

## CHAPTER ONE

Pedal to the floor, heart in her throat, Felicity Shields raced along a dry desert road lined with sharp shrubs and twisted trees. Red dust ballooned over the hood of her VW Golf.

Her eyes focused on a distant, lavish, two-story adobe house. Backdropped by New Mexico's Sangre de Cristos mountains, the McMansion appeared inconsequential, isolated, and abandoned. Its colorful inlaid tiles shimmered through the hazy air. Fee gripped the steering wheel. *Why wasn't Mom answering?*

A series of chimes blared through her car speakers. Startled, she glanced at the touchscreen, and accepted the call. "Hey, Mae."

"Oh, good. I caught you. Tell your mom I'll be watching her speech online from my bed. This pregnancy is a killer. When do you take off?"

She wiped sweat from her forehead. "We missed our flight."

There was an ominous pause on Mae's end. "What happened?"

*What happened?* Fee swallowed. "Mom was supposed to pick me up. She never showed. I called; she didn't answer. I'm on my way to her place now."

Another pause, this one punctuated by heavy breaths that reflected Fee's own budding panic. "Your

mom always answers when you—” The connection cut out and back again. “She once picked up your call during a CNN interview.”

True. So many people thought that call had been staged to show Mom as likeable and motherly during her trial. The truth was, she’d called Mom in a blind panic after having destroyed things with the love of her life, Brooks. In her desperation, she’d forgotten Mom had had the interview. “Look—”

“You’re cutting out.”

Of course she was; the service out here sucked. “I’m almost there.”

“Maybe you should call Liam? He does work for the Santa Fe PD.”

Ugh. She’d intended to tell Mae all about Detective McCheater at the conference, but with Mae on bed rest, she wouldn’t make the conference. A turn of the wheel and she bumped onto the brick-lined driveway. “I’m here. I’ll call you back in ten minutes.”

“I’ll—” Static. “—five minutes—.” Silence. “I call the police.”

She wanted to tell Mae not to worry, but, first, she’d have to convince herself. Mom was in great shape but older now. What if she’d fallen? Should she have called an ambulance? “Give me at least ten minutes”

Mae didn’t answer.

Fee fished her cell from the cup holder and glanced at the screen. Lost connection. Great.

She hit the garage remote. Bay one didn’t open. She hit the other two buttons.

Nothing.

Relief loosened her tense shoulders. This was why Mom wasn’t answering. Something had happened to

the power and, without the cell extender, Mom couldn't make or receive calls. And, of course, the generator hadn't kicked on.

She'd told Mom she needed propane. For such a brilliant woman, Dorothy "Never Surrender" Shields was often absent-minded. Time to pressure Mom to get over Claire retiring and pick a new personal assistant.

Slipping her phone into her yoga pants pocket, she flung open the car door and climbed out. A hundred-degree dry wind gusted her hair into her face. The direction changed when she turned to the house and her blonde hair flared behind her.

She jogged up the slate stairs. Her flip-flops swept against the slabs. The backs thwacked against her heels, the loudest sound out here.

Crossing the portcullis, she inserted her key into the lock. Huh. One of Mom's planters was upended.

Squatting down, she righted the cracked pot then cupped the dirt and deposited it back inside.

Dusting the soil from her hands, she stood, turned the key, then pushed the bronzed handle.

It didn't budge.

Had she'd locked it?

Fear hijacked her nervous system, spiking her blood pressure, sending cortisol and adrenalin to work.

*Stop.* She breathed deeply. No reason to be afraid. This was so like Mom. The woman had once been protected by Secret Service, but, now, she couldn't be bothered to lock her front door.

Annoyed, Fee unlocked the door and readied herself to give Mom a piece of her mind. Then they'd eat breakfast because she was starving. She'd arrange new flights later. Thankfully, they had some time. Mom

wasn't speaking until tomorrow morning, but she'd miss today's afternoon meetings. Maybe she could livestream in.

Backhanding the front door closed, she tossed her keys into the metal bowl atop the foyer table. The *swish* and *clink* echoed down the stairwell, nearly drowning out a muffled grunt from downstairs.

Mom often did morning yoga on the lower deck. Fee let her fingers brush the smooth iron railing as she headed down to the terrace level that Mom refused to call a basement, because she'd spent so much money on the gorgeous space. "Mom? It's—" she worked moisture into a dry throat "—Fee."

Blinking at the change of light, she shivered in the cooler air. She hit the light switch. No lights. *Duh*. No lights without electricity.

Flicking her sunglasses up, she let her eyes adjust. It was dim, though long glass panels opened to a stunning mountain view. Outside those panels, chaise lounges sat on a large deck with a gas fire pit and an infinity pool.

She sniffed at a heavy, metallic smell. Her stomach rolled as her vision adjusted. Muted mustard walls, colorful patterned chairs, tan leather couches... and Mom.

Sitting on one of the couches, Mom had on a red mud mask. Unbelievable. "A facial, really? Today's Friday. We've missed our flight."

She crossed the room. Mom groaned. The facial dripped into her eyes.

Not a facial.

"Mom!" Fee slid to her knees, her hands skirting over her mom's wrists. Wires? Blood. So much blood.

What was happening? What had happened? Had to stop the bleeding.

Her mother made a sound—a protest or maybe a plea. Dark red blood gushed down her chin.

*An ambulance! Call an ambulance!*

*Please let her phone work.* She reached for her cell. Mom's eyes rolled up.

"Hold on, Mom." Please, hold on. "I'm calling for help."

Shaking, she dialed 911.

"Ffff," Blood shot from her mom's mouth, landing across Fee's lips.

A swish of sound from behind. A shadow arm.

Terror seized her. Twisting away, she smashed the call button. A whistle of sound and a sharp crack of pain snapped against her head, dragging away consciousness.

## CHAPTER TWO

Fifty feet up a sheer rock face, Brooks Delgado dipped his fingers into the brown chalk pouch that appeared green through his night vision goggles. A flash of light. He cringed. *Coño*. He'd told all his trainees to turn off their phones and smartwatches, but he never did.

Turning off all messages, alerts, and using silence was usually good enough. In fact, the only messages he allowed were related to...

Fee.

His heart jumped into his throat and he tapped his smartwatch. The words that appeared sent a chill through him. *Dorothy Shields found murdered in her Santa Fe home.*

His stomach dropped. Pulse pounding, he dusted off his fingers, clicked, and read. "Former Vice-President Dorothy "Never Surrender" Shields was found brutally murdered in her Santa Fe home Friday afternoon. Reports indicate she was discovered by her daughter, Felicity Shields, who was injured by—

"Brooks?" Carey called up from below the trainees. "You okay?"

"Gotta—" He choked on the pain. "—make a call."

"Now?"

There was grumbling along the line as private security trainees held tight to their positions. They'd

survive. They were seasoned climbers, most former soldiers. Even though the skills they learned tonight were new and difficult, they could hold their ground for a couple seconds.

Re-securing his own feet, he hit the speakerphone on his watch and made the call. It rang. *Pick up, Felicity. Please pick up.*

A sharp squeal and announcement broke across the line. He flinched. He'd been in enough hospitals to know the paging of a doctor. Wind whipped his back. He leaned closer to the watch. "Fee, it's Brooks. Are you there?"

There was a long pause filled with deep breathing. Unease double-timed against his ribs.

"Someone... killed Mom."

Grief pummeled his body. Muscles clenched. Fingers dug into stone. "I'm so sorry." She sounded... "You're hurt?"

"I'm fine. Mom... so much blood... I couldn't save her."

"Jesus," one of the men below him said.

"I'm coming, querida." Could he still call her that? She was still dear to him. "I'm there. As soon as I can get to my plane."

Silence fell. He waited for her to tell him not to bother. Waited for her to tell him that he'd deserted her eight years ago and there was no place for him now, but she whispered, "Promise?"

He squeezed his eyes shut tight, hearing the echo of meaning, the undercurrent of emotion in *that* word all the way to his bones. How many times had they used *promise* to reaffirm their love? In how many different ways over the two years they'd been together? A

thousand. A promise that had been brutally, irrevocably broken eight years ago when she'd decided to postpone their wedding. And he, hurt and angry, had left.

He swallowed and told her—as he'd done back when it had been their love against the world—“Promise forever.”

#

“This is some crazy.” The Lyft driver double parked on a side street near Felicity's house.

Brooks grunted his agreement. The block was lined with news vans as large as tactical response vehicles topped by glaring satellite dishes. He knew the media circus would be bad, but he'd had no idea just what would happen when one of the most infamous women in the world—a former vice president who'd narrowly avoided jail—was murdered in a brutal, sick, and dramatic way.

Helicopters? Four circled Felicity's neighborhood. A police cruiser sat by a blockade at the top of her street. The cop okayed cars trying to get home, denied reporters and their cameras.

Grabbing his duffel from the floor, he climbed out. He slipped between two towering news vans to the sidewalk, bypassing reporters, cables, and mysterious black trunks. A reporter blandly narrating details of Dorothy's murder into a camera made his muscles tighten. Damn, he'd forgotten the callousness inside the media cage match.

Rolling his shoulders, he let the tension slide off. He wasn't going to go back to being the angry,



confrontational guy he'd been. That was the *last* person Fee needed. When they'd been engaged, he hadn't understood that his agitation fed her anxiety.

A flash of unwelcome memory shot down his spine: Felicity's lowered head. A tear falling, puddling onto her hand.

*"My mom is fighting to stay out of jail."* She'd looked up, begged him to understand. *"Hate is hate. Whether it's ours at them or theirs toward us... I don't want a wedding surrounded by hate. Let the fire burn down, okay?"*

It hadn't been okay with him. He'd told her, "You cancel this wedding, you cancel us."

He hadn't looked back—well... he had. But, by then, it'd been too late. Lesson learned.

Losing the love of your life had a tendency to teach you shit.

He walked up to the barrier blocking off Felicity's street. The officer, a big guy with a beat-up nose and teeth too straight to be real, put up a hand. "Do you live on this street?"

"Brooks Delgado. I'm Felicity's..." *Díos*, he'd almost said *fiancé*. But, last he'd checked, that role was being filled by Liam Forster. "Friend. She's expecting me."

Cop didn't look convinced. "Show me your ID."

He flashed his credentials.

The officer looked at it. "You don't look Canadian."

"Yeah. I left my hockey stick at home."

The cop glowered suspiciously.

Should he tell him he was a dual citizen or pull his American passport from his pocket?

Nah.

The cop reached for his two-way, his eyes sliding over Brooks' wrinkled *Delgado's Land, Sea, and Air* T-shirt, his utility cargo pants, and worn boots. He pointed at Brooks' shirt. "What's that all about?"

"Survivalist training. Northern Vancouver Island."

"Survival?"

*Play nice, Delgado.* This idiot was his gateway to Fee. "Navigation, tactical climbing, evasive maneuvers, survival at sea, living off the land, tracking, shelter, keeping safe from predators. Two- and four-footed."

The cop's eyes widened. "Can anybody get in on that?"

"We train private security forces."

"Hired guns." The cop grunted and spoke into his two-way. "Brooks Delgado's here. Says he's a friend."

Brooks didn't point out that, without private security, this guy's job would be a lot harder. A few photographers snapped Brooks' photo. Must've heard the cop.

Brooks lowered his ball cap. He was going to be on the news. Hadn't thought of that. Nat might see him. She might worry. Maybe he should've called? No. Though they'd been friends-with-benefitting for over a year; they rarely shared anything too personal.

One reporter, a thin guy with thick jet-black hair, called to Brooks, "What do you think of the Puppeteer's manifesto? Is Felicity Shields afraid?"

He cringed. They'd nicknamed Dorothy's killer that because the sick fuck had tried to make her into a puppet—cutting out her tongue, sewing a wig onto her head, and stabbing cables through her wrists.

Word came down that Brooks was cleared. He

adjusted his bag as the officer swung the barrier back like a door. He started past, stopped, and lowered his voice. "You know anything about this manifesto?"

The cop averted his gaze and answered out of the corner of his mouth, "Early this morning some guy claiming to be The Puppeteer put a manifesto online. Includes a list of women he says need to be killed because they inherited a bad gene—an *Eve* gene." The cop looked at him. "Your friend is at the top of the list."

Leaden cold seeped into his bones. He fought an urge to sprint down the street. "Why would the guy put out a list? Makes it harder for him."

The cop jutted out his chin. "These guys love to taunt the investigators. Even sickos want fame."

Brooks wasn't so sure. "Thanks."

Checking his fight-or-flight reflex, he loosened his stranglehold on the duffel strap and walked down the street. He rounded the corner and spotted the house he and Felicity had once shared, a traditional Santa Fe one-story with a terracotta shingled roof. He doubted the actual murder scene had had more cops in front of it.

Anxiety getting the better of him, he started to jog. His duffel bumped against his back.

A cop stepped onto the sidewalk in front of him. "Drop the bag. I'm going to need to search you and it."

Damn. Hopefully this wouldn't be a problem. "Sure thing. But, so you know, I've got two weapons, registered, and a tactical knife in my bag."

"Step away from the bag. Spread your legs. Put up your hands."

Brooks did. The cop waved another officer over. "Weapons in the bag."

The officer patting him down asked, "Why didn't

you tell the officer who let you down here?”

“Didn’t think about it. I flew in from Canada—

The first guy jerked his head up from the duffel.

“They let you take weapons on a plane?”

“They do if you have the proper paperwork.” *And are flying your own plane*, but he wasn’t going to mention that.

The first cop pulled out one of the weapon cases. He opened it and whistled. “What is this? A tricked-out Glock?”

Tricked-out? “It’s fitted with a night scope and laser. Sometimes I hunt at night. My other gun is smaller sidearm—a Beretta.”

As the second officer finished patting him down, the first took his weapons and moved off a distance. There was a long discussion with more cops. They looked back at him every once in a while.

Good to know Fee had people looking out for her, but, damn. He really hoped they wouldn’t take his weapons. Getting replacements would be a pain in the ass.

The first officer came back. He handed Brooks the guns and knife. “You check out.”

With a *we’re-good-here* nod to the officers, he stowed his weapons and made his way up the walkway. He lifted his hand to knock.

“Get out. Now!” Fee shouted.

Nerves stretched tight, he grabbed the handle and pushed open the door.

A barefoot Felicity stood among multiple vases of flowers, squaring off against a man he’d seen only in photos.

Liam Forster was white where Brooks’ skin was

tan, blond where Brooks' hair was black, blue-eyed where Brooks had brown.

Liam towered over Fee. Her fists were balled, hair wet and tied back in a bun, face freshly scrubbed. In simple jeans and her threadbare Arizona State college sweatshirt, she was as beautiful as he remembered.

Hurt and heat spread through him equally. An emptiness in his soul, a hole he'd grown so accustomed to he'd forgotten it was there, refilled with a slow, weighted sigh. Oh, fuck. He'd missed her.

She poked a finger toward the door. "Out now."

Fee was angry at Liam? As angry as he'd ever seen her. Considering she'd been a pacifist who'd thought she'd change the world one happy public relations article at a time, that came was a surprise.

A surge of reciprocal anger washed over him. What had this *pendejo* done? Felicity's mother had been murdered; this guy was supposed to be there for her. But, judging by the red in her cheeks, the set of her jaw, and the tone of her voice, the last thing she wanted was Liam Forster near her.

And that shouldn't make an irrepressible and alarming parade of hope whisk through his body like thrown confetti, but there it was. Neatly erasing all the lies he'd ever told himself about being over her.

## CHAPTER THREE

Felicity's two worst romantic mistakes—the one she should never have let go, and the one she should never have let in—stood in her foyer on her cracked terracotta tiles, backdropped by mauve walls, wood-framed vacation photos, and the honey-sweet scent of condolence flowers.

*First things first.* She pointed at Liam. The Cheater. “Out. And leave your damn key.”

Had it only been a few weeks since she'd discovered he'd been cheating on her? It seemed like a lifetime ago. Without his presence in her life, she mostly felt... relieved.

“This isn't about you and me.” Liam tugged on the lapel of his charcoal gray suit. His gaze flicked to the professionally dressed woman beside him. “Special Agent Annie Meeks and I arrived while you were in the shower. We've been waiting for you. There's been a development.”

*A fed?*

She dropped her hand, addressing the special agent with the direct brown eyes, short blonde hair, and at least five inches of height on Felicity's 5' 6. “I thought my mom's case was the jurisdiction of local law enforcement.”

“Before I explain, I'd like to apologize, Ms.

Shields.” The special agent’s voice was as sharp as the creases in her pantsuit. Her tone suggested it could curdle even the *hint* of bullshit. “I was unaware of the situation between you and Detective Forster when he let me inside.”

Of course. Liam never hesitated to step all over boundaries.

“I’m here,” Meeks continued, “because someone claiming to be the man who killed your mother has put out a manifesto, suggesting he intends to come after you. And others.”

Sour saliva flooded her mouth. Her vision dimmed.

“Fee?” Liam put a steadying hand on her shoulder.

Reflexively, she flinched away. “Don’t touch me.”

His jaw tightened and he glared. Heat climbed up his neck.

She refused to feel bad. Years of making excuses for his behavior stopped now.

Mom was right. Actions spoke louder than words. He’d shown her who he was. Not just by cheating, but by not calling after Mom’s murder. He’d chosen keeping her mother’s case over keeping *her*. “Get out, Liam. You don’t need to be here for this.”

“Actually, as lead detective and someone with knowledge of prior attempts on your mother’s life—”

“It’s okay, Detective Forster,” Agent Meeks interrupted. “I can handle it from here.”

Red spread up Liam’s neck like lava from a volcano. His annoyed gaze jumped from her to Brooks to Meeks. His jaw ticked.

“Right, then.” As stiffly as if the starch in his collar had hardened into his knees, he made his way to the

door and pulled it open. Before stepping out, he turned to her. "I'll be there for you at the funeral."

Like she'd ever fall for his faux sincerity again. Not a chance. It was all about the high-profile case, not her. Not them. "All assholes need an invite. And you're not on the list."

The front door clicked closed. The foyer descended into harsh silence.

Brooks stared at her like she was a demon wearing a Fee suit. The twenty-three-year-old Felicity he'd known, Miss Sunny Optimism, didn't exist anymore. That naïve girl had thought positivity *out* meant positivity *in*. In reality, it'd ended up giving everyone who'd step all over her a free pass. Exhibit One had just left.

Liam would have to deal with the fact that she'd changed and not just emotionally. Like normal people, she'd aged.

He looked the same. Healthy tan skin. Thick black hair. A jaw line of a model or a god. And those eyes... Honey-brown ringed in black. The effect turned his light-brown eyes gold. Sheesh. The man actually looked better than the last time she'd seen him.

His healthy glow was a balm to her regrets. He'd lived a better life without her and her family drama.

Crossing her arms, she gathered her elbows in each of her palms. "Why are you staring at me like I killed your kitten, Brooks?"

His eyebrows rose. "I have two dogs. Sappho and Blanco."

Regret gagged her throat and strangled her words. They'd planned on getting a dog together. Now he had two? Those could've been *her* dogs, *her* tan and toned



man, and *her* outdoorsy life if she'd followed that path, if she'd have gone through with their wedding...

She mentally scrambled away from a decade-long list of *what ifs*. It followed her all the way to the present with... *what if* she'd called the police when Mom hadn't shown up? Or when she'd noticed the garage doors hadn't opened. Or what if she'd left her home a half hour sooner or—

"Fee." Brooks moved toward her. "You're shaking." He opened his arms. "Can I hug you?"

An unfathomable well of longing unrolled inside her, and yet, accepting that invite struck her as wrong. As if Liam, the man who'd cheated on her, should be the person she let comfort her.

Forget that.

She slid into Brooks' embrace. His strong arms wrapped around her and the masculine scent of him brushed over her like a forgotten dream. His natural aroma sent memories of long, satisfying nights wrapped in his arms surging through her.

He gathered her closer, encircling her with his strength and caring. Her whole being cried out with a release of tension as deep and warm as a bath. Oh, she'd forgotten his embrace. To be held by Brooks was everything she needed just then.

His breath heated the edge of her ear. "I'm so sorry, Fee. I loved Dorothy. I'm so very sorry."

A tidal wave of grief washed over her. Tears swamped her eyes. His steady strength sent her a direct message: if she gave way to her pain, if she broke, if she cried and wailed her grief, he would catch her.

But that wouldn't be fair to him. She couldn't force him to carry her pain on top of his own. She had to be

strong. She had to rely on herself now.

Her windpipe thinned with emotion. She fought the uprising tears. Breaking away, she saw him wipe his eyes. Emotion clutched her.

He was the first person she'd seen since her mother's death who grieved with her—and that wasn't because of the police barrier at the end of her cul-de-sac. It was because of the barrier she'd put up around her life, her heart. When you had a mother as notorious as hers, when the next fight was always in front of you, putting up walls was the only way to survive.

Most definitely couldn't break now.

The next fight was already here.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Standing in the foyer of Fee's house, Brooks watched her become all business. Her shoulders rose, she ground her jaw ground, and her fists tightened at her sides. This Fee was harder than the woman he'd known. Or more injured. Or both.

Keeping his distance, he followed her and Special Agent Meeks into the living room.

It was the same—and different—from when he'd lived here with her. Lots more trophies—their name for trinkets they collected on their travels.

The travel and hiking photos of him and Fee were gone from the familiar sofa table. They'd been replaced by photos of Fee and a bunch of smiling people dressed in work attire.

Didn't recognize a-one.

There was an adorable photo of her and her mother wearing matching wide brim hats in what looked like India. A photo of her and her best friend Mae wearing hiking gear and backpacks, faces shiny with sweat, smiles wide as they stood atop a mountain. No photos with Liam. Again, that irredeemable balloon of hope rose in his chest.

Calling himself a selfish, degenerate bastard, he popped that balloon and stuffed it into his shame box.

And then he saw the couch. The scroll-armed, tan

chenille-and-leather couch brightened by Navajo designed blue and brown pillows.

They'd pooled money to buy it from a Santa Fe designer. How many times had they made love on that couch in a frenzy of ripping clothes and surging lust?

Not enough.

Felicity looked toward the couch and back at him. Pink crept up her cheeks, highlighting her tired eyes.

Her gaze moved to the duffel on his shoulder. "If you haven't arranged for a room," her face flushed pinker, "I have an extra."

He hadn't. Hadn't even thought of staying anywhere else. "Thanks. I'd like to stay here."

Tears swamped her eyes. She blinked them away. "You know where the guest room is. Why don't you get settled? I can handle this."

*"It comes down to this, Brooks. I can handle the media attention; you can't. Now, you've lost your job. It's all too much."*

Her words dropped out of memory, stirred up an old feeling, and then fluttered away. He'd been so angry, so sure her choice of calling off the wedding had been because she feared being judged by the media. He'd thought she'd chosen public opinion over him. He'd been an idiot. He'd learned the hard way. *Don't take everything so personally, wait emotions out, and apologize when you have the chance.*

The pain and regret of eight years wouldn't allow him to make the same mistake again. Shouldn't have left then; damn sure wasn't leaving now.

"I have no doubt you can handle it." This time, he wasn't the easily offended culo he'd been. "But I'm here for this. For Dorothy."

*And you.*

Not that he'd say that last. She was under enough emotional stress. And, truly, his relationship with Natalie, even as casual as it was, meant he had no right to even *think* about Fee in those terms. He was here for her as a friend. He wouldn't mess that up. "Unless you'd rather I not be here for this."

She smiled gratefully. "I'm glad you're here. And Mom would've been..." she motioned between them, "...over the moon to see us here together."

He knew that. Wished he could have some time alone to grieve with her.

"Ms. Shields." Agent Meeks tone briskly swept aside his wish and his desperate need to comfort Felicity. "I'm sorry to rush you."

Felicity waved her to continue.

Meeks nodded. "Early this morning, a man claiming to be The Puppeteer posted a manifesto online."

In a flash as sudden and jarring as a blaring car horn, Fee's gaze turned hot and focused on Meeks. "Was it him?"

Meeks opened her mouth but Felicity cut her off. "I deserve the truth. I saw...." She grimaced. "I saw what he did."

Meeks' eyes narrowed. "I don't do bullshit. I do cautious."

Wasn't sure that made a difference right now. "How about you throw caution to the wind?" he suggested.

Meeks looked to him then to Felicity. She relented with a sideways flick of her head. "It's most likely him. The BAU... sorry, Behavioral Analysis Unit. It's the—

”

“I know what the BAU is.” Felicity massaged three fingers into her temple. “Please continue.”

A curt nod. “The BAU anticipated the suspect would want attention for the crime. The manifesto, which named seven women directly, states you and women like you—”

“*Like me?*”

“Women with notorious mothers. He claims you’ve inherited a bad gene, an *Eve* gene that needs to be eradicated. He went so far as to specify qualities like being outspoken or sexually active as being tied to more violent crimes like murder, robbery, treason.”

“Díos,” Brooks said. “That’s crazy.”

Meeks gave him a whole face full of side-eye. “That’s a given. But worse than a crazy suspect with an impulse problem is a crazy suspect with an agenda.”

Fee pulled her hand from her face. “There was another case. A man threatened Mom. Years ago. Bart Colson. He was inspired by misogynistic writings. He wrote a manifesto, too.”

Meeks nodded. “Detective Forster filled me in. We’re looking into it.”

“And since this man is trying to establish an ideology through killing, he’s a terrorist, right? Labeling him as such would benefit the case.”

He understood her point instantly. If it was terrorism, it meant more resources, more money to investigate, and more agents.

Meeks’ eyebrows rose. “Crimes of this nature aren’t deemed terrorism.”

Fee squared her shoulders. “That’s the kind of bull Mom spent years fighting. Men infected by radical,

misogynistic ideologies killing women, but we don't dare call it by a term as ugly as the crime. Femicide is ignored—”

“Ms. Shields, although we're examining all possibilities, the BAU has theorized that the killer hadn't originally intended to write the manifesto or the list. He did so only after you interrupted your mother's murder.”

Fee's posture shrank, making him aware of how delicate her tough façade was. Her hands curled and uncurled. “I don't think I understand.”

“Your mother likely served as a focal point for his hatred and desire for years. He had anticipated the... outcome. Likely every detail. To him, there could be a sense of incompleteness. He needed to devise a way to expand that focal point, a way to satisfy himself and justify to the world his rage and need for revenge. He, therefore, compiled a list of traits he deemed inappropriate in women. He cross-referenced those against notorious women—women who had daughters around your age. Thus, the list.”

“And what of their mothers? Are they in danger too?”

“In all but one case, the mothers are dead, in jail, or otherwise inaccessible.”

“He's created this list of women like me *because* of me?”

“It's a working theory. One of a dozen. He could've had this list-plan all along. It might have nothing to do—”

Fee blinked rapidly, brushing away the glossy sheen of unshed tears. “But if he hates me so much, why did he let me live?”

Meeks frowned. “Honestly, there’s no immediate answer. Perhaps the perpetrator was startled, maybe because your call to 911 went through, or it could be he’s playing a game. My point in telling you all of this isn’t to get caught in *what ifs*, but to ask you to reconsider your plans for a public funeral. The BAU believes it could trigger him to come after you.”

Felicity shook her head so adamantly a strand of wet hair escaped her bun. “He doesn’t get to take her life and her voice, *and* have the last word on her. I will honor my mother with a funeral.”

Meeks’ frowned. “And provoke this nutjob?”

Coño. The detective was really laying it on for Fee. More than anything he wanted to hold her. Or go back in time and not let go. Because this Fee... she was as different as she was distant.

“Special Agent, I know all about acquiescing to the haters. After Mom was acquitted, I convinced her not to be so political, to focus on women’s issues, to live a life of service without confrontation. I begged her to stop pouring gasoline on the fire.”

Her gaze flicked to Brooks then away. Her cheeks reddened. Fee had often told him the same thing.

“You know what? It didn’t work. No strategy works in the face of hate.” Her voice broke. She swallowed. “If I’d asked her to demure and try to get along, the haters only drove harder. If I told her to try calm and reason, they screamed louder, accused her of horrible crimes, and spread lies about her. And if she ignored them... Well, silence was proof that their ideology was right and that she was worthy of scorn. I’m done trying to appease the haters. I can’t talk; I can’t *not* talk. These people want me dead or broken. They



will get neither.”

Felicity’s face flushed. Her jaw set.

She was furious at the world. She was...

Díos. The way *he’d* been. Memories fell on him like a ton of bricks, hard and fast enough that the ground shifted.

*He leaned over the table as he stood to leave. “One day, Fee, you’ll realize what you should’ve fought for—us—was worth fighting for.”*

*Her eyes widened, hurt and accepting. “And one day, Brooks, you’ll realize that, by saving you, I’m fighting for the best part of us.”*

A scalpel of pain sliced through him, ripping open every stitch and suture he’d made in his heart over the last eight years. She’d been right. She *had* saved him.

These past eight years without her had been hell—but the anger, and the social media and public harassment that had been near constants—the looking around for an enemy and the intensity of that spotlight-existence had all vanished.

But not for her. She’d started doing PR for her mother, throwing herself into the fire.

And had been burned...

Meeks looked his way. “Talk some sense into her. The amount of VIPs at this funeral—the number of people needing to be protected... It will be incredibly difficult to secure the area.”

The thought of “talking sense” to Felicity made his palms sweat. He’d been away for eight years. He couldn’t imagine what she and her mother had been going through.

“Special Agent,” he said, genuinely angry that the fed had put him in this position, “she’s made her choice.

And just so you know, I'm on her side all the way."

Felicity's mouth dropped open and. Her eyes grew wide.

Heat crawled up his neck. He hadn't meant to march over to Felicity's house and declare himself her ride-or-die buddy, but he'd effectively done just that. Fuck. So much for not putting her under any more emotional stress.

