

Preface

She could hear the footsteps behind her as she ran down the alley. She was afraid to look back; afraid he was getting closer. She slid on the wet pavement, but never let up. She jumped up and continued running. Her shoes making what to her sounded like loud clomping on the ground. Her breathing was labored. She could feel sweat running down her forehead, feel it burning her eyes.

“Sofia,” he cried from the distance. “You know you can’t hide from me.”

She didn’t slow down. She could see a streetlight in the distance in front of her. She picked up her pace, hoping she could get around people before he reached her. Just as she turned the corner to a well-lit parking lot, someone grabbed her from behind and covered her mouth to stifle her scream.

“Shh,” the soft voice said. “He’ll hear you.”

CHAPTER 1

Three months earlier

As Sofia rode in the cab to her new house ‘Melvin’s Grove’ she got a strange feeling. Looking out the window didn’t reveal anything special; trees, a lake, horse riding trails. The same stuff she had seen when her and her brother would visit as children.

The last time she had been here, she was barely thirteen. She remembered the day her parents said she and her brother wouldn’t be visiting again.

Five years ago...

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“Why can’t we go back?” Brice whined.

“All you need to know is it’s not safe there anymore.” Amanda Moran told her youngest child. “There are things you wouldn’t understand. I know you’re angry right now, but you’ll see, it’s for the best.”

Brice mumbled to himself as he stomped off to his room.

“I’m sorry mom. It’s not fair that Brice has to suffer because of me.”

Kirk Moran spoke up, “Sofia, you have nothing to feel guilty for. Brice will be fine in time. He’s only ten; they bounce back quickly at that age.”

Amanda and Kirk Moran were dedicated loving parents. Their children never wanted for anything, but they were not rich. Though Kirk had come from a wealthy background, no one would ever know that by the way he acted.

Kirk was a tall blonde haired good-looking man. His high school sweetheart, and current wife, was almost a foot shorter, with brown hair. The only thing they had in common was their eyes; they were both blue.

Then they were both gone as if they were never here.

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Now here they were, going back to the last place Sofia wanted to be. If it wasn't for the fact these people were their only living relatives, Sofia and Brice would not be heading there. Even if it was only for three months, until Sofia turned eighteen. Then she'll be Brice's guardian, and he'll never know the truth about this horrible place.

"I can't believe it, Sof. Nothing's changed in five years."

Brice was looking out the opposite window except his eyes were filled with awe. His sister's eyes were filled with fear.

Sofia watched the cab drive away as she stood on the magnificent porch that would be their home for the next few months. She hadn't told Brice they wouldn't be staying long; she just hoped he would understand when they left that it was for the best.

Sure, he had been a kid when mom and dad had told him they would no longer spend their summers here riding horses and camping out by the lake. He pouted for a few weeks, but once school started back, he didn't mention 'The Grove' again. The next summer, instead of The Grove, they sent him to a survival camp. They had smores and swimming lessons, but that was as tough as it got. When he turned thirteen, he said he was too old to go anymore and wanted to stay home and hang with his friends.

Two weeks before school ended, Amanda and Kirkman Moran were killed; shot to death in their beds by, as of yet, and unknown assailant.

Sofia saw a note taped to the door, as she got closer. It just said 'be back soon. Make yourself at home. Pick any room you want in the north wing and unpack. I will see you both at dinner, Love Aunt Esther.

Brice turned the doorknob and the large wooden door creaked open.

“Well I guess we’re home now Sissy.” Brice said.

“Yea, home sweet hell.” She replied.

Brice laughed at her comment but grabbed his bag and headed inside. She followed and they went up the stairs to the north wing. Sofia stopped in front of the first door and opened it.

“I’ll take this one,” she said as she looked around the room.

“I’m gonna take the last one down the hall,” Brice told her. “I like my privacy and it looks quiet.”

Sofia waved as he walked down the hall.

Brice looked around the large old room as he opened the door. It seemed cold and lonely. He dropped his suitcase on the floor and sat down on the bed. It had been a long time since he had seen this house. He couldn’t recall ever being in this particular room, but really, they all look the same; dark walls, wooden desk, and green bedding.

Brice remembered coming here when he was very young. He loved to ride horses and swim in the lake. The last summer he was here had ended early. They still had almost a month before school started but mom and dad showed up late one night and brought them both home. He had been in bed asleep and rode home in his pajamas; all the while asking why they had to leave. No one ever gave him an answer and he finally stopped asking.

Sofia was taken to the hospital and stayed a few days then spent the rest of that summer almost entirely in her room. He always suspected that her injury was the reason they didn’t go back, but when his parents sent him to survival camp alone the next year, he knew he would never see The Grove again.

Now he’s back and can’t wait to have fun. Even his sister couldn’t ruin it for him. The only thing that keeps him from being happy is that his mom and dad had to die for him to come back to the place he loved.

Sofia was hanging her clothes up in the enormous walk in closet when she heard the voices. She froze in place and strained her ears to listen. Trying to figure out which way the voices were coming.

As she stood in the doorway of the closet, Sofia realized there was nobody talking it was singing she heard. It was coming from the vent in the back of the closet. "A strange place for a vent," she thought as she walked quietly toward it.

She remembered when she was young that she could hear people talking through the vents if she listened real close. When she tried to tell her parents about it, they said it was her imagination. As she got older, she was glad no one believed her. She heard many secrets about the people that lived in the house.

Sometimes she heard things she wished she had never heard.

When Sofia was thirteen, there were lots people living in Melvin's Grove. Several staff members and the old couple who owned the place, as well as their son. They were her and Brice's great aunt and uncle. Melvin and Esther Moran were their dad's aunt and uncle.

Uncle Melvin had died a few years after the night Sofia's parents took them from the house. Aunt Esther and her maid and nurse are the only ones that still live here full time, but a cook and driver come every day. Sean Moran, Melvin and Esther's only living child, hadn't been seen in years.

When their mom and dad died, Aunt Esther said they could come live with her. She still has her mind but her body is weak. She said she would hire a nanny but the children said they didn't need one. The maid agreed to help with the kids and the judge finally agreed. Nobody asked Brice or Sofia if they even wanted to move here.

Down the hall, Brice was blasting his radio and jumping on the bed in rhythm to the music.

"What do you think you're doing?" Sofia yelled over the noise.

Letting his legs fold under him, Brice smiled at his sister. "I'm just trying to have fun sissy. It's boring here."

"Try putting your clothes away. That should take you ten minutes. Then go outside and yell. I can hear your music in my room."

"Fine, I'll be quieter but I'm not putting my clothes away. It's not like we'll be here long anyway."

Sofia's mouth dropped. She hadn't told Brice they were only staying until she turned eighteen.

"Don't look so shocked. I'm not stupid. I know you hate this place so I figured you would leave as soon as you can. I wish I could say I'm not going with you but Aunt Esther is old and she might not live much longer. When that happens I'll have to live with you until I'm eighteen. Which actually sucks since I don't know why you can't just stay here? This place is so huge you can hide from everyone."

Brice went back to jumping on the bed as Sofia left his room. "Not everyone" she thought.

Dinner was served at six every night. Sofia remembered that from her summers here. At fifteen till six, she went to get Brice so they could go down to dinner.

He was standing in the middle of a pile of clothes looking confused. He looked up when she walked in the room. "I don't know what to wear. Do I dress up, or just wear what I usually do?"

"You can wear anything you want. Don't change who you are to appease anyone else Brice," his sister told him.

"Your right sissy," he said and jumped down off the clothes. "I'm gonna stay in this." He held his hands out to show his everyday jeans and a black tee shirt.

Even Sofia had to admit her brother was good looking. Tall for his age, he was 5'10 and 180lbs of muscle from football and wrestling in school. He had dad's blonde hair and blue eyes. He looked older than he was too. At fifteen, he could easily pass for eighteen. He had driven around the old neighborhood since he turned fifteen eight months ago. That's also when he started to fill out everywhere else.

Their birthdays were less than a month apart. Sofia's was a few weeks before Brice's and they were both in July.

Sofia just hoped she could make it until her birthday this year.

As they sat down for dinner Brice noticed how Sofia seemed to tense up the minute they entered the room. Her face was white and her fists were clenched. She stopped just inside the doorway. Brice took her arm and led her to the closest chair. She sat down slowly and Brice took the chair next to her. He and his sister had fought each other for years but he still felt it was his job to protect her. Seeing as how he had grown taller and bigger than she had this past year, he believed it even more.

"Sissy, are you ok?" he whispered to her.

"Um, yea," she stuttered, "I'm fine."

Somehow, he knew she wasn't fine but didn't press the issue. She would tell him when she was ready.

Aunt Esther was wheeled in by her nurse to the head of the table. Her hair was short and completely grey, but her blue eyes still had life in them. Her frail looking body couldn't be more than 100lbs but her smile was bright. The kids sat quietly waiting to see what was expected of them.

"How lovely to see you both again," she said. "It's been too long. The pictures your father sent don't do either of you justice."

Sofia and Brice looked at each other. They didn't know their dad had sent pictures.

Aunt Esther patted the nurse's arm, "this is Rita. She is my full time nurse and is here most of the time." Rita was a short plump woman. Her hair was auburn and her skin the color of chocolate. "She has been my friend for over ten years now. When I became so ill I couldn't be alone, she offered to come stay here so I wouldn't have to go into a nursing home. I don't know what I would do without her."

Just then, a woman carrying a large tray entered the room. She placed it in the center of the table.

"This is the cook, Carrie. She will be here Monday to Friday to cook all the meals. Rita cooks on the weekends." She smiled at the cook and nodded her head.

Carrie smiled back then looked at the kids, "it's nice to finally meet you. Esther talks about you all the time. If there is anything special you kids like, just let me know and I'll work it into the menu."

With that, she left the room in a hurry.

"So how was your trip?" Rita asked.

Sofia answered her, "It was fine, thank you."

Dinner was tense and mostly quiet. Rita tried to make small talk, and she smiled at the kids but it didn't help much. It was very awkward and sad sitting in that big dining room with only four people.

Brice noticed his sister kept looking at the kitchen door. She barely spoke and hardly ate. Something was going on with her but he didn't know what. Of course, Sofia had always been a little odd.

She only had one friend in school and never dated. It wasn't because she wasn't asked either. He guessed she was pretty to other boys. 5'3 and 110lbs she wasn't fat. Long light brown hair and blue eyes. She was also very smart. Most of Brice's friends had a crush on Sofia but he told all of them she was off

limits. She kept to herself a lot and didn't even hang out at the mall like most girls her age.

Brice didn't think it was a big deal until a year ago when he started noticing girls. That's when he realized Sofia had never had a boyfriend, or even a date. Not that it was a bad thing, but it was weird.

After dinner, they walked back up to their rooms. Sofia went into hers and shut the door before Brice could ask her about her behavior. As he walked away, he heard the door lock. Funny, Sofia never locked her door at home.

As she walked over to the bed, Sofia tried to keep her composure. She knew that Brice had noticed her strange behavior. She just hoped he didn't ask about it. Sofia was adamant years ago, that Brice never know about her shame. He would never forgive her.

Her cell phone rang making her jump. Brice was on the caller ID. "Hello, Brice."

"Hey, I was hoping you would go for a nighttime ride with me. It's supposed to be warm tonight and we can hang out a while."

Sofia new that horses were Brice's favorite animal. We didn't have room at home for any, but they had leased some land a long time ago and had two horses on it. When we knew we were moving here, Brice had the horses moved here too. They had been here a week already and Brice missed Flame. He rode him all the time. He had even been known to ride the horse to the store for a coke. In our small town, nobody cared if there was a horse tied to the bicycle bar.

"Ok Brice. Can you saddle Mabel for me while I change?"

"Sure Sof, I'll meet you at the stable." Brice hung up but sounded excited.

By the time she reached the stable, Brice had both horses ready to go. He was holding the reins of Mabel, while sitting on Flame.

Sofia jumped up and they set off on a trail. She followed Brice's lead. He seemed to remember every trail in the woods. By eight that night, they were sitting by the lake. Brice was starting a fire while Sofia was taking the saddles off the horses. She tied them to separate trees and went to look for firewood to add to the small fire Brice had going.

They soon had a blaze going. Then they sat watching the lake ripple.

"So, you gonna tell me what's going on with you sissy?" Brice finally said.

"What do you mean Bri?" she tried to look innocent.

"You know what I mean. You didn't talk the whole ride up here. I had to take you to the table in the dining room, and you stared at the kitchen door during supper. Then you locked your door when you went in after shutting it in my face. I can tell your upset Sof and it's not about mom and dad. So are you gonna tell me or do I have to guess?"

Sofia didn't know what to say. Brice seemed to see more than she thought. She didn't want him to know her secret, but she couldn't think of anything else to say.

"You don't want to know Bri. It's not a happy story and you wouldn't understand anyway. Just drop it and pretend we never had this conversation." She didn't really think that would work but she gave it a shot.

"Are you kidding me sissy? You think I could just pretend you blew me off. I'm not a kid anymore. Mom told me the same thing when I asked why we didn't come here anymore. I wouldn't understand she said. But I'm almost sixteen, and I'm mature for my age and you know it. Just tell me already."

"I don't want to tell you ok. It's not your business." Sofia was getting mad but Brice was persistent.

He got up and stomped around. "Look Sofia," he only called her that when he was mad, "I know something's up. Every since we got here you've looked like you've seen a ghost. You're pale and quiet. Not your usual quiet either,

cemetery quiet. I'm not a kid and if whatever it is affects you then it affects me too. That's the way it is. You are the only thing I have left. Aunt Esther is only family by default. Blood does not make us family it just makes us related. Just please trust me."

By the time he finished his rant, Sofia was crying. When he realized what he had done, he immediately went over and put his arm around her. "I'm sorry sissy. I didn't mean to yell at you. I just need to know what's wrong so I can fix it."

She pulled away, "you can't fix it Brice. Nobody can fix it. Please, let it go."

He pulled her close again, "I know you think I'm just a kid, but really, I can help. No matter what it is, I can help."

This time she didn't pull away but she tensed up. Somehow, she knew she couldn't keep this a secret forever. "Ok Bri. But if you want to know everything, you have to listen. Do you have the time to listen?" Sofia said sadly. "You can't interrupt or yell, just hear me out and please don't be mad at me."

"Why would I be mad at you?"

"Because I'm nasty, and dirty, and I don't want you to think badly of me when you know the truth."

"Sofia, I don't know what you're talking about. You could never do anything to make me believe you're that bad. Just tell me. I promise not to judge you in any way."

So she began the tale she had tried to hide from her brother for five years. The story she swore she would never tell again.

"I know you remember the last time we were here. You were ten and I had just turned thirteen. Mom and dad picked us up in the middle of the night and I spent almost a week in the hospital." Brice nodded his head, "that's where this started. It was that summer."

“I know mom told you I was hurt and had to see the doctor. I also know she never told you how I got hurt. Did she?”

“No. Mom just said you had to stay in the hospital a few days but you would be ok. I was asleep when they came and got us so I didn’t ask how you were hurt. After time passed, I didn’t think about it.”

“Well, the thing is Brice; I wasn’t hurt in the normal sense, though I did have some serious bruises as well as a surgery scar.”

“I don’t remember any bruises, or a scar. I remember you spending a lot of time in bed getting better though.”

“The bruises weren’t anywhere you could see easily. I had some on my wrists and some on my ankles, but mostly on my thighs, my inner thighs. I even had some on my neck. That’s why I wore a scarf anytime I left my room. The scar, well, it was hidden under my pants.”

Brice looked livid. Sofia could see recognition forming on his face. She could also see his anger, and his disgust. She turned her back to him. She didn’t want him to see the guilt she felt. She had ruined his time at the Grove that night, and now she was doing it again. Now he knew why.

“Who did it?”

“What?” she asked him.

“Who did it Sofia? Who raped you?”

She turned her head, “what does it matter. I’m dirty, ugly, and untouchable. But nobody can ever know about this Brice. Please?”

“Sofia, it’s not your fault. You don’t have to be ashamed. He is the one who hurt you and I want a name.”

“It is my fault. I led him on. I dressed too sexy and flirted with him. I shouldn’t have worn a two-piece swimsuit. I shouldn’t have let him walk with

me. I shouldn't have smiled at him. He got the wrong idea. I didn't mean to but still, I can't deny I'm partially to blame."

"Oh my God. Sofia, who told you that bullshit? It's never the girls fault. I don't care if she walks around naked. If she says no then you leave her alone." Brice pulled his sister into a hug. "Why did you have bruises on your ankles and wrists?"

"Because he had me tied to the bed. I fought the binds, but I couldn't get away."

"Tell me what happened Sof. Tell me everything."

Sofia sighed as she recalled the day she had tried so hard to forget. Only Brice could get her to retell the worst day of her life.

"I was swimming in the lake when I saw him on the bank. I never thought about the suit I had on and I walked up to him and started talking. I didn't mean to flirt with him; I was just trying to be nice and polite. I picked up my towel and he walked me to the main house. He said he would walk me to my room but I told him I was fine by myself. He insisted so I gave in. When we made it to my door, he opened it for me to go in. I walked past him to my bed. When I turned around, he was shutting the door from the inside.

"I asked him what he thought he was doing and he just smiled at me. I heard the lock as he turned it. He walked toward me and told me I was a vixen. He said I shouldn't flaunt myself so much or someone would get the wrong idea. I told him I was sorry. I hadn't meant to lead him on, but he said it was too late, I owed him for the things I had done. When I asked him what I had done, he said I teased him and now I had to pay up, that no one teased him without following through. I told him I hadn't teased him and tried to run for the door.

"He grabbed me and threw me on the bed. Then he chocked me until I passed out. When I woke up, I was tied to all four posts with my own stockings. He was looking down at me smiling. He said he'd been waiting for me to wake

up. He didn't want me to miss the best part of our night. I still had on my suit at this time and he sat down on the bed beside me. He reached under me, untied the top, and pulled it off. Then he untied the bottoms, all the while telling me how beautiful I was and how much I was going to enjoy our time together.

"When I started to cry he slapped me. He said harlots like me didn't deserve to cry. We should know our place. I tried to tell him I was not a harlot, I was still a virgin but he wouldn't listen. He said no proper girl would dress the way I did. Then he raped me. It hurt so bad I screamed but he put a handkerchief in my mouth so nobody would hear me. When he was done, I thought he would let me go. But he just walked over to the window and looked out. I asked him to let me go but he said no, that he liked to take his time with his conquests and we had all night. Then he raped me again, repeatedly, for hours.

"I don't know how long I had been there but I know it was late. He heard someone trying to get in the door and he panicked. He jumped out the window. I could hear someone asking if I was in there and if I was sick, but I couldn't answer. Finally, the door came open with a bang and Uncle Melvin's bodyguard tumbled in falling to the ground from having used his shoulder to open the door. The maid came over and covered me up and Aunt Esther called mom and dad. They came and took me to the hospital and took you home."

When Sofia looked at Brice, she couldn't read his face. She could see he had tears in his eyes but his expression was unreadable. She could see that he had his fists clenched and there were broken twigs lying under his hands. "Now are you glad I told you everything, or do you wish you never heard it?"

"You never said his name Sofia. What was his name?"

"Why do you want to know?"

Brice looked her in the eye, "so I can kill him for what he did to you. You didn't deserve that sissy. You didn't do anything to lead him on. It's not your fault. Do you understand me? It's not your fault"

“Brice, I had almost nothing on. I let him in my room. In some way, I had to have told him I wanted him. Why else would he have done it?”

“Because he’s sick and doesn’t know right from wrong. Just believe me when I tell you, you are not to blame and I don’t feel any different about you. Now Sofia, give me his name.”

Sofia turned away from Brice’s stare. Quietly she said the name she hadn’t uttered since that horrible night, “Sean.”

“You mean our *cousin* Sean?” Brice asked feeling disgusted.

“Yes Bri, Cousin Sean.” She said a little too loudly, “Now do you see what I mean? We’ve known him since we were babies. If I hadn’t led him on, he would never hurt me. That’s why I didn’t tell you. You always loved riding with him and I didn’t want you to stop. I told mom you could still come back here but she said no. I’m sorry I ruined your summers.”

“You didn’t ruin anything. I loved the camp where they sent me. I loved going by myself. I felt grown up.” Brice hugged her tighter, “Sean ruined you. He’s the reason you never dated. He’s the reason you don’t trust anyone. I will make him pay for what he did.”

“I don’t see how Bri. Nobody has seen Sean since that night. He jumped out the window and didn’t come back.”

“If he’s gone then why haven’t we been here since, just to visit at least?” then Brice blushed, “I guess that’s insensitive of me. You couldn’t bring yourself to come back after that.”

“It’s not that Bryce, at least not just that. Uncle Melvin didn’t want me back. He said if I didn’t go around half-dressed, all the time then Sean wouldn’t have lost control. Dad told him that if I wasn’t welcome then no one would come back. That’s why we haven’t been here since then. When he died, Aunt Esther sent an invitation to all of us but dad didn’t want to make me face it with Sean still free. He was afraid he might come back now that his father was dead.”

“I know I was too young to know what was going on then, but why didn’t you ever tell me. I’m not dumb you know. I knew there was more to it than what I was told. You could have trusted me.”

“I’m sorry. I always thought you blamed me for not coming back here. I thought it was my fault. I felt guilty for so long that I just believed you would think me guilty too. Please forgive me for everything.”

“You don’t need forgiveness. I love you no matter what. Now just tell me about the hospital and police. I want to know why they never caught the guy.”

“After Frankie knocked the door open, Aunt Esther asked me who had been in there. When I told her, Uncle Melvin left the room. Frankie offered to go hunt him down but I said no. I didn’t want to see him again and I thought that they were going to bring him back to the house. When mom and dad got there, dad took you home and mom took me to the hospital. I was anemic from blood loss and in pain. They kept me there for five days. The cops came the next day to ask me questions. I told them the same thing I told you. The swimming and the door locking. They took a report but nothing ever came of it because nobody knew where he was.”

“Nobody ever found him? Did they even look?” Brice asked.

Sofia shrugged her shoulders, “I have accepted the fact he’ll never be punished for what he did. Just knowing you don’t blame me makes me feel free again. I still can’t wait to get out of this house and back home though.”

“I understand now sissy. I do have one question though. Why were you so scared in the dining room and stare at the kitchen door? You said he raped you in your room.”

“When he walked me to the house, he brought me in through the kitchen up the servant’s stairs so no one would know he was with me. The dining room is where Frankie carried me and Uncle Melvin called me a slut and said I seduced Sean. I guess that’s what was going through my mind.”

“Why didn’t Aunt Esther call an ambulance instead of waiting the three hours for mom and dad to get here? That doesn’t make any sense.”

“Uncle Melvin wouldn’t let her call. He said it was my own fault for being such a slut and he wouldn’t sully the good name of his ranch with false allegations. Aunt Esther just had Frankie move me to the entry hall to wait for mom and dad. I could hear them arguing. I hadn’t thought about that in a long time. It was the only time I remember Aunt Esther raising her voice.”

“She didn’t argue enough. Well sissy, it’s getting late. We should get back unless you want to sleep out here tonight.”

“If we had sleeping bags I would do just that Bri. It almost feels peaceful here.”

Brice smiled and went to his saddlebags. He pulled out two thick blankets, “this good enough?”

Sofia couldn’t help but smile through her tears, “yes, that’s good enough.”

“One more question then we’ll change the subject, I promise. Are you ok? Physically I mean. You said blood loss, bruises, and a surgery scar I have never seen. I know there are STD’s and all sorts of stuff that can happen to a woman that is assaulted.”

Sofia put a finger on his lips, “its ok Bri. I know what you’re asking. No, I didn’t get pregnant or get any STD’s. I was bruised and battered, had loss of blood from being a virgin and raped repeatedly. The worse part about the whole thing is I’ll never have children. He damaged me too severely, hence the severe blood loss and an emergency hysterectomy.” Sofia pulled her shorts down just enough to see a faint line across her lower abdomen, “I have accepted it and you need to as well. I will be the worst aunt in the world, but I will never have a child of my own. Of course, you have to have sex for that and I never will so it’s not a total loss.”

Brice regretted asking that particular question. He knew things like that had happened he just hoped it wasn't his sister.

He thought about his girlfriend as he lay on the ground. He knew he had secrets of his own he should reveal, but they were nothing compared to the bombshell Sofia had laid on him. No matter how many times he tried to reassure her that he is glad she told him, maybe if he never knew he would be ok too.

No, that was wrong. He needed to know. He had to have all the details to take care of sissy. Just like his dad made him promise with his dying breath.

CHAPTER 2

The morning sun was bright without the smog getting in the way. The air smelled nice but the lake still looked dark. Sofia guessed it would forever feel dark to her after that night. She hadn't so much as lain out in her own backyard in a swimsuit since then. The worse part about that is her lack of tan but she could live with that.

After her talk with Brice, she felt redeemed. Now she could move on. Somehow, just saying the words aloud, made them seem easier to deal with. She no longer felt guilty about being raped, that was all on Sean but she still felt if it wasn't for her Brice would have still had spent summers here.

When she turned over to wake Brice up, she realized he was gone. Fear overtook her as she jumped up and looked around. She laughed at herself when she saw him sitting down by the water.

"Hey Bri, what are you doing up so early?"

He smiled as he turned to look at her. She seemed better today though she cried out a lot in her sleep, which is the reason he was up but he wasn't telling her that.

"Just catching the sunrise for the first time in...er ever." He laughed.

By the time they made it to the house, breakfast was on the table. In this house, if you're late you don't eat. Every meal has a time and no second chance. The kids found out when they were young that if they were late, the cook always had leftovers on plates in the fridge. They hoped this one would do the same.

Breakfast seemed tenser than supper had the night before. Brice was quiet and withdrawn. Sofia was afraid it was what she had told him. Now he resented the place he had once loved.

Brice felt as if he needed a shower just sitting the dining room. Aunt Esther was trying to be pleasant, but he just couldn't pretend he was ok. The

things his sister had told him had darkened the feel of his surroundings. None of it was her fault but he couldn't shake the feeling there was more going on.

After he showered and changed, he decided to explore the mansion. As a child, he had been limited to certain areas. Now he had no such restrictions and even if he had, he had learned to sneak around pretty well at home. With strict parents, you had to learn to adjust.

Brice knew this place had secrets, all mansions do, and he wanted to uncover them. It would be his mission this summer, to keep him from obsessing on something he had no control over, getting the man that hurt his sister.

As he was walking out the door, his phone rang, "Hello."

"Hey baby, I was wondering how life in the mansion is?" it was Brice's girlfriend Kim.

"Hey babe, it's all good so far. This trip anyway."

"You seem down. Your voice is sad. Is something wrong there? Are they assholes to you?" she laughed in the phone, "I'll come whoop their ass for you."

Brice laughed at the way his very delicate girl tried to act tough. "No babe, things are ok I guess. Sofia just told me some stuff last night and I can't get it off my mind."

"Like what? She's not knocked up is she? That would be something, since she's considered untouchable." Kim laughed again.

Brice's temper flared, "don't talk about my sister that way. You know she's not like that. Besides, I can't tell you. I promised her I wouldn't tell anyone."

"Anyone doesn't include girlfriends Brice. Everyone knows that."

“No, everyone doesn’t know that, and besides I promised I wouldn’t tell and I’m not going to. I’m sorry I brought it up.”

“I’m sorry I pushed the subject Brice. I didn’t think it was anything serious. I was joking. She’s not pregnant for real is she? I promise I won’t tell anyone.”

“It’s ok Kim, I know you’re joking, and no she’s not pregnant. It’s something else but I have to deal on my own. When and if I can tell you I will, but not until Sof says, it’s ok.”

“Ok Brice, I’ll wait until you’re ready to tell me. So when am I gonna get to see you. It’s been weeks and I can’t stand it. I miss you.”

“I miss you too Kim. I’ll try to get to town this weekend. I’ll let you know if it works out. It’s harder now that I’m way out here in the sticks. Maybe you can get out here sometime too. It’s really beautiful and secluded. We won’t be disturbed if you know what I mean.”

“You’re a bad boy Brice, but I can’t wait to see you either. Love you and talk to you soon.”

“Love you too babe.”

Brice thought about Kim as he walked the grounds. How he needed to talk to Sofia. The problem was his shit seemed like nothing in comparison to what she was going through. How could he burden her with his drama when she couldn’t handle her own?

It didn’t matter anyway; everything had changed since his issue came up. His parents died and now he finds out his sister was brutally raped. How could he even be thinking about talking to her about sex after that? The problem was he had no one else to talk with. Dad was gone and all his friends were useless.

So he was on his own.

He considered his options as he found a room on the top floor he hadn't noticed before. The door was locked but that never stopped him before.

Sofia was sitting alone in her room. She hadn't noticed yesterday how similar it was to the other room she had been in before. The same color bedding, the same color walls, even the desk was the same.

Even with the door locked tight, and the window sealed, she didn't feel safe. When she closed her eyes, she could see him on top of her. the same nightmare she had for months after the rape. Now it was back. She had had it the night before. She only hoped Brice hadn't noticed. She didn't want him to see how vulnerable she really was. She had to be strong for him now. They needed each other.

Her phone buzzed on the table. It was Brice texting her to meet him by the back door. Well at least it was a distraction from her mental rambling.

Before she left the room, Sofia took the key out of the lock. She closed the door and locked it from the outside so no one could surprise her when she came back in later.

When Sofia reached the back door, she didn't see Brice anywhere. She looked around the side of the house, still not there. She checked the message just to be sure she read it right. It said meet me at the back door. Did this house have more than one back door?

She went back inside to ask the maid, "Jane, is there more than one back door to this house?"

"Just the kitchen door dear." She replied as she vacuumed the already clean carpet.

Sofia shuddered. She couldn't go to that door, could she? Maybe Brice wanted to show her it wasn't scary anymore. Well she guesses she could try.

Slowly Sofia walked into the dining room, only pausing long enough to picture uncle Melvin in the captains' chair staring at her accusingly. Then she

walked into the kitchen. It was a modernized kitchen now, with chrome appliances. Not exactly what you expect to see in an old slave owner's house. In her mind, Sofia could see the black women hunched over a cast iron pot, stirring the days stew. She laughed at her own imagination.

This was just a kitchen. Nothing in here wished her harm. As she reached for the door handle she remembered something that she never had before, seeing uncle Melvin in the shadow of the pantry. Now when had that happened?

Shrugging her shoulders she opened the screen door and looked outside, ready to tell Brice she wasn't afraid of a room anymore. He wasn't there. How strange that he had asked her to meet him and then run off. Probably his idea of a joke. Too bad, she didn't share his opinion.

Since she was already outside, Sofia decided to look around a while. See how much had changed since her days here. Clear her mind of the cobwebs she had tried to hide for so long.

As Brice looked around the dark room, he wondered why it had been locked. It was nothing for him to pick it open, and not his first time either, but this was the only one he had found locked since he started searching.

So far, all the rooms were virtually the same. Dark wood walls, dark wood furniture, and green bedding with matching curtains. A few of the rooms had private bathrooms. The only difference was the shades of green. Varying from light mint, to dark hunter green.

The one he was in now, was completely different.

Searching the room he found a light swinging from the center and pulled the chain switch. The dim light cast creepy moving shadows against the light colored walls. Everything was dust covered and in disarray. The furniture was upended and appeared to have been thrown wildly all around the room.

On a closer look, Brice noticed pictures with shattered glass barely hanging from their frames. A chair with one leg broken off only held on by a

splinter. The bed was pulled slightly from the wall and the bedding in shambles.

Brice picked up a lamp lying by the bed and the bulb was still intact. On the off chance it still worked, he turned it on. Temporarily blinded by the sudden light he shielded his eyes until they adjusted. Then he really looked around the messy room.

The room clearly belonged to a kid. There was a toy soldier on the desk, and planes hanging down from the ceiling. The clothes coming out of the dresser had bears imprinted on them. The bedding was also childlike, with cowboys on the comforter.

A door caught Brice's eye in the back of the room. It had a padlock on the outside of it. His interest got the better of him so he tried to pull off the lock. No luck, it was on tight. Good thing he didn't give up easy.

Brice looked through the room and found a Swiss army knife. He found the screwdriver and tried to pry the lasp off the wall. It didn't give. He tried again and thought he felt some give on the metal.

Diligently he worked on his mission 'operation take-a-peek' he dubbed it in his head. Almost thirty minutes later, he could feel the lasp giving away. He could see pieces on wood splinters falling on the floor by his feet. Then with one gut wrenching, knuckle busting, loud grunting pull, the whole thing came out of the wall and Brice fell back onto his backside.

After the initial shock of hitting the floor, he realized he had done it. Feeling very proud he got up and dusted himself off. He laughed at himself for not bracing himself against something.

He was still laughing when he walked into the now opened room. His laugh immediately became somber. He was sure it was just the darkness invading his eyes. He couldn't have seen the things he saw. It was a mistake.

He used the lamp like a flashlight until he found the light switch. When he flipped it on, he wished he hadn't. He wanted to run screaming, but he was frozen.

Brice closed his eyes, shook his head, and then looked again. Nothing had changed.

He walked around the room that could only be described as a torture chamber.

On one wall were chains coming out of the wall with metal cuffs on the end. At the back of the room was a chair that had leather straps at the armrests and ankles, as well as the where the neck would be.

In the far corner of the room was a box. It was wooden with a pad lock on the outside, but it wasn't locked. Brice wasn't sure he even wanted to see what was in the box, but he couldn't stop himself from walking over and kneeling down in front of it.

Slowly he opened the lid. He gasped when he saw what was inside. It was toys, building blocks and legos. A dusty doll dressed in boy clothes with a cowboy hat on. There was even a rubics cube.

Brice sat down to examine the toys closer. He could tell the doll seemed to be the favorite, as it was the most worn. He removed all the contents in the box and noticed the bottom had a small hole from rot, but it wasn't the bottom. It was another compartment under the bottom. He reached his finger in the hole and pulled the second lid open.

All that was in the hidden section was two dolls. Both dolls had long light brown hair and blue eyes. One doll was dressed in an old fashion dress, long to the ankles and long sleeves. Even the neck was covered, and the hair was neatly combed. The other one was wearing a bikini. The hair was tangled and the face was messed up. The thing that Brice noticed the most was the red paint on the doll, going down the dolls legs.

He dropped both dolls and jumped up, looked around the room one last time, then headed toward the door. He didn't want to see anymore. He had seen too much now.

Sofia headed back toward the house for lunch. She knew Aunt Esther was a stickler for meals, and she didn't want to offend her. She hadn't blamed her aunt for the tragedy from her youth, aunt Esther had tried to convince her uncle to call the police.

She felt odd as she entered the front door, as if she was being followed. Sofia shook her head and walked inside, sure it was just her imagination. She had been seeing things every since she arrived here.

Lunch was on the table and Aunt Esther was sitting at the head of the table, where Uncle Melvin used to sit.

"Hello Sofia," she said smiling up at her.

"Hello Aunt Esther. How are you feeling today?"

"Better than I have in a while my dear. I think you children are making me feel young again." She laughed.

Sofia smiled at her aunt, "I'm glad you're better. I hope we haven't been too much of a burden on you."

"Of course not child, you are both doing wonders for this place. It feels like a home again. Now, please enjoy your lunch. It appears your brother has lost track of time while searching the house."

"What do you mean searching the house? He was outside just a few hours ago."

Shaking her head she replied, "No sweetheart, I'm afraid you're mistaken. He has been systematically searching the rooms on the third floor. I hope he finds what he is looking for soon. The maid hates to clean the empty rooms." She laughed.

Sofia smiled but felt uneasy. If Brice has been upstairs all this time, why did he say to meet him at the back door?

She finished eating, said a polite goodbye to her aunt, and set out to find Brice. She had to see what he was up to. She had to know if he was ok, and why he played such a mean joke on her earlier.

Brice paced around his room. The only thoughts in his mind were the two gruesome dolls he had found, in the hidden torture room. What did they mean? Why were they hidden under the bottom of the chest? Who did they belong to? What did it all mean?

He had to know, so he went back to the room, taking a box with him to collect stuff in. Maybe there were clues he missed when he ran out. He was freaked and didn't think it through rationally before. Now he had a clear head and was ready to solve this mystery.

And what a fucked up mystery it was. Bloody dolls and torture chamber, if this were a movie; he would be walking into a trap. Good thing this is real life, or he would be worried.

The room seemed different as he walked in it. The light was still on, and the torture room door was still wide open. Brice stiffened his shoulders and sharpened his gaze as he walked to the back of the room where the other door was.

Brice was over the initial shock the room brought about in him before. He could look around without his jaw dropping open so he could be more professional and distance himself from the personal nature of his quest. He had a job to do, and he couldn't let his emotions get in the way.

Brice walked slowly toward the box in the corner of the room. He scoped out the torture chair as he passed it. He noticed the leather straps were worn, making him believe it had been used a lot. He didn't want to know who had been held there.

Kneeling by the toy-chest, he picked up the two dolls. He tried to look at them rationally but it was hard. They were very disturbing. He carefully placed them in the box.

Next, he walked over to the chair. In his initial examination, he assumed the straps were made into the chair but they now seemed removable. He walked around to the side of the chair and peered around to the back. The straps were removable, but they were screwed in. he grabbed the screwdriver from his back pocket and attempted to undo the fasteners. It was a tight squeeze but he slowly felt the screw loosen. His feel of satisfaction was short lived when he realized there were several more fasteners he had to remove.

It was a slow process, but he continued. He couldn't give up. Somehow, Brice felt like he was helping whoever had been strapped into that chair. It was a comforting thought but for the slight tingling in the back of his mind telling him to let it go. He ignored it and started on the straps at the arm of the chair.

Sofia searched the second floor for Brice. She couldn't find him anywhere. She proceeded to the third floor when the hairs on the back of her neck stood up. She new someone was close by and she knew they were watching her. Cautiously she continued up the stairs, looking around for anyone who might be hanging out in the stairwell. Maybe it was the cook hiding in here to take a smoke. Maybe it was the driver sneaking a quickie with his girlfriend. It doesn't have to be a bad person; Sofia might just have interrupted someone in a private moment hiding from his or her boss downstairs. She told herself all these things, and they all seemed plausible, but she didn't really believe any of them even though she told herself she did.

When she reached the third floor landing, Sofia immediately noticed the bedroom doors ajar. She looked down the long hallway to the darkness at the end. She hoped she caught up to Brice before she had to go that far.

She pulled on the first door and jumped as it creaked. She laughed at herself but her voice sounded high pitched and quivery. "Brice, are you in here," she said from the doorway.

When no answer came, she moved to the next door across from it. She walked that way slowly calling into each room. The closer she got to the darkness, the more nervous she became.

After the eighth room, she again looked into the darkness. Sofia was sure she saw a faint light in the distance. She squinted her eyes and hoped it was her imagination. She didn't want to go that way, but in the back of her mind, she knew she had to.

Sofia looked around for a closet. There was one between the fourth and sixth bedrooms. She searched around and found a flashlight with batteries taped to the outside. A paper dated on it said three months prior and an exchange date for a month ahead. Sofia assumed it was when the batteries were taped on and when they were to be replaced. It was something her uncle would have done before. If there were a power outage then they wouldn't have to worry about the battery power. They had a generator but it was limited to the kitchen and main living room. Uncle Melvin also had a wood heater in the main living room.

With her flashlight in hand and her face determined, she walked toward the end of the hallway. The dim light she first saw became brighter. When she finally reached it, she was at the very last room. The door was slightly ajar and she put her hand on the handle.

Slowly she pushed it open. She saw the bed with the cowboy bedspread. She saw the toys in the corner. She felt relieved at first, but then she saw the door at the back. It too was ajar and the light in there was brighter than out in the main room. Sofia assumed it was a closet so she walked toward it. As she got closer, she heard Brice cursing at someone, or something.

She pushed the door open and gasped, "Oh my God," she cried.

Brice looked up in horror, "no sissy, get out of here." He yelled as he jumped up and grabbed her arm.

He sat her down on the edge of the bed and knelt down in front of her.

“Sofia, please look at me,” He said. He grabbed her chin and forced her to look him in the eye.

She looked at him but the look in her eyes was fear. “What are you doing?” she said very low.

“I’m trying to find out what that thing was for. I was searching the rooms and this door was locked. When I broke into it, I found the chair and some other stuff. Now you need to go back to your room. When I am done here, I’ll meet you there. Just go back and lock your door. Don’t let anyone in but me. Do you understand?”

Still shaking Sofia shook nodded her head. Brice stood her up and walked her to the door.

“Remember sissy, go straight to your room and I’ll be there soon.”

She nodded again then picked up the flashlight. She almost ran to her room and locked the door as she entered. She laid her forehead against the door and cried.

What the hell was going on? What was that room, and that chair all about? And worse yet, what did Brice know about it?

Sofia paced around the room. She kept looking at the door, willing Brice to be there. It seemed like hours before he finally knocked.

“Sof, it’s me. Let me in.”

She hurried over to the door and turned the lock, relieved she was no longer alone. Brice came in carrying a box. The lid was closed so she couldn’t see what was in it.

He laid it down on the bed then sat next to it. He wiped sweat off his forehead, laid back, and took a deep breath.

“Are you ok?” Sofia asked him.

“Yea just a little tired. Let me rest a sec and I’ll get to it.”

Sofia waited anxiously for him to calm himself. She tried to peer into the box but Brice had folded the flaps so they each held the other one down. She gave up and went to sit on the settee at the end of the bed.

After a few minutes, Brice raised up. “Ok Sofia, you are not gonna believe some of the stuff I found.”

He opened the box slowly. Sofia jumped up to see what was inside but he closed it quickly. She pretended it didn’t bother her and he pretended he hadn’t noticed.

He had pulled out a piece of leather and held it up. One side had holes in it while the other had a buckle. One of the wholes was stretched as if something had tried to pry it open. Sofia shuddered.

“Ok,” Brice said, “let me start by saying I was searching the house and found the kids room locked. I picked the lock open and found the door in the back pad-locked. I pried it off and found that room. It reminded me of a torture chamber from a horror movie so I had to look around. This is a strap you saw me messing with. This one is off the armrest but there are more at the ankle and I also have one from the neck. I’m not sure why someone would have this stuff but I’m sure it’s not good.

“I also found chains coming out of the wall with cuffs on the end. I didn’t try to get them off though. I would have had to take down the wall to do it. I figured it would attract attention.

“Any way, I also found a closet full of stuff.” He pulled something else out of the box, “look at these.” Brice held up a tattered pair of old timey long johns. The kind that is full-bodied, only they are torn and full of burn marks and red stains. Stains that looked like blood.

Sofia took the clothes from Brice and looked at them. They were small, about the size of a child, no older than eleven or twelve, maybe even younger.

Sofia felt her eyes fill with tears. She couldn't believe someone would do this to a child.

"What else do you have in the box," Sofia asked as she tried to look inside.

Brice grabbed it up quickly, "nothing sissy. Just more straps."

She put her hand on her hips and stared at him, "if it was only more straps you wouldn't be hiding it from me. What is in the box Brice?"

"Nothing, really," Brice said as he was backing toward the door.

"Please don't lie to me Brice. I know it's something," she said as she hurried up to her brother.

Sofia grabbed at the box and he tried to counter. She pulled at it and he pulled back. Sofia fell to the floor and the box tumbled out of both their hands. Brice jumped over to cover it up before Sofia could see the dolls. He didn't think she could stand it.

When he looked up at her, he knew it was too late. He could see the fear and disgust in her eyes, and the tears rolling down her face.

"Wh...what is that Bri?"

He quickly gathered up the dolls and stuffed them into the box. "I'm sorry Sof. I didn't want you to see these. They were hidden under the bottom of the toy-box that was in the corner of the room. They are really gross and I knew you wouldn't like them."

"Brice, did you see them. Those dolls, they look like me."

"No they don't sissy. They are just a couple of mutilated toys, some sicko's idea of fun. Don't read anything into it. It doesn't mean anything." Brice said firmly.

Sofia couldn't bring herself to say the words she heard in her mind. The dolls looked just like her, the day before and the day after her rape.

Brice put everything back in the box and closed it tight. She knew he was trying to hide it from her because he was thinking the same thing she was, that the dolls were based on her.

"I am gonna put this stuff in my closet Sof. Stay here, I'll be back in a few minutes so we can talk about it."

Sofia followed him to the door and locked it as soon as he shut it behind himself. She waited by the door for him to come back.

She heard a soft knock, "it's me Sofia," she heard and unlocked the door.

Brice came in the room and started pacing around. He was distracted and scared. He knew in his gut that Sofia wasn't safe. He just didn't know why he felt that way. Finally, Sofia couldn't take anymore. She stopped him mid-stride.

"Brice, please stand still. You're making me nervous. What is wrong?"

"I'm not sure sissy. I just feel like something bad is going down in this house. I don't want to scare you, but I think Sean might be around somewhere."

Sofia fell onto the bed. She could feel her heart beating out of her chest and she couldn't catch her breath.

Brice knew she was having a panic attack and he knew how to handle it. He took her face in his hands and kneeled in front of her. he looked directly into her eyes. "Sofia, look at me. take deep breaths. Now slowly let them out. It's ok, I'm here and nobody will ever hurt you again."

After several tense minutes, she began to relax. She had silent tears running down her face and Brice gently wiped them away. He hated what had happened to his sister. He hated even more that she was afraid to tell him for so long.

When it seemed that the episode had passed, Brice got up and sat beside her on the bed. After a few uncomfortable minutes, she finally began to talk.

“If you think he is here, then why did you scare me this morning?”

Brice was confused, “what do you mean? I have been looking all over the house today. I didn’t try to scare anyone.”

“You told me to meet you at the back door in a text message. You knew I was scared of the employee entrance. But I went there anyway and you never showed. Why would you do that?”

Brice really became worried. “Sissy, I didn’t tell you to meet me anywhere. I have been upstairs all day, and I don’t have my phone with me.”

CHAPTER 3

Brice camped out on Sofia's floor that night. He knew he couldn't leave her alone at this house again. She walked with him to get his clothes, which were still in the suitcase, and brought them all to her room.

"You don't have to stay here Bri. I'll lock the door and not let anyone but you in. I'll wait for you to come get me before leaving the room in the mornings."

"No sissy, it's ok, I don't mind staying here. I'm used to the floor anyway you know." He was referring to the fact his room at home consisted of a mattress on the floor and a closet and a TV. The rest of his room was bare.

Late the next night, Brice was lying awake on the floor thinking of his girlfriend. He wanted to talk to his sister, but he didn't know how to approach the subject. She had called him earlier that evening and Sofia, realizing who was on the phone, excused herself to take a long bath.

Kim had given him some good news. He wanted to tell Sofia all about it, but he didn't know how. He was afraid she would change how she looked at him. He loved his sister and wanted to keep her safe. He would never let anyone else hurt her but he really needed a friend himself too.

"Sofia, are you awake?"

"Yes Brice, I'm still awake."

"I need to tell you something but I'm not sure how to go about it."

She turned over on her side and propped her head on her hand. "Well, I have always thought the best way was to just say it."

"Yea I know, but I don't want to burden you right now. You have a lot on your plate."

“Bri, after what I told you, I think you can tell me anything. I trusted you with my issue. Now you can trust me with yours.”

Brice knew she was right, but it was still hard. He knew the best way was to say it, “me and Kim have been having sex and she thought she was pregnant, but it’s ok she just called to tell me she’s not.” Brice had to catch his breath after his little speech. He looked up at Sofia to get her reaction. She didn’t seem fazed.

“Did you hear what I said Sof. Me and Kim are hitting the sheets, a lot. Are you just gonna stare at me.”

“I knew already.” Sofia smiled at him, “though I’m glad you dodged a bullet, but you really should be more careful. Raincoats are cheaper than kids.”

“How did you know?” Brice’s face was red with embarrassment.

“Well let’s just say your wall is thin.”

Brice’s face really got red then, “you mean you could hear us?”

Sofia laughed, “yes Bri, I could hear you. Well I could hear her. Good work by the way. From what I hear, you know what you’re doing.”

“Oh my God Sofia.” Brice turned away from her. “I can’t believe you heard us.” He looked at her frantically, “don’t tell Kim, please. She’ll freak out if she knows you heard her.”

“Don’t worry little brother. I would never say anything. I’m just happy your happy. I hope it lasts a long time.”

“She wants to see me. we haven’t been apart this long before. Even when I was grounded, she was sneaking into my room at night. I miss her so much.”

“Well maybe we should go to town then. She can meet us somewhere and you two can go make up forever.”

“That’s great, but when. You don’t have a car and I don’t trust anyone here. How will we get anywhere?”

“Don’t worry Bri, I’ll find a way. Just be patient for a while. We haven’t been here long so it would seem suspicious to need something now, but in a few weeks, we’ll need supplies that are not kept here.”

“Like what Sofia. They have everything here.”

“Not everything Brice. Aunt Esther doesn’t know about my hysterectomy and so she might not know I don’t need birth control, though I should get you some.”

Brice laughed, “I think I’ve got it covered sissy. No more close calls, I promise.”

“Ok little brother but remember that one day I really want nieces and nephews, preferable two of each.”

“Ha ha...I don’t know about that many, but I do promise you will have some kids in your family. I just won’t promise when or how many.”

They both laughed and then settled down for the night. Brice was happy he had confided in his sister, just as she was happy he felt he could. They were closer than they had ever been.

As the days went by, they searched the entire room where Brice had first found the dolls. He hid them in the back of the closet where his room was supposed to be. Sofia pretended she didn’t think about the gruesome pair of dolls, and Brice pretended he didn’t know she was thinking about them.

They found nothing but stuff you would expect to find in the main bedroom at the end of the hallway on the third floor. When they talked about it, they referred to the room as the boys room since it had almost nothing but boy clothes and toys.

The age of the boy was uncertain. The clothes ranged from a child's size six, to a young teenagers size fourteen.

The hidden room, as they have dubbed it, was completely different. It had toys for both sexes, as well as boys and girls clothes going up to adult sizes. They hadn't tried to determine and age of whoever was in that room. Brice wore a men's medium and he was fifteen so they didn't want to speculate.

Sofia and Brice only decided that the person that lived in that room had a horrible life.

As they were going through more stuff they had found in the closet one day, Brice brought up the taboo subject they had argued about several times.

"We should confront Aunt Esther. She has to know about this shit. She has lived here all of her life. Maybe she even helped torture somebody." Brice again tried to persuade his sister.

"No, I told you we can't do that yet. We have no proof anything even happened in the hidden room much less that our aunt was involved."

"I have been thinking about that too. I mean we can see the leather is clearly stretched and the clothes have holes that are not normal wear. Maybe Aunt Esther didn't help someone be tortured; maybe it was done to her."

"That's an even better reason not to say anything then. If it was done to her, then she wants to forget it I'm sure. If it was she or one of her brothers that was in the hidden room, she won't like us being in there. We have to wait."

"I understand what you're saying Sof, but I still think we should say something. Maybe hint around and see if she takes the bait."

"I don't know Bri. She is an old sick woman and I don't want to give her a heart attack. I'm not sure we should even tell her what we found."

"If we never ask her then we'll never know why the hell it's all about. Then all our effort will be for nothing. Do you want to just quit now?"

“No, you’re right; I want to know what happened in there. I’m just not sure how to approach the subject. I mean what do we go up to Aunt Esther and say ‘hey did you or someone in your family like to torture little kids when you were younger?’ that would go over like a lead balloon.”

“I see your point but we have to figure out something. Look at all the evidence we’ve found. The torn clothes, the worn leather, and don’t forget the red stained mattress we found on the closet floor in the hidden room. I’ll bet money its blood.”

“We’ll know for sure when we get to town if its blood, which by the way I have figured out how to get there.”

“That’s great sissy, how?”

“Simple, it’s time for my gynecological exam this year.”

“Ugh...isn’t there another way to go than that?”

“I’m sure I could think of another reason, but the best part is its true so they can’t catch us in a lie. I can tell Aunt Esther I need to go to my appointment and it could take a while and you are going to pick up some supplies at the mall for me because after my exam I won’t feel like going there. That way you can meet Kim at the mall and you two can spend some time together. What do you think?”

“When are we going?”

“My appointment is on Monday morning so you better call Kim so she can plan on getting there.”

“Ok Sofia, but what about Luke, are you gonna try to see him too?”

“Yes, as soon as I’m done with the doctor, I’m gonna walk over to see him.”

Brice grinned to himself. Luke Christoni was a cop in Prattsville. The town they had grown up. He was two years ahead of Sofia in school. Right after graduation, he went to the police academy. Now he was a cop on the force. He also had a huge crush on her while they were in high school together.

Brice worried about his sister. He didn't know why she had ignored Luke in school, now he did and he didn't know what to do. He didn't even know if Luke still liked her or if he had a girlfriend, but he also didn't want Sofia to be hurt again. She had already said she was never going to have sex in her life, but he hoped she found a way to heal.

Luke was a nice enough guy, but nobody would be good enough for his sister. He just wanted her to have a normal life but as long as Sean is free, he didn't think she could.

"I'm gonna call Kim now so she can plan on meeting me Monday. I'll just be down the hall ok sissy?"

"Yes Bri, I'll be ok. You can sleep in your room too if you want. I will be fine alone."

"Absolutely not gonna happen. Until we figure out what the torture chamber was for I'm not leaving you alone."

With that, Brice closed the door and headed down the hall to call Kim.

"Hey babe, I got good news." Brice said.

"What's up lover?" Kim replied.

"Can you meet me at the mall Monday morning?"

"Yes, oh yes Brice I can. I've missed you so much. How did you all figure it out?"

Brice explained it all to her as quickly as he could. Even though he was well aware of females and all they have to go through, he still wasn't comfortable talking about it.

"What are you gonna tell your parents about being dropped off at the mall babe?"

"I forgot to tell you I got my license last week. third times charm I guess." Kim was almost a year older than Brice was but it hadn't been a problem. Now it will even come in handy.

"That's great baby. I'm proud of you. I'll see you soon."

Brice thought about Sofia as he walked back to their room. He knew he was young, but he truly believed he loved Kim. He wanted his sister to feel this one day. He hoped that she could get over her assault, and find love.

The door was ajar when he reached it. Panicked, he pushed it open fast. Sofia was laying on the bed with her back to him. He walked slowly over to see if she was ok.

As he neared the bed, he heard her softly crying. "Sofia, what's wrong?" he asked quietly.

She snubbed as she sat up on the bed, "Am I ugly?"

Stunned by the question he didn't answer right away. She took that as a yes and turned around.

"I knew I was ugly. You can see him on me can't you? Every since I told you the truth, I could tell you have treated me differently."

"Sofia, I have not treated you different. I don't think your ugly, you just surprised me by asking, and you don't have Sean all over you. He raped you Sof, that's all. He doesn't own you and you can't let him take over every part of your life. You have let him ruin your life since then but now you have me. I am going to make you whole again."

Sofia fell against her brother. She had always relied on him but never this much. If a boy bothered her at school, Brice made him back-off. If she needed a shoulder to cry on, even if he didn't know why at the time, he was there. Now she needed him in a major way and didn't know how to say anything to him. Something she had wanted to talk about for a while.

She pulled away and wiped her face on her handkerchief. She looked up into his eyes and tried to see his mind. She didn't have anyone else to talk to but she wasn't sure what to do.

"Bri," she sniffled, "can I talk to you about anything?"

"Yes sissy, you can. I know you need to talk. I didn't want to push it before but I know you need to talk about this. I will help you anyway I can."

Speaking through her tears, Sofia began talking. "Sean hurt me Brice. He took everything away from me. He took my heart, my self-esteem and my virginity. But the worst thing he took was my ability to have a child. I want to have children Bri, but I never will." She paused to wipe her nose, "he even took my ability to love someone. I'll never get married, and I'll never be a mom."

"Sofia, you will find someone one day. I'm sure of it. You are beautiful and you are a good person. You will meet someone and get married, I know you will."

"Nobody will ever want me Brice. I can't make a man happy, physically I mean," she hid her head and blushed at those words.

"You mean sex?"

Turning away she said, "Yes Brice, I mean sex. No man will want someone like me. I don't know if I ever want to have sex, and even if I did, I'm not sure I know how."

Trying not to laugh, because he knew his sister was being completely honest, Brice had to try to help. "Sofia, no one knows how their first time. It's

something you learn as you go. There isn't a manual to teach you. you just have to trust someone enough to learn together."

"I don't know if I'll ever trust a man enough to try."

"Well you have come a long way Sof. When you first told me what happened, you were certain you didn't ever want to, now you have at least thought about it."

"Well, that wasn't true anyway. I have thought a lot about it. I just didn't think anyone would think that way about me so I figured I'd close myself before someone else shut me down. I'm still not sure what will happen, but I'm not gonna shut myself off anymore."

"I'm happy to hear that. I have to ask you a question though."

"Ask me anything you want."

"Can I tell Kim what's going on? She is my girlfriend and I have never kept anything from her. I just didn't want to say anything unless you're ok with it."

"You can tell her anything you want. I have decided I'm not going to hide anymore. I didn't do anything wrong, something was done to me and I can believe that now, and I want him to pay. I hope one day he will."

"So do I sissy, but that's up to the police. We can only hope they will find him one day."

"I think I'm ready to sleep now Bri. I'll talk to you tomorrow. You can go to your room now."

"Nope, I have already got my bed ready. I'll see you tomorrow."

The weekend was incredibly long. Brice was like a kid on Christmas Eve. The idea of seeing Kim again had him floating on air.

Sofia watched her brother with envy. How she wanted to have what he seemed to have, the ability to trust another person without reservations. She hoped that one day she would be able to do the same.

Sofia was up and ready at eight Monday morning. Brice was still in the shower so she was gathering the stuff they had planned on taking to Luke.

Sofia remembered Luke from school. He was a bit older than she was but he was always nice. He made an effort to include her at their dances and such. She always thought of him as a friend but she was so closed off, even her friends didn't know whom she really was.

Sofia felt that a large leather bag would look inconspicuous with all the stuff she had to carry. Most of the high school girls were carrying large bags now so it looked normal.

At breakfast, Aunt Esther told them the driver was sick with the flu and she didn't have an alternate driver available until the next day.

"I have to go to the doctor Aunt Esther. I need to get to town. Is there a cab I can call?"

"You misunderstand Sofia; I was saying that if you have to go today you will have to drive yourself. Otherwise, you will have to wait until tomorrow."

"You don't mind if I take the car?"

"Of course not my dear, you can help yourself to anything I have. All of this is yours too, and Brice's of course. Feel free to come and go as you please, as long as you stick to the curfew, I have no problem allowing you free rein."

"What's the curfew?" Brice asked quickly.

Aunt Esther smiled, "for you its ten PM young man. But for you Sofia, I believe midnight will suffice."

“Thank you Aunt Esther. I’m sorry I just assumed we had to stay here all the time. I figured you were old fashioned and didn’t think kids should be allowed to go out when they want.”

“That’s ok Sofia; I know its different now than it was in my day. Just remember that I will ground both of you if you break the rules. I think we should go over them before you leave for town.”

Sitting down at the table, Brice and Sofia wondered what rules she might mean.

“First, as I said you both have your curfews. Now here are the house rules, there will be no drinking alcohol, no smoking, and no having overnight guests without prior approval. When school starts, I’ll amend the curfews, but other than that, these rules are not negotiable. Can you two live with that?”

“Yes ma’am,” Brice answered.

“Not a problem, Aunt Esther.” Sofia responded.

“Well, now that that’s settled, you should really go before you’re late. I’ll see you at home later.”

Feeling more relaxed about the day, Sofia now wondered if they were doing the right thing. If they made a formal report about the stuff, they found, would their aunt get in trouble?

Brice was thinking along the same lines, “are we still gonna tell Luke what we found?”

“I’m not sure Bri. Aunt Esther was so nice to us just now; I don’t want to get her in trouble.” Sofia bit her bottom lip, “I’ll think about it and let you know after I finish my appointment.”

Not sure himself what they should do, Brice had to come up with another idea. He didn’t know if it would work, but they had to try.

“What if we just talked to Luke first, not give him the evidence. Then if he says Aunt Esther will be ok, we give it then.” Brice asked, “Do you think that would be ok?”

Considering what her brother suggested, Sofia agreed, “yea, that’s sound ok. If he doesn’t see it he can’t go to her but if he agrees to wait until we know more then I’ll give him the stuff.”

After dropping Brice off at the mall, Sofia parked the car at a garage walking distance to where she needed to be. It was in the middle of town so it was convenient for everything she and Brice had in mind.

The doctor’s off was her first stop. She had been coming here since her rape and she thought of her doctor as a friend as well as her gynecologist. Dr. Sharon Brenner was a good woman who knew everything about Sofia. She couldn’t wait to tell the doctor about her breakthrough over the past month.

Brice was scared, as well as excited to see Kim. He knew he had to tell her a lot and just hoped she would understand. It was a burden to keep secrets, and even worse if it’s not yours to tell, but Brice wouldn’t have betrayed his sister for anything.

He was sitting at a table in the food court when he saw Kim walk up. He felt the smile spread across his face and saw the glow in her eyes. He knew this is what love must feel like.

“So lover, do you want to go somewhere more private?” Kim asked as soon as she was in Brice’s arms.

“I would love to but we can't right now. I promised Sofia I wouldn’t leave the mall until I heard from her. Besides, we need to talk.”

“That doesn’t sound good. Is everything ok?”

“Not really. Do you remember when I told you Sofia had told me a secret?”

“Yea babe, you said you couldn’t tell me. I promise I won’t ask if that’s what you’re afraid of.”

“No beautiful, Sofia wants me to tell you now. It’s just that it’s a long and horrible story. Can we go somewhere we won’t be heard?”

Kim took Brice’s hand and led him down a hallway, “This is the internet café. It’ll be the best place because it’s set up for college students to study in private.”

“Perfect Kim, this will be fine.” They sat down at a table in the back, a table with the wall behind him to see if anyone was around. He didn’t want anyone to overhear them.

“Ok Kim, I think I should start at the top.”

Brice watched Kim’s face as he told the whole sordid story of his sister’s rape. He watched as she went from disbelief to disgust to fear. Then he watched tears form in her big green eyes. She tugged at a strand of her short black hair, twisting and untwisting it in-between her fingers. She always did that when she was trying not to say what’s on her mind.

They were both quiet after he finished talking. He knew Kim would have to process the information before she could grasp the point. She was smart but sometimes very analytical. She had to break it all down then come up with a conclusion she could understand to relate. Brice could see in her eyes she couldn’t find a plausible answer and she didn’t like it.

“Now I understand why she stood in the corner all the time. Why she never dated nor had a boyfriend. She didn’t think she deserved to be happy.” Kim finally said after their long silence.

“I never even noticed all that. What kind of brother am I? I let my sister get assaulted, and then don’t even see her pain.”

“You were ten Brice. You didn’t even know what sex was, much less rape. It’s not your fault, just as it’s not your sisters. You’re both victims of a predator.”

“I wasn’t a victim like Sofia. She was brutalized by him and now she wants justice. I plan on helping her get it too.”

CHAPTER 4

After leaving the doctor, Sofia felt better than she had in a long time. Sharon said it was a real breakthrough in talking to her brother. She believed Sofia was well on her way to leaving the incident behind her, and having a normal life.

As she walked west on the sidewalk that would lead her to the police station, Sofia started to become nervous. She wasn't sure why, just that she was almost afraid of seeing Luke after all this time.

Perhaps she was more excited to see her old crush than she let on to herself. Blushing at the thought, she shrugged it away; it was just the contents of her purse. At least that's what she told herself.

Stopping outside the glass double doors of the Prattville police, Sofia took a deep breath and closed her eyes. She placed her hands on either door handle, walked in the white, cold, stony room, and held her head high. No longer would she lower her head in shame, she was not a victim anymore.

At a small desk in the front of the room was a uniformed officer. She scanned the room for Luke, but he wasn't in sight.

She walked up to the small desk and cleared her throat.

Looking up the officer smiled, "can I help you ma'am?"

"I'm looking for Luke Christoni. Is he around?"

The officer picked up the phone on his desk and called out over the speaker, "Detective Christoni, please come to the front."

It reminded Sofia of when she was called to the office at school. Everyone looked at her and she couldn't just sneak out without notice. It made her embarrassed for Luke.

She heard a voice from the back, “what is it Joey? I’m doing my paperwork.”

“There’s a chick out here asking for you,” he yelled back. Sofia wondered why he just didn’t do that to begin with but didn’t say anything.

She could hear papers being ruffled as she stood there waiting. The officer in front of her was smiling at her and winked his left eye, “you a family member of the detective’s ma’am?”

Sofia tried to smile back, “old school friend.” She answered.

“Oh, well, in that case, are you free tonight?”

“Joey, that’ll be enough.” She heard sternly from the back room.

The officer immediately went back to his computer and didn’t say anymore to her.

Sofia went to look out the side window as she waited. The road was almost empty this time of day. She saw a few people walking down the street, and a little girl trying to pull her mom into a store, but nothing extraordinary.

“Sofia?” she heard behind her.

Turning around, her breath caught in her throat. She remembered Luke as a good-looking kid, but now he was all grown up, and extremely ripped. His blue eyes sparkled as he smiled at her. Sofia saw dimples bigger than any she had ever seen.

“Um, hi Luke, I wasn’t sure you’d remember me.”

“How could I forget the first girl to ever turn me down for a date?” he said shaking his head.

Sofia blushed as she remembered that day. He had surprised her and she had said no before she even considered it. She always regretted that day, but you can’t go back in time, and she wasn’t here to rehash the old days, she was

here for justice and maybe a little revenge on the man that had ruined most of her life.

“I’m sorry about that Luke. I was a different person then. I have come to ask you to lunch today if you have time. Strictly professional I assure you.”

“Well that’s too bad, but I’d love to go anyway.” He smiled again, “give me a few minutes to get my paperwork in order. I don’t like to leave anything half done.”

Sofia went over and sat down in an empty chair. She tightened her grip on the bag over her arm thinking about the contents it held. Was she doing the right thing? It’s too late to go back now.

“Ma’am?” the desk officer said and Sofia looked over at him, “I can make that worried look on your face disappear if you let me.”

“Pardon,” Sofia, said confused.

The man gave her a teasing smile and walked over to where she was sitting, “come on, detective ‘stick up his ass’ has no idea how to please a woman, but I can have you screaming in pleasure in no time,” he said seductively.

Stunned, she couldn’t answer. The old fear in her snuck up and hit her hard. She started to tremble as he leaned toward her. She turned her head before he could kiss her and softly whispered, “Please don’t.”

He squatted down in front of her and tried to take her hand, “come on, I’ll make it worth your while.” His eyes glinted at her.

A little louder, she tried again, “please sir, leave me alone.” She could hear the tremble in her own voice.

“Joey!” a voice behind them yelled, “get away from her and let her be.” The man in front of her was pulled away forcefully.

“I’m sorry Sofia,” Luke said softly as he hauled Joey away. “Would you like to press sexual harassment charges against this officer?”

“No Luke, but an apology would be accepted if it were sincere.”

“I’m really sorry ma’am. I meant no offence.” Joey said with his head down.

Luke grabbed the man by his shirt, “you are lucky this lady is so nice. If she chose to press charges, you would have lost more than your badge. I had better never see anything like this again or you’re fired. Is that clear?”

“Yes sir, I really was just trying to cheer her up. She seemed rather sad.”

Joey went back to his desk and fixed his shirt. The incident seemed to have little if any affect on the man at all. Sofia wondered if it wasn’t his first time being called down.

Reaching for the door Luke looked at her smiling, “where are we headed milady?” he held his arm for her to hold but she looked away.

Unaffected he put his hands on his hips and waited for her answer.

Embarrassed by her own behavior she looked out the window. “Where ever you like. I don’t know any places besides the food court at the mall.”

Smiling he said, “Follow me then.”

Twenty minutes later they were in a small diner booth in the back of a place her dad would have called a soda shop. Sofia made sure they were away from most of the people so she could talk freely.

“I hope you know I’m glad you came to see me, but I’m also very surprised. I haven’t heard from you since high school and now here you are, at my front door so to speak.” Luke said.

“I know and I’m sorry about this. I just had no one else I could turn to. I remember at school you were nice to me, and you went out of your way to talk

to me when nobody else did. I don't want to put you in the middle of my problems; I just have no other choice." She said fidgeting with the bag she still gripped tightly.

Resting his head on the fist, Luke sighed. Sofia was about to leave, thinking he didn't want to get involved. Just as she picked up her coat and started to stand, Luke put his hand on her arm.

Instinctively she jerked back and then felt her cheeks getting warm.

Pretending he didn't notice her behavior, Luke looked at her face. "Don't go Sofia; I'm just mulling it over in my mind. I can tell by the dire look on your face this is important to you, and that whatever it is, is eating at you. I am taking a second to prepare myself for what has you so rattled."

Sofia wasn't sure if she should wait for Luke to say more or give him a minute. She didn't want to wait too long and then chicken out, but she couldn't just spring it on him either.

"Ok, I think I need to know what's going on. I can tell you're scared of my reaction so just tell me, are you in some kind of legal trouble?"

Laughing nervously she replied, "No, not me, but it is a legal matter. I don't want to get anyone into trouble, but I can't keep what I have found to myself." Sofia picked at her fingernails nervously. "I think someone has been hurt, but I don't know who or when. I just know how. Does that make sense?"

Sitting up, Luke got a professional look on his face. One Sofia could only think of as cop face, the way an officer looked at you when you make a report.

"I think I understand, but I will need more details. I can't help someone if I don't know who he or she is. If you know how that's a start. Tell me about it and we'll go from there."

So Sofia told Luke about Brice's find of the torture room, and the chair. She tried to watch his face for any response. He stayed unabashed as she relayed all the details. Never giving her any idea of what he was thinking.

“Is that everything?” Luke asked after she finished talking.

“As far as I know it is.”

“Well first we need to know if it’s really blood and if it is, that’s its human blood.”

Sofia shifted the purse she carried, “I thought of that, but I’m not sure what I should do. I don’t want my aunt in any trouble.”

“Well she can't be in trouble if there isn't anything to it. Let's see if we need to go further before we even make a report. Do you have anything with the stains on them?”

Sofia took out the piece of material Brice had cut with the stains on it. They had sealed it in a zip lock bag. She carefully handed it over to Luke. He took the bag and without opening it up, he looked over the stain.

“It does appear to be blood, but I’ll have it tested anyway. It will take a few days, but I’m sure my lab can identify this, and if it is human blood, get DNA from it.”

Feeling slightly relieved, Sofia finally sipped her coffee knowing it already cold. She hadn’t even realized she never ordered any food. Just then, as if she read Sofia’s mind, the waitress walked over to get their order.

This was the first time she had been alone with a man that she hadn’t felt scared since her rape, and Sofia smiled inside.

Sitting at the internet café, Brice couldn’t help looking at the clock again. He knew Sofia’s appointment had ended two hours ago, she had texted him about it. Now he was starting to worry. She had never been out this long alone before, mom had always been with her. He was afraid something had happened to her.

Just as he stood up and grabbed his jacket, and was about to tell Kim they were going to go find her, Sofia walked up to them. He couldn't be more relieved, and then he was curious. Where had she been?

"Are you serious?" Brice asked his sister again. "You had lunch with Luke?"

"Why is that so hard to believe?" Sofia asked as they drove back to the house they currently resided in.

"Because it was a date that's why, you have had your first date sissy. You know that don't you." Brice grinned like a Cheshire cat.

"It wasn't a date. It was just lunch."

"But you were alone with him and you ate together. It was a date."

"Whatever Bri, if that's what you think." She said aloud, inside she was secretly hoping it was a real date and that Luke would call her soon. "Can we discuss what's really important now?"

"Ok, fine, what did he say?"

"Nothing much, just that he'd call when he found out anything. The first thing he's going to do is check out the stain and see if it is blood. After that, he'll have it analyzed to see if it matches anything on record."

"Ok, cool. I guess there's nothing to do now but wait."

Chapter 5

“Hey Luke, here is the test you wanted.” Luke looked up from his desk at the messenger. The boy couldn’t have been more than 16 but he rode his bike all over town for the cops delivering results from the local lab.

Smiling Luke took the yellow envelope from the kid. “Thanks Rick. This stays between us now doesn’t it?” Luke said as he passed the boy a twenty.

Waving it off he replied, “You know it will Luke.”

He put the letter in his top drawer until he got off work later. The investigation was unofficial so he couldn’t let the others see. Lucky for him he had a private office.

Just to get his facts straight about Sofia, he pulled up her old case. He was a kid then and didn’t remember all that much. He got the case number and went down to the basement where the cold cases are kept.

As he walked into the dusty room, he felt a chill. The place hadn’t seen a broom in months and something scurried across the floor. Remembering why he was here, he walked past the isles until he reached level D. now just to find case 70218.

Over an hour later, up on a 4 foot latter he found in the corner, Luke finally found the box. Pulling it down he thought it was lighter than it should be. He carefully let it fall to the ground on its bottom, hoping nothing would spill that might be inside it.

Jumping down himself, he dusted his own self off and grabbed the box. He sat down at the table near the door and opened the box.

After reading the report, Luke was angry. Why wouldn’t they try harder to catch this guy? The torture Sofia had endured in those hours had him almost in tears. No wonder she had been scared when he asked her out. It’s unbelievable she can stand being in a room with a man after that.

Luke could feel himself becoming angrier about every word on the page. He wanted to hold her and show her that not all men take what they want like that. To show her the gentleness she deserves.

Brice had been quiet the last few days. Sofia thought it was seeing Kim but now was getting worried.

“What's wrong?” she asked him in their room that night.

Brice looked up from the floor, “What makes you ask?”

“You haven't said much since we got back the other day. Did you and Kim have a fight?”

“No, nothing like that, I told her what happened to you and now she's acting different.”

Sofia slid out of the bed and scooted over near her brother. Laying her head on his chest she asked, “How so?”

He put his arm around her and sighed, “Well she hasn't called me much and when she does she seems distant. Did I do something wrong? I mean I thought honesty was important but now maybe I shouldn't have said anything.”

“No Brice, you did the right thing. I am glad you waited until I said it was ok but I'm glad she knows. Just give her time; it's a lot to process all at once.”

“Ok Sof, I'll give her some time. I mean it's only been a few days anyway.”

After a few minutes, Sofia could hear him snoring. She got up quietly and went out into the hallway with her phone. She would find out what was going on with Kim. She didn't want her brother to be hurting and if it were Sofia's fault, she would fix it.

After four rings, a sleepy voice came on the line, “Hello?”

“Hey Kim, its Sofia, I need to talk to you.”

She could hear a yawn on the other end, "Ok."

"It's about Brice."

"Is he ok?" she said in a now alert voice.

"Yes he's ok physically, but he seems to think he's done something wrong. Is everything ok with you two?"

"No Sof, nothing is wrong. I just have a lot on my mind. Brice told me what happened and, well, I just don't know what to say." Sofia could hear she was not telling her everything by the sound of her voice.

"Are you sure that's it?"

"Um...well, I'm not sure if I should say."

"If it is hurting yours and Brice's relationship then maybe you should say."

After a few minutes, Kim spoke again. "It's about the man who hurt you. I don't think you're the only one he did that to."

Almost dropping her phone Sofia stuttered "W...what?"

"I'm sorry to tell you this, I have been thinking about whether or not I should."

"Yes, tell me please."

"Ok. So as you know my dad works with the cops a lot. His messengers deliver a lot of stuff to the police station. Anyway, about 5 years ago I heard my dad talking to one of them. He was telling dad not to let me go out at night because a young girl was taken off her bike and held for 2 days. She was raped and starved but they found her barely alive. She had been dumped by the lake and some teenage boys had been swimming. They saw the guy running off. The police think he might have been planning to drown her until the boys chased him. The last thing they remembered was the guy running toward Melvin's Grove. The description also matches yours in the file."

Sofia couldn't speak. She slid down the wall to the ground with tears in her eyes. Her rape as clear in her mind as if was happening again. She could feel her chest tighten up and her breathing became labored. She knew she was having a panic attack. She could hear Kim on the phone trying to get her to answer.

The bedroom door jerked open and Brice came running out skidding to a stop by Sofia. Picking her up he took her to the bed and sat down by her.

Gently rubbing her back and whispering in her ear, "Its ok Sof, he's not here. He's gone and I'm not gonna let anyone hurt you."

Slowly Sofia's breathing became even and she just lay there quietly. She could hear Brice on the phone.

"Yea Kim thanks for calling me. No, she's ok now. She just had a panic attack. She's had them for years so I know what to do. No, it's not your fault; she needed to know so we can tell Luke. Ok, love you too. Talk to you tomorrow."

"I'm sorry I scared Kim." Sofia said from the bed, now sitting on the side instead of lying down.

"It's ok Sof; she understands it's hard for you. You haven't spoken about this since it happened so it makes sense since you would have a few episodes from it. Just remember that you can come to me now. Don't shut me out anymore. And one more thing, thanks for talking to Kim. Now I know why she has been acting funny, she was scared too. So now let's go back to bed, I'm tired." Brice lay back down on the floor.

Sofia lay back over and closed her eyes. Brice couldn't help but see she was shaking slightly.

"Damn!" Sofia heard the next morning. "Damn!" she heard again.

Slowly she rose up off the bed and looked at where the sound was coming from. It was Brice and he was throwing clothes out of his suitcase and muttering to himself.

“What are you looking for?” she asked.

Brice jumped at the sound of her voice. She laughed at his face as he continued his tirade. “My necklace is missing. The one with the gold dog tags on it. It had my name and birthday too.”

Sofia knew which one he meant. It was his birthday present from last year, before our parents died.

“Where did you see it last?”

“It was in my suitcase when we got here. When I went to get it this morning it was gone.”

“Are you sure you had it in there?”

“Yes I am. Now it’s gone and I don’t know how. It was in my room the whole time. I never took it out. Hell my suitcase was in my room until last night when I brought it in here.”

“Then someone went into your room and got it.”Sofia said.

“It seems so but why? It doesn’t mean anything to anyone but me.”

“I don’t know Brice but it was really valuable. I was with mom and dad when they bought it. Its real gold.”

“But it has my name on it.”

They sat down on the floor together and looked once more for the necklace. It was nowhere to be found, and for some reason Sofia got a chill down her spine. Something wasn’t right about this and she was gonna find out why.

Luke sat at his desk in the hallway of his house looking over the results of the stained piece of sheet Sofia had given him. He didn't believe it at first so he had to look at the cold case report again. He had brought it home so he could go over it carefully. He wanted to finally put this guy where he belonged, 6 feet under.

The results were the same; the blood on that piece of material had the same DNA as the semen found on Sofia after her rape. It was also a match to a rape from 5 years ago, one that hadn't been linked to Sofia's because hers was never entered into the computer system. Someone didn't want her rapist caught.

Knowing he had to tell her, Luke called Sofia, "Hey Sofia, it's Luke. Are you free later today?"

Sofia was stunned by the question, "Um yea I guess so why?"

"I need to talk to you. If it will make you feel better, bring Brice too, he might need to be here."

"Ok Luke, where do you want to meet?"

"Same place as before at lunch time."

"Sure I can be there."

"I look forward to seeing you again." Luke answered not sure, where that came from.

"Me too" Sofia said softly.

"Are you sure about this sissy?" I know you think you want to know but once you do you can't take it back." Brice said to his sister when she told him about the phone call from Luke.

“Yes I'm sure. I need to know what he found out. I have to start moving forward with my life and to do that I have to come to terms with the past.” Sofia said out-loud. To herself she was reasoning ways to back out.

The drive to the restaurant was quiet. Neither one wanted to say what was on their minds. They both knew this is the last time they could deny the truth, that someone real had been horribly treated in that room, someone they might be related to, or even know.

Luke had arrived early to lunch. He wanted to be prepared for what he knew was going to be traumatic for the girl he has come to have feelings for, or maybe the feelings have just resurfaced. Either way, he knew Sofia was bound to be hurt. He vowed to himself that he was going to find her attacker and make him pay.

Brice and Sofia walked into the restaurant together looking for Luke. He was in a booth in the back of the dining room with papers spread across the table. His face showed no signs of emotions. He just looked professional.

Sofia was the first to speak, “Hey Luke, how are you today?”

Brice looked at his sister wondering why she was being so formal. “Hey dude, long time no see,” Brice said as he extended his hand.

Luke stood up to take it, “Hey Brice, Sofia, glad you could both make it. Do you want to get down to business or eat first?”

“Business please,” Sofia answered. “I want to get this over with.”

Luke's face showed just a hint of pain then he recovered himself and picked up a file. “I know I was a kid then Sofia but I do remember when something happened to you,” he paused to see her response. Seeming unaffected, he continued. “I found your old case file in the basement of the precinct and went over it again.” He glanced at her again, “I'm sorry by the way, for what happened to you and even sorrier that nothing was done about it.”

That time Sofia had to look away. She didn't want him to see the tears in her eyes. Wiping them away quickly she took a sip of water and motioned to the other papers, "what else did you find Luke?"

This time he didn't try to hide his distress. "the piece you gave me, it was blood on it, human blood. I had it analyzed and it matched another case, well two others actually." He picked up one file and opened it. "this is the case of an eleven year old girl from about five years ago. She was kidnapped, raped and starved for days. She was found..."

"By the lake?" Sofia asked interrupting him.

"Yes, how did you know?"

She took a quick glance at Brice, "Just a friend. She told me the other night. About the case."

"Ok then, anyway, the DNA was a match to the semen found inside the girl and so I checked another similar case as well." Luke looked Sofia in the eye, "It was yours sweetie. The DNA matched your rapist as well."

Brice's mouth dropped open. He looked over at Sofia to see how she was handling the news. She seemed to be calm and not even surprised.

"You knew didn't you Sof? You knew it was gonna match yours." Brice said.

Nodding her head yes, Sofia looked at Luke. "Do they have any suspects?"

"None that I know of. Your file had a description of the perpetrator but it seems to be missing, as well as a lot of information that should be in your file.

"You mean it doesn't say who raped Sofia?" Brice asked with a slightly raised whisper.

Luke looked at him puzzled, "No, should it?"

"She it should. She knows who her rapist is."

He looked over at Sofia who was very interested in her napkin all the sudden. Sofia, please tell me, do you know your attacker?"

"Yes I know him."

"Then you have to tell me so we can pick up the bastard and make him pay."

"It's not that easy Luke. My uncle paid lots of people to hush my assault up. He even tried to bribe my parents into saying it never happened, that I made it up. Fining him won't be that easy."

Brice took his sisters hand, "I'm sorry sissy. I had no idea uncle Melvin did all that? I'm sorry I ever wanted to come back here, but he's gone now, maybe we can find Sean and put an end to all this. Who knows how many other girls there's been after you. He could have killed someone."

"I wish he had killed me sometimes. Then I wouldn't feel so dirty all the time."

Luke took Sofia's hand but she yanked it away. "Don't think that way Sof. You are a beautiful young woman and I'm very glad you're still here. I know that Brice loves you more than anything too. we need you in our lives."

Sofia looked up at Luke hesitantly. Then she laid her hand slowly on his. He carefully put his other hand on top of hers. He knew it was a big step for her to touch anyone but her brother and he didn't want to upset her. She looked in his eyes and he smiled at her, she smiled back.

Quietly watching his sister willingly hold a man's hand that she wasn't related to made Brice smile to himself. The fact it was her high school crush and he was so tender with her made it all the better. He had hoped Luke still liked Sofia. He always liked him.

Sofia never knew how beautiful she really is. Brice couldn't count how many guys he had to scare away from her in school. He never minded but it was a full time job for a while. He finally got the word around that she was off limits

but Luke never gave up. He only asked her out once but he was always friendly and polite with her, so much so that Brice didn't have the heart to scare him away too.

Clearing his throat he waved to the server, "I think we should order before they throw us out." he said.

Chapter 6

The night was quiet as they both processed all the information they had learned. It explained nothing and yet everything at the same time.

Sean was a predator in the worst way. He had to be stopped and Brice vowed to do it, for Sofia, and any other girl he had hurt.

Lying on his pallet on the floor, Brice listened for Sofia's breathing to even out, letting him know she was asleep. He quietly rose and made his way to the door. One more glance in her direction and he crept out into the hallway, making sure the door locked behind him.

Looking quickly around to make sure he was alone, he headed to the little boys room that had started it all.

He stopped at the door and reached around for the flashlight he had hidden under the bed. he knew there had to be more clues in this room. He just felt it. Closing the main door, he decided to use the ceiling light and save his battery.

Not wanting to go into the torture room, he started looking around the bedroom. He pulled all the sheets off and saw urine stains on the mattress. He wasn't surprised, he would pee the bed too if he grew up like this boy had.

He went to the small wooden dresser that sat in the far corner of the room and emptied every drawer. He shook out every piece on clothing and still nothing. He pulled the drawers out all the way and checked for hidden places. Still nothing.

Walking back over to the bed, he grabbed the footboard and pulled with all his might. He could feel his muscles trembling as the heavy wooden bed slowly scooted across the carpeted floor thankful it wasn't hardwood floors. The screeching would have woke the entire house.

When the bed was sitting in the middle of the room, Brice sat on the edge, avoiding the yellow stains and wiped the sweat from his brow. When his

breathing stopped coming in gasps he walked around to the back of the headboard looking at the floor. No indications of the carpet having been moved or replaced.

Getting frustrated he leaned against the wall bent over with his hands on his knees. He heard a squeak from behind him and quickly stood up. Examining the wall closer he saw the faint outlines of a hidden panel. It was clear no one had checked it in a long time as the outline only showed because of the dust built up around it.

Going after the knife he had left behind from his last time here, he knelt down in front of the secret panel. Using the corner of the knife he pried the pane out and sneezed as the dust invaded his nose.

The wall piece came out completely and behind it was a door. It even had a small doorknob and hinges, rusty hinges at that. He turned the small knob and heard a click. Pulling slightly, the small door made a squeak as it came open. Using the flashlight, Brice peered inside.

It was a stack of papers and an old photograph. Everything was covered in dust and some of it was brittle. Carefully he took it all out and closed the small door. Going over to the desk in the opposite corner from the dresser, he sat down and turned on the lamp for a closer look.

“Oh my God!” he said out-loud to himself. “I don’t believe this.”

Putting the papers in a neat pile, he picked it all up carefully and walked back to Sofia’s room. Standing outside her door and pulling his phone from his back pocket, he called the only other person he could trust with this job, Luke.

Ring....ring....ring...

Tapping his foot impatiently, he waited for the answer he was hoping to get on the other end of the phone.

“Hello” he heard groggily from Luke.

“Hey, sorry I called so late but I need to talk to you privately.” Brice said in a hurried whisper.

Suddenly awake, “Is Sofia ok? Is she safe?” he asked shakily.

“Yes, physically she’s fine, but I’m not sure how much longer she’s gonna hold it together. I have an idea and I need your help to figure it out.”

“Anything, if it will help her. I hate seeing her like this. I always knew something happened, I just never thought it was so horrible. I will do anything to make it better for her.”

“Thanks Luke, I know you care about my sister. Just know that even though I like you, I will kick your ass if you hurt her, that’s a promise.”

“I understand. I know you probably don’t understand but I have loved her for a long time. She may have rejected me in school but I never gave up hope. Please don’t judge me by my past actions either. I was a bit of a player I’ll admit, but it was only to get over Sofia. I didn’t know then why so I wanted to forget her. Now I realize it was just her fear that pushed me away. I’m not gonna let that happen this time. She means too much to me and I’m here to stay unless she sends me away.”

Luke was embarrassed after his acclimation but he wasn’t sorry he said it. He wanted Brice to know he had good intentions and would never hurt Sofia.

“Well dude, after that speech all I can say is let’s get started.” Brice drew in a deep breath and began to tell Luke everything he had found out, even things he hadn’t told his sister. He knew she would be angry but he also knew she would be distraught at the same time. He was glad she was getting better, and he had no intention of letting her fall into depression again.

“That sounds like a good plan Brice, but it won’t be easy. If what you’re telling me is true, then it is much more complicated than we thought. I think it’s time to talk to your aunt. She is the only one who can confirm your theory.”

“I know. I just don’t want to hurt her. She has actually been really nice to us. I don’t think it was her that paid off the cops or whatever my uncle did to get Sean out of trouble. I bet she doesn’t even know about it.”

“I guess we’ll find out. I will be there tomorrow around five. You had better tell Sofia what’s going on before I get there or she is gonna be pissed at you.”

“What else is new?”

Laughing Luke hung up the phone.

Brice went back to bed dreading the day he had in store for tomorrow.

After breakfast, Brice asked Sofia if she wanted to go riding. He hoped it would soften the blow of what he had to tell her.

As they went along the path, Sofia noticed how quiet Brice was being. She knew he had something on his mind and she just hoped he would eventually open up.

They were sitting by the lake with the horses grazing behind them. She was watching him skip rocks across the water. Finally, the silence was too much.

“Damn it Bri, what’s wrong?”

He turned around and sighed. “I don’t want you to be mad at me but I went searching the room again last night.”

He walked over and sat down by her.

“Why would I be mad?”

Surprised he said, “I don’t know but I just thought you would be. I found some more info I wanted to share too. I called Luke last night and told him about it. he said I had to tell you too.”

“Well I agree you need to tell me but I'm not mad. I'm glad you did it because I can't go in there anymore. I'm sorry if that leaves you all the hard work but it's just the way I feel. I hope you understand.” She replied looking at the ground.

“No I don't mind anyway. It's not like you can move the furniture and find secret panels anyway.” He smiled.

“What? Secret panels? What are you talking about?”

Laughing he got up and went to the saddlebag hanging on the low tree branch, having taken the saddles off the horses so they could rest.

She watched as he carefully pulled a box from the bag and then open it up to reveal the contents.

“Well after you were asleep, I went to the boy's room. I moved the bed all the way to the middle of the room and found a panel on the wall. I pried it open and found all this stuff. It really old but it tells a lot. You're not gonna believe it until you see it yourself.”

He handed her the photo that was laying on the top of the pile. It was old and the color had faded to a pale almost yellow color. It was two children, little boys about 6 years old, twins it appeared. They were dressed exactly alike and sat together on a love seat. Neither of the boys were smiling but one was noticeably different. The look in his eyes was feral, like a wild animal. The other boy seemed much more timid, almost scared. You could defiantly tell which one was the dominate child.

She handed the photo back and Brice placed it on the lid of the box that was lying on the ground. It kept the photo from touching the damp ground, which would have ruined it.

Sighing, Brice handed her the next thing in the box it was a birth certificate. It was for twin boys, live births. Parents names were Esther and Melvin Moran, the boys were Shane Lee Moran and Sean Melvin Moran.

Sofia gasped when the truth hit her. Sean, her attacker had a twin. There was two of them. She picked up the picture again and looked closer at it. she knew without a doubt, which one was Sean.

“Are you ok sissy?” Brice asked her.

“Yea I think so. What else do you have?”

Carefully he picked up another piece of paper. This one was a death certificate. Shane Lee Moran died from exposure to cold when he was only seven. It must have been right after the picture was taken.

“Oh my God Brice. I don’t understand what all this means. Sean had a twin and he died. Maybe that’s why he was so evil.”

“No Sof, you haven’t seen it all yet. Don’t feel sorry for him until you read this.”

He handed her an old newspaper article.

On December the 25th, a seven-year-old boy was found dead after three days of searching. It is believed he wandered out into the below zero weather trying to find his missing cat.

Reports say the boy had no coat and only sock feet. He was found about 200 yards from the main house laying down on a bench by an empty flower garden. Shane is the oldest son of Esther and Melvin Moran. He is survived by a twin brother just thirty minutes younger than he. The Moran’s have no other surviving children.

Close friends of the family ask that no flowers be sent to the house. Instead, they request donations to the local children’s hospital. The cat in question was found alive in the kitchen pantry.

After reading the article, Sofia handed the paper back to her brother, tears in her eyes. “How awful. It must have been hard growing up without your twin. We’re not twins and I don’t know what I would do if I lost you.”

“I think you’re missing the point Sof. Read between the lines. Shane was older; he was timid if you look at the picture and he was looking for a cat that was locked in the pantry. Doesn’t it sound like he was lured outside? He wasn’t even that far from the house. I know the place they’re talking about. I use to play there when I was young. Its grown up and you can’t see it very well but the bench was always clean. The flowers were long ago overtaken with weeds but the bench never had any dirt or anything on it.”

Standing up and walking toward the lake, Sofia said softly, “You think Sean lured him out there. But why would he do that?” she asked looking at her brother.

“Simple, he is insane. And he is the younger sibling, which means Shane would get everything if their parents had died suddenly. It all makes since now.” Brice said almost to himself.

“But her was only seven Bri. How could he have thought of that then?”

“Maybe he had help.”

“From who?”

“I’m not sure but you haven’t seen everything yet.sit down and read this before you coma to any conclusions.”

Sighing Sofia plopped back down next to Brice. He handed her the next sheet of paper.

Another newspaper article only this one wasn’t as old as the other one. The picture next to the article was a very young maybe teenage Sean. Sofia viably cringed when she looked at it.

Young Sean Moran, 16, was released earlier this week when a surprise witness showed up at the police station to say he was with her the night a young girl was kidnapped and raped.

The girl (whose name is being withheld) was taken through her bedroom window last Friday night around midnight. She was said to have picked Sean from a line up. He was arrested and charged with kidnapping, sexual assault on a minor and molestation.

It's stated that Monday evening around 8pm, a miss Connie Morris came into the station and told the officer on duty she and Mr. Moran had been on a date the night in question and he couldn't have taken the child. When asked why she waited three days to come forward, she stated Sean's mother didn't like her and she was afraid to tell they had been sneaking around.

Further investigations proved miss Morris and Mr. Moran did indeed have a secret relationship and so all charges were dropped.

No further suspects have been found.

Sofia was speechless. So Sean had been doing this since he was a teen. Maybe before if he killed his brother.

"What's wrong with him? Why would he do these things?"

"Because he has no soul. He's evil Sofia and you need to understand that. You didn't do anything to lead him on. Now do you believe that? Can you forgive yourself?"

"Yes Bri, I can finally believe it wasn't my fault. It was all on him."

"Ok now there is one more paper left to look at."

Nervous, she took the last bit of info they could find on her attacker. What horrible thing is left to find out?

It was a deed. The deed to Melvin's Grove. It wasn't even very old. The date on it was after uncle Melvin had died. Skimming all the boring legal stuff, Sofia stopped on the owners name on the deed. It was hers.

Confused, she looked at her brother. "What does this mean Bri?"

Taking the paper and replacing it into the box with the rest he said, "I think it means you own this place sissy. We need to take it to a lawyer to make sure but it looks real. I asked Luke to get me the name of a lawyer he trusts. We'll meet with them later tonight." Looking at his watch Brice stands up, "we have to get back. Luke will be here in an hour to see aunt Esther."

Chapter 7

Sitting in the family room was tense. Aunt Esther had Carrie bring some drinks and finger sandwiches before dismissing her for the night.

Luke was being overly polite and very professional.

Sofia and Brice were sitting at the back of the room while Aunt Esther and Luke were by the coffee table making conversation. Everyone was wondering when he was going to get to the real reason he was there.

“Well detective Christoni, I knew you’re not here to talk about the weather so how can I help you this evening?” Aunt Esther finally said.

Scooting to the edge of the seat, Luke pulled some folders out of his briefcase and laid them on the coffee table.

“Well Mrs. Moran, I have come across some interesting documents and I need you to authenticate them for me.”

“Me, why me detective?”

“Because they are directly related to you and your family.” He said handing her the picture of the two small boys. “Who are these children ma’am?”

Tears formed at her eyes as she stared at the old yellowed photo. Looking over at Sofia and Brice, she spoke with a tremble in her voice. “They are my sons.” She sniffed. “Sean and Shane, but Shane died a few months after this was taken.”

Carefully taking the photo back, he then handed her the newspaper article and the boy’s death. “And this ma’am, can you tell me about this?”

She took the paper and skimmed the title before handing it back, “I don’t have to read that to know, it was about Shane’s death. He died of exposure while looking for his cat.” The way she said it, it almost sounded like reciting from memory. She glanced again in the direction of her niece and nephew.

“Ok ma’am, how about this one.” He handed her the one about the little girl who was kidnapped.

“That was mistaken identity was all? They cleared Sean’s name of any wrongdoing.” She almost dropped the paper on the table as if it was contaminated.

Finally, Luke brought out the file on Sofia’s rape. “Mrs. Moran, I know this is hard on you but I need you to be honest. Do you remember what happened to Sofia?”

Turning her head away, she nodded yes.

“Can you tell me anything that wasn’t in the report then ma’am? It’s very thin and files are missing. I know someone has removed information from it but I was hoping you would fill in the blanks.”

Now real tears rolled down the old woman’s cheeks. She looked over at Sofia, “I’m so sorry my child. I tried to help him. I tried to tell Melvin he was unstable but he wouldn’t listen. What my son did to you was unforgivable and I know it scared you for life, physically and mentally. I just hope you can forgive me for not stopping him sooner.”

Sofia got up and hurried to her aunt. She pulled her into a deep hug, “I don’t blame you. I have finally moved passed what happened to me I just want to see justice done for the others. Can you forgive me for trying to put him in jail because that is what I plan on doing.”

Patting Sofia on her back, “No dear, I understand and I want to help you. I have known since he was seven that Sean was evil. Since the night he killed his twin.”

The whole place went quiet. Even Luke lost his business demeanor when his mouth dropped open.

Composing himself, he pulled out the newspaper article again. “Mrs. Moran, why did you say he killed his brother?”

Sighing Aunt Esther visibly slumped down in her chair. "I know because I found Shane locked in the freezer. He didn't wonder outside to find his cat," tears were welling up in her eyes as she continued, "Sean lured him into the freezer by telling him there was a surprise for him hidden under the racks. If I hadn't been so blind to my own child, I would have found him sooner and saved him."

"How do you know for sure. Maybe he accidentally locked himself in there." Brice asked, speaking for the first time since Luke arrived.

"The freezer door locks from the outside with a rod. I saw Sean putting the rod through the hole and asked him what he was doing. He said father had asked him to. Sometimes Melvin would give the boys small jobs so they could feel like they were helping you see. Anyway, I didn't think anything of it at the time. Later that night, I went to check on the boys from bed and Shane's bed had a covered lump so I assumed he was asleep. Sean smiled at me and I left to retire for the night.

"The next morning when I went to wake the boys up for breakfast before school, I found the lump was just bunched up covers and pillows. Sean was still asleep but I was so scared I yanked him up and asked him where is brother was. He said he didn't know but I didn't believe him." She started crying then, "God forgive me but I slapped him. I struck my own child."

Luke placed his hand gently on her knee, "Ma'am, I know this is hard but I need to know the rest."

Composing herself some she continued, "I called their father to the room and he checked everywhere. Under the bed in the closet, even in the tub. We just couldn't find him. It was just before daylight when we heard the scream. It was our cook, Greta. When we ran downstairs into the kitchen, I froze. Greta was standing there with Shane in her hands. He had frozen to death during the night."

No one knew what to say. We had considered the possibility of Sean hurting his brother but it was just a thought. To hear it detailed was unbelievable.

Luke quietly spoke to the visibly distraught woman. "You need to tell us the rest. How was it he was found in your garden?"

Wiping her nose very lady-like on a handkerchief, Aunt Esther continued. "That was Melvin's idea. He knew, like I did it had to have been Sean only he was sure it was an accident. I didn't know what to think so I just let him take over." She stopped to sniff again, "He carried the tiny body and placed him on the bench and came back inside to call the police. After a few days, an officer found him. The cat was an afterthought. He had to have a reason to be wondering out in the cold." Standing to walk to the window, she sighed, "After that, I didn't trust Sean. You see, I found a note he had written to Shane that day. The note said their father had something for them and Sean found it. He wanted to show it to Shane in the freezer. I know that was a ploy to get him in there to lock the door. Then, Sean went to bed like nothing happened. He never even cried over his brother. Not one tear."

"I can't imagine how you have coped all these years Mrs. Moran. To keep all this inside and yet still raising the boy. What I want to know is why you think him capable of killing his own brother but not the girl. You honestly can't think she was mistaken do you?"

"No detective, I don't. However, my husband just couldn't believe his son could do something horrible. He paid the girl to say they were together and paid off the officer on the case. Then it all went away and Sean was sent to boarding school for his last two years of school."

"What about Sofia's case? Do you know what happened to her files?"

"That I don't know. If Melvin did anything with that, he didn't tell me. I tried to get him to see the truth but he just said Sofia was at fault and she seduced Sean."

Jumping up Brice was livid. His face turned red. "That's not true. She was only thirteen and she had never been with a guy. It was all Sean and if I ever see him I will kill him." He stomped out of the room and we could hear his footsteps going up the stairs.

"I don't blame him." Esther said to no one in particular. "I would feel the same way if it was my sister."

Slowly she moved back over to her chair. Luke helped her to sit and then returned to his briefcase.

"I have one more document for you ma'am. We're not sure if this one is legitimate but we are going to have it checked out by a lawyer. You may not know either but you are free to look at it."

He laid the document on the coffee table and Esther picked it up. She laid it back down with no surprise on her face. "Yes it's authentic."

"How do you know?" Sofia asked.

"Because I filed it myself. Right after my husband died."

"But why Aunt Esther? Why would you put it in my name?"

"So Sean couldn't get it. After what he did to you, he doesn't deserve this place. I know it may hold more memories than you can handle and want to sell it. If you choose that, I will understand. All I ask is that I get to spend the rest of my days here."

Sitting on the floor by her aunt's feet Sofia laid her head on the lady's lap. "I would never make you leave your home. It's your place not mine and it will always be so."

"Regardless, after I'm gone, it will be yours to with as you please." She stroked Sofia's hair gently. "I always wanted a daughter." She said quietly.

Brice had finally calmed down and came back, “what did I miss?” he asked.

“The house really is mine Bri.” His sister told him.

“All the same, I think we should have an unbiased lawyer take a look at this.” He said as he placed it in his case. Esther just smiled.

“Now for the hard stuff Mrs. Moran.”

Frowning she stopped stroking Sofia and looked at Luke. “What do you mean sir?”

Sofia and Brice looked at each other and knew what was coming.

“Well ma’am, the kids here found a room in your house that had a secret door in the back. When they went inside, they found several things that concerned them. Do you know the room in question?”

Dropping her head, “Yes I know the room. It was Sean’s after his brother died. You don’t have to ask, yes I know what when on in there. Melvin hired a psychiatrist to help Sean. He felt the boy was depressed. The man who called himself a doctor was just as crazy as my son. He tied him to that chair for hours and let him scream. Then he would lock him in the back room and leave him with no food for days. I tried to stop it but Melvin wouldn’t let me interfere. He said it was just making a man out of him. It went on for a few years until Sean got big enough to fight back. Then he beat the doctor with a bat until he was unconscious and ran away. He stayed gone for a few weeks and then turned back up dirty and hungry. Melvin decided he was a man and started to reach him the business. The doctor recovered soon after and was paid to keep his mouth shut. I just kept to myself most days. Melvin and Sean were inseparable. They did everything together, even women.”

All three of us gasped at that last statement.

Luke recovered first and asked the dreaded question, “What do you mean ma’am?”

“They would pick up a girl in town and bring her here. I knew about it but I was afraid to say anything. Melvin hadn’t been affectionate in years. Mostly I didn’t know or want to know what was going on but sometimes I could hear screaming. Once I decided to find out why.”

Esther was fidgeting with the handkerchief still in her hand. She got a faraway look in her eyes as she began to tell the story.

“I was in the sitting room when I heard them come in the front door. I knew they had been to town and that they had been drinking at the pub. When I heard a giggling sound, I knew they had another girl with them. I tried to pretend it didn’t bother me but it did. I just kept on sewing my dress and ignored the noises from the front room. It got quiet after a bit so I was able to forget they were there. That’s when I heard her scream. I jumped and stuck my finger with the needle. The screaming stopped so I began my sewing again. A few minutes later I heard someone shout help. I couldn’t pretend anymore. I had to see what was going on.

“I walked up the stairs to the sound of a muffled cry. It was in the room Sean had spent his preteen years. I knew if Melvin knew I was there, he would be angry so I hid in the shadows. When I saw the men, they were too busy to notice me so I crept closer until I could see what was going on.

“I couldn’t believe my eyes. The girl was face down on an old mattress with her arm and legs tied to each corner. Melvin was walking around her with a whip from the stables and Sean...he...he was taking her from behind. She was bleeding and crying. I couldn’t move because I was afraid. Sean stood up and the girl whimpered. Melvin hit her back with the whip. She already had red welts from previous strikes but he just smiled. Sean came around to the woman’s head. He loosened her arms enough for her to sit up. He walked up to her exposing himself and told her to please him or she would be hit again. I didn’t want to watch but I couldn’t move. As she was....you know...to him, he grabbed the back of her head and said deeper as he pushed himself further into her mouth. I could see she was gagging and choking but he didn’t stop. Just kept on until he....finished. I was able to sneak out then because they laid her

down again so their backs were to me. As I was walking away, I heard Melvin say “my turn” and that’s when I ran out. I packed a bag and left that day.”

Brice looked up from staring at the floor then in shock. “But you’re here now.”

“Melvin came for me a few days later. I was staying at a hotel near the city and he found me. When he asked me what I was doing, I told him what I had seen. I thought he would let me leave so I wouldn’t tell anyone but I was wrong. He grabbed me up off the bed and slung me to the ground. He said if I had taken care of his needs then he wouldn’t have to hire someone. I told him it wasn’t the girls it was what he did to them. What he let Sean do. He said it was none of my business and I should be a good wife smile at dinner parties and leave the rest to him and his son.

“I told him I wouldn’t allow that sort of behavior in my house and he hit me. He said it was his house and I had no say. I said fine I wouldn’t be back but he tied me up and carried me there. I was strapped into Sean’s old chair for days with nothing to eat or drink. I couldn’t even get up to use the bathroom. I don’t know how long it was because I kept blacking out but Melvin started to bring me water and bread. I think once a day. After a few weeks, he would let me out of the chair to bathe and change. A few more weeks and I was the perfect housewife again. I knew my place.”

“That’s just sick!” Brice yelled out of nowhere. “How could he do something like that? Why didn’t you just leave again?”

Luke pulled Brice to the side and whispered to him. Brice calmed down and went to sit by his sister.

“I know what you must think of me son but I had nothing. Everything was in Melvin’s name. It was common back then for the husband to do that. Women didn’t have many rights. I wish I had been stronger but I was weak. After that one incident, they men didn’t bring the girls home anymore but there were some nights they didn’t come home until very late. I can only assume they had another place for their disgusting ways. I wanted to go to the police but Melvin

owned so many of them I didn't know who to trust. I was stuck in a house I hated with a man I despised and no way out. Melvin got sick a few years later and stopped going out with Sean. Then you kids started coming every summer and it all seemed to be ok. I thought it was over until Sofia. If I had known how Sean was, I wouldn't have put her in danger. Then when Sean disappeared and Melvin died, everything came to me. That's when I put it in Sofia's name."

Esther looked defeated. Like her whole world had collapsed and she was all alone. Sofia went up and hugged her tightly. "I'm so glad you could tell us the truth. I know it was hard but now we can get justice for the other girls Sean has hurt. I don't want to ask but do you know where Sean is or how we can find him?"

"I don't know where he is but I might be able to help you find him. When he runs out of money, he'll send word and I meet him to give it to him. The last few times I tried to get him to come home but he refused saying everyone was out to get him. It's almost time to meet him for more money now. About every other month, I go to the city and he finds me. I will help you find him. It's the right thing to do."

"Then we need a plan and I think I know what we need to do." Luke said.

Chapter 8

As Sofia and Brice walked around the mall, Kim ran up and jumped into his arms squealing. "I missed you so much baby. I don't know how I can be away from you again."

Laughing at her younger brother's blushing face, Sofia headed toward the food court to give them some alone time.

Weaving around the crowded table, she spotted an empty booth near the back and headed in that direction. She couldn't take her mind off Luke's plan to lure Sean out of hiding.

Thinking back on the conversation she and Luke had after Aunt Esther went to bed; she got chills down her spine. She agreed it was the only thing they could do but she was anxious. She had yet to tell Brice what was going on since he clearly wouldn't like it but it was the only way.

Sofia had to be the bait.

Sitting alone in the booth, she suddenly got the feeling of being watched. Jerking her head up and looking around, she saw nothing. It was just her nerves she told herself, she was worried about the plan, and even more worried to tell her brother about the plan.

As she sat alone lost in thought, the booth slightly jarred and Sofia jumped.

"Chill sissy, it's just us." Brice said with a smile on his face.

"Sorry Bri, I'm just a little on edge."

"Aren't we all?" he replied.

Looking back down at the napkin on the table, Sofia cleared her throat before saying very quietly, "I'm going to be the bait to catch Sean."

"What?" Brice replied.

Knowing she had to be brave about it she looked in his eyes, "I'm going to be the bait to trap Sean."

"No fucking way!" he shouted causing people to look at us.

Blushing Kim scooted closer to Brice, "Calm down baby, you know it has to be this way. We talked about this last night."

Confused Sofia looked at Kim, "Excuse me?" she asked.

Kim sighed, "He," pointing at Brice, "called me last night and told me what was going on. I suggested that we need bait to get Sean and it should be you or me because we know what he is capable of. That way we would be prepared. He didn't agree at first but then after some convincing he said himself it might be the only way."

"I was lying so you would stop talking about it. I never thought Luke would put Sofia in danger like this."

"It's ok Bri, I want to do this. I need to take back my control. If not I'll feel helpless forever. I need to do this, please."

"Tell me how you and Luke plan on doing this?"

"Basically, I just go out unprotected and let him see me. We already think he's in town. When I told Luke about the texts you didn't send, luring me out into the back yard; he said it was most likely Sean. Every since we got here you have been by my side so he couldn't have access to me. What Luke and me want to do is for me to be alone more. Give Sean the chance to mess up and show himself. Make him think we don't believe he's here."

"Ok, but I'm gonna be with you."

"Well that kinda defeats the purpose don't you think?" Kim said.

"Yes it does." Sofia agreed.

“I mean in the shadows. He’ll never know I’m around. We’ll come separate and not even sit together. That way if he shows up I’ll get him and you’ll be safe.”

“I have to admit I’d feel safer knowing you were close by but he cannot see you. It would ruin everything.”

“Ok, I’ll be careful. We will finally catch him sissy. He is gonna pay for what he did to you.”

As the three of them headed out to the parking lot, they didn’t notice someone lurking in the shadows, someone watching them from afar.

As Sofia and Brice drove off toward The Grove, Kim went back inside to finish her shift at the coffee shop, not knowing she was being followed.

He waited back outside in the parking lot until she showed up again a little after sunset. She didn’t look around for anyone. She was too distracted searching for something in her purse. It would be so easy to snatch her up right now he thought. No one would look for her for hours. They could have all night together. As he crept closer to her car, he heard someone running on the pavement. He stopped to see who it was before he continued to his target.

“Kim, wait.” The boy said out of breath from running. “You forgot your keys.” He said handing her the small item in his hand.

“Oh wow, thanks Keith. I might need those.” She said laughing.

Leaning over to catch his breath, the boy answered, “Your welcome. Get home safe now.”

The figure backed up slowly as Kim opened her door and waved at her companion. He knew the moment was gone and he would have to wait for another night.

The ride home was tense between Sofia and Brice. He didn't want her to be in danger but knew their options were limited. She didn't want her brother to get hurt trying to help her, but she knew she couldn't do it alone.

Lying on the bed, wide-awake, Sofia looks over the edge to see if Brice was asleep. It was easy since he still refused to leave her room and was beside her on the floor.

Without opening his eyes he said, "Why are you staring at me?"

"Sorry, I can't sleep. What about you?"

Opening his eyes wide he said, "Not a wink. Want to talk?"

Sitting up and crossing her legs Indian style she smiled, "Ok, what about?"

"You being the bait, that's what."

"Aww come on, you know we don't have a choice."

"I know; it's not that sissy, I think I have a better plan than just hanging out at the mall all the time."

Suddenly and unexpectedly, she became tense, "Ok, what?"

"Well, I know Aunt Esther, is waiting for him to call her for money, but what if he sees her giving us money. That should piss him off and make him show himself to claim what he thinks is his."

Thinking about it she said, "That actually sounds like a great idea. We can go to the bank and let him see her handing us cash. Then we go wild spending it and he thinks we are using her for her money. That is brilliant."

Smiling up at her, "I know I am. Just can't believe it took you so long to figure it out." Stand up and sitting down by Sofia, he put his arm around her shoulders. "I know it's going to be hard but it will make everything better in the end."

Laying her head on his shoulder she sighed, "I know but it still scares me. I'm afraid he's going to hurt me again, or someone I love. I don't know if I could handle losing you too."

"You won't lose me.," he said to her but knowing it was a possibility. He would die to protect her if he had too.

The next morning they explained the plan to Esther. She was thrilled.

They looked at each other shocked. How can she be thrilled when they are after her son?

"I can't believe I'm going out on the town with two young ones. I haven't been anywhere but the doctor or senior center in so long; this is just the spark I need." She smiled, "Besides, the money is technically Sofia's anyway."

So when the plan was set, they all went to prepare. They were going to start that afternoon. The quicker they get out there, the quicker they get Sean off the street.

Sofia called Luke and filled him in. he decided to have some undercover officers close by.

"You know it could take some time before he shows. I don't want you to take away from your open cases."

"This is my first priority Sofia," Luke said, "Your case is top priority. So when is it going down?"

"This afternoon at the Prattville Community Bank. We are making a big show of it, and then we go spending. Me one-way, and Brice the other. I hope that Sean will find out and follow me. Then we can get him."

"Ok just remember that even though you might feel that way, you will not be alone during any of it."

“I trust you Luke.” That was the hardest statement Sofia ever made to someone not related to her.

As they entered the bank, the elderly guard smiled at Esther with more enthusiasm than was necessary. When she smiled back and said hello his eyes lit up. Brice thought maybe there was more than friendship there. Ant other day he might have pursued the subject.

Sofia opted to stay outside on the hope that Sean was around. It worried Brice but he knew the cops were out there somewhere. It also gave Aunt Esther a reason to give her money out where he could see it.

If anyone doubted Esther before this day, no one will again. She made a perfect show of handing giving Sofia her money and even hugged her tight.

“I am so glad you two kids have come to live with me. I have been so alone and now I have someone to dote on again. All that I have is yours too.” she said as she held Sofia.

It was perfect.

Brice runs off down the sidewalk toward an arcade to meet Kim. He waved at them as he walked away.

“Come Sofia, I’ll have the driver drop you off anywhere you want. Then you can just call him to come back and get you later. Is that ok?”

“Yes Aunt Esther that would be nice. Just drop me off at the mall if you don’t mind?”

“No trouble at all. How about later I can come back and we can have dinner in town.”

Grabbing her into a hug Sofia smiled, “That would be wonderful.”

In the shadows of the alley across the street, someone watched the whole scene with interest.

“Is this real? Has mother replaced me with these two? A slut and even worse, a jock. This is not how it’s supposed to be.” He will make them pay.

In his evil mind, he makes a decision. He will not wait any longer. He will not let them take his inheritance, his money. He has waited years for his mother to die. He knows she is not in good health and that her time is short. Now the slut and the jock have shown up to try to claim what’s his.

No, he must regain control. He must be the last one.

He knew what he had to do. He had to kill them both.

Kim pulled up to the public parking lot and waited. Brice is supposed to meet her here after the big bank scene. She knew he was to head to the arcade. Then he was going to sneak out the back and be here waiting. He was late.

It was hot in the car so she got out and sat on the trunk. She was painting her fingernails when the stranger showed up. She didn’t even see his face. All she knew was a sudden pain in her head then it was black.

Chapter 9

Where is she, Brice thought to himself as he walked the parking lot? He knew he was late but she wouldn't have left without telling him. Kim knew how important today was for our plan.

He walked around the circles checking every silver mustang he saw until he finally came to the right one.

Sighing in relief, he headed toward the car. "Baby, I was afraid you had given up on me..." he started, and then realized she wasn't in the car. He saw a small note taped to the steering wheel.

Smiling he reached for the door handle, "So you did give up huh. Well I will find you where ever you are." He said to himself as he grabbed the note.

Gasping at the words written in block letters on the paper Brice fell to his knees. "No, no, no....it can't be." He cried out in pain

He reached for his phone and saw he had no service in the lot. Running back down the three floors he had just walked up to get out of all the interferences, he was panting as he hit the outside. Looking again to see if it was ready, he quickly called Sofia.

"Hello brother, how is Kim?"

"Missing sissy, he has her" he yelled into the phone.

"What do you mean he has her?" she asked tensing up.

"I was late meeting her and when I found her car all that was there was a note saying he had her," crying into the phone he pleaded, "Please help me sissy."

"Ok Brice, first call Luke. We need to get on this now, before he has time to..."

“Brice didn’t ask what she was about to say. He knew and yet he didn’t want to hear it. He couldn’t stand the thought of that guy touching his girl.

“Luke, Sean has Kim.” He cried into the phone.

“Slow down Brice tell me what happened. Did he follow you?”

“No he took her before I got to her. He left a note.”

“Ok, bring it to the station. I’ll meet you there. Maybe we can get some information from it.”

Running in the direction of the police station Brice tried to stop the tears and be strong. He knew he had to be calm if he was going to find her.

Without hesitating, he yanked open the door to see Luke and Sofia inside waiting for him. She had tears in her eyes too. Brice couldn’t help but remember the horrible things Sean had done to his sister and hoped he didn’t have the chance to do that to Kim. It sounded selfish even in his head and he felt a little guilty.

Some guy he didn’t know came up and asked for the paper. Looking at Luke nod, he handed it to him. The man had white gloves on his hands and quickly took the paper to a metal table in the back. Luke, Sofia, and Brice followed.

“What exactly does the note say?” Luke asked, making Brice look away from the paper and at him instead.

“It said ‘You took what was mine and now I take what’s yours. When you see her again, she will be just like your slutty sister, Sean Moran. What do you think that means?’”

Luke glanced at Sofia before answering, “Nothing good Brice, nothing good.”

They all waited in silence then for the man to check the paper for a clue. Brice noticed Sofia was standing close to Luke and he had his hand lightly on her back. He wanted to be happy for her but he couldn't stop thinking about what that bastard was doing to his lovely and kind girlfriend. If he touched her at all, he would kill him with his own two hands.

They all jumped when the door opened. Esther was standing there looking very uncomfortable. She had tears in her eyes and was holding her purse against her chest.

Without thinking about it, Sofia went up to her and helped her to a chair. "Are you ok?" she asked her quietly.

"He called me."

Brice jerked his head around. "What?"

"He called me as I was leaving to come here, after officer Christoni had called me. He said he saw me giving away his money. He was very angry. He said he was take yours if you took what was his." She dropped her head and started sobbing into her hands, "It's all my fault. I should have killed him when I knew what he was. He has no soul; he is evil just like his father."

Brice came over then, "It's not your fault aunt Esther, its mine. It was my idea to piss him off. It was my idea to split up. I was late meeting her. Don't cry, you did nothing wrong."

She reached out and patted his hand, "Thank you Brice, but it wasn't your fault either. It worked though; he wants me to meet him for money. Only he wants it all this time. Every penny we have."

"Where are you supposed to meet?" Luke asked calmly.

"At an old warehouse building Melvin owned. I didn't know about it until after he died. I think it was where he...."

No one said anything. We knew what he did there, with Sean.

Luke went about calling some cops to come in to help with the raid on the warehouse. He didn't use the cop radio's he said they could be monitored to easy; he called everyone if them on his cell phone.

An hour later, we had about ten cops ready to go at a moment notice. Brice was staring out the window and Esther had left with her driver to go back to the bank. If Sean was watching, he needed to think she was actually getting the money.

The door opened and Esther walked in carrying a large purse that was bulging at its sides. She handed it to Luke and he looked inside.

He looked up at her and grinned, "How much?"

"Five thousand." She replied.

Everyone looked confused until Luke pulled out a few of the bills, they were all ones. Laughing he turned around, "She got it all in ones."

Brice even smiled at her ingeniousness.

"Well he said to fill up my purse and bring it to him. He didn't say I had to use big bills." Aunt Esther said matter of factly.

Everyone laughed and the tension broke.

"Ok everyone we need to be sure we have it all planned out. I don't want any mistakes here." Luke became serious again.

Kim was huddled in a corner of the room with her hands and legs tied behind her. It was dark and dirty and smelled like a garbage bin. Kim didn't know where she was but she knew she had to get away. If this was the same one who had hurt Sofia, then she could be in a lot of trouble.

She had been working on the ties around her wrists for a while now and the ropes were off. If she could get her ankles undone then maybe she could get away. She heard him walking toward her and froze.

“I'm glad to see your awake. I like my girls to be awake for me, it's much more fun.” The man said as he got closer to her.

Kim whimpered at his words and tried to back forgetting she was in a corner.

“Oh are you scared? Don't be scared little girl, you are really going to enjoy this, I promise.” He pulled a whip out from behind his back.

Kim screamed when he pulled his arm back to hit her. She brought her leg up and with all her might; she hit him square in his manhood.

He doubled over as he hollered out. She took the opportunity to run out of the room. Stopping for only a second she saw a door leading outside. If she could get out, her speed would help her get away.

She heard him grunting as he got up, “You'll pay for that bitch!” she heard him say as she ran outside.

The sun was going down. She knew that once it got dark she would be helpless. Heading toward the road, she took off. If she could get to a phone or stop a car then she would be free.

An hour later Kim was walking toward the police station. She couldn't believe she had made it. It was a miracle. There were a lot of cars sitting around but the station was quiet. Where were the cops?

With her feet hurting from running in flats, she slowly walked up the stairs. She saw Sofia and Brice sitting behind a desk. They both looked up when the door opened.

“Kim?” Brice said then ran up and picked her up. “Oh my God. Are you ok?” he sat her down and looked at her carefully, “Did he hurt you? Did he...?”

“No he didn’t. I kicked him in the balls and ran.”

“That’s my girl!” Brice exclaimed.

Putting her hand softly on Kim’s shoulder, Sofia asked, “Where is he?”

“I don’t know now, but he had me at some old abandoned house. It was just outside of town going down Kirkman road.”

Her hand going to her mouth Sofia gasp, “That’s our house. The one mom and dad bought before they died. Grandpa owned it a long time ago and dad said he wanted to fix it up.” She dropped down in to a chair, “How did he know about that house?”

“I’m more worried about Luke and the others; they are going the wrong way. They think he’s at the old warehouse.”

“What?” Kim asked.

“Sean, he called our aunt and said to bring him some money. He said he would be at a warehouse somewhere on the other side of town.”

“We have to warn them. It could be a trap.” Sofia cried. She just found Luke and she didn’t want to lose him.

“We can take my car.” Kim offered.

“Give me the keys and stay here,” Brice said to Kim, then turned to Sofia, “you too.”

“No way” and “Not a chance” came from both girls.

“I’m not gonna argue.”

“Good,” Kim said jumping up, “I’ll drive.”

We ran out the door toward the public parking lot. Brice made it first and we all had to catch our breath before getting in.

“Give me the keys Brice.” Kim said.

“You don’t know where it is. I’ll drive.” He said as he jumped in. lucky he had a spare key for Kim’s car or we would be stuck.

The drive to the warehouse was quick with Brice at the wheel. He wasn’t supposed to drive at his age but dad had let him since he was thirteen.

We slowed down to a crawl as we approached the police cars parked on the side of the road. He pulled in behind Esther’s limo and turned off the engine.

“I guess we walk from here.” he said.

Sofia could feel her heart racing as she got out of the car. Maybe she shouldn’t go with them. Maybe it was too soon to confront her past.

“I think I'm going to stay here. I don’t think I can face this.”

“It’s ok sissy. I’ll be with you the whole way. We know he’s not here so your safe. Remember, Luke is up there.” He pointed to the big metal building.

Taking a deep but comforting breath, she nods.

Slowly they walk up to the huge door in the front of the building that is already open. The cops must have done it.

Walking through the big doors, they caught the scent of death. It was everywhere.

Looking around it was clear this wasn’t the only room. There were doors leading to several other rooms off from this one.

Going toward the voices, we found the others in a room off from the main room.

Esther was off with her driver in the corner softly crying. Three more cops were wearing white gloves and looking the chains that were coming out of the wall.

Luke was off by himself on the phone. The kids walked straight to him. When he saw Sofia he hurried over, "I'll have to call you back....yea I'll keep you informed." He hung up the phone.

He pulled her into a hug and she didn't resist. Then he looked at Kim, "Are you ok? How did you get away?"

"I got myself untied and kicked him in the balls." Kim told him shrugging.

"Where were you? We looked this whole place over."

"I was on the other side of town. On Kirkman road in an old house. I was never here."

"Well at least your safe now." Luke replied never letting go of Sofia.

"What is this place Luke?" she asked quietly.

"It's Sean's home apparently. It looks like he has been living here a long time, maybe a year or more. It's also where he took the girls Mrs. Moran told us about. Why he wanted her to meet him here is beyond me, unless he wanted her to find this stuff. Maybe he wanted to show her what he was. He's long gone now but we have a lot to go on. The forensics team will be here for hours."

They walked over to the areas the men were concentrating on, Luke bent down in front of Esther. "Mrs. Moran, I think you should go home. I'm gonna put a look out for Sean and a car on your house. He might have gone over the edge when he saw these two," pointing at Brice and Sofia, "with you at the bank. It was too much, but look," he pointed to Kim, "she's safe. She managed to get away unharmed."

She agreed to be escorted home and Brice and Kim were going to follow.

“I will bring Sofia home myself. I want to talk to you, Kim, about anything you might have seen or heard.” Luke told them before they headed for the door. “Just think about it until I get there. Any little thing no matter how insignificant it might seem.”

Chapter 10

When Sofia and Luke arrived at the house, Kim had already helped Esther top bed. The day had taken a lot out of her.

Brice and Kim were sitting in the family room and he has started a fire to stop Kim's constant chills. She didn't tell them they weren't from cold but from the memory of what almost happened. She knew she would have to tell Luke but she didn't want Brice to know, he would look at her differently. She was afraid he would leave her.

Sofia and Luke walked in with his arm around her waist. Brice noticed but didn't act like it so as not to make her uncomfortable. It had taken her a long time to get close to anyone and he wasn't going to ruin it.

Sitting down beside each other on the couch, Luke leaned out with his elbows on his knees. He sighed loudly and looked at Kim softening his face. "How are you Kim, really?"

"I'm ok. He didn't really do anything to me like he did the other girls. I got away too soon." She dropped her eyes to the ground.

"Tell me everything you remember, starting from the garage."

Fidgeting Kim looked at the fire now blazing she began. "Well, I was supposed to meet Brice at the garage. He was late and I was hot sitting in the car so I decided to wait on the hood. I was distracted and didn't hear anyone come up behind me but something hit me and I blacked out." she rubbed her head and found a small lump. It was sore but nothing serious.

"When I woke up I was in an old house with my hands and feet tied. It smelled rotten and it was dark. I knew he didn't know I was awake so I stayed still. He was talking to himself the whole time. He seemed to think someone else was with him. Someone he called Shaney. I kept pulling at the ropes until he walked over to me. He reached down, touched my breast, and squeezed them, hurting me but I stayed quiet anyway. Then he answered the invisible person again saying he could touch me if he wanted too since I was his now."

Kim stopped to look at Brice. He was looking at the floor but she could see anger in his eyes.

“I'm sorry Brice; I didn't want him to touch me. Please don't be mad.” She said quietly.

“What?” he said looking in her eyes, “Why would I be mad at you? You didn't do anything just like Sofia didn't do anything. That man is sick and I want to kill him”

“Really, you're not mad at me?”

Leaning over to hold her hand, he shook his head no and smiled.

“Ok then. Anyway, after he finished arguing with himself about whether or not he could touch me, he went into another room and talked to himself some more only it was about Sofia. He called her the slut and Brice is the jock. I only heard him use names once. I'm sorry Sof.”

“It's ok Kim, I know it wasn't you.”

Smiling she continued. I kept working with the ropes since they weren't on very strong. I managed to get them off and started on my ankles before he saw I was awake. He came walking slowly toward me and said I'm glad you are awake, it's more fun that way.”

Sofia involuntarily shivered at the memory of those words.

“By then I had my feet free but it was so dark he didn't see. As he reached down for me, I kicked him as hard as I could in the family jewels and ran out the door. I walked to the police station and found these two,” she pointed at Sofia and Brice, “and you know the rest.”

At that, she slumped slightly and Brice pulled her to him. “If that all I think she needs to lay down.” He asked Luke.

“No, that’s everything I need. Kim, thank you and please remember that nothing you did today is your fault. Sean is a predator and you have nothing to be ashamed of. If you think of anything else though, please call me.”

Nodding to Luke, Brice took her hand and led her to the stairs. Sofia assumed he was actually going to sleep in his own room tonight.

Sofia walked Luke to the front door. She was nervous and yet excited at the same time. This was new to her and she wasn’t sure what Luke expected. Did he want to date her? Did he just feel sorry for the girl who never had a boyfriend?

When they reached the door, Luke carefully held her hands. He smiled at her as she looked into his eyes. She wanted to kiss him but didn’t know how to ask. She didn’t know if he wanted the same.

“Sofia, I know you have had a hard time with what happened to you. I know you have trust issues with men, but please know that I will never ask you to do anything you don’t want to. I want to see you more but I won’t push you. All you have to do is call me. I really like you, and I’m willing to take it slow. Just know that when you’re ready, I’ll be here.”

With that, Sofia got up her courage. She leaned up on her tiptoes and put her lips closer to his very slowly, giving him the chance to say no. When he didn’t she continued until their lips barely touched.

Luke took control of the kiss and not knowing what to do she let him. He started out soft, and then he deepened it. Putting his arm around her waist, he pulled her closer. Her arms went around his neck and pulled his head even closer.

Going across her bottom lip with his tongue, she opened her mouth letting him explore her mouth fully. She met his tongue with her own and softly moaned. She felt butterflies in her stomach and other feelings she had never felt before but wanted to fully explore.

Pulling away from her lips and going down her jaw, Sofia lifted her chin and he started kissing her neck. She felt him softly suck and nibble as he ran his tongue down the sensitive area between her neck and shoulder, she groaned in his ear and he smiled.

Pulling her even closer to his body, Sofia felt his erection on her thigh. Her body stiffened involuntarily and she started to breathe fast.

Realizing he had went past her comfort zone Luke pulled back. "It's ok Sofia. I won't hurt you. Please calm down before you hyperventilate. Just calm down baby. I'm sorry I didn't mean to go too far and scare you."

Closing her eyes, Sofia wills herself to calm down. She knows this is Luke not Sean. She just had a flashback for a second and needed to pull herself together.

"I'm sorry Luke. I don't know what came over me."

"Its ok sweetheart, I know you went through hell and I'm sorry I got caught up and scared you. I will try to be more careful."

"No Luke, you didn't do anything. I wanted to kiss you. I want you to hold me like a normal girl. I want to be closer to you. I just don't know how." Turning away from him she whispered, "I don't know how to be like your other girlfriends."

Stunned, Luke walked around so she was facing him, "You don't have to be like anyone else Sofia. I want you just the way you are. I won't lie, I have had other girlfriends, but none of them ever held up to you. You're the one I always wanted."

Smiling she looked up into his eyes, "You always wanted me?"

He nodded and pulled her into a hug. Putting his fingers gently under her chin he brought her lips close to his, "You are the only girl I ever loved." Then he slowly bent down and pressed his lips on hers.

She closed her eyes and reveled in the sensation as she put her hands around his neck. She had never before felt such a connection with a man. The fear she first felt subsided into bliss. She deepened the kiss and ran her tongue across his bottom lip.

Smiling he opened his mouth and let her explore. When he could see she wasn't pulling away, he put his arm around her waist and pulled her tight against his body.

She again felt his erection against her hip. This time she didn't feel afraid, she knew she was safe. Instead, she ran her hand down his chest until she reached the top of his pants. Hesitating for only a second, she tugged on his shirt.

Realizing her intentions, Luke pulled back long enough to take it off and toss it in a nearby chair. He pulled her back to him and began kissing her neck. Sofia leaned her head back giving him full access. She ran her hand down his perfectly formed abs, memorizing every curve and line.

Smiling at the sensation of her light touch Luke groaned. He trailed his hands down her back, stopping just above her butt. Slightly tugging her top to see if she would say yes, he waited.

Taking a step back away from Luke Sofia, blushed then pulled off her shirt and let it fall to the floor. Luke pulled her back and whispered into her ear, "You are the most beautiful creature I have ever seen."

Making a decision she thought would never happen, Sofia grabbed both of their shirts and pulled Luke by the hand upstairs. Stopping at her door, she held her finger to her lips for Luke to stay quiet.

She peeked inside to see Brice and Kim on the floor by her bed. Closing the door quietly, she asked, "Can we go to your place? Brice is in my room."

"If that's what you really want to do. I don't want to push you."

Tossing him his shirt, she smiled. "Yes it's what I want. Just let me get a bag and leave Brice a note so he doesn't worry."

"Ok," he said, kissing her gently, "I'll be waiting downstairs."

Getting out of Luke's car, Sofia was surprised to realize she wasn't scared. Not once since her rape had she spent any time alone with a man that she wasn't scared but with Luke, it was different. She only felt this safe with her brother, and yet here she was, alone with a man, and wanting to be here.

He took her bag and offered her his arm. Smiling she accepted it. Luke lived in an apartment not far from the police station. It was on the third floor with no elevator. They walked up the stairs silently, both knowing that tonight everything would change.

When they walked into the apartment, Sofia looked around. The living room and kitchen were to the left and separated with only a bar that had four stools lined up against it. She assumed that was his eating table since there wasn't a dining room. On the opposite side of the living room was a set of sliding doors, which opened to a balcony.

Luke took her hand and started leading her to a closed door off to the left. When he opened it, she could see a large bed in the center with a dresser on the left wall, and the bathroom off to the right beside the closet.

Tossing her bag on top of the dresser Luke pulled Sofia to him, "It's not too late to back out. I will never ask you to do anything you're not ready for."

Instead of answering him with words, she reached around his neck and pulled him to her mouth, crushing her lips on his and letting out a small groan. He backed her up to the bed slowly. When she felt her legs touch, she lay down pulling him on top of her. He pulled away from her lips and started kissing down her neck, sucking and nipping.

She let her hands go down his back until she found the bottom of his shirt and tugged it up. Her pulled it over his head quickly and tossed it on the floor, returning to her neck. She pulled him back up to her mouth and licked

across his lips. He opened his mouth and met her tongue with his. She ran her hands down his bare chest until she reached his pants. She started to unbutton them when he pulled away.

Whimpering she opened her eyes to see why he had pulled away from her. He smiled down, "Not fair, you still have your shirt on."

Giggling she looked down at herself. "So...." she said as she raised her arms up over her head waiting for him to pull it off.

Barely touching her, he ran his fingers down, across her breast then her stomach until he reached the bottom of her shirt. Putting his hand under the hem, he slowly pushed it up with his palms touching her across her stomach and then her breast only to pause with both hands on either breast. After a minute, he continued until he pulled the top off completely.

Looking at her face to see if she was ok, he then looked down to realize her bra fastened in the front. He cupped her face with one hand and undid her bra with the other. He watched her as she closed her eyes. Delicately he leaned down and kissed her already hardened nipple. He smiled when he heard her moan. He massaged one breast as he teased the other with his mouth. Then when Sofia started to squirm, he locked his mouth on her nipple, then nipped, and sucked.

Putting her hands in his hair Sofia looked down to watch Luke as he went from one breast to the other. She could feel things that she never felt before, or ever thought she could feel. Her body was heating up and her breath was coming in gasps. She felt Luke tug at her jeans and she raised her hips up so he could lower them down.

Pulling back up to see her face, Luke pulled off her pants and leaned over her until their eyes met. "Are you ok?" he asked softly.

"That depends on your version of ok. I'm not scared if that's what you mean, but I'm far from ok." She smiled back at him then pulled him down to her mouth. She took one hand, slid down to his pants, and unbuttoned it with two

fingers. Not wanting to wait, he stood up and pulled them off quickly then returned to her on the bed. Looking down she realized Luke didn't wear underwear. She pushed him over until she was sitting on top of him her legs on either side.

Never having seen a man before, except high school biology, she was curious. Luke stayed still as she explored him fully. From his chest to his stomach, all the way down to his groin. When she lightly brushed his member, he let out a moan. Jerking up to look at his face, she realized it was in pleasure not pain that he made that noise. Knowing she had that control over him, she smiled.

She leaned down and licked the tip carefully, not quite sure how. She heard him moan again and felt his hands in her hair. She put the tip completely in her mouth and lightly sucked. "Oh baby," she heard him say and smiled inwardly. She pulled him further into her mouth he groaned louder. She kept a steady rhythm of up and down for a few minutes then started going back up to his body, she kissed his neck, then up to his chin, finally reaching his lips. Grinding herself on him as she went. Unable to take anymore, Luke flipped them over and reached down to remove her panties.

He separated her delicate folds until he found her nub, already swollen with want. He caressed it with his thumb as he inserted one finger inside her. Her panting increased as he went faster. Putting another finger inside she screamed aloud, "Luke, please don't stop. Please....."

Just as she was about to release, he pulled out. "What...?" she started until he settled himself between her legs.

"I want your first orgasm to be with me inside you." He told her.

She felt him at her core. She spread her legs giving him easier access. He pushed inside her and slowly started to move. She could feel herself starting to build up again as he went faster. When she thought she was going to explode, he thrust hard. Her release was overwhelming as she writhed beneath him. A few more thrusts and he felt his own release.

He turned over taking her with him. She settled on his chest still panting. "That was amazing." She told him. "I didn't know it could be like that."

"I'm glad you're happy, and I'm glad you're ok." He said back as he stroked her hair. "I love you Sofia."

"I love you too Luke."

Chapter 11

Sofia woke up tangled up with Luke. She had never felt so happy in her life. Thinking back on her life the last 5 years, she knew the time had come to let go. To let her past and her fears go. To move on in her life with no more regrets.

She tried to untangle herself from him without waking him but it was too late, he pulled her back down on top of himself. "Where do you think you're going?"

Pushing up on her hands she looked at his beautiful face, "I have to go home Luke. Brice will be beside himself worrying about me."

"Ok then," he said letting her go, "We better get you home."

After quick showers, they both headed to his car. The ride back was quiet but Luke held Sofia's hand the whole way.

She started to feel nervous as they descended on the stairs to the main door. Before she could open it, it flew open to reveal none other than...."Aunt Esther...?" Sofia said confused.

"Get in this house young lady. You, Luke come here now!" Esther held the door wide for them both to enter.

Sofia came in first and heard footsteps running. She looked up to see Brice coming toward her. He grabbed her up in a hug that took her breath away. "Oh my God sissy, I was so worried."

"Bri, let me down, I can't breathe." He loosened his grip but didn't let go, "What's wrong? I left you a note. It said I would be with Luke."

"I didn't find any note. Where did you leave it?"

"On the door, it was a sticky note." She explained.

“I’ll go see if it fell to the floor.” Brice said as he walked away, but not before glancing at Esther.

Looking over at her, Sofia cringed. She still looked pissed and Sofia didn’t understand why.

With her hands perched on her hips she looked at Luke scowling, “How could you Luke? What was going through your mind when you took this young girl from her home late at night and probably took advantage of her crush on you?” She crossed her arms over her small chest still glaring, “Well, explain yourself, now!”

“Ma’am, I didn’t take advantage of Sofia, I love her and we wanted to be alone. She asked to come to my place and I let her come. What we talked about or did there is not your business. I’m sorry to seem so abrupt but that’s how it is.”

Her hands in small fists she dropped them to her sides, “Now see here Luke Christoni, that girl has been through hell and back. She has feelings she doesn’t understand and you know she has never had a boyfriend.....”

“Aunt Esther,” Sofia started to say but stopped when Esther put her hand up to tell her to be quiet.

“Sofia is only seventeen Luke. I could take your badge, I could put you in jail!” she yelled at him.

Luke looked like he had just been slapped, “seventeen?” he said quietly looking at Sofia.

She nodded at him.

Dropping down into a nearby chair, Luke put his head in his hands. “I never considered, I didn’t think to ask.” He said almost to himself.

Brice showed back up and looked at Luke puzzled. He didn't ask but looked at his sister, "I looked everywhere, and there was no note. Kim looked too. We couldn't find it anywhere. Are you sure where you left it?"

"Yes, I put it on the outside of the door as I left. It said I would be at Luke's and I would be home in the morning."

Kim came down then and she also looked at Luke, then at Brice who shook his head at her. She shrugged and went over to Sofia. Hugging her, she whispered softly in her ear, "We need to talk later. We'll go on a horse ride just us girls." Sofia softly nodded and Kim released her. Out-loud she said, "I'm glad you're ok Sofia. We were worried and Brice was beside himself. I had to stop him from running out the door to go look for you. We called the police and they said we had to wait twelve hours to officially report it.

"I'm so sorry everyone. I didn't mean to scare you all." She walked over to Luke and put her hand on his shoulder. He pulled back quickly, looking at Esther. Sofia tried to blink away the tears starting in her eyes before Brice saw them.

When he saw the way Sofia looked at Luke, Brice suddenly realized what was going on. "Oh no....he didn't..." he looked from Sofia over to Luke, "you didn't.....with my sister?" he yelled then lunged at Luke with his fist drawn.

Luke stood up to defend himself as Brice's punch landed squarely on Luke's jaw.

Kim and Sofia both screamed, and Esther took a step back.

"Stop it Brice!" Esther yelled as Luke blocked the second punch. He didn't listen so she tried again, "Stop or your grounded and Kim goes home!"

A few seconds later, he realized what Esther had said and hesitated. It was only a second, but it gave Luke the chance to put Brice in a hold that pinned his hands behind him.

"Are you done?" Luke asked him. Brice just nodded.

“You can release him Luke,” Esther said.

Luke dropped Brice to the floor and Brice glared at him.

Walking over to Sofia, Luke wiped away the single tear that had escaped and kissed her cheek. “I have to go, but I will be back tonight. We need to talk about this.”

He walked over to Esther and bowed his head briefly, “I'm sorry Mrs. Moran. I meant no harm, and I would never take advantage of Sofia. I love her and have since she turned me down in high school. I will abide by your wishes seeing that you are her guardian and she is still a minor. I will be back later for your answer but please remember, no matter what you decide; I will protect her from Sean. He will pay for what he has done to her and the countless others we found proof of in the warehouse.” With that, he turned and walked out the door.

Esther pointed to Sofia, “Follow mw child.” She said, and without waiting for an answer, she walked into the family room.

Brice and Kim lagged behind. Esther turned to them briefly and quickly waved them away as she shut the door.

Brice looked shell shocked as the door shut on his face. Turning to Sofia, Esther face softened.

“Are you ok Sofia? I know this must all seem like too much to you.”

“I'm fine Aunt Esther. I know you don't think so but I can make decisions for myself and I decided to go home with Luke.”

“I know dear, that's not why I called you in here. I will say that I am very disappointed in your decision-making but they are yours to make. The reason we I was so scared and the reason I am not letting you go off like that again is because of Sean.”

“I'm not scared of him anymore. I know he will be caught. I just want a normal life now.”

“You misunderstand child. He was here, at the mansion. That’s why I was so frightened. I thought he had taken you again.” Tears fell down her soft wrinkled face and she walked up and pulled Sofia into a hug. She was stronger than Sofia would have imagined and more caring than she ever would admit.

“When did you see him? Did you tell Brice? What are we going to do?”

“Slow down girl, one question at a time. It was around two am when I saw him sneaking out the back door. No, I haven’t told your brother yet. I knew it wouldn’t have been good when you were gone. In addition, I am going to the police station today. I will tell your friend everything but don’t think I have forgotten last night. It was irresponsible to leave like that. You should have come directly to me.”

Realizing how much trouble she caused, Sofia felt horrible. “I’m so sorry ma’am. I didn’t think it would hurt anyone. I just thought of myself.”

“Well now that we’ve cleared the air, how was last night? Are you ok? Do you need to talk about it? I know I’m an old woman but I still remember what it was like to be young and in love.”

Blushing Sofia looked over at the empty fireplace. “It was nice. I don’t think I have ever felt anything so amazing. I didn’t know it could be like that. I didn’t think it could be anything good at all.”

“Well now we need to talk to that brother of yours. He is going to be really angry I assume. Then we’ll go to the station to tell your boyfriend who I’m sure will be equally angry.”

As predicted, Brice was furious. He started ranting about the security of the house and insisted that we hire a full time guard. He then said he was going to put all new locks on the house.

All we ladies sat on the couch watching as he paced across the floor coming up with ideas to make the place safe.

“Well,” said Kim after his rant subsided, “Now that that’s settled, Brice and I will go to town and get the supplies to change the locks and see about a guard. I know a place we can go that has trusted men. It will be expensive but they are well trained.”

“Here is my credit card,” Aunt Esther said as she handed the little piece of plastic to Brice. “Price is not an issue. Just make sure your girls are safe in this house. Sofia and I will go see Luke about Sean.”

Kim and Brice headed off in her car and Sofia got into the limo with Esther.

At the station, Sofia held the door open for her aunt then followed her inside. They walked up to the same man that had hit on Sofia the first time she had been there. She believed his name was Joey.

“I need to see detective Christoni please.” Aunt Esther said.

“Luke, some old lady is here to see you, and that fine ass girl from before.” He said loudly.

Esther turned to the officer, “You will apologize for that remark young man.” She said angrily.

“I'm sorry I called you old.” He sneered.

“Not that you increasingly waste of space. I'm talking about my niece, now apologize.” She almost yelled at him. As she slapped her hand on his desk

“What's going on out here?” Luke asked as he entered the room.

“This old bitty wants me to apologize for stating a fact.”

Sofia blushed, “Aunt Esther, it’s ok really.”

“No it is not ok, and if this is how this office is run then it’s no wonder they never caught Sean.” She said looking at Luke.

“Will someone please tell me what happened?” Luke looked sternly at the officer that was now standing and glaring at Esther.

She never backed down; she simply repeated the words that he had to her without losing eye contact with the officer.

Luke looked at Sofia then to his officer. “That is the last straw Joey. I have put up with your shit long enough. Now if you don’t do as this lady said you will be looking for a job tomorrow. Is that understood?”

“All I said was she was a fine ass girl. It was a compliment, but if you insist,” he looked at Sofia, “I am very sorry if I offended you. I was just stating a fact.”

With that remark Luke slapped the guy across the back of the head, “I swear Joey, you are gonna piss off the wrong boyfriend one day and I’ll have to clean it up.”

Motioning to the two ladies, Luke pointed toward his office. They went inside with him following and closing the door.

Turning around he looked at Esther. “Am I to assume this is about last night?” he said to her.

Shaking her head no she sat in the chair across from his desk. “I’m afraid we have more pressing news at the moment.”

He walked around to his chair and leaned back looking at her curiously. “What would that be?”

“Sean was in the house last night.”

Jumping up he looked from Esther to Sofia. “Tell me everything.”

After Esther retold her sighting to Luke, he passed around the room. He seemed to be thinking very hard about something. He finally sighed and looked straight at Sofia.

“I have some news about the forensics at the warehouse. I received the report this morning and I wasn’t sure if I should tell you, but after hearing that he was in the house I guess you should know.”

He turned around and picked up a file on his desk. “This is the report I was telling you about. After a thorough search of the warehouse, it was said that one of the officers found a gun, a Smith & Wesson 9mm.” he paused and took a deep breath, “We had ballistics check it for unsolved shootings and got a hit.”

Luke walked over to Sofia and kneeled down in front of her, “Baby, I’m so sorry. It matched your parent’s case; it was the gun that killed your parents.

Sofia cried and held onto Luke. Esther had silent tears trailing down her delicate face.

“I’m actually glad I know now. But that also means he killed them to get me back doesn’t it?”

“Yes love, I’m afraid that everything we found pointed to his obsession with you. He had journals hidden under some floorboards. Some going back as far as ten years. It seems he had been watching you since you were little. The night he held you, he believed it was your wedding night. Then you were taken away. He went crazy. He followed you all through high school. He said he could see lust in every man’s eye for you. That when in the books he started calling you slut.”

Esther walked over to Sofia. “We have to go sweetheart. Brice will be worried.”

Leaving the station Luke followed them out to the sidewalk. “Don’t worry. I will find him. I can’t be bought off like the last detective from this office. As a matter of fact, if he wasn’t dead I would have him up on charges.” He looked down at Sofia and took her hand, “Please be safe. I couldn’t handle it if anything happened to you.” He lightly kissed her cheek and then hurried back into his office.

Sofia and Esther got back into the limo. She was afraid to look at her aunt. She didn't want to disappoint her again after she had been so good to her and Brice.

"It's ok Sofia," Esther said after a few minutes. "I could see the love in his eyes myself. Just know that I will not allow more overnight stays at his place. That wouldn't be what your parents would approve of. He is free to stay in one of our guest rooms if he wishes."

After a quick call to Brice, they headed toward the mall.

Sofia and Esther told Brice everything they had learned. He handled it fairly well. After they finished, Sofia asked her brother, "You knew, didn't you?"

"I had my suspicions. It couldn't have been that much of a coincidence that he started stalking you right after our parents died unless he knew they were dead. I didn't think he was that bad about you, but I can't say I'm shocked. I just know we will get him. He has gotten desperate, and that leads to mistakes."

They had decided to eat a quick lunch there and then Esther said she was headed home. Sofia couldn't help but notice that she got tired very easy.

After lunch, Sofia decided to go shopping. She hadn't actually shopped in the mall for a long time; it was just their usual meeting place. This time she was going to spend money.

After saying bye to her brother and Kim, Sofia went to the nearest clothing store. She used to come here with her mom. She thought she would be sad to walk down these halls but she found herself smiling at the memories.

As she walked up and down the aisles, she started to feel like she was being followed. Stopping to look at a pair of shoes that would match a dress she had at home, Sofia sat on the small stool and tried to casually look around, not wanting to alert anyone that might be around she tried on the shoes.

Deciding it was time to leave; she walked over to the counter and paid for the shoes. She hadn't realized she had stayed so long at the one store. She headed toward the food court to see if Brice was still there. He wasn't anywhere in sight so she walked over to the front door. Kim's car was still in the parking lot.

Sofia figured her brother had just walked Kim to work and headed over to the coffee shop to have a cappuccino.

When she asked the cashier about Kim while paying for her cup, he said she had the day off. Sofia went back to where she and Brice always sit when they meet here. She was sure he would be here soon. He and Kim probably just went shopping again. Kim had a problem with retail.

After an hour, Sofia couldn't stand waiting anymore. She tried to call the chauffeur to come pick her up but his phone went straight to voicemail. She called the house and it just rang. Aunt Esther must have lain down. She had already tried Brice but she tried again, then Kim's cell. No one answered.

The last person she wanted to call was Luke. She didn't want him to think she was a damsel in distress. She wanted him to think she was strong and independent. Still, she knew there was a crazy man out to kill her and her friends so she swallowed her pride and dialed the phone.

The phone rang four times then went to voicemail. She left a quick message about being stuck at the mall without a ride and then hung up. She tried Brice one last time. Still went straight to voicemail.

Well it was all up to her now. Calling the local cab company she found out there was a forty-five minute wait. Tired of sitting inside, she went back, ordered another cappuccino, and headed out to the small park area that had a bench. It wasn't a cold night but the wind had picked up and it felt like rain in the air.

After a half hour, Sofia felt breath on her neck. Thinking it was Luke she smiled and turned around, only to be face to face with the man of her nightmares.

Before she could scream, he hit her over the head and she blacked out.

Chapter 12

Now she's mine again, the one that got away. He thought to himself as he drove Sofia away from town. He had waited years to have her back, the only one that ever meant anything to him. He had tried so many in his life but she was the only one that could make him feel. The rest were just trash off the streets.

Even the few young ones had never compared to Sofia. Now that he had gotten rid of all the other problems, she was his alone.

He could barely take his eyes off her as he drove down the dusty road. He swerved a few times while he daydreamed of the fun they were going to have.

"Hehehe, if she only knew how talented I would become, she never would have let me go the first time," he told her unconscious body as he rubbed her hair. "You will know all of it tonight."

Singing to himself, he turned into the driveway. He couldn't help but remember his childhood as he looked at the mansion that was now all his. He had to sneak around before but now he knew they would always be alone.

Sofia felt herself move as Sean picked her up out of the car. She wasn't able to open her eyes yet as she was very dizzy. She felt him shift her upon his shoulder and thought she was going to be sick from the quick movement. She managed to hold on. She didn't want him to know she was alert. She wanted to stay calm and find a way out of this.

She just had no idea how.

Luke searched the mall frantically. Sofia had left the message while he was in a meeting with his superiors. It was over an hour before he had been able to check his phone. The cabbie said he had been called out to the mall but the party never showed up. Kim's car was in the lot but Luke had yet to find her or Brice.

As he rounded the alley, he knew something wasn't right. He could feel it. As he started to lift the lid to the trash bin his radio blared, "Detective Christoni, please respond...over"

"Christoni here."

"We have found the boy and his girlfriend. They were tied up in a janitors closet knocked unconscious....over"

"I'm on my way. Call the paramedics to be on scene for possible injuries."

"Yes sir...over"

Luke ran around the building to Brice and Kim. He just hoped that Sofia was with them and the officer just didn't know yet.

He saw the people carrying Brice out of the closet as he opened the rear door. Another person was bringing Kim out as he approached. He walked into the closet himself and it was empty.

Cringing to himself for the slightest moment, he became detective Christoni again.

"Are the children ok?" He asked the EMT seeing blood on Brice.

"They appear to have been drugged sir. Both of them have needle marks on their neck though the one on the boy looks almost ripped. He must have struggled. We are taking them both to the ER."

"I'll meet you there and hopefully we can get some answers." Luke said to the EMT. To his self he said, "I hope it's not too late."

Sitting in the waiting room chair, Luke hoped that Brice had some idea of where he could find Sofia. He had already dispatched people to the house Kim was kept and found it empty. The only clue was a receipt from the local gas station that proved Sean had a vehicle. An APB was out on a blue 1992 four-

door ford Taurus with a red right rear door and a dented rear bumper. Luke just hoped he didn't ditch the car yet.

When the doctor came out of the room, he looked at her anxiously.

"Are you family?" she asked him.

"I'm the detective on the case. We're having trouble locating the kid's guardians. Please tell me how they are."

"Well, Brice will be fine in a few hours. He has a few stitches in his neck where he must have tried to fight off his attacker. It probably kept a lot of the sedative from going in his system. The young woman, I'm afraid had a full dose and will be out for much longer. She is stable and on IV fluids but its touch and go. I don't think it was a lethal dose but there could be brain damage, or memory loss. It depends on what she was given. We are running the blood at the lab to find out right now but it could be a few hours."

Nodding to the doctor and shaking her hand, Luke thanked her and then pulled out his phone to call Esther again.

After the third try, he called one of the officers and sent him over to the mansion to tell Esther about Brice. Kim's parents had already been notified and were on their way, which just left Sofia.

Where was she?

Pulling up to the house, the officer spotted the car in the driveway. He radioed the station to get a name on the plates. As he waited for the station to reply, he saw a curtain move across the upstairs window.

He didn't want to alert anyone that he was suspicious so the officer backed out of the driveway and turned out heading toward town. Stopping about a mile down the road he called Luke directly, "Boss, we have a problem at the Grove, the suspect's car is there right now."

Luke ran out of the hospital calling the station on his phone. "All available units are to head toward the home of Esther Moran. I don't want any lights, and everyone is to be in unmarked vehicles. Stop outside of the driveway and wait for my call." Luke jumped into his own car and peeled out of the parking lot heading to the last place he ever thought Sean would go....home.

Sofia could tell Sean was agitated for some reason. She had stayed quiet even though she wanted desperately to cry her eyes out. Sean knew she was awake because he had seen her but he was too distracted to talk to her. He seemed to be having a conversation to himself, just as Kim said. He had an invisible friend.

He didn't even notice when Sofia had slid over to the fire place and picked up an old piece of coal that had a sharp edge. She knew her hands were bleeding but she didn't stop sawing the coal over her bound wrists.

She watched him pace around the room looking out the window and then talking to his self again.

Sofia knew she was at home, she just didn't know where Esther was. The limo wasn't outside so maybe Esther hadn't made it home yet and was safe somewhere else.

As she listened to the ramblings of this mad man, Sofia learned many interesting things. Things that would make anyone go insane.

She knew that Melvin, Sean's father, was not a nice person but she didn't suspect he had been so completely cruel. As she quietly sat on the floor, watching Sean pace back and forth, he started talking to his dead father.

"Daddy, you know I've been good. I took care of Shane like you wanted me too. He didn't tell anybody." There was a pause while Sean listened to his dead father. "I know daddy, she didn't tell anyone either. I always do what you tell me to." Another pause, "no I never told anyone about our special times. You said it was a secret."

After the last pause, Sofia felt sick to her stomach when she saw Sean smile. "Yes daddy, I had a lot of fun with her. I'm so glad you brought her to me. You know I still like when they do that to me. It's my favorite thing."

When Sean tilted his head back and closed his eyes, Sofia almost gagged. He actually pulled his penis out and started touching himself in front of her. "Yes daddy, I like when you do that. I like it when the girls do too."

Then Sean's eyes went wild. He turned to look at Sofia sitting on the floor then as if he just remembered she was there.

"Yes I really like it when the girls do that." He said walking closer to her.

Sofia scooted back away from Sean. He just kept coming closer while touching himself. She continued to scoot until she was against the wall. He kept coming to her very slow, almost sensually.

Sofia still had the coal in her hand. The binds had snapped when Sean was talking to his dead father but she was afraid to move.

Sean was standing right over her now. He grabbed her hair, pulled her head back and forced his penis in her mouth. She gagged, then without realizing her own strength, she hit him with the chunk of coal on his foot. He jerked back then she hit him right in the groin.

Running toward the door, she tripped over a lump on the floor under a blanket. Pulling it off to see what it was, she saw her aunt lying on the floor. She looked dead and Sofia wanted to cry.

Realizing Sean was still moving; she stood up and went for the door. It was locked. She heard Sean laughing behind her.

"I wasn't going to lose another toy this week." He sneered. "The last one left me hungry for more."

Knowing she was helpless to do anything, Sofia just backed up against the wall and waited for Sean to take her again. He crouched down in front of

her and looked in her eyes. "It's a shame this has to wait; I have big plans for you, but as it is, I think we may have been found so I am going to have to move you again. It is an inconvenience but good things come to those who wait."

At that, he grabbed her hair and banged her head against the wall. After a few seconds, Sofia went out.

Sean picked up his prize and headed out the door. He went down the hidden hallway and slipped out the back door before the police cars ever came up the driveway. He ran through the woods to the cabin he had been hiding in for months. He couldn't believe that no one had ever found the cabin but his daddy said it was their secret place. He was right.

The patrol cars all lined up the street just before Esther's driveway. Luke was in the front of the line while everyone awaited his command. Turning to the officers that will be accompanying him to the house, he spoke. "I don't know what we are going to see but remember that Sean is considered armed and dangerous. He is a known rapist and possibly a killer. Now Miss Sofia Moran may be inside being held against her will. It is our first priority to get her out safely. Now, is everyone clear?"

"Yes sir," "Ready sir." They said in unison.

"Let's go." Luke said and waved his arm toward the house.

Waking up in a hospital bed, Brice felt sick. He looked around and saw Kim still unconscious in the bed next to him. He knew someone had grabbed him from behind but he wasn't sure who it was. He thought maybe it was Sean, but then everything went black, and why was he at the hospital?

Throwing the covers off and pulling out the IV, Brice walked out of the ER and down the street. He knew he had to find Sofia.

Waking up in a cold dark room, Sofia was nauseous and scared. Her head hurt like crazy and so did her wrists. She could barely see out of her right eye it was so swollen. When Sean banged her head on the wall, it must have hit her face too. Her whole cheek was sensitive to touch.

She looked down to see dried blood and her hands and arms but Sean hadn't tied her back up. Did he think she would stay out longer? Maybe he just ran out of zip ties. Either way, Sofia wasn't going to let this opportunity pass. She listened carefully for any sounds of movement. Hearing nothing, she cautiously picked herself up off the floor and walked toward the light at the other side of the room.

As she reached the slightly ajar door, she peeked around it to see if Sean was there. He was asleep on a cot near the front door. Actually, the cot was right in front of the door. To get out, Sofia would have to climb over Sean, or move him out of the way, depending on how the door opened.

Knowing it was her only chance, and knowing that she would rather die than be his captive, she walked over to him and leaned over his sleeping body to try the door. Luck was on her side, the door opened out. Now all she had to do was climb over him and run.

Chapter 13

As the cops descended into Esther Moran's house, the first thing Brice noticed was Mrs. Moran's purse was sitting on the table by the door. Without saying anything, he pointed to his men then to the purse. One broke off and went toward the kitchen another went toward the family room and Luke went to the stairs.

Slowly he crept up toward the bedroom the he knew Sofia had shared with her brother fir the last few months. The hallway floor squeaked the tiniest bit causing Luke to stop in his tracks.

Waiting a full minute, no one came out so he continued down the hall. He stopped outside the door and slowly opened it to see if she was inside. The bed was turned up and all the covers were askew. The closet had been emptied of all its contents and the window was broken.

Swallowing the lump that was forming in his throat, he pulled his weapon out of the holster and went on down the hall.

After several more doors, Luke found himself at the end of the hallway. Just as he was about to turn around, he felt a small breeze on his neck. Holstering his weapon, he started to inspect the wall that sat at the end of the hall.

After a few futile attempts, he finally found a hidden doorknob under the wallpaper. Pulling his weapon back out, he entered the very dark room. He reached for the small flashlight that was attached to his belt before continuing.

When he illuminated the room he saw that is wasn't a room at all, it's another hallway. Smaller than the other hallway, he saw only two doors in front of him.

He carefully went up to the first one, which was opened. As he stepped inside, he saw Mrs. Moran lying on the floor. He reached down to her and found a slight pulse. He then went to check the other door before calling anyone, afraid of alerting Sean if he was still there.

When he pulled open the other door, he realized it was a hidden way outside. He stepped out to the balcony and looked around. It was clear that Sean had gotten away.

He called for the paramedics to help Mrs. Moran and then called everyone to search the area for any clues to Sofia's whereabouts.

He was starting to get frustrated. Sean seemed to be one-step ahead at all times. He was afraid he would never find her.

Sofia knew she had to find a way to get out before Sean woke up. She had no choice but to crawl over him.

As carefully as she could, Sofia put her left foot on the edge of the cot and pushed herself up. Raising her right foot, her left leg shaking slightly, she stretched it all the way over to the other side and slowly sat it down on the opposite edge of the cot. She then picked up her left foot up high, brought it to the other side, and sat it down by her right foot.

She carefully took her right foot and sat it down on the ground just outside the open door. Turning around she picked up her left foot and set it down on the ground too.

After only a fraction of a second, Sofia started to run. She didn't look back as she stumbled. Her head still aching, she turned a corner and tried to find a road or path that would take her to safety.

After an hour, Sofia finally saw the town in the distance. She wasn't sure if Sean had woken to find her gone and she wanted to keep it that way. Exhausted from the long walk, hurting from being knocked out and shivering from the rain that had started to fall; she found a place to sit.

She looked around and realized she was sitting at the park. Hugging her arms around herself, she started to cry. She knew she was only half hour from

the mall but it still seemed unreachable. She started to rock back and forth rubbing up and down her arms to try to get rid of her chill.

She sat on the bench for just a while longer, waiting for her breathing to regulate. Sofia knew it wasn't safe to sit out in the open but she couldn't make herself move. She was trying to convince herself she needed to go as she saw a shadow out of the corner of her eye.

Not waiting to see what or who it was, she took off running in the direction of the mall, hoping she could get to a phone to call Brice.

She heard a yell from behind, "Sofia, I know your here."

"No!" she said to herself. "He couldn't have found me so fast."

She started to sprint with all everything she had. She knew she didn't have much time. He would soon be on her. When she rounded a corner, she saw an alley up ahead. She thought this was just the cover she needed.

She could hear the footsteps behind her as she ran down the alley. She was afraid to look back; afraid he was getting closer. She slid on the wet pavement, but never let up. She jumped up and continued running. Her shoes making what to her sounded like loud clomping on the ground. Her breathing was labored. She could feel sweat running down her forehead, feel it burning her eyes.

"Sofia," he cried from the distance. "You know you can't hide from me."

She didn't slow down. She could see a streetlight in the distance in front of her. She picked up her pace, hoping she could get around people before he reached her. Just as she turned the corner to a well-lit parking lot, someone grabbed her from behind and covered her mouth to stifle her scream.

"Shh," the soft voice said. "He'll hear you."

As the ambulance took Mrs. Moran to the hospital, Luke and the rest of his people searched the area. They had followed a trail that led to an old cabin behind the property. It was clear it had been lived in for a while. There was fresh food in the fridge, which was plugged into a gas run generator. There was a radio on the shelf and a cot by the door. In the back of the house, they found a mattress on the floor with blood on it. The blood was still wet so it was believed to be Sofia's.

Luke left to go to the hospital to see if Brice or Kim were awake. He hoped they might have some idea as to Sean's whereabouts. It was a long shot but it was all he had.

Luke knew as soon as he walked into the ER that something wasn't right. There was a guard standing by the curtain where Brice and Kim had been and a state trooper talking to the nurse on duty.

Walking over to them, Luke introduced himself to the officer. "Hello sir. I'm detective Luke Christoni. Is there a problem I can help with?"

Nodding over to Luke the trooper said, "Well detective, it seems one of your victims has disappeared from the hospital."

Losing his composure he gasped, "What? Who?" He looked at the nurse.

"It was Brice Moran. When I came to take his vitals half hour ago, he was gone. We don't know for how long or if he left of his own accord. There is a cop looking at security tapes to see right now."

"Thanks Mindy let me know if you find out anything."

"I will Luke." She left to attend another patient and the trooper left to assist his partner in checking out the tapes. Luke entered the room where Kim still laid unconscious.

Heading over to the nurses' station Luke found Mindy again.

“Hey, do you know about the older lady that was brought in a little while ago?” he asked her.

Smiling up at him she nodded, “Yes, she was admitted right after she arrived by her oncologist.”

Surprised he just nodded, “Thank you.”

Oncologist? Why would Mrs. Moran have a cancer doctor? Maybe she is keeping secrets too.

He had too much on his mind to ponder to long about all the things Mrs. Moran may be hiding. Knowing that Brice is probably out looking for Sofia, Luke knew he had to do something too.

Heading to the room the nurse pointed to, Luke had to ask Mrs. Moran if she had any more information she needed to share.

Walking into the room, he couldn't help but see how small she looked laying the all white bed. Mrs. Moran was very fragile and he didn't want to upset her but he had to know the truth.

Mrs. Moran looked over at Luke as he entered the room. She spoke weakly to him. “Have you found Sofia? Is Brice ok?”

Looking into her sad eyes he replied, “Brice is fine as far as I know. He left the hospital without telling anyone but Kim is still here. They were drugged and stuffed into a closet at the mall. Sofia is still missing. Please Mrs. Moran; do you know anything that will help me find her?”

She took his hand weakly, “Luke, I know where he was taking her when they left the house. It was to Melvin's cabin behind the property. I haven't been out there in years but Sean was talking about it. I guess that really he was talking to someone else because he seemed to think that there was another person there. Anyway, he said something about having it all ready for her return. When I told him he had better leave her alone, he hit me. I'm sorry Luke, I blacked out. I couldn't stop him.” Tears welled up in her eyes.

“It’s ok ma’am. You did everything you could for her. It’s up to me now and I promise I will find her.”

Looking back over her head, Sofia smiled at Brice. Grabbing him around the neck, she whispered, “I can’t believe you found me.”

He held his finger to his lips to silence her. Then he peered out onto the alleyway to see if it was clear. When he didn’t spot anything, he grabbed her hand and ran for the parking lot of the mall.

Without stopping they ran inside the mall full speed, catching the look of several pissed off people. They didn’t slow down until they were in the very public food court.

Finding an empty booth near the back, Sofia finally looks at her brother.

His face is pale and he has fresh blood seeping out of a bandage on his neck. He had dried blood on his arm where it appeared he had an IV inserted. Reaching out to touch his swollen neck, Sofia jerked back when Brice grimaced.

“What the fuck happened to you?” she asked angrily.

Instinctively grabbing the bandage on his neck, Brice averted his gaze from her, “It was that asshole, he found me and Kim here and stabbed us in the neck with some kind of drug. I tried to fight him and the needle tore my neck good. Kim was still unconscious at the hospital when I came to find you.”

“I’m so sorry Bri. Are you ok?” she asked uncertainly.

“I’ll be fine. The question is, are you ok?” he asked as he put his hand delicately on her chin and inspected her bruised and beaten face. His eyes mad with fury.

Pulling her face away from his touch, she mumbled, “I’m fine.” But she could feel tears betraying her words.

“What did he do to you?”

Looking away, she trembled slightly, “Nothing.”

“I know you’re lying to me. Tell me Sofia, did he rape you again? You can tell me anything.”

“He didn’t rape me. He tried to force his penis in my mouth. I hit him with a piece of coal and tried to get away. That’s when I found Aunt Esther.” She looked in his eyes then, “I think he killed her.,” she sobbed.

“Don’t worry sissy, he will pay for what he’s done. I promise he won’t ever touch you again.” He scowled, “Or anyone else.”

Brice pulled Sofia into a hug. He kept a sharp eye on the door, waiting for something to happen. He could feel the fear coming off his sister in groves. He couldn’t stop what had already happened to her before, but he is older and a hell of a lot stronger now. No one will hurt either of his girls again.

Knowing it wasn’t safe to wait there, but it was worse going out into the night, Brice knew he had to find a phone. He needed to get Sofia somewhere safe, so Sean couldn’t get to her again.

Sofia felt the hair on the back of her neck stand up. She pulled away from Brice and looked around. She looked at his confused face, and then over his shoulder, she saw him, Sean.

Seeing the fear in her eyes, Brice turned around. Smiling at them from across the food court, he tipped his hat at them and stood up.

Taking a defensive position, Brice yelled to Sofia, “Run! Go find Luke! I’ll hold him off.”

Hesitating for a split second, she ran out the door. As it was closing, she turned around. She saw Sean lunge at Brice, then crowds of people starting screaming then running away. Knowing the only way she can help is by getting Luke, Sofia took off toward the police station.

She jerked the door open when she reached the station. Without stopping at the front desk, she ran to Luke's office. Slamming the door open, and jumping as it hit the wall behind it with a massive thud, Sofia realized that it was empty. Running over to Luke's private bathroom, she yanked open that door hoping he was in there. He wasn't anywhere in the office. Not sure what she should do, she thought maybe the officer on duty might know where he was.

She turned around and ran right into an extremely large chest. Looking up to the face that goes along with that chest, Sofia gasped. Before she could even think of what to do, a large hand covered her mouth, and then picked her up.

She tried to struggle but it was useless. He was too strong and she was just too small and too tired to put up much of a fight. She glanced around with her eyes and saw the desk officer on the ground with his throat slit.

Whimpering, she tried again to get away. The dead body giving her a boost of adrenalin, she started to kick her legs around furiously. The thought of her brother, lying on the mall floor with his throat slit came to her mind.

She bit down on Sean's hand hard. She tasted blood in her mouth as he yelped and pulled it away. When her mouth was free, she started screaming. As loud and long as her lungs would allow.

As she was taking a breath for another scream, she felt his hand on her throat, cutting off her oxygen.

"If you don't shut up, I'm gonna crush your throat." He said whispering in her ear. "Then I'll go back and finish off that fucking jock."

Brice was still alive. She stopped trying to get away. She would do anything; let Sean do anything to her, to keep Brice safe. She just let silent tears flow down her cheeks as the thought of him touching her again came to her mind. Nevertheless, to keep her brother safe, she would endure it all a hundred times.

Sean covered her eyes and had turned around, walking toward the door when it opened. He stopped suddenly and Sofia heard him chuckle.

“Put her down,” someone growled at him. Sofia knew it was Brice.

“Make me you stupid jock.”

He dropped his hand away from her eyes to reach in his back pocket to pull the bloody knife out.

Luke had no idea how he was going to find Sofia. He has searched all the places Sean has been seen in the last few months. All they had turned up was that he had been here for a while. Living in at least three different places. Not one of which gave them a clue as to where else he might go.

Needing to step back and think, he decided to go back to the station.

Parking on the street across from the station, Luke walked up the stairs and was about to open the door when he saw the scene inside. He stopped in his tracks and looked closely at what was going on.

He saw Sean Moran holding Sofia around her waist tightly; he had a knife in his free hand pointed toward her brother, Brice. The desk officer was on the floor with his throat slit and blood was all over the floor. Brice was holding the officer’s gun and shouting at Sean, telling him to let Sofia go.

Sofia had tears going down her face. I wanted to run in there, kiss them away, and take her away to a place where no one can hurt her again.

Sean wasn’t looking toward the door; he had his eyes on Brice, whose hands were trembling slightly.

He knew the boy would never be able to pull the trigger on that weapon; he didn’t have it in him. Unfortunately, Sean knew that too. He had to get in there before anyone else died.

He slowly crept open the door, and hunched down below the desk with his weapon out. Luke had to get close enough to shoot Sean without hurting Sofia, but he was using her as a shield. If he shoots now, there was the chance Sean could still hurt her.

He could hear the dialog going on between Sean and Brice.

Sean; "She is mine you fucking jock. You can't have her anymore. You have no idea how long I have waited to get her back. To taste her throbbing core, to lavish her ample breast." He was trying to through Brice off with his words; distract him so he could take her. "Now put down that gun or I'll kill her."

Brice; "You put down the knife Sean. If you wanted her dead, you would have done that already. You don't want her dead." His voice trembled, showing how much Sean's words affected him.

Sean; "if it's her or me, I will kill her. But what a waste of such delicate flesh that would be."

Brice; "If she dies, you die you sick bastard. Now put her down!"

Luke knew he couldn't wait anymore. Just as he was about to show himself, Brice screamed.

"NOOO!"

He leaped up with his weapon pulled. Everything seemed to happen in slow motion.

He saw Sean pull his blade across Sofia's neck. He saw Brice drop the weapon he was holding and grab her as she fell to the floor. Sean turned around and headed toward the back of the station.

Luke had to decide if he was going to stay with Sofia or chase Sean. It only took him a split second to get to the girl he loves. Brice had already covered her gash with the sleeve of his shirt; he must have missed him ripping

it off. Luke picked up his radio and called the paramedics to the station. When he knew help was on the way, he looked at Brice.

“Go get him!” he shouted in Luke’s face.

As he got to his feet, he heard it.

Brice looked up at Luke as he looked down at him. The echo coming from the back of the station seemed to last forever. He ran toward the sound and stopped dead in his tracks.

Sean was on the ground bleeding slowly from the hole in his chest.

The shooter was standing weakly with the gun hanging at their side, and their head down. Luke reached over and carefully took the gun as the shooter looked up at him.

He was stunned into silence. The shooter was Sofia and Brice’s elderly aunt, Esther Moran.

Before he could even register this in his mind, he heard the sirens announcing the paramedics.

Esther just walked over to a nearby chair and sat down. No emotion showed on her face as she stared at the dying body of her son. He didn’t know if he should leave, but his heart was being pulled into the other room.

He heard the front doors open and knew the ambulance was there. He had to see if Sofia was alive.

When he walked back to the entrance, Brice was holding Sofia’s head in his lap and crying. The paramedic was trying to convince him, to let them take over.

“No!” he cried, “I promised her I wouldn’t let him touch her again. I promised her!”

“Brice,” Luke said softly, “I need you to come with me. Someone else needs you too. Let the doctors take care of Sofia for now.”

He reluctantly let the men take her off his lap. He scooted over near the window and stood up. He saw Luke waving him over and followed him to the back where Sean lay on the floor, and his aunt sat watching Sean die.

As they entered the room, Brice walked over to Sean and nudged him with his foot. When Sean groaned, he nudged him harder.

Brice looked over to see Esther, sitting in the same chair, staring at Sean.

He walked over to her, “Aunt Esther, what are you doing here?” he picked up her small hand, “Are you ok?”

Finally looking away from her dying son, Esther smiled at Brice, “I’m fine now. He won’t hurt anyone anymore. He can’t hurt Sofia anymore.”

Brice looked at Sean, then back at Esther. I saw realization hit him full force. He looked up at Luke; his brows were furrowed in confusion. He pointed to Sean, then to his aunt.

“Yea, it was her.” Luke told him.

Brice pulled his aunt into a hug, “Thank you Aunt Esther. Thank you for saving Sofia.”

A single tear fell down Esther’s face. She patted Brice on his back and looked around, “I think I need to get back to the hospital now,”

Luke and Brice helped her out the door to the front entrance. As they walked in, they all saw Sofia being taken out on a stretcher.

Luke followed the ambulance with his lover in it to the hospital. He called in about Sean on the way. A second ambulance was sent in to see if he was still alive.

Esther was taken back to her room and Brice was again checked out, but refused to leave the waiting area by his sister. Kim had woken up and was with him outside the OR where they were trying to save Sofia.

After a few hours of constant staring, the surgeon walked out of the OR.

“Who’s the next of kin?” she asked.

“Me,” Brice spoke up.

“Ok, well let me start by saying Sofia is a strong young woman. The cut was deep, but it didn’t sever her trachea. It slightly hit her esophagus, but we were able to repair the damage. I'm glad to say that most of it is cosmetic; no arteries were touched at all. If I had to guess, whoever did this knew where to slash without killing instantly. It would be a slow death if not treated quickly. Sofia will be here a few days, but she will be fine.”

Brice visibly relaxed. The thought of losing Sofia was more than he could bear after losing his parents.

“Thank you doctor.” He said shaking her hand.

“You’re very welcome.”

Chapter 14

Everyone was at the dinner table enjoying the cake that had been made for Sofia's eighteenth birthday.

Esther had told her she could have a party at the lake house, but Sofia only wanted a small family get together. Luke had been invited, as well as Kim. To Sofia, they were family.

Sofia was thinking to the day that had almost been her last.

She was sitting up in her hospital bed, leaning back on the pillows when Luke entered the room.

She smiled and waved. She wasn't supposed to talk for a few days, and then only in small amounts until her injuries healed fully.

He sat down in the chair by the bed and took her hand. Smiling he looked into her eyes, "He's dead Sofia."

She knew he meant Sean, but it was still a shock. Brice had already filled her in on Aunt Esther, and how Luke had found her holding the gun.

Brice, Sofia and even Luke, were afraid of the repercussions of Esther shooting him. They knew there was the possibility she could be charged. Luke said he was trying to get it written up as a self defense of a minor, since he had threatened both Brice and Sofia, and Esther was their guardian, so she was therefore responsible for their wellbeing.

The biggest issue was that the paramedics weren't called right away. Luke told the authorities that that was his call. That I was the victim so he felt I took precedent. He neglected to tell them he waited until he was on the way to the hospital before calling it in.

Brice had tried to rake the blame first but Aunt Esther refused to let him. She said it was her decision and she wouldn't allow anyone else to be punished for it.

In the end, they declined to press charges seeing as how Sean was a murderer and serial rapist.

After the search of the two more places they found him to have been hiding out, one just outside of town and the other a few counties away, they had evidence of almost 30 rapes and 3 more kidnappings. They even found the body of a missing prostitute from another state buried under the boards at the warehouse. She had only been dead a few weeks if that.

Sofia was just glad no other girl had to suffer at his hands.

"Sofia," her aunt said. Taking her out of her thoughts, "It's time for you to open your presents."

"You know I'm happy with how my life has turned out, I don't need presents."

"Tough." She responded as she handed Sofia a large envelope. Inside was the deed to the house and land with a notarized letter from a lawyer's office.

She looked at her aunt confused.

"I had the paperwork finalized. The house, all the land and every property I owned, is now yours and Brice's'. You can keep or sell anything you wish. I know there are a lot of bad memories here, but keep in mind that nothing is permanent. You can demolish any structure on this property, and rebuild anything you want, anywhere. I have already had the cabin demolished; the rest is up to you."

Standing up and hugging her aunt, Sofia started to feel tears welling up in her eyes. "Thank you."

“You’re welcome.”

“My turn.” Brice said quickly.

Sofia sat back down and wiped her eyes.

“I wrapped it myself.” He said as he handed her the pink box.

She pulled on the ribbon that had been tied over the box as she looked at her brother she smiled, “It must have taken forever to tie this bow Bri. However did you manage?” She smirked at him.

Unabashed he smiled, “You have no idea. That thing was killer.”

Kim had her arm around Brice’s and was biting her bottom lip, “I hope you like it. It took forever to get the right thing. You know, you are very hard to by for.” She smiled.

Pulling the top off the box and moving the tissue paper out of the way, Sofia found another envelope. This one was white and opened like a folder. She took it out and opened it up. She found five tickets to Las Vegas.

Still looking confused, she looked at her brother, “Thank you Bri, and you Kim, but I’m not sure I understand.

She saw a glance pass between Luke and Brice.

“Here, this might help explain it.” Luke said as he handed her a small gold box.

She took it carefully, he hands shaking. She pulled off the top and found a jewelry box inside. She pulled it out and raised the hinged lid. It was a diamond ring.

She felt tears falling down her face as she looked at Luke.

He got down on his knee in front of her and took her hand. Looking into her eyes he asked, “Will you marry me?”

Unable to speak, she nodded her head yes vigorously. He slipped the ring on her finger then kissed her hand.

Sofia looked at the tickets again, noticing the date on them. It was for two weeks from now.

Looking back at her brother still confused.

“Jeez sissy, are you that dense, really? We are going to go to Vegas together and you are marrying this idiot here,” he said pointing his thumb at Luke.

Smiling, Sofia finally found her voice.

“That’s wonderful, but what if I had said no? What would you have done?”

“What? Please, you could say no to Mr. Muscles here, you can't break his heart twice that would be too much for the meathead to take.” Brice laughed.

Luke was giving him annoying looks.

Brice just shrugged, “Well, all of its true.”

Grabbing Luke around his neck, Sofia couldn't help but laugh out loud. She hadn't been this happy in years, and never thought she could be.

Two weeks later, Sofia and Luke came out of the chapel as man and wife. They were going to stay in Vegas for the week but everyone else would be leaving first thing in the morning.

They decided to have a small dinner instead of a reception. Esther had insisted on paying even though Sofia and Brice had enough money. Luke had already booked the hotel for the week, so Brice paid for the extra rooms for himself, Kim and his aunt.

After dinner, they said their goodbyes. The plain home would be leaving at 5am so they wouldn't get to see each other before then.

When Luke and Sofia got back to their room, Sofia suddenly felt nervous. She had only been with Luke the one time, and it was amazing, but for some reason this time felt more pressured.

Kim had secretly given her a birthday present later that night after her birthday dinner. It was a sexy nighty from Victoria's Secret. Now she was having doubts about whether to wear it.

Everyone had known about Luke's proposal that night except Sofia, but she didn't have any reservations about marrying Luke. He was her knight in shining armor, her savior, and her best friend.

As Luke brought in their luggage, she decided it was time to overcome all of her fears and be the woman Luke deserved.

"Hey baby, are you ok?" he asked when he looked into her scared eyes.

"I'm fine, just a little overwhelmed. Not about being your wife, that's the best thing that could ever happen, just being a wife in general. I don't know how to be. It's all a little scary."

He walked over and cupped her cheeks with his hands. Leaning down he kissed her softly and whispered, "You are the best person I have ever met. You have a good heart and I could never love anyone the way I love you."

She turned her head and kissed the palm of his hand. "Thank you Luke, I guess I just needed to hear it."

While Luke was digging in his suitcase, Sofia grabbed the pink bag and hurried to the bathroom.

Luke glanced up when he heard the door shut but continued to root around in his clothes, trying to find his favorite tee shirt to wear when he takes Sofia for a moonlight walk down the strip.

He finally came up with it and reached down to grab his black jeans when the bathroom door opened again.

When he saw Sofia, he dropped his clothes back down on the suitcase. She had on a black lace nightgown that had a split up the front until it stopped between her breasts. The panties were the same black lace as the top, but they were thongs with very little covering the front.

The idea of going out completely vanished from his mind. All he could do was stare.

Getting a little fidgety, Sofia dropped her head.

Then all the sudden she was swept off her feet and laid down on the bed with Luke over her. He captured her lips with his. Licking her bottom lip, she opened her mouth and her tongue met his, deepening their kiss. She could feel his hands going up and down her thighs.

He moved down to her neck and lightly sucked the tender area between her neck and shoulder.

Sofia wrapped her arms around his neck. She arched her back and he slowly started kissing down her neck until he reached her breast. He moved the lace to the side and took her nipple in his mouth. Sucking and nipping.

Sofia groaned and shifted under him. She reached down and pulled his shirt out of his pants. He raised up and let her unbutton it all the way then let it fall to the floor beside the bed.

He reached down and removed her top, tossing it into the dresser. Sofia ran her hands up Luke's chest and then down. Taking in his taut abs. She worked her way down to his pants and started to remove them.

Getting impatient, she pushed him over onto his back and pulled them off and tossed them aside. Then she climbed back onto the bed straddling him.

"Sofia," he whispered. His eyes were only slits and he had his head back.

She smiled, knowing it was her that was making him feel this way.

Just as she did before, she just ran her fingers lightly down his chest then his abs as he moaned and called her name. Never taking her eyes off his face, she let her fingers lightly touch his fully erected member. She giggled lightly as he hissed with pleasure.

Scooting down she took him into her mouth and slowly moved up and down. She loved hearing him groan and hiss at her hand. She felt him put his hands on her head and she went faster. His breathing sped up and his moans came quicker. She could feel him lifting his hips up so she quickened her movement. Going faster and taking more of him in her mouth. A few minutes later, he cried out as she felt him release. She sucked until he was completely spent.

Sitting up she straddled him and started to grind against his member. She could feel him growing hard again and smiled. After a few minutes, Luke grabbed her hips and turned her over until she was on her back under him.

“Now it’s my turn,” he said playfully.

Sofia smiled in anticipation.

She closed her eyes as he started kissing her neck. She felt him go down to her breast and suckle her hard nipples one at a time, while his hands ran the length of her thigh. He moved down to her stomach and nibbled, then licked her belly button, causing Sofia to giggle.

She groaned as she felt his breath on her core, but he started to lick and kiss her inner thigh. His hands above his head still squeezing her breast and pinching her nipples. He raised up and ran on hand down to her center. Sofia moaned louder when he cupped her.

Moving slow, he rubbed her up and down, teasing with his fingers.

“Luke, please.” She begged.

He separated her delicate folds and circled her nub with his thumb.

“Oh Luke,” she cried out as she felt the buildup in her lower stomach.

Luke could feel her wetness and smiled. He inserted one long finger inside her and moved in and out. She raised her hips in response with his hand. Then he plunged a second finger in her and she cried out.

“Luke, oh Luke. Please, take me now.”

He didn't need another word. Putting himself over her, she spread her legs to give him entrance.

Just before he thrust inside of her he said, “I love you Sofia.”

Then he thrust deep inside her causing her to yelp. She locked her legs around his waist and pushed with him, making him go deeper in her. He could feel her nails clawing at his back and smiled.

Pulling out suddenly, Sofia whimpered.

“What?” she looked at him.

He turned her over on her stomach and leaned up to whisper in her ear, “Do you trust me?”

“Yes.” She replied.

Then he thrust in her again. He reached around her waist and pulled her up on her knees. Leaning on her back, he brought his hand down to her core. He massaged her nub as he thrust her from behind make her orgasm intensify. He could tell her release was coming by the quickening of her breath and the moans getting louder.

When she cried out his name, Luke thrust a few more times until he could feel her tension release. He thrust once more and felt his own release.

Sofia collapsed down on the bed panting and Luke moved to her side and did the same.

Turning to look at Luke, Sofia reached out and touched his face.

“I am so glad I said yes to you.” She said still panting.

Looking back at her, “So am I.”

She scooted over and laid her head on his chest. “I never knew it could be this way. I never thought I could be happy with a man. You have changed my life Luke Christoni.”

“You changed mine Sofia Christoni.”

They quietly lay basking in each other for a long while. Luke was stroking Sofia’s hair and she was tracing the muscle patterns on his chest.

He looked down at her sad eyes and become worried, “Sofia are you ok? You seem upset.”

She looked up at him, “For the first time I actually wish I could have a baby. Your baby, but that was taken from me by him.” Tears ran down her cheeks.

“Shh, baby. It’s ok, we will be ok. If you want kids I will find a way to get them for you.”

“I don’t know Luke, I never really wanted kids but that may be because I’ve known since I was thirteen I couldn’t have any. I’m sorry Luke I shouldn’t have brought it up. Really I’m ok with not having kids; I was just thinking that it wasn’t fair to you.”

“Hey, I told you before, I have five sisters and they all have kids. At least two each and one had four. We will always have kids in our life. And if there ever comes a time you want one of your own, I will get it for you.”

Relaxing back down on Luke’s chest, Sofia began to realize her life was not even, close to what she thought.

When they get back home, Luke will go back to his job as a cop, and she will start college, and raise Brice for a few more years. He asked if he could move in with them and Luke agreed. It will be cramped until the remodeling on the house is done. Aunt Esther has moved to a retirement home. She said she is tired of living alone and wants her last time here to be around friends and family.

Looking up at her sexy husband, Sofia knows her life is perfect. She slowly pulls herself up until she is sitting across his middle again. Luke has his arm draped over his eyes but he starts to smile when she moves her hips up and down his member again.

Moving his arm, he looks at his beautiful wife, "Yes baby. Can I help you?"

Smiling she leans down to kiss him, "I don't know love. You seem pretty tired a few minutes ago."

Grabbing her around her waist, he turns them over until he is above her. He leans down and kisses her hard.

"I'm just getting started." He smiles.

The End (or is it?)