



## Nothing Between Us (Loving on the Edge Series Book 7)

By Roni Loren

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*From the New York Times bestselling author of Need You Tonight comes a steamy Loving on the Edge novel that proves watching is only half the fun...*

Unlike the heroine of her popular thriller series, Georgia Delaune can't afford to take risks or push sexual boundaries--unless you count spying through her neighbor's bedroom window, and never missing a single move he makes.

Colby Wilkes is more than willing to put on a show for the alluring woman next door. But his dominant side aches to show her the pleasures of submission up close. As a counselor, Colby is sensitive to Georgia's fears. As a Dom at The Ranch, a private BDSM retreat, he's the perfect teacher to unleash her passion.

But just as Georgia lowers her emotional barriers, an unexpected complication arrives: a bad boy musician from Colby's past who adds fuel to her heated imagination. Now, the lonely author has two gorgeous men eager to fulfill every fantasy she's ever written--and one she's never dared to dream....

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### Editorial Review

Review

#### Praise for Roni Loren and the Loving on the Edge Novels

“Hot and romantic, with an edge of suspense.”—Shayla Black, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Theirs to Cherish*

“Revved up and red-hot sexy!”—Lorelei James, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Hillbilly Rockstar*

“Loren writes delicious, dark, sensual prose.”—*USA Today*

“A sexy, sizzling tale that is sure to have readers begging for more! I can’t wait for Roni Loren’s next tantalizing story!”—Jo Davis, author of *Risky*

About the Author

**Roni Loren** is the *New York Times* bestselling author of the Loving on the Edge Novels, including *Not Until You, Need You Tonight, Caught Up in You, Fall Into You, Melt Into You* and *Crash Into You*.

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### ONE

12:35 a.m.—Spring

Georgia Delaune had never been particularly drawn to illegal activity. Or taking risks. Or, okay, fine—sexually deviant behavior. She was woman enough to admit what this was. So finding herself hiding in the dark, peering around the curtains of her second-story window with a set of binoculars, should’ve tipped her off that she was officially losing her shit.

But since moving into the house on Fallen Oaks Lane six months earlier, she’d known this moment was coming. Before now, she’d convinced herself that she’d only been catching inadvertent peeks and unintentional glimpses. Her neighbor would surely shut his curtains if he didn’t want to risk being seen, right?

She groaned, lowered the binoculars, and pressed her forehead to the window frame. God, now she was blaming the victim. *He gets naked in the confines of his own home. A home that’s on a treed corner lot with tons of privacy and a seven-foot-tall fence. How dare he!*

This was so screwed up. What if he saw her? He could call the cops, and she’d be slapped with some Peeping Tom charge—or Peeping Tammy, as the case may be. That’d be an epic disaster. Especially when the cops found no information on a Georgia Delaune. Plus, afterward, she’d have to move because there’d be no facing her neighbor again. Not after he knew what she did at night. And there was no way in hell she was

moving. It had taken too much time, effort, and planning to find this spot, to finally feel even a smidgen of security and safety. These walls were her only haven, and she had no intention of leaving them.

But despite knowing the risks, when she saw a lamp flick on and light glow in the window of Colby Wilkes's bedroom, she found herself dragging a chair over to the window and lifting the binoculars to her eyes. It took a second to adjust the focus, but when the lenses cleared, the broad, wet shoulders of her dark-haired neighbor filled the view. Her stomach dipped in anticipation.

He wasn't alone.

She'd known he had friends over. She'd seen the group going in when she'd closed her living room blinds earlier that night. Two women and three guys, plus Colby. Later, she'd heard water splashing and the murmuring of voices, so she'd gone into her backyard for a while to listen to the distant sounds of life and laughter. That world seemed so foreign to her now. Being surrounded by people, having friends over, relaxing by the pool. She couldn't see anything from her backyard. Colby's pool area was blocked by the house and bordered by trees. So she'd lain in her lounge chair out back, closed her eyes, and had imagined she was a guest at his party, that she was part of that laughter. And she'd also found herself wondering what would happen afterward.

Now she knew. Colby had stepped into his bedroom, obviously fresh from the pool with his dark hair wet and only a towel knotted around his waist. And he had company with him. One of Colby's friends, a tall blond guy who was also sporting a towel, had followed him in. And then there was a woman. She wore nothing at all. Georgia's lip tucked between her teeth, heat creeping into her face. She *so* shouldn't be watching this. But she couldn't turn away. She'd learned rather quickly that her dear neighbor, despite his affable grin, Southern-boy charm, and straitlaced job, was a freak in the bedroom. Threesomes were only part of it. The man was dominant to the core. Considering her last relationship, that alone should've turned her off, sent her running. Guys who wanted control. Fuck, no.

But the first time she'd caught sight of Colby bringing a flogger down on a lover's back, Georgia had been transfixed. She'd been completely stuck on her latest writing project at the time. But after watching Colby drive a woman into a writhing, begging state, Georgia had gone into her office, opened a new document, and written until the sun had broken through the curtains the next morning. Before she knew it, her thriller-in-progress had taken a decidedly erotic turn. Thankfully, her editor had loved the new direction. So now Georgia, in her guiltiest moments, told herself these stolen moments at the window were all in the name of book research.

Yeah. Even her sleep-deprived brain didn't buy that one.

The guilt wasn't enough to make her stop, though. Especially now when Colby was grabbing for the knot on his towel. She held her breath. The terry cloth fell to the floor at Colby's feet, and everything inside Georgia went tight. *Holy heaven above*. She'd watched—oh, how she'd watched—but never before had she been able to see everything in such intimate detail. The binoculars transported her, took her by the hand and dragged her into that room with those strangers. Colby was right there in front of her—strong, beautiful, aroused. His hand wrapped around his cock and stroked ever so slowly, taunting her with unashamed confidence. No, not her. The woman. God, Georgia should look away. But need rolled through her like thunder from an oncoming storm, her fingers tightening around the binoculars.

The other man had stripped, too, and although he was gorgeous in his own right with his polished, camera-ready good looks, Georgia was drawn to the rough-around-the-edges brawn of her neighbor. Every part of Colby hinted at the wildness he hid beneath his surface—dark wavy hair that was a little too long, the close-cropped beard that shadowed his jaw, and a body that looked like he could bench-press a Buick. He was the

opposite of the pressed and creased, Armani-clad businessmen she'd been attracted to in her former life. He was the guy you'd be wary of on first glance if you ran into him in a dark alley—the cowboy whose hat color you couldn't quite determine straightaway.

Perhaps that was why she was so fascinated with him, despite the fact that he was a man who wanted what she could never give. She'd learned that danger often hid behind the gloss of an urbane smile and perfectly executed Windsor knot. Colby was none of that. But regardless of the reason for her mixed-up attraction, she couldn't stem the crackle of jealousy that went through as the other man laced his fingers in the woman's hair and guided her to take Colby into her mouth.

The view of Colby's erection disappearing between the lips of some other woman was erotic. There was no denying that. But it also made Georgia's jaw clench a little too hard. She could tell, even from the brief moments she'd been watching, that this woman belonged to Colby's friend. They were a couple and Colby the third party. But it still activated Georgia's *He's mine, bitch!* reflex.

Georgia sniffed at her ridiculous, territorial reaction, and tried to loosen the tension gathering in her neck. *Sure, he's yours, girl. You can't walk down the street without swallowing a pill first, much less start something if he were even interested in the weird, spying chick next door.*

But she shoved the thought away. She didn't want anything tainting these few precious minutes. This wasn't about finding a hookup. Only when she stood at this window did she feel even a glimmer of her former self trying to break through. This was her gossamer-thin lifeline to who she used to be, to the capable and confident woman who would've never hidden in the dark.

Before long, the blond man eased the woman away from Colby and guided her toward himself, taking his turn. Georgia tilted the binoculars upward, finding Colby's face instead of focusing on the scene between the other man and his woman. What she found lurking in his expression wasn't what she expected. There was heat in Colby's eyes, interest for sure, but as she stared longer, she sensed a distance in those hazel depths. Like he was there with them but other . . . separate. Alone.

It probably was only because the other two were a couple. Or maybe it was Georgia's mind slapping labels on things to make herself feel better. But regardless, it made her chest constrict with recognition. She didn't know what was going on in his head. Or how seeing his friends together made him feel. But she knew loneliness. And for those few seconds, she was convinced Colby did, too. She pressed her fingertip against the cool glass of the window, tracing the outline of Colby's face. Needing to touch . . . something.

The glass might as well have been made of steel, the yards between the houses made of miles.

But she couldn't walk away. The night went on and there she sat, watching the three lovers move to the bed, the woman being cuffed to the headboard. The two men lavished her with hands and mouths and tongues. It was like watching a silent symphony, the arching of the woman's back the only thing Georgia needed to see to know exactly how these men were affecting their willing captive. The melancholy feelings that had stirred earlier had quickly been surpassed by ones much more base and primal. Georgia's body was growing hot and restless, her panties going damp.

When Colby braced himself between the woman's thighs and entered her, Georgia trained the binoculars on his face, unable to handle the image of him having sex with another woman. Her mind was developing quite the ability to focus on the fantasy and block out the unwanted parts. She only had a view of Colby's profile, but she watched with rapt attention as his jaw worked and his skin went slick with sweat instead of pool water.

Without giving it too much thought, she braced one elbow on the window ledge to hold the binoculars steady and let her other hand drift downward. Her cotton nightgown slid up her thighs easily. Somewhere her brain protested that this was wrong—sick and sad. She had a perfectly functioning vibrator in her bedside drawer. She had an imagination strong enough to fuel an orgasm without doing this, without watching the man next door screw another woman. But her starved libido didn't seem to give a damn about morals or ethics or pride right now. There was need. And a solution. Simple as that.

As Colby's lips parted with a sound she could only imagine, Georgia's fingers found the edge of her panties and slipped beneath the material. Her body tightened at the touch and the little gasp she made reverberated in the dead silence of the guest bedroom. Colby's head dipped between his shoulders, and Georgia imagined it was her he was whispering passionate words to. That deep Texas drawl telling her how good it felt to be inside her, how sexy she was, how he was going to make her come. He would be a dirty talker, she had no doubt. No sweet nothings from Colby Wilkes.

She closed her eyes for a moment as she moved her fingers in the rhythm of Colby's thrust—long, languid strokes that had a fire building from her center and radiating heat outward. It wouldn't take long. Her body was already singing with sensation, release hurtling toward her. But she wouldn't go over alone. She forced her eyes open, the binoculars still in her grip, and found Colby again. His dark hair was curling against his neck, sweat glistening at his temples. He had to be close, too. Every muscle in his shoulders and back had tensed. All of her attention zeroed in on him, and in her mind, the touch of her own fingers morphed into his—his hands and body moving against her, inside her.

Every molecule in her being seemed to contract, preparing for the burst of energy to come. Her breath quickened, her heartbeat pulsing in her ears. And right as she was about to close her eyes and go over, Colby jerked his head to the side toward the window. His heated gaze collided with hers through the binoculars—a dead-on eye lock that reached inside Georgia and flipped her inside out. *He knows.*

But she was too far gone for the shock to derail her. Orgasm careened through her with a force that made the chair scrape back across the wood floor. She moaned into the quiet, the binoculars slipping from her hand and jerking the strap around her neck. The part in the curtains fell shut, but she didn't notice. Everything was too bright behind her eyelids, too good, to worry about anything else but the way she felt in those long seconds. *Enjoy. Don't think. Just feel.* The words whispered through her as her fingers kept moving, her body determined to eke out every ounce of sensation she could manage.

But, of course, the blissful, mindless moments couldn't last forever. Chilly reality made a swift reappearance as her gown slipped back down her thighs and sweat cooled on her skin. She sat there, staring at the closed curtain and listening to her thumping heart. Colby *couldn't* know, right? His gaze had felt intense and knowing because the binoculars had made him seem so close. But her window was dark, her curtains darker, and the moon was throwing off enough light that it would make the glass simply reflect back the glow.

But her chest felt like a hundred hummingbirds had roosted there, beating their wings against her ribs. She wet her lips and swallowed past the constriction in her throat. She had to look. Would her neighbor be striding over here to demand what was going on? Would he be disgusted? Embarrassed? Angry?

God, she didn't even want to think about it. She wanted to turn around, go to her bedroom, and hide under the covers. But that was all her life had turned into now—hiding. And though she couldn't fix that situation, she refused to create another one. So she forced herself to lean forward and peel the curtains back one more time, leaving the binoculars hanging around her neck.

What she saw made the hummingbirds thrash more. Colby wasn't in the room anymore. His friend was now with the woman in the bed, and both seemed totally absorbed in each other. Did that mean that Colby had

left and was heading this way to confront her? She was about to go downstairs to check the yard but then paused when she realized nothing had changed about the view. Nothing at all. If Colby had been concerned about a nosy neighbor, he hadn't bothered to close the curtains or warn his friends. Surely he would've done that.

She sat there, debating and worrying, but soon Colby returned to the bedroom. The man and woman had finished. Colby had on a pair of boxers and had brought clean towels in for everyone. He didn't look concerned. He didn't glance over at the window. He seemed perfectly relaxed as he helped uncuff the woman's hands, kissed her forehead in a friendly gesture, and then left his friends to sleep alone.

Georgia let out a long breath, sagging in the chair.

He didn't know.

She should stop taking this risk—throw away the binoculars, put a bookcase in front of this damn window, and stop while she was ahead.

But she knew she wouldn't. She would find herself here again.

Because if she didn't have her secret nights with Colby Wilkes, what was left?

Four walls, long days, and fear.

She needed this. She just had to make sure he never found out.

## **TWO**

October 31

Right before quitting time, Colby got a visit from the Grim Reaper. Colby looked up from his desk at the hooded head peeking in through his doorway. "You know where Dr. Guthrie is?"

The sullen voice sounded appropriately grim for the costume. Colby put aside the student file he'd been making notes on. "He had to leave early because he wasn't feeling well. Were you supposed to meet with him today?"

The reaper shrugged and pulled his hood back, revealing the face of junior Travis Clarkson. "Yeah. But if he's not here . . ."

Colby could hear the indecision in the drift of Travis's voice. If his counselor wasn't here, he had the right to skip his appointment, but Colby sensed the kid needed to talk. He'd heard there'd been a bullying incident this morning and that Travis had been the target. Unfortunately, not an uncommon spot for Travis. Poor kid came from one of the wealthiest families in the area, but money couldn't fix his acne-prone skin, his crippling social anxiety, or the resulting depression it caused.

"Come on in and grab a chair, Travis," Colby said, keeping his voice casual. "There's only a half hour before the bell. You can skip the rest of study hall and chat with me."

Travis shifted on his feet in that awkward way teen boys did when they hadn't quite grown into their new longer limbs. "I don't want—you look busy."

"Nope." Colby stretched his leg beneath his desk and sent the chair in front of it rolling toward Travis. "I

was just finishing up some notes. You'll save me from boring paperwork."

Travis tucked his hands in the robe of his costume and shuffled in. He glanced around at Colby's office, his eyes skimming over the shelves of books and the few photos he'd kept from his music days. "Your office is different than Dr. Guthrie's."

No shit. That was because Guthrie liked to pretend he was Freud himself instead of some guy working at the pedestrian institution of Graham Alternative High School. Guthrie's office had a plush couch, hunter green paint over the cinder-block walls, muted lighting, and a freaking desk fountain. If smoking weren't banned in the building, Colby had no doubt the school psychologist would have a pipe hanging from his mouth during sessions. But Colby had learned that the last thing these kids needed was to walk into something that looked like a therapist's office. In fact, he spent most of his sessions with his students doing something active while they talked. It was amazing how a kid could open up if he was shooting hoops and not being stared at when he answered personal questions.

"I like to keep things simple."

Travis went to the wall to get a closer look at a photo instead of immediately sitting down. "Is that you and Brock Greenwood?"

"Yeah," Colby said. "I played with him in a band when we were younger. Of course, back then, he wasn't *the* Brock Greenwood. Just a guy who could sing his face off. You listen to country music?"

Travis turned away from the picture and lowered himself into the chair. "I listen to everything. I like mashing shit—er—stuff up on my computer. You know, making things that don't seem to go together blend."

Colby smiled. "Really? That's cool. I can't be trusted with all those music programs. I have a friend who does it and he's tried to teach me, but he's declared me a hopeless case. Just give me my guitar and a blank piece of paper to jot down lyrics."

"Old school."

"Or just old."

Travis almost smiled—something Colby wasn't sure he'd ever seen Travis do—but the kid seemed to catch himself before he let it break through. God forbid he let the school counselor know he liked talking to him. "You still play?"

"I do. I play a few gigs here and there. Nothing serious. It's a good way to relax—playing without any pressure attached to it."

Travis nodded. "Yeah, I get that. But I can't really imagine getting onstage as being relaxing. I like the behind-the-scenes stuff. Putting on my headphones . . . I don't know, it's like a switch that shuts out the world and transports me somewhere else, another life."

"An escape."

"Yeah," he said, rubbing his chapped lips together. "That's what I like. That escape. Nothing else matters when the music is playing."

Colby leaned back in his chair and hooked his ankle over his knee, understanding that desire but also hearing



the loneliness lacing Travis's words. "Ever thought about pursuing a career in that? Sound engineering or music producing?"

Travis glanced up, his face a bit haunted—although that could've been the whole Grim Reaper look he had going on. "I've thought about it. But my parents would shit a brick—sorry."

Colby waved a hand, dismissing the language. The kid was talking, he didn't care if he slipped up and cursed.

"They hate me fooling around with my computer. They think it isolates me or whatever. Like if I just stop doing that, suddenly my life will be all Friday night football games and proms and crap." He sneered. "They can't see that those things aren't options for me even if I wanted them. Maybe they should be the ones on medication. They're delusional."

Colby rubbed a hand over the back of his head, choosing his words carefully. It was always a fine line when kids complained about their parents. If you took the parents' side, the kid shut down. If you undermined the parents and agreed with the kids, you helped justify behavior that might not be one hundred percent healthy. "Sometimes it's hard for parents to see the benefit in something that from the outside looks like wasting time. If they don't share that passion, it can be hard for them to understand."

"They just wish I were someone else." His gaze dropped to his hands, which were fiddling with the strap of his backpack. "I don't really blame them."

Colby hid his frown. "Would you want to be someone else if you could?"

He twisted the strap around his fingers. "Maybe."

"And who would you be?"

He grimaced. "I don't know. Someone who could ask a girl out without getting pit stains in front of everyone."

"Is that what got Dalton and his friends after you today?"

He chewed his lip and gave another shrug.

"Would you want to be him?" Colby asked, picturing Dalton Wiggins—Mr. Popular, lead shit-stirrer at Graham High. And a kid who had an irrevocably broken home life that Colby would wish on no one. Of course, no one here knew that except him since Dalton only shared that stuff in the privacy of his counseling sessions with Colby.

"Fuck, no," Travis bit out. "The guy's a jerk. But if I looked like him, I wouldn't act like he does. I'd just, I don't know, use it for good."

Colby lifted a brow. "For good?"

"For girls," Travis supplied, a little smirk touching his lips.

Ah, it always came back to girls. "So what happened today when you asked that girl out?"

"She started out being nice about it—even though she was going to say no. I could tell. They always say no. But when Dalton walked up and teased me about sweating, she just kind of looked embarrassed. And like . . .

.” His jaw clenched. “Like she felt sorry for me.”

Colby’s chest squeezed. Damn, this kid couldn’t catch a break. He was probably one of the smartest students in the school. His test scores were always off the charts. He was only here at Graham because his depression had become debilitating last year, and he’d missed too much school. One day, he’d probably be some brilliant engineer, rich off his ass, clear-skinned and sought after by droves of the fairer sex. But Colby knew the future seemed so damn far away when you were a teenager. “Travis—”

“I just want the crap to end, you know? Like, can they cut me some slack for one goddamned day? You know how hard it was for me to get the nerve to ask Mallory out?”

“I’ll make sure and talk to Dalton about his behavior. He’s already on warning and is close to getting kicked out if he keeps it up. We’ll make sure you can come to school without having to worry about bullies.”

Travis sniffed. “Someone else will just replace him.”

Colby flinched, knowing that was probably true. “How about we—”

The bell rang, startling them both.

Travis jumped up, slinging his backpack over his shoulder. “I gotta go.”

“Hey,” Colby said, standing. “Wait, you don’t have to—”

“I need to pick up my sister at her school. If I’m late, my mom will be pissed.”

“Travis, I want to make sure you’re okay after what happened today. If you want to talk some more, I can—”

“I’m fine.” He pulled his Reaper hood over his head again. “Happy Halloween, Mr. Wilkes.”

Colby opened his mouth to say something else, then shut it when Travis disappeared into the now-bustling hallway. Colby sat back in his chair and rubbed a hand over his face. Monday he’d pull Travis out of class for a full session. At least with the weekend, the kid would get a break from school for a few days.

And after today, Colby could use one, too. He packed up his things and headed out. He had a party to host. And a bet to honor.

He wasn’t looking forward to the latter.

—

“Damn, Colby, you were supposed to dress up. Where’s your costume?” Kade asked when Colby opened the front door to let his two friends in a few hours later.

Colby lifted his plastic ax to his shoulder. “Don’t fuck with me, Vandergriff. I have weapons. And Paul Bunyan could totally kick a zombie’s ass. One swing to the head and you’re done.”

Kade grinned a macabre, dead man’s smile and stepped past Colby into the house, carrying grocery bags. “So I guess this means you lost the bet with Kelsey and Wyatt?”

“I was hustled. I had no idea that girl was so good at pool.”

Tessa, Kade's girlfriend, was fighting a smile beneath her black lipstick as she followed Kade in. "Evening, Mr. Lumberjack."

Colby groaned and cocked his head toward his ax. "You're lucky you're good-looking, zombie girl."

For months, members at The Ranch, the BDSM resort Colby worked at on the weekends, had been calling him The Lumberjack behind his back. He hated the nickname, and now it was definitely going to stick. Especially after he saw Kade set down his bags and snap a pic with his phone. It was probably spreading through their network of friends like a virus as they stood there.

Tessa handed him a plastic-wrapped tray of red and green Jell-O shots that were shaped like brains and tilted her head to give him another once-over. "Don't worry. It's a good look for you. Very rustic. I'm sure you could head out to The Ranch and have a crowd of submissives volunteering to play Babe the Blue Ox for you tonight."

He laughed and took the tray from her. "There's nothing sexy about an ox."

Plus, he had no desire to go to The Ranch tonight. He'd been working there for a few years now as a trainer. It was what he did for a little fun and a lot of extra money. And normally, Halloween was one of his favorite nights to go out there since no one knew how to do deviant costumes—or the *treat* part of the trick-or-treat equation—like kinky people. But the enjoyment had been draining out of his time at The Ranch over the last year, and it had started to feel like work instead of an escape. He couldn't pinpoint what had shifted. But lately, the dynamic of training someone as a business arrangement had sucked a lot of what he loved about kink out of the experience. He used to get a high from sessions. Now too often he felt hollow and exhausted by the end of them. Even when he was with someone off the clock, it still felt like a transaction instead of a connection.

In fact, the last time he remembered having a really good time with anyone was the night he'd helped Kade give Tessa her threesome fantasy. It'd been a fun and sexy night with friends. But Colby had known then it would be a onetime thing. His best friend had been stupid in love with the girl already—even if the idiot hadn't realized it at the time. And though Colby was always up for a little fantasy and fun, he knew better than to mess around with friends once things got serious. Kade hadn't even had to say it. Colby knew Tessa was completely off-limits now.

Which was fine with him. Tessa was great—beautiful and smart. But there was no doubt she was meant to be with Kade. The two lit each other up in a way that had Colby more than a little jealous. And damn, when Kade and Tessa had fallen into their dominant and submissive roles that night they were all together, it'd been something to behold. The air had seemed to vibrate with the energy between them. That was how it was supposed to be. That was where the kink transformed into something bigger than hot sex and dirty words. It became sacred. Colby couldn't remember ever being with anyone who flipped his switch like that. That night, more than anything else, had made him start to question his job at The Ranch.

He liked having the extra cash but not enough to stick around if the role had lost its shine. The submissives he worked with deserved better than a guy who was becoming more and more tempted to phone it in. He planned to talk to Grant, the owner of The Ranch, about stepping down as soon as he'd secured the full-time counselor position at Graham.

But regardless of his own issues, he was thrilled for his friend. Kade had found exactly who he needed. Tessa was it for him. They all knew it, and somehow, they'd all moved past any potential awkwardness from their one night together without much effort. Mostly because Kade was so damn cocky he didn't know how to be jealous.

Colby carried the tray of wiggling brains into the kitchen. “Well, I think you brought enough alcohol to tank the whole neighborhood. I approve.”

Kade tucked a few bottles of wine and a twelve-pack of beer into the fridge, his shredded zombified suit swinging with the movement. “Jace, Evan, and Andre said they’d pick up pizza on the way. Kelsey’s bringing candy to hand out to the kids, and Wyatt’s contributing his top three horror movies of all time for us to choose from.”

“Sounds like y’all have got it all covered. I should play host more often. I didn’t have to do anything but open the door.”

“Your place is the best for Halloween. Kids aren’t even allowed to trick-or-treat in my or Wyatt’s neighborhood. It’s ridiculous.”

Colby sniffed. That was because his friends were loaded and lived in those swanky neighborhoods with coded gates and a mile between the damn houses. The kids would pass out from exhaustion by house number three.

Colby had gotten used to being one of the few of his friends who wasn’t rolling in cash. He’d saved up a lot of money from The Ranch and had invested the money he’d made from his brief music career early on, so he did well for himself, better than most. But he tried to be smart and not live lavishly. He didn’t need—or want—that castle on the hill. What he had now was a thousand times better than the broken-down rental house he grew up in. He had a nice home with a pool. Quiet neighborhood. And privacy. That was all he required.

Kade shut the fridge. “You know the kids aren’t going to understand your costume, right?”

“I’ll tell them I’m an ax murderer,” Colby said, lifting up the plastic wrap on the gelatin brains and snagging one. He popped it in his mouth.

“Believable. You’re the type. The friendly neighbor who disappears for long stretches of time on the weekend with implements of torture in his truck. Deviant bastard.”

Colby grinned. “Takes one to know one.”

“So you have a hot date coming over tonight?” Kade asked, helping himself to one of the shots.

“Nah, I’d figured me and your brother could represent the dwindling singles population in our group, but I heard he sprained his ankle yesterday. So I guess I’ll just flirt relentlessly with everyone else’s women to keep myself entertained. Your girl did say my outfit looked good on me.”

“Uh-huh. Unless you plan to use that ax tonight, I wouldn’t recommend treading in my territory.”

Colby chuckled. “Look who’s developed a possessive streak.”

“Damn straight.” Kade nodded toward the window, where rays of dusky sun were stretching over the side yard. “What about your hot neighbor? She doesn’t look like she has any big plans tonight.”

Colby leaned forward on the countertop, squinting at the view through the window. His neighbor, Georgia, had ventured out of her house with a package in one hand and gardening gloves in the other. He walked toward the window, following her with his eyes, and propped his shoulder against the frame. It was such a rare occasion to see Georgia outside that he had to take the time to savor and appreciate the view.

She was obviously prepared to get dirty. She'd tied a purple handkerchief around her head to keep her curly halo of black hair away from her face and was wearing threadbare jeans and a faded White Sox T-shirt. But hell if he could imagine her looking any better. Something about the way those jeans hugged her curves and sat just a little too low in the back, exposing the dip of her tailbone and a swath of creamy cocoa skin, had everything else fading into the background.

She headed toward the side of her house, peeking over her shoulder more than once as if she were waiting for someone to show up in her driveway. She couldn't be worried about trick-or-treaters yet. It was still too early. A guest, maybe? But no one was there. And Colby would bet money that no one would be coming. Georgia never had visitors—unless they were only stopping by while he was at work. His gut told him that wasn't the case.

She plopped the package next to her herb garden, kneeled in the grass, and took one last glance toward the front yard. When she seemed assured she was alone, she put on her gloves, pulled a ball of wired plastic pumpkin lights out of the box, and leaned forward, bracing on one hand and stabbing a stake into the ground with her other. Her jeans sank lower down her backside.

Now that was a sight Colby didn't need to see. Georgia on all fours, the barest peek of her ass taunting him and sending his thoughts in a decidedly X-rated direction. Damn, what he wouldn't give to end his night with that view, his hands spreading over those flared hips.

But he knew it would never fly. Georgia Delaune was like some mysterious, uncharted island. One with tall, craggy, stay-the-fuck-back rocks around the perimeter and no lighthouse. Not that she'd ever said a cross word to Colby, but he'd gotten the message just the same. He'd tried to flirt with her when she'd first moved in and though he could tell she wasn't . . . unaffected by him, he'd felt that thick wall rise up between them. Since then, he'd had the feeling that, for whatever reason, he'd been given the *Look, but don't touch* label in Georgia's head.

Because, God knows, she *looked*—and had seen way more than he'd ever allowed anyone outside his circle to see. But he liked it too much to make her stop.

His neighbor thought she had a secret.

Colby knew better.

“Earth to Colby?”

Colby snapped out of his spinning thoughts. “What?”

Kade lifted an eyebrow. “I said why don't you go over and invite her to the party? It'd be a neighborly thing to do.”

Colby snorted. “Neighborly?”

“Fine. Fuck neighborly. How 'bout this? You've been working your ass off. You look exhausted. And I think you need a little fun in your life. Go invite hot neighbor chick over and have some. We promise to behave—mostly.”

“You totally should,” Tessa said with a sage nod from the doorway of the kitchen. Colby hadn't even noticed her come in. “That lumberjack getup is like girl Kryptonite. She'll say yes. Plus, we could use another woman around here to even out the testosterone.”

Kade sent his woman a narrow-eyed glance. “Girl Kryptonite?”

Tessa shrugged and with her tattered dress, it reminded Colby of one of the walking dead from the old “Thriller” video. “Just saying. It’s an empirical observation.” She headed over to Kade and slipped her arms around his waist. “But don’t worry, I’m, of course, into blond, blue-eyed zombies.”

Kade kissed the top of her head. “Yeah, you’re kinky like that.”

Colby smirked. Ten seconds, tops. That was how long he’d give it before his friends would have black lipstick all over each other. He turned back to the window to leave them to their own devices and watched as Georgia lined her garden with the pumpkin lights. Her movements were efficient and her posture stiff, like she was performing a duty instead of something she wanted to be doing, which was kind of strange considering no one *needed* to have Halloween decorations. But she seemed determined to get them set up.

He should probably leave her to it. He’d tested the waters with her before only to find them chilly and uninviting. He wasn’t one to chase. If someone wasn’t interested in what he was offering, so be it. Plus, he rarely hooked up with anyone outside The Ranch. The vanilla world really had no place for him. But as he watched Georgia lift her hair off the back of her neck and listened to Kade and Tessa kissing behind him, the pang of want went through him.

What did he have to lose? Unlike a random girl he met somewhere, Georgia *knew* what he was. She might not understand the extent of it, but she’d seen it with her own eyes. He’d seen her curtains twitch and sway on that night he was with Tessa and Kade. And he’d watched those same drapes move late at night when he undressed in his bedroom or when he brought someone home. Either the woman was terrified of him and documenting all of his deviant acts in case he turned out to be a serial killer . . .

Or she was turned on by it.

Tonight, he planned to find out.

It was about time he paid another visit to that isolated island of hers.

—

The fading sunlight felt good on Georgia’s skin. That was what she focused on—the warmth of the late-afternoon rays, the tickle of the fall breeze against her neck, and the smell of the rosemary and thyme growing in her small herb garden.

But only paying attention to those pleasant things took effort. It meant ignoring the prickling of nerves that was an ever-present companion when she was out in the open. She was getting better at handling the anxiety each time, though. That was something. Even on the days she found it more difficult, she forced herself out at least once a day anyway to keep the promise she’d made via Skype to Leesha, her friend and therapist. Baby steps. That was what Georgia was relegated to. But at least they were steps.

Georgia got the string of pumpkin lights all lined up and turned on. She smiled that they were working but quickly realized they only illuminated a bunch of weeds that had popped up since the last time she’d cleaned the garden. Damn. Well, what did she have but time? The kids wouldn’t be coming around for candy for a while still. And even then, she didn’t plan on opening her door. She’d bought a big bowl and made a sign that said Help Yourself to put out on the porch. So she went to work weeding the garden.

She’d never been particularly into yard work before moving to Texas. It was hell on the nails, and she used

to care about shit like that. But now it had become an outlet for her—one where she could let her mind wander and relax. Grab and yank, grab and yank. In a way, it was like meditation. And tonight she could use a bit of serenity. It would be a late night of hearing unfamiliar noises outside.

She pulled at a stubborn weed, but it didn't give. And it was blocking one of her pumpkin lights. That wasn't going to work. With a huff, she put her other hand at its base and got into a squat to tug harder. The roots didn't want to release but she was determined to get it out of there, so she gave it one last yank. The weed came free and sent her sprawling backward, a trail of soil arcing through the air. She landed on her ass with an *oof*, and the dirt showered her shirt and jeans.

A shadow enveloped her. "And she's down for the count."

Her heart gave a start at the deep voice and the nearness of it. She scrambled, spinning around onto her knees and pulling the canister on her hip in an automatic gesture. But as soon as she had the pepper spray aimed, her subconscious thankfully processed the voice before her systems could go completely haywire. "Colby."

He had his hands up in a *whoa, there* gesture but didn't seem overly concerned, as if instinctively knowing she wasn't going to attack.

"Shit." She lowered her arm and let out a shaky breath. "Sorry. I—you must think I'm a lunatic."

He gazed down at her, blocking out the sun, and then put a hand out to her. "No, it's my fault. I didn't mean to startle you."

She eyed his hand, reluctant to even go there, but she didn't want to be rude. She put her hand in his large, warm one and he helped her to her feet. "Thanks."

He let her hand go immediately, as if aware that the contact made her nervous, and took a step back. "You okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. It's just . . . Halloween makes me jumpy." The excuse was lamer than most she came up with, but that was all she had at the moment.

He gave her a friendly smile. "I'm not sure pepper spray works on ghouls and ghosts, but it's never a bad idea to protect yourself. Did you hurt anything on the fall?"

"Only my pride." She glanced down and brushed the dirt off her ratty clothes. But it just made dark streaks smear over her shirt. Nice. She looked like she'd been rolling in the mud and he looked like . . . wait. She let her gaze travel over him again. He'd pulled a knit cap over his curly dark hair and had let his beard grow a little extra. And though it was cool outside, the red plaid flannel shirt and dark jeans seemed a little out of place for the night. Frankly, the whole rustic woodsman look was kind of working for him—and her—but she couldn't quite figure out if it was supposed to be a costume.

He must have noticed her perplexed expression because he smirked. "I'm supposed to be Paul Bunyan. If I had my ax or an ox, it'd probably make more sense."

She bit back a smile. Well, he was a giant of a man—well over six foot and broad—so it sort of made sense. "Right. That's . . . creative."

"I lost a bet."

A laugh escaped, the act feeling foreign in her throat. "Well, I guess it could be worse then. They could've

made you wear a tutu or something.”

“I don’t know. I think my friend is bringing over a stuffed blue ox for me to carry around, so there’s more humiliation to come,” he said, hooking his thumbs in his jeans and making his shirt stretch across what she knew was a well-honed, to-die-for chest.

She had to press her tongue to the back of her teeth to keep herself from inadvertently licking her lips. *Don’t think about him naked. Don’t think about him naked.*

“So anyway, I was coming over to see if you’d like to play witness to that humiliation.”

She blinked and her brain scrambled for a moment. “What?”

He cocked a thumb toward his house. “I’m having some friends over tonight. Nothing major, just pizza, movies, and a little alcohol in between handing out candy. If you’re not doing anything tonight, you should come over.”

She glanced down at the ground, that familiar push and pull yanking at her. The shadow of her old self leapt at the idea of going to a house party and meeting new people, at hanging out with the guy she’d been spying on for over a year now. Before everything happened back in Chicago, she’d never been an introvert. But that was then. She wasn’t stupid enough to think she could handle this. She could already feel the electricity working through her, the nerves priming for fight-or-flight. If she attempted to go over there, she’d make a scene whether she wanted to or not. No. Freaking. Way.

He must’ve thought she was looking down at her clothes. “You don’t need a costume or anything. It’s going to be laid-back.”

Was *laid-back* his way of saying all his friends would end up in bed together? Because she’d seen some of the parties at his house. But she couldn’t imagine that he’d ask her to something like that. He didn’t know her at all. And though she knew he was kinky, she got the sense he kept that side of himself very separate, only exposing it to a trusted circle. He did work at a local high school, after all, and had to maintain a certain image. “That’s really nice of you to ask.”

“So come,” he said simply.

She forced a weak smile. “I’m sorry. I can’t. I need to work tonight. I’m doing online interviews for a virtual assistant and . . . I’m not great with crowds anyway.”

Shit. She hadn’t meant to confess that.

His eyes narrowed as he studied her for a second. If he was trying to figure her out, she wished him luck. Most of the time, she couldn’t figure herself out.

“All right.” He gave a nod and she appreciated that he didn’t push the issue.

That was one of the main reasons she’d managed to act halfway normal around her neighbor. Most men made her anxious these days. The girl who was never afraid to go after a guy and flirt could barely breathe when guys approached her now. But Colby seemed to sense her skittishness and always stayed a couple of feet away from her, giving her space, and he never got pushy about anything.

“I appreciate you thinking of me, though,” she added.



His sexy half smile almost made her rock back on her heels, the sensual power of it like a physical blow. “You’re easy to think about, Georgia.”

Her stomach dipped.

He adjusted his knit cap, more dark hair escaping around the edges, and turned. “Invitation stands if you change your mind.”

“Okay,” she said, but it came out small, and she wasn’t sure if he’d even heard her.

When he crossed the invisible line back into his own yard, she felt more alone than she had in a long, long time.

If he took one of those women at the party to his bed tonight, Georgia knew she would watch. And it might kill her. Because this time, she knew it could’ve been her.

But when she went upstairs late that night, Colby’s curtains were shut tight.

### **THREE**

At dawn Monday morning, Georgia shuffled to her living room with a steaming mug of coffee and a headache. She hadn’t slept well, but she wouldn’t be able to sleep anymore this morning. Once she was up, she was up. Plus, she had a video chat session scheduled this morning with Leesha, and they were supposed to discuss Georgia’s progress now that the trial was only two and a half months away. Georgia blew across the top of her mug, but it was more a weary sigh than any attempt to cool off her coffee.

Progress. It was going to take Georgia the hour before the call to come up with things to list in that column. Everything was going so much slower than she, Leesha, or the prosecution had hoped for. The notion that she was supposed to get on a plane in January, fly back to Chicago, and face her ex-boyfriend, Phillip, was too much for her to think about right now. In the last six months, her biggest accomplishment had been managing to go back and forth to the grocery store without having a complete meltdown. Even in that, she wasn’t a hundred percent successful every time. Last week, she’d left a basket of groceries defrosting in the middle of the store because she’d seen someone who looked like Phillip and had to run out to the car before she made a scene.

But if she didn’t figure out a way to get herself to Chicago, functioning at full capacity, Phillip could walk. He’d murdered the person she’d loved most in the world, and he could stroll out a free man. The thought made her want to retch, but it was a real possibility. Phillip was a brilliant attorney and had hired an equally brilliant one to represent him. Most of the evidence was still circumstantial and Georgia’s testimony was key. But if she got on the stand and freaked out, jurors would believe the things the defense attorney would say about her—unstable, overactive imagination, drama queen.

Not an option. If Phillip went free, she was done. Revenge would be swift and deadly at his hands. Or worse. He’d take her and not kill her at all. He’d try to *keep* her.

Georgia shivered and went to the front window to let in some light. There were too many shadows surrounding her all of a sudden. But when she cracked her blinds open, her breathing ceased, and she almost dropped her mug to the floor.

There was a man in her front yard. Fear swept through her in a rush. But before she could tumble into full-fledged panic, the man turned and she caught sight of his familiar profile.

Colby reached up toward the tree in her front yard and tugged something from it. Only then did she take in the rest of the scene, her tunnel vision widening out. Her front yard was a complete disaster. Toilet paper hung in sagging loops from every branch and bush, and the flowers around her tree were flattened into a brightly colored carpet.

Seeing all her hard gardening work dismantled had the fear morphing right into anger, helping her shake off the dark memories she'd been plagued by a few minutes before.

She set her mug down and went to her front door, unlatching the three deadbolts and deactivating the alarm before pulling it open. The sight was even worse outside. Her entire garden out front looked like a herd of elephants had trampled through it. "What the hell?"

Colby turned at the sound of her voice, his jaw set. "Morning."

She wrapped her arms around herself, remembering she was only wearing a thin robe. "What's going on?"

He dropped the pile of soggy toilet paper to the ground and took a few steps toward her. He was dressed for his morning run—baseball cap, track pants, and a blue Nike shirt. The man was like clockwork with his routine. Not that she'd noticed or anything.

"Apparently, some of the neighborhood kids decided to go on their own post-Halloween rampage and went a little overboard last night. My house got hit, too. When I came out, I figured it was probably a group from the school I work at targeting the staff. But then I saw your yard. My kids would know better than to tear up someone's garden. At least they better or I'd have their butts out here fixing all this."

She glanced over at his house and saw that it had gotten the same treatment. The white streamers of toilet paper billowed in the breeze. "Why are you over here, though? Looks like you have your own mess to handle."

He shrugged. "You work hard on your yard, and it'd be tough for you to reach this stuff in the tree. I figured I'd help."

"Thank you. That's really nice of you." She fought past her tendency to evaluate the kindness. She'd learned that a favor could be an aggressive move, a way to make someone feel indebted without permission. But every instinct told her Colby wasn't a danger to her. The man was dominant and a sadist, but he lived by a code. She'd done her research on his lifestyle and had seen it in action through the window—structured, practiced, controlled. He only hurt with consent. "Do you want some coffee? I just made a fresh pot."

He wiped his hands on his pants and smiled. "Sure, that'd be great."

She stepped back inside and put her hand on the door, giving him the subtle signal that he wasn't invited inside. No one was. "I'll grab some and bring it out to you. Cream?"

"No, black with a little sugar is fine."

She shut the door and locked it. With lightning-fast precision, she pulled on a pair of yoga pants, a bra, and a long-sleeved T-shirt, then made her way back toward the front of the house with two cups of coffee. Colby was sitting on her front steps when she walked out. He stood when he saw her and took the cup from her hand.

"Thanks," he said, leaning against one of the brick columns on her porch. "I usually don't let myself have one of these until I get to school."

She wrapped both hands around her mug, the heat warming her cold fingers and soothing her nerves a bit. This was just coffee with the neighbor. “If I don’t have it within ten minutes of opening my eyes, I’m ruined for the morning.”

He took a long sip and recoiled a bit. “Whoa.”

She bit her lip, trying not to smile. “Sorry, I make the kind with chicory in it. My dad’s originally from New Orleans, and I picked up the habit. I could get you some cream if you want.”

He coughed, but his eyes were smiling. “No, I’ll be fine. Just didn’t expect that kick. That’ll grow hair on your chest.”

“I certainly hope not,” she said, taking another sip.

He chuckled and his gaze drifted downward ever so briefly to the V-neck of her top, making her instantly aware. But as quickly as the glance was there, his attention was back on her face again. “So is that where you’re from? New Orleans?”

The question was a simple one but held more drama than he could know. “No, my mom’s a college professor, so we moved when I was little from New Orleans to Chicago once she landed a tenured position.”

“How’d you end up here?”

This had been a bad idea. She knew her story, had it memorized for anyone who asked, but somehow Colby had her wanting to tell the truth. Something about him made her want to pour it all out there on her porch. But of course she couldn’t do that. “I don’t like harsh winters. And since I’m a writer and can work from anywhere, I figured I’d set up shop someplace warm with a low cost of living.”

It all sounded logical. Of course, it was all bullshit except for the writer part. She was simply renting this place because a good friend had inherited the house from her grandmother and offered to let her stay there. She hadn’t cared where she landed as long as it wasn’t anywhere close to where Phillip would be. As soon as he was safely behind bars, she could return to her cute little house in Evanston and start living again. Find that happy girl who used to have great friends and a busy social life.

“What do you write?” Colby asked, bringing her mind back into focus.

“Lately?” *Really hot, kinky scenes loosely based on my neighbor.* “I do freelance stuff for websites and am working on a novel. A thriller.”

He couldn’t know that she already had an ongoing thriller series published under the pen name Myra McKnight and that she made her living from that. As far as anyone knew, Myra had moved to some exotic island to write her next book about well-loved undercover agent Haven Fontaine and would be making no public appearances in the near future.

“Wow, that must be fun,” he said, sounding genuine. “I’d love to—”

But his cell phone buzzed and cut off whatever he was about to say. He apologized and pulled the phone from the clip on his pants. He frowned when he read whatever text message he’d received.

“Everything okay?” she asked.

His laid-back expression had tightened into concern. He looked up, as if he’d forgotten for a moment that she

was there. “Yeah, sorry, I think so. It’s just a message from my boss. I’m going to have to get going. Something’s come up.”

“Oh, right, sure,” she said, surprised at the disappointment she felt. It’d been a long time since she’d shared coffee with anyone. And sharing it with Colby had been more pleasant than she cared to admit.

He handed his cup back to her. “Hey, when I get home tonight, how about I help finish the cleanup and then we go grab a burger or something? I’d love to hear about your book.”

The offer was *so* tempting, but he might as well have asked her if she wanted to accompany him to Paris for the night. Each was equally impossible unless she wanted to load up with her anxiety pills. Then she’d be no company at all anyway. “I’m sorry, I can’t.”

He tilted his head slightly, his expression more curious than anything. “Can’t or don’t want to?”

She looked away.

“Hey”—he touched her elbow gently—“either way, it’s fine. I’ve noticed you don’t go out much.”

She pressed her lips together and forced her gaze back to his, then nodded. “Leaving the house is . . . difficult for me.”

His eyes softened, and she imagined he probably made a very good counselor to the kids at his high school. Despite his seemingly rough edges and overwhelming size, there was something in that expression that held understanding and sympathy without judgment. He gave a little smile. “Well, maybe I’ll bring the burgers to you, then.”

She couldn’t help returning the smile, despite knowing how bad an idea this was. She wasn’t prepared or equipped to pursue anything with anyone—especially someone like Colby. But her mouth was working on its own volition. “Maybe I’ll let you.”

When she shut the door, she leaned against it and smiled. Maybe she would have some progress to report to Leesha after all.

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Being called into the principal’s office first thing in the morning was never a good thing. Not in Colby’s school days and not now. So when his impromptu coffee date with Georgia had been interrupted by a text from Principal Anders, requesting that Colby come to her office before the first bell, an old knot of dread had settled in his chest. He’d wanted to call her immediately, insist on knowing what it was, so his mind wouldn’t have to go down all the possible paths. But this was one of the few relationships in his life where he wasn’t in the driver’s seat. Principal Anders liked to do things her way. And her way was face-to-face meetings. He smirked to himself as he headed into the bathroom for a quick shower. She’d probably make an excellent *domme*.

But the amusing thought died quickly as he hurried through his routine and the possibilities of what she could want to see him about drifted through his mind. On the way to the school, he told himself it was probably just a request to fill in as a substitute for the day or something. That happened on a pretty regular basis. He wouldn’t relish the duty today—he’d had a string of late nights over the weekend, starting with the Halloween party Friday night and then putting a new submissive training class at The Ranch through their paces on Saturday evening—but he’d do it. It was always easier when someone familiar to the kids was in

charge of the class. The students were pros at steamrolling the inexperienced and unsuspecting substitutes the district sometimes sent them. The Graham Gauntlet. That was what the teachers called it behind the closed doors of the teachers' lounge.

But when Colby pulled into the half-empty parking lot and two Dallas PD squad cars were glinting in the early-morning sun, Colby knew his initial qualms had been well founded. Not that it was completely out of the ordinary to see cops at the school. Any high school had issues. An alternative school for kids who'd gotten booted from the main system had more. But there were no students in the building yet. School wouldn't start for another hour. So that meant something had happened over the weekend. Either someone had gotten arrested or someone—

No, he wouldn't go down that road yet. But the same sick feeling he'd had six years ago filtered through him, making his few sips of coffee burn in his stomach. Though it had been a different city and a different school, that day had been all too similar. Early-morning call. Cops. And questions for Colby. Only then, there had been an urgency to everything, a crackling frenzy. A feeling that something could still be done to help. Nothing had. In the end, a student had disappeared in the night—a vulnerable seventeen-year-old kid who'd sat silent in every form of therapy but who had opened up to Mr. Wilkes, his music teacher, and had shared things Colby hadn't been prepared to handle. He'd tried to help, but he'd fucked it up.

The student had eventually been labeled a runaway, but most of the staff knew that wasn't likely. There'd been a note. A missing gun. A good-bye to the world.

So the cops had closed the book, stopped the search. And Colby had been left with the eat-you-from-the-inside guilt that he could've done more. That it was his fault. He'd resigned his position, knowing that the school would've encouraged him to do so even if he hadn't volunteered. There'd been whispers of lines being crossed. After that, he'd moved to Dallas and had gone back to school to get his master's in counseling, vowing that next time he'd know how to handle a kid who needed real help.

Now another ominous morning. Another call. And more cop cars.

He sent out a silent prayer to the universe as he climbed out of his truck and headed inside. *This will be just another ordinary day.* Maybe if he said it, it would make it true.

But it wasn't.

Principal Rowan Anders was wearing her solemn face as she invited Colby into her office, her usual everything-in-place appearance loose at the edges, like she'd gotten ready in an even bigger hurry than Colby had. The school psychologist, Ed Guthrie—or Dr. Guthrie, as he so often reminded his students and colleagues—was already there, peering over at Colby from one of the chairs as Colby took a seat.

“What's going on?” Colby finally asked, done with thick silence.

Rowan tucked an errant blond hair back into the clip that was precariously holding it up and sighed. “It's Travis.”

The name and her tone had his stomach tumbling. “What's wrong?”

She pressed her hands to the top of her desk. “Around eleven last night, he took a handful of his mother's sleeping pills and cut his wrists with his dad's hunting knife.”

*No.* Colby's chest seized at the information, shock and heartbreak colliding. “Is he, did he . . .”

Principal Anders took a breath and kept talking. “He’s still alive. His father woke up with indigestion later that night and went to get antacids out of the downstairs bathroom. He found Travis lying in the bathtub, unconscious and bleeding. Thankfully, the cuts hadn’t been deep enough to kill him quickly, so the ambulance got there in time. He’s had his stomach pumped and he’s lost a good bit of blood, but they think he’s going to be okay—physically at least.”

“Christ.” Colby breathed a deep, bone-shaking sigh of relief at that outcome and rubbed a hand over his face.

Rowan’s shoulders lifted and dipped with another long exhale, and that was when Colby felt the shift in the room. This wasn’t just a meeting to inform him about one of the students. He could see the businesswoman mask slide over her features. “Colby, I understand that you were the last of the staff to talk to Travis on Friday.”

He blinked, caught off guard for a second. “Yes, we had a short session before the last bell.”

“Can you tell me what happened in your meeting with Travis?” she asked as she straightened a few papers on her desk without looking at them.

Colby rubbed a hand along the back of his neck, still trying to get his heartbeat to settle after worrying he’d lost a student. On Colby’s left, Dr. Guthrie gave him a sidelong glance.

Colby ignored the stench of judgment he could sense wafting off the other man and focused on his boss. “Travis was supposed to have a session with Dr. Guthrie but since Ed was out that afternoon, I offered to talk with him instead. I knew Travis had been having trouble with a few of the other kids, and we discussed that. He was down and frustrated, but nothing that sent up any red flags.”

“Did he inform you that he’d gone off his meds?” Ed asked, his voice cool.

*Fuck.* “No. But I didn’t ask.”

“Why not?” Principal Anders asked.

Ed’s eyebrows quirked up, and he leaned forward in a way that said, *Yes, Mr. Wilkes, please share with us how completely incompetent you are.*

Colby resisted the urge to throat-punch the guy. The jerk had always seen himself as far superior and had been against Colby’s more down-to-earth approach with the kids from the start. “The session was informal since we only had a few minutes and I didn’t have his file. Plus, Travis and I haven’t talked in an official capacity before, and I needed to build some trust and rapport. If I had jumped right into questions about medication, he would’ve shut down.”

Ed sniffed and Principal Anders gave an unreadable nod. “Did you notice any danger signs, anything that gave you pause?”

Colby thought back to Friday. The kid had looked tired, a little beat down by the rough week, but nothing out of character from what he’d seen of the kid before. The only thing out of the ordinary had been that Grim Reaper costume. Looking back, maybe that had been a clue. But there’d been at least three Reapers roaming the halls that day. It wasn’t an uncommon costume. “Nothing that made me overly concerned. He told me about his altercation with Dalton earlier in the day. He talked about how he liked to create music on his computer. We discussed how things like music can be a nice escape from stress sometimes.”

“What did he say to that?” the principal asked.

“He agreed. He said”—Colby replayed the conversation in his mind, that hollow-stomach feeling returning—“he said he craved the escape.”

Ed grunted. “This is why I should never take an afternoon off. How did you not see the signs, Wilkes? Did you ask him if he had a plan for an escape?”

Colby’s hands curled around the arms of the chair, but he forced himself to keep his voice even. “It wasn’t said like that.”

Principal Anders frowned. “Colby, I’m sure you’re well aware that if a threat or plan for suicide is shared, we are legally bound to break confidentiality and report it.”

Colby counted to three in his head before responding. “Yes, of course. I’ve already done it twice this year when students have admitted thoughts of self-harm. That was not the case on Friday.”

“Travis told his parents this morning that he talked to you, that he told you he wanted it all to end,” she continued.

Colby frowned. “The bullying. He said he wanted the *bullying* to end.”

God, *had* he missed something? It’d been late on Friday. He’d had a busy week with a number of small successes with his students. But he’d also been tired and a little distracted, knowing he was hosting the Halloween party that night. And Travis had rushed off. Maybe he hadn’t listened closely enough. Maybe he had missed the signs. Maybe he should’ve run after him when he’d bolted.

Principal Anders smoothed the papers in front of her, her mouth pinched. “Colby, I’m sure you did what you could. You do a good job here, and I know the kids connect well with you. That’s why I’ve been trying to get you bumped up to full time. But the school district is going to get heat for this. Travis’s parents are well-to-do and were already annoyed that their son was in an alternative school after things didn’t work out at his private school. The cops said the words *lawyer* and *negligence* were already being thrown around at the hospital. You know how sensitive these things are for the school district.”

Colby could feel it, the anvil hovering above his head.

“So, until an investigation has been conducted, I’m going to have to put you on leave.”

*Bam.* Flattened. “Rowan, you can’t think that I’d—”

She lifted a hand, cutting him off. “If lawyers get involved, they’ll dig. They’ll pull all of your background, your work history.”

Cold moved through him.

“The incident with that student at your previous school”—she glanced down at her notes—“Adam Keats, is sure to come up. I know this is a different situation, but from the outside, it could look bad. Like a pattern.”

He shook his head, too gutted to respond. Even thinking about Keats again was too much to handle. But that wasn’t the only problem with someone poking into his background. Colby had a side job that would make every school board member’s head explode. He’d be fired faster than he could spell *BDSM*.

“Dr. Guthrie will take over your caseload for now,” Rowan continued, all business now. “We’ll bring in extra help if needed. But we have to show that we are taking immediate action and looking into the matter.”

And you should know, the school district may decide that our students should only be seen by a psychologist instead of splitting the caseload between you and Dr. Guthrie. You know that's not my opinion. I think you add a different perspective and approach. And frankly, the kids here need all the resources they can get. But I might not have a say if Travis's father really kicks up dust."

Colby caught the barest hint of a smile in his periphery. That fucker Guthrie was probably preening with glee on the inside. He'd never wanted Colby here. He'd wanted a promotion and a raise, not a counselor added to the mix. So from the very beginning, Guthrie had made it clear what he thought of "a washed-up musician counseling young, vulnerable minds." The ire had only grown when it'd become obvious that the kids gravitated more toward Colby's no-nonsense approach than Dr. Guthrie's cool, clinical tactics.

Now all of Colby's students would get moved to Guthrie's caseload—temporarily in the best-case scenario, permanently if Colby's position was eliminated altogether. The thought made him want to throw things. The faces of the students he counseled each week flipped through his head like a slide show on fast-forward. Kids who had come to trust him, kids who had made hard-fought progress, kids who didn't need another change in their already unstable lives. Kids who were a lot like him when he was that age.

He wasn't under the impression that he was the only one who could help them. But knowing that he *could* be the one was what got him up every morning, what kept old demons at bay.

But he hadn't helped Travis on Friday. Just like he hadn't helped Adam Keats. Maybe he'd gotten too confident that he knew what he was doing.

"I understand," he said, the fight draining out of him.

Principal Anders gave another terse nod, as if putting a period on the end of her declaration. "Thank you, Colby. Hopefully, this won't go too far or for too long. His parents are understandably upset and panicked. They're going to want to find blame everywhere else. We're the easiest targets."

No, *he* was the easiest target. And maybe it wasn't unfounded. He should've asked Travis about his medication. He should've grabbed his file to see if there were any hot points to check in on. Maybe instead of trying to put him at ease by getting him to talk about music, he should've asked him different questions. "I'll get my files and go over them with Dr. Guthrie so he can be up to date on my students."

Guthrie slapped his thighs and stood. "No need. I've already had them moved to my office. Your students will be shifted onto my calendar starting today."

Well, wasn't he the eager beaver. Apparently, Rowan had called him first and had everything taken care of before Colby walked in. It was like being fired only without the pink slip. Everyone knew it was going to happen except you.

After Guthrie strolled out, Colby stood and headed for the door.

"Colby?"

He looked back to Rowan. She'd stood as well and her cool principal mask softened into one more human. "For what it's worth, I know that if you had suspected he was in real trouble, you would've reported it."

He nodded.

But he heard what she didn't say. *Maybe you should've suspected.*



They were words he'd heard before.

## **FOUR**

"You playing tonight, Wilkes?"

Colby looked over to the left at the man who'd leaned against the bar and posed the question. Jenner Bodine smiled back at him, toothpick clenched in his teeth. Colby took another sip from his whiskey. "Nope. Jus' drinking. You?"

Had his words slurred? He couldn't tell anymore.

"Yeah, I'm onstage next. Filling in for an act that had to cancel." He glanced out at the empty seats in the bar. "I hate playing on Mondays. Only the real dedicated drunks show up on a Monday."

Colby raised his glass in salute.

Jenner laughed. "Wow, the hard stuff, huh? I don't think I've ever seen you with anything but beer."

Yeah, and Colby's brain was feeling the effects. He could handle his liquor, but he'd been here since early afternoon and things were getting a little fuzzy around the edges now. Good. If there was ever a time to get shit-faced, it was the day one of your students almost fucking died—and you realized it might have been partly your fault. All he kept thinking about was how if Travis's father hadn't chosen Thai food for dinner that night, Travis would've been dead this morning. A sixteen-year-old kid. Dead. Two days after a session with Colby.

God. He rubbed a hand over his face. Was he that fucking blind? That useless? He'd been too wrapped up in his own crap and missed danger signs with his little brother all those years ago. Then he'd screwed things up with Adam Keats, and the kid had disappeared. Now this. Maybe he should just stick to his guitar and his job at The Ranch after all. Everything else he touched seemed to go to shit.

Colby tapped the bar and motioned for Lenora, the bartender, to pour him another. She grabbed the bottle of Jack Daniel's but frowned at him before she poured. "Sugar, I know you're a big man who can take his liquor, and I'm guessing you had a real bad day, but you're going to be sick as hell if you keep going."

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