

*Chapter One*

Desparre, Alaska, was so far off the grid, it wasn't even listed on most maps. But after two years of running and hiding, Desparre made Sabrina Jones feel safe again.

She didn't know quite when it had happened, but slowly, the ever-present anxiety in her chest had eased. The need to relentlessly scan her surroundings every morning when she woke, every time she left the house, had faded, too. She didn't remember exactly when the nightmares had stopped, but it had been over a month since she'd jerked upright in the middle of the night, sweating and certain someone was about to kill her like they'd killed Dylan.

Sabrina walked to the back of the tiny cabin she'd rented six months ago, one more hiding place in a series of endless, out-of-the-way spots. Except this one felt different.

Opening the sliding-glass door, she stepped outside onto the raised deck and immediately shivered. Even in July, Desparre rarely reached above seventy degrees. In the mornings, it was closer to fifty. But it didn't matter. Not when she could stand here and listen to the birds chirping in the distance and breathe in the crisp, fresh air so different from the exhaust-filled city air she'd inhaled most of her life.

The thick woods behind her cabin seemed to stretch forever, and the isolation had given her the kind of peace none of the other small towns she'd found over the years could match. No one lived within a mile of her in any direction. The unpaved driveway leading up to the cabin was long, the cabin itself well hidden in the woods unless you knew it was there. It was several miles from downtown, and she heard cars passing by periodically, but she rarely saw them.

Here, finally, it felt like she was really alone, no possibility of anyone watching her from a distance, plotting and planning.

After a year and a half of living in run-down motels and fearing each morning as much as she feared putting her head on her pillow at night, she'd desperately needed a change. She hadn't expected to end up here. She'd driven north for days, finally stopping because heavy snowfall had made traveling farther impossible. And for the past six months, she'd stayed. There was something magical about Desparre.

It was far from the kind of place anyone who'd known her as a sun-loving city girl would have expected her to end up. Far from anywhere she would have expected to ever call home.

But damn, did she love it. If she had to spend the rest of her life in solitude, this was where she wanted to do it.

Tipping her head back, she closed her eyes and let the crisp, cool Alaskan air refresh her. With a smile, she pulled out her phone to check the time. Although she had nowhere to be, she wanted to run into town early, then get back to do some work.

As soon as she saw the date on her phone display, her smile dropped under the force of her shock. Today marked exactly two years since she'd left New York City. Two years since she'd left behind everything and everyone she knew. Two years of missed birthdays and holidays. Two years of not being able to talk to her mother or her brother, not being able to see her friends.

A familiar ache welled up, one that only Alaska had been able to keep somewhat at bay.

When she'd said goodbye to New York, she'd expected—hoped—to be home long before now. The police couldn't guarantee they could protect her, but they were hunting for her stalker. She'd believed it was only a matter of time. But with her in hiding, new leads had probably dried up fast.

An image of her mom and her brother back in New York City looking at the calendar together popped into her mind. Her mom would be frowning, a tightness to her jaw that Sabrina had seen in her childhood. Her brother would try to comfort her, try to hide his own anxiety. But they would both be wondering where Sabrina was, wondering if she was okay. Wondering if she was still alive.

She tried to suppress the instant mix of anger and sadness. She'd explained to her family what the PI she'd hired had told her: disappearing was the only way to ensure her safety—and theirs. She wouldn't be able to contact them, and she couldn't tell them where she was going.

They'd fought her on it, but it hadn't mattered. She wasn't going to let anyone else die because of her.

Tucking her phone back into the pocket of her pajama pants, Sabrina stared into the woods, hoping to regain the peace she'd felt only moments ago. But tears pricked her eyes, and today even the woods couldn't ease the tension between her shoulders.

Six months was longer than she'd stayed in one location since she'd gone into hiding. Three months ago, she'd actually started venturing out for more than just essentials. This tiny little town had given her back something she hadn't felt in a long time. Something she hadn't felt since that very first contact from her stalker.

Despite all the solitude, she felt less alone than she had in almost two years.

She'd actually made friends here. Sure, they didn't know her real last name, and in her normal life, she would have called this level of familiarity simple acquaintances. But with two years of loneliness, two years of running whenever she saw a shadow out of place, it felt like real progress. It almost felt like a real life again.

Guilt surged at the very idea that she could just move on with her life, in any small way. Now, the three months of memories she'd built with Dylan felt so distant, so short. She'd been naive to invite him into her life with a stalker following her, leaving her his twisted version of love notes. It wasn't that she hadn't been taking the threat seriously; it was just that she'd thought the threat was only against her.

But on a brilliantly bright Saturday afternoon when she'd gone to meet Dylan's family for the first time at their lake house, Dylan had been late. She'd been annoyed until police had shown up to tell his family why.

He had died simply because he'd dated her. It was something she'd carried with her ever since.

Before Dylan was killed, police had been taking the letters seriously, but compared to the other crimes they were investigating, it was low priority. When Dylan had been shot inside his own home and then the letter arrived, telling her not to be sad because Dylan had been standing in the way of her true happiness, the police response had been much more intense.

A month later, though, they'd been at her door, their discouraged, too-serious expressions telling her everything she needed to know. With fingerprints and some DNA left behind at the scene of the crime, they were sure they'd get Dylan's killer eventually. But he wasn't in the system, so they couldn't match the forensic evidence to a name. In the meantime, he'd continued to contact her, somehow slipping past the cameras police had installed, and once, slipping a note into her purse on her way home from work.

Dylan's murder showed that her stalker was escalating, police had told her. She was in real danger, quite possibly his next target. They were committed to keeping her safe, committed to stopping the person who'd killed the man she had only just begun to call her boyfriend.

But they couldn't provide twenty-four-hour protection. And she hadn't been willing to risk anyone else she loved.

Sighing, Sabrina stepped back inside, all the healing powers of the Alaskan wilderness no longer working. The PI who'd helped her create a fake name and then disappear had set up a system, a place for her to check safely for updates. The investigator would post a specific message on her website if the stalker was ever caught.

In two years, there had been no updates. But no one else had been hurt because of her, either. If she had to spend the rest of her life running, at least she'd finally found somewhere she could imagine having even a fraction of the life she'd left behind.

If the years in between had taught her anything, it was that living like this could break your will, break your heart if you let it. Her stalker had taken the life she'd built, but he wasn't going to steal all of her happiness.

"Buck up, Sabrina," she told herself, then squared her shoulders to face the day. By the time she'd gotten dressed and was headed for the door, ready to run into town for some groceries, she felt almost normal. She was even smiling at the thought of trading small talk with the owner, Talise, who'd lived in Alaska all of her seventy years and always had good stories.

Then she opened the door, and the whole world spun in front of her. All the oxygen seemed to disappear as she gripped the doorframe to keep herself upright.

There was a single white card on her doorstep. On it, the same angled, spidery font she'd come to dread back in New York. The same bright red ink that reminded her of blood even more since Dylan's death.

The message was simple, exactly what she would have expected if she hadn't started to believe she'd finally outrun her stalker.

*I've missed you.*

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