

DELILAH:
AN UNDER
your
SCARS

NOVELLA

ARIEL N. ANDERSON



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PROCEED WITH CAUTION

This is a sequel novella that follows Caroline seventeen years after the events in *Under Your Scars*.

The books must be read in order.

This book is told from Caroline's point of view as an adult who lost her hero at a young age, and as such, her opinions on Christian and the events in the final chapters of *Under Your Scars* may not necessarily reflect yours. *Delilah* is not meant to be read as a redemption story.

CONTENT WARNINGS INCLUDE:

parental loss, themes of suicide, depression, violence, and grief.

This is a book with adult themes and is intended for mature readers only.

*If you have any questions about sensitive content, please reach out to me on
Instagram: @ariel.n.anderson*

“Hey there Delilah, what’s it like in Meridian City? Well, there’s trauma, murder, pain, and suffering, Jesus fuck it’s gritty.”

- My Husband

PROLOGUE

Sometimes when I think about my father's suicide, I wonder if he knew he'd kill a part of me, too.

The thing about that mindset is that it's not fair to him. It took me a long time to realize that his death wasn't, isn't, and will never be about me.

Losing my parents shattered me, but I'm still here.

So what does that say about how broken he was?

CHAPTER 1

At four years old, I was adopted by the richest man in the world.

At four years old, I was twice orphaned.

Seventeen years later, it still doesn't feel real some days. Sometimes I still wake up hoping it isn't.

But not once have I ever been so lucky to wake up back in that perfect life I had for so little time.

I remember my time with Christian and Elena so vividly. I remember arriving at a stuffy courtroom in Meridian City in a silver minivan and leaving in a black private jet headed straight for Disney World.

To this day, it's still one of my favorite memories, because even then, I knew that my new parents would have done absolutely anything to see me smile.

I remember riding the teacups until I got sick. I remember us hunting down every princess in the park so they could sign my autograph book. I remember taking a million pictures in front of Cinderella's castle and my new parents buying me one of everything from every gift shop in the park.

I remember going to our hotel room that first night and telling Christian Reeves that he was the best daddy in the whole world.

And he was.

I don't care what anyone says. Christian and Elena Reeves loved me. We were the perfect family. Those four short months I got to spend with them were the best months of my life, and it was the last time I can say I was truly happy.

And then Elliot Young ruined everything.

I know. I know. *I know* he was justified in his concern for his daughter. She was married to a serial killer, after all; but Elliot took away my

family. He strangled his *wife* and then shot his *daughter* in the head.

The investigation determined that Elliot knew about the Silencer, and that's what pushed him off the deep end. My gut has always told me that there's more to the story—that there's history there that the rest of the world is never meant to know.

For anger or guilt or simply because Elliot went crazy from his brain tumor, I don't know, but I was meant to die that day my parents did. I've convinced myself over the years that if I had walked into that kitchen a few minutes earlier, Elliot would have shot me too.

Sometimes when I'm in the darkest depths of my depression, I wish that he did. It would have been a mercy.

Looking back on that day feels like an out-of-body experience, but everything about it is burned into my memory so deeply I could probably project it from my eyeballs.

When I first walked into that kitchen to see my father on his knees and blood everywhere, I don't know why I didn't scream or cry. I don't know why I cared so much about those stupid pancakes, but Dad told me he'd get them for me if I counted to one hundred, and I tried so hard to be good and do it.

I got to ten when I heard the gunshot. I was at seventy-two when Paolo found me, still with my back turned from the carnage. I remember him pulling out his phone, calling the police, and telling me to come to him as he held a cupcake to distract me so I wouldn't turn around.

I turned around anyway, and the first thing I said was, "*Mommy?*"

She was sitting there, in a pool of her blood with her eyes still open and her face still wet with tears. Dad was there...clutching onto her lifeless body with his own as if trying to drag her to the afterlife with him.

I dropped my cupcake. It landed with a 'plop' in a puddle of my father's blood.

To this day, I can't even look at a cupcake without bursting into tears.

And if I see a pancake? Well, who knew something so innocent and sweet could be the source of a full-blown panic attack?

Grandma was in the kitchen because of me, because Mom promised me pancakes for breakfast. They were all in the kitchen because of me.

They're all dead because of *me*.

CHAPTER 2

I look forward to this day every year. I also dread it.

Every year on May 8th, Travis, Justin, and I travel to Meridian City to visit the family I lost too soon.

Edwin, my grandfather for all intents and purposes, didn't make it very long after Christian died. I think he just completely lost the will to live, and he was already old and in poor health. I think he *wanted* to die, so just three weeks after Travis got full custody of me, he did.

I think Edwin had a lot of guilt about who Christian became after Thomas and Elizabeth were murdered, and didn't want to mess up with me, so he didn't even fight to keep me. I'm not bitter about it, because I know he was doing what was best for me, but at the time, it felt like he didn't want me when all I wanted was my parents and my grandfather and my perfect little life tied up with glittery ribbons and ice cream and *love*.

The last time I ever saw him alive was after the funeral when he held me so tight in his arms I thought I might burst, as he wept in the rain until his spirit finally dried up.

At four years old, I was briefly the richest person in the world. My age and Christian's sudden death complicated things. The vacancy as CEO of Reeves Enterprises resulted in a power grab. Stuffy men desperate for just a *taste* of my father's wealth tore apart Christian's legacy.

They shut down the orphanage and sold off his businesses one by one until Reeves Enterprises was nothing more than an outdated page in Forbes magazine. When it finally came out publicly that Christian Reeves was the Silencer, the FBI was forced to come in and seize everything—the mansion, the stocks, the credit cards, the loose change under the couch cushions. I was left with nothing but a disgraced last name and two gravestones.

I could see even at four years old how unconditionally my father loved my mother, even before they were officially my parents. I've never

seen that kind of love anywhere else. Christian had his share of problems, and I'm not denying that, but all of that melted away when he looked at Elena. He was the first man who ever showed me what love is, and I saw it every time my parents were in the same room.

I stare out of the car window as we approach the cemetery. Travis and Justin are in the front, so I have the back to myself. We don't talk much on these trips.

As much as I love Travis and appreciate him after everything he's done for me these past seventeen years, we have very differing opinions when it comes to our dead family.

He's always been on his father's side, and I've always held the position that Elliot did more damage to our family than Christian ever would have.

Travis stops at the entrance to the cemetery and remains silent as I get out of the car and open the trunk. Every time I visit, there are always horribly profane words spray painted onto the headstones. I bring supplies with me, and I update my parents on my life as I painstakingly scrub off every bit of paint and dirt from their graves.

Justin rolls down his car window. "You good, kid?"

I take a deep breath. "Yeah, I'm good."

He nods, and that's the last thing he says to me before they drive off. Travis and I never visit Elena's grave together since our opinions on her role in the matter differ. It's just better that we leave each other alone with our thoughts.

But I'm never truly alone, and that's the worst part. As the daughter of one of the United States' most prolific serial killers, the media has always followed my life, and every year on the anniversary of my parents' deaths, the local news always tells the world on what I'm up to.

The East Coast knows about my life updates before my parents do. There's probably already a photo of me sitting in this graveyard right now circulating on the internet at this very moment.

You'd think that since I was only four when everything happened, the media vultures would have left me alone.

I couldn't have been more wrong.

I didn't start noticing the shadows until I was fourteen. They started following me home from school or waiting outside of grocery stores to get a glimpse of me and Travis.

When I was eighteen, they started approaching me, asking questions and requesting interviews. I've always ignored them for the sake of my uncles. They deserve privacy and peace, something they haven't gotten since they took me in. The least I can do is stay out of trouble and out of the public eye as much as possible.

As I've gotten older and went out into the world by myself for college, it's only gotten worse. I'm in my last semester at MIT. I had to be given special accommodations to finish my degree online because it caused too much of a commotion for me to be on campus.

People see me choosing the same college as my father as an act of rebellion against the public for their negative coverage of my family's lives, but it's not like that. For all the terrible things he did as the Silencer, Christian Reeves was a hero. *My* hero.

After my parents died, Travis and Justin tried to keep us in Meridian City, but as I got older, people started sending me death threats. Families of my father's victims would reach out and either tell me to go to hell or demand money that I didn't have. The only reason I could afford to go to private school for as long as I did was because my parents already paid my tuition at Meridian Academy in full until I was eighteen. We couldn't afford private security, so when I was fifteen Travis was finally forced to pull me out of the Academy to homeschool me. Then we moved to Texas for a couple of years to live in Elliot and Bethany's house, but eventually, the media followed us there too. Travis and Justin were forced to sell that property and used the money to move us to middle-of-nowhere Kansas, and that's where we've been since.

I approach my parents and kneel in the center of their headstone. My eyes instantly fill with tears. I trace my fingers along the words '*murderer*', '*psycho*', and '*whore*' plastered against the marble in colorful paint. I pull out a sponge and a spray bottle and start scrubbing the headstone as the tears begin to fall.

“I graduate next month,” I try to say cheerfully, though the words get stuck in my throat. “Top of my class, just like you. I’m working on getting a patent for a generator I built. It’s twice as powerful and needs half as much fuel. I want to build them and donate them to homeless shelters but...well, they’re expensive and you know I don’t have two nickels to rub together.” I chuckle to myself. “But there are grants for that kind of stuff, so maybe I’ll get lucky.”

Bright orange paint trickles down my hands and forearms as I start scrubbing harder.

“I went on my first date a few days ago. I mean, like, a real date, with someone who didn’t know who I was. His name is Garrett. He’s cute. Thick brown hair, glasses, and he has *dimples*.”

I imagine my mom squealing in excitement at that. “I know right? He asked me for a second date. Guess what we’re doing?” I laugh to myself again, but it’s a sad laugh this time. “Bowling. I remember you telling me that’s why Dad fell in love with you. You’ll have to make some time to teach me. Because I want to be in love like you were.”

My voice breaks and I have to rest my hands on my knees to keep from falling over and dry heaving on my grief. “I...I miss you both so much I can’t stand it sometimes. It never gets any easier, you know. My therapist tells me that I’ll hit a point where I’ll learn to live around the pain but...well she’s been telling me that since I was four. I’m starting to think she’s full of shit.”

CHAPTER 3

It takes me two full hours to clean my parents' headstones. I update them on everything they've missed in the year since I last visited. I spend a lot of time asking their opinions on what I should do after I graduate.

I want to do so much good in the world, but nobody believes in me the way that they would. It's so hard to get people to listen to me when all they think about when they see my name is that I'm the daughter of a serial killer.

Travis once suggested that I change my last name from Reeves back to my birth name, Gilbert, but I would never do that. I am a *Reeves*, and I'll always be a Reeves. All I want to do is prove to not only the world, but to my parents, that I'm proud of who I am, and the sins of my father will never change that.

After I leave the cemetery, I spend some time wandering around the city, and eventually, my feet carry me to the abandoned Reeves Estate. I clutch my hand around the wrought iron gate and stare at the mansion across the overgrown yard.

People say the property is cursed. So many people who have lived here have met their violent demise. It's nothing but a slowly deteriorating relic of the worst parts of this city.

I haven't been back here in seventeen years. Travis never brought me when I was little, and then when we started moving states, I just never thought to see what's become of my old home.

I look around once before slipping through the small crack in the gate. The chain lock allows just enough space for my body to fit through. I walk down the driveway and feel a sense of dread as I approach the house.

The pristine white brick is now coated in a thick layer of dirt. Moss and weeds climb up the walls. The windows are shattered, some of them

boarded. The marble statue outside the front door is broken and the stagnant water in the well has gone black and is probably festering with insect eggs.

If I didn't know better, I'd say the home from my memories and the one in front of me aren't the same. This isn't even a home anymore. It's a graveyard.

The front door is wide open, and with hesitation, I step through. It's dark outside and even darker in the house. I pull out my cell phone and turn on the flashlight. I watch a few rats scurry away. My footsteps don't echo like they used to. The floor is so thick with dirt and grime that my footsteps make a faint padding sound as I walk further into the foyer.

No shocker that most of the living room furniture has been stolen or eaten by rats. The bookshelves are covered in mold and the books on them are decayed. I slowly walk through every room on the first floor, avoiding the kitchen, reliving all the memories I cherish so deeply in my heart.

The Tootsie Roll stashes that my dad would hide around the house for me. The way he'd put me on his shoulders, and we'd chase Mom around the dining room table. The marker streaks are still all over his desk from where he let me go wild in my coloring books while he worked. The pictures I drew for them are still framed in their bedroom.

There's still a stack of stuffed animals in the corner of my old room as tall as I am, and princess dresses still hanging in the closet, eaten through after years of neglect.

The lavender comforter on my bed is covered in animal urine and droppings, but it's still unmade in the exact orientation as I left it.

I remember, because that horrible morning, I almost left my bedroom without Mr. Bunny. I came back to grab him before I went to the kitchen. When I left the room, I looked back at my bed. I think my four-year-old heart somehow knew that would be the last time I'd be in that room.

All of my memories from my time here are so vivid. The bad ones, yes, but especially the good ones.

They're the only proof I have that I was loved.

I wipe my face as a few stray tears fall down my cheeks. My phone starts to feel warm in my hands from the flashlight being on for so long, but I continue my haunting tour of my old home.

One of the first memories I have of this house was from my second day living in it. I wasn't used to the stairs because we didn't have them in the orphanage. I slipped down three and landed on my wrist to catch myself before tumbling all the way down.

I started crying, and once my parents determined that my wrist wasn't broken, they let me eat a popsicle while they took turns kissing away my tears until they turned into giggles.

Two days later there was a fluffy white carpet installed, and I never slipped again.

But I did '*accidentally*' use those stairs as a table to color my next picture, and got red marker all over the carpet.

I remember Mom being so *mad* and telling me I couldn't have dessert that night as punishment, but Dad just smiled and winked at me.

That night, he brought a bowl of ice cream to my room after Mom went to bed and read me a bedtime story until we both fell asleep.

The evidence of our betrayal was left on my nightstand, but all Mom did when she caught us the next morning was crawl into bed beside us and cuddled me until my stomach started grumbling for breakfast.

The second floor of the house is in just as sorry of a state as the first floor, only there are more cobwebs up here.

There aren't many framed photos of the three of us together, but the ones I do find on various bookshelves, I keep in a pile to take with me when I leave. I never got to come back to claim any sentimental belongings. Travis was allowed to come onto the property during the investigation to get me clothes and necessities, but we were never allowed back inside.

I set down the dirty frames and notice a few of the cobwebs to my right are gently billowing on a soft breeze. I wave my fingers near the webs and furrow my brow. A draft.

I shrug off my coat and attempt to push the bookshelf to the left, but it doesn't budge. I cough as dirt wafts up around me. My shirt, pants, and hands are now filthy, and I swear a spider is crawling down my back.

I feel the draft again to confirm it's there. I squat to examine the lowest bookshelf to see if it's possibly bolted to the floor, but it's not.

Instead, I catch the flashlight reflecting off a tiny silver semi-circle in the very corner of the bottom shelf behind a few books and trinkets. I move them all to look more closely. I blink twice, dumbfounded by my discovery. I look around the shelf some more on my hands and knees. The left side of the outer shelf also has a small piece of metal and two screws.

I have a multitool on my keychain, so I pull it out of my bag and use it to loosen the screws. When I pop off the metal plate, there's a keypad underneath.

There's no electricity still connected to the house, so there's no way the keypad would work, but I take after my father in the way that I'm an expert in security systems. I lie down flat on my stomach and start dismantling the small device until I can see the wires inside.

It's nothing special, but now my curiosity is piqued.

I also dismantle the portable charger I keep in my purse and use the battery to create enough charge to give power to the keypad. I spend a few minutes going through every numerical combination I can think of. None of them work.

I take a wild guess, and for my last try, I type in Edwin's birthday.

The small light on the keypad turns green before I hear a small *'click'*.

I gasp and crawl backward, grabbing my phone to shine the light on the bookshelf. I stand up and push the bookshelf again, and this time, it rolls across the floor to reveal a narrow staircase.

I laugh to myself because I can't imagine how no one found this before me. It's been nearly two decades. This house was crawling with investigators for months.

Maybe no one ever found this because *I* was meant to.

I swallow the anxiety creeping up my throat and take the staircase down until I reach a basement. I use my flashlight to look around the space, and I can't see anything of any importance. A few metal tables, some old tools, and crumpled pieces of paper.

And then my eyes land on a generator in the corner. One of the ones that you have to crank up like an old lawnmower.

If there's one thing I know about my father, it's that he was always prepared, and I don't even have to think twice as I crank up the machine and watch the lights come on.

I stare at the large concrete room in awe, but not shock. My father had to keep his double life hidden somewhere, after all, but to see it for myself feels...otherworldly.

There are computers and racks of weapons. A shooting range and sparring mats on the ground. There are dozens of blueprints and prototype gadgets spread across the metal tables.

At the computer, there's a password screen. I type in my mother's birthday and chuckle when the computer unlocks.

"You really were obsessed with her," I whisper to the empty, cold room. The computer screen is chaotic. There are shortcuts all over the desktop, some of them double-stacked. They're all labeled with numbers and dates, with no other indication of what kind of information they might hold.

But in the corner, all by itself, is a folder simply titled '*Angel*'.

That's what my dad used to call my mother, so often that I'd sometimes wonder if that was her real name and Elena was just a nickname.

I never did get to ask him why he called her angel; I've always just assumed it was because of how simple and ethereal her beauty was. Her aura, her compassion, her love, everything about her was angelic.

I've struggled a lot with whether I believe in an afterlife, in heaven, but if it's real, I know she's there.

And the worst part about that thought is that if heaven exists, I know my father can't exist there with her, which means that in killing himself after losing her, he probably still ended up having to live an eternity without her.

I click into the file, and sort by date, with the oldest coming first. The very first file is a video from September 6, 2019. A part of me nags me not to watch whatever is on that video, that it's probably private, but I also can't help myself.

"Dad, this better not be a sex tape."

I take a deep breath and click into the video with my eyes squinted in case I need to quickly shut them. After a second I peek. There's no sound, but the video is playing.

It looks like some sort of...body camera footage. It's shaky as the person the camera is attached to paces around in a circle.

It's a rainy night. Water splashes against the camera, leaving droplets on the lens that distort the video.

When the person the camera is attached to pulls out a gun, I know exactly who this is.

I'd recognize those self-harm scars anywhere. I remember tracing over them one night before bed and my father telling me that *love* saved him.

He puts that gun to his head, and I have to quickly pause the video as a familiar feeling of dread and horror washes over me. I put one hand to my chest as I try to catch my breath, bracing myself with my other hand on the desk.

My fingers grasp a cream-colored envelope covered in a layer of dust.

But under that dust, is a name. *My* name. A single tear slides down my cheek as I lift the envelope, stiff and stained with years of neglect just like everything else in this mansion.

The envelope isn't even sealed.

Inside is a letter written on the custom embossed parchment Dad used to let me use as coloring pages. I pull it out, and as soon as I see my father's

handwriting, my chest feels like it's being ripped open.

CHAPTER 4

Caroline,

I've restarted this letter a dozen times and it never sounds right, so I'm just going to get straight to the point with this one.

I wrote your mother a letter once telling her that I was at peace with the idea of being alone and the idea of death. I didn't think I was afraid of anything. I had this idea that I was untouchable...invincible.

But then I met Elena, and I realized that the reason I didn't fear death was because I feared being alone more. I feared losing her and the love she so willingly gave me, even when I didn't always deserve it. I still don't think I deserve it, and yet here I am, with the two best things that ever happened to me.

You should know that in the time you spent at the orphanage, I was always considering giving you a home. I was convinced that the money would make it easy for me to give you the life you deserved, and I suppose in a way, it would have. But looking back on it now, I'm glad I met Elena first.

When I fell in love with your mother, I had no idea how much commitment it would take to build a life with her. Until she came into my life, the only way I knew how to live mine was through anger or by throwing money at my problems until they went away. But that's not love, and I know that now.

So when we adopted you, I made you a promise that you'd always be the happiest, most loved girl in the universe.

Little did I know you'd turn that around on me and become the best four-year-old manipulator the world has ever known. I know you know what I'm talking about—because on the rare occasion that I have to tell you the word 'no' (usually when your mother is in the room), you always counter with, "but it would make me the happiest girl in the universe".

There are things I won't put in writing for your safety, but I want you

to know that I will always take care of you, and I promise you'll always have the means to make this world a better place.

If you're reading this, it's probably because you or your mother found it digging through my belongings after I'm gone. If that's the case: I'm so sorry for whatever I might miss, whether it's as small as going through a car wash for the first time, or something as big as your wedding. I've already missed the first four years of your life. I hope I never miss anything else, but I'm nothing if not prepared.

If something happens to me, I want you to go to Jason Lockhart. That's our attorney from when we adopted you. He's keeping something safe for you there, and if you find yourself stumped, I want you to remember that your mother is the best thing I never deserved.

Now that my life is as close to perfect as it will ever get, I need to confess something to you. I'm not a good man Caro. I've done terrible things. I've done things to your mother, the love of my life, that are unforgivable, and I suspect that my sins won't stop anytime soon.

So if they catch up to me, I offer you this:

Be better than me. Do good in this world. Be selfless and passionate and never let go of the way you choose to see the best in everyone.

The way you chose to see the good in me, even when I knew I didn't have any.

I love you, Caroline. Forever.

Tell your mother that I'll be waiting for her on the other side, yeah?

Love,

Dad.

CHAPTER 5

The tears don't stop falling for three straight hours.

Not even because this letter broke what little was left of me, but because we had so little time together that he didn't even get to seal the envelope.

My shirt sleeve is covered in snot. My eyes feel puffy and heavy with grief. I check my phone. It's eight in the morning. I've been down here all night. I have twenty missed calls from Travis. I text him that I'm fine and not to worry, but the signal doesn't go through the concrete walls of the basement.

The computer is still paused on the video I couldn't bring myself to watch, but after reading this letter...I feel like I have to. I have to understand why my father would love me as much as he says he did in this letter, but then leave me to face this world alone after he lost my mother.

Was I not enough?

I swallow the thick ache in my throat and rub my eyes as I wiggle the mouse to press play. There's no sound, but I don't think I need it.

I watch in both horror and fascination as my father puts the gun in his hand to his head, and then the frame goes still. The gun drops to his side, and he peeks over the ledge of the building he's standing on.

I don't even have to see her face to know that the woman below him in the alleyway is my mother, and it begins to all make sense.

He called her angel because she saved his life the night they met.

He didn't kill himself because he gave up on me, but because he lost the only thing that was holding him together.

His love for me would have *never* filled that hole in his chest.

"Dad..." I whisper into the chilly basement as tears stream down my

cheeks. “I’m so sorry.”

I don’t let myself watch any of the other videos. There’s no point. The circumstances of their relationship aren’t my business, and though I’m curious, I’d feel like I was intruding on a story that isn’t mine.

I place a kiss on my fingers and then trace my mother’s rain-soaked face on the screen, before shutting down the computer and smashing the hard drive.

When I leave the basement and put the bookcase back where I found it, I take a shaky breath. I’ve lived almost my entire life lost and confused. Every time I think about my parents, I’m overwhelmed with a feeling of *‘what could have been’*.

I wonder who I’d be if I hadn’t lost them. Would I have still gone to MIT? Would I have wanted to help people? Would I have grown up to be a spoiled socialite?

Now more than ever, I wonder if they ever would have told me about my father’s double life, or if they would have kept me in the dark to protect me and my innocence.

My father’s letter doesn’t answer that question, and I suppose I’ll have to make peace with the undeniable fact that I’m not meant to know the answer.

I gather my things and walk back down the stairs that squeak and groan with each step. When my feet are flat on the first floor, I turn my head to my left.

That same feeling of dread washes over me as I stare in the general direction of the kitchen—where my life ended before it even had a chance to begin.

I swallow the ache in my throat and walk towards that horrible room. With my pictures still clutched to my chest, I stand in the doorway and stare at the ground where I saw nearly my entire family dead.

I swear, if I try hard enough, I can still see the ground covered in blood. I’m fairly certain that I can see a rusty stain on the hardwood beneath the thick layer of dust.

I take a seat on the floor where I last saw my father alive and trace

little shapes into the dust coating the floor. Simple shapes. Shapes a small child without a care in the world would draw. A star. A Christmas tree. A slice of pizza.

A sad face for the child who died here with her parents.

The one emotion that's always haunted me about that day is guilt. Everyone was in that kitchen because I wanted pancakes that morning. Maybe it's not fair for me to blame myself for that. I couldn't have known my grandfather was going to go off the deep end that morning.

But that's not the only thing I feel guilty for.

I saw my father, alive, kneeling next to my mother's dead body.

I spoke to him.

He looked over his shoulder at me.

I should have gone to him. I should have given him a hug or done *anything* except fucking stand there and count. Of all the times I could have been stubborn, that was it.

And I failed.

I should have cried; I should have screamed. I should have saved him, just like my mother did.

But I didn't, and I'll never be able to forgive myself for it. Sometimes I wonder if his spirit is still out there, lingering, angry at me for not trying harder.

I chose pancakes over my family.

So in that regard, I deserve his anger. I deserve the guilt.

Most importantly, I deserve the loneliness he was so afraid of.

CHAPTER 6

Walking through the streets of Meridian City is like walking through the lowest circle of hell. It's only gotten worse as the years have passed, and even the once pristine streets of the rich side of the city are falling apart.

I flag down a taxi driver and ask him for directions to Jason Lockhart's law firm, and luckily, he's still doing business in the city. It's about a twenty-minute walk, and despite staying up all night, I'm wide awake with anticipation.

I approach the receptionist tightly clinging my picture frames to my chest. She gives me a strange glare, and I realize I probably look like a mess with dust covering my clothes and crying all night.

"Hi," I start awkwardly. "I don't have an appointment, but is Mr. Lockhart available?"

"Are you a client of ours?" the receptionist asks.

"No, I uh..."

"I'm very sorry ma'am, but Mr. Lockhart doesn't accept walk-ins."

I take a deep breath. "Please. It's really important." I take another deep breath and prepare myself for what I'm about to admit.

"My...My name is Caroline Reeves. My father was Christian Reeves. Mr. Lockhart was present when I was adopted. Please let me see him."

The receptionist gives another office worker across the room a wide-eyed stare of disbelief. "Do you have some form of ID with you?"

I quickly pull out my driver's license and hand it over. The woman holds it like it might be cursed and then practically shoves it back into my hands before telling me to wait.

I take a seat in one of the leather chairs of the lobby and fidget with a

hangnail as I wait. A short while later, I hear footsteps approaching. I look up to see the attorney, and some of the tension leaves my body when we lock eyes. He looks at me like he's seeing a ghost and I give him an awkward smile.

"Miss Reeves," he greets, holding out his hand for mine to shake. "My, how you've grown."

"Yeah, seventeen years will do that to you," I murmur under my breath.

He leads me through the firm until we reach his office and instead of having me sit, he prompts me to stand at a large credenza near his desk. He opens the door to reveal a safe on the bottom shelf. We both stand there staring at it for a minute before he clears his throat.

"I'll give you a moment," he says, and then takes a seat at his desk and pretends to work on his computer while he side-eyes me, probably just as curious as I am to see what's inside.

I kneel on the floor in front of the safe and think about what the combination could be. He never got the chance to give it to me, and I don't think it would be something as obvious as a birthdate or my adoption date. If it was, someone probably would have gotten into this safe more than a decade ago. I can see some of the numbers are worn down. The lawyer must have tried to open it, assuming I'd never come back to this city after my parents died.

Remembering the letter my father left me, I ponder his words.

Your mother is the best thing I never deserved.

I type in the only other combination that makes sense to me.

0-9-0-6-2-0-1-9

The day my parents met.

Fear and anxiety consume me when the safe unlocks and the door pops open slightly. I gulp, and I can feel the lawyer staring at the back of my head. My hand trembles as I pull open the door further.

All that's inside the safe is a single manila envelope.

I don't have the strength to open this envelope near a stranger, so I stand up and wordlessly leave the building.

All I can think about as I walk back to the hotel where Justin, Travis and I are staying during our trip is what could be inside this envelope, and it doesn't even cross my mind that I've been out all night with a dead cell phone until I walk into the hotel lobby to see Travis speaking with a police officer.

When he sees me, it's not relief that washes over his face, but *anger*.

"*Caroline!*" he shouts, and I know he's furious with me.

"Do you have any idea how worried I've been about you? Where the hell have you been all night? Why didn't you call me?"

"I tried!" I defend myself. "The text messages I sent wouldn't go through and then my phone died..."

"Where were you?" he demands, placing his hands on his hips. I almost laugh, because this is the first time I've ever seen him act like a concerned parent rather than an uncle that got stuck with the unfortunate task of raising a twice-orphaned child.

When I don't answer, Travis' eyes glance down at the stack of frames nestled in my arms. "What are those?"

I turn away protectively. "It doesn't matter."

"Caroline!" he shouts louder this time, drawing the attention of the officer watching the interaction from the other side of the room. Travis manages to grab one of the frames and tugs it from my arms, and when he does, the rest of them, along with the envelope, fall to the floor.

He takes one look at the picture in the frame, and I know he's never been more furious than in this moment right now.

"Did you go to that house?" he asks in a devastated and betrayed whisper. I don't say anything as I squat to pick up the frames. Two of them now have broken glass right where I'm standing in the picture.

If that isn't irony, I don't know what is.

"Caroline Young, did you go to that house?"

"Don't call me that!" I shout back. "That isn't my name."

"Oh, I'm sorry. Let's take a trip down memory lane, shall we? Who raised you for the past seventeen years? *Me*. Not Christian *fucking* Reeves. You want to know what Christian Reeves did?"

"Stop," I plead through gritted teeth as tears spring into my eyes.

"He got our entire family killed, Caroline. That's what he did. He was a serial killer that brought that shit into my family's life and it got them all killed! And he was too much of a coward to face what he had done, so he took the easy way out and shot himself in the head with you right *fucking* behind him. He didn't care about anyone, least of all you. What kind of father abandons his own kid like that?"

"What kind of father murders his wife and his daughter to make a point?" I spit back, fueled by grief and anger and filled with lethal venom.

Travis has always been in denial about Elliot killing Bethany. But I've read the same police report he did. The fingerprints around her neck matched Elliott's, not Christian's.

"Don't go there. You didn't know my father like I knew him."

"And you didn't know mine!" I screech, so loud and aggressively that the officer on the other side of the room comes to grab my arm and pull me back a few feet. "He loved me and he loved my mom more than you will ever understand. And *your* dad is the one who took that away from me. Everything was perfect until *him*."

I finish my sentence through gritted teeth, barely holding it together. Huffing out an angry breath, I gather the frames and envelope into my arms and go straight to the elevator, to our hotel room, and slam the door. I use the extra lock so that even with a key, Travis won't be able to get in. He's the last person I want to be near right now.

I slide down the heavy door and slump to the ground, pulling my knees up to my chest as I sob. Wiping my face with my dusty jacket, I pick

up the envelope and open the brads, pulling out the thick stack of papers inside.

The top few pages are legal papers. My original birth certificate, the court documents from my adoption, a copy of the deed to the estate, and a copy of my father's will, leaving everything first to my mother and then to me.

As if the FBI left any of it to salvage.

I wipe my face again and keep flipping through the papers until I get to a stack that's binder-clipped together. I let the papers loose.

In the top left corner, there's a bank logo. I can't read most of the papers, because they're in a foreign language I don't recognize, but numbers are numbers.

Underneath my full name, there's an account number, a routing number, an interest rate, and on the last line, an initial deposit amount with so many zeros I have to count them three times to make sure I'm not hallucinating.

The date on the top of the page is from the same month I was adopted, which means those zeros have been gaining interest for seventeen years, untouched. I flip the page to continue to read, and a bank card is attached with a small glue dot. I rip off the heavy golden card and flip it over to see my name embossed on the back.

I plug my phone into the charger so I can turn it on and call the number on the back to see if the account is even still active. Thankfully, the phone tree has an option for English.

I type in the card number and the robotic female voice reads me back a balance so large that the voice begins to fumble over itself, the programming not even designed to go that high.

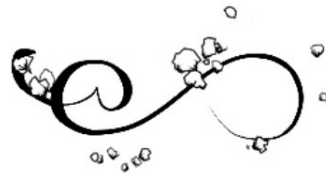
A tear drips off my chin and lands on the card as I hang up, and something I can only describe as relief fills my bones. Even in death, my father found a way to take care of me, just like he always promised he would.

Inside the envelope, I find a checkbook connected to the same bank

account, and I know, in this very moment, there are two very important things I have to do.

The first is simple: write a check to Travis and Justin, to thank them for taking me in when I had nothing. I sign my name and place the check on top of Travis' pillow before stuffing the picture frames and envelope into my suitcase. My entire world is now the belongings in my suitcase and the memories encased in broken picture frames.

I leave the hotel through a side door to avoid my uncles in case they're still lingering in the lobby, and with my last three percent charge on my phone, I look up the location of the nearest diner that serves all-day breakfast.



“Me again,” I say quietly to the empty cemetery where my parents are always willing to listen to me, even if no one else is. “I came here to snitch on Dad,” I quip, looking at my mother’s name etched into the marble headstone. I sit on top of my suitcase to avoid the cold ground. “He used to hide stashes of candy for me all over the house. He made me promise I wouldn’t tell you, but I think you suspected after I spent one too many nights bouncing off the walls from a sugar rush.”

I dig around the takeout bag and place one Styrofoam container on my father’s grave, one on my mother’s grave, and one on my lap.

I take a deep breath and slowly open the container. Inside, three fluffy, perfectly round pancakes sit steaming as condensation gathers in the corners of the box. A sinister shiver crawls up my spine and I find my earlier shred of bravery lost to the wind as I stare down at them.

Tears well up in my eyes and spill over almost instantly. I glance at my father’s side of the headstone as I spread butter and syrup over the cakes. “I didn’t want to eat them ever again because it felt like I was moving on and I wasn’t ready for that.”

“I just...I wanted you to know that I get it now. I’ve always been confused and lost, wondering why you left me. But I’m not lost anymore, Dad. I’m going to make the world believe in me the same way you did. I promise. So...that’s why I’m here. To share my breakfast with you.”

With one last whimper, I swallow the fear gathered in my throat and get my first taste of pancakes.

And closure.

EPILOGUE

Four Years Later

“So...what do you think?” I exclaim gleefully as I spin in a circle. My satin wedding gown *whooshes* as I come to a stop. “We didn’t have a big wedding either, just a little courthouse ceremony. We’re going to dinner and then in the morning, we’re leaving for our honeymoon. We’re headed for New Zealand.”

I thumb at my new wedding band on my ring finger. It’s simple. A silver band with small diamonds all the way around. Garrett and I didn’t have an engagement. After almost four years together, we just woke up one morning and decided to get married. That’s our style. Spontaneous. I’ve faced too much loss and tragedy to be anything but someone who lives every moment as if it’s my last.

In the past four years, I got the patent for the generator I designed. I’ve been able to donate hundreds of them to women’s shelters, libraries, food banks, and community centers all over the country.

I’m good at making things work...building machines, understanding software. I’m not so good at running a business, so Garrett takes care of that side of things for me. Together, and with the help of the money my father left me, we started our own orphanage on the same grounds as the old one. It’s nowhere near the one I knew when I was a child, and it doesn’t have the glitz and the glam that Christian Reeves would have given it, but it’s a home. A home for kids that deserve second chances like I got to have.

Though it broke my heart to keep the Reeves name off the side of the building, I eventually realized that it was the best decision from a business standpoint. We settled on my middle name and called it Delilah’s Place.

Today, there are ten children there. It’s max capacity for now, but there are already plans in place to renovate the old compound and make more space.

I never intended to move back to Meridian City, or even to the East Coast, but when Garrett and I were ready to leave Kansas, my heart begged me to come back.

My new husband has always been patient with my grief. He's always understood that a part of me will never move on from losing my parents as traumatically as I did. He's the first person who saw what was in my heart, and has never looked at me as the twice-orphaned child of a serial killer. He's only ever seen Caroline. He's only ever seen *me*.

Despite our happiness together, Garrett and I decided to remain childless. The thought of my children growing up without parents sends me into a dangerous spiral that takes weeks to get out of.

Our happily ever after only requires each other, and that's more than enough for me.

I take a deep breath and run my fingers along the marble headstone. "I'm happy. I promise," I whisper. "I love you."

I rapidly blink away my tears so I don't smudge my makeup before dinner. I turn to Garrett, who gives me a small smile of understanding as he waits patiently, leaning against the car. I hold my hand out for him. He takes it and kisses my wedding ring.

"Ready?" I ask.

"Actually..." Garrett glances towards the headstones. "Can I say something to them?"

I stare at him in confusion for a second. He's never asked to speak to my parents before. Not once.

"Um...yeah, sure."

He nods and laces our fingers together before approaching the grave with me at his side. "Mrs. Reeves. Mr. Reeves," he greets. "I apologize for not asking for your blessings to marry your daughter. I didn't feel like it was my place to come see you without her here. She talks about you both all the time. Her heart is so big and you two hold such a special place in it. I wanted to make you a promise that I'll keep it safe."

My throat feels like it's on fire.

“You loved her first, but I love her now, and it’s the honor of my life to have her by my side.”

“Gare...” I whisper between sniffles. He kisses away a tear as it falls down my cheek and rests his forehead against my temple.

“Do you think your mom believes me?” he asks.

I kiss the underside of his jaw. “Yeah,” I whisper back.

Nervously, he asks, “What about your dad?”

I chuckle through a sob, and tell him the truth. “*Not a chance in hell.*”

He holds me for a few minutes while I silently mourn what I lost, but also cry for the unknowns of my future. Before we leave the cemetery, I reach into the back seat of the car to grab something.

I clutch it to my chest as I approach the graves again and kneel in the hard dirt in front of the headstone.

I place a kiss on Mr. Bunny’s head before I prop him between their names. I give my father a sad smile. “He’s been a good friend all these years,” I whisper.

Garrett helps me to my feet and back to the car. Before we drive off, I look at Mr. Bunny one last time.

He’s so old he’s lost all his purple coloring. An eye is missing. He’s raggedy and limp.

But he’s still holding on.

And so am I.

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To those of you who reached out to me with your own stories of grief and loss after reading *Under Your Scars*, I want you to know that your messages mean the absolute world to me. There are no words for what an honor it is to have someone message me to say that a book I wrote amid my own severe depression helped them process theirs; to tell me that my book had a profound impact on their life.

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CONNECT WITH ME

If you enjoyed Caroline's story, please consider leaving a review. It would mean the world to me!

Instagram: @ariel.n.anderson

Bookbub: @ariel_n_anderson

Goodreads: Ariel N. Anderson

TikTok: @ariel.anderson34

Thank you to all the discordians in the Pancakes and Violence server. I love the little community we've made there, and I always look forward to the chaos we create.

If you'd like to join my Discord server and receive first dibs on ARCs, exclusive sneak peeks, discount codes, flash giveaways, and more, please DM me on Instagram @ariel.n.anderson for the link!

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