course, there was that awkward high five stage,” she mentioned, remembering all the strange, overly familiar gestures from her stoic partner that had seemed to come out of nowhere. There had been nothing aggressive in it. It had simply been odd. “That was weird.”

Nathan smiled sheepishly, and she knew he’d been reassured. “Not my finest hour.”
“Wasn’t bad weird. Just weird.”

His fingers tightened slightly around hers. “I kept thinking I’d imagined the whole thing. I just wanted to be sure.”

She wanted to take that anxiety, grind it to dust, and scatter it into the wind. She’d been repulsed by the idea of Chris needing her to feel normal but she longed to make Nathan feel that way. Perhaps because he’d never ask that of her. “If you’re ever unsure again, I give you full permission to remind yourself.”

He pulled their joined hands to his mouth, pressed a kiss to the area his thumb had been tracing, and didn’t say a word.

She’d always hated the cliché about butterflies in people’s stomachs but she remembered this very cab filled with them. The way their wings had fluttered, erratic and dangerous, was exactly how she felt now.

They continued the drive in silence and she tried to look out the window to assess all the changes in town. They had a job to do and she couldn’t let herself get distracted, easy as it would be to lose herself in the wonder that was Nathan Wuornos.

“I still can’t believe Vince was the head of the Guard all this time.” There had never been anything menacing about the man – aggravating, most certainly – but there had always been something endearing under than bumbling, close-mouthed façade. He was harmless. But the Guard was anything but – all menacing tattoos that haunted Duke and whispers of imaginary information that pulled Nathan away from her. They should have been on the same side, helping the Troubled, but there was some ingrained difference that would always be a wall between them – she valued the lives of everyone in Haven, while they only cared for those bound together by their afflictions.

“I asked him about that. Told me I shouldn’t have interfered with the Barn and now I had to live with the consequences. Haven’t exactly invited him out for drinks since.”

It was just one more thing Vince Teagues would have to answer for.

When Nathan pulled up to the *Haven Herald* office Audrey was shocked by its appearance. “The place looks new.” The paint was brighter and the steps were no longer worn. There were no flower pots on the banister either, and while the font on the hanging sign looked more modern it was also stark and cold. The lighthouse was gone as well. Just the words, all whimsy gone, made her nervous. It wasn’t right. Too much had changed. Was it all her fault?

“It was hit by one of the meteors. Practically razed the place. They had to rebuild.”

The meteors were supposed to stop. That’s why she had gone in to the Barn. She felt like Howard had lied to her, and the resulting surge of betrayal made little sense and did no good. He had lied to her the entire time she’d known him and now he was dead.

“Looks nice,” she said, but she didn’t mean it. “Where did they get the money? Is there such thing as meteor insurance?”

“Don’t know. But in Haven there should be.”

She let him open the truck door for her but she led the way into the building. The steps no longer squeaked under her feet, but the bell that rang when she entered the office was abrasive rather than cheerful.
“You owe me some answers.”

Both men’s heads snapped up quickly. Dave’s eyes grew comically wide. “Audrey.”

“It isn’t Audrey,” Vince barked. “She’ll have a new name now.”

“Her hair’s the same, you twit,” Dave retorted. “And it isn’t time for another one. Something went wrong with the Barn. The Troubles are still here, and so is she.”

“She can also hear everything you’re saying, you know.” Just like always, she was torn between aggravation and endearment. But this time she wouldn’t let them weasel their way out of answering her questions.

“She wouldn’t know to come here if she didn’t remember,” Dave reasoned.

His words got through to Vince at last. “Audrey, is it really you?”

“Yeah. And the Troubles aren’t gone, and the Barn’s destroyed, so I really need to figure out another way to stop this.”

“The Barn can’t be destroyed.” Vince’s response was too automatic; he’d spent a lot of time convincing himself of that.

“I know you tried blowing it up in the fifties and that didn’t work, but this time it kind of imploded and then burned down. I don’t think it’s coming back.”

“We don’t know anything,” Vince claimed.

“Now we all know that’s a lie.”

They had the courtesy to look chagrined, but they didn’t budge.

“The only way to get by in this town is to keep things close to the belt,” Vince finally answered.

“So I’ve seen. But all that’s accomplished is the same thing happening every twenty-seven years. Don’t you want to find a way to stop the Troubles for good?”

“They weren’t stopped at all this time.” She finally recognized a glimmer of the Guard front man in the steeliness that had found its way into Vince’s tone, turning a simple statement into an accusation.

“I know. I want to fix that. But I need your help.”

Their excuses were immediate and almost simultaneous.

“I think you overestimate our usefulness,” Vince said.

“Our archives were destroyed by the meteors,” claimed Dave.

Audrey rolled her eyes and pivoted toward Nathan, who was watching with crossed arms from the doorway. “A little help?”

He smirked and shrugged. “You’re doing fine.”

She turned and took another step toward their desks. “Okay. Playing hardball. You like information, right? So how about a trade? An answer for an answer.”
“I don’t believe you know anything we’d be interested in.” Vince was evasive and defensive, but Audrey recognized opportunity in the way Dave mostly stayed out of the conversation. Although she could possibly work Vince up enough to get him to reveal something, Dave was already considering talking. He was the weak link.

So she looked him in the eye when she showed her hand. “The Colorado Kid was Sarah’s son, right? I know who his father is.”

It felt wrong to barter with such information, as if she was using both her son and her once and soon-to-be-again lover as blackmail, but she needed the Teagues’ cooperation. She needed them to give her a place to start, because no matter what happened with Nathan tonight or tomorrow or a few weeks down the road she’d never be able to really relax until the Troubles were over. And she wanted the freedom to fall into Nathan’s arms and not come up for days.

“How do we know you’re telling the truth?” Dave had taken the bait, and Audrey had to suppress the urge to celebrate her victory.

“I’ve never lied to you. I’m not going to start now.” They locked eyes. She wasn’t sure what got to him, but she could see his resolve crack and shatter. Perhaps it was some remnant of loyalty to the woman she’d once been.

“What’s your question?”

Vince made a noise of protest, but he didn’t stop Audrey from asking.

“Sarah left her son in Colorado to be raised by someone else, and she told him to come find her in 1983. How much did she know about all this, and how did she find out?”

“‘All this’ is very vague.”

“The Barn. The Troubles. New identities every twenty-seven years.”

Dave sighed and pulled off his glasses, folding them carefully before pinching his nose. He seemed to be gathering his thoughts, and Audrey could hardly believe that he might actually tell her something important.

“She didn’t know anything when she came here. But she loved a good mystery, almost as much as she loved helping people. It was our mother who noticed she looked like a woman who’d come to town almost thirty years ago. Margaret Thomas. We started digging around together. Found out about the Barn, and the way the Troubles cycled. After she found out she was pregnant she was determined to stay. But something changed before she had the baby. It was like she’d given up.”

“Sarah was no quitter!” Vince exclaimed, slamming a hand against the desk.

“She accepted her fate. But she wouldn’t tell us why. We tried to send the Barn away without her.”

“You tried to blow it up,” Audrey clarified, remembering what Howard had shown her.

“Yes. When that didn’t work—”

“Leave it, Dave,” Vince warned.

“No. She has a right to know. Maybe it’ll help.”

“There’s nothing about what we did that day that helped.”
“What did you do?” Audrey asked.

“We told Sarah that she didn’t have to go into the Barn. That she should just stay. Go back to Colorado, raise James somewhere safe, forget about the town and its Troubles.”

“Did she listen?”

Dave swallowed. “She did. Till the meteors started.”

Vince’s response was so booming Audrey found herself flinching back from the sound of his voice even before the words sunk in. “First one hit the school. Twenty-seven children died. More were injured – horribly injured. Sarah was devastated.”

“She was furious,” Dave continued, quiet and contrite in contrast to his brother’s fury. “Last thing she ever said was how we never should have tried to stop her. That she was meant to go into that Barn.”

The pieces clicked as she turned toward Vince. “That’s why you started the Guard. To make sure that was always what happened.”

“He was blinded by emotion. Sarah knew she had to go in the Barn then, but she didn’t want to keep going back forever. But he couldn’t see the difference.”

“There is no difference! The cycle repeats again and again and again, and all we can do is weather it out.”

“Sarah thought there was another way,” Dave claimed. “Maybe she found it.”

“But she didn’t tell you?”

“No. She did keep a journal, though. I’d catch her writing in it sometimes. But she’d never show it to me. Said a lady’s thoughts were private.”

“Do you know where she might have left it?”

“No idea. Might have taken it with her.”

Audrey drew herself to her full height and tried to look menacing. These men had helped pick out her wardrobe once, and she wasn’t sure she was convincing. “This isn’t one of those times where you lie to my face and act like you have no idea what I’m talking about, is it, because I swear to God…”

“No. We don’t have it. Scouts honor.”

“Neither of you?” She looked deliberately at Vince, who was sulking. He frowned at her with furrowed brows, but he eventually shook his head.

“Neither of us.”

“All right. Well, it’s a start, I guess. Thanks. I’ll see you around.” The fact that Sarah kept a journal was a lead, even if she had no idea yet how to follow it. She now knew Dave was more likely to talk and Vince still had something to hide, and she was sure they’d given her some clues to interpret their dynamic. The next time she came to see them she’d be ready.

“Wait. The Colorado Kid’s father. You promised.” There was something pleading in Vince’s tone that stopped Audrey in her tracks.
“Nathan.” She glanced back at him and smiled. “It’s Nathan.”

“How is that possible?” Dave asked, and his befuddlement was amusing but she didn’t let herself laugh.

“There’s a question for the next time I need answers, isn’t it? See you later, boys.”

“Be careful,” Vince called after her.

She waited until they’d left the office before she stumbled into Nathan, giggling.

“When that starts getting around I’m going to have a lot of awkward explaining to do.”

“Should have thought of that before you knocked me up before you were born.”

The smile he flashed her was devilish. “Fair enough.”

“Nathan, honey, you there? Someone just phoned in a disturbance outside the bank.” The radio on Nathan’s belt crackled to life. Haven’s dispatcher sounded older, but it was still a sign not too much had changed.

“Duty calls.” He unclipped the radio. “We’re on our way, Laverne,” he said into it.

“We? Who are you with?”

“I’ll explain later.”

“She still calls you honey?” Audrey asked once they were back in the Bronco.

“Yeah. She’s actually more of a mother hen now than she used to be. Think she’s a bit worried about me.”

“She doesn’t have to worry anymore. But I appreciate her looking out for you.”

“Does she pack your lunch and remind you to clean your room?” she asked a few seconds later.

“No,” he said petulantly. “Did sew some buttons on for me a few months back, though.”

“That’s great because I am awful with a needle.”

His head snapped to the side to look at her as soon as he realized the domestic implications of her statement. The best part was she wasn’t even messing with him.

“You’re an easy mark, Wuornos.” She reached over and patted his thigh, pleased when he almost jerked out of his seat.

“I’m sure you could come up with some way to make it worth my while to mend your clothes.”

“I can think of a few.” His voice had turned husky and it took everything she had not to shiver. This was something they’d never done in the Bronco. There had always been a line their flirting didn’t cross. But the Barn had erased it, leaving so much delightful territory to discover.

But all playfulness drained from him as they approached the bank. “I need you to stay in the car,” he said as he cut the engine.

“Yeah. Because that’s going to happen.”
“I’m serious.”

“I know it’s been a long time for you, but I was in that Barn for like five minutes. I’m not rusty. We were chasing after that guy at your reunion two days ago.”

“You don’t have a gun.” Once again, she’d forgotten. She’d given it to Duke, and they hadn’t gotten back to the station yet to issue her another one.

“Laverne just said there was a disturbance. How do you know I’ll need a gun?”

“I know.”

“We’re wasting time.” Audrey exited the car and Nathan scrambled out after her.

Six men had a seventh surrounded, and much to Audrey’s aggravation five of them had guns drawn. Nathan pushed her behind him, drawing his own weapon. She hoped the group would be too focused on each other to notice their arrival; she and Nathan had hardly been stealthy.

Perhaps she was rusty. It was a rookie mistake. Or maybe she should have spent less time thinking about sexing up her partner and more focused on top-notch police work that kept them both alive.

The leader of the group was taunting the man in the middle, who was sobbing like a child. He was well dressed in a business suit, somewhere in the early years of middle age, and he had the look of someone who spent most of his time behind a computer.

Those who made up the circle were far rougher around the edges, wearing jeans, boots, and jackets – typical attire of the average laborer. Two of the men had their sleeves rolled up, and Audrey could see the Guard tattoos there, black and foreboding against their pale skin. Only one of the men seemed not to belong – well dressed like their victim, except for the strange gold gloves that he wore.

“Why Chief, it’s so good of you to join us,” one of the tattooed men called, and Audrey really wished she had a gun.

Nathan made another effort to hide her from view, but she didn’t let him get away with it. She wouldn’t let him take a bullet for her. Neither of them was getting hurt today – not after everything else they’d already been through.

“Help me,” the man in the middle begged.

“Yes, let’s see if the Chief of Police can get you out of this.” Audrey could hear the man’s smile even though she couldn’t see him.

“What’s going on, Bernie?”

“Alistair here was trying to skip town.”

“Don’t see the harm in that.”

“Why of course not. Flee while the getting’s good, away from this cursed town and its Troubled inhabitants. Good riddance, I say.”

“Then why the gun show?”

“If he was afraid for his safety he should have just left. But you know, those rich, Untroubled folk, they don’t know how to cut their losses and run.”
“He came to the bank to withdraw something,” Nathan reasoned.

“Cool half million. You could build quite a new life with that money. A safe, secure life in a place we’d never find you, right?”

The Troubled men all took a step forward, tightening the noose, and Bernie reached out and nudged Alistair in the chest with his gun. “I don’t want anything to do with this town! I don’t mean you any harm.”

“No harm? What about your sister in Portland with her news station? Didn’t you mean it when you told Carol you were going to give her the story of a lifetime?”

“She told you that?” Alistair choked.

“We have eyes everywhere.” Surely the other man in the suit owned these particular eyes, but Alistair was too panicked to make the connection.

“You thought you could sell us out!” one of the other men accused. “Crawl off somewhere safe and laugh when the military came in to restore order and cart us off to some lab to get studied like freaks.”

“You are freaks!” Audrey could feel the atmosphere shift, and knew the outburst was a terrible mistake.

“Let me take this from here,” Nathan tried, placating. “I’ll see that he’s detained. No one on the outside will be informed.”

“What law are you going to charge him with breaking, officer?” The man’s laugh, deep and carefree, had a manic quality that filled Audrey with dread.

“I’ll worry about that.”

“No, no. As much as it would amuse me to let you further undermine the very system you swore to uphold, we won’t play games with our safety. We’ll be taking care of this ourselves.”

Audrey couldn’t bear to stand by and do nothing any longer. “You can’t!” she shouted, stepping away from Nathan. All eyes turned to her, quickly followed by all guns, and if Alistair was a smarter man, or less terrified, he would have used that to his advantage.

“No,” Nathan bellowed, grabbing Audrey and pulling her behind him once more. His grip was like an iron shackle on her arm, but he didn’t seem to realize he was hurting her.

“If it isn’t the Police Chief’s little whore.” Bernie’s voice had turned from syrup to arsenic, and although she didn’t have all the pieces yet she began to understand Nathan’s fear.

“Leave her alone,” Nathan growled.

“We won’t lay a hand on her - today. She needs to realize what she’s done – just like you have. But once she understands, she will pay. You can’t protect her.”

“Wanna bet?”

“Yes.” Without even turning Bernie emptied two slugs into Alistair’s chest. The man fell with a strangled cry, but he wasn’t dead. Blood bubbled from his mouth as he gasped for air. Audrey wanted to run to him, staunch the bleeding, apologize, but Nathan wouldn’t let go.
“There’s your first lesson, whore, over what choosing love over duty has wrought.” Bernie spit on the dying man, and Audrey swallowed her sobs but she couldn’t stop her tears. “You were supposed to be our salvation. Instead you left us in this hell.”

She hadn’t meant to, she wanted to scream, but she couldn’t make her throat cooperate.

“A moment like this ought to be memorialized, shouldn’t it? Winston.”

The man with the gloves stepped forward and knelt beside the dying man. He peeled one of the gloves off, revealing a hand that looked gold and scaly. “Should have left without the money, Al,” he muttered, sounding contrite. He grasped Alistair’s arm, which after a few seconds began to resemble the banker’s hand. In less than a minute he was entirely golden, one hand clutched to his chest and his face frozen in a grotesque grimace.

“Best run along, officers. Surely you have some paperwork to sign after this tragic accident.”

“You can’t do this!” Audrey exclaimed, finally finding her voice.

“Parker!” Nathan sounded nearly hysterical but she was so devastated and furious that she didn’t care.

“We protect our own. Those outside Haven will not be allowed to interfere. I think you’ll soon find that we can do anything we need to make certain of that.”

“You won’t get away with this.” They’d killed a man in broad daylight in front of two law enforcement officers and they didn’t even seem worried. Audrey’s mind was reeling. Even in Haven that wasn’t how the world worked. No one lived without consequences.

Bernie actually seemed surprised, though perhaps it was her audacity when they were clearly outgunned. “He hasn’t told you anything, has he?”

“We need to go,” Nathan demanded.

“We need to do something!”

But she didn’t know what, and before she could figured it out he had grabbed her by the waist and tossed her over his shoulder. She shrieked, mortified and infuriated, and beat at his chest with her fists. “My God, Nathan, let me down!”

But he pretended not to hear her until he dumped her into the Bronco. Long after her throat was hoarse all she could see when she closed her eyes was red and gold.
Chapter 7

Nathan threw the Bronco in gear and sped toward the station, everything that had just happened replaying in agonizing detail. Audrey’s cries wrapped barbed wire around his heart, but he couldn’t heed them. He had to get her out of there.

“You stop this car this instant, Nathan Wuornos, and you tell me what the hell is going on!”

He’d never heard her so furious.

“I can’t.” He stared out at the road, not daring to look at her.

“You damn well can!” She reached for the steering wheel but he caught her wrist, trapping it. She played dirty the second time, reaching for this thigh but he wouldn’t be distracted when her life was at stake.

“Do you want me to drive us off the road?” he hissed. He had to take his other hand off the wheel to stop her and it was a few seconds until he’d clasped both her wrists in his right hand. “Don’t make me cuff you.”

“You wouldn’t dare.”

“Better than getting us both in an accident.”

“Then pull over!”

“They could be following us.”

“We should be following them!”

“Why? We’re still one gun against six.”

“Because they just murdered someone in front of us and expected to get away with it! The Nathan I knew would have made sure they didn’t.”

“Maybe I’m not that man anymore.”

He heard her sharp intake of breath and ventured a glance her way. Her eyes were red and there were tears running down her face. Despite everything this town had thrown at her, he’d rarely seen her cry. Maybe she’d never forgive him for this – and maybe she shouldn’t. But he wouldn’t survive if anything happened to her.

“We’re not safe on the road. We’ll talk at the station. I’ll tell you everything you want to know.”

They didn’t say another word for the rest of the drive. When she began to fidget he suspected sabotage until he realized how uncomfortable her position must be. He released her wrists, filled with shame. She wrapped her arms around herself, and he desperately wanted to be the one to do that. To wipe the tears away, kiss her forehead and promise that everything was going to be okay. But even if she ever let him touch her again he couldn’t promise what he didn’t believe.

The shock of the station’s new appearance broke her pledged silence. Two stories, smaller, faded wood instead of stately brick. So different from the place where they’d worked side by side, became partners, grew into friends. When he’d returned from the hospital to find it smoldering, all traces of her destroyed, it had been worse than the bullets. “What happened?”
“Didn’t have meteor insurance.” With so much of the town ruined they’d had to make due. The way most of the residents felt about him, restoring the police station to its former state wasn’t a priority.

She didn’t wait for him to open the door for her. She scrambled out of the car as soon as it stopped and he followed, half afraid she was going to bolt in the wrong direction just to get away from him. Instead she waited for him to cross in front of his truck and slapped him in the face.

“How dare you!”

His hand came up instinctively to cover his jaw. It hurt, but that was of little importance. The sting would fade, and he’d miss it when it was gone. It was the torment on Audrey’s face and the rage that seemed to radiate from her that would destroy him.

“I had to keep you safe.”

“That wasn’t about me! The Guard attacked an innocent man.”

“This is all about you!” She hadn’t expected him to shout at her. But he couldn’t take it anymore – her inability to put her own needs in front of this damned town and look out for herself.

“Get inside. We shouldn’t stay out in the open.”

“You’re being ridiculous.”

“Get inside! Now!” he bellowed.

He was prepared to drag her in but she went of her own accord. But as soon as the door closed behind them she rounded on him.


“Let’s go to my office.”

“No. You said we needed to go inside. We’re inside. Start talking. Unless you need to send reinforcements after our merry band of murderers, but somehow I don’t think that’ll be happening.”

The receptionist was staring at them with a dropped jaw. Everyone in this station knew how he’d mourned her. Everyone in the town knew what that had wrought. The Guard had made sure of that. Now she was shrieking at him like a banshee and even if he deserved it it was still embarrassing.

“Come on, Parker.” He reached for her elbow and she smacked his hand away.

“Don’t.”

“You really want to hear the whole story in the lobby of the police station?”

“I wanted to hear it in your truck, but apparently that wasn’t safe. So this will have to do, since you didn’t bother to tell me this morning.”

He was hoping that if he just kept walking toward his office she would follow when Stan rounded the corner. There was no way he hadn’t heard her yelling, but he still looked gobsmacked at her appearance. “Officer Parker!”

“Stew! Stan! Damn it!” Perhaps realizing this wasn’t how she wanted to reunite with all of her

It was a short walk. Smaller building, fewer rooms.

“Talk,” she demanded as soon as she slammed the door behind them.

“All right.” He clutched at his neck, trying to figure out where to begin. All he could see was himself, pounding on the Barn that would disappear any second and take her away from him. That was where this had all started.

“The meteors kept falling for a day. Took out about a third of the town. Homes. Businesses. The harbor. Couple hundred people died. Would have been more if Dwight hadn’t taken charge.”

“The meteors were supposed to stop when I went in the Barn. That’s what Howard said.”

“They didn’t.” He had known, watching the Barn disappear, that they wouldn’t. He had expected the whole town to burn. And in that moment he hadn’t cared. “There was mass panic. You know how that brings out the Troubles. Whole families who didn’t even know they were affected suddenly were. But it was different this time. It wasn’t all accidents. People were angry, and they started using their Troubles like superpowers. Vince and Dave even stopped trying to cover everything up. They advised people to stay calm and lay low.”

“It didn’t work,” she said flatly.

“No. The Guard knew what was supposed to happen with the Barn, and they were furious. They started telling people that the meteor storm was never supposed to hit – that the Troubles should have gone away. That it was our fault that they didn’t. That’s why I had to get you out of there. They hate you, and they’re everywhere.”

“We’re the police. We should be able to stop them.”

“We tried. But there are hundreds of them, and they have dangerous afflictions and no rules. We lost six good officers the first month just trying to keep order. Stan was in a coma for seven weeks when one of them drained almost all his blood. A third of the force quit, and no one rushed to sign up. You know nothing is simple when a Trouble’s involved. Locking them in jail rarely makes anyone safer. We still tried it because there was nothing else we could do. People using their Troubles on purpose didn’t want to be talked down or sent off with Dwight. There were breakouts, and more dead officers. The Guard swore to protect the Troubled, and that makes more than half the town on their side.”

“Who do they need protecting from? The Rev’s men?”

“At first. There were more kidnappings, shootings in the streets. Sermons about hellfire seemed pretty convincing when the church was the only building standing in that part of town. But they never had a strong leader after the Rev, and it became clear pretty early that the Guard was more powerful. Hatred and fear are less motivating when you realize they’ll only get you killed. But there was satellite footage of the meteor storm. It was national news. Ever since they’ve been terrified that the rest of the world is going to realize what’s going on here and try to intervene. Every nosy reporter or conspiracy theorist is a threat, and every scared native without a Trouble has the potential to squeal.”

“And they don’t think murder in the streets will get anyone’s attention?” she snapped.

“There was talk of a purge. Kill everyone without a Trouble. But there were too many who still cared about people without them. So the next plan was to lock down the town. Put checkpoints on
the roads, cut phone and internet service to the outside world.”

“They couldn’t do that,” she said, aghast.

“Rumor is they have a family that can. We fought with everything we had to make sure that didn’t happen, but the Guard could change their mind any time and there isn’t much left for us to do. They have the power here, and they’re willing to do whatever they think necessary to protect their own. All we can do is warn the public who to watch out for and advise them how to stay out of the way. And damn it Audrey you have to be careful, because now that you’re here you’ll be their number one target!”

“If they hate us so much why didn’t they go after you?” Her voice was quieter now, but it still felt like an accusation.

“Because they knew it’d hurt more to keep me alive than to kill me.”

She reeled back as if he’d hit her, and he turned away, unable to stand the look on her face. He felt like he had. He’d certainly failed her. Failed every innocent and everyone who’d turned guilty because he’d damned them to this.

He had to get out of there. He’d told her the truth and now he needed space. “The official reports are all filed. The real reports are in the bottom drawer of my desk. The details are all there. Please, just stay here. I have to figure out how to cover up the fact Alistair’s a gold statue or his sister will blow the whistle on this and I can’t do that if I’m worrying about you.”

He expected her to fight him, and he wasn’t sure how he was going to stop her. But she nodded and settled into his chair. “All right.”

He fled, and he didn’t go back for hours, even though she was in his office and it would have been easier to work the cover up from there instead of one of the spare, empty rooms. Didn’t help matters that each and every one of his co-workers knew he was slinking around like a dog with his tail between his legs, but he needed some time away from her disappointment. He did have a job to do, even if it wasn’t what it once had been. Thankfully the entire Haven PD knew to leave him be when he was in one of his moods. As evening approached he ordered her dinner and had Stan take it to her, and the man walked past his office periodically to make sure she was still there.

When the end of the day came he knew he couldn’t hide forever. He didn’t know how he’d face that inevitable day when the Guard decided she’d seen enough of what Haven had become and tried to kill her, but he could watch over her now, at least.

He knocked on the door before he entered and she startled from her position behind a wall of files. She’d pulled her hair back and taken off her suit jacket, and her fries were half eaten and forgotten.

“Time to go.”

He couldn’t read her expression. She looked tired, but maybe he was just projecting. She rose without a word and followed him through the half-empty police station.

He anticipated a protest when he turned toward his house instead of the Gull. He didn’t expect them to share a bed ever again, but he wasn’t letting her out of his sight. He’d sleep in a chair by the door if he had to. He assumed his house was safe, but he couldn’t swear the Gull wasn’t booby trapped and there was no way he was checking it tonight. He’d get Duke to help in the morning.

But she didn’t say a word about that or anything else, which unnerved him even more than her earlier anger. Audrey was never quiet for so long. He’d never met anyone with a stronger need to
fill silence, and he’d heard her ramble on about the cream and sugar at the police station for ten minutes just because he wasn’t in a talkative mood.

If Claire was still here she’d surely be able to analyze that, and it wasn’t the first time Nathan wished the nosy shrink had survived their last brutal case. Claire had spent hours talking to Audrey, so maybe she would understand what was going on in that head of hers, because Nathan could only guess and fear the worst.

She took off her shoes and hung her coat and suit jacket on the hooks by the door, all without saying a word, and it was all so odd and domestic and perfect and yet somehow wrong and Nathan was too damn exhausted to make any sense of it. He didn’t feel weariness the way he had back in college or the Academy, but his limbs were heavy and his brain sluggish even though there were too many thoughts racing through it. Just this morning he’d thought that maybe he didn’t have to feel this way anymore. That her being back was enough. But he’d been fooling himself. Because now he had something to fight for but he didn’t know how to do it, especially when she was too damned stubborn to let him. Maybe she was too shocked to argue now, but that wouldn’t last. She wouldn’t be Audrey if she gave up so easily – that’s what had made those last two months together so wrong – and normally he wouldn’t ask that of her but Bernie’s threat kept echoing in his mind and just like he couldn’t save Alistair he was terrified that he wouldn’t be able to save her. Because they were outgunned and outnumbered, and he couldn’t protect her every single second and it would only take one slipup for everything to be lost.

And now they were standing in his living room at an impasse and all he wanted was for everything awful to just stop – just for a little while.

“You think I don’t know that this is my fault?” he rasped, the awful truth draining from him like pus from a wound. “You wanted to stop the Troubles but I couldn’t let you go. Everything that’s happened – everyone who’s died – has been because I needed you so damn much I didn’t care about the consequences. And I’m even worse than Dave and Vince because even knowing how it turned out I would do it again. Because you’re here now. Even if you never look me in the eye again I would still choose to save you, because it isn’t fair that you have to give your life for this damned town. You deserve to be happy. I want to be what makes you happy. But I know you want me to take care of Haven. I tried. I just couldn’t do it without you.”

She advanced on him, reaching a hand out to cover the place where she’d slapped him earlier. Her fingers were surprisingly cold. “Nathan…”

“Don’t,” he said shakily, pulling away. He couldn’t do this tonight – be a gentleman while she gave him a glimpse of heaven and then shut the door in his face. He had no right to expect anything of her, but he wanted her, desperately. He’d spent years wanting her – wanting her by his side, wanting to see her smile, wanting her to fix him, wanting her beneath him, craving his touch as much as he craved hers. Now that she was back, here before him but still somehow so far away he didn’t trust his self control to hold.

Yet he couldn’t make himself take more than one step backwards. Because as much as he knew he couldn’t handle it he wanted whatever bone she would throw him. It was pathetic. But he had spent so long with so little hope, and now that she’d miraculously returned some tiny part of him still believed that maybe – just maybe – he hadn’t ruined them beyond repair. That she could still see something worthwhile in the wreck of a man he’d become. And he’d be strong enough to save her.

She wore the same pained expression from earlier in his office. “I’m not Sarah,” she whispered. He couldn’t figure what that had to do with his confession.

“You are,” he insisted. Because if she wasn’t he was even more of a bastard in all of this, having
sex with some clone of her just because they couldn’t get their shit together in their proper time.

“That’s not—” She shook her head, clearly agitated. “I don’t mean what she said to Vince and Dave. I forgive you.”

The thought of that paralyzed him. He’d learned early that if something seemed too good to be true, it usually was.

“How?” He’d never seen her as upset as she was today. It seemed incomprehensible that anger had disappeared.

“You didn’t know what was going to happen. You just wanted to keep me safe. How can I stay mad at you for that?”

“So many people died.”

“We can’t change the past. But we still have the future.”

“Haven’s in shambles. I can’t control the Guard. There are more Troubles than ever. All because I couldn’t let the Barn have you.”

“Because you love me.”

“Yes,” he said miserably.

Her hand was on his face again, forcing him to look at her. The anger had melted away. She looked young. Vulnerable. Aching beautiful. She stared into his eyes and did not flinch. “Because you love me. And I love you. So I forgive you.”

Her fingers began to move and he felt like he was being undone. “I can’t,” he choked out. Couldn’t resist her. Couldn’t be strong anymore. Couldn’t believe this was happening.

“I’m not asking you to. Not tonight. No more false starts. No more teasing. No more later. Just stop thinking.”

“Make me,” he challenged, but he knew as soon as he said it that she’d already won.

Their lips crashed together desperately. She met his anger and swallowed it, and it didn’t take long from him to be lost in the swirl of her tongue and the warmth of her mouth. Her hands found their way under his shirt, and he gasped when she pressed one against the small of his back. The other soon followed, and then they were dancing across his skin, sliding up toward his shoulders and then back again, leaving tingling nerves in their wake.

She broke contact with his mouth long enough to pull his shirt over his head, but then their lips were drawn back together like magnets. Now her hands were everywhere, running across his chest, finding scars and muscles and feelings he’d long given up on. He wanted to get her shirt off, give back as good as he was getting, but he couldn’t concentrate. One hand had snapped the elastic and was fisted in her silky hair, stroking her neck as the other clenched at her hip, holding her to him. He was never letting go.

His time with Sarah had been wonderful, but it had been quick and half-clothed in the front seat of her car. He had felt so much, but it had been nothing compared to this. Since she didn’t know of his affliction he had tried to suppress how much she affected him – but Audrey knew. There was no need to hide, and no way that he could have. And she was taking full advantage.
When her lips left his mouth and started traveling down his body it was almost too much. His brain overloaded, his legs started to quake, and he grabbed her shoulder to steady himself.

She straightened immediately, adjusting her stance to support his weight. She brought both hands up to cradle his face and tilted their foreheads together. It was all he could focus on, and as everything else fell away the world stopped spinning.

She looked deep in concentration, sapphire eyes dark with lust but shining with concern, and God she was beautiful. “You all right?” she asked, patient when he was dizzy with endorphins, and he loved her all the more for it.

It was awhile until he could form words at all. “Not thinking much.”

She threw back her head and laughed and he used the opportunity to pepper kisses down her throat. He could feel her satisfied hum vibrate under his lips, spurring him on.

It was easier to focus when he had the upper hand. He found her shirt buttons and was shocked when the first one had a ghost of substance under his fingers. He’d had to learn how to unfasten buttons by sight and instinct. Now that he could feel one he seemed to have forgotten the lesson. But they were far enough from her skin that he couldn’t properly discern the button from the fabric around it. He fumbled unsuccessfully, aggravated that he was incapable of such a simple task.

He wanted to grab either side of the shirt and just rip it off, buttons be damned, but he wasn’t sure she’d appreciate that. Wasn’t sure he’d survive if she did.

“Little help?” he growled.

He expected her to unfasten them quickly, irritated and impatient. He didn’t expect the feeling of her hands covering his. The buttons became completely solid under their stacked fingers, and she retaught him the movements with painstaking care, repeating the process for every button until the fabric parted. He sought her eyes for permission, and was blown away by the tenderness radiating from them. He didn’t understand how she could look at him like that, especially after everything she’d seen today.

But she nodded her consent, and he owed her a hell of a lot of payback. Taking a deep breath, he slipped his hands under her shirt and pushed it off her shoulders, trailing after it down her arms until it fell forgotten to the floor.

“Flawless,” he whispered before dropping his hands to brace them just above the waistline of her pants.

“Stop,” she murmured shyly as a blush crept across her pale skin.

“I mean it.”

Her skin was so warm and inviting. His hands drifted slowly in a thorough exploration. He marveled at the way one of his hands nearly spanned her slight waist. Enjoyed the way she arched and moaned as it traveled upwards.

Her black satin bra was soft under his fingertips, but not nearly as soft as the flesh beneath it.

“Catch me,” she whispered in his ear after a few minutes of bliss, scrapping her teeth over his earlobe for a few overwhelming seconds.

He barely had his wits back by the time she clasped her hands on his shoulders and pushed herself
upwards, wrapping her legs around his waist.

He’d never know if it was shock or instinct but his arms came around her, clasping her to him and then there was so much skin touching, her breasts pressed against his chest. “Parker.” The word came strangled from his throat as her arms wrapped around his neck, caressing.

“You won’t drop me,” she promised, and sure enough his legs were steady underneath him even as his heart felt it might beat out of his chest or explode.

Her lips blazed a trail across his collarbone and began moving downward while she threaded a hand through his hair, scratching lightly at his scalp. He couldn’t stop his moan of appreciation or the tremor that went through him.

“I’m not going to hurt you, am I?” she asked from somewhere above his right nipple.

“God, I hope not.” He had no idea, honestly, but he’d try to hold it together for her – for him – for them.

Her laughter was throaty, glorious, and perplexing.

“Something funny?” He couldn’t hold a scowl when her legs were locked around his waist and she was half naked in his arms.

“I’ve just missed you.” From her perspective she’d only been in the Barn a few minutes. But that wasn’t what she meant. He understood, but he couldn’t come up with a suitable response.

She shook her head with a soft smile, releasing him from an apology he’d have to make later. “Take me to bed, Nathan.”

They hadn’t solved anything, and come morning they’d have to deal with that. But it felt like absolution, having her warm and willing and safe in his arms.

Hours later, after she retaught him the feel of every inch of his skin, and he would have forgotten even his own name except for the number of times she repeated it in various tones of ecstasy, she tilted her head up to meet his eyes from where she was sprawled across his chest. “We’re going to find another way,” she swore, and after all she’d just done to him it was impossible not to believe her. “I need to stop the Troubles. And I will. But I’m not giving this up.”

His body still buzzed with the feel of her, but his mind was blissfully still. Giving himself over to the relief of that, he pulled the sheet around them and let himself sleep.
Chapter 8

Audrey woke warm and sated, cocooned in Nathan’s arms. Memories of the previous night filtered back, like watching the best movie in the world on repeat, and she basked in them. She could hardly believe that this was real, and not another dream to get her through her lonely, anxious nights. But Nathan’s chest rose and fell behind her, his arm a comfortable weight around her waist, and she could hear his breathing, deep and even. This was no dream.

It had all been so deliriously slow. She didn’t usually go for that, and she fully intended to show him the merits of speeding things up a little. But the man sure knew the value of each and every touch, and the results had been electrifying. She’d never felt so loved. Cherished. Adored. Or alive, as his hands and lips found ways to drive her wild that she’d never even imagined.

And then there were the things she did to him.

She held an extraordinary amount of power over the man. Last night it had been intoxicating, with him practically purring beneath her, absolutely at her mercy. In the daylight it was terrifying.

Because maybe last night she’d started putting him back together. But for years she’d been breaking him apart.

One of the first things that had attracted her to Nathan Wuornos was the fact that he was an extraordinarily good man. She didn’t come across many of those in her line of work. She was accustomed to chasing serial killers, pedophiles, and other dregs of humanity. Most men in the Bureau were hardened by the job and saw her as either a threat or a screw-up. There’d been little time outside of work to search for someone less rough around the edges. So she’d been shocked and pleased to find that underneath her new partner’s dry humor and New England stoicism was an honest to goodness white knight, complete with door-opening chivalry and everything.

At first she’d written it off as small town manners, until she realized that no one else in town had any manners at all. She’d never been in such a close-mouthed, tight-fisted community. But Nathan went out of his way to make her feel welcome, buying her ridiculous local paraphernalia, giving her lessons on how to sound like a Mainer, and talking about her staying like it was some foregone conclusion. (Turns out it was, but he hadn’t known that.) And it wasn’t just that he was flirting with her – because really, she’d never met anyone more awful at flirting.

She’d known without a doubt how wonderful a man he was when he took back his affliction so Jackie could be free of hers. It was the most selfless act she’d ever witnessed – and he hadn’t even known the girl. She couldn’t quite fathom how he could willingly go back to a life without feeling when he’d obviously been delighted to have all his senses again – but he’d brushed off her awe as if everyone would do the same.

When she’d started bending rules to help the Troubled he’d gotten anxious, and as much as he’d hated the Rev he’d disapproved when she killed him. And on some level she’d appreciated that even when he was annoyed at her. Because he was her moral compass whenever she got a little lost.

So when he’d joined the Guard and started going rouge it had left her with a constant sinking in her gut. Letting a Troubled prisoner escape was something she might have done – but he shouldn’t have. She’d known that every indiscretion was for her sake but that made it even worse, because she hated herself for being responsible for his corruption.
When she’d returned to find Haven in such disarray, its denizens shooting each other in the streets without fear of reprisal, something inside of her had snapped. Even though she’d learned to get creative when the Troubles were involved all the years she’d thought she spent in the FBI had instilled in her a firm belief in law and order. To see that obliterated, and Nathan accept its loss, had released months of pent up frustration.

But it had all dissipated when he’d admitted the Guard had kept him alive to make him suffer.

His father had warned her how dark a place Haven could be, but she hadn’t believed him at the time. She’d still been enamored by the weirdness, and convinced that once she found some answers and got bored she’d go back to chasing murderers with the FBI. But later she’d seen the Chief literally break into pieces under the strain of holding the town together. Now she worried Nathan might do the same.

She turned in his arms so she was facing him. He looked utterly relaxed, and she was glad for that. But as she ran a hand over his shoulder she couldn’t help but think of all the burdens resting there. She wanted to take them from him. To spirit him away to a place where he didn’t have to fight and stand and hurt while everything crumbled around him. A place where he could feel all the good things in life, and was never left alone.

Ever since she’d come to Haven she’d had a need to help the Troubled that she couldn’t rightly explain, eclipsing everything else, even her search for her mother turned prior identity. As much as she’d cared for Nathan and Duke and enjoyed the life she’d built in Haven, from the moment she learned of her fate she rarely considered defying it. There was something engrained in her, to accept the cycle. Maybe Howard was right – maybe it was penance for a crime she couldn’t remember, and she’d accepted the punishment a long time ago.

But she would flee this place with him and never look back if it meant taking away the pain she’d seen blazing in his eyes.

The Guard had been wrong. Lust hadn’t kept her out of the Barn. But now that she had slept with Nathan that could be what kept her from seeking it again. The urgency to help everyone was dampened by her concern for him. There was one particular Trouble she wanted to cure, and everything else seemed dim in comparison.

He had left the station so exhausted and miserable she could hardly stand it. When he had taken the blame for all that had happened it had broken the proverbial dam. She had known she was hurting him before she left, but she’d thought it was for his own good. But there was nothing good about the self-hatred he was spewing except that it told her the man she loved was still in there, raging against the injustice of what he’d become.

He was too far gone to be comforted by her words. But she’d known there was another way to fix him – to give him back the missing pieces of himself, if only temporarily. Maybe it hadn’t been fair, to override his mind by supercharging his body. But she’d needed to take his pain and replace it with pleasure. To make him forget this terrible burden he’d been carrying.

Because this wasn’t his fault – it was hers.

And now Bernie’s accusations kept running through her head and she wondered if they were true. Maybe she was a whore. Because she did want to choose this over duty. Now that she’d had a taste of everything she and Nathan could be she wanted to build a life with him more than anything. To spend every night making love and wake up in his arms and tease him in the Bronco and solve cases together and watch the awe wash over his face when they fell over the cliff together. She didn’t want to walk into some Barn and forget Audrey Parker and how she’d come to life the day
Nathan pulled her from a dangling car.

But she had told him to stop thinking, and all she could do was take her own advice. She had slept with Nathan, and there was no undoing that. She had vowed she would find another way to fix this, and that was what she’d have to do.

To accomplish that they’d probably have to go to the station, as much as she never wanted to leave this bed. According to the clock on Nathan’s nightstand it was already nearly eight.

The only positive was she could wake him far more pleasantly than an alarm clock.

Starting at his nearest shoulder, she trailed a line of soft, wet kisses across his collarbone and up his neck. She was surprised when he didn’t startle awake or react to her touch, but by the time she reached his jaw she noticed his eyes were open and following her.

“Morning,” she drawled, placing one last kiss on the corner of his mouth.

He swallowed, his eyes wide. “Hi.” His voice was low and raspy and she found it undeniably sexy even as he was looking at her like he couldn’t quite figure what she was doing in his bed. Her adorable, awkward man.

Stifling a giggle, she shifted down and nuzzled into the crook of his neck, pleased when his arms tightened around her. She pressed an open palm above his heart, feeling it race under her hand. His fingers drifted across her back, and she let herself absorb the peace of the moment, wishing she could store it away to keep her sane once the world came knocking, as it was sure to do as soon as they left this room.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered into his neck after a minute or two.

She felt his entire body tense and his hands still.

“No about that!” she assured, catching his drift. She pulled back so she could look into his face and chase the fears away. “Last night was…”

“Incredible,” they said almost simultaneously. She was so glad they were back in sync.

“Mmmmmhmmmmm,” she hummed. “For someone with absolutely no game with chicks, you certainly have some moves.”

He didn’t take the bait, instead flashing her a cocky smile. After the night they’d had, she supposed he’d earned it.

“What are you sorry for?” he asked after they’d grinned at each other for awhile like love sick teenagers.

She sighed, almost wishing he’d let her comment drop. They needed to have this conversation. But she’d really rather they didn’t. “For making a scene at the station yesterday. Wait, no—”

He squinted at her. “You’re not sorry about making a scene at the station?”

She pulled away, running a hand through her hair, which was a tangled mess. “No. Yes. I mean I’m sorry about the yelling. But the manhandling was not okay, mister!” She punctuated her point with a few prods to his chest.

“I had to protect you.” His tone allowed for no argument, and she wanted to roll her eyes at how
quickly he could turn caveman on her.

Instead she went for honesty. “I know. That’s why I’m sorry.”

“What are you talking about?”

She sat up and suddenly wished she was wearing clothes. She pulled the sheet around her and crossed her arms across her chest, but covering up didn’t make her feel any less vulnerable.

“I’m so sorry for everything you went through while I was gone. The Guard made you suffer because of me. You had to hold Haven together because I left it in a mess. Even before the Barn I was hurting you. This isn’t your fault – it’s mine. You’d be better off without me.”

“Are you crazy?”

“Hey!” she protested.

He sat up as well, but he didn’t try to cover himself. She had to force herself to look at his face, not his chest.

“Didn’t you see me the night you came back? I’m not better without you! Don’t you dare even think that.”

He had been ruined, but it should never have come to that. “You were supposed to be fine on your own. You weren’t supposed to fall in love with me!”

“Little late for that.” He said it with such finality, as if it was a universal truth and not something she could wreck if she tried hard enough or just kept being herself.

“I thought if I pushed you away you’d get over it. You’d be okay when I was gone. And you’d be safe.”

“Why the hell would that make me safe?”

She didn’t know why he couldn’t see it. It had all been so clear in her head. The only thing that made sense, really. She couldn’t save herself. But she would save him. “Because I thought Lucy had been in love with the Colorado Kid. And he’d died because of her. I didn’t want the same thing to happen to you.”

“That’s why you froze me out?”

“Yes.”

“That was an awful plan.”

He said it so matter-of-factly the tension that had been growing between them snapped. “Yeah. I realize that now.” Hating the distance between them, she scooted forward and collapsed into his shoulder.

“You’re allowed to be mad at me, you know.” She was glad she wasn’t looking at him when she said it. Because as much as it was true, she didn’t want to see that anger contort his handsome features.

He was silent at first, and she thought he would pass up the opportunity. When he finally spoke his raw voice startled her into pressing closer.
“I hated the way you were acting. I just wanted to help you, Parker, and you’d barely even look at me. You kept flaunting Duke in my face.”

She wouldn’t make excuses, but she had grievances of her own to air while they were being honest. “I hated seeing you with Jordan. I wanted to be happy that you’d moved on but it killed me every time you went to her and not me. I was having seizures in that damned haunted house and you didn’t even notice. I know I was the one pushing you away but I just wanted my partner back.”

“It hurt too much to follow you around. I never wanted Jordan. But I thought the Guard could help me find a way to keep you here.”

“I just needed you safe.” It had been her driving focus those last few months. Find the Colorado Kid. Find out why the Barn always came for her, if she could. But protect Nathan at all costs. Even when the cost was making her last days miserable.

He pulled away enough to cradle her face and press their foreheads together. “That’s exactly how I felt. How I still feel. I would do anything, Parker. Anything,” he swore.

“Don’t lose yourself,” she pleaded.

“What?”

“I don’t know who I am—”

“I’ve told you. I do.”

“And I know who you are. I need that to stay true, no matter what happens. You’re not allowed to lose yourself.”

“I was a mess before you showed up the first time. I can’t hold this all together without you.”

“So we hold it all together – together. Sorry. That kind of got away from me.”

He stopped her babbling with a searing kiss, and she grabbed his shoulders to pull them flush against each other. He didn’t cave like he had last night, and they battled until she had to pull away to fill her starving lungs.

He only allowed her a few seconds to recover and then it was back to the best kind of drowning. His hands were everywhere as he pushed her down on the mattress. Seemed like he didn’t have trouble with fast after all.

Just so long as it was fast.

As if he’d heard her wayward thought he pulled back far enough to give her a long suffering look. “You’re going to tell me we have to get back to the station,” he groaned.

“Am not.” But she didn’t sound convincing even in her own ears. Then one of his hands found its way under the sheet and she let out a squeak as it traveled lower.

“Was gonna say now might be a good time to join me in the shower.”

He didn’t need telling twice. He slid out of bed and scooped her into his arms, but she was still half tangled in the sheet, which almost sent them both crashing to the floor when it wouldn’t come untucked from the mattress. By the time Audrey freed herself she was giggling uncontrollably.

“Smooth, Wuornos.”
He grunted and picked her up again, carrying her toward the bathroom. “You didn’t fall for smooth.”

She laughed at what might have been the understatement of the year. “True. Fell for good.”

Once they were finally standing under the faucet together joy flooded her at the way his face lit up when the water hit him, mixing with her arousal to send her cart wheeling in a heady swirl, and he was barely even touching her yet. Was this how she made him feel, she wondered as she pressed against him so the heat could wash over his skin.

“Fell for you,” she whispered, before showing him just how hard she had fallen.
Chapter 9

There were still a few hours of morning left by the time they made it to the station, which Audrey felt showed significant career dedication.

Their conversation on the drive over was light and inconsequential. She held his hand and pretended the contact – and all the delicious hours of contact since yesterday – had banished the tension from his body.

Most of her worries from that morning were still swirling through her head. Putting on her work clothes had less of a focusing effect when Nathan was trying to convince her to take them back off. But there was also a giddiness bubbling inside her. Though she knew it wasn’t true, she felt invincible. Walking through the station door felt like a brand new start.

“Morning, Marge,” she chirped at the receptionist.

It took a few moments for the woman to raise her head and flash her a puzzled look.

“Joan,” Nathan corrected fondly from a few steps behind her.

Audrey turned back to look at him. “Really?”

“Yeah.” It had been easier to concentrate when she didn’t know a whole myriad of ways to wipe a smirk like that off his face.

She shook her head and tried to focus on the present. “Damn. I’m going to get better at that.”

“Because you’re less distracted now then when you first came to Haven?” he quipped.

“Shut up.” She shoved him gently, and then turned back to Joan, who was watching the exchange with raised eyebrows.

“I’m sorry, Joan. That’s a lovely name, really. Better than Marge. I’ll remember it next time. Or try to, anyway.”

She’d only taken a few steps toward Nathan’s office, him chuckling all the way, when another officer whose name she couldn’t even begin to guess entered the hallway and stared at her like she was either a ghost or a banshee.

“Hi,” she offered lamely, realizing that maybe she really should have been sorry about causing a scene at the station.

By the time she encountered Stan, who stammered a greeting and wouldn’t look her in the face, she’d figured out how to fix this.

There was a spare desk in the lobby, and she dragged Nathan over and used his shoulder to steady herself as she climbed onto it. From that vantage point she could see down the hallway. There weren’t nearly as many officers bustling around as there used to be.

“Excuse me,” she shouted. The room went silent, though she could hear people shuffling in their offices. “Could everyone please come out here? I’ve got a couple of announcements.”

“What are you doing?” Nathan asked, peering up at her.
“I’ve got this.” She waved him off as a small crowd filed in. After a minute or two she took a deep
breath and flashed them all a shaky smile. As much as the town apparently revolved around her she
wasn’t used to being the center of attention. “So, I’m back. Obviously. First off, I want to
apologize for all the yelling yesterday. I was a little shocked by what’s going on, but it’s all good
now. I’ll try to use my inside voice in the future. And secondly, Nathan and I are sleeping
together.”

“Parker!” he hissed.

Just as she expected, that didn’t seem to shock many people. “We weren’t, before I went –” she
made a vague, fluttering hand gesture, “wherever he told you I went – but we are now, so you can
settle your bets and move on. Thank you. Now back to work.”

She waited until everyone had filtered out before she clambered back to the floor.

“Was that necessary?” He looked mortified, but she wasn’t sorry.

“I just saved us from weeks of awkward questions meant to fish out did they or didn’t they just so
they could figure out who won the office pool. It’s all in the open now. So I can do this.” She
leaned forward on her tip-toes, looped her arms around his neck, and kissed him.

She half expected him to resist and was pleased when he didn’t. When he pulled away he left his
eyes closed and his forehead pressed against hers. “We’re still not supposed to do that. Here
anyway. Or probably at all.”

“Why don’t you tell the Chief?” she teased.

She wasn’t used to the mischievous grin he flashed her, but the way it sent heat pulsing through her
she determined to cause it more often. “Heard he’s a pretty good guy. I could probably get him to
make an exception.”

“If not, I can always try to convince him,” she purred. Her hands slid up his chest to finger the skin
above his collar.

“You do realize other people can see us, don’t you?”

He stepped away, and she pouted at the loss of contact, even though she knew he was right.
Heaven only knew what Marge – Joan – thought of them now.

“You’re the one who insisted we come here today. I have enough vacation saved up we wouldn’t
have to bother for weeks.”

She allowed herself a moment to savor the thought of that – being able to lock herself in Nathan’s
bedroom and do nothing but him for a week. To say everything that needed to be said without
interruption. To teach them both the meaning of untempered joy and love without strings. To
simply be two people, young and in love, driven by adoration, attraction, and hormones. Not two
hardened cops trying to hold a town together and solve a decades old mystery to save their own
skins. She wanted to blow off work without feeling guilty. Sit around with a couple of beers
swapping childhood stories. Fall asleep together on the couch while watching a movie. Go on dates
without worrying someone was trying to kill her.

But there were people trying to kill her, and they didn’t have the luxury of living their lives as if
there weren’t. A blissful week wouldn’t be worth it if she was shot dead at the end of it and Nathan
was left alone again.
“You know why we have to bother.”

She hated that she had to darken his good mood. But they did need to focus, and she needed that reminder as much as he did.

“Yeah,” he said tightly, glowering.

She placed a hand on his shoulder. “We’ll figure this out. We just can’t give them the time to get the jump on us.”

“They’ve got every advantage.”

“They don’t have me. And I’m pretty good at this Troubled stuff.”

She stared at him, daring him to contradict, but he conceded instead. “You did always like the weird ones.”

“That is so much truer than we ever imagined. So what’s on the docket today, Chief?”

He slipped on his professionalism like a uniform. “I think I’ve got the Alistair cover-up under control. Dwight faked a car wreck. Story is dentals confirmed identity, but the body was so badly burned immediate cremation was ordered. Stan should have called the sister to let her know this morning.”

“Wanna blow off paperwork to help with some investigating? I’ve got some questions about the files I read yesterday.”

“Yeah,” he said tentatively.

“Don’t worry. I promised no more yelling, remember?”

She followed him through the station. All the confidential files she’d pulled were still piled on his desk – probably unwise except that it sounded like it didn’t matter much. She examined the plain, rectangular room – a desk, a chair, a few filing cabinets. No ornamentation of any kind. It lacked life and character – and space for her.

“You office is awfully small. How are we going to fit another desk in here?”

His eyebrows scrunched as he squinted his eyes. “We aren’t?”

“Ah, come on. Are you really going to make me work in some empty office down the hall?”

“I’ve had my own office since I became Chief.”

“Yeah, but I was right outside. And it was more fun when we shared.” They’d driven each other half nuts sometimes being in such close quarters, but that had always made life interesting. Now that they had a shared secret mission, it seemed more important than ever that it was easy to work together.

But square footage was not on her side. He set her up in the nearest empty office, issued her a new gun and filed the paperwork to get her reinstated. But once the technicalities were accomplished she dragged the comfiest chair she could find into his office, fully intending to invade his work space at every opportunity.

She started by rolling her chair right beside his and picking up the top file. “So. Meteors keep falling. Town goes crazy. Troubles flare up everywhere. That makes sense.”
“So what doesn’t make sense?” he asked.

“You said the Guard is afraid the outside world’s going to catch on to what’s happening in Haven. And that the meteor shower was national news.”

“Yes.”

“Then how come they didn’t catch on? These paint a pretty bleak portrait of disturbing killings, maimings, and basically gang warfare between the Guard and the Rev’s men. Even the doctored versions would easily make the nightly news. How could the world possibly look toward Haven and not know something’s going on?”

“The Guard has a family that can make people forget. They know killing outsiders will start something they can’t contain. So they’ve made sure no one leaves here with any knowledge of what they’ve seen.”

“A bunch of reporters become amnesiacs after visiting a small town? Seems like that would require a whole other cover up.”

“The family can control how much is erased. It’s not a full memory wipe.”

“And that’s worked?”

“Seems to.”

“I hate to give the Guard any credit, but it does seem like they dodged a bullet there. If scientists caught wind of this place it would be a nightmare.”

“Thought has crossed my mind.”

He had a fancy diagnosis to hide behind, but she’d done enough research after they first met to know idiopathic neuropathy couldn’t explain the scope of his symptoms. She thought of him strapped to a lab table and knew she’d wipe a few nosy reporters’ brains to keep anyone from daring to run tests on him. But there would be no easy way to explain a man whose shadow had a thirst for vengeance or a woman who turned into a succubus every Friday and stole the years from her victims to give them to her miracle-grow babies.

“So the Guard is trying to protect the town – they’re just willing to use any means necessary.”

“The Guard is protecting the Troubled,” Nathan corrected sharply. “They don’t give a damn for those in town who aren’t.”

“So maybe I should tell them I’m Troubled, ‘eh?”

“You can’t seek them out!” he demanded.

“Okay. I was just trying to lighten the mood. I get it. Stay away from big bad men with tattoos.”

“I have a list of all known Guard members. You’ll need to memorize it. And we’ll have to figure out which ones have Troubles that could still harm you, even if they don’t work on you directly.”

“Aye, aye, Captain.”

“This is serious.”

“I know.” But she hadn’t figured out what to do about the Guard yet, and she didn’t want to fight
with him today. She flipped absentmindedly through a few pages of the folder she was holding. It was too vast a compilation to pick out anything useful without having a clue what they were looking for. They’d need to figure out a plan of attack before they really started digging.

“Where did you tell people I went?” she asked. He’d told her she’d been listed as dismissed after vacating her post, but that hardly said anything. With two Havens, it was unwise to take anything at face value.

“Didn’t really.”

“Do they know what’s going on, or are they still buying the BS about gas leaks and food poisoning?”

“You’d have to be pretty dense to believe the spin anymore. Half the time Dave and Vince don’t even bother. The whole PD knows about the Troubles. But the Guard did a pretty good job spreading their side of the Barn story. So most everyone thinks you either left town so you didn’t have to go into the Barn, or you went in unwillingly, and that’s why it didn’t work.”

“Unwilling because I’d rather be sleeping with you.”

“Basically.”

“Well I’m glad I pretty much substantiated that rumor.”

“Yeah. Thanks for that.”

But when she rolled her eyes he let the cracks show in his mask of disapproval. They’d gravitated closer during their discussion and his face was only a few inches from hers. She could see the specks of blue in his eyes and she itched to count them, run her fingers up his cheekbones and bury them in his hair, kiss his slightly parted lips.

He was staring at her just as intently. The thread of their conversation lost, she leaned in closer.

“We are not making out here.”

His voice startled her, but she didn’t pull away. She licked her lips and watched him gulp. “We are so making out here. We spent far too long not making out here. If we’re going to spend most of our time at the station, making out will happen. Unless you think you can resist me?”

She leaned even closer but didn’t touch him, waiting for him to make that move.

His resolve held for a few seconds before he caved. “Not sure the point of tryin’.”

“Good man,” she whispered.

“Terrible cop,” he countered before closing the distance between them. The kiss was unhurried and gentle, obviously not going anywhere since they were indeed at work, but it thrilled her nevertheless.

“Eh,” she murmured when they pulled away. “Rules are overrated.” She leaned forward to kiss him again but he shifted his head slightly so she could feel his warm breath on her ear.

“Later,” he whispered.

She jerked away with a laugh. He looked as dazed as she felt, and she just wanted to lock the door, close the blinds, and make later now.
“This is why you need to have your own office.”

“Point taken.” She pushed her chair away to put a respectable amount of distance between them, but he kept gazing at her in a way that was definitely not work appropriate.

“My father is probably rolling in his grave,” he finally said.

“Rattling in his cooler?” she shot back, unable to help herself.

“That’s not funny.” But his lips twitched upwards, and she laughed.

“Yeah it is.”

His smile faltered. “He told me not to fall in love with you.”

He’d gotten too serious all of a sudden, and she wanted to banish that. “Let me guess. He was not a fan of office PDAs.”

“He really wasn’t. But that wasn’t it. He told me you were too important to the town.”

That surely meant something. Garland had worked with Lucy for God’s sake and had never said a thing to Nathan or Audrey, and that was something they’d have to explore. But it wasn’t going to stop them. “Good thing you never listened to your father.”

“Yeah. We should go over that Guard list.” After pulling the file up on his computer Nathan grilled her on names and abilities until her phone vibrated across the desk. Grateful for the distraction, she was even gladder after she read the text.

“We have to go to the Gull for lunch. Duke’s bored.”

“Well let me drop this and get my running shoes,” he deadpanned.

She rolled her eyes. “James is there.”

There was something so endearingly paternal in the way he perked up at the mention of their son’s name that she didn’t make him scramble for an excuse to change his mind. She just stood up and reached for her coat.

“Besides, once we tell Duke the Guard runs the town he may not leave the Gull till we sort this all out.”

“Wouldn’t that be lucky?” Nathan said from behind her, but there was no bite in it, and she wasn’t fooled for a moment.

Duke was behind the bar when they entered the Grey Gull. But there was definitely something strange about the way he scrutinized them as they entered his restaurant. “Well if it isn’t my favorite officers of the law.”

“What’s with the look?” Audrey asked.

“He’s trying to figure out if we had sex.” Nathan tried to sound longsuffering about it, but he didn’t stammer or shy away from Duke’s innuendo, and Audrey could read the pride in that.

Part of her wanted to knock the boys’ heads together and tell them to keep her out of their pointless alpha male pissing contests. But if Duke was going to butt into their sex life, she might as well give
Nathan the upper hand in this one.

“Wrong question,” she teased. “How about how many times?”

“I’m glad it’s easy to pretend you’re not my parents.”

She hadn’t noticed that James was already in the restaurant. *Way to make your already extremely awkward relationship with you son even worse,* she internally chided, hiding her face in Nathan’s shoulder for a few seconds as she stifled a giggle. “You were not supposed to hear that. I am so sorry.”

“Glad the over sharing was for my benefit, then,” Duke quipped.

“She’s already announced it to the entire police department. Might as well tell you next.”

“You did what?” Duke asked.

She settled on one of the stools and leaned across the bar. “Don’t you guys watch TV? Partners are never supposed to fall for each other, and they always do, and then they spend an aggravating half a season trying to hide their relationship from their co-workers. But the co-workers always find out, and there are bets and hijinks and we don’t have time for that. And you’re the boss so, figured we’d just get this all out in the open. Full disclosure.”

“Did you send them a memo?” Duke asked.

“She stood on a desk and made an announcement.”

“You didn’t!” Duke seemed altogether too delighted about this.

“I did. I don’t see what the big deal is.”

“Audrey Parker, that is classic. Did he blush just like he’s blushing now?”

“Did turn pretty red. I calmed him down though.”

“Really,” James interrupted. “I don’t need to be here for this conversation.”

Duke laughed, and Audrey found she was strangely pleased by his approval. “I’m happy for you guys. But can I just say – finally.”

“You’ve said it. Now you can get over it.” Nathan’s voice was tight, but Audrey didn’t think he was really mad. She reached out for his hand and linked their fingers together. He squeezed back slightly, reassuring her.

“Wow. Still a spoilsport. I really thought you’d be in a better mood considering—”

“So what’s for lunch?” James interrupted.

“Your subtlety makes so much more sense because I know where it comes from,” Duke said with a smirk.

He disappeared into the kitchen and returned with four perilously balanced plates. “Crabcakes. Finest Haven has to offer.”

“These are divine,” Audrey exclaimed after her first bite. Even better, it felt like comfort food. Something quintessentially Maine that would have marveled her before she got so wrapped up in
the dark side of Haven. Sometimes she forgot that this place really was beautiful. That before she’d gotten distracted she’d been charmed by the sea and the beaches and the small town atmosphere that was so different for someone born in Cincinnati who’d spent years living in Boston. One could build a life here, away from all the hassles of big city living – if not for its residents’ supernatural maladies.

“I told you.”

She rolled her eyes, but she didn’t hide her smile. “Yeah, yeah. Like you needed the ego boost.”

“Care to tell me why everyone in town is so grumpy nowadays? My seafood man looked at me like I was a ghost and then grossly overcharged me.”

Audrey looked at Nathan, glad the man no longer seemed delighted at the prospect of telling Duke. She’d found his paranoia about tattooed men amusing on more than one occasion, but it wasn’t a joke anymore. The Guard had taken over the town, they’d made Nathan suffer, and they were a threat to everything she cared about. She hated that maybe they’d steal Duke’s good humor as well.

Their eyes locked, and she could tell he was wondering if she wanted to be the one to break the news. But she didn’t, so she shook her head.

“What am I missing here?” Duke asked, suspicion creeping into his tone about their little display.

“The Guard practically runs Haven now,” Nathan revealed. “They’ll be after Audrey for not taking the Troubles away. If they find out you’re the one who helped her out of the Barn they’ll probably target you too. You might want to lay low for awhile. Delay the Gull’s reopening until we get this straightened out.”

Audrey held her breath and waited for the hysterics. But Duke didn’t leap from his stool and start gesticulating. Instead he set down his fork and muttered, “Damn.” He ran a hand through his hair, which he hadn’t bothered to pull back into a ponytail today. “I’m guessing Vince isn’t in charge anymore?”

“No,” Nathan answered.

Duke took a deep, steadying breath. Instead of panic overtaking him Audrey watched in awe as he seemed to pull himself together, like a fed during a pre-op. “So how do we stop them?”

She wasn’t expecting his voice to be steady, or tempered with steel. He was so different from the man who’d demanded police protection after he thought he’d saw a man with the tattoo in the grocery store.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” he asked. Audrey hadn’t realized she’d been staring.

“I expected you to be freaking out,” she admitted, shaking her head to try and clear the notion. He’d come such a long way since they first met, and she’d been so wrapped up in everything she hadn’t even noticed. “But it’s like you’re all grown up.”

Something raw and honest seemed to flash across his face for a moment, but it melted so quickly into his typical cheek she didn’t have a chance to analyze it. “Why Officer Parker, that was extraordinarily condescending. I’ll have you know I’m quite capable of keeping a cool head in a dangerous situation. I did all right when my ship was commandeered by those poker freaks, if you recall.”
“I absolutely remember that you can strip on command,” she teased.

“That was your brilliant plan, sweetheart.”

Despite all the danger they’d been in, that had still been a good day. “I figured why not. Take out the bad guys, keep your ship from sinking, get a little show in the process.”

“I don’t recall you telling me how you got the upper hand on the boat,” Nathan said. Duke had specifically asked her not to mention it, even though she’d known Nathan would have been delighted by the story. She supposed it did sound a bit scandalous, and she hoped Duke had the tact not to turn it into something it wasn’t.

“You better watch out, Nathan. She ever hands you an earpiece and tells you to do whatever she says you don’t know what she might come up with in that twisted mind of hers. An officer of the law.”

Grateful, she plastered on a fake scowl. “You really want to play that card, Crocker, when your boat got taken over because of something you were smuggling?”

“So, did Vince and Dave have anything to say about how we solve this little problem?”

Audrey laughed at Duke’s abrupt change of topic. It felt good to know their news about the Guard hadn’t wigged him out. And that even if Duke was maturing, he was still a lovable smartass. He’d always known how to keep her amused and distracted, and she had a feeling she’d need that more than ever in the coming months.

“Not really,” she answered. “But I think I’ll be able to crack Dave if I work at it enough. He told me Sarah kept a journal, and she was working on a plan to stay. If we can just figure out what she did with it it might have some clues we need.”

“She left it for me,” James said.

Audrey stared at the man who’d mostly been quietly observing their conversation. For some reason the idea had never occurred to her, but it made perfect sense.

“Do you still have it?” she asked.

“No. I gave it to Lucy, like I was supposed to. But I have this.” He reached into a pocket of his flannel shirt and pulled out a folded, yellowed sheet of paper and a photograph.

Audrey took them almost reverently, setting the letter down in front of her but holding on to the picture. She had so little proof of her former lives. She held her breath as she stared at the photo of Sarah standing on a beach with little James in her arms. It was like looking at the Colorado Kid photo – her features were the same, but the hair was so unfamiliar it didn’t seem like her. The photo was black and white, so all she could tell about her hair color was it had been darker than it was now, but she’d never had such tight, short curls.

But it wasn’t herself she kept staring at. It was the baby she was cradling so reverently. Audrey had never thought herself maternal—frankly babies were needy and a bit scary. Finding out she’d had one she’d forgotten about had shaken her, but as much as she’d intellectually understood the Colorado Kid was her son there was still some part of her that hadn’t internalized it. She wanted to know James, to bond with him and form a relationship. But they looked about the same age now and he already had a mother who raised him. She supposed she’d have to settle with being a friend and to be honest that hadn’t bothered her much. But something stirred in her as she stared at the photo. The wind had been cold that day, the first sign of summer’s fading, and she had known she
was nearly out of time. As desperately as she loved her son it would not keep her here, and she
needed to protect him at all costs. She’d been overwhelmed by a love so deep and a despair so
encompassing it had almost torn her in two. She did not want to leave her son. But his father was
the only thing that could save her, and he wasn’t even born yet.

“Parker, are you all right?” Nathan’s hand on her shoulder pulled her from her reverie. Instinct
made her wipe her hand under her nose, but she wasn’t bleeding. She didn’t want to move her head
for fear it would shake the memory further away, but it was already fading.

But the love it had revealed was left behind. She glanced over at James and had to fight an
overwhelming urge to throw her arms around him and never let go.

“Yeah, I’m okay,” she answered, feeling hot tears leak from her eyes.

“Audrey?” Nathan’s voice was soft with concern, and he was so focused on her reaction he hadn’t
even looked at what she was holding. And something twisted inside her, because she barely even
remembered this, but Nathan had known Sarah.

She passed it to him. “Our son,” she choked, waiting for the despair to wash over him at the sight
of everything he should have had. If he’d never gone back to his own time Sarah would have loved
him without any of Audrey’s baggage, and even if they hadn’t been able to stop the Barn he would
have had their son to raise. Nathan would be too outstanding a father to give in to despair if he had
a child to love.

But the pain she waited for never appeared. Nathan stared at the photo in awe, and when he turned
to her he was grinning. He brushed her tears away with the pads of this thumbs and then cradled
her head as he kissed her. When they came up for air he didn’t let go. His eyes also seemed to be
sparkling with tears.

“Thank you,” he whispered.

“For what?”

“For giving us our son.”

She wanted to tell him she had nothing to do with it, but the way he was looking at her like she was
the most precious thing in all the world convinced her how much he believed it had always been
her, no matter what memories she had. She needed that certainty to face whatever was ahead. She
wanted to believe her past, fractured as it was, was a single narrative of looking for him.

“You’re incredible,” she told him, needing him to understand how much he held her together. He
had a terrible habit of never giving himself enough credit, and she supposed it came from decades
of the Chief’s tough love and his isolating affliction.

He ran his finger down her face. “And we’re making the others uncomfortable. Read the letter.”

She had forgotten Duke and James were there, and she blushed at the thought of them witnessing
such intimacy. Maybe it was going to be challenging to work with Nathan now. He’d never been
able to capture her attention so thoroughly that the rest of the world fell away. Being observant was
critical to being a cop, but now she just wanted to observe him. She’d never been able to shake her
drive in any other relationship.

He handed her the letter so she didn’t have to risk meeting anyone else’s eye as she reached for it.
She unfolded it carefully. The paper was fragile and the creases were frayed and pronounced, as if
it had been read and refolded many times.
The only cursive she used anymore was in her signature, but she recognized those few oft-written letters in Sarah’s script. Taking a deep breath, she began reading.

Dearest James,

I wish that you could grow up hearing every day just how much I love you. It breaks my heart that I can only pray that you have a happy childhood rather than giving you one myself. June and Paul are kind, generous people, and you will be safe with them. I do not know if they will mention me. I doubt it, but maybe that is just as well. It will be safer for you to grow up in ignorance. Better, perhaps, not to know that I exist at all until it is time for us to meet again.

For I, Sarah Vernon, am the woman who gave birth to you – not June Cogan.

I am sorry if that is a shock, and news that you do not wish to hear.

I need you to understand two things about this revelation – that your mother loved you desperately, and there was nothing shameful about your birth.

If I could rewrite the rules of the universe to stay with you then I would in a heartbeat. The reasons why such drastic measures would be necessary cannot be contained in a single letter, but you must know this – you were never unwanted. I have loved you from the moment I knew you were on your way, and I shall hold on to the memory of the first time I held you for as long as I can.

As for your father – he was the most wondrous man I ever met. Handsome, kind, brave. When I looked into his eyes it was as if I saw countless lifetimes together, and in each one he adored me. Had we only the luxury of time we would have done everything properly so there could be no word of scandal to disparage us. But our time together was very brief. By the time I knew I was pregnant he was long gone.

This diary contains a very strange tale, and it is your choice whether you wish to read it. Doing so will open your eyes to a world you never imagined, and part of me wishes to shield you from that. But part of me wants you to know the extraordinary tale of where you came from. The choice is yours.

There is one thing I ask of you. You were born in a town called Haven, Maine, about fifty miles north of Portland. In the spring of 1983 I need you to come looking for me. You will not find Sarah Vernon. Perhaps some will tell you she had come to town once and disappeared years ago. I suspect most will tell you nothing at all.

Do not be discouraged. Because Sarah will not be in Haven – but I will be, with a different name, and a different hairstyle, and no memory that I have been there before. I will not have aged, and I will not remember that I sent you here or that I’ve ever birthed a child.

If you need help finding me look for Vince and Dave Teagues. Someone once told me I would find them running the local newspaper. It seems fitting that now I tell you the same. Show them the photo I’ve left with this letter, and tell them that Sarah needs them to help you find her new self. I fear they will still mourn me, so do not be harsh with them. But do not let them play dumb. If I have returned they will know, and do not let them pretend otherwise.

You must give me this journal. I know what I ask of you seems impossibly strange, and the truth is what I’ve just told you only scratches the surface. But your father once told me, “You don’t need to be afraid of what you can’t explain,” and that advice has sustained me through everything I have experienced since I met him. As tragic as my life feels in this moment, knowing I must leave you to be raised by someone else, I have faith that our time together is not ending – it is only being
delayed. I had hoped to find a way to stay with you, but it seems we both must wait. But I am confident that there is an end in sight to the cycle I am trapped in. My future self must know what I discovered so perhaps she can bring about that end.

Give me this journal, and tell me to read it, and my curiosity will do the rest. Because there is something about this town that I cannot resist, no matter who I am, and as my fate seems to be tied to it I will do whatever I can to free us both. I just need time, and information, and a friend by my side.

Perhaps it is selfish of me, but I hope you will be that friend.

Travel safe, my darling. Do not judge your father for leaving me, and do not judge me for falling into temptation. For ours is a love that transcends reason, capable of amazing things, of which you will always be its first and greatest gift.

With all my love,

Sarah

She wanted to reread it until she’d memorized every word and could remember writing it and all the emotion that must have gone into composing what was both a goodbye and an introduction. She’d thought about writing a goodbye letter for Nathan before the Barn arrived, but she’d given up on the notion because she hadn’t been able to find the words. Sarah had an eloquence she’d never possessed as Audrey Parker, and an adoration for the two men who’d been in her life for such a short while while that Audrey wished she could express.

“Did you read the diary?” she asked James when she could finally speak. He looked slightly uncomfortable, and how could he not be. She was neither the woman who’d birthed him or the one he’d gone looking for. If he’d ever bonded with Lucy the circumstances surrounding his death had sullied that.

“Of course. Introduction like that, how could I not?”

In that he was surely his mother’s son. “What did it say?”

“That shortly after Sarah arrived in Haven she fell in love with a man from the future, but she had to send him back to his own timeline. She befriended a pair of newspaper men, and together they helped people in town with supernatural problems. She learned that she bore a striking resemblance to someone who’d visited the town nearly thirty years ago. She discovered that there was another Sarah Vernon in Washington. That she didn’t just look like Margaret Thomas, she was Margaret Thomas. That for as far back as she could trace she had visited the town with a new name and a new look every twenty-seven years and the Troubles always stopped when she left. But they always came back, and so did she. She said she was looking for a way to end the Troubles without going away. But she ran out of time, so she needed a safe place for me. June was a friend of the real Sarah, and she knew she wasn’t able to have children of her own, so she left me in Colorado with her and her husband and asked them to give me the letter and the journal in 1983.”

“Did she mention anything she’d learned about staying?”

“She was vague. She’d make comments sometimes about how she dared not write down what she’d learned. I’m not sure who she thought would read it. But there was a sealed letter to Lucy inside. Maybe she told her.”

“Lucy ever mention any ideas about how to stay out of the Barn?” Nathan asked.
The bottom seemed to drop out of Audrey’s stomach, because she realized that Lucy had. But she wasn’t ready to hear Nathan tell her she should kill him for the good of the town. That wasn’t an option, and she didn’t want to fight about it with others around. She looked at James with wide, panicked eyes.

He simply shook his head. “No.” She smiled at him and tried to calm herself down before the others noticed.

“So where’s the journal now?” Duke asked.

“No idea. Lucy still had it when I was killed. She carried it around with her sometimes. I don’t know if she had it when she went into the Barn.”

“We’ll have to see if there’s any of Lucy’s stuff anywhere,” Nathan suggested. “Should be easier to find something that’s only been missing thirty years instead of sixty.”

“Yes.” It was a needle in a haystack, but it was encouraging to know that at least there was something in that haystack to find. She fingered the letter. “Can I borrow this? Maybe it’ll spark something. It would be a whole lot easier if I could just remember where Lucy put the diary – or what she and Sarah knew in the first place.”

James nodded. “Sure. And I’ll write down anything I recall reading. I was pretty blown away by how crazy everything was so I’m sure the finer details escaped me, but maybe I’ll remember something that means something to you.”

“Thank you.” She reached out and clasped her hand over his. It wasn’t the embrace she yearned for, but it was a start. Maybe one day they could both see her as that woman standing on the beach, but for now they had a shared objective and a basic understanding of their past.

“We ought to get back to the station.” She wasn’t sure what she could do there exactly. She needed the Herald archives and the diary of a woman who was essentially dead. But her head always seemed clear at the station. She’d feel productive and she and Nathan could come up with some next steps. And there were still plenty of Troubled people that needed her help, so she was sure to have some casework soon.

“Probably,” Nathan echoed.

“Thanks for lunch,” she told Duke, piling her silverware and napkin on her plate and then stacking that plate on Nathan’s.

“Thanks for the crying and the making out with Nathan right in front of us.”

“Shut up!” she said, but she couldn’t stop the grin that bubbled up inside her.

“There’s that smile. Keep your chin up. We’ll figure this out.”

Duke was all anyone could ask for in a brother – supportive, amusing, and desperately afraid of sentimentality. She wasn’t sure she’d be able to keep sane without him.

“You be careful, all right?”

“If there’s one thing I’m good at, it’s hiding from bastards with maze tattoos. I’m not going to let them get me now. Don’t you worry.”

She could feel Nathan’s hand on her back as they all said their goodbyes. She and Duke needed
words but with Nathan his presence was enough, and that was something altogether different and absolutely wonderful. And as they returned to the station Audrey realized that she didn’t have to be jealous. Because Sarah may have had a man who loved her and a child she remembered, but Audrey Parker had a family.
Chapter 10

The rest of the afternoon passed fairly uneventfully, except for the mysterious brown paper bag that Nathan retrieved from the kitchen before they left the station.

“What’s that?” Audrey asked as she shrugged into her coat.

“What usually comes in paper bags?”

“Booze. Porn. Drugs.”

“Funny,” he deadpanned.

“Seriously. What’s in there?”

“It’s honestly killing you not knowing, isn’t it?”

“Just tell me.” She reached for him, and he stepped nimbly out of the way.

“No cheating.”

“Spoilsport,” she huffed.

He laughed, but he also relented, tipping the bag forward so she could see its contents.

“Groceries?” She’d honestly been expecting something a little more mysterious.

“I asked Stan to pick up a few things.”

“Hmmm. Running the Chief’s errands. What did the poor guy do to deserve that?”

“Did you really want to spend this evening in a grocery store?”

“Ugg, no. I hate shopping.”

“My kitchen isn’t exactly well stocked at the moment. So Stan picked up a few things on his lunch break. Because he’s a friend.”

“I figured we’d just grab something.”

“Duke’s not the only one who can feed you, you know.”

She’d just been rattling his chain, but it was obvious she struck a nerve. “Wow. That was quite a tone there, Wuornos.”

She watched his whole body rise and fall as he took a deep breath. “I just thought I’d make us something nice, okay. But if you want to go to the Gull—”

“I’d appreciate that,” she interrupted, reaching out to settle a hand on his arm. “Really.”

She could tell he was still agitated on the drive home by the way he clenched the steering wheel, his knuckles white against the black leather.

“You don’t have to be jealous. Have you forgotten the past forty-eight hours? I chose you.”
“I’m not jealous,” he argued, but there was no conviction behind it.

“Yeah you are. And you don’t have to be. I didn’t mean to offend your manhood by implying I prefer Duke’s cooking. It’s just – he owns a restaurant. Makes sense he’s pretty good at it.”

“I want to be the one who takes care of you,” he admitted.

She was beginning to understand where his head was at. “I’d really like to argue that I don’t need to be taken care of, just on principal. But in this case I do want someone to feed me.”

“You don’t need anyone, I get that. Doesn’t mean you don’t deserve someone.”

She couldn’t remember anyone ever offering. She hadn’t even had parents to look out for her. Her foster families made it clear she was just a paycheck and an extra set of hands for the chores. Independence wasn’t a choice, it was the only way to survive. Except that had been the real Audrey Parker’s life, and even though she remembered that she hadn’t lived it. She didn’t know if she’d ever had parents. When she might have had parents. It made her head hurt to think about, and it made something inside her ache for a normal, uncomplicated life. She’d thought chasing Lucy and finding her birthmother would tell her more about who she was, make her whole. All it had done was reveal that everything she thought she could count on was a lie.

Everything except the man beside her, who was staring a little too deliberately out the windshield. Had she messed things up so thoroughly that he was already convinced of her rejection? Probably. She reached out one of her hands to cover his on the steering wheel, eliciting a labored breath. She went no further, not wanting to tease or distract him. She just wanted him to know that she was there.

“Thank you,” she said simply, for once all her volumes of words failing her.

He turned to look at her then. “You’re not going to fight me on this?”

“I think we’ve wasted enough time fighting with each other. Besides, I think we both could use someone looking out for us for a change.”

She was used to his serious expressions, but he was extraordinarily handsome when he smiled, and she resolved to give him plenty of reasons to do so more often.

“Eyes on the road, mister,” she finally said. “It’ll be real embarrassing when we get pulled over for reckless driving.”

Once they reached his house Nathan turned on the stove and started unpacking the groceries.

“So, what’s for dinner?” she asked. “Or is it a big surprise?”

“Lobster,” he answered. “Seem to recall you’re fond of that.”

“Oh, absolutely. Do you need any help?”

He shook his head. “I’d like my kitchen to still be standing by the end of the night.”

“It’s still impossible sometimes to tell that you’re joking.”

“Who says that I’m joking?” But he cracked as she scowled at him, pulling her forward to brush a kiss across her lips so brief it was over before she even realized what was happening. It was such a strange, familiar gesture, as if they’d been together for years and not days. But already he was
pushing her toward the door. “I’ll take care of dinner. Go. Relax. Change into something comfortable. I’ll find you when it’s ready.”

It was as if he understood how new and strange this was for her, to spend every waking moment with someone, even him, and he was giving her space to chill and process.

It wasn’t until she’d shut herself in his bedroom and opened the duffle bag of clothes she’d brought from the Gull that etiquette started to overwhelm her. He’d told her to change into something comfortable, but had that been code for swapping her work attire with something sexier? He was making her a lobster dinner, surely with romance on his mind, and if he was anyone else she’d feel the need to impress him. But she honestly thought Nathan had no expectations that she’d emerge in anything but some comfy sweats – and she also knew she didn’t have to wear anything alluring to turn him on. If she did pick out something nice for him, would he think she was trying too hard or would he appreciate the effort?

Still uncertain, she pulled her cell phone out the pocket of her slacks.

As she glanced at the screen the missed voicemail icon she’d been dutifully ignoring since she left the Barn caught her eye. As long as she wasn’t looking at the shadows under Nathan’s eyes it was pretty easy to forget how long she’d been gone, but something about the idea of listening to the messages someone had left her during that time filled her with dread. She wasn’t sure why her phone was even still functioning when she hadn’t paid a bill in two years. But such logic didn’t seem to matter much in Haven. Truth was her social security number and bank account belonged to a brunette amnesiac in Boston, and yet their paper trails had never crossed.

It wasn’t like there were many people lining up to call her even when she was in town, she tried to convince herself. Rarely did she let fear smoother her curiosity. She was being ridiculous, and with nothing to do until dinner was ready she was out of excuses to put this off. With a deep breath she activated her voicemail and entered her password.

“You have thirty-three new voice messages,” the perpetually cheerful automated voice told her. Audrey was nearly certain she’d misheard. She didn’t think she’d gotten that many messages in her entire life. Especially if her life started the day she came to Haven.

She wasn’t expecting the first voice she heard to be Nathan’s, hoarse and frantic with a rasp that could have been blood rattling in his lungs.

“Parker, get out of there! Howard’s dead and the Barn’s breaking up. Duke’s coming. You have to go with him. Don’t be noble – something’s wrong. Come back.”

His desperation stole her breath. Suddenly she was back on Kick ‘Em Jenny Neck, watching the betrayal flash across his face as she’d given Duke her gun. She’d hated that their goodbye was steeped in agony. She’d rather the last thing she remembered be the way his eyes had fluttered shut when she kissed him.

Her finger trembled as she saved the message.

By the time the next one started she had a terrible sense that she knew how all of them would go.

“Parker, get out of there! Howard’s dead and the Barn’s breaking up. Duke’s coming. You have to go with him. Don’t be noble – something’s wrong. Come back.”

His desperation stole her breath. Suddenly she was back on Kick ‘Em Jenny Neck, watching the betrayal flash across his face as she’d given Duke her gun. She’d hated that their goodbye was steeped in agony. She’d rather the last thing she remembered be the way his eyes had fluttered shut when she kissed him.

Her finger trembled as she saved the message.

By the time the next one started she had a terrible sense that she knew how all of them would go.

“I’m at the hospital. Dunno if Duke told you, but Jordan shot me. But I’m okay. They patched me up. Gave me some meds. Waste of time, though. I don’t feel anything. The Troubles aren’t gone. The meteors didn’t stop. Nothing’s fixed. Whatever the Barn was supposed to do didn’t work. So there’s no reason for you to stay away. You need to come back. Because the town needs you. Because I need you. Please, Audrey.”
A tear coursed down her cheek. Nathan Wuornos wasn’t a begging man. But his voice, drugged and feeble, pleaded with her. And she hadn’t obliged.

“I’m going to find you, Parker. Whatever it takes. However long it takes.”

There was the man she knew, determined and stubborn and fearless. But he didn’t stay that way. The shades of desperation in each subsequent message shifted between grief and anger, frustration and despair, but it was always something consuming him. Driving him to confess what he probably wouldn’t say to her face, with far more words that he normally uttered at one time.

Just like watching an accident on the highway, she couldn’t tear herself away.

“It’s been a week. Damn it Parker, I don’t know what to do. Troubles are popping up all over the place and you’re the one who always talked everyone down. I can’t convince anyone everything is going to be okay when I don’t believe it myself.”

He recounted events she’d read about in the police reports. The rise of the Guard and its threat of a purge of all non-Troubled. He’d been frantic when he introduced the possibility, exhausted when he declared the crisis averted. The exhaustion seemed to linger. No matter what other emotions his words conveyed, he always sounded bone-weary.

“Today a Guardsman held a gun to my head and I almost told him to pull the trigger. I wanted him to. But I could hear your voice, telling me to man up. I knew that you’d be ashamed of me. You wanted me to live. That’s why you wouldn’t let me follow you into the Barn. You wanted me to have a life and look after the town and be there when you returned so next time someone would just be straight with you. I want to be that man you thought I was. But I’m not. My father was right. I’m weak. Always have been.”

Tears ran down her face as she choked back a sob. She felt paralyzed in a nightmare she couldn’t wake up from. What if he hadn’t thought of her in that moment? What if she’d come back and he’d been in the ground with no chance, however faint, of resurrection?

“I’m not sure if you can hear me. Sometimes I hope you can’t. Because I can’t bear the thought of you stuck someplace, listening to this, feeling sorry for me, wondering what’s going to happen. But I want to believe that the Troubles haven’t stopped because you’re out there somewhere, still you. That Duke found you so you aren’t alone and the two of you are looking for a way back. With James. That one day you’ll come back to town and nothing that’s happened in the past year will matter, because you’ll fix it. You’ll fix me. And if there’s anyone in this whole damn word stubborn enough to break fate and come back it’s you.”

In a few of the messages she could hear the alcohol fueling them. She thought of the Chief with his list of vices, explaining with his dying breath all the ways he’d tried to hold together, and she couldn’t blame Nathan for trying to find some solace.

“I went to Colorado. Thought maybe there’d be some clue about all this. But June Cogan’s mind is gone and no one would tell me why there are Guard symbols plastered all over her house. And the whole time all I could think was it should have been me by your side when you discovered that James was our son. And that I should have told you about Sarah. I made so many mistakes. I was afraid you wouldn’t forgive me for that one. I tried to resist. But she was just so … you. She looked at me the way you did when I told you I’d found Lucy Ripley. And all I’d seen in your eyes when you’d looked at me for so long was disgust. I just wanted to remember the way we used to be … how we could have been. She looked so disappointed when I turned away, and for once I knew how to fix that. And as soon as you touched me I was lost. It’s not an excuse but – I’m not sorry. Because even if he’s gone now James was proof that the two of us lived, and loved, and rang some
To hear that he’d thought she’d been disgusted with him was like a knife to her gut. She’d been exhausted and frustrated, terrified out of her mind he’d get caught up in the crossfire of whatever supernatural soap opera her life had become, but the only one she’d been disgusted with was herself. She’d hated herself for not being able to stand the fact he could be happy with Jordan, couldn’t abide that he was keeping his distance even though she’d done everything in her power to make that happen. Her list of mistakes was just as long as his, and she’d started penning hers first. She’d hated the situation, but she’d never hated him. She wished that it had been her on that beach, not Sarah, because she wanted to go back in time and absolve him. He shouldn’t have had to find another version of her just to see her smile again.

“You know what I’m really scared of, Parker? It’s not waiting for you. Twenty-seven years is a long time, but I’ll do it. I’ll wait through every damn day just to do this all over again, just like you said. Even if I’m old and you don’t remember any of this – it’ll be okay. But what terrifies me is maybe you aren’t coming back. What if you’re dead? What if you’ve been dead since the moment that Barn broke up? Sometimes I can’t breathe because I’m so sure that I’ve killed you. That by shooting Howard I destroyed the Barn with you in it. And James. And then I sent Duke to his death. The only three people I care about dead because I was too damned selfish to let you go. And what if you knew, in those last moments, that all this was my fault. You wanted to sacrifice yourself for Haven and instead of saving you I made your death meaningless. Except maybe I didn’t. I don’t know. And twenty-seven years of not knowing...how am I supposed to bear it?”

She had to pause before she listened to the next message, her heart pounding so fast she felt flushed and faint. How many had it been? How much longer could she do this to herself? Surely he’d never meant for her to hear all this. It was like talking to a gravestone, with the perk of her voice on the answering machine. He’d just been trying to cope and she was back now and it didn’t matter, because he hadn’t killed her. He’d saved her, and maybe he had damned the town to do it but she was glad she hadn’t waited another twenty-five years to return.

But he had spent two years in hell and she had fast forwarded through it all and if he could pull himself through it somehow then she could listen to the evidence.

She played the next message.

“It’s starting to hurt less, you being gone. I should be glad about that, but I’m not. Because I know what it means. It’s not that I’ve accepted this is the way it should be. I’ll never believe that. I’m just starting to forget what pain feels like. When my Trouble came back I was scared and angry. But by the time you came to Haven that had faded. I was just numb, inside and out. You made me feel things inside again long before you touched me. But I’m losing all that. The day I forget how much it hurts that you’re gone will be like you’ve died all over again.”

She couldn’t fathom anything being worse than pain, but she understood something about emptiness. All her life the mystery of her parents had been a void she couldn’t fill, not with boys or school or a successful career. Maybe that hadn’t been Audrey at all. Maybe that had been who she really was, some mythical child of Haven, lost or damned or something, either searching for the truth of her existence or living out her penitence.

Was that why they trusted each other? Because at the end of the day, they both just wanted to feel alive?

“I never told you I loved you. At first I thought it would mess things up between us. Then you got kidnapped and started pushing me away and I figured you wouldn’t even care. But I should have told you anyway. I should have made sure you knew instead of assuming you had to. Because what
the hell were we doing? I didn’t care about Jordan, and I don’t think you really wanted Duke. We knew you’d have to leave. So why didn’t we make the most of every minute we had left instead of barely speaking to each other? I should have kissed you. I should have showed you how I felt since I couldn’t find the words. I shouldn’t have let you run before you were even gone. We could have made those last few months something beautiful, instead of something ugly. We wasted our chance, and I just want it back."

The operator’s voice returned, telling her the mailbox was full and she should delete unwanted messages. She wanted to delete them all, not just from her phone, but from her brain, and also Nathan’s life. She wanted to go back to three days ago, after the reunion, and when Nathan said he was going to look at satellites with Duke she wanted to demand that he stay. To give him one beautiful memory to hold on to that was completely her. To spend the early hours of the dawn reminding him what kind of man she knew he was, so he wouldn’t question it once she was gone. To explain how she could never be disgusted with him. To tell him that she loved him, and sometimes it felt like she always had.

“Dinner’s almost ready,” Nathan called as he entered, but he stopped in his tracks when he saw her clutching her phone, her face a splotchy mess.

“I was hoping you wouldn’t get those.” His hand rubbed the back of his neck in vain. He looked contrite and embarrassed, like a boy caught doing something wrong. But that notion was absurd. Loving her was his biggest sin, and she couldn’t fault him for that.

“All she could manage was a shaky exhale. She hated herself for the weakness. He deserved someone who could be strong for him. But listening to a two year litany of his pain had brought her to her knees, metaphorically, and she felt as sick and useless as she had after Duke had told her about the Hunter.

Her distress seemed to compound his own. “Don’t cry, Parker.”

Something in his plaintive tone launched her forward. She crossed the room in a few quick steps and threw her arms around him, burying her face in his solid chest and breathing him in. She could smell seafood from the kitchen, but underneath that was the familiar scent that was uniquely him. He wasn’t some tortured voice on a phone she couldn’t reach – he was here.

“You’re not alone anymore,” she mumbled. He had tensed when she had grabbed him, but he was beginning to settle, his heartbeat slowing, the anxiety at her state flowing out of him as he got used to the prolonged contact. His arms came around her, warm and comforting.

“I know.” It sounded like he did, but tones could be deceiving. She didn’t know how he could let go of so much so quickly. Three days ago she’d been gone, and he’d been a maelstrom of misery.

“I won’t leave you alone again.” Her hands worked at the back of his shirt, desperate to find their way under, skin on skin contact is better, to seal her promise with a reassurance only she could give him.

And when she finally spread her hand across his lower back he arched into her, inhaling sharply. There had been so much touching since she returned, yet she could still send him reeling.

“Dinner,” he protested with a cracked voice, but she was far more concerned with not wasting this chance.

“Dinner can wait,” she declared as she pulled his shirt over his head.
Later they tossed the lobster and she watched him from one of his kitchen stools as he made pancakes. There was a surety to his movements as he measured and mixed ingredients that she found fascinating. He couldn’t feel the spatula he was holding but he used it deftly. Occasionally he broke focus to glance back at her. She was wearing his shirt and little else, and when she caught him looking at her legs rather than her face she recrossed them deliberately, giggling at the flush that crept up his neck. But he didn’t look away, taunting her right back by trying to make her forget it was her rumbling stomach that had driven them from the bedroom.

She’d banished their anguish with the feel of his skin against hers, warm and soft and forgiving. They’d burned through all their emotions and pushed them off the cliff with them until she was empty and calm. He’d made her delete the messages, voice rough as he swore he believed she was back and had forgiven him. She hadn’t been able to find the words for those apologies, so she’d imprinted them on his skin, imagining them sinking deep inside of him, taking root in his brain and his heart, waking every part of him so he’d never feel less than whole again.

“It’s my mother’s recipe,” he said as he placed a steaming plate before her, looking proud and anxious as if after everything he still needed this to win her approval. The weight of the revelation made them even sweeter. She could picture him, a shadow at his mother’s side, watching carefully to learn the secret art. The image did something funny to her insides, twisting them up in a way that wasn’t unpleasant.

Of course the pancakes were delicious. But she would have sworn they were no matter what they tasted like, and meant every word.

It was a long overdue moment, unsullied by past or future. Troubles be damned; they’d been heading toward this ever since she’d noticed that her partner was handsome and kind and had a pancake fixation. Even if it had taken them far too long to get here, the wait had been worth it.

As Nathan took a seat beside her and clunked his glass of orange juice against hers, for the first time in any life she could remember Audrey felt like she was home.
The calm she instilled in him never lasted long after they left his house. As each day wore on, Audrey watched Nathan’s shoulders drag toward the earth and tension build in his jaw, the cords of his neck bulging and leaving her with a constant aching need to smooth them away. At this rate she figured he’d grind his teeth to the gums in a matter of months. She tried being flip and irreverent but he rarely smiled, even attempted sincerity once but that just made him uncomfortable.

It was far worse when they were out at a crime scene. He panicked every time Laverne called in a disturbance, and they’d nearly had another screaming match when he tried to bench her. The way he’d searched for Guard members around every corner had almost made her wish she had stayed behind. He was simultaneously hyper aware and thoroughly distracted and that was a terrible combination for a cop. She was used to him putting himself in harm’s way without even thinking about it, but now he was just waiting to jump in front of a bullet for her and she couldn’t stand the thought of that.

It took four days to work up a plan better than dragging him into a supply closest every time he got insufferable. (That had been fun, but the effect hadn’t lasted nearly as long as she’d hoped, and she suspected from Joan’s disapproving looks that the receptionist was on to them.)

“Think you can handle things at the station without me today?” she asked over breakfast.

“Aren’t you feeling well?” he asked, his brow furrowing with concern.

It was an easy lie, but one that could easily backfire. He might offer to stay and take care of her, and then she’d need a new excuse tomorrow.

“Actually, I thought I’d spend the day with James. We’ve got a lot to work out, you know.”

“Right.” She could read his skepticism at her willingness to spend an awkward day bonding instead of going to work. “You’ll be careful?”

It took a lot of willpower not to roll her eyes. She understood why Nathan was worried and she was attempting to be patient, but he was driving her crazy. “We’ll stay at the Gull. You may have noticed that Duke has a lot of guns. We’ll be safe.”

Her insides squirmed at the way he studied her but she tried to look casual even as she took in his appearance and committed to it memory – the hair she loved to run her hands through which always looked half mussed nowadays, the intense blue eyes overflowing with reverence, the broad shoulders and strong, strong arms. These past few days, despite the state of the town and Nathan’s near constant anxiety, had meant more to her than anything else she could remember. She nearly gave up on the plan and followed him to the station, the possibility of losing this too much to fathom.

Except he was already crumbling at the thought of spending a day without her. She could see it in the way his arms were pressed too tightly to his sides, his hands clenched. The tiny gesture sucked the air out of the room, because she couldn’t bear to see him set off by such a small thing and she wasn’t going to be able to stand being expected to be constantly at his side much longer.

With renewed resolve she started toward him. “You better get to the station. Everyone’ll blame me if the boss is late.” She braced her hands on his shoulders and pushed herself up on tiptoes to kiss him – not hot and heavy like each night they returned to the safety of his house – but slow, tender,
and filled with sentiments she didn’t say often enough – and some never at all.

She resisted the urge to press her forehead against his and breathe him in. She’d give herself away if she acted too clingy so she let him go and stepped back before her body overrode her good sense.

“Have a good day.”

“Say hi to James for me.”

She watched his truck drive away before she retrieved her cell phone from the bedroom.

Nathan’s trusty cleaner answered on the second ring. “Dwight.”

She was surprised by how glad she was to hear the kind, hulking man’s voice.

“I need a favor.”

“Audrey. You are back.”

He sounded relieved but only mildly shocked. “So the word’s already out, huh?”

“There were rumors. But I thought Nathan would be in a better mood if they were true.”

She snorted at the man’s candor. “That’s kinda why I called. I need you to get me a meeting with the head of the Guard.”

“That’s a bad idea.” Steel had flared up in the man’s tone, reminding her that the gentle giant wasn’t always so gentle. “They’re real angry that you didn’t stop the Troubles. You need to stay out of their way.”

After all she’d seen and done, she wasn’t about to be cowed by Dwight Hendrickson. “It’s too late for that. Nathan and I ran into them the day I got back when they ambushed Alistair at the bank. Bernie said he was going to kill me. Nathan’s been on edge ever since.”

“How’s it going to help him if you get killed sooner?”

“I’m not going to get killed.” She was mostly sure of that. But there was some tiny part of her that had wanted to hold on to Nathan this morning and never let go that knew he’d be wrecked for good if this went south.

“This isn’t the sort of man you mess with. Things have been bad here.”

“So I’ve heard. Look, talking the Troubled down is kind of my specialty. And Bernie said he wasn’t going to kill me until I understood what I’d done. I haven’t been back long enough for that – but I can’t delay this. I just have to make him see that killing me isn’t actually in the Troubled’s best interest.”

“How are you going to do that?”

“I’m working that out.”

“This is damned risky, Audrey.” But she could tell she was wearing him down against his better judgment. There was a weariness in his tone she’d gotten used to hearing in Nathan’s voice. Keeping the town together had worn these men down to their bones.

*Her fault,* Bernie had said.
She had to fix this.

“I know. But I have to do it. The Barn’s destroyed and I need to find another way to stop the Troubles. And I can’t do that with Nathan freaking out every time I leave his sight. I can’t live being smothered – not even by him.”

There was a long pause, until she heard him sigh. “I’ll see what I can do.”

She felt a rush of gratitude, relief, and anticipation, all wrapped up together in a way that set her stomach churning. “Thank you. So what can you tell me about Bernie Smith? He took over for Vince, right? What’s his Trouble?” Nathan had been very thorough about everyone else on his list of Guard members, but he’d glossed over their leader, only telling her it didn’t matter because she needed to stay clear of him. As if that wouldn’t stoke her curiosity.

“Anything he reads comes true.”

She realized almost instantly why his last name had seemed so familiar, aside from being so common. “Nathan and I have seen that before. Haven got hit by the ten plagues of Egypt because some guilty father had been reading a Bible. TJ Smith.” It had been one hell of a day, Nathan dying outside with countless others while a woman with all her memories watched her talk down a man about to kill himself in front of his infant son. It had been so hard to stay composed when her mind was swimming with the consequences of her failure. Even then she’d known she couldn’t stand the loss of her partner.

It was also one hell of a Trouble. TJ had thrown the whole town in chaos, and it had been completely unintentional.

The potential devastation if someone knew what they were doing was almost unimaginable.

“TJ was Bernie’s brother. His house was hit by one of the meteors. Everyone inside was killed. TJ, his son, and his in-laws.”

Audrey closed her eyes against the weight of the loss. Good, innocent people, one of them a baby. Her fault.

“Bernie was an English teacher at the high school. His first day back after the funeral, he read a passage from King Lear. The whole class started going crazy. One kid actually blinded someone before another teacher heard the screaming.”

“He didn’t know he was Troubled before that?”

“No one else did, anyway. He was fired, of course. Some of the parents wanted to run him out of town. But others … the ones who were Troubled themselves … they rallied around him. He started making speeches about the injustices the Troubled faced. Started recruiting his students into the Guard. Instead of staying in the shadows he openly challenged the Rev’s men. Took the Guard public. And made no qualms about killing anyone in his way.”

There had definitely been something deadly and a little manic about the man lurking in what was almost charm. “Did he have a history of violence?”

“No. I went to school with him. He was top of our class. Smart. Funny. Didn’t let his popularity go to his head much. Went to Williams College and then came back home to teach. He was a good guy once. But you know how the Troubles can change people.”

“Yeah.” She’d seen it again and again, how tragedy and desperation could strip away humanity
when inhuman abilities were introduced. But she’d also seen people fight it – a girl who refused her thirst for human blood, a man who gave his life to save the world from a time loop.

“He’s dangerous, Audrey. He thinks he’s on a crusade, and he doesn’t care who gets hurt. He turned Nathan into the town’s scapegoat. It was ugly. This is a bad idea.”

“I have to do this. For Nathan. For me. And for this whole town. I was going to leave, you know that. I went into the damn Barn to fix all this. The fact that Bernie lost his family and became a killer is my fault.”

“Letting him kill you won’t fix this.”

“Getting him to not kill me just might. Just get me the meeting, okay? Sometime today if you can.”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

“Thanks.”

She’d never had much trouble putting herself in danger before. It was part of being an agent. Part of being a cop. Part of trying to get to the bottom of whatever was happening in this crazy town. But she wasn’t used to having anything to lose.

For the first time she had someone beside herself to live for. Nathan needed her and she needed him. Keeping two people safe was a lot more challenging than keeping one person safe.

She couldn’t let that paralyze her. She was tough, dammit, and this was too important to screw up.

She grabbed her keys and headed to the bed and breakfast.

Duke had given her James’s room number after he’d helped him settle in. It was just a few rooms down from where she had stayed what seemed like a lifetime ago. The Gull had been comfortable, cozy, a space that was hers where she could put down roots. The b&b had just been a place to sleep and store her clothes.

She knocked, unable to fight the impulse to case the area for anyone suspicious. Apparently Nathan’s paranoia was catching. She hated the way she felt exposed in broad daylight in one of the quietest parts of town.

Was this how Duke felt, searching for tattooed men everywhere? The thought made her smile, and James chose that moment to open the door.

“Luc—” James stopped his greeting mid-word, looking abashed. “Sorry. Habit. You don’t even look that much like her.”

“You’re the only one who’s ever said that.” It was reassuring in a way that made no sense. She still couldn’t decide if she was jealous of her former selves for the lives they’d led and the time they’d spent with Nathan and James. It all gave her a headache even when it didn’t make her nose bleed. “Can I come in?”

“Yeah.” He stepped aside and she followed him. His room was arranged the same as hers had been, and just as bare of anything personal. All the feelings she’d had when she looked at the photo of Sarah and her baby came surging back as he offered her a chair by the window. She wasn’t used to the instantaneous maternal affection, which was both soft and fierce simultaneously. Most people had months to get used to the idea of having a child. She’d acquired an adult son without any of that buildup, and she’d missed every formative experience of his life – yet as he scrutinized
her now with a look that was a perfect mixture of her and Nathan she knew she now had two extra people to live for.

“I’ve been working on rewriting the journal, but I’m not finished yet.”

She shook her head slightly, trying to clear her thoughts and give him her full attention. “Oh. Thanks. That’s not why I’m here though.”

“Then why?”

She hated how skeptical he was in her presence. Audrey Parker knew all about people who turned out not to be what they seemed. Eighteen years of foster care had taught her that too good to be true always was – but it had taken plenty of mirages gone bad to make the lesson stick. Her son should never have been in that situation. “Look, I know this is all super awkward. I have no idea how close you and Lucy were. I remember almost nothing about her or Sarah. I don’t know what I said or did that made you think I could possibly be willing to kill you to save myself. I don’t know if I’ll ever get those memories back, and I’m not sure I want them. But Audrey would love to get to know the impossible son she brought into the world. So I was hoping we could start over?”

It was crazy how much she wanted him to agree. It had been easy to put off this conversation when she had Haven’s problems and Nathan’s nerves to deal with, but sitting in this drab motel room she knew she had another priority to juggle.

“We could try.”

She grinned. As if it was contagious, his lips quirked upwards into a smile as well.

“Great! If you’re anything like me, you’re probably going stir crazy. So maybe we could start with you helping me with something.”

“Will it get me out of this room?” he asked eagerly.

She nodded. “How much do you know about the Guard?”

“Lucy was scared of them. And you, Nathan and Crocker were pretty upset they’d taken over the town.”

She’d have to find out what Lucy knew – but it was just one of many questions she needed to ask and today probably wasn’t the day for that. “Those are the important points. Their leader threatened to kill me because I didn’t take the Troubles away, and now Nathan is wigging out. I’ve got to convince the Guard to give me a reprieve so we can find another way to stop this.”

“Nathan’s desperate to protect you, and you’re going to walk right into the lion’s den.” Though his words were accusatory, his tone was more curious than anything.

“I’m doing this for him. He’s driving himself crazy trying to protect me, but the Guard is too powerful. If they want me dead, it’s only a matter of time until they succeed. So I have to convince them it’s in their best interest to keep me alive.”

“Is it?” She had no idea where his head was at, and it was throwing her off. She was used to telling people what they wanted or needed to hear. Since she couldn’t figure that out, there was only the truth.

“I think so. I want to stop the Troubles. I’m not going to kill your father to do it – but there has to be another way, even if I have to magic another damn barn. Sarah was on to something. Lucy
might have known. But I need some space and some time to figure it out. If they kill me and I’m the only one who can stop this, then they’ve just damned themselves for eternity. I don’t think they want that.”

He was silent for a while before he finally nodded. “What do you need me to do?”

“I don’t want to put you in danger. But I need someone close by – just in case. If this goes bad, someone needs to tell Nathan.”

“You want me to tell my father I let you get killed.” This time his disapproval was obvious.

“I’m not going to get killed.” She really, really wished people would stop saying that. “Look, I can’t ask Nathan. He can’t see this objectively, and he and Bernie have a history. And Duke’s terrified of anyone with a Guard tattoo because his babysitter told him once that was the last thing he’d see before he died.”

“Weren’t you Duke’s babysitter?”

She hadn’t expected to be derailed mid-rant, and it took a few moments to even comprehend what James had meant.

“He had another babysitter, top. Did Lucy really spend that much time watching Duke?”

“She really couldn’t picture herself watching children when she was trying to solve Haven’s mysteries and keep herself from disappearing. “That’s weird. Anyway. I need backup. I figured since you used to hang out with Lucy you’d be kind of used to this sort of thing. And because you have my Trouble, you should be relatively safe if anything strange goes down.”

“Where are we meeting him?”

She smiled at his implied acceptance. She hoped all the grinning wasn’t creepy, but she couldn’t seem to help it.

“I’ve got someone setting that up. We might not know for a few hours.”

“Not much to do around here.” This bitter tone she understood perfectly. It swirled inside her every time Nathan tried to keep her chained to a desk, even for her own good. There were takeout containers spilling from the trashcan and a tall stack of newspapers on the desk.

“You’ve been stuck in this room since we got back, haven’t you?”

“Pretty much. Nathan suggested I lay low. I am supposed to be dead.”

But it was a beautiful day, and Audrey was tired of laying low. “That’s it. We’re going out.”

“Isn’t that a bad idea?”

“Probably. But we’re going on an extremely risky mission in a few hours anyway so we’re already ignoring Nathan’s advice. Might as well get some fresh air in the meanwhile. You with me?”

“Absolutely.”

She laughed as she gathered up his bedspread. “We may need this.”
“We’re not supposed to take that out of the room, are we?”

“I wasn’t supposed to let it get turned into a cocoon and then have Nathan cut me out of it either, but that happened. Marge’ll get over it.”

“What?”

“I’ll tell you once we get out of here.”

They stopped at Haven Joe’s Bakery for sandwiches and cupcakes to go. She tried not to meet anyone’s eyes but it still felt like everyone was staring. They judged her for being an outsider before. Now she felt like a pariah. Joe practically squeaked when he recognized her, but she paid the bill quickly and hurried back to the car.

“So, we’re going to try and stay away from people, okay?” She couldn’t sort out who actually knew what and what was just in her head, but it would be safer to work that out after she’d appeased the Guard. She’d contemplated where she could take him, and the first place that came to mind was the beach. There was so much history there – some of it his own – but she kept circling back to that photo that seemed to have started all this. It was probably best not to bring him back to the place where he’d thought she’d killed him.

So she took him up to Tuwiuwok Bluff instead. They spread the bedspread out and had a picnic while they watched the water churning below. “This is one of the first places in Haven I saw this time around,” she revealed. She could remember that day so clearly – the maddening, attractive man she’d been paired with and his even more aggravating father, all the bells going off that things didn’t quite add up and the single word running through her head to describe the town – quaint. “I was an FBI agent chasing a suspect who escaped from prison and ran back home to Haven – and Nathan was the local cop helping me. The man was found dead on the beach, so we came up here to try and figure out why he fell.”

“Sounds romantic.”

“It really wasn’t,” she said with a laugh. But it had been more than just an investigation, even then. There had been something about Nathan that had intrigued her. His face hadn’t been bad to look at either.

They’d come such a long way.

She told James about the early days of their partnership, before things got dark and complicated. He told her of his simple life back in Colorado. Hiking, skiing, becoming a carpenter like Paul Cogan. He didn’t mention Arla much, and even though Audrey wanted him to be honest with her she was grateful, because the loss of Claire and all those other innocents still hurt.

Listening to tales of his childhood was bittersweet as well. She was glad that he’d grown up happy and loved in a place where there were no whispers of dark times full of impossible happenings. But she couldn’t help imagining herself and Nathan into all his stories with vivid, heartbreaking clarity.

At some point her distress must have become obvious because he looked at her face and stopped mid-sentence. “This is bothering you. I’m sorry.”

“No,” she answered automatically, but his immediate skepticism sent her backpedaling. “I mean it is, but it isn’t your fault. It’s just…” She looked down at the half eaten box of cupcakes and stared at her frosting covered crutch as she tried to gather her thoughts.
“In one of the first cases I worked with your father the harbor master had this baby. And the moment Nathan saw it his whole face lit up. I’d never seen him not be serious but there he was babbling nonsense at this tiny little baby and I couldn’t even wrap my mind around it. It was uncomfortably weird. And this woman ended up having three babies in three weeks so Nathan kept running into them. But every time I saw him transform into a pile of goo I couldn’t help but think, ‘he will make an amazing father.’ It just isn’t fair that he missed out on that. Because of all the men in the entire world there’s no one who deserves to raise their own child more than Nathan Wuornos.”

“It’s not too late,” James said. But he was almost thirty years old – sixty, technically – and even if he and Nathan got close it wouldn’t be the same. She tried to figure out how to tell James that when he shook his head with a strange half-smile.

“I don’t mean me. You two are still young. Well,” he clarified, “you still seem young, anyway. You could have another baby. I wouldn’t feel like you were trying to replace me or anything.”

She gaped at him, suddenly so overwhelmed by the thought of her and Nathan with a baby and a life lived without interruptions that she couldn’t breathe. She had never let herself contemplate this. She hadn’t known him well enough during Beattie’s baby incident and she hadn’t felt any echoing maternal feelings of her own to want to cast herself in a mother role, even with him as the over-doting father. By the time she found out she was James’s mother thinking of Nathan at all was painful, and the revelation than Nathan was his father had been overshadowed by her impending departure. She’d given up on the idea of having any sort of normal life the day she found out she was Lucy Ripley – and before that she’d been too busy to realize that she wanted one.

They couldn’t bring another child into this crazy world, with enemies lurking around every corner. The future was a luxury they weren’t afforded. They couldn’t count on nine months, let alone eighteen years.

“We couldn’t,” she muttered, but she couldn’t stop thinking of a tiny little child with his eyes and her blond hair – a color that was hers and not Lucy’s or Sarah’s – and the way Nathan would look at it, like it was absolutely the most incredible and precious thing in the entire world. As it would be. God, how she wanted to give that to him.

“If this works, and the Guard leaves you alone, and you put a stop to all this … maybe you can.”

She let herself consider that. Growing older with Nathan by her side – not staying the same age while he skipped right to his sixties. A house full of kids. Juggling baseball games and parent teacher conferences and late nights at the station. Going on dates and vacations and doing all the everyday things most people took for granted. Being a family, with no expiration date hanging over their head. Years full of memories that were undoubtedly her own. Having a boring, normal, blissful life.

Even before Haven, Audrey Parker had never expected to have that.

But the thought that maybe, just maybe, she could set some spark ablaze inside her.

It also sent her launching into James’s arms. “Thank you,” she whispered into his shoulder.

His arms came around her, loose but strong. “Anytime. Mom.”

She had to keep hold of him a little bit longer so he wouldn’t see her blink tears out of her eyes.

Later when her phone rang part of her resented the interruption, but she felt ready. Today would be
the first step toward a future that had eluded her for too long.

“Whatcha got for me?” she asked Dwight.

“He’ll see you at four today. At the Haven Public Library.”

“Figures. Least the librarian will step in if we get too disruptive,” she said lightly.

“The librarian’s not going to step in even if he shoots you. He spends most of his time holed up there. He wants you to go in alone, but please tell me you’ve got backup.”

She glanced at James, who was listening avidly to her half of the conversation and not even trying to hide it. “I’ve got backup.”

“Nathan has no idea you’re doing this, does he?”

“I won’t tell him you set up the meeting.”

“That’s not what I’m worried about.” He did sound worried, but Audrey felt revved and hopeful. She had too much to fight for. There was no way she was giving up this time. “I’m not sure Nathan could handle losing you again.”

It hadn’t taken thirty-three phone messages to convince her that he couldn’t. “I know. That’s why I need to do this.” They’d spent too long being afraid. It was time for them both to start living.

“Thanks for getting him to the hospital after I left.” She’d never be able to pay him back for that, but she’d have to figure out a way to try.

“Course. He’s a good man.”

“I know. I’ll take care of him.”

“Be careful.”

“I’ll see you later.”

And she would. No trigger happy bookworm was going to stop her from going home tonight and telling Nathan exactly how much she’d enjoyed flouting his rules.

She watched her son pack up the remnants of their picnic. “Ready to win us some freedom?”

He offered her a hand to help her stand. “Ready.”
Audrey was used to sophisticated FBI equipment, but thankfully she’d always been good at improvising. She’d surely be able to find a wire at the Haven PD, but that would be nearly impossible to pull off without running into Nathan. She didn’t want to lie to him again, so she settled with buying a prepaid cell phone at the general store, deliberately ignoring the stink-eye the cashier shot her.

She explained the plan to James in the store parking lot, going over the basics of how cell phones worked because she didn’t want to be left without backup because her son had only spent five days in the twenty-first century.

She was going to call him on the burner phone as soon as they reached the library, leaving hers on speakerphone in her jacket pocket. She was almost certain Bernie wasn’t going to search her, so she left her gun in her holster and tucked a knife in her boot in case he decided to kidnap her.

“I don’t want you to put yourself in danger,” she told him for the third time as she pulled into the library lot. “But if it seems like I’m in trouble, I need you to call Nathan with your other phone and tell him what’s going on.”

“Are you sure you don’t want me to go in with you?” he asked as if he hadn’t heard her, and she found his willfulness both aggravating and endearing.

“I can’t be distracted worrying about you. He wants me to come alone. I’ll be fine.” She hoped more than anything that was true.

“Mom?” Her heart flipped when he said it, even though there was still something tentative there, and she was more determined than ever to emerge from the building in front of her unscathed.

“Mmmhmmm?”

“Next time can we just go to a ball game or something?”

She laughed at the thought of that, remembered Seadogs and Cutters and Nathan’s glee over some silly game and a town tradition that until that day had nothing supernatural about it, and she agreed and slipped out of the car before the tension could settle back in her stomach.

She’d always liked libraries. Books provided a great escape from her unhappy childhood, and since very few of her foster families had any interest in paying for her hobby the library’s collection was like the best friend she never had. In college the library had been a good place to hide when everyone else on campus was partying but she just didn’t feel like getting wasted with a bunch of strangers. She’d been to the Haven Library a few times, even gotten a library card after she quit the FBI. It had always been a bright, cheerful place, even if the librarian, Miss Pierce, enforced silence over her domain like a television stereotype.

Today the building seemed cold and eerily deserted. Most patrons were probably still in work or at school – or perhaps they no longer wanted to hang out in the domain of a Troubled psychopath. She was glad there weren’t many innocents to get caught up in the crossfire – but she had hoped meeting somewhere public would provide some degree of protection. Not that that would necessarily stop a man who was willing to murder someone in broad daylight in front of two police officers.

Miss Pierce glared at her when she entered and Audrey’s greeting died in her throat. Nodding
instead, she walked through the racks of books to the table hidden among the classics.

Bernie was already there, relaxed like a king on his throne with three piles of books in front of him. *Animal Farm* and *Peter Pan* caught her eye but she didn’t take the time to read the other titles.

“If it isn’t Haven’s own Hester Prynne,” he crowed, his tone brimming with a joviality she didn’t trust for a second.

Her mind processed the reference and searched for one to toss back as she slid into the chair across from him. “And who are you supposed to be? Prospero?”

He chuckled. “Ah, very good. Though I prefer Gandalf.”

“Seriously?” she scoffed, unable to help it. “Well, at least you didn’t say Dumbledore.”

“Now that’s a thought. I was a teacher, you know.”

“So I’ve heard,” she said dryly.

“I was surprised when Mr. Hendrickson told me you wanted to meet. Your execution hasn’t even been scheduled yet. Anxious to push up the date?”

His tone was light and conversational, reminding Audrey that there was something unhinged lurking in this man. She’d seen him murder someone in cold blood, and now he was discussing literature and her death as if they were having a lively discussion about the weather.

“I was hoping to postpone it, actually.”

He frowned and abandoned his friendly affectation. “You waste what little time you have left. I may have Prospero’s power, but I lack his mercy.”

“You’d make a pretty poor Gandalf then. But it isn’t your mercy I’m counting on. It’s that scholarly brain of yours.”

He picked up one of the books from the pile, running his fingers along the edges. She wanted to call his bluff and tell him what he read wouldn’t have an effect on her, but that wasn’t true enough. She could still be hurt through the others in town. “The scholar in me has spent a lot of time contemplating the best way to kill you. Literature is rich with material. So many tragic deaths … and many that were well deserved. Sweet Tess, executed for her crime of passion. Mary in *Native Son*, now that’s a doosey. Smothered and burned in a furnace. Or how about *Romeo and Juliet*? That seems fitting. But which of you to kill? That police chief of yours might go mad from grief if he lost you again … but how would you react if you lost him, I wonder?”

The thought of that had her itching to reach for her gun and show this cocky bastard that Nathan was under her protection now. But he was obviously baiting her, which meant he wanted her to get angry. Which meant that she needed to stay calm and keep her wits about her. But God…

She breathed deeply and said nothing.

“He thinks himself invincible, just because he can’t feel pain. But he can hurt – my boys have seen to that. Your abandonment wounded him terribly. I wonder how much more it would take to make him crack. I’d like to see that. I suppose the question is whether I should keep you alive to see that.”

“Enough!” She had to close her eyes against the onslaught of images and the surge of hatred she
felt toward this man for taking her failure out on Nathan. She willed James to stay put because she knew if anyone got set off now it would get nasty in the crossfire. “I get it. You’ll enjoy killing me. But is revenge worth dooming everyone in this town and all their descendents to living with the Troubles forever?”

He didn’t falter. “That assumes you need to be alive to end the Troubles. There are many who believe the opposite – that if you die, the Troubles die with you. They’ve been anxious to test that theory for a very long time.”

“Maybe so. But if you’re wrong, that’s something you can’t take back. Is it worth the risk?” This wasn’t entirely true, but she hoped the Guard didn’t know about Noelle and Moira. Or if they did, she hoped she was right about all this. She had no proof that her death wasn’t the answer.

His grip on the book tightened and his fingers stopped wandering. “So you want us to let you go unpunished because there’s a chance that the repercussions of your death would be damning? We’re already damned. We live with our curses every day because of your actions.”

She knew how dangerous he was when agitated, so she tried to ignore the way her heart was pounding in her chest. “We have the same goal here – to end the Troubles,” she placated. “I just need you to stop getting in my way.”

“You had your chance to end the Troubles,” he snapped. “You chose lust.”

He’d obviously spent far too long reading *The Scarlett Letter* and reframing it as the story of her life.

“I went into the Barn. I was going to leave and take the Troubles away. Something went wrong.”

“Such a cold woman to blame your lover for what you’ve caused.”

She wondered how many times this man had said such things to Nathan’s face; if maybe that’s why he’d come to believe it. “This wasn’t Nathan’s fault. I knew he wanted to keep me here, so I made arrangements so he couldn’t interfere. Then your girl Jordan showed up and started shooting him and it all went to hell.”

“That’s not the story I heard.”

“Well, all your witnesses are dead and I honestly don’t care what they had to say. The point is I want to end the Troubles.”

“Then call the Barn back. If the Troubles go, you and I no longer have a problem. I’ll leave that police chief of yours alone.”

“The Barn only takes the Troubles away for twenty seven years. There’s another way to stop them for good.”

He hesitated, straightening almost imperceptibly, and she could see how appealing he found that possibility. When he spoke his words seemed to rush over each other. “Then you best do it before my patience wears thin.”

“I need some time.” She needed to sell this point more than any other, so she looked him in the eyes, jaw set, trying to exude confidence when her nerves were so jittery she wasn’t sure her skin could contain them.

But she’d never been a great actress. “You don’t know what it is,” he deduced.
She could already see his interest waning, the immediacy of revenge a powerful counteracting force to any rational reason to pardon her. “No one is exactly forthcoming in this town. But my last two selves were working it out. I just need to dig a little deeper.”

She expected him to get angry at her for trying to hoodwink him. But he cocked his head slightly with something that seemed like curiosity. “What makes you think you’ll like what you’ll find? There’s no forgiveness for what you’ve done.”

“I told you, I didn’t mean to leave without taking the Troubles with me.”

“That isn’t what I meant.” They stared at each other, and she didn’t like the look of dawning realization which manifested as glee while she was left confused and at an impasse. “You don’t know.”

“Know what?”

He was grinning at her now, and it sent a shiver down her spine. She was losing her grasp on the situation, fast. “You say you want to stop the Troubles, but you don’t even know why they started.”

The fact that anyone else did was flooring. Somehow that question had never occurred to her. And no one, not Nathan or Duke or Claire or the Teagues, had ever mentioned that this was apparently common knowledge.

“Care to enlighten me?”

“Not particularly.”

Suddenly the room seemed small around her, the bookshelves too close, the air heavy and oppressive. This was taking too long. She wanted to get out. Take James for ice cream, go visit Nathan at the station. Whatever Bernie knew she’d need to find out, but something inside her warned she wasn’t going to like it. He was too fond of irony and metaphor and literary devices that weren’t going to side with her in this story.

“Look, I don’t know much about who I was before I came to Haven as Audrey Parker, but what I do know is I want to help these people. And I did, before I went away. There are lots of people still alive in this town because I helped them. There are plenty of Troubled people I could have sent to jail for what they’d done, but I didn’t, because I understood that they had no control over their afflictions. Like you. I figure you probably weren’t a bad guy, once upon a time. But a little grief gave you magical powers and a major God complex, and I really don’t think it’s okay for you to murder whoever you want.”

“What are you going to do about it? Throw me in jail? I need only speak the words and an angel will rescue me from my cell.”

She knew firsthand how dangerous a Bible could be in his family’s hands. “I’m not going to do anything about it. For now. But you’re going to let me walk out of here with a promise that the Guard’s not going to come after me.”

He laughed, but the sound had none of his earlier warmth. “You’ve got guts, Hester, I’ll give you that. But I still don’t see why I should give you a free pass to chase a solution that may not even exist.”

“Leave me alone for six months. If I haven’t stopped the Troubles by then we can renegotiate.”
“And what if I’m not in a negotiating mood?”

She handed him the next book on the pile, and almost faltered when she saw it was *The Green Mile*. Of course. “Then you can schedule that execution.”

She held her breath as he considered, wishing she had some kind of Trouble that could help her here, like Chris’s likability or Ginger’s persuasiveness. She needed him to agree to this, needed it so fiercely she could feel the blood rushing in her veins, all the repercussions of her failure waiting just beyond her to swallow her up. If this failed, she and Nathan were both lost.

“You’ve got nothing to lose here. Either I stop the Troubles for good, and you can go back to being a normal, law-abiding citizen for the rest of your life, or I fail and you just have to wait six months before you kill me. If you kill me now and the Troubles stay you’ll always be left wondering if you could have been the hero and you chose to be the villain.”

“What are your terms?”

Relief washed over her. “The Guard doesn’t touch me, or Nathan, or Duke Crocker. Or the Colorado Kid. For six months.”

“Why the Colorado Kid?”

“Doesn’t matter why. Those are the terms.”

“And what if I refuse to spare the others? Or what if something happens to your precious Chief? Will you end your futile quest to stop the Troubles?”

The edgy cheek was back in his voice, but she was having none of it. “Oh, I’ll end the Troubles all right. But if you hurt Nathan I’ll end you too.”

She had shocked him, she could tell, but he recovered quickly. “I don’t believe you would.”

“You should. I killed Reverend Driscoll because he was going to murder a Troubled girl – and I didn’t even know her. Don’t mess with my friends.”

This time his laugh was so warm and loud and unexpected that her first irrational thought was to warn him that Miss Pierce was going to scold him. Instead she crossed her arms and scowled, which only made him laugh harder.

“You’re as crazy as the rest of us. If you weren’t the cause of all this you’d make a fine addition to the Guard.”

“No thank you. I’ve got to look out for the entire town, not just those who are afflicted. Do we have a deal?”

“It seems that we do. Six months. But not a day more.” He held out a hand and she took it, feeling a bit like she was making a deal with the devil. Was this how Nathan had felt when he’d illegal arranged that transport? Except she wasn’t giving the Guard anything, just her word that she’d end the Troubles, which was her intention anyway. Whatever it took. Well, almost whatever it took. She had to believe that elusive third option existed, even if Howard had never mentioned it.

“Deal.”

Even as the adrenaline began to fade and an overwhelming desire to turn and walk out of there as fast as she could washed over her she knew she couldn’t leave just yet. She dropped his hand but
not his gaze.

“At the bank you said you couldn’t kill me yet because you wanted me to understand what I’d done. I want you to tell me.”

“Why?”

“Because even if I didn’t mean it to be, this is my fault. I’m not going to run from the consequences.”

Just as she’d hoped, she saw approval flicker across his face. She wasn’t sure why that was important – the man was a maniac – but she needed him to understand how serious she took this, so he could impress it on his followers. She needed to be able to trust his word.

So she listened for nearly an hour as he recounted the horrors of the years she’d missed, starting with the loss of his family. He spoke in vivid, disturbing detail, his literary training suffusing the truth, which was horrid enough, with imagery and metaphors that painted pictures in her mind she was afraid she’d never be able to delete. Much of what he said seemed to come from the point of view of his students and the ways their families had come apart, casting the whole thing in a tragic light of innocence cruelly lost. Those who suffered most were not those who died but those who were left behind, and that made her think of Nathan so strongly that she finally couldn’t take it anymore. Muttering an excuse, she rose from her chair and fled.

She tried not to look at anything, needing to get out of there, but it was impossible to miss Dwight sitting at one of the tables, a magazine open in front of him and completely ignored. She didn’t stop to acknowledge him.

James looked pale and tense, but he offered her a halfhearted smile as she opened the car door and slid inside. She pressed the power locks immediately, taking some comfort in their definitive click, and then she pulled her cell phone from her pocket, hit end and tossed it on the console between them. She leaned her head against the steering wheel, letting the feel of the cool leather ground her in the immediacy of her surroundings and help her accept that it was over and she was safe. Safe, not just for now, but for six months. This whole endeavor may have been foolish, but it had paid off.

“So I guess that went all right,” she finally said, because it was too silent in the car.

“I figured out something else you and Lucy have in common, besides the cupcakes.” Audrey sat up and turned to look at James. He waited to gain her attention before he continued. “You’re both the bravest person I’ve ever met.”

He was so earnest it made her uncomfortable. “We might just be the most reckless people you’ve ever met. But thank you.”

“Why didn’t you go after he agreed to leave you alone?”

She’d honestly forgotten, as Bernie told his story, that James could hear it too. “Because everything that happened while I was gone is my fault. Nathan had to live through that. Least I can do is understand.”

“Not many people would take on that responsibility.”

“Well, I think we’ve firmly established that I’m not normal. Let’s get out of here.”

“Nathan’s been calling.” He held up his real cell phone, which Duke had obviously picked out. It
was so complicated even she’d had a little trouble with it. Mobile technology seemed to have accelerated while she was gone.

“Shit.” She grabbed her own phone. A list of text messages appeared, growing increasingly frantic, and she had a couple of missed voicemails as well.

“Relax. James & i r on the way to the Gull,” she texted, knowing he’d rather hear her voice but she wasn’t ready to face that quite yet. “He’s going to be mad.”

“Won’t he be glad you don’t have death threats hanging over your head anymore?”

“Once he calms down, hopefully. But first all he’s going to see is that I put myself in danger.”

It would be okay though, because they had six months. Her FBI training was kicking in and she was starting to compartmentalize everything she’d heard, just like details of a disturbing case. Someone couldn’t chase serial killers and dwell constantly on the evidence without going mad if they couldn’t manage some emotional distance. She need to know what had happened in her absence, but it wouldn’t do anyone any good – included all the Troubled residents of Haven – if she couldn’t move past that.

She threw the car into drive and headed toward The Grey Gull.

“We’re being followed,” James said after a few minutes, voice sharp with unease. “And this man looks gigantic.”

Audrey looked closely in her rearview mirror, saw a familiar face, and smiled. “That’s Dwight. He’s the one who got me the meeting. He was in the library, hanging around in case I needed more backup.”

“We can trust him?”

“Absolutely. He’s your father’s cleaner. Helps fix things up after any incidents with the Troubled. He used to work for your grandfather when he was the Chief.”

“Seems like more useful backup that I was.”

“He’s a bullet magnet. Literally. Not actually the best guy to bring to a tense situation, despite his size. He’s a good guy though. Looked after you father while we were all gone.”

They were only a few minutes from the Gull. Just as she expected, Nathan’s truck was in the parking lot. When she saw it sitting there in all its bright, familiar glory the truth of what she’d accomplished finally began to sink in. She had won them all a reprieve. And like a pardoned criminal going blinking into the sun for the first time in years, suddenly the world seemed a whole lot brighter.

Dwight parked beside her and was out of his car quicker than she was.

“You’re not exactly inconspicuous,” she said, but she was still pleased that he’d bothered to keep an eye on her.

“You were in there a long time,” he answered, and she could see the worry lines etched on his face and realized he hadn’t been close enough to hear anything. He just knew she’d walked out of there seemingly unscathed.

“ Took some convincing. But he’s going to leave me alone for six months. So everyone can just
calm down.”

His relief was palpable, and she wanted to laugh hysterically like Bernie had. “That was a hell of a risk.”

She settled for a wide grin. “ Paid off though.”

He shook his head disapprovingly, but his lips twitched into a smile. “Welcome back, Audrey.”

“It’s really good to see you, Dwight.” She reached out to grasp one of his massive arms. “And thanks again for taking care of Nathan. I don’t know how to pay you back for that.”

“Maybe try putting me in fewer situations where I have to spend hours worrying I’d gotten his girl killed.”

She didn’t belong to anyone, but she found she didn’t actually mind being referred to as Nathan’s girl. She was pretty sure he wouldn’t fight her claim over him.

She was also pretty sure this wasn’t the last time she’d do something reckless. But the next time she planned something dangerous she’d leave Dwight out of it.

“I’ll try to be careful,” she offered, not promising anything.

She was thinking about introducing James when a sharp crack captured her attention. Nathan had opened the door to the restaurant so forcefully it had slammed against the side of the building. Now he was storming toward her, Duke a few paces behind.

“Where the hell have you been?” His voice shook. While most people would have assumed it was rage, Audrey knew it was fear that had him so worked up. She’d gotten far too personal a glimpse of what losing her did to him, so she resolved to give him some leeway when normally she would have found his behavior unacceptable.

“A little help here?” she tossed to Duke coyly, counting on the way he could always bring some levity to a situation.

But he didn’t even smile at her. “You’re on your own this time, sweetheart. I’m all for sneaking out but the next time you want to play hooky don’t use my restaurant as an alibi. I don’t appreciate Rambo knocking down my door expecting me to know where you are.”

She hadn’t thought about that. “Didn’t expect to be gone so long,” she said, contrite.

“What were you doing?” Nathan demanded.

“It’s okay, Nathan. I’m okay.”

“It’s not okay. It isn’t safe. You weren’t where you were supposed to be, and neither you or James would pick up your phones. I thought—” He left his sentence hanging, but she knew how to finish it.

She closed the last few steps between them and grabbed his face with both hands, ignoring the way it made him shudder. His eyes were red as if maybe he’d been crying, and she was reminded of why she’d had to confront Bernie today. Because she couldn’t let him keep doing this to himself. He was far too anguished over the fact she hadn’t answered her phone for less than two hours.

Her thumbs slid across his cheeks and down his jaw. He closed his eyes and stilled.
“I’m fine. James is fine. You don’t have to worry. The Guard’s not going to bother us anymore.”

His eyes snapped open, and they were still wild, though he’d stopped shouting. “What have you done?”

“I talked to Bernie. He’s going to leave us alone. You, me, James and Duke.”

The strangled cry he made sounded almost like a death rattle. His hands clamped like vices on her shoulders, and she thought for a moment that he might shake her.

Instead he stared at her with a look of such devastated terror that she almost regretted what she’d done, even though she knew the outcome. “What did you promise him?” he rasped.

“Nothing,” she answered instinctively.

“I know that man. He blames us for all of this. He wouldn’t have let you walk away without demanding some price. What is it?”

“I told him I’m trying to find another way to end the Troubles. He gave me six months to figure it out.”

“What if you can’t?”

She hated to tell him the bad news when he was taking the good news so poorly. But she couldn’t lie to him about this. “Then he’s probably going to kill me.”

She’d never heard him swear so strongly. The word seemed even more profane coming from his mouth. “How could you go and barter with your life? You heard him say he was going to kill you. He meant it! What the hell were you doing talking to him without backup?”

She was finding it harder and harder to keep her aggravation at bay. “That’s kind of how this works, remember? I find out what makes the Troubled tick, and then I talk them down. It’s never about what they can do – it’s about why. Bernie was pissed the Troubles didn’t go away. So I made him see he needs to get out of the way of me fixing that. And I had backup. James was ready to call you if anything went wrong.”

“So you dragged our son along to visit a psychopath? Why not get him killed too?”

Everything started happening at once. Suddenly James was at her side, indignant. “I’m not a child. You don’t get to make choices for me!” But as she watched the two men square off she could hear Duke saying, “Didn’t Nathan tell you about that, Sasquatch?” and out of the corner of her eye she could see Dwight’s flabbergasted expression.

She’d honestly forgotten they weren’t alone. This was far too personal an argument to have in front of every other friend she had.

“We need to take this inside,” she hissed. “If you’ll excuse us,” she called to everyone else.

Nathan tried to protest, but she grabbed his wrist and pulled him toward the entrance to the Gull, figuring it was closer than her apartment.

As soon as the door was shut he collapsed against the doorframe, as if all the fight had been drained from him.

“You lied to me.”
His sense of betrayal wounded her more deeply than his anger, because in this he wasn’t at all unjustified.

“If I’d told you the truth, would you have tried to stop me?”

“Yes,” he answered without hesitation.

“That’s why I didn’t. If I’m gonna be honest, then you need to trust me.” She knew how to reinforce that point, but she fought her instinct to reach out to him. He needed to accept this because it was true, without her touch fogging up his reasoning.

He was deliberately looking anywhere but at her, and now she wanted to shake him a little bit.

The impulse fled as soon as she heard his next words. “You gave up,” he said on the back of a ragged exhale. “You never give up on anyone, but you gave up on yourself.”

She wished she could deny that, but found that she couldn’t. “I did,” she admitted. “But it’s different this time. You kissed some sense into me.” She hoped in vain that it would get some sort of rise out of him.

“I cannot handle losing you again.” It had the gravity of absolute truth, but his admission was superfluous. She knew.

“That’s why I did this.”

He looked at her then, and his eyes were blazing. His whole being was radiating such an intense ferocity at the thought of her in danger on his account that she thought if Bernie saw him now he’d never dare to threaten her again. “Dammit, Audrey. The last thing I want is for you to put yourself in danger for me!”

But she knew a thing or two about protective ferocity, and she felt her own frustrations roaring to the surface.

“And the last thing I want is to watch you worry yourself to death over me! Every time we leave your house it’s like you’re just waiting for me to disappear again. Sometimes I’m afraid it’s going to literally pull you apart like your father.”

“That’s not how it works—” he protested.

“I know. But I can’t stand to see you so anxious. And I can’t live under house arrest. I’m a grown woman, and I’m used to being on my own. There are going to be times you don’t know where I am. You have to be okay with that. And if we don’t let James out of that motel room he’s going to book a flight to Colorado and never look back.”

He had the grace to look abashed, and she could see that she was getting through. She softened her tone and took a few steps toward him, but she kept herself just out of reach.

“I spent so much time before the Hunter being afraid of what was going to happen. I don’t want to live that way anymore. This is our second chance to have something beautiful, and I want to take advantage of that. I don’t want to hide, even if it’s with you. So I did what I had to do to make that possible. I wasn’t being reckless on your account. I did this for us. And it worked. We’re safe. I need you to accept that.”

“For six months.”
“That’s almost as long as I was here the first time. And it’s far better than the Guard deciding they want to knock me off next week.”

“What happens if we can’t solve this in six months?”

She met his eyes. “Then we figure out another plan. But no matter what happens, we have these six months to spend together.”

He nodded, and she decided that was all the confirmation she needed that he understood. She closed the distance between them and threw her arms around his waist. He responded instantly, wrapping his arms around her and dropping his face to her shoulder. She could feel him trembling against her, and she rubbed a hand across his back and let the tension bleed out of him.

“I’m sorry for worrying you,” she apologized.

He lifted his head. “I may have overreacted,” he said sheepishly. “But the thought of you in danger makes me crazy.”

“Hadn’t noticed,” she cracked. He seemed lighter, just for a second, but she wanted him lighter all the time. She reached up and ran a hand through his hair so she could watch the way his eyes widened and his breath caught when she scraped her nails across his scalp.

“I don’t want someone to protect me. I want someone to be there beside me. To be my partner, and more than my partner. I’d much rather have gone to see Bernie with you – but good police work requires emotional detachment. You need to be capable of that or our relationship is going to be an obstacle in any case we work together.”

“You telling me to calm the hell down, Parker?” His words loosened something in her chest.

“Pretty much. Can you do that?”

“Guess I have to. Unless you want to be partnered with Stan.”

She laughed, encouraged by his humor. “Please, no. I think he’s annoyed that I still don’t know what his name is half the time.”

“It’s not even that hard.”

“You work with a lot of people, okay?”

He chuckled, and she was glad he found amusement in her petulance.

When he calmed down she rested both hands on his chest and looked up at him. “Look, I love you, and I’m going to do everything in my power to stay here with you this time around. I need you to believe that, whatever we face. Can you do that?”

He’d started grinning like a fool the moment she told him she loved him, and she was a little afraid he’d missed the rest of her message when his hands came up to cover hers. He tugged one of them up to his mouth and brushed a kiss against her knuckles that made her knees weak.

“Yeah. Long as you can accept that I love you too much not to try and protect you. I’m always going to step in front of bullets for you. I can’t help it. I don’t want to help it. But I’ll try not to freak out every time you don’t pick up your phone.”

It was really all the compromise she could ask for. She’d get in front of any bullet meant for him.
Maybe they’d both push each other out of the way and end up unscathed.

“That’s a start, then.” With the next six months wide open before them, she realized it really, truly was.
Chapter 13

After they let everyone else into the Gull and Audrey told them about her harrowing day, Duke pulled a bottle of whiskey from under the bar and poured a round of shots.

“To Audrey’s nerves of steel. May they protect us from tattooed men,” he declared before they all tossed them back.

The toast felt too flippant, but Nathan wasn’t going to refuse the alcohol when his nerves were still shot after two hours of picturing every revolting way the Guard could have hurt Audrey while she was missing. But she was safe and whole beside him, with her arm casually draped over his own to remind him of that fact, and the longer they sat there, the more that seemed to sink in.

“I can put some burgers on the grill,” Duke offered when it got late, but Audrey shook her head and stood before anyone else could respond. “We’ve got something to do.”

Duke leered and James blushed, but Nathan had spent nearly a week learning Audrey’s signals and she didn’t seem to have anything sexy on her mind.

She barely reacted to Duke’s innuendo, obviously distracted. As Nathan followed her out of the restaurant he worried there was something she’d been afraid to tell him in front of the others.

“What’s going on?” He tried not to sound as panicked as he felt.

“What do you know about the Troubles started?” Audrey asked, unusually shy.

“No.”

“So this isn’t something else that everyone in town knows but conveniently forgot to mention to me?” It sounded like an accusation, and he wasn’t used to hearing her so bitter.

“Everyone in town’s too busy denying the Troubles exist to talk about why they started. What’s this about?”

“Bernie expected me to know how the Troubles started – like it was common knowledge. He said it was my fault. Not just the Barn going wrong this time. The whole thing.”

The notion was so absurd he chuckled. “Shouldn’t we know better than to believe anything the Guard says? I’ve never heard any story. But I’m sure there’re two people who have a few theories.”

She pushed her hair behind her ear and offered him a shaky smile. “Do you think they’re still at the Herald?”

“Working on the evening edition, I’m sure.”

In a town this size it was unnecessary for newspaper men to work this late, but Nathan couldn’t remember a time Vince and Dave hadn’t. He supposed it gave them the freedom to roam the town and butt into everyone’s business during normal office hours.

The brothers were arguing when Audrey and Nathan arrived, but they stopped with the ringing of the doorbell.

“Audrey,” Dave said warmly.
There was something cold in Vince’s voice when he said Nathan’s name.

“What brings you both here so late this evening?” Dave asked.

“I’ve got another question for you,” Audrey said.

“We’ll be glad to help as long as you have an answer for us. Though hopefully it will be longer than one word this time.” For some reason Vince glared at Nathan as he said it, leaving Nathan puzzled. He certainly wasn’t the one who’d decided to barter information about his son’s parentage to the town gossips.

“A huh,” Audrey said noncommittally. She’d stayed distracted the whole ride over, and Nathan was beginning to realize how much Bernie must have gotten to her. He wished he could punch the bastard, but it was probably not worth risking their fragile truce. “How did the Troubles start?”

“Now there’s a good question. Probably would have answered that one for free,” Dave crowed.

“Still can,” Audrey countered.

“That’s not how this works, missy.”

Nathan had little patience for these petty games of give and take. He’d been amused at first by Audrey’s exasperation at the close mouthed residents of Haven – but they were on a deadline now and he’d be damned if she couldn’t be saved because no one in town was willing to share information. “Just answer the question.”

Vince straightened, his voice taking on a strange gravity, as if he found his own story fascinating. “The Troubles go back nearly to Haven’s founding in the early sixteen hundreds. The historical record’s a bit spotty that far back. But there is a story. An English girl was sold as an indentured servant to the colonies to pay off her father’s debts. She became a maid in the mayor’s household, and she fell in love with the town blacksmith. But the blacksmith was betrothed to the mayor’s daughter, so he rejected her advances. She was so heartbroken she cursed him and the entire town.”

“How?” Audrey demanded.

Vince leaned toward her. “She was a witch, of course.”

“A witch?” Nathan echoed skeptically.

“Indeed. This is New England. There was quite a lot of that back then.”

“There was a lot of hysteria,” Nathan replied.

“Told you witches were real,” Audrey teased, and Nathan thought of Jess Minion and taxidermy come to life and how he really didn’t mind being wrong when she was grinning at him like that.

“They are,” Vince continued. “It was a terrible curse, crafted to choose the specific punishment for each individual that would cause them the most pain. The town nearly destroyed itself before the mayor’s daughter found a way to stop it.”

“How?”

“Turning to witchcraft herself, she lured the servant into her father’s barn and cast a spell to trap her there. While she was confined her magic no longer worked, and everyone she cursed returned to normal. But the mayor’s daughter was only strong enough to hold her for twenty-seven years.
After that she emerged from the barn, not having aged a day, and the curses returned. Children born since her imprisonment found they had the same affliction as one of their parents. It was months until the mayor’s daughter could trap her again. This time she set an extra spell on the Barn, that even though it would release the witch every twenty-seven years, it would draw her back after its powers had recharged.”

“What happened to the mayor’s daughter?” Nathan asked.

“That was almost four hundred years ago,” Vince said. “She died.”

“So I’m the witch,” Audrey said. “I’m not the one who saves the town. I’m the one who cursed it.”

“No,” Nathan answered, responding more to the devastation in Audrey’s voice than the logic in her argument. Because surely she was the solution here, not the problem. That was the only option that made sense.

“Well, yes,” Dave admitted, not meeting her eyes. “If the story is to be believed.”

“What about the memory loss? The different identities? Officer Howard? How do all those fit in?” Nathan demanded.

“We don’t know. None of that is mentioned. It may be part of the enchantment to draw her back into the Barn.”

He waited for Audrey to punch more holes in their logic, but he kept waiting. When he turned to her she was frozen, her features a portrait of shock or grief or maybe both at once.

He’d told her about her memory blackouts, and there was something about the glassiness of her eyes that terrified him. He didn’t want her to remember this. “Parker,” he called, crossing to her and grabbing her hands, which trembled at her sides. They felt like ice and he yelped; he hadn’t felt anything that cold in years.

She didn’t react, even when he tried to rub some warmth back in them. “Come on Parker, come back to me.” He dropped one of her hands to snap his fingers in front of her face. She blinked and seemed to rouse herself.

“I’m right here,” she slurred, but he was hardly convinced she was fine. He grabbed her other hand again, and she stared down at their pile of fingers.

“Let’s get you home.”

“She owes us an answer,” Vince demanded. All the warmth that had been in his voice while telling the story was gone. He was no longer a grandfather figure, but a man capable of leading a bloodthirsty underground organization. “That’s the deal. We each get a question.”

“Can’t you see she’s in no state to answer you?” He had to get her away from here and find out what was going on in that head of hers, because surely this was a lie and he couldn’t bear the thought that she believed it.

“But you can, can’t you?” Dave interjected.

He’d rather have carried her out of there, bargain be damned, but he knew she’d be angry with him when she came back to her senses. And with the way Vince was glaring, perhaps getting through him wouldn’t be as easy as it seemed.
“What’s the question?” he growled.

“How are you the father of Sarah’s child?”

There had been a day, just a few years ago, when the Teague brothers had come into his office and chided him for waiting too long to tell Audrey how he felt. He didn’t understand why the thought of him and Sarah together made them so venomous now.

“A little help?” he whispered to Audrey but she just looked at him like she wanted to cry and he knew he was on his own for this one.

“Duke got sent back to 1955 by Stuart Mosley. He sent me and Audrey a letter. I went to investigate. Got sent back too. I met Sarah the day she came to town.” He wanted to rub a hand across the back of his neck but he wasn’t willing to let go of Audrey.

“And,” Vince demanded.

Nathan wanted to squirm like a scolded child under his glare. This would have been uncomfortable even if Audrey was doing the talking, but damn. “I think you can figure out the rest.”

“You took advantage of a girl just because she looked like someone you knew, and then you left her pregnant and alone to deal with your irresponsibility.”

“I didn’t take advantage of her!” It had almost been like she’d taken advantage of him, not that he’d minded one bit or put up much of a fight. But he’d tried to keep his distance and she’d kept reeling him in, as if this stranger was familiar even though she had none of the memories they shared.

He certainly couldn’t tell the Teagues that.

“Did you have any intention of staying with her?”

Truth was he had considered it when he was buried inside her, his name on her lips, because for one glorious moment his life had been simple. He had wanted to stay there in the past, and love her, and forget all the mistakes they’d make in another fifty years. But that had been cowardly and shameful and even if it wouldn’t have collapsed history he loved Audrey too much to abandon her, even to another version of herself.

He couldn’t tell the Teagues that either.

“Duke and I had to go back. We were changing history.” A memory sparked, and he thought he found a way out of the situation. “Before I was sent back Duke changed something, and the two of you killed each other. Care to explain that?”

“You only get one question today,” Vince snapped, but Dave was shaken, and Nathan had had about enough of this.

“It’s not Nathan’s fault.” All eyes turned to Audrey, who seemed to have roused a little. “She always loved him. Couldn’t resist.”

He didn’t know how she knew that. Maybe she didn’t know it at all, and was only trying to protect him.

“We need to get you home.”
She nodded, and that was all the permission he needed. He linked their hands and pulled her out of the Herald without even a goodbye.

She didn’t talk on the ride back to his house, and he didn’t push it. She still seemed slightly catatonic, and his only relief was she hadn’t started bleeding.

“I’m not sure how I’m going to look at Vince and Dave again after that,” he joked as he flicked on the lights in his living room, wishing she would smile and they’d both laugh at his awkwardness and move on to lighter topics.

“How can you even look at me? I did this to you.” She grabbed a book from a nearby table, but he was so distracted by her anguish he didn’t realize she’d thrown it at him until he heard it hit the floor after reflecting off his chest.

“No.” He grabbed her hand and pressed it to his cheek. It was still cold and clammy, but as the feel of it seeped into his skin he settled her other hand over his heart. He could feel it beating wildly under her palm. “This is what you do to me.”

She froze like he’d caught her in a floodlight, and he could see the tears reflected in her eyes that she wouldn’t let fall. He stared back, trying to will her to believe him, but he had no such power. He dropped his hands and hers soon followed. She stepped back and wrapped her arms around herself.

“Maybe you can only feel me because I’m the one who cursed you,” she whispered, staring at the floor.

“Where did you get that logic, Harry Potter?”

His quip got her to look at him, but she didn’t smile. “Mechanics don’t just fix cars they broke themselves. Doctors don’t only heal injuries they caused. There’s no correlation.”

“Dave and Vince think there is.”

“That’s a story from hundreds of years ago. We seek to explain the unexplainable. That doesn’t make it true.”

“But the Troubles are real. And every twenty-seven years I go into that barn. I told Howard it felt like I was being punished, and he didn’t deny it. It fits.”

“It doesn’t fit! You wouldn’t do that.”

“Wouldn’t I? How would we know that? We don’t know who I was ninety years ago, let alone four-hundred.”

She looked so miserable he couldn’t stand it. He’d watched her mope around for weeks without doing anything about it when he was with Jordan and he’d sworn to himself that if he ever got her back he’d never let her suffer alone again.

“I know you. Audrey Parker.”

“Audrey Parker’s a brunette that lives in Boston. I have her memories but that’s not who I am. Just because she wouldn’t doesn’t mean that I—”

Her voice cracked and she stopped, and as she deliberately looked away from him he understood.
“There were differences between you. You had similar mannerisms, could finish each other’s sentences, but you weren’t the same. You have more compassion. You’re nicer to Duke. You like the crazy, and you want to help the Troubled, no matter what. She was scared off because she thought she saw a clown. Even if you had been affected by Jackie you wouldn’t have let that stop you.” He reached out and laid a hand on her cheek; God knew it helped to steady him when she did it. “I didn’t love her.”

She didn’t shrug him off, but it didn’t seem to convince her. “It’s guilt. That’s why I care so much. Because I caused this.”

“If you really caused this you wouldn’t feel guilty. You’d be bitter that you’re still paying for it.”

“That’s a stunning endorsement of the prison system from a chief of police.”

“It’s the truth.” He slid his hand down her neck and rested it on her shoulder. “If you were selfish enough to curse a whole town because one man rejected you, then you wouldn’t feel guilty afterwards.”

She shook her head and closed her eyes, taking a deep breath before she opened them. “I keep asking myself if I could do it if it were you.”

“That’s a ridiculous example. I wouldn’t have rejected you.”

She rolled her eyes, and he’d never been so glad to see her annoyed. Anything was better than defeated.

“I think about how I felt when you were with Jordan – and I was so angry. So jealous. If I had the power to curse people – I could have snapped. Maybe it was an accident. So many of the Troubled we help don’t even know what they’re doing at first. Their rage or their fear just manifests. If it was something like that I could have done it without really meaning to … but it would still be my fault.”

But Jordan was his fault, and he hated himself for letting that go as far as it had. And as much as Audrey’s argument was rational it still felt vehemently wrong. “The story’s a lie. I’m holding to that unless we find proof otherwise. In the meantime, I’m making dinner.”

“I’m not hungry.”

He swallowed his reflex to tell her she needed to eat. Audrey never took well to being told she had to do anything, so he changed tactics and banked on the fact that as much as she was trying to isolate herself she didn’t seem to actually want to be alone.

“Well I am, so I’m making something. You don’t have to eat if you don’t want.” With great reluctance he let go of her shoulder and made his way to the kitchen. He did not let himself look back to see if she was following, but as he began pulling ingredients from his refrigerator he could hear her shuffle into the room. He had the strange sense that he could feel her watching as he sliced the chicken and vegetables and set the broth to boiling.

“Chicken noodle soup? Are you for real?”

He looked back. She stood in the doorway, arms still around herself, voice alight with weary disbelief.

He narrowed his eyes. “Yes?”
“You really are almost perfect.”

“I’m not. It’s just soup.”

“Stop it!” Her voice was so fierce it did make him pause. She strode forward and settled gracelessly on one of his island chairs, fixing him with a scowl that did funny things to his heart. He wasn’t sure if he was intimidated or aroused. “You’re always putting yourself down. I wish you’d knock it off. I know you’re not actually perfect. Jordan and the Guard and the Troubles and all that. Heaven knows we both made a lot of mistakes last time. But you’re a good man, and I wish you could see that.”

He wanted to kiss her, pull her to him, and never let go, because when she was saying such things to him the last thirty years fell away and he felt like the man she thought he was. Plus she was yelling at him, which meant she was coming back to herself, and God how he loved her.

Instead he smiled at her and drawled, “Suppose I can try.”

She heaved a long, labored sigh. “You’re certainly good at taking care of me, mess that I am.”

“I do it for the perks,” he quipped, and he let her consider the more scandalous implications of that before he turned back to the stove with a smirk. “Testing my coffee, telling me when I need a band-aid.”

“That all I’m good for, Wuornos?”

“Certainly not all.” None of that scratched the surface, not even the sex, but there was life in her voice and color in her cheeks again. He’d keep talking nonsense until the end of time if it raised her spirits.

He ladled out two bowls of soup and set one in front of her. She narrowed her eyes but he shrugged his shoulders and picked up his spoon.

“That’s hot!” she scolded, grabbing his wrist to stop him from taking his first taste.

He could see the steam rising, but he’d honestly forgotten. It was one of the benefits of his affliction that when he did cook for himself he didn’t have to wait for anything to cool. But he didn’t suppose she’d want to hear that, so he held his tongue.

She continued to hold his wrist, and it was all he could do not to tilt the spoon and spill soup all over the table. She traced her fingers across his veins as if she found them fascinating, and the soft caress sent sparks running up his arm. His breath caught in his throat, and he couldn’t have said anything if he’d wanted to.

After a few minutes she seemed to come back to herself and realize the way he was staring at her. She dropped his wrist, blushing furiously, and he dropped the spoon, sending soup splattering everywhere.

“Geez, sorry.”

“No, I’m sorry,” she said with a quiet laugh, and she stood to grab a napkin and mop up the mess. “I think the soup is cool now.”

He retrieved his spoon. Instead of grabbing her own Audrey wrapped her hands around the bowl as if she wanted to soak up its warmth. It worried him that she was still so cold, but he supposed some things went deeper than the skin.
But after verifying he hadn’t made any grievous mistakes and the soup was edible he nudged her spoon in her direction. “You’re supposed to eat that, not use it as a heater.”

“I don’t even want any, remember?” she protested, but she picked up the spoon anyway and took a small mouthful.

He watched her carefully, wanting to compare her body’s reaction to whatever she might tell him to spare his feelings. He was delighted to find both seemed to be in agreement. A moment after swallowing she grinned and reached for another spoonful. “My God, Nathan, this is fantastic. I was going to sulk and keep pretending I wasn’t hungry – but this is really delicious.”

He smiled, glad to get something warm and nutritious inside her when sometimes it seemed like she lived on caffeine and cupcakes, with an occasional side of whatever she could beg off of Duke.

“There’s more where that came from.”

“I may take you up on that.”

They ate in silence for awhile. He was thrilled when she did ask for a second bowl.

“Is this your mother’s recipe too?” she asked while she waited for it to cool.

He wasn’t entirely sure what loosened his tongue. Today had left him raw, and he’d do anything to keep her distracted from what they’d learned. “Yeah. It was her special cure for a bad day. I could always tell when things were rough at the station. Even if she’d been making a roast there’d be soup on the table.”

Audrey swirled her spoon around the bowl with a forced nonchalance. “You don’t talk about her much.”

“Never found much use in dredging up the past.” The irony of that wasn’t lost on him.

“What was she like?” She seemed to be waiting for him to shut her down.

He didn’t. “She taught music at Haven Elementary. That could have been mortifying– but she was the cool mom. All my classmates were jealous.”

He stared down into his own soup, trying to pick a few happy memories to share with her. Thinking of his mother was painful, but it was a dull ache, because he’d spent so long deliberately avoiding the issue he’d forgotten all the reasons the loss had hurt.

“She and the Chief were happy. Sometimes I’d catch them dancing in the kitchen without any music. She could even get him to sing a few bars. I used to think that was gross.”

He chuckled. Now he yearned for such moments with Audrey. His parents had had a quiet intimacy he hadn’t understood as a child, but as he looked at the woman beside him, hanging on to his every word with that curiosity he found so mesmerizing, he figured he got it now.

He shared a few other stories: her annual ritual of extravagant Christmas preparations, their family fishing trips, the way she’d let him help her cook, even though it took twice as long when he asked questions at every stage of the process.

When the stories petered out she asked the question he somehow knew was coming. The one anyone with more tact would have shied away from.
“How did she die?”

He remembered how cold the church had seemed. Not Good Shepherd but First Presbyterian, which his mother had attended faithfully every Sunday. There had been a line of people offering him condolence just like with his father but they’d been even more useless then. The sadness had been so smothering he was sure he couldn’t breathe, but somehow he kept living. He remembered her asking him about his day with a kiss and a smile, just a few days earlier it seemed – and nothing between that. “I don’t remember.”

Her eyes narrowed. Her spoon stilled. “How old were you?”

“Nine.” It bothered him how this had never bothered him before. He probed at the blankness, but it didn’t give.

“So the Troubles were involved, then?”

It was easy to guess the dark paths her mind was traveling down. “It wasn’t your fault.”

“You don’t know that.”

“You don’t know that it was.” He didn’t know what happened, but he knew what happened after. “After she died the Chief and I just fell apart. Nothing I could do was ever good enough for him. My batting average was never high enough. My grades weren’t perfect. I was never as popular or successful as he wanted me to be.”

“Your father was a damn fool.” He wished he could have seen her say that to his face. “But he was also a liar, since he worked with Lucy and still looked me in the eye and said he didn’t know anything about the woman in the photo. I don’t think he meant to be as hard on you as he was.”

He trusted Audrey implicitly, but she wasn’t an impartial judge. “Guess we’ll never know.”

There was something else, and it was a secret he’d carried on his own for so long that he found himself needing to share it with her. “I don’t remember Max Hanson.” It was another empty vacuum, and this one panicked him even more because it wasn’t a few days that were missing. It was years. And he wasn’t sure if it was the reason for the loss or the content of those stolen memories that was more frightening. “If I really think about it I remember a different house, and the Chief wasn’t there – but Max wasn’t either. I looked up his file after he died.” Maybe she had too, because she grabbed his hand as if she knew what was coming. He took a deep, shaky breath and forged ahead. “He beat her – and me. She didn’t leave him until I was five. But I don’t remember any of that.”

“I’m glad,” she said, squeezing his hand, and the panic receded a little. “Maybe it’s better that we forget some things.”

Just as long as he never forgot this moment – two damaged souls finding refuge in each other. Was the Barn’s memory wipe supposed to be a kindness, to make her forget everything that she’d lost?

“You said the Guard has a family that can make people forget things, right? But they weren’t on your list of Troubled people.”

“We don’t know who they are.”

“I guess that would be a pretty easy Trouble to hide, since you could just make everyone forget that they noticed. Maybe they were involved.”
“Could be worth looking into. But it’s been a long day. We should get some rest.”

She nodded and rose to start clearing the table. He wanted to tell her to leave it but something stopped him. Maybe they needed the normalcy. It only took a few minutes to load the dishwasher and put everything away, and it might have taken a few less if he didn’t spend so much time watching her whenever she wasn’t looking, completely in awe of the fact that she was moving around his kitchen doing chores like she belonged there.

It was also strange to get ready for bed together without falling into it. Since she’d returned his nighttime routine had been sacrificed to their urgent need for each other. Now it was odd to change into clothes instead of pulling them off. To shuffle around each other as they brushed their teeth and she washed the makeup off her face and brushed the tangles from her hair. She retrieved a t-shirt from his dresser without asking and he watched wordlessly as she put it on in front of him. He was struck by the fact that this is what they did now. There was no need for modesty when they’d spent so much time exploring each other’s bodies. No need to ask for permission when she already knew he’d give her absolutely anything she asked for. This was no casual thing – there was no need for the “how do we define our relationship” talk. Their lives were so serious they’d skipped all the baby steps in their physical relationship without even realizing. He was absolutely fine with that. He’d known, from the first time he’d realized his feelings for Audrey, that if he ever acted on them he’d never be able to stop.

Nathan waited until she’d crawled into her side of the bed to turn off the light. A nearly full moon streamed through the window, casting her pale skin in silvery shadow. She laid on her side, facing him, but there were a few feet between them and she made no move to broach the distance.

“James and I went on a picnic this morning,” she said, almost wistful, but he could hear the edge of pain in her voice. “He called me Mom, and I thought: if I can just get through this meeting then it will have been a good day. But I was wrong.”

He wanted to pull her into his arms and never let go, but he was pretty sure she’d said something about space earlier at the Gull. It felt like now might be one of those times she needed some. He knew how she hated to seem weak. But she looked so small and forlorn, curled in on herself, that he couldn’t do anything. He reached out one hand, intending to settle it on her shirt, but the need to feel her skin was too strong. He slipped his fingers under the hem and ran them softly up her back. Her skin was soft as silk and so incredibly warm, but he fought his instinct to close his eyes to savor it so he could watch her reaction, needing to know if he affected her even a fraction of the way she affected him. Her eyes widened as he continued his ministrations, stroking a gentle pattern up and down her back, and then she was scooting into him and buried her face in his neck.

“Don’t stop,” she commanded, and he tightened his arm around her and obeyed.

“Yes ma’am.”

“Bossy,” he added as an afterthought. He felt the amused hitch of her breath against his neck. It wasn’t the laugh he was going for, but it was a start.

For the first time he let himself really contemplate what she had done today. Six months wasn’t nearly long enough with this woman – but just this morning he’d had no idea how he was going to keep her alive six weeks, let alone six months. The thought of six months together, as partners and lovers and friends, seemed like an incredible gift. He’d discover ways to make her smile and laugh. He wouldn’t let her dwell on what could not be changed. And he’d find her the answers she needed, so she could put this all behind her and start living. He imagined what it would be like, growing old with her, and his heart almost couldn’t contain the joy of it.
But as thrilled as he was to have her pressed against him, so magnificent under his fingers it set his body humming with bliss, her sadness was just as overwhelming. He heard it when her breath began growing shallow, and her warm tears burned his skin. She’d tried so hard not to cry in front of him that he didn’t dare draw attention to it, but he tightened his hold and felt her shudder.

“I don’t care who you were or what you did hundreds of years ago,” he swore. “I fell in love with the woman I pulled from that cliff, and nothing can change that.”

He would not let her succumb to this, he resolved. He kept rubbing her back until her breathing levelied and deepened. It wasn’t until long after he was certain she’d drifted off that he stilled his hand and let himself sleep.
He allowed her one day to wallow. He called the station to excuse them both and they spent most of the morning in bed, sometimes making love, sometimes just holding each other as he traced assurances onto her skin and whispered them into her hair.

Later they turned to Jack Daniels and Patsy Cline. She couldn’t help but smile as he pulled the CD from a cracked and well worn case. Some part of her had always thought he’d been kidding about that. After they’d both had a few shots she pulled him up – “Easier to wallow from the floor,” he’d drawled – and they swayed to the music. She couldn’t help but think of his reunion, when he’d been reluctant to touch her and she hadn’t wanted to let go, but hadn’t been brave enough to say it. That certainly wasn’t a problem anymore. His hands wandered, the alcohol perhaps making him a little fresh, and as mad as she wanted to stay at herself she still marveled at the way she came alive under his fingertips. She was glad to see him take what he wanted – especially when what he wanted was her.

The need for fresh air eventually drew them out to his front porch. He must have texted Duke for backup because there was a box of cupcakes waiting for them with a note that read: Cheer up. What do those old bastards know, anyway? She’d never tell him, but she had always found something pretty about Duke’s handwriting, as if even the shape of his letters was putting on a show.

They sat on Nathan’s porch swing – because Haven was that sort of town – and gorged themselves on chocolate and peanut butter, vanilla and strawberry, and a few other delectable combinations. Nathan tried to tell her they were too sweet, but she insisted he save her from eating the whole dozen herself. She kissed the frosting off his lip even though she knew he’d gotten it there on purpose, and then she snuggled into him to watch the sun set over the ocean.

There wasn’t a picket fence – Haven wasn’t that sort of town – but that gave Audrey an unobstructed view of how the lawn gave way to a rocky cliff that tumbled into the sea. She should have been able to see the lighthouse, but the shoreline was unbroken – another of her casualties, surely.

It was a mild March, which was still quite chilly in coastal Maine. The flannel jacket Nathan lent her dwarfed her frame, but it was like his arms were around her twice, and she’d already decided she was never giving it back. Her hands were lost in the sleeves, and the hem came nearly to her knees. She’d had to roll up the cuffs to eat her cupcakes, but as she pulled them loose she could feel Nathan laughing behind her.

“I look ridiculous, don’t I?”

“Nah. Midget lumberjack’s a good look for you.”

She twisted back and was shocked to find that he was beaming. She finally believed, as her lungs stuttered and stilled at how handsome he was when he smiled like that, that he’d been telling the truth. As inconceivable as it was, he didn’t blame her. That had been one of her deepest fears – that there was some seed of bitterness inside him and once it took root and he could no longer hide it she wouldn’t be able to live with herself. But there was no way he could look at her like that if he blamed her at all.

“I love you,” she told him, leaning back into his chest.
He didn’t say anything, just tightened his arms around her and pressed a kiss to the top of her head. He hadn’t said much all day. He’d just been there, a warm presence at her back, when no one else had ever bothered. His love for her was so clear in all his actions that her words felt inadequate. She’d have to come up with a way to repay him.

“Tell me everything is going to be okay,” she whispered.

“Everything’s going to be okay,” he told her. He was as reliable as the tides. As certain as the sun setting before them.

“You really believe that, don’t you?”

“Yep.” His breath was warm on her neck as his hand carded through her hair.

She took a deep breath and released it slowly, imagining all her uncertainties dissipating with the air. “Okay.” Now it was up to her to believe it too.

Life in Haven went on. Solving cases was much more enjoyable after Nathan took their reprieve to heart and stopped picturing doom around every corner. Though Audrey’s guilt still resurfaced whenever someone in town treated her coldly, Nathan’s presence was usually enough to keep it at bay.

One morning she pulled out her duffle bag and found it woefully empty of anything even vaguely resembling professional attire.

“I don’t have anything to wear,” she muttered mostly to herself as she scanned the room for something that wasn’t too wrinkled to be presentable.

“We should do laundry tonight. And you should move in.”

“What did you say?” Her head snapped toward his voice immediately. He’d just come from the shower, and he was shirtless and toweling his hair dry.

“We should do laundry,” he repeated slowly. “And then we should get the rest of your stuff and bring it here.”

She couldn’t believe they were having this conversation when she could see all the muscles in his chest. “Whoa, Wuornos. You don’t just spring that on a girl. Let’s do some chores and then make a major life commitment.”

He lowered the towel and smirked at her. “You’ve spent every night here since you’ve gotten back. You only go to your apartment to swap out clothes. Makes sense for you to move in.”

“Yeah, but…” She couldn’t find an end to that sentence. Could barely think at all with the way her stomach was suddenly churning.

The dread must have shown on her face. “Do you want to go back to your place?” he asked, sounding hurt and worried.

“No!” The thought of that made her even sicker. She’d gotten used to waking up with him always in reach, and she made a point to touch him so he could start each day feeling something. She didn’t want him to wake alone either.

He dropped the towel and stood in front of her, settling his hands on her shoulders. “What are you
afraid of?"

It was uncanny how well he knew her. She took a deep breath and tried to convey the panic as something intelligible. “I’m terrible at all this relationship stuff. Even before my life became a trainwreck, my life was a trainwreck. I’ve always been on my own. I’ve never lived with anyone who cared – especially not a guy. I’m a mess. I rarely have time for chores. I never dust – or vacuum. I let dishes pile up. I forget to pay rent.”

He chuckled. “You really haven’t lived with a man before. I’m not your grandmother, Parker. I’m not looking for a housekeeper. I don’t give a damn about any of that as long as I wake up beside you.” She could hear his amusement just as clearly as she could see it, and even though he was mocking her it soothed her somehow.

“Besides, from the way your clothes are strewn across my house, I already figured you were a mess.”

She flicked him in the neck and he shied away, exaggerating the pain. But as soon as she started to laugh his hands were back, rubbing circles on her shoulders.

“You move in here, maybe James can stay at the Gull. It’ll get him out of that awful motel.”

The shockwave of nostalgia was unexpected. “I love that apartment.”

“We could stay there then. James could move in here.”

She stared up at him, shocked that he seemed absolutely serious. “You’d give up your house – and put up with Duke as your landlord?”

“Long as you were there with me.”

His tone was brimming with sincerity, but there was something a little bit wicked in his eyes. “You just want to remind Duke that we’re sleeping together.”

He smiled at her, and God, sometimes he made her feel like such a girl. “Would be a bonus.”

Fear was loosening its grip, and she could begin to see the situation rationally. “It would be silly to give up your house.” In truth her apartment was too small for two people, and she didn’t need a security blanket when she had him.

“There are plenty of spare rooms. You can have one. Do whatever you like with it. Go there whenever you need some time alone to paint your nails or have a good cry.”

“Wow. Obviously you’ve never lived with a woman before.” But she stopped herself. She knew so little about his life in the years between the Troubles. “You haven’t, have you?” she asked. She wasn’t sure why the answer seemed so important. She should have wanted that for him – a normal life with a few failed relationships. But she didn’t like the thought of him being rejected – or anyone else being able to lay a claim on him.

“Nah.” He seemed a little wistful, and she placed her hands on his waist. He was always so warm, she couldn’t comprehend how he couldn’t feel it.

“Why not?”

She had wondered, long before she thought of him as anything more than a partner and friend, why a man as handsome and decent as Nathan Wuornos hadn’t been snatched up long before his
Trouble reactivated.

“Because I knew, as much as I tried to pretend otherwise, that the Troubles would come back. Didn’t seem fair to start a life with someone when I knew I would ruin it.”

She frowned, wishing she could tell him that wasn’t the case.

“Besides, none of the other girls in Haven were you.”

“That was terrible,” she groaned, even as his cheesy words flooded her with warmth. Her fingers twitched on his skin, and she noticed something different in the way he reacted – a small smile crossed his face and he twisted away from her.

“You’re ticklish,” she crowed.

“Am not.” His eyes widened, and she itched to prove him wrong.

“Parker,” he warned, but her fingers were already moving up his sides. Soon they were both breathless with laughter. He eventually caught her wrists and trapped them against his chest.

“Move in with me,” he repeated, boyish and beautiful and everything she didn’t deserve but desperately wanted.

“You’ll get tired of me,” she admitted, her last and greatest fear.

He didn’t even hesitate. “Not gonna happen.”

It really was unfair that they were having this conversation when he was half dressed, she thought as she stared at his chest. “Everyone always does.”

He lifted her chin gently. “Not me.” He kissed her slowly, thoroughly, until it seemed they were breathing the same air and she could feel his promise down to her toes.

They did laundry that night. The next night, Duke and James came over to the Gull to help her pack.

It was a little depressing how quickly they finished. The Gull had been more of a home to her than any other place she’d ever stayed, but it still took four people only a little more than an hour to box up all the belongings she’d acquired.

As the men tried to figure out how to get the piano downstairs she retreated to the deck, where she’d so often gone to gather her thoughts. She curled up on one of the Adirondack chairs, sad that it might be the last time.

Except for stepping into the Barn, Audrey had never found it so hard to leave somewhere.

It wasn’t that she regretted her decision. When she looked at it objectively, Nathan was right – she’d already been living at his place since her return. She shouldn’t be weepy over the fact she was relocating her clothes.

But the Gull had been important to her. She’d decorated, she’d thrown a Christmas party in July, she’d invited over friends and dates. She’d actually looked forward to going back there, knowing that staring out over the ocean or listening to the bustle downstairs would soothe her when life at the station was too heavy. She had started to build a life in Haven, and this was the place she’d gone to process it all.
Except she’d already left it behind without even realizing, because she had Nathan now. And that was inarguably better than solitude. But it was still unsettling to leave this, when solitude was all she’d known her entire twisted, never-ending life.

“You okay?” Duke asked, settling in the chair next to hers.

“Aren’t you supposed to be helping?” she asked, tilting her head toward the truck. Nathan and James had gotten the piano out of the building, but it was still a long way from loaded.

“They got it,” he said. “Besides, I had to get your present.”

He handed her a narrow blue bag with a silver bow. She pulled out a fancy bottle of champagne.

“Thanks, Duke.”

He grinned at her. “Least I could do for my favorite former tenant.”

“Not just for this,” she said solemnly. It was another thing she’d miss. Duke had been more than her landlord. He’d been someone to rely on – a listening ear and an extra gun and a short-order cook, all rolled up into the second friend she’d ever had. They’d still be friends, but now that she was moving in with Nathan they’d never be quite the same.

“You’re not going to get all sappy on me, are you?”

“Maybe.”

He leaned toward her conspiratorially. “I’ll allow it, just this once. Only cause Nathan and James are down there.”

She laughed, hugging her knees to her chest. “After we found out about the Hunter, I was a wreck. And you were always there, watching out for me. I’m not sure what I would have done if you weren’t.”

She could tell he appreciated the words, but in typical Duke Crocker fashion he didn’t say that. But he didn’t try to excuse them away, either. He looked out toward the lot where Nathan was hoisting the piano. “He taking good care of you now?”

She was sure her smile was sickening, but she couldn’t temper it. “Yeah.”

“If he stops, you tell me. I’ll kick his ass. I won’t even enjoy it. Beating on Nathan is no fun. But I’d do it.”

“You won’t have to,” she assured. But it felt good, somehow, to know that he would.

The piano finally in place, James and Nathan began to strap it down. The cadence of their voices carried, but she couldn’t discern what they were saying. There was something delightful about seeing them together, as if for a few moments all was right in their crazy world. “Can I ask you another favor?”

“Another favor? Why Audrey Parker, I think you’re taking advantage of me.”

But she didn’t take his bait this time. “Will you keep an eye on James for me? I worry about him sometimes, with Arla … and everything.”

His sigh was deep, without a hint of affectation. “Yeah, I’ll watch the kid. I’d be a pretty terrible uncle if I didn’t, huh?”
“You’re a good man, Duke,” she said, but she cut him off when he tried to protest. “Don’t worry. I won’t tell anyone.”

“Thanks.”

They sat in silence for awhile, listening to the music downstairs. When she first met Duke Crocker she’d never have guessed that comfortable silence would be one of his strengths, but since she moved in here he always seemed to know when she just needed someone around.

“I feel like I’m leaving home for the first time,” she said after a few minutes. “How weird is that?”

“All grown up and moving in with a boy,” he teased.

“Everything okay up here?” Nathan and James had returned. Audrey smiled and patted the arm of her chair so Nathan would come and sit by her.

“Everything’s great. Duke brought us booze.”

“Why am I not surprised?”

“Maybe because I kept you from packing four of the wine glasses.”

They were always digging at each other, but something had shifted between Nathan and Duke, and though Audrey wasn’t exactly sure what she was grateful for it. She needed both of them, although in different ways, and she wanted them to get along. There were too many real enemies to fight to waste time sparring with each other.

She leaned against Nathan as Duke and James went inside to get the glasses and a bottle opener. “No regrets,” she whispered, linking one of her hands with his.

The four of them toasted under the starry sky. “To old tenants. And new tenants. And friends,” Duke declared grandiosely, and even Nathan managed the ghost of a smile.

“To family,” she amended, watching each of the men in her life in turn. Somehow, this time around, the servant had gotten lucky.

Duke had promised he’d come by the next evening to move the piano, but Audrey and Nathan brought the rest of the boxes into his house by themselves. His delight made it impossible to hold on to her melancholy.

Once they’d moved most of the stuff to his bedroom and a few boxes to his kitchen he pulled her down the hallway to a room she’d never been in before.

“If you don’t like it you can pick another one,” he said. “I won’t be offended.”

“What are you talking about?” she asked.

He opened the door and pushed her gently inside.

The walls were a warm yellow and lined with bookshelves, except for the window that gave her a clear view of the ocean. There was a desk, a comfortable looking couch, and one of the deck chairs from the Gull.

“I thought one was missing,” she said, rubbing her hand over the familiar wood, surprised at how glad she was to see it when she’d just been sitting in one two hours ago.
“Duke’s contribution,” he said.

“Nathan, what is this?”

“Your space. For when you need it.”

She wanted to jump him, right then and there, and she also had an aggravating urge to cry. She managed to do neither, but it was quite a struggle.

“How did you pull this off? I agreed to move in with you two days ago.”

“James. He painted and built all the bookshelves while we were at the station.”

The thought of that, her son and his father, conspiring to do all this for her was almost too much.

“There’s one more thing.”

“Only one?”

He handed her a square package wrapped in newspaper and she tore into it, almost afraid at how this could get any better.

It was a ceramic tile with a cerulean blue border. The words “Audrey’s” and “Room” were spelled out in thick yellow letters and separated by a cupcake with chocolate frosting and white sprinkles.

“You made this,” she whispered, realizing she was finally holding evidence of his infamous decoupage skills. “When did you have time to make this?”

“You’re a heavy sleeper,” he said, as if it wasn’t a big deal at all.

Which explained why he’d been extra hard to rouse this morning but not how he got to be so ridiculously perfect.

“You’re too much,” she said, each and every cell brimming with so much affection for him she wasn’t sure she could stand the intensity of it.

His smile made her dizzy. “You make me the happiest man in the world. Least I can do is try to return the favor.”

After placing the sign in the center of the desk where it would hopefully be safe she launched herself at him, kissing him with the ferocity of a hurricane, one hand raking through his hair and the other working its way under his shirt. They stumbled backwards until she pushed him against one of the bookshelf covered walls. That would have been uncomfortable for anyone else, but for once she was grateful she didn’t have to care. She continued to ravage him until she needed to come up for air and then they panted together like animals while her hands continued to move, move, move.

“So now that I live here, you’ll have to show me your decoupage room,” she murmured into his neck, her tongue flicking out to taste him.

It was a testament to just how much time they’d spent desensitizing him that he was able to manage a coherent response. “That wasn’t part of the deal.”

“Guess I’ll have to move out then.” Her hands moved to his belt buckle and lingered there, teasing.

“Shame.” His hand ran up her thigh and she decided it was time to get his pants off.
“We’re supposed to christen every room in the house, right?” she asked a few minutes later, all thoughts of even pretending to leave long forgotten.

“I think we’ve hit a few already.” She loved when his voice went all low and gravely and he tossed his inhibitions out the window.

“Better do them again though, just to be safe.”

His fingers danced across her. “No arguments here.”

“You think you can find it,” he purred in her ear later as she neared the edge, every muscle coiled against him. She’d meant to have the upper hand, but somehow he’d turned the tables.

“What?” she asked, nearly delirious.

“The decoupage room.”

It was honestly the last thing on her mind, but she appreciated he thought so much of her concentration.

“Oh yeah,” she said, but it came out more of a sigh then anything, and the way he was touching her she didn’t care.

“By the time we get there, you won’t even notice,” he promised, and she came laughing into his shoulder, hoping he was right.

She found it a few days later while she was pawing through the knick-knacks on top of his dresser – a dusty gold ring on a silver chain.

“What do you want for breakfast?” Nathan asked from the doorway, and Audrey jumped like she’d been caught with her hand in the cookie jar.

But he was far too distracted by her appearance to take much notice of her actions. She was wearing the flannel shirt and fur-lined boots he’d bought her shortly after she came to Haven, her hair tossed up in a messy bun so it would be out of her way while snooping.

“You kept that,” he said after he’d looked her up and down.

She smiled, glad that he was obviously pleased. “Course I did. It was the first gift you ever gave me – even if you were making fun of me for being an outsider. Which turned out to be untrue, by the way. I’ve been in Haven longer than anyone.”

“Yet you still have no idea how to dress for a Maine winter,” he said, shaking his head with a laugh. “Were you going through my stuff?”

“Yep,” she answered without shame. “You’re the one who asked me to move in. I’m nosy. You’ll have to deal with it. I found the ring.”

It was only after she said it that she realized how that sounded. But his eyes went wide immediately. “That’s not for you. Not that it couldn’t be. I mean—”

“Obviously,” she said to stop his floundering. “Because it would be in a box, not on a chain. Not that I’ve been thinking about that, because that would be - crazy.”

“Not that crazy,” he muttered under his breath. But even as her heart pounded in her throat she
noticed something shifty in his gaze.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” she asked.

“You’re not wearing any pants.”

She threw back her head and laughed, their uneasy spell broken. “Great observation, Sherlock.”

That was for his benefit, of course. His libido had been suppressed for so long, she liked making him feel like a man. It was always fun when he turned all shades of awkward. What came after the awkward was fun too.

But seducing him would have to wait, because there was something important about the ring and she wouldn’t be sidetracked until they figured this out.

“So what’s the story?” she asked, opening her hand and letting the ring dangle on its chain from her fingers.

“It was my father’s.”

“Pretty feminine for the Chief,” she teased.

“You don’t think he was a jewelry guy?” he countered with an easy smile. “He used to keep it in his pocket. Always had it with him.”

“Was it your mother’s?”

“No. He buried her with her wedding rings. Strangely sentimental for the Chief. Or maybe he just assumed I’d never need them.”

She let that slide, the topic a little too close to home after their earlier exchange. “Whose was it then?”

“He never said. But I found it after he … exploded. I used to wear it. Stopped after you were gone. Didn’t seem worth it, or something.” He scratched at the back of his neck. “Why are you so interested?”

She opened the jewelry box she’d placed on his dresser and pulled her own ring from the bottom. “Vince gave this to me. Said it was Sarah’s,” she explained as she handed it to him.

He rolled it between his thumb and forefinger, taking in the same size and color. The diamonds were arranged differently, and Audrey didn’t know much about jewelry, but there seemed to be similarities. “Think they were a set?”

“Yeah, I do.” She wasn’t sure where the conviction came from, but it felt right. “There’s an inscription on it.”

“PAH,” they said simultaneously.

“Well I guess that solves that,” Audrey said.

“Hardly.”

“Did Sarah wear a ring?”

“No.” He blushed as he said it, and she wished for the millionth time that she could remember
why. What had he done to Sarah, exactly? What had she done to him?

“How old do you think these are?” she asked.

“No idea. Guess we could ask an appraiser. They seem old.”

“Sixteenth century old?”

“What are you thinking?”

“Maybe I cursed the town and stole the mayor’s daughter’s wedding rings just for fun.”

He shot her a disapproving look. He was still holding steadfast to her innocence in this whole debacle. “If we can identify the initials that could give us a lead.”

It was a place to start when they didn’t have many of those. But holding onto the ring which Nathan had worn around like a talisman for no discernable reason, she couldn’t shake the feeling that it was hers.

Apparently thinking that it should have been was what had started all this.

“You think Lucy gave this to your dad?”

“Makes as much sense as anything, I guess.”

“But why? And why would Sarah give hers to Vince?”

“Something to remember her by?”

It was hard to fathom how many times the cycle had played out – her leaving her friends behind with very little explanation. Was that why Garland had never said anything? Was the fact she didn’t remember him too hard to face?

But as much as she’d wanted to leave a piece of herself for Nathan, she’d never once considered giving him a ring. And she’d had one, so she could have.

“How would she get them?”

“Same way you did, maybe? Passed down from cycle to cycle by those she left behind.”

“So maybe you were supposed to give this back to me.”

It was easy to see how the thought of that pained him. Talk of the Barn was inevitable when they were so consumed with solving this mystery, but they were both trying to live in the present.

“You should hang on to it. Since we destroyed the Barn and I’m not going anywhere.” She reached up and dropped the chain over his head. The ring settled on his chest like it belonged there. “I’m back now. So maybe you should start wearing that again.”

“'Kay. And you can keep this one.” He handed her Sarah’s ring and she put it back in her jewelry box.

“That leaves just one question,” he told her.

“Only one?” she asked, raising an eyebrow.
“Why aren’t you wearing any pants?”

“Thought that was obvious,” she said, trying not to giggle. “I’m trying to seduce you.” He grinned, and she wrapped her arms around his neck and rubbed her bare leg against his. “Think breakfast can wait?” she whispered in his ear.

“Breakfast can always wait,” he answered, finding the buttons on her shirt.

“Even pancakes?”

“Even pancakes,” he echoed sincerely before kissing her.

Being preferred over a breakfast food had never felt like such a victory.
Chapter 15

Between the bizarre cases and unanswered questions they scrambled for some semblance of normalcy. Life in Haven was a three ring circus on the best of days and an outer circle of Hell on the worst. But there were hours when the world seemed to forget her importance and leave them alone, and Audrey cherished those more than any gift she’d ever received.

The sex was phenomenal, of course, and there was plenty of that. But she liked the quiet moments too, the both of them in his bed after a long day, sharing a pillow while she trailed her fingers lazily up and down his arm and they smiled at each other in the dim light like fools.

Intimacy had always made her uncomfortable. Maybe that started hundreds of years ago when her parents shipped her off to a hostile continent to pay their debts. Maybe the Barn always chose identities for her like Audrey Parker, who learned at a young age that anyone who wanted to get close had bad intentions, but few even bothered. But all the fortifications she’d built came crashing down when Nathan offered himself to her with wide eyes and a desperation for human contact more profound than her own. While trying to give him everything he deserved she found that she wanted it too. She’d spent so long believing that no one could want her. The fact that he did was an enormity she couldn’t comprehend. But she craved every piece of evidence, and she collected it diligently, whether they were working a case or hiding from the world.

But she was still Audrey Parker, relationship wrecking ball.

Her wandering fingers found the tattoo on his forearm. All the times and ways she’d touched him she’d consciously avoided it, but something drew her to it tonight. She was never any good at just letting things be. Her curiosity slayed felines wherever she went. There was so much they’d never spoken of, and once again the time clock on her life was counting down. She hadn’t brought it up because she hadn’t wanted to fight with him, but she didn’t want this to hang over the rest of their time together, either.

He tensed but she persisted, tracing the men at the points of the maze. It had taken on such sinister implications for them all, but the symbol itself looked harmless enough. She supposed secret societies were supposed to be subtle. Weren’t they all standing outside the maze of life, unsure how to navigate its twisted passages?

Apparently copious amounts of sex and spooning made her philosophical.

It didn’t make her any more tactful.

She liked the quiet moments, but she ruined them anyway.

“Did you sleep with Jordan?” she asked.

The smile melted from his face, leaving his features blank and unreadable. As panic crept over her words started tumbling from her mouth so she wouldn’t have to wait in silence for his answer. “Not that it matters, really. She’s gone, and obviously you chose me and—”

“Yes.”

She didn’t understand why it hurt so damn much. She’d been nearly certain of that, the way the two of them had been together. The way Jordan had acted when Nathan had died. They’d been a couple too long for them not to have slept together. And it wasn’t like Audrey’s jealousy even made sense, because she’d had him every way possible since she’d been back and she knew
without a doubt that he’d choose her over Jordan every time. But she hated the fact they had ever been together. Her stomach churned, but instead of retreating she twisted the knife deeper.

“Did you feel anything?” She hated herself for asking when she already knew the answer; it was catty and hurtful but she needed confirmation anyway.

He pushed himself up with one arm and ran the other hand through his hair, agitated. “No,” he said, dark as one of Marion’s storms. The room crackled with anticipation. After the thunder shook them, what would the lightning show?

“Not just physically. I never cared about her. I wasn’t trying to get over you. Maybe that makes you feel better. But it makes me sick.”

It made her sick too, the self-loathing in his voice and the images his words conjured. She wanted to take back the questions, shut Pandora’s box, find some shelter from the lashing winds. But she didn’t stop him, because she’d always been one to stand and fight rather than hide.

“I used her. I knew exactly how desperate she was to feel somebody, so I took advantage of her Trouble and mine. I made her think I actually cared, and the whole time, God even when I was inside her, all I could think was how I needed to save you.”

The truth was like some grotesque, twisted creature in the bed between them. She wanted to beat it to death, bury it far away, and erase it from her memory. But she had no right. He was trying to blame himself, but her role in his corruption had never been more obvious. His indiscretion was because of hers. Once again she had taken love and turned it into something vicious.

She wanted to scream, because she’d never meant to do this to him. He’d just been too stubborn to let her go. And she wanted to throw up, because she didn’t want him to be capable of this.

He was still talking, whatever restraint that usually stopped up his words destroyed with their innocence. “Then I cheated on her with Sarah. But every time I was with her I felt like I was cheating on you. And I’d sworn to myself I’d never treat a woman like that. I never thought I was the kind of man who could.”

She didn’t think he was the kind of man who could do that either. Is that why it felt like she was swallowing glass? Or was she just being selfish again, hating the thought of him touching another woman, spending all his time naked with Jordan when she was contemplating her approaching mortality – or immortality, more likely – completely alone?

She blinked the tears away, determined not to let them fall. “She tried to kill you,” she offered lamely, but they were both too smart to believe that absolved him.

“Doesn’t matter. She just wanted to be normal again. Duke killed her right in front of me and I didn’t even care. I was sleeping with her for a month, and I didn’t mourn her once.”

His voice was practically a wail, and she could sense him pulling away emotionally just as he’d moved to the edge of the bed to put physical distance between them. But she wasn’t going to stand for it. As much as she wanted to flee from all this ugliness, she’d only go if she could drag him with her.

“I kissed Duke in Colorado,” she admitted. As a different fire flared in his eye she reached out and clamped a hand around his arm, demanding. “You can’t be mad at him! I started it, and then I stopped and he was a gentleman about it – well, for Duke anyway – but it happened and I want you to know.”
“Why?” She couldn’t get a read on his tone of voice and thought maybe she’d miscalculated. She needed him to see she wasn’t blameless in all of this. But maybe bringing up Duke had been a bad idea.

“Because he was there. He was there, helping me, and he kept telling me I should live out whatever life I had left and I was so tired of being lonely. But it was wrong. I knew it almost instantly. He wasn’t the one I wanted to be kissing. Going any further would have broken all of us, and there wouldn’t have been any time to fix it, and I couldn’t do that to either of you. You were both supposed to look out for each other while I was gone.”

He sighed like something inside him was giving up, and she ached down to the marrow of her bones. She wanted to go back to a few minutes ago, when they’d been so happy. Why did she shatter everything she loved?

“He’s in love with you,” Nathan whispered.

It was so incomprehensible she laughed, despite everything. “Stop it. Duke flirts with everyone.”

But Nathan was solemn in the moonlight. “He admitted it. After you went into the Barn. I could see it all over his face.”

The pieces clicked into place as the truth sunk into her soul, and she wasn’t sure how she hadn’t realized before.

“I didn’t know.” But maybe she should have. The revelation cast clarity on all his actions since she’d come to Haven. She’d thought it was his past with Nathan, however tumultuous, that kept him involved in their little drama. She never thought he’d seen her as anything more than a friend and a casual flirtation.

“He wouldn’t try anything…” She was certain of that. There was nothing devious in his motives.

She wouldn’t be able to handle it if there was.

“I know. You should just be careful. Don’t string him along. I know what it feels like to want someone you think you can never have.”

Her hand reached out to link with one of his, and he didn’t pull away. Her stomach started to settle as she realized the implication of his words. “You’re looking out for him,” she teased softly.

“Am not,” he answered petulantly.

“Are too. I knew it. You secretly like Duke.”

He looked horrified at the notion. “Do not.”

“Yeah you do. No hiding it now. I’m on to you.” She tugged on his arm, urging him to settle back into bed. The storm was passing. Maybe the rain would cleanse them all.

He laid back down but kept his distance. She stared at him, trying to figure out what to say, but all she could manage was to squeeze his hand.

“How can you even look at me?” he asked after a few minutes.

“Because this is my fault. Not yours.”

“Damn it, Audrey. Let me take some responsibility!”
But she wasn’t going to lose him, not even to himself. “Fine. Sure. Long as I get my share. I could have stopped all this. After Duke told me about the Hunter I should have admitted that I wanted to start something between us but I didn’t think it was fair when I would be gone in forty-six days. You would have told me that was your choice, and you’d rather we make the most of the time we had, and we would have been far too busy screwing our brains out for you to have even met Jordan. Maybe we would have found a way to keep me here, and maybe we wouldn’t have, but you wouldn’t have had to sell yourself to Jordan for information she didn’t even have. Instead I just moped around making us all miserable. I made choices for you, I made choices for Duke, I completely ignored what I wanted and I fucked us all up. If I could go back in time and change it all I would. But I can’t. And you can’t either. I hate that you slept with Jordan and I hate that it was because of me. But we already wasted so much time because of that. I just want to put it behind us. Because I love you, and I forgive you. If you need a day or two to wallow I can give you that, but you don’t get to pull away and let that woman ruin us. I won’t stand for it. Because all we have for sure are the next five months, and we’re going to make the most of every minute, you hear me?”

“Yes ma’am.” The response was instinctual; Nathan had learned fast that it was best not to argue when she got bossy. But she could practically see him processing her words, that sensitive, skeptical mind of his considering whether to accept them. She willed him to understand how much she was willing to forgive him for. If he didn’t care that she’d cursed an entire town how could she not be as open minded? There was something dangerous about her love, if history was to be trusted, but she’d embrace that as long as it was him that protected.

Perhaps it was her scowl that convinced him. After a few seconds his face relaxed and he leaned forward to kiss her on the forehead.

There was something so tender in the gesture her heart nearly burst. His lips lingered a few seconds, and then his head sank to the crook of her neck. She raised a trembling hand to run it through his hair, closing her eyes to focus on the feel of his warm breath on her throat, the fluttering of damp eyelashes against her skin.

She might have comforted James like this if their lives had been less chronologically confused. It might have been maternal affection that surged inside her now, demanding she protect this man at any cost. Whatever it was she embraced the feeling. Anyone who wanted to get at Nathan would have to go through her first.

There was another feeling blossoming inside her, the one she always felt whenever he held her in his arms, that she’d searched for all her lonely life and never found until she met him – relief. *They were going to be okay.*

“I’d never cheat on you,” he swore, the promise punctuated with the whisper of a kiss against her throat.

She stilled her hands and tried not to let her body betray how much she wanted him to do that again. “Damn well better not. I’ve got a gun and I know how to use it.”

She felt his body contract in a silent chuckle. Her hands began to wander once more, and one of his made its way to her back.

“If Duke ever kisses you again I’m going to punch him in the face.”

Now it was her time to laugh. “Seems fair.”

They resituated once he’d pulled himself together, her ear to his chest so his heartbeat could lull
her to sleep. Jordan didn’t matter. As long as Audrey was still here after their six months were up,
no one else in the world would ever be this close to him again.

She would make sure he had everything he ever dreamed of, and then she’d come up with a way to
top that.

Without meaning to, her hand came to rest on the tattoo, covering it.

His voice startled her back into awareness, dry and sardonic. “I could get it removed. Wouldn’t
even hurt.”

She shook her head, knowing full well he could feel the shifting of every strand of hair against his
sensitive skin. “I think you should keep it. As a reminder that we can rise above our mistakes.”

If she had anything to say about it, they’d rise like phoenixes from these ashes and set the whole
town ablaze.
Chapter 16

Duke had never been the kind of man who enjoyed routine, but there was something soothing about the restaurant and its many cycles. Inventory, open, close. Taco Tuesdays. Karaoke Thursdays. He hated payroll – doing the math and writing the checks – but the more often he did it the more he realized he appreciated the stability it represented – a stability he’d never had before in all his life.

He’d been taking fewer and fewer smuggling jobs in the months before the Hunter. He’d told himself he wanted to be nearby in case Audrey needed him.

Maybe some part of him had been stricken by Julia Carr’s biting words, his little pigtailed shadow all grown up and denouncing him for being a criminal.

Or maybe it was the desire to prove Nathan wrong. To show him he could be a better man than his father.

Since returning from the Barn Duke had only taken the _Cape Rouge_ out on a brief fishing excursion to clear his head.

All his contacts thought he’d flown the coup, he told himself as he wiped down the bar on a Wednesday night. It’d be tricky wading back into the game, and with Haven such a powder keg it was better to stay close. Nathan might deny it, but he and Audrey need another pair of hands for whatever was going down.

Besides, it took a lot of elbow grease to get the _Grey Gull_ back up and running, so it made sense he’d want to stick around and make sure everything progressed smoothly.

What confused the hell out of him was the crazier Haven got, the less compelled he felt to leave.

He’d always enjoyed playing bartender, though, because it gave him a chance to be witty and flirt with girls for tips and survey the whole place and appreciate that for the first time in his life he had something good that was unquestionably, legally his.

Business had been solid since the reopening, and he was mixing a piña colada when one of his waitresses called for his attention.

“Hey boss. You want us to be on the lookout for anything suspicious, right?”

He flashed the girl a grin, but he was already peering past her, looking for anyone burly and dangerous. “What have you got for me?”

“There’s a man sitting alone in the corner of the restaurant. He’s been here the past couple of nights. Never orders anything but a water, and he sticks around until we close the place down.”

Nathan had warned him that reopening the Gull made him a target, but he’d ignored the advice. He really hoped this wasn’t how the Guard offed him, because it would be mortifying to die proving Nathan right. “He doesn’t have a tattoo on his arm, does he?”

“I haven’t noticed one.”

“Great. Care to point him out?”
Duke came around the bar for a better look, and Marcy pointed to the loner in the corner. Duke immediately relaxed when he recognized the near-familiar scowl.

“That’s my new tenant, actually. Next time he comes in here and asks for a water give him a jack and coke on the house. And can you get Joel to cover the bar? I have to talk to him about rent.”

He grabbed a bottle of scotch and two tumblers and made his way over the James, who was staring into his glass of water as if it was something a hell of a lot stronger. “You know, I’m not an expert on etiquette in the 1980’s, but in 2012 when someone hangs out in a bar, they’re supposed to order drinks.”

James jerked, and when his eyes met Duke’s his scowl deepened. “I’ll go then.”

“I wasn’t saying you should leave. I was saying you should drink.” Duke set the glasses on the table and poured two measures of scotch, pushing one toward James while grabbing the other and settling himself in the chair across from the brooding man.

“I’m not paying for that.”

“Course not. Gift from your friendly landlord.”

“I don’t need your charity,” he snarled.

Duke downed his shot to keep from saying something he’d regret, Audrey’s plea to look out for the kid running through his mind. He didn’t look much like Nathan most of the time, but it was uncanny how he seemed to be channeling him now. The trick would be to ignore the way he was acting like Nathan and treat him as if he was Audrey. Having one Wuornos as a fair weather enemy was quite enough, not to mention Audrey’s wrath if he made her kid’s life any harder than it already was.

“You think Audrey ever paid for anything around here?” Duke poured himself a second shot, and dumped a little more liquor into James’ glass. “Food. Drinks. Coffee. Advice. There are a lot of perks to living at the Gull. Might as well enjoy them.”

It was really a shame Audrey hadn’t had a daughter, Duke mused as his charm fell flat.

“Seriously. If you don’t start drinking I’m going to keep talking.”


Duke knew firsthand how Audrey couldn’t stand silence. After he’d found out about the Hunter they’d spent a lot of nights together on her balcony, and even when she’d say she just wanted company it wasn’t long before she was rambling about leads or theories or therapy sessions with Claire. But Duke didn’t think something like that was genetic, and James hadn’t spent enough time with Audrey to pick up her habits. Even if he had, Duke wasn’t his confidant. James didn’t trust him or even like him – and a few years ago Duke would have quickly given this up as a lost cause. But now it was more than the thrill of the challenge keeping him focused.

Audrey didn’t need him anymore – not the way she had, anyway, when he’d usurped the role of best friend because Nathan was being a jackass. Truth be told he’d always known it would be temporary. If Audrey didn’t disappear then she and Nathan would eventually get their act together. Even Nathan couldn’t screw up the way Audrey looked at him – though damn, he’d really tried. Duke had resigned himself to that since the night in Colorado. He’d done all the right things, been charming and supportive and there, and even his superior kissing skills hadn’t been enough to
sever her connection to Nathan.

He’d always found her loyalty kind of sexy, anyway. And it said a lot about the strength of their friendship that they really were okay after she put the brakes on anything romantic. There hadn’t been a whole lot of time for awkwardness, with Nathan being dead and the Bolt Gun Killer running amok and the clock ticking down to the arrival of the world’s most temporally complicated barn.

But now she and Nathan were shacking up and it was the cop she turned to when she needed advice or a shoulder to cry on. Aside from missing her, Duke still wanted to help. And if the help she needed was making sure her moody son didn’t drown in despair or do anything rash, then he wasn’t going to give up.

So he waited. And drank. And waited some more.

“It’s too quiet upstairs,” James finally admitted after he’d downed a couple shots. “I’ve been coming down here because of the noise.”

Audrey had never once complained to him that her apartment was too quiet. It might have been heartbreaking if their lives weren’t already all kinds of tragic.

Duke took another drink, figuring he’d need it before this conversation was over. “Look, I’m not going to pretend to know what you’re going through. I don’t think anyone does – unless Arla had some relative who married some poor smuck – which come to think of it probably has happened, because history has a tendency to repeat with anything Trouble related. I knew a couple of people Arla killed – and so did Nathan and Audrey, so they’re not going to want to talk to you about this.”

“That’s fine,” James interrupted.

“No it isn’t. But here’s the thing. I was married once too. Evidence Ryan.” He swirled the liquid in his glass. He’d never talked to anyone about Evi. He wasn’t exactly sure what was driving him now. Perhaps he had drank too much.

“With a name like that, I should have known she was trouble. Actually, I did. I met her in Barbados running a con. We were young, stupid, high on the thrill of it. I don’t know if I really loved her. I thought I did at the time. But it certainly wasn’t mushy, star-crossed love like your parents. We were just two people who seemed to want the same things in life.”

He could still picture her wild curls and devilish smile – the gleam she’d get in her eyes when he suggested something dangerous – but not so much the lines of her face or the shape of her nose. Somehow the idea of Evi had always been more alluring than the woman herself.

“It was fun, for awhile. Evi and I, we had this game we played. We were always trying to one-up each other. So one day she double crosses me and leaves me behind, and I know she’s expecting me to come find her. But I got a call from a friend back in Haven that weird stuff was going down. And I knew the Troubles were back.”

He could still remember the chill that had run down his spine at Ian’s description of the way the skin had melted right off Mrs. O’Malley. He hadn’t thought about the Troubles in years – had half convinced himself they were just stories, like the tales the islanders would tell about ghosts and men who cut out children’s hearts and gave them to the devil. But before Ian had even finished he’d felt the trap clamp around his ankle, and all the escape routes he’d spent years chasing vanish like smoke behind a retreating ferry.

“So here’s the thing. My father was a bastard. Never any doubt about that. And he seemed to know
I was going to get the hell out of town as soon as I could. But before he died he made me promise that I’d come back to Haven when the Troubles did. And for some reason, even though I hated him, I knew I had to keep this promise. I’d been a kid the last time the Troubles were here, but I remembered some pretty crazy shit. I didn’t want Evi mixed up in that, so I went back to Haven without her.”

How he wished that was the end of the story. That she could remain an anecdote from his reckless youth that he’d pull out one night when he wanted to shock Nathan and Audrey. “Did I ever tell you about my wife?” he’d ask nonchalantly, and he’d laugh at the way they gaped at him. The memories were all tainted now. It had seemed somehow shameful, when she’d showed up and he’d never mentioned her, and he could never tell them how he got married half naked on a beach under the full moon because all three of them would think of him locked in that cell, covered in her blood.

What a damned waste.

He took another drink to steady himself and glanced up to see James watching him intently. At least it was working.

“I didn’t see her for three years, and then she just showed up in Haven. I tried to keep my distance – but she always had a way of reeling me in. Then one day I grab her phone to take a picture of Nathan making a fool of himself – and there’s a message from the Rev. This guy was a big creep, but he kept hinting he knew information about my father. Turns out she was working for him. Got your father demoted, and God knows what else. And when I confront her about it the whole police station gets locked down. Some killer disease Trouble. She tells me she did it all for me. That Reverend Driscoll told her I was special and important. And then she busts out of the station demanding answers, and takes a bullet to the chest.”

So much about Evi had faded, but he remembered that night vividly. The anger, the confusion. Her excuses that didn’t make any sense. The desperation in their last encounter. The way he knew the instant she died because the spark left her eyes. His determination to storm out there and avenge her death, because that day seemed as good as any to die. The hollowness he felt looking at her body, which he’d never been able to shake or characterize.

“And I was just so furious. Still am. And I’m not sure if I was mad because she was working for the Rev or because she got herself killed. I guess that probably means I didn’t love her, because it wasn’t so much that she was gone as how she went, and the fact she left me with more questions than answers. Maybe it was always a lie. Maybe she found me in Barbados because she was supposed to manipulate me in Haven. I’ll never know, and sometimes that keeps me up at night.”

He’d never admitted such things to anyone. Audrey had tried to get him to talk about Evi once, but he’d shot her down and she’d never tried again. It had felt wrong somehow – like his devotion to Audrey was a betrayal of Evi, and Evi’s very existence was a betrayal of Audrey. Damned women, and the way they shook him all up like a martini. Nathan had certainly never tried to broach the subject, though he had left him an expensive bottle of scotch after the funeral.

“It’ll always suck, I think. Same thing with Arla. Your parents might try to sugarcoat it, but I’m not gonna. We’ll never know what was going on in their heads. This damn town, it can mess people up pretty bad, and often the biggest victims are those left behind.”

It was only the alcohol that gave him the courage to look at James. He certainly didn’t want any pity from the man whose wife skinned people and stitched their body parts together. Thankfully the kid looked intrigued more than anything.
“Did you ever get the Rev to tell you what he knew?”

“Nah. Audrey shot him for threatening a Troubled girl. But then my father came back as a ghost and told me all about my family legacy. How I was supposed to murder Audrey and it was my duty to kill other Troubled people to purge their bloodlines of their afflictions. Turns out I preferred not knowing any of that.”

Life had certainly been simpler when he was content to be a ne’er-do-well drifter. All this legacy sins of the father shit was enough to drive a man to drink. He wasn’t sure how Audrey stayed sane throwing past lives on top of all that.

“How do you stand it?”

It was the pleading in James’s tone that had Audrey worried, like a frayed bowline close to snapping. No one could blame the kid for doing so.

But no one might be able to patch him either.

“I kept busy. I have my boat, the restaurant. Audrey kept pulling me into her cases. At first I was annoyed about that but she was right – wallowing wasn’t doing me any good.”

This seemed to agitate him more than Duke expected. “I told them I’d help find an end to the Troubles, but I have no idea how to do that. They don’t need me. And just waiting around here, in the place that killed her… Sometimes I think I might go as crazy as she did.”

“I’m sure Nate and Audrey are glad you’re here. But they’re not used to being parents, and they’ve got a whole lot of baggage to work through from before the Barn.”

“I don’t need a babysitter.”

“I didn’t say you did. What did you used to do back in Colorado?”

“I was a carpenter.”

Duke considered that a moment. “That’s a pretty useful trade. Shouldn’t have changed much in the past thirty years. I’ve got a couple of projects around here I could use some help with.”

“I don’t want your charity!”

He rolled his eyes and realized that it probably wasn’t going to be a member of the Guard that was the death of him – it would be Nathan and Audrey’s son. “Calm down. Last I checked honest work wasn’t charity. Better than just letting your parents pay your rent. Besides, I’m not convinced Audrey’s balls are gonna keep the Guard off our backs forever. I’d like to put a safehouse in here – and it’s better that’s done by someone I trust. Plus I know some folks who wouldn’t mind looking the other way if you don’t have a license or any bonding, long as the price is good.”

“Helping me isn’t going to make Audrey leave Nathan you know.”

Duke was hurt, but also a little impressed that even half-drunk the youngest (or was it oldest, technically?) Wuornos had such a solid grasp on the situation. He was hurt and lashing out, but he was paying attention. “Wow, not pulling any punches are you, Junior? I know that.”

“Then why are you doing this?”

Flippancy was second nature. “I told you. Free advice is part of the lease.”
“You’re full of shit.”

For some reason it amused him to be called out on that for once. “And you’re so like both your parents I’m not sure how this town is going to survive.”

It took a few moments to formulate an honest answer he was willing to share, but James waited for him. Was it really only loyalty to Audrey that drove him – a loyalty which he knew would never get him anywhere? There were other ways to keep an eye on James besides spilling his guts about his dead wife. A few years ago he’d never put up with his attitude.

Audrey had insisted more than once that he was turning into a good man. Damn if she wasn’t right.

“Truth is I could have used someone looking out for me when I was your age.” Unwilling to end the night on such a serious note, he flashed James a grin. “Besides, it’ll get your old man riled up if we’re friendly, and that’s always fun.”
Chapter 17

Nathan liked to read the newspaper in the morning, and Audrey liked to read Nathan.

She’d always been one to stay up too late and rue the morning, leaving herself just enough time after her alarm sounded to dress and run out the door. But Nathan, apparently, preferred leisurely mornings. Whenever she groused that his alarm went off far too early he’d apologize with a kiss – or sometimes more than a kiss – and then slip out of bed to get ready. When she finally emerged showered and dressed she’d find him in the kitchen with his head in the Haven Herald, breakfast and coffee already waiting at the place beside him. He’d acknowledge her when she entered but his attention always went back to the paper as if he actually believed the lies the Teagues printed about their dangerous little town.

So she would eat her eggs and wait for the caffeine to work its way through her system, and because she had no interest in reaching for any of Nathan’s discarded sections she would watch him instead. He never commented on any of the stories, even with her beside him, but she could often discern his reaction from the look on his face. For a stoic man he was unusually expressive, but she wondered if that had something to do with how often she overloaded his sense of touch nowadays. Being unable to hide his reaction to that, maybe he just forgot to hide his reaction to other things.

Whatever the reason, it was fascinating to watch him scoff and marvel without saying a word. She learned new things about him every day, and she appreciated the invitation into his daily routine, even if it meant she slept less and had bigger and more consistent breakfasts than she ever had in her life.

It didn’t hurt that it gave her an excuse to stare at him – to watch the adorable way his brow furrowed when he was surprised by something or the knowing smirk that appeared anytime he understood what the Teagues weren’t really saying.

She’d never admit it, but she’d become fond of their morning routine. It gave her time to think about things that weren’t related to the Troubles, such as the man sitting beside her. They’d approached their whole relationship in such a backwards way she was still learning things about him that she probably should have known a long time ago.

She was musing on that one morning when revelation struck.

“I just realized something!” she exclaimed, flush with a eureka moment.

“Hmmm?” he hummed from behind a wall of newsprint.

“That can’t be—”

But the idea was snowballing as her brain connected the dots, and she was certain she was right. “It’s true. We’ve gone out undercover and dressed up to investigate, but that doesn’t count. We were going to have a date the night I was abducted, but that never happened. Now we live together and have sex constantly - we even had a kid - but we’ve never been on an honest to goodness, dress up and meet me at seven date.”

She watched him consider that, but the response he came up with was, “Huh.” He was particularly fluent in monosyllable in the morning.
After nearly a minute he followed that with, “Wouldn’t say constantly.” He sounded part wry, part petulant, and she rolled her eyes in fond exasperation.

“That wasn’t the important part of my argument. We should be wining and dining each other. So we’re going to start now. Tomorrow night. Dress up. You can pick me up in my cupcake room. Though make it six, not seven.”

His lips twitched upward and she was finally certain she had his complete attention. “I’m apparently not very good at this, but aren’t you supposed to ask someone if they want to go on a date with you?”

She rolled her eyes. “Fine. Do you want to have dinner with me tomorrow?”

“Yep.”

“Smartass,” she said with a laugh, swiping his last piece of toast in retaliation.

She spent more time that afternoon researching potential dates than suspects, but by the end of the day she was proud of their itinerary, which she refused to share with Nathan. Friday dragged, and she kept waiting for a new case to swoop in and make leaving town that night impracticable, but for once Haven was atypically quiet.

She hadn’t been up to buying a new outfit when the shopkeeper would probably call her a harlot and spread rumors of her sexcapades all across town, so she wore the blue dress Dave had picked out for her shortly after coming to Haven. She took the time to curl her hair like she used to and was still fussing with her makeup when Nathan rapped on the door.

She found him standing in his own hallway in a vest and shirt, clutching a bunch of blue flowers. His eyes raked over her appreciatively, and she smiled at how similar his outfit was to what he’d worn for his reunion. She’d found him particularly handsome that night, even if she hadn’t worked up the nerve to tell him that.

There would be no more bashfulness over such matters. “Looking good, Wuornos.”

“You look beautiful.” The reverence in his tone made her blush. “These are for you,” he said, handing her the flowers.

She’d tossed Chris’s flowers out a window once, because she’d always thought buying someone flowers was a silly cliché and it was obvious he’d been trying too hard. But she had no urge to fling these anywhere. “You didn’t have to…”

“Reminded me of your eyes,” he said, and her heart swelled in an embarrassingly girly way. She hadn’t expected today to actually feel like a first date.

“Thank you.” She held them up to her face to give herself a few seconds to pull herself together. “We ought to get going.”

“Are you finally going to tell me where, or do I never get to find out?”

In the past day she’d discovered he was very impatient about surprises, and she looked forward to using that to her advantage.

“I figured since most of the town hates us right now it’d be a relief to get away from gossiping eyes. I made us reservations at a little place in Derry called Fisherman’s Cove. It’s got great steak
“I’ve heard of it. Supposed to be nice.” For a moment he seemed pleased with the plan, and then something that looked almost like fear crossed his face. “You’re not driving, are you?”

She swatted his shoulder. “Just for that, I should. But no, you can drive.”

“I’m looking out for both of us. If I was in the car, how could I pull you out of it when you drive over a cliff?”

“Ha ha. That was one time. I’m a good driver.”

She couldn’t hold up under his incredulous look. “Fine. I’m an okay driver.”

He still didn’t seem convinced.

“You better watch it. I’ll take your truck for a spin just to prove that I can handle it.”

“I love you Parker, but don’t you dare.”

She laughed at his genuine concern. “Fine. I won’t touch your precious truck. But if we don’t get out of here we’ll miss our reservation.”

His hand lingered over her lower back as they walked to the Bronco, and although the gesture was unfamiliar she most decidedly didn’t mind.

The Fisherman’s Cove was bursting with coastal New England charm. When they stepped over the threshold Audrey felt like she had indeed walked into a fisherman’s shack – albeit one that was large and extraordinarily well kept. There were nets draped across the graying walls and jars filled with seashells on every flat surface. She figured the candles flickering on each table had to be scented, because they were too far from the beach for the restaurant to smell so much like the ocean otherwise. There was nothing subtle about the ambience, but Audrey found she didn’t hate it. It was a tourist trap for the summer people, no doubt, but she’d grown used to that – Duke was more subtle about his decor but his livelihood also depended on these finicky visitors with the fat wallets.

Their waitress looked like she could have grown up in a house just like this one, but her smile was bright even though her hair was gray.

Audrey only needed one glance at the menu to decide what she wanted.

“You should get the scallops,” Nathan recommended.

She scrunched her face. “I’ve never had scallops. Always thought they seemed slimy and gross.”

“They’re not. Best thing on the menu. I promise.”

“Have you been here before?”

“Nope. But I know.”

“I was going to get a lobster.”

“Do you trust me?”
“Yes.”

“Then get the scallops.”

She wasn’t sure about the seafood, but he was confident and she was sure about him, so she ordered the scallops. He did the same, but he also added a lobster tail to her order.

“Thought the scallops were the best thing on the menu,” she teased after the waitress had left.

“They are. That was just in case you don’t have the taste buds of a normal person. Can’t have you going hungry.”

“Or maybe you’re just racking up the bill because I’m paying.”

He looked stricken for a moment. “You don’t have to.”

“Yeah I do. I’m a modern woman, and I asked you out. Besides, I’ve recently come into a bit of money. I have one fewer bill to pay, you know.”

She was such a girl, but his eyes seemed to twinkle. At least it wasn’t his skin. “So that’s the real reason you moved in with me.”

“Yep. Don’t have to pay rent now. You found me out. I’m a gold-digger.” There was something so easy about their banter when everything else was unfamiliar – from their surroundings to the fact she was wearing a dress and had spent more than five minutes on her makeup.

“Well if you’re paying, maybe I should get us another bottle of wine.”

“Go for it.”

But perhaps she didn’t have total control over her tone. He considered her with brows slightly raised. “Are you nervous, Parker?”

“Maybe,” she admitted.

“Why? It’s just me.”

“That’s the problem.” She exhaled loudly, but had to keep her hands away from her face so she wouldn’t mess up her curls. At the station she could fiddle with her hair as she pleased.

“I’m not following.”

She wished she could get up to pace. She felt vulnerable and exposed sitting across from him, but she knew he deserved an explanation. She’d had a crazy case of jitters all day, and she was afraid they stemmed from more than a fear that he wouldn’t like her date planning skills. “You’re important to me. You matter in a way Chris never did. If I had a bad date with anyone else I could just forget about it and move on. But there’s no moving on from you. I know it doesn’t really matter if we’re good at small talk and silly clichés because we’re great at solving crime and helping the Troubled – but I want to be good at those things too. Because you are.”

She waited for him to rebuke or dismiss her. He did neither, but she couldn’t get a read on what he was thinking, and that unsettled her even more.

“I seem to recall you telling me on multiple occasions that I have no game.”

His reactions to Jess had been slightly mortifying at every turn, but she regretted teasing him about
them now that she realized how tricky this relationship stuff was. “But you do with me. You’re always taking care of me and doing nice things and telling me the flowers match my eyes.”

“You’ve already given me the best gift—”

But maybe that was really what this freak-out was about, she realized with a sinking stomach. Was that all she brought to the table, really? Without her magic touch, would their relationship fall apart? “I want to do more than just touch you. You deserve so much more than that.”

“That wasn’t what I was going to say. The touching’s great. But the gift is you’ve always accepted me, whether I could feel you or not. To everyone else I’ve always been a freak. You see me as a man.”

“That’s because you are!” She reached out to grab his hand and realized she’d just proved her own point. Physical comfort had become instinctive. She sighed deeply, dropping her eyes so she didn’t have to look at him – but she didn’t drop his hand. She was starting to think she needed his touch as much as he needed hers. She wasn’t used to that sort of dependency. “I’m afraid I’ve fallen into a pattern. Every time you’re upset all I can think to do is touch you. And I don’t want it to become something manipulative. I just – it’s so easy to reach out to you, and I like to watch how relieved you get and know that I’ve done that– but it shouldn’t be the only reaction I’m capable of. I don’t want to take advantage of you.”

She felt him raise her chin gently, forcing her to look at him. “I don’t mind. Really.”

She jerked away, annoyed. “That’s not the point! I don’t want you to be okay with me taking advantage of you. I want to not do it.”

He stared at her as if she’d stumped him. “You’re not as bad at this as you think you are,” he finally said.

He was so completely shocked by her outburst that she knew he shared none of her concerns. “I’m over thinking this, aren’t I?”

“Yeah. Relax.”

She drank more wine, and the food arrived, and that helped. He was right – as hard as it was to force herself to take the first bite, the scallops were delicious, and by the time she’d finished them off their appearance and texture didn’t bother her. She was nearly full, so she let Nathan help her with the lobster tail, which he consumed with surprising relish.

“I thought you didn’t like lobster.”

“I never said that,” he denied.

“You shoot it down every time I suggest it.”

“Growing up in Maine, it’s nothing special. Still good though. But pancakes are better.”

She didn’t admit that she was starting to think he might be right.

Despite her resolution to find other ways to relate to him, the conversation had been going well and she couldn’t help herself - she slipped her shoe off under the table and stretched her leg until she found his. His eyes widened for a moment, but he seemed to write it off as an accident until she began sliding her foot deliberately up his leg.
He jerked and she giggled. “Something wrong?” she asked innocently, feeling like a teenager again.

He swallowed, and she watched him pull himself together. “You always so frisky on a first date?” His voice was lower than normal, and it rippled through her.

“Only with men I’m already living with.” She slid her foot even higher and his eyes closed.

“Seems fair.”

She wanted to do this more often.

He insisted that they look at a dessert menu even though she was stuffed. Though she gravitated toward the chocolate tort she let him order a blueberry crumble to share, which turned out to be perfection.

“Pretty good date,” he said after she paid the bill.

“The night is still young, my friend. That was only the first activity on our agenda.”

“So where next?”

“The movies.”

“Something you want to see?”

“No. We’re going to sit in the back and make out. Isn’t that what couples do?”

She could really get used to his smile—his dimples and his straight white teeth and the way it made him look young and free. “Good plan,” he drawled.

Turns out it wasn’t.

“You thought we could make out to this?” Nathan grumbled five minutes into the movie, when it was impossible to concentrate on anything besides the rapid gunfire emanating from the screen.

“I didn’t really think about it. It was supposed to be good, and it started at a convenient time.”

“This is like a really bad day at work.”

“And we’re not supposed to make out there,” she teased, leaning close to drag her lips up his neck. Until a warehouse exploded and he jerked at the sound.

“Yeah, not gonna work,” she sighed, dropping her head to his shoulder. “What are these guys doing, anyway? They’re never gonna catch him like that.”

A loud “Shhhhh,” came from somewhere in front of them.

“They probably wish we were making out too,” Nathan whispered, completely deadpan. But when she glanced at him he was almost smiling.

She’d gotten so much better at telling when he was joking.

They judged the partners’ police work through the entire movie, keeping up a snarky running commentary that earned them the displeasure of everyone sitting near them. Though it wasn’t what
she’d planned, it wasn’t such a bad way to spend two hours, with Nathan’s arm around her shoulder and his voice in her ear.

They solved the crime half an hour before the protagonists and were feeling rather proud of themselves when they exited the theater arm in arm. He held the door of his truck open for her, and it was only once they were both situated that she realized she didn’t know how to move them to the last part of their night.

She’d expected to come out of the movie hot and bothered, making segueing easy. In the absence of that, she contemplated a clever way to bring up her plan and nearly just blurted it out when he reached out his hand to lay it gently on her wrist.

“Can I show you something?”

“Sure,” she answered without hesitation, willing to follow him anywhere. He looked a little nervous, and curiosity sparked within her at where he could be taking her in a strange town in the middle of the night.

He drove a few minutes before parking at the end of a quiet street. He helped her out of the truck and led her up an embankment. The beach looked just like Haven’s shoreline, with the moonlight reflecting off the ocean as waves gently lapped the sand. The wind carried the scent of saltwater and hardy living.

“I ran away when I was fourteen. Hitchhiked. Ended up on this beach.”

Nathan rarely spoke of his past, and she was touched that he’d chosen to open up to her without any prompting.

“Why?” she asked softly.

“Got in a fight with my father. Don’t even remember why. I’d just had enough. Wanted to get away.”

“What happened?”

“ Took him seventeen hours to find me. I spent the night here. Figured I’d gotten away with it. Then the Chief showed up and I thought he’d be livid. But he was relieved.”

“He loved you,” Audrey said. “He was terrible at showing it, but I know he did.”

“I believed it, that day. But the feeling didn’t last. Soon as I got my truck I used to come up here when I needed to get away from everything.”

“Plenty of beaches in Haven. Why come all the way up here?”

“Thought I could hide and no one would notice. Turns out Dad probably had the local force keeping an eye out for me. But it felt like an escape.”

She tried to imagine brooding, gawky, teenage Nathan, butting heads with his irascible father. But all she could do was relive the interactions she’d actually witnessed. She wished the two of them had been able to work out their differences. Wished she’d been able to hold the Chief together like she’d held James Garrick.

“Walk with me?” he asked, holding out his hand.
She nodded, a shy smile crossing her face. Ignoring the fact she was inappropriately dressed for such an excursion, she reached down to slip off her heels. Dangling them from her right hand, she clasped her left hand in his.

Audrey Parker had grown up in Ohio, and she’d never laid eyes on a beach until spring break. Maybe that’s why Haven fascinated her. Aside from the weirdness and the company there was something about the place that called to her. A serenity to be found staring out at the water. Tonight the siren’s call was particularly strong, the ocean smooth as glass. The tide was low, and Audrey pulled Nathan toward to water.

“That’ll be cold,” he warned.

She quirked an eyebrow at him, dropped his hand, and then stepped into the surf.

It was like standing in a vat of ice. She jumped back with a squeak.


She crossed her arms. “I didn’t think you were an expert on temperature, considering.”

She knew he actually appreciated how she didn’t dance around his affliction, even if half the assumptions she made were wrong.

“Some things you don’t forget.”

She smirked, a wicked idea forming. Maybe he knew, intellectually, that the water would be cold, but it had been far too long since he’d felt it.

Abandoning her shoes a few feet from the water’s edge, she inched back toward the waves and plunged her hands into the surf.

Clenching her teeth against the shock of the chill, she spun on her heels and advanced on Nathan.

“Parker,” he said warningly, but he didn’t catch on to what she was doing quick enough to deter her from grabbing his face and cradling it between her wet and frigid hands.

He emitted an unmanly squeak, and she laughed at the shock that crossed his features, but she didn’t let go.

He brought his face closer to hers, and she thought he was going to kiss her to warm himself, but he hesitated when there were still a few centimeters of distance between their mouths.

“Think you’re funny, do you?” he whispered, and then instead of kissing her he scooped her into his arms and started walking toward the water.

“Nathan, no,” she shrieked, pounding on his chest and laughing through her exclamations. She was almost certain he was kidding, but she did not want him to dump her in that water.

“Don’t you dare! If you drop me I swear we’re never going on another date! Put me down.”

“If you insist.” The world seemed to drop out from under her and she waited for the cold to engulf her, hardly believing what had gotten into Nathan – until she felt his arms around her again and he retreated from the water’s edge.

“Not funny, mister,” she scolded, but he was grinning as he set her back on her feet.
“Turnabout’s fair play, Parker.”

She supposed she expected nothing less.

He grabbed one of her hands and rubbed it between his as they continued their walk. The warmth was appreciated, but it didn’t fully stave off the cold, and she couldn’t help but shiver. When he noticed he took off his jacket and moved to drape it around her shoulders.

“Nathan, don’t,” she said, stepping out of his grasp.

“Calm down. I’m pretty sure it’s date etiquette that the guy is supposed to give the girl his jacket if she’s cold. I’m just lucky because I won’t even miss it.”

He did have a point, so she allowed him to help her into it. The sleeves were comically long, but it was warm and it smelled like his cologne.

Strange that – she’d never known him to wear cologne before – but nice. She didn’t really wear dresses either.

They walked in comfortable silence, content in the uncharacteristic peace of this place. She could understand why he would come here when he needed to get away. How many times had she stared out into the water in Haven hoping that it would clear her mind?

Sometimes she wondered how her life would have changed if she’d never seen the Colorado Kid photograph. Would Haven’s allure have been enough to keep her there if she’d been drawn by a normal case? If they’d found a perfectly reasonable explanation for Jonas Lester’s death, would the serenity of the coast and small town living have been enough to catch her?

What about the man beside her?

Probably not, if she was being honest. She’d been too driven, too caught up in the job to allow herself to get distracted by simple pleasures. She would have thought Nathan was handsome, but she wouldn’t have stuck around long enough to learn that he was also loyal and kind, noble and generous, and just the right amount of tortured to understand her fear of intimacy and shaky social skills.

If there’d been a reasonable explanation, perhaps he wouldn’t have been tortured at all. He might have been happily settled, and the point would have been moot anyway.

She should have preferred that, but she didn’t.

“It’s so beautiful,” she told him when she could contain the sentiment no longer. There wasn’t much beauty in their work; there had been less in the FBI. Now she most often saw beauty in the relief on his face whenever she touched him.

“It gets under your skin. When I left for college I didn’t plan on coming back. But I missed it. City was too quiet.”

She wasn’t exactly sure where the University of Maine was, but she doubted it was a thriving metropolis. Even if it was, his statement made little sense. “I’ve never heard anyone call cities quiet.”

“When you get to college you realize cities are noisy. But you couldn’t hear the world.”

She supposed that was true enough. Nature hadn’t shown her face much in Boston, but she was a
constant settler in Haven.

After awhile they retraced their steps, but instead of returning to the Bronco he led her to a bench at the base of the dunes. He sat down and she curled into his side, pulling her legs up on the bench beside her. His arm came around her shoulder and she breathed him in, utterly content.

“We should do this more often,” he murmured.

“Pretend to be normal?” she quipped.

“Yeah.”

“Okay.” It had been hours since she’d thought about the Troubles or the Guard, and the realization was liberating. “But the next date’s on you. And I think I set the bar pretty high, so it better be good.”

“Think I can manage that.”

His other hand reached out to casually brush the sand from her bare leg. The warmth of his touch traveled upwards, coiling below her stomach.

She wondered if he could feel arousal, or if only his brain knew when he wanted her.

He seemed to know when she wanted him, at any rate, because his lips twitched into a half smirk and his hand began to stray a bit higher than the sand had reached.

“First time we sat on a beach you said you couldn’t fix me – no one could. Mighty glad you were wrong.”

Something ached inside her that he’d thought she was writing him off as hopeless when really she’d meant exactly the opposite. She was no good at this touchy-feely vulnerable stuff. Apparently when she tried she only made things worse. “That’s not what I meant.”

But she couldn’t think straight with his hand on her leg. She wasn’t sure she could articulate this even without the distraction. Needing to try, she grabbed his wandering hand and pried it gently away. Unwilling to lose the contact entirely, she laced their fingers together and dropped them to the bench. His fingers tightened around hers, and she wondered if it was more reflex than choice.

“I didn’t mean that you’d never feel again.” She hated the thought of this beautiful, sensitive man so closed off from the world. Had hated it even then. “What I was trying to say was you were the only one who could convince yourself that being Troubled didn’t make you broken. Because that was never how I saw you.”

He gaped at her, and she felt herself blush under his scrutiny.

“I mean…”

“I was broken,” he interrupted. “Until you came and fixed me.”

“No,” she said vehemently, and she wasn’t immediately sure why this bothered her so much until she verbalized it.

“You did.”

“What if you couldn’t feel me?” she asked, suddenly terrified by how this conversation might go. “What would that have changed between us?”
“Nothing,” he swore without hesitation. Something inside her relaxed.

“Then it wasn’t my immunity to the Troubles that fixed you. What changed when I came to town?”

He paused to consider his answer. His thumb stroked across her palm, the gentle contact strumming through her because she knew how important it was to him. “I had someone to talk to. Joke around with. You were this beautiful, intriguing bundle of sass and nerve. And the more I got to know you, the more I wanted to be the kind of man who deserved to be by your side.”

She couldn’t imagine him as anything less. But she’d seen his insecurity, and knew she wouldn’t be able to disavow him of the notion. Not tonight anyway.

“So you fixed yourself to become that man. It wasn’t about what I could do. It was about you and me.”

She wondered if she’d ever get over the desperate need to be more than her identity crisis and the destiny that came with it. “Chris couldn’t understand the distinction. He liked that I was immune to his charm – but only when it suited him. He needed me to feel normal, but he still wanted the power his Trouble gave him. I don’t want to be valued for something I have no control over.”

She was shocked to feel warmth building behind her eyes and she couldn’t stop a tear from falling. Mortified, she hoped the moonlight would hide any sign of her weakness.

But he had more than perfect vision, and he was watching her closely. His hand reached up to cup her jaw, and one finger brushed away the tear, though he didn’t otherwise acknowledge it. “I love you, Audrey,” he said so earnestly it was impossible to suppose any falsehood in it. “Would even if I couldn’t feel you.”

She was going to have to let go of this insecurity, she decided, because it hurt him every time she questioned his motives. And it wasn’t even that she doubted him, not really. It was life she didn’t trust – that anything as good as his love for her could really be true. Because everything she believed in crumbled, eventually – her past and her future and who she was and even the belief that she was meant to help the Troubled. Except for him. Even that had gotten rocky for awhile, but he was here now, all adoration and guileless devotion – and what had she ever done to deserve him? But God, she wanted him. And maybe she was no better than Chris, because she needed him too – needed his unwavering faith in her, his reassurances of her identity, his reliable advice and his good policework and even his touch, so reverently given. Those weeks she’d pushed him away she’d barely held herself together.

“I know. That’s what makes the fact you can a gift instead of a dealbreaker.”

He dropped his hand to her shoulder and tangled his fingers in a few of her curls. “Fate.”

It seemed important to him, and with everything they’d learned about her past, she didn’t have any reason to deny the theory. “Sure,” she said with a shrug, settling back against him.

She could feel his breath warm against her neck, and he pressed a feather light kiss there before whispering in her ear, “Think I’ve found a flaw in this date.”

It was hard to be coy when she wanted to feel his lips on her again, but she managed it. “Was it my choice in movies? Or my insecurity about this whole touching thing?”

“Nope. It’s the fact that it’s late and we’re a long way from Haven, and all I want is a place to make love to you.” His voice was thick and sweet like maple syrup, and she felt her knees quake
from their place on the bench.

Good thing one or two of her former selves must have been a Girl Scout.

“There’s a bed and breakfast down the road. I booked us a room and told them we’d get in late.”

His dazzling smile promised that the night was only beginning. “Have I told you lately how brilliant you are?”

She grinned back. “You can never say that too often.”

He rose and pulled her up the beach after him. “Brilliant. Beautiful. Though a bit presumptuous. It’s only a first date, after all. What if I didn’t put out?”

His tone and phrasing made her think of a finicky teenage girl, and she threw back her head and laughed. “You’re a pretty easy mark, Wuornos. It was a safe bet I could win you over.”

“That so?” he asked, his voice a smoldering dare, and none of Audrey’s other relationships had ever been so effortlessly fulfilling. Despite everything going on in their lives, he made her happy.

“You’ll see,” she promised, and she took off up the dunes. But his longer legs and her restricting dress meant he soon gained the lead, and when he got tired of waiting he picked her up and kept on going. Her protests were only for show as she felt his pulse racing through his neck where her hands were clamped over it and watched his eyes shine down at her with unbridled admiration. She wanted to stay with him forever, just like this. Safe in his arms, they laughed all the way back to the Bronco.
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

Because my brother and I feel strongly that every season needs at least one appearance by Garland ...

It was a funny thing, coming back from the dead. But living in Haven as long as he had, nothing much surprised Garland Wuornos anymore. Besides, he’d already done it once.

So when he woke up a second time with a body he was fairly certain wasn’t fully functional and a hazy impression of the afterlife, all he wanted to do was find Nathan.

He hadn’t left things well with the boy, and that was a shame. There’d been no time to worry about feelings when Haven was literally crumbling around them, but he remembered the fear in the boy’s eye when he was clutching that gun on the beach, the loss when he’d told him he couldn’t be in love with Audrey. He hadn’t been much of a father, but he’d kept the kid alive, and that was something. More than he’d been able to manage with Marilyn.

But if he was back, then the Troubles were still here. Maybe he could help.

The town was still standing, but even a rooky could tell something was wrong. People didn’t meet each other’s eyes in the streets, and their fear and mistrust was almost tangible. Something had hit the infrastructure, too. Half the town was shoddily rebuilt.

Nothing hurt as much as seeing the police station, once such a proud fortress of justice, reduced to little more than a shack. That building had been sturdy, and it would have taken quite the attack to level it. He hoped Nathan hadn’t been there then.

Hoped Nathan was there now.

He found Joan at the front desk. God bless that woman, who’d greeted him almost every day for forty years and once typed all his unofficial reports when a pyro scorched both his hands and nearly roasted him alive. She didn’t shriek or faint or any of the other unhelpful things womenfolk typically did when they saw someone who was undoubtedly dead. Just peered at him from over her thick-rimmed glasses. “Been a long time, sir.”

“How long, Joan?”

“Three years. Thereabouts.”

“Troubles should have moved on.”

One didn’t typically speak openly of such things – but Joan knew. State of the town, seemed like everyone did. “Haven’t yet.”

“Nathan here?” He tried to make it seem inconsequential, but his voice betrayed him. He was rusty. Wouldn’t make sense for him to be here if Nathan wasn’t – but Haven wasn’t exactly known for sense.
Would be a mighty fine punishment, sending him back if Nathan was gone.

There was something unreadable in Joan’s smile. “Third room down the hall. Chief’s office.”

“Much obliged.” He’d tip his hat but he hadn’t come back with one. Settling for a nod, he started down the hall.

The third door was open, and the sound of carrying voices drifted toward him.

“Six people missing since this morning, and we have livestock running amok in town. What is this? Two Troubles for the price of one?” Something about that voice reminded him of the first time he’d heard it, from a pain in the ass photographer who’d never take no for an answer. He’d known she was trouble then – the kind of trouble you grew accustomed to and missed when it was gone because it threw all the good things in your life into such sharp relief.

The trouble had hit closer to home the second time she’d appeared, when she’d only been in town a few minutes before cleaving onto Nathan, threatening the only good thing he had left.

And now here she still was, when she should have been gone.

“Animal farm.” The second voice wasn’t Nathan’s, but it was familiar.

“You think the livestock are the missing people?” Audrey asked.

“A couple of pigs and a horse? All prominent businessmen missing. Would be quite a coincidence otherwise.”

“Bernie.” There was Nathan’s voice, sharp with anger. Garland hadn’t expected his relief to be so fierce, not when Joan had already confirmed he was alive.

Three years Nathan had held the town together. Nearly as long as Garland had managed this time around. Perhaps he had made the boy tough enough.

“Why would he do that, though?” Audrey pondered.

“He’s a murdering psychopath. Doesn’t need a reason,” Nathan argued.

“There’s always a reason. And we had a deal.”

“I thought your deal was he didn’t murder the four of us in the next six months.” He’d heard the fourth voice before as well, but couldn’t place it. He edged closer to the doorway.

“Yeah. He was also supposed to behave.”

“Well, he didn’t kill anyone this time. Just turned them into animals. Which, if you think about it, is kinda funny.”

Garland was too old to lurk in doorways, but decades as a cop had taught him the importance of observation. People never acted the same when they knew they were being watched as when they thought they were alone. With him and Nathan, everything was always a show. He wanted to see how the boy really was before making his appearance known, so he crept closer until he could see through the open door.

Nathan sat in his old chair, slightly reclined, with Parker perched unprofessionally on the edge of his desk. The other two men had their backs toward Garland, one of them on a chair and the other on the couch, so he couldn’t make out their identities.
“He was a twelfth grade English teacher, right? Probably would have taught that book every year. Maybe he just got nostalgic.” The familiarity of that man was unnerving but Garland couldn’t place it without looking at his face.

“How many characters are there? Is this going to keep happening?”

It was the ponytail that gave it away – not many men in Haven so lacked self respect. But Garland couldn’t figure what Simon Crocker’s son was doing in the police station outside of an interrogation room.


“We ought to gather all the animals and keep them somewhere safe. Then we’ll have to pay Bernie a visit. Hopefully he’ll be able to change them back.” It was strange how some things never changed. She was still taking charge, even though she had no authority of her own.

“What are we gonna do, ask nicely?” Duke asked.

“Sure. And if that doesn’t work, ask not so nicely.”

Parker turned and nudged Nathan’s leg with her foot. “Why are you smirking? I’m waiting for the lecture on how dangerous Bernie is and how we shouldn’t antagonize him.”

Nathan’s expression didn’t change much, but there was a hint of mischief in it Garland hadn’t seen for a very long time. “I’m saving my breath. And thinking about how good you were at chasing cats.”

“That was a long time ago!” Audrey protested. “And you could have told me the whole class was watching.”

“Coulda.” From the state of the town Garland had expected Nathan to be cracking under the pressure, but he seemed uncharacteristically relaxed. As much as he wanted to be happy for his son, the town needed his attention and this was hardly the time for goofing around.

“So, at least six animals to round up, scattered around town, with the possibility of more? I’d say we have a little wager.”

“This isn’t the time, Duke,” Nathan argued.

“Challenge could be fun,” the mystery man stated. “What do you have in mind?”

“We split up. Me and James versus Haven’s finest. Whichever pair takes the longest to round up their animals owes the other pair dinner. And drinks. And not at the Gull, because then I’ll just end up comping it anyway.”

No one ever played games with policework when he was Chief – specially not a pair of civilians who had no business being involved. Garland bristled. But Lucy had always been up for a challenge, and Audrey hopped down from the desk. “Better pull out your wallet, Crocker.”

“I don’t think I’ll need to.”

“What makes you so sure?” the second civilian asked.

Duke leaned toward him conspiratorially, but he threw his whisper. “Because as soon as we leave here, they’re gonna make out. We’ve got this in the bag.”
Garland nearly fell through the doorway, but the officers barely reacted to the accusation. The stranger did stand and turn, giving Garland a clear view of his face, which sent him reeling again.

It was the Colorado Kid.

“I can’t believe my son is friends with Duke.”

If he had a functioning heart, Garland thought it might have stopped at Nathan’s droll statement.

“You should probably be more concerned that our son was born before you were,” Audrey teased, and the pieces all started to click together into some strange, impossible whole.

“I’ve come to terms with that. But being friends with Duke...”

“I haven’t come to terms with that, by the way,” Duke quipped. “You should have heard the way he lectured me. ‘Don’t step on any butterflies. You’re gonna have to kill your grandfather because that’s what’s supposed to happen.’ And then he goes off and gets Sarah pregnant.”

Garland couldn’t take it anymore. “He did what?” he bellowed, storming into the room.

In another situation the way everyone froze might have been comical. Nathan’s eyes were as wide as saucers and Audrey looked like she’d been caught with her hand in the cookie jar.

Lucy’s kid recovered first. “You?” he asked, staring at the Chief in obvious recognition.

“You knew him?” Audrey asked quietly.

“Course,” Nathan muttered. “Wait, you can see him this time?”

Audrey narrowed her eyes as she worked it out. “Yeah. Couldn’t see ghosts or fears. But I could see alternate timelines. The plagues. And the animals in the streets.”

“Bernie again?” Nathan concluded.

Audrey turned to James. “If this was our friend Prospero’s doing, what book would he be reading?”

“Because there’s only one book about dead people,” Duke interjected.

But James’s answer was almost immediate. “Hamlet. His dead father roamed the castle walls.”

“Well there’s definitely something rotten in Haven,” Nathan said darkly.

“Animal Farm. Hamlet. He’s going down his class reading list,” said James.

“Then what comes next?” asked Audrey.

“Lord of the Flies,” he suggested.

“Perfect,” said Nathan. “Cause all this day needs is some kids trying to kill each other.”

“You know,” Duke said, “when Audrey does that it’s weird enough. But you too? It’s like Trouble solving in surround sound. That’s just freaky.”

Their rapport was effortless, and Garland was impressed at how quickly they’d reached a conclusion. But his mind was still spinning and he didn’t appreciate being ignored. “I’m right here. And I want to know what the hell is going on.”
Duke inched toward the doorway. “All right, kid. I think that’s our cue to skedaddle. Unless you want to stick around for the family meeting. But I wouldn’t recommend it.”

James surveyed the group before nodding. “Yeah.”

Duke turned back before he was out of sight. “We’ll round up the pigs. You take care of this and keep our wizard from reading any more books. But you owe us dinner.” With a wink and a smirk he bowed out of the room.

Then there were three.

He could practically see the tension rolling off Nathan. Audrey had a hand on his arm, as if her presence could steady him. But he wasn’t calm and Garland wasn’t standing for it.

“See you didn’t listen to my advice.”

“No, Dad,” he spat. “I didn’t. It was too late then, and even if it wasn’t, why would I listen to you when you’d just come back from the dead and all you could say was ‘don’t fall in love with Audrey.’”

“Shoulda listened. Now she’s still here, and the Troubles are too. When’s the sacrifice planned?”

“What?”

It was obvious Nathan had no idea what he was referring to, but Parker lost all color mighty quick.

“She didn’t tell you then?”

“Tell me what?” Nathan turned to her, but her eyes were wide and her arms had come around herself.

“Nathan…”

Garland didn’t wait for her to explain. “There’s a way to end the Troubles for good that keeps her out of the Barn. She just has to kill someone she loves.”

He took no joy from the way something inside her seemed to just crumble, but if it saved his son he’d have no remorse. All these years, and he had no idea of the danger he’d been in.


“Yes,” she admitted.

“Why didn’t he tell me?”

“I asked him not to.”

“Damn it Audrey! How could you keep something like that a secret?”

“Howard told me when you took Arla out of the Barn. It was never an option, not even for a second. I couldn’t bear to hear you tell me I should do it, and I didn’t want you to try anything stupid. I figured if I was gone you’d never have to know. You were so worried when I came back I knew you’d say I should think about it. But I couldn’t. I won’t.”

Garland wanted to be sympathetic, but he couldn’t quite believe her.
“We need to talk, son. Alone.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” Audrey claimed. Garland knew he wouldn’t be able to shake her, so he tried another tactic.

“You need a girl to stick up for you now?” he taunted Nathan.

He saw Nathan’s jaw clench. Watched the veins in his neck pop. Knew it was necessary. “Go,” he ordered. “I’ll be fine.”

“I’m sorry.” But instead of making an immediate exit she pushed up on her toes, grabbed Nathan’s face and kissed him in a display that certainly would not have been tolerated if Garland was still chief.

He looked away with a growl of disproval, both disgusted by their inappropriateness and feeling like she was somehow taking advantage of his son. He knew how much Nathan didn’t like to be touched because of his affliction, and he had no idea how a physical relationship would work for him. Didn’t want to know, frankly.

But she didn’t leave, so he looked back and was shocked to find that Nathan wasn’t kissing her like a man who couldn’t feel anything. Sure looked (and sounded, God help him) like he enjoyed it. As his arms roamed across her back, Garland realized there was no way that would be happening if he didn’t feel something.

Once she pulled away she whispered something in his ear. After lingering a few seconds she left the room without acknowledging Garland’s existence.

“Guess that explains that,” Garland said. It was cruel and callous but he needed to know; he didn’t trust Nathan to be straight with him when he was already so defensive. “Had to find someone immune to your Trouble, so there’s your girl.”

He expected Nathan to get angry. He didn’t expect the fist that collided with his face.

He stumbled back from the momentum, but it didn’t hurt – not as sharply as it should have, anyway. It was a phantom pain for a phantom soul – he wasn’t alive, after all. It was only some magic or curse that had brought him here. Nathan didn’t rub his hand to relieve the sting. The punch hadn’t hurt him either. Garland knew for sure then that his Trouble wasn’t gone. The only thing he could feel was Audrey.

“How dare you!” Nathan was shaking with rage, and Garland had never seen him so angry. He’d been hard on the kid through the years, with good reason, but he’d rarely talked back. Even after he’d gotten older and decided sometimes that he didn’t need to take it, he’d never lost control. But for the first time Garland looked at him and saw a glimmer of Max Hansen.

“I know you don’t think much of me, but I can’t believe you think I’d use Audrey like that. I love her.”

“Figured you did, way you used to look at her. Just had to be sure.”

“You couldn’t have just asked instead of saying – what, I’m just fucking around with her so I can feel something?”

He turned to leave and Garland reached out to stop him. “Wait, son, I’m sorry. We got off on the wrong foot. This was just a shock, is all. Seeing the town like this. Finding out I’m a grandpa.” There’d been so much banter between the four of them, he thought humor might work. But he was
mistaken.

Nathan shook off the hand on his arm like it was something disgusting. “You’re dead, and I don’t have to listen to this. Go back to hell.” He slammed the door behind him, leaving the Chief alone in an office that was no longer his own.

He went back to his house because he had nowhere else to go. He’d miscalculated badly, expecting Nathan to bend, not snap. Seemed he’d developed a backbone and a temper. And Garland had been too thrown by all the revelations about Audrey to change his approach.

The house was dusty and largely untouched, with the spare key still under the stone in the garden. It should have been cleaned out and sold, but he supposed he didn’t blame Nathan for not getting around to it. There was no time for pleasantries with the Troubles afoot.

Time for time travel and illegitimate children and falling for the one person who could utterly destroy you. But no time to go through your dead father’s things.

He could have gone to see Vince and Dave. They would have given him the answers he wanted. But he hadn’t come back to talk to them, and he had no desire to make the effort. He’d come back to see Nathan, he could feel it in his not-real bones, and maybe it was because of the damn play but that didn’t make it any less important to him.

But the boy obviously didn’t want to talk to him and he wasn’t sure what he could do about that. So he retrieved the bottle of whiskey from under the kitchen sink, pulled the plastic sheet off the couch, and waited.

It was after midnight when he heard a pounding on his door. He hoped it was Nathan. Instead he found a bristling Audrey Parker, wearing a scowl and a ragged, oversized UMaine sweatshirt.

“So you’re sleeping together, then?” The snark was automatic. It’d been a hell of a day, and this rift with Nathan was undoubtedly her fault.

She planted her hands on her hips, as if she was trying to puff herself up like an angry bird. “Is that really what you want to open with? ‘So, you’re sleeping together?’ We have a child. I think that’s kind of implied. And excuse me, but what the hell is wrong with you? I know you care about Nathan. I’ve seen it. When everything changed and he died first you were upset. And civil to me. What I can’t figure is why you’re always such an ass in this timeline.”

“I don’t know what you’re going on about,” he grumped.

She snorted. “Course you don’t. I thought it was frustrating watching the two of you circle around each other when you were alive. But this is ridiculous. He watched you explode into pieces of rock and now you’ve come back twice and each time you’ve only made things harder on him.”

“I’m trying to protect him.”

“Nathan’s compassion isn’t weakness.” She’d gotten quieter, but there was a fierceness in her tone that booked no argument. “He’s a good man, the best man I’ve ever known. He gave up the chance to feel again to save a girl from a terrible life. He throws himself into danger all the time to help others without caring about his own safety. And he never asks for anything in return. The town whispers behind his back and he still tries his best to save it. I get that you wanted to make him tough, but he’s held this town together for years, all the while thinking that the man who raised him had never really loved him because of who he came from. And despite all that, he still followed in your footsteps, trying to hold together the piss-poor legacy you left for him. Do you
have any idea how hard he’s tried to live up to your impossible standards, even after you were
gone? If you care about him at all, then you owe it to him to tell him that before it’s too late.”

He was an old man, and dead to boot, but he wanted to squirm like a schoolboy under her glare and
the two truths he could no longer escape.

He didn’t want to think about how his tough love may have done more harm than good. So he
focused on the second realization. “You really love him.”

“Yes.” She didn’t hesitate. Lucy had always been squirrelly about taking a stand on anything
personal, as if she didn’t want to nail herself down.

He stared her in the eye so he could watch for a tell. “Are you going to kill him?”

“Of course not!” She was immediately scandalized, and he could find no falsehood in her reaction.
But Lucy had been so desperate he wasn’t sure he could trust her.

“Have you really thought this through?”

“Don’t tell me you think that I should!”

“Course I don’t want you to kill Nathan! Why do you think I’ve been trying so hard to keep him
away from you? But if it was any other man’s son - one life for all those that would be saved if the
Troubles were gone forever. Seems like a more than fair exchange.”

“There’s nothing fair about any of this! I won’t use his life as collateral.”

“Then you damn a lot of people.”

“Don’t you get self-righteous at me. You looked me in the face every day, told me you didn’t
know anything about the Colorado Kid, even gave me a job, but you knew I was Lucy the whole
time. We found pictures, talked to people. You worked with her!”

When she’d first come to town he’d struggled to keep them separate when their attitude was clearly
the same – but the blond hair helped and he’d tried to keep his distance. Let Nathan deal with her.
That had been his first mistake. But he’d known he’d had to keep her there. It was more than
Howard’s orders. It was Vince and Dave’s stories, the truth of the cycle. She’d come, and she’d
help the Troubled, and then she’d go, and they’d stop, and maybe she’d go soon enough that he
could keep everything held together in the meanwhile, because it was so much harder this time
without Marilyn to come home to.

He’d known that the two of them together was a recipe for disaster. But he needed her to stay in
town and Nathan was the only one she seemed to take to. He’d been too distracted by the way the
town was fracturing. It wasn’t until he was dead that he realized how much he needed to run
damage control.

“You want to know about Lucy?”

“Yes.” The desperation in that single word was familiar at least.

“Then come inside. This isn’t a story to shout to the neighbors.”

He offered her a drink but she didn’t take it. He poured himself another shot of whiskey. He’d gone
through half the bottle today, but he didn’t feel it. He wondered if this was what it was like to be
Nathan – to live in the world and yet be somehow disconnected from reality.
“She was a photographer.” If he closed his eyes he could still see her, with her stick-straight brown hair and impeccable posture, that monster of a machine hanging from a strap around her neck. “Used to work for a paper down in Baltimore. Came to Haven to get away from the city, or so she thought. Went to see Vince and Dave, and they sent her over to the station. Said she could take photos of crime scenes, evidence. The Troubles were spreading like wildfire and the last thing I needed was some outsider sticking her nose where it didn’t belong, but I couldn’t shake her. Lord knows I tried. Turned out she had a knack for the weird stuff though. Couldn’t use two thirds of her photographs for anything, but she had a cool head and a quick mind and she didn’t spook easy. Knew how to cool the Troubled folk down, figure out what made ’em tick.”

He thought it would be hard to talk about her, but once he started the words just flowed. He’d been dealing with the Troubles for a couple of years by the time she came along, and he’d thought his life couldn’t get any stranger. But she’d proved him wrong just by coming to town. “About a month after I met her this kid started hanging around. She stuttered out some excuse, but the girl was a terrible liar. One night after a nasty case I took her out for drinks and she spilled the whole thing. All the madness we saw every day, and the girl couldn’t keep a secret worth a damn. She said the kid was her son, and he brought her some journal that said she was actually a woman named Sarah who lived in Haven twenty-seven years ago. Tallest tale I’d ever heard, but she was all shook up, so I went to talk to Vince and Dave and I’ll be damned if they didn’t tell me that it’s true. They knew Sarah, and they sent Lucy to me because they couldn’t bear to see her every day but they needed someone to look after her and they knew she’d be able to help me with the Troubles.”

She was staring at him the way Lucy used to hang on his every word when he was outlining the facts of a case, and it was unnerving, to say the least.

“So she started coming to work late and running off with this boy, and she said there was a storm coming that she was supposed to disappear into but there was a way she could stay—”

“What is it?” Parker demanded, but he hadn’t reached that part of the story yet.

“She didn’t know yet, I don’t think. But she ran herself ragged looking for answers, and she never smiled and she didn’t sleep and the storm kept getting closer and closer. I was trying to hold the town together but I could feel the cracks spreading, and Marilyn was gone but Lucy said the Troubles would go when she did so I knew I just needed to hold on a little bit longer. But a week before the storm she tells me she doesn’t wanna go – she’s gonna run. I had a cousin in Portland so I sent her up there till she could get a flight to someplace far away. The next day I get a call her son’s dead on the beach.

“I dunno why he didn’t leave. He was supposed to go when she did. But there he was, shot in the back, and my first thought was, ‘Just let her run, Garland. No sense calling her back to see this. It’s not something she can fix.’ But maybe I was selfish. Maybe I needed the Troubles to end. So I called and told her what happened, and she said she was coming back.

“I saw her picture in the paper so I knew she was back in town. A few days later she shows up at my house in the middle of the night. Says Simon Crocker is dead and the meteor storm’s in a few hours and she needs me to dig up James because if she takes him into the Barn with her he’ll be alright. So I dig him up, and she tells me she figured out how she could stay. All she had to do was kill someone she loved, and the Troubles would end forever. She looked at me and she swore she hadn’t done it. And the last thing she ever said to me was she wished she’d had a chance to be Lucy before she had to be everyone that came before or after.”

He’d never spoken to anyone else about Lucy; there had never been anyone to tell. For a lot of
years he’d tried to forget, and it seemed like the town forgot with him. But in that instant he could see her so clearly, the woman who was tough as nails with tears streaming from her eyes, her misery so palpable he’d wanted to flee. He had, as soon as she’d stepped into that Barn. He hadn’t stuck around to watch it disappear.

“I couldn’t help her. Not really. I could dig up her son and tell her goodbye but it wasn’t enough in the end. But I knew what she needed from me. I couldn’t help Lucy, but I could help whoever came next by keeping my trap shut and letting her figure it out in good time. So that’s what I did. And I don’t regret it.”

She’d kept interruptions to a minimum, which was a small miracle, considering. He’d rarely seen her so quiet and still. When she finally commented, there was something trembling in her voice that made her seem strange and uncertain. How had she gotten younger than him, when technically she was probably as old as the town? “If you were trying to help Lucy, why do you hate me so much?”

Lord knows he’d tried a time or two, but the woman had gotten under his skin and he could never manage it. “I don’t hate you. But you’re a danger to my son, and I’d choose him every time.”

The answer seemed to placate her. “Do you have any idea how much it would mean to him to hear you say that?”

He didn’t need another lecture on his parenting skills, so he turned the tables on her. “Why are you still around? Dave said Sarah was only here a year. Lucy was in Haven four months. The Hunter was due to come six months after I died. But it’s been years.”

She froze, gnawing on her bottom lip. Her hesitation set off all sorts of warning signs.

“What happened, Luce?” In his desperation he didn’t even realize he’d said the wrong name until he watched her startle.

“I went into the Barn like I was supposed to,” she said slowly, haltingly. “But Nathan couldn’t let me go.”

He swore, violently, thinking of the devastation he’d seen which was surely only the tip of the iceberg. “Last time I saw him I was afraid something like that might happen. He was already too attached.”

“Don’t you dare bring this up! He already blames himself. If you make him feel any worse I don’t care that you’re dead – I will shoot you.”

There was ferocity radiating from her every pore. He knew enough about Nathan to realize the truth in her statement – he’d be hard enough on himself for the both of them. “Scouts honor.”

She scowled at him as if she could peer into his soul to judge his intentions. She must have found something placating there, because the edge of her mouth twitched up slightly. “Never saw you as much of a boy scout.”

“I was an Eagle Scout,” he said with a touch of indignance. “And a troop leader. Where do you think Nathan learned all his outdoor skills?”

“Moose Hunter Magazine.”

She said it was such a straight face that he barked out a laugh. In those first few weeks, before James came, Lucy’d been good at getting him to loosen up.
“I did think maybe you’d have more sense than to let him get wrapped up in this.”

“I tried to keep him out of it!” she hissed. “As soon as I found out I had to leave I started pushing him away. Thought it would make it easier to let me go. But all I did was hurt the both of us.”

She looked down and picked at the cuff of his sweatshirt. “Sometimes I think neither one of us can help it,” she whispered. “We were searching for James before he was even conceived. Sometimes it feels like I was always looking for Nathan, every time I came to Haven. That this was inevitable, somehow, that we would meet and fall in love. Because he’s the only thing in this whole mess that I can absolutely trust.”

A shiver went down Garland’s spine, much like it had the night twenty-seven years ago, when he’d looked at this woman and thought the very same thing.

“The Guard’s not happy that we messed up the cycle. If I don’t find a way to end the Troubles in the next four months, they’re gonna kill me and everyone I care about. Maybe I deserve that, especially if this is all my fault. But I’m afraid they’ll keep Nathan alive to make him suffer. I can’t let that happen. So I have to figure out some other way to stop this.”

When she looked up at him her eyes were blazing. “If you know anything that could help me,” she implored, “something about Lucy or Sarah or what made the Troubles start – then I need you to tell me. We can’t hide from the truth anymore. I don’t care if it hurts me – not if it saves him. So if you do love him, then please, tell me.”

He lived his life by secrets, and there were quite a few that might be relevant. “I spect I do know a thing or two. But you’re not the one I need to tell.”

“Then tell Nathan. But don’t wait. We talked to Bernie. He said his illusions fade in a day or two. You’ve got a day left at most. And you’ll probably never get another chance.”

“He doesn’t want to talk to me.”

“You’re right about that. You certainly know how to push his buttons. Took hours to calm him down.”

She smirked, and Garland knew she was pushing his buttons now, just like she’d been doing back at the station. Making out with Nathan in front of him to stake her claim. Show him that Nathan wasn’t so different from any other man – not when he was with her.

He supposed he was glad for that, though by God he didn’t need to see it.

“We’ll be at the station tomorrow. If you can’t corner him there, I’ll bring him to the Gull afterwards. But please, don’t wait any longer.”

“Never heard Lucy beg.” She’d lived life on her own terms. Which might have been why she’d broken when she discovered she’d never had any choice at all.

“I’d do anything for him.”

“Even go away?”

Her smile was sad, but determined. “Tried that once. Wouldn’t be for him.”

“You oughta stay away from Crocker,” he growled.
She laughed. “First time you ever sounded like Nathan.”

“You should listen. I knew Simon Crocker. He was a lowlife and a killer.”

“Duke’s not his father. Neither of them are.”

She wasn’t just talking about him, he knew. But he’d realized Nathan was nothing like Max Hansen a long time ago.

“Doesn’t mean he’s not dangerous.”

“He isn’t. Not to me, anyway. He’s all tied up in this too, somehow. We need him.”

It was the last time he’d ever talk to her like this. He could feel it, just like he’d been able to feel the mood of the town transforming his insides. His work was almost done. Time to let go.

He’d fought it for so long, but maybe she was right. (A part of him had always known she was right.) A man never got anywhere by denying the inevitable. “You’ll look after Nathan, won’t you Luce?”

This time he called her that on purpose. She’d always be Lucy to him, just as he supposed she’d always be Sarah to the Teagues. Perhaps Nathan would be strong enough to make Audrey the last name she ever carried.

“I promise.”

Without a goodbye she slipped off into the night.

He dozed off sometime after she left, and he went to the police station as soon as he woke. But Joan fixed him a strange look of pity. “He doesn’t want to see you,” she said before Garland could even ask.

“Suppose he doesn’t, but this is important.”

“He told me to have you escorted out if you wouldn’t go on your own.” She sounded sorry, but not as if she could be swayed. “He’s the boss.”

She’d never been one to stand insubordination. That was half the reason they’d gotten along so well.

“Can you at least tell him I was here?”

“That I can do.”

“Tell Parker too,” he added before turning away.

He hoped she’d make it an early dinner. He could already feel his molecules start to drift. He understood better than most what it felt like to come apart at the seams, and he wasn’t long for this world.

Good thing he also knew quite a bit about holding himself together.

He couldn’t spend another day sitting in that house, surrounded by the memories of his failings.
Failings as a husband. Failings as a father. Parker had been a bit too insistent that Nathan’s pain was his doing. He’d always been a firm believer in ends justifying means, with no time or patience for coddling, when that only gave someone a weakened character and an unrealistic expectation that life was going to be kind. The greatest gift he could give his son was the ability to survive in a harsh environment, and it didn’t get much harsher than Haven in Trouble-time. But it seems Nathan had taken it all a bit more personal than he’d intended.

The graveyard was thankfully deserted, so he could sit at Marilyn’s grave without anyone realizing he should have been in his own. He tried apologizing. Tried to remember how life had been brighter, those few years they’d had together. Tried to figure out what to say to Nathan – the answers he needed to save Audrey and those he needed to let go of the past.

Tried to imagine that maybe there could be a happy ending in there somewhere. Or at least one a little less tragic.

It was nearly seven by the time he went to the Gull. The hostess led him to a back room without being asked – surely Parker’s doing – and he could hear the buzz of warm conversation even before he saw the four of them around a table, with beers and burgers and a sense of camaraderie that had been so foreign to Nathan all his life.

She was already looking after him.

Audrey smiled at Garland when he entered the room, a small consolation when Nathan erupted out of his chair.

“We need to talk.”

“I’m not listening to anything you have to say,” Nathan snarled.

“Even if it could help save Audrey?”

“We’re just gonna … go,” Duke stammered with a vague hand motion, and James scrambled out after him.

Audrey stood as well. “Don’t,” Nathan pleaded with wide eyes, reaching out to clasp her elbow. She smiled back at him, trailing her free hand down his arm. “You two should talk. Alone.” She rose on her toes to press a kiss to his cheek. “It’ll be okay,” she promised before retreating.

Garland waited for Nathan to compose himself. He expected him to sink into a chair, moody but defeated, but he crossed his arms and held his ground.

“Thought you wanted me to stay away from her.” His voice was tight but level.

“Too late for that now, isn’t it?” Nathan bristled, but he hadn’t meant for that to be a barb. “Look, I told you that for your own benefit. No good could come from loving her.”

“No good? You have no idea all she’s done for me.”

He pressed on anyway. “You didn’t have all the information. Look at this from a father’s perspective. Best case scenario, the girl walks off into a Barn and leaves you with a broken heart for twenty-seven years. Worst case scenario she loves you back and decides to off you to save her own skin. Excuse me for wanting to save you from that.”

But he wasn’t sure Nathan was even listening. ‘She’s the only one who’s made me feel like I’m worth anything since Mom died. She doesn’t care about my Trouble, that I’m less than everybody
else. Doesn’t let me use it as an excuse. For the first time since I was a kid I feel normal again. Sometimes even happy. She gives me the strength to get up every morning and face all the god-awful things we see every day. She makes me feel like the man you always wanted me to be.”

“I know you may not believe me, considering, but I’m happy for you, son. Really am.” It wasn’t just lip service, either. Now that he’d accepted there was no way he could steer his son away from Lucy, he was glad she was looking after him. He knew firsthand how all this was far easier to handle when there was someone waiting at home with a soft touch and a listening ear. Or in this case by your side with a gun and some attitude. At least he wasn’t risking his life for a casual dalliance.

Nathan’s eyes narrowed. “You’re right, I don’t believe you. The reason I didn’t have all the information is because you spent my entire life keeping secrets from me.”

Everyone in Haven kept secrets. It was one of those truths he wanted Nathan to stop being so blind about. “I’ll let you ask all the questions you want in a minute. But we can’t bank on the fact that I’m going to keep coming back from the dead, and there are things I need to say.”

“Like what?” he barked.

“I owe you an apology. I probably owe you thirty years of apologies.”

The retort Nathan had been preparing died in his throat, and Garland watched him flounder like an undersized fish that had just been tossed back in the sea.

“For what?” he finally asked.

He heaved a deep breath, unsettled when he didn’t feel it in his chest. The sand was really slipping through the hourglass now. “According to your lady friend, I wouldn’t have enough time left to go through the list.”

“Huh?”

All those hours today in the graveyard and he still wasn’t sure where to start. There was no more time to say whatever sprang to mind and rely on Nathan’s good nature to forgive him eventually. For once he had to get this right.

“Your mother was the kindest person I ever met. Never had a mean word for anyone, not even that monster of a first husband of hers.”

“Shame she died and left you with a piece of that monster.” Garland was shocked by the self-loathing in Nathan’s voice. Good Lord. Surely the boy didn’t think that was true? He’d been grateful that Nathan hadn’t known about Hansen so they could avoid this very issue. After he found out there hadn’t been time to set the record straight.

Apparently the kid had spent years building up a narrative where Garland secretly despised him for being another man’s son.

“Now you listen here. We had our share of problems, you and I, but that was never one of ‘em. I was nervous at first, I’ll admit. Even if it wasn’t genetic, that sort of behavior usually goes through homes. Kids don’t know any better than what they learn. So I used to watch you closely. But I never found any meanness. You were your mother’s son, through and through. And you had the biggest protective streak I ever saw, even as a five year old. For months I felt like you were sizing me up, making sure I wasn’t a threat to your mama. Knew you’d make a great officer, right then.”
Nathan’s eyes were wide and there was something raw in his expression that made Garland too uncomfortable to look at him for more than a few seconds.

“Your mother was too good for this place,” he continued. But it didn’t really help, thinking about her, the single bright spot in his drab life. “Too soft, and the town ate her alive for it. Once she was gone I was terrified of losing you the same way. Max Hansen was a tough sonovabitch, I’ll give him that, and I hoped that you’d get just enough coldness from him to keep you alive. But all you got from him was his curse. So I thought I needed to toughen you up to survive. Because I knew what was coming, and what I wanted most was for you to still be standing on the other side. Maybe I got so caught up in the future that I lost sight of what you needed in the present, and I’m sorry for that. Didn’t mean to make you think I didn’t care.”

Nathan’s breathing was loud in the silence that followed. If he was six years old Garland would have wrapped his arms around him, patted his head and told him a few placating lies about how everything would be okay. But he was grown man now who certainly knew better, and Garland didn’t know what to do.

“I don’t remember how Mom died,” Nathan eventually said, his voice a ragged whisper. “I remember her funeral, and I remember her being alive – but everything in between is a blank.”

There was no shirking responsibility for that now. “I know.”

“I don’t remember Max, either, and I lived with him for years. I didn’t know I wasn’t your son until the day you both died.”

“You are my son. In every way that matters,” Garland swore.

He’d never been one to dwell on feelings, but it still hurt to see how shocked Nathan was by his admission. Things hadn’t ended well between them, but he hadn’t realized they’d gone quite so wrong.

“What happened to Mom?” Nathan asked again.

“She got in the middle of a fight up at the school. Tried to help, like she always did. I told her she needed to be careful, that things were bad, but she wouldn’t listen. Thought the world of her students. One of the kids was Troubled. He turned every water molecule in her body to ice. Killed her instantly.” He could still remember the blue underneath her translucent skin. He hadn’t used ice for over a decade, and he hated winter with a passion.

But it didn’t hurt quite as much as it used to. It was all pretty fuzzy, but he knew she’d been right as rain the last time he saw her. He’d be seeing her again soon.

“You were in that class,” he revealed.

Nathan went taunt as a bowstring, and all the doubts Garland ever had about keeping the truth from him disappeared, because that was pain no child should have to live with and it was too much, even now. “By the time I got there she was lying on the floor and you were clutching on to her, frostbit from your fingers to your cheek. No one else could touch her without gloves, but you didn’t feel it. You didn’t feel anything.”

Nathan shook his head as if he was trying to come out of a daze. “My Trouble started during a sledding accident.”

“You know better than that. It takes more than physical trauma to set a Trouble off. There needs to be an emotional outburst.”
“How could I forget something like that?”

“You were inconsolable. Wouldn’t let anyone touch you. You just cried, and at night you woke up screaming. I was at my wits end. Then Lucy came, said she wanted to see you. The moment she walked into your room you just stopped. She sat down on your bed and put a hand on your shoulder, and then suddenly you were hugging her and she was rocking you and I was standing there wondering what the hell was going on.”

“I could feel her,” Nathan whispered, something like reverence in the realization.

“Suppose so, though I didn’t know it then. You finally fell asleep, and she was all shook up. The next morning Vince Teagues came by. He said he’d heard you’d been having a rough time, and you’d probably cope better if you didn’t remember seeing it happen. He offered to take the memory.”

“It’s the Teagues that are wiping memories?”

“Yeah. Lucy’d already told me that – I guess Sarah knew. Then he offered to take more than just what happened at the school. He said he could make you forget about Hansen.”

“You let him rewrite my childhood?” He could understand Nathan’s disgust. He wouldn’t want anyone messing around in his head either.

“Your mother wouldn’t have approved. But you still had nightmares about that bastard, and Marilyn was the only one who could calm you down. Your mother and I had been married three years, but you were still so timid around me. I thought it would be easier to be your father if you forgot that I wasn’t. And I didn’t want you to remember that man or what he did to you. I couldn’t fix your Trouble or bring your mother back, but I could free you from him at least. And I don’t regret that. I just wish I’d had time to explain before I died.”

Nathan sunk into a chair like a puppet whose strings had been cut, resting his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands. “Thought you hated me,” he whispered. “Cause of Max.”

“Couldn’t hate you if I tried.” He knew Nathan couldn’t feel it, but the boy looked so forlorn that Garland pressed a steadying hand to his shoulder. Nathan looked up and seemed startled to find him so close, but he pitched forward to lean against him. “I know I was tough on you. That’s the way I was raised, and there wasn’t much softness in my life once your mother was gone. I didn’t know how to be a father, and I got distracted – by the town, the job, my Trouble. But I’ve always been proud of you. Proud of the man you became despite all you’ve been through. Proud you came back to Haven to become a detective instead of getting the hell out of this place. Proud that you’re still here, holding it all together when I couldn’t.”

It was uncomfortable, but Nathan needed this, so he tightened his grip on Nathan’s shoulder and pulled him tighter against his side. Nathan’s chest heaved with silent sobs.

“I messed up, Dad. I couldn’t let Audrey go. She went into the Barn – and I shot Howard. She came back two years later, and she was still Audrey. But the Troubles never left.”

He knew how doggedly Nathan protected his own, and that’s why he’d feared something like this was coming. “You’re not the first man to do something stupid for love.”

“Now the whole town’s paying for it. Every death is my fault. And if we can’t find a way to stop the Troubles for good in the next four months, the Guard’s gonna kill her. She won’t ever come back, not as anybody.”
“Then you better find a way to stop them.”

Nathan pulled away at the steel in his voice.

“I mean it. There’s your problem – now find a solution. She’s always been good at that, no matter what name she goes by. And someone in this town must have faith in you, because you’re still the Chief, aren’t you?”

“Got demoted once. My replacement didn’t last a day before he was dead from someone else’s Trouble. No one’s exactly lining up for the job.”

“Then you just keep doing it the best you can.”

The air was too charged, so he settled into the nearest chair to give himself a reprieve. “Howard was a cagey bastard anyway,” he growled, trying to steer the conversation toward something less sentimental.

Nathan cleared his throat and tried to compose himself. “You knew him?” he asked, his voice almost back to normal.

“He was waiting outside the Barn the day Lucy went away. Asked if she was sure about bringing James, and when she said she was he carried him in. Then the day Parker came to Haven I got a call that Lucy was coming back to town, and I needed to convince her to stay. I went to the Teagues to make sure they kept quiet, and they said a man posing as her boss came to them the day Lucy arrived and said the same thing.”

“Who is he? What does he want?”

“I think he wants the cycle to continue, just like it’s always done. He told me she’d heal Haven. Make it a real Haven again.”

“But why?”

“I asked him that. He said it wasn’t any of my business. And it really wasn’t. Her coming back meant there was an end date for the Troubles, and I was having a hard time holding everything together. I thought at first I could outlast ‘em, but then the Rev started nosing around and tempers flared. After Max came back it was all too much. All I could hope was I’d prepared you enough to survive what was coming.”

“I don’t understand any of this. I don’t care. I just want Audrey safe.” That kind of stubbornness had driven Garland crazy on many occasions. But it struck a different chord now.

“Maybe that’s the answer.”

“What?”

“All the flack I gave you for not noticing what was in front of you, and I was pretty oblivious to you and Lucy.”

“Whadaya mean?”

“I knew something was up the night she visited. The way she looked at you – but you were eight, for Christ’s sake. I was broken up and exhausted, so I pretended I imagined it. But she’d ask about you, every once in a while. And every time she mentioned the man Sarah loved it made me uncomfortable, though I couldn’t put my finger on why.
“Right before she left she told me Howard said she could stop the Troubles by killing someone she loved. I believed her when she swore she hadn’t killed James. But it was like she was sayin’ she hadn’t this time, not that she wouldn’t ever. I was still trying to process that when she pulled a ring from her pocket and told me to give it to you when you were older. Felt like she was handing me your death warrant. Spooked me, but I didn’t like to think about why. I kept the ring, but I couldn’t give it to you, not even when I knew I didn’t have much time left.”

Nathan reached under his collar and pulled out a gold chain with something sparkly on it. “This ring?”

Even from this distance he recognized it. He’d spent a long time staring at it, but it never gave up its mysteries. “How’d you get that?”

“Picked it up on the beach. After … Felt like I was meant to have it.”

Maybe he had been a fool for fighting the inevitable for so long. “Guess you were.”

“What am I supposed to do with it?”

“She didn’t say. But there’s only one thing a man does with a ring like that.”

He wished he’d be there to see it. Nathan deserved to have someone standing beside him that wasn’t that Crocker kid.

“I was so terrified she’d picked you as her sacrificial lamb I was blind to everything else. I should have realized you were James’s father.”

“Bout that.” Nathan rubbed at the back of his neck. “Wasn’t as tawdry as Duke made it seem.”

“I don’t want to know. Parker seems okay with it, and that’s all that matters.”

“If you were so concerned we’d end up together why did you give her a job here?”

“Because she made you happy. Been a long time since I saw either one of you smile. I figured if she didn’t remember you weren’t in too much danger. You were both so awkward I didn’t think you’d get around to doing anything about your attraction before the Barn came. She’d go when it was time, and maybe she’d teach you a few things in the meanwhile.”

He wasn’t a boy any longer, Garland realized. He was a man now, with shadows under his eyes and a badge at his hip to prove it. “Guess I miscalculated a bit.”

“Lucy used to talk about how Sarah was sure that once she found James’s father she’d be able to stay. I thought that was because she had to kill you – but maybe there’s another way. And if there were ever two people stubborn enough to find it it’s the pair of you.”

“Did Max really kill the Colorado Kid?”

It was easy enough to read the subtext. Did my father really kill my son? Fucking town. “I dunno. He didn’t have an alibi, and that was good enough for me. Claimed he couldn’t remember where he’d been that day—”

“Then the Teagues were involved—”

“You’ll have to take that up with them. There were no other suspects, and he was guilty of enough evil all I needed was an excuse to let him rot. Way he treated you and your mother – he deserved
everything he got. I didn’t mean to kill him, but I’m not sorry about that either.”

“You framed him.”

“Maybe I did. No doubt I wasn’t the best father, and maybe I wasn’t the best cop either, but it’s too late to do much about that now. But everything I did for all those years was to look out for you. Maybe it backfired. Maybe it didn’t. But you’re still here, and that’s something. I hope you and Audrey can figure this out, because the two of you deserve a life beyond all this. That’s all I ever wanted for you.”

There was something running through Nathan’s head, but he didn’t seem capable of saying it. But that was all right. He didn’t owe his father anything – and Garland should have accepted that a long time ago.

“Now that I talked your ear off, I should probably go. Your beer’s warm.”

“You could stay,” Nathan suggested, quick but tentative. “We were going to play some cards.”

Garland almost declined out of habit. But he recognized an olive branch when he saw one, and he knew he’d never make it to morning. How could he turn down one last chance to spend time with his son?

He’d been the one to teach Nathan how to play poker, decades ago, when his cop buddies used to come over once a week to play cards. Nathan had been thrilled to be included, and he’d concentrated with such diligence you could read the strength of his hand on his face every time. After a few weeks his buddies got tired of his insistence that they didn’t swear in front of the kid, and they moved the games to Joe Smoker’s place.

It was the first time he’d had to tell Nathan that disappointment was a part of life.

He wouldn’t tell him again tonight.

“Been a long time since I’ve had a good round of poker.”

Nathan’s slow smile unclenched something in his chest.


“Wouldn’t expect anything less from a Crocker.”

Nathan stepped out to retrieve the others. Their dubious host returned with a fresh round of beers. Audrey swung a bag of poker chips from an outstretched finger.

“You boys play nice?” she asked, but her teasing tone implied she already knew the answer. She shot Nathan and Garland significant looks in turn. Nathan stared back before his lips twitched up ever so slightly.

“Ayuh.”

“Oh, Nathan’s going full Mainer tonight,” Duke teased as he cleared off the table. “Means yes,” he told a confused James, who grabbed a deck of cards from the bag of chips and started shuffling.

Garland tried not to stare, but he couldn’t help but watch as Audrey sidled up to Nathan, resting a hand on his arm as she leaned close to whisper something. He huffed out a breath and brushed some hair from her face. She smiled and dragged him toward the table, and after they were situated
one of her hands covered his until they had to pick up their cards. Much as he’d tried to avoid this, Garland found himself grateful toward the woman. Nathan looked at her like she was the only port in a storm, and for the first time since he was a kid he wasn’t drowning.

“I still think something’s up with Sasquatch,” Crocker remarked after the first hand. It was obviously a recycled conversation, because Nathan rolled his eyes.

“Because Dwight couldn’t possibly have anything better to do on a Wednesday night than play cards with us,” Nathan said dryly.

“He’s busy every time we ask? Unlikely.”

“Maybe he has friends,” James said, and something about his tone sent Parker into hysterics.

“Those are hard to come by in this town, kid,” she said once she’d calmed down. But the way she looked around the table, her eyes falling on each man in turn with a fondness Lucy had never possessed, made Garland realize she was stretching the truth a bit.

They played for hours. Garland was mostly an outsider to their banter, but he didn’t mind. Nathan was in the thick of it, and that was all that mattered. This was more than a gathering of friends. They were brother-in-arms, bound by duty and danger, and that’s what he’d started to see back at the station. Garland wondered how Crocker had earned a place in their army. Lucy had killed Simon, but instead of revenging his father Duke smiled at Audrey as she teased him about his hair and his cooking. Something was surely different this time around. Whatever was coming, Nathan wouldn’t face it alone, and that soothed Garland in a way little else had.

As the night wore on he found his mind drifting, and eventually his hands weren’t solid enough to grasp the cards. In an uncharacteristic moment of tact Duke dealt him out and pretended nothing had changed.

When the end came, he kept his eyes on Nathan to the last. “Love you son,” he said. Then he faded from existence without waiting for a reply.
Chapter 19

Half an hour after his father disappeared Duke kicked them out of the Gull with an exaggerated yawn, claiming he had to open the restaurant in the morning. James offered to let them crash upstairs, but Nathan declined. What he needed now was Audrey, and he didn’t want to make the kid uncomfortable.

She hadn’t said anything to him since Garland faded – no one had – but the warmth and pressure of her hand on his thigh under the table had been a suitable distraction, and she repeated the gesture as soon as they climbed into the Bronco and kept her hand there all the way home. The drive passed quickly since there was no one else on the road at that ungodly hour. It wasn’t until they were standing in their bedroom that Audrey broke the silence.

“Are you okay?” she asked softly.

“Yeah,” he answered automatically, because that was always the answer expected of him.

She raised one golden eyebrow and frowned.

Only then did he let the enormity of the past two days wash over him. All his father had revealed and the way he’d looked at him caught in a lump in the back of his throat.

“He said he was proud of me,” he whispered, his voice a hoarse mess.

She launched herself at him so quickly all he could process was the warmth of her body enveloping his. “Course he was,” she said. Her fingers stroked through his hair and he closed his eyes and breathed her in. He’d felt like he was seconds from detonation ever since his father appeared in the station, but she was carefully defusing him. “How could he not be?”

He didn’t know how long he stood there, whimpering into her shoulder, before she said, “You know I’m proud of you too, right?”

“Why?”

“Because you’re you.”

He pulled back slightly so she could see his puzzled expression.

“It’s too late for sappy speeches, mister. Ask me again in the morning.” With a quick swipe at what must have been a tear on his cheek she spun away from him to get ready for bed.

“We are so playing hooky tomorrow,” she said when she emerged from the bathroom. “There’s no way I’m going to be at the station in five hours.”

“You’re a bad influence on me,” he teased.

She rolled her eyes. “Oh please. Usually I’m the one telling you we need to get to work.”

“Never wanted to stay in bed until you were in it with me.”

The snappy reply he expected never came. She blushed and climbed under the covers. “It’s too late,” she muttered, and he chuckled as he climbed in beside her.

His heart flipped at the sight of her in one of his old t-shirts. He supposed he should prefer her in
something slinky or skintight to show off her gorgeous curves. But seeing her in his clothes, even if they were far too big for her slight form, always set off something possessive deep inside him, like by wearing his clothes she was declaring she was his.

Truth was Audrey didn’t belong to anyone, and she’d probably smack him for such archaic thinking. But it was still a choice to wrap herself in his stuff and his scent. She could have had any man in Haven, with a body and a mind like hers. But she’d chosen him.

There was no doubt that he belonged to her. She owned him, body and soul. During the mess with the Hunter that had made him angry, because it hadn’t seemed fair that she could crush his heart so effortlessly when she didn’t even want it. But now that they were finally in sync he was happier than he’d ever been when he was in control.

As she grabbed his hand and guided it to her back he remembered another reason he loved it when she wore his clothes – there was always plenty of room for him to join her. While she was still tentative about expressing her feelings and many other facets of their relationship, she was never shy about telling him what she wanted physically.

Good thing, because he’d never been great at reading cues.

He let himself revel in the softness and warmth of her skin, watched her eyes flutter closed and felt her shiver as he stroked slowly upwards. She brought both her hands to his chest and traced absentminded patterns across his skin in a gesture she probably thought was soothing.

He’d never tell her, but it was impossible for him to sleep when she was doing that. The warmth and pressure of her body pressed against his was comforting, and once he got used to its presence it could lull him off to dreamland. But movement was a distraction his mind couldn’t ignore. Her touch was comfort and passion, love and need, a taste of normalcy and something extraordinary all at once, and there was always a moment when his brain and his heart didn’t know how to handle it.

It would have been enough to have her golden hair splayed across his pillow, her blue eyes shining at him in the dark as he listened to her breathing and took in the subtle scents of her shampoo and body wash and her. She overwhelmed all his senses, and she was surely more than he deserved. But the fact that she could touch him and bring him back to life meant more than he could possibly put into words. It was a miracle in a place better known for curses, and it bound him to her more strongly than any drug. He would have loved her even if he’d never felt her touch, and been so blessed he couldn’t lament what he was missing. But now that he had – there was no force on Earth that could make him give that up.

He closed his eyes and allowed himself to savor the contact. Late as it was, he was in no rush to sleep. Thanks to his affliction he never felt tired. He was not immune to exhaustion – her body collapsed beneath or above his as their hearts hammered in synchrony and his lungs sucked in air while his brain struggled to reboot – she made quite sure to remind him of that often. But simple tiredness from a long day followed by hours of just feeling his partner – he’d never notice it in the morning.

But Audrey would, and her still roaming hands betrayed the fact that she was awake. He opened one eye and then the other to find her staring at him intently.

“Audrey?”

“Are we okay?” she asked.

“We wouldn’t we be?” Perhaps he wasn’t entirely immune to tiredness after all. He was fairly sure
he should know what she was referring to, but his brain was sluggish and the only thing that was entirely clear at that moment was her.

“Because I didn’t tell you what Howard said. About how to stop the Troubles.”

“By killing me.”

She flinched as if he had struck her. “I never considered it,” she swore. “Not for a second.”

“Course not.” It was a ridiculous notion, being afraid of Audrey Parker. “Though maybe you should have.”

“Don’t!” She sat up quickly but clamped a hand around his arm. “This is why I didn’t tell you. I can’t listen to this. Killing you is not an option.”

He wasn’t about to put up an argument why she should. Still... “Would have preferred not to hear it first from my father.”

“I am sorry about that. I didn’t think you’d ever have to find out.”

He frowned, something about her glib honesty making him uncomfortable. “That’s the problem. We’re okay, Parker. But we need to be honest with each other. Especially with anything about the Troubles. Even if it’s not a viable option, it could still be a clue to work this all out. When you find something out, I want to know.”

She gnawed on her lip, and he could see the wheels in her head turning. Instead of laying back down she crossed her legs as if she was preparing to be up for awhile. “Last night I went to see your father after you fell asleep,” she admitted.

“Why?”

“To give him hell for the way he treated you,” she said sharply. She paused, pushing her hair behind her ear. “And to ask him about Lucy.”

The fact that she’d never been cowed by the Chief was another thing he loved about her. “Did he tell you anything?”

“Yeah. I’ll give you the full rundown in the morning. But he said he didn’t tell me about Lucy because she didn’t want him to. She wanted me to have a chance to be Audrey.”

He’d met Sarah, but he still couldn’t imagine Audrey as anything but herself. He knew how her identity crisis plagued her, but in his head it was simple. The Barn could change memories, but it couldn’t change her.

“How do you feel about that?” he asked.

He got the impression that the way she linked her hands with his and started playing with his fingers was more to distract herself than him. “I haven’t decided yet. I went to see him thinking I would have wanted more time to work this out – but there’s no guarantee we would have even if your father was straight with me from the beginning. When I first found out about Lucy – that shook me. But you and Duke were there to cheer me up and keep me grounded. If I’d found out before we were close, I don’t know how I would have dealt with that.”

“I would have been there for you no matter when you found out.”
“Even when I was just the pain in the ass FBI agent digging around in all your secrets?”

“You intrigued me from the moment we met. After our first few cases I would have done anything you needed.” He felt like maybe he was revealing too much. They’d never talked about how fast and hard he’d fallen. He’d been ready to admit it, back at dinner and pancakes, but after that all went to hell there had never been a good opportunity.

She smiled at him but she looked down quickly at their joined hands. Her thumb skimmed the sensitive skin on his palm.

“It was weird to hear your father talk about Lucy,” she admitted, still not looking at him. “I had this whole other life, right here, and I only remember a few snatches of it.”

He could sense she was tired of being the center of attention, but she wasn’t quite ready to fall asleep. And she wasn’t the only one who’d learned something from the Chief’s visit. “He told me how my mother died.”

Now she looked at him as her hand stilled and squeezed his. “Do you want to talk about it?”

He shook his head. “Tomorrow. Maybe.” She was the only one he could possibly imagine telling, but it was still so raw, even though he only had his father’s recounting. If he could actually see her lying there… A shiver passed through him involuntarily. “He said Vince tampered with my memory so I wouldn’t remember.”

“The Teagues are the ones wiping memories?” she asked in her detective voice.

“Yeah. Makes sense too. With Vince’s ties to the Guard, he’d be poised to clean up after them.”

“And the paper’s the perfect cover. They snoop around, ‘investigating’ any suspicious activities, and they can wipe anyone who knows something they shouldn’t.”

“While they fly under the radar and pretend to be harmless old men, which we’ve seen isn’t true.”

“I’ll have to talk to them tomorrow.”

“Want me to come along?” he offered.

“Because that went so well the last time?” She paused a moment to let him remember that train wreck. He hadn’t thought she’d been coherent enough to tease him about it. “Nah, I’ll go alone. I’ve got a theory.”

“Care to share?”

“I’ll tell you tomorrow after I test it.”

Yawning widely, she sunk back against the pillow and wriggled into position. Her body heat was radiating toward him, but in his estimation she was still too far away. He resisted the urge to pull her closer. Focused on the day’s other revelations instead.

“Dad said Lucy came to see me after Mom died.”

He could hear her breath catch. “What did she do?”

He reached a hand toward her shoulder to demonstrate. “She touched me.”

Audrey stared.
“Not in a creepy pedophile way.”

She snorted and smacked his shoulder lightly. “Obviously.” She was smirking at him, but he’d shaken her, he could see it.

“I lost my sense of touch when I watched my mother die. Then Lucy came and held me together. Just like you did earlier.”

“She knew you were James father,” she concluded.

“I think so.” It was the only theory that made sense. The thought of her looking out for him when he’d needed it most – even though she’d been someone else and he’d been a kid – warmed him from the inside out, like his mother’s chicken noodle soup on a blustery day.

“Did you tell Sarah your last name?”

“Yeah.”

“Her letter must have told Lucy to find you.”

“There’s more.” He tugged at the chain where it laid on his chest. “We were right. She gave my father this ring to give to me.”

“Did she say why?”

“No.” It wasn’t a lie, but he couldn’t help recalling his father’s words. *Only one thing a man does with a ring like that*. In that moment he’d pictured it – Audrey in a simple white dress, a lily in her hair, promising to spend the rest of her life with him – and now the image would haunt him until he found a way to make it reality. If only they weren’t constantly distracted by curses, quests, and crime. She’d spook if he asked her now. Between her childhood as an orphan and the fact she’d never really lived it commitment didn’t come easy to her. She’d think he was desperate, and she wouldn’t be wrong. But if they made it through the next four months and finally put an end to all this then they could slow down and do things right. He was sure he could convince her, eventually. What they needed was time.

“One more mystery,” she said wistfully. She was wearing down, he could tell, and truth was sleep seemed mighty appealing to him too.

“We’ll figure it out in the morning.”

“Or just come up with five more questions.” She seemed to stretch, but when her arm extended it grabbed on to his and tugged. “Come ‘ere.”

He didn’t need telling twice. He let her position him like a mannequin, throwing his arm around her waist and kicking his legs out of her space.

“Better?” she slurred from above his heart.

Her shoulder dug into his chest and her hair tickled and it was *glorious.* “Much.”

She chuckled, and the vibrations went right through him like magic. “Love you.”

“Love you too,” he echoed.

It was hard to have a bad day when it ended like this.
Audrey’s morning began with a wild goose chase. Figuring she might as well skip the station entirely and let Nathan catch up with some of his paperwork, she went directly to the Herald office. A hand-written sign taped to the door informed her that the place was closed for the day.

She tried the Haven Hunt Club next and found Dave there shooting the breeze. The other club members didn’t hide their disdain at her appearance, and she yearned for the days where she could fire off a few perfect shots and win their approval. Instead she resigned herself to their anger and asked him where she might find his brother. He seemed relieved to be rid of her, and she knew she’d been right to target Vince.

She found him on the beach near where Garland had exploded, where the Colorado Kid had been found, where Nathan and Sarah had kissed – where it sometimes seemed like nearly everything important in her life happened. He sat in the sand facing the water with a sketchbook on his knees. The fact that he’d sketched the waves in charcoal gave them a particular stormy appearance.

She sat down beside him, facing the ocean but watching him out of the corner of her eye. “You’re the one making people forget things,” she said conversationally.

He didn’t startle, even though he hadn’t reacted to her approach. His hand stilled, but he didn’t look at her. But she noticed how old and weary he seemed, as if more than two years had passed since she went away. The starkness of his drawing told her more than the wrinkles around his eyes. “Where did you acquire that piece of information?” he asked, as if he’d been resigned to her finding out eventually.

“Nathan’s father.”

His head snapped quickly to the side, his bushy eyebrows furrowed. “Garland’s back?”

“Not anymore. Bernie had a little fun – but the Chief faded like the rest of his tricks. But not before telling me you’re the reason Nathan doesn’t remember Max Hansen. Why did you do that?”

“Because she asked me to.” There was only one person he could be referring to. He said it like Audrey should have known, but there was nothing obvious in this town.

“Lucy?” she asked in wonder.

“Course,” he said gruffly. “She was real shook up, and it took a lot to shake that woman. She said Garland’s boy needed my help. It wasn’t a for hire service – but she was insistent.”

“You loved her,” she concluded. The brothers’ behavior started to make more sense once she’d realized that. “You and Dave both. That’s why you freaked out on Nathan for abandoning Sarah.”

“It was impossible not to,” he admitted, the master of spin suddenly painfully honest. “This crazy town, and the girl took it in stride. Even being pregnant and unmarried. Everyone talked, and it didn’t faze her. She wasn’t ashamed. She had guts.”

“She never told you who James father was? Not even a hint?”

“Not until she was leaving. ‘His father hasn’t even been born yet,’ she said, before she disappeared into a legend and a mystery.” He looked away to watch the waves break across the shore. “I didn’t believe her. Truth was I always thought Dave was the father and even she didn’t know it. I expect he thought the same about me.”

There was something ugly about Vince’s words that she wanted to shy away from. When she’d first come to Haven Vince and Dave had been like the grandfathers she’d never had. The bumbling
was a façade – she’d seen that on her last terrible day in Haven. But she preferred it to the reality that Vince could lead a militant underground group, and the brothers were capable of turning on each other at any moment and either might have gotten Sarah pregnant and then made her forget to cover their tracks.

She must not have done a convincing job hiding her disgust.

“You might think our Trouble is less dangerous than others you’ve seen. We’ve never killed anyone accidentally. But what we kill is the certainty in someone’s mind that what they’ve experienced is true. And that can be a terrible thing."

She understood the gaping maw of missing memories, and how not knowing who you’ve been could wreak havoc on all your beliefs. Her identity crisis was about as subtle as a freight train. But she remembered how tentative Nathan had been when he’d first told her he didn’t remember his mother’s death or his biological father. When they’d finally pulled themselves out of bed this morning he’d needed to run off to the station, but he’d promised they’d talk about all they’d learned as soon as he was off shift. But she could see how much the topic of his tampered memories bothered him, and he was a pretty difficult man to shake when her safety wasn’t involved. It was as if the sanctity of his mind had been violated, and she understood why that would make anyone squirm.

She wasn’t sure it was worse than murdering people for their skins or making them combust, though.

“I need your help.” There was no use pretending she was here for anything but that. She’d wanted to confirm her theory, but self preservation was far stronger than her curiosity.

“I got in a lot of trouble for my interference last time,” he said sharply. “Worse yet, I went against Sarah’s wishes. She would be furious about all the lives ruined on her behalf. You should be too, instead of asking me to do it again.”

She knew she had to placate him. “You’re the one making sure no outsiders tell the world about Haven. You’ve been running damage control to keep the Guard in check.”

He puffed up like a porcupine. “Least I could do. Haven’s a powder keg, and if the outside world finds out the whole place will explode.”

“You’re protecting the town, just like Sarah wanted. I get that. But if I don’t find a way to stop the Troubles in four months the Guard’s going to kill me and everyone I care about.”

“Shoulda thought of that before messing up the natural order of things. I can’t stop them even if I wanted to. They know what I can do, and they have safeguards against it. I won’t interfere again. I should have learned my lesson last time.”

Before she went away she’d never realized that it was guilt that drove the Teagues. She’d thought they were just born cantankerous and ornery, or became that way as age set in. Now she couldn’t help but look at Vince and think of Nathan. Is this what he would have become in sixty years?

Maybe she had an inflated sense of self-importance, but she didn’t think he’d have lasted that long.

“Do you think Sarah wanted to die?” she asked softly. Because even if this man was bitter and standing in her way, Sarah had cared for him once, and it was her fate that had turned him into what he’d become.

“She wanted to protect this town and everyone in it. She was willing to leave her own son to do so!
But Lucy ran and you – I don’t know what went wrong.”

Nor did she, really. Her love for Nathan didn’t make sense but she knew that it defied all this.

“I don’t think Sarah wanted to go into that Barn. But I think she knew she couldn’t stop this – not yet. But Nathan and I, together – I think that we can. But I don’t know how, and I don’t have much time to figure it out. If the Guard kills me, maybe I’ll pay for my crimes, but the Troubled are just going to keep on suffering forever. Sarah certainly wouldn’t have wanted that. Do you want to live with that on your conscience? Because I don’t.”

She waited, just like she’d been taught in Quantico, hoping the silence would make him break, but she caved first. He was stony as the coastline, and she was as desperate as a beached whale.

“Please, Vince. If you loved her, don’t let her sacrifice go unrewarded. I do have to help this town. And I want to live. I think she wanted that too. I think she wanted more than anything to raise her child but she knew that she couldn’t. She sent James to look for Lucy. There had to be a reason for that, when he was surely safer staying far away from this place. Maybe she knew that Lucy wouldn’t be able to stay either. But I think Lucy discovered that I would be different. Maybe she didn’t like that I’d get to stay when she needed to go – maybe that’s why she ran. Maybe she was just scared. But I need to know what she did.”

He sighed as if the entire weight of the world was in that singular exhale of breath. “I didn’t spend much time with Lucy. It was too painful. We were old men to her. Too old to be in the thick of the Troubles. That’s why we sent her to Garland.”

“He told me about Lucy,” she said. “But he didn’t know anything about how she could stay. Said she ran around a lot with James, looking for something.”

“You should ask the boy, then.”

“Funny thing, though. I have. He remembers the Troubles we encountered and how Lucy helped. He knows Sarah left a journal for Lucy that he knows he read. But he can’t recall what Sarah wanted Lucy to do. Can’t remember a thing about what they were looking for.”

“I’m not the only possible cause of that,” he said quickly, as if offended by her implication.

“Are you saying I should talk to Dave?”

“I’m saying the kid spent time in the Barn, and you’re case in point of what that place can do.”

“The Barn’s never been so selective with my memories.”

“You have a different purpose than he does. Maybe the Barn protects the cycle.”

All these maybes got her nowhere. She hated that she was back home and finally with Nathan and she was still living with an expiration date. “So there’s nothing you can give me? I know you know more than you’re saying. You always do.”

“When Lucy wasn’t at the station, I sometimes saw her around town with Eleanor Carr.”

“Julia’s mom?”

“Of course. Interesting Trouble that family has. It’s said that when they get too close to someone they can see their worse memory.”
She thought of the medical examiner and narrowed her eyes. “Even if the person is dead?”

Vince chuckled. “That would almost be cheating, wouldn’t it?”

“You think Eleanor saw Lucy’s worst memory?” Audrey asked, latching on to the possibilities that could create. She wondered what the woman had seen when they’d first met. If their previous friendship was why she’d seemed to take pity on her and tried to help her fit in. “Would she have told Julia?”

“Oh I doubt it. Those two fought like gulls and toddlers squabbling over potato chips. Julia was always running off somewhere long before she went to Africa.”

But Eleanor was lost, another victim to the Troubles like so many others. She’d liked the woman, but she had died so early into her stay in Haven she never wondered if she’d known Lucy. “Then I’m not sure how this will help me, unless I write a story and get Bernie to do me a favor.” Come to think of it, that wasn’t so bad a plan, though maybe this wasn’t the situation to try it with.

“Isn’t Bernie that needs to do the reading. From what I recall Eleanor Carr always took meticulous notes.”

Of course. She’d seen the ME make observations in the well bound notebooks she preferred, had even been in Eleanor’s house and saw a bookshelf full of them. If she and Lucy had been friends – and Eleanor had known most of the townsfolk’s secrets – who knew how many answers she could find. “Thank you!” she exclaimed, practically gushing. She wanted to throw her arms around the man – but he wasn’t her grandfather and given everything she knew, that wouldn’t be appropriate. “I’m sorry for – I’m just sorry.”

He narrowed his eyes, examining her with something she couldn’t decipher. “Sometimes I can’t decide if you’re nothing at all like Sarah or exactly the same.”

Sometimes she wondered the very same thing. “Did Sarah really believe she was the cause of all this?” she asked.

He shook his head slowly. “No. Dave and I told her the same story we told you. But she said it didn’t seem true – and she always trusted her instincts.”

She wished she was as certain. Trouble was her instincts were telling her she’d do anything to hold on to Nathan.

She rose, brushing the sand off herself. He stared out into the ocean. The tide was coming in.

“I’m sorry that Sarah never loved you the way you deserved. But she was in love with Nathan before you even met. I think maybe that was as inevitable as the Barn coming for her.”

He didn’t look at her, so she saw his melancholy in profile. Once again she thought of Nathan.

“I meant what I said. I can’t hold the Guard back anymore. They’re anxious for vengeance. Mr. Smith is not a man to be trifled with.”

But her instincts were telling her she didn’t have to worry about him. “I’ll put this all right.” She leaned down and tapped his sketchpad. “You should add some color to that.”

He looked at her then, and his eyes were misty. “She always had hope too, Sarah did. Until her very last moments.”
Audrey was glad she now knew that Vince’s Trouble wasn’t premonition. But there was still something in his tone that made her shudder.
Julia Carr hadn’t shown her face in Haven for nearly three years, and her family home sat abandoned ever since at the end of Wisteria Lane. Nathan spent nearly five minutes explaining the proper channels they should take to get access, but Audrey’d never been very patient and he’d never been very good at saying no to her, so it really shouldn’t have been very surprising when they found themselves standing on the front porch dressed all in black under the full moon.

“Just like old times,” Audrey teased, somewhat delighted by the recent turn of events. This had all of the thrill and none of the danger of a real case, and Nathan was looking pretty fine in a black sweater that was just a bit tighter than anything he typically wore.

“Can you hurry up? And be quiet. There are neighbors.” They’d parked the Bronco down the block and walked the rest of the way to avoid detection.

“You’re no fun, partner.”

“Seeing as your partner is the Chief of Police, I really don’t want to get arrested for breaking and entering.”

“So now the rules are important, Mister The-Guard-Runs-Amok-And-I-Can’t-Do-Anything-About-It?” She flashed him a grin to make sure he knew she was ribbing him. “Besides, that wouldn’t be nearly as awkward as when Laverne caught us making out in the supply closet.”

“Somehow I’d like to come out of this relationship with some credibility.”

“It’s not looking promising.” He wasn’t really annoyed, she knew. He’d always enjoyed riling her up, and she was just returning the favor. “Least there won’t be creepy merkids on the other side of this door.”

“I dunno, Parker. I think all that swimming off was just a decoy so we wouldn’t guess that the Glendowers have all been hiding in Eleanor’s bathtubs.”

“We’ll get ‘em to help us search then. Hold the flashlight.”

She handed her light to Nathan so she could pick the lock. It released with a satisfying click and she pushed the door open. “You first,” she said, giving him a nudge. “So you can protect me from the monsters.”

He grunted at her glibness but stepped inside. She followed, reaching for the light switch as soon as she closed the door behind her.

Nothing happened. “Power’s shut off,” he told her, handing her back one of the flashlights. “We couldn’t use the lights even if they’d work. The neighbors would notice.”

“We live in a town that gets hits by meteor showers, where buildings sometimes crumble because of a puzzle. You think anyone would be disturbed by a light or two in an abandoned house?”

“Our luck? Shirley Brown’s a light sleeper and a busybody. She’s more likely to come down here to scold the local hoodlums herself than call the police.”

“I really want that to happen now. Can we wake her up, please?”
“Remember how you convinced me this was a good idea because we were going to find information on your past?”

“Right. Focusing. You get me all distracted, Wuornos.” Just to prove her point, she pounced on him and pressed a kiss to the side of his mouth.

His eyes were bright in the darkness as he blinked once and then let out a shaky breath. “I’m sorry,” he whispered huskily.

“No you’re not,” she whispered back, shifting enough to kiss him properly before sinking back on her heels and stepping away.

“This place is filthy,” she declared as they moved from the entryway to the living room. Even in the dim light she could tell every surface was covered in dust, and there were cobwebs spanning every corner.

It took him a few moments to recover and respond. “What did you expect? No one’s been in here for years.”

“Outside looks all right.”

“Dwight has someone trim the grass every month. Those sketches are in here someplace. Who knows what else Eleanor’s stashed away. Didn’t want kids to get any ideas about looking around in here.”

She couldn’t help but chuckle at the irony of that. “Should have invested in a better lock, then.”

“Apparently,” he said dryly.

“So, the notes. I know I saw a bookshelf upstairs when we were here before.”

“Lead the way.”

They found the bookshelf easy enough, and as she’d expected each volume was filled with notes in Eleanor’s neat, thin script. But the first four Nathan and Audrey paged through appeared to be filled entirely with medical jargon.

“There may be something helpful in here if we find the years the Troubles were in Haven,” Nathan concluded. “But I doubt we’ll get through all these by daybreak.”

“You’re right. We need reinforcements. Should have thought of that before,” she said as she fished her phone out of her pocket.

“That better not be Stan.”

She stuck her tongue out at him. “James is always looking for ways to help. And you know Duke’s always up for some petty crime.”

“Or some not so petty,” Nathan shot back. But there was no vehemence in it. Lately Nathan barely put in the effort of ragging on Duke.

“You two need to hug that out or something.”

She felt a little bad about waking them, but she did enjoy their confusion at her insistence that they wear black, come together, park down the street, and bring flashlights. By the time they arrived half an hour later Audrey and Nathan were nearly certain they wouldn’t find what they needed on
this bookshelf and were ready to launch a more full scale investigation.


“Shut up and get off the porch,” Nathan growled.

“Gonna arrest me for trespassing?”

“Boys,” Audrey scolded. “For the record, I broke in. Nathan lectured me on protocol and then looked the other way as I picked the lock. If you’d like to make a civilian arrest I’m willing to let you try.”

She almost thought Duke was going to take the bait, but he stepped inside with a laugh. “One of your former selves was a bad girl, ‘eh?”

“Oh no, that was all Audrey Parker. Useful skill for a foster kid. Made me pretty popular in college too.”

Nathan’s eyes widened, and Audrey resolved to tell him a few stories from Audrey’s wild years.

“Not that I don’t find your methods absolutely delightful, but if you’d come to me first and not as a last resort I could have told you that there’s a spare key under that particularly hideous gnome.”

“How do you know that?” Audrey asked.

Duke shrugged as a slightly lecherous grin stole across his face. “Julia may have told me once.”

Nathan frowned. “Everyone seemed to notice the way she followed you around back in high school, except you.”

“Nathan, Nathan, Nathan. Of course I noticed. I wasn’t you.”

“So you had a secret fling? Here?” Audrey supposed it made sense, from what she knew of Duke’s teenage years and the way Julia used to look at him. Still, her and Julia had gotten drunk a few times and talked about men, and the brunette had never mentioned actually hooking up with Duke.

“Thrill of the chase, darlin’. Her mother was kind of terrifying.”

“She also might have known something that could keep Audrey here,” Nathan interrupted, firm and disapproving.

“Eleanor was friends with Lucy,” Audrey clarified. “And according to Vince, she could see a person’s worst memory. So who knows what secrets she may have learned.”

“She kept journals – lots of them,” Nathan said. “We’re looking for those she wrote while the Troubles were here.”

“Do you remember her?” Audrey asked James softly. Just like his father he didn’t like to be pressed about the gaps in his memory; he’d been here for over a month before she’d even realized anything was missing.

James nodded slowly. “She worked at the hospital. Never seemed very friendly. But Lucy would go off with her sometimes when she said she needed girl time.”

“So the three of you didn’t do any investigating together?”
“I don’t think so,” he said tentatively.

“We’ll figure this out,” Nathan said, resting a hand on James shoulder. A significant look passed between them, and Audrey’s heart swelled a little. Her boys.

“Come on. There’s a bookshelf upstairs, but I don’t think it has what we need. We may have to dig deeper.”

“Always do,” Duke said as they all followed Nathan up the steps.

James volunteered to keep combing the medical notes in case they got more interesting or something out of place was hidden there. After a warning not to touch any drawings of the town or anyone he might know, Nathan, Duke and Audrey began to search the rest of the house.

There were books in drawers, books on tables, books on shelves between knickknacks so obscured by grime they were barely recognizable. Most entries were carefully dated, but there were some that appeared to be filled with random observations that seemed to span decades. But there was no mention of Lucy or Audrey, and nothing from those eventful years in the 80’s.

“She didn’t want just anyone to come across them,” Audrey deduced after a few hours of fruitless searching. All the squinting at handwriting in the dim light was giving her a massive headache. “We know she kept secrets here – like those drawings. Where would they be safe?”

“We haven’t tried the attic yet,” Nathan suggested.

Audrey was about to follow him there when Duke stopped her with a hand on her arm. He put a finger to his lips and tilted his head toward Nathan. Once the other man was out of view he dropped his hand.

“What is it?” she asked. He’d been in a good mood when he arrived, but he’d grown increasingly serious as the night wore on. She’d thought maybe he was just tired, but this seemed to be something different.

“Do you think Julia had her mother’s Trouble?”

“Probably. That’s usually how it works – unless her father had a stronger one. But I don’t know if anything triggered it this time around. She never mentioned anything.”

“To me either. But people aren’t exactly forthcoming about their problems.”

“Would make my job a hell of a lot easier if they were.”

“Yeah.” Duke rubbed at the back of his neck. She wasn’t used to seeing him so discomforted.

“What’s this about?”

“Nothing. Just curious.” He huffed a breath out his nose. “Africa seems a hell of a place to go with a Trouble like that.”

She shuddered. “Hadn’t thought of that.” She brushed some dust off her sweater. “She ever contact you after she left?”

“Nah,” he answered a little too quickly. “Granted no one could, these last two years. But before then – nothing.”

“Everything was so chaotic when she left – with the Chief dead and the other Audrey showing up. I
never got to say goodbye. It wasn’t until weeks after she was gone that I started to wonder if something happened.” She narrowed her eyes. “Did something happen?”

“No! Well … maybe. But nothing – like that.”

“Nothing like high school?” she asked, her voice heavy with implication.

“No. But I think she was pretty shook up about what happened on my boat with those poker guys. Then I kept pressing her about the Guard and she showed me the symbol all over this old graveyard – and then she skipped town the next day.”

“You think she saw something?”

“Maybe. But I guess it doesn’t matter now, unless she decides to come back. We don’t have time to scour Africa. It’s going to be hard enough making sense of this place.”

“You guys coming?” Nathan called from somewhere above.

“Yeah,” Audrey called back.

“We’ll figure it out,” she said as she walked past, trailing a hand briefly across his shoulder. “Maybe she will come back. That seems to happen a lot around here.”

“Yeah,” Duke said almost wistfully. “There’s just something about this place.”

The attic was a mess, but more like a dumping ground for discarded family junk than a storehouse for priceless and dangerous artifacts and information. Most of the boxes contained clothing or toys. Shelves were covered in ancient appliances and there was an old couch and a few massive television sets.

“We’re going to have to come back here,” Nathan said. “It’ll be light soon, and we can’t be here when the neighbors start waking up.”

“It’s here somewhere, I know it!” Audrey stood up and spun around the cluttered room. “The years we need are deliberately missing, and we haven’t found anything related to the Troubles, and Eleanor implied that she had more than just those paintings.”

“Maybe she didn’t keep them here,” Nathan suggested.

“Maybe Julia took them with her,” Duke offered.

“No. They’re here,” she insisted.

“You know, when I have something valuable or dangerous, I don’t just leave it with the rest of my junk where anyone could happen upon it,” Duke supplied. “Especially in a town like Haven, where there’s a high likelihood of croaking at any minute.”

“Not that anyone cleans houses out around here,” she said under her breath, shooting a glance at Nathan.

“We’re busy,” he defended.

But Duke’s words were slowly sinking in. “Of course! What kind of cop am I? I blame the dust and the dark and exhaustion. It’s so obvious.”

“Not following,” Nathan said.
“We’re tackling this like we’re looking for her car keys. Everyone in Haven guards their secrets. She’s not going to box them up with stuff from the life she can talk about – and she’s not just going to shove them in a drawer either. She’s going to hide them. And if she had years worth of stuff to hide, she’d sure as hell develop a good hiding place.”

“Now we’re talking!” Duke said. “I happen to be pretty good at discovering secret hiding places.”

“We still may need to come back.”

“Ah, ah, ah. Let me work.”

But while Duke grabbed James and took to canvassing the house for potential hidden closets or crawlspace, it was Nathan who noticed that the dust was slightly less thick in one corner of the attic, and the boxes there were particularly light.

“Parker,” he called after he slid them aside. “These boards aren’t nailed down.”

They’d already come across a toolbox. There was just enough space at the edge of the board to slide a crowbar, and with a little leverage the board lifted easily, along with three others.

Underneath the floorboards was a plastic bin filled with books.

“I love you,” she told him, kissing him thoroughly before reaching for the first volume.

The first entry was dated February 2, 1983, and her whole body tingled with excitement.

“I’ll go get Duke and James. We’ll pull up the bin so we can take it with us – and we’ll check if there are anymore.”

He was letting her be the one to read these first, she knew. Her past, her discovery. She loved him all the more for his understanding. “Thank you.”

He clasped her hand briefly with a slow smile and then left to find the others.

She scanned a few entries about odd happenings in town with explanations Eleanor didn’t buy. In March her husband had a fatal heart attack – and as he faded she saw his younger self watch his father die the exact same way. She wrote of both her husband’s death and the triggering of her Trouble with a matter-of-fact detachment Audrey found off-putting but completely in character with what she remembered of the ME. Heart disease ran in his family, and a proclivity to see people’s worst moments ran in hers. Her parents had been honest with her about that when she was a child, and although she’d had nearly three decades to pretend to forget, she wasn’t about to be fooled when the Troubles came back.

She chronicled each memory she saw, some more horrific than others – but in a town like Haven the capacity for horrific was stretched beyond the norm. Audrey knew she’d have to study each one in greater detail and ask Nathan to make sense of the names and the families so she would know who was still alive and still dangerous. But tonight all she wanted to do was discover what happened when Eleanor met Lucy.

She found that entry near the back of the first journal she picked up. The name “Lucy Ripley” leapt from the page, and Audrey forced herself to find the start of the entry and read from the beginning.

There is someone new in town. Not a summer person – it isn’t yet the season for that, and she hasn’t been anywhere near the tourist haunts. The Teagues say her name is Lucy Ripley, that she’s a photographer and she means to stay. Those from Haven always come back eventually, the
summer folk return year after year long as the weather’s good and the Troubles are quiet, but no one else comes to stay. There are no other Ripley’s here.

It’s been all anyone can talk about for three days. No one seems concerned, merely curious. But I feel that something is shifting. Someone needs to get to the bottom of this. And if no one else is volunteering, than perhaps it must be me.

The next entry was dated the following day, and Audrey tore through it eagerly.

When I was eight years old I brushed against a woman in the market, and the memory I saw was so strange I couldn’t make sense of it. Always before and since I could recognize the person whose memory I saw – often they were younger, but they were still themselves. This woman had stylish red hair but the vision I saw was of a blond woman of nearly the same age who was wearing the strangest clothes I’d ever seen. She’d been arguing with a man almost hysterically, and I was left with a sense of clawing desperation even after the woman apologized and disappeared down another aisle. I couldn’t understand how a woman with a smile that bright could have ever been so sad, so I tried to forget, and as the years passed I saw many stranger things that pushed the incident from my mind.

Today I met Lucy Ripley. Though I cannot explain it, her worst memory matches exactly that of the woman from the marketplace.

Lucy Ripley is one of those modern women, with long brown hair and airs to prove herself in a man’s world. But when I touched her hand I saw a blond woman in what I now realize was Puritan garb. She arrived at some sort of workshop lit by candlelight and was met by a dark-haired man who was tall, handsome, and distressed. He did not wish to open the door for her, but she persisted. Ignoring his warnings that “they” would look for her there, she claimed that this was all a terrible misunderstanding, that she had done nothing wrong and she was not the cause of the town’s distress. The man was not swayed, but she persisted, asking what cause she would have for such actions. He suggested jealousy, but she pulled a chain from under her dress and clutched a strange circular pendant. “I had no need for jealousy,” she whispered. “Only patience. I would have withstood the waiting.” The man seemed to reconsider, but when the woman reached out to grasp his arm he pulled away from her like her touch burned. “You are the devil’s child,” he spat. “I can abide no more of your treachery. Be gone! If you wish to live you should flee this place, because they will burn you if they catch you.” “I do not,” she whispered, but his face did not soften at her despair, and she collapsed upon his doorstep as the vision faded.

I do not understand how two women can hold a memory from another’s life; perhaps the sorrow is so deep it transcends generations, though neither woman seemed particularly sorrowful. Though few details were given about the actual cause of the quarrel, it is impossible not to assume that the town’s distress then had something to do with its current problems, as much as many would try to hide them. Despite all that I have seen, witchcraft is a difficult explanation to swallow.

But there is something I am certain of. Whoever the woman was, whatever crime she was accused of, it was a false accusation. Her distress was far too acute to be fabricated, and even now, hours after our meeting, her agony lingers with me, as if warning me to leave it alone. I already fear that I shall not listen. The pull of truth to be uncovered is too strong. Though this woman may not have received justice in her lifetime, perhaps it is not too late for her descendant to be absolved. I must learn more about this Lucy Ripley.

Eleanor’s words hit her with the force of a speeding car, and at first she could not tear her eyes away as they spun through her head, stealing her breath and her sense. When she finally glanced up it was to find Nathan staring, his face alight with concern. “Audrey?”
“It wasn’t my fault,” she revealed, and by saying it aloud the full force of that overwhelmed her anew. Absolution indeed. Within seconds he was by her side, his arms comforting bands across her waist and her shoulder, and she buried her face in his chest and held on tight, his heartbeat pounding under her ear and the smell of him steadying her. Eleanor’s story surely alluded to terrible things – misery and heartbreak and betrayal and lies – but she was not its cause and in that moment that was all that mattered. She had not damned Nathan and Duke and the entire town; there was not some great depravity inside her that could arise again with the proper provocation. She’d been framed.

He tilted his head to rest it against hers. “Told you,” he whispered in her ear, and his certainty and warm breath made her shiver. There was nothing condescending in his tone. It was a declaration that he had never doubted her, even when she had doubted herself, and she was extraordinarily grateful for that.

Duke, however, was less diplomatic. “Is it too early for I told you so? Because frankly, the thought of you being the cause of all this was ridiculous. No one’s better than you at fixing the Troubled.”

All her wit seemed to have abandoned her, so she untangled herself from Nathan and stumbled toward the smuggler. He eyed her warily as if he expected her to smack him, but she flung her arms around him instead. “Oh shut up,” she mumbled as he stood stiff and still in her grasp. After a few seconds he wrapped an arm around her tentatively as he answered, “Yes ma’am.” When she pulled away he seemed gob smacked and wouldn’t quite look her in the eye, but she blamed it on the tears he knew she’d hate for him to see there. He kept making shifty glances toward Nathan, as if he was afraid the cop would hold him accountable for her affection.

That left James, who was lurking on the fringe of their little group as he always seemed to be, hands in his pockets and wearing an expression to match the dictionary diagram of awkwardness.

“You too, kid,” she said, because this was her son and she didn’t want there to be any insurmountable distance between them. He didn’t lean into the hug, and she was glad she couldn’t see the look on his face, but he didn’t stop her either. She wasn’t sure what she was supposed to say in situations like these. She was just glad that he was here, sharing in her news, and she told him as much.

“I’m glad too.” There was a moment of hesitation, and then the word that thrilled and haunted her. “Mom.”

She squeezed a little harder before pulling away.

“I think I was supposed to know this wasn’t your fault,” he said, his brow furrowing exactly like his father’s, and she chuckled and swiped the tears from her eyes.

“Don’t worry about it. I think I was too.”

“We really need to go,” Nathan reminded them.

“Right. Nosey neighbors.”

“I think it’s safe to say that we’re all going to be pretty useless today,” Duke said, surprisingly chipper for the statement he was making. “So how about we have some breakfast? My treat.”

“Depends what you’re making,” Nathan shot back before Audrey could even process the offer. She rolled her eyes as Duke declared that he could make both pancakes and waffles.
“You know, I could really go for an omelet,” James said. His tone was even, but Audrey caught the twinkle in his eye as he watched the flabbergasted expressions appear on the other men’s faces.

“That sounds heavenly right about now!” she exclaimed, not nearly as successful at masking her glee. “And bacon. Lots and lots of bacon.”

Nathan looked at her like a very large, very neglected puppy, and she couldn’t contain her laughter.

“Oh my god. The look on your face. Duke’s too. What is it with the two of you and your breakfast fixation? I’m getting a little concerned.”

“It’s obvious neither of you grew up in Maine,” Duke supplied, uncharacteristically serious.

“You’re just kidding around, right? We can still have pancakes?” Nathan asked.

This time Audrey and James both laughed. “Yes, we can have pancakes. But only if we don’t get arrested first. So let’s get out of here.”

Nathan and Duke hoisted the bin between them, and Audrey and James stuffed a few loose volumes in the knapsack she’d brought. As they left the house she could barely make out what the men were bickering about, but at one point Duke seemed to raise his voice for her benefit. “Good thing she didn’t curse the town, Nate. Because causing all this and then not appreciating pancakes – that could be a deal breaker.”

Instead of defending her honor, Nathan just chuckled as they slipped into the dawning morning.
Audrey and Nathan made a point of sneaking off to Derry for a night or two every couple of weeks since it was nearly impossible to have a relaxing evening in Haven with judgmental townspeople haranguing them wherever they went. Audrey had gotten somewhat used to that after shooting the Rev, but she saw how much it hurt Nathan every time someone blamed him for the town’s misfortunes. In Derry they were blissfully anonymous. Audrey found it odd that people who lived less than thirty miles outside Haven could be completely oblivious to the happenings there, but she supposed Vince and Dave did their job well.

They tried different restaurants, but they always stayed in the bed and breakfast Audrey had discovered on their first date. It was a charming little place that abandoned the obvious seaside motif in favor of a rustic garden scheme. The rooms were cozy, the beds were comfortable, and the pancakes were served with homemade maple syrup – much to Nathan’s delight.

It was his love for those pancakes that drew Audrey out of their room twenty minutes before the dining room closed. They’d gotten in around midnight and done nothing more than strip and sleep. For eight days straight they’d been working a particularly nasty case: more than a hundred people had come down with what was essentially a slow acting form of the plague. Thankfully only twelve people had succumbed before they found who was responsible and cajoled him into reversing the effects – but it had been touch and go the whole way and they hadn’t slept more than four hours a night for a week. She had wanted to stick around town to get back to the neglected journals, but Nathan had insisted they take a proper break and she hadn’t had the energy to argue with him.

More than nine hours of sleep later she still didn’t. Instead of sitting across the table she took the seat next to his so she could lean her head against his shoulder. She was surely a sight – she’d tossed on the first thing in her suitcase and had barely taken the time to run a brush through her hair. Nathan looked quite rumpled himself, though less sluggish. He got pale when they worked too hard, which threw the shadows under his eyes into sharp contrast.

Right now those beautiful eyes of his were narrowed at her in consternation. “We shouldn’t have gotten up,” he said.

“You love these pancakes,” she argued. There were so few good things in his life lately, she couldn’t stand to deprive him of this one.

“Love you more.” He was so earnest it made her slightly uncomfortable, even as her heart swelled. “And you look like death warmed over.”

There was familiar territory – the back and forth they’d always done so effortlessly.

She wanted to tell him he didn’t look so great either. Trouble was she couldn’t do it. He always looked beautiful to her, even that night when she’d first come back from the Barn and he’d been an absolute train wreck. He could be drunk, depressed, or bleeding and he was still so damned
handsome, all sharp symmetrical lines and miles of vibrant, pulsing man.

“We need to eat. Someone’s always telling me that.”

“Wise guy. But I think this time he might be wrong.”

“Nah.” But her authority was undermined by the yawn that shuddered through her. Embarrassed, she nuzzled her head into his shoulder. He was a little bony; maybe she should get on his case about eating more. But he smelled good, and he was pleasantly warm and incontestably safe and that was wonderful in itself, crazy life that she led.

“Audrey.” She could hear his concern, and she felt it as his long fingers, so clumsy and handicapped most of the time but so nimble against her skin, brushed a few strands of hair away from her face with utmost tenderness.

She looked up at him as his blue eyes watched her closely. “You don’t have to worry about me.” She put in the extra effort to enunciate clearly for his benefit. She wasn’t sure why she was so wiped this time around, but she’d snap out of it. Always did. “I just need some coffee.” She reached for the mug the waitress had brought her a few minutes ago, figuring it’d be cool enough, but Nathan got there first and covered it with his hand.

“Uh-uh.”

“No coffee for you. Soon as we eat you’re going back to bed.”

“I don’t wanna waste your day off.”

His lip twitched upward. “Hardly a hardship spending the day in bed with you.”

For all his white knight chivalry, sometimes there could be a bit of a devil in Nathan Wuornos. And boy, how she loved it. She punched his shoulder, hard enough she knew he’d feel it through his sleeve. “Even if I’m passed out and snoring?”

“Sure. Sounds you make are more interesting than a symphony.”

She flicked his neck and jerked away from him in indignation, but he snaked an arm around her shoulder and pulled her back, chuckling.

“We’ll get up for dinner. And I’ll give you a back rub.”

His plan was sounding better by the minute. “Buy me a cupcake when we get home and you just may have a deal.”

“Suppose I can spring for that.”

The pancakes’ arrival rejuvenated her a bit, but Nathan snatched her coffee out of reach and insisted the waitress bring her an orange juice instead. She debated arguing that the sugar in the syrup was sure to keep her up anyway, but she could tell he was truly worried under all his teasing and as much as she yearned for her caffeine fix it wasn’t worth stressing him out over. Truth was a few more hours of sleep – or even just lazing in his arms – did seem mighty appealing. Who knew how many more chances they’d have for that.

They were nearly finished when they heard someone approach. Audrey expected it to be their
waitress, but looked up to find Dorothy, the owner of the establishment. Audrey didn’t remember ever having a grandmother, but Dorothy was exactly the type of woman every kid hoped for to fill that role – jovial, generous, full of interesting stories and clever as a whip. She ran the B&B with her two sons, and while they may have handled many of the business aspects she was clearly the boss. Nathan and Audrey were accustomed to lingering in the dining room or the window seat in the lobby, grateful for the freedom to be out in public without fear of reprisal, so they often found themselves chatting with the woman, who on more than one occasion had mentioned how nice it was to see young couples so in love, which always raised a delightful blush in Nathan’s cheeks.

Today there seemed to be a bee in her bonnet. Her eyes were narrowed and one hand was planted on her hip, and for the first time ever Audrey saw her frown.

“Morning,” Nathan greeted, but his tone faltered at the sight of her scowl.

Audrey sat up straight and tried not to look half-asleep. “How have you been?”

“I know I said you were always welcome here, pleasure to have polite young folks who actually look at each other and not the contraptions they’re carrying. But the staff are beginning to talk. You show up in the middle of the night any day of the week, rarely any warning. This isn’t that kind of place. You’re a real pretty couple, and maybe you’re meant to be, but I can’t abide the thought of what you’re leaving at home so you best not come around here any longer.”

Audrey blinked at the unexpected tirade. She heard the words spilling from the woman’s mouth, but they didn’t make any sense. She turned to Nathan. “Maybe I’m just tired, but I have no idea what she just said.”

“Not a Mainer yet,” he remarked, and even though she thought they were probably supposed to look chastised he still seemed a little amused. “She thinks we’re having an affair.”

“Huh,” she said with an amused huff of realization. “Oh no,” she assured the woman, turning back to her. “Nathan’s not allowed to sleep with anyone else. I have a gun.”

Instead of relaxing the woman’s eyes widened. “We’re detectives with Haven PD,” Nathan explained, using the slightly patronizing tone he adopted when he thought Audrey was being more socially clueless than he was. “We’re not with anyone else.”

“Is there a non-fraternization policy at the station?”

“No,” Audrey answered at the same time Nathan said, “Well, yes.”

She turned to him. “Maybe you want to take that off the books, Chief.”

“It’s a good rule. Mostly.”

She rolled her eyes. “Never been too fond of rules.”

“Hadn’t noticed.”

Dorothy cleared her throat and Audrey sobered. “Is that why you’re sneaking around?”

Nathan reached for her hand and she squeezed back in solidarity. “We’re not sneaking around. This isn’t a secret back home.”

Audrey could tell the woman needed further reassurance, so she took over. “Work’s a bit – intense. It’s hard to relax back home. We like to get away when we can. But we never know when we’ll
have a break in a case. If you don’t want us to come here anymore we can find a new place.”

Audrey wasn’t used to caring about people’s approval, but as the woman scrutinized her she found herself hoping she’d understand. Dorothy was one of the few people that hadn’t thought her and Nathan’s love was wrong, and she didn’t want that to change.

Thankfully whatever track Dorothy’s train of thought took it ended with a smile. “Of course you’re welcome here, dears. I’m sorry about the accusation. In this day and age you start to see patterns. I can’t abide the thought of my inn as a den of sin. But a lover’s hideaway – the thoughts would make my Charles smile, if he were still around.”

“Thank you,” Audrey said earnestly.

“We’ll try to check in earlier,” Nathan offered.

“Nonsense. Crime doesn’t consult people’s schedules. I’ll give my staff a standing order to watch out for you – and tell them to hold their tongues.”

Having witnessed her displeasure firsthand, Audrey figured her staff would do almost anything to avoid it. There was no need to worry about gossip now.

“One small piece of advice – since I have already been quite bold today.”

“Hmmm?” Nathan hummed.

“If you’re going to keep a lady up all night, it’s good manners to at least let her sleep in afterwards.”

Nathan blushed scarlet, and Audrey dissolved into gut-wrenching laughter.

“Enjoy the rest of your stay, dears,” Dorothy said with a twinkle in her eye before leaving the two of them alone.

“Oh my God.” Audrey leaned against his shoulder and wiped the tears from her eyes.

“You’re the one who set the alarm,” Nathan protested.

“You are never going to live this down.”

“It’s not that funny,” he grumbled.

“I know, but I’m so tired.” She looked up at him with her best feigned innocence. “Cause you’re wearing me out, and all.”

“That a challenge?” His voice had dropped, and his sudden seriousness rippled through her.

“Absolutely.”

Twenty minutes later, curled back up in bed, she still couldn’t contain her snickers, not until he climbed on top of her and gave her reason to go back to sleep.

They woke again around dinner time and headed into town. The man at the front desk had handed them a flyer for Derry’s Spring Fling when they checked in, and Nathan was excited to take her to her first New England carnival. They ate fried dough and fried green beans – “Almost makes eating vegetables worth it,” she told him, “except these are kind of disgusting” – and he took her up on the
Ferris wheel to watch the sun set over the ocean. Derry was a sleepy town compared to Haven – about a thousand more people but far less Trouble – and as she gazed at nearly all of it from her perch she realized as much as she enjoyed their time there together, it wasn’t home.

Afterwards he presented her with a stuffed dolphin from one of the carnival stands, but the dog she won him at the shooting game was three times its size. He took it on the bumper cars with him and pretended it was driving, and she realized this was another side of Nathan she’d never seen – the goof. They’d been living together for months and he still surprised her sometimes.

They stayed for the fireworks, and then went back to their room to make their own. Nathan built a fire in the fireplace and then they made love slowly, taking the time they hadn’t been afforded the past eight days. He drained the tension from her body, knowing exactly what to do to leave her sated and boneless, her skin still faintly humming from his adoration. She rolled on her side to watch the flames in the hearth, but reached back to drape his arm across her stomach.

“I’ve been thinking,” Nathan told her, his voice a few inches behind her ear.

“Now I’m worried,” she teased.

The immediate rebuttal she expected did not come. When he answered there was no flippancy in his tone. “If we can’t find another way to stop the Troubles before the Guard’s deadline, I want you to kill me.”

She spun toward him, her entire being – mind, soul and body – protesting his absurd request. “Have you lost your mind?”

He sounded serious, but also somewhat casual, as if he was asking her to make dinner every night that week instead of murder her soul mate. “It may be the only way—”

“Stop it! Stop it right now,” she demanded. “I won’t.”

“Audrey, please. Least hear me out.”

In the past three months she’d learned countless ways to make him beg in far more pleasurable situations. This was something else entirely, as if his very soul implored her to listen to something it could not keep contained. As much as she found the plan he proposed abhorrent, she respected him too much not to heed his request. She would listen.

Wouldn’t make any difference, though. There was no way she was killing him.

“Okay. Explain to me how you possibly think this could be a good idea.”

“It’s not a good idea. But it might be the only way.”

“It’s not the only way!”

He closed his eyes and grimaced. “Please, just let me finish. Then you can argue all you want.”

It was hurting him to say this, she realized, as good as he was at projecting calm. She shouldn’t make this any harder. “No more interrupting,” she promised.

“Thank you.”

His eyes were bright but his voice was steady. “We’re going to keep trying to figure this out. But
we’ve only got three months until our time is up. We need to consider the possibility that there isn’t another option. The Barn is gone. The only other way we know to end the Troubles is for you to kill someone you love.”

She squeezed his hand and clenched her teeth against the refusal bubbling up her throat like bile. The moment Howard had told her about her second option, she’d sworn to herself to die before she let that happen.

He raised his free hand to run it gently across her clenched jaw. “These last three months with you – despite everything happening in town – have been bliss. I never thought it was possible for me to be so happy. I want to spend the next sixty years by your side. But my happiness is built on others’ suffering, and I can’t ignore that any more. When I shot Howard I interrupted the cycle. So many innocents are still paying the price for that. I love you, but I can’t live with that forever.”

As much as she wanted to rage at him for daring to suggest such a thing, all she could do was ache at the injustice of it all. Because here was the just, noble man she’d fallen in love with, who’d chosen to retain his Trouble to free a stranger from hers. She could not fault him for the very trait she’d found so attractive.

That didn’t mean she could do what he asked.

“I get it. But you couldn’t let me go into the Barn. What makes you think I could kill you?” Her voice cracked, and as much as she tried to keep the tears at bay for both of them they fell, warm and unwanted, down her check.

He wiped them away with infinite tenderness, and then pushed her hair back behind her ear. “You’re stronger than me. Always have been. Even when I was a kid you were holding me together.”

But she could not look at this man, who had borne so much on his shoulders for so long without complaint, and see anything but strength.

She reached out to trace his features, to run her fingers across his lips and his eyebrows and his cheekbones, suddenly desperate to commit it all to muscle memory just in case – God, just in case. The thought of not being able to do this anymore made her cry again, terrible burning, honest tears.

“I’ve been alone all my life. All my lives. I don’t want to feel that way anymore. Maybe I’d survive. But I’d never get over you.”

He surged forward, pressing his forehead against hers and holding her there, his hands warm on both sides of her face.

“I don’t want to leave you alone. The thought of that – it practically kills me, right here and now. But it’s better than the alternative. The Guard will kill you. And James and Duke. Possibly others, too.”

She gulped, because she knew what else he was thinking, and it was the worst part of all. “But not you.”

“I don’t think so. They know it would hurt worse to keep me alive.” He closed his eyes and took a deep breath that shuddered through him. Audrey couldn’t help but think of a death rattle, and the sudden nausea was so strong she almost gagged. “They’re right.”

She threw her arms around him, threading one hand through his hair and running the other down his back, needing to ground them both in this moment where they were both still alive and together.
He spoke into her shoulder. “I can’t live with that pain again. Not if they make me watch while they take away everything I love, knowing I could have stopped it. And it would be for nothing. Killing you won’t end the Troubles, I know it. This whole town would be damned forever.”

In that terrible instant she thought it would serve them right. She was shocked by her hatred toward the place she had always worked so hard to protect.

Haven was home. But Nathan was the only thing she needed.

“If you kill me only one life has to be lost. So many will be saved. At least it’ll mean something. And you won’t be alone. Duke will look after you.”

She pulled away, unable to trust her ears. What a time for Nathan to make a joke. But his face was earnest. “I can’t believe you’re trusting Duke to look after me.”

“He loves you.” She realized he must have contemplated this plan for a long time to come to terms with leaving her to a lifetime with Duke.

But all possibilities of a relationship with the criminal with a heart of gold had sailed when she’d fallen for her partner. Duke was a dear friend, and there had definitely been moments of attraction between them. But she could never be with him that way after what she had shared with Nathan. It would be a betrayal of the worst kind, even if she had Nathan’s blessing. And it wouldn’t be any fairer to Duke than it would be to Nathan’s memory.

“I don’t want him. I want you,” she swore.

“Good to know.” There was a touch of self-satisfaction in his tone that shouldn’t have been necessary; he never should have doubted that, but she’d spent too long playing with both their affections.

Was this her punishment? she wondered. She had not loved him well enough, and now she’d have to kill him.

He braced his hands on her arms. “I need you to promise me, Audrey.”

She shook her head. “I’m not giving up! We have three months. We’ll keep looking. There are still all of Eleanor’s journals and –”

“Course we’ll keep looking. Soon as we find a better plan I’ll be all for it. But if we don’t—”

“Last resort. It’s just a last resort. It’s not the plan. The plan is to find another way.”

Their eyes met, and she knew he was wrong. He was stronger than she was. At least in this. “Okay.”

“I’m only agreeing because I can’t bear the thought of you suffering alone. And because we can’t let them kill James.”

He nodded. “It’ll be all right as long as you’re with me at the end. After six months with you I’ll die a happy man.”

She closed her eyes against the wave of misery she felt at hearing him mention his own death so casually. Her stomach churned so fiercely she didn’t know how she’d be able to eat for the next three months.
“You’ve been buttering me up all day,” she deduced. “The sleep and the carnival and the sex.”

He glanced up at her shyly. “Are you mad?”

“No. Yes.” She heaved a deep sigh. “Not at you.”

“I wanted to give you a normal day.”

“It was wonderful.” He was always going out of his way to look after her, while she was constantly distracted by the lives they lived and the curse she’d somehow brought on Haven.

“I’m sorry I teased you about what Dorothy said.”

He shook his head. “Don’t ever apologize for being you. I expect you to keep on teasing me. Right until the end.”

“This isn’t going to end this way,” she swore. “This is my curse, and I won’t let you be its victim.”

“If there’s anyone stubborn and smart enough to stop this, it’s you. I’m not worried.”

She wished she had the same confidence. She’d move heaven and earth to keep him safe, but the last time they were up against a clock hadn’t turned out so well.

Whatever came to pass, she’d make the most of the time they were given.

Starting with tonight. She pushed him back against the mattress and kissed him until neither of them could breathe, her hands charting a frantic, desperate course across his body that made him shiver beneath her.

“Audrey,” he gasped as she went to work on his neck, scraping her teeth against his jugular where his pulse pounded.

“Shut up.” She ran a hand up his thigh and then ground down on him to give him the friction he craved. “Just touch me.”

She could cry after he was gone.
Chapter 22

Monday became family dinner night. Occasionally they cooked, working in tandem while Nathan did most of the creative work and Audrey chopped vegetables or boiled pasta, relegated to simple tasks where it didn’t matter if she got distracted by how sexy he was in the kitchen, focused and confident and one hell of a provider. For a few stolen hours they’d sit around their dining room table and feel strangely normal – until Audrey mentioned Mrs. Mineva’s talking tea kettle or James referenced literally not-growing up in a barn.

But such time to slow down was hard to come by. More often than not an unsolved case made it nearly impossible to get out of the station at a reasonable hour so they met up at the Gull. Duke teased them mercilessly about their happy little family, but he always sent over free rounds of beer and sometimes he’d join them for awhile, making excuses about checking the quality of the service. Audrey didn’t mind, and she suspected Nathan didn’t either. Her boys were all getting along, and it was a wonderful distraction from their looming deadline. Sometimes they had “book club,” discussing the obscure clues in Eleanor’s journals, but there was an unspoken rule that such talk was not allowed on Monday nights.

She supposed it would always be weird, having a son nearly as old as she was – or as old as Audrey Parker was supposed to be, anyway. But they were adjusting. Even though she couldn’t remember holding him in her arms and had missed out on his childhood she was shocked by the strength of the bond between them. She didn’t always know what to say to him. In many ways he was still a stranger. But she loved him fiercely in a way she couldn’t explain. She could make a list of all the reasons she cared for Nathan. But with James, the strongest draw was the fact that he was a part of her and Nathan both. Their love had overcome supernatural obstacles, their own stubbornness and even the rules of cause and effect to create this brave, clever young man who was now regaling her with stories about rebuilding houses after a flood. Nathan had gotten a call from the station he couldn’t avoid, so they’d ordered for him and now awaited his return.

She nursed her bottle of beer, enraptured by the tale of the young boy who’d followed James around through the whole project, making him sing songs and tell stories and even cajoling him into building a dollhouse for his little sister. He would make an excellent father one day. It was odd to think that day could be soon; that she could very well be a grandmother before she was thirty. But not too soon, probably. She could still see the scars Arla’s betrayal had left on him, and there were days she wanted to damn that woman even more severely for the damage she had caused. Most days the situation just left her incredibly sad. The Cogans certainly weren’t the first to have their love twisted by the Troubles, but it was the case that hit closest to home. Even though Audrey was nearly certain now that she hadn’t started the Troubles, she was almost certainly involved, and she hadn’t been able to stop them yet either. There were moments when the guilt was overwhelming, especially when she thought of her former daughter in law.

Occasionally she looked at James and saw only the future, not the past. Today was one of those days.

But peace never lasted long in Haven. Someone surely had a Murphy’s Law Trouble. “If it isn’t the illusive Audrey Parker.”

Her stomach dropped at the familiar voice. She looked up and there he was, looking just as dour as always. “Chris Brody,” she said, doing a poor job of hiding her dread.

“You’re a difficult woman to find. Tried to look you up the last time I was in town and everyone seemed to think you’d vanished into thin air. Funny. I can usually get a better story than that.”
“That was pretty accurate, actually.”

She hoped he’d take the hint from her lack of eye contact, but instead he pulled out one of the empty chairs at the table and settled into it.

“Well now I’m intrigued.” He turned to James with a scowl. “The name’s Chris. You won’t remember that when I go anyway. You’ll be too overwhelmed by the fact that the greatest man to walk this earth sat next to you in a dirty restaurant. Let me tell you, greater things will happen in your life, so there’s no need to gush.”

James turned to Audrey with a befuddled expression. “What’s wrong with him?”

“His Trouble makes everyone adore him. His winning personality predates that.” Audrey frowned at Chris and rolled her eyes. “You can cut that out. Your Trouble won’t work on him.”

Chris actually seemed to relax at the news. “You have a brother you never told me about?”

“Son, actually.” The words slipped out without conscious thought. She saw James freeze. It wasn’t exactly a secret. Stan had found out a few weeks ago when he’d overheard a family conversation at the station, and she figured from the funny looks she’d gotten since he’d told a few other officers at least. There was no real reason to keep it quiet. She’d already bartered for the Guard’s protection over all of them.

But she hadn’t exactly been telling people either.

“Rapid aging Trouble?”

She’d forgotten how quick Chris was. She had found that attractive from the beginning. “That makes a lot more sense than the truth. So … sure.”

“Well now I’m curious. You can’t leave me hanging.”

She could do just that. Truth was she probably should. She really didn’t want to be having this conversation, and she particularly didn’t want to have it in front of her son.

But she couldn’t make herself send him away. Part of her knew she had never been fair to Chris. She’d been lonely and confused, and she’d given in too quickly – and then pushed him away just as fast. It was not that she thought he’d been pining all these years. They would never have been happy together. He didn’t understand her, and she really didn’t give a damn about his sea algae and its ecological ramifications. But she hadn’t been able to fix his Trouble, and that was supposed to be what she was good at. Though it certainly wasn’t as damaging as many others she’d encountered, there was no doubt that it had upended his life.

She couldn’t give him much. Didn’t want to, honestly. But she could give him an explanation. For someone who craved order in the universe, that could go a long way. “Remember how I kept saying there were things in my life I couldn’t tell you about?”

“How could I forget that when it was so delightful?”

“Turned out I didn’t know the half of it.”

“I’m listening. I’ve got nowhere else to be tonight.”

She had barely started her explanation when she heard footsteps approach. She looked up and saw Nathan walking toward her – but he saw Brody first.
“Christopher Brody!” he boomed with a dopey grin in the sycophantic voice he’d used to gush over the former mayor. He took the empty seat, but not before dragging it closer to Chris’s. “Long time no see. How’ve you been?”

There was no way she was putting up with Nathan fawning all over Chris. She pushed out of her chair and stood behind him, covering his eyes with her hands. “None of that, babe.” He startled at her touch and then slouched slightly, and she could imagine his brain clearing. He growled, and she wasn’t sure if it was at the endearment or the frustration at going all man-crush on a guy he hated when he could think straight.

Either way it was a little bit funny. “Sorry. Can’t help it. That just slips out sometimes.”

“You do realize we can hear you right?” James asked, trying to look disgusted – but she didn’t buy it. She had forgotten for a moment that their son was there.

“Something I learned a long time ago, kid – your parents are gross.” Duke had arrived with their tray of burgers, his eyes tracking immediately to Audrey and Nathan.


“Chris Brody! What a spectacular surprise. What causes you to grace my fine establishment?”

The look on Duke’s face made her grin. Nathan wasn’t allowed to idolize anyone but her, but Duke’s rapture at the biologist’s presence was kind of hilarious.

“Turn around,” Nathan ordered, his tone booking no argument, and shockingly enough Duke obeyed.

A few seconds later he rubbed a hand over his face. “Oh man. So he’s back now, huh?”

She couldn’t help but giggle.

“What’s so funny?”

“I’m sorry. I keep thinking of that day Haven was stuck in a time loop. Most of it was awful, but the highlight of every repeat was watching Duke get excited about cooking Chris waffles.”

“I cannot believe you didn’t warn me about that.”

“That’s because it was hysterical,” Nathan said drolly, and Audrey snorted.

“They’re so mean to me,” Duke whined in the direction of James, covering his eyes with a flourish.

“Told you this time,” Nathan said.

“That is true. Audrey, on the other hand, wicked woman that she is, is totally delighting in this situation.”

“It is pretty funny,” James offered.

“I’m still here, you know,” Chris reminded them.

“There a reason for that?” Nathan snapped.

“I’m still here because Audrey owes me an explanation for why your son looks about five years younger than you are. And your rudeness is refreshing, by the way.”
There were only four chairs at the table, so she sat in Nathan’s lap, ignoring his halfhearted protests. She could feel his eyes burning into her neck, but at least he had something to stare at that wasn’t Chris. And it could hardly be clearer who her heart belonged to when she was publically invading his space and making them all a bit uncomfortable. She could tell Nathan didn’t like it from the way he never relaxed, but she gave Chris the cliff notes version of her life story, ending with her return to Haven.

Chris leaned back in his chair. “Well I’m not exactly sad I wasn’t more mixed up in that.”

“Maybe you should be,” James said. Audrey recognized the tone of dawning realization from her work with Nathan.

“Excuse me?”

“This Trouble of yours – it makes people fall in love with you or something?”

Chris scowled. Whenever Audrey thought it was impossible for someone to be more dour, Chris always managed it. “Or something. It’s more like admiration than love. Basically I’m very popular until someone closes their eyes.”

“Can you make someone do something?”

Audrey frowned but let Chris answer.

“I wish I could make people go away and leave me alone. Haven’t been able to master that.”

“I’m serious. If you asked, would people do what you say?”

Chris shrugged. “Probably.”

“Then we can use him!” James declared, turning toward his parents.

“James—” Nathan said, but whatever was to follow was cut off by James’s rambling enthusiasm. Whenever he got excited he was Audrey’s son, through and through.

“We’re going to need an extension, and I don’t think Bernie’s going to give it to you. But if Chris asked—”

“Now this is getting interesting,” Chris observed.

“Absolutely not,” Audrey asserted, but no one seemed to hear her.

“Who do I need to ask what?”

She couldn’t believe James was telling him this. “There’s a man whose going to kill us all if we don’t find a way to end the Troubles in the next three months.”

“Why don’t you just take him out?”

“He runs this shady underground group of Troubled people. There’s too many of them to take out.”

“Also, we’re the police,” Nathan reminded him. “We don’t take people out.”

“I’d take people out,” Duke piped up. “But the kid’s right. There’re too many of them.”

“What do you need me to do?”
“We don’t need you to do anything,” Audrey protested. This was a terrible idea, but James and Chris were rapt with attention and it was difficult to judge what Nathan and Duke were thinking when neither could open their eyes.

“I can help,” Chris insisted.

“No.”

“I didn’t do so bad with that psycho root case.” That hadn’t been her finest moment though, leaving Nathan to face the killer plants with a blow torch while she walked out of there with some jerk she barely knew.

“You did a pretty bad job with the station lockdown. Remember when you gave the man who caused all that my gun?”

“That was a mistake, I’ll give you that. But I’m not a cop. I’m not trained in these things.”

“That’s exactly my point. This is dangerous, Chris. I won’t let you get killed for me.” He was a loose cannon, and Haven already had enough of those.

“But you’ll let your son and your boyfriend get killed just to keep me out of it?”

She glared at him, wishing there wasn’t a grain of truth in his words. He’d always been able to pick her arguments apart; damn scientific mind. Truth was she wanted to stay far away from him. Her stomach had been rolling since the moment she heard his voice. Looking at Chris may not have put her out of her mind with desire, but it flooded her with memories of guilt and poor choices and weakness. She had hurt Nathan for a dalliance that had meant nothing to her, and the whole debacle had only made her identity crisis worse. She didn’t need reminders of that, and Nathan certainly didn’t either.

It wasn’t even the man’s fault, really. He had been pretty much exactly what he always seemed. She’d just been searching for what wasn’t there, looking in the wrong places. That made this all the more aggravating.

“Plan is to figure out a way to stop this so no one gets killed,” she snapped. “The Guard isn’t something to be trifled with. If they discover you’re trying to manipulate them they’ll take you out, and it will break my deal.”

“So they won’t discover it,” he dismissed.

She could feel the pressure building in her temples. “It’s not that easy.”

But while she was growing increasingly agitated, he remained maddeningly calm. “Maybe it’s not as hard as you make it out to be. I would have been okay with everything that was going on with you when we were dating, you know. But you never let me in.”

She was acutely aware that every other man in her life that meant anything to her was overhearing this conversation. “This is really not the time to talk about this.”

He chuckled wryly, and there was a tiredness in his dark tone that she recognized. “There will never be a time. But if you ever decide you need my help, give me a call. I’ll be around.”

She watched him go, three women and one man accosting him on the way to offer him a drink and try to convince him to stay. He brushed them all off, closing the door forcibly behind him.
“Well that was awkward,” Duke voiced.

Audrey leaned back into Nathan with a groan, resting her cheek against his chest. He wrapped his arms around her loosely. “Didn’t miss that guy,” he rumbled, his voice a balm to her riled emotions.

“Me either,” she promised. “Don’t you worry.”

“I still think we should consider him a backup plan,” James insisted. She recognized the source of his bullheaded persistence and couldn’t fault him for it, but this time she wasn’t going to cave. This whole mess was enough of a headache without getting Chris involved.

“And I think you two should have a little less PDA in my bar,” Duke suggested.

Audrey laughed at his disgust, looping her hands around Nathan’s neck. It was inappropriate, and she didn’t give a damn. “Shame we don’t always get what we wish for.”

She should have kept her mouth shut.

They were going through journals a few days later, her head on his leg as she sprawled across the couch and he perched on the end of it. It was a Sunday morning and they didn’t have a shift. She’d just as soon have stayed in bed, but she wouldn’t be the one to admit that. There were still so many pages to scour, and they were running out of time. Thoughts like that sent the panic skittering through her veins, so she focused instead on the heat from his leg warming her cheek and the way his hand occasionally lowered to comb through her hair. It was hard to focus on the text when she was so tired, but it wasn’t a bad position to be in.

“Listen to this.” His hand retreated to clutch the other cover of the book. Audrey gazed up at him, intrigued by the concentration etched across his face. “Lucy and I visited Ms. Nightingale’s collection today. She asked that I didn’t write about what we discovered, and I suppose I should abide by that. But there were many illuminating artifacts from Haven’s founding and I believe she is close to understanding the origins of the curse that has gripped our town for centuries.”

Audrey pushed herself into a sitting position. “Does she say anything else?”

Nathan paged ahead, skimming. “Doesn’t seem to.”

“Seriously? This woman writes pages and pages about everything, and leaves out all the important details on something that’s actually relevant.”

But Nathan didn’t seem all that upset. “‘Cept for one. Ms. Nightingale.”

She leaned toward him. “Do you know who that is?”

“Sure do. Lives in her family’s manor down by the harbor. Works for the Historical Society. Kids used to whisper that she had a secret museum.”

“Where?”

“Well, we were twelve, so the going theory was her basement.”

“If she has artifacts from Haven’s past they could help me figure out who I originally was. And if I can figure out why this all happened, I can figure out how to stop it.”
Nathan’s indulgent smile made her consider delaying their quest, just for a minute. “I think it’s time to visit that basement.”

She always enjoyed investigating when there wasn’t a body. Nathan looked so self-assured when he knocked on the door, his badge at his hip, even though this wasn’t official police business.

The house was large and beautiful. From the brightness of its white walls she’d guess it had been recently painted. The hedges were immaculately trimmed, but there was a stump in the yard that seemed out of place.

When Ms. Nightingale emerged she was a slight woman in her mid-seventies, wearing a severe gray pantsuit and a frown.

“Haven PD,” Nathan said. “We have a few questions about your collection.”

“I know who you are. And I know what trouble you’ve caused,” she snapped.

“Excuse me?” Audrey asked.

“And you.” The woman turned to her, pale eyes blazing. “You’re worse than he is. He could have stopped the Troubles this time, but you keep coming back, bringing them with you.”

“We’re trying to fix the damage we’ve done. We think you can help us.” Nathan was inordinately calm considering her accusation, but it wasn’t like he hadn’t heard them before.

“There’s some damage that can’t be fixed. You can count the lives lost in the meteor storm and all the chaos that’s followed. But everyone dies eventually, except her. As long as there’s a record of their lives they can be remembered, even after everyone who knew them is lost. But once those records are destroyed, they can’t be recovered. The truth is always rewritten in the retelling. Artifacts don’t lie. But once they are gone they tell nothing. Do you know how much of the town burned when you delayed your departure? This house has been in my family for six generations. Every stain on the floor and scratch on the wall told a story. And one flaming rock erased it all. It may look the same on the outside, but that is empty vanity. I’m not interested in creating new stories at my age. Now when I die, my family’s history will go with me.”

“That kind of stuff is just going to keep happening if you don’t help us,” Audrey insisted.

“That kind of stuff is just going to keep happening if you don’t help us,” Audrey insisted.

“Nothing can bring back what I worked my whole life for. If others must face that disappointment, then so be it. Come back with a warrant if you want to search here. Otherwise if you don’t leave I’ll call the real police.” She turned, slamming the door in their faces.

Audrey understood the fickleness of memory better than most. Their current quest to find some record of the past they could trust seemed to align with Ms. Nightingale’s philosophy. But that was a means to an end, not the end in itself. “Well, her priorities seem a little scrambled. It’s not the deaths that are important; it’s the property damage?”

“We’ve heard weirder.”

“What do we do now?” she asked as they started toward the truck. “A woman so concerned with relics from the past. She’s gotta have something useful.”

“I have an idea. But you’re not going to like it.” She could tell by his tone of voice and the look on his face that he didn’t like it either. The depth of that dislike sparked a revelation, and she groaned at the unavoidable conclusion.
“Chris.”
Chris was eager to help, much to Audrey’s dismay.

They couldn’t come up with another plan, and she was certain Ms. Nightingale’s collection held answers she needed, so she swallowed her pride and picked him up at his place. She had wanted Nathan to come along, but Chris had insisted it would be hard enough to keep Ms. Nightingale occupied while she snooped around. Having two people she detested in her home might be too much to ignore despite Chris’s supernatural charms. As much as Audrey wanted to protest, the cop in her realized the logic in his reasoning. The two of them it would be.

He sulked when she didn’t let him drive, and she threw off his attempts at small talk until he turned to her with a completely straight face and said, “I don’t understand the difference between me and Wuornos.”

Her resulting laugh was so violent she nearly drove off the road. “Do you want the short list or the long?”

She couldn’t think of a single way they weren’t different, aside from growing up in the same town. He was the polar opposite of Nathan, and maybe that’s what had been appealing. She hadn’t realized how deep her feelings ran for her partner at the time, but there had been a general frustration about her life she couldn’t shake. Maybe she had subconsciously been waiting for Nathan to make a move, and when he didn’t she’d latched onto the first warm-blooded male to show any interest. Not her finest moment, by any means. But as aggravating as Chris Brody could be, at least he’d made it clear from the beginning that he wanted her.

“Ha. I forgot how funny you are. I don’t mean as people. When we broke up you said you couldn’t stand that I needed you to feel normal. And I get that. I don’t like it, but I get it. What I don’t get is why you settled for an extremely similar situation. At least my Trouble means I could have any woman I want. His means you’re his only option.”

“That’s not exactly true,” she argued, but she knew her words were hollow.

“Biologically, it is,” he interrupted, his smug tone making her want to squirm. This was absolutely none of his business, but at the same time she realized he wasn’t unjustified in asking. Those were her words he was using against her. “You’re the only one he can respond to. That should bother you. But I’ve been watching the two of you. You touch him all the time. Besides that little show at the bar, it’s usually unobtrusive. A hand on his wrist or shoulder. Brushing against him as you walk past. You’re anchoring him.”

“So?” she pouted. She hated being backed into a corner, particularly one of her own making.

“You made it quite clear you didn’t want to anchor me.”

“It’s different,” she insisted. But when that didn’t satisfy him she needed to continue.

“Your Trouble had already activated when we met. I was always the girl who wasn’t swayed by your charms. We didn’t have a relationship beyond that. You may have been intrigued, but you didn’t know me, and you never would without your Trouble getting in the way. But we’d already worked together for months before Nathan realized he could feel me. He did everything in his power not to make me feel awkward about it. We probably touched less than we would have if he was normal. The way we feel about each other has nothing to do with his affliction. It’s about us.”
“How can you be sure of that? Being able to feel only you has got to be a powerful aphrodisiac.”

It felt profoundly wrong to talk about this with Chris. Even worse to hear him voice the doubts that had once plagued her. How many other people who knew of Nathan’s curse and her remedy thought the same?

But he wasn’t right. She was certain of that.

“I was supposed to go away for twenty-seven years. Then the Troubles would have ended – all of them. Nathan would have been able to feel again. He could have had any woman he wanted. I was going to leave. He wouldn’t let me. If all he cared about was feeling something he wouldn’t have stopped me.”

“You weren’t kidding when you said there was a lot going on with you I probably wouldn’t understand.”

“You should probably be glad I cut you loose when I did.”

He didn’t respond to that. His lack of agreement left her wondering if she had misinterpreted things. “Would you have stopped me?” she asked quietly, keeping her eyes straight ahead and focused on the road.

He didn’t answer right away, and she glanced toward him, afraid she’d find him with some lovesick expression on his face, but instead he looked decidedly uncomfortable. “I know this is going to make me sound like a terrible person,” he answered when he caught her looking at him. “But if it would have ended all the Troubles – and you were willing to go–”

She breathed a deep sigh of relief and actually smiled. “It’s okay. That’s what everyone else thought, every other time. It’s probably what should have happened this time too. But that’s the difference. He loves me, and I love him, and it’s not a burden to make him whole.”

She expected a cynical retort, but he smirked at her.

“What?” she asked through narrowed eyes.

“You know how long it’s been since I’ve lost an argument?”

She quickly did the math. Sometimes she forgot how long she’d been gone. “About three years?”

“More like seven. What, did you think I only got so smart after my Trouble kicked in?”

“You’re an ass,” she said with a chuckle, turning her full attention back to the road.

“And I appreciate the fact you can recognize that.”

The silence that pervaded the rest of the ride was far more comfortable. Chris didn’t speak again until she pulled up to the Nightingale Manor.

“You do realize you have to let me do most of the talking?” he said as they exited her car.

“I’m so looking forward to it.”

“You’ve been spending too much time with Wuornos. His sarcasm is so becoming.”

“Shut up.”
This time when Mrs. Nightingale came to the door her scowl melted into a smile as soon as she saw Chris. “What a delightful surprise. It’s so rare that I find a nice young man on my porch. How can I help you?”

“My friend and I are interested in the history of Haven, and we heard you have some artifacts you might be able to show us.”

“Your friend?” When she noticed Audrey her joy faltered, and Audrey was afraid they’d finally found something stronger than Chris’s Trouble – hate. She inched toward him, hoping to put him back in the old woman’s line of sight.

“You should choose your friends more wisely. Surely you’ve heard. Not only is she connected to all those dreadful stories, she runs around town with that police officer.”

“We’re not that kind of friend,” he said awkwardly at the woman’s disdain and implications. “But we have a shared interest. When she heard I was going to visit you she begged me to let her come. I just couldn’t bear to disappoint her.”

“A true gentleman. I suppose I could show you the collection. But I must warn you – it isn’t nearly as impressive as it once was. Many of the pieces were lost when a meteor hit the house. You can thank your friend for that.”

“Thanks,” he said as they followed the woman into her residence.

“Laying it on a bit thick,” Audrey whispered, rolling her eyes.

“You didn’t mention meteors.” She’d told him about James and her multiple personalities, but she’d skipped over most of the details of the Barn fiasco, unable to be objective about that when everyone else was listening.

“Be glad you were in London.”

“New York, actually. Thought maybe there’d be enough people there I could just blend in.”

“Did that work?”

“Hell no. New York’s much worse than here, Troubled or not. Though if you and Wuornos could solve this thing and end the Troubles I’d really appreciate it.”

“That is the plan.”

Ms. Nightingale led them across a vast foyer and through an impressive hallway. Everything in the house looked stately and ancient. Audrey didn’t typically have much appreciation for that, but she was ready to make an exception. The furniture and the paintings on the wall seemed to exude history, and she wondered how many secrets this woman knew. But there was a stark impersonality to the entire affair. The place was a mausoleum, not a home.

The woman chattered about various pieces they passed, trying to impress Chris, but they were too modern to hold Audrey’s attention. She needed to understand Haven at its founding and the part she had played in that era. The hundreds of years since then were less important.

Just as the children had speculated, the truly old stuff was in the basement.

“You tell that so-called friend I’m keeping an eye on her,” the woman scolded before allowing them to enter. She fixed Audrey with a stare that would have curdled milk. “I know what you stole
the last time. There’s so little of it left now. You won’t make off with anything again.”

She did a poor job hiding her shock. If Lucy had taken something surely it was important. That also meant it wasn’t here – not here to be destroyed by the meteors, but not here for her to discover now, either. But maybe it was still out there somewhere for her to find. But just like Sarah’s journal, she had no idea where that somewhere was.

“Haven was founded in 1635 by a group of English Puritans. My family has made it their lifework to protect relics from the town’s first one hundred years. The Puritans put great worth in literacy, so there is a surprising amount of written documentation surviving nearly four hundred years later. Or there was.”

Audrey flinched. What had been lost that could have been helpful? “I’m really sorry about that.”

“Your apology is not accepted.”

“Yikes,” Chris mouthed when their guide’s back was turned.

There was a pedestal near the entrance to the room, which was obviously meant to be a focal point of the collection. But there was nothing atop it besides a black cloth.

“There used to reside Haven’s charter, which listed the names of all Haven’s residents at the time of its founding. But it was lost in the fire. Burned to ash. Those people will never be remembered now. A second death.”

“Tragic,” Chris said. To anyone who wasn’t besotted his disinterest was extremely apparent.

But it was tragic. A listing of all of Haven’s original residents could have been extremely helpful. Would those families correspond to the Troubles still active now? Now she would never know.

“I do have some documents signed by Governor McKee a few years later.”

“McKee?” Audrey said sharply.

Ms. Nightingale looked at her, and the dazed expression began to slip from her face. Audrey could almost hear her internally wondering why she’d allowed the thief back into her sanctuary. She took a few steps closer to Chris, who frowned at her.

“It’s just not a very British name,” he said. “There must be a story there. I’d just love to hear it. But maybe you can show me the documents first.”

The woman blinked and smiled. “I would be honored to tell you, handsome.”

“Maybe you should stop getting in the way,” he whispered to Audrey as he followed the historian. His cheeks were tinged pink, but she kept herself from laughing. She was still trying to process this latest revelation. “Look around. Stop reminding her you’re here. I’ll keep her distracted.”

“Find out everything you can about the governor and his family.”

“That name meant something to you,” he deduced.

“Let’s just say I’ve met one of their descendants.”

“Always so cryptic, you are.”

“Just go.”
She started examining the painting and framed documents on the walls, but stayed within hearing range.

The circumstances that had brought Robert McKee from Ireland to Britain and then to the New World were apparently quite complex, but Audrey picked out what she most wanted to know. He had crossed the Atlantic with his wife and his sixteen year old daughter, but his wife had perished on the journey. Upon settlement of the colony he was elected governor. With his wife gone, he purchased the indenture of a young servant to help with the household.

Audrey held her breath and waited for the woman to mention tales of witchcraft associated with the pair, but instead she launched into an explanation of the colony’s governance structure. Chris, who didn’t know the right questions to ask, didn’t redirect the conversation.

He did ask about another empty pedestal.

“You should ask your friend about that, since she’s the one who stole it,” the woman revealed.

Audrey perked up but didn’t turn.

“I’m sure you’re more forthcoming.”

“It was a book thought to date back to the early years of Haven. It is worn, as if the pages were filled. But they’re all blank. At least, to the undiscerning eye.”

“You think that’s a … Haven thing.”

“I believe that something was written there, and someone must be capable of reading it. In most places that would be an impossibility, but here there are stranger occurrences.”

“Is there anything here that references these occurrences?”

Audrey wanted to listen to her answer. But she had just noticed a large silver pendent on a long chain, resting on a satin pillow. Something drew her toward it. The closer she got the more familiar it seemed. Only once it was within reach did she make out why. She’d spent a good deal of her time in Haven chasing its design. Four men stood at the points of a maze, always searching. The infamous tattoo, the emblem of the Guard. She’d never thought it pretty; perhaps because its implication was always so sinister. But rendered in silver at this size it was delicate and beautiful, its luster bright despite its obvious age. But strangest of all was the surge of affection she felt when she saw it, as if it was some beloved object she’d lost that she’d been searching for for a very long time.

She couldn’t help herself – the woman’s rules about not putting the artifacts at risk be damned. She reached out for the necklace. As soon as her fingers touched it the world erupted in brightness.

“I have a gift for you.” The man sitting beside her was tall and handsome, a bright smile lighting his entire countenance. He waved a small wooden box at her before depositing it in her hand.

Her fingers closed around it, taking in the simple but excellent craftsmanship. Something warm and all-consuming swelled within her chest. He made her ache for things to be different in a way she had abandoned when her mother died. “I cannot accept this.”

“Surely you can at least take a look before you reject it. I toiled too long for no one to witness its beauty.”

Instead of taking offense he was jovial. His good humor was impossible to resist. In this serious
place he was always able to make her smile.

She opened the box and gasped at its contents. He had not exaggerated; it was beautiful indeed. The silver gleamed in an intricate pattern the likes of which she had never seen.

“This must have taken ages to craft,” she said with awe.

“It did. But it will all be worth it to see it around your graceful neck.” The swelling feeling nearly choked her now. She wanted nothing more than to give into his words. But she could not abandon the practicality her father had instilled in her. “You must be like your name,” he had told her, again and again.

“I cannot wear this. My mistress will wonder where I got it. She’ll accuse me of stealing. The consequences will be dire.” Unconsciously she clenched her hands together, trying to hide the marks where Morgan had applied the switch for her apparent laziness. The falling stars had been so entrancing she’d been unable to sleep, and she’d stayed up all night to watch them. But she had not woken at her usual time, and when breakfast had not been prepared before morning prayers Morgan had been extremely displeased.

“That is beyond your control,” she whispered. “Always be prudent, Prudence. Daydreams are the devil’s threshing field,” her father had said.

“He reached out and gently took her hands, pulling them apart. She gasped at his boldness. They sat together on a bench by the beach, and while no one was currently near there was no guarantee of privacy. “I will not leave you at that woman’s mercy for five more years.” He did not mention the marks on her skin, but he ran his thumbs over them gently, and she knew he recognized them for what they were. Her body tingled at the contact. She felt lightheaded and breathless, but she did not want him to stop.

“Not if I buy your indenture.”

“Her breath hitched, but she did not let her mind wander down that glorious path for long. “The cost of that would be extreme. Morgan delights in bothering me, and her father rarely denies her anything. Why would you do that?”

“His thumbs stilled, and his grip on her tightened slightly. “Dearest Prudence, I thought I’ve made my intentions clear.”

She did not allow herself to gaze into his handsome face and hope. She couldn’t look at their joined hands either, so she peered at the sand beneath their feet. “You wouldn’t be able to marry me. A servant isn’t allowed. Marrying her master, furthermore, would cause a scandal. You could be ejected from the colony. Or worse.”

“His hand lifted her chin gently, until it was impossible not to stare into his eyes. His hands were so warm against the autumn chill. “Then we will wait to wed until your indenture expires. I will be your master in name only. And you will be free of her control.”
“It will cost you a small fortune.”

“Did Jacob not labor for Rachel for seven years without complaint? I am a prudent man with a flourishing trade – it shouldn’t take me nearly that long. It will be worth every penny.”

“You hardly know me.” She could not fathom his willingness to look after her, when no one else had ever bothered.

“I know enough. My heart and soul yearn for you. I shall not be complete until our lives are joined.”

“What me?”

He released her chin, but before she had time to mourn the loss of contact he reclaimed one of her hands and raised it, brushing his lips across her knuckles. Heat flooded through her and settled beneath her cheeks. He smiled at her, and it felt like his eyes saw right through her body and into her soul. Instead of a violation it was the most sacred blessing.

“You are like a doe in the field, beautiful to witness. But that doe is not meant to be caged. Nor are you. I cannot change the rules of this place. But in our home you shall be free to do as you please. All I ask in return is that you allow me to stand by your side.”

This time she did allow the tears to fall. Maybe it was folly, but the portrait he painted captivated her. All her life she had yearned for a freedom she was not allowed, and someone who loved her enough to give it to her. Surely it was divine intercession that he could speak so clearly to what was in her heart.

She nodded, laughter and tears intermingling. “As soon as my indenture ends I will gladly marry you.”

His smile was dazzling like the sun rising over the water. “I shall begin work on the rings next. In the meanwhile the necklace must do.”

She retrieved it from the bench beside her and ran her finger over the ridges. “The symbol tis strange. What does it mean?”

“That I would stand on the four points of the world for you.”

Everything began to vibrate, his face growing hazy even as he continued to beam at her. She reached for him, but her hands passed through his flesh as if he was not there.

“Audrey. Audrey.” Her head pounded and someone kept shaking her shoulder. “Stop it,” she slurred, lacking the energy to open her eyes. She just wanted to go back to sleep, to the lovely dream about the man and his gift. But her tormentor didn’t listen, his voice loud and jarring. “Come on Audrey. Don’t you die on me. Wuornos will kill me, Trouble or not.”

His words sparked some recognition within her. “Nathan,” she moaned. He’d make her feel better. Always did.

“He’s not here. It’s just me.” Disappointment gave her the strength to pry open her eyes. It was Chris hovering over her, looking more scared than she’d ever seen him, even when they’d been facing killer plants and fast spreading plagues.

“What happened?” Her head was killing her. She was sprawled on her back staring up at the ceiling of Ms. Nightingale’s secret museum, and she had no idea how she got there.
“I was hoping you could tell me. One minute you’re just nosing around, and the next you drop to the floor and start having seizures. You were unresponsive for like ten minutes. I thought you were dying.”

“I was remembering,” she realized.

Ms. Nightingale returned and thrust a tissue box in her hand. She looked up at Chris in confusion. “For your nose. You’re kinda bleeding all over the place.”

She glanced down and realized her blouse was indeed stained with blood. “Right.” She held a tissue to her nose, pulled it away, and was shocked at how red it was after only a few seconds. She grabbed another one and pinched down a little harder.

“Remember, huh? What, your grocery list?”

She did appreciate that he wasn’t freaking out on her, but really. “I recognized that necklace. It used to belong to me.”

“The four hundred year old necklace used to belong to you,” he said skeptically.

“Yeah. And I’ve never remembered anything nearly that far back before. Guess my brain didn’t like it much. I’ve never been out for more than a minute or two.”

“So this has happened before? You could have warned me that was a possibility.”

“Kinda forgot,” she said sheepishly. “Sorry. It’s been awhile.”

He pinched his nose and peered at her with a longsuffering look. “Let me get this straight. You have nosebleeds and seizures and you remember stuff about these … other people you used to be?”

“Well, just Lucy, before today.”

“What about Sarah?” he asked. Most people would only have gotten the basics from the story she’d told him about James’ paternity, but Chris had an ear for details.

“Yeah, don’t remember her.”

“There are so many comments I could make about that.”

“Don’t,” she warned. Her nose had stopped bleeding, but it felt like someone was bashing her brain with a drumstick. “Can you help me up? There’re still a few things I want to look at.”

“No way. You’re not getting up till the ambulance gets here.”

“I don’t need an ambulance,” she protested, trying to sit up, but her arms wouldn’t hold her and she sunk back to the floor. “Okay, not feeling great.”

“It’s already on its way. You were unconscious for ten minutes. You’re going to the hospital.”

“There might be more clues here.”

“We’ll come back,” he assured, his voice going uncharacteristically soft for a moment.

“All right,” she conceded. Truth was she didn’t need a hospital, but she wouldn’t be any use investigating either. All she wanted to do was curl up in bed and let Nathan give her a backrub. She could just sleep this off, and in the morning she’d be fine.
“Do you want me to call Wuornos, have him meet you there?”

She wanted Nathan here with her now. But she shook her head. “He’ll just worry. They’ll let me out and I’ll just go home.”

“You sure?”

“Yes,” she insisted. But she already regretted her decision when the EMTs arrived a few minutes later and strapped her into the stretcher. She tried to insist she could sit up, and no one listened. The ambulance was huge and empty, and she thought of Will Brady in his coma, being sent home to die.

“You’re coming, right?” she called to Chris, hating the weakness in her voice.

“Course. I’m not that big of a jerk. I’ll take the car and meet you there so we have a ride back.”

“Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it. Really, don’t.” But he turned to one of the EMTs and grabbed her by the arm. The woman, who had to be in her fifties, nearly devolved into a pile of mush. “You take good care of her, all right?”

The woman swore on her life she would, and then the ambulance barreled off down the road, siren blaring.

They didn’t let her out.

They rushed her for an MRI and the doctor started throwing around big words like brain hemorrhaging even before the results were in. When she told her they’d have to keep her overnight for observation even if everything was fine, she turned to Chris with teary eyes from where he was watching from the doorway, trying to keep out of the way.

“Uh-uh,” he said, catching her drift. “No way. I’m not putting that on me. The doctors say you need to stay, you need to stay.”

“I’m fine.”

“You don’t know that.”

But this was a Troubles thing, not a medical issue, and she hated hospitals and her head hurt and she wanted her partner.

“You should call Nathan. I’m sure he’s better at this comforting thing than I am.”

She’d never heard Chris call him by his first name before. She wanted to listen, but she kept imagining Nathan’s panic and she didn’t want to do that to him. “He’s going to freak out.”

“He’ll freak out when you don’t come home. He’d want to know sooner than that.”

Damn man was right. “Yeah. Can you hand me my phone?”

The room had cleared of all medical personnel, so he figured it was safe to approach. He handed her the cell phone sitting on the table by her bed.

“I don’t think you’re supposed to use that in here.”
“Stand watch?”

“Good thing you’re not asking me to use my powers for evil.”

She smiled, but it seemed to pull some muscle in her skull and she quickly abandoned the effort.

She stared at Nathan’s number for nearly a minute before she dialed, looking at the photo they’d taken together at the fair a few weeks ago. Why couldn’t they stay happy for more than a few hours at a time? Why was Haven always getting in the way?

Why did the memory of him presenting her with that stuffed dolphin remind her of a stranger giving her original self that pendant? She’d felt so young, so uncertain, but there was nothing uncertain about the way the man felt for her.

The thought of anyone besides Nathan loving her that strongly made her decidedly unsettled.

But that was four hundred years ago, and whoever he was was long gone. She wasn’t that girl anymore, either.

According to Eleanor’s vision they hadn’t gotten to be together, but she was Audrey Parker now and she was determined that her and Nathan would get their happy ending.

She started the call. He picked up on the first ring.

“You coming home soon? What did you find out?”

She let herself focus on his voice just for a moment before shattering his calm. “Not as soon as I hoped. Don’t freak out, but I’m at the hospital.”

“What happened? Are you all right?” He’d gotten so much better at controlling his panic in the past few months, but it was back in full force now.

“I’m fine. I don’t even need to be here, but they won’t let me out.”

“I should never have trusted that bastard to look after you.”

“It wasn’t Chris’s fault. I remembered something. Had one of those episodes. Just please come see me, okay?”

“I’m already on my way.”

“Thanks.”

She expected him to hang up in his haste to get to her. Instead he added, “I love you,” and the pain abated for a moment.

“Love you too.”

The doctor had just come in with her results when Nathan burst into her room with crazy eyes. He saw her on the bed and froze.

A harassed looking nurse entered a few seconds later. “Excuse me sir, but you can’t be in here.”

“Like hell I can’t. I’m the Chief of Police,” he bellowed.

As glad as she was to see him, his volume wasn’t doing her headache any favors. “Okay, Rambo.
Inside voices.” She flashed the nurse a contrite look. “He’ll cause less of a disturbance if you don’t try to throw him out.”

“Parker,” he breathed, his relief rippling through her.

“C’mere,” she summoned, patting the bed beside her. “Told you not to freak out.”

He dropped down beside her and pulled her into a fierce hug. She laid her head against his chest and let his heartbeat steady her. “You’re really all right.”

She pushed the hair away from his forehead. “Told you I was. Now let’s listen to the doctor so you don’t make a liar out of me.”

She shifted partway out of his grasp so she could see her doctor, but he kept one of his arms around her, their hands clasped in her lap.

“You’re very lucky, Miss Parker. Despite the severity of your episode I see no indication of cerebral hemorrhaging.”

Nathan tensed at the word severity, but she leaned back against him and willed him to stay calm.

“I’m really fine. This has happened before.”

“That makes this exceedingly more troubling.”

“It’s Troubling, all right,” she said, catching on to the doctor’s choice of words. “Very Troubling, if you know what I mean. And as such that’s not much you can do. So why don’t you let my partner here sign me out and we’ll get out of your way. Get lots of rest, drink lots of fluids, no guns till the headache fades. I got it.”

“Apparently you do not. I’ve lived in this town my whole life. I am well aware that there are incidents here that defy medical explanation. But just because the causes are unexplainable does not mean the symptoms cannot be monitored and treated. Seizures and nosebleeds indicate intense cranial trauma. If the brain starts to hemorrhage that could lead to a stroke, which may cause death or irreversible damage. So I strongly suggest you and your police captain stay put and let us discuss this matter further.”

“Chief,” Nathan muttered. “I’m the police chief.”

“My apologies,” the doctor said with an indulgent smile. “Your chart says you told the EMTs that you fell and passed out. Witnesses claimed you went into seizures and started bleeding from the nose.”

“Sounds about right.”

“We’ve yet to find a medical explanation. But you claim this has happened before.”

“Yeah.” She didn’t like talking about this when she didn’t know who she could trust, but Nathan was clearly on edge from the doctor’s rant and she didn’t really like the possibility of stroking out, either. At least this woman hadn’t accused her of arson or adultery – yet – so maybe she’d finally found someone in Haven who didn’t know who she was or what her and Nathan had done. “I have these … repressed memories … from a long time ago. When something triggers one I remember, and then I have one of these episodes.”

“Did you remember something this afternoon?”
“Yes.”

“Would you say the episode was less severe, more severe, or relatively the same severity of previous episodes?”

“It was worse,” Audrey admitted. “I’ve never been passed out so long before.”

Nathan’s arm tightened around her and she squeezed his hand in response.

“Was there anything different about today that might have made it worse?”

“The memory was older than all the others.”

“How much older?”

“A lot.” There was no way she was telling the doctor four hundred years.

“Well, it’s obvious there is some kind of block that is causing extreme psychological distress whenever these repressed memories surface. I recommend you see a psychiatrist. They may be able to employ hypnotherapy or some other technique to help you unlock these memories more safely.”

She was suddenly hit with the dawning horror of Claire’s demise, that terrible moment when she’d realized that it seemed like the woman she’d confided in for weeks was sitting across from her, but it was really a monster wearing her skin. “No shrinks.”

“Many are hesitant to go into therapy, but I truly believe it’s the best option.”

“No shrinks,” she repeated, the thought of it making her sick. “I saw a therapist when the episodes started a few years ago. We tried hypnotherapy. It didn’t really help. I’ll just be careful. Try to stay away from any triggers.”

“If the episodes get any worse there could be permanent damage.”

“You already said that,” she said petulantly, sinking against Nathan’s shoulder. “Can I go home now?”

“As I’ve already said, we need to keep you for observation. You hit your head on the way down, and we need to watch you for concussion. I want to make sure all your vitals remain stable before I release you.”

She looked at Nathan, pleading with her eyes for him to pitch a fit and get her out of there, but he ran a hand over her hair and shook his head. “We shouldn’t take any chances. Besides, you’re always making me go to the hospital. Payback time.”

“This sucks,” she declared, resigning herself to her fate as her doctor and nurses left the room.

“This wasn’t how I planned on spending the night either.”

“You’ll stay, right?” she asked, clutching at his arm. She wasn’t normally so clingy, but she couldn’t fathom being alone tonight, with her new memory and her achy brain.

“Of course,” he assured, pressing a kiss to her temple.

“But I’m going to go,” Chris said from the doorway. “Look man, she just started seizing and bleeding. I got her to the hospital as soon as I could. She didn’t warn me that could happen.”
“Thank you.” Shocked by the sincerity of his tone, Audrey twisted to gaze at Nathan’s face. He was looking right at Chris, but there was no trace of artificial admiration.

“You’re welcome. Wow, that’s even weirder when my Trouble’s not doing it. Okay. Leaving now. This was fun. Call me if we need to do it again.”

He turned back when he reached the doorway. “Hope you feel better soon,” he said, somehow making the simple statement awkward.

She managed a small smile. “You did good this time, Chris. Thanks.”

He left with a nod and a smirk.

Finally alone with Nathan, she rested her forehead against his chest and closed her eyes. “I really don’t feel so well,” she admitted. “My head’s throbbing.”

“They give you anything for the pain?”

“Guess I forgot to ask in all the commotion.”

“Let me get a nurse.”

“No.” She grabbed his wrist to stop him. “That can wait. Just stay here with me for a while.”

“Kay. But you should lie down.”

She didn’t want to disentangle herself from him, but she obeyed anyway, scooting to the edge of the bed before lying down and patting the space beside her.

“Lay here with me.”

“Pretty sure I’m not supposed to.”

“I’ve never been too fond of rules, remember?”

He smiled, and some of the fear left his face. “How could I ever forget that?” He stretched out beside her and she shifted against him, rising up briefly so he could slip an arm around her waist. Her body molded against his automatically, muscle memory taking over, and even though she still hated the hospital and wanted to go home she felt safe and almost content.

But his leg hung off the foot of the bed and he was only an inch or two from the edge. “These things really aren’t made for two people,” he observed. “If I actually fall asleep like this we’ll both wake up on the floor.”

The thought of her doctor walking in and finding that particular scene made her chuckle. “Fine. You can move when I’m asleep. Not a minute before.”

“Deal.” His hand wandered across the scratchy fabric of the hospital gown spread over her stomach. “What happened today?” he asked, his voice low and even, as if she was an animal he was trying not to spook.

“The governor – the one whose daughter framed me for starting the Troubles – his last name was McKee.”

“Jordan?” he growled, his hand stilling.
She grabbed the other one braced on the bed.

“Distant relative, I guess. Isn’t that an awful coincidence?”

“I’m not sure any of this is coincidence.”

“Siding with fate now are we?” she teased, recalling their earlier debate on this topic with Duke and Julia.

“Long as fate keeps bringing you back to me, I’m okay with it.”

She wanted that so badly to be true. For at least three incarnations it had seemed to be.

“Is that what you remembered?”

“No.” She was terrified to tell him the truth. It wasn’t that she thought he’d be mad at her for something that happened four hundred years ago. He had not rejected her when she’d thought she had caused the Troubles; surely he wouldn’t fault her for being in love so many centuries before he was even born. But she didn’t want him to compare the two, to worry that her true love had been her first and he was merely a replacement. She couldn’t fathom anything being more all-consuming than the love she felt for Nathan. Whatever Prudence had felt for her suitor, it had not been given the opportunity to flourish.

But there had been something so familiar in the memory.

“Whatever it is, you can tell me.” He raised his hands and placed his fingers lightly on her forehead, rotating them in a circular motion. “Does that help?”

It did indeed, the gentle movements sending waves of pleasure through her skull that chased away the pain. She had to bite back a moan. “Mmmmhmmmm. Don’t stop.”

“Tell me if I’m hurting you.”

“You’re really not,” she assured. She let herself focus on his magic fingers for a minute, the way they soothed away the tension. But he was waiting for an answer.

“They were really in love. The servant and the blacksmith. She didn’t put a spell on him. He didn’t prefer the governor’s daughter. I don’t know why the Troubles started but he really loved her. Me. Prudence. My name was Prudence.”

She held her breath as she waited for his response. His fingers never stopped moving. When he finally responded his conclusion was unexpected. “Like your middle name now.”

She hadn’t thought of that. “Guess so. That’s weird.”

“Maybe.” He sounded distracted, but he didn’t sound pained. “What set off the memory?”

“There was this pendant in the collection. He gave it to me, all those years ago. He wanted to get married, but I was indentured, so we had to wait. The governor’s daughter was cruel to me. He knew it. He wanted to take me away from that.” She could still feel the way the hope the suitor provided flooded Prudence’s veins, whispering a way out of the desperation that had dogged her for so many years. She had not despaired of her lot, exactly, but her lot was harsh and lonely, and the blacksmith promised a world of freedom and love.

Just as Nathan had promised her friendship and a partner to watch her back and tolerate her jokes
and search for her past when she didn’t know where to look.

“It was the pattern of the Guard tattoo. The maze with the people at the corners. It was supposed to be a symbol of his love for me and they twisted it somehow and I don’t know why.”

Her voice sounded high and hysterical even in her own ears. God knew what she sounded like to Nathan. “Hey.” One of his hands drifted down to spread across her cheek. “We’ll figure it out.”

They would, she knew. She just needed some sleep and a fresh perspective. This would all seem better in the morning.

“What was he like? The blacksmith.”

He was trying hard for nonchalant, but she wasn’t fooled. He cared.

She wasn’t sure what to tell him. She did not even have a clear picture in her mind. The feelings were strong but the visuals were not. He’d been wearing Puritan clothes – harsh, dark wools, and a hat with a brim that threw shadows over his face. He’d been tall, with dark hair and bright eyes. Though she thought there was something familiar about his cheekbones, if Claire was still around she would have told her she was projecting.

What had really struck her was his smile. He was so good-tempered, even in the face of her nervousness and the obstacles standing in their way.

“I don’t even know his name. But he cared about me. Enough to buy my indenture and wait five years to get married. I don’t know how he could have thought I’d created the Troubles after that.”

His fingers had drifted upwards, into her hair. The sensation was a glorious balm which made it hard to hold on to her panic.

“So you believe in witches now?” she ribbed, thinking of his dismissal when Jess Minion was concerned.

“I believe in a lot of things I didn’t three years ago. You’ve broadened my horizons.”

His warm voice rolled over her like silk, and she wanted to dwell in his affection forever. “I just want to be happy,” she admitted, unable to control her petulance. “Is that too much to ask?”

“History won’t repeat this time. I’m not falling for any tricks.”

“You may not have a choice.”

“Audrey.” His hands stopped moving, and when he didn’t continue she glanced upwards to meet his gaze. His eyes blazed with a determination so fierce it stole her breath. “Trust me. You’ll get that happiness this time around.”

But maybe she was being short-sighted. Surely she’d already found it.
The hospital discharged Audrey first thing in the morning. Instead of going home to rest she insisted on going back to the station. They were in the middle of a case, and even though the damage so far had been to property, not people, she wouldn’t risk someone getting hurt while she was out of commission.

So it wasn’t until they caught a break two days later that Nathan and Audrey really had time to discuss everything she’d learned.

“Ms. Nightingale said Lucy stole something from her collection,” Audrey said, leaning back against the couch and tracing the condensation on her bottle of beer. “A book dated back to the early colony. She must have known it was important, unless she was just a kleptomaniac. But just like Sarah’s journal, I don’t know what she did with it.”

Nathan straightened slightly in his armchair, but his tone remained monotone. “Any chance the book’s blank inside?”

Her breath caught. “How did you know that?”

“I know where it is.” He said it like they were discussing the weather, not a breakthrough that could help her stay in Haven.


“My father had a box of Lucy’s stuff. I went through it when I was looking for the real Lucy Ripley. There was nothing particularly helpful, but I remember there being an old, empty journal.”

“You never told me you had some of Lucy’s things.”

“At the time I thought I could sift out anything relevant. After you talked to Lucy I put it away and forgot.”

“Is Sarah’s journal there?”

“No. I’m pretty sure I would have realized there was something important about a book that told me I hooked up with your former self in the 1950’s.” Most of the time she appreciated his dry humor, but she was anxious to hop on this lead and he seemed to be taking his time.

“Let’s go to your father’s then. Ms. Nightingale seemed to think something was written in the book, most people just couldn’t see it. Maybe Lucy stole it because she saw something. Maybe it was meant for me.”

“No need.”
She slammed her bottle against the coffee table. “Of course there’s a need! This could be our best lead yet.”

Nathan smirked at her ruffled feathers. “No need to go to Dad’s. I didn’t want to spend any more time there than necessary. I brought the stuff here. It’s up in the attic.”

“You mean we’ve been scouring the town for information on my past and the answers might be right in our house?”

He grinned.

“What?”

“Our house.”

She smiled fondly. “That’s old news. I’ve been here for months.”

“Still like it.”

His earnestness left her flushed, dissolving her exasperation. “I like it too. I’ll like it more if we can make it years.”

He squeezed her shoulder after he stood. “Stay here. I’ll bring the box down.”

She paced the living room while she waited. It seemed like an eternity before he returned with a dusty cardboard box with “Lucy” scrawled on one side in the Chief’s messy script.

“How did your father end up with some of Lucy’s things?”

“I dunno. I didn’t find this until after he died. Thought maybe since he knew her he’d have something useful – photographs, letters. Wasn’t expecting to find a box with her name on it in one of his closets.”

Audrey considered that, remembering the chance she’d had to finally confront Garland about his partnership with Lucy. “I think they were friends. The way he talked about her when he came back…”

“Friends I can deal with. Anything else would be weird.”

“Agreed,” she said vehemently, shuddering at the thought.

She opened the box and pulled out a couple of sweaters and some boots. “Very eighties,” she said with a wrinkled nose.

“They hit hard here in Haven. Mighta been amplified by a Trouble.”

“Stop it,” she said with a chuckle. There was a black camera bag, and she pulled out a large camera with a telephoto lens and a smaller Polaroid.

“No film in there,” Nathan told her. “I already checked.”

“There’s no way this captured some info on the photos she took, right?”

He frowned at her. “No digital cameras in the eighties. And this is Haven PD, not some federal scientific brain trust. You’ve been watching too much TV.”
“Worth a shot. Maybe we can find someone with some electronic Trouble? They could commune with the camera or something.”

“Maybe,” he answered, but she could hear his skepticism.

The box was nearly empty by the time she found the book. It was slightly larger than a modern paperback, bound in brown leather. There was something familiar about it as she ran her finger down its spine. She turned it over, expecting to find the cover blank, and was shocked to see the words Prudence White written clearly in handwriting that looked very much like her own. She gasped, nearly dropping the journal.

“What? Did you remember something?”

“Do you see this?” she asked, pointing at her name.

“It’s the book I mentioned. Probably the one Lucy stole.”

“But don’t you see what it says?”

“It doesn’t say anything.”

She opened to a random page which was covered in writing. “What about this?”

“Blank.” Nathan scrutinized her. “It’s not blank when you look at it, is it?”

“No. The cover says Prudence White. That’s my name. It’s my handwriting. I think this was my journal.”

“So it’ll tell us how the Troubles started.”

“I think so.” The thought of finally getting some answers was staggering. She was sure she wouldn’t like most of what she found in there, but if it kept Nathan alive and herself in Haven she could deal with knowing the truth, however dark.

“Are you sure you should read that?”

“I have to! This could be the key to everything that’s going on here.”

There was nothing left of her monotone man now. “What if you remember? The doctor warned that if you have another episode so soon it could leave permanent damage. Reading that book could kill you. I can’t lose you.”

“And I can’t lose you. But I will, if we don’t solve this. This is the best shot we’ve had yet. I have to take it.”

“I hate when you’re reckless.”

She reached out and grabbed his hand. “When I touched the necklace I remembered right away. But I’m holding this book now and nothing’s gone wrong. It feels familiar but I don’t remember. And I didn’t remember when I read about Eleanor’s vision. Maybe it’s different when I read something.”

“What if it’s not?”

“Worse case scenario, I have to go back to the hospital and you can get scolded again by all the nurses for climbing into bed with me. I’m not gonna be taken down by a few returning memories,
no matter how old they are. I plan on being around to worry you for a long time.”

He kissed her, keeping his hands on her face even after he was through. “If it starts to hurt, I need you to stop, okay? You can come back to it if you need to, just – don’t push too hard.”

She nodded. “I’m going to take this to my cupcake room. Bunker down there. Could be awhile until I get through this.”

He nodded, and she thought he understood. But once she settled in her Adirondack chair she glanced up and saw him standing in the doorway.

“You can’t stand there the entire time.”

“I could.”

“Nathan, I get that you’re worried. But I have to do this, and I need some privacy. This room is supposed to be my sanctuary. You promised. I’m saying this with love, but you need to get the hell out.”

“Damn it, Audrey. I get that you’re stubborn and independent, and I love that about you. But you forget that sometimes someone does need to look after you, especially if you’re not willing to do it yourself. I got a call two days ago that your reaction to a memory was so severe you were in the hospital. And thank God Chris was there to take you there. But what if he wasn’t? I understand you need to do this. But you need to let me watch out for you if this all goes south. Because if I come down here in a few hours and you’re dead on the floor because you sent me away it will destroy me.”

“Hey.” She set the book on a table and rushed toward him, wrapping her arms around his waist. He was trembling, and she ran her hand up and down his back to soothe him. “Shhhh. I’m sorry.”

“Let me sit in here for a couple of minutes, just to see if you have a reaction when you start reading. If you don’t I’ll go.”

“Okay,” she conceded, her need to calm him down overriding all else. “You can leave the door open when you go. Peek in on me quietly whenever you want.” He nodded, and she disentangled herself. “But don’t you dare just sit out there in the hallway. That’d be terrible for your back.”

“Wouldn’t feel it.”

“Not at the time, maybe. But I need you in tip top shape.” She leered at him a little, and it broke the seriousness of the moment.

She settled back in the chair, trying to ignore Nathan perched at her desk. She wasn’t entirely sure why she’d made such a fuss about him being there. But all her life she’d been used to having space to process anything major, and as much as she loved living with Nathan there were times that it was smothering. This was liable to be one of the most monumental things she’d ever have to process. Although she was going to tell him whatever she found, she wanted time to absorb it first. She didn’t need him studying her, trying to interpret every reaction she made. Not to mention he’d be bored to tears.

But it was very practical of him to worry that she might have an episode, and she’d rather wake to his face hovering over her than anyone else’s.

As soon as she started reading she forgot about him entirely.
Herein is recorded the private journal of Prudence White. May whoever read it learn from this sad tale, and remember me with pity instead of hate.

I have lived more years that I have dared to count, most of them with only misery and Henry as company. It is the fear of so many more such years that has driven me to this desperate course. Though my soul protests inviting such violation, the truth is I am already damned. Though God may not forgive me, I am afraid I shall never meet him no matter what I do. I can abide this so called life no longer, and since I am not to be granted the solace of death, I see no other option besides accepting Henry’s plan.

I leave this journal as a final testament to my life and its transformation, as it were. Henry tells me no other shall be able to read it. When I was young such statements would seem nonsensical. Now I have witnessed far stranger things. But I can no longer discern whether Henry can be trusted. His mistress is gone, and his affection for me may sway his judgment. But he has sworn to keep me bound, and perhaps he means to dissuade me from leaving clues to some unknown rescuer. He should know I have given up such hope long ago.

Perhaps I shall be the only one who can read this. If so I hope it never falls into my hands again. There is only misery in these truths, and I shall pay dearly for the chance to forget. But as these memories are soon to be lost from me, I find that I yearn to have them recorded. Tragic as they are, I wish there to be some record of me untainted by Morgan’s deceit. My dearest wish is for His descendants to understand I never brought this down upon them willingly.

Strange, as terrible as my life has become, the thought of it being erased entirely saddens me further. So I asked Henry to bring me this journal.

I was born in England in the year of the Lord 1618, the only daughter to Lucy and Matthew White. Father was a cobbler, but he fell on hard times after a fire burned his workshop. Mother went to heaven when I was six years old attempting to give life to my brother, who passed from this world on the same day he arrived. I still remember the look on my father’s face when he learned both his wife and his son had left him. His grief manifested as anger, and he told me my childish tears would not be tolerated. All my life I tried to heed his advice, but here in this place I have cried enough tears to fill the ocean that eventually separated us. Turns out he was correct; these tears have helped nothing.

Father was cold and distant once Mother was gone, and though I tried to run his household it was often more than a girl of my age could manage. When I was sixteen a ship set off to the new world to start a colony in Maine, and father indentured me for the money to buy a new shop. Though I have never forgotten the pain and indignity of being valued less than a sack of pounds, I was not upset to leave my father’s home. Though the prospect of such a long voyage was frightening, I was intrigued by this new world so many spoke of in whispers in the marketplace. There was nothing for me in England more exciting than churning butter and learning my letters. In Maine the life I built there would be my own, as soon as my seven year indenture was through. The colony was to be called Haven, which seemed like a beautiful promise.

The voyage was dreadful and lonely. I saw families toss loved ones over the side of the ship when sickness claimed them. Heard children cry in the middle of the night as the ship rocked. Stayed up hours each night praying for a safe arrival.

Once we did arrive the place seemed to live up to its name. The first months were hard as homes were built and crops planted, but they were also fulfilling. My indenture was purchased by Robert McKee, a prominent man who was elected governor of the new colony, and I worked beside him and his daughter Morgan to build their new home. Morgan was a few months older than I was,
and had also lost her mother. I tried to befriend her, but the matter of our station was always between us. Robert did not like when we acted too familiar. Though there were moments when it seemed Morgan desired a confidant, she was capricious and vain, and six months into my indenture I discovered she could be cruel when displeased. I did my best to follow her commands, but sometimes I grew distracted by the wonder of this new place – a flock of deer in the meadow, falling stars streaking across the clear sky, the way the waves would crash against the rocky shoreline.

Robert’s prestige meant many townsmen helped him establish his new home, and were often about the property. One such guest was the local blacksmith. It hurts too much to write His name, nay even think it, so from here I shall refer to Him only by capitalized pronoun.

It was at the McKee’s homestead that I was to meet the man who stole my heart and shattered my soul. He came to deliver hinges and nails for its construction, and at first He mistook me for the governor’s daughter. I was quick to disavow Him of this notion, but not quick enough. Though I informed Him I was merely a servant, He developed an attachment which flourished into love.

My father had always advised me to be prudent in all aspects of my life. I thought him blinded by grief, but he was right. My imprudence led to ruin, and not only my own, but that of an entire town.

The terms of my indenture stated I could not marry until I was released, but I was swayed by His beautiful promises of a life with Him of freedom and love. We met every day at the beach, and He told me stories that made me laugh and forget. Love crept over me slowly, secretly taking root in my heart and not making itself known until it had bloomed through my entire being, too tied to my very life to ever be pruned out. Even now, after all the pain it caused and the betrayal I can barely speak of, it is impossible for me not to love Him.

He gave me a token and spoke of marriage, but Morgan found out about the betrothal. She confronted me, her lovely face flush with rage. I had never seen her so angry, and I realized she too was fond of the handsome blacksmith. She switched my arms until they bled and locked me in the cellar overnight without a blanket.

By the time Robert released me the following morning, my fingers numb with cold, Ginny Miller couldn’t see.

Her vision had darkened in the night, and the doctors could find no explanation. I’d seen Ginny and Morgan stroll around town together, giggling, but she’d never spoken to me. Her vision did not return, and Morgan never visited her.

A week later Betsy Chesterfield woke up with her tongue gone. Not cut out, like she’d been attacked. There was no blood, and no sign in her home of a struggle. Her husband had been asleep beside her. Her tongue was simply gone.

The townspeople started whispering about witches. I tried to avoid such gossip, my father’s practical voice telling me there must be a more logical explanation, but no one seemed capable of finding it. There were more incidents. The West homestead burned in the middle of a rainstorm. Marlow’s dogs turned feral and killed his family.

When everyone who looked upon Meredith Clark saw their worst fear, the Reverend suggested she should be burned as a witch, and the council agreed. Her family begged for clemency, stating her obvious distress at the situation, saying surely she was bewitched herself and not the caster of any spell. But without any other source, the council decided to purge the colony.

All were invited to the burning. But since none could stand to look upon her, no one witnessed her
demise. The governor’s home was near the town square, and I could hear her screams. Somehow I knew we had murdered an innocent, but there was no one who would listen to my concerns.

The next morning the entire Meers family was found dead in their home, except for their youngest daughter.

My love assured me that whatever evil had befallen our town would pass, but He grew serious and distant. I dared not meet with Him frequently, because Morgan’s mood was foul and I feared her anger.

One evening I heard her cackling about Betsy’s misfortune, saying it served the old crone right for the sharp words she would utter at the young girls passing her porch, and a terrible suspicion arose within me. If I listened closely I could hear Morgan leave the house well after midnight. She was gone for hours before she’d return.

I tried to convince myself that perhaps she had a secret suitor; as wicked as it was, I had sometimes considered slipping off to meet my betrothed by moonlight. But Morgan did not act as one besotted by love. Her cruelty had sharpened as of late and even her father seemed to notice, reprimanding her in a way he’d never dared before.

One evening I followed her. I sometimes wonder if my life would have taken a different course if I had not, but the curiosity was too great. I thought if my suspicion was confirmed my love and I could put a stop to this evil and restore peace to our town. I was so naïve then, not understanding that the forces at work were already beyond my control.

She led me to Tuwiuwok Bluff and uncovered a large black book from a pile of stones.

It was unlike any book I’ve ever seen, the pages seemingly of some thick black substance instead of paper. I was immediately reminded of Ginny’s wide, sightless eyes, Victoria’s despair when her husband’s ship literally disappeared at sea. I had known misfortune, but I’d never before stood in the presence of evil.

In that instant I let my horror override my good sense. I have been paying for it ever since.

“It is you,” I accused, and when Morgan turned to me her eyes were as black as her hair. She threw her head back and laughed, and I feared I would die on that spot, never to see my love again.

If only I’d been granted that mercy.

“If it isn’t the little doe.”

It was something my love had called me once, and I knew immediately that we had not been alone that day.

“What have the townsfolk done to deserve your curses?”

“Everything. And yet nothing. They are nuisances, but they are inconsequential. It’s you whose ruin I desire.”

“What have I done to anger you so?”

“You have stolen him. The only worthwhile thing in this joke of a town, and he squanders his affections on you.”
“I didn’t steal him. He was never interested in you.”

“But he should have been! What can you offer him? Practically an orphan, sold by your own family. No dowry. No social standing. A contract practically making you someone else’s property. But you bat your pretty little eyes and he comes running. He will throw his life away waiting for you. With me he could follow my father as governor. I could give him a comfortable life.”

“I did not choose to keep him from you.”

“That is what makes it worse. I did not intend to curse the town. I intended to curse you.”

“Then why have you not?”

“I have tried, again and again. Every night I come here and read the spell, and every day you go about your life, untouched.”

“Why?”

“If I knew, do you not think I would remedy it? Instead those around you fall victim. It is a fascinating spell. Each curse is particular to its bearer. Betsy is a terrible nag, so her tongue disappears. Amy Meers, always so afraid of the dangers of this new world, kills those around her with the toxicity of that fear. Mathew West’s anger burns in a literal fire. The devil has a sense of humor.”

“And you have sold your soul to him.”

“Perhaps I have. There was a woman on the ship who used to make the children sleep. She never went to mass. I sought her out on the edge of the settlement. She told me there were ways to channel my anger. That there was power here that had not been in the old world. The love potion didn’t work. He was already bespelled by you. But she sold me this book for protection and a comfortable life. And once I signed my name in it, I had power that I’ve never dreamed.”

“You won’t get away with this. They’ll burn you.” I felt so certain in that moment that my words were true. That evil could not persevere, when confronted with the light.

“You think anyone would believe your tale? I’m the governor’s daughter. You are no one.”

“He’ll believe me.”

“He’ll suffer if you tell him.”

“If you love Him you won’t harm Him.”

“You’re right. He’ll never be mine if I kill him. But his beloved parents. His dear sister. They’re all dispensable. They will die, and I will be sure the entire colony believes it is your fault.”

There were no words to describe the fear I felt at that moment. I would have flung myself from that bluff to save him from that pain.

“Don’t. I won’t say anything. I’ll do whatever you ask.”

She laughed again. “Go home, girl. Remember your place. Don’t say a word. And watch the games commence.”

I had no choice but to comply.
The next morning when Morgan hugged her father he collapsed to the ground, screaming. No one dared accuse the governor’s daughter of choosing to inflict terrible pain on those she touched.

I stopped meeting Him, knowing I’d be unable to hide the truth in His presence and unwilling to risk His family.

Then one day I was accompanying Morgan to the general store. I tripped on something and stumbled into her. She reached out to steady me, her bare hand clenching mine, and everyone around braced themselves for my scream of agony.

All I felt was gentle pressure. “Don’t you feel that?” she demanded, voice high and hysterical, but I could see her smirk.

“I don’t feel anything.”

“Thank the Lord, I’m cured!” But when she reached out to clasp the hand of the nearest bystander he collapsed in anguish.

“Why doesn’t it affect you?” Morgan demanded, showing little regard to the man crumpled at her feet.

“I don’t know,” I stammered.

“I saw you arguing with Margaret yesterday. Today when she read the passage at mass the room filled with manna and quail.”

“I didn’t even see Margaret yesterday.”

“This is your doing!” Morgan shrieked, and I suddenly understood her plan.

“You best run,” she whispered, her face transforming from fear to fierce glee in an instant. “The elders will be coming for you.”

I wanted desperately to flee into His arms, but I dared not put Him in danger. The town was so desperate sometimes people were burned for supposed association with witches. I hid in the forest for two days, seeking some way to expose Morgan, but there was only one person in town I trusted.

I went to His workshop after dusk, intended to hide there until morning to avoid detection, but the windows were lit by candlelight. I was so certain that I would fall into His arms and He would help me find a way out of this hellfire. But His countenance was grave and He nearly refused to open the door. My heart broke when I realized He too believed Morgan’s accusations. I had not a friend in this cruel world. I collapsed upon His doorstep, and that is where they found me the next morning.

The trial was a mere technicality. Morgan had already rallied the townsfolk against me. It seems that everyone had been afflicted in those days I was missing. Of a colony of hundreds I was the sole member left uncursed, and there was no evidence stronger than that. He did not come to the trial. Morgan did, and she wept that someone she had been so close to was responsible for such evil. I desperately wanted to expose her, but I had no evidence, and I kept thinking of His dear sister, who I dared not endanger.

I almost welcomed the sentence of death. Existence had become a misery, and there was no other escape for me. At least I knew my soul would be welcomed into heaven, for I was responsible for none of the atrocities I was blamed for.
I longed for one last glimpse of my love. I wanted to make Him understand. If I could only absolve myself in His eyes I could die in peace. But He did not come.

On my last night on earth, chained in a tiny cell, Morgan came to visit me. She wore a dark cloak and a rabid smile.

“Seems I cannot curse you, but these self-righteous fools can.”

“You have won,” I said wearily, too heartsick to abide her gloating. “There’s no need to punish these folks any longer. Once I am gone, will they be well?”

“Yes,” she said. “I promise you that.”

“Then I shall see my death as a service, to God and to man.”

Her next words still haunt me. “Death is too kind for you.”

“You promised!”

“I promised that you’d be gone, not that you’d be allowed to die. You have only suffered days. For nearly two years I have yearned for him. You punishment must be manifold.”

“They will burn me tomorrow. That is your doing. You cannot stop it.”

“They cannot burn you if you’re not here.” She gestured to the darkness, and her father’s servant Henry slid from it. Unlike my indenture, which was meant to expire, Henry would never be a free man, and was bound to a life of hard labor.

With a few whispered words and a touch of her hand Morgan opened my cell and unlocked my chains. Henry grabbed me, and though I struggled he was impossibly strong. She waved her arm, and I found it impossible to speak.

They dragged me to her father’s barn, which I had helped to build a mere two years before. “What awaits me there?” I asked as Morgan opened the door, finally finding my tongue unrestrained.

“Justice.”

Henry carried me inside, and did not release me until the door slammed behind him. As soon as I was free I ran for it, but it did not budge. I peered out the window and saw Morgan light a torch.

“We’re going to burn to death!” I shrieked, self-preservation suddenly stronger than my misery. I hoped that Henry could be swayed by a need to save himself. But he stood calmly in the center of the barn, refusing to look out the window.

“We are not,” he stated, his deep voice seemingly sad at the prospect.

I watched the flames lick the wood, banging on the window until my hands bled, but the glass never shattered. Nor did the smoke choke us, or the interior of the barn show any sign of the blaze outside. I watched townsfolk gather, not a single one retrieving a bucket to extinguish the fire. The barn gave a mighty wheeze and the windows darkened.

Henry lit a candle.

“What happens now?” I asked, sinking to the ground, the weight of the past week near unbearable. I’d seen too many impossible things.
“We wait.”

Wait we did. With no sun there was no way to mark the passage of days. There was no food, but I felt no need to eat. No water, but I felt no need to drink. Sometimes I slept, because there was little else to do to pass the time. I dreamt of curses and woke screaming. I dreamt of happier days and woke crying. Again and again I saw the moment He rejected me, but never could I make any sense of it. I wanted to curse Him as unfaithful and cruel, but I knew that was not in His nature.

I don’t know what my companion dreamed of, but sometimes I heard him mutter in a language I could not understand.

After a few days I was certain I’d go mad, but the madness never overtook me.

Then one day the door opened.

I ran, desperate for air and freedom, but the sunlight was blinding and my legs too weak for exertion. I crumbled to the ground, crying, because surely Henry would catch me and take me back and I just wanted to live again. But he did not follow, and eventually I regained my strength and got my bearings.

I was in the governor’s yard. I wanted to flee in the opposite direction but I was frozen in shock, for out of the governor’s house strolled Him.

He had aged, but there was no mistaking those cheekbones. And there was no mistaking the woman who clutched His hand. She was beautiful, though she was a woman now. The ground seemed to shift beneath my feet as if the world was shaking, because there were rings on both their fingers and He looked at me with great disdain.

She acted shocked to see me, but I could read the falsehood in it. “This is why the curses are back,” she declared, hand pressed to her chest. “It was too much to wish that her devilry was extinguished.”

“This is not my devilry!”

“Go back inside, Morgan,” He ordered. “Make sure the children are safe.”

“There are children?” I gasped. I did not understand it. Surely not enough days had passed for them to be so well along in years. Surely He could not have taken to wife the one responsible for all this misery.

“You shall not touch them.”

Once His determination had been on my behalf but He had turned against me now.

“How could you marry her?”

“You should not have returned here. Your evil shall not be tolerated.”

“Would you kill me yourself, kind sir, and end this torment? For the sake of the love you once held for me, if nothing else?”

“It is not my place to take your life. The council will hand down punishment accordingly. If you cannot be burned, we must find another way.”

Terrified by His words and His coldness, I ran. I expected to hear His footsteps in pursuit, but He
I went down to the docks, hoping Phillip would be in port. My love’s best friend had been at sea when the curse began, but I cherished his wise council and kind soul. I lurked in the shadows, frightened by the thought of his reaction. As usual, Phillip was the last to leave his precious ship, and I stepped into his vision once we were alone.

“Why have you come to haunt me, ghost?” he asked. “Is it because we never got a proper goodbye?”

“I’m not a ghost, Phillip.”

“You haven’t aged a day.”

“And you have aged many.”

“I’ve been told I look good for forty-seven.”

His characteristic humor was such a stark contrast to all I had known for so long that I began to laugh and could not stop until I had dissolved into gut-wrenching tears.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

“Not at all. But it helps a bit that you care, when no one else does. I did not bring this curse upon this town, I swear it.”

“I know.” Phillip looked down, and when he raised his eyes they were full of regret. “I have always known.”

“Even with the evidence?”

“Hang the evidence. There’s no one less capable in this entire world than you of causing such evil.”

“But He believes it.”

Phillip scowled. “He is a fool, and I have told him so.”

“He will not listen to even you?”

“He stopped seeking my council long ago. He has no wish to listen to reason. I’m sorry Pru.”

“How could He marry her? She is the cause of all of this. She wished to torment me, and so many innocents have suffered to that end. But I thought His love was the one thing she could not take from me.”

“He is not particularly happy, if that helps.”

“It does not.”

“I suppose it wouldn’t.” He smoothed his hand over his tied back hair. “The man is a halfwit. But he never thought clearly after Clary died, and Morgan preyed on that.”

“Clarissa is dead?” The last time I had seen her she’d been a sweet, precocious girl. It hurt enormously to think her gone.
“For twenty-seven years now. She died two days before your trial. I thought you knew.”

“No one told me. How?”

“It was if her body failed in her sleep. But there was a mark upon her forehead.”

“What sort of mark?”

“Strange, like a maze.”

Ice ran through my veins. I pulled the necklace from underneath my dress. “This?”

“Exactly like that. Where did you get it?”

“He made it for me. I didn’t do this, I swear. I would never harm her.”

“Certainly not! But I’m beginning to understand why he thought you did.”

“Morgan saw us together. She must have seen the token he gave me.”

“I do not understand how you are here, and so young. You burned in that barn. The whole town watched.”

“The inside did not burn. I have been there all this time. Though it did not seem to be twenty-seven years.”

“How did you escape?”

“The door opened – and I ran. I do not know why.”

“Because the Troubles are back.”

“Troubles?”

“That’s what the Reverend has taken to calling them. Troubles that have befallen the town due to one of our own’s communion with the devil. They stopped the day you were burned. But a few months ago they began to return.”

“How can they blame me for that if I was supposed to be dead?”

“They couldn’t.” He looked at me, and his sadness made me want to sink into the ground. “They can now. You should leave this place.”

“I have nowhere to go.”

“There is nothing for you here. People are desperate. For almost thirty years they have been normal again, but they remember. And this time the curses seem to run in families. No one likes the thought that they are passing their curse along to their children.”

“What curse do you carry?” I asked. He seemed well enough, standing before me.

“Who says that I am cursed?”

“Everyone was, save for me. Were you spared out upon the seas?”

“No.” There was a world of darkness in the word that Phillip did not usually dwell in.
“Is it really so awful?”

“Yes.”

“I am sorry—”

“Some of my crew got in an argument and a storm blew up. It was a clear day, and then suddenly we were hanging on for our lives. We realized one of the sailors was the cause. I tried to subdue him and some of his blood got on me. Suddenly I was impossibly strong. It was a rush like I could not describe. My men said my eyes went silver, and they were afraid I’d toss them overboard.”

“But the effects faded, did they not? If you avoid the blood all should be well.”

“That isn’t all.” There was something chilling in Phillip’s tone. She’d rarely heard him serious. “A month ago Lester Miller went crazy. His skin was covered in green boils and he was filled with rage. He had ten year old twins, and they were affected as well. The family was on a rampage – they killed his wife and were going after the in-laws. I thought if I touched some of his blood I could overpower him, but we struggled with the knife. He died. As soon as he passed, his children went back to normal.”

I scrambled for an explanation beside the obvious one. “Perhaps any time someone Troubled dies their children are cured.”

“No. There have been other cases. That is not true.”

“Oh, Phillip.”

“They come to me now, when someone’s curse is destructive. I’ve had mothers beg me to take their lives to protect their babes.” He was the second gentlest man I have ever known, and he had a sanctity for all life, even the fish he caught in his nets. It made me ill to think he was being asked to kill and pressured into it for the greater good. At last I understood his shame. “Sometimes I do as they ask.”

“Morgan told me the curses were specially chosen for each individual. They make you kill because you are a good man.” I reached out for his hand. I imagined the blood there but did not shy from it.

“I will do what I must to protect those in this town,” he declared, looking down, and for the first time I noticed the gleam of silver on his finger. “But I fear for my children. I have two boys and a girl. I would not have them carry this curse.”

“We must stop her!”

“How do we do that?”

“I don’t know.”

“The sun is nearly set. I am expected home.”

“Go. Be with your family.”

“It’s not safe for you to be about. Go to the largest oak in the forest. I have some rations I can give you. I will bring more in the morning.”

“Thank you.” He disappeared into his ship and emerged a few minutes later with a pack and a thick cloak.
“Don’t give up,” he advised before watching me slip off to the forest.

I was not the only one to seek sanctuary there. When I found the tree Phillip had spoke of there was a young boy leaning against it, crying.

I did not think of the danger to myself; all I could see was a lost and upset child.

“Are you all right?” I asked softly, kneeling down so I was at his level. The boy still startled, standing quickly and waving his hand at me as if he was brandishing a weapon.

“I mean you no harm,” I assured.

“You’ve come because I hurt Mommy!” he said. “I didn’t mean to.”

“That’s not why I’m here, little one. I’m hiding too.”

That seemed to calm him. I sat with my back against the tree and patted the space beside me. He sat, but he left a fair amount of distance between us. “What happened to your mother?”

The boy, who couldn’t have been any older than seven, blinked back tears. “I was so mad she wouldn’t let me play with John. I grabbed her skirt and she got so cold.” He wiped his hand under his nose. “Froze like the ice over Fielder’s Pond.”

Bile rose up my throat, but I tried not to let him see my disgust. “Did you mean to hurt your mother?”

“No! I didn’t know that would happen. It never happened before.”

I reach out toward him and he scooted backwards violently. “Don’t touch me. It could happen to you! My hands are still so cold.”

All I could think about was how Morgan had lamented how the curses did not work on me. I also knew that if I miscalculated, I would not mind a sudden demise.

“It’s all right.” Praying that it would be for this boy’s sake if not my own, I reached out and took his hand.

It was frigidly cold, but that cold did not transfer to my being. Within seconds the boy had sunk into my side and I cradled him as best I could from that position.

“I don’t want to go to hell,” he sobbed as I ran a hand through his hair.

“God shall not damn you for what you don’t do willingly,” I assured, wishing desperately for that to be true. “But perhaps you can control this so you don’t hurt anyone again.”

“How?”

His hands were already warming. “The ice may come back when you are angry or afraid. You need to be careful and patient. If you keep it inside you, it can’t hurt anyone else.”

I don’t know where the advice came from, but it sounded true. After he was calm I gave him a piece of bread and sent him away, inviting him to come back next time he was afraid.

He returned two days later with a dandelion and a smile. His mother had thawed, and he hadn’t hurt anyone else.
Phillip visited me every day or two, but he wasn’t the only one. The boy brought a friend who withered any plants around him, and my oak tree managed to survive unscathed. Soon there were other children, and I found I was able to talk them out of their mania. The curses, though caused by some external magic, fed on strong emotions and disquiet of the soul. My own soul began to heal as I realized how many could be helped.

One night Phillip brought me one of his sailors who was deathly ill. He went back to his wife well, but my return was a secret no longer. He recognized me.

I waited for the angry mobs, but they did not seem to dare to come. It was only those seeking healing who sought me out.

Until Morgan came, cackling in the moonlight.

“You think you can help them, one by one,” she sneered. “It’s like trying to hold back the waves by drinking from the ocean.”

“Every life has value.”

“They all suffer because you have returned.”

“That’s a lie.”

“You know in your heart it is not. I wanted you to see the damage you have caused. The town has moved on, but they still pay for your insolence. They will always pay. But when you go, the curses will cease. Until you return again.”

“Then I shall not return,” I declared, trying to be brave. Phillip had given me a knife in case I encountered creatures in the woods, and though it might damn my soul I was certain it was sharp enough to spill my lifeblood, if such sacrifice was needed to end this.

“How can you have forgotten? Your freedom has never been your own since you set foot on this land. I still hold your indenture. You belong to me. There is a power in that that gives the magic strength. You shall leave and return whenever I say. Henry.”

And there he was again, by her side, and I finally realized the futility of my lot. There was no time to reach for the knife. No chance to say goodbye to Phillip or any of those I had helped. As Henry pulled me through town I realized the mob had gathered, they’d just been too afraid to retrieve me themselves. But they stood around the McKee barn—miraculously restored—with torches.

The only solace was He did not come to watch me burn.

The next three decades were more unbearable, for I knew what would come next. I cried for days, no longer caring for the weakness my tears exposed. I dreamt of halcyon days turned crimson and relived each moment of betrayal again and again.

It was loneliness that drove me to speak to Henry. For years he would not answer me, but sometimes I imagined he shed silent tears as well. Once when I asked why he did Morgan’s bidding, he looked at me with wide, glistening eyes, so white in the dim light of the barn, and told me I was not the only one she owned.

The next time the door opened again, I knew what to expect.

Or so I thought. But Phillip has passed away in the last twenty-seven years so I found no friends at the docks.
I returned to the forest, to help who I could, and the Troubled came. The townsfolk’s hysteria had faded, but not their pain. They recognized the pattern, but were terrified of its consequences.

One day a schoolteacher infected his entire class with a plague. When Phillip’s son came to see me that night with blood on his hands he begged me for absolution I could not give. Phillip had told his children of my mercy and my innocence, but I could not slay one of the only pieces left of him.

Three months after my second return, He came to visit me. He was an old man now, grey and stooped, but underneath the wrinkles was the man that I had dreamt about, that I dreamt of still, again and again in my prison.

But my hope had been long extinguished, and the love that stirred at His presence was a blind and crippled thing. All save Phillip would put it out of its misery.

“There’s no need for your wife to drag me off again. As soon as she asks I’ll go.”

“You’re still the same,” He said in awe, and there was no anger in His voice this time, His tone soft enough I could pretend that it was tinged with loss.

“And you are not.”

“The children say that you’re a healer.”

“And their parents say that I’m a witch.”

“Not the ones who used to be children.”

“It doesn’t matter what they think of me. It does not change what must be done. There was only one whose approval I sought, and that was lost to me a long time ago.”

“I fear, in my old age, that I was deceived. I finally see clearly again.”

“It is too late,” I said sharply. So long I had wished for a moment like this, but it was hollow now. “I needed your love, and received only scorn. I would never have hurt your family. I certainly would never have hurt you. You should have realized that. Phillip did.” I knew that would sting, and in that instant I wanted it to. Because I had chosen His affections over Phillip’s, but it was Phillip who had stood by my side.

“We had not spoken for half our lives. But he called for me on his deathbed. Told me I should see you one last time. He was delirious, but he kept repeating, “True love conquers all.””

“Tis true that the love of Christ can conquer all evil. But I do not believe those powers extend to man.”

“You were never cynical.”

“You were never cruel. People change.”

“She is better when you are gone,” He whispered. “Kinder. She is a good mother.”

I could tell that He sought absolution, but I was filled with disgust. He knew what Morgan had done, or at least suspected. Still He stayed with her. “It is easier to be kinder when you have everything you desire. All she ever wanted was you.”

“And you were all I ever wanted.”
I sobbed and turned away, unable to look at Him. “You promised me once you would free me from her control. Now I fear I shall live under it for eternity. It would have been best if you left well enough alone.”

“Tell me how I can make this right,” He pleaded.

“Find someone to send you back in time and pay no mind to the girl who answers the door when you deliver nails.”

“You would wish away our time together?”

That was surely the prudent course, not just for myself but for this entire settlement, which had suffered greatly for our failed love. But I could not say the words I knew that I should mean.

“The stars fall again tonight. It is time for me to go. The Troubles shall end when I depart. That is how it shall be, again and again, through all of time. But I do not bring them here. I’m sure your wife is waiting with a torch. She always is.”

“There need be no violence tonight, if you will go willingly.”

No matter how lonely and haunting my time in the barn was, there was something worse about each return to Haven. I had no desire to stay, especially when I knew the townsfolk’s suffering would end once mine resumed.

He held out his hand, and after a moment’s hesitation I took it. He startled when our palms pressed together, but then He was leading me forward. I could have moved more quickly if I was not held back by His shuffling gait, but it was exquisite torture, to walk one last time by His side.

There was no one else waiting at the barn, to send me off with curses and visions of hellfire, besides Henry. I thought perhaps He was right, and Morgan had grown kinder, to allow Him to see me with dignity one last time.

He raised my hand to His lips and pressed a trembling kiss there, and every shred of any good emotion I had left shattered, and I knew this was no kindness. “I am truly sorry, Prudence,” He whispered. “I shall pray for your soul.”

“And I shall pray for yours.”

I knew they’d all be dead the next time I returned.

I asked Henry if the cycle would end once Morgan was gone. For years he did not answer me, but one day he declared that he could feel that his mistress was dead. After that her hold on him seemed to lessen. He told me that the curse would not end with her life, that she had designed it to perpetuate into eternity. I asked him questions to pass the time, and sometimes he would answer. He told me stories of Africa, where he had been born, about the parents he’d been stolen away from and the girl he’d been sweet on who was surely dead long ago. I told him about England and how many people had lived there, the focus on wealth instead of spiritual pursuits. How it was dirty and sinful and yet so much kinder than the new world.

I looked forward to the day the barn door would open, but Haven was a changed place. Not a single person born before my imprisonment began was still alive. I had hoped that Morgan’s instructions to Henry had been an idle threat, and we would find the town unplagued now that Morgan was gone. But the Troubles were as rampant as ever. Children came to me that I could not save, and I began to despair. Since I could not go into town I asked them to bring me supplies. One naïve girl brought me a knife to slice a loaf of bread and the gleaming metal taunted me, bright
like the pendant I still wore around my neck, and after two days I decided to plunge it into my heart and end all this. Perhaps the Troubles would cease with my breath. If they did not, at least they would no longer be my concern. I am ashamed to admit that I knew I might damn the townsfolk eternally with my actions, but I was too heartstricken to abide this life any longer. But as soon as I picked up the knife Henry was at my side, stilling my hand. I beat my hands against his chest and screamed for him to let me end this, but he took the knife and disappeared. I tried to stop eating, but he came with warm meals that smelled so delicious my deprived stomach could not resist. I tried to drown myself in the ocean, but Henry saved me. Attempted to hang myself, but the tree branch broke.

The sky fell, and we left again.

I had finally comprehended the futility of my existence, and its eternal nature terrified me. I could not imagine doing this forever, and I told Henry so, often in shameful hysterics. Morgan’s death seemed to have instilled some power in him, or perhaps it just freed him to access it. The barn, which had always looked just as it had when we’d built it, now looked more like a home. A bed appeared for me, covered in soft quilts, and I slept as much as I could. He conjured food, and we ate even though we didn’t need to.

He asked what I’d done in my spare time. Sometimes the wall of the barn became a window to the ocean, and other times we seemed to stroll through the forest even though we did not leave our prison. But often I read to him, and when he admitted that he did not know his letters I resolved to teach him. Such actions had been forbidden in the colony, and I was grateful that there was finally a rule I could break. These pursuits distracted me, but I told him often how much I detested the thought of returning.

A few days ago, after I woke from a nightmare screaming, he told me there might be a way to end this torment.

He cannot break this cycle any more than I can, and he’s been forbidden to let me die. But there’s a man in town who can make people forget.

I told Henry it would surely be worse to be banished again and again and not know why, but he elaborated further. While the man can make people forget, his wife can fill that emptiness with the memories of another.

Drastic measures, and I know such violation goes against the intention of God. But I have already been damned, and I can abide this existence no longer. I am haunted by His betrayal and His fate. I feel the loss of each innocent destroyed by the Troubles, the pain of hundreds upon hundreds. The knowledge that this will never stop is too much. Henry says he will ask the couple to travel with us, and as long as they are swayed by the idea of eternal life they can make me someone new every time we arrive. He says he can channel the magic in the barn to change my appearance enough that I will not be recognized. They are already beginning to forget why the Troubles started, the name Prudence White no longer the curse it once was. With a new name I can walk freely through town. I can be of more help, and I will not know their suffering is my fault. Henry will make sure I return when the barn is ready, and I will only have to abide twenty seven years before I start again as someone new.

I was not certain, when I began this journal, if I was going to do it. I thought, by recollecting the past, I might convince myself against such a desperate course. But I am only convinced all the more strongly that there are no other options. The thought of oblivion holds such peace, and it has been over a hundred years since my weary soul had any of that.

But as tragic as my life has been, I have recorded it here, because if I am going to erase all traces
of Prudence White, I want there to be some proof that I lived. History will see me as a villain, and I wish there to be some record of the truth. Even if no one else can read this, I am comforted that it exists. I will go back to the woods when Henry searches for the couple, and I will hide this with the pendant, and maybe one day someone will find this record and take pity on the wretch who loved the wrong man too fiercely, and angered a cruel girl with poor judgment and a terrible confidant.

Though I willingly slip from this world, in this book I shall forever remain Prudence White.

Audrey closed the book and let the enormity of all she had read wash over her. She was alone in the room; Nathan must have decided she wasn’t at risk and given her the privacy she asked for. She had no idea how much time had passed. Her head didn’t pound – she hadn’t remembered anything. But it felt true – an explanation for the emptiness at the bottom of her heart that only Nathan could drive away. Her soul ached at the enormity of everything she’d learned. She pulled her knees to her chest and hugged them tightly. She didn’t have the energy to fight the silent tears that coursed down her cheeks. Prudence’s misery was practically a presence in the room, smothering her. Audrey knew full well what it was like to have to go into that barn and leave Haven behind, but to do it over and over again and know what was waiting – to know that so much suffering was due to a love that had not even stood by her side – it was unfathomable.

She took a few minutes to process, but the longer she sat there, the more she realized that she did not want to be alone. Swiping her hand across her face, she set off to find Nathan.

As soon as she opened the door to the hallway she was greeted by a delicious smell. It grew stronger the closer she got to the kitchen, until finally she was standing at the doorway watching him pull two pans from the oven and set them on the counter beside a container of frosting.

“You baked me a cake?” Her voice was rough with disuse. She cleared her throat and glanced down at her watch. She’d been reading for hours.

Nathan rubbed at the back of his neck. “Don’t own any cupcake tins, so this’ll have to do.” He smiled self-deprecatingly. “Should probably pick up some of those.”

“You baked me a cake,” she repeated, overwhelmed by this simple gesture when her former self had been so unlucky in love.

“Came from a box,” he said, pointing to the evidence still on the counter. “Not like I made it from scratch.”

“You just happened to have a box of cake mix sitting around?”

“Had one tucked away for emergencies.”

“You’re perfect.”

“Wasn’t even that hard.”

“Just shut up and hold me.”

He wasted no time in obliging, cradling her to him, and she closed her eyes and breathed him in. He whispered comforting nonsense while he smoothed his hand down her back and the misery retreated into her subconscious.

“Whatever you found out, it’ll be okay. We’ll get through it together.”

She kissed him on the cheek and pulled away, retrieving a spoon from one of the drawers and
hoisting herself onto the counter a few inches from the cake. Opening up the frosting container, she took a scoop and then cut a bite sized piece from the nearest pan, popping it in her mouth before he could protest.

“This is delicious.”

“You’re ruining my cake.”

“I’m saving you the trouble of frosting it. Don’t worry, it won’t go to waste.” She served herself another spoonful, icing then cake, and then pushed the pan toward him. “You should try it.”

He didn’t like sweets nearly as much as she did if they weren’t for breakfast, but he got himself a spoon anyway and followed her lead.

“Not bad for a first attempt,” he declared, taking another bite before perching on a stool a few feet to her right.

“Think we’ve found your second career,” she joked.

“Think I’d need a few more skills than stirring up a boxed mix for that, but I can work on it.”

“Thank you,” she said sincerely, reaching out to cover one of his hands with hers. The way he cared for her was such a contrast to everything Prudence had ever known, and that helped her distance herself from all she had just read. Prudence was a part of her, but she wasn’t that forsaken girl any longer.

“You’re not bleeding. You didn’t remember.”

“No,” she answered. “But I know what happened now.”

She flipped his hand over, seeking his pulse with her thumb to delay the inevitable moment when she’d have to talk about this. His fingers curled involuntarily toward her and she could see the cake mix under his nails.

“I chose to forget. I was willing to become a new person every twenty-seventy years because spending a lifetime as Prudence was too much to bear. It’s like I killed myself, except instead of dying I had to do it all over and over again.”

He didn’t say anything but he grabbed her hand, tethering her to this place as he’d always done.

“She was so hopeless. Howard was right. It was a punishment. But my crime wasn’t cursing a town. It was loving someone. I didn’t cause the Troubles – not directly. The governor’s daughter wanted to curse me because the blacksmith loved me instead of her. But it didn’t work, so she cursed the town instead and blamed me for it. And this became my curse, to watch the Troubles happen again and again, to try to help but know it’s only a band aid because the only thing that makes any real difference is when I go. But I always come back, and so do they.”

“Where does Howard fit into all this?”

“His name used to be Henry. He was a slave that belonged to Morgan’s father. It was his job to make sure I went back to the Barn on schedule. But after she died he started to feel sorry for me. He couldn’t stop the cycle. But he suggested a way to make it more bearable.”

She took another bite of cake, the sweetness of the chocolate soothing her and the delay giving her a chance to regroup.
“I thought the Barn took my memories, but it didn’t have that power. There was someone in the Barn with us. A couple. Musta been related to the Teagues. One wiped my memories, and the other implanted someone else’s.”

“They were in there the whole time?”

“They probably came out when I did. No one ages in the Barn. Eternal life’s probably not so bad if you have someone to spend it with.” She looked up at him shyly and saw the yearning in his eyes. Just as she thought, he’d give up the immediacy of the present for more time with her. It was useless to contemplate – the Barn was gone, so they’d never spend forever within its memory drenched walls. But it helped to know that he would, if he was given the choice.

“There’s something else,” he said. “We guessed at most of that. You choosing to go into the Barn was not so different from what Prudence did. But something’s got you shaken enough to eat half a cake all by yourself.”

“You helped,” she quipped, noticing that one of the cake tins was indeed empty.

He didn’t smile. “You can tell me, Parker. Whatever it is, it won’t change the way I feel about you.”

She wasn’t afraid of that this time. It just hurt. But maybe it would be better after the telling. He did deserve to know.

“You don’t have to worry about that blacksmith,” she told him.

“I’m not worried,” he declared, his quickness to cut in disproving his words.

She rolled her eyes. “Sure. But you don’t need to. When the Troubles hit, he forsook me like everyone else. First time I came back, I found out he’d married the governor’s daughter. Had kids with her and everything. He knew by the time he died that she’d done this. She cursed everyone and framed me for being a witch. But he stayed with her, tried to defend her.”

Nathan dragged his stool closer and then put an arm around her, pulling her gently over to rest her head against his shoulder. She leaned into the contact as his fingers trailed up and down her forearm.

“What can I do?” he asked earnestly.

She looked up at him, the force of her love threatening to combust her from the inside out. This is what Prudence had needed – someone to fight for her.

“You’ve already done more than anyone else. I was ready to accept my fate again, but you destroyed the Barn. You freed me from my prison.” She’d been mad at him once for getting in the way, but she was overcome now by how grateful Prudence would have been for such an action. Whatever happened to her now, at least it would not continue into eternity. She’d never thought dying – eventually – could be a relief. “Now we just have to keep you from paying for that with your life.”

“You’ll never be alone again,” he swore, but she recognized how carefully he’d chosen his words. He did not swear to always be the one by her side.
“Everything’s going to be okay,” Nathan told her, his hands steady on each side of her face. His eyes were bright but he was impeccably composed, and she didn’t understand how that was possible when everything inside her was flying apart.

“It’s not,” she argued, her voice choked and ragged, her hands reaching for his face because she needed to spend every second she could touching him before it was too late. It felt like she was caught in an undertow and being tossed around by the waves, the unfairness of the situation pulling her down and spinning her about over and over again.

“Think about everyone we’re going to save. There are so many people out there who love each other like we do who will get to be together because of today. Families that won’t be broken apart. Parents who won’t have to live with the guilt of passing their Troubles to their children.”

He was right, but that wouldn’t take away the pain she felt just contemplating the action she must take. How could she ever live with it? “How am I supposed to go on without you?”

“You’ll have James and Duke. They’ll look after you. Teach you how to laugh again.”

“I don’t want to laugh with anyone else.”

“You’re so strong, Parker. For hundreds of years you’ve cared for the Troubled, borne their pain. It’s time to set that right so you can be free.”

Some part of her felt the allure of that, but it didn’t compare to her need to keep him with her, always.

“It’s time to keep your promise,” Jordan spat. “As cute as this is, can we get on with it? Some of us have normal lives to get back to.”

In that moment Audrey hated the woman, just as she’d hated her ancestor who had caused all this misery. But the Guard had them surrounded, shotguns cocked and ready, and they had James and Duke and there was no way out of this except to do what they demanded.

Nathan’s fingers wiped away her tears, drawing her attention back to him. “You’ll always have the memories of us. Always know how much I love you. These past six months have been more incredible than I could ever imagine, and I don’t regret any of it. A part of me will always be with you, but I want you to move on. Keep living for the both of us.”

“I don’t want to.” Back in school she’d thought *Romeo and Juliet* melodramatic and silly, but she understood far too clearly now. Maybe it was extreme, but she’d rather follow him in death than be left behind.

“I need you to take care of our son,” he implored. She thought of James, who was certainly old enough to care for himself. But there were pieces of Nathan in his presence and demeanor, and it wasn’t fair to leave him with Duke as his only friend in the world.

Nathan gently pulled her hands from his face and pressed his gun into them. Then he was kissing her and it was surely goodbye, so she drew the moment out as long as she could. She kept her eyes open, needing to see him every possible second. Determination practically radiated from every pore. He was saving her, in more ways than one, and all she could do now was accept that gift, terrible as it was.
“It’s okay,” he whispered against her mouth. “It won’t hurt. All I feel is you.”

He didn’t know that he’d said the exact same thing in a timeline that didn’t exist, and it shattered something inside her now just as it had then, except this time there was no restart. She wouldn’t wake up frantic in his arms, praying for a chance to do it all differently.

It should have been his arms she’d woken up in then, not Chris’s. She had wasted so much time.

“I will always love you,” she swore. She kissed his cheek, so that the last touch he’d ever feel would be the same as the first. Then she pulled the trigger.

He collapsed backwards with a strangled cry. She surged forward, horrified. Her aim, so steady at long distances, had failed her now. The wound was surely fatal, but it wasn’t a clean shot.

“Why can you feel that?” she sobbed, because it was clear that he could. His jaw was clenched in agony and he was making some terrible gurgling sound in the back of his throat. Every other time she’d watched him die had been peaceful.

She pressed her hands to the wound out of instinct, but the pressure amplified his pain. She knew she had to let him bleed out, that touching him now was counterproductive, but she couldn’t pull away. She wanted to take this all back. She’d rewind to her arrival in Haven and drive herself off that cliff if it would save him from this.

“Maybe it’s working,” he gasped. Blood bubbled from his mouth and she felt terribly sick.

“I’m sorry. So, so sorry,” she sobbed, running a hand through his hair, but the red streaks it left there made her stomach roll.

“Love you.” Then his eyes went glassy and his breathing stopped. She collapsed against him, barely able to pull air into her lungs. Everything smelled like his blood, and it was choking her.

A scream from somewhere behind her brought her back to herself.

“It didn’t work,” Jordan screeched. Her gloves were off, and a Guardsman lay crumpled at her feet, clutching his arm. “The Troubles are still here.”

“No.” Surely her heart would explode in her chest and end this nightmare. There was no way she had just killed Nathan for nothing. “No!”

“You cold-hearted bitch,” Jordan sneered, grabbing Audrey’s arm. She didn’t feel anything, of course, but she wished she did. “He loved you so much. And apparently you didn’t return those feelings.”

“I did!” she cried.

“Was it Crocker you preferred? Could have told Nathan you were fucking his best friend before he let himself get killed for you.”

“I don’t love Duke.” She didn’t know how she could ever leave this field and move on from this. How had it all gone so terribly wrong?

“Calm down, Jordan.” Bernie’s voice was as level as always, as if he was prepared to lecture a class. “There’s no need to get hysterical. This is only a temporary setback. We have her son and the Crocker boy. She need only decide which one she loves the most. Killing one of them will surely end the Troubles.”
“I can’t.” She desperately tried to come up with another way out of this situation, but her clever mind could process nothing but grief and revulsion. She looked up to where two pairs of Guardsmen were holding Duke and James. The smuggler struggled, but his face was resigned. Their eyes met, and she knew with shocking clarity what he was thinking. He’d ask her to kill him, except he knew that it wouldn’t work.

But James was frozen in terror. Audrey knew how many years this very scenario had haunted him, and now it was playing out again. But she wouldn’t do it. She wouldn’t kill her child. Not even to save this awful town, which had done nothing but hate her unjustly for centuries.

She grabbed the gun from the ground, pressed it to her heart, and fired.

Nothing happened.

She tried again before she realized why. Nathan had only put in one bullet to stop her from doing something exactly like this.

“Contain her,” Bernie ordered. One of the Guardsmen complied, and she shrieked and fought, not wanting anyone to touch her ever again, but all her training was lost in her hysteria and she could only flail ineffectively. He pinned her arms and dragged her toward the other captives.

“Decision time,” Jordan taunted. “You better make up your mind fast, because it’ll be worse on both of them the longer you wait.” She reached out and grabbed their necks and their screams tore through Audrey’s soul. When Duke tried to hold his back Jordan laughed and stroked his face. “You psychotic bitch,” he spat, unleashing a string of expletives in languages Audrey didn’t know, but his control slipped further the longer she touched him.

“I can do this all day,” Jordan crooned. “So by all means, take your time.”

James was crying now, and Audrey ached to go to him. Why couldn’t she remember rocking her baby? Why had he had to grow up alone?

None of them were ever leaving here.

The mania faded from Jordan’s face and she was suddenly serene. Her tight leather clothing flickered, becoming a long black dress. She was no longer concerned with ending the Troubles because she had caused them. “This is your fault, you know. You never should have loved him.”

“You’re a monster!”

“Doesn’t matter who you choose. There’s no escape for you, Prudence.”

Audrey bolted upright so violently her head collided with Nathan’s where he was bent over her, hands on her shoulders. Blood started to leak from his nose and the smell was too much. She stumbled out of bed and to the bathroom. She barely made it to the toilet before she was throwing up everything she’d eaten, seemingly for days. The bile kept spewing from her but it didn’t make her feel any better. When her stomach finally seemed to settle she pressed her head against the cool porcelain and bawled.

“Parker.” Nathan’s hand on her back and his voice in her ear only made her cry harder. It was too good to be true that he was here with her, that it had just been some awful dream. But he rested his chin on her shoulder and pulled her back into him. “It’s okay, Audrey. Breathe for me, okay? Deep breaths. You’re safe.”

“You weren’t.” She couldn’t bring herself to turn around and look at him. This had to be reality and
not the dream, but some small part of her wasn’t sure.

“Am now.” He turned her around gently and then he was kissing her, one hand tangled in her hair and the other pressing her closer. She never thought she’d get to do this again, but he was warm and present and lovely and alive, and the terror that had gripped her mind started to fade. They were making out in his bathroom, and he was alive and safe and she was never entertaining the notion of killing him again.

When he pulled away he kept a hand on her cheek, but she noticed the way his nose wrinkled.

“What?”

“You taste like vomit.”

“Gross. Sorry.” She reached up to touch the blood dripping from his nose. Otherwise her hands were clean, but she remembered so vividly how they’d been slick with crimson. “Your nose is bleeding.”

“You have a hard head.” Even in the dim glow the nightlight cast she could see his lip twitch upward. “Which shouldn’t surprise me.”

She grabbed some toilet paper and handed it to him. “Hope it isn’t broken.”

“I wouldn’t know,” he said as he pressed the paper to his face.

She prodded at his nose and he didn’t groan in pain so she figured it was all right. “I’m so sorry,” she mumbled, collapsing against his chest.

“You have nothing to be sorry for,” he said into her hair. “But if we never kiss again right after you throw up that would be great.”

She pinched at his side. “That was your fault, mister.”

“Had to calm you down somehow.”

“Thank you.” She was so grateful that he was here with her, and it had all been a terrible nightmare. She ran her hand up his back, feeling the muscles twitch under the stimulation.

“Musta been an awful dream to get you this spooked.”

She pulled away so she could look at him. She needed him to understand.

“Killing you – it won’t work. I won’t do it.”

He ran his hand gently across her face. “Audrey, it was just a nightmare. Wasn’t real.”

“You told me once to trust my instincts.”

He looked at her strangely. “No I didn’t.”

“Yeah, you did.”

He shook his head, eyebrows raised. “No. I told Sarah that.”

There was too much going on to process that particular bit of information at the moment. “Whatever. Did you mean it?”
He didn’t hesitate. “Yes.”

“Well every instinct inside me is screaming that this was more than just a dream.”

“Okay,” he soothed. She wasn’t a frightened animal, but his tone calmed her anyway, even as she knew she probably should feel patronized. She was just glad she could feel anything besides despair. The fact that he was really all right hit her all over again and she hugged him tightly, pressing a kiss to the hollow of his throat that made him sigh.

“Tell me what happened?”

She didn’t want to relive it, but if doing so kept it from actually happening she’d tell the story a million times. She nuzzled her nose into his shoulder, drawing strength from the way he tightened his arms around her. Dream Jordan was wrong. This was love in its purest form.

“Our deadline was up. The Guard had us surrounded, and you wanted me to go through with it. There was no other way.” When she closed her eyes she could still see the blood coming out of his mouth, so she kept them open and focused on his eyes, which sparked with life. “So I shot you.” Her voice cracked, and it took everything within her not to sob again.

His hands ran up and down her bare shoulders. “You did what you had to do. I’d never blame you for that.”

She shook her head. He’d misinterpreted why this upset her so. “You didn’t.” She took a deep breath. “It didn’t work.”

“Audrey.”

His agonized pity prompted the rest of the story to flow from her in a terrible rush. “You felt it! You weren’t supposed to but you did, and then you died but the Troubles weren’t gone. And the Guard had Duke and James, and Jordan was there, and she was torturing them, and Bernie wanted me to kill them too in case that worked but Jordan looked at me and she was Morgan and she told me that it didn’t matter what I did, because there was no escape for me.”

“She was wrong,” he said vehemently.

“Dammit Nathan, I won’t kill you!”

“Not about that,” he assured. “We’re taking murdering me off the table. But she’s wrong that there’s no escape for you. We will find another way.”

She was overwhelmed by his determination, and by the fact he’d accepted her refusal to kill him so readily. “God, I love you.” The only thing that kept her from kissing him in that moment was the realization that subjecting him to her vomit breath again probably wasn’t the best way to show it.

“Love you too.”

“Killing you doesn’t even make sense, now that we know about Morgan. She loved whoever Prudence did – or was obsessed with him, anyway. She didn’t want Prudence to kill him. And Prudence didn’t mention Morgan or Henry saying anything about another way.”

“So why did Howard tell you it would work?”

“I don’t know. Maybe because it’s the kind of cruel thing that would make me suffer. Having to kill you – and then finding out it didn’t work – nothing has ever hurt like that.”
“Hey, it’s over now.”

“That could have been real.”

“But it wasn’t.” His lips pressed against her forehead. “We can run.”

“You don’t want to do that.” He’d been adamant before that they needed to put an end to the Troubles, refusing to consider abandoning the town to the damage they caused.

“It’s better than making you go through what you just dreamed. We’ve still got a couple of months, so they won’t expect us to go yet. We’ll have to take everyone we care about with us. Though maybe we can ditch Duke somewhere along the way. Not sure I can stand a lifetime of hiding out with him.”

The thought of living in peace with Nathan someplace far away certainly held some appeal. That’s why she’d suggested it months ago. But it had never been particularly feasible. “Lucy tried to run. Didn’t work.”

“Lucy didn’t have me.” His blazing determination soothed her, but there were too many holes in his plan.

“They’ll start killing innocents until we come back. They’ll know we can’t live with that.”

“I can’t live with them using me to hurt you.”

“There has to be something we’re missing. Sarah and Lucy both knew something we don’t. I’ll go back to Eleanor’s. Maybe Lucy hid something else there.” She scrambled to her feet, mind racing. “I’ll just brush my teeth and go.”

He grabbed her arm. “Parker, it’s two in the morning.”

“We don’t have any time to waste.”

“We can waste four hours.”

“What if we can’t, Nathan? I don’t care how tired I am now if it means in two months we’re both still alive.”

“You’re running on adrenaline. But it’s going to catch up to you. Soon as it does you’ll be useless for the rest of the day. Let’s go back to sleep. First thing in the morning we’ll go looking.”

“I don’t want to go back to sleep,” she admitted. “What if I have the same dream?”

“Then stay up. But let’s go back to bed at least. Get comfortable. I’ll be useless if I go running about now.”

Tiredness never seemed to faze him, but she couldn’t imagine going to Eleanor’s if he wouldn’t come with her. Not tonight, when it would be too easy to believe the nightmare if he wasn’t right there at her side. She scowled up at him, but then moved to brush her teeth. She could see him in the mirror behind her, swirling mouthwash. Once she was satisfied her mouth finally tasted clean she turned to him. He filled a glass in the sink and handed it to her.

She set it on the counter and drank him in instead, standing on her tiptoes to get as close as she could. His life thrummed under her fingers, his mouth tasted like Listerine, and this was unquestionably real.
“Bed,” she panted when they broke apart. He nodded and followed her back to the room.

But the sheets were damp from her cold sweat and there were spots of red on the pale blue from his battered nose. She stared at them, remembering how his blue shirt had been soaked through but she hadn’t dared strip it away to look at the damage.

“I’ll change the sheets,” he said quietly.

“No need,” she said, grabbing his arm to stop him. “We’ll just mess them up again.”

She stuck to his half of the bed though, curling tightly into his side. He rubbed her back but didn’t try anything fresh, not even when she started drawing her ankle up his leg.

“I’m not sleeping,” she reiterated.

“ Heard that the first time.” Even if he was pretending to understand, she knew he wanted her to get some more rest. But if he was planning on out-stubborning her on this, he better be ready to put up one hell of a fight.

“Lotta hours til morning,” she said, drawing patterns across his chest. “Wonder what we can do to pass the time?”

“Don’t know any lullabies,” he answered.

She snorted, certain he was joking, but he’d been completely monotone and he wore no trace of a smile. Could he really be that dense?

Either way, she could work with this.

“If we both make it out of this—”

“When,” he interrupted.

“Okay, when we both make it out of this, you’ll have to learn a few,” she told him.

His arms tightened around her and he pulled them into a sitting position. “Parker, you’re not—”

“No,” she assured, not expecting him to look quite so devastated about that. “I’ve been on the pill since I came back. Can you imagine us trying to keep a baby safe right now? There’s no guarantee we’d have nine months to carry it to term.” She shook her head and looked into his eyes, allowing herself just a moment to imagine them staring up at her from a cherubic baby face. “But if we did, you’d be a wonderful father. You are a wonderful father, but you’d be good at all the parenting stuff, besides just impregnating me and then offering advice when the kid’s twenty-something. Or fifty-something, I guess, technically.”

“If this is a joke, Parker, it’s not—”

“I wouldn’t joke about something like this,” she promised.

“You’d have a baby with me?” he asked, voice soft with awe.

It hurt a little how much that shocked him, but the last time they’d really talked about children he’d been cooing at babies and she’d been pretty vocal about how uncomfortable the whole situation made her.

“Already done that once. But it’d be nice to remember it the second time around. And third. Maybe
fourth. I think that’s where I draw the line. No matter how cute they are, there’s a limit on the number of people coming out of my uterus.”

He looked at her with narrowed eyes. “Sure you’re not a chameleon? Because Audrey Parker does not like babies.”

“I reckon it’ll be different when they’re half you.” She grabbed one of his hands and linked their fingers together. “I always saw kids as this ticking time bomb of responsibility. Never saw the point of subjecting myself to that. But now – I figure you’re going to be such an amazing father, anything I do to screw them up you’ll just fix, so—”

“Audrey,” he breathed reverently, and he looked so ecstatic that she wished they could forget about deadlines and start working on that family now. “You make me so ridiculously happy.”

“Even when I wake up screaming and bash you in the nose?”

“It doesn’t matter. One of these days none of these dark times are going to matter.”

“I look forward to that. Just like I look forward to the day you lose all semblance of masculinity when you look at our next child.”

It was the perfect opportunity for him to show her just how much he looked forward to that too, but instead he settled back into the pillows with a goofy grin. Suddenly overwhelmed with frustration, she wiggled against him, but while that normally drove him crazy he didn’t appear to take any notice. She was convinced this was the reality now and the nightmare was fading, but when she closed her eyes she still saw him sprawled out, bleeding, and she wanted to replace that image with something far better, him moving above her, every bit of him alive and driving her wild.

She heaved a heavy sigh. She knew Nathan could be pretty oblivious about women, but he was usually better at picking up these particular signals.

“Something wrong?” he asked.

“You certainly know how to miss a hint tonight, Wuornos,” she huffed.

“Who said I missed a hint?” His voice was laced with mirth, and she gaped at him before flicking him on the shoulder. “Something you want, Parker?”

“You’re holding out on me, Wuornos! The night I had, and you’re teasing me.”

“Would you prefer if I didn’t?”

“No,” she admitted. They got along much better when he wasn’t acting like she was made of glass. And his ribbing was a comfortable reminder of their early days, where he wouldn’t touch her but he would give her a hard time for her city-girl ways.

“Thought so.” He smirked at her. “I’m just waiting for you to tell me what you want.” He drew his hand through her hair slowly, pushing the strands behind her ear. “What do you want, Parker?” he whispered, his breath hot on her face.

It had taken her a long time to get to a place where she could admit that to herself, let alone anyone else. But she had no doubts anymore. “You,” she confessed, licking her lips in anticipation. “I want you to chase the nightmares away.”

“Always,” he swore, rolling them both so his body sheltered hers as he began his quest.
If by the time he finished she’d forgotten all about her pledge to stay awake, she’d never tell.
Chapter 26

She was poking around his closet one day when she found the fedora. She couldn’t imagine an occasion where he’d wear such a thing, so she brought it with her to confront him in the living room.

“Where’d you get this?” she asked curiously, holding it out toward him.

He lowered the Haven Herald he’d been reading. A funny look crossed his face. “1955.”

The thought of that did something funny to her stomach. “Must have been rather dashing,” she said, trying to picture him wearing it.

“That was the general consensus.”

His lips quirked, and she wanted to know what put that smile there. “You never told me what happened with Sarah,” she said, trying to sound casual.

The tips of his ears went red as he rubbed at the back of his neck. “You kinda saw the gist of it.”

“Yeah. And Howard making the Barn show us the two of you getting busy was not the best way that revelation could have gone.”

“Sorry,” he said as he squirmed a little.

She sighed. “I’m not mad. Considering all our problems, I can get over that. But I am curious. I’ve seen your moves, and it took almost a year for you to make any on me. So what made you jump the gun with Sarah?”

He patted the sofa near where he was sprawled and she sat, worrying the brim of the hat between her fingers.

“I went to the Veteran’s Hospital to find Stuart Mosley and Sarah found me at his bedside. She was so furious that I was disturbing her patient she grabbed me by the ear and dragged me out of there. I could hardly believe it. I knew Sarah would be in Haven at that time, and I knew she’d been you. I’d seen photos of Lucy. But to actually see her with my own eyes.” He shook his head, and there was something about the fascination in his tone that made her want to snap at something. “Her hair was so red, and she had these tights curls and this southern accent. But her attitude … it was exactly the same as when I’d rescued you from that car and you pulled a gun on me. She wasn’t taking crap from anyone, not even some tall stranger with a police badge. When I felt her pinch my ear it was all just incredible, and I told her so.”

“You actually told her she was incredible,” she said skeptically.

“Yep. Then I tried to leave but she told me I couldn’t just call a girl incredible without explaining myself.”

“So you explained yourself,” she snapped, unable to keep the hurt from her tone.
She could see him tense up, but he didn’t snap back. “All I’d wanted for weeks was to talk to you, but you’d kept pushing me away. Then there you were, eager to talk, and it was you, just without all the baggage. I was weak. So I agreed to meet you on the beach when your shift was over.”

“Sarah,” she corrected.

“You,” he insisted. “It was you. The smile and the eyes and the personality. Different memories. Different experiences. But you. It was like I was entranced or something. My conscience was telling me to get the hell out of there but I couldn’t pull myself away. Then you showed up with a blanket and a six-pack.”

“How romantic.”

His eyes narrowed. “Wasn’t supposed to be romantic. Wasn’t supposed to go as far as it did. Except we were already chasing after James so maybe it was. I don’t know how all this cause and effect works. But there we were on the beach and you were just so unburdened.”

“We had sex because I was unburdened?”

“You running commentary isn’t helping,” he growled. “Look, it wasn’t some quick, dirty thing. It’s just – when you first came to Haven you’d make stupid jokes and laugh at me and be shocked by all the quaint town traditions. Then after you found out you were Lucy and things got worse in town you became so serious. Once you got kidnapped you started pulling away. It’d been so long since I’d seen you happy. Sarah didn’t know any of that yet. She’d just come to Haven. She was telling me about being in the war and helping vets in DC. Even though I knew it had all happened to someone else I just wanted to keep listening to whatever she had to say, just to see her smile. I wished it was us on that beach. You and me. Laughing with a couple of beers, just shooting the breeze. We were working together every day but I missed you. Then Sarah kept touching me. My hand, my face.”

Audrey tried to imagine herself being so handsy the day she met Nathan – or anyone, really – and couldn’t manage it. “That was pretty forward of her.”

“Yeah. Know anyone else good at pushing boundaries?” He paused significantly and she had to give him that one. She shrugged, but she knew he was right. “Then she told me I was her first friend.”

A spark of recognition coursed through her so strongly it was almost like an electric shock. “That’s what I said—”

“—when Jess left. I know. Then she told me that on the front she’d learned to make the most of every minute she was given, and here we were together and all she could think was ‘we have time.”’ He reached out and grabbed her hand. “I wanted that to be true, so badly. Because all I wanted was more time with you. That’s still all I want. But the Hunter was coming and I was losing you and I just wanted things to be different. Easy again. But I turned away because it suddenly felt wrong to be there with you when you had no idea what I’d become.”

The phrase “We have time,” was running through her head in a strange yet familiar accent, and she realized it wasn’t the first time she’d heard it. Suddenly she didn’t want him to just be telling her this story. She wanted to remember it.

“But you didn’t turn away,” she prompted.

“I started to. But then you said, ‘Why do I always go for the shy ones—’”
Recognition blazed through her again. “I said the same thing when you wouldn’t dance with me at your reunion.”

“Yes. I told you, under the memories, you’re really the same every time. I couldn’t bear to disappoint you. Just once, I didn’t want to disappoint myself either. So I kissed you.”

It was starting to make sense, logically, but she still didn’t like it. “Show me,” she ordered.

“What?”

She took a deep breath and looked into his eyes. “I want you to show me exactly how you kissed her.”

“Why?”

“Because I want to remember.”

Nathan shook his head. “Absolutely not. It’s too dangerous. Last time you remembered something you ended up in the hospital. I shouldn’t even be telling you this.” He dropped her hand and scrambled off the couch, scowling.

But his logic rolled right over her. She’d made up her mind and wouldn’t be swayed. She was so damn tired of people keeping secrets about her own life. She didn’t want to put Nathan in the same category as Vince Teagues and Garland Wuornos. She crossed her arms and glared right back. “I don’t want to be mad at you about this but I’m jealous. I’m jealous of myself, which makes no sense! Do you know how aggravating that is? But maybe I don’t have to be. If I could remember what happened then maybe I could accept that Sarah and I are the same. I want to remember how our son was conceived. I want to remember the first time we made love. If I’m really Sarah, then those are my memories, and I want them back.”

“I don’t want to hurt you.” She’d only ever heard that pleading tone in his voice when her welfare was on the line. As much as she was grateful for his protection, she couldn’t let it hold them both back.

“It’ll be all right,” she said softly, letting her ire drain away. “The headaches weren’t that bad when I remembered Lucy.”

“That was only twenty some years ago, not fifty, and the doctor warned that any further trauma could be dangerous.”

“If it starts to hurt, then we’ll stop, I promise.”

He heaved a heavy sigh. “Why are you always so willing to put yourself in danger?”

“Says the man who throws himself in front of guns and psychotic machines just because he can’t feel it.” She rolled her eyes. “Neither one of us are all that great at protecting ourselves. But this isn’t about that. I need to understand how all these people I used to be affect who I am now, and since you have firsthand knowledge of that I need you to help me.”

She stared him down, and could see the exact moment her relented. “I don’t like this.”

She grabbed his hand and tugged him back down to the couch. “I know.” She ran a hand over his hair before dropping the hat in place. It really did look quite dapper, drawing attention to his cheekbones and the blueness of his eyes. “Now kiss me, you time traveling stud,” she said in her best Southern accent.
He made a face. “Sarah didn’t sound like that. And I wasn’t wearing the hat at the time.”

She smirked. “Keep it on. It’ll help us get into character.”

“Can’t believe we’re doing this,” he muttered, but then his hands were on either side of her face and he was kissing her like he was drowning in it, a desperate man whose thirst hadn’t been quenched in far too long. She realized that’s what he’d been then – lost, yearning, knowing what he wanted but not how to get it. She tried to imagine how Sarah must have felt to have a near stranger kiss her like that. The rush of power that would come over her. Except she wouldn’t know that she was the only one in her decade that could make him respond like this. She opened her mouth to him and he took full advantage, tilting her head to get better access, and she moaned in the back of her throat, unable to stop herself. She understood now, after a kiss like that, how things had gone as far as they did.

“Wow,” she raved when he pulled away, and his eyes narrowed.

“That’s what she said.”

“That’s cause that was some kiss. What happened next?”

Then he was kissing her again, and it was softer, familiar, more like he kissed her now, and when he broke from her mouth his lips traveled across her jaw and down her neck to linger at the hollow of her throat.

“Oh,” she hummed, finding it hard not to get lost in the moment.

“You said, ‘There’s something different about you, stranger. I’ve never had a man kiss me like he knew me when we’d met that afternoon.’” His voice took on a strange tone as he said it, soft and fond, as if he was trying to mimic the gist of her accent but not the specifics.

“Then?” she asked, her throat dry.

“Then you touched my face.”

“She ran the backs of her fingers across it slowly, tracing his brow, his chin, his cheekbones, watching the way it made his eyes flutter shut and something inside him relax, before finally tracing his lips with the pad of her thumb.

He swallowed. “Just like that.”

“And then?”

Anticipation coiled in her stomach as she followed his directions. She’d always known where this was going but she hadn’t expected it to affect her so strongly. She could almost feel Sarah’s nerves, the rush of this unexpected encounter coupled with some strange relief that this was finally happening.

He gently grabbed her wrist. “Not here.”

“It’s your couch, Nathan. The door’s locked. I think we’ll be okay.”

Something flashed in his eyes as he shook his head. “Not here on the beach.”

“Oh.” She couldn’t tell what was real and what was the game anymore, and that unsettled and
excited her simultaneously.

“Tell me your car isn’t far.”

She giggled, and she wasn’t sure where such a girly sound came from. “My car’s right down the road. Maybe we can take this there?”

“Yeah,” he breathed and she laughed and this time it was definitely Audrey, because his lack of smoothness had always amused her, made him more genuine.

“We can really take this to the car,” she whispered, and he went adorably crimson.

“Uh,” he stuttered. “I’d rather stay here.”

“Fine. What happens next?”

“Climb into my lap.”

“Yes sir.”

He led her through the motions, but half the time she knew what he’d suggest, because it was exactly the way she’d respond. They spent a long time kissing, as if he was thrilled by that but frightened to go any further. But once she spread her hands across his chest he moved his to her shoulders, pushing the fabric away. “This was easier when you were in a dress,” he grumbled.

She laughed, but he grew bolder now and it stole her breath as he eased her back onto the couch and continued with their foreplay. He slid her jeans down her legs, kissing a line across her thighs, his tongue swirling circles against her skin. His eyes were so dark with lust, and she knew he’d done this countless times now but she tried to imagine how it would be the first time, stuck in his world of numbness for so long, finally alive and feeling. He reached out to touch her face, mirroring the pattern she’d traced on his own earlier. Then he uttered a single word, soft and sweet like a caress. “Sarah.”

With a blaze of clarity she could feel the leather of the seat beneath her, smell the ocean in the air, hear the gulls and feel the sunlight. She was Sarah Vernon, caught up with a handsome stranger in the most magical moment of her life, and she knew what came next.

“No one’s ever said my name like that.” The accent was strange in her ears, but it was also perfectly natural.

“No one’s ever felt this way.” Then his eyes widened and he seemed to come back to himself. “That’s exactly what Sarah said.”

“I know. I remember,” Audrey panted.

The illusion waivered as he pressed a hand to her forehead. “You all right? How’s your head? We should stop.”

She felt none of the side effects of her previously recovered memories. But need was swirling through her like a twister, amplified by the two women waiting inside her head, a different part of her anatomy threatening to combust. “Don’t you dare, Wuornos,” she demanded. “I’m fine. But I won’t be if you don’t make love to me right now.”

“Bossy,” he countered fondly, and that wasn’t how the script went. But then he was moving inside her, both of her, and there was only him, her constant through the ages.
Afterward he grabbed the afghan from the top of the couch and wrapped it around them, even though they were still half clothed. He pressed his head into the crook of her shoulder, and she could remember him doing it, both with Sarah and the first time he’d made love to Audrey.

“Are you mad at me?” he asked.

She gazed up at him, their bodies still pressed together and the hormones still flowing through their veins. “Think it’s impossible to be mad at you at the moment.” Her body was sated, but her mind was also uncharacteristically calm. She thought back over what she had just experienced, and the entire memory was there now, from the moment she’d seen him in the hospital. Beneath the undeniable attraction – good Lord, that hat – there was an inexplicable familiarity that made less sense to Audrey than it did to Sarah. She knew why Nathan found Sarah familiar. But even though their futures were entwined, why would that extend before their first meeting?

But it was mostly that familiarity that had prompted Sarah to let things go so far. She was all about seizing the moment, but she had a good head on her shoulders and she rarely let a moment evolve to that particular conclusion. As a nurse, she knew full well the potential consequences of such a tryst. But the way he’d looked at her, the way he’d leaned into her touch, she just hadn’t cared.

“I did seduce you,” she hummed, smiling at the memory.

“I didn’t put up much of a fight.”

He hadn’t really, but that was all right. She did understand better. Now that she recalled every toe-curling detail, she found it impossible to fault him for it.

“I’m not mad. You always know how to take care of me.” Her voice dropped, making the simple statement lascivious.

“I aim to please,” he quipped.

She laughed against his chest. “That you do.”

He was still wearing the hat, though it was wildly askew. She straightened it, smiling at his feigned consternation.

“So you remember all of it?”

“Yep. Not everything about Sarah,” she clarified. “Just our little backseat tryst and what led up to it.”

“You really feel fine? No headache?” He brushed the hair back from her forehead, lingering.

“I feel better than fine. Best way to recover lost memories, hands down.”

“I hope that won’t work on too many of them.” He paused, seemingly to realize what he said. “I’m sorry. That’s selfish of me.”

She shrugged. “It’s all right. I don’t exactly like the thought of there being a bunch of people still running around Haven that one of my former selves were involved with. That’s one of the reasons I wasn’t madder when I found out about James. If my former self had a kid, I’d rather you be the father than Vince or Dave or someone I may have passed on the street and not even known. I just wish I’d found out differently.”

“I didn’t know how to tell you.” Pressed together on the couch there was no way for him to
distance himself from her, but she could tell he wanted to. “Once I got back to Haven it felt like I’d betrayed your trust. I’d been with you without asking and I couldn’t stand the thought of you hating me for that. We weren’t talking much anyway, so I just kept my mouth shut. I’m sorry.”

“I know,” she said with a sigh. “I don’t like it much, but I get it. We both have a lot to be sorry for. It’s a good thing the makeup sex is pretty phenomenal.”

He huffed a loud breath through his nose. “Yeah.”

She wished she could spend the rest of the day like this, but they had plans with James later and she had to go see Chris to look at some photos he’d taken when he went back to Ms. Nightingale’s collection. Nathan made her feel so content. In any incarnation, apparently.

That idea took hold and wouldn’t let her go. “What if I’d come out of the Barn this time as someone else?” She pushed herself up on her elbow so she could see him better. “What if instead of Audrey Parker I’d been … I don’t know … a bartended named Lexie?”

He frowned. “What’s Lexie like?”

She considered it. “She’s more carefree. From somewhere out west … Arizona, maybe? She’s … sexy. Long hair. Tight clothes. A little bit slutty. And she makes a mean Screaming Orgasm.”

“What?” he choked, and she laughed at his mortification.

“It’s a drink. Didn’t you go to college?”

“Not the same one as you, apparently.”

Her laughter faded, the situation getting less and less funny the more she thought about it. “How would you have felt about her?”

“Parker.” He reached up to pull her back against him but she resisted.

“Just answer me, Nathan.”

“I wanted you to be the one to come out of that Barn, Audrey. I used to have nightmares that you wouldn’t. Even though there was no precedent for you staying the same I prayed for that, every night – and I don’t even believe God cares. I wanted you to come back you, with your tough girl attitude and your blond hair and all the memories of everything we’d been through together. I wanted my partner, my friend. I am so grateful, each and every day, that you’re here with me now.”

She blinked stupid, girly tears out of her eyes. “But if I wasn’t?”

She could see how much the idea of that pained him, and it helped, somehow. “It would depend on what this Lexie person was like. But if she was anything like you – and history seems to suggest that she would be – if she was brave, and strong, and didn’t put up with any of my crap, and was willing to help the Troubled, whatever it took – then I think, as long as you came back after a few years instead of a few decades and I wasn’t old and kind of creepy, that I wouldn’t have been able to help falling in love with you again.”

She blinked stupid, girly tears out of her eyes. “But if I wasn’t?”

His words took root in her heart and swelled, pressing on her lungs. “I would have missed Audrey, and I would have hoped that she could remember you somehow, but I wouldn’t have been able to turn my back on whoever you were now. I’d want to find a way to keep you safe, and in Haven, with me. I don’t know if that’s what you wanted to hear, but it’s the truth.”
She collapsed against him, wrapping her arms around him and holding tight.

“Are you upset?”

She shook her head against his chest. “I dunno. Not at you,” she assured. “I don’t like not understanding who I am. Even as we fill in the pieces it just gets more confusing.”

“I know who you are.”

Her heart fluttered the same way it had the first time he’d said those words to her. He’d always been her rock, giving her strength when she had none left of her own.

“What were you going to say that day? You never finished your sentence.” She had an idea, but she’d always wondered.

“Because of you I can face each day, knowing someone’s got my back. Knowing you’re watching out for the people of Haven, doing everything possible to help them, and the least I can do is help you with that.”

“You’re pretty good at that.”

“You helped me too. Long before you ever touched me. You didn’t let me wallow. Reminded me how to smile. Gave me a purpose.”

“Loving the Troubled?”

“Loving you.”

She blushed and pushed at his shoulder. “You’re such a sap.”

He smiled at her, unbothered. “Your curse was that none of the curses could touch you. You were a witness to the damage Morgan did, and you just wanted to help, and the only way to do it was to sacrifice yourself, again and again. All those identities the couple in the Barn gave you … they were coping mechanisms, to try to protect you from all that pain you couldn’t stop.”

But that was exactly what she found most troubling. She knew Audrey’s memories before Haven weren’t her own but she still clung to them, because as unhappy as most of them were she liked who they’d made her into, all the little quirks that made her the woman lying there in Nathan’s arms. She didn’t want that to be just a construct. “I like Audrey Parker.”

“So do I.” He punctuated the statement with a kiss. “The Barn’s gone. She’ll always be here now, and I’m glad. But you don’t need to be afraid of who you are underneath that. I’m not.”

“But I am. I’m terrified. You didn’t read that journal. She was so hopeless, Nathan. And he hurt her so badly, whoever he was.”

“I’m not him.” His fingers wrote promises on her skin, starting at her hands and sweeping upwards. “I won’t let anyone hurt you like that. This time, whatever happens, you’re not alone.”

She nodded, unable to contradict him about this when his determination was so evident. She didn’t mention how alone she’d be if the Guard forced her to kill him, or if something else unexpected happened. She wanted him to promise her this, because if some tragic moment came she wanted him to mean it.

He kissed her almost lazily, and then he gazed down at her with admiration. “There’s a Seadogs
game this afternoon. We should take James. We can introduce him to one of Haven’s finest traditions.”

She didn’t care much for baseball, but she cared plenty for her boys, and she figured the other spectators would probably be too wrapped up in the game to care too much about the scandal of her and Nathan being out together.

Spending a day out in the sunlight with them both felt like just what she needed.
Chapter 27

The hat never made it out of the living room, and Audrey found it there a few days later, tossed carelessly behind the couch. She rubbed the brim between her fingers, smiling indulgently at the dual memories it evoked. She let her mind linger in a few of the steamier details before setting it on the coffee table. As soon as she stepped away she realized it had given her another gift – her next course of action.

What she needed was something that helped her remember Lucy. A trigger, just as the hat had been for Sarah. That woman was still an enigma, when most frustratingly of all she should have been most in reach. Even though Audrey had found plenty of people who’d been helped by Lucy, none of them knew her secrets. Audrey needed to get those from Lucy herself.

Nothing had sparked in her when she’d sifted through Lucy’s hideous clothing, but she was considering a little fashion show when she remembered she possessed something else of the photographer’s.

The locket was tucked away in her jewelry box next to the mysterious ring. She handled it gingerly, half ready to be violently shoved into the past like she’d been when she touched Prudence’s pendant. But there was no flood of recognition. It remained a simple silver locket with her cursive initials scripted on the front. There was nothing inside when she opened it. She wished there was a picture of Lucy and James. Even a picture of Lucy and Garland, the Teagues, someone. What good was an empty locket? She ran her fingers over the smooth interior, aggravated, but her nail caught on a nick she’d thought merely a scratch. She heard a faint click and the inside of the locket sprang forward, revealing a second compartment holding a single scrap of paper.

Audrey turned it over and read the tiny words scribbled there: *Take Duke to West Docks.*

The words meant nothing to her, and they spurred no recognition, but she grabbed her phone. Duke answered on the second ring.

“You busy?” she asked.

“I’m at the restaurant, but I may be able to get someone to cover for me if a favorable alternative presents itself. What’s up?”

“Did Lucy ever take you to the West Docks?”

“Only if she was a terrible babysitter. I’ve told you, I really don’t remember us hanging out back then, but if that place was anything like it is now it’s definitely not a place to take a kid.”

It was funny how clearly she could picture Duke’s facial expressions even when they were talking on the phone. His irreverence steadied her, even as she felt the pressure of approaching deadlines and pieces that were taking too long to fall into place. Every day she grew more desperate – they were running out of time. “Can you meet me there in fifteen minutes?”

“Why exactly do you want to meet me at the shadiest part of town?”

She heard Duke’s hesitance, but ignored it. “Because Lucy told me to.”

Despite his reluctance, his answer was almost immediate. “I’ll be there.” She was grateful they didn’t have to play the *I don’t help cops* game today. She didn’t have the energy.
Her GPS got her to the docks in ten, and she checked for other visitors as she waited for Duke’s Jeep to arrive. He looked kind of squirrely when it did, five minutes late, and he kept scanning the area.

“There’s no one here,” Audrey assured. “I’ve already checked.”

Duke ran a hand over his ponytail. “Yeah, look. It’s the middle of the day so we should be fine, but I’d like to keep this little jaunt off the record. If anyone saw me here with a cop it’d totally kill my street cred.”

She raised an eyebrow. “That kind of shady, huh?”

“Of course I’m going to say no, because I’m an upstanding citizen – but yeah.” They began to inch around the perimeter. The whole place was eerily deserted. Haven was full of boats, but not a single one was tied here. Perhaps it had something to do with the ragged gap at the far edge of the platform, the wood mangled and half submerged in the water. In Haven, there were plenty of things that could have done that besides the ocean. What she didn’t know was why no one had bothered to fix it.

“How exactly did Lucy tell you to bring me here?” Duke asked, eyes still shifting nervously.

“There was a slip of paper in her locket.”

“It would have been too much to ask to tell you why, right?”

“It was a pretty small piece of paper.” She smiled, but Duke didn’t. “Are you okay?”

“I’ve never liked this place,” he admitted. “Not sure why.”

“What kind of shady stuff goes on down here?”

“You asking that as a cop, cause I’m not really comfortable disclosing—”

“I’m asking as a friend who’s only got a month to figure out the central mystery in her life before all her friends, including you, get killed for it. If there was something going on down here, Lucy could have gotten wrapped up in it.”

Duke nodded, relenting. “Smuggling, mostly. A little black market bartering. But the clientele down here, they don’t want to be disturbed.”

“So the less hardened criminals go to the East Docks?” she teased. Something about Duke’s demeanor was throwing her off. He took most things so cavalierly. There had to be a reason this was different.

“As a matter of fact they do.”

She wasn’t entirely sure if he was kidding, but she supposed it didn’t matter. There had been warmth in his voice again, and that helped.

“Any Troubled stuff?”

“Not that I’m aware of. But I have no idea what was happening thirty years ago, and that’s not the kind of thing you advertise even in this line of work.”

The place didn’t look particularly familiar, but truth be told she didn’t like it much either. There seemed to be something sinister in its decay. The ocean lapped at the abandoned posts, which were
crusted with barnacles. The place wasn’t very large, and she could see it all from the edge of the wooden planking, which was faded gray and heavily weathered. She felt exposed, their cars conspicuous in the gravel parking area just as they stood conspicuously in the center of the dock. If someone else showed up, there’d be nowhere to hide. It seemed a poor venue for deeds that were meant to be hidden.

There was some sort of stain near the center of the dock. “You probably don’t want to think too much about what that is,” Duke advised. Audrey ignored him and crouched near the spot, which was about two feet in diameter and roughly circular. It was dark and faded, but she could imagine it had been crimson once.

“I think it was blood,” she said, reaching out to touch.

Suddenly the light changed, the sun sinking further down the horizon, the sky darkening with clouds.

There was a man on the docks in front of her, clutching the shoulders of a boy, one who she recognized both from a photo and from the man he would become.

“Your time is coming to an end, Lucy.” The tone of his voice set her on edge. He wasn’t threatening her – yet – but he certainly wasn’t friendly. Even young Duke seemed to realize something was wrong.

“You’re right, Simon. The Barn comes tomorrow, and I’ll leave Haven. But I’d like to go knowing what happened to James.”

“We all leave this world wishing we knew something we don’t.”

“You don’t know who killed him, do you?”

“Course I don’t. But I saw the picture of you and Duke in the paper this afternoon. Don’t know what you think you’re playing at, hanging around my son, but I figured I might at least make the most of it. I knew you’d come here if he gave you the message. You could never stay away.”

“What do you want?”

“There are those who say if I kill you the Troubles will end for good. Not just for twenty-seven years.”

Ice ran down her spine. As much as she should at least entertain the notion, she couldn’t. “They’re wrong.”

“Don’t lie! Neither of us know if that’s true or not. What I do know is that you killed my father. He was a good man, and times got tough after he was gone. He deserves to be avenged.”

“He came after Sarah. She didn’t want to. It was self-defense.”

“Then maybe that’s what this is,” Simon raved. “Self-defense. Because it’s always you or us. The Crockers, or the girl in the middle of the Troubles. Doesn’t matter what name you carry. You’re poison to this town.”

Duke pulled on Simon’s sleeve. “Daddy, why are you yelling at Miss Lucy?”

“Send him away, Simon. Whatever happens here, he doesn’t need to see this.”
“But he does. He needs to be prepared. This is his legacy. Either you die here today for good or one day it’ll be him, staring you down right before you put a bullet in his heart.”

“It doesn’t have to be this way. I’m done with this town. I just want to go.”

“You didn’t want to go. You ran away. You were going to leave us to our curse!”

“I came back.”

“Only because someone was smart enough to put a bullet in your son. Wasn’t me. But I commend their planning.”

Wasn’t marked down in no record book, but Garland had given her a gun when people in town started to get cranky. She pulled it out of her coat now and pointed it at Simon, unable to stand his taunting. She could still see James on that beach, so pale in the midst of all that bloodstained sand.

Simon grinned, the savage glee transforming his face into something devilish. “There she is. Do you see that, son? She pretends to be a healer, but when it comes down to it she’s a killer just like us.”

“I’m not a killer.”

“But I am.”

Lucy cocked the gun as Simon pulled a knife from his belt, but instead of threatening her he jerked Duke into a stranglehold and held the knife against his throat.

“What are you doing?” she shrieked, the gun trembling in her hand.

“You don’t know what it’s like to carry my Trouble. The thrill when the Troubled blood hits my skin—I had some pretty good drugs back in my day but none of them compare. The rush. The power. The strength. And the knowledge that I can save whole families from repeating terrible fates. Hurting other people. My family has done a lot of good to this town.”

“Let Duke go,” she pleaded. “He’s your son.”

“Exactly. This will be his job one day. But will anyone thank him for it? No. He’ll be an outcast. Distrusted. And with good reason. Because this Trouble, it’s terrible to control. The hunger is always there. And in this town there are so many places to feast.”

“That’s why I always find your family. Because sometimes you need to be stopped.”

“Precisely. The cycle will continue unless we change the pattern. I can protect my family for all generations to come. Free us, like I’ve freed so many others.”

“Daddy, I’m scared.” Duke’s voice wrenched something in Lucy. Had James been scared, or had it happened too quickly for him to anticipate what was coming?

“There’s nothing to be afraid of Duke. This is for your own good.”

She didn’t know how Simon could be so damned calm. “You can’t do this.”

“Crockers have always had to make sacrifices for the greater good. That’s the point of our Trouble – kill one to save all the rest. I know you’ve grown fond of Duke. Thought you could turn him against his family, I’m sure. But I’ve got another boy back home. What about the children he’ll have some day? They’ll be safe from you if I do this. They’ll never have to be killers.”
“What are you going to tell his brother when Duke never comes home? What are you going to tell his mother?”

“That bitch left me a long time ago. Couldn’t understand what I had to do. Wade will, one day. He’ll be grateful when I tell him his brother died so he could be free.”

A mother would never be able to understand. “Let him go, Simon. This is your last warning.”

“Or what?”

The bullet went through Simon’s neck with a spray of blood. Father and son collapsed in a pile of red. Lucy dropped the gun and pried Simon’s arms away from Duke. The knife had nicked him during the fall, but the cut didn’t seem to be deep. Lucy pulled off her scarf and pressed it into Duke’s shaking hands. “Hold this to your neck. It’s going to be all right. Let’s get you away from here.”

Simon coughed, the sound gurgling through the hole in his throat. His voice had a terrible phlegmy quality and the wound bled profusely. “So the cycle continues. I don’t think he’ll have any trouble killing you now.”

Simon’s hand clamped onto Duke’s arm and held fast. “You come back here, son. No matter how far you run, the next time the Troubles return you need to come back and avenge me. Do you hear me? Promise.”

Duke’s pale skin with spattered with blood, his eyes wide. “I promise.”

“She’ll turn on you one day. Never forget that. She can’t be trusted.”

Simon started coughing again, and Lucy pulled Duke away, taking him to the edge of the dock so he wouldn’t have to see the light leave his father’s eyes. “I’m so sorry, Duke.” She wrapped her arms around the trembling boy. Shock was surely starting to sink in.

“Are you going to kill me one day?” There was no malice in it, just an exhausted curiosity that hurt almost more than if he’d been shouting at her.

“Never,” she swore, pulling away so she could look him in the face. She wanted to dab at his cheeks like she had after he’d played in the mud, but the blood was already starting to dry and she didn’t want any more of it on her hands. Her heart ached for this little boy, caught in something he should never have to understand. She could only hope what Sarah wrote held true, because she could easily see how he’d become exactly like his father after this, no matter how sweet a child he was.

She couldn’t guarantee her next incarnation would keep her promise if he came after her.

“I’m sorry you had to see that. So sorry. I couldn’t let you father hurt you. We’re friends, Duke. I need to go away, but we’re going to be friends again someday. Better friends, because you’ll be older then.”

“As old as you?” he asked with a wrinkled nose.

“Not exactly. But grown up. I’ll have different hair and a different name, but it’ll be me. I need you to remember that we’re friends, no matter what anyone says.”

“Friends.”
“Yes. You’re a good person, Duke. You need to remember that, whatever happens. You’re not a killer like your father. You’re better than that.”

“Why did he want to hurt me?”

That question would be Simon Crocker’s terrible legacy. “It’s complicated. You’ll understand one day. He had to make a terrible choice. But when it’s your turn you can make a better one.”

“I want to go home.”

“I’ll get you home in just a minute. I need you to do something else for me.” She reached into her camera bag and pulled out a battered book and a silver locket. She ripped a corner from the book, wrote a quick note, and hid it in the locket’s secret compartment. She’d planned on giving them to James, but it was too late for that now. This was the only option left to her.

She wasn’t sure it was even worth it, anyway. All this planning for someone else’s future and she’d leave with her life in ruins. Why hadn’t she been allowed to live whatever time she had in peace? “I need you to keep these safe for me, okay? It’s really important. I want you to give me the necklace the next time you see me. Tell me Lucy gave it to you, all right? And I need you to hide this book. You can’t tell anyone you have it. Just stash it someplace safe, like a pirate. One day I’ll ask you for it and I’ll need you to give it back. Can you do that for me?”

He nodded.

“Good boy. Let’s get you home.”

Audrey’s head was throbbing as she came to sprawled on the deck. As soon as her eyes locked with Duke’s – still the same color though the features of his face had changed – the memory came rushing back.

“What the hell just happened?” he asked, sounding uncharacteristically vulnerable as he sat up and rubbed at his head. Apparently he’d collapsed too.

She pulled herself upright and clutched her knees to her chest. “Oh my God, Duke. I’m so sorry.”

He narrowed his eyes and shook his head. “Sure we were watching the same thing? Because from what I saw you have nothing to apologize for.”

She was half afraid he had seen something different – and half hopeful. “I killed your father,” she whispered. “Right in front of you!”

She waited for that to turn him against her, just as his father had predicted. But he merely frowned. “You saved my life. I knew he was a bastard, but damn.”

Her stomach was still rolling at the thought of what she’d exposed him to. He’d been just a child. “I didn’t have to shoot to kill. I could have given him another chance to step down.”

“You did what you had to do. Now shut up and come here.” He patted the deck beside him. She didn’t feel like standing yet. Wasn’t sure her legs would hold her if she did. But at least she felt stronger than the last time this had happened. If she gave herself a few minutes to recover she could probably avoid another hospital visit.

His tone booked no argument, so she scooted closer and leaned her head against his shoulder. He looped his arm around her in a half hug, and she took a deep, shuddering breath, willing herself not to cry. It was hard to accept forgiveness could be so easily granted. It was also strange being so
close to Duke. Six months ago it had been rare for her to touch anyone willingly. But Nathan had taught her the value of human contact. This was different, of course - she cared for Duke, but not romantically. But there was something undeniably comforting about his embrace.

“Why didn’t I remember that before?” he asked. “I knew I’d seen my father die. I came back to Haven because I remembered promising I would. But I thought he was lost at sea. I didn’t know Lucy was there. I know the Barn takes all your memories but why are mine gone?”

“It isn’t the Barn that takes my memories,” she corrected, all the disparate clues starting to solidify with a blaze of clarity. As a cop she lived for these ah-ha moments where murderer and motive became clear. But rarely was it so personal. This time her life really did depending on figuring out the answers. “It’s the people in the Barn.”

“There’s someone in the Barn besides you?”

She’d told Nathan everything she read in Prudence’s journal, but she hadn’t been able to admit to Duke that she’d chosen to give up her former identities.

“Yeah. Related to someone else we know who has a tendency to play around with people’s memories.”

“How come whatever we do those old men are always in the middle of it?”

“Maybe it’s time to find out.”

He twisted his head to look at her, shocked by the righteous anger blazing in her tone. “You’re bleeding,” she noted. In the memory blood had been speckled across his face but now it just pooled under his nose.

He wiped his sleeve across his face and grimaced at what he saw. “So are you, sweetheart.”

She had tissues in the car. “Let’s skip the hospital visit. We’ve got work to do.”

“Want me to come with you?”

She shook her head, lifting it slightly so she didn’t knock against his shoulder. “If you’re sure.” There was something about his expression that reminded her of the child he had been and she grabbed his arm, hard.

“Hey.”

“You have it!” she exclaimed, not believing she hadn’t realized that immediately.

“Devilishly good looks? Cause that’s not new, but I’m glad you finally realized.”

She swatted his arm and then scrambled up, tugging him after her. “Lucy’s journal! The one that was Sarah’s. The one that might tell us how to stop all this.”

“Yeah, I get the picture. Hold on a sec. I don’t remember Lucy giving it to me.”

“But you have it! You had the locket! Think, Duke. You were supposed to keep it safe.”

He stepped out of her grasp. “It’s very hard to be zen when you’re shrieking at me. Give me a
minute, okay?”

“You were supposed to stash it somewhere safe,” she said desperately after an endless period of silence. Audrey Parker had never been good with patience.

“Like a pirate.” The words seemed to stir something in Duke. “That’s it! I buried a time capsule that year. Can’t off the top of my head remember why.”

“Do you remember where?”

“Nope.”

“Duke!” She didn’t know how he could sound so casual when their continued existence rested on this journal he’d hidden.

“Relax. All good pirates leave a map to their buried treasure.”

“You have a map?”

“Yep. You know, it’s funny. I dated the thing. Told myself to dig it up in thirty years. But I haven’t had time with everything that’s been going on.”

“I need that book, Duke.”

“I’ll get it, Aud. You and Nathan will have your happily ever after.”

There was something unsettling about the way he said that, but Audrey didn’t have time to dwell.

“Call me when you find it? I have to go talk to Vince.”

“Just Vince?”

She wasn’t used to the fury being directed at that man. “Just Vince,” she echoed darkly.
She found the man in question in the Herald office, bickering away at his brother behind their ancient computer.

“Get the hell out of here, Dave,” she snarled. The rage had been building through her entire drive and she could tell how close she was to snapping. She wasn’t used to losing control. But rarely did anyone so deserve her wrath.

“Well good afternoon to you too, Audrey.” Dave finished the sentence he was typing before he glanced up, nonplussed, and froze at the look on her face. In any other circumstance his shock would have been comical.

“I need to speak to Vince. Alone.”

“That really isn’t necessary. Anything you have to say to me you can say in front of him.” Vince didn’t look half as terrified as Dave and that pissed her off. Just because he used to be some tough guy in the Guard didn’t mean he could get away with everything.

“Okay then. So Dave, how did you feel when Vince had Sarah’s son killed?”

Dave immediately paled, and Audrey’s fragile hope that she’d misread the situation died. He pushed back out of his seat on shaky legs. “I’m gonna go.”

“You don’t have to,” Vince protested.

“You’re on your own here, brother.” Audrey heard the bell on the door signifying that he’d left, but she kept her eyes trained on Vince.

“Tell me I’ve got this wrong, Vince.”

The man heaved a heavy sigh. She could read the guilt engraved on his ancient features. “I wish that I could.”

His remorse did nothing to calm her sudden flash of hatred. She had to clamp her hands to her legs to keep herself from reaching for her gun. She’d never wanted to hurt another person so desperately – except for the time Nathan had been lying dead in front of her.

“What the hell is wrong with you? You told me you loved Sarah. Was that just your sick way of covering your tracks?”

“I did love Sarah.” Vince’s deep voice took on an air of authority when he raised it, but she wasn’t afraid or impressed. “Everything I’ve done since she left has been because I loved her.”

“That’s bull! Maybe you were obsessed with her. But it wasn’t love. I know what love feels like. I could never kill Nathan’s child, whether I was its mother or not.”

Vince’s face had become blotched and grotesque with a passion she’d never seen him express. “You don’t understand! Sarah charged me with protecting this town, whatever the cost. But Lucy was different. Selfish. She ran. The Hunter was coming. If she didn’t go into that Barn it wouldn’t even matter if the Troubles stayed because the whole town would be destroyed. Howard came to me and said I needed to draw Lucy back to Haven. He’s the one who suggested such drastic measures. But he promised that as long as Lucy took James into the Barn with her he’d be revived.”
Howard’s meddling seemed in character, but she wasn’t about to let Vince off the hook so easily. “What if he hadn’t told you that?” she demanded. “Would you still have done it?”

He sidestepped her question. “Sarah wanted two things – to save Haven and more time with her son. What I did gave her both.”

Hearing him call James’s death some twisted gift hurt like he’d punched her in the gut. She would always remember the fear in James’s eyes when he first saw her as Audrey. Even now she sometimes caught him flinching away, as if his first instinct toward her was wariness. It wasn’t just that Vince had murdered her son. He’d murdered the trust between them.

“Did Sarah also want her son to think she’d killed him to save herself?” she spat.

“What are you talking about?” For the first time during their confrontation Vince seemed unbalanced. She pressed her advantage, finding some savage glee in his confusion.

“When James came out of the Barn he thought Lucy had killed him.”

“That doesn’t make any sense. It wasn’t her, obviously.”

“I know about your little friends in the Barn. Did you get them to rewrite his memories so he couldn’t point the finger at you?” she accused.

“Stop letting your emotions cloud your judgment and think like a detective for a minute. If I was worrying about protecting myself I would have made sure his body never went into the Barn. Lucy and James were supposed to have time together. I don’t know what went wrong.”

There was something about that whole process that set flags off in her mind, begging her to work through it, but she didn’t let herself be distracted now.

“But you did know that it was your ancestors who lived in the Barn and gave me new identities.”

He paused, and she could practically see him weighing his options, sifting the truth to fit his agenda.

“Damn it Vince!” she shouted, and her palm flattened against her holster to steady herself. “Full disclosure. You owe me that.” She could see him swaying, but he didn’t topple. “You owe Sarah that.”

Evoking her former self did the trick, leaving her to wonder if perhaps he had loved Sarah after all. She had believed it at the time of his admission, but she couldn’t fathom how he could love Sarah and kill her son. She’d do anything to save Nathan from such pain. “I didn’t know, back when Sarah was in Haven. But I saw them once or twice around town. The family resemblance was obvious. When they showed up again when Lucy was here, practically unaged, I grew suspicious. Dave and I confronted them. They told us of the pact they’d made for a never-ending life together. They weren’t willing to do anything that jeopardized that. I thought if Lucy could keep her memories next time she returned she’d be more willing to go into the Barn. But they said that wasn’t allowed, and they would not be swayed.”

“So you went to plan B. Having James killed by this own grandfather.”

“I certainly didn’t know that,” Vince said sharply. “There was no reason to suspect it. Nathan was just a boy. Far younger than James.”

“But it was Max Hansen, right? What, did he owe you a favor?”
Vince scowled. “Max Hansen didn’t do favors for anyone. He was a violent, unpredictable man who beat his wife and son and terrorized anyone weaker than himself. Garland wanted to make him pay, but he was too noble to do it. I saw an opportunity to put him away for a long time. You remember Ginger – the little girl who could make anyone do what she wanted? Her grandfather did owe me a favor – so I had him give Hansen the order. I knew afterwards Hansen would figure out what happened and go after that family. So I made him forget. He knew I’d been involved – well, me or Dave, but Dave wouldn’t have the balls to go against him. It gnawed on him that he couldn’t remember why he’d done it. All those years in Shawshank, unable to figure it out. He threatened me when he got out. I thought maybe I’d have to kill him, but Garland got to him first.”

“That’s Nathan’s father you’re talking about,” she said with disgust.

“No it isn’t. Garland was that boy’s father, and that’s a damn good thing for you, because who knows what kind of monster he would have become under that man’s thumb.”

“Nathan could never be a monster!”

“Spoken like a fool in love. There’s a little monster inside all of us. That’s what makes the Troubles so dangerous. They bring it out. Give it power. Max was isolated from the world. Invincible yet untouched. Unable to be comforted. Pain lost meaning because he forgot what it felt like. He couldn’t connect to the world or anyone else. All he had left was anger. Tell me you haven’t seen the same brewing in Nathan.”

Her heart recoiled at the notion. Nathan was never cruel. Despite his affliction he held on to compassion – a compassion he’d certainly never learned from Max. She doubted he’d gotten that from Garland either. The Chief had raised him to be fair and strong, but he hadn’t been generous with affection. For all his flaws there was something inherently good in Nathan, and Audrey would never accept otherwise.

But she had worried about him when he started to infiltrate the Guard. He’d been ruthlessly willing to do whatever it cost to protect her – and the cost had been catastrophic. His anger had built ever since she pushed him away, its explosion leaving Howard dead and the cycle broken.

But it wasn’t the same. He’d never meant to hurt anyone, and the guilt of what he’d done still haunted him. He’d never lay a hand on her or their child or take his misfortune out on others.

Except his lot wasn’t the same as Max’s, because he had her to drive away the numbness that ate away at him. He could feel her touch, offering solace and pleasure and blissful moments of normalcy to tether him to a life that was otherwise so unfulfilling.

Even without her Nathan would never have become a monster. But he may have been different. Colder.

She shook her head. Such conjecture didn’t matter. He had her now, and she’d make sure he always did. “There’s clearly a bit of monster in you.”

“I came to terms with that a long time ago.”

“You won’t get away with this.”

“I already have, my dear. What are you going to charge me with? James is alive now – and the same age he was when he was killed. How are you going to explain that in court? There’s no evidence linking me to the crime even if you could establish that it happened. Hansen is dead. Unless you’ve recorded this conversation there’s nothing to tie me to the murder. If you try to take
me into custody you won’t be able to hold me. They’ll forget why I was there.”

Her hands shook with anger as she pulled her gun. Vince had to be punished, and if the legal system failed her she’d have to take matters into her own hands. “I could just kill you.”

He didn’t flinch. She forced her hands to still and released the safety. “You could. But you won’t. You’re better than that. At least Sarah was.”

“What about the monster inside and all that?”

“You’ve spent hundreds of years keeping yours in check, Prudence. This won’t be the day that you snap.”

Of course he’d known her original identity all along. Damn meddling bastard. “I’ve never had a child to protect before.”

“You still do. You’re forgetting that the boy’s alive again. Do you really want to toss away the life you’ve built for revenge for a crime that’s already been undone?”

Truth was when the Troubles were involved law and order held little sway in their town. She wasn’t sure anyone would charge her for killing Vince long as she spun it the right way.

But Nathan would know. And as angry as he’d be for what Vince had done to James, she didn’t think he’d approve.

She clicked the safety back on but didn’t lower the gun.

“There’s not a day that I don’t look at you and wonder if I made the right choice. You can hate me for it. I may deserve that. But remember this – your existence as you know it is only possible because of what I did. If I hadn’t lured Lucy back this town would have been razed by the meteor storm. Thousands of lives would have been lost. You’d never have become Audrey Parker. Lucy would have never seen Nathan again, even if he did survive. James probably would have ceased to exist, because he would never have been conceived. Ask yourself – is that what you want?”

She was still reeling from the shock of the alternate reality he painted when her phone rang. She jumped, fumbling with the gun as she put it back in its holster and pulled out her phone. She saw Duke’s name flash on the screen and had the irrational feeling that as soon as she picked up he’d know what she’d been doing. Of all people Duke wouldn’t judge her – but she wanted to be better than this. Wanted him to think better of her.

“Tell me you found it,” she demanded. And there, on top of the maelstrom of rage and confusion Vince’s story evoked, the anticipation came rushing back. Duke might have uncovered the final chapter of secrets, which could either keep her in Haven or doom her and everyone she cared about. The clock was running down and she needed a weapon to make her stand. She had not wanted to go into the Barn, but she’d convinced herself it was for the greater good. But no good would come from dying at the hands of the Guard, and the thought of losing Nathan, James, and Duke was unbearable.

“Bossy,” he teased, all lighthearted sass that she normally appreciated, but right now they had no time.


“I’ve got it,” he said solemnly.
She closed her eyes against the relief that washed over her and took a deep, steadying breath. Maybe it would be okay after all.

“Meet me my place.”

“I’ll be there.”

She hung up and glanced at Vince, who was watching her with unhidden curiosity. “What was that about?” he had the audacity to ask.

“Stay the hell away from my family,” she answered, and left him behind without another word.

When she pulled into Nathan’s driveway ten minutes later Duke was leaned against the hood of his jeep with a weather worn book in hand.

“I didn’t look inside,” he said, holding it out toward her. “Figured you should do the honors.”

She ignored the proffered volume and threw her arms around his neck, pulling him into a fierce embrace that threw him off guard. “Thank you,” she whispered into his shoulder, grateful for the absolution he offered so freely almost as much as the clue he had found.

She could hear Nathan’s Bronco rumbling to a stop and the door slam, but he didn’t interrupt them and she couldn’t pull herself away quite yet.

“It’s weird to think that little book could solve all this, maybe. We may have left ourselves the answers and then forgot.” It was a banner day when Duke got serious enough to philosophize. But while the prospect of ending the Troubles should have excited her she was too drained to even contemplate it. The last few months had been exhausting, and she was reaching her breaking point. Lucy had killed Duke’s father in front of him and nearly let the town burn and Audrey had almost put a bullet in Vince’s head, and those were only the developments of the day. She couldn’t begin to fathom what Sarah and Lucy’s journal would tell her. She wasn’t sure she had the strength.

All she wanted was a quiet life with Nathan by her side. She didn’t want every moment to be a fight for the town’s salvation and her own continued existence.

“What if it doesn’t work?” she whispered. She hated letting Duke see her so weak, but he’d never judged her for it before.

“It will.”

“How can you be so sure?”

He pulled back slightly and offered her a wry smile. “We proved my old man wrong, you know. We are friends, despite what happened. No need to kill each other. God, that would have pissed him off.” He chuckled, and she couldn’t help but follow suit. “But that overprotective boyfriend of yours might kill me if I don’t let go of you, so I should probably scram.”

She dropped her arms and offered him a watery smile.

“You call me if that book tells you anything I can help with.”

They had come such a long way from the time when she’d had to strong-arm him into favors. “I will.”

He pressed the book into her hand. “Relax, Aud. We’re getting to your happy ending.”
The sentence was so uncharacteristic coming from Duke that she snorted. “Wow. Of the three of us I thought Nathan was the sap.”

“Lucky for you I’m always right.”

He turned away with a waggle of his eyebrows, offering Nathan a messy salute. “Howdy, Nate.”

Nathan grunted a response. Audrey approached him slowly, not sure she had the energy to argue if he had the wrong idea.

But his face changed from neutral to concerned as he got a good look at her.

“You all right?” he asked, reaching out to brush the hair out of her face.

She leaned into the contact, closing her eyes to savor the feel of his callouses against her skin. “I don’t know,” she admitted. He stepped closer, and she could feel the warmth radiating from him. “I should be.” She pitched forward to lean against his solid chest and his arm snaked around her waist. “But I don’t think I am.”

“Hey.” His thumb stroked a deliberate pattern across her cheekbone. “What happened?”

What hadn’t happened in the hundreds of years she’d paid for someone else’s crimes, leaving broken lives in her wake? But he just meant in the last few hours. She’d have to tell him about Simon and Vince and the sins of the past, but right now it was the future they’d have to face. She pulled back enough to show him the book she was holding. “I found Sarah’s journal.”

His eyes widened. “Where?”

“Duke buried it. Lucy gave it to him for safekeeping. Neither of us remembered until today.”

Nathan’s eyes narrowed, and she knew he’d connected the dots. But she was extraordinarily grateful when he didn’t press her about how dangerous it was to remember.

“What does it say?”

“I don’t know. Haven’t read it yet.”

“Come inside,” he suggested, gently tugging on her hand. She linked their fingers together and followed, letting him pull her toward the couch. Once she was settled she stared down at the book in question. The cover was worn brown leather, with the word “Sarah” embossed in gold block letters. The edges of the pages were gilded. She lifted it toward her face. There seemed to be something familiar about the smell, but the memories danced just beneath the surface of her consciousness, out of reach.

“Do you want me to leave you alone?” he asked softly.

“No!” She clutched his hand so tightly it might have been painful for him, but he didn’t flinch. She wasn’t sure why this was different from Prudence’s journal. She’d been desperate for space then and he’d been reluctant to give it to her. Now he was offering to go and she needed him to stay. She wanted to curl into his side so his warmth would remind her of his presence. She wanted him to be there to hold her if it all fell apart. “Stay. Please.”

“Course.”

She scooted into him and he slid his fingers into her hair, tugging the band free so it tumbled
around her shoulders. He’d gotten good at the move. For weeks he’d snapped them in anticipation or left her hair in a tangled mess. The trick, he’d learned, what to search for what he couldn’t feel.

“We’re going to be okay, you know,” he said after she’d stared at the cover for a few minutes, unable to open it. “Sarah and Lucy had a plan. No matter what it is, I’m not giving you up.”

His words swelled in her chest, her battered heart so desperate to believe them. “How can you be so calm now? You were such a mess when I came back. Now I’m the one losing it.”

He leaned down to press a lingering kiss to her forehead. “Only one of us needs to be strong at once. You’ve been holding me up for a long time. Let me take this watch.”

She nodded against him, helpless against the warm tears that rolled down her checks.

“I believe in you. Always have. You can do this.”

She kissed him, letting him show her with actions what for once he’d already found the perfect words for. When she pulled away she looked down in determination and opened the journal. There was Sarah’s familiar script she’d seen in her letter to James. But suddenly Audrey realized this wasn’t where she needed to start. She already knew most of Sarah’s story. It was Lucy’s journey she needed to understand.

She flipped the book over and turned to the last page.

She’d seen Lucy’s handwriting inside the locket, but that had only been a few words. Her script was narrow and slightly messy, in manuscript rather than cursive. It seemed to match the woman she’d met what seemed like a lifetime ago, who’d spoken of another with the same name and same memories, but a different face. Audrey’s face. The original Lucy Ripley.

With a deep breath, Audrey started reading.

_The curse was cast to prevent Prudence from marrying her love. It is sustained on the potential energy of that union which never was. If the wedding were to take place, the curse would no longer have purpose or power to sustain it._

There were two Polaroid photos taped side by side of pages from some ancient, yellowed book of old fashioned names. Two were circled in thick Sharpie.

Prudence Audrey White.
Thaddeus Nathaniel Hansen.

And then Lucy’s handwriting again, in all caps and underlined.

_FIND NATHAN._

Audrey dropped the book with a squeak, her mind trying to process the revelations crashing over her in waves.

“Audrey.”

Nathan turned her head toward him gently, his eyes beseeching her for answers. But when she opened her mouth no sound came out and she could only shake her head unhelpfully.

He plucked the book out of her lap, skimmed the last page quickly, and then closed it with a boom like a thunderclap.
“Marry me.”

Her head was still shaking, but his plea unfroze her vocal chords as panic clawed up her throat. “Nathan, don’t. We have to talk about this.”

“What’s there to talk about? I love you more than life itself. If all I have to do to end the Troubles is marry you – God that’s fantastic.” His face had split into a dazzling grin, but she wasn’t sure she could breathe.

This was not how this was supposed to go. They were supposed to end the Troubles together, and he was supposed to marry her – someday – but these two things were not supposed to be tied together in some twisted act her former selves had plotted out fifty odd years ago. Or four hundred, depending on who you asked.

“I don’t want you to have to marry me just to keep me around.”

He sobered instantly at her distress, his hands reaching up to cradle her face. “Audrey,” he started, before shaking his head and letting out a labored breath. “Parker. You listen to me, and don’t you ever forget this. I am not asking you to marry me because of some book. There is nothing in this world that would make me more honored than you agreeing to be my wife. I’ve wanted to spend the rest of my life with you for a long time. If we weren’t so consumed by the Troubles I would have already asked you to marry me. But with all the pressure you’ve been under I didn’t want to freak you out. I’d hoped we could put all this behind us first. I’m sorry that we can’t but I promise you – I am not asking you to marry me because of that book. The book is just the reason I’m asking you to marry me now.”

He was looking at her with so much love and devotion, his handsome features brimming with intense admiration. It should have felt perfect and it didn’t.

“You’re not him,” she whispered.

“I know, but I’m as close as we’re going to get after four hundred years. Thaddeus Nathaniel and Prudence Audrey. Our awful middle names. That can’t be a coincidence.”

Which was exactly what she was afraid of. It was too neat. Too orchestrated.

“I don’t want you to be him,” she admitted.

He dropped her face and stood up. “It’s a little late in the game to go looking for a long lost cousin or something.” He was trying to make a joke out of it but she could tell that she’d hurt him. She reached out and grabbed his hand so he couldn’t retreat too far.

“Stop it. Of course I want you. It’s him I don’t want. This Thaddeus Hansen.” She spat the name, Prudence’s misery still fresh somehow after four hundred years. “He hurt me so badly, Nathan. He didn’t believe in me, and then he married the woman who cursed us all. And that’s supposed to be the cure? Marrying him?”

“He was an idiot. I would never do that to you.”

“You already did.” The words were out of her mouth before she could stop them. Once she saw the devastation cross his features she wished desperately that she could take them back. He was trying to save her – love her – and she was destroying him. But this needed to be said. “I needed you, and you chose Jordan.”

He pulled out of her grasp, rocked back on his heels and clenched his jaw as if he was readying
himself for another sucker punch. “I never wanted Jordan. But I understood her. Thought I could help. Instead I used both our Troubles against her. I’ve never been more ashamed of anything in my entire life. The worst part is whenever I was with her all I could think about was you. Why do you think I get so crazy every time you remember your past lives? I think about what you went through in that haunted house and on that cliff - how you needed me and I didn’t even know. It kills me. If I could get Stuart Mosley to send me back to do it all over I would. I can’t change the past, but I promise I will never, ever do anything like that again. I will fight for you, no matter how you try to push me away. Please don’t let her come between us again.”

She nodded through bleary eyes, unable to deny his earnestness. She knew he felt bad about Jordan and didn’t want to turn this into a guilt trip. “Okay,” she whispered. “Okay.” But even she wasn’t sure if she was agreeing to his proposal or just to let go of the past.

Not even in her childhood affection-starved nightmares had she imaged herself fucking up a moment like this so badly.

He sat down beside her again and pulled both her hands into his lap, running his fingers up her arms and then brushing his thumbs down to her wrists, leaving blazes of heat in their wake. When had she gotten so cold?

“What’s going on here, Parker? If you really don’t want to marry me then we’ll find another way. But don’t give me excuses. Please.”

He sounded so sad she was struck by the appalling thought that he might take back his proposal, and it was the resulting terror that stole over her that made her realize she needed to assure he did no such thing. How had she let him think that for even a minute?

“No!” She clamped down on his arms so hard that this time he did flinch. “I mean yes. God, yes, I want to marry you! So much. Haven’t I said that already?”

“Nope.” But there was a light in his eyes again, a smirk on his lips and a touch of humor in his voice. Something loosened in her chest, some of the panic dissipating into the air around them. “Too busy freaking out.”

“I do,” she assured, leaning over to rest her ear over his heart, the steady beating soothing her jittery nerves. He wrapped his arms around her and she was instantly enveloped in safe – a feeling she’d striven for all her life and only ever found with him.

Maybe there was the problem. It wasn’t that she didn’t want this. It’s that she’d wanted it for so long.

“I want this to be real,” she admitted. “I want us to be real.”

He combed a hand through her hair. “Course it’s real.”

She looked up at him. “Is it though? Lucy left me a book of instructions on how I needed to find you. And those names – our first and middle names were switched four hundred years ago. If that’s not predestination I don’t know what is. Did we even have any choice in the matter?”

She waited for his face to crumble as he realized their entire relationship had been built on a foundation they hadn’t constructed. But he just kept smiling at her, his hand stroking through her hair, unperturbed.

“Maybe Lucy and Sarah had a plan, but you and I didn’t know about it. We fell in love anyway. It’d be different if the book told you to marry Dwight or Stan. That wouldn’t be real.”
“I dunno, me and Stan are pretty hot and heavy when you’re not around.”

He growled, and she giggled into his neck.

“There’s my girl,” he said, his fondness sending her blood quivering.

“Maybe it was fate or reincarnation or someone pulling the strings. I don’t know how the universe works. Frankly I don’t care. It doesn’t matter to me why we fell in love, just that we did. I told you – I want to marry you whether it ends the Troubles or not. But you gotta admit, that’d be pretty nice.”

She allowed herself just a few seconds to consider it – the town at peace and her husband with all senses intact.

“Seems a little too easy.”

“Really?” he said with a snort. “Cause this hasn’t exactly been a walk in the park.”

She rolled her eyes. “You’re right, I guess. But I was picturing some kind of quest. Maybe a gateway to another world.”

“This proposal has felt like a quest,” he teased.

“Ask me again,” she said earnestly, suddenly struck by the need to have some romantic memory unsullied by supernatural quandaries. A story they could tell their future children. And James and Duke, who didn’t need to know how much time she’d spent hysterical. “Pretend the last fifteen minutes didn’t happen and ask me again.”

He slid out of her grasp and got down on one knee beside the coffee table. When he raised her right hand to his lips and placed a soft kiss there her veins filled with butterflies. Their eyes were level and his were shining. She could hear her heartbeat in the silence. And God, how she wanted him, more than anything else she’d ever fathomed wanting.

Miracles of miracles, he wanted her too.

“Audrey Prudence Parker,” he said, voice low and thick. Her breath caught and her heart swelled, and she simultaneously wanted him to hurry up and to stay in the moment forever. “I love you more than I could ever say, and I want to spend the rest of my life with you, whether that’s two months or two centuries. Will you marry me?”

This time she didn’t hesitate. “Yes.” She pounced on him, her lips finding his and her hands finding their way into his hair. He pressed her closer, one hand splayed against her cheek and the other making its way under her shirt to rest, warm and steadying, on the small of her back. Since she wasn’t used to being on his level the angle was unfamiliar, but his hand guided her and she was too dizzy with thoughts of the future to care much.

When they broke for air she stepped off the couch and pulled him upright, sure his knees would appreciate the relief even if he hadn’t noticed the strain, and then she lost herself in him again.

When her head finally cleared after the second kiss she pulled herself away, ignoring his puppy dog pout as her mind raced. “So, getting married. What do we have to do? Get a license, I guess. How long does that take? Do couples have to get blood tests in Maine? Gosh, I hope that doesn’t turn up anything scandalous, like me being four hundred years old. You don’t think there’s any chance we’re related or something awful?”
“No, I don’t,” he said drolly, but he was grinning like a fool and it was infectious. “Let’s start with the ring, okay? I think this was supposed to come before all the making out. You got me distracted.” He reached under his collar and pulled out the chain he always wore. The ring dangled there, all sparkle and promise.

“PAH,” she recalled with dawning realization as she held out her hand. “Prudence Audrey Hansen.”

“Dense, weren’t we?” Nathan said with a chuckle as he slid the ring on her waiting finger. “I’ve been carrying this around for years.”

“And I’ve got the wedding ring.” But that didn’t bother her the way it would have half an hour ago. She looked down at her hand and had to blink back tears. The ring fit perfectly, the pale metal shiny against her skin. It felt like she’d been waiting forever to wear it.

She had known, when he’d been dead, tragedy making her feelings sharp and clear. “I have always loved you.”

Sarah had known too. It’s why she’d given herself to a stranger.

They’d never been strangers. Not really.

“Mighta been an idiot, but he was one hell of a blacksmith.”

She laughed, the intensity of the moment lifted. “So, where do we go next? City Hall?”

His disgust was palpable. “We’re not getting married in City Hall.”

She rolled her eyes. “I don’t care where we get married. We just need to break the curse, get Bernie off our back. Make you better,” she added shyly, unsure if he’d taken the time to let that sink in.

“Member how I told you I wasn’t marrying you to break some curse? We’re only going to get married once. It should be special.”

“We don’t have time. If the Troubles aren’t gone in six weeks—”

“Yeah, six weeks. Not six hours. We can take a couple of them to make some arrangements. Aren’t women supposed to dream about their weddings?”

“Apparently I did, back in the 1600’s. Been a little distracted ever since.” Audrey Parker had never been one to read bridal magazines and fantasize about marrying celebrities. She’d been pretty resigned to living on her own.

“Then I’ll take care of the planning. All you have to do is show up in a dress. Deal?” She found it adorable that Nathan cared enough to do that, when she’d honestly be content to get hitched on the way home from work. She was curious about what he’d come up with. The man was pretty good at romantic gestures.

“Do I really have to wear a dress?” she pouted just to rib him on, not because she actually minded.

“Normally I’d say you don’t have to wear anything at all,” he answered, his voice so low it made her shiver. “But since our guests will include Duke and our son, you should probably wear something.”
She could feel herself blush. “Duly noted.” She glanced down at the ring and spun it once around her finger.

“Shame the initial are wrong,” she noted. “Should be APW. Audrey Prudence Wuornos.”

The look of raw hunger that crossed his face when she said his last name obliterated any lingering fear that he didn’t want this with all his heart and soul. He swept her into his arms, and she squeaked and threw her arms around his neck as she suddenly found herself off the ground.

“Where are we going?” she asked, but she already had a pretty good idea.

“To celebrate,” he answered as he ducked down to press a kiss to her exposed throat. “All. Night. Long.”

Sometimes her fiancé had some damn good ideas.

Hours later she peered over at him as they caught their breath after their most recent go-round. His hair was sticking up in every direction, and she reached out to pat it down fondly, to absolutely no avail. “I really hate to break this up, but I’m starving,” she said dramatically, clutching at her stomach. “If you don’t feed me there’s no way I’m making it until morning.”

He pushed himself into a sitting position as she watched his muscles contract and his skin glisten. She would never get tired of seeing him like this. Her very own Adonis.

“I’m sure there’s something in the fridge.”

She shook her head. “That’ll keep you out of bed too long. Can we order a pizza?”

“Yeah.” He grinned at her, every pore radiating such absolute happiness she couldn’t help but grin back. It was like he was glowing. He’d been that way since he’d taken her to bed, and it was kind of ridiculous. But there was an answering joy singing in her soul and she let herself bask in it for a while.

Till her stomach rumbled and reminded her this was getting a bit mushy.

She pushed him lightly on the shoulder. “Okay, Romeo. Get on with it.”

He called for the pizza, and she managed to keep her hands off him until the food arrived. She took stock of him as he got dressed: his incorrigible hair, swollen lips, flushed cheeks, and the mark on his collarbone. Pride swelled within her – she’d sexed him up good. There was absolutely no way he was going to make himself presentable enough that the delivery boy wouldn’t know exactly what they’d been up to. Which meant it was only a matter of time until the whole town knew.

She sank back against the pillows. Aw well. Maybe this way they wouldn’t have to send out an engagement announcement.

Their celebration had burned off all the nervous energy that had consumed her for most of the day and had been driving her slowly mad for months. She felt delightfully relaxed, her body languid after being so expertly catered to for so long. All her reservations were gone as well. Marrying Nathan seemed like the most natural thing in the world, and she wasn’t sure why she had looked for so many loopholes.

By the time he returned with the pizza and a bottle of wine she’d thrown on one of his t-shirts and a pair of boxers, weirded out by the thought of eating naked.
He poured them each a glass of wine and then handed her a paper plate. “To us,” he toasted.

“To us,” she echoed, snatching a piece of pepperoni and sausage pizza. “This is heaven,” she moaned as soon as she swallowed.

“Make a guy feel a little insecure,” he quipped with mock sincerity.

“Trust me Wuornos, you have nothing to be insecure about,” she purred. “But this may be the best pizza I’ve ever eaten.”

She scarfed down three pieces hardly pausing, legs crossed at the foot of the bed while Nathan leaned against the headboard. “This feels so normal,” she remarked wistfully.

“Didn’t realize pizza and wine were the typical engagement meal.”

She chuckled. “Oh no. You so owe me a fancy dinner, partner. But this. Sex. Food. No work. No supernatural catastrophes. Just the two of us in our own little world for a while. I like it.”

He has such beautiful straight white teeth. “I like it too.”

She saw him steal a glance at the last piece of pizza and she nudged the box toward him. “You should eat that.”

He shook his head. “I shouldn’t.”

She cocked her head to the side. “Why not?”

He hesitated and she wondered why, because she’d meant it as an innocent question. “I can’t tell if I’m hungry or full,” he finally said. “So I know how much of a food I should eat, and I only eat three pieces of pizza.”

“You’ve already had four,” she pointed out.

“Figured if you could eat three, I could eat another one.” His tone had lightened, and she wanted to call him out for drawing attention to her appetite, but she didn’t. All the meals they’d eaten together, as partners and then as lovers, and she’d never known this about him.

“We’ll split it then,” she declared. “Cause if I can eat three and a half slices, I’m pretty sure you can manage four and a half.”

He nodded and she grabbed the last piece. Instead of breaking it down the middle of the crust she tore off the bottom and dropped it on her plate. She stole one of his pepperonis before handing him the upper half.

“Gee thanks,” he deadpanned.

“You’re very welcome,” she sassed back, light and airy. But there was something squeezing in her heart. It wasn’t pity, exactly. He didn’t need anyone to feel sorry for him. He wasn’t broken – she’d never accepted that. But he wasn’t whole. Maybe it was empathy she felt. Except that wasn’t right either, because she couldn’t actually fathom what he went through on a daily basis just to function as he used to before he was Troubled.

Perhaps it was just love.

“You know,” she said gently, not particularly wanting to break the Trouble-free spell they’d been under but suddenly needing to see his reaction to their latest development. “If this works—”
“When,” he interrupted.

“When this works,” she amended, “your Trouble will be gone. You’ll be able to feel again.”

She watched him closely, but there was no light of dawning realization. He shrugged slightly, and that was all.

“That excited huh?” she said, trying for his trademark wry tone and failing somewhat; she was too obviously incredulous.

He looked down at the pizza, set the plate on the bed and then looked at her. “When my Trouble came back six years ago I went to the doctor so I could pretend there was a rational explanation. I figured out how I needed to adjust and life went on. The worst part was the isolation. No one understood how nothing seemed real if I couldn’t feel it. But I knew I just had to put up with it for a couple of years until the Troubles went away again. Then you showed up.” He smiled and shook his head a little. “Even before you touched me you made things better. My body was dead, but you woke up my mind, and then my heart.” He reached out and laid his hand on her ankle. “And now my body’s not so dead either,” he added with a smirk. “Even if the Troubles never go away, long as you’re with me I’m not alone anymore.”

She didn’t understand how that could possibly be enough for him, but he seemed so sincere. “But it’ll be better when they’re gone, right?” she pressed.

His smiled widened, and she wanted that for him, desperately. “Yeah. Suppose it will,” he conceded.

“I’m sorry I didn’t say yes right away,” she apologized, needing to take back those awful, frantic moments when he thought she didn’t want this.

“’S okay. I knew you were going to freak out. Probably should have framed it better.”

“It wasn’t okay,” she argued. “Happiest moment of my life, and I have a meltdown.”

“What happened with you and Duke today?” he asked. He didn’t sound jealous, but there was definitely wariness there. She supposed that was justified from the way she’d acted.

She wanted to go back to their marathon sex and forget all the day’s revelations. But that wasn’t how they’d build a marriage.

She sighed. “I found a note from Lucy in her locket. Told me to take Duke to the docks. When we got there we both remembered something.”

“That Duke had Lucy’s journal.”

“Yeah. But also that Lucy had killed Simon – right in front of Duke.”

His hand tightened on her ankle, his thumb gliding slowly across her skin. He hesitated, and she knew he was working out what to say. She fought the urge to look down, to stand up and pace, to run from him either physically or emotionally. She couldn’t do that anymore. Not if she was going to promise to be his.

So she held his gaze, and she waited.

“Musta had a good reason.” It was like she’d told him she’d forgotten to buy something at the store, not that she’d murdered their friend’s father in front of him.
“He threatened to kill Duke to end his family’s curse – but still, I didn’t need to shoot to kill.”

“You were protecting those you care about.”

“You can say that. You’re objective. But Duke – he wasn’t even mad at me. He just told me not to worry about it. I don’t get it. He was covered in his father blood.” If she’d told Nathan about this six hours ago she would have been hysterical. But it all seemed distant now. She was just puzzled.

“I remember Simon,” he said haltingly, his hand creeping a bit higher up her leg. “He wasn’t … nice. Wouldn’t be surprised if he and Max had more in common than Duke and I would ever admit.”

There was that squeezing of her heart again. She couldn’t stand the thought that he’d ever been hurt that way, even if he couldn’t remember. She wanted to kiss him, but he was too far away, so she pried his hand off her leg and raised it to her lips. She heard his sharp intake of breath, and then he continued.

“Even if he did mind, you forgive those you care about.”

She thought she’d been fond of Vince Teagues, but her hatred of his actions hadn’t gone away, even if she’d buried it deep under Nathan’s attentions.

“I pointed a gun at Vince’s head today. And I wanted to pull the trigger.”

“What did he do?” Nathan asked sharply, sitting up straighter and pushing himself closer to her.

“You can’t run out of here to go shoot him yourself,” she warned, unwilling to let Vince of all people ruin their night. “As my future husband you are contractually obligated to stay in this bed with me all night long.” She glared, deadly serious under the hyperbole.

She’d learned long ago that he got a rise out of her bossiness. “Don’t remember signing that pre-nup,” he answered, the set of his shoulders relaxing.

“My lawyer will get it to you in the morning,” she said archly. If they had a quiet day perhaps she would draw one up. She could picture his face as she handed him a list of ridiculous demands. Surely he’d come up with a few pleasurable amendments.

“What did Vince do, Parker?” His fingers drumming on her leg pulled her from her reverie.

“He’s the one who had Max kill James.”

“What?” Nathan roared. When he started to rise she grabbed his arm and pulled him back down.

“We are not letting that meddling bastard ruin this night,” she hissed. “You can give him hell in the morning.”

She didn’t want to be cross with Nathan, and she really didn’t want him to leave. So she climbed into his lap and distracted him with a barrage of short kisses, pulling away and drawing him back to her again and again. His arms came around her automatically and she soothed the tension from his back till he rested his forehead against hers.

“Why did he do it?” he asked, resigned.

She loved being so close to him they could almost share breath. It healed the wounds of all the months they’d sat side by side and been miles apart. “He said Howard told him it was the only way
to lure Lucy back. He knew that if James went into the Barn he’d be healed. And then —” She shook her head, feeling the incredulous truth of her next statement wash over her anew. “He said the only reason that I have this life – that I’m me – is because of the choice he made. And he’s right, damn it. If Lucy had never come back I’d still be her, and we’d never have this.” She nuzzled into Nathan’s shoulder. “I can’t wish this away, but I can’t forgive him for what he did to our son.”

“May be selfish, but I’m glad you don’t feel the same way about Vince as Duke does about you.”

“Stop,” she warned, chuckling as she tried to stop any visuals from sinking in.

“James is okay. We’re okay. We’ll figure out a way to give the old geezer hell later.”

“I really wanted to shoot him,”

“That’s cause you’re a mama bear.”

She pulled back, but he didn’t let go. “You did not just compare me to a large, lumbering wild animal.”

To his credit, he didn’t backpedal. But hearing how close he was to laughter only riled her up further. “It was a compliment.”

“I don’t care what Moose Hunter Magazine said—”

“You should. It’s very educational for anyone living in the wilds of Maine.”

Unable to come up with a suitable reply she kissed him soundly, her tongue demanding entrance as her hands clamped down on his shoulders.

“See. Fierce,” he breathed into her neck afterwards, his lips lingering to suck gently there. His voice was still alight with humor, but she could hear the need crackling through. From her place on his lap she could feel it too. “My mama bear.”

“I’ll show you fierce,” she countered, finding something equally as attractive in his possessiveness.

“Please do.”

With a flick of her wrist the empty pizza box went spiraling across the room. It didn’t take long for their clothes to follow.

“Don’t think I’m gonna make it til dawn,” she mumbled into his shoulder a few hours later. Audrey Parker wasn’t a quitter, but she was thoroughly spent. Considering the fast paced life they led, his goal had been a little overoptimistic.

When he could only muster the energy for a vague grunt instead of an actual response, she figured he wasn’t too upset.

She snuggled toward him in search of a more comfortable position. “Should stay in tomorrow. I’ll make it up to you when we wake up.”

“Sounds great,” he slurred before dropping a sloppy kiss to her forehead. His breathing evened seconds later but his arms pulled her toward him as if it was instinctual.

There was one more thing she needed him to know, even if he wouldn’t remember this moment. “I
really do want to marry you, love,” she swore, the endearment falling from her lips without conscious thought, exhaustion stripping away all her filters. She’d never use it in front of another living soul – perhaps never in the light of day – but in this moment it felt right.

He cracked one eye open and she half expected him to comment on the nickname. But he just smiled at her.

“Likewise, Parker.”
“Do you think me and Lucy ever went skiing?” James asked one afternoon from behind Audrey’s desk. With Troubled activity intensified and the Guard particularly testy, she and Nathan were working two cases simultaneously. Since they had missed family dinner James had shown up at the station with lunch.

She shook her head as she considered it. From her perch on Nathan’s desk she was perfectly poised to steal his fries, even though she had a pile of her own. “Lucy showed up in the spring and was gone before the end of the summer, right? Would any slopes be open then?”

“Doubtful,” Nathan answered, swatting her hand away halfheartedly. “Most slopes in Maine close in March. There’s a place in Vermont that stays open till April.”

She persisted in her burglary, popping a fry into her mouth.

James frowned. “That can’t be it. I didn’t come to Haven until May.”

Something was obviously bothering him, and Audrey turned from Nathan’s lunch to focus on her son. “Why do you ask?”

“I keep having this dream of me and Lucy skiing. It’s so vivid I thought it might be a memory. It’s weird, though. Looked like this place in Colorado I used to go to when I was a kid. But that doesn’t make sense. Must be a dream after all.”

Audrey concentrated hard, searching for some corresponding memory, but she didn’t think she’d ever been skiing and Lucy was just as distant as she usually was. But there was something about his story that clicked. There was no way they’d actually been in Colorado together. But in Haven things were rarely what they appeared.

“Maybe it does make sense,” she realized. “Oh my God.”

“Not following, Parker.”

“Me either.”

She looked at her boys, intoxicated by the way the revelation built up inside her, the clues falling so perfectly into place. “Vince was upset when I said James came out of the Barn hating me. He said it didn’t make sense, and I was just so mad at him I didn’t work it out – but it didn’t. The couple in the Barn wouldn’t wipe my memories when I first go in. Even if time moves quicker in the Barn, whoever I’d become would notice something was up when I didn’t age for years. Easier to give me a new identity right before they let me out. When Howard came to my apartment in Boston to tell me to look for Lester in Haven – that was probably my first real memory as Audrey.
Prudence said her and Howard could make the Barn show them things. They’d pretend to go walking in the woods. If James and I were skiing in Colorado—"

“We were together in the Barn,” James finished.

Audrey nodded, breathless. “I think we were.” The thought of spending so many years with her son flooded her with warmth. She’d been trying to connect with him since he came back to Haven, but there was an awkward distance she wasn’t sure how to breach. But if they’d done it once before, surely they could do it again.

“I want those memories back,” James declared. “If I’m dreaming about them they can’t be gone.”

“Sometimes a trigger helps. A place or an object tied to the memory,” Audrey suggested.

“We haven’t found anything like that yet. And we don’t have time to go to Colorado. What about therapy? There are supposed to be ways to recover lost memories, right?”

At the mention of therapy Nathan grabbed her hand. She closed her eyes and tried to fight off the wave of sadness that assailed her as the image of Claire Callahan’s curious face filled her mind. No doubt that woman would have been ecstatic at the solution they’d discovered to end the Troubles. She’d been very vocal about her wish to see Audrey and Nathan get together. She would have demanded to be a bridesmaid for sure.

“What did I say?” James asked, noticing her distress.

“Audrey had a therapist that was helping her remember,” Nathan answered carefully. “She died.”

“Seems to happen a lot in this town. Why are you both looking at me like that?”

Audrey wished she could save James from the truth, but she couldn’t lie. It would be a disservice to Claire’s memory, and to James as well. He was strong enough to hear this. She’d hated every time someone hid the truth from her. Even if it was supposedly for her own good.

“Arla killed her to get close to me,” Audrey admitted.

James internalized pain the way his father did, and Audrey watched him shut down. “I’m sorry.”

“Nothing she did was your fault,” Nathan assured, fierce and protective, the natural counterpart to her mama bear.

“She was trying to get me back, wasn’t she?”

The most terrible, twisted part of it all was that was exactly it. Arla hadn’t been motivated by hate or revenge – she’d been driven by love. “She was sick,” Audrey clarified. “Her Trouble made her desperate and unhinged. I hate what she did. Claire was a friend. But blame won’t bring anyone back. Not her. Not those she killed.”

“You’re right. Nothing can bring them back,” James said darkly.

“We don’t have to let the Troubles take this too.” She hopped off the desk and crossed in font of James where he was hunched in her chair, trying to disappear. The need to comfort him was stronger than her wish to stay far away from anything that reminded her of her dead friend. “I want to remember. Claire would have wanted me to. We should go to whoever replaced her. I’m sure there’s someone dealing with all these Troubled people. That’s a lot of unresolved psychosis.”
“Are you sure?” Nathan asked from behind her, and she understood better now his hesitation. He had his own fears.

“I can do it, Nathan.” She looked at James. “We can do it. Are you with me?”

Their eyes locked, and she was shocked at how familiar they seemed. But they weren’t Nathan’s eyes – not exactly.

“Yes,” he finally consented. “Let’s get our missing years back.”

--

It took two days to get an appointment with Doctor Julie Bishop, the no-longer-so-new department shrink, despite how much Audrey blustered and threatened. Apparently because her Trouble wasn’t life threatening to herself or others she wasn’t a priority. While practically she understood the logic of that, it irritated her to no end.

She tried to tamper down her moodiness when she walked into Claire’s old office, both her boys right behind her. There was a new desk chair and different portraits on the walls, but the other furniture was that same and that stung. But she struggled not to flinch, not wanting James to feel any guiltier about something she was determined not to blame him for.

Miss Bishop rose when they entered and extended a perfectly manicured hand. “The infamous Audrey Parker. I read your file this morning. It was fascinating.”

“Not fascinating enough to bump up my appointment,” she snapped. She didn’t like the thought of someone else pawing through Claire’s observations on her; didn’t think that was quite ethical either.

The woman seemed utterly unfazed by her tone. “Considering how unstable this town has been, it was lucky I could fit you in this week.” She smoothed her hands down her crisp pantsuit, each long strand of platinum blond hair perfectly in place. “Please have a seat. Though I’m a bit confused. I thought the appointment was for two of you.”

“Nathan stays,” Audrey insisted, clamping onto Nathan’s hand. “There’s nothing we could say that he can’t hear.”

The woman peered over her thick black frames. “That’s highly irregular.”

“Everything in this town is highly irregular. Isn’t it your job to deal with it?”

Nathan snorted softly beside her, and she wheeled on him. “Watch it mister. Maybe I will send you away.”

“Relax, Parker,” he said gently. She was ready to scold him for being condescending when he tilted his head towards James. “You’re making a scene in front of the kid.” Though he managed to keep a straight face, James didn’t, and his laughter broke the ice.

“I hate shrinks,” she said petulantly, sinking down onto the couch.

“Your file did indicate your reluctance to engage with the psychoanalytic process.”

“Stop telling me what was in my file!” she demanded. “Do you know what happened to the woman you replaced? What really happened, not what the Herald said?”
“I am aware,” she said softly. “And I understand how revisiting this process could be traumatic for you. So I imagine whatever drove you to seek my assistance must be important. So let’s get to that, shall we? What brings you here?”

Audrey huffed a deep breath and tried to relax. “I have these past lives – as you apparently already know. Claire helped me remember one once. With hypnotherapy. There’s something else I need to remember.”

“What brings you here?”

“Why did you book a double appointment?”

“Because this is James Cogan. We’re missing the same memories.”


Audrey looked at him with a wavering smile. “Yes.”

“He was alive after all,” she stated, her wonder bleeding through.

“Obviously,” Audrey said with an eye roll.

“How it that possible?”

“We were both together in the Barn for twenty-seven years before I became Audrey. We need you to work your hypnosis magic and help us remember.”

“Hypnosis is a questionable therapeutic technique. There’s strong evidence most reports of past lives are fabricated under suggestion.”

“Have you seen the things your patients can do?” Audrey demanded. “This is Haven. We don’t have to make up past lives.”

“I can show you my birth certificate from 1955, if that helps,” James quipped.

Doctor Bishop smiled back at him. “That won’t be necessary. I was ethically obligated to tell you that. Now that I have, we can begin.”

“Wait, don’t you have to look it up on the internet or something?” Audrey asked. Claire had been so proud of her three days of research when Audrey had finally chosen to come to her.

The shrink’s condescending look made Audrey hate her just a little. “No. I’m familiar with the basic theory.”

“So we’re starting like, right now?”

“Unless you would like to make another appointment. I may have an opening at the end of next week.”

Audrey’s fear was irrational. She wanted to remember the life she had with her son. With Nathan at her side she didn’t fear pain – he would get her to a hospital if it came to that. But there was something about the thought of Lucy that was terrifying. They had always scared her, these past lives of hers, since the moment she realized the scar on her foot meant Lucy wasn’t her mother at all. Because as often as Nathan had reassured her he knew who she was, the truth was she didn’t know, and she didn’t particularly want to. She just wanted to be Audrey Parker, and she was terrified that accepting the others meant she would lose part of that.

“You can still back out of this,” Nathan said softly, his hand brushing lightly over hers, and she
wanted to tell him, “Let’s go home.”

But she looked up at James and he was watching her closely. It felt like a test, and she knew what she had to do to pass.

She could not forsake her past lives, because it was only through them she had any claim on him.

If she was going to be his mother, then she had to accept that she was Sarah.

If she was going to be his confidante, then she had to accept that she was Lucy.

“We need to do this, Nathan. For our family.” If they were alone she would have kissed him to chase away the terror that flashed in his eyes. He knew who she was, but he was terrified of losing that.

Instead she squeezed his hand and turned to the doctor. “How do we start?”

They rearranged the furniture so James and Audrey were both lying on couches. Nathan dragged a chair between them so he could hold both their hands. Audrey cut off Bishop’s protests. “You can’t make him leave,” she said fondly, temporarily glad for Nathan’s stubbornness. “He’ll be more of a distraction if you try.”

She hid it well, but Audrey decided the psychiatrist was just as annoyed by her as Audrey was by the good doctor, and that made her feel a little better.

“There’s a chance she’ll go into seizures,” Nathan warned. “There’s some sort of block on the memories.”

“If there appears to be a threat to their health I’ll pull them out immediately. The hypnotic process should soften some of the shock of the memories’ return.”

Audrey looked at James before they began. He was doing a fair job pretending the way Nathan was clutching his hand wasn’t awkward, especially since the woman probably hadn’t put together that Nathan was his father.

“You ready?” she asked, even though he didn’t seem half as nervous as she felt.

“Let’s do this, Luce.”

There was something familiar about the nickname that stuck with her as Doctor Bishop began the calming exercises. Garland had called her that.

Surely these deep breathing exercises were meant to bore her to death.

“Think back to the Barn,” Doctor Bishop finally instructed.

*Loss that cut through her heart like the smoke in her lungs. The look on Nathan’s face as she turned from him was crushing her. Now everything was on fire. There was Duke – frantic – but where was James?*

“Now think back to the first time you were there together.”

*Failure. She’d meant to save herself and she’d gotten them both killed.*

*The barn was pearly white, harshly sterile like an operating room. But where was the patient?*
“James! James!” she called, terrified at the thought of being along in this emptiness.

“He can’t hear you.” Suddenly Howard was there, smug, and she’d never hated him so intensely. She attempted to muster her composure and could not manage it.

“You bastard! You told me the Barn would bring him back.”

He was unperturbed by her outburst. “The Barn will heal him, yes. But these things take time.”

“How much time?”

Howard shrugged. “Time is somewhat relative here.”

“How long?” she demanded.

“I don’t know.”

She wanted to hit something, break it, but there was nothing to destroy. The Barn was empty around her. She was going to go mad here.

“I want to see him.”

“Then look.”

But she had already searched this room, and there was nothing. She crossed her arms. “I have.”

“The Barn is your home now. It will take you wherever you wish – except out.”

He looked pointedly off to her right, and she followed his gaze. A door had appeared.

Not bothering to say goodbye, she pulled it open.

This room was still white, but it showed traces of habitation. There was a window – though nothing outside it – and a vase of lilies on a small table. Beside the table - James.

He wasn’t breathing though. She touched his forehead, grabbed his hand, but he was just as cold as when she’d identified him at the morgue, when she’d kissed his forehead before they’d closed his casket and when Garland had handed him to Howard minutes – hours? – ago.

“Damn it!” Her voice was too loud in the silence, but it didn’t startle him awake. She felt the hot tears burn behind her eyes. She’d cried more in the past week than she had her entire life and she hated that.

She didn’t know how long she stood beside him stupidly blinking back tears before she absently wished for a chair.

A chair waited for her, as if it had been there all along.

“Stupid town,” she muttered, sinking into it. It was a deceptively comfortable chair. “Damn supernatural mind reading Barn.”

James would have laughed at her crossness. But James was dead and she was alone here and the injustice of it all made her so tired.

Eventually she laid her head down and slept.
She woke to someone tugging on her hair. “Where are we?” James asked hoarsely.

She jolted upright. He looked pallid and exhausted, but he was conscious and as alive as anyone could be in this purgatory. The relief made her lightheaded.

“Were you crying?” he asked incredulously.

She scowled and scrubbed at her face but her tears had dried. Her makeup must have run and given her away.

“You were dead,” she snapped, but it galled her how much she’d cared.

He frowned and found the pulse at his wrist. “I’m not now though – right?”

“Nope. You’re as alive as I am, anyway.”

“You’re not making much sense again, Luce.”

Her heart leapt at the nickname. She’d never expected to hear anyone call her that again. “We’re in the Barn.”

She watched his face crumble as he worked out exactly what he’d lost with his resurrection. “Oh.”

“Like I said, you were dead. Taking you with me was the only way to bring you back to life.”

“So we’re stuck here for twenty-seven years?”

She wanted to snap that she’d be more than stuck. She’d be gone. But he’d been having a pretty rough day already. And unlike herself, he had people he’d left behind. “That seems to be the pattern,” she said with a heavy sigh.

Pain made him look younger, and she had a strange urge to gather him in her arms to calm him down.

“Hate to keep Arla waiting that long.”

She must not have been able to hide her disgust at that name. Most people had just seen a woman – the wrong woman, mind – but Lucy had seen exactly how she’d stitched herself up in someone else’s skin.

“When you get back, you need to stay away from her.”

“What are you talking about? She’s my wife.”

Someone softer might have lied to him, to save him from twenty-seven years of a terrible truth. But Lucy had never believed in mollycoddling, and not even the damn warmness that swelled in her when she looked at this cherub-eyed boy who was almost the same damn age as her would change that.

“Your girl’s Troubled, and it’s not a kind one.”

“What are you talking about? Arla’s not even from Haven.”

“Musta had a relative or two that was.”

“That’s crazy.”
But he was too defensive, too fast, as if he’d always suspected something lurked in her. In a simpler time he just hadn’t known that Haven could let it out.

“When she heard you were dead her skin slid right off.”

“Oh God.”

She didn’t let herself dwell on the horror stealing over him. She just pressed onward, trusting the truth to liberate them all somehow. No one else in this town understood its value. “So she took someone else’s and wore it like a coat. She killed a woman, and she wanted me to take her with us so you could be together in the Barn, but I wouldn’t.”

“You should have helped her!” She had never expected James to shout at her. “Isn’t it what you do - help these people? She’d just lost her husband, and you abandoned her.”

“Sometimes people are beyond saving. Like Holloway. She’d killed someone and she wasn’t even sorry.”

“She needed me! I could have calmed her down. She wouldn’t have done it again. You forgave others for killing when they didn’t mean it.”

But there had been something lacking in Arla that had frightened her – remorse. She’d had to protect him from that. “She meant it, James.”

“Get the hell away from me,” he snarled, and she’d wanted to object, but suddenly she was back in the empty hallway and the door to his room was gone.

She didn’t know how long it took to find him again. It might have been years. The Barn gave her anything she wanted – food and a soft bed in a room that reminded her of her very first apartment, a library of all her favorite books – except for the single thing she wanted most. His desire to stay hidden must have been stronger than her will to find him.

Or maybe the Barn just liked him more. Wouldn’t that be the story of her life.

One day a door appeared, right in her bedroom. Eternally curious, she opened it.

She was on a familiar beach in an unfamiliar time, the warm sea air making her feel more alive than she had in ages, but even as the smell and spray assaulted her she knew it wasn’t real.

There was a couple on the beach and the woman was her, except she wasn’t. Her red hair was perfectly styled in tight curls from a stricter era. She wore a dress and a flirtatious smile, and Lucy approved of neither.

But it was the man sitting beside Sarah who captured Lucy’s attention. As much as her mind protested she couldn’t ignore the way her heart quickened at his appearance. He was undeniably handsome – tall, bright eyes, strong cheekbones. Soft spoken and smartly dressed. Familiar.

Because he was James’ father, she told herself, but that was a lie and she knew it. It rankled.

James was on the beach too, beside her, and though there were similarities between the two men they didn’t look all that much alike.

“I’ve watched this over and over. He knew her before they met.”
James’s voice startled her; it had been so long since she heard it. Surprised they were speaking, she turned away from Nathan to look at James, but he was staring at his parents with a wistfulness that made her sick.

“Well isn’t that romantic,” she spat. “I’m sure whoever I am in the future will really appreciate how he went back in time to sleep with a different version of her.”

“If this hadn’t happened I wouldn’t have been born,” he said indignantly. She could tell he was still angry and she knew she shouldn’t push him, but she ignored her instinct and blundered on.

“So I’m glad it did. But don’t hold this up as some epic love story. If they’re together in the future, he’s not faithful.”

“He loves her,” James insisted. “I’ve been in love. I know what it feels like. The way he looked at her when they first met – the way he’s looking at her right now – that’s love.”

She thought it sad that this was what he’d been doing all this time – turning this twisted little soap opera into a fairy tale. Her father had left her mother for another woman when Lucy was three years old, and the former Mrs. Ripley had been sure to bring her daughter up with a firm understanding of the realities of lust.

It was unfortunate no one had given Sarah that lesson, and whoever came next was going to forget. “He’s looking at her like that because he can feel her.”

Finally James turned to her. “Why wouldn’t he?”

“Because he can’t feel anything else. That’s his Trouble.”

“You’ve met him,” James marveled with the same wonder he’d displayed when he’d told her she was his mother.

She sighed, but it was impossible not to remember. “Once. He’s Garland’s boy. His mother died a few months ago.” That was relative now, but she had no other point of reference. They might have been here decades. Or it could only have been weeks. “Garland was a mess. Said the kid was inconsolable. Couldn’t sleep through the night. His Trouble kicked in and he just went numb.”

“That’s awful.”

“Yeah.” It truly had been. The kid had been curled in on himself, shaking, until something had compelled her to sit down next to him and draw him into her side. She’d just gone to bring Garland a casserole. She still couldn’t explain what had driven her to ask about the boy – why she’d gone to see him, and why afterwards it had been so hard to pull herself away.

“You cared about him.”

Lucy scowled at the accusation. “He was just a kid.”

“But there was a connection. You’d have to touch him to know that he could feel you. Why?”

“I just wanted him to stop crying.” It had seemed like a miracle when he had. His hysteria had been choking her, as if she’d finally found a Trouble she wasn’t immune to. But as soon as she’d wrapped her arms around him he’d gone quiet and still, and she’d known before she left the house that she was going to ask Vince to fix this.

“Sure,” James said, but Lucy could tell that he didn’t believe her.
“Are you still mad at me?” she asked, changing the subject.

“Yes,” he answered, but he just sounded tired.

“Can’t be too mad if the Barn let me find you.”

He shrugged, and she snuck one last glance at the couple behind them. They were locked in a heated kiss, and Lucy blushed and looked away. The beach dissolved around them, and they were back to whiteness.

They needed a distraction. She’d been alone with her thoughts too long.

“If you were back in Colorado, what would you do to blow off steam?”

“I’d go skiing,” he answered.

“I’ve never been skiing,” she told him. “Think you could teach me?”

He hesitated, and she was shocked by how much that hurt. “We have the time,” she added, trying to turn it into a joke.

He smirked at her as their surroundings morphed into a formidable mountain. “Try to keep up.”

Turned out she was pretty good at skiing once she got a handle on it. She appreciated the thrill of the wind in her face as she barreled downward, leaving her boredom and despair behind. Even the rides up on the lift were exhilarating as she took in the beauty around her. She’d always loved New England winters, and Colorado was magnificent. She wondered if it truly looked like this, or if what she saw was enhanced by James’s nostalgia.

When they got tired, they went to a ski lodge.

Its desertedness made her unsettled, like they were the last two survivors at the end of the world, but it didn’t stop there from being a roaring fire and two cups of coffee. Hers was laced with something stronger, and she drank deep and settled into the armchair. She’d led a busy, productive life, but there had been few moments of comfort, and none that she could share with James. It was nice to think that he’d been different. He’d had a contented childhood, even if it had been a lie.

The silence was comfortable, the company more important than conversation, but eventually James spoke.

“How did I die?” he asked.

It didn’t even occur to her to lie. “You were murdered.”

“By who?” he asked, his alarm almost comical given the circumstances.

“Thought you could tell me.”

He narrowed his eyes and shook his head. “I was down on the beach. My plane left in a couple of hours. I was staring at the ocean, and I heard someone walk up behind me. I turned around and all I could see was this arm coming toward me with that maze tattoo. And then – nothing.”

“Then you died,” she finished. Once upon a time she’d be raring to solve the mystery. But there
were hundreds of men in town with that tattoo. With only their memories to play in, they’d probably never narrow it down to just one.

She wouldn’t remember if they did, anyway.

“Guess so. Glad I don’t remember that part.”

She took another drink, letting the chocolate and the alcohol steady here. “It was my fault,” she confessed.

“There’s the Lucy I know, making everything about you.”

There was no bitterness in his tone. He was teasing her – which must mean she was forgiven. Strange how it had taken so long for him to get over her leaving Arla behind, but he seemed unconcerned that she’d gotten him killed.

“The Guard wanted me to go into the Barn,” she explained. “They knew I wouldn’t stay away if I heard you were dead.”

“Guess they were right, huh?”

“I’m sorry, James.” She’d never thought much of Arla, honestly, but he’d had a whole life beyond this place and he’d lost it because of her.

“Coulda been worse. Coulda been murdered and not resurrected by a supernatural barn.”

She scoffed but he just smiled at her over his cup of hot chocolate. “No use fretting over what can’t be changed. I’m here now. Might as well make the most of it.”

“That what you decided all that time you were mad at me?”

“Yeah,” he said softly. There was no explanation for the way his approval calmed and settled her. They’d only known each other a few months.

He was the only one she had to talk to. Surely that had something to do with it.

There were so many things she wanted to tell someone. Now seemed as good a time as ever to start. “Simon Crocker came after me once I was back.” James knew how erratic the man had been. He’d been the one who insisted she tell Garland. Not that a restraining order had been much help.

“How’d you stop him?”

For a second she was back on that dock, the stench of death thicker than the filth of the sea, and she was afraid the Barn would intervene and James would see it too. But the lodge remained. “I killed him.” She closed her eyes and tried to imagine a better outcome. “Right in front of his kid.”

“You were protecting yourself.” His absolution felt too easy. She hadn’t earned it.

“Simon said one day it would be me and Duke in a standoff. That seems to be part of the pattern, doesn’t it?”

“Duke seemed like a good kid.”

“Simon was a kid once too. He was ranting about his Trouble and the hunger. He was half-crazed – but I almost believed him. Maybe it is inevitable. Maybe Duke can’t change what he has to do any more than I can.”
“I like to think the universe still has a few surprises.”

“What evidence do you have of that?”

“Well, my father was born after I was. That seems like something new.” He said it casually, but she knew the affectation was orchestrated to make her feel better.

Damned if it didn’t help, just a little.

She rolled her eyes and reached for her coat.

“Ready to hit the slopes again?”

She dreamt of fathers and sons, terrible legacies and patterns that could not be broken, and always woke to a vision of prominent cheekbones and bright blue eyes.

She blamed the Barn for getting in her head, stirring up all the thoughts she couldn’t quite work out while she was awake and mixing them with memories that weren’t her own.

She’d always striven for control. So when she was awake she chose what the Barn made her see.

First it was Sarah’s standoff with Roy Crocker. Lucy had read about it in Sarah’s journal, but it was an entirely different experience to witness firsthand. Sarah’s horror afterward seemed genuine, but Lucy recognized the rush of self-preservation that made her pull the trigger.

But they weren’t alone. Once again she had a witness, and once again it was Duke. The universe must have an awful sense of humor. Sarah hadn’t realized the significance of the man in the middle of their showdown, but Roy had said his name and Lucy could see a glimmer of the boy she was so fond of in the ponytailed man. He was sad and serious, but he wasn’t angry at her. He offered her advice before she sent him home, even though he’d just watched her gun down his grandfather. She didn’t understand how confirmation of the cycle could give her hope that it would be broken, but there was something reassuring in the way he looked at her. He knew her, just like Nathan did. And he didn’t hate her, even though he had every right to.

Watching that first memory was like peeking inside Pandora’s box. She’d never been able to let a mystery rest. Much as she tried to pretend otherwise, Sarah’s handsome stranger – the descendent of Prudence’s unfaithful love – was the biggest mystery of her complicated life. She’d figured out Prudence’s sob story and the cause of the Troubles, but she couldn’t fathom how this one man could be the solution to it all. She fought the urge for a long time, but one day when James was elsewhere she had the Barn show her Nathan’s time with Sarah.

He was in Haven for less than thirty-six hours, and she scrutinized every one of them. James was right – there was foreknowledge there when Sarah dragged him out by his ear and he called her incredible. She watched their picnic on the beach over and over – the way he turned away after Sarah offered herself and how he came back. Only once did she allow herself to watch what happened after – how they stumbled toward her car and got unconscionably familiar. She was surely right about the lust. Lucy could see it play across his face every time Sarah touched him. He was a man starved for affection and Sarah was more than willing to give it to him, and Lucy was simultaneously shocked and intrigued by that willingness. But there was a reverence in his actions that gave even the cynic within her pause.

She watched the way he’d praised Sarah’s intuition, worried for her safety and succumbed to her
kisses. One day she found herself wishing it had been herself in that car with his weight settled over her, whispering admirations in her ear – and as soon as she caught herself she left the scene and vowed never to return.

Because she was not Sarah Vernon. The nurse’s actions had become familiar, as one could memorize the moves of an actor on the screen. But no matter how many times she went through the memories Lucy never felt like she had lived them herself.

She had only one real memory of Sarah, and that had come to her long before she’d known of the Barn. She’d dreamt once of a twin whispering promises to a baby, her tears leaving drops on his precious face. She’d kissed the boy before handing him to a couple and turning away, and woke to an incredible sadness.

James came to town the next day with a letter and a journal and an unbelievable story, and she’d realized the sadness had never left her.

They got bored, so she took him on a safari.

She’d gone right after college, scraping together every dollar she had saved for the plane ticket and a bag full of film and got there practically penniless with only the vaguest of plans. She met up with a group headed into the savannah and bartered passage to accompany them. She’d made friends with their guide, an enormous man with a beautifully deep voice who taught her Swahili and more about photography than any of her professors.

It had been the best month of her life.

They were the only ones in Africa now though, so she drove the jeep, regaling James with stories from her unencumbered youth as the grasslands passed them by. He was amazed at the very first zebra, but she knew that was amateur stuff and kept on going. She stopped eventually to show him elephants and ostriches, a family of giraffes, and a dozing cheetah. She snapped a few photos, the prospect of developing them exciting when she’d been distracted from her passion and profession for so long.

There was unlimited film here, and she didn’t have to sell anything to get it.

They happened upon a pride of lions, just as her caravan had years ago, and from a distance she set up her tripod.

“Johnny told me that most people get out here and waste the experience.” The man’s real name had been unpronounceable to her western tongue. He’d laughed so hard every time she tried. “They’re so excited to be someplace new they miss the beauty of it because they’re too busy snapping away. The photos aren’t worth it anyway.” Through her lens she watched the king of the jungle play with his little prince, but the angle was poor and she pulled back. “He taught me how important it was to wait for the perfect shot.”

“Shame you didn’t take your own advice.”

He was watching the lions, feigning nonchalance, but it was an act and she knew it. He was sly and this was a challenge.

“What are you talking about?”
He turned to her and she could not read the look on his face. “We had a plan. We found out about Nathan. All you had to do was go into that Barn and wait, and next time you could end all this.”

“It’s not the same!” she insisted, seeing the parallel he found but rejecting it. “No matter how long I have to wait to take a photo it’s still me who will develop it. But I’m going to die in here, and whoever walks out won’t be me at all! Excuse me for not wanting to sacrifice myself for this damn town. I’m all for helping when I can, but why do I have to lay down and die? I’m not Prudence! It wasn’t my stupid little fling that got this town cursed. Lucy Ripley really exists, and I didn’t ask for my memories to be implanted in someone else’s body. Besides, it was a terrible plan. All the next me has to do is fall in love with some jerk’s descendent and get married? Are you kidding me? Haven isn’t a fairy tale. It’s more like a Hitchcock movie.”

She’d wanted to say such things for so long and never dared. Everyone in that town was more concerned with their salvation than her well-being. She couldn’t blame them, but she knew she’d find no sympathy, not even from Garland. But there was no use hiding her selfishness now. Not like it had helped much anyway.

She held her chin up, waiting for his reaction to her outburst, her blazing eyes daring him to judge her just like Simon had.

“You’re wrong about dying in here,” he said quietly. Apparently her irritation wasn’t catching. “You won’t be gone completely.”

“How can you possibly know that?”

“You wouldn’t have come back to save me if there wasn’t a bit of Sarah in you.”

He was fishing, and the fact that he needed to tightened something in her chest. He’d tracked her across the country and she’d given up her life to bring his back and they spent most of their time together now, saying everything but what needed to be said and they both knew why, but they only voiced it in the abstract. Even now that was all she could manage. Keep it clinical. Keep it detached.

She hadn’t been detached when she’d been bawling at his bedside.

“That’s biological. Mothers protect their offspring. This body gave birth to you, even if that wasn’t me. But all this love nonsense … What’s to say my next incarnation will want to have anything to do with Nathan Wuornos? Is she going to have to marry him, just to make this stop, like I had to go into the Barn? Damn, sorry I’m missing that.”

He was so damn calm, and her stomach was churning. “Just because you’ve never been in love doesn’t mean it doesn’t exist.”

“You want to make a case that it does, after what your wife did?” she spat, regretting the words as soon as they were out of her mouth. The instinct to lash out was inescapable, but she hated herself for hurting him.

“Even imperfect people fall in love. That doesn’t make it unreal.”

“But is it worth it?”

“Yes.” His lack of hesitation made her pause. “Knowing what Arla did – even knowing why she did it – I wouldn’t take back our time together even if I could. Love – it’s like this force coming over you that makes someone else more important than yourself. And knowing they feel the same way about you – it’s the most wonderful feeling in the world. The way Nathan looked at Sarah, that’s
how he felt. I’m sure of it. That’s the way he’s going to look at you. And you’ll understand.”

“It won’t be me,” she insisted, practically sick with the unfairness of it. Why was he making her want what she could never have?

There was surely something cruel about love.

“Did you ever have the Barn show you Prudence?”

“Why would I?” she bristled, recoiling at the idea.

“Because I’ve never seen you run from a mystery.”

She’d never even considered it. It had been hard enough to bring herself to watch Sarah. She didn’t like seeing her features on someone else. And Prudence was the cause of all this mess.

“What would that accomplish, exactly? Think it would make me ready to die? If I see how kind and wonderful Prudence was, I’ll just give up Lucy Ripley and be ready to become her next puppet?”

“She’s a lot like you. Spunky – which wasn’t very appreciated in the sixteen hundreds. Smart and inquisitive and independent. They were all like that, everyone the Barn showed me.”

“Why did you watch that?”

“I wanted to know where I came from,” he said softly. “I wanted some idea who you might be when we leave here.”

“I won’t be anyone.” She didn’t wipe the tears away. Let him see. He deserved to feel bad about making her cry.

“You’re more than Lucy Ripley. She’s a part of you. But she’s not all that’s in there.”

“What if I want her to be?” she asked, finally honest about the one thought that had consumed her ever since Vince and Dave had confirmed that she’d been Sarah.

“Then you’re out of luck. You can rage about this, but you can’t change it. Just like I can’t change what Arla did or the fact the Cogans will think I’m dead for twenty-seven years.”

“I don’t want to go,” she admitted.

“I’ll always remember you,” he promised. “No matter who you become and what she thinks of me, I’ll always remember Lucy Ripley. And I’ll be glad we got to spend this time together.”

It was still an awful situation. But there was something about his earnestness that made her feel a little better.

Lucy had always wanted to leave a legacy.

They were back on the slopes one day when the mountain disappeared and the sudden change of momentum sent her stumbling into a pile of hay.

It was the first time the place had ever looked like a barn.
She pulled herself off the ground and scowled at the couple standing a few feet away, but their appearance chilled her like she’d been dumped in a snowbank in her underwear.

“It’s not time yet,” she snapped. Surely it hadn’t been three years, let alone nearly thirty.

“Just about dear.” The woman was surprisingly beautiful; her descendants had not inherited those looks. She appeared to be in her mid-forties, but something about her felt older.

“Today we leave the Barn to find you a new identity,” the man said. He might have been Dave’s father, though he had more hair and no glasses.

She crossed her arms and tried to sound braver than she felt. “I’m not ready to change.”

“You always have been before,” Mrs. Teagues remarked.

“Well this time I’m not. I’ll go back to Haven. Do this all over again, as many times as I need to. I don’t want to be someone else.”

“That isn’t your choice to make.” Suddenly Howard was at her side for the first time since she’d arrived. The Barn had been helping her keep away from him, but she’d let her guard down. He sounded almost sad, and she was reminded how he’d been Prudence’s only company, hundreds of years ago, and she’d been his. But she felt nothing but distrust for this man. She’d never had Prudence’s compassion. “Prudence decided to change. So change you must.”

She turned to the couple, appalled by this gnawing weakness that made her beg but unable to overcome it. “Please.”

“There’s nothing we can do.” The woman’s voice was kind but there was no hope in it. “We must abide by the rules of the Barn, or we’ll lose our place in it.”

They wouldn’t sacrifice their never-ending lives for hers.

That shouldn’t have shocked her. She didn’t want to sacrifice her life for this damn town.

“What about James?” she asked. “Will he become someone else too?”

“There’s no call for that,” Howard said. “He’s made no deals. He’ll stay James Cogan. But he won’t be allowed to remember his time here.”

The hopelessness choked her, just like it had when Garland had called to say James was dead. He’d kept it at bay during their time together. But good things never lasted. Her mother had taught her that too.

She’d teach him, except he wouldn’t even remember the lesson.

“He’ll forget me.”

“That’s what Prudence wanted.”

It was just one more reason to hate her.

“Stay away from me,” she hissed, stumbling back. She tried to will herself back to the slopes, back to her s—James, but the Barn didn’t shift.

“We have a question for you,” the man said. “That’s why you were summoned.”
“Who do you want to be?” the woman asked.

“Is that supposed to be a philosophical question?” she spat. “I want to be me.”

“Sarah wanted to be you.” The woman’s voice froze her heart. The cold seeped outward, immobilizing her. Sarah had been loved and blessed and a mother and— “She asked us to find an investigator. Someone who wasn’t afraid of the truth. A woman who was strong and brave and cunning.”

“We thought you were a journalist, coming out of the newspaper office,” Mr. Teagues admitted. “Didn’t notice the camera till we were back in the Barn.”

“Don’t lie to the girl,” his wife chided. “We saw the camera. We just didn’t know what it was.”

“You’ll let me pick the kind of person to take my place?”

“Yes.”

She only took a few moments to consider. “She should be a detective.” She thought of Garland and the son likely to grow up following in his footsteps. “A police officer. Tough. Plucky. No romantic delusions. Someone without any detachments who’s used to being alone.”

The Teagues looked at her with pity, but there was something calculating in Howard’s stare that worried her.

“Aren’t I allowed to be bitter?” she covered. “Besides, it’s silly for her to have attachments that aren’t real anyway.”

But secretly she hoped that maybe her successor would be smart enough to escape this trap that was made for her.

Or maybe she’d find what she’d been looking for.

“Can I go back to James now?”

“You best say your goodbyes,” Howard advised as the Barn faded away.

She materialized in a snowbank, and she was still protesting the cold when James hovered over her, offering a gloved hand.

“Where did you go?” he asked, scared, and for the first time in her life she understood why people lied to spare other’s feelings.

She couldn’t bring herself to do it though.

“I was with Howard – and the couple that’s going to take my memories. It’s almost time.”

“It can’t have been years!”

“It can outside, I guess.”

She was shocked when his arms came around her. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d been embraced. “It’s going to be okay. I’ll miss you, but I’ll be seeing you again soon. And when you
fall head over heels in love with my father, I look forward to saying ‘I told you so.’”

She snorted into his shoulder. “Don’t hold your breath,” she sassed, but it took all the strength she had left not to cry.

“I'll always remember you, Lucy,” he promised, and it was like he was running her through with his ski pole.

She didn’t acknowledge his statement. But she didn’t correct him either.

It wasn’t long before James faded without warning, leaving her with the other inhabitants of the Barn. She hadn’t said goodbye, but she wouldn’t beg for the chance now. There was no use anyway – neither of them would remember it.

Now the last memory of him she’d have was the way he looked barreling down the slope ahead of her, at peace with this cruel world, strong and hopeful despite all he had lost.

She wondered what he’d think when he came out of the Barn and found the world had moved on without him. She worried most about the way he wouldn’t remember her warnings about Arla. It was one of so many things she couldn’t change. He’d have to fend for himself now.

The Barn was white again, like the blank slate it represented, and she was sad that she’d die in this emptiness, when she’d always loved color.

Rainbows spiraled across the walls, soothing her until they settled into a sunset over the savannah. She could smell the grass, feel the sun on her skin.

The Barn would remember her, even when she was gone.

There was a brunette lying unconscious in the grass. She had a ponytail and a fancy suit. “She’s not a lawyer, is she?” she asked, wrinkling her nose at the notion.

“FBI Agent,” Mr. Teagues said, stumbling slightly over the letters.

That would aggravate Garland for sure.

“Let’s get this over—” But Mr. Teagues doesn’t wait for her to finish her sentence. He grabbed her hand, and she tried to hang onto the memory of her son’s face as everything else faded away.

Once again she woke to blue eyes hovering over her, but this time Nathan wasn’t the man she needed. “James,” she gasped, searching for him wildly, still gripped in Lucy’s final wave of panic. Gone again and so much she’d never told him.

But he wasn’t gone. “Mom!” he cried, suddenly at her side and pulling her into his arms. She clutched her hands around his neck and held on. Her sweet boy.

“My son,” she said shakily, and she felt it more strongly than she ever had before, the maternal affection surging through her without any protest from her mind about its illogicality. She was Sarah and Lucy and Audrey and James Cogan was her son.
Once the memories began to settle she pulled back slightly, swiping at her damp eyes. “I couldn’t bring myself to say it then. But I felt it, every day.”

“I forgot you,” he said contritely, and all she wanted to do was absolve him.

“It’s okay,” she said, squeezing his arm. “I forgot myself.” She thought about all she had learned, and couldn’t help but smirk. “Lucy was a piece of work.”

He smiled back. “That she was.”

“Everything okay?” Nathan asked. He was standing awkwardly to the side, and she grabbed his arm and pulled him closer.

“Is now.” She smiled at him, trying to ease the worry contracting his brows. “We’ve been waiting for you for a long time.”

He examined them both, and she had no idea what was going through his head. “Hope I lived up to expectations,” he said dryly.

“Well, Lucy’s expectations were pretty low,” James quipped. “Told you so, by the way.”

She barked out a laugh before linking hands with Nathan, her thumb rubbing a soothing pattern across his skin. “She was jealous,” she explained. All of Lucy’s actions and intentions were suddenly so clear. The memories before the Barn weren’t easily accessible, but she understood who the woman had been. “Didn’t like that the women before and after her got to be in love, and she was stuck in the middle.”

“She told me she didn’t believe in love,” James pointed out. Audrey was so glad she suddenly knew his favorite food and sports team and the way he’d wanted to be an astronaut when he was seven.

“She was lying.” She squeezed Nathan’s hand and he squeezed back. As she looked at him she felt that powerful swell of protectiveness that James had told Lucy about, her love for him so strong it was almost an entity in itself. But she was finally willing to admit that Nathan wasn’t the first to inspire it in her. “She was just afraid that accepting who she’d been and who she’d become meant she’d lose who she was right then. I understand the feeling.”

It was hard to fault Lucy when the thought of losing Nathan to another version of herself was so terrifying. Audrey Parker may have gone into the Barn with a little less prompting, but only because she thought she was saving Nathan.

“That’s very interesting,” Dr. Bishop proclaimed. Audrey had completely forgotten she was there. “I’d like to explore the way you come to terms with your past lives now that you’ve begun to remember them.”

Audrey stood, shaking her head at that decidedly unappealing thought. “Think I’ll just take my boys to dinner instead.”

She would have to work all this out, but she didn’t need some stranger passing judgment when she had a son and a fiancé to listen. The very idea of that recent development still thrilled her, and she swiped her finger against the place where his wedding band would soon rest as she pulled him to the door.

“Sorry, doc,” James called from behind her. “But thanks for the help.”
There was no doubt in her mind that Lucy would be proud.
Chapter 30

Two weeks before the wedding she realized she’d forgotten to buy a dress.

She called Duke in a panic. Dave was hardly an option anymore, considering, and the prospect of making this decision on her own when she’d already practically ruined it was paralyzing.

“I need your help,” she demanded, breathless.

“What’s the Trouble this time?” he answered, immediately serious. Serious Duke always set her on edge, reminding her that almost everything in their lives was life and death now.

This wasn’t quite so urgent. “No Trouble. I’m just the idiot who forgot to buy her wedding dress.”

“Wow. Nathan gave you one thing to do for this wedding and you forgot. You’re like the opposite of a bridezilla.” But Duke’s mocking actually soothed her, and that was half the reason she’d called him.

The other half was she honestly didn’t know how she’d pick out a dress on her own.

“Just shut up and help me,” she quipped, rolling her eyes.

Two hours later they pulled up to a little bridal shop in Derry. She’d been the one to insist they leave Haven. “Everyone in town hates me,” she’d declared, and although that still hurt she was used to it by now. “If they find out me and Nathan are getting hitched they’ll probably show up and throw tomatoes. Or rocks.”

“I wish I could say you were over exaggerating,” Duke replied. “But you guys do seem to be the town pariahs. It’s kinda weird not being the one everyone hates most.”

“Thanks for coming with me,” she said sincerely as they exited his Jeep. The bridal shop looked like a fairytale cottage, down to the thatched roof, cobblestone path and flower gardens. “I don’t trust myself to make this decision on my own.”

“Wait a second.” Duke stopped in his tracks and grimaced. “I’m your maid of honor, aren’t I?” He sounded horrified at the prospect, but his eyes were twinkling. “Nathan’s asked James to be his best man, I’m sure. And since I’m the only other person you guys ever socialize with—”

“I wasn’t going to say it out loud,” she teased. Truth be told she’d forgotten about that too. She really was awful at this wedding stuff.

“I’ll stand up there and hold your flowers. Even give you fashion advice. But I draw the line at wearing a dress. Don’t want to show you up on your big day.”

She chuckled, unable to stop a few absurd images from filtering through. Nathan would die. “No need to scandalize the townsfolk any further.”

“And absolutely no details about the wedding night, please. You really need to find some girlfriends.”

“Maybe once the Troubles are over I’ll get on that.”

He held the shop door open for her, and once she stepped inside and saw the racks and racks of
white dresses it all became impossibly real.

She was getting married. To Nathan. In two weeks. Her. Audrey Parker. Self-identified loner and commitment-phobe extraordinaire. She needed a chair. Or a paper bag. Or some time to actually sit down and think about all this. She needed –

“How can I help you, dear?” The saleswoman’s face looked younger than her gray hair suggested. At her simple question Audrey’s mind blanked.

The last time she’d been around so much white she was in the Barn.

“Ummmm–” she managed, not quite sure what was happening to her. Was she having a stroke?

“She needs a wedding dress,” Duke explained, shooting Audrey a funny sideways look.

The woman eyed him warily. “When’s the happy day?”

Once again Audrey waited for Duke to answer. “Bout two weeks.”

The shop woman’s eyes narrowed. “That doesn’t leave much time.” She glanced between the two of them and her disapproval cut through Audrey’s paralysis; finally here was something she was familiar with. “It’s bad luck for the groom to see the dress before the wedding.”

The color drained from Audrey’s face. “Oh no. He’s not – That’s just Duke,” she stammered. She thought she saw Duke grimace, but everything was kind of a blur.

“We’re going to start looking,” Duke declared, his usual charm falling flat. “Not much time before the wedding and all.” Then he pushed her toward the back of the shop.

“Stop freaking out,” he advised as soon as they were out of earshot.

“It was that obvious, huh?”

“Sweetheart, that was embarrassing. I thought Nathan was the one without any social skills. How the two of you interrogate suspects successfully is beyond me.”

“Stop it,” she said weakly, spotting a bench in between two of the racks and sinking down on it, burying her head in her hands as she tried to steady her breathing.

“Do you want to marry Nathan?” he asked.

“Yes,” she answered vehemently, not even having to think about it.

“Then what’s all this about?” He made a circular gesture toward her mental and physical state of dishevelment, and then sat down beside her on the bench.

She took a deep breath and tried to figure it out. “This is actually happening. Like, soon. The Troubles have been so active lately I haven’t had time to think about the wedding. But seeing all these dresses makes it real.”

“Why does that scare you?”

She stared down at her hands. Was she supposed to get a manicure? Did she need to find someone to do her hair and makeup?

“I’m no good at things like this. Fancy, girly stuff. I wanted to get married in City Hall and be done
with it. But Nathan wants a real wedding. He’s good at romantic gestures, and he thinks this is important. I don’t want to disappoint him.”

“First off, I highly doubt Nate’s any good at romance. Secondly, I’m pretty sure you’re the best thing that’s ever happened to that man. It’s sickeningly obvious to everyone that he worships the ground you stand on. You could walk down the aisle in a sheet and he’d be thrilled.”

“I can’t walk down the aisle in a sheet,” she scoffed, but Nathan had basically assured her as much when he first proposed. The sheer number of dresses in the shop made that idea somewhat appealing.

“That’s why you have me. Who do you think is actually planning this wedding?”

“Nathan said he knew someone who could take care of the details,” she recalled with dawning realization.

Duke smirked. “Like I said, you guys have a very small social circle. But you have nothing to worry about. The wedding’s going to be nice, but nothing extravagant. I’ve already decided against the ice sculptures.”

“Because it’s August.”

“Nah. Because it’s Haven. Don’t want you guys to see them and think you have a case.”

“If all goes well there may not be any more cases.” She didn’t let herself dwell on that often, because if marrying Nathan didn’t end the Troubles and appease the Guard she didn’t know how she’d survive the devastation of their last hope failing, let alone the fallout. She couldn’t lose him right when they were supposed to be starting their life together. She didn’t want to lose herself either, not anymore. Maybe her terror wasn’t so much about dresses as it was about the fact their continued existence hinged on this wedding being more than just a ceremony. It didn’t matter how good she looked if he couldn’t feel anything afterwards, because they were running out of options. She needed to save him, and she had to take Lucy’s word that this would do it.

Trouble was she now knew Lucy hadn’t been particularly sold on the idea.

But Nathan was so certain the wedding was the key, and she trusted him. It was just hard to hold on to his faith when he wasn’t beside her.

“Wouldn’t that be something,” Duke said wistfully. She forgot, sometimes, that the Troubles affected him too, in ways she and Nathan didn’t have to cope with. And he might be just as dead as the two of them if this didn’t work. “Now let’s get this party started. You pick a few dresses and I’ll tell you what I think.”

She grabbed the first five dresses in reach in her size and brought them with her to the dressing room. She wasn’t used to zippers, clasps and bodices, so it took her a few minutes before she emerged again.

She wasn’t sure if Duke’s reaction was a grin or a grimace, but it certainly wasn’t encouraging.

“What?” she asked indignantly, fingerling the lace on the sleeves.

“No. Just no.”

The second dress spurred only a frown and a head shake.
“Take that off.”

The third dress fared no better. “Absolutely not.”

By the time he’d rejected the fifth dress she was aggravated. “What’s wrong with this?”

“Do you hate Nathan or something? Cause that has got to be the ugliest dress I have ever seen.”

“I’m thinking of uninviting you to the wedding,” she snapped, halfway serious.

But Duke just grinned. “Obviously you need me.”

“I need you to actually be helpful and give me some advice!”

“All right. No sleeves. You’re not sixty years old. Plus, it’s gonna be hot. Show a little skin. You’re an attractive woman – play it up. You’re not trying to find the exact dress Prudence would have worn when she first came to the New World. Also, no cream. That’s just weird. Stick with white.”

“Anything else?” she asked, her hands on her hips. The dress was scratchy and misshapen, and she felt overheated and she’d only been wearing it a few minutes, but she’d be damned before she admitted Duke might be right.

“Yeah. Why don’t you try actually looking at the dresses before you try them on instead of just grabbing anything in reach?”

She fought the urge to growl at him. Nathan must have been rubbing off on her. “I hate you a little right now.”

“And I’m not sure how Vince and Dave had the patience to help you with this before.”

She turned back into the dressing room, grabbed a hanger, and flung it at him.

He caught it deftly and smirked at her. “God, Nathan’s in trouble when you get pregnant.”

She’d try on a million dresses if they could only get to that point.

“Next time I’ll just shoot you,” she deadpanned.

She did try to take Duke’s advice the second time around, passing by anything that looked too matronly. But once the sleeves and the color were considered, she wasn’t sure what she was supposed to be looking for – or avoiding. Strapless dresses seemed like a lot of work, but they would show off skin. She’d never worn anything with sequins or beads, but was that the kind of finery Nathan was expecting?

Duke’s comments were less disparaging with this set of dresses, but he still didn’t approve any of them.

“Can’t you just tell me what I should try on?” she demanded. It felt like they’d been there for hours, and she’d left Nathan at the station going through a stack of his father’s files to identify the family of a Trouble Dave had mentioned seemed familiar.

“Do you really want to tell Nathan that I picked out your wedding dress?”

She was so desperate she almost didn’t care. “It could be our little secret.”

“That’s a slippery slope I’m not going down. Try again. What do you want to wear? Let the dress
She rolled her eyes. “Unless whoever made them’s Troubled, I’d need to be drinking pretty heavily for these dresses to say anything.”

He perked up. “Think that’ll help? Cause I might have something in the Jeep that’ll do the trick.”

“If this goes on much longer I may need to take you up on that. Can’t I ask the saleslady to help me?” she whined.

“The one who’s been glaring at us the entire time because you’re a wreck and I’m not your fiancé? If you really want Mrs. Judgypants’s opinion…”

“Oh, okay. I’ll keep trying.”

She was on her fourteenth dress when she looked in the mirror and felt something besides the usual apathy. She smoothed her hand over the soft material, but it fit so well nothing shifted. She’d need some taller shoes, but the way it clung to her body made her feel beautiful. The straps took away the worry she’d have to cope with a wardrobe malfunction while allowing the neckline to dip in the front and the back enough to satisfy Duke’s skin criteria. The skirt flared out, but it didn’t make her look like a ballerina. There was some sort of shimmery pattern on the bodice that caught the light but wasn’t gaudy. She twisted around in the mirror to see the back of it, and when she turned she could picture Nathan waiting for her in a sharp black suit, eyes wide and mouth gaping.

“Everything okay in there?” Duke called, startling her out of her reverie.

“Yeah.” She took one last look before opening the door. “This is better, right?” she asked tentatively, so worried he’d dismiss this one too that she almost missed the look on his face when he saw her – eyes wide and mouth gaping.

“Oh shit.

He recovered quickly and was Duke again, cavalier and disarming, but he didn’t make fun of her this time. “Wow, Aud – that’s – that’s gorgeous.”

But suddenly this wasn’t about finding a dress at all. She was so distracted and oblivious and that made her a terrible friend. “I’m sorry, Duke,” she apologized, suddenly ashamed of herself.

“Wait, what?”

“You’re in love with me.”

His eyes widened, and for the first time Audrey saw him blush. He looked away, running a hand through his hair, and when he turned back to her he seemed scared.

“Look, I’m not going to do anything to mess this up for you, so you don’t need to worry.”

“Of course not,” she interrupted, the thought never having crossed her mind.

“I do care about you. Probably always will. But I’m not carrying a torch or anything. There’s no need to tell Nate and get him all upset right before the wedding.”

“Nathan already knows.” Nathan knew, and she’d known, and still she’d been so damn blind. “He told me months ago that you admitted it right before I went away. I believed him, I guess, but it didn’t sink in until right now. The way you looked at me in this dress—I’m a horrible person. I
never should have dragged you here to watch me try on wedding dresses for another man. I didn’t even think – but I’m so, so sorry.”

His deep breath shuddered through him. “You’re not a horrible person. A little self-centered, maybe. But who am I to judge?”

His absolution was too easy, and his tone too self-deprecating. He wasn’t self-centered – not anymore. “I’ll change. We should go. I can call a cab if you want some space.”

He reached out to catch her arm but dropped it quickly. “Don’t be ridiculous. I’m not leaving you stranded in Derry.”

“I’d deserve it.” She had never meant to wrong him. But she’d taken him for granted, and she’d never once considered how hard it must be for him to have her so close yet out of his reach – even though Nathan had asked her flat out to keep that in mind.

It wasn’t always herself she’d been focused on. But this town, the Troubles, the time clock on all their lives – she was so constantly wrapped up in mysteries sometimes she missed what was right in front of her.

“It’s always been you and Nathan. Not saying it doesn’t sting, but I stopped being shocked a long time ago. It took me awhile to accept it, but the evidence has been right there since the night you stood me up.”

“I didn’t need to flaunt it in your face.”

“That’s true,” he conceded. “And if you wanted to dial it back a little I wouldn’t argue.”

She tried to imagine how she’d cope if she was in Duke’s shoes. She’d barely been able to be in the same room with Nathan when he was with Jordan. Helping him prepare for a wedding to someone else would have been unbearable. “You could have told me. Or at least come up with some excuse not to come dress shopping with me.”

“I considered that. But you were in a panic. You needed a friend. If I can’t be anything else to you, at least I can be that.”

She was overwhelmed by the feeling swelling up in her chest. It wasn’t the all consuming passion she felt for Nathan, but it was powerful and sure. She felt tears prickle behind her eyes. “You’re a good man, Duke.”

He didn’t shake off the compliment like he usually did. “You’re the only one who’s ever thought that about me. You and Lucy. And even when you were just some hot, pain-in-my-ass fed I wanted to be that man you thought I was.”

She had watched him turn into that man. Maybe she’d been the catalyst, but the power to change had come from within. “I’m not the only one who can see it now. One day you’re gonna find a nice, uncomplicated girl without any past lives and she’s gonna appreciate you for who you are. And I’m going to be so, so happy for you.”

Maybe it wasn’t fair, but she couldn’t help herself – she stumbled forward and threw her arms around him. He returned the gesture, his arms steady across her back. He smelled like the sea, and a life she’d never have.

“It kinda helps to know you two were meant to get together and end the Troubles,” he confessed, still caught in her embrace. “Who am I to argue with fate unless there’s a Guard tattoo involved?
But if Thaddeus and Prudence hadn’t been all star-crossed, I would have totally stepped in with my roughish good looks and swept you off your feet.”

Truth be told if Nathan wasn’t around he very well may have. But that wasn’t the life they lived, and they’d never know.

She pulled away and swiped her hand over her eyes. “Should I try on another dress?”

“No. I think that’s the one. I don’t need to burn my eyes with the sight of you in another one of those monstrosities. Though I don’t think you’re supposed to cry in your dress before your actual wedding day.”

She wiped her eyes again. “That woman isn’t looking, is she?”

Duke smirked. “Oh yeah. And she definitely thinks something’s going on. Shotgun wedding, maybe?”

“She’s not exactly wrong about that,” she said wryly, shuddering at the thought of the trigger happy Guard. “Let’s get out of here.”

“Wait a minute. Don’t you need to get that hemmed?”

She glanced down at the dress dragging on the floor and swore. “This wedding thing is a real pain.”

“I know I’m a little late in the game to suggest this, but I’ve found eloping to Aruba to be a lot less trouble.”

The humor was back in his voice, and she knew they were going to be okay. “You never did tell us about that.”

“Not gonna start today,” he said flippantly. “A man needs his secrets.”

The night before the wedding she left Nathan to square out the last few details with Duke as she headed home to try on her dress.

“I’m here to kidnap you,” said a voice from her couch, and she had her gun drawn and was a few breaths from pulling the trigger before she registered that it was James.

“Whoa Mom,” he said with outstretched arms and wide eyes.

“Not a good idea kid,” she scolded as she holstered the gun and tried to still her racing heart. It wasn’t his fault his wife had done the same thing with far more sinister intentions, but she’d never take home invasion casually again. “How’d you get in here?”

“You gave me a key.”

“Right.” She ran her hand over her hair and took a deep breath. “I’m sorry.”

“I’m the one who should be sorry, apparently. Are you all right?”

“Yeah. But word of warning, don’t sneak up on a cop.”

“Gathered that now. Worst Lucy could do was hit me with her camera.”
“Why are you lurking in my house?”

“I told you. I’m here to kidnap you.” He held up a black blindfold. “Duke’s orders.”

She thought of the dress in her cupcake room which she’d just picked up this morning and was itching to try on. “Now? The wedding’s tomorrow.”

“I think that’s the point. He said something about a party.”

“Good Lord. I can only imagine.”

“Won’t have to imagine if you just come quietly. I think he’s collecting Dad now.”

“Duke’s going to try to kidnap Nathan? This isn’t going to end well. If either of them have a black eye at the wedding I’m going to be so mad.” She started toward the doorway, anxious to diffuse the situation before it blew up, but James cleared his throat and called her back.

“Aren’t you forgetting something?” He shook the blindfold at her, and she rolled her eyes.

“You’re really serious about that?”

“Promised I would be.”

“Fine,” she obliged, coming close enough that he could tie it around her head. “But you better drive fast. I won’t be able to see the speedometer, so you won’t have to worry about me pulling you over.”

“Okay Mom,” he said with a chuckle, leading her carefully out the door.

James refused to reveal where they were going, and they took too many turns for Audrey to guess. But she could smell the salt water when James opened the car door for her, and she knew she was at the marina.

From the commotion she heard, she also knew Duke’s plan wasn’t going well.

“All right boys, break it up,” she commanded, marginally aggravated by the fact she could hear scuffling and arguing but couldn’t see what was going on.

“Audrey,” Nathan called, the relief in his voice more desperate than she’d expected.

“Yeah, I’m here,” she answered, wanting to reach for him, but she wasn’t close enough.

“Your fiance’s being a real baby,” Duke lamented. “Honestly. I’m trying to throw you a nice bachelor/bachelorette bash, and this is the thanks I get.”

“You could have sent an invitation instead of ambushing me with Dwight,” Nathan snapped.

“Quit your bellyaching. Kidnapping the bride and groom is a time honored tradition. Besides, it was fun until you started swinging at me.”

“I get this blindfold off, I’m gonna start swinging again.”

His petulance seemed a little extreme until James started leading Audrey to the docks and she realized its cause. Without his sense of touch Nathan relied heavily on his other senses – and with sight obscured and no way to feel his surroundings the loss of control must have been terrifying.
She was sure Duke didn’t realize. But she couldn’t let it stand. “Go help you father,” she whispered to James.

His hand on her arm was shortly replaced by Dwight’s. “Howdy, Audrey,” he greeted. “Sorry for all this. Duke insisted.”

“It’s all right,” she said. And it would be, just as long as they all got there in one piece. “As soon as we get on the boat get me next to Nathan, all right? I’ll calm him down.”

“Will do.”

Nathan had stopped muttering curses by the time they’d been escorted to one of the benches on Duke’s boat, but his heavy breathing made him easy to locate.

“Hey,” she said soothingly, reaching out until she found him hand. He jerked at her touch and then held on tight.

“I don’t like this,” he said miserably, and her heart turned in her chest. She could image him groping blindly for the fabric over his eyes, but he wouldn’t be able to tell if he found it. She wanted to yell at the smuggler for doing this to him, but she knew Nathan wouldn’t want attention drawn to his weakness.

“I know.” She reached her free hand toward the sound of his voice, searching carefully until she found the edge of the blindfold and tugged upwards. “Better?”

But she already knew the answer; she’d heard the relief in his long, heavy sigh.

“Thank you.”

“Anytime, partner.”

She felt him tugging at her own blindfold, but she reached up and grabbed his wrist. “Leave it. Some of us know how to have a little fun.”

“I couldn’t—” he began, and his tone of voice told her everything his words didn’t.

“I know,” she said softly, squeezing his hand. “It’s okay now.”

He pressed his forehead against hers and she could feel his warm breath on her face. She closed her eyes and breathed him in, his presence steadying her. She’d been nothing but nerves for so long, but in that moment the world contracted to just the two of them, safe and straightforward and full of possibility.

“We’re getting married tomorrow,” she marveled, and for once she didn’t worry about whether it would work or last.

“Yeah.” The single syllable was infused with such unfathomable reverence that she grinned, wishing she could see his answering smile. “If Duke doesn’t dump us in the ocean first,” he added dryly.

“He probably wouldn’t have brought an audience for that,” she countered smartly, pleased when she heard his amused chuckle.

Eventually the boat’s engine stuttered to a stop and she heard footsteps approaching. “Hey,” Duke protested, probably noticing Nathan’s uncovered eyes.
“Leave it,” Audrey warned.

“Spoilsports,” he teased. “I should take you both right back home and forget it.”

“Fine with me,” Nathan countered.

“Stop,” Audrey said, elbowing him in the side. “I want to see what kind of party Duke Crocker throws.”

“For you two – an epically boring one. But that’s not my fault. I knew that if I got strippers of any variety one of you would shoot me.”

“Smart call.” Nathan certainly wasn’t allowed to ogle any other woman, and she had all the man she needed.

“So I figured, since you’re an outsider, I’d treat you to one of Haven’s finer traditions.”

Nathan took her hand and guided her carefully off the boat. The smell of burning wood assaulted her and she froze, her mind imagining horrors in the flames, stripped bones and the cry of a woman she’d promised to save, a woman who’d already been dead.

“Hey,” Nathan whispered in her ear. “It’s all right.” He slipped the blindfold off and suddenly she was blinking in the light of dusk and the bonfire Dwight was stoking.

“And before Nathan gets all Chief of Police on me, this beach is private property which makes this totally legal.”

“Whose private property?” he asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Never you mind.”

Once she could see the fire she knew it bore no resemblance to the blaze at the Inn. Nathan tugged her gently toward one of the logs set up around it and she followed. She hadn’t been able to smell the ocean at the Inn. Here it invaded her senses as the waves broke fifteen feet down the shore and the air was damp with ocean spray.

“Haven tradition, huh?” James asked, bringing a second box from the boat.

“I haven’t been out here like this since the night I graduated high school,” Dwight chimed in.

“Me either,” Nathan said. “Used to be the thing to do on a Saturday night.”

“And what exactly would a bunch of teenagers do around a fire in the middle of the night?” Audrey asked, finally beginning to relax.


“We will be doing exactly one of those things.”

“I brought plenty of bottles.”

She stuck her tongue out and tossed a handful of sand at him.

“Is that the way to treat someone who brought you presents?”

Duke retrieved two bags from the box James had retrieved, one pink and one blue, and set them in
front of Audrey and Nathan.

She’d never gotten many presents in her life so she dove in eagerly, pulling out a plastic tiara, a white and pink sash that said “Bride to Be” and a navy t-shirt that said “Hail to the Chief.” Turning to Nathan with a laugh, she saw he’d blushed scarlet and was decidedly looking anywhere but as his gifts.

“Can’t be that bad,” she said, grabbing his bag before he could stop her. Her eyes widened when she saw the instruction manual and the fluffy pink handcuffs, but she wasn’t one to be cowed. “Least put this on,” she said, snatching out the ridiculous gold crown and settling it on his head. She giggled as he scowled and snapped a photo with her phone before she put on her own crown and the sash. It was stupid and juvenile but she’d never had girlfriends to take out and embarrass, hadn’t gone to prom or snuck away with a bunch of classmates to get drunk around a fire. It was shockingly normal, and she was grateful that Duke had gone to the trouble to give her that.

She didn’t miss the way Nathan kept looking at her either, his claim to her emblazoned across her chest.

“Now I know how much Audrey loves her girly drinks, so I whipped up something for the occasion.”

Duke pulled a tumbler of shockingly pink liquid from the cooler, along with five solo cups. “I call it the Troublebreaker,” he said with a smirk, handing the first one to Audrey.

She peered at the color for a moment before taking a swig. At first she only noticed how sweet it was, and she was halfway through complimenting it when the aftertaste hit. “Wow, that’s a lot of rum.”

“Yep. If you don’t want to hate yourself tomorrow, you should probably switch to beer after one of those. Nathan’s next.”

“I’m not drinking that,” Nathan protested.

“Are you really going to refuse your wife-to-be’s signature drink? Also, you don’t get any beer until you drink it.”

“Come on,” Audrey goaded. “Just try it.”

Nathan relented with a sigh, and she watched him closely as he swallowed it down.

“Forget the rum. Is there a whole sugar cane factory in there?”

She giggled at his incredulity as Duke handed out the rest of the drinks. “To Audrey and Nathan,” he said, holding out his cup in toast. “May this drink live up to its name, and may they have a long, happy life together, disgusting everyone around them with their sappy displays of affection.”

“Here, here,” James echoed.

“To Nathan and Audrey,” Dwight said, and Audrey was struck by the fact she’d never before seen the giant man relax.

“We’re not sappy,” Nathan argued. Back in Boston such a claim would have bothered Audrey Parker, but she was self-aware enough to know it was probably true, and she felt neither remorse nor regret.
She wasn’t the woman who came to Haven three years ago. Not because that woman was a construct. But because Nathan Wuornos had taken Audrey Parker’s loneliness and Prudence White’s four centuries of heartbreak and turned her into a real girl.

They roasted hot dogs over the fire and watched the sun set over the water.

“Really is pretty out here,” James commented. “That’s easy to forget when people are killing each other and turning into things.”

“There’s no place like it,” Duke said. “And believe me, I’ve looked.”

“Gets under your skin,” Nathan added.

“It’s home,” Dwight finished simply. Audrey could feel, somehow, how true all three statements were. She had memories of other places she’d never been, and she spent decades gone, but there was something special about this place and the people who had carved out an existence here despite the strife. She could understand Duke’s attraction to the sea, because there was something soothing about that as well. Ohio couldn’t hold a candle to this.

She trailed her hand through the sand absentmindedly, letting the damp grains slide through her fingers. She caught Nathan looking at her once with an expression she could only quantify as yearning. It struck her then all the little things he was immune to. It wasn’t all pain and pleasure and warmth and cold. A million tiny sensations she took for granted, and he’d been without them for years. But maybe not for much longer. She reached for his hand, deliberately trapping the grains between them so they pressed into his skin, cool and damp and slightly scratchy. She watched him still, wonder stealing over his face, and she desperately wanted to give him everything he’d missed out on and more.

“She. Gross.” Duke cut through their moment, but she didn’t protest, and she didn’t let go of Nathan’s hand. She just shrugged.

“So, Pinocchio, what’s the first thing you’re going to do after the Troubles end?” Duke asked, looking right at Nathan. Panic gripped Audrey, because she couldn’t bear to hear his answer in case it didn’t come true.

“This may not work,” she protested, cutting Nathan off.

“Oh, it’ll work,” Duke said, nonchalant in the face of her borderline hysteria.

“How can you be so sure?” she demanded.

“Crocker family motto. ‘Love conquers all.’ That’s a pretty curious mantra for a family of killers, don’t ya think? But the first Crocker – Prudence’s sailor friend – he got it. Knew the blacksmith was being an idiot, shoulda fought for his love. He’s obviously the smart one in this story.”

“That doesn’t mean he knew how to break the curse.”

He shook his head at her like she was someone else’s misbehaving child. “Stop fighting this and relax. Have another drink.”

Nathan had tensed beside her. She knew her hesitancy bothered him. But it wasn’t his intentions she doubted. The universe hadn’t been kind to them, and she’d learned young to be suspicious of happiness. But his thumb traced a patient pattern across her wrist and his wide eyes implored her to give into the fantasy, just this once.
She took the beer Duke offered her and held her tongue.

“So how about it Nathan? What’s the first thing you’ll do post Troubles?”

“Probably go to the reception you’re throwing us. So no pressure.”

His tone was dry, but his smile gave him away. “Har har,” Duke responded. “What if it was just a normal day? You could feel again, and you could do anything.”

It was a deeply personal question, and Audrey expected Nathan not to answer. He looked into the fire, not meeting anyone’s eyes, but he spoke. “I’d go driving along the coast with the windows down. Feel the air and the sun.”

Such a simple wish. She took such things for granted every day.

Duke hummed in approval. “I’d go out on my boat. Same idea.”

“I’d go skiing,” James added. “Just to feel the cold and the rush.”

“I’d work in my garden,” Dwight said, and Audrey turned toward him with narrowed eyes.

“Seriously?” Duke asked.

“Seriously. I like to plant things. I find it soothing.”

It was hard to hold back her laughter at the thought of the massive man tending poesies.

“You’re like an onion, Sasquatch. All these layers we’ve never seen beneath. What about you, Aud?”

She scrabbled for an answer. She didn’t have hobbies or a favorite season. She’d want to do everything; she’d just want to be normal. She glanced at the man by her side and knew she’d want to spend the time with him. Whether she’d been able to feel him before or not, she’d want to feel him then, with the world suddenly right around her. Not just sex. She’d want to feel him tuck a strand of hair behind her ear, rest her head against his chest and feel his heart beating against her cheek, grip his arms through his shirtsleeves and feel the strength there. She’d want him to be there when she experienced every sensation – sheets and sunlight and his stubble against her skin.

She’d whisper that in his ear when they were alone, but she wasn’t about to say it in front of their friends.

“I’d take a long, hot bath. Then I’d change into sweats and curl up in the sun with a good book.”

“Didn’t know Officer Agent Parker even know how to relax,” Duke teased. “Sure you wouldn’t just go to the station and fill out some paperwork?”

“Oh shut it.”

“My Trouble won’t be the only one gone,” Nathan pointed out.

Duke smiled softly, pulling out a bag of marshmallows and deftly spearing one to hold over the fire. “Will be nice not to have people begging me to kill them anymore. Might even turn respectable.”

“Weren’t respectable before you found out about your family’s legacy.”
Audrey bumped her shoulder against Nathan’s, but he was nonplussed as Duke tossed the bag their way.

“What about you, Sasquatch? Do you know what you’re going to do once they’re gone?”

Dwight’s grin made him seem years younger. “Yep.”

They all waited for an elaboration that never came.

“You’re not going to tell us, are you?” Duke groaned.

“Nope.”

Duke shook his head with a heavy sigh. “Onion, I tell you.”

They laughed well into the night, sharing stories of simpler times and dreams of a brighter future. By the time the beer was gone there might have been some off-key karaoke as they sang along with the radio Duke had brought. As the warmth of the fire stole over her, Audrey curled into Nathan’s side, his arm draped around her shoulder, and drifted off to the overwhelming feeling of contentment.
Nathan woke alone and numb. He reached out to pull Audrey toward him but no matter how he stretched there was no burst of warmth to give away her position. He pried open his eyes to discover the bed was empty beside him.

Wasn’t even his bed, either.

“Morning,” a man’s voice called from the kitchen. As Nathan blinked and sat up the details of last night clicked into place. Duke had insisted he couldn’t see Audrey before the wedding, so after the party he’d been banished to the Gull with James.

His son was currently behind the stove, whipping up some heavenly smelling eggs.

Nathan ambled over, settling on one of Audrey’s old kitchenette chairs. He’d helped her pick them out at a yard sale ages ago, the real Audrey Parker also in tow, but the way those two had carried on he’d been fairly certain he’d only been invited for his muscles and his truck.

He’d had the perfect view of her smile as she and Audrey bickered, so he hadn’t minded at all.

He’d been far gone, even then.

_They were getting married today._

The sheer incomprehensible joy of that welled up inside him. Didn’t matter that he’d woken up alone today. He’d never wake up alone again.

Today, for some inexplicable reason, Audrey was going to swear to spend the rest of her life by his side.

He’d never understand why. But by God he was going to make the most of it.

James slid an omelet in front of him. Nathan could smell the sharp cheddar and greasy bacon. “Can I help with anything?”

“Could throw in some toast.”

“Sure.”

He knew where Audrey had kept the bread. He’d been the one to arrange her kitchen after he’d gone out and bought her groceries because she’d had her own place for a month and still had no discernable provisions. James hadn’t moved it, and Nathan found butter and jam in the fridge. By the time the toast popped James had finished his own omelet.

“This is really good,” Nathan praised after his first bite. He’d always be a pancake man, but he could appreciate a good egg, and apparently James knew his way around a kitchen.

“Thanks. I know I’m not the one you wanted to see this morning.”

“Least you saved me from having to sleep on Duke’s damn boat.”
James laughed, but there was something tentative in it. They were definitely family, but they’d never had time to figure out what that meant.

“I’m glad you could share this with us,” Nathan said earnestly, looking the kid full in the face. He could see pieces of Audrey there, and pieces of himself, and it was the damnedest thing. He wished he’d had the chance to watch him grow up, to teach him all the things a man should know. But at least he was here now.

“Me too.” James’s brow furrowed. “You know, in the Barn I prepared this big speech I was going to give you about not hurting her. Seems superfluous now.”

“I’d rather cut out my own heart than hurt her,” he swore.

“Obviously,” James said with a smirk. “You’re what Lucy would call ‘a complete sap.’”

It was so strange to think that James had a whole history with a part of Audrey he’d never see. It was Audrey he loved, but he couldn’t help being curious about these other people she’d been. “What was Lucy like?” he asked.

James didn’t answer immediately like Audrey would. Instead he pondered the question, and Nathan could imagine the methodical paths his mind took to carefully choose each word.

“She had all the toughest parts of Sarah and the coldest ones of Audrey, I reckon. She was aloof, but I think that was to protect herself. She was used to disappointment by the time I met her – and then we found out about the Barn. But she was witty and brilliant, and she helped wherever she went, even when it seemed like she didn’t want to. She kept your father on his toes.”

He was teasing by the time he was through, and Nathan appreciated that. “That couldn’t have been easy.”

James smiled, but the tentativeness was still there. “What was Sarah like?” he asked, voice dropping as if the subject was taboo.

The flash of memory was somehow instinctual – the red hair and that gorgeous, carefree smile. He’d wanted so desperately to see it on Audrey’s face, he’d looked at Sarah and been willing to pretend.

He’d lost his way before he found Sarah, and she’d helped him find it – not just his proper year, but his proper path. After being with Sarah, he couldn’t hide from Audrey any longer. “She was … vibrant. So full of life. All sass and nerve. I’m not exactly proud of how that went down, but I wouldn’t change it. Not with the result sitting right in front of me.”

It was still unfathomable, after all this time, that he and Sarah had a son.

“I’m glad you found each other – then and now. And that Lucy was wrong.”

He didn’t like that Lucy had seen him as the cad in this story. Or that he’d turned out to be far more of an absentee father than his own. He rubbed at the back of his neck. “Look, I know we’re still practically strangers. With everything that’s been going on there hasn’t been much time – but I want to change that. You ever been fishing?”

“Sure. We’d pull trout out of the river every spring.”

He had the tact not to specify the other half of that ‘we’ but Nathan knew who he was referring to. And even though he was grateful that James grew up with a loving family, it still killed him that
family wasn’t him and Audrey. But he swallowed the lump in his throat. Wasn’t the kid’s fault. “What about ocean fishing?”

“Nope.”

“We should go sometime.” He wanted to try harder. Needed to. Maybe this was how his own father had gotten so distant – the increasing demands of a town constantly in crisis and the countless folks in distress who cried louder than the boy silently wishing for his attention.

James’s smile unfurled like a flag on the wind. “I’d like that.”

“We’ll pick a date. Make a day of it.” There were still things he could teach James. He wouldn’t waste any more chances.

“Gotta get you hitched first. We better get ready. I promised Mom I’d come by to help her, and Duke left us quite a to do list.”

Even mention of the smuggler couldn’t bother Nathan today. In just a few hours, he and Audrey would be married.

Contrary to the weather report, it was a beautiful day.

They’d decided on an outdoor wedding. Because of the Rev Nathan could hardly stomach walking into a church, and he didn’t need that baggage on his wedding day. Audrey had agreed readily enough. The biggest challenge had been finding a picturesque spot where they didn’t already have a history – they couldn’t get married at the place their son had died, or been conceived, or where his father had self-destructed. Duke had griped he was being too picky, but he wanted a new place for a new memory, and they deserved that.

He’d done his best to keep things simple. Since they hadn’t invited many people it didn’t take long to set up a handful of chairs halfway down to the water. They’d laid down a strip of carpet to make it easier for Audrey in her shoes and flanked the ceremony area with baskets of lilacs and lilies, at Audrey’s insistence.

There were dozens of details that had come together – from the white lily pinned to his suit to the particular arrangements the keyboardist was playing. But as pretty a picture it was, Nathan barely cared. He watched the guests filter in – a few folks from the station, an aunt and a cousin, Dwight – but the only one that mattered to him was Audrey. James had gone to retrieve her an hour ago, and every minute since then had stretched and multiplied. Back in his childhood he would have felt the itch in his limbs; now he drummed his fingers against his legs just to give himself something to do.

“When she gets here you better remember to breathe, big guy,” Duke taunted. “We can’t have you not noticing you’ve stopped and passing out on us. Though I brought smelling salts, just in case.” He tapped his jacket pocket with an exaggerated gesture.

“Stop being an ass.” But he couldn’t muster up any actual aggravation. Not today, when his world was so uncharacteristically right.

“I’m serious.” Duke actually sounded it, oddly enough. “You’ll know what I mean when you see her.”

He grunted. It would probably be fair advice coming from anyone other than Duke.
“You sure are a lucky bastard, getting a woman like that to marry you.” There were a range of emotions in Duke’s voice, but none of them were sharp. Nathan watched the man out of the corner of his eye, surprised by how at peace he seemed. “But I’m happy for the both of you. Really am. Even if I do give fate all the credit.”

Nathan was suddenly struck by the notion that he’d never be able to stand up there if it was Duke Audrey had chosen. He couldn’t help but respect the man for that. Perhaps he had changed.

All such pondering came to a halt as the music swelled.

“It’s go time, Pinocchio,” Duke whispered. “Time to turn you back into a real boy.”

Then Audrey appeared, and words failed him. Love and joy and pride sent him spinning as if a wave had knocked his legs out from under him. She was the definition of perfection. Her white dress hugged the glorious curves he was so familiar with, v-ing just deep enough in the front to reveal a hint of cleavage. There was something on the fabric that shimmered. Her hair cascaded in loose curls, half of them pinned away from her face, a white lily behind her ear. She clutched James’s arm with one hand and a purple bouquet of lilacs with the other. By far the best part was her smile as their eyes met, so radiant it put the sun to shame.

Then suddenly it wasn’t just his emotions that were churning. Audrey was replaced with a view of the ground coming up quickly, and he stopped himself as he pitched forward. He turned toward Duke as soon as he righted himself, and the man looked far too proud of himself.

“Breathe,” he advised with a smirk.

Nathan deliberately did just that, figuring everyone was too focused on the bride to notice his lapse. He was too ecstatic to be embarrassed, anyway.

It seemed to take forever for Audrey to reach him, but finally James clapped him on the shoulder and then placed her hand in his. She tightened her fingers and he reveled in the warmth and softness.

“Wow,” he breathed, unable to help himself, not caring that the guests could probably hear him. Audrey’s smile grew impossibly brighter, the most soothing balm he’d ever come across in his weary life.

“We gather here today to join Nathan Wuornos and Audrey Parker in holy matrimony,” the minister began. Nathan knew he should probably pay attention to what he was saying, but there was nothing he could say about love that Audrey hadn’t already taught him, no advice about marriage that would change his determination to cherish her for eternity. Standing together on that beach he could see their whole lives spread before him – holding their next child, baseball games and piano recitals, walking their daughter down the aisle, warm nights curled up on the porch swing, growing old together. Blissful, overwhelming normalcy. Love and family and tradition, and he would give her that and so much more.

“Can I say something?” Audrey interrupted, the thumb skimming across his hand quelling the nerves that had flared at her interjection.

“Certainly,” the pastor said with an indulgent smile.

She took an exaggerated breath, and when she looked at him there were tears glistening in her eyes. But she was still beaming, and he knew he didn’t have to fear anything she had to say.

“You asked me once if I was going to fix you. But you fixed me. You taught me so many things I
never learned growing up, and even in your weakness you taught me how to forgive. I don’t know what I did to deserve your devotion, but I will cherish it always. Cherish you. And I swear to love you back just as fiercely for as long as there’s breath in my body. We’re a team. We have been since we met. I’ll never let anything come between us again.”

If only they were alone. He would have kissed her until they both saw stars, and etched his devotion into her skin. As it was, words were the appropriate response. They’d never discussed writing their own vows, so he didn’t have anything prepared. But he wanted her to feel as good as he did in that moment, and that inspired him.

“Audrey.” But that was who she was to the world, not who she was to him. They’d been partners first, and now there was nothing that could break that apart. “Parker,” he corrected, and she smiled even brighter. “You gave me back everything the Troubles took away. Hope. Joy. Love. Family. You’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me and I’m gonna spend every day of my life making sure you know how much I love you.”

He yearned to wipe her tears away, but he knew she wouldn’t want attention drawn to them. There would be time later, when they were alone.

“Well,” the minister said. “I’d say that takes care of most objections. But if there’s anyone here with reason these two should not be wed, speak now or forever hold your peace.”

He tensed, ready for some bitter townsperson to intervene, and glanced over at Duke. But the man was smiling and there was no interruption.

“Then let us begin the vows. Who has the rings?”

James pulled them from his jacket pocket, placing Sarah’s ring in Nathan’s hand and a plain gold band in Audrey’s.

“Audrey, do you take Nathan to be your lawfully wedded husband, to have and to hold, to honor and to cherish, in sickness and in health, from this day forward, as long as you both shall live? If so answer ‘I do.’”

“I do.”

“Then repeat after me. ‘With this ring, I thee wed.’”

Her hand shook, but her voice was steady as she slid the ring on his finger. “With this ring, I thee wed.”

“Nathan –”

“Yes.” The minister chuckled at his impatience, but he couldn’t imagine delaying this another minute. But the minister continued with the vows, and this time he waited for him to finish before he said “I do.” He forced himself to focus so he wouldn’t drop the ring. “With this ring, I thee wed,” he said, reverently sliding the ring made by a less worthy man onto her delicate finger to rest beside the engagement ring.

“Then by the power vested in me by the state of Maine, I declare you husband and wife. What God has joined, may no man tear asunder. You may kiss the bride.”

He was so intent on that task, the way she gasped into his mouth and tasted of home, that he didn’t notice the wind in his hair or the sun beating down on his dark suit.
Not until they’d broken apart and Duke clapped him on the back. “Congratulations buddy.”

He wheeled on the man with wide eyes.

“Whoa, relax Romeo.”

“I felt that,” he revealed, back still stinging from the contact.

“Really?” Duke seemed genuinely elated.

“Yeah.”

He’d never know how it happened, but suddenly the two of them were embracing, and Duke was solid under his arms.

“Do I need to get the two of you a room?”

Nathan pushed Duke away, startled out of the moment, to find Audrey watching him with delighted eyes. He grabbed her by the waist and hoisted her in the air, grinning at her breathless giggle. “You’re safe.” The realization crashed over him, making him giddy as he spun her, repeating it over and over. He could feel gravity again, but he was weightless, the future he’d seen at the altar locked into place.

“We’re safe,” she corrected softly. “You’re stuck with me for a lot longer than a couple of weeks.”

No more Guard. No more Troubles. No more talk of sacrifices and misery.

“Thank God.”

He kissed her again until he felt the strain in his arms and had to put her down. He dropped his forehead against hers, breathing in the blissful peace.

“Are the Troubles really gone?”

He looked up at the sound of Dwight’s voice, but kept Audrey tucked into his side.

“There’s one way to find out,” Duke offered.

“No one’s bleeding on my wedding day!” Audrey scolded.

“They’re gone,” Nathan insisted with a certainty he felt in his racing heart. He wasn’t the only one free today. It was over.

Dwight nodded, his uncharacteristic smile making him seem mischievous. “I’ll see you at the reception then. There’s something I gotta do first.” The cleaner scurried away, leaving Duke to mutter, “There’s something going on with that man,” as James and Audrey embraced.

“We should head out too,” Duke said after a moment. “Gotta make sure everything’s ready at the Gull before the guests arrive.”

“You can’t leave before the pictures,” Audrey insisted.

“There’s that bridezilla I knew was in there,” Duke teased.

“Shut up. Now that we’re all going to be around to remember this I want some photos. Just stand there and smile.”
“Fine. Though I warn you, I’m going to be the handsomest person in them. I can’t turn this off.”

They’d been wary of telling too many people about the wedding, so Audrey had agreed to let Dave be the photographer. As he approached them now there were tears in his eyes. “You look beautiful, Audrey.”

She smoothed her hands down the dress self-consciously. “Thanks.”

“You take care of her Nathan.”

“I will,” he swore. He’d been wary of the Teagues ever since he revealed James’s paternity, but Dave wasn’t showing any sharp edges now. Audrey had told him that Dave had loved Sarah, and Nathan couldn’t imagine himself in this man’s place, with a life wasted waiting only to see her love and marry another.

Nathan normally had no use for photography, but he didn’t mind this. Even though he’d commit every moment of this day to memory it would be good to have a physical reminder. He let Audrey and Dave run the show, only finding it hard to tear his eyes away from Audrey to look at the camera.

Eventually James and Duke snuck off, leaving him and Audrey to a few dozen more shots.

Once he finally finished Dave packed his camera back in its case. “Vince sends his regards,” he said solemnly. “He’d like to deliver them to you himself at the reception.”

“No,” Audrey answered sharply. “I know this all turned out all right and I ought to forgive him – but not today.”

Nathan could muster none of Dave’s sadness. Vince had dared to have their son killed, and he was lucky Nathan hadn’t returned the favor. “Very well. I’ll send you a portfolio as soon as these are developed.”

“Thanks.”

Dave looked at him before he turned to go. “You father would have been proud of you today, Nathan.”

The idea of that stirred something that settled like a lump in his throat. “I’m not sure that’s true,” he said wistfully after Dave had gone. “He’d probably think getting hitched was a sissy way to end the Troubles.”

“He would have been happy for you,” Audrey countered. “And glad that I didn’t get you killed.”

It surprised him that he actually wished his father had been there to see this, even though it would have surely meant a couple of barbs and quite a bit of grumbling.

“We oughta get to that reception,” he deflected.

She followed him to the Bronco, but after he pulled out on the road she asked him to go in the opposite direction, pointing toward the coast. “And roll the windows down.”

It took him a few moments to figure out the reason for her request. He watched her out of the corner of his eye, her pristine dress so out of place in his battered pickup, but the spark in her eye familiar. “I just had to come up with an answer I could tell everyone, you know. All I really wanted after I could feel again was you.”
Her white dress made her blush even more obvious. “Ditto, partner. But there’s no reason you can’t have both.”

“It’ll mess up your hair.”

She rolled her eyes at him. “You really think I care? We already took the pictures, anyway.” She cranked down her window and looked over at him expectantly. “Come on. It’s a nice day. I want to enjoy it too.”

Of course he obliged her. The force of the air was a shock at first, cool and strong all the way from his skin to his lungs. He leaned his arm out the window, delighted by the way the sun beat down on it, flooding him with an all-encompassing warmth which the ocean breeze strove to temper. The metal was so hot he could feel it through his sleeve. It was hard to keep focused on the road when the world beyond the windshield was alive, and for the first time in years he was a part of that.

“Is that grin gonna become permanent?”

He shifted his gaze to Audrey, who was regarding him with a grin of her own, her hair slightly mussed but still undeniably beautiful.

“Married less than an hour and you’re already picking fun,” he said dryly, not actually annoyed in the slightest.

“I’m not picking fun,” she argued, more earnest than he expected. “Happiness looks good on you, Wuornos.”

How could he not smile a little brighter at that? “You too, Parker.” He looked back toward the road but kept watching her out of the corner of his eye. “But everything looks good on you,” he said casually. “Specially nothing.”

She never expected him to be forward, and he loved catching her off guard.

“We could just keep driving,” she offered. “Forget the reception and find someplace we could celebrate, just the two of us.”

He’d never known the full effect just her voice could have on him, and he yearned to explore that further. But they couldn’t. Not quite yet.

“Duke went to a lot of trouble. We can’t stand him up,” he said reluctantly.

“You and Duke again. Maybe I should be worried,” she teased.

He scowled at the thought of that and she giggled beside him. “Okay, maybe not.”

“I never could have stood up there and watched you marry someone else,” he admitted after she’d calmed down. “Guess today that makes Duke a better man than I am.”

She reached out and rested a hand on his knee. “I couldn’t’ve watched you marry someone else either. You’re all mine now.” Her words and the patterns she was smoothing across his leg were making it nearly impossible to concentrate on driving, but he couldn’t tell her to stop. Her former self might have been a witch, the way she could bespell him. “He’s a good friend. He’ll find someone someday. But I guess you’re right. We should get to that reception.”

Nathan took the next turnaround. “We’ll make an appearance. But I booked us the honeymoon suite at our B&B in Derry, so we shouldn’t stay long.”
Her fingers stilled but her grip tightened, promising pleasures he couldn’t imagine yet. “My hero,” she purred, sending a thrill through him even though she was joking.

There were more cars in the Gull’s lot than he’d expected. The reception list was slightly longer than the wedding’s, but there weren’t many people in town he’d expected to be happy for them. He was sure Audrey noticed too, but she didn’t say anything, and he didn’t dare put a damper on this.

They entered the restaurant hand in hand, and Duke’s voice carried across the microphone, cavalier yet slightly exasperated. “And finally, the moment we’ve all been waiting for, I introduce Mr. and Mrs. Nathan and Audrey Wuornos.”

He was so wrapped up in the sound of that that it took him a few moments to realize that Audrey had stopped beside him.

She stretched up on her toes and whispered, “Did you tell Duke to play this?”

“What?” He listened for a few seconds to figure out what she found so offensive and smirked once he figured it out. “Not a fan of the Captain and Tennille?”

It probably boded poorly for him that he found her adorable when she was annoyed. “Don’t you remember?”

“Remember what?”

“The day we met, this was the song playing on the radio. I distinctly remember thinking that I didn’t want to die listening to this song.”

She certainly had been fired up. Adorable even then. “Didn’t hear it. Guess I was too distracted by the pretty blonde with a bad driving record and no survival instinct.”

She swatted at his shoulder. “Is that really what you thought of me?”

He chuckled. “Thought you were pretty. But a little mouthy. And awful quick to pull your gun on me.”

“You pulled your gun on me! And when you went around my car I thought you had left me there.”

“Well that wouldn’t have been very chivalrous.” He’d never thought a routine rescue could change his life so drastically, but he was grateful. As the song continued to play he couldn’t help but smile.

“It did, you know,” he told her as he pulled out a chair at the table Duke had set for them. “Keep us together.”

“What?”

He chuckled at her. “Love. Like the song said. Love will keep us together.” His voice dropped as he sang a couple words, and he took note of the way that made her breath catch and filed that info away for later when they were alone. “It was our love that ended the Troubles and kept you here in Haven. Ironic, isn’t it?”

“What, someone had a music relevance Trouble?”

“Nah. Probably just fate. Hey, what if this is our song?” he said with exaggerated zeal.

“I can still divorce you,” she deadpanned, so droll he didn’t worry about the possibility for a
“Sometimes I can’t tell when you’re kidding,” he countered, harkening back to the early days of their partnership.

“Who says I’m kidding?” She kept a straight face but only barely, and then gave up and rolled her eyes at him.

“ Took you guys long enough,” Duke chided, coming over to stand beside them. “I do not want to know what you were doing.”

“Contemplating making a run for Mexico,” Audrey answered cheekily. “But this is beautiful, Duke.”

Nathan supposed the place did clean up nicely, with white lights strung from the ceiling to chase away the dark corners and enough flowers strewn about to make the whole place smell like Audrey.

“Anything for my favorite cop and her trusty sidekick.”

Nathan was trying to think of a comeback when he heard someone squeal, “Look at the fairy lights!” He looked toward the entrance and found Dwight ushering in three girls, the youngest maybe twelve and the oldest practically a woman herself. There was something familiar about them, but Nathan couldn’t immediately place it. It was strange seeing Dwight with anyone else; far as Nathan knew he didn’t have any family left.

The man in question lumbered toward them. “Sorry I’m late.” The youngest girl clutched onto his hand, and she looked at Audrey with bright eyes and a shy smile.

“You’re so pretty.”

It was Audrey’s recognition that spurred his own. “You’re--”

“Sophie Benton,” he finished, knowing she’d never remember the name that went with the face.

The girl nodded, but clutched even tighter to Dwight. “I’m better now,” she mumbled, and Nathan couldn’t help but remember the sisters’ terrible thirst for human flesh and the manhunt that had left the Rev dead by Audrey’s hand. The Troubles had turned the girls into wendigos. “Dwight’s gonna take care of us.”

“Dwight’s been taking care of you for quite some time, I’d bet,” Duke said, voice smug with realization. “You know, Sasquatch, you could have told us where you were always running off to. Here we thought you just didn’t want to be friends.”

“They needed someone to look after them,” Dwight hedged. Nathan smiled. Now that the Troubles were over the survivors could begin picking up the pieces.

The eldest girl regarded them with eyes far older than her age. “Mr. Hendrickson said you were the ones that ended the Troubles. That made us normal again. We can never thank you enough for that.”

“You don’t have to,” Audrey said. “Just live your life. That’s thanks enough. Though maybe you can get this one to loosen up a little bit.” She tilted her head toward Dwight and smiled.

Frankie’s answering smile was terse; she’d seen too much to ever be a kid again. But the fact that
she’d have a life now outside the slaughterhouse was an unforeseeable gift.

“I never thanked you for saving my life,” the middle girl said. The last time Nathan had seen Amelia she’d been terrified and half mad from hunger. She could be a normal girl now, and somehow he and Audrey had done that.

“I’d do it again in a heartbeat.” She’d always been a defender of the weak, and he’d always found that ridiculously attractive.

“Why don’t you go find us a table,” Dwight suggested, and the girls filed away after a few more significant looks.

“Real good thing you’re doing,” Nathan offered.

The blond man smiled. “They’re good girls. Gonna take some time to readjust to normal life. But we can all start to heal now.”

Audrey found Nathan’s hand under the table and laced them together. He wouldn’t need time. His healing had completed the moment he knew she was safe.

“Look, I ran into a friend outside. Didn’t want to start anything while the girls were there. He gave me this. Said Audrey would know what it meant.”

Dwight pulled a battered paperback from his jacket pocket and handed it to Audrey. She handled it as gingerly as if it was a bomb, opened it to the first page, and then hissed when she read the inscription, slamming the cover shut. For the first time all day dread settled like a stone in Nathan’s stomach, but he only allowed himself a second to panic, determination fierce and strong with a voice that sounded a lot like Audrey welling up inside him. No one was taking this away from them.

He snatched the book so he could read it for himself. There was a note scribbled on the title page of *Pride and Prejudice*. “Fine work, Hester. May this serve as a reminder that impressions can be deceiving. Consider us even. –Prospero.”

“Oh no,” Audrey spat. “That man killed people – in front of the police! He terrorized you for years. He’s not getting away with it!”

Nathan had spent months worrying himself sick about Bernie’s influence over the Guard, but that seemed so long ago. He was just a man now, no longer immune to Parker’s sense of justice.

“There’s no statute of limitations on murder. We should be able to get him on Alistair’s death. Probably a few other charges as well. But it doesn’t sound like he’s going to skip town. So maybe we can not arrest anyone on our wedding day?”

She hesitated, and he knew if she insisted they’d be off in their wedding clothes. Then she let out a breath so heavy it shifted the curls framing her face. “All right. But he doesn’t stay free long.”

“Pinkie swear,” he answered, holding out his hand to her.

She shook her head at his childish gesture, but smiled and linked her finger with his.

“I’m just gonna go,” Dwight said awkwardly.

“We are officially one of those sappy couples I hated all my life,” Audrey said with a laugh as she watched him leave.
“What’s wrong with being happy?” Nathan pouted, tugging her hand up so he could brush his lips across her wrist.

Her eyes fluttered closed for a moment. “Nothing,” she sighed.

Their moment was broken by the approach of their waitress. “Champagne for the newlyweds,” the woman said with a genuine smile, and Nathan recognized her not just because they were in the Gull all the time but because it had been a case that had first brought them together and etched the worry lines into her face.

“Thank you, Tracy,” he said as he accepted the glass. “How’s the family?”

“We’re hanging in. Brooke’s at college now. She’s doing well.”

“And you son?” Audrey asked.

“He holds together most of the time. There’ve been a couple episodes, but we’ve gotten through them.”

“I don’t think you’ll have to worry about that anymore,” Audrey said, but she didn’t elaborate, and Tracy left the glasses and returned to the kitchen.

At the bar Duke clanged some silverware against his own glass. “I know we’re all anxious to eat, but first I’d like to give a toast.” Nathan wanted to groan, but held his tongue for Audrey’s sake. “To Audrey and Nathan – the beauty and the pain in the ass.” Audrey shot Nathan a warning look, and he gritted his teeth and said nothing. He was an expert in enduring Duke’s taunts, and the smuggler was using the shit-eating tone that meant in his mind at least it was all a game. “I’ve been unfortunate enough to know Nathan most of my life, and I met Audrey the first day she came to town – or when I was eight, depending on how you want to look at it.” He paused, and Nathan could see something in his veneer crack. When he spoke again there was something honest in his voice Nathan hadn’t heard much of in decades. “There’s no doubt in my mind that they’re far better together than they are apart. Not often does love break a curse and save a town from a host of supernatural afflictions. But I don’t think Nathan or Audrey even know the definition of the word normal. But they do understand perseverance, and sacrifice, and if anyone deserves a long, sickening happy life together it’s the two of them. So here’s to that.”

“See, not so bad,” Audrey whispered as they clinked their glasses together. But he was too lost in the memory of the skinny, gangly kid who’d carried him down the hill when he broke his arm and sometimes told him uncomfortable truths about his family life before he learned to guild the pain with lies.

James stood next. “Not many people get to give the toast at their parent’s first wedding.” Nathan could hear nervous twittering as the guests tried to work that out. James parentage wasn’t exactly a secret, but they weren’t advertising it either. He was sure it was his relatives who were probably most shocked. His Aunt Millie refused to acknowledge the Troubles’ existence, and her own brother had shattered into a pile of rubble. But let them talk. Nathan was tired of hiding. “I’m a strange kind of lucky, I guess. I was blessed to grow up watching my adoptive parents love each other. We’ve all spent so much time looking for each other. Today we can stop searching and start living.”

Audrey’s eyes were bright when they turned to each other, and for the first time in years Nathan could feel tears pricking behind his own eyes.

But they tapped their glasses, drank the champagne, and life continued on.
He didn’t even flinch when he saw Duke approaching, though he did squint at the way he seemed to be hiding something behind his back.

He leaned toward Nathan conspiratorially. “So I’m only going to give this to you if you pretend it was a special request. The rest of the guests are getting steak.” With a flourish he pulled his hand from behind his back to reveal a heaping plate of pancakes.

Nathan opened his mouth but no words came out. Duke chuckled and put a hand on his shoulder before nudging Audrey’s arm. “Your lobster’s on the way. And you look beautiful.”

“Thank you. For everything,” Audrey said, voice brimming with sincerity.

“Don’t mention it. To anyone.” Duke turned away with a wink, and Nathan still hadn’t figured out what to say.

And then something shattered.

He turned toward the sound to see Audrey’s lobster on the floor, and Tracy staring at a man who had once been a ghost.

“Tracy, baby, you can see me right?” James Garrick asked. “I think I’m solid again.”

With a hitched sob, Tracy threw her arms around her husband. “James.”

“I’m here. I think I’m here to stay,” he said haltingly.

Nathan turned from the reunion to his own wife, and as their eyes met he was certain the same thought flashed between them. They had done this.

The mermen showed up later.

Audrey had just smeared their wedding cupcake across his cheek so she could kiss off the frosting when the restaurant filled with dripping wet Glendowers.

As Cole Glendower strode toward them Nathan swiped his hand across his face, certain they’d be able to find another cupcake to finish that fantasy later. The man was intimidating even sopping wet, and Nathan squared his shoulders for the confrontation.

“I understand you two are to thank for our return,” Cole said, terse and solemn like Garland had been. Maybe it was the similarities between them that made him nervous.

“Yes sir,” Nathan answered, not bothering to ask how he had known that.

“I will turn myself in as promised. But I’d like an hour to see my wife first.”

The man had killed his own relation, and Nathan knew justice had to be done. But those two torturous years without Audrey made him hate the thought of imposing separation on anyone.

“No arrests on our wedding day, right partner?” Audrey said slyly, and he nodded and took the out she offered him.

“Probably won’t be coming in for a few days anyway. Why don’t you take a week?”

Cole’s lips twitched into a smile. “I will. My family owes you a debt of gratitude we cannot repay.”
“Just stay out of trouble,” he advised.

“How’d you get back so fast?” Audrey asked. “I thought you were staying well off the coast.”

“We felt the change begin three weeks ago. Haven was calling us back home.”

He watched the way Audrey’s eyes widened, but she waited until Cole was gone to say something.

“We got engaged three weeks ago.”

“Indeed we did, Captain Obvious,” he teased, but he understood her awe. He’d gotten so used to their love destroying lives. This time it was putting them back together.

Soon Duke was calling them up for their first dance. “Thought this song was appropriate,” he cracked, voice dripping with mirth over the microphone.

As the first notes played Nathan held out his hand, remembering the first time they had done this. Just like then his heart sped up when she clasped her hand in his, but that warmth was familiar now, though no less affecting. All the awkwardness of that first dance was gone. They found their positions naturally, his spare hand resting on her waist and hers on his shoulder. She stepped close enough to lay her head on his chest and he pressed a kiss to her hair, inhaling her scent. He began to sway with the music, not caring that he probably looked like a fool. He could feel his feet now, but all that mattered was her. She looked up at him, so kissably close, and this time it wouldn’t be a risk to close the distance and cover her lips with his own. He had wanted her so badly that night, and he hadn’t been brave enough to do anything about it, but it had been bliss, having her there in his arms.

Then the chorus started and Nathan understood Duke’s joke.

*I have died every day waiting for you* Darling, *don't be afraid I have loved you* For a thousand years *I'll love you for a thousand more*

Audrey laughed, shaking her head. “Not quite a thousand years. But close.” Her hand smoothed down his shoulder. “We won’t have a thousand years left either.”

“That’s okay. I’ll settle for a hundred.”

“Wow, a hundred. We’re gonna live that long, huh?”

He shrugged. “Medicine’s advancing.” He leaned closer and watched her breath catch. “I won’t accept a day less,” he whispered before kissing her chastely, just a brush of lips.

“We haven’t danced since your reunion,” she observed, staying close.

“Doesn’t Jack and Patsy count?”

“Nope. Greif clinging does not count.”

“We can make up for lost time.”

She hummed, but she didn’t break eye contact and he knew she had something more to say.

“That night, after the reunion – I wanted you to come upstairs with me,” she admitted.

“I know.” He’d figured as much even before she’d asked him what he was doing. And he’d desperately wanted to oblige her. To spend one night showing her how he’d grown to love her. He’d had all sorts of fleeting romantic notions that if he just kept her in bed all day the Barn
couldn’t find her. He’d fight off her fate single handedly, and she’d be so smitten no force in this world could steal her memories away. But that had been foolish, and it was more important to keep her in Haven indefinitely than to spend one night as a real man.

“Do you ever wonder what would have been different if you had?”

“Wasn’t Arla waiting for you in your apartment?”

“Yeah.”

“Then we probably wouldn’t have had sex,” he said pragmatically.

She squeezed his shoulder and leaned in even closer. “I dunno. Two against one? I think we could have taken her.”

“Psychotic daughter-in-laws are kinda a mood killer though.”

“If you had admitted you wanted me it would have taken a lot more than Arla to keep me away. We could have locked her in the closet or something.”

He chuckled at her gall even though he didn’t quite believe it. “This turned out alright though, didn’t it?” He ran his thumb over her rings, feeling the smoothness of the bands and the catch of the diamonds.

“Yeah.” She rested her head against him again. “I just wish you hadn’t had to suffer so much while I was gone.”

“It’s all right.”

She pulled back, eyes flashing. “It’s not!”

“You’re right, it was awful living without you. But I’d do it all again in a heartbeat as long as this was the reward.”

This time she reached up and kissed him, and it was a little less chaste. “We should get out of here soon,” she suggested.

He watched her dance the next song with James, heads bowed together in some secret confidence, and they embraced as the number ended. Then he and Audrey began to say their goodbyes, and Duke insisted they share one more dance, and finally everyone was cheering them off as they made their way to the Bronco.

“We have to stop by the house,” he told her as he threw the truck into gear. “I had our stuff all packed, but I didn’t expect to get banished last night.”

“I’m just gonna change into something more comfortable for the drive,” she told him as they walked inside. “I’ll be right back.”

“Oh.” He was too shocked to hide his disappointment, and she rounded on him with narrowed eyes.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“Nathan,” she insisted, and he knew not to argue with that tone.
He rubbed at the back of his neck, startled to actually feel the skin there. “Just figured I’d be the one helping you out of your dress,” he admitted, doubly embarrassed by the way he felt the blood rushing to his face. “And if we do that now no way we’ll make it to Derry tonight.”

Her eyes widened, and he charged on. “But it’s fine, really. I don’t want you to be uncomfortable.”

She cut him off with a kiss, and when she pulled back she pushed his hair across his forehead. “The dress stays.”

“You really don’t have to—” he protested.

But she shook her head, resolute. “The dress stays.” Her hand drifted down his face, stroking at his cheek, and the tenderness in her eyes stole his breath. “You saved me from an eternity of futility and loneliness. More importantly, I love you. You deserve to have whatever you want tonight.”

“And always,” she added under her breath.

“Audrey—” he breathed, reverent, but he didn’t know how to finish that sentence. He couldn’t think of a single thing to say that could express how much he loved her.

She smirked, and the heaviness of the moment lifted. “But if you have a foot fetish you better take these shoes off me right now, because I’m not wearing them to Derry.”

He laughed, glancing down at the strappy high heeled contraptions. “Nah. The shoes can go.”

She undid the buckles with a blissful sigh and slipped into a pair of baby blue flip flops.

“Let’s get out of here, Wuornos,” she beckoned, and just as always he followed.

They were halfway to Derry when it started to rain.

It was just a few drops at first, but a few minutes later it was a full out downpour.

“I’m so glad it didn’t do this a few hours ago,” Audrey commented as she peered out the window. “I was so worried about whether the Troubles would end I forgot most brides just fret about the weather.”

“Good thing I talked to Conrad.”

She turned toward him, “What’d you do?”

“He’s the one who recommended the minister, so he already knew we were getting hitched. Figured it couldn’t hurt to ask him to make sure Marion was in a good mood today.”

“Look at you, saving the day,” she said fondly.

“I try,” he countered cheekily.

It was still pouring when they reached the B&B. Nathan offered to drop her off at the door but she refused, so he parked in the closest open spot and tried to wait it out.

It only took Audrey about three minutes to get antsy. “Don’t you have an umbrella in here?”

“No,” he answered. “You do remember I couldn’t feel the rain until today, right?”
She rolled her eyes. “You could still get wet.”

“So?”

“You’re such a man,” she said with fond exasperation. “We’re gonna have to make a run for it, I think. Unless you want to take this dress off me in this truck.”

“That’s a whole other fantasy,” he deadpanned, but he did allow himself a few seconds to imagine just that. Then he pulled off his jacket and handed it to her.

“You’ll feel the rain now,” she cautioned.

He grinned at her. “Good. You can warm me up. But put that on so you don’t ruin your dress.”

She shrugged. “Not like I’ll ever wear it again anyway.” But she obliged him, slipping it over her narrow shoulders. It was far too large for her, the sleeves totally hiding her arms until she pushed the cuffs back, but something fierce and possessive and proud welled up in him as he watched her sweep her hair from underneath the collar. All her perfect beauty, wrapped up in something he’d worn. She was his wife now.

*God, they needed to get inside.*

“Looks better on you than it does on me,” he said appreciatively, and then he burst out of his seat, crossing in front of the truck and pulling open her door before she had time to react. He scooped her in his arms, already keenly aware of the cool rain sliding down his neck. “Hold on,” he advised, and then he pushed the car door shut and strode toward the inn.

They were both soaked by the time they reached the lobby, but she was giggling into his neck, her warm breath a lovely contrast to his chilled skin, and her joy was contagious.

“We’re here for the honeymoon suite,” he told the man behind the front desk, unable to contain his grin, and then a flash went off somewhere to his right. He turned just in time to see Dorothy snap another photo.

“Look at the two of you,” she said mirthfully. “I’ve never seen such a happy couple. Even if you are dripping water all over my floor.”

“Bit of weather out there,” he said, but he couldn’t keep a straight face.

She laughed. “You two don’t want to spend your night talking to me. Here’s the key, loves. Enjoy.”

It was a little awkward that the old woman was giving them her blessing for their wedding night activities, but Nathan resolved not to think about that. He took the key and continued in the direction the proprietor had pointed.

“I can walk now, you know,” Audrey said, her hands wandering down his neck and sending shivers through him that had nothing to do with the rain.

But he was determined to carry her over the threshold of their room, even if he could feel the strain in his arms. She wasn’t heavy by any means, but he wasn’t used to gravity’s counteracting force.

“Like having you in my arms,” he told her, and she had no response to his honesty.

She opened the door when they came to it, and he held his breath as they stepped inside.
The lights were off, but there were so many candles lit Nathan could hardly tell. There were bouquets of white roses everywhere, filling the room with their perfume. Per his request there was a bottle of champagne chilling next to a box of cupcakes.

“Nathan,” she breathed, and he grinned and set her gently on her feet.

“Only the best for my bride,” he whispered, reaching out to stroke her cheek.

She closed her eyes and breathed in deeply, and he recognized that feeling of being overcome.

“So how does this dress fantasy of yours go?” she asked, her eyes still closed.

“Well,” he considered, hardly believing this could possibly be real. Truth be told, he’s imagined his wedding night with Audrey long before she’d started wearing his ring. Inappropriate as it had been to think of his partner this way, after her almost death at the chameleon’s hands made him accept how deeply his feeling ran he’d had a couple dreams where she swore to be his and then reintroduced him to the world of sensation.

But in none of those dreams had it ever meant quite as much as it did now.

He took one last, long look at her in her wedding finery, the sequins in her dress sparkling in the candlelight. His jacket had absorbed most of the water, and he removed the damp fabric gently, tossing it toward the couch. Her hair was in tight tendrils now, as if she’d just come out of the shower, and he set to work on removing the pins. They had substance under his fingers now. He leaned close to smell the lily behind her ear before dropping it to the floor, and when all the pins seemed to be gone he combed his fingers through her curls and massaged her scalp to make sure he hadn’t missed any.

She was uncharacteristically quiet at his ministrations, occasionally uttering a soft sigh of appreciation but no commentary. After he was certain her hair was free he brushed it all over one shoulder and then pressed a kiss to the top of her neck. By the time he worked his way to the edge of her first strap he realized that she was shaking.

“Are you nervous, Parker?”

He expected an immediate denial; maybe an excuse about the rain.

He didn’t expect her to answer, “Maybe.”

“Why?” he asked, too shocked to put it more delicately. “Not like we haven’t done this before.”

He’d been scared out of his mind that first time, afraid his broken body couldn’t handle the experience or he wouldn’t be able to satisfy her. But practice had quickly taught him he had nothing to fear in that department. Being with Audrey like this was as natural as breathing.

“It’s different now. We’re married, and you can feel again. I just want it to be perfect for you.”

He grabbed her by the shoulder and spun her to face him, too overcome to do anything but kiss her, hoping that somehow that would convey how much her words meant to him. “This is already perfect,” he whispered into the shell of her ear, dropping his lips until he found the spot on her neck that always made her sigh and arch into him. “Just stop thinking,” he told her, echoing her command on their very first night together. They’d come so far since then; he’d never imagined they’d be granted such happiness.

“Make me,” she challenged, another echo, but there was no desperation tonight, just playfulness
with an undercurrent of need.

“You’re just trying to get me to undress you faster,” he teased.

“Can you blame me? At this rate we’ll still be here on our anniversary.”

He chuckled. “Now that would be some year.”

“Not if we’re still wearing all our clothes.”

He sucked gently on her earlobe, and once she was pliant in his arms he whispered, “Bet I could think of a few things that would still be fun.”

She rolled her eyes, unimpressed. “Show me later.”

Realizing it was time to oblige her, he crossed behind her so he could begin unfastening her dress. The fact that he could feel the zipper without looking at it made it easier to focus on kissing every inch of skin he revealed, creating a blazing trail down her back. He could hear her breathing quicken, and that stirred an answering need within him. But he took his time, one hand curved around her waist to keep her steady while she trembled under his attention, occasionally uttering a soft sigh that made him want to spend the rest of his life making love to her.

Once the zipper was finally undone he nudged the straps down her shoulders, kissing from one to the other, and then he gently slid the dress down her body, his fingers catching on the sequins.

He’d barely gotten a look before she spun around to face him. The sight of her standing there stopped the breath in his lungs. Her bra and underwear were electric blue, perfectly matching the color of her eyes and complimenting her creamy skin. A matching garter encircled one of her thighs. “Wow.”

He wanted to tell her she was the most gorgeous sight he’d even seen – and he’d spent years seeking out beauty to replace the sensation he’d lost.

What came out instead was, “Hope Duke didn’t help you pick that out too.”

She threw back her head and laughed, exposing her pale throat. The sound shot straight through him in the most delightful way, setting his body on edge the way her touch had the first night they’d spent together.

“ Nope,” she finally answered. “This is for my husband’s eyes only.”

Her words made him want to drop to his knees and thank some higher power for making him so lucky. “Say it again.”

“Got all sexy for my husband,” she obliged, but she ducked her head shyly, as if she didn’t quite believe it.

He couldn’t let that stand. Still too overcome to manage a coherent argument he pulled her toward him, cradling her face and kissing her with everything inside him.

“You’re so damn beautiful,” he managed as soon as he had the breath to speak, keeping her pressed against him so she could feel his need.

“And you’re wearing too many clothes.”

“Maybe my wife can help with that,” he suggested coyly.
She didn’t have his patience, but she still drew out the process, sliding the damp fabric across his skin so he would feel its removal. Suddenly he understood her impatience. She toyed with the buttons on his shirt and trousers, her fingers running deliberately across him through his clothing and as good as it felt he yearned to speed things up. But he forced himself to stand as still as he could manage, though he did not muzzle the moans she drew from him. Now that she was in control again she wore a wicked smile, all tentativeness gone, and she knew damn well how much that turned him on.

Finally he was completely bare before her, while she was still wearing that sinful blue number. His hands found her hips, his fingers stroking gently as they marveled at the contrast between skin and silk.

He’d never felt so aroused, his body, mind and soul finally synchronized with his all-encompassing need for her. Yet something held him back, made him savor the anticipation that was almost painful.

Then she was pushing on his chest and he was moving backwards. He startled when he actually felt the back of his legs hit the edge of the bed and he toppled onto the mattress. He moaned in surprise as he sunk into the cool sheets, so different against his skin than her hot little fingers.

“Sorry,” he mumbled once the shock passed and he realized she was watching him.

“You never have to apologize for feeling anything,” she said softly, and his heart swelled in his chest. He loved her so much that sometimes he could barely breathe. She nudged at his legs until he swung them onto the bed, and then she climbed in after him, bracing herself above him, her hands on his shoulders.

He was so captivated by the look on her face, so full of love and uncharacteristic vulnerability, that he didn’t notice her grab the sheet until she flicked the corner of it across his stomach.

He twitched at the sensation and she laughed, the ends of her hair tickling his chest. “We’re going to have fun tonight, Mr. Wuornos,” she purred, all her earlier nervousness evaporated. She was his siren once again, sexy and sure. “You see, I’ve got this fantasy too, where you can feel again.” One of her hands traveled down his side, lingering at his hip. “And it’s up to me to make sure you make the most of it.”

Even as the thrill of that ran through him he recognized that she had given him the perfect opening, and he couldn’t resist, at least this once. “Best get started then, Mrs. Wuornos,” he said, and then he pulled her down on top of him before she could argue.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the delay - vacationing again. I’ve now caught up to what I’ve written, but there are still 4 more chapters which will hopefully make their appearance before the next season starts. Please let me know what you think.
They spent the next thirty-six hours in bed, but Nathan would never admit exactly how many of them were spent asleep.

He’d thought waking up with Audrey in his arms was the best feeling in the world, until he discovered that waking up with Audrey in his arms and a soft mattress beneath him was even better. He stretched his legs, reveling in the way he could feel the tension in his muscles coil and release. The further he reached, the cooler the sheets became. Every inch of his skin was alive, even the parts she wasn’t touching. It was surely a miracle.

But not as big a miracle as the fact that she had married him. He stared down at her rings and rubbed the matching band on his own finger. The metal had weight and substance against his skin, and a symbolic significance he was only beginning to comprehend. Even if they had those hundred years they’d talked about, he wasn’t sure he’d ever fully understand.

He’d been so alone before she came to Haven. Perhaps that isolation was of his own making. He used his affliction as an excuse to drive people away. But they didn’t understand, and he couldn’t abide their pity. Solitude was easier.

But she’d never had time for pity. She didn’t go easy on him because he was different, and she was curious about his affliction but not repulsed. She’d ignored all his defenses – the bristly stoicism and cool indifference - chipping away at them with her sass and persistence until it was impossible to want to keep his distance. She gave him something to care about – not just her, but the fate of the town she’d taken under her protection, and the legacy his father had left him. She deserved a hero, and she made him think he could fill that role, just so long as she was the one actually pulling the strings. It meant so much just to have her close, in his life and in his bed, sharing jokes and theories and body heat. It was impossible to be lonely when she was jabbering on, and that was true even when they were just partners, except for those terrible weeks before the Hunter.

And okay, yeah, the sex was phenomenal. Having been numb for so long there were no words to describe the rush of sensation she so determinedly evoked. There was a deliberateness to her passion, each touch meant to induce the maximum amount of pleasure within him. She made him feel like a man again, virile and strong, instead of a crippled freak. He wanted her to feel as incredible as he did, and he’d never been one to back down from a challenge. The result was like electricity surging through his veins, and that hadn’t changed even though he was whole again.

Sometime in the past year he’d finally gotten lucky.

So the morning after his wedding he was content to simply marvel at his sleeping wife as he gingerly tested the feel of his pillow, the sheets, and his own skin. But as soon as Audrey started to stir he was done being patient. He nuzzled his way down her neck, pressing a wet, sloppy kiss to her throat. She squirmed away, making a muffled sound of protest, and he chuckled and followed, running his tongue across the hollow behind her ear, tasting the sweat there. “Na-than,” she giggled, but her eyes remained shut.

“Tell me to stop,” he whispered huskily.

“Never,” she sighed. She opened her eyes and he wanted to lose himself in them. “Hi,” she said
shyly, blinking up at him from behind golden lashes.

She was so beautiful the word got caught in his throat. “Hi,” he finally managed.

She smiled at his awkwardness. “Please tell me yesterday wasn’t a dream.”

He was sure he looked like a fool. He felt like one. “Wasn’t a dream. Less I pulled this out of a vending machine.” He held up his hand so she could see his wedding band. “But then I wouldn’t know how comfortable this bed is.”

She grinned. “Oh my God, that’s right. How do you feel?”

He took a moment to assess. There was an overwhelming amount of data to process, but one sensation stuck out most strongly. “Honestly? A little sore.”

She snorted. “You’ll get used to that.”

He narrowed his eyes at her. “You feel like this all the time?” he asked, incredulous and a bit repentant.

“Pretty much. Side effect of all the amazing sex.”

“I’m sorry.”

She laughed at him. “You shouldn’t be. It’s definitely worth it. At least we’ll never have to go to the gym.” She looked past him to glance at the clock on the nightstand and then sat up so quickly when she saw that time that he had to duck out of the way.

“How can it possibly be that late? You should have woken me.”

“Just did,” he told her, amused by her crossness.

She smacked him on the shoulder. “You should have woken me earlier! Our first day married, and I’ve slept most of it away.”

He could have told her that it didn’t matter. They had the rest of their lives to spend together. She needed the sleep – they both did – and it wasn’t like they’d turned in early. He could have made a million excuses, and they’d all be valid.

Instead he gazed up at her with a lazy grin. “You could make it up to me.”

She chuckled, a smile of her own blooming across her face. “Is that so?”

“Ayuh,” he drawled with a shrug. As cavalier as he tried to sound, his body was buzzing at her proximity.

He’d thought it was hard keeping his hands off her before. He wasn’t sure how he was going to manage it now.

Good thing that today he didn’t have to.

Afterwards they drank warm champagne and ate cupcakes, finishing what the Glendowers had interrupted, and when that wasn’t enough to sustain them they ordered room service. There was a silver frame resting on top of the tray beside their meal. Nathan knew immediately he’d like this photo better than any Dave had taken. A shot like this could never be posed. Dorothy had caught them mid-laugh. Their heads were tilted together, her’s half buried in his neck, but he could still
see the slant of her grin. His white shirt was soaked through and her curls were all over the place, but their eyes locked and the universe stilled. They were a beautiful mess, and he wouldn’t trade it for anything.

Sometime later Audrey propped herself up against the pillows and studied him. “Is it different now?” she asked. “The sex, I mean.”

Surely she realized it wasn’t bad. He didn’t particularly want to talk about this, but he wasn’t about to deny her. “Yeah,” he admitted.

“How?”

He cleared his throat, trying to buy himself some time to find the right words. “Before it was more … focused. I could only feel the parts of myself you were touching. Now I feel my whole body, the sheets, the temperature of the room. There’s a lot more going on.”

“Sounds romantic.”


“Yeah, I get it. All that distracting, normal stuff, but it’s still good.”

“I don’t get it. Why are you upset?” Her jaw was clenched and tension radiated through her.

She huffed out a breath and closed her eyes. “Oh God. Less than twenty-four hours and I’m already ruining this. That has got to be some kind of record.”

“You’re not ruining anything. But I don’t know what’s going on.”

She opened her eyes, stared him in the face, and then leaned back against the pillow with a groan.

“You can tell me anything,” he reminded her. “Think that was in the vows somewhere.”

“You know that I’m glad your Trouble is gone.”

“Course.” She’d made that abundantly clear last night, both with words and actions.

“I’m so, so glad that you can have a normal life again. I really am. It’s just – this is going to sound awful – your Trouble was kind of like an insurance policy.”

It was like she had thrown a bucket of ice water on him. “What do you mean?” he asked, but he was fairly sure he understood.

“I know we’re about more than my immunity. I believe you. I do. That’s not why we got together. But there’s going to come a day when all that fades and you get tired of me. When I was the only one you could feel I figured that might keep you around a little longer.”

He gaped at her, unsure how such nonsense could come out of her mouth after everything they’d been through. “Audrey—”

“Don’t!” she protested, pulling her knees to her chest and wrapping her arms around them. “Just let me explain, okay? And then you can get mad, or whatever.”

He nodded. She looked so forlorn that he wanted to reach for her, but he kept his distance.
“I know you think you meant everything you said yesterday, about loving me forever. But I know how this works. I drive people away.”

“Audrey—”

“Please, Nathan! Just let me get through this. It’s not that I don’t trust you. You’re the only one I do trust. That’s the problem.”

He opened his mouth but she glared at him and he closed it. “When I was nine years old I had these foster parents. The Reynolds. They were good people who treated me like one of the family instead of just a paycheck. They took me on vacations. Gave me birthday presents. For the first time in my life it felt like somebody cared. They had this daughter, Amanda, who was a year older than me. She swore her parents were going to adopt me so many times that I believed her. We were gonna be sisters, and I was gonna have a real home.” Her voice trembled and his heart broke for her because he could guess the ending of this story. “Then Mr. Reynolds got a job out of state. Instead of adopting me they sent me back.”

He couldn’t stand the distance between them any longer, even if she thought she needed space. He reached out to lay a hand on her shoulder. She didn’t shrug it off, but she didn’t scoot any closer either.

“The next place was horrible, and the one after that was bad too, and it was even worse because I’d dared to imagine a better life. I swore to myself that I wouldn’t get close enough to anyone to let them hurt me, because it wasn’t worth it. I could take care of myself. And I did, for so many years. Maybe I was lonely, but I was focused and I was fine. But I’ve never let myself need anyone the way I need you. When you leave – like everyone does – I don’t know how I’m going to go on.”

She took a deep shuddering breath, tried to meet his eyes, and then closed them instead. “There, I’m done, so you can freak out or leave or whatever.”

It stung that she thought him capable of that. But the need to comfort her was far stronger than any hurt feelings. She acted so strong that he forgot how similar they could be. It was weird to think he’d actually been the lucky one. As stern and aloof as the Chief had been, he’d loved Nathan in his bristly way, and he’d kept him safe and provided for. He’d never found home particularly welcoming after his mother died, but at least it existed. Audrey had grown up fending for herself, and that wasn’t even touching the fact that as vivid as all these memories were, she hadn’t actually lived them. He couldn’t begrudge her her demons when she was so patient with his own.

He raised his hand to ghost over her face, freeing the curls that tears had matted to her skin. “Parker,” he chided, soft but sharp enough to get her to open her eyes and look at him. His thumb glided across her cheek and she leaned into his touch. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“You say that now—”

He moved his fingers to cover her lips. “Now it’s your turn to listen to me.” His other hand found hers, his thumb rubbing over her wedding bands. “There’s a lot in this world I can’t control. Living in Haven we know that better than most. I can’t swear that nothing will keep me from spending the next fifty years with you. But these rings are a promise that I’ll never choose to leave you. When we fight we’ll work it out. If heaven forbid the sex gets boring we’ll find a way to spice things up. But I’m in this for the rest of our lives. You can’t scare me away and I’m not going to get tired of you. How can I prove that to you?”

Her eyes were welling with tears again and her chin trembled. “I’m not sure that you can,” she whispered.
But that was unacceptable. “I’m sure I can come up with something.” He racked his brain for things that would let her know he was serious but get her to smile. “Let’s see.” He leaned back, pretending a nonchalance he didn’t feel, but he kept hold of her hand. “I could give up pancakes.”

Her eyes widened, but she didn’t comment.

“Or sell my truck.”

Her fingers tightened around his and she gnawed at her lip.

“Maybe I could get a tattoo that says ‘Property of Audrey Parker.’”

“You would not!” she squeaked, bumping him with her shoulder.

“Yeah I would.”

“Where?” she challenged.

“Wherever you want,” he said airily, glad she’d come out of her funk a little.

She reached under the sheet and brushed her fingers over his hip. “How about right here? ‘Property of Audrey Wuornos.’”

“Even better,” he said with a grin.

She was tracing the letters into his skin, and it took all his willpower not to reach for her. “It’d hurt,” she said, and he should have been worried she was contemplating this but he was too glad she seemed to be cheering up.

“Bring it on.”

She stared at him for a few moments before breaking into a smile. “You’re a goof,” she said with a laugh.

“There’s my girl.” He reached out to cradle her face, surreptitiously brushing her tears away. “I mean it though.”

“You love your truck.”

“Love you more.”

“I don’t know how you’d live without pancakes.”

“I’d manage. You’re sweeter anyway.” He pressed a kiss to her neck, running his tongue across her skin to prove his point. “There’s nothing you could ask of me I wouldn’t give you.”

“I’d never ask you to do those things,” she whispered.

“I know,” he said solemnly.

They stared at each other in the dim light, nose to nose, and he willed her to see herself the way he saw her — strong and enchanting and beautiful.

“You’re really not mad?”

He pushed her hair behind her ear, reveling in its softness. “I’ve spent all day in bed with my
smoking hot wife. Mad’s not even in my vocabulary.”

She collapsed against him, burying her head in his shoulder as their bodies molded together, the sheet between them. He wrapped his arm around her and pulled her even closer, his hand rubbing a comforting trail across her bare back. “I know this town’s given you a lot to worry about. But you never have to worry about the way I feel about you.”

She sighed, her body rising and falling like the tides that had surrounded him all his life. She was his rhythm now. “Be patient with me? Remind me that when I forget?”

He nuzzled against her. She just fit there in his arms, like he’d been made to shelter her. “Every day if I need to. I promise.”

His arm was asleep when he woke, but it was worth it when her gloom seemed to vanish with the tingling.

He would have been content to stay in that bed forever, but the following morning Audrey declared that she needed some air.

“Let’s go to breakfast,” she chirped, uncharacteristically chipper considering she hadn’t had any coffee yet. She tugged at his arm and then wrinkled her nose. “You need a shower first though.”

She was just as sweaty as he was. “You too. Join me?”

But she shook her head, leaned forward to give him a quick peck on the lips and then pushed him away. “You go first. I’ll be there in a few minutes.”

Puzzled, he complied. Clarity hit him with the water. She was giving him the space to turn the facets from frozen to scalding and back just so he could experience the range of temperature without someone watching, the privacy to test out every toiletry that had been provided without feeling self-conscious that he was fascinated by how cool and sticky the shampoo was and how the soap slid across his skin. He was grateful that she’d allowed him this private rediscovery, but it was still more fun once she’d joined him.

She was the one who noticed the hot tub.

Once they finally made it to the restaurant Audrey slid into her usual chair. “Two orders of pancakes,” Nathan said before the waitress had even laid down the menus.

“Oh no,” Audrey corrected. “I’ll have a ham and cheese omelet with a side of bacon. Extra home fries. And coffee. Might as well leave the pot here. But he can have my pancakes.” She tilted her head toward him and flashed the waitress a grin.

“I know you can live on maple syrup, but I need protein,” she declared once they were alone again. He chuckled, disinclined to argue. He’d be impressed if she ate all that food, but he’d seen her do the like before, and they had been working up quite an appetite.

As soon as Joan brought their coffee Nathan wrapped his fingers around his mug, shocked by how quickly the heat seeped into his hand. He dipped the edge of his thumb in the liquid and pulled it out quickly. “I wouldn’t drink that yet,” he advised.

Audrey laughed, dumped in some more cream, and cradled the mug without tasting its contents. “So I guess I’ll have to go to the courthouse when we get back.”
“Why?” he asked, still fascinated by the temperature of his coffee. He wasn’t sure he’d be able to tell yet when hot was too hot.

She looked at him as if he was a little thick. “To get my name changed.”

He felt the shock of his heart skipping, coffee forgotten. “You’re gonna take my name?”

“Of course. Unless you don’t want me to.”

But he did, and that want of this unexpected gift was welling up inside him so fiercely he stumbled over his words. “No! I mean yes. Yes I want you to. As long as that’s what you want.”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

He felt entirely upended. “You’re a modern woman,” he stuttered, “and I just thought—”

“That I wouldn’t want your name?” Her bluntness stopped him in his tracks. He hadn’t thought he was that transparent. Unless that was how she felt?

“Yeah,” he admitted.

She shook her head, frowning. “So here’s the thing. If I have to give up my insecurities, you need to work on yours. I chose to marry you, and if you were worthless that would say something about my judgment, wouldn’t it? So you ought to stop being so hard on yourself. If you can’t do it for yourself, do it for me.”

She was a wonder, his Audrey. “I’ll try,” he promised.

She reached out and grabbed his hand. “Shouldn’t have been so shocked. I said something about this last night.”

It was like she had branded him. He could almost still feel her hands burning the letters onto his hip, and his throat went dry. “Thought we were joking around.”

Her lips twitched. “We were. But I meant it. I want the world to know you’re my husband. Besides, Audrey Parker’s just a name those in the Barn picked for me. Audrey Wuornos is real.”

There was a strange tightness in his chest, his emotions manifesting physically, and though it wasn’t comfortable he wouldn’t trade it for anything.

“By that logic I’m not sure Nathan Wuornos is real either.” But the thought of that didn’t make him feel sorry for himself this morning. It was just another way they were alike.

“You’re nothing like Hansen – the one who fathered you or the one that betrayed Prudence. You deserve to keep the Chief’s name alive. Now I get to help with that.”

“Thank you,” he said, the words inadequate to express how much that meant; how much all this meant.

“I just have one request.”

“Anything.”

She looked down before she said it, a sure sign that she was nervous. “Could you still call me Parker every once in a while?”
He grinned to think that meant so much to her. At first it had been a sign of professionalism, but it hadn’t stayed that way for long. “Yeah. Think I can manage that.”

“You better. I’m going through a lot of hassle for you. I looked it up – there’s a lot of paperwork involved. I wasn’t going to start it until I was sure the Guard wasn’t going to knock us off in two weeks.”

He didn’t like to hear her joking about how close they’d come to running out of time, but the very fact that she could was miraculous. All the stress and fear and uncertainty of the past months had disappeared with the dawn. He couldn’t remember the last time there hadn’t been anxiety buzzing in the back of his mind.

Joan brought their food, and Dorothy followed shortly afterwards. “If it isn’t my favorite couple. I didn’t expect to see you for a few days.”

It was so strange to feel the blood rushing to his cheeks.

“Needed some air,” Audrey said, unabashed. “But the room is lovely.”

“Thanks for the picture,” Nathan added, grateful to the woman despite her innuendo.

“Least I could do, dears. When are you leaving for your honeymoon?”

“Oh,” Audrey squeaked. “Huh.”

The idea had honestly never occurred to Nathan when their long term survival hadn’t been guaranteed, and he did a poor job disguising that fact.

“Now see here young man,” Dorothy scolded. “I’m glad you’ve come here to celebrate, but any place you visit regularly is hardly a proper honeymoon destination. I know you work hard, but you can take a few days off to take your lady somewhere special.”

“We could go somewhere, couldn’t we?” Audrey asked once Dorothy had gone, tutting disapprovingly.

The idea of sneaking away with her was extremely appealing. Just the two of them in some place normal. No work. No Troubles. No Duke.

“Where would you want to go?”

“Someplace warm and far from here. Maybe a beach where we won’t get called in about dead bodies? Since we don’t have passports I guess—”

“Why wouldn’t I have a passport?” he interrupted.

She faltered. “I just thought…”

“That because I grew up in rural Maine I wouldn’t have a passport? Why Mrs. Wuornos, that’s extremely condescending,” he teased. It was so rarely that he got her flustered, and he intended to take full advantage of that.

“Do you have a passport?” she asked, face adorably scrunched in confusion.

“Yep,” he said smugly.

“Where have you been?”
“Canada.”

She laughed. “I’m not sure that disproves my point.”

“Thanks,” he said dryly. She smirked back at him.

“Well, I don’t have a passport, and I’m not sure I’ll be able to get one since I’ve got a double in Boston, so we’ll have to pick somewhere in the US.”

“I’m sure Duke could get you one. For future use.”

She stopped mid bite, her eggs hanging in midair. “Wow, Wuornos. I can’t believe you just suggested that.”

He shrugged. “It’d be nice to travel the world with you.”

That was a little more touchy-feely than they usually got in public, so he wasn’t surprised when she turned her attention back to her breakfast, spearing some home fries before looking up at him. “We could start with Hawaii,” she said tentatively.

It sounded like bliss. “We could leave tonight. I’ll buy the tickets.”

“Can we really do this?” The tone of barely contained hope in her voice reminded him that as cynical as he’d been, she’d had even longer to know only heartbreak – centuries longer.

But they were starting a new pattern. The idea had taken root in him, like the killer plants that could only be stopped by love, and he wasn’t about to be deterred. “I don’t see why not. Town should calm down, everyone’s normal again. There are enough officers to deal with regular crime. Heaven knows we never used any vacation time since you showed up.”

“What about Bernie?”

That psychopath certainly wasn’t going to be what stopped them. “Stan can pick him up. I don’t expect he’s going anywhere in a hurry. So what do you say? Come away with me?”

The smile that stole over her face was dazzling. “Yeah.”

He leaned over the table to kiss her, and she squealed and gave in, her hands reaching out to clamp his shoulders and he felt the fabric press against his skin. When he pulled back he stayed close, pressing a playful kiss to her nose. “I do have a request,” he whispered. “Can we try out the hot tub before we go?”

Her resulting grin promised all sorts of delightful, wicked things. “Absolutely.”

Back at the Gull they found Duke entertaining the youngest Benton girl with a stack of waffles and a magic trick. When he reamed them out for leaving their hotel room too soon Audrey countered with a few very explicit examples of what they’d been up to before sweetly asking for a ride to the airport. Although Nathan didn’t approve of anyone knowing the details of their sex life – particularly Duke – he had to admire the way she’d made the smuggler blush and shut up.

He’d married one hell of a woman.

James drove.
Nathan was determined not to complain about feeling anything, ever – or at least until the newness wore off – but after they boarded the airplane he couldn’t help thinking how the flight would be more comfortable if he didn’t feel the way his legs were wedged beneath the seat in front of him.

He must have failed at hiding that discomfort even though he didn’t voice it, because Audrey patted his thigh with a sympathetic smile.

“We’ll spring for the extra legroom next time.”

“That’s not necessary.”

“That’s not what you’ll think by the time we get there, partner.”

Half an hour after takeoff she’d already stolen his peanuts and was talking a mile a minute about the celebrity gossip she found in the magazine left in her seatback pocket. He wouldn’t have guessed she even knew who these people were. He recognized a few names from the days before the Troubles, but really, who had time for trivialities when the world was falling apart around you?

An hour later she was fast asleep against his shoulder, and he knew he’d be sore when they arrived – and long before that – but he couldn’t bring himself to mind. She was adorable when she was sleeping, and blissfully quiet, and they were really leaving Haven together and it wasn’t for a case or an investigation into her past.

He was a lucky man, cramps and all.

Their first stop after the airport was a department store.

Neither of them had many clothes suitable for a tropical vacation, so they’d basically skipped packing and resolved to buy what they needed after they arrived.

Even though television had taught Nathan that women were persnickety about men’s opinions on their clothing, Audrey whined so much about being a terrible shopper that he figured that was a hint she wanted his help. He didn’t know anything about women’s fashion – and he told her so – but he did have an eye for color.

Her wardrobe in Haven was made up of neutral colors, grays and white and black. So he chose blouses in jewel tones and sundresses in lively island patterns, wanting to see the way they’d accentuate her bright eyes and pale skin. She made faces at some of his selections but tried them on anyway.

Eventually she shooed him off to buy his own clothes. Once he’d finished she’d bought everything he suggested as well as several outfits she wouldn’t show him and a garish blue and orange Hawaiian shirt he swore he’d never wear.

(That was a battle he’d lose long before the week was out. Of course he knew that.)

In Haven the shore was rocky, the ocean rough, and more often than not he only made it to the beach when there’d been some sort of crime.

Hawaii was paradise, miles of white sand meeting calm blue sea.
As soon as they picked out their chairs Nathan toed off his sandals and stripped off his shirt. The sand was so hot it stung his feet, but the particles were small and soft. His eyes closed the second the sunlight hit his chest and he sank back against the lounge, savoring the sensation. He could surely get used to this.

After a few minutes Audrey cleared her throat and tapped his shoulder. “You need to put on some sunscreen.”

He looked up at her and gulped. She’d left the hotel in a flowery dress, but now all she was wearing was a red string bikini. He’d seen her in far less, of course, but never in public, and the fact that everyone else on the beach could see her too was not lost on him. But the desire to tell her to cover up was counteracted by the realization that would obstruct his view as well, so he kept his mouth shut.

She must have noticed the way he was staring, because she smirked and cocked her hip as she shook the bottle at him.

“Time to lather up.”

“Don’t wanna,” he whined. “Sun feels so good.”

“Won’t feel so good when you’re burned to a crisp. I’ve got big plans for this trip. I need you in tip top shape.”

He wanted to squirm at the leer in her voice. Instead he sat up and turned his back to her.

He twitched when the first cold glob of sunscreen hit his shoulder, but soon he had to bite his lip to keep from moaning as her talented little fingers rubbed the sticky liquid into his skin. Even though the sun’s rays were dampened he could still feel them through her gentle massage, and it was all a haze of chemical sweet perfection.

It was over too quickly. “There,” she said. “Now you can do your stomach.”

“Or you could do my stomach,” he begged. “Please.” He had no pride in that moment, and no desire to reclaim it. He just wanted her hands on him.

She laughed, low and throaty. “All right. But just for today.”

He turned and she sat beside him on the lounge. He watched her as she set to work, her lower lip caught between her teeth in concentration as she drew her hands across him deliberately. It tickled, and he wanted to laugh but he didn’t dare break the spell.

She finally pulled back, her eyes raking down his chest. “Time to do me.”

His little minx handed him the bottle and turned. He swept her hair over her shoulder first, mindful of the way she shivered when his fingers brushed against her neck. He squirted a bit of sunscreen into his hand and dabbed at it with his fingers, testing its consistency before he began spreading it down her back in gentle circles. Her skin was already warm and she arched back into his touch. He could hear the subtle change in her breathing, and she had a sweetness all her own that mingled with the smell of the sunscreen. Intoxicated, he pressed a kiss to the juncture of her shoulder. Her soft moan spurred him on, and he kissed further up her neck as he reached for the red bow that was taunting him.

The strings had just begun to fall away when she squeaked “Nathan!” and wrapped her arms around her chest. “We’re in public,” she scolded, but her low, breathy voice made it sound more
like a dare than an admonishment.

He’d forgotten himself, but he wasn’t sorry. “We could change that.”

Glancing around for peeping toms, she reached behind her neck to re-tie the suit and then stood up and took a few steps away from him. “Uh-uh. I did not fly across the country just to have sex with you. We could have stayed in Derry for that. We’re at the beach and no one is dead, and I’m going to enjoy it. You’re just going to have to behave yourself until the sun goes down.”

“You started it,” he pouted. He’d been perfectly content at the beach until she’d ensnared him with her bikini and her lotion.

“And we’ll finish it later. But right now I’m going to go have a swim. You can join me once you get control of yourself.”

He called out as she started to walk away. “Could you just stand there a sec?” he asked, finally concerned about who might be around and watching.

She looked him up and down very deliberately, and then stood up even straighter. “Is that really going to help you calm down?” she teased.

She didn’t need to wait for an answer. “Don’t take too long,” she called over her shoulder. He watched her walk away, and that wasn’t helpful at all.

When he finally made it to the ocean the water was warm but refreshing, but the best part was the way Audrey dived into it so fearlessly, laughing as she pulled him down beside her. They splashed around until he could actually feel the strain in his legs, and though she wouldn’t share a chair with him afterwards she pulled hers close enough that her shoulder brushed against his as they laid out in the glorious sun to dry.

Every day was a new adventure.

They went snorkeling and parasailing and climbed volcanos, and it took Nathan three days to realize why. At first he thought it was just her thirst for adventure, because she was the one doing all the planning. But they were in the midst of their hike when he noticed the way she was watching him and realized this was just a continuation of her wedding night fantasy – just with more clothing. He could feel again, and she was making sure he made the most of it.

Her consideration meant more than he could ever express, but honestly the press of her wedding rings against his finger when they held hands or the brush of her eyelashes against his bare chest felt better than any adrenaline rush. Still, every excursion she planned made him feel alive and exhilarated, and everything they saw was almost unbelievably beautiful.

Only once did he pick the activity. She’d told him once how much she’d loved dolphins growing up, so he found a place to go swimming with them. She’d teared up when he suggested it, but by the time they arrived she was bouncing around like a little kid, exuberant and fascinated in turns. A photographer documented the experience, and Nathan bought the entire CD just for the photo of the moment Audrey first touched the dolphin, because the awe on her face was surely exactly how he’d looked when she’d first kissed him on the cheek.

He didn’t tell her how much he appreciated what she was doing for him, but every night he tried to show her. Their mornings were filled with adventures and the afternoons were often spent at the beach, but the nights were for the two of them. It was a good thing they had slept so much the day after their wedding, because they weren’t sleeping much now. They teased and flirted and denied
themselves all day long, but at night they made up for it and gave into the yearning.

Every morning he woke, somehow sated and aching for her simultaneously, and the cycle continued.

Their hotel had a golf course, and Nathan should have suspected something was up the minute Audrey suggested they play a round.

She excused herself to visit the bathroom once they got to the clubhouse, and came back wearing perfume that was surely meant to drive him insane.

He’d seen her buy the bottle at a marketplace the night before, but he hadn’t heard what the saleswoman whispered to her. He didn’t know if it was just his heightened sense of smell or if the perfume was actually designed to turn men into animals, but he’d never so desperately wanted to take her right where she stood, propriety be damned.

But from the look she gave him she had at least some idea of what she was doing to him, and that gave him just enough strength to rein in his urges and drive them to the first hole.

She was all coquettish innocence as she insisted he show her how to swing the club, and as she leaned back against him he nearly ripped her clothes off. Her neckline gaped as she leaned forward. She was wearing the bra she’d worn on their wedding night and good lord he wanted to feel that satin again.

There was no cover whatsoever on the whole damn course, but he actually considered whether the golf cart would hide them if he pulled her down to the ground.

His erection was painful and it was by far the worst game of golf he’d played since he was fourteen.

She was so terrible he still beat her soundly.

She had a surprising amount of power for a woman with no experience, but her aim was awful. He knew she was an amazing shot with any firearm, and her deficiency with a golf club seemed to aggravate her as much as it amused him. As the game went on she focused less on seduction and more on her technique, but it hardly helped. But concentrating on her consternation allowed Nathan to get a better handle on himself.

By the eighteenth green she was steaming.

“Damn perfume didn’t work,” she whined after another double bogie. He sunk his second par of the day, dropped his putter, crossed to her in three strides and kissed her hard.

“Worked all right,” he growled into her neck, holding her against him so she could feel exactly how much. “And if we don’t get back to our room in ten minutes we’re gonna get arrested for public indecency.”

They made it in eight, though they didn’t get any further than the wall for quite some time. He made her pay for all the torment she put him through.

They didn’t make it to lunch that day. Or dinner.

Or breakfast.
On their last night in Hawaii there was a luau at their hotel. Whatever drink they were handed went
down sweet but packed a powerful kick. Despite Nathan’s initial reluctance soon they were
dancing around the fire with the other guests. They stumbled back to their room sometime after
midnight and made love. It was sloppy and silly and they laughed the entire time.

The next morning Nathan woke with flowers around his neck and a killer headache.

He was still determined not to complain about any feeling he was blessed enough to have - but
damn his head was pounding.

He looked at the bedside clock and swore softly. “Audrey.” He poked at her shoulder and she
groaned and pressed her face deeper into her pillow. There was still an orange blossom tucked
behind her ear, though it looked rather trampled. “Our flight leaves in three hours. We have to get
up.”

“Don’t wanna,” she slurred.

He didn’t either. But it was more than not wanting to drag his screaming body from the
comfortable bed and cart their luggage to the bustling airport. He didn’t want to leave this
sanctuary, where it was just him and Audrey and a beautiful, kind world. He was getting used to
having her to himself, and he didn’t want to give that up.

“We could stay.”

She grunted in approval, but after a few moments she tilted her head and looked at him. Her eyes
were slightly bloodshot, and there was crust in the corner of them.

“We’d miss our flight.”

“We could get another one.”

“Much as I don’t want to get up, that seems extreme.”

“Not if we stay for another week.”

She pushed the hair out of her face and studied him. “You’re serious.”

“Yeah.” He smiled, but it pulled something in his head so he settled into a more neutral expression.

“You already bought the tickets.”

“I don’t care. Every cent will be worth it for another week here with you.”

“You really mean it? We could just – stay.”

“Live a little, Parker. For once in your life throw responsibility out the window. Another week in
paradise. What do you say?”

Their eyes locked, and he could read all her reservations. Bernie might still be at large, and who
knew how the townsfolk were coping with normalcy, and whatever would the station do without
its Chief and its best detective.

God, he didn’t care. He should – but he didn’t.

She smiled, a timid smile that lit up her face as she sunk back into the pillow. “I say you should go
get us an extension on this room, hubby.”
He leaned forward to peck her on the cheek before he slid out of bed. The world swayed and his stomach churned, and he resolved never to drink so much mystery liquor again.

“Nice necklace you got there,” she pointed out with a yawn as he looked for his shirt.

“You’ve got one too,” he pointed out, tweaking the blossom behind her ear before dropping his lei over her head. The flowers fell between her bare breasts, making her look like an island goddess.

His goddess.

“Hurry back,” she advised, snuggled back into the covers.

She was sound asleep by the time he returned half an hour later. His hangover wasn’t gone, but he’d gotten used to the discomfort.

He knew he should let her sleep, but he couldn’t contain his excitement. “Wake up Parker.” He plucked the flower from her hair to run it across her shoulder, and when that didn’t work he shook her.

“Week two of honeymoon starts tomorrow,” she mumbled.

“We’ve gotta move rooms, babe.”

The pet name got her to open her eyes. She scowled but didn’t swat him, and he wondered if he could get away with it a second time.

“Why can’t we stay here?”

“Cause they’re giving us the honeymoon suite.”

“What’s so great about that?”

He grinned wolfishly. “It’s got a private beach.”

Turned out that was more fun in theory than in practice, thanks mostly to how small beach towels are. He rolled off her right into the sand and she found that so funny he dragged her down with him. Neither of them appreciated all the places sand ended up, and she swore she was never having sex with him on a beach again. His manhood required him to object on principal, but secretly he agreed that was probably a good idea.

But the beach did have a private cove, and she made no such promises about the water.

The next day it rained.

“Hope this isn’t some kind of cosmic sign,” she groused as they watched the monsoon outside their window.

“Must be,” he countered. “Universe doesn’t like two week honeymoons. Too much sex.”

She rolled her eyes at him. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but I cannot just have sex with you today.”

He’d never admit it, but he wasn’t sure he was up for that either. But he puffed out a labored breath
and narrowed his eyes. “I’m offended you think that’s the only thing we could do when we’re stuck inside.”

“Less we can scare up some crime or a mystery to solve.”

He scooted toward her until their hips brushed, and he used her distraction at that to snake his arm behind her back and run his fingers down her waist. He knew how much that tickled, and just as expected she squirmed into him.

“That really all we have in common?” he whispered, feigning hurt as he tilted closer, his lips a few centimeters from her neck. “Attraction and crime fighting skills?”

“I don’t know. Maybe the hotel has a decoupage class.”

He nipped at her throat for her sass, his fingers traveling lower till he found a spot that made her gasp. “Or a vampire fanfiction workshop.”

He captured her breathy laugh as he rolled on top of her.

Her fingers dug into his back, but there was still irreverence in her tone. “Pancake eating convention?”

He pulled back with wide eyes. “Really? We oughta get dressed then.”

Her legs locked around his hips. “So not happening.”

Afterwards he couldn’t keep himself from smirking.

“What?” she asked, her voice crackling with fond exasperation.

“You’re the one who said we weren’t going to have sex.”

She shook her head in a shimmer of gold. “For the record, I said we weren’t going to have sex all day.”

He crossed his arms. “Not sure I believe you now.”

“Your fault, you know. You’re awfully convincing when you don’t have any clothes on.”

“Just when I don’t have clothes on?”

“Certainly helps,” she quipped.

“I think I’ve figured out what we should do,” he said, changing the subject, pretending to be offended when in truth joy was rushing through him like a good buzz. Banter had been effortless between them back in the beginning of their partnership, before Lucy and Sarah and Jordan and everything that had torn them apart and worn them down. He’d missed the synchronicity.

“Round two?” she teased, and he almost gave in, because God, why not.

He could spend the rest of his life in this bed with this woman, give up pancakes and driving and living, and never complain.

But she’d said she needed a break, and they weren’t animals. They still had another week alone, after all.
“Never did find you a favorite movie, did we?”

“Nope. Got a little distracted.” She stretched, her raised arms giving him a lovely view, but he kept a grip on his self-control. “You remember that?”

“Not supposed to forget conversations with your best friend.”

They ordered pizza and beer and curled up on the palatial couch. He flipped through channels, picking movies he thought she’d like. She provided a running commentary through *Jurassic Park*. He dozed in her lap through *Casablanca*, her hands running occasionally through his hair in the quintessence of comfort. She was the one who slept through *Batman*, unimpressed by the billionaire’s angst.

Shortly after *The Wizard of Oz* began he knew they’d found a winner. She sat alert and enthralled, her hands fisted in the hem of the “Hail to the Chief” t-shirt which secretly filled him with pride each time she wore it. If he happened to be wearing a certain extra bright Hawaiian shirt at least no one else saw him in it but the man who’d brought their room service order.

As the credits rolled he grabbed the remote and lowered the volume. “What did you think?” he asked, studying her closely in the dim light cast by the television.

She blew out a breath that disturbed the hairs that fell around her face. Her forehead wrinkled as she gnawed on her lip.

“She just wanted a place to belong,” she said, and it wasn’t an answer at all but he understood. Usually he was the one who couldn’t find the words.

Luckily they didn’t need them.

“Welcome home, Dorothy,” he whispered.

By day eleven they were beginning to wear on each other’s nerves.

They were used to spending nearly all their time together, but apparently nearly was the key word. Back in Haven there were times they had separate angles to work, and she’d periodically disappear to have lunch with James or hole up in her cupcake room with a trashy book. He had meetings he had to go to as the Chief, and on the rare occasion he’d even stop at the Gull for a drink and a bit of testosterone.

In Hawaii it was just each other.

He loved Audrey dearly, but she was always talking, and he needed quiet. They were both getting testy when she declared he ought to go play a round of golf, because she was going to the spa.

He spent the walk to the course ruminating on her unwarranted sharp tone.

He spent the first hole cherishing the solitude. He could hear the ocean in the distance, the sharp cut of his club through the air, and an occasional seagull. None of them demanded anything. None of them talked back.

By the third hole he was doing the calming exercises he’d learned when his Trouble came back, focusing on the intricacies of nature around him and how his other senses assured him he was still part of this world. It had calmed him then – or at least he’d pretended it did – but it wasn’t doing anything for him now.
By the tenth hole he was bored out of his mind.

The course was beautiful and he was playing well, but there was no one to tease him when he missed a shot and no one to gloat to when he sunk it. The first time he made a birdie the trash talk was on his lips before he realized she wasn’t beside him. He was used to playing alone and had never felt the need to brag, but he didn’t have many chances to one up Parker, and that had become important.

He could imagine her pout, her laugh – and the way she’d rubbed up against him, smelling like sweet temptation.

She’d ruined golf for him. Now he would always prefer it as a seduction game.

He knew his dependence on her wasn’t healthy, and he’d seen firsthand the damage it could wreak. So he stayed and finished his game instead of running back to her.

But he didn’t hang around the clubhouse afterwards, and he spent the walk back wondering how long she could possibly stay at the spa.

He was relieved to find her out on the balcony when he got back to their room. Her arms were wrapped around her legs as she stared out at the ocean, and her toes were painted a bright pink.

“How was the spa?” he asked, all his earlier annoyance evaporated.

She shrugged. “Fine, I guess.”

“Just fine?” he prompted, shocked by her succinct answer.

“I don’t understand why people make such a fuss about them. You don’t even want to know how much it cost to have them paint my toenails – and this color is ridiculous.” She wiggled her toes, and he couldn’t help but agree. It was a fine color, but it was absolutely wrong for her.

“Did you get a massage?”

She wrinkled her nose. “Not sure why I’d pay hundreds of dollars for a stranger to touch me when I have a hot husband who’ll do it for free.”

“Good answer.” He hoped she could hear how genuinely he meant that, because her words made his heart swell in his chest. He sat down beside her. She had said something about his hovering this morning, but he couldn’t help himself – he reached out and grabbed one of her hands, running his thumb across her soft skin. Her fingernails were the same shade of pink.

He could hear the slight hitch in her breath. If his other senses were going to dull now that his sense of touch had returned, it hadn’t happened yet.

“So I guess you didn’t relax.”

“Not really,” she said wistfully. “How was golf?”

“All right,” he answered automatically. But there was something in her tone that made him think that she was fishing, and he wanted to be honest with her, even if it was a little uncomfortable.

“I missed you,” he admitted.

She squeezed his hand, and they both blurted “I’m sorry” almost simultaneously.
She smiled, and the tension he hadn’t be able to get rid of on the course vanished. “I am all for some space when we get back to Haven, but no more honeymoon alone time, okay?”

“Yeah. Though I think we should go back to the spa together.”

“Don’t tell me that you want a couple’s massage.”

He chuckled at her disgust. “Nope. But we can buy some oil.”

“I love the way you think, Wuornos. Dinner first though?”

He stood and pulled her up after him. “Dinner first.”

On their last night they skipped the luau for a picnic on their private beach. Once the food was gone they took a walk through the surf and watched the sunset.

Parker watched the sunset, anyway. Nathan watched her. She’d left her hair down most of the time they weren’t adventuring, and while on a few occasions she’d shoed him out to the balcony to wait while she spent what seemed like hours curling her hair, tonight it fell in its natural waves, the unruly curls stirring in the breeze that came off the ocean. The hem of her skirt fluttered too against her bronzed legs. She’d left her sandals with the picnic basket.

He’d always appreciated that his partner was tough as nails. The fact she could kick anyone’s ass was sexy as hell, and aside from never quite learning how to prepare for a Maine winter she was efficient and practical, and he respected that. Here in Hawaii she was softer, more feminine, and he hoped she wouldn’t lose all of that once they got back to Haven. He liked seeing her in dresses and color, but most of all he liked how unburdened she looked when she smiled, like the weight of the world was no longer on her shoulders.

He was different here too. She’d commented more than once how silly he was acting, but he couldn’t help it. Every morning he woke up to realize that she was safe and he was whole giddiness welled up inside him and all he wanted to do was make her smile and laugh and believe in this impossible happiness they had been given. He’d never expected to feel like this; hadn’t thought that is was possible. He loved her so damn much and the fact she loved him back and they finally had a lifetime to spend together made him ecstatic.

She looked back and caught him gawking. Her eyes lit up at whatever lovesick expression he was probably wearing, and he realized he didn’t want to rely on showing her how he felt – he wanted to tell her.

“Thank you.”

“For what?” she asked, so airily it was almost a giggle.

Audrey Parker, giggling. He was thankful for that.

“Everything.” The answer was automatic and true, but he could see it roll over her as just one more example of his sappiness, and that wasn’t good enough.

“For making sure I felt so much during this trip,” he clarified.

She looked down at the sand, and he wanted to break her of that shyness anytime things got too personal. “Am I that easy to read?”
“Nah. But I like to think I’m pretty good at it.”

Her smile was wry when she looked up at him. “You’re the only one that is.”

“There’s something else.” He took her hand. “I was a little worried. That once I could feel again this – us – would become normal.” From the way she stiffened he knew she had worried that too. He raised her hand and kissed it, and he could feel her skin ripple under his lips. “I was wrong.”

Their eyes locked and he felt the weight of her full attention. “Even now that my nerves work when I touch you it still feels like electricity. There’s this rush that I never want to stop and it doesn’t matter that I can feel other things. I just want to feel you.”

She pushed up on her toes and kissed him. He fell into it gladly, moaning a little as her fingers sent sparks racing across his scalp.

Afterwards she kept her forehead pressed against his. “I never doubted you nearly as much as you doubted yourself.”

She stepped away to continue down the beach. “I’m still glad to hear it.” She wriggled her fingers so he would take her hand, but he put his arm around her shoulder instead, pulling her gently against his side. She tilted her head against him and matched his stride.

“You’re so good to me,” she said after a rare moment of silence. “I wanted to return the favor. I want you to have everything you’ve ever wanted.”

“I already do.” There was only one thing that could make his life any better, but he wasn’t going to push her on that. She’d already told him she wanted it too. Knowing that one day she’d have another child with him, he could wait as long as she needed. They had time now, and he did rather like having her to himself.

“That easy to please, huh?”

“Yeah. Because our entire courtship has been a piece of cake.”

“Courtship? Seriously. You do realize I’m not Sarah, right?”

“Accent gives that away,” he said drolly. “Haven’s an old fashioned place.”

“I can’t believe we’re going back tomorrow.”

“We don’t have to.”

She looked up at him, but he could tell the idea wasn’t quite as appealing to her as it had been the first time.

“Your savings are going to run out eventually.”

“Not next week.”

“We have to face reality at some point. I think it’s time. This has been amazing, and I think we should come back sometime. But I miss James.”

He envied the bond those two shared. He knew the man was his son, and he wanted to get to know him better, but he hadn’t internalized it yet the way she had.

“We’re going to go fishing sometime. Decided that before the wedding.”
“That’s great. I know it’s weird. He says he doesn’t need us to be his parents, but he deserves it you know? And so do we.”

“You’re amazing,” he declared, leaning down to kiss the crown of her head. “Guess it is time to go home.”

“I’ve never had a home before.”

“You do now.” He stopped walking so he could face her properly. “But we don’t have to stay in Haven if you don’t want.”

“Where else would we go?” she asked, cocking her head.

“Anywhere you want. Big city girl in a post-Trouble Haven … it’s going to get dull. If you want to start fresh somewhere else I’d understand.”

He’d tried leaving Haven once and been unable to manage it, but he’d give it up for her without hesitation. A big city wouldn’t be lonely with her beside him. He could build a life anywhere as long as they were doing it together.

She shook her head. “I should want to leave, all the awful things that have happened there. But it’s like you told James at our party – Haven gets under your skin. I’d like to see what it’s like when it’s not falling apart.”

“If you change your mind just say the word.”

“I will.” She looked out at the water for a moment, and then grabbed his hand and pulled him back toward their hotel.

“You know, if we’re going to stay in Haven, we could start looking for some land,” he suggested. “Find an architect to design our dream house. White picket fence. Dog in the yard. Sea monster in the pool.”

“With the Troubles gone, sea monsters will probably be hard to find.”

“Empty swimming pool then.”

“You already have a house,” she pointed out, and it was the tone she used when he was moving too fast and that was starting to freak her out. “You worked hard for that.”

“I bought that house because I didn’t want to spend one more minute under my father’s roof. It served that purpose for a long time. Would be nice to have something that was ours, not mine. Something started out of love and not spite.”

“That does sound nice,” she admitted. “But maybe we can wait a little while? Settle into this normalcy stuff before we get even more domestic?”

“We can wait as long as you need. Or we don’t have to move at all. It was just a thought.”

She squeezed his hand. “A good thought. Your house is only really big enough for two, anyway.”

His head jerked to the side at her implication, and she laughed at his eagerness. “Someday,” she promised.

He grabbed her by the waist and hoisted her in the air, and she shrieked and locked her arms around his neck as he spun her until they were both dizzy. “I love you, Audrey Wuornos,” he
swore.

“Good thing. Cause I love you, Nathan Wuornos.” It was a rare instance where she had the higher ground, and she leaned down to kiss him until both his lungs and arms were burning.

“What do you say we end this honeymoon right?” she whispered once he set her down. “One last swim,” she suggested, glancing pointedly at their private cove.

He had his shirt off before he’d formed a coherent thought. “Race you,” he dared as he took off at a run.

Chapter End Notes

I am SO SORRY about the delay in this chapter. I spent most of the summer working, and then moving, and then traveling … all kinds of real life stuff. I had hoped to finish this fic before the new season started, but probably we need this fluff more now that we did two weeks ago, so I hope you enjoy. There’s one more proper chapter, and then two epilogues coming, and I’ll try not to take so long.

If you forgive me for keeping you waiting, please let me know what you think. I need some positive Naudrey energy, because Mara is killing me.
“You’re not Duke,” Nathan pointed out helpfully as they approached the familiar, battered Jeep in the airport parking lot to find Julia Carr behind the wheel.

“And you’re not denying the obvious attraction between you,” the brunette called through the rolled down window.

“Not anymore,” Audrey said with a chuckle, hoisting her duffle bag into the trunk. Nathan stowed the suitcase they’d purchased to hold their new wardrobes and then opened the passenger door for her.

She narrowed her eyes. He needed the extra leg room far more than she did.

“Girl time,” he mouthed, and she caved. She certainly hadn’t expected to find Julia outside the airport – or anywhere. In her experience once someone left they didn’t come back.

“Duke’s at the Gull throwing some party for us, isn’t he?” she guessed as she slid into the seat.

“And we ruined the first one by not coming back. That’s why he was so weird when I told him we were staying another week.”

“I wouldn’t feel sorry for him,” Julia advised. “After everyone showed up most stuck around for dinner on their own dime. Probably made enough profit to pay for this party. But look surprised when you get there, all right? I wasn’t supposed to say anything.”

“I’m surprised to see you,” Audrey said. Julia looked good – tan, relaxed – not as anxious as she’d been the last time Audrey had seen her. “It’s been so long, I didn’t think you were ever coming back.”

Julia started the car and looked determinedly at the road. “The Troubles were over,” she said as she pulled onto the highway. “Seemed like time to come home.”

“We found out about your family’s Trouble. Africa seems like a pretty rough place to be when you can see people’s worst memories.”

Julia’s laugh was dry, but she didn’t sound bitter. “Yeah. I only lasted about four days. Transferred to the Australia bush. Nearly as terrible medical care. A lot less genocide.”

The thought of everything Julia must have seen just in four days made Audrey extremely uncomfortable. The woman was tough, but Audrey wasn’t sure how anyone could be that tough. So she tried to find a lighter subject. “We broke into your house.”

Julia glanced sideways with a smile. “Duke mentioned that. He knew where the key was, you know?”

“Yeah, he told us that afterwards. But you never mentioned it.” They hadn’t had a lot of time to bond because Julia had only been in town a few months. But there had been a few late night margarita binges where Audrey may have mentioned how attractive she found both men in her life, and Julia had never let out a peep about being involved with Duke once upon a time.
“That was a long time ago,” Julia countered. She sounded more wistful than defensive. “We were different people then.”

“He was pretty shaken up when you left so suddenly,” Audrey told her. “As shaken as Duke gets, anyway. But he told me he didn’t know what happened.”

“Being on his boat when it got taken over by those poker thugs must have triggered my Trouble. Mom had warned me what was likely to happen. She sent me letters for years, telling me it would be better if I was in Haven when it did. When I came back and was fine after Mom’s death I thought maybe it hadn’t passed to me. But I saw something when I took Duke to the graveyard to show him the maze symbol on the tombstones.”

“What did you see?”

She looked up at the rearview mirror as if to see if Nathan was listening. Audrey was sure he was, even though he’d stayed silent in the back seat.

“I saw you kill Duke’s father. Except he was eight and you looked different – but it was you. And it freaked me out because if I really thought about it, I knew Mom had this friend around that time and she looked just like you. But you’d never mentioned it, and Duke didn’t seem to mind that you’d killed his father right in front of him. It was too much. I didn’t think I could deal with my Trouble and everyone else’s. So I ran.”

“Lots of people do.” Nathan’s voice from behind her was knowing and even. “No shame in that.”

“I’m not sure that’s true. You were my friends and I didn’t even ask for an explanation.”

“We wouldn’t have had on then,” Audrey said. “But we do now, if you still want one.”

“Duke told me some of it. Past lives and vengeful witches and the Crocker curse. Pretty crazy.”

“It’s even crazier when you’re living it – trust me. But it turned out all right in the end.” When Audrey glanced up she could see Nathan smiling in the back.

“I’m happy for the both of you. Not at all surprised. But happy.”

Julia was far too smug. “I’d barely come to town when you were here. We weren’t that obvious.”

“Puh-leese. I’ve known Nathan all his life, and never did he go around with those puppy dog eyes the way he looked at you. And you were way too fascinated with your partner for it to be platonic.”

Audrey searched for a rebuttal but couldn’t come up with one. She honestly hadn’t been thinking of Nathan romantically at the time – not consciously anyway. She’d acknowledged his attractiveness in an objective, drunken way, but she hadn’t considered doing anything about it. Their partnership had been too important. He’d been her rock and her friend, and she’d needed that more than a sleeping buddy.

She’d cared for him too much to start a relationship. Maybe Julia was on to something.

She’d never admit it.

“Isn’t platonic now,” Nathan piped up from the back. “That’s all the matters.”

“Duke was right. You’re sweet. It’s gross.”

Audrey laughed, joy flowing out of her like a melody. She’d been worried Haven would be
different, that the lightness she’d felt in Hawaii would evaporate somewhere over the ocean. But the high hadn’t left her. Her new life was even more remarkable here. “You have no idea.”

When Julia pulled into the Gull’s parking lot the place was packed. Audrey couldn’t help but think of the mostly empty lot at their reception; everyone who’d mattered had been there, but the small number had stung, somehow, even if it was only for an instant.

“Sure the party is tonight?” Nathan asked, and Audrey felt just as unsure as he sounded.

“You’re the town heroes. They’ve all come to pay their respects.” Julia threw the car into neutral and unlocked the doors. “You should get out here. I’m going to have to park down the block.”

Nathan opened the door for her and she stepped into him as they watched Julia drive away. “Is this really for us?” she whispered.

He lifted her face, fingers warm and steady against her cheek, and leaned down to kiss her quickly. “Seems so. Let’s go find out.”

He held out his hand and she laced their fingers together.

The noise when they walked through the door was deafening. The number of people packed into the building was surely a fire code violation, and every last one of them was singing, “For they are jolly good fellows.” The decorations for their reception had been tasteful. This looked like the scene of a preschooler’s birthday party. Large homemade banners proclaimed messages like “Congratulations” and “Thank you Audrey and Nathan.” It was like a rainbow had vomited balloons and streamers across all the walls and ceilings.

Nathan’s hand tightened around hers. She had to blink tears out of her eyes, but he was beaming.

Everything she’d seen since she came to Haven, and this was the hardest to believe.

Suddenly everyone was surging toward them in an unending crowd of gratitude, thanking them for saving them from this Trouble or that, and some Audrey recognized but many she did not. Everyone wanted to say something, and Audrey found herself on the receiving end of many awkward hugs. The man whose sweat had turned toxic was particularly effusive, while his wife clutched his hand and whispered her thank you with teary eyes.

She glanced at Nathan when the couple turned away. He’d been right. Touch wasn’t everything. They’d been okay.

But touch was surely something. They were no doubt better now.

Then it was Dave standing before them with a thick book bound with a blue ribbon. “The wedding photos turned out beautifully,” he said. “You pick whichever ones you like and I’ll get copies for you. My treat. It’s the least I could do after everything you’ve done for this town.”

Audrey untied the ribbon and opened the album. They were beautiful shots, capturing the atmosphere and the joy they’d felt on that wonderful day. Nathan looked so ecstatic in every photo she wanted to frame them all. Though she still had a soft spot for the picture Dorothy had taken at the inn.

“These are gorgeous. You’re a great photographer.”

“She helps when the subject matter is so agreeable.” He looked at them with a straight face, but
Audrey could see a gleam come into his eyes. “I do baby portraits too.”

Nathan chuckled at his gall and soon she was joining in. Surely by the end of the night at least half the town would think she was already pregnant. But she didn’t mind. Let ‘em talk.

But then Dave stepped aside and her good mood vanished.

“I have something for you as well.”

“Get out of here Vince,” she warned. She hadn’t been angry for more than two weeks, and now it was churning in her fiercely.

“I told you it was too soon,” Dave chided. “You never can leave well enough alone.”

“A family trait,” Vince countered. “I’ve as much right to be here as anyone else. I have a gift for the happy couple. Two gifts, actually.”

“We don’t want anything from you,” she snarled.

“At least look at it before you reach that conclusion.” He handed her a book roughly the size of the one Dave had given her and she wanted to bat it away but something made her take it instead.

She opened the cover and her stomach dropped. “You have got to be kidding me.” She turned page after page and her own face stared back at her from sepia photographs and yellowed newsprint in incarnations she’d never seen and a few that had become familiar. Interspersed with the photographs were handwritten notes, and it was clear from the phrasing that the Teague brothers had been the authors.

“How dare you,” she seethed. “All that time I was desperate to understand who I’d been. To find some clue that could keep me here. And you had a scrapbook of my lives and never thought to tell me.”

“There’s nothing in there that indicates how you could stay. If we’d known that we would have told you.”

She could feel a headache building in her temple. “Why now, when it doesn’t even matter?”

”Because if you’re anything at all like Sarah you’re still curious. Knowing who you are now doesn’t mean you stop wondering who you were.”

She hated that she could see the truth in that.

“There’s something else. This is for the both of you.” He handed her a large manila envelope. She tore it open and extracted a sheet of paper. “Deed of property,” she read, more flabbergasted by this gift than the last one. She handed it to Nathan with wide eyes.

“Seriously. Is this all a joke?”

“A young couple needs a place to establish themselves.”

“And you just happened to have some property to unload? Did you get it through the Guard? Maybe the owners died tragically, or got run out of town.”

“211 Cherrytree Lane.” There was something strange about Nathan’s voice as he read the address, as if it were familiar instead of just ridiculous.
“There were no Troubles involved. At least not the Haven kind. Family got behind on their payments. The bank seized the property. A developer was going to build a fancy hotel so they tore down the house. But the tourism business is fickle even when the Troubles aren’t involved. Project never got off the ground.”

“My mother grew up there,” Nathan interjected, awe in his voice, and Audrey watched him carefully as he put the pieces together. “She used to talk about the wildflowers, and the horses in the backyard. Her parents lost it when she was fourteen.”

“Garland bought it from the developers. He was going to surprise her with it. But she died before he could. Afterwards the place just reminded him of what he’d lost, so I took it off his hands. They’d both want you to have it, I think.”

Nathan was looking like he might actually tear up and Audrey couldn’t process it all.

“You can’t just buy our forgiveness with extravagant, inappropriate gifts,” she insisted. “You had our son killed by his own grandfather. That’s not something a parent can just forget.”

“James is fine.” The old man’s voice had turned to steel, and he looked younger somehow. “The Troubles forced us all to make difficult choices. I regret the pain I caused you and Lucy, and I never would have laid a hand on Sarah’s son unless it was absolutely necessary. But it was necessary. I won’t apologize for that. Not now that the town is free, and you with it. Keep hating me if you like, but what will that really accomplish?”

Vince left without a goodbye, and Audrey turned to Nathan, who was still staring at the deed. When he realized she was looking at him he tucked it back in the envelope.

“Do you think I should forgive him?” she asked. “Have you?”

“If he touches any part of my family again I’ll kill him.” There was something chillingly cavalier about Nathan’s statement. Audrey’s insides were still churning, but he didn’t seem agitated in the slightest. “But I’m not too inclined to be angry about much of anything right now.”

“I just can’t get over the fact that he got away with it. He had James killed!” She could still feel Lucy’s hysteria and despair, and how the woman had yearned for a vengeance she’d known she’d never get. But as she took a deep breath Lucy’s rage faded. “But this is a fresh start, and I don’t want to be angry anymore.”

Nathan smiled, and she felt like she’d chosen correctly. “Then let it go. He lost Sarah. That’s a worse punishment than anything you could do to him.”

He sounded too knowing and all the chilling might have beens gripped her for just a moment. “He never had her to begin with,” she said softly, reaching out to lay a hand against his upper arm. He smiled at her, and she knew that even through his sleeve he could feel it.

“Guess we better start looking for that architect,” she said, needing to change the subject. Nathan was still gripping the envelope like a lifeline.

“We don’t have to.”

“Look on your face when you realized it was your mother’s place – yeah we do.”

He beamed at her as her heart flipped in her chest, and it was like they were back in paradise. She needn’t have worried things would be different in Haven. They were still good. “I love you.”
“I know,” she said with a laugh.

“Well aren’t you both tan and relaxed.” Duke strode forward, shooing away a few well-wishers with a suggestion to get some more drinks. Audrey tried not to blush at Duke’s words as she remembered the way Nathan had been fascinated by her tan lines, taking special care to worship the skin the sun hadn’t touched. “I was starting to think you’d found some sense and were never coming back.”

As soon as she got her dirty mind in check she looked at Duke and was shocked by how relaxed he seemed. He’d trimmed his hair. It was probably too short for his ponytail, but it still fell nearly to his shoulders, like he used to wear it when they first met. That trademark, shit-eating grin that had endeared him to her despite her best efforts not to befriend the town con was back in full force, and it was only now that she fully realized how strained it had been for so long. There were no shadows under his eyes or worry lines on his face.

“No such luck.”

Duke pulled a face at Nathan’s jovial tone and leaned toward Audrey conspiratorially. “Did he get hit on the head with a coconut or something?”

“Nope. He just discovered a new emotion. Happiness.”

“Seems to be a lot of that going around, actually.”

“I can see that.” Her eyes scanned around the crowded bar. Everyone had backed off to let Duke talk to them privately, but there was still a queue waiting to offer their congratulations.

Duke nodded toward a table in the back that was overflowing with wrapped packages. “Julia registered you at a few places. I’m not sure how all that domestic stuff works. But I figured, why the hell not. Married couples love free stuff, right?”

There was so much free stuff it was a good thing they’d soon be building another house.

“How’d you get everyone here?” Nathan asked.

“That was the easy part. Haven’t you been listening? You’re the town heroes. And it’s about damn time. Audrey’s been sacrificing herself for this town for centuries, and finally they appreciate it.”

Gratitude welled up in her so fiercely she surged forward and hugged Duke. “Thank you,” she said, burying her head in his chest.

He stood woodenly in her embrace, and after a few seconds he cleared his throat. “You’re welcome. But Aud – you might want to let go or your husband might skewer me.”

“No he won’t,” Nathan said without a trace of jealousy or disapproval.

Audrey stepped back with an awkward chuckle and swiped at the tears on her cheeks. She hadn’t thought that she cared what the town thought. But after months of being a pariah and centuries of being unappreciated their gratitude and acceptance overwhelmed her. “This is one of the nicest things anyone’s ever done for me.”

“Don’t mention it. Really, don’t mention it.”

“Now that would be mean except you sound so happy. I don’t know how to deal with that.”

“You’ll have to get used to it.”

She’d never get tired of her boys getting along. “Quite some decorations you’ve got here,” Audrey pointed out.

“Sophie did most of them,” Duke explained. “The Benton girls have been here a lot while Sasquatch has been out retrieving people from the Guard safe houses. Then Ginger came by this morning and they decided they wanted to fill up every balloon in Haven.”

“Oh, Uncle Duke to the rescue again,” she teased.

“I can’t help it if children are charmed by me.”

She shook her head indulgently. “Mmmmmmm. Speaking of which, now that the Troubles are over, have you thought about seeing Jean?”

He reacted too quickly not to have thought about it, and it wasn’t shock that flashed across his face, it was pain. “Don’t think that’s a good idea. She’s got a family now, and even with the Troubles gone there’s no need for the kid to know what kind of freakshow she came from.”

“Take it from someone who knows. One day she’s going to find out she was adopted, and she’s going to wonder where she came from. It’d help to know her father didn’t give her up willingly.” She would have given anything to find out that was the case in her own life.

“It’s not like I was ready to raise her even if she wouldn’t have killed me.”

“You would have done right by her. You still can.” She was absolutely certain of that.

Their eyes locked in a staring contest, and she saw the man beneath the confident persona he projected, who was vulnerable and unsure that he was any better than the crook he pretended to be. But she didn’t share his doubts, and he blinked first. “I’ll think about it.”

“Good. Have you seen James?”

Duke grew even more somber, sending a spike of panic straight to her heart. “What’s happened?” she demanded. “Where is he?”

“Colorado,” Duke answered after a heavy breath.

Devastation crashed over her like a wave. How could he simply be gone, without a goodbye or a word of warning? But she should have known. Of course he’d go back there. He’d had a family and a life there and with her and Nathan gone that was nothing tying him here.

“I thought he’d be back by now. He called last week and I told him you were staying till today. He said he’d check in before you got back – but he didn’t.”

“You okay?” Nathan asked, his hand a gentle and soothing weight on her shoulder, but she wasn’t, and a caress and some uncomfortable PDAs weren’t going to change that.

“I need some air,” she croaked. “Don’t follow me.” She backed out of his reach and tried to find a path through the crowded bar, hot tears leaking unchecked from her eyes.

She’d lock herself in the bathroom, cry this out where no one could see, and then pull herself together enough to go back out there and make it through the night. Wasn’t like he was dead. She
and Nathan could go to Colorado and visit him there. Wouldn’t be the same, but they’d make do.

It still hurt like hell.

She was so focused on making her escape she didn’t notice when she crashed right into someone.

“Sorry,” she stuttered, trying not to catch the person’s eye so they wouldn’t see she was a mess.

His arm reached out to steady her, preventing an easy getaway. “Audrey. I was looking for you.”

She looked up into a familiar face. “Oh,” she squeaked, searching for a name that wouldn’t come.

“Will Brady,” he said. “I was in a coma—”

“I remember you,” she assured. “I’m just terrible with names.” She swiped her hand across her eyes, trying to be discrete, but there was no way he didn’t notice something was off. “You’re awake.”

“I’ve been awake for almost two years now. That’s thanks to you. My sister said they were about to pull the plug when some crazy blond convinced them I was still in there.”

“Crazy blond? That sounds about right,” she said wryly, her misery fading a bit at the sight of someone else she’d saved.

“I went to look for you as soon as I got out of the hospital. But no one could tell me where you were. It was like you’d just disappeared.”

“Yeah.” She huffed out a breath. “All that stuff about doing what you have to to save lives and fighting fate – let’s just say it hit a little close to home.”

“But you’re back now. And you didn’t just save me. They say you saved the whole town.”

She pushed her hair out of her face. “Guess I did.”

“When I heard about the party I wanted to come say thank you. Because I wasn’t ready to leave. And this life I came back to has been a pretty good one.”

“I’m so glad.”

“The shirt worked you know. I got married a couple of months ago.” He held up his left hand where a gold band glistened.

She held up her hand. “Me too.”

“ Heard about that too,” he said knowingly. “To that partner of yours.”

She groaned. “Was I that obvious?”

“You were pretty off kilter, raving about serial killers. But you were very concerned that your partner wasn’t conscious.”

She thought back to that moment and how much she’d wanted to stay, even though she’d already resigned herself to leaving. She and Nathan were finally talking again and she’d just wanted to hold on and never let go.

She could do that now. “Guess I was pretty far gone, even then.”
“I’m happy for you both. But there is something I’ve been wondering.”

“What?”

“Did you ever catch the man who killed Erin?”

That still hurt, even now. Claire should have been here to celebrate with them. She would have been delighted. Audrey nodded. “She can’t hurt anyone ever again.”

“She? It was a man.”

“Yeah. I know it looked like a man. But the entire town was in your coma. This is Haven. Things aren’t always what they seem.”

“But she paid for what she did?”

“Yes,” Audrey assured. “Erin got justice. All the victims did.”

Will nodded. “Good. Thank you for that. I’ll let you be then. But I’d like you to meet Elizabeth sometime. She had plans today. But maybe you and that partner of yours can have drinks with us one night.”

“I’d like that. I’d like that a lot.”

“See you around, Audrey Parker.”

She laughed, because she remembered how he’d teased her for saying that but this time it was actually true and they both had long lives ahead of them and it was glorious. “This time you will, Will Brady.”

He smiled at her and slipped away, and she realized the need to flee left with him. She’d be all right. She had Nathan and she had a life and they’d straighten things out with James somehow. She turned back to look for Nathan and found her son approaching her instead.

Her breath caught in her throat. “Sorry I’m late,” he said tentatively. He was wearing dark slacks and a white dress shirt with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows. His face was more somber than normal, but he was here.

She threw her arms around his neck with a sob and held on tight.

“Okay,” he said shakily, his arms coming around her after a few seconds. “Hello to you too.”

“You’re here.”

“Yeah.” He was speaking slowly like she was a spooked animal. “Is everything okay? The honeymoon wasn’t bad, was it?”

“God no.” Her hitched laugh sounded more like a choked gasp, and she pulled away but still kept him at arm’s length. “I’m sorry. I don’t know why I’m such a wreck today. All the town came out for this party and then you were gone and I haven’t really gotten much sleep—”

“Stop there, please.”

“Sorry.” She took a deep breath. He looked so concerned, and she didn’t want that. “We came back and you were gone and I just thought—”
“Mrs. Cogan’s funeral was this morning.” That explained the suit and the sad eyes.

“I’m so sorry.” She reached out and grabbed his hand, the long fingers cool under her own.

“I knew she was bad off. You and Dad both told me that. But I wanted to see her, and I figured I might as well go while you were gone.”

She squeezed his hand, unable to stop herself from imagining the pain he must be in. June had been in a bad way when she’d visited her, and that had been years ago. She couldn’t imagine seeing someone she loved so old and broken. Duke’s rapid-aging Trouble had freaked her out, and she’d barely known him then. If something like that happened to Nathan now it might break her.

“I think the Alzheimer’s might have made things easier. Most of the time she didn’t remember that she’d thought I died. She was just so glad to see me.”

“James.” It wasn’t fair what life had done to her son. First his wife and now his mother, and she didn’t know how to fix it for him. What kind of words could provide any real comfort?

“It’s okay,” he said, squeezing her hand back, and what was most surprising was that it sounded like he meant it. “She’s at peace now. She got to see me before the end, and I think that meant the world to her.”

“But how are you?”

“I’m doing all right.” She must have looked skeptical, because he repeated himself. “I really am. I lost them a long time ago. At least I got to say goodbye. She passed away in her sleep on Wednesday. I was able to put her affairs in order while I was waiting for the funeral. I wanted to be back before the party started but this was the first flight I could catch.”

“So when do you go back?” she asked tentatively. She dreaded the answer, but she needed to know.

“There’s nothing left for me there but memories,” he said. “I figure it’s time for a fresh start. And from the way you were clinging to me earlier I guess you wouldn’t mind if I made it here.”

She had to restrain herself from embracing him again. “I’d love that,” she swore. “Nathan and I both would.”

He looked beyond her and Audrey followed his gaze to where Nathan was leaned against the bar, talking animatedly at Duke. As if he could feel her eyes on him he glanced over to her. A slow smile stole across his face, which released butterflies in her stomach and settled somewhere in her heart.

“He said he’d take me fishing when you guys got back.”

“He told me about that,” she said. “This whole situation’s weird, but he wants to be a father to you.”

“Think he’d come to Africa with us?”

She thought of Lucy and James in the Barn, on the fabricated savannah, contemplating love and life. They could have real adventures now. They’d chosen to come back to this town, but they weren’t trapped there anymore.

“For the two of us? I think that man would follow us anywhere.” She was certain of it. Nathan Wuornos may have never once contemplated leaving the continent, but he’d never say no if they
asked. “But since you and I have a few identity issues that might make it a little hard to get a passport, maybe we should start with a skiing trip.”

“I’d bet Duke could get us some papers.”

“That is exactly what your father said,” she said with a laugh.

Nathan chose that moment to approach as if he’d been summoned, carrying three extraordinarily pink drinks. “Apparently the Troublebreaker is the official cocktail of this party.” He handed one to James and Audrey and then leaned toward his son. “Duke insisted, but if we give these all to her and pretend we drank them I’ll go and get us some beers.”

“Trying to get me drunk, Wuornos? If these are anything like the ones from our bachelor party by the time I have three I’ll be totally sloshed.”

“The way Duke’s handing them out to the entire bar I’m sure they’re watered down.”

Audrey took a sip. It was just as sweet as she remembered, but it was missing most of its kick. “Yeah, definitely a lot less rum.”

“So, everything okay over here?” Nathan asked.

“Perfect,” she assured. “James and I were just discussing taking a family trip.”

“I’ve grown rather fond of trips,” he said, and the affectation in his voice made her laugh.

“Don’t mind your father,” she said, turning to James. “He thinks he’s funny now.”

“I am funny now,” he said with mock indignity. “I’ve always been funny. You were just too uptight to notice.”

“I noticed.” It may have been masked in stoicism, but she’d always appreciated his dry wit.

“So are there any family friendly stories from Hawaii, or are they all going to leave me bleeding from my ears?”

“I think we can come up with a few.”

“Let’s find a table,” Nathan suggested. They shared plenty of stories, even though they were interrupted throughout the night by various Havenites. Every account of a Trouble cured or a family reunited made her giddier than the drinks Duke kept plying her with. The joy in the room was contagious, and she’d never heard so much laughter. Duke didn’t flinch when half the people on the dance floor had Guard tattoos. Audrey could barely contain herself when Sophie dragged Dwight into the center of the room and stood on his feet as he swayed with the music. She had never seen the giant man so content. Duke seemed rather content himself when Julia pulled him onto the floor.

But the best view was surely from Nathan’s arms. He spun her slowly, his body so tantalizingly close even as she watched the rest of the world move on around them. “Some homecoming, huh, Parker?” he whispered in her ear, and the sound shot straight through her and weakened her knees, but his arm at her waist kept her steady.

She knew then that they’d made the right choice coming back. Because Hawaii had been paradise, and she’d never trade those memories for anything. But here, now, surrounded by friends and family, the town whole and elated around her, she knew she wasn’t living some unsustainable
fantasy.

This was unquestionably real.

Chapter End Notes

We’re nearing the end now folks. Two short epilogues to go. I’d love to know what you think.
Audrey took the test four times and then she called James.

Nathan was typically the one good at romantic gestures. She’d come back from the courthouse after changing her name to find “I love you Mrs. Wuornos” spelled out in cupcakes all across the kitchen counter. (Her car may have been filled with the most comfortable bedding she could find, but that was a spur of the moment purchase that hadn’t required nearly as much forethought as his confectionary declaration.) It was a trend that continued through their first year of marriage. Sometimes it was as simple as leaving little's on her desk at work so she would find them when she started her morning, and sometimes it was a treasure hunt on their six month anniversary that left her solving clues all across town.

She loved that he was thoughtful and meticulous and yes – even sappy. He never expected that of her. Swore up and down that her presence was enough for him, and she believed it. He’d never been a very convincing liar.

But for once she wanted to surprise him. So she spent a few months stewing over the details, and when she was ready she called James.

They spent the morning at the hardware store. James picked out everything she needed and drove it to her house. They went out for lunch, careful to keep all conversation away from the matter at hand so the town rumor mills wouldn’t find out before Nathan did. When he said goodbye he was practically vibrating with excitement on her behalf.

She spent the afternoon in the kitchen. Nathan still did most of the cooking, but she’d picked up a few tricks now that she had time for such domestics. A special day required a special meal. She’d discarded the obvious choice right away. His pancakes were far better than hers, and news like this required a more grown up menu. She’d found a recipe for chicken parm that seemed manageable and delicious. There was something surprisingly soothing about following the directions that helped her understand why he was so fond of the process. Her mind wandered as the food cooked, her hand drifting occasionally to rest on her stomach as she hummed a tune under her breath.

It had been a fantastic fourteen months. They’d had some space issues to work out, and it hadn’t been completely easy for her to adjust to a post-Trouble Haven. With the Troubles gone some of his memories of Max had come back, and she had plenty of demons of her own to cope with from her multiple pasts. There were rough patches, bad days, and nights filled with Patsy and Jack. But she loved coming home with him, whether it was for a torrid night of lovemaking or a rousing game of Life. His joy was infectious, and even when she wanted to be annoyed it was nearly impossible to maintain any negative emotions when he was beaming at her. The sex had become less constant and desperate, but he still knew how to drive her wild. She’d never had another lover who could switch between tender and passionate so effortlessly. Even as the other side effects of his Trouble faded – his posture becoming more relaxed, his actions less regulated – he always seemed a bit more alive when she was touching him.

And he’d literally bound her to this life when otherwise she’d been destined to become another person, so it made sense that she felt most real when she was by his side.

She had just put the garlic bread in the oven when she heard the front door open.

“Honey,” he called. She’d gotten used to the pet name, as long as it was in private and never at work. His voice softened whenever he said it, and she’d never admit it to another soul but it made
her want to belong to him. She could hear him moving through the house, making the short trek from the entryway to the kitchen. “Why is there a pile of wood on the porch?”

She turned and wiped her hands on her jeans. He came forward and pressed a quick kiss to her cheek. “That smells delicious by the way,” he said, peering over her shoulder to look through the oven door.

She’d practiced the way she would say it, cavalier and disarming, like it was no big thing. But she felt her nerves in her stomach and her heart pounding in her ears and it sounded like her voice was trembling when she told him, “James says it’s everything you’ll need to build a crib.”

She managed to keep a straight face for a few seconds as she watched him, and she could tell he was thrown by this.

He swallowed, wide eyes blinking as he stared at her stomach. “You’re pregnant?” he croaked.

“Yeah.” And finally she let the joy she’d felt since this morning shine through. Her nervousness evaporated, leaving a breathless giddiness and a smile so wide that it pulled on the corners of her mouth.

His answering grin was just as wide. “We’re having a baby?”

“Yes,” she said, laughing at his bright puppy dog eagerness and the prospect of this strange, beautiful, perfect, normal life laid out before them, a life Prudence had thought stolen from her and Audrey Parker had never expected to have.

He was laughing himself when he silenced them both with a kiss so thorough it left her clutching his arms to stay upright. He followed it with feather light kisses to her forehead, her nose, and her eyelids and she laughed at the way it tickled and how much she loved him.

“You’re sure?” he whispered into her ear. She nodded, her chin bumping against his shoulder.

“I took the test four times just in case. I have a doctor’s appointment on Thursday. I figured you’d want to come with me.”

“Course.” He pulled back slightly though he didn’t loosen his grip on her waist. “I thought you were on the pill.”

A year ago she might have worried about his intentions with such a question. But she’d spent quite a lot of time learning how his mind worked. He loved James – they both did. But he was a traditional guy from a traditional town, and she imagined he’d prefer if all his children weren’t accidentally conceived.

She reached out to push his hair across his temple. He still leaned into the contact like she was his only port in a storm. “I stopped taking it on our anniversary. I know we haven’t talked about kids in a while, but I figured this would be a good surprise.”

He tilted his forehead against hers, closed his eyes, and breathed her in. “The best,” he said reverently.

“Your swimmers sure don’t waste any time, Wuornos.”

She could feel his quiet chuckle rumble through them both. “James should have taught us that,” he whispered. “Sides, they have lots of practice.”
“That they do,” she practically giggled. Audrey Parker did not giggle, but Audrey Wuornos was growing increasingly familiar with such frivolity.

“So I’m supposed to build a crib, ‘eh?’”

She looked up at him. “James offered to help if you need it.”

“How’d he take the news?” Nathan and James had been working on their relationship, and while it still wasn’t as effortless as hers with James a mutual respect was building that warmed her heart to see. She loved watching her two boys together when they didn’t realize she was spying. The similar mannerisms, the matching features, the confident manner Nathan adopted when he was teaching James something about growing up in the wilds of Maine.

“He’s thrilled for us. I was afraid he’d be jealous. But he’s really not. He offered to babysit whenever we need a break.”

“Probably could figure out the crib on my own. But a second pair of hands would be nice.”

“You should call him.”

“I will. But first – may I?” He looked down at her stomach and she knew exactly what he was asking.

“I’d be shocked if you didn’t, daddy,” she told him, but the nerves were back in full force. This was another moment she’d been waiting for. How many times had she relived the way he’d acted when he’d seen Beatrice’s babies? She’d been shocked at the time to see her normally serious partner turn into a bouncing, babbling tower of mush with an infant in his arms. But as they’d grown closer sometimes she dreamed of his simple, unashamed joy at innocent new life. Now she yearned to be the one to hand him that life and bask in the knowledge they’d created it together, rather than the one who scoffed and told him they had to get back to work.

His fingers twitched against her when she acknowledged his fatherhood, and then he dropped to his knees beside her. His hand was shaking when he gently lifted her shirt and laid his other palm across her still flat stomach.

“Hey baby.” His voice was deep and quiet, and Audrey fist her hands into his hair to keep her balance. His thumb moved almost imperceptibly up and down against her skin and her eyes fluttered closed at the sensation. “Your mommy and daddy are so excited to meet you soon. You are going to be so smart and so beautiful. Or handsome. Yes you are. And we’re gonna love you so, so much. We already do. So grow big and strong for us. And don’t be too hard on your mommy. She gets grumpy when she doesn’t feel well.”

Audrey reached down and flicked his ear. She should have caught on sooner from the playful tone that had crept into his voice, but she’d been overcome by the moment.

“You better get used to it, Wuornos. As excited as I am about meeting this little guy I am not looking forward to the process.”

“You’ll do great,” he said lightly, and then he pressed a chaste kiss to her stomach. Before she recovered from his actions he scooped her into his arms. Her hands came around his neck automatically. “Where are we going?”

“Bedroom,” he said like it was obvious, and she supposed that it was. She might have given in if the oven timer hadn’t sounded.

He kissed the side of her neck and started working downwards. “It’s okay if we burn the house down. We’re building another one anyway.”

“Nathan.” She tried to make it a warning, but his lips found a sweet spot and made her inflect his name with the wrong kind of desperation.

“Okay, we can turn the oven off first.” He took a step in that direction and she used his distraction to her advantage, pushing on his chest.

“I mean it. Put me down.”

Their eyes locked, and once he realized she was serious he complied immediately. But he looked like a kicked puppy when he stepped away from her.

“Don’t give me those sad eyes,” she said, turning toward the oven so she wouldn’t have to witness his disappointment. “I’ve been cooking all afternoon. Heaven knows that soon I’m not going to want to do that. We are not ruining this meal because we can’t wait half an hour to fall into bed with each other.”

In the reflection of the oven she could see him dutifully take his seat at the table. He smiled softly as he watched her pull the food from the oven. Satisfied he wasn’t actually upset, she revealed her final surprise.

His pouty face was back as soon as she turned, but it melted into delighted shock as she flashed him a wicked grin. “Besides, I bought us a bottle of maple syrup for dessert.”
Epilogue Part 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

She never woke to the baby crying.

It was always Nathan’s voice she heard first, the deep, soothing baby talk with the touch of silliness she secretly adored.

Somehow it soothed her too, smoothing over the roughness of waking abruptly from a sleep that was never long or deep enough. For nearly a minute she would lie there rallying her strength to get up as she basked in her husband’s love for their daughter.

The man was surely born to be a father. It certainly wasn’t a learned trait, the role models he’d had. Max had been a terror, and as convinced as Audrey was that Garland had cared for Nathan deeply his tough love was the polar opposite of Nathan’s effusive warm and fuzzies.

He’d had the patience of a saint through her entire pregnancy. It was smothering at times and she’d snapped at him more often than she cared to count, but that had never deterred his devotion. She wouldn’t admit it, but it had helped immensely to know she had someone at her beck and call to get her whatever strange thing would make her more comfortable. She could wake him up at three in the morning for a backrub, a trip to the grocery store, or a quickie and he’d never complain. She suspected this had more to do with his excitement about the baby than any feelings toward her, but the result was the same.

Now that the baby was here he actually seemed enthused about the midnight feedings. Every night for the past month he’d woken first, and maybe she’d be jealous if he wasn’t so adorable about it.

“How’s my perfect little pretty princess?” he cooed. In the dim light Audrey could see the way he cradled the baby to his chest, his large body curled around it in a fort of love and protection.

“Feeling hungry aren’t you baby? Yes you are. It’s dinner time. But mama’s tired. Why don’t you settle down and I’ll get you a bottle. Yes I will.”

He was a baby whisperer, Audrey was certain. It was like an anti-Trouble. Emma stopped crying whenever he switched into his special tone, staring up at him with wide alert eyes. Audrey’s heart had melted the first time Emma reached out with her tiny little fist and grabbed Nathan’s finger. But she didn’t quiet completely tonight, her hunger stronger than Nathan’s magic, and she wriggled and fussed in her father’s arms.

Audrey finally pulled herself into a sitting position. “She doesn’t want a bottle. Bring her here.”

Nathan turned with an apologetic smile. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay. I know you’d be the milk dispenser if you could.”

He handed her over carefully and Audrey leaned forward to brush her nose against Emma’s soft, sweet head before settling her into the nursing position. With one hand she undid the buttons on the dress shirt she’d commandeered from Nathan for this very purpose and pushed the fabric down her shoulders.

“Mama would appreciate sleeping through the night every once in a while,” she groused softly, fully aware that she had her own special tone that she used with the baby. It wasn’t nearly as
ridiculous as Nathan’s, and the words weren’t as strongly out of character, but she finally understood the need to babble anything that sounded comforting.

Emma latched on eagerly, and Audrey stroked her finger across her daughter’s head and marveled. “There you go, baby.” She’d thought this would be weird; she’d once thought the whole idea of motherhood unnatural. But everything had changed the moment the nurse put this little girl in her arms. She hadn’t thought it was possible to love anyone more than Nathan, but she’d do absolutely anything for this child – kill or die or set the whole town on fire. There were moments she felt such fierce love towards James, but he was a grown man who could typically take care of himself. Emma needed her, and she’d do anything to fulfill that need.

They’d talked a lot about names. They both had so much history, and so many potential namesakes. Now that she had the knowledge from Vince’s scrapbook it was actually challenging to find a moniker Prudence hadn’t adopted. They didn’t want their child to be weighed down by the past; they’d lived through enough tragedy. So they’d picked one without any connections. She’d start her own legacy.

Audrey had a theory that Nathan liked two syllable names that started and ended with vowels. Flattered, she’d never called him out on that.

She did shoot him down when he suggested they name the baby Parker. That was something she wasn’t sharing.

She felt the mattress depress as Nathan sat down behind her. He settled one arm loosely around her waist and rested his chin on her shoulder.

She leaned back against him, appreciating his solid warmth. His fingers slipped under her shirt to ghost across her stomach. She glanced to the side to see him staring down at their nursing daughter.

“Enjoying the view?” she teased.

“Yeah.” But there wasn’t a trace of lust in his voice, even though they hadn’t had sex in months. There was a purity about his love for Emma that sometimes took her breath away.

“She’s so perfect, Parker. And we made her. You and me. Isn’t that amazing?”

The wonder in his voice wrapped around her like a warm bath, infusing her with peace and comfort. “It really is.”

“I always wanted kids. But I couldn’t imagine passing my curse on to anyone, ‘specially someone I loved. Couldn’t imagine anyone’d want me anyway. But she’ll never have to know what I went through. I can never thank you enough for that.”

She felt tears burning behind her eyes and she wanted to kiss him senseless. But Emma was still suckling away, so she settled on honesty instead.

“I didn’t want kids. They seemed like a lot of trouble that couldn’t possibly be worth it. Plus I didn’t think anyone would want me either. But I’m glad you changed my mind. Because now I don’t understand how Sarah could have possibly given James up.”

“You’ll never have to,” Nathan swore, his fingers twitching against her side at the very possibility. Sometimes in moments like this she mourned all the nights she’d lost. James was content and well adjusted, recovering from the scars Arla’s descent into madness had left on him, and he’d grown up knowing love in a way neither of his parents had. But Audrey wanted to be the one who’d nursed
and dressed him, waiting for his first words and first steps and every milestone until he grew into a wonderful man.

She never expected how much she’d enjoy being a mother. She was absolutely exhausted all the time, to a level spending years remediing Troubles should have prepared her for but hadn’t. Her body had turned on her in its quest to nurture a new life – she’d been nauseous and achey for months, forced to rely on Nathan when she could no longer do the things she prided herself on. Her emotions had gone batshit crazy, and she was still marginally unbalanced. She cried at the drop of a hat, and she hated crying in front of people. There were times that she was just frustrated – frustrated that Nathan was so much better at her than this, frustrated that she was the one who had to go through all the physiological changes, frustrated that the baby refused to sleep through the night. But the episodes would pass, and she’d look down at the precious little being in her arms and know with certainty that all her discomfort was worth it. Would always be worth it.

“I want to have another one,” she admitted. His excitement about the idea was immediately obvious from his beaming grin. “A few more, probably.”

“Yes. God, Audrey. Anytime.” He dipped his head to kiss the corner of her neck, and she squirmed into him with an appreciative hum. She did miss him like that. She might be exhausted and sore and cranky, but as soon as the doctor cleared her she was going to find some time to be alone with her husband.

“I’d like to get this one sleeping through the night before we start on the next one. Maybe feel like a normal human being again for a few months. But I don’t want to wait too long.” Her biological clock had been ticking on and off for hundreds of years, and she had no way to judge how old her body thought it was. But she wanted to get all her child bearing in before it decided it was too old.

“You’re a wonderful mother.”

She chuckled to hide the way his praise affected her. “I don’t know about that. But I’m better than I thought I’d be. And I’m confident you’ll keep the kids from being too screwed up, Mr. Father of the Year.”

“We can do that together.”

She sighed in contentment. Emma had finished feeding and was drifting off to dream world. Audrey was just about ready to curl herself around her husband and join her there.

“I finally believe you,” she said shyly.

“About what?” There was something teasingly boastful about his tone. Audrey loved Nathan desperately, and he knew that, but it wasn’t often she admitted he was right.

“That you won’t leave us.” She was finally absolutely certain of that. There was nothing in this world that could pull him away from his family – not her shortcomings or her past or any hidden shred of disloyalty within him.

“Never,” he swore before standing to kiss her properly.

Chapter End Notes
Well that’s it folks. This was only meant to be a one shot, and nearly two years and 200,000 words later here we are. If you enjoyed this, I’d really appreciate if you took a moment to write a final (or first) comment. Thank you for your comments, kudos and support.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!