HIDDEN NATURE

By Nora Roberts

Homeport
The Reef
River's End
Carolina Moon
The Villa
Midnight Bayou
Three Fates
Birthright
Northern Lights
Blue Smoke
Montana Sky

Angels Fall
High Noon
Divine Evil
Tribute
Sanctuary
Black Hills
The Search
Chasing Fire
The Witness
Whiskey Beach
The Collector

The Liar
The Obsession
Come Sundown
Shelter in Place
Under Currents
Hideaway
Legacy
Nightwork
Identity
Mind Games

The Born In Trilogy:
Born in Fire
Born in Ice
Born in Shame

The Bride Quartet:
Vision in White
A Bed of Roses
Savour the Moment
Happy Ever After

The Key Trilogy:
Key of Light
Key of Knowledge
Key of Valour

The Irish Trilogy:
Jewels of the Sun
Tears of the Moon
Heart of the Sea

Three Sisters Island Trilogy:
Dance upon the Air
Heaven and Earth
Face the Fire

The Sign of Seven Trilogy:
Blood Brothers
The Hollow
The Pagan Stone

Chesapeake Bay Quartet:
Sea Swept
Rising Tides
Inner Harbour
Chesapeake Blue

In the Garden Trilogy:
Blue Dahlia
Black Rose
Red Lily

The Circle Trilogy:
Morrigan's Cross
Dance of the Gods
Valley of Silence

The Dream Trilogy:
Daring to Dream
Holding the Dream
Finding the Dream

The Inn Boonsboro Trilogy:
The Next Always
The Last Boyfriend
The Perfect Hope

The Cousins O'Dwyer Trilogy:
Dark Witch
Shadow Spell
Blood Magick

The Guardians Trilogy:
Stars of Fortune
Bay of Sighs
Island of Glass

The Chronicles of the One Trilogy:
Year One
Of Blood and Bone
The Rise of Magicks

The Dragon Heart Legacy Trilogy:
The Awakening
The Becoming
The Choice

The Lost Bride Trilogy
Inheritance
The Mirror

Many of Nora Roberts' other titles are now available in ebook and she is also the author of the In Death series using the pseudonym J.D. Robb.

HIDDEN NATURE

NORA ROBERTS

PIATKUS

First published in the US in 2025 by St Martin's Press,
An imprint of St Martin's Publishing Group
Published in Great Britain in 2025 by Piatkus

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Copyright © 2025 by Nora Roberts

The moral right of the author has been asserted.

All characters and events in this publication, other than those clearly in the public domain, are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

All rights reserved.
No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, without the prior permission in writing of the publisher, nor be otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library.

Hardback ISBN 978-0-349-44330-0
Trade paperback ISBN 978-0-349-44331-7

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

Papers used by Piatkus are from well-managed forests
and other responsible sources.

Piatkus
An imprint of
Little, Brown Book Group
Carmelite House
50 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DZ

The authorised representative
in the EEA is
Hachette Ireland
8 Castlecourt Centre, Dublin 15, D15
XTP3, Ireland
(email: info@hbgi.ie)

An Hachette UK Company
www.hachette.co.uk

www.littlebrown.co.uk

To Bruce and Jason,
my own Mr. Fix-Its

PART ONE

DEATH

Now cracks a noble heart. Good night, sweet prince,
And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest!

—William Shakespeare

CHAPTER ONE

The day Sloan Cooper died began before dawn and ended shortly before midnight. As a corporal in the Natural Resources Police, she'd helped take down a trio of men who spent most of the fall harassing, robbing, and assaulting hikers on the trails in the Western Maryland mountains.

The three men, two brothers and their father, deemed the public lands their property, as sovereign citizens, and all who crossed their borders trespassers.

Now, after a three-day operation during which she'd personally disarmed the father, one John aka Red Bowson, all three were in custody. Sloan figured they'd have a nice long stay in a federal prison to consider the error of their ways.

So satisfying.

Plus, she wanted that third chevron, wanted the rank of sergeant, and this bust could push that through.

Since she'd won the toss, she manned the wheel on the drive back to the Special Ops Division while her partner checked in with his wife.

Joel Warren, a beanpole of a man with deep brown skin and close-cropped curls under his felt Stetson, had a deceptively lazy manner that masked a sharp mind and enough energy to power a small city.

They'd trained together, and both had aimed for the Criminal Investigative Bureau. He, born and raised in DC, and she, from a small town in those western mountains, had found their rhythm early on.

Their partnership of nearly five years worked despite—or maybe

because of—their opposing personalities. He: easygoing, do the job, and go home. And she: intense, driven, and buttoned-down.

As she drove, she listened with half an ear as he told his bride they were on their way home.

He downplayed the three brutal days, didn't mention the fact they'd been fired on or the black eye Sloan had earned during the takedown.

Not just to spare Sari the darker details, Sloan knew. Because, for Joel, that was then. This was now.

She had to admire how he compartmentalized.

When he finished, he rearranged his endless legs.

"Not supposed to tell you yet."

"Tell me what? Since you're going to."

"Told my mama, and Sari told her folks. Supposed to wait a couple-three more weeks, but—"

She was a trained investigator, and she knew Joel like she knew a brother, if she'd had one. "You're kidding! Sari's pregnant?"

His brown eyes twinkled as he pointed at her.

"See, I didn't tell you. You concluded, and you're right, sis. I knocked Sari's fine ass up. Nine weeks gone."

"Holy shit, Joel!" Delight had her pumping her fist in the air before she punched his shoulder. "You're going to be a daddy."

"Already feel like one. Weird, right, but I do. Mama says it's a girl, and you know Mama ain't never wrong."

"Mama Dee ain't never wrong. But you're all good if it's a boy?"

"I'm all good."

"How's Sari?"

"She puked every morning for about a month running, but that's passed. Halle-freaking-lujah. She says how she can't wait to get fat. We've got a lot to be thankful for when Turkey Day rolls around in a couple weeks."

He looked at her with a shining grin. "You're gonna be an auntie, sis."

"Auntie Sloan will always have cookies. I'm so happy for you, Joel. Oh, man, I'm so happy for both of you. You'll be great at it."

"How about you and Matias? Ever think about taking that next step?"

"As in moving in together?"

She hadn't thought to check in with the man she'd been seeing for most of a year as Joel had with Sari. Then again, Matias wouldn't expect it—and wouldn't have appreciated a check-in after ten at night.

"Not sure," she concluded. "Mostly no, but not sure. And I know what you're thinking." She ticked a look in his direction. "*Not sure* means just *no*. But it really means *not sure* and *not yet*. We're fine like we are."

"Mm-hmm."

She only rolled her eyes, as she knew that sound. It meant, in his opinion, she was fooling herself.

Maybe so, but she liked her life just as it was.

But he said, "I need a Dr Pepper."

"You always need a Dr Pepper."

"Dr Pepper gives me my sparkle."

"So you say, but fine. I have to pee anyway. And we might as well gas up while we're at it."

Another mile either way would've changed everything, but she cut quickly to the right and took the next exit.

She drove half a mile, winding through the almost middle of nowhere to a quick stop. She pulled up to the pumps.

"You gas it up. I'll buy the expectant daddy his drink of choice. Daddy," she repeated. "Holy shit, Joel!"

She got out of the truck, an athletic woman with her blond hair secured in a bun under her Stetson. Her eyes (the left sporting a shiner), large, almond-shaped, and deeply green, dominated a face of strong cheekbones, a slim nose, and a long, sharply defined mouth.

Like Joel's easy manner, people often mistook those large, fairylike eyes for soft. She could bench-press a hundred and fifty—thirty over her own weight—send a speed bag singing, and run a mile in six minutes flat.

She'd spent her childhood hiking the trails in the Alleghenies, swimming or boating on the lake in the summer, skiing, snowshoeing in the winter. The outdoors had honed her physique and her mindset. Her ambitions and chosen career made, to her thinking, the best of them.

She stepped into the little mart thinking about emptying her bladder,

then finishing the second half of the drive home, where she'd take a long, hot shower and sleep in her own bed.

Even as the door shut behind her, she knew something was wrong.

The stance of the man with his back to her—white, brown hair, six feet, a hundred and sixty—and the wide eyes that read fear in the counterman facing her, had her resting a hand on her weapon.

It happened fast.

It took an eternity.

The man spun, and the weapon already in his hand fired.

The first shot grazed across her forehead, a sharp, shocking sting that gave her an instant to draw.

But the second struck her chest, threw her back and down with pain beyond comprehension.

She saw the man running by her—mid-thirties, brown eyes, little scar on the right cheek—as her breath wheezed, as the shocking pain spread.

She tried to raise her weapon, but the world grayed. She tried to shout a warning to Joel, but could barely draw breath.

The shooter—black Adidas low-tops, gray trench, jeans frayed at the bottom—began to fade out of her mind.

Dimly, she heard another shot, then one more.

Then Joel was beside her, pressing down on her chest so the pain screamed in her head. "Sloan, Sloan! You look at me. You fucking stay with me. Officer down, Officer down. Need immediate medical assistance."

She stared at his face—she knew that face—as his words fell away and into a void.

Then his face was close, so close it blocked everything else, and his eyes—dark as two new moons—were fierce.

"You stay with me. Help's coming. I'm here, right here."

"Hurts."

"I know, sis, I know. You use that, use that hurt and stay with me. I'm with you. Don't you go anywhere. Stay here, stay with me."

Pain obliterated time and space. She drowned in it, and went under. When she surfaced, the pain came with her. Screaming like the sirens. Faces she didn't know snapped out words she couldn't understand.

Cold, bitter cold covered her, but didn't numb the wild, unrelenting pain.

But she heard Joel—somewhere as the world sped by.

"You're strong. You're fucking tough, and you're gonna fight. You hear me? You hear me, Sloan?"

Everything was white. Everyone shouted, but the voices bounced off her ears and away. Lights, too many lights hurting her eyes, so she closed them.

Then it was Joel again, gripping her hand, his eyes fierce. "I'm right here. I'll be right here. You fight, goddamn it, Sloan. Don't you give up."

Then it all went away. The pain, the lights, the voices. It all went to black.

When the light came back, it came soft, gauzy. She felt free in that light as she floated. As she looked down at the woman on the table. So pale, so still. So much blood.

All those people around her. They'd cut the poor thing open, she thought, before she realized, with a kind of mild interest, she was the poor thing.

It's me down there.

Someone shouted *Clear!* and the paddles made her body jerk. Floating, she sighed. They were working so hard, and she—*I*—looked tired of it. So tired of it.

You can let her go, she thought. *Let me go.*

The paddles hit again, and she ignored them.

She could see so much from where she floated. Joel, pacing, pacing, a phone at his ear. She could even hear him.

"She's still in surgery. Her family's on their way. I'll call you when she's out."

She watched him swipe tears away, and that touched her. She wanted to tell him she was fine, peaceful in this soft, pretty light. But there was blood on his shirt, and his eyes were shattered.

"We're not going to lose her, Sari. We're not. She's going to fight. She won't give up. She's not finished yet. Sari, she's not giving up."

All right, all right, damn it.

Once again, she looked down at herself. She thought of Joel and a baby coming. She thought of her parents, her sister.

The next time the paddles struck, she let them take her back to the black.

When she woke, the pain was there, but dulled, as if smothered under a warm blanket. The air had a sting to it, one she recognized as hospital even before she registered the beep of machines.

The light, dim but harsh, pressed against her eyelids and made her long for just a moment of the soft and gauzy.

"She's waking up, Joel. Sloan? Baby, it's Mom. Open your eyes now, sweetie. Sloan, my baby, open your eyes."

She blinked. It took such effort and, since everything blurred, didn't seem worth it. She started to close her eyes again.

"Come on now. Give my hand a squeeze and open your eyes. There you are."

She felt her mother's lips press to the back of her hand, her palm, her fingers.

"There's my girl."

"Hospital," she managed. Her throat felt sandpapered, her tongue as thick and dry as a plank.

"That's right, and you're going to be fine. Just fine."

And it came rushing back. The mini-mart, the man at the counter. The explosion of pain.

"Shot!" She tried to push up, barely managed to move her head. "Joel."

"Right here, sis."

She saw them now as her vision cleared. Her mother, ghost pale, blue eyes shadowed and red-rimmed, and her partner, looking worn to the bone.

"How bad?"

"Not bad enough to stop you." He bent down, kissed the top of her mother's head as he closed a hand around Sloan's. "I'll get the doctor."

"Everything's going to be fine now." Elsie Cooper kissed her daugh-

ter's hand again. Tears, two warm raindrops, spilled on Sloan's knuckles. "Your dad and Drea are close by. We've been taking shifts."

"How long? How long?"

"You've been sleeping awhile, and healing. This is day three. They put you in a coma at first so you could just sleep. And here you are waking up. Baby? You feel this button?" She guided Sloan's hand. "If it hurts, you can press this button for medicine."

"Okay. I feel . . . mushy."

A tear slid down Elsie's cheek as she smiled. "I bet you do. Here's the nurse. This is Angie. She's been really good to you. To all of us."

"Glad to see you awake."

The nurse wore her gray-streaked black hair in a bob and had red flowers over the pale blue of her scrubs. Sloan judged her at about forty, and felt a trickle of relief when she noted the woman's brown eyes smiled along with her lips.

"Dr. Vincenti will come in shortly. Elsie, Joel, why don't you give me a few minutes to look after Sloan?"

"We'll be right outside," Elsie promised her.

"How bad?" Sloan asked the minute the door shut. "How bad am I hurt?"

Angie checked the IVs, the monitors, then Sloan's pulse by hand.

"Joel said you'd want it straight, so I'll tell you it was bad. And now it's better. You're going to make a full recovery, and you'll have to stop yourself from pushing that. Dr. Vincenti and the surgical team? You don't get much better."

"I died."

"You're very much alive." Angie held a cup with a straw to Sloan's lips. "Sip some water."

Because the thirst raged, Sloan obeyed. "On the operating table, I died. They had to bring me back."

Angie set the cup aside, then took Sloan's hand. "You had an experience?"

"Did I? They zapped me, didn't they? My heart stopped and they zapped me. I think three times."

"The bullet missed the heart, but we'll say the surgery was tricky.

Vincenti's very, very good. You're young, healthy, and strong. And putting those factors aside, we can say, it wasn't your time."

"Three times."

"Yes. And here you are, alive, awake, aware. Your vitals are good. You're stable. If I'm a judge—and I am—we'll move your condition up to good within the next twenty-four. Now, if you're not too tired, and it's okay if you are, the rest of your family wants to see you."

"Yes, please."

"Family makes a difference, too."

Gently, Angie eased Sloan up and turned the pillow to the cool side.

"People who love you make a difference. And you're loved. The call button's right here if you need me. Dr. Vincenti's on his way."

Her father and sister came in. Her father, silver threads starting to gleam in his brown hair and trim beard, his green eyes sheened with tears, leaned over, pressed his rough, unshaven cheek to hers.

She felt him trembling, pulling in air to stop tears.

"I'm okay, Dad. They said I'm okay."

"Scared the crap out of me, Sloan. Give me just a minute."

While she did, she looked over his shoulder at her sister. Drea, face splotchy from recent weeping, her usual lustrous brown hair dull and yanked back in a careless tail, swiped at eyes as blue as their mother's.

She took Sloan's hand, smiled. Said, "Whew."

"Sums it up."

Dean Cooper lifted his head, then cupped Sloan's face in hands as rough as his stubble. "Try not to do that again."

"Okay, Dad."

In a lifelong habit, he kissed her forehead, her cheeks, her lips. "I know you're tired, and rest is what you need. But know we're here."

"I do." She worked to clear the clouds from her brain. "Who's minding the business?"

"We got it covered. Don't you worry."

"Plenty of people in Heron's Rest were pulling for you," Drea added. "And plenty of them pitched in to help keep things going."

"And Joel? He's our hero. You're both heroes."

She felt herself starting to fade, struggled to stay awake. "Did we get him? White male, mid-thirties, brown and brown . . . Did we get him?"

But she dropped off and didn't hear the answer.

When pain slapped her awake again, Joel sat by the bed reading the worn paperback copy of Stephen King's *It* he always kept in his go bag.

Sloan remembered asking him why he kept that particular book packed. He'd told her it reminded him, when he was away from home, that whatever they dealt with couldn't be as bad as Pennywise.

To test his theory, she'd read it herself and could only agree.

"Came close this time," she mumbled.

He looked up, then set the book aside. "Hey there."

"Did we get him?"

"Hit the button. You're hurting."

She shook her head and immediately wondered how the movement could spread more pain. "I want to stay awake. The shooter."

"I heard the shots—two shots. He ran out, fired at me. Missed. I returned fire and winged him. Got his plate number, the make and model of the beater he jumped into, but I couldn't pursue. You were on the floor, bleeding."

"Something off—counterman terrified. I had my hand on my weapon, but he swung around, fired. Twice?"

"Twice."

"I didn't even draw my weapon."

"Yeah, you did, sis. It was in your hand when I got to you. I called for an ambulance and relayed the plates, vehicle, and suspect description. They had him by the time they were loading you in the ambulance.

"Push the button and I'll tell you the rest."

She pushed it, and the pain backed off a few inches.

"Okay, responders spotted the car, driving erratically, and no shit, since I caught him just under the armpit. He lost control of the beater, sideswiped a tree—beater lost that battle. And the dumb shit came out firing. DOS."

"Anyone else hurt?"

"No."

"The civilian, counter guy."

"He's fine. He was shaken up, may have pissed his pants. But he grabbed a T-shirt from the rack so I could use it to put pressure on the chest wound."

"He shot twice. It's not real clear, but . . ." Confused, she lifted a hand to the right side of her forehead, felt the bandage.

"Yeah, no penetration. You got about ten stitches on that one."

Head shot, she thought. The sting of a thousand angry wasps. "Could've been worse."

"Could've been."

"Mom, Dad, Drea. They were here, right?"

"Yeah."

"It's blurry."

"They said that would happen for a while. Don't worry about it. They were here the whole time. I talked them into going home, seeing as they came with the clothes on their backs and not much else. They'll be back in the morning."

"When can I get out of here? Shouldn't I talk to the doctor?"

"You did talk to the doctor."

"When?"

"This afternoon. You've been in and out. They've run a bunch of tests, and you're doing pretty good. They're probably going to get you up tomorrow, get you to walk a little."

"When can I get out?" She wanted to whine, and came very close. "It smells like sick people in here."

As she'd said exactly that the last time she'd surfaced, he just smiled. "You are a sick person, sis. They've gotta monitor for infection and shit like that. And they've got to get you up and around a little. Look, the bullet clipped the—give me a second."

He closed his eyes. "Manubrium. Yeah, that, and a rib. So they picked bone fragments out. You got a busted rib and a hole in your chest. Not to mention the gash in your hard head. So sit back and relax. It's going to be a few days."

"I really want to talk to the doctor. Can you just get the doctor?"

"Sloan, it's past two in the morning. Give the guy a break."

"Two? In the morning? What the hell are you doing here? Go home." Agitated now, she managed to push up a few inches, then just dropped back. "Sari's pregnant. She's pregnant, right? I didn't just dream that?"

"She's knocked up good, Auntie Sloan. She peeked in on you yesterday. Everybody in CIB has come in. And every damn one gave blood. You lost a hell of a lot."

Because they wanted to tremble, he rubbed his hands on his thighs. "You're all full up now. You had both sets of grandparents check in, and your uncle, your cousins, Captain Hamm, and a whole bunch."

"I don't remember any of it. Everything's so goddamn mixed-up and vague. Except . . . I died on the table. The operating table."

"They brought you back."

"Yeah. Three times they had to zap me. I was floating."

But if everything else blurred, that remained clear as polished glass.

"I watched them." She spoke slowly as she remembered every detail. "I saw you, pacing the hallway, blood on your shirt. My blood. In some hallway, talking on the phone. Crying a little. You said my family was coming, and you'd call when I was out. I was in surgery, and you'd call when I got out."

He rubbed the hand he held in his. "Are you stringing me along?"

"It's all so clear. Joel. How can that be so absolutely clear, and everything else not? I was going to let go. I felt so light, and it would've been so easy to just let go. But you were crying a little, and I remembered you'd told me I had to fight. Not to give up, but fight. So I did."

He got up, walked to the window. Nudging the curtains open a little, he stared through the gap into the dark.

"I was talking to Sari. She was scared, crying, and wanted to come. I had to talk her down, talk her into waiting until I said to come. She loves you."

"I know. I love her."

He took another moment before he came back to sit again. "I guess that makes you a miracle, sis."

"I don't feel like a miracle. I got a tube sticking in me."

"For drainage, they said. They'll take it out before much longer."

"They've got me hooked up to all this—this stuff."

"IVs for fluid, catheter deal to catch them when you pee them out."

"It's demoralizing," she decided. "Plus, it freaking hurts. Everywhere. Why are you grinning at me?"

"You're getting better. Bitchy's better."

"Great. Help me break out of this place. C'mon, get me out of here. I'm starving."

He sat up straight. "You're hungry?"

"Hungry is wanting a bag of chips. I said I'm starving."

"I'll get you something."

When he rushed out, Sloan gave in, pushed the button again.

She drifted off, but just under the surface. She broke through again when Joel came back with a little plastic bowl and a spoon.

"They said to start off with this."

"What is it?"

"Beef broth."

"That sounds disgusting." And to the woman who had, only days before, bench pressed one-fifty, the spoonful of broth felt like a ten-pound weight. "It is disgusting," she said, and ate another spoonful.

She managed four sips before she wore out. "Sorry, that's it." She could feel herself drifting, going under again. "Go home, Joel."

Instead, he set the bowl aside, then rubbed his knuckles over her cheek before he sat down. He picked up his book, stretched out his legs, and read.

The next time she woke, the open curtains let sunshine pour in. Her sister sat beside her, hair loose and shining around her shoulders as she worked a crossword puzzle on her tablet.

Sloan said, "Oh, man."

Drea glanced up, shot out a big, bright smile. "It's good to see you, too."

"How long was I out this time?"

"It's just after nine on this sunny November morning. I kicked Joel out—which wasn't easy. Mom and Dad will be in this afternoon. Want some breakfast?"

"Maybe. I want out of here, Drea."

"Who wouldn't? I hear you're taking the first steps toward that—literally—this morning. Let me see about getting you some food."

When her sister went out, Sloan managed to find the controls and brought the back of the bed up a couple more inches. And took her first good look around.

A lot of flowers. That was nice—she'd be grateful. She'd be more grateful if she and the flowers had been in her apartment, but she'd be grateful.

She had beige walls, no surprise there, a lot of machines, a couple of chairs, a door she assumed led to a bathroom. Through the window she could see some buildings, some trees, a parking lot.

For the first time it occurred to her she didn't know where she was.

"Where the hell am I?" she demanded when Drea came back in.

"Hagerstown. Closest hospital, and they've been great. Angie's bringing you breakfast, and news! The doctor will be in to take out the catheter. You're going to take a walk."

"Outside?"

"No." In the professionally cheerful voice she used with clients and customers, Drea continued, "We do have a wide variety of indoor activities lined up for your entertainment and amusement."

"Kiss my ass."

Ignoring that, Drea rolled right along.

"Physical therapy. Whee! Blood tests, urine tests. Such fun! We also have a book of crosswords, just for you."

"You're the crossword addict."

Drea, in her tend-to-you way, eased Sloan up, smoothed and plumped her pillow. "And I'm assured they're an excellent way to exercise your brain. We also have my spare tablet. You can stream movies, TV, whatever."

Reality, and the dread that ran with it, leaked into hope.

"Jesus, Drea, how long am I going to be stuck here?"

"A few more days anyway, but ask the doctor. He's adorable, by the way."

"Are you hitting on my doctor?"

"I would, but he's wearing a wedding ring." She turned as Angie came in with a tray.

"How are you feeling this morning?"

"Better. Like it's time to go home."

"Let's see how you handle breakfast."

"Not beef broth."

"No. We've got scrambled eggs, applesauce, yogurt."

"Coffee?"

"A smoothie for now. We'll check with the doctor on the coffee. He's making his rounds, so he'll be in shortly."

"You said that before, I think, and Joel said I talked to him, the doctor. I don't remember."

"You're on some excellent drugs. After you see the doctor, we're going to get you up. We're going to want you to take short walks several times a day. A therapist will be in later to show you some breathing exercises."

"Can I take a shower?"

"Soon. We're going to keep you busy for the rest of your stay. If discharge is the motivation, use it. You'll get there faster. And food helps."

She gave Sloan's hand a pat, and left.

Sloan managed a few bites of egg, then leaned back. "It feels like I'm starving, then I start to eat. It's exhausting. Nothing tastes right."

"Try the smoothie." Drea held the straw to Sloan's lips.

After a taste, she shook her head. "I want some damn coffee, I want this thing out of me so I can pee like a normal person. I want to get the fuck out of this place, and I want . . ."

She stopped, pressed her hands to her face, mortified tears burned in her eyes.

"Jesus Christ, listen to me! I'm a bratty ten-year-old. I'm alive, and I could be, maybe should be, dead, and all I can do is whine.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry, I just feel so bitchy."

"Hey, some son of a bitch shot my sister. I'm feeling pretty bitchy, too."

On a calmer breath, Sloan dropped her hands. "I'm top bitch. You can be assistant bitch."

"Figures. Assistant bitch says try to eat a little more."

"Okay."

She tried more eggs, took a spoonful of yogurt.

"Sorry, honestly, that's it."

With a nod, Drea angled the tray away.

"Shit, does Matias know?"

Back turned, Drea fussed with a flower arrangement. "He came to see you the day after your surgery."

"Do I have my phone? I should probably call him, or at least text him."

With fire in her eyes, Drea spun back. "They let him in to see you. Mom and Dad insisted. He stayed about three minutes, and that's probably overestimating. He hasn't been back since."

"Oh." Her brain tried to process it. "All right."

"Is it? Is it all right?"

"No, of course it isn't. Not even close to all right. I'll deal with it."

"If you don't boot that selfish asshole to the curb, I swear, I'll wait until you're back in shape— No, you're stronger than me, and meaner. I'll wait until you're on your feet, barely, then I'll kick your ass."

In the face of her sister's fury, some of the bitchiness in Sloan dropped away.

"You still couldn't take me. I won't have to boot him, Drea. He's booted himself. And I'm either too tired to care, or I just don't. Would you mind getting that food out of here? Even the smell's not hitting right."

"Sure."

As Drea reached for it, Sloan took her hand. "I love you, even though you think you're the pretty one."

"I love you. Trust me, right now I am unquestionably the pretty one."

"That bad?"

"Avoid mirrors for another couple days. I'll be back."

After Drea went out, Sloan glanced toward the bathroom. Now she absolutely had to look at a mirror, but couldn't figure out how.

As she calculated, Dr. Vincenti breezed in.

Drea had it right there. Adorable.