

T H E A G E N T S

T A

Everything changed

P P

when I tapped her.

E D

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

BRYNNE ASHER

TAPPED

THE AGENTS

BRYNNE ASHER



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TAPPED

The Agents

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The Agents

Possession

Tapped

Exposed

Illicit

Killers Series

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Paths – A Killers Novel, Book 2

Gifts – A Killers Novel, Book 3

Veils – A Killers Novel, Book 4

Scars – A Killers Novel, Book 5

Souls – A Killers Novel, Book 6

Until the Tequila – A Killers Crossover Novella

The Killers, The Next Generation

Levi, Asa's son

The Carpino Series

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Beautiful Life – The Carpino Series, Book 2

Athica Lane – The Carpino Series, Book 3

Until Avery – A Carpino Series Crossover Novella

Force of Nature - A Carpino Christmas Novel

The Dillon Sisters

Deathly by Brynne Asher

Damaged by Layla Frost

The Montgomery Series

Bad Situation – The Montgomery Series, Book 1

Broken Halo – The Montgomery Series, Book 2
Betrayed Love - The Montgomery Series, Book 3

Standalones

Blackburn

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This book is for the self-disciplined.

May I be more like you while writing my next book.

BLACK

Evie

Guilt is an asshole.
It's wrapped its sweaty fingers around my throat and squeezed every ounce of life from my soul.

I can't breathe.

Figuratively, that is.

Physically, I'm fine.

I would know. I am a doctor.

I've done everything I can to avoid this next chapter of my life I'm about to write. I don't want this for Chase.

Hell, I don't want it for me. But Jeff is not the man I married. Not anymore. There are days I look into his eyes and see a stranger.

"What's for dinner, Mama?"

I look through the rearview mirror at my son. I can't put this off another moment.

His father will be served with divorce papers today. I asked for a separation months ago, but Jeff wanted none of it. When I talked to my attorney, who's

also my brother, I knew the time had come.

Jeff put on the brakes and isn't going anywhere willingly.

I have no idea how Chase will respond. Our son is smart. He's also half-tyrant, half-sweet.

A boy.

A little boy whose father never spends time with him and treats him like a chore rather than a child.

Take out the trash.

Get the oil changed in the car.

Fix the strainer on the pool.

Love your son.

All things my soon to be ex-husband avoids like the plague.

He'd rather be watching a game with friends or fishing on that damn boat he insisted we buy to keep up with the Joneses.

Seriously. I kept my last name because I was in my residency when we married. Also, Litchfield carries a lot of weight in Miami. The *Joneses* are nobody compared to my family. The next level up would be Gloria Estefan or Pitbull.

I ignore Chase's question about dinner, because he can have whatever he wants after the conversation we're about to have. "Baby, we need to talk about something. Dad won't be home tonight."

I glance quickly into the mirror long enough to see Chase's reaction. He's not fazed and remains focused on the action figure he's playing with in his booster seat. "Then can we get chicken nuggets on the way home?"

I look back to the highway which isn't as busy as normal. Jeff and I should be sharing this conversation with our son. But no. My husband refuses to accept the fact that our marriage has been over for a very long time.

I'm done. I'm out of choices. It's all on me.

I clear my throat. “What I mean is your dad is moving out. From now on, he’ll live somewhere else and have his own house.”

I look back into his dark eyes through the mirror. I finally have his attention. “A different house?”

I nod and white-knuckle the steering wheel, trying to remember the speech I rehearsed endlessly for this moment. I promised myself I would not apologize or lie to our son. One person alone cannot make a marriage. “Yes, baby. I know it will take some getting used to, but you’ll be okay. We both love you. That will never change.”

Well, that could be a lie. I’m not sure Jeff knows how to love anyone. Not anymore.

My car is silent besides the smooth hum of the freeway beneath us. I can sense the little gears clicking away in Chase’s head. In turn, my gut is a storm of anxiety.

“Lanie’s dad doesn’t live with them. She has two dads. Her other dad lives at her house next to us, but she calls him Mike, and she has to leave to see her dad. That’s why she can’t play sometimes.”

I nod. “Yes, that’s right. Lanie’s mom and dad are divorced, and she has a step dad. Like a bonus dad.”

His inquisitive stare is heavy on me when I glance back again before changing lanes. “Are you and Dad going to be divorced too?”

I pull in a breath and pray I’m saying the right things. “Yes. Just like Lanie’s parents.”

Chase focuses back on his action figure and stays silent.

Finally, I call for him. “Chase?”

“Huh?”

“Are you okay? Do you want to talk about it? Do you have any questions?”

“Do I have to leave to go see Dad?”

Shit. This is what has kept me from pulling the trigger on the big D for as

long as I have. The thought of Chase going to stay with Jeff alone makes me physically ill. He won't spend the night with anyone but my parents. He's attached to me, and I've never forced him to do anything he doesn't want to do, besides eat vegetables. And he barely does that. "We'll figure that out when we get to it."

"Cause I don't want to." He makes a blastoff noise through pursed lips as he flies the toy around the space in front of him. "So can we get chicken nuggets?"

My shoulders droop, even though I know this won't be the end of the conversation. Not even close. But for now, I've done my duty. We have the rest of his childhood to talk about it. I'll get him in therapy. Therapy is always good, right? I might need therapy as a result of this conversation, even though I blame the whole thing on Jeff. I blame him even more that Chase isn't upset about his parents getting a divorce, his father moving out, and all he wants is chicken nuggets. "Yes. We'll stop and get dinner on the way home."

"I want ice cream too!" he yells louder than necessary. "And onion rings and French fries and bar-b-que sauce and ranch."

I'm about to answer that I'll get him a buffet of dipping sauces, but my attention is drawn to the dashboard.

Warning and service lights flash like the Fourth of July.

Bells and warning sounds join them.

Great. My car is only a year old. One more thing I don't have time to deal with. Nothing could be more metaphorical. Every part of my life is in a downward spiral at the moment.

I switch lanes to exit and make every demand Chase has for dinner come to life. I'll do anything I can to divert his attention from having just informed him I'm divorcing his father, because that's exactly what is going to happen. Jeff told me he plans to fight me tooth and nail when it comes to ending our marriage.

If I thought it has an ounce to do with me or Chase or us, I'd continue to fight for our family. It's all I've done for two years.

I'm done.

We're done.

I flip my signal to merge into the right lane and hit the brakes.

But there's little resistance.

I pump the pedal again.

This time there's even less.

I press harder, and this time it almost hits the floor.

"Shit." I quickly switch lanes to avoid a semi.

"You said shit! You always tell Dad not to say shit."

I don't apologize. My insides seize as my brain plays catch up to my reflexes.

I pump on the brake pedal again.

And again and again.

Fuck.

They're out.

I look for the emergency brake, but it's just a damn button. I've never once needed it while driving. This is nothing like driver's ed.

I'm forced to change lanes again as we speed down the highway.

All I see in front of me are red lights. Traffic and construction barrels are racing toward us.

Too fucking fast.

My voice cuts through the car. "Chase!"

"Mama?"

Oh, God.

No.

Panic explodes within me.

My mind blurs.

I merge all the way to the left until I hit the narrow shoulder of the interstate. Sparks fly as I steer into the railing, but we don't slow fast enough.

Chase screams.

The handful of horrific moments play out in slow motion like a horror movie.

"Chase, hold—" I yell, but it's too late.

We hurl into a set of construction barrels. Nothing but orange fills my view as they crash into the hood and windshield. Metal scraping metal and breaking glass are mere background noises to my screams and Chase's cries.

And my world goes black.

LIKE A GOVERNMENT AGENT?

Evie
Six months later

Taking a hiatus from your own life because of trauma sounds like a vacation.

But for me, it's only delayed the inevitable.

This is where I wanted to be months ago. My plan was to be past this by now. A single mom. A divorced woman.

But the accident...

The Litchfields are exceptional in every way—career, marriage, parenting. Heck, my sister was a hellion growing up, and she not only excels at everything in life, but also in her hobbies. She has the pickleball trophies to prove it.

My father is the founder of BioNova Research. He started out as a chemist and worked in research for a decade before breaking out on his own. His corporation is on the cutting-edge of medical breakthroughs to help people in all walks of life. His company and foundation have not only saved lives through research and philanthropy, but it's also made him an incredibly wealthy man.

To the tune of a secured spot on the *Fortune 500* for the last fifteen years.

My mother was an opera singer. But then she birthed three elite children, and that messed with her diaphragm. But that hasn't stopped her. She's been the president of the Miami Arts Institute for two decades.

My grandfather was an architect. His buildings are still well known throughout southern Florida for their artistic flare.

My brother is an attorney for BioNova.

And my sister is the harpist for the Miami Symphony Orchestra.

A harpist.

My family thrives in everything. Perfect marriages, over-achieving children, and lavish homes that look like they belong on the cover of magazines.

The Litchfields don't know how to fail.

It's not like I'm a slouch. I went to medical school instead of into research like my father wanted. I wanted to be a doctor. I scored in the top five percent for the MCAT and the Boards. I might not help run a multi-billion-dollar corporation, but my work is important. I make a difference in people's lives, just in a different way.

It's all I ever wanted.

The elderly have a special relationship with their doctors. I see my patients regularly in the clinic and in the hospital. It's the nature of being a geriatrician. I love my job, my patients, and the group of doctors I get to partner with. I'm successful in my career, just as our parents raised us to be.

Exceptional.

But I'm a failure when it comes to marriage. This is the chapter that I never saw coming in my book of life.

Talk about a plot twist.

I've done everything I could to avoid it, which makes the fall even harder. In my case, avoidance was simply taking a blind eye. I told myself I could live in a loveless marriage.

I did it for our family, for my sanity, and, if I'm being honest with myself, to

save face from everyone in my life.

And the world in general.

But I'm right back where I was six months ago. The accident derailed all my plans. There's something about recovering from a near death experience and focusing on Chase that put divorce on the back burner.

"Evie, don't do this, dammit. Give it just one more month. I'll go to couple's counseling. Hell, let's take Chase on vacation. The three of us."

Chase.

My son makes the guilt heavy.

I turn to look at the man who was never really a husband. I should have cut him off long ago. I was blinded to his true nature before I ever said *I do*. I'm lucky the only nasty souvenir I have from my marriage is a broken heart and wounded ego. We haven't had sex in over a year. I've tested myself just in case, even though I have no proof he's cheated.

Sex has been the least of my desires for as long as I can remember.

I have other kinds of desires, though, and in the last week they've hit me with a force. At the top of that list is for Jeff to be out of this house forever.

"You had all day to pack. Tonya will be back with Chase in thirty minutes, and I refuse to do this in front of him. If you want any type of shared custody, I suggest you find yourself an attorney."

Jeff's handsome features that won me over years ago contort into angry lines that crease his face. I don't recognize the man I fell in love with when his voice bellows off the high ceilings. "How am I supposed to find a fucking lawyer who will give me the time of day in this damn city when your last name is Litchfield? I'm powerless, and you know it. Petition for the papers to be reversed, Evie."

I cross my arms, straighten my spine, and ignore the guilt that claws at me like nails on a chalkboard. "It's taken me too long to get to this point, but I've made my decision, and I need to follow through. I've given you more chances than you deserve. If you don't want to pack a bag, that's on you. I'll

have your things boxed up and sent to you, but you're leaving."

"Where the hell do you expect me to go? I don't have a fucking job."

"I don't know, and I don't care. You have a credit card, use it. You'll just have to get a job again. You quit two years ago, but it's not like you stayed home with Chase like you said you wanted to do. He's with the nanny all day, every day while you're living your best life at the gym or on that damn boat. All you do is fish with your free-loading friends. Who knows what else you're doing when you're gone all day. I'm done and don't give a shit where you go. You'll never live here again. Get out."

My pulse speeds when he takes two steps in my direction. In all the years we've been together—all the lies and empty promises—I might have been heartbroken, but I've never once felt unsafe.

I hold up one hand and yank my cell from my pocket with the other. "If you even think about touching me, I'll call the police."

He huffs a disgusted exhale. "Touch you? I can't remember the last time you let me touch you. But, what's new? It was before you became a cold bitch."

"Being ignored and lied to tends to piss women off. I was too busy testing myself for STDs. I should've kicked you out long ago, but for some reason, I thought there was a chance you'd change—that you'd pick us to be your priority. I was wrong."

He stares down at me as he mulls over whatever lies he's telling himself. Hell, I've probably chanted the same ones in my head over and over. Hoped and prayed that he'd change. For me and for Chase.

But I find my strength and press on. "It didn't need to be this way. You don't want me, and I stopped wanting you long ago. I'm exhausted, Jeff. Tired of pretending and wishing you would change. I lost all hope a long time ago and have been going through the motions for Chase. If you're not going to pack, get out."

He pulls in a deep breath before dragging a hand down his face and looks like he's contemplating every trouble in the world but us or the family we committed to together. I'm embarrassed that I've shuffled the state of our marriage under the rug like stale dust from years past.

His stare lingers but the disdain disappears from his features when he practically begs, “I’ll try harder. I swear. I’ll fire the nannies and spend all my time with Chase like we planned. Don’t do this, Evie.”

“You’re one to talk,” I huff and motion between us. “You’re the one who’s done *this* for years, but now you’re out of time. I’ll have your things delivered—text me the address when you get settled. I refuse to allow Chase to see this. Get out.”

His hands go to his head, and he violently threads his fingers through his hair as he turns a one-eighty. He didn’t think I’d follow through. It’s been bad for so long, but the last two weeks have been different.

Jeff has been different.

He’s actually been trying when he hasn’t in years. Sucking up to me, spending time with Chase, and being...

Present.

Instead of his recent change of behavior making me feel better about our marriage and family, it’s done the opposite. Something is off, and I trust him less than I ever have.

Which isn’t much, so that says a lot.

I’ve tried to put my finger on it. But instead of relishing in his recent change of face, it’s only made me more suspicious. I can’t live like this any longer.

“Go,” I repeat, my tone guttural. “I won’t change my mind.”

He shakes his head but doesn’t turn around to look at me when he mutters, “This wasn’t supposed to happen.”

I frown. “It’s a little late for that.”

He moves toward the entryway without a thought about his things or me. “I’m fucked. Completely fucked!”

I say nothing as I watch him rip the door open and slam it shut behind him. The hurricane-proof frame shakes from the force.

Screeching wheels are his final, dramatic goodbye as he races away from

what was our life together.

I rush to the door and flip the locks, only because it makes me feel better. It won't keep him out—he still has a key. I need to get those changed and do the same with the passwords on the security system. That uneasy feeling that has niggled at me for weeks is now like salt in a gaping wound.

It stings.

I drag my eyes open and glance at the clock. Tonya is always on time and will be home soon with Chase. She's only been with us for a few months, but she's never been late. I can't afford another second, so I race up the stairs to our bedroom. Now that this is done and he's gone, I want every spec of his existence out of this house.

My nerves float to the surface and my hands tremble as I rip apart his side of the closet. The suits he used to wear to work before we both decided one of us should be home with Chase. His workout clothes that he lived in when he pretended to be at the gym, or even more, fishing.

Fishing...

My soon to be ex-husband will have to find a new hobby or new friends with boats. His love for expensive toys is about to come to an end. I might demand half of that damn boat in the divorce just to spite him.

I have one suitcase haphazardly stuffed and another is half-full as I reach for his shoes. I'm not sure why I'm worried about what he has. I can't remember the last time he was truly concerned about Chase or me—and the last two weeks don't count.

The last two weeks have been the worst.

I jump when the doorbell chimes through my quiet house like a gong.

That can't be Tonya. She has a key. I trust her completely, and she comes and goes with Chase to keep him busy so he doesn't sit in the house all day.

I need to get my shit together. This is what I do—I deal with things. My case load is heavy. Focus and memory are my strong suits. They have to be. I have no trouble remembering my patients' ailments, or their hobbies, new

grandbabies, and their favorite desserts.

My nerves are shot. There's no way I'd be able to carry on a decent conversation about the weather, let alone bunions or brownies. And when you need to make small talk with the elderly, weather is always a conversation starter.

But I can't think about the upcoming hurricane season or the milder weather southern Florida lives for in the coming months. The doorbell rings again.

And again.

And again.

Dammit.

Who answers the door anymore unless they're expecting someone?

Not me, that's who.

My father would lecture me for not living in a gated community to simply not have to deal with unwanted visitors. Instead, I do what most people do who can't afford gatekeepers but they can afford top of the line technology. I pull up my front door camera.

The man standing on my front porch ringing my doorbell incessantly is wearing a frown and a pair of aviators. The former is etched in every line of his square jaw and strong cheekbones. After he presses the button again, he drags a hand through his dark blond hair. It's long enough to turn up at his nape when he looks to the side and shakes his head with frustration before crossing his thick, tattooed arms across his wide chest.

Who the hell is he?

The man is huge, taking up more of the screen than most mere mortals when I screen uninvited visitors. I bet he'd still be ominous while grinning from ear-to-ear eating rainbow cotton candy on a unicorn stick.

There's no way I'm opening the door. Today, of all days, I don't need a distraction. I rescheduled my entire afternoon to get this done with Jeff so Chase wouldn't be here, and I was booked back-to-back with patients. Whoever that guy is, I need him to go back to whatever grumpy hole he

crawled out of and never return.

My list of problems is longer than my patients' excuses for not drinking enough water, no matter how many kidney issues they might have from dehydration. I do not need irritable strangers in my life adding to my list.

I'm about to turn back to the half-filled suitcase when the man at the door rips the sunglasses from his face and bends at the waist. His frown extends to his deep blue eyes when he looks straight into the camera and bites, "I know you're home. I'm not leaving until you come to the door."

I gasp and lean to the wall as if I can hide between Jeff's suits and his crisply ironed dress shirts.

It's like he sees me hiding in my soon-to-be ex-husband's clothes, because he doesn't budge and continues to threaten me with his presence. "We need to talk. Trust me, I don't want to be here anymore than you want me here. If you don't come to the door, I'll be forced to take other measures. I don't want that, and you sure as hell don't want it."

He must be one of Jeff's friends. They don't come to the house often, just to pick him up or drop him off on their way to the harbor, or wherever they go and do whatever they do.

I have no idea what Jeff did to piss off this guy, but it's got to be bad.

And since I don't trust one thing Jeff says or does anymore, the possibilities are endless.

The beast of a man leans in farther and pushes the button as if he's hell-bent on wearing out the chimes. A chunk of unruly hair falls to his forehead when he leans in even farther as his deep voice hits me through my phone and takes my breath away when he addresses me directly. "Dr. Evita Litchfield, we need to talk. I can't stress enough that I'm the one person on earth you need more than anyone. Open the damn door."

Oh, he did not use my full name.

No one calls me Evita but my mother. Who does this guy think he is? All of a sudden, my anxiety melts into anger. I will not allow him to make demands through my video doorbell and blindly do as he says. He can stand in the

sweltering Florida heat all day. He's not my patient.

If he dehydrates, it's not my problem.

As if on demand, he reaches behind him and flips open an oversized wallet. I lose sight of his rugged features and the only thing I see through the camera is a badge. "Special Agent Micah Emmett. I'm not the big, bad wolf who's come to feast on you. I'm your knight in shining armor."

An agent? Like a government agent?

Not only that, what kind of guy refers to himself as a knight in shining armor?

If I wasn't a responsible mother, I would bury myself in this closet and never come out. But Tonya and Chase should be home any moment. I just sent my husband away, and no one on earth other than my family knows.

I don't need a government agent on my front porch when Tonya gets home.

I climb to my feet and hurry down the stairs to the front door. The doorbell is ringing nonstop by the time I flip the lock and throw open the door and freeze.

Wow.

I have no words.

I thought he looked big over the camera, but it's nothing compared to reality. I'm not short, but I'm also not tall, and this man towers over me. I don't let go of the door handle and prepare to slam it in his face should I need to. "Who are you, and what do you want?"

His eyes drag over me efficiently before focusing over my head to scan my house. His blue eyes narrow when he mutters, "Are you alone?"

My heart speeds, and I wonder if I made a mistake. Anyone can shove a fake badge and credentials into a tiny camera. Why the hell didn't I question that?

"No," I lie. "My husband is upstairs."

His intense blue-eyed stare lands back on me. "Is that so?"

“He’s in the shower.” I start to close the door, because the need to put a barrier between me and the rest of the world is overwhelming.

He puts a hand to the door and his arm barely bulges when he easily stops me. “Why are you lying?”

I don’t let go of the door and try to control my nerves. “Why would I lie?”

“That’s what I want to know. Why would you lie?”

“Who are you, and what do you want?” I repeat.

“You’re alone,” he states.

“Look, whatever your name is, my husband is upstairs. I’ll have him come down and talk to you when he gets out of the shower. But I’m busy.”

He doesn’t take his hand off the door and has the nerve to take a step over the threshold.

“No—” I panic and try to shut the door on him, but he doesn’t stop and shifts his weight to reach for something on his hip.

He looks down and turns a dial as a beep and crackle break through the thick, humid air. He looks at me when he presses the comm button and speaks into the two-way radio. “Yo, Cruz, you there?”

The radio crackles before someone answers, “Ten-four. Is the doctor at home?”

He never takes his eyes off me when he pauses for a quick second. “Yeah, she’s here. Have the units pulled Jeff Michaels over yet?”

My expression might as well dissolve at my feet. I let go of the door and take a step back to wrap myself in my own shaky embrace.

The deep voice responds quickly. “Damn, you’re impatient. We had to follow him until he got off the freeway. We’re pulling up behind the officer with more backup. Give me three minutes, and he’ll be in custody. What about the boy and the babysitter?”

I find it hard to pull in a breath at the mention of my son. So much so, I might fall over. “What’s happening?”

The man, who I can only assume is telling the truth about who he is, takes it upon himself to enter uninvited. The door slams with a thud for the second time this afternoon.

“Where’s your son?” the agent demands.

Shit.

I thought my life was a nightmare when Jeff left.

My nails sink into the skin on my arms where I’m doing everything I can to hold myself up with my clammy hands. All of a sudden, I’m cooperating with the federal agent. “With the nanny. They should be home anytime. Please tell me what’s going on.”

“Dammit,” he bites and brings the radio up as if he’s going to respond. Instead, he speaks to me. And his demand sets every nerve ending in my body on fire. “Contact the sitter and get them home. Now. And tell me their location so I can send a unit to escort them.”

I rattle off directions to the park in the neighborhood and almost drop my cell when I pull it from my pocket while fumbling the screen to text Tonya. “This is my son. I deserve to know what’s happening.”

Agent Emmett orders a unit to look for Tonya and Chase before clipping the radio back on his waist. He exhales a big breath before crossing his arms over his wide chest. “Ma’am, I’m not sure how to break this to you, so I’m just going to come right out and say it. Your husband put out a hit on your life.”

My cell hits the hardwood floor at my feet, and I can barely hear my own voice. “What?”

He lifts his chin once to confirm that my life really is turning into a nightmare made for cable TV. “Money has exchanged hands. The job is paid in full.”

“No,” I whisper. “We have our problems, but you must be mistaken. He wouldn’t do that.”

The agent nods, as if to argue the defense of my husband who I just kicked out of our home. “And not just you.”

I shake my head, willing this to be a mistake.

“Your son too.”

My vision tunnels.

I stumble backwards.

The agent’s icy blue eyes narrow. “Evita, are you okay?”

I can’t shake my head. The cool air in my house is suddenly too thick, and my chest is so heavy. I can’t pull in a breath.

The last thing I see is the agent lurch forward and feel a large hand wrap around my arm. I’m pulled into his chest, and another arm wraps around my waist to keep me vertical.

My growled name vibrates through my body. “Evita.”

My knees give out.

That’s when something happens that I only understand because I’m a doctor, because it’s never happened to me. I’m completely caught off guard by my own body.

I pass out.

LIFE-CHANGING EVENT

Evie

“This is Emmett. I need EMS at the targets’ residence. Michaels’ wife is unresponsive.”

The radio crackles from a mile away. My brain is too hazy to argue or beg for help, but the last thing I want is EMS barging into my house.

A deep, irritated voice comes over the radio as my mind and body re-enter reality. “What the hell did you do to her?”

“I told her that her shithead husband paid to have her killed. Just get a unit on the way. I caught her before she cracked her head open. Like I don’t have enough reports to write.”

I barely notice how difficult it is to pull in shallow breaths, because arms circle me in a vise.

New arms.

Strange arms.

Arms so solid and impenetrable, I’ve never felt anything like them.

“Evita.” My name is a razor cutting through the haze. It’s demanding, and I struggle to pry my eyes open despite the unfamiliar and overwhelming exhaustion that blankets me. Blue eyes, that were the last thing I saw before

my vision tunneled to black, are frowning at me from above. “You okay?”

I swallow over the lump in my throat and shake my head. “Chase. I need my son.”

He shifts me from his arms, and my back hits the floor. I struggle to push away, but he splays a hand under my breasts to hold me down. “Stay where you are. I don’t need you to hit your head. EMS is on the way to check you out.”

“No. Let me up. I texted the sitter but I need to call her. I need to know Chase is okay.”

“Cruz, did you find the sitter and the boy?”

The radio crackles and beeps again. “We’ve got eyes on them and are following them to the house. We’ll be there in a few.”

The man drops the radio on the wood floor next to me. He’s leaning on one hand next to my head, leering over me from above. “Your son is safe. My partner will make sure of it.”

I exhale and bring my hands to my face. I’m trembling, and it doesn’t matter that we’re in the middle of summer on the southern tip of Florida. I’m freezing.

“Take a deep breath. We’ll have the paramedics check you out, but I really need to talk to you about your husband.”

I shake my head before looking up at the man who just rocked my world in the worst way. “What’s your name again?”

“Emmett. Micah Emmett.”

“I passed out. Cancel the ambulance. Once I lay here for a second, I’ll be fine.”

Micah shakes his head. “Can’t do that. This is to cover my ass. If you pass out again, and I’m not here to catch you, that’ll be on me. My day already turned to shit seeing as the case I’ve been building for two years just blew up. I’m looking at a week’s worth of reports as it is. You bleeding all over me is one I don’t want to add to my list.”

It turns out reality is as much of an asshole as guilt is. “Why do you think Jeff is trying to kill me?”

He hikes a thick brow. “I don’t think, I know.”

I try to sit up again. “He’s a horrible dad and husband, but he’s not a murderer—”

He pushes me back to the floor, and this time, he leaves his hand firmly planted on my abs. “Look, hiring a hitman doesn’t happen often. In fact, this is the first time a murder-for-hire has blown up one of my cases. I guess you could call us both virgins when it comes to this. You’re in the denial stage of *my husband paid to have me murdered*, but you need to take this seriously until we find out who he paid and eliminate that threat. I get that you’re not happy about it. Hell, I’m not either. I’ve got two years of work on the line, but when someone’s life is threatened, I’m obligated by the government to intervene. Besides, I don’t need this on my conscience. I might be an asshole but not that kind.”

“I’ve been in denial about my marriage for a long time, but this is unbelievable. This doesn’t happen in real life—or at least my life. I want to know how you know for sure.”

Sirens sound in the distance, proof that my life is about to drop to a new low. I might be great at caring for my patients, but like most doctors, I hate being the patient. I do not want anyone examining me. “I want to know how you’re so sure.”

He presses in where his hand is splayed on me as his jaw goes hard. He says nothing, and the sirens get louder and louder before they cut off altogether.

“You can’t just show up at my home and tell me my husband wants to kill me with no proof. I’m a doctor. I don’t believe in anything blindly.”

“Since the contract was paid in full this morning, I’d put my faith in the fact this was brought to your attention and you need to do everything in your power to protect yourself and your son until we know the killer isn’t a threat anymore.”

My head has quit spinning from my first ever unexpected syncope. Given my job and the family I was raised in, I’m a controlled person by nature. Nothing

catches me by surprise, and I'm always prepared for the worst.

Test results.

PET scans.

EKGs.

Unrealistic family expectations.

You know ... all the biggies when it comes to life-changing events.

It's not only the way I was educated, but the way I was raised. There is very little I'm unequipped to deal with.

"Proof over faith, Agent Emmett. Jeff is a shit husband and an uninterested father. Unfortunately, men like him are not few nor are they far between. But a murderer? That's going to take some convincing."

There's a knock on the door at the same time the radio he dropped on the floor next to us comes to life. "Micah, we're pulling into the neighborhood. Just a warning, I'd say the sitter is freaked given the fact she barely hit twenty miles per hour all the way home."

"Great," I mutter.

The agent looks down at me. "I'll get you your proof. And when I do, you'll thank me. When you hear it, you'll wish you would've put a little more faith in the asshole on your doorstep."

That sounds like a warning.

I don't like it.

But I don't need to mull that over. "I look forward to the proof."

He shakes his head. "Lady, you'll regret those words. That is nothing to look forward to."

"I can deal with truths. The unknowns are what unnerve me."

There's another rap on my door followed by a chime of the doorbell, which is really getting a workout. "Do you promise to stay here so I don't have to

worry about you cracking your head open when you faint again?”

“I’m not going to faint again. If my son is home, I don’t want to scare him. They can take my vitals and prove to you I’m fine.”

His exhale is as frustrated as it is theatrical.

I’ve had about enough man drama today. Hell, I’ve had enough man drama for life.

No more men.

“Let me up,” I demand.

Instead of giving me what I want, he doesn’t move and yells, “The door is unlocked.”

I look to the side and see two EMTs stalk through my door with bags of equipment. Behind them, Chase comes running through, followed by Tonya, and a tall, handsome man with a gun holstered on the waist of his jeans. He’s sporting a twin badge just like Micah’s, clipped front and center.

His dark eyes dart between me and the agent pinning me to the ground before they widen. “What the hell are you doing, Emmett?”

Micah

“TWO YEARS. Two years of seventy-hour weeks, no life, and living out of my government car or the wire room down the drain. I was close. So fucking close, and it’s all flushed down the shitter.”

“You had no choice.”

I look at my partner and best friend, Brax Cruz. We’ve been tighter than blood since we were assigned as roommates in the academy. He had his own career-making case when he took an assignment in coordination with the CIA and went undercover for years. He’s still riding the high of making a name for himself. The DEA gave him a choice of any assignment in the country,

and he chose Miami.

I followed him here, and we've been working in the Magic City ever since.

I was kicking ass, racking up charges, and had almost enough evidence to connect my Colombian distributor to a high-level cartel out of Panama when it happened.

Jeff Michaels.

The dumbass who thought hiring someone to kill his family was the perfect way to get around the prenup his wife was smart enough to have him sign before they got married eight years ago. A divorce would leave him with nothing. And since Evita Litchfield is a doctor herself and from one of the wealthiest families in this part of the country, Jeff wasn't interested in legally severing his marriage only to be left with nothing.

Since their prenup accounted for divorce but not mortality, Michaels' only option was the *death-do-us-part* type of a not-so happily ever after.

I have proof.

But Brax is right. I didn't have a choice. The wire room went ballistic when they heard Jeff Michaels talk about the order. We had no time to waste and intervened.

"She really doesn't believe you?" Brax asks.

I look through the window of the conference room where Dr. Evita Litchfield is massaging the anxiety from her temples while her son plays a game on her phone. "Look at her. Who wants to believe that the person they chose to marry is capable of paying someone to kill them. And to make it worse, your kid too."

Brax's jaw goes hard, and he crosses his arms. "I've seen some fucked-up shit, but that's fucked up. Michaels might as well have signed his own judgment. He deserves to rot in prison for the rest of his life."

There was drama at the mansion. After Evita passed out, she informed everyone in the room that it had never happened before. She was agitated and tense while EMS checked her vitals. The doctor was the worst patient I'd

ever seen. She downed two glasses of water, forced herself to eat a protein bar, and declared herself *fine* before the medics cleared her.

Prior to knocking on her door today, I'd never seen the woman in the flesh. A basic Google search led me to her professional profile with the hospital she's associated with. In her white medical coat, she stood out among her peers.

Young.

Pretty.

No. Pretty is too basic a word for the woman.

She's exquisite.

Damn. I've been trapped in my G-ride for too long. I've never described anything as exquisite in my life. Certainly not a woman and never a doctor.

I need to focus. "We have no idea who he hired. Michaels is waiting in the interrogation room. But the doctor needs to take this threat seriously."

I don't take my eyes off her as her son climbs down from his chair and ditches the small screen to run circles around the conference table. She picks up her phone and starts to flip through the screens before tossing it to the table and drops her face to her hands.

"For some reason, I think she knows," I add. "She just can't accept it."

"Given the evidence, convincing her won't be hard."

I force myself to look away from the tortured woman. "She needs proof. She demanded it."

Brax hikes a brow. "Did she tell you this when you had her on her back pinned to the floor?"

I shrug. "It's where I do all my best work."

Brax huffs. "If you didn't work twenty-four-seven, I might believe you. You need to get a fucking life."

"You sound like your wife. For the time being, I'll settle for convincing Evita that her husband paid a whack to have her and the little guy murdered so she

takes it seriously. I barely get any sleep as it is. I do not need this keeping me awake at night. She needs to be convinced, and the only person to do that is her shithead husband.”

“You think you’re going to get him to tell her?”

“No fucking way. She doesn’t need to be anywhere close to him. But she can be on the other side of the wall.”

“You’re going to let her listen to the interrogation?” Brax scoffs. “That seems ... I don’t know. Cruel.”

I move for the door. “It’s her new reality. If she needs proof, I’ll dish up the truth and feed it to her on a golden spoon. That’s how much I need my sleep.”

Brax follows. “You’re ruthless. At least prepare her for what she’s about to hear.”

I get to the conference room and yank the door open.

The boy skids to a halt in front of me and the doctor looks up through her tired, dark eyes and scowls. “You insisted we come here, but we’ve been sitting in this room for over thirty minutes. I have patients to check on, not to mention, I just got a text from my nanny. She quit, by the way, and I have a full patient load the rest of the week. I can’t just call in sick and put my patients off for a week so I can get my life in order. You can’t keep me here. If I have to call my attorney, I will.”

I look from her son to her and say just enough that he won’t understand. “You wanted proof. I’m going to give it to you.”

She looks exhausted from passing out and bites her lip before glancing at her son who throws himself into her lap. “Mama, I’m hungry.”

She runs her fingers through his thick, dark hair that’s the same shade of dark chocolate as hers. “I know, baby. We’ll get home soon, and I’ll make you dinner.”

Brax butts in. “I’ve got a desk drawer full of snacks that I keep for my son when he visits. How about you come hang out with me and you can have

whatever you want while your mom talks to Agent Emmett?”

“No,” Evita says. “He needs to stay with me.”

“If you want your proof, I don’t think that’s a good idea,” I add.

“What’s your name?” Brax asks her son.

The boy pulls out of his mother’s hold and runs to the man who bribed him with food. “Chase!”

Brax holds his hand out for a fist bump. “Cool. My name is Brax. I’m like a police officer who wears jeans. You won’t be far from your mom, but never go anywhere with strangers, got it?”

Chase looks to his mom.

Evita sighs. “He’s right. But you can go with him. Be good and try not to talk his ear off.”

Chase looks back to his new friend. “What kind of snacks do you have?”

“Cookies, chips, and maybe some chocolate if Micah didn’t eat it all.”

Chase keeps talking. “Do you put bad guys in jail?”

“I do,” Brax confirms.

Chase’s eyes go big. “Can I see the jail?”

“No,” Brax deadpans. “No, you can’t.”

Chase mopes. “I hope that other guy didn’t eat all the chocolate.”

They disappear down the hall as Chase asks Brax if his car has a siren, and if he gets to drive fast.

I look back to his mom and hold the door open. “Let’s go be a fly on the wall, Evita. You’ll get all the proof you want.”

She hesitates before picking up her phone and purse. If she’s five inches over five foot, I’d be surprised. Her hair falls down her back in messy waves, and I know for a fact that her curves are small since I had her in my arms not too long ago. She looks up where she stops in front of me. “No one calls me

Evita but my mother.”

“Note taken, Dr. Litchfield. I’m definitely not your mother.”

“Evie,” she states. “Other than my patients, everyone calls me Evie.”

“Evie,” I repeat, and decide that I like her more than I did two seconds ago. Evita is stuffy and formal. I’m neither of those things, and I hate both with a passion. “Are you ready for this?”

The small swell of her tits rise and fall with a deep breath, but I never look away from her chocolate eyes. “Where are we going?”

“Your husband is about to be interrogated, and we’re going to watch. My supervisor is going to question him about a lot of things, but mainly hiring someone to kill you and Chase. Whether he admits to it or not, I promise you’ll be convinced.”

She pulls her purse strap up her shoulder and exhales an exhausted sigh. “Our marriage has been bad for years, and I haven’t trusted him even longer. I have no confidence he’ll tell you the truth about anything today.”

“Then it’s a good thing I have evidence.”

“And what evidence would that be?” she demands.

“Evie,” I say and pause, trying her nickname out for a second time and liking it even more. “Your husband was tapped by the federal government. To say he’s screwed is an understatement. The only thing I’m worried about is you and your son’s safety.”

Her pink, plump lips part as she pulls in a shallow breath.

Yeah, this isn’t going to be good.

ORDER

Evie

“I didn’t do it! I don’t know where you got your information from, but I love my family. I’d never do anything to hurt them.”

Jeff is red in the face as his voice booms through the speaker. We’re watching on a closed-circuit TV from down the hall as my husband is being interrogated. I was introduced to the agent in charge, Tim Coleman, before this shit show started.

I stare at the man I forced out of our home just hours ago.

My husband.

The father of my son.

“How is this happening?” I mutter.

Micah shifts to stand at my side. “You okay? You’re not going to pass out again are you?”

I shake my head but can’t look away from the television as Agent Coleman keeps talking. “It’s paid in full, isn’t it?”

Even from over the monitor, the color drains from Jeff’s face.

“How long ago did you arrange this?” Tim goes on. “You have a very small window to cooperate, and that window is closing. Tell me who you paid, and

you might not die in prison from old age.”

My husband is vain. I’m sure the thought of old age makes him sick to his stomach, let alone aging in an orange jumpsuit. Jeff starts to panic. “No. I have no idea what you’re talking about—”

“Hold that thought.” Tim holds up a finger to quiet my husband and reaches to the laptop sitting in front of him. He opens it, clicks a few keys, and flips it around to Jeff. “Listen.”

Only because Micah told me my husband was being tapped do I have a feeling what’s to come, and he still hasn’t told me why they’re tapping him in the first place.

I hold my breath.

I’m afraid.

Afraid of the proof I so vehemently demanded.

Proof that will be life-changing.

Or even worse, life-ending.

For me and my sweet boy.

A voice, who I don’t recognize, fills the interrogation room. *“I told you—these things take time. He’s working on it, but this one has been harder than normal.”*

“It’s been months. I can’t fake it any longer, and I can’t stand being in that house with her. I signed a prenup. Her father forced it on me—this is my only way out, and I’m sick of waiting.”

For the second time today, I find it hard to breathe and force myself to pull in much-needed oxygen.

For the second time since I married Jeff, another man put his hands on me. A large hand slides across my lower back and wraps itself around my hip in a firm grasp.

Jeff’s expression falls. All he can do is stare at the laptop that’s playing his own voice. His private conversation.

His order to kill.

“You’re sure you still want the kid included in the job? This is your last chance to change your mind.”

I can’t help myself. I lean into Micah’s wide chest. I need the support right now more than I did back at the house. He wasn’t kidding when he said he had proof.

Jeff has the decency to hesitate, as if he at least mulls over the fact he wants to kill Chase too. *“Yeah. Fresh start. I don’t need the burden.”*

My hand flies to my mouth as I choke out a muffled cry.

The stranger on the recording sighs. *“Your orders. I’ll let my contact know. But that’s going to be another quarter of a million.”*

“What?!” Jeff snaps. *“I already paid the five-hundred thousand. You’re not getting another penny.”*

“Don’t know what to say. Price’s gone up. Inflation and risk. If you want it done, you’re going to have to shell out.”

“Fuck.” Jeff pauses before he agrees. *“Fine. I’ll pay. But this time he’d better get the job done. I don’t care how or where, but he better not botch it this time. Evie and Chase need to be together, and it cannot be linked to me. I need my alibi to be solid. I don’t want to go through this twice.”*

I can’t look at my husband for another moment. I forget that I’m with a stranger and turn my face into Micah’s chest to let out a real sob this time.

I’m a crier and always have been. But this is different.

So very different.

Jeff keeps talking. *“I want to know who it is to make sure they follow through. How do I know you’re not just pocketing my money and will blackmail me later?”*

“No can do. My contact never meets clients.”

A stagnant, heavy silence blankets the small room broken only by my own whimpers. My fingers fist Micah’s shirt. I don’t care that he’s a stranger. He

told me he had proof, and I basically dared him to give it to me.

The special agent has turned out to be a man of his word.

I don't know if I can take any more. I want to scream and demand he turn off the live stream. But this is what I get. I asked for it, after all.

I need to know it all. It's what I do in work and in real life.

"Tell me when and where to drop the cash. I'll be there."

No. I've had enough.

"Turn it off," I beg into the stranger's chest. "Please, turn it off. You've proved your point. I can't take it."

I didn't realize Micah's hand had worked its way into my hair where he's holding me to his chest. But he lets me go long enough to pick up a remote to click off the TV.

I have no idea what's going on in the interrogation room or how Jeff will try to get out of what he did after that. There's no way he can refute his own words.

Micah's hand lands on the back of my head for the second time. I realize where I am, who I'm with, and what I've done.

I need to get my shit together.

I push away and the tattooed arms that were firmly holding me fall from my body.

"I'm sorry. I mean, thank you. You were right. That's what I asked for—you know, proof." I shake my head and swipe at my tears. I can't help the panic bubble inside me. "I need to get out of here. Where is Chase? I want to take my son home. Now."

Micah steps forward to grip my shoulders and look me in the eyes with his intense blue ones. "Calm down. Chase is with Brax. He doesn't need to see you like this. Now that you know, we have things we need to talk about."

I shake my head. "What is there to talk about? You can fix this, right? Just arrest everyone that needs to be arrested. I'll divorce Jeff—faster than I

planned—and we can all move on. I mean, I hope Jeff gets charged with something for this. You can't just pay someone to kill two people without consequences even if it wasn't carried out. He admitted it—you have the evidence. Do your thing, and I'll do everything in my power to make sure Chase knows as little as possible about the man who deserves to rot in hell. The end.”

Micah shakes his head. “It's hardly the end, Evie. This isn't even close to being over. You can't just go home and go on with your life.”

I try to pull away but he holds tight. “That's exactly what I'm going to do. Chase's life will go back to normal, just without his deadbeat dad. No pun intended.”

His grip on me tightens. “You and your son are not safe until we find him. The order is still out there. Evie, we have no idea who he paid.”

“What?” The word falls from my lips on a breath. “What do you mean, you don't know? Who was the guy Jeff was talking to? Arrest him. Make him tell you.”

“We need to find him. His name is Adder, that's all we know. Does that name sound familiar? Did Jeff mention that name?”

I shake my head. “No. I've never heard that name in my life. But Jeff never talked about anyone. Never brought anyone home.”

“There's a warrant out for his arrest. At which point, we can only hope that he'll tell us. Until then, this isn't close to being over. Your husband can't stop this. The recording says it all, we have no reason to believe otherwise. You and Chase are very much in danger until we can find out who the contract killer is and stop them.”

“This can't happen. I have a job. My patients need me. And Chase's nanny just quit. She said she didn't sign up for police and ambulances. She did it over text so I didn't have a chance to talk her into staying.” I pull away from him and fall into a chair next to the table. As if passing out didn't exhaust me enough, my husband hiring a hitman has put me over the edge. “She was probably tired of Chase's nonstop chatter. I think she was looking for a reason to quit. The DEA escorting her from the park was the perfect reason.

Not that being thrown into the middle of a murder-for-hire scenario wouldn't have done the job on its own. It doesn't matter how well I pay. And I pay really well."

Micah stares down at me. "You cannot ignore this. It might shake your life up, but you need to take it seriously. The people your husband was working with are no joke. They are not the kind of people who don't follow through on a job. In their world, they get killed for shit like that."

My head swirls with details that I'm not mentally prepared to deal with. "It's not like I can work from home. I need to be in the office with my patients and check in on them in the hospital. And now I'm without childcare."

"Childcare should be the last of your worries right now. You need security around the clock."

"Security? How will I be able to work? Shit." I run my fingers through my hair and wonder how much worse this day can get. "Where did he get the money for this? Especially cash? I have alerts on every bank account we have. I wouldn't miss that much being withdrawn."

When Micah goes silent, I look up and find him studying me.

"What?" I demand.

"You really have no idea." It's a statement, not a question.

"Agent Emmett, I work long hours. I have one afternoon off a week, and I'm on call every third weekend. Even when I'm not on call, I check on my patients if they're in the hospital. Asking Jeff for a divorce was enough to shake up my life. This is so much more. To say that I have no idea is an understatement."

He runs a hand through his hair, and the expression on his face gives new meaning to the word frustration. "Your husband has been running drugs from the Bahamas for one of the biggest cocaine distributors in Central America. He's been under surveillance for the last couple months."

All thoughts of security and child care escape my mind. "Running drugs?"

He tips his head and hikes a brow. "Your husband found a way to make some

extra cash while playing with his big boy toys.”

“The boat,” I whisper.

“I’ve never seen a Colombian drug cartel offer direct deposits, so I think that’s a safe assumption.” This time Micah shrugs. “He wasn’t exactly a stay-at-home dad like he wanted you to believe.”

Anger replaces the hurt that coursed through me just moments ago. We bought that boat right after Chase was born. He talked about it my entire pregnancy. Things were better then.

Was our marriage ever picture perfect?

Hell no.

But it started to spiral after we had Chase. Jeff was never happy and didn’t like our new life that was consumed by a bundle of joy. Though consumed wasn’t his word.

It was more like dragged down. Boring. I think once he told me our family sucked the life out of him.

I finally relented and gave in to getting the boat. He still had a job then, a decent one. And since the house was a wedding present from my parents, fifty feet of luxury in an ocean cruiser wasn’t out of our pay scale, though it was unnecessary.

That boat magically solved every first-world problem in Jeff’s life. He stopped complaining, but he also stopped being present. Looking back, I never once complained.

I might have acted as a single parent most of the time, but I wasn’t unhappy with the newfound peace that boat offered me.

“I guess it’s good to know I don’t need to petition for Jeff to split his drug-running 401k with me in the divorce.” I pull in a deep breath and stand. “Is there anything else I should know before I go home, deal with my lack of child care, my patients who need and trust me, and security to keep my son and myself alive?”

The room is small. I’m so close to the agent, that when he crosses his arms,

it's all I can do not to let my eyes wander to his thick, tattooed forearms to study the artwork. Growing up in the pretentious home of my parents, tattoos were unacceptable. My brother came back from spring break his junior year of college with a small piece of art on his shoulder blade, and I thought my mother was going to have to be committed she was so beside her straight-laced self.

On one arm, his sleeve disappears into his T-shirt. It's a cracked Roman numeral clock—intricate and dark—snaked with thorns and vines that are just as elaborate, but not at all beautiful.

If I'm being honest, they're eerie.

I'm fascinated.

It starts at his wrist, and I really want to know where it ends.

The tat on his other arm starts at his wrist and fades at the thickest part of his forearm. It's a compass, but it's not pointing north.

It's pointing south.

“Evie,” he bites. “We've been investigating your husband for months. You have to understand that we've run your background.”

My gaze snaps to his chiseled face. “Is that supposed to make me feel better or worry me?”

He takes a step closer. We're almost toe to toe. “It means I know everything about you. I know that your house is paid off, and not by drug money, but by your parents. I also know your father is the founder of BioNova.”

“If you're trying to throw my family in my face, that's happened more times than I can count in my lifetime. I'm immune to it at this point. If you have something to say, Micah, spit it out.”

His brows rise. “I hit a nerve.”

“Hardly. My family might not be perfect, but they're mine. They aren't horrible people, even if they are pretentious. My sister isn't snooty, but she is crazy. My brother decided to veer outside the lane a bit and pretended to be a rebel. He's got the three-inch tattoo to show for it.”

What happens next surprises me. His lips tip up on one side. Just a hint of a smile on the DEA agent.

I can't lie. I like it. I haven't seen his full-on smile, but I can't imagine it would be sexier than the smirk aimed at me. "Three inches is ... underwhelming."

I frown. "Nice. I'm a doctor. I literally work on the human body for a living. If you think a sexual innuendo will rile me, you need to try harder."

He leans in and lowers his tone. "You're the one who said three inches. I was just stating that a tiny tattoo is sad. Go big or go home. And I haven't said shit about your parents or your family. If you've been eating shit about them your whole life like you said, then me stating that I hope you can afford to arrange some real security for yourself and your son is nothing more than me trying to clear my conscience."

I poke him in the chest. "Why are you so frustrating?"

He grabs my hand and holds it in his. "Why aren't you grateful that I saved you from bashing your head in when you passed out?"

I pull my hand from his and reach for my purse. I need to get out of here, so I shove my business card at him. "I need to find Chase and get home. If you wouldn't mind calling me to let me know the fate of my psycho soon-to-be-ex-husband, I'd appreciate it. And the other guy too. It would be nice to know when I can get back to living a normal life again. Or as normal as I can after today."

He takes my card and tries to grab my arm to stop me, but I pull away and am out the door. I look both ways down the hall and take a chance toward what looks like an open area of cubicles.

I hear him before I see him. My son is as smart as he is loud. If that Brax guy gave him sugar, I'm sure he's hating himself.

"I'm going to go to kindergarten when school starts, but my mom says I can't talk when I get there otherwise I'm going to get in trouble."

I come around the corner, and the agent assigned to babysit Chase is leaned back in an office chair. He kept to his word and hasn't taken his eyes off my

son. "I'm sure you can talk in kindergarten."

Chase is tummy down in his own office chair, spinning in circles. "Nope. She meant it. She said so. My mom is a doctor for old people. She takes care of them until they die."

I stop in my tracks. "Chase. We talked about this. You cannot talk about my patients that way."

He doesn't stop spinning. "That's what Dad says."

"Get off that chair before you get sick. What do you say to the agent for the snacks and watching you."

Chase drags the toes of his sneakers across the floor until he comes to a stop. But he doesn't thank anyone. He falls straight to his bottom when he tries to stand and erupts into a fit of giggles. "I'm twisty!"

Micah comes to a stop beside me as Brax motions to Chase. "He had some pretzels."

I exhale. "Thank you. We're all off schedule. He would've been starving when we got home, I'm sure."

"We still need to talk about that," Micah adds.

"I'll take care of it. Like you inferred, I'm a Litchfield. I can arrange an army of body guards with the snap of my fingers. I'll get on that." I walk over to Chase and bend to collect his hand in mine. "Let's go, baby. You can have whatever you want for dinner."

Chase sways to the side when he climbs to his feet. "Ice cream!"

"You can have anything you want but sugar," I amend.

He quickly regains his equilibrium. "I want popcorn!"

"That's fine. You can have chicken and carrot sticks with your popcorn."

"I hate carrots," Chase whines.

"Wait a second." Micah catches up and grabs my arm. "You can't just leave. What's your plan?"

Micah can't stop looking from between me and Chase as my son hops on one foot at my side. "We're going home where I'll arm my security system. Then I'm going to make popcorn and turn on a ridiculous cartoon that's bad for his brain, but they're the only ones that keep his attention. Then I'm going to open a bottle of wine and contemplate where I went wrong. In the midst of all that, I'll call my attorney, who also happens to be my brother. That will surely get to my parents and sister in record time. It will be a whole thing, which is the reason I'll need the wine first."

His smirk is gone, and he's back to frowning. "That's your plan? You've got a hit on your—" He pauses, glances at Chase, and has the decency to shut his mouth. "After what you learned today, that's your entire plan?"

"That's my plan for now. You've done your part. I'll take care of everything. I always do."

Brax rustles Chase's hair before he hands me his card. "Call if you need anything. Anytime."

"She has my card." Micah turns back to me. "It's my case. Call me."

"Thank you. We'll be fine." I stuff the card in my purse and turn to the only human on earth I would literally lay my life down for. "Let's go home, baby."

I can't shake the unnerving feeling of walking to my car after what I just learned. I need to get my shit figured out fast.

I never want to come back here again.

CHILLING

Evie

Andrew hangs up from his call and turns to me. “That was the security department. Someone will be here right away to sit in front of the house tonight.”

I exhale a relieved breath. “Thank you.”

Andrew is the oldest. He’s fifteen years older than me, and has always acted like a parent instead of the older brother who would get me out of trouble or buy me beer in high school. I might as well have had three parents growing up.

I called him on my way home from the DEA. I had no choice. He’s my attorney and drew up my divorce papers. He promised he’d keep it under wraps with the rest of our family until I handled things at home with Chase. The last thing I need is my mother breathing down my neck. She’ll demand that Chase and I move in with them. As desperate as I am for childcare—and now, security—I need to wrap my head around everything that has happened.

I’m not an idiot. I know dealing with my family is better than hiding from a killer. I just need a minute to process what happened today on my own without having to manage everyone else.

“You and Chase should go to Mom and Dad’s. You’ll have an extra layer of security at their house with the gates, and the guard can sit outside the house

there.”

Lovely. Andrew not only argues for a living, he’s now building his case against my inner thoughts.

“I’ll think about it. It’s almost Chase’s bedtime.” I glance into the family room at my son. All I see are his little bare feet sticking up over the back of the sofa where he’s watching cartoons upside down. He’s starting to chill out for the night. I’m not going to uproot him now. I lower my voice when I turn back to my brother. “He hasn’t even asked where Jeff is. If that’s not telling, I’m not sure what is. Had I done this long ago, I wouldn’t be in this spot. I’m an idiot for thinking I could fix my marriage.”

“It doesn’t matter how much I agree with you, now is not the time for that. Don’t do that to yourself. You can’t change anything, and you had no idea he’d turn into a murderer. I haven’t heard the recording yet, but from what you described, he’ll be charged with attempted murder times two. You won’t have to worry about him for a very long time. I’m no divorce attorney, but this will be sped through the courts. No judge will make you go through the motions.”

I pick up my glass of wine and mutter, “Look at you, all glass is half-full. So unlike you.”

“I know. It feels wrong,” he deadpans. “Look, even with security sitting outside all night, if you insist on staying here, I can rearrange my trip in the morning and stay with you.”

I take a sip of my wine and let it warm me from the inside. “It’s okay. I have cameras surrounding the house. As long as someone is outside, I’ll be fine. I’m going to take Chase to the clinic with me in the morning. He can hang out in my office until I can figure something out. Plus, you need to quit being so nice. It’ll suck when you go back to being distant and obsessed with work. We haven’t seen you for over a month, you know. If this is what it takes for a mini-family reunion, then the Litchfields are more cold-hearted than I gave us credit for.”

“You’re the only warm-blooded one in the family, Evie. No one but you would have the patience to work with every blue-haired senior in the Miami metro.”

“Don’t give me shit. I love my patients.”

“Mama said shit!” Chase yells from the family room.

I hope he uses his multitasking skills for good and not evil when he starts kindergarten in the fall. “Sorry, baby.”

Andrew rolls his eyes but picks up his phone to read a text. “That was fast. Your security guard is here. Are you sure you don’t want me to stay?”

I set my wine down and wave him off. “Go. You’re scheduled to leave early, you don’t need the hassle of staying with us. I’ll call and check in tomorrow.”

He pulls me in for a hug. “Call Mom and Dad. They’ll hold it against me if you try to keep this from them too long.”

He walks over and pulls Chase up by the ankles. My son immediately squeals and gone is the chill mood I was counting on to get him to bed.

Oh well. It’s no different than most nights when Jeff got home and disturbed his bedtime routine by demanding dinner or complaining about me telling him to keep his voice down.

Andrew flips him right-side-up and tickles his ribs. “Be good.”

“You’re nutty!” Chase squawks between giggles.

Andrew tosses him back to the sofa. “You’re a monkey. Don’t give your mom fits tonight. She’s tired.”

I can’t help the small smile that settles on my lips despite everything that’s happened. Chase rolls off the sofa and falls to the rug with a light thud. His bowl of popcorn goes everywhere.

All of a sudden I go from tired to exhausted. “I’m going to walk Uncle Andrew out. Pick up the popcorn and go brush your teeth. I’m going to check them, so do a good job.”

Andrew follows me to the door. “I’ll call the DA in the morning to see what they’re doing with Jeff. You’ll be fine with the guard out front but call anytime. Arm the system the moment I leave. Jacey is taking the twins for another college visit tomorrow, but other than that, she’ll be around.”

That strangely makes me feel better. “Thank you for arranging security.”

“It’s the least I can do for being the coldest-hearted of the Litchfields. I’ll talk to the guard before I leave and tell him not to bother you unless he sees something. He’ll call you first. Don’t open the door for anyone.”

“That means the world to me. I really do feel better. I might actually be able to sleep.”

He leans in and presses his lips to the top of my head. “I’ll call you tomorrow.”

I slam the door harder than necessary, flip the locks, and arm the security system through the app faster than I ever have. There’s even a little part of me that wishes I allowed my parents to buy us a home in a gated neighborhood.

At the time, this house was more than we needed. As a young couple, we could barely afford the property taxes on this place every year without dipping into my trust fund. We looked ridiculous enough moving in when we did. I was in my residency and Jeff sold insurance.

Insurance.

Shit. I wonder if he ever took out a policy on me that I don’t know about? I wonder how I can figure that out.

One more thing to add to my list of to dos.

Then I do what I never do—check all the cameras.

The pool.

The guesthouse across the deep yard.

The gates and paths from the street.

And the long drive lined with palms.

My father didn’t mess around when he bought each of his kids a house.

All is quiet. I even expanded the motion detectors. Every bird or gecko will set it off tonight, but who am I kidding. I probably won’t be able to sleep

anyway.

Chase yawns. “Can I have a popsicle?”

“You had one after dinner. You can have a glass of milk.” I pour him a glass and he climbs up into a barstool. I study my son. I’m going to need to break it to him somehow that his father isn’t coming home.

Ever.

I brush his dark hair from his forehead. “Do you want to sleep with me tonight?”

This is a treat he only gets when Jeff is gone. And now I know he wasn’t on extended fishing trips. Instead, he was speeding across the Pacific to the Bahamas with a boat full of cocaine. Jeff hates it when Chase crawls in bed with us and always sends him back to bed. He moves in his sleep almost as much as he moves when he’s awake. But tonight, of all nights, I want my son close to me.

Chase’s little face lights up. “Yes! Can I watch TV to go to sleep too?”

“Sure. Why not?” I can’t let on that depriving him of anything he asks for will feel like a knife to the gut.

A knife to the gut...

Shit. I need to quit having thoughts like that.

I take his empty cup and send him on his way. “Teeth, bathroom, and meet me in bed.”

He runs off to his bathroom as if nothing in the world could make him happier than having a sleepover with his mama. I have no clue what I’m going to tell him about Jeff. The only thing I am sure about is it will be a complete lie. I can barely deal with the reality of the position Jeff has put us in, there’s no way a five-year-old can begin to comprehend what his father has done.

What should have been a simple divorce with shared custody has turned into a primetime TV special. They won’t even have to work hard on the headlines, Jeff took care of that all on his own.

Husband runs cocaine in a luxury ocean liner to pay a contract killer to get rid of his wife and son for good.

Love and murder ... the only hotter headline is sex. And since there hasn't been any of that in the last year—and the year before that it was sparse and less than mediocre at best—primetime shows won't get the trifecta.

I down the last swallow of my cab and set the crystal in the sink to deal with in the morning. It's late, but I'm not sure any amount of sleep will prepare me for what I'll have to deal with tomorrow.

Chase is jumping into the king size bed that's still unmade from where I'm sure Jeff slept this morning. The last two weeks of his presence and attentiveness that set off every red flag and warning bell in my psyche didn't translate to mornings. He was still asleep when Tonya got here to look after Chase and I left for work.

I flip on the TV to the same channel that distracted Chase when Andrew was managing my crisis. He crawls under the messy covers, and it's everything I can do to ignore the churning in my stomach. All of a sudden, I want to rip the covers and sheets off the bed and burn the damn mattress that Jeff slept in less than twenty-four hours ago.

Instead, I lean in and press my lips to Chase's forehead. "Settle in, baby. I'll be right back."

He tucks his arm around the long neck of a rumpled brontosaurus, strangles it in the crook of his elbow, and yawns. "Is Dad going to be mad that I'm here if he comes home?"

For the second time today, my eyes sting with tears. "No, baby, he won't."

And like a coward, I put off the conversation that his dad won't ever return to this house if I can help it. I pull the covers under his arms to tuck him in and think of all the things I'm sure Jeff is angry about tonight. I'm sure his son sleeping on his side of the bed isn't even on his list.

It doesn't matter how iron clad my security system is or that a guard is sitting outside the house. Chase being out of my sight for even the shortest amount of time is nerve racking. I can't get ready for bed fast enough.

I'm prepared for more questions since that's what my inquisitive son is best at, but when I flip off the light to the bathroom and round the corner, I find him fast asleep. With my phone clutched in my fist, I rush out of the bedroom and move through my dark house to the banister that overlooks the two-story entryway. Through the window that reaches the ceiling, I see the SUV with the guard inside parked at the end of my drive.

"Stop freaking out, Evie. Get a grip," I mutter to myself.

I hurry back to Chase and climb in next to him. He's hogging the middle of the bed like usual, but I don't care. I roll into him and pull his back to my front. He shifts against me, but his dead weight settles in an instant.

I check the cameras once more and regret creeps in that we didn't go to my parents' house. This isn't any different than most nights Jeff hasn't come home over the last year, but tonight is very different. I'm alone. So alone.

In my dark, silent house, nothing feels familiar. Even with my child in my arms, everything is new and foreign and...

Chilling.

My pillow is wet with silent tears, and I wonder how long this will last. How long it will be until the police find the killer Jeff hired.

If this goes on too long, I'll lose my mind.

YOU'RE FIRED

Micah

When I woke up this morning, I never expected this. It's almost midnight, and I'm so deep in paperwork, it would reach my elbows if it weren't electronic. And since paperwork is about as appealing as a doctor asking me to turn and cough, it's safe to say I've done the absolute minimum to appease management.

Not that my supervisor would be surprised. I've reported to Tim Coleman since I got out of the academy. Our days go back to the Big Apple when I was wet behind the ears and eager to make a name for myself.

Make a difference.

Now, work is a hobby I keep silently on the side. Tim plays golf. Brax obsesses over his family. Rocco is killing it at Miami PD and thinks he's going to star in the next *Bad Boys* while chasing bikinis on South Beach.

I've tried to play golf but I hate collared shirts. Brax's wife, Landyn, has made me an honorary uncle to their son, not to mention his Godfather. I'm a required guest at their table every Sunday for family dinner. And since I just turned thirty-two, I have no desire to create my own action-adventure movie. Besides, the bikinis on South Beach got old a month after I moved here.

Miami is one of the top three busiest divisions in the DEA. It's a major port

and has direct access to the Caribbean. The ocean is a big fucking place and not easy to police. Boats and planes sneak in and out of the country like rats that only come out at night to feed on trash and spread disease.

Fucking rats.

When I'm not chasing human rodents through wire taps or confidential informants, hunting ghosts is still my preferred pastime.

"The wire room is covered. Go home," Brax demands.

"The last time I checked, you're not my supervisor." I look up at my friend who thinks he can boss me around. "What are you still doing here? You're about to have a baby. I'm surprised you haven't taken the whole month off."

Brax slings a backpack over one shoulder. "I'm saving the time off for when my daughter makes her grand appearance, asshole. Landyn barely had time to get the salon up and running. Which reminds me, you could use a haircut. You should call her and get in before the baby comes."

I look back at my computer screen. "Okay, Mr. GQ, who never has a hair out of place. I don't want to think about the scenes that probably play out when she cuts your hair. If you want to double as a Latin runway model, be my guest. Perfection isn't my thing."

"Trust me, everyone knows that. I'm just saying, Landyn won't forgive you if you go somewhere else, and don't try to get her to cut it in our kitchen again. She's got a whole salon now."

I throw him a smile. "You're just jealous your wife can't help herself when it comes to my locks. She practically begs me to let her cut it."

"Fuck you," he deadpans. "You and your overgrown mop aren't special. She hates dead ends."

"Your wife might hate dead ends, but she doesn't hate me anymore. She can give me a quick trim when Uncle Micah brings obnoxious gifts for Brian and the baby. You'll spend every minute of the day thinking of me."

"More like hating you," he adds. "I'm not afraid of much, but you and Rocco are making it a competition for who can gift the most annoying toys. I

thought we had each other's backs.”

I shrug and swivel in my chair to face him. “I like your kid more than I like you.”

“Fair enough.” He turns to leave. “Seriously, go home, Micah—if you can remember how to get there. You saved the doctor and her son today. Her asshole husband is sitting in jail. You deserve a decent night's sleep before the sun comes up and you feel the need to do it all over again.”

Brax knows me better than anyone. A decade of fighting demons while working alongside the same person has a way of bringing out the truth.

And regrets.

Those might be the worst.

Speaking of the doctor, Brax is right, but he's also not. I'm not sure I saved anyone today, but the good doctor knows her husband paid a contract killer to get rid of his family.

That shit is fucked up.

I can't stop thinking about Dr. Evita Litchfield. She said she's good and can hire security. Hell, her murderous husband even admitted there was no way to penetrate their house—the security is that ironclad.

I hope he's right.

I've spent most of today studying my list of targets for a lead on who Michaels hired. Hell, he said on the wiretap he didn't know, and there's no reason for him to lie.

Jeff Michaels might've blown my case up with the murder for hire, but it's his wife I can't stop thinking about. The woman took her son and ran out of here like she had a gun to her head.

Which, in a way, she does.

I look at the clock. Five 'til twelve. Brax is right, I need to get out of here, and I really need some sleep.

By the time I pack up, get to my car, and head out of the parking garage, I

pause.

I didn't lie when I told Evie the DEA and the Miami PD don't have the manpower to offer protection. We're both short staffed as it is. I did my duty and informed her about the threat.

Though, I'm not that big of an asshole that I won't check in on her.

I could do that first thing tomorrow morning.

Or I could just drive by and make sure she was able to arrange security at the last minute.

It's completely out of my way.

I live in a shit condo as inland as one can get in the city of Miami—nowhere near the doctor's mansion. Depending on traffic this time of night, it might be two in the morning before I'll get home.

And when it comes down to it, she's not my responsibility, even if she does have a shit husband.

"Dammit," I mutter to no one in my silent car.

I turn right instead of left.

Before I know it, I'm pulling into the same neighborhood I did earlier today when I had to inform a woman that her husband put a hit on her life and her child's.

That feels like forever ago.

I drive through what looks like the street of dreams that most Americans won't ever know. Hell, some might not even know to dream this big. When I left earlier today, I did a circle of the neighborhood to get a lay of the land. There's a helipad in the back lot. My guess is it's not there in case anyone needs Life Flight. I bet it's to avoid the gridlock of Miami that the rest of us have to endure.

There's rich, and then there's Miami rich.

There are some communities that operate as small cities. They have their own clubs, gyms, golf courses, and even shopping so their residents don't have to

mingle among the regular public. Those are full of high rises and pack as many residences into them as possible.

Don't get me wrong.

They're for the rich. They're a million times better than the forty-year-old condo I bought when I moved back to Florida.

But Sapphire Shores is not that. There are no high rises here. It's a rare piece of land made up of mansions of every shape and size.

Dr. Litchfield comes from money. The kind of wealth that's usually only seen on TV. I get she's a doctor and her husband has been running drugs for the Colombians for a few months, but both of those combined couldn't start to pay for this.

Jeff Michaels isn't Pablo. From the intel I've gathered so far, he had one goal—to get rid of his family—and needed a side hustle to fund it. He's in over his head with the cartel and has not one fucking clue what he's doing. Other runners make triple what they're paying him. He's not only running drugs, he's an idiot and clueless. That was solidified today on the wires when the hierarchy started talking about him.

They have no clue where he is. We're doing everything we can to keep his arrest under wraps. It's the only way for me to salvage the rest of my case.

When I turn onto Evita Litchfield's street, my headlights shine on a Ford parked in front of her house.

It's lit up from the outside, but every light inside the house is off. The good doctor must feel good enough about her security system and the guy sitting outside to get some rest.

Surveillance is a slow and monotonous job. Minutes drag into hours and hours into days at times. It's boring as hell.

So when I let off the gas to see what I think I see, I get how it can happen, but I do not get it.

Not for this. Not this scenario, and not for this job.

This is too important.

I hit my brakes and throw my car in park. The fuckwad doesn't even budge.

He's sawing logs.

I open the camera on my phone, click a picture of him, and get out. My badge and credentials are pressed to his window as I tap on the glass with the barrel of my gun.

He jumps at the same time he opens his eyes and scrambles for his own weapon that slips to his feet from where it was resting between his legs.

"DEA," I announce myself with a warning. "Hands where I can see them on the steering wheel."

He turns his tired eyes to me and slowly raises his hands. "I've got my concealed carry and a PI license. I'm hired to watch this house. You put that gun down, I'll show you."

I shake my head even though I know this guy is most likely the hired security. He's got a weapon sitting at his feet, and I'm no idiot. "You can show me after you get out and step away from the car. Now."

His stare hangs between us as heavy as the humid blanket of late summer air. He moves slowly and flips the handle. I take a step back and make room for him.

He stands in front of me and frowns. "Happy?"

"Fucking euphoric. Shut the door and step away from the car."

He shakes his head and follows orders while keeping his hands in the air. "Dude, chill."

My brows rise. "Chill? You want me to chill. If you are who you said you are and were hired to watch this house, you were sleeping on the job. Don't tell me to chill, and you definitely don't need to chill. You need to wake the fuck up."

He lowers his voice. "Can I get my ID so you can get that gun out of my face?"

"Turn around, put your hands on the hood, and spread your feet." He rolls his

eyes and complies. I pat him down. “Show me your ID and PI license that should be revoked for sleeping on the job. You’re not investigating anything anyway.”

He reaches into his back pocket, slides two IDs out of his wallet, and hands them over. “See? Legit.”

I hand them back and glare down at him. “You were asleep.”

He frowns and throws a glance left and right. “This is the swankiest neighborhood in the best part of town. Nothing’s going down here.”

I slide my gun back into the holster on my waistband. “Do you even know why you’re here?”

He shakes his head. “I mean, she and her husband are separated. It’s got to be some lovers spat, and her brother doesn’t want the guy near his little sister.”

I cross my arms and can’t believe what I’m doing. I have no business adding anything to my work load, even if it is for one night. I also have no business sticking my nose into someone else’s drama.

But I can’t help it.

I level my stare on him. “You’re fired.”

His complacency dissipates into thin air. “What?! You can’t fire me.”

“Watch me.”

“But I don’t work for you.”

“And now you don’t work for the doctor either. You’re being paid to watch her house, and you were asleep. You had one job, and you failed. Get in your car and go.”

“No,” he spits. “I don’t work for the doctor—I work for her father’s company. I’m not leaving.”

“Then I’ll be curious how your employer feels when he finds out you weren’t doing everything you could to make sure his daughter is safe.”

He throws a hand toward the house that’s lit up by a million landscaping

lights, but besides that, it's dark. "Everything is fine."

"If you don't get in your car and leave this minute, I'll call BioNova myself."

He points to the house. "But what about her?"

I pull in a swift breath and let it out slowly. "I'll take care of her. If you want to preserve your job, I suggest you do as I say and get the hell out of this neighborhood."

He drags a hand through his hair and is trying to figure out how to preserve his paycheck. "You promise?"

No fucking way. I'm calling BioNova first thing in the morning. "I'll call now if you don't leave."

His glare on me lingers for another moment before he yanks his door back open and climbs in. I rest my hand on my gun as he reaches for his. He tosses it in the passenger seat without looking up at me again. I don't take my eyes off him as he pulls away from Dr. Litchfield's home and turns the corner. I stand in the middle of the street and don't move while I wait to make sure he doesn't come back.

I'm about to climb back in my car and kiss any sleep goodbye that was in my short-term future when the porch light to the house pops on. I look up and a shadow appears in the window looking out the front of the house. I recognize the silhouette of her full head of dark hair. I remember how soft it was when I had her in my arms and pressed to my chest.

And the way it fanned out on the floor when I had her pinned below me.

There's no better time to break the news that I just fired her rent-a-cop.

I give her a low wave and head for the front door.

This should be interesting.

URNS ME ON

Evie

I watch him walk up to my front door. The same man who informed me that my husband paid a hitman to kill Chase and me.

Being a doctor trained me to sleep when I have the opportunity. It doesn't matter what's on my mind or how long or little time I have. I can sleep all night or catch a nap.

But that skill flew out the window when I learned my husband is trying to have us killed.

The minutes felt like a cheese grater dragging over raw skin. They were just that painful as I sat on the floor of my bedroom between Chase and the door staring at it as if the boogeyman would bust through at any given moment.

Finally, I had to get up and move.

The commotion at the end of my driveway freaked me out so badly, I almost dialed 9-1-1.

But when the interior light of the car popped on, I realized who it was. My sights zeroed in on the tattoos that intrigued the married woman in me for about two minutes before he told me why he was at my door and changed the course of my life forever.

And at the end of those muscled arms was a gun pointed at my security

detail.

I have no idea what to think about the entire encounter I just watched go down on my street. I even zoomed in on it from my security cameras to get a better look.

But there's no need to watch him through the cameras any longer. He's walking up to my front door in the flesh.

I turn off my security system before flipping the deadbolt and turn the handle.

"What the hell was that?" I seethe through a whisper. "What are you doing here, and why did my security detail just leave?"

Special Agent Micah Emmett stops short of my front door and holds up a low hand, but doesn't look me in the eyes. His intense blue eyes are lasered in on the gun fisted at my side.

He looks up at me and back to the gun before he mutters, "It looks like you've taken security into your own hands." He looks back up to me and hikes a brow. "I'd like to tell you to put the gun down so I can explain what just happened. But I'm not gonna lie, a woman with a gun turns me on."

My eyes widen.

Me with a gun freaks me the fuck out. I've actually never held one before today. When Jeff brought it into the house, we went round and round about the damn thing. I don't want guns anywhere near Chase and didn't see the point. We didn't say no to one bell or whistle with the security company. The sales rep almost looked orgasmic when I kept adding to the plan and the bottom line kept ticking up like a bull market report on Wall Street.

But I relented when Jeff agreed to keep it locked up and put away.

I almost forgot about it until tonight when sleep evaded me.

After today, I'm grateful there's a gun in the house. I might not have been able to sleep, but I have found it easier to breathe with it by my side.

But the DEA agent at my door telling me how a woman with a gun turns him on...

I'm not sure what to think about that, other than the fact I am definitely not his type of woman. Not that it means anything. I wouldn't be his type even if I weren't married.

Which I am.

Even if it is simply contractual.

Because it's not playing out in the bedroom.

Or anywhere else for that matter.

When I don't respond to his comment about the kind of woman who turns him on, Micah lifts his chin. "You look like you're wound tighter than a junkie. Put the gun down so I can explain what just happened."

My brow furrows. "You just sent my security detail away and you want me to put this gun down? No way."

He glances unimpressed at the heavy weapon fisted in my hand before crossing his arms to settle in. He almost looks bored. "Your husband fucked up my day so bad, I just left the office and decided to do a drive-by to make sure everything was okay. Your rent-a-cop was asleep."

My expression falls, and my stomach plummets right behind it. "Asleep?"

He shrugs like he's not at all surprised. "And not just a catnap. The asshole sounded like a freight train. I'm surprised he didn't break any rules your fancy neighborhood has for noise after dark. I took the liberty and fired him. You're welcome."

"You fired him?" I whisper. Panic bubbles inside me. Yes, sleeping on the job isn't good. It's actually really, really bad given my day. But at least he was there. I mean, the chances of him waking up in case something happened are better if he's sleeping in front of my house than at home tucked in his own bed. "Dammit. I could have made him a pot of coffee and fired him in the morning. Now I'm left with no one."

His thick arms drop to his sides, and I tense when he makes a move in my direction. He hesitates, but only for a second. This time, he moves slower, every step he takes is deliberate and controlled.

I watch until he's standing a breath from me. Besides my pounding heart, I don't move a muscle. His hand wraps around mine slowly, and I don't stop him. His hold on mine becomes firm, and now I'm not the only one fisting the gun.

I tip my head back to look up to where he stares down at me. "Do you know how to use a gun?"

My mouth goes dry, and it's all I can do to keep my emotions in check. But I don't admit that I hate guns or how much they scare me. "Point and shoot. Easy, right?"

"That's not what I mean. This isn't a western, Evie. Have you ever shot a gun?"

"Why does it matter?" My nerves are shot and exhaustion seeps in for the first time tonight. All of a sudden, the desire to wrap my son in my arms and sleep for a week is overwhelming.

He doesn't move other than his fingers around my hand. He's strong and controlled, and I don't stop him when he loosens my fingers from the gun. I allow him to overpower me and the weapon that feels foreign in my palm. The moment he slips it from my death grip, I hate that my insides relax, but they do. Relief fills me as his other hand comes up and lands low on my hip to hold me in place. "A gun is an extension of your body. You control it like you would a wave of your hand. A smile. An attitude. It's deliberate and instinctual at the same time. It doesn't take a marksman to look at you and see nothing but a virgin thrown to the ravaging masses."

My frown mars my face.

A smirk tugs at his lips.

"Metaphorically speaking, of course."

"Metaphorically speaking, I'm sure you're not wrong," I bite back and change the subject. "You still had no right to fire my security. What am I supposed to do now?"

The man proves he doesn't care if I'm a married woman, because he makes no move to take his hand off me. "You don't know me, but I'm not going to

leave you high and dry. You won't look death in the eyes tonight, Evie. I'll make sure of it."

Life and death are a part of my everyday life. I'm used to looking at death through the eyes of my patients and their families. But not when it comes to myself, and the thought of anything happening to Chase is what led me to digging that damn gun from its safe.

The accident was bad enough—

Oh, shit.

Micah frowns, and his grip on me tightens. "Are you going to pass out again?"

I shake my head. "No. But today has been hell. Too much to process ... I can't believe I didn't think about it before."

"Think about what?"

I step back, and Micah follows me into the house and shuts the door behind him. I vaguely hear the deadbolt click as I thread my fingers through my hair, pulling at the roots. Every nerve in my body is electric from the memory. "The accident. How did I not put it together before now?"

"What accident?" he asks.

I shake my head. "It's been months. It was bad, but I finally turned a corner and got past it. It took Chase longer. It's only been in the last few weeks that I can drive on a freeway again without him freaking out."

"Evie." My name is a demand on his lips. When I turn to look at him, he's still holding my gun as he closes the distance between us. "What accident are you talking about?"

"I was in a car wreck. It was bad, but it could have been so much worse. I didn't need the police to tell me how much worse it could have been. Something happened to my car on the freeway. It locked up ... my brakes, the power, even the steering ... everything just shut down. I lost all control. If it weren't for a group of construction barrels to cushion the impact, I would've gone over the edge. I'm sure of it. I spent four days in the hospital.

Chase lived through it with only some cuts and bruises, but emotionally he was not okay. I was unconscious when EMS got to the scene. He was pinned in his car seat. It was traumatic for him. He'd have an anxiety attack if I drove on the highway."

"You don't think it was an accident?"

I pull in a deep breath before answering on an exhale. "I don't know. Today has been too much. I just now put it together. Investigators finally ruled it an electrical issue with the car. I was just happy to be alive. I replaced it with the safest SUV I could find and focused on Chase."

"Did investigators look for foul play?"

"They mentioned it. My family wanted me to push it with the manufacturer, but I literally didn't have it in me. Recovering from the crash wasn't easy. Jeff didn't have the patience for any of it—me or Chase. It was easier to move on and be grateful we were alive."

Micah hikes a brow and deadpans, "Convenient for Jeff."

"So I'm not crazy to think it might not have been an accident?"

"No, Evie. You're not crazy. I'll find the police reports and look into it."

I drag a hand up the back of my neck to relieve some of the tension. "I'll mention it to Andrew tomorrow."

"Who's Andrew?"

"My brother. He's the lead attorney for BioNova and arranged for the guard through their security department. He's not going to be happy that guy fell asleep on the job."

"I took a picture. You know, for shits and giggles."

"I never would've known had you not driven by. Thank you. You really don't have to stay. I should be fine with the security system—and I have a gun."

"Yeah, the gun. If you promise to give your gunslinging a break for one night so I don't have to worry about you accidentally shooting me or yourself, I'll stay."

I purse my lips. I should send him home. He made it clear earlier today this was not part of his job.

He rolls his eyes as if he can read my mind. “I’m already here. By the time I get home, I’ll barely get a few hours of sleep. I’ll stay, Evie. If you want to kick me out, I guess you can call the cops.”

I huff a lame laugh. “I feel bad. You made it very clear that I’ve ruined your day as it is.”

“Only feel bad if you keep fucking around with that gun when you have no clue what you’re doing.”

“That’s fair,” I agree. “I have no clue what I’m doing.”

“Lock it up, so it’s not sitting out in the morning when your son gets up. I’ll be out front.”

He turns for the door, and something comes over me. “Wait.”

He turns back and frowns.

I do everything I can to bite back the damn emotions that have been nipping at me all day. I wonder if this is what it feels like to be at a breaking point.

I pull in a deep breath, push away my tears, and motion to the family room. “There’s no need to sit in your car. Seriously, make yourself comfortable.”

“The government pays me to sit in my car for hours on surveillance.” He glances at his watch. “It’s less than six hours.”

“I feel guilty enough that you’re here and—”

“I’m good in my car, Evie. It’s not a big deal.”

I shake my head and can’t help the words that spurt from my mouth. “Please, Micah. Don’t make me beg. Stay in the house.”

His stare lingers on me, and for the first time I realize I’m standing here in nothing but a matching tank and sleep shorts. It’s pure silk, luxurious, and thin.

I’m also not wearing anything beneath it.

I cross my arms.

“You want me in the house.” It’s a statement, not a question.

My bottom lip trembles as I nod.

He gives me another chin lift and doesn’t take his eyes off me as he pulls his gun and holster from his hip. He moves to my family room, and I follow his every move as he sets his gun on the coffee table, followed by his badge. Then he unloads his pockets—keys, phone, wallet, a few loose bills and coins. I’m fascinated when a tube of lip balm lands on top of the messy pile.

Finally, he turns back to me and nods to the stairs at my back. “Go to bed, Evie. I’ll be right here.”

I pull in a deep breath and nod quickly as I exhale. I hurry straight to the front door and arm the security system, officially locking myself and Chase in with a stranger. I grab the gun that feels foreign in my hands and can’t wait to lock it back up.

I’m up two stairs when I turn back to see the enormous tattooed man settle on my sofa.

Nothing has ever looked more out of place in my house, yet, I can’t remember the last time I’ve felt this much relief.

It consumes me.

So much, a chill runs down my spine, but I can’t cross my arms again to mask my hardened nipples because of the damn gun that’s pointed at the floor.

“Thank you.”

Micah’s blue eyes angle back to me from across the vast space.

“I know my house is safe and monitored. But when I turned off all the lights tonight, my brain ... it started to mess with me. Thank you for staying. It means a lot. The thought of something happening to Chase...”

“Get some sleep,” he demands as he reclines on my sofa. “You’ve had a shit day. Tomorrow you can tackle this with a clear head.”

I nod, grateful and relieved to have this strange man sitting in my house all night.

“Goodnight,” I call, for no other reason than I have no idea what else to say.

He doesn't return my awkward farewell. His heavy stare doesn't help me shake the chill from my ragged emotions. In fact, the combination feels like a science experiment gone wrong, and I might erupt at any time.

He's right. I need sleep.

And I need to lock away this damn gun.

I turn to run up the stairs and away from the special agent.

HARDHEADED

Micah

There's a banging on the door followed by three quick rings of the doorbell.

And since I doubt many hitmen announce their arrival, I assume it's someone Evie knows or is expecting.

But I also don't want to trip the alarm. If her system is half as good as she touts and her family is as influential as they came across during my investigation yesterday, the SWAT team will be here in no time.

It's not even six in the morning. Who the hell would be banging on her door at this hour?

I slide my gun back onto my belt and go to the bottom of the stairs to call for her without yelling. "Evie."

Nothing.

The doorbell rings again. There's no way anyone can sleep through this.

I raise my voice. "Evie! I need to answer your door. Turn off the alarm."

The banging ensues as a deep voice bellows from the other side, "Evie! I found out what happened yesterday. You can't keep this from me forever. Open the damn door."

Shit. She must be able to sleep through a freight train.

I take the stairs two at a time and turn down the hall. There are too many damn doors. Who needs this many rooms? She only has one kid.

There are a set of closed double doors at the end of the hall. Damn. My grandma always said, no good deed goes unpunished, and since I rarely do good deeds just to do them, I had no idea what that really meant.

But here I am, in a Miami mansion looking for the woman I'm supposed to be protecting while someone is banging her front door down, hoping no one trips the alarm. I can hear Tim yelling at me for spending the night in a strange woman's house who's directly involved with my Colombian case. And all of that would lead to more paperwork, which I am not down for.

So I knock on the double doors and hope to hell the good doctor actually wakes up. "Evie. Someone is at your door. If you don't get down here soon or kill the security, you'll have cops swarming your house for the second day in a row."

I put my ear to the door as my insides tighten.

"You okay? I'll bust through this door if I have to—"

The lock turns.

I'm not prepared for what I see.

Wide, dark eyes angle up to mine from her phone before she turns it to me and whispers, "It's my dad."

My brain barely computes what she said because she's wet.

Literally dripping.

And naked.

At least I assume she is since her small frame is wrapped in a towel gathered at her tits.

Her hair is glued to her glistening skin, every drop dances down her bare body before disappearing into the thick, white towel.

When she speaks again, I'm forced to shake myself from the trance her wet body has thrown me in. "Chase is still asleep, and I need to get to the hospital to check on a patient before clinic. I turned off the alarm, can you please let him in before Mrs. Rollings next door reports me for noise pollution? She maxes out her hearing aids and can literally hear a pin drop from Orlando. I'll get dressed and be down in a minute. Thanks!"

Thanks?

She slams the door in my face.

She doesn't really slam it since her son is asleep. But the lock is clicked with force.

I jog down the stairs and make my way across the house to the front door. The screen on the security system reads all clear. Her dad needs to shut the hell up, so I turn the lock and pull open the enormous door.

He takes a half-step back and looks up at me with tense, wide eyes that are the same deep chocolate as Evie's. "Who the hell are you and where are my daughter and grandson?"

"Evie is upstairs with Chase. She's getting ready for work."

He straightens his spine and claims the space he just put between us. "You didn't answer my other question. Who are you and what are you doing here?"

I never, and I mean never, tell people about my job if I don't have to. I give him just enough of the truth to pacify him. I hold out my hand for him. "Micah. I was Evie's security detail last night. She told me to let you in and she'd be down in a minute."

He stares at me for a beat, so I step to the side and let him through. I glance around her front yard where the sun is coming up and don't see any activity. Not even a jogger or stray cat. The neighborhood is eerily perfect.

I shut the door and turn to find Evie's father stalking through the house. "Evie! Get down here and explain what the hell is going on!"

I follow him into the kitchen where I helped myself last night after Evie went to bed. I skipped dinner and didn't plan on this gig. I was starving. There's

nothing like rummaging uninvited through a stranger's kitchen. I learned a lot about the owners, which made me wonder if what I learned says more about Evie or her shithead husband.

My investigation into Evie yesterday was deep and thorough and included her entire family. Hugh Litchfield is in his mid-sixties, and looks like he has no intention of retiring. Years of investing and diversifying BioNova have made him one of the wealthiest men in America.

Evie's father is fit and looks much younger than the date on his birth certificate as he turns to me where he stands in the kitchen wearing business casual that looks not at all casual because of how much he probably paid for it.

He proves to be all business. "Andrew told me he hired you. I'm here now, and have made arrangements for Evie and Chase."

I cross my arms. "I don't work for Andrew. And I'm not leaving until I know what Evie's plans are for the day."

His perpetual frown deepens. "Andrew told me he hired security to watch the house last night."

"He did," I confirm. "And I sent him home."

Hugh crosses his arms. "What?"

I shrug. "It's not my place to say. I'll let Evie fill you in. But I'm not leaving until I talk to her."

He drops one arm and points to me with the other. "Who are you—"

"Grandpa!" Evie's son interrupts as he runs in the room wearing pajamas that look like a big baseball. "What are you doing here?"

Hugh proves he's not always an asshole and transforms himself into someone completely different when he reaches down to scoop up his grandson. "I came to see you. How's my boy?"

"It's early. Mama said I have to go to work with her today because Dad's gone and Tonya is busy." Chase wraps his arms around Hugh's neck before wiggling himself to the floor. He starts for the family room but stops when he

almost runs into me. “You’re back.”

I hold out my fist and he returns my bump. “I am.”

His little shoulders slump. “Do we have to go to that place again? That took forever. But I don’t want to go to work with Mama either.”

If I had to guess, Hugh is not in the know about everything that went on yesterday. Interesting. Evie didn’t fill her dad in on her drama.

“What place did you go to, Chase?”

I was right. He has no clue.

“The place with the police officers. They have snacks.”

Hugh mulls over that as he stares at his grandson. “Is that so?”

Chase changes course and turns back for the kitchen and disappears around the corner but keeps talking. “Mama’s office is boring.” He comes back out with an enormous box of cereal and almost drops it as he climbs up a barstool at the island. “I wanna stay home.”

“Lucky for you, I’m here. Your grandma and I want to spend some time with you before you start kindergarten. How about a little vacation to our house?”

Cereal pieces fall to the floor as the boy stuffs his face as he talks around it. “Really?”

“Yep. Grandma is at home waiting on you. I’ll bring you back before I go to work.”

Chase’s entire arm disappears into the box to dig out another handful. “How long do I get to stay?”

Hugh throws me another frown before looking back at his son. “As long as it takes to do all the fun things on your grandma’s list. Go pack a bag. Grandma canceled all her meetings to hang out with you.”

More dry cereal lands on the floor as the little guy talks with his mouth full and jumps down from the barstool. “Okay!”

“Dad. What are you doing here?”

Everyone turns to stare at Evie. She's not wet and wrapped in a towel this time. She's wearing a black dress that hits her above the knees and fits every small swell on her body just enough to be on this side of professional. She's barefoot, her hair is wrapped in a towel, but she is wearing makeup.

Now that I've seen her without makeup—and practically naked—I think I prefer her bare.

Not that she cares what I prefer. She's busy trying not to get unalived by an unknown hitman hired by her husband.

Hugh turns to his grandson. "I need to talk to your mom. Go get packed. We'll leave in ten minutes."

Chase lets out a bellowing *whoop* and runs up the stairs, leaving a trail of dry cereal in his wake.

Evie puts a hand on her hip and stares at her father. "What is he packing for?"

"Andrew called an hour ago and told me everything. We'll talk about the fact you didn't tell your mother and me about what happened with Jeff yesterday later. I'm here to get Chase and take him off your hands. We know everything—every damn thing, Evie. How do you think we feel knowing our daughter and grandson's lives are in danger and you didn't bother making a phone call. Andrew also said your babysitter quit. Your mother canceled her plans for the week to spend time with Chase."

Evie's eyes fall shut, and she pulls in a deep breath. "I should've called. It's been a lot to think about."

"Yes, you should have," he admonishes as I stand silently to the side. I have no desire to step into anyone's family drama. I have enough to worry about with my case. Hugh goes on pecking at Evie. "You should've packed up and moved to our house for the time being. I get here, and there's a strange man in your house."

So much for standing silently to the side.

When Evie glances my way, her pleading eyes look like an apology. "Dad, this is Micah Emmett. Micah, my father, Hugh Litchfield."

“We met,” Hugh says. “But he didn’t tell me who he is or how he knows you.”

“Your daughter and I met yesterday. I came here to inform her about—” I pause and turn back to see if Chase is anywhere close and decide not to risk it since the little guy seems to show up out of nowhere. “The situation with her husband.”

“He’s a DEA agent, Dad.”

Well. So much for keeping my job under wraps.

Hugh hikes a brow, as if this bit of information finally captures his attention. “The DEA?”

“Your son-in-law crossed paths with my case. I can’t elaborate. The investigation is ongoing.”

“Jeff was being tapped,” Evie announces, spilling all the details about the work that’s taken years to compile. “If it weren’t for Micah, I’d never know what was going on and Jeff wouldn’t be sitting in prison right now.”

“Jail,” I correct. “Prison is for after you’re convicted. And you don’t have to tell everyone about the wiretap. We told you for obvious reasons, but I’m still trying to salvage what I can of my case.”

Evie throws a hand to motion to her father. “He hates Jeff. He’s not going to do anything to help him get out.”

“That’s true,” Hugh agrees. “Jeff is a shit husband and a lazy father. As long as my daughter and grandson are safe, I couldn’t be more pleased with this scenario. Andrew is working on getting an ex parte motion for an emergency divorce. When they find this person that Jeff hired and throw him away for life, too, you’ll be done with him for good. Years too late, but still done.”

It looks like this isn’t the first time Evie has listened to this, and mutters, “Trust me, I know.”

“Andrew also told me your babysitter quit. We’ll keep Chase until you can get that worked out. Your mom is more than happy to cancel her schedule to stay at home with him. Given the threats against you both, they won’t leave

the grounds. The property is more than secure.”

“No way,” Evie argues as she fires up an espresso machine. “You can keep him during the day, but he’s coming back here with me at night. I can’t be away from him. Not right now. Sleeping last night was hard enough. I’ll go crazy if Chase isn’t here.”

“He’ll be safe with us, and you will be too,” Hugh insists.

She turns and leans into the counter while her coffee brews. “It’s too far for me to drive back and forth to the hospital and the clinic and all the way to South Beach. Seriously, what time did you get up to come here anyway?”

“I took the helicopter.”

Wow. These people are next level.

“You go from your house to downtown. My patients are all over.” Evie goes to the refrigerator, pulls out a container of half and half, and looks at me. “Not everyone can hire a helicopter service to shuttle them around the city. Am I right, Micah?”

I hold my hand up. “The only time I’m in a chopper is when we’re doing surveillance or chasing a high-speed boat over the water.”

She stops what she’s doing. “Wait, is that how you found out Jeff was running drugs on the boat?”

I shake my head. “Your husband is loose lipped. He was easy to peg, and we have all the evidence we need. No offense, he’s not good at what he does.”

“None taken. I’ve yet to find anything that he is good at,” she mutters and finishes making her coffee. Her head pops up and her dark eyes hit me. “I’m sorry. You’ve been up all night. I’m so distracted. Do you want a cup?”

I’m about to answer when Hugh butts in again. “Evie, I need to take Chase. You know it’s the best thing for him right now.”

Evie is about to argue again, but I’ve given them time to sort out their family drama. I can’t stay quiet any longer. “You remember what you heard on the recording, right?”

She tips her head and frowns.

“What recording?” Hugh asks.

Neither Evie nor I answer him and don’t break our gaze.

“He said a lot of things,” she whispers. “Every single word has been circling my mind. I couldn’t forget them if I tried.”

“He had one demand.”

Her coffee cup hits the counter, and she has to reach back and hold onto the edge.

“Dammit, what are you two talking about?” Hugh demands.

“I don’t have kids. Can’t imagine what you’re going through, Evie. You’re scared. You don’t want your son out of your sight, I get it. But remember what you heard on that tap.”

She looks like she has to swallow over a boulder, and her words are rough. “He demanded that it happen when we’re together.”

I nod.

“Shit,” Hugh hisses. “Is there anything else I need to be made aware of?”

I don’t take my eyes off her. “Think about it. He might be safer away from you than with you until we can find him.”

Her dark eyes well before she turns away from her father and me. She swipes at her face before picking up her mug to take a sip.

“Evie,” her father calls for her.

Gone is the agreeable daughter. She slams a hand flat on the counter followed by her mug. “I know, okay? I know what I have to do, dammit.”

I exchange a glance with Hugh right when Chase calls from upstairs. “Grandpa! Can I bring my Legos and my tablet and my rocket ship?”

Hugh pulls in a deep breath. “Bring it all, buddy.”

Evie lets out a whimper.

Hugh moves across the room, turns his daughter, pulls her into his chest, and she doesn't argue. He looks over her head straight to me. "Is it your job to find out who Jeff paid to do this?"

Fuck.

It's not my job. I work drugs. We have one focus—it sets us apart from every other federal agency.

This is not my responsibility.

I cross my arms. "No. It's our responsibility to alert you. We're drug investigators, not protection detail. Not that we have the manpower to do that if we wanted to. We handed it off to Miami PD to investigate. They're one of the most capable departments in the country."

He tips his head down to his daughter. "Just for a while, Evie. You know we'll keep him safe. No one will touch that child. I love him like I love you. We'll arrange for you to be with security day and night, and I'll keep someone at the house with us, even though Chase won't leave our property. We'll get through this."

I watch her knuckles whiten as she grips his freshly pressed dress shirt. I can't take this.

"But it is my case," I blurt. Hugh's gaze angles to me. "I'll make it my job. I'll find whoever Jeff paid and make sure they'll never touch your family."

That's when Chase comes lugging down the stairs, a bag bumping and thumping behind him on every step. He's dressed, but that doesn't mean he matches. He's wearing a Dolphins T-shirt and swim trunks covered in anchors. Evie pushes away from her father. Whatever makeup she put on is now smeared under her eyes as she tries to get herself together.

"You look like you're running away from home." With a fake smile plastered on her tortured face, she looks down at Chase. "What's in there besides toys?"

"Underwear and pajamas and shorts."

Evie bends at the waist and picks him up. She's too small and he's too big to

be held like that, but at the same time, they're a perfect fit. "Did you pack your toothbrush?"

Chase looks guilty.

"You have everything you need at our house. And you're ready to swim? That's all that matters. I'm sure your grandma will order you a whole wardrobe." Hugh smirks at Chase who agrees vigorously.

"What am I going to do without you?" Evie pulls him into her in a tight embrace. "Give me a kiss. I'll call you every time I get a break."

Chase gives Evie a big smack on the cheek before wiggling away, and she's forced to set him down.

Hugh mirrors the peck on her cheek before asking, "What's on your schedule today?"

She shrugs. "I have to swing by the hospital to check on a patient, appointments all morning, and a funeral after lunch."

A funeral?

"We need to go. I have a car waiting out front. But as soon as I get to the helicopter, I'll arrange for someone to be with you all day. If you have to push your schedule back and miss the funeral, everyone will understand. Do not leave the house until you hear from me."

I've never seen anyone be so businesslike about a funeral. It's not like she's a mortician. She's a doctor and in the business of keeping people alive.

Evie sighs.

"Love you," Hugh says to his daughter. "I'll check in to see how you're doing throughout the day."

"Love you too." She rustles Chase's dark, shaggy hair and presses a kiss to the top of his head. "Love you, baby. I'll miss you every minute, but have fun."

Chase is clueless to the nightmare circling him and his mother. "Love you, Mama."

I stay in the kitchen and wait for Evie to return after walking them to the front door and pull out my cell. “Give me your number.”

She walks straight to her coffee. “I filled out more paperwork than Medicare requires from my patients. The DEA has my number.”

“I sat awake at your house all night and you’re going to make me look that shit up?” I ask. “Give me your number, Evie.”

She picks up her coffee. “I appreciate you staying last night. I can’t pretend I wasn’t freaked. I hate to admit it, but in the dark of night, everything from yesterday caught up with me. I thought being in this house alone with Chase was bad, but sending him off to stay with my parents ... that was torture.”

I move through the kitchen and round the island leaving a few feet between us. “Are you really going to make me look up your number? I was serious when I said I’m going to work on this.”

“You were also serious when you said it wasn’t your job. Let the PD investigate and do everything you can to put my husband away for drug trafficking. He’ll be out of my life for good. My only regret in life will be that I didn’t pick better for Chase. My dad is demanding and over the top, but he’s still a good father and always has been. It’s on me Chase won’t have that in his life.”

“Evie.” I pause, eat up half the distance between us, and lower my voice. “You’ve got a hitman after you and your son. Your husband paid for one, yet he has no fucking clue who it is. You just sent your son away to protect him and you still have to go to a funeral this afternoon. Do yourself a favor and accept the help I’m offering. Give me your number so that when I leave here, I won’t feel like shit if something goes down and I can’t get a hold of you before I can find your phone number in a mountain of paperwork like a needle in a haystack.”

She tips her head back farther to look me in the eyes. “Why are you so determined to help me?”

“Why are you so hardheaded and refusing help from everyone?”

“Because I’m used to doing everything myself.”

“How do you plan on finding the hitman who’s after you?”

Her teeth sink into her bottom lip.

“Exactly,” I confirm her silent answer. “Give me your number.”

She doesn’t hesitate this time. She rattles it off and I type it into my phone like a starved man who hasn’t eaten in a week and finally has had his first taste of food.

A win for me.

I slide my phone back into my pocket. “There will be no rest for me until later. While you’re waiting for the next security detail, I’ll take that cup of coffee.”

She doesn’t move. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

“You don’t even know what I’m thanking you for.”

“I’m going to assume it’s for everything.”

That wins me a ghost of a smile. “Fair enough.”

“Coffee, Evie. Make it strong.”

“It’s the least I can do.”

“It is,” I agree.

When she turns to the complicated espresso machine, I do something I should not do. I take advantage and look without having to pretend I’m not.

There’s a lot to like about Evie Litchfield.

Other than her stubbornness.

DUSTY VAGINA

Micah

“You look like shit.”

I walk past Tim without stopping but flip him off with my free hand as I wipe a drop of coffee from my bottom lip with the back of my other. “Fuck you, too, boss.”

I go straight to my cubicle and yank out my chair, but my manager doesn't get the hint because he just keeps at me. “Cruz said you worked late. Did you even go home? You wore that yesterday.”

I log into my computer and swivel to Tim but I don't say a word about last night. The last thing I need is for anyone at the office to find out I spent the night sitting in Evie's house. “I found out something that has nothing to do with my case, and it intrigues me.”

He leans an elbow on the low wall that makes up the pod that Brax and I share. “Why do I not like the sound of that?”

“Probably because it's bad. Dr. Evita Litchfield was in a car accident a while back.”

Tim hikes a brow.

“It was bad,” I add. “It was a top-of-the-line vehicle that wasn't even a year old. The whole thing sounds suspect.”

“Lots of cars get into wrecks. I haven’t met one that is fool-proof. Even a tank can be tossed.”

I recline in my chair and pick up my coffee. “Yeah, but it’s not like someone hit her. That vehicle should not have had an issue—at least not like this. It went haywire. Electrical, brakes, steering. I need to get my hands on the accident report.”

“Let me guess, her son was in the car with her?”

“He was.”

“You’re spread thin enough as it is with this case. This isn’t something you have time for.” Tim crosses his arms and sighs. “How did you even come across this information?”

Vagueness is my friend in this case. “I checked in on the doctor to make sure she arranged security. Conversation led to this. She was so overwhelmed with what went down yesterday, it’s almost like she had a revelation mid-conversation. Now she’s really freaked-the-fuck out. Her husband is whacked. I can’t blame her.”

“She has security?”

I continue to tread carefully. I didn’t leave until her new detail showed up at her house to take her to work. She assured me she’d be fine. That was over an hour ago, and I can’t stop thinking about her. “It’s not top of the line, but she has someone with her. And her son went to stay with her parents so they won’t be together. Since that was the direct order, it should keep them safe for a while.”

“What a shit show.” Tim shakes his head and gives in. “Get the accident report and look into it. Make sure Miami PD knows about that link. I’m with you—it’s too coincidental to not be related. If only you could trace back to who had access to that car months ago, you’ve got a lead.”

“Done.” At least I don’t have to do this on the downlow.

“And Micah?” I pick up my second coffee of the day when Tim interrupts me again. I turn back and he’s already on his way back to his office when he calls, “Go home and take a shower. Maybe grab a nap. I’m not kidding, you

look like shit.”

That would make sense since I feel like shit. Pulling an all-nighter is not what it used to be.

I pick up my cell and press go on a number I haven’t had a chance to call in two weeks.

It rings and rings and rings. I think he’s going to send me to voicemail, but then I get nothing but silence.

Finally, I call, “Roc? You there?”

“I was asleep,” he groans. “But since you’re a selfish asshole and woke me up after working third shift, I’m awake.”

“I was up all night, too, and I’m sitting at my desk kicking ass. You’ll be fine.”

I hear a rustling as his rough voice complains over the line. “Fuck, man, why is everything a competition with you.”

“Because I’m a winner, that’s why. Look, I need a favor.”

“I work eleven at night to seven in the morning and have for almost two years. Three in the afternoon is my morning. Call me back then.”

“This can’t wait.”

“My need for beauty sleep says it can,” he mutters.

“You just want to be a pretty boy like Cruz. Pay attention and make a note or some shit so you won’t forget. I need an accident report pulled. It’s from six months ago. It’s tied to my case.”

“You play old-man softball with half the lieutenants on the force. Call one of them.”

I smirk as I spin around to look out the only window I can see from my spot. “But you’re my protégé and I haven’t talked to you in weeks. How am I supposed to see how my greatness is rubbing off on you?”

He yawns. “Don’t ever talk about *rubbing* and *me* in the same sentence.”

“I need the report by the end of the day, Roc. It’s important.”

“The sooner I go back to sleep, the more of a chance you’ll have that I’ll actually do what you want me to do. Text me that shit and get over yourself.”

I smirk when I say, “You seem to have forgotten who gave you a fresh start when you needed it.”

“I haven’t forgotten shit. It was Landyn,” he bites. “Text me.”

“I don’t have an exact date, but I might be able to get you one later. I have a name. That should be enough but I’ll send you more information when I get it.”

“Done.”

“Hope to hear from you before tonight,” I say.

I’m about ready to disconnect when he says, “Micah.”

“Yeah?”

“I got accepted into SWAT.”

I lean back in my chair. “No shit? You haven’t even been on the force two years.”

“I know. I’m that exceptional.”

“You’re proving to be.”

He sounds alert. “Brax doesn’t know. Landyn is going to lose her shit.”

He’s not wrong about that. Rocco Monroe was a prospect in one of the most dangerous biker gangs on the west coast. Brax is the one who pulled him in, but it’s his wife, Landyn, who really connected with him when he was barely eighteen.

Rocco isn’t wrong, she will lose her shit when she finds out Rocco is joining the Miami SWAT team. She’s already hormonal from being pregnant.

“Your secret is safe with me. I don’t want to be in the general vicinity when you tell Landyn Cruz. Even so, nicely done, Roc. People rarely get accepted

into SWAT before their third year.”

“I have you to thank for a lot too.” He yawns. “Text me the details.”

And he hangs up. I’ve known Rocco for years and that’s as warm and fuzzy as he gets.

I down the rest of my coffee as I pull up the newest contact in my phone.

Me – Please tell me your new security detail hasn’t fallen asleep on the job yet.

I answer a few emails and review the latest wire transcripts. So far, they have no idea Jeff Michaels is out of commission and sitting in jail awaiting an initial appearance in front of a judge. That should happen by the end of the day.

I’m about to call Brax and see where he is, when my phone vibrates.

Evita – Not yet, thank goodness. He can’t exactly follow me into the hospital or exam rooms. He’s spent his morning sitting in waiting rooms.

Me – That doesn’t make for tight security, Evie.

Evita – I have no other choice, MICAH.

Me – Are you screaming at me?

Evita – Of course not. I am throwing sarcasm at you. You actually called me by name in a text.

Me – It’s your name. What else am I supposed to call you?

Evita – I have a patient waiting, MICAH. Are you texting me to tell me my husband has been charged with attempted murder yet?

Me – No. I need to meet with you. Sooner rather than later. I need details about the accident so I can dig.

Evita – My day is packed. I told you I have a funeral.

Shit. A funeral.

And the fitted black dress.

Me – Are you attending this funeral alone?

Evita – Yes. Seriously, the longer I make this patient wait, the farther behind I'll be.

I cannot believe I'm doing this. I do not do funerals. I haven't for years.

Me – When? I'll pick you up and take you. We can talk on the way there and back. Your security detail can take a lunch break.

Evita – You do not need to do that.

Me – Tell me when.

I get nothing, followed by bubbles, and then more nothing.

Me – I'm not a complete ass. The sooner we find the hitman, the sooner your son can come home, and you can move on. I want to help you.

I knew that would do it. More bubbles, and she finally relents.

Evita – Funeral is at one. It's only fifteen minutes from my office.

This time it's my turn to hesitate.

If I'm going to rip off the bandage, it might as well be for a stranger. Hell, she doesn't seem the slightest bit affected by the fact she has a funeral on her agenda.

Me – I'll pick you up at twelve-fifteen. No one wants to be late to a funeral.

Evita – If you're sure. I should feel guilty, but I want Chase back. I'll take anything you give me. I'll send you the pin to my office so you'll have the address.

Me – I know where you work.

I should tell her that I know more about her than she realizes. But she's already late, and I need a shower.

Evita – Staying awake all night for me and taking me to a funeral. I'm going to be your least favorite person in no time.

I shut down my computer and toss the coffee cup in the trash.

Me – We'll see about that.

Evie

“SOMEONE IS ASKING for you at the front desk. And from what Jenny says, he is not a patient.”

I look up from my laptop where I'm updating a file as my insides clench tighter than they do at my barre class. It's a few minutes after twelve. My special agent is early.

Unless it's not him. Jenny has reported on the security guard my father sent all morning. He paces the waiting room and glares at every patient who walks through the door. We're a full-service practice with our own specialties, so it's not just the elderly shuffling through. The office manager isn't happy and has asked me twice if it's possible for him to tone it down.

I've only spent a short time with Vincent, but I can honestly say, toning it down is probably not going to happen.

He has no chill, and he's freaking me out more than I was already.

“Who is it?” I ask. “What does he look like?”

Naomi has been my nurse since I started at the practice, but in that time, she's turned into the best friend I didn't know I needed. I also told her about the DEA agent who spent the night at my house, is taking me to a funeral, and I might have described his tattoos with great detail. “If this isn't your date to the funeral, then take me down now—I won't be able to handle the real thing.”

“You’re not helping,” I bite. “It’s hard enough to focus not knowing who I’m supposed to hide from, texting my mom between patients to check on Chase, and knowing Micah is picking me up for a funeral.”

She moves in and folds her arms across her blue scrubs. “He looks like a linebacker who just stepped off a private jet to play in the Super Bowl. He’s in a suit, and good God, Evie, he does not look like he belongs in a suit even though he wears it well. I’m talking, his rough edges are magnificent. As good as he looks in a suit, it’s covering the tattoos. I vote we put him in an exam room and give him nothing but a paper gown. He’ll rip right through that sucker like the Hulk, and my life will be complete. Please. Can we make that happen?” She pauses and narrows her eyes. “Wait, is he married?”

I close my eyes. It takes me a deep breath to get my shit together. Anticipation pours off Naomi in spades, as if the exam room and paper gown are a real option.

“That’s Micah—or, Special Agent Emmett. It has to be. And how am I supposed to know if he’s married? Though he stayed at my house all night—I can’t imagine his wife would be too happy about that if he has one.” I grab the enormous bag that comes with me wherever I go, plus my water and cell. “I’ll be back. The test results for Mrs. Nowak are in her file along with her new prescription. Could you please call her and explain her new meds? If she can get her daughter to download a coupon, that will help offset the cost. She was worried about that.”

“Will do. I want to know everything that happens at the funeral besides the funeral stuff. Every fucking detail.”

I stop in front of her and lower my voice. “You act like we’re going to prom. He’s taking me to the funeral to talk to me because I have no time in my schedule today. He wants to know about the accident.”

Her face falls. “Why?”

Our office building is old and the walls aren’t exactly soundproof, so I whisper, “Because I realized this morning that it might have been a failed attempt to kill Chase and me. It was horrific and bizarre and should’ve never happened. The fact Chase and I are alive today is a miracle. It didn’t hit me until this morning, but I think that was Jeff’s first attempt to take us down.

Hell, no one could explain my car going haywire other than it being a fluke. If it was Jeff's doing, he almost got away with it."

She reaches out for my arm and gives me a squeeze. "I've been on the *ditch Jeff* train for almost two years, but I've just hopped on the *let Jeff be a prison bitch* train. If the scorching hot man in the waiting room can help you figure that out, let him."

I feel my shoulders relax a touch.

"Then let him rip your dress off and give you a chain of orgasms. It's what your nurse prescribes for your critical case of dusty vagina."

I move around her and mutter, "Trust me, I have bigger problems than a dusty vagina."

"That's true." She falls into step beside me. "But breaking through the cobwebs will be the natural antidepressant you need. Hell, you don't need anyone to make your dreams come true. You need to chase off your demons for five minutes. And that man out there looks like he can throw you up against a wall and make that happen with his blue eyes and pinky finger."

She's not wrong.

But I can't think about that right now.

I ignore all talk of Micah's fingers and open the door to the waiting room.

Wow.

Naomi was right.

Micah in a suit doesn't look natural, but that makes him even hotter. I doubt he wears one often.

He stands in the middle of the room talking to Vincent. Patients are scattered here and there and the Food Network plays in the background.

When Micah's blue eyes hit me, it's not lost on me that we match. His suit is as dark as my dress, but his tie is as blue as his eyes, which are the same color as the ocean on a bright, sunny day.

He looks good.

Too good.

Though, I'm not sure there is a fancy enough suit or hair product to mask his sharp edges.

Every tattoo is hidden and his hair is tamer than it has been in the last twenty-four hours since I've known of his existence. I doubt this type of transformation is normal for him, and he did it for me. And here I thought he'd drop me off at the church and wait outside.

I've seen men like him, but never known one personally. They've never touched me or taken me to a funeral, that's for sure.

Now I'm glad I didn't have time to tell Naomi about how he caught me when I almost fainted, and how I remember in detail what it felt like when he touched me, since it's the first time in a long, long time anyone has done that.

Including my husband.

There's no way I can tell Naomi I know what those hands feel like on me even though we tell each other everything. She's the ultimate hype girl, but I don't need that at the moment.

Naomi was not wrong about the dust or the cobwebs. They're thick and might need a bulldozer to break through them.

I need Micah to catch the killer, Jeff to rot in prison, and to move on so I can try to give Chase the best life I can.

My cobwebs are at the rock bottom of my list of problems.

Micah glances at Vincent as he passes him a business card before focusing back on me. My security guard is gone in a flash as Micah hikes a brow and simply tips his head toward the door, silently communicating that it's funeral time.

"He's not wearing a ring. Find out if he has a girlfriend," Naomi whispers. "Lord have mercy on your lonely vagina if that man is single. If he wants something—like your panties on the floor—all he has to do is stare at you and you'll be naked in two-point-four seconds. My thoughts and prayers are with you if you think you'll have any defenses against that man."

I force myself to tear my sights off Micah and glare at Naomi. “You’re the least helpful friend ever.”

She frowns. “Did you miss the part that I’m praying for you? That’s what friends do. I’ll have my mom light a candle at church too. Your vagina needs all the help it can get. If that man is single, it’s going to take a team effort.”

“You’re the worst friend in the world,” I lie.

“You could offer to check him for a hernia in exchange for taking you to the funeral. That would be a nice thing to do. It’ll save him a co-pay.”

“I hate you.”

She smiles. “I love you. Your ass is looking fine today—perkier than normal. It must be all the clenching from the stress. Go get ‘em, tigress.”

“Evie.” I turn to narrowed blue eyes staring at me. Micah turns to the side and motions to the door. “I gave Hill Street Blues time off for lunch. Let’s hit it.”

I feel Naomi’s words hit my ear when she leans in and whispers, “Yes. Definitely hit that.”

If I wouldn’t look like a fool, I’d totally give my nurse an elbow to the gut. Instead, I ignore her, like the proper woman my parents raised me to be, and walk to the special agent.

I stop in front of Micah and look up. “Ready.”

He motions for me to go first and mutters, “Is anyone really ready for a funeral, Doctor?”

I move through the door as he holds it open for me. “Very true, Special Agent. Very true.”

FUNERAL

Micah

All I wanted was a conversation.
Date.

Location.

Who had access to her car leading up to the accident.

What I did not intend to do was walk into a church today for the first time since the big event that rocked my world.

This is a different church in a different decade.

The organ notes cut through the vast space, roll off the high ceilings, and shoot straight down my spine like an uninvited dark memory.

Fuck.

It doesn't matter how long I've been away, a lifetime of going to mass is like riding a bike. I dip my fingers into the holy water to cross myself as Evie and I enter the sanctuary side by side. The place isn't close to full, so I'm surprised when Evie tugs at my sleeve. I turn and she slides into the back row.

Interesting.

She won't get an argument from me.

I follow and take a seat in the pew next to her where she's slid to the far side. We're literally in the back corner of the church. If I didn't know better, I'd swear she's hiding.

Our conversation on the way here was exactly what I wanted. She gave me the information I was looking for about the accident. The location, the date, scenario. She rattled it off like it replays in her brain like a news ticker. Unlike this morning when she cried off her newly applied makeup, she was all business—focused and unaffected as she spewed every detail.

What she did not do was tell me who's funeral we are attending.

Given the fact she hasn't talked to another soul since we got here and we're sitting in the dark corner, my guess is she's not important to the rest of the loved ones crowded near the altar.

There's no way I can sit through an entire funeral and wonder. When I lean to the side to whisper, the smell of floral and just plain clean soap hit my senses. "Are you going to make me sit here for the entire show without telling me who died?"

We're dangerously close when her dark eyes turn to face me. She hands me the funeral bulletin she picked up on our way in.

Georgia Rosendale Bostic.

Born April 7, 1938.

Died ... four days ago.

Well, at least she lived a full life. That makes me feel slightly better about being here.

Good for you, Georgia.

I hand her back the bulletin without reading further.

"Family?" I ask.

She shakes her head and turns back to the front of the church. "Patient."

I widen my eyes and let my next question hang in the stale air between us. “You didn’t accidentally ... you know...”

She frowns and practically yells at me so quietly no one else can hear. “No, I did not kill my patient. Mrs. Bostic had lung cancer. She battled it for a long time. She was a fighter. A survivor ... until it got the best of her. She was courageous and funny and bossed her kids around every time she was in my office or I visited her in the hospital.”

I forget where I’m at and shift in my seat to get a better look at her. “Were you close to her?”

Evie shrugs a slim, bare shoulder and turns her attention forward. “No closer than I am to any of my patients.”

I rest an elbow on the back of the pew and settle in. “But close enough that you felt it was important to be here.”

“I specialize in geriatrics. By nature, my patients have a high mortality rate under my care.”

“I never thought about it that way.” The doctor is more and more intriguing as the moments pass. “You probably have a lot of patients.”

“The last I checked, just over eight hundred. Ideally, I shoot for seven hundred, but there’s a shortage of geriatricians and a plethora of elderly in southern Florida. I can’t turn away patients when they’re referred.” She tips her head and sighs. “I mean, I could, but I just can’t.”

I read the room and watch mourners of Georgia shuffle in. Well done, Georgia. It looks like you might have a full house.

I stretch my arm out behind Evie and lean in closer since we aren’t as removed as we once were. “Do you go to a lot of funerals?”

Her dark eyes hit me somewhere deep. “Look at all of these people, Micah. My patient meant something to every one of them, or they wouldn’t take the time out of their lives to be here. I don’t ever want to forget that. I go to every funeral I can. My father used to harp at me that it’s too much, and I need to distance my heart from my work. But I feel the opposite. Doing this,” she motions to the vast church in front of us, “makes me feel good.”

I stare at the woman in front of me and wonder what the hell is wrong with her husband that he would go to such lengths to rip her from his life forever. Evie is straight up good.

A good mother.

A good doctor

A good person.

He's taken advantage of that, probably because she comes from money and he's a plain shit person. Maybe at one point, he knew what he had before he fucked up his life.

I've never wanted to kill anyone more than Jeff Michaels. That might be one funeral I'd be happy to attend.

I leave my arm where it's stretched across the pew behind her and shift to face forward again. Touching her at all is wrong.

But I can't help but want to.

She doesn't move when the outside of my thigh rests against her bare one where her legs are crossed. That damn dress has ridden halfway up her quad.

The background music is done, and the organ starts a new piece. It's louder and makes the church feel less big but more ominous. The last time I was in a church, I swore that was it.

Because it doesn't matter how good you try to be—or fuck, just how good you actually are—life sucks.

Hannah is proof of that.

And so is Evie.

I lean in one more time before I'm forced to focus on the life of a woman I didn't know. "How is Chase?"

She tips her head and sighs. She looks defeated. "He's good. More than good. My parents were demanding when they raised us, but they take their roles as grandparents seriously and spoil their grandchildren. I tried to talk to him once since he got there, but he has no time for me. He was playing with the

dogs, picking lemons, and eating donuts.” She shakes her head. “I never saw a donut in our house growing up and I love donuts. Chase is living the life I always wanted.”

I scoot down in the pew to settle in and rest an ankle on my knee. “That statement packs a punch Dr. Litchfield. I think you either need therapy or a donut.”

She glances up at me with a sad smile. “I know I could use the latter and after the last twenty-four hours, I’m sure I could benefit from the former.”

I’m about to tell her I can help her out with at least half of that, but the processional starts, and we stand. The memories come back as a casket is wheeled down the aisle, followed by the priest and who I assume is Georgia’s immediate family. A number of adults followed by a herd of kids ranging in all ages take forever to get settled in the front.

Evie pulls out a bunch of tissues from her small purse since she left her huge bag locked in my car. In the short time I’ve known this woman, I know more about her than I do about most people who have been in my life for years.

A middle-aged woman catches Evie’s eye and gives her a small smile. Evie returns her smile with a small wave before she dabs at the corner of her eye.

Without realizing what I’m doing, my hand wraps around her far shoulder to give her a squeeze.

Evie’s body is now pressed to the side of mine from thigh to shoulder, I feel the tension ease from her petite frame.

I should let go.

I should definitely unwrap her from my side and put some space between us.

Hell, I should use the next hour to shut my eyes and grab a nap.

But I don’t do any of that.

I hold the doctor tight to my side and take in the funeral of a woman I did not know while my brain and heart are all over the fucking place.

Talk about going against your nature.

I don't know who I am right now.

Evie

UNLIKE THE DRIVE to the church when Micah quizzed me about the accident, our drive back to my office has been silent.

I've never attended one of my patients' funerals with someone. I always go by myself.

Micah pulls into the lot, puts it in park, but leaves the engine running. Neither of us makes a move to get out.

His sigh is audible over the hum of the cool AC. I realize for the first time that he's as lost in his own thoughts as I am mine. I turn to find him with his eyes closed behind his sunglasses with his head relaxed on the headrest.

"I'm sorry," I whisper. "You have to be exhausted from not sleeping last night. And now you had to sit through a funeral. You don't even know me and didn't have to do any of that. Why did you?"

He exhales in a deep breath that bleeds exhaustion. "You know, you're a hard woman to figure out. You're tough as nails, but there are moments that you're so vulnerable it makes me want to bulldoze a moat around you so you can catch a break from your own fucking life."

My eyes widen.

"What?" he asks.

"No one talks to me like that."

"Sorry," he apologizes, but does not sound like he means an ounce of it. "But I shoot straight."

"I'm sorry that I come across tough as nails, but that quality is purely a survival mechanism. There's no way I can manage my life without it. Jeff hasn't been an active participant in our marriage for a long time nor has he

ever been a decent father. I have lived with the mistake of marrying him for far too long—the proof of that is him wanting me and Chase out of the way when I finally pushed him for a divorce.”

“I’m not saying I don’t like the tough as nails. I’m just saying I’m trying to figure you out.”

I grab my bag, throw my purse inside, and pick up my water. “Thank you for taking me and doing what you can to find the person after us, but there’s nothing to figure out. I am who I need to be for Chase. I have no other choice. And I need to be tougher than ever after this week.”

I climb out of his car and make my way through the heavy, summer air to my office when I hear a door slam and his locks beep. “Evie, wait.”

I don’t wait, but he’s hot on my heels, through the waiting room and follows me straight to my office.

He runs into me when I stop at the threshold. Vincent is standing in the middle of the room talking to Andrew.

I glare at the two men who have invaded my private office uninvited. “What are you doing here?”

Andrew turns his angry gaze to me. “I heard my security detail was sleeping on the job and you fired him. I feel like shit and came right over here to check on you when I found out. Dad said he arranged someone else. I ran into Vincent in the waiting room, and I’m grilling him on why you’re out of his sight.” Andrew looks from my hip to the man over my shoulder. “Who is he?”

I step out of Micah’s hold. Him touching me in the middle of a funeral is very different than doing it in front of my brother. Andrew might be one of the sharpest corporate attorneys in the city, but he’s also the family blabbermouth.

Point being, my father showing up at my house this morning before sunrise.

“This is Special Agent Micah Emmett. He’s the reason Jeff is in jail. And he was with me the whole time I was gone. Don’t yell at Vincent.”

Andrew holds out his hand to Micah. “I appreciate what you’ve done for our family. The sooner we get rid of that cocksucker, the better.”

I throw my bag in my chair. “Seriously. There’s an exam room next door, and these walls are not exactly soundproof.”

Andrew puts a hand up and lowers his voice. “Sorry. But he is a cocksucker.”

“Evie.” Naomi peeks around the corner and knocks on the door jamb. “You’re fifteen minutes behind schedule.”

My head falls back and I look at the ceiling. My office is not big enough for this kind of get together.

“Are you good to stick with her for the rest of the day?” Micah asks Vincent.

“Yep. I’m pulling a twelve-hour shift and have a replacement coming tonight.”

“They’d better stay awake,” Andrew warns. “I fired the guy from last night after you fired him. If I could kick his ass to the curb a third time, I would.”

I grab the tablet from my desk and push through the crowd. “I’ve got to get back to work. If you could all see yourselves out, that would be nice.”

Andrew moves across the room and gives me a peck on the cheek. “I filed your divorce papers and paid the extra fees to have it rushed. If Jeff doesn’t sign them, I’ll meet with the judge. You’ll be single before you know it.”

“I’ll be in the waiting room studying everyone that comes through the doors,” Vincent assures me and follows Andrew out.

I’m on my way to my first patient of the afternoon as my stomach growls, but Micah blocks my way. It’s everything I can do to not fall at his feet and thank him for coming with me today or punch him for being such an ass for calling me tough as nails, as if that’s a bad thing.

I frown up at the beast of man who was so sweet to me during a funeral. “I’m late.”

He puts a hand high on the door jamb and leans his head down a couple inches. It’s not lost on me that this is exactly the way men in rom coms stand

before they're about to kiss a woman.

A kiss.

Damn.

When it comes to kisses, my lips might be as dusty as my vagina. It's been just that long.

But he does not kiss me. Why would he?

He does, however, remind me of my shit-show life. "I've got someone at the PD pulling your report. I'll go over it and call you."

"You'll call me," I echo. Calling isn't as good as being wrapped in his thick arm. "I appreciate it."

He stares at me for two long beats before I feel his exhale brush my face.

Again, not at all like a rom com, but such is my life.

"I'll let you get back to work," Micah states, as if he's doing me a favor.

"It's not like I have anything to rush home to, but I'm sure my patients will appreciate that."

He pushes off the door jamb and turns to walk away from me.

When he rounds the corner, I jump when I hear a file hit the counter. Naomi is standing there with eyes the size of saucers with her jaw hanging wide. "For the love of law men everywhere, that man wants to dust off your vagina. I know it!"

"I told you not to talk about my vagina," I whisper. "You're getting the silent treatment for the rest of the day."

I turn down the hall to find my next appointment when she calls in a whisper, "The first sign of needing help is pretending that you don't need help."

I ignore her, open the door, plaster a smile on my face, and do everything I can to forget my life. "Mr. Putney, how are your grandbabies? Do you have new pictures to show me?"

OUCH

Micah

I jerk awake when my phone vibrates on my thigh. When I see who it is, I put it to my ear. “Yeah?”

“The next time you need something, call a lieutenant or a sergeant or even a damn detective. Do you know the hoops I jumped through today?”

I drag a hand down my face before rubbing my eyes. “Did you get the accident report or not?”

“Yeah, I got it. It just took me a fucking hour and four conversations,” Rocco complains. “That means I had to explain four times what I was doing and who needed it. Not fun.”

I look at my watch. It’s almost seven o’clock. I went back to the office after the funeral to check on the wiretaps. There’s chatter, but it’s not about shipments or distributions once the loads hit Miami.

The organization is pissed from the bottom to the top. There’s a kink in their pipeline—no one knows what happened to Jeff Michaels.

We’ve kept that under wraps, but it’ll no doubt change. Michaels was arraigned late this afternoon for premeditated murder. We all agreed to hold the drug charges back for now. I’m not ready to blow the case up if I can avoid it.

What was the strongest case of my career has turned into a shit show that threatens to negate years of work.

There's a blacked-out silhouette at the top of the hierarchy that I need to uncover. I've worked too long and too hard to let them go.

I stand and head to the refrigerator for a protein drink. "Did you talk to higher ups you've never talked to before?"

"You know I had to," he bites.

"Then you're welcome. Consider this little project a gift. Networking is just ass-kissing when there's no reason for it. They won't forget you when your name comes up for a promotion."

"Whatever. I don't want to promote. I'm SWAT now, remember? I'm going to kick doors in and shit."

"Chill, Rambo. Where's my report?"

"Check your email." I hear a car door slam in the background. "Will I see you at Brax and Landyn's tomorrow?"

"What's tomorrow?"

"Never mind. You probably weren't invited. I forget that Landyn hates you." I can almost hear the shit-eating grin in his tone.

"Landyn doesn't hate me. I might've been an asshole for a day or two, but it's been years. Will that storyline never die?"

"Nope."

"For fuck's sake," I mutter. "I need to study the report. You're welcome for the networking opportunity."

"I read it before I sent it over. It's as good as a cold case at this point. You're going to need a whole lot more information to prove someone fucked with that car."

"Look who's talking like an investigator when all he wants to do is kick in doors."

“I didn’t say I wasn’t smart enough to promote, I said I didn’t want to. Wish I could chit-chat longer, but unlike you, I have a life outside of work. I might or might not see you at casa de Cruz.”

I take a swig. “I’m surprised you don’t live with them the way Landyn likes to mother you.”

“You’re jealous. Brax might be your person, but Landyn is mine. It’s not my fault she secretly hates you.”

I’ve had enough. “Thanks for the report. Be careful and watch your back.”

“Always.”

I hang up and crack open my laptop to pull up the report. Everything is exactly how Evie described.

But damn, the pictures.

They’re gruesome.

Whoever did this almost completed their task. Her car was a mangled pile of metal. Chase’s car seat did its job and was still banged up despite it being the only spot in the car that was pretty much untouched since it was in the middle.

The protein shake I just downed sours in my gut as I look over the pictures a second time. The investigating officers questioned her in the hospital, but there was nothing to go on. I can’t imagine what she went through.

The car hadn’t been serviced or been in the shop prior to the event. It was parked in the hospital parking garage when she was there to see a patient before she picked up her son. The car was logged into the garage for over an hour that day, but there’s no video surveillance in the file or mention that it was pulled.

The entire thing was written off as a technical issue. No suspicion of foul play was ever noted in the report.

I know a lot of Miami officers. We work in the same circles and some are assigned to our office, but I don’t recognize this investigator.

It happened more than six months ago. There's no way that video is still around from the hospital parking garage. I'll call the detective tomorrow to see if he looked into it but just didn't include it in the report since there was nothing to see.

I toss my laptop to the side and lean my head back to close my eyes. Missing a night's sleep and attending a funeral is an exhausting cocktail. I should go to bed and sleep it off.

Evie sat glued to my side for the entire service. I've never seen anyone that composed and emotional at the same time. It feels like the woman wears armor but could implode within it at any moment.

My head is all over the place today.

Funerals.

Hannah.

And my fascination with a married woman.

Granted, she won't be married for much longer. I have a feeling that only fascinates me more.

This isn't exactly the Friday night of years past. But it's the weekend. Tomorrow, I'll hit the gym and start over with a clear head.

I drag a hand down my face and am about to give up when my phone vibrates on the sofa next to me.

It's like she can read my mind from her posh neighborhood on the other side of Miami.

Interesting.

Evita – Thank you.

Evita – For today. You know, the funeral.

Evita – And the security.

My lips tip up on one side.

Evita – I mean, thank you for the security at the funeral. You really know your life is in turmoil when you have to watch your back because a hitman is after you while you're at a funeral. Shit, I'm a mess. Ignore all of this.

Me – You're welcome.

Evita – Okay. Well, that's all.

My thumbs hover over the screen as I try to erase thoughts of her ass in that dress, her bare thigh pressed against mine, or the fact she attends funerals on the regular. I'm too obsessed with all of it.

And it's not lost on me that the funeral aspect of that list is the only thing keeping me from being a complete ass who thinks solely with his dick. Because the other two are definitely dick-driven.

I adjust my junk that's bigger than it was two minutes ago and text her back.

Me – I got a copy of your accident report.

Evita – Oh. Just one more thing I need to thank you for.

Me – There wasn't anything in it you hadn't already told me.

Evita – I'm not sure if that's good or bad.

Me – There's nothing else in it to follow up on. So, bad.

Evita – Given the way this week ended, I'm not surprised.

Me – I'm going to call the detective on Monday.

Evita – You're just racking up the reasons for me to be indebted to you. Do I need to remind you that this isn't your job?

Me – Going to funerals isn't a part of your job, yet you do it anyway.

Evita – True.

Me – Is your security detail there?

This time her response isn't immediate.

Evita – Yes, sitting in his car. But the sun is still shining. He looks conscious and alert.

Me – You're good then.

Bubbles play at the bottom of the screen. They disappear and return and disappear again.

I stare at my phone and will myself to give her a minute. She started this. So far, it's been a useless conversation, and I have no clue what she was thinking when she started it.

Too many minutes pass without a message or even more bubbles.

Me – Evie, are you good?

It takes another minute, but she finally answers.

Evita – No. But I will be. I don't have a choice.

Me – What's wrong? Besides the obvious.

Evita – Yes, the obvious sucks.

Me – I'm sorry. Is Chase okay?

Evita – Yes. My mom is keeping him so busy, he doesn't even want to talk to me. He's great.

Me – But you're not.

Evita – That's not a question.

Me – You just confirmed it.

Evita - This house is just really big and quiet when I'm home alone. I'm not used to being here by myself. Chase is always here. And I can't stop looking outside to see if the damn security guard is awake.

It's my turn to go silent.

I should tell her she'll be fine. What are the odds of her family hiring two shit security guards in a row with all that money?

I should turn off my damn phone and get a decent night's sleep.

Evita – Sorry. I'll leave you alone. It's Friday night. You're probably busy doing fun and fabulous single people things.

That gets my attention.

Me – Ouch. Why do you assume I'm single?

Evita – Shit. Sorry.

Evita – Dammit. Now I made it awkward.

I should stop. Let her off the hook.

But I'm me.

Me – Why do I have to be the single one?

Evita – OMG. That's not what I meant. I'm going to go now.

Me – You're not going anywhere. I went to a funeral today, and I do not do funerals. This is just getting interesting. What's wrong with me?

Evita – There's nothing wrong with you. Seriously, I'm so sorry. And embarrassed.

Me - You're the one who's married. It would only be awkward if you were hitting on me. Right?

Evita – I swear, I'm not hitting on you. I wouldn't know how to hit on anyone. This is mortifying. I'm going to go, and you'll never hear from me again.

Me – If you go quiet on me, I'll be forced to drive over there to make sure you haven't been unalive because your security fell asleep on the job again.

Evita – That's not funny.

She's right. That's not funny, but the rest of this is.

It's really fucking funny.

Me – Neither is assuming I'm single. Seriously, I need to know what's wrong with me. Maybe I need to hit the gym harder. Am I letting myself go?

Evita – No! That's not it at all. You're in great shape.

Me – I've been working chest and arms. You must be a legs and ass woman. I'll work on that.

Evita – Holy shit, Micah. I'm not a legs or an ass woman! I'm not an anything woman. I offended you. I'm so sorry. This conversation needs to end, or I'll die of humiliation.

All of a sudden, I'm not tired.

I'm starving.

Both literally and carnally.

I stuff my feet into my running shoes and grab my keys.

Me – Give the guard a heads up not to shoot me.

Evita – What? Why?

Me – Because I'm going to make sure you don't die tonight. Rhetorically or otherwise.

Evita – No. No-no-no. I've already died rhetorically, and they'll make sure I'm fine otherwise.

I'm out the door.

Me – I've already attended a funeral today. If I get shot tonight because you didn't clear the way for me with every layer of security around you, you're going to hurt my feelings more than you already have by assuming I'm unwanted by females everywhere.

Evita – Please, Micah.

Me – First you assume no one wants me, and now you're begging me. You're hot and cold. I'm getting mixed messages.

Evita – Death by foot in mouth ... I'm dead.

Me – No kidding, I'm gonna be pissed if I get shot.

I toss my phone in the passenger seat and back out of the narrow drive of my condo on a mission.

And this time, it's personal.

NEEDY AND DESPERATE

Evie

I pace on bare feet in front of the dining room window.

I should not have texted him. I don't know what's wrong with me or why I did it other than the fact I'm not living inside of my own head very well at the moment. I can't stop thinking about the funeral. Of all the funerals I've attended since I started practicing, no one has ever gone with me. Naomi thinks I'm crazy, and my father thinks it's a waste of precious time.

What they don't know is it's selfish. It keeps me from turning into a person I don't want to be.

It keeps me grounded. When I lost my first patient, it gutted me. So much, I attended his funeral without telling anyone.

I'll never forget Mr. Kelly. He had only been my patient for a few weeks. I inherited him when another physician in the practice suggested he'd be better served by a geriatrician. He was eighty-nine and suffered from nothing more than a full-lived life and a loving family.

If anyone deserved to be celebrated, it was him.

That's how it started, and I'll never forget his funeral.

When my father found out I attended one funeral, let alone made it a hobby, he preached and preached to me not to become attached, that it was

unhealthy, and to keep my work separate from life. He said if I didn't, it would eat me alive.

He was wrong.

I'm not like him—my job is a passion, not a business—and attending countless funerals doesn't drag me down at all.

It has the opposite effect.

It makes me feel alive and grateful for the chance to have helped people when my patients needed it the most.

Until today, it's something that has been private and personal. Call me selfish, but I like it that way. It's been a time for me to reflect and remind myself my patients are more than just that. They're fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, grandparents.

Someone important to them lost a friend.

It's my way of privately honoring them.

And all these years, I've kept it to myself.

So, sitting at a funeral next to someone with their arm around me felt foreign. I couldn't stop thinking about the man who held me tight to his side. Focusing on Micah was the easier choice. So much better than fixating on my life falling apart.

My empty house is a constant reminder of why it's not safe for my son to be with me where he belongs. The ache deep in my chest is nagging and tender. I miss Chase so much, and he hasn't even been gone for a full twenty-four hours.

To make matters worse, tomorrow is Saturday, and I'm not on call. I'm here by myself all weekend with no distractions. I could call Andrew or Cadence, but I don't have the energy for them.

I stared at my phone for an hour before I texted Micah. I only wanted to thank him for what he did for me today, but it turned into something else entirely.

A mess.

I don't even know what to do with myself.

And that entire text string...

Mortifying.

Utterly and completely.

I don't know him and have no clue what he was doing, but I played into every single thing he said. I was desperate to make it better and blew it up into a catastrophe.

And it sits on my phone for me to read, reread, and read again.

If it weren't for the fact he offered to help find the person Jeff hired, I'd delete the entire string and block him after all he's done for me, even though it's against my nature to do anything like that.

Guilt.

I'm drunk with it right now. Had I listened to my family and seen Jeff for exactly what he was, I wouldn't be in this situation.

I wouldn't have Chase, either, which makes regretting Jeff even more of a shot to the heart.

My need for a distraction led to the most mortifying text string in the history of cellular communication.

And because Micah doesn't deserve to get shot over me, I did exactly as he told me to do. I called Vincent and told him Micah was stopping by to question me further about Jeff.

And now I'm wearing a path waiting for him. Dammit. I have no clue how long I've been pacing, but it feels like hours.

There's an orange glow over my street, echoes from the sun, closing out this day from hell. I know the faster I wish it away, the sooner a new one will begin.

Headlights round the corner. The same Tahoe that ushered me safely to and

from the funeral today pulls up next to the car sitting at the end of my driveway. Micah rolls his window down, and I have to crane my neck to see what's going on.

They visit for two minutes before Micah pulls into my driveway.

Damn my conscience. If he got shot, it would've been his own doing for coming here uninvited.

My phone vibrates.

Micah – Call off the dogs. I'm here.

Me – What? I don't have a dog.

Micah – Your alarm, Evie. Spent the night at your house last night. I know you don't have a dog. Maybe you need one though.

Me – I don't have time for a dog.

Micah – Maybe you could make time to open the door.

Ugh.

Totally need to get my shit together.

I disarm my system and flip the locks. When I pull the door open, Micah is standing on my doorstep fisting two brown paper bags in one hand, and a thin box is balanced on the other. A backpack is slung over his shoulder. The aroma of sweet, fresh-baked bread fills my senses as I take in the special agent standing there in a pair of athletic shorts, a T-shirt, and running shoes. His hair is the exact opposite of what it was earlier when he had it neatly combed for the funeral.

It's messy and falling onto his temples and forehead.

My mouth waters right along with my dusty vagina. My vagina for obvious reasons, and my mouth because I haven't tasted a pastry in a very long time.

He shoves the heavy paper bags into my arms and barges through my house without a hello. "I'm starving, and you sounded like you could use a donut."

I watch him disappear through the great room and into my kitchen before I

shut and lock the front door. When I catch up to him, he's opened the flat box that's big enough for a baker's dozen. Then he grabs the bags out of my arms and unbags enough boxes of Chinese food for six people.

"Who else did you invite?" I ask.

He doesn't look at me when he speaks. "I didn't know what you liked and I didn't have time for you to text me a dissertation. It was easier just to order a shit ton."

"I haven't eaten," I admit.

"I figured. I haven't either." He goes directly to the plates and silverware as if he's lived here for the last eight years with me.

I peek inside the box to an assortment of the most beautiful donuts I've ever seen. They're all different and loaded with toppings. These aren't from the grocery store, and I wonder what bakery is open this late. I've never seen donuts so fancy. He really went all out.

He pushes a plate in my direction. "Eat up, unless cold kung pao chicken is your thing."

I'd rather eat a donut, but since he brought me a buffet—and I've already offended him tonight ... though I have a feeling Micah Emmett doesn't get offended about much—I take the plate and start to spoon steaming food from the boxes. "This is really nice. Nicer than I deserve after my text string fiasco. I'm sorry about that."

"You should feel bad." He shovels a bite of beef and broccoli between his full lips and talks with his mouth full as he helps himself to my refrigerator. "Beer?"

I shake my head. "I'm not a beer drinker."

He pauses and turns to me with a bottle in his hand. "So this is your husband's beer?"

"It is," I confirm on a sigh.

He immediately cracks it open and takes a big pull. "He has shit taste in beer, but he won't be drinking it anytime soon."

I hope he's right.

I go straight to the bottle of wine I opened last night and pour myself a glass. When I get back to the food, he says, "Your husband was arraigned late this afternoon."

I focus on the box in front of me and pick out as much shrimp as I can find. "That's what I heard. My brother filled me in."

"Then you know—no bail." He turns to me and holds up his bottle. "Congratulations are in order."

I pull in a breath and wonder how I got to this point in my life that my husband is in jail, it's not safe for my son to be with me, and a strange DEA agent is in my house on a Friday night drinking Jeff's beer.

I clink my glass to his bottle as we toast to my husband's demise. "That is something I never thought I'd drink to, but thank you. It's a break I didn't know I needed."

We both take a big drink. Micah continues to make himself at home in my house and takes his piled-high plate to my sofa and grabs the remote. He switches on the TV, turns on a baseball game and sets the volume to mute.

I don't watch the game. I watch him, and I fixate on his tattoos.

Both sleeves are intricate, but inked into the artwork of his right arm is part of a clock falling into an hourglass. Roman numerals are etched into the bottom of the glasswork. It's so detailed, I can't figure out what the date is while he's eating.

It's hard to focus on anything with him sitting on my sofa eating a late-night dinner in front of the TV. The lights are low. Besides the glow from the game, only the accent lights from the kitchen are filling our space as the sun sets and my house darkens.

For anyone else on a Friday night, this might be intimate and familiar, but I can't stop thinking how different my life was just a few days ago.

I set my wine and plate on the coffee table and turn to him. "Why are you here?"

He stabs a piece of broccoli and mixes it with breaded chicken this time, but doesn't answer.

"Micah," I call to him.

His blue eyes tilt to me, but he keeps eating.

"Why are you here?" I repeat.

He swallows and takes another swig of beer that's now resting between his legs on my sofa. A napkin comes to his lips before he asks. "Do you want the whole truth or part of the truth?"

"What's the difference if it's all the truth?"

"I guess the better question is can you handle the whole truth?"

I shake my head. "Honestly, I don't know. Before yesterday I thought I could handle anything. Today, I'm on shaky ground."

"Then I'll give you part of the truth." He pauses and tips his head. "You sounded sad and scared. You're alone and someone has been paid to make sure you and your son are dead."

My gut tightens. He's so matter-of-fact about my demise.

He hikes a brow. "By the look on your face, I'm right. It's not fun to be right about shit like that."

"You're right," I whisper.

"I'm hardly ever wrong, Evie."

I can't help it. I have to press my lips together to not smile at his cockiness. I'll never admit it to him, but he wears it well.

He lowers his voice. "You might still be sad, but there's no reason for you to be scared when I can do something about it, so I'm here."

"Thank you for that."

"You're welcome."

I ask the question that's been on the tip of my tongue since he told me he was

on his way over. “How long are you staying?”

I swear, his gaze sharpens. “How long do you want me to stay?”

I mull my words around in my head, and just decide to put it out there. If I sound needy and desperate, it’s because I am. “I slept last night after you got here. After what happened yesterday, I didn’t think I’d get a wink. But once I put that damn gun away, I crawled in bed with Chase and actually slept.”

“I didn’t sleep at all last night.”

I bite the inside of my mouth and realize I’ve overstepped. “It’s okay, Micah. I don’t want to guilt you—”

“I’m a light sleeper,” he interrupts. “Do you want me to spend the night?”

I exhale a sigh of relief and decide to just go for it. “Will you?”

“I’m *single*,” he stresses the last word. “So, yeah. Since I have nothing to do, I’ll spend the night with you. Thanks for asking.”

He’s teasing, just like before.

Any other day—like, before yesterday—I would have laughed, or at least punched him in the shoulder.

But not today.

It happens so fast, I can’t control it.

I burst into tears.

DONUTS AND DECISIONS

Evie

“I ’m sorry,” I sputter as I bring my hands to my face. “I’m so, so sorry. You’re a stranger and single. I’m being so selfish. It’s just hard to be here by myself for all the worst reasons.”

“Shit.” I hear his plate and beer hit the coffee table. The next thing I know, strong hands circle my wrists and pull my face away from my hands. That doesn’t mean I can see him through my tears. Those hands turn into arms, and I’m pulled to his chest.

He’s strong and warm and unfamiliar. He dips his hand into my hair and presses my face to his soft shirt. “I’m sorry, Evie. I was trying to make you smile, not cry.”

I fist the material at his abs as my tears soak his shirt. I can’t remember the last time Jeff wrapped his arms around me.

That thought makes me sob even harder.

He dips his head. His words are low and warm in my hair. “I’m an asshole. You’re dealing with too much. You don’t need my shit on top of everything else.”

I shake my head against him. “I waited too long to divorce him. This all could’ve been avoided. I thought I could save my marriage. I thought maybe he’d get his shit together and want to be better. At least be a better dad for

Chase.”

Micah sighs. “If I’m an ass, your husband is the most worthless asshole on the face of the planet. He’ll rot in prison, Evie. I swear. I’m racking up the charges on him, and that’s without attempted murder. He doesn’t deserve you or your son.”

I sob into his chest again.

When he pulls in a frustrated breath, I feel it in every muscle wrapped around me.

I wish I could stay right here all night.

But he’s experienced enough of me. I’m sure he regrets ever answering my first text. Hell, maybe he regrets telling me what Jeff did.

I push away and look up at him through blurry eyes. “I’m sorry. And you’re not an asshole. You were only trying to make me feel better. You didn’t come over here for me to cry all over your T-shirt.”

He reaches up and swipes my cheek with his thumb. “Don’t worry about my shirt. It’ll be just fine. I came over because I could tell you needed to be with someone. If you want to cry all night, I’m here for it.”

I shake my head. “No. No way. I hate crying. And now your food is cold. How many things can I apologize for?”

He hands me a napkin that smells like General Tso’s chicken, and I do my best to rub my mascara away. “I have no clue what went down in your marriage, Evie, but in the last day, I’ve spent the night at your house, met your dad and your brother, taken you to a funeral, and held you as you cried in my arms. I also heard your drug-running husband say some fucked-up shit on my wiretap, so I’m going to go out on a limb here and say your marriage being in the shitter is not your fault.”

I sniff a hiccup as I stare down at the mangled napkin. “I’m not used to failing. Litchfields don’t fail. My parents made sure of it. And right now, I feel like nothing but a failure.”

Micah rips the soggy napkin from my hands and replaces it with my wine.

“Drink and eat. We’ll put something on TV—whatever you want to watch. You can chill and think about nothing before you go to bed.”

I do exactly as he says. I haven’t eaten anything since before the funeral. My afternoon was packed. If I could work day and night, the time would fly since I can’t be with Chase.

Micah flips the channel, I pick at my dinner, and he inhales his. He even refills his plate. I’m about to clean the kitchen and put the food away when a big hand lands on my shoulder. “Find something to watch. I’ll get the food.”

His random act almost takes my breath away. I do everything for Chase. I’m his mom. But Jeff didn’t do anything for anyone.

Ever.

Not for Chase.

And especially not for me.

Looking back, we were roommates before we were enemies.

That should’ve been my first sign.

So many signs that I missed or ignored.

I’m clutching my empty wine glass when he returns with the bottle. I look up as he fills my cup ... in more ways than one. “You brought dinner, donuts, and you cleaned the kitchen. How are you single?”

He finishes pouring the red, and it’s not lost on me the sight of him standing over me like this...

Excites me.

He corks the wine, sets it on the coffee table, and takes his place on the sofa with a fresh beer. “Did you miss the part about me being an asshole?”

“I haven’t witnessed an asshole yet, Micah.”

He shrugs. “You will. Trust me. Everyone in my life can attest to it.”

I tuck one leg under me and turn to face him, ignoring whatever show the

television landed on. "Can I ask you something?"

He takes a drink. "You're a real talker tonight. Ask away."

This time I smile. "See there? I didn't break into tears."

He bops my knee with the head of his bottle. "I knew you were a pillar of strength."

I hug a knee and take a sip. "You said you don't do funerals."

I can't take my eyes off him. I've never studied anyone so fascinating. His expression doesn't budge. "That's because I don't. I'm not like you ... I have other hobbies."

I prop my elbow on the back of the sofa and lean my head into my hand. "What are your hobbies?"

He tips his head and frowns. "Why are you asking hard questions?"

"You don't have any hobbies, do you?" I guess.

"I do."

"Then what are they?"

"Not going to funerals, that's for sure."

"Funerals aren't my hobby," I defend myself. "It's my passion. I told you, it keeps me grounded."

"There are other ways to stay grounded, Evie."

I put my wine glass to my lips. "But it's my way. You still haven't answered my question."

He points to me with his bottle. "I play in a softball tournament once a year. It's for charity, which makes me a really good person."

I bite back a smile. "Exceptional, I'm sure."

"I even help organize it, which elevates my goodness even more."

My smile swells. "Well, you might be the best person I know, and it has

nothing to do with the donuts.” This time I give him a nudge on his thick shoulder. “You still didn’t answer my question about funerals.”

“Why do you want to know? Is it not enough that I brought you donuts?”

“It’s an odd thing for you to throw out there in conversation, that’s all.”

“No more odd than your passion for going to them?”

“I didn’t say it wasn’t odd. I know it is. What I’m saying is that funerals aren’t your thing but you went with me anyway when you didn’t have to. You could’ve easily asked me the questions about the accident over the phone.”

His beer bottle touches his lips, but he never takes his eyes off me. He shakes his head once on an exhale. It’s like he’s giving up a battle and isn’t happy about it.

“The last funeral I went to was during my sophomore year in college. It was my sister’s.”

“Oh, Micah.” My expression falls. “I’m sorry.”

“She was a senior in high school. Went to a party like any other kid would. Hell, I threw the parties when I was in high school. Someone slipped a drug into her drink. Like that wasn’t bad enough, it wasn’t what they thought it was. That shit was laced with fentanyl. That was it. She didn’t even make it to the hospital.”

Tears fill my eyes again, but these are different. These are not for me.

These are for him.

I set my wine down and reach for his hand to take it in mine. There’s nothing I want to do more than comfort him.

He did it for me.

But as soon as I touch him, he takes over, engulfing mine in his. The move is so swift, it’s like he was itching for the chance to touch me.

I let him hold onto me and run my other hand over his.

All of a sudden, I can't get enough of his touch.

"You did something today that brought you pain. And you did it for me." The lump in my throat threatens to choke me, making my words rough and hoarse. I look from our entwined hands to his blue eyes. "I don't know what to say, Micah. I keep throwing I'm sorrys and thank yous around like confetti, but they're not enough. Nothing will ever be enough after that."

His stare on me is heavy and intense. I wish I could bottle it and come back for a hit when I'm alone and scared.

Because right now I'm anything but.

"I don't know. You're a pro when it comes to dealing with death. Saying nothing is an art people should use more often." He gives my hand a squeeze and forces his thick fingers through my thin ones and holds even tighter. "This from you is better than words."

I look down where we're tied together. His masculine skin against mine does something to me.

Seeing it.

Feeling it.

It's everything I need right now.

I'm selfish, especially after what he just told me.

Sitting here with this strange man, I feel safe in so many ways. I take advantage.

The tips of my fingers dance up his arm, touching the artwork I've been intrigued by since he pounded on my door looking for Jeff. I'm sure there is meaning in every single detail. Knowing what little I do about him—he doesn't seem like the kind of man who would mark his body for life because it's trendy.

Micah Emmett is deliberate.

I use our hold to lift his arm to get a better look.

It's hard to see, but within the swirling sand, the name Hannah is scripted so

beautifully, it looks like a storm rather than letters. If someone didn't know to look for it, they might not ever see it.

When I look up, he proves his intensity has many levels. His is off the charts.

“Hannah is your sister?”

He just lifts his chin.

I look back to his arm and trail my finger down the dripping clock into the hourglass.

And then the date.

I'm not sure how old he is, but I doubt it could mean anything else. “And this is when she died.”

He nods.

And he's right. No words are needed as our gazes lock.

I don't let go of him. Not that I could if I wanted to.

His hold on me is resolute.

I want to thank him for sharing the memory of his sister with me. But I don't.

Instead, I continue being selfish.

“No one has touched me in a very long time.”

I get nothing but a tick of his strong jaw.

“Not like this.” I give his hand a squeeze. “Or held me in their arms. Or comforted me. Or anything else.”

It's his turn to speak over the gravel in his throat. Every single word travels down my spine and hits me somewhere dusty. “I'm convinced your husband is the biggest fucking moron on the face of the planet.”

I don't answer. I'm guilty for putting up with it for too long.

“What do you want, Evie?”

I exhale and feel lightheaded under his spell. But I'm honest when I say, “I

want to be needy and selfish. I haven't done anything I wanted in a very long time.”

I say no more.

There's nothing else to say.

He gives me a good yank. Before I know it, I'm turned with my bottom in his lap, his hand in my hair, and his lips land on mine.

They devour mine.

But not just his lips.

His hands. His arms. His tongue.

I forget who I am. That I'm married. That my son is across town because someone is after us.

For the first time in too long, I lose myself in someone else.

It feels good.

No, it feels fucking great.

And there's not one tender or gentle thing about it. Micah's lips are bruising. His tongue is demanding. One hand is buried in my hair, and the other is planted on my ass. My hair pulls at the roots and his other hand grips my ass like he's holding on to his sanity by a thread.

And he tastes like man. My tongue dives into his mouth, into heaven. Micah is like nothing I've experienced.

And to think I was excited about donuts.

Every muscle in his body is taut around mine. I drink in his groan when he pulls me to him—my hip pressed to his cock, so thick and long and hard through our clothes.

I thread my fingers into his messy, overgrown hair to hold him to me. I thought I was obsessed with him because I was mentally drained and starved for physical attention.

But no.

That isn't it.

This is all Micah.

I'm shocked when his hold on me tightens further, but this time, it's to push me away.

I open my eyes and look at him in shock. His lips are swollen, and he's breathing hard. I can't imagine what I look like.

"What's wrong?" I breathe.

Desperate.

I definitely look desperate.

But I just don't care.

"This is ... fuck." He drags a hand down his face. "This is wrong. You're all kinds of emotional. And you're all kinds of married."

"To a man who's in jail," I argue. "Are you serious? Biggest moron on earth, remember? Those were your words. And a divorce is underway."

He shakes his head. "You're a part of my case, Evie. A big fucking part. I'm good at what I do, and there are rules and boundaries for a reason. There are agents who break rules every day, but I'm not one of them."

Shit. That feels like a slap in the face.

"I'm not a part of your case," I whisper. "My husband is. I've done nothing wrong but marry the wrong man."

Despite his words, when I try to pull away from him, his hands grip my hips to hold me in place. "Don't do that."

My brows shoot up. "You're the one who just said this is a mistake. Let me go, Micah. You can leave. I'll be fine."

He shakes his head. "I'm not going anywhere after that kiss."

"You just said it was a mistake."

He pulls me into his cock one more time. It's as hard as ever when he bites, "I didn't say it was a mistake. I said it was wrong, and I don't cross boundaries. At least I haven't been willing to in the past. What I said is you've had a shit week, and I do not take advantage of women in any state."

"I'm not drunk or high, Micah. I'm having a bad week, but I am of sound mind. Don't treat me like some delicate flower."

He says nothing and simply stares at me. He also doesn't let go of me.

I poke his pec with my index finger for the sheer purpose of touching him. "What?"

He shakes his head before it falls to the back of the sofa and stares at my ceiling. When I move to climb off his lap, his face snaps back and he looks like his head might explode. "Can we just sit here and watch TV?"

"TV," I repeat.

"I just—"

"You're not into me," I whisper, mortified as the realization hits me. "You really are just being nice. Holy shit."

"Nice?" he spits, and this time doesn't hold me away from him. He pulls me into his cock tighter and lifts his hips a touch to emphasize his point. "Does this feel like I'm just being nice?"

I put a hand to his chest to keep some safe space between us. The man is confusing. But then again, I haven't had any interaction with anyone like this other than Jeff for years. "Men can get hard over very little, so I'm not giving myself that much credit. Seriously, don't try to make me feel better. You can go. But leave the donuts. I'm going to need them now more than ever."

"Dammit." I'm no match for him. He's on his feet with me in his arms for two seconds before my back hits the sofa. He follows me down, his hips fitted between my legs, and his mouth on mine.

He gives me whiplash. As much as I don't want to enjoy being pinned to the sofa by his heavy body, I like it more than I care to admit. His cock is pressed right where it was meant to be—between my legs.

He just pushed me away. I can't let him know I like this. "You're the one who said this was wrong."

He shakes his head and frames my face with his big hand. "If you think I'm leaving you or those fucking donuts, you're crazy."

My breaths are shallow—he's that heavy and I'm that overcome. "Then why did you push me away?"

"Because this is messed up."

I shake my head as much as I can in his vise grip. "You have a knack for saying the wrong things."

He lowers his voice. "I meant this is messed up because all I do is work, and when I finally meet someone that does this to me." He presses his long cock between my legs, as if I need more for dramatic effect. "She's the wife of my target and gets off on going to funerals."

"How do you think I feel?" The need to defend myself is right up there with making sure my patients have the best quality care I can give them. "My husband wants my son and me dead, and no one has touched me like this in years. And you're a self-proclaimed asshole. It seems I have shit judgment in men."

Micah's lips tip up at the corner. "That's one thing we can agree on."

"You're still on top of me. You haven't exactly pled your case well for being right where you are."

Instead of getting up, he leans down and presses his lips to mine. "Just so you know, I've wanted to do this since you passed out in my arms the other day. And I really like the way you feel right here."

That warms me.

"But you're lonely and scared," he goes on. "I'm exhausted. We're not making this decision tonight. We'll make it over donuts in the morning."

"In the morning?"

A sexy smirk teases his full lips. "If people still want to fuck in the light of

day, bloated on baked goods, and with a clear head, they can't be wrong. But I know for a fact, I'd rather you make that choice in the morning than regret it at that time."

"I have very few regrets in life, Micah. Really only one—staying with Jeff as long as I did."

"I know. Don't beat yourself up over that. You had no idea he'd turn into a psycho."

"No, I did not see that coming."

"I didn't see this coming." He drags his nose up the side of mine. "We'll finish this conversation over donuts and your fancy-ass coffee machine."

I nod. He shifts me and falls behind me on my deep sofa, stuffing throw pillows under our heads. I reach for the remote and click up the volume as I settle into his warm chest and the crook of his lap.

The special agent is spooning me. I don't remember anything that has felt this good in years.

He reaches between us, adjusts his hard-on, and groans into my hair.

I bite my lip.

Donuts and decisions.

All of a sudden, I'm not dreading Saturday as much as I was before.

MIND YOUR OWN BUSINESS

Micah

“Hey.”
My hand instinctively squeezes.

Ass.

Mmm.

Nice.

“Go back to sleep,” I grumble.

“Micah.” My name is whispered against the skin of my neck. I’m so fucking hot but I don’t give a shit. “You said you were a light sleeper. Your phone has been vibrating on the table. Someone is looking for you.”

I drag my eyes open. It’s still mostly dark. I’m on my back and my new favorite geriatric doctor is sprawled over me. My cock, which took forever to settle down last night, is in true form once again. It’s like he’s waiting for me to wake up and have important conversations where he’ll be the star of the show.

I flipped channels for thirty minutes when I felt her weight go heavy against my chest. Sleeping next to Evie did not suck.

Feeling a kink form in my back from sleeping on the sofa did.

I still wouldn't change it. Close quarters with Evie is something I enjoy.

I don't look at my phone. I look at the woman on top of me. Her eyes are sleepy, and her hair is a mess. She has a crease down the side of her face from laying on my chest.

I run my hand through her hair. "Good morning."

A small smile tugs at her pink lips. "You're not nearly as soft as my Sleep Number bed."

I lift my hips. "There's nothing soft on me, baby."

Her eyes flare.

My phone vibrates again. I snag my phone from the coffee table. "Shit."

She leans up a little farther on my chest and frowns, but my hand stays planted on her ass. She's not going anywhere. "What is it?"

"Damn, either missing a whole night's sleep really did me in, or I sleep better with you. My partner, my boss, and three calls from the office. This can't be good before the sun rises on a Saturday. They actually have lives outside of the office."

I hit go on Brax's number. He forgoes the pleasantries. "Where the fuck are you, and why aren't you answering your phone?"

I avoid the first question like the plague. "I was asleep. What's up?"

"What's up? You only thought your case went to shit this week, that's what's up."

All of a sudden my brain is as alert as my cock. "What's going on?"

"Those new pole cameras you put up on that house have seen a lot of activity. It's mayhem. Miami PD is crawling all over the place. We've got a dead body and a house full of cash."

"Fuck." I roll Evie to the side so I can stand. "When did this happen?"

“In the last hour. Tim and I just got here, but so did the media. We’re staying out of the way, and Tim is doing everything he can to get Miami Narcs to cooperate so your case stays clean. When I say there’s a lot of cash, Micah, it’s a fucking understatement. You were right about the house, but this is not good for your case.”

I run my hand through my hair and stuff my feet in my shoes. “I’ll be there in fifteen.”

“Fifteen?” Brax asks. “We’re at least forty minutes from your condo. Where are you?”

I turn, and Evie is on her way to the kitchen. I follow as I talk to Brax. “Now the house is burned, dammit. Miami is going to want that cash. I don’t blame them, that’s a good hit for anyone. Run a dog on it. We know it’ll hit, but then Miami can confiscate it. I’ll write it into our case later. I need to see that video. Be there soon.”

“Micah—” he calls for me, but I hang up.

I stop at the island across from where she’s firing up the espresso machine. “Evie, I’ve got to go.”

“It sounds like it.” She presses a few buttons, and the machine comes to life before she turns to face me. “That didn’t sound good.”

“If this weren’t important, I wouldn’t leave. Something happened at a target location in my case. I need to be there to manage it.”

“I’m a doctor. If anyone understands that work comes first, it’s me.”

“But not this morning. Nothing else was supposed to come first this morning.” I look out the back of her house where the sun is peeking over the privacy wall on her vast backyard, guesthouse, and pool. “Are you going to be okay?”

She turns back to the coffee and puts a lid on the to-go cup before rounding the island and handing it to me. “Here. Take a donut for the road.”

I take the coffee but don’t look away from her. “No shit, Evie. Are you going to be okay?”

She runs a hand down my chest, between my pecs, and stops on my abs. There has to be nine inches between us and well over a hundred pounds. I've never been with anyone long enough to consider myself having a type.

But I think I just found it in a woman who should be off limits.

"Evie." I capture her chin between my fingers and force her to look at me. "I don't want to leave you. Are you going to be okay until I get back? I have no idea how long this will last. I've got a dead body and a mountain of drug money in a drop house that I needed up and running."

Her eyes widen. "Is this tied to Jeff?"

"It's tied to Jeff's friends, so yes." Since I'm standing in the house she lived in with *Jeff*, I have no desire to talk about the fucker. "What are your plans today?"

She sighs. "I'll keep myself busy. I might organize Chase's toys. Clean a closet. If I can focus, I'll try to read a book. I can't remember the last time I read a book. I'll be fine. Security will be here all day. I think it's just the nights that freaks me out. Maybe Chase will take enough time away from summer camp at grandma's house to FaceTime me."

"I need to get this sorted, but I will be back," I promise. I brush her bottom lip with my thumb. "Save me a donut."

Her dark eyes wander to the side. "I don't know. If I get bored, I might eat myself into a sugar coma."

"I want to kiss you," I tell her the truth. "We were going to talk this morning with clear heads."

"Don't you have somewhere to be in less than fifteen minutes? A dead body and cash sounds like an emergency."

I set the coffee down on the counter and dip my hand into her long messy hair and pull her to me. She fists my tee and presses herself into my body. All the talk of corpses and me leaving ruined my morning wood, but it's back. I turn to press her into the counter and think about how else I could be spending my morning. Her arms round me and angle up my back, reminding me of what we should be doing right now. Plunging my tongue into her

mouth, I enjoy every small swell of her body against mine.

When I drag a hand down the side of her body, I feel her moan everywhere. Her tongue, her tits, and lower. I feel down the side of her tit until I get to her hip when I slide my hand around to her ass again.

I force myself to drag my lips away and look down at her flushed face. “I hate my job right now. I’ve got to go. I’ll text you.”

She bites her swollen lip.

If I lean in for one more kiss, I’ll never get out of here. I grab my bag and she walks me to the door. As I’m jogging to my SUV, there’s a changing of the guard at the street.

Well, then. I’m sure that will get back to her family that the DEA agent spent the night at her house.

I’ll let her worry about that.

I’m late.

BRAX WASN’T KIDDING. The place is swarming.

Cops.

The coroner.

The media.

Fucking media.

I can kiss this location goodbye for sure. No dealer with two brain cells would step close to this place again, let alone use it in their chain supply.

I park, grab my badge and gun, and make my way across the lawn where Brax and Tim are standing.

The neighborhood is old and the houses are small, but this area of town doesn’t get this kind of action. Neighbors are clustered and watching the

drama unfold, not used to this kind of thing happening on a Saturday morning.

I'm in the same shorts and tee, but I did throw on a ball cap. It was the best I could do since I didn't have time to go home. I need to start leaving a change of clothes in the car.

Tim looks me up and down. "Did you come straight from the gym?"

Brax hikes a brow. "He was asleep when I finally got hold of him, so he did not come from the gym. He also didn't come from home."

I have no time to make up a story or defend myself. Their barrage continues hitting me like the drive-by that no doubt happened in the front yard we're standing in from the looks of the bullet markers that pepper the house and ground. "Two days in a row you show up to work looking like you rolled out of bed."

More like rolled off the sofa. "It's Saturday. This wasn't exactly on my schedule, boss."

"You were right about the house," Brax says. "You'll shit when you see the amount of cash in there. If we can keep this from becoming a dead end, your case is about to get bigger."

I turn to the house and change the subject. "Who's dead? And do we have a copy of the video yet?"

"We should have the video anytime," Tim says. "The office is cutting it as we speak. We got plates on the car. They uploaded it into Miami's license plate reader already. But I have bad news about the dead body."

I turn back to Tim and Brax. "What's the bad news?"

"It was a holdup. They were coming back to the house with a load of cash. Another group drove by and ran up to pick it off. Right now, we don't know who did it," Brax says.

We see shit all the time. Someone getting popped in the middle of a cartel war is nothing new. Unfortunately, it happens a lot. "Besides the dead body, which is always bad, what are you talking about?"

Tim motions to the front of the house where a body is just being zipped up in a body bag. “Detectives ID’d him. It’s your guy.”

I frown. “What guy?”

Brax finally spills. “Adder.”

Anger bubbles from within me. “No fucking way. You’re sure?”

Brax nods. “Sorry man. His name is actually Adder Hoffman. He actually had a DL on him.”

“Fuck.” I drag a violent hand through my hair before I yell, “Fuck!”

Everyone in the yard and street turns to us.

“Whoa,” Brax says in a low voice. “We’re trying to lay low for the sake of your case. The last thing we need to do is have the media report this was DEA.”

I drop my head and stare at the ground in front of me while I contemplate just how bad this is. When I look up, I mutter, “He was the key. The one fucking guy I needed alive got his ass taken out by a rival group in a hold up. What are the fucking odds?”

Brax narrows his eyes on me, but Tim keeps talking. “The rest of them ran. We live on a peninsula. They’ll turn up eventually. He can’t be the only one who knows about the hitman.”

“Maybe but this was the guy. He had the answers, dammit.” A PD officer exits the house with his K9 on a leash. “I want to see it for myself. There might be clues in the house. We need to get the hell away from the cameras anyway.”

The coroner is busy making notes when we get to the front door. We sidestep the evidence, careful not to disrupt the scene.

“Can you tell where the shots came from?” I ask.

He stands, snaps off his gloves, and tips his head to the west. “Point blank. But there are bullets everywhere that hit from all directions. Multiple weapons—it was a shootout. Did I hear mention of cameras?”

I motion up and down the street. “Two on the poles out front and another in back of the house. We’re pulling video now. I can send you what you need.”

He reaches into his pocket and hands me a business card. “It’s obviously death by multiple gunshot wounds, but that would be good to include with my report. I appreciate it.”

I step over the prone body bag on the porch that will quite literally take the information I need to the grave. I follow Tim and Brax through the house and down a short hallway to the back bedroom.

“Holy shit,” I mutter.

“Told you,” Brax says.

Brax wasn’t kidding. This is a shitload of cash. We put the cameras up last week when we followed one of our main targets here multiple times. We’ve seen duffels come and go from the house, but this has been going on for a while.

“The dog hit the cash.” Brax, Tim, and I turn to the voice behind us. Lieutenant Carl Arriaga from Miami’s Narc unit is standing there in a pair of BDUs and a T-shirt. He crosses his arms and looks around. “In fact, the dog hit on almost half the contents of the house. It’s like they rolled around in a mountain of blow before coming home from work every day. I heard you’ve got cameras up outside.”

“We should have the video soon. We’ll share it with you,” Tim says.

I glance around the house and take in what could have been. “After today, this location will be dead to my targets. No way will they use it to stash or move anything.”

“You know we’re going to have to take everything for evidence,” Carl says.

I nod. “If the DEA could stay out of it, that’ll keep my case clean. If I found this house, I’ll find the next one, but I can’t lie—this sucks. Not to mention the dead body out there died with the information I need on a double murder-for-hire case.”

“No shit?” Carl whistles and shakes his head. “We can do that. They’re going

to want their money. I need to get it out of here fast. I feel like a fucking sitting duck with all this cash,” Carl says.

Brax looks at his phone. “The video just came in.”

“It’s my case,” I complain. “Why’d they send it to you?”

Brax pins me with his eyes. “Because we work everything together and when you didn’t answer your phone this morning, they called me. That’s what happens when you go MIA and sleep places other than your own home.”

Tim lets out a low chuckle. “That’s why you keep showing up looking like that.”

“Can we get to the video?” I bite. This shit is exhausting, even though I am more rested than usual. I know for a fact it has more to do with the woman I shared a sofa with than the sofa itself.

A laptop would be easier, but everyone in the room is anxious to see what happened. We huddle around Brax’s phone as he pushes play.

The street is dark, almost as dark as the house was when Adder walks up carrying two duffels and a backpack. He’s the reason I have cameras on this house to begin with. He’s also the one who led us to Jeff Michaels. Cases like this are nothing but a complicated flow chart. Then it’s like following ants that are building tunnels. They’re either moving product or burying the dead.

In this case, it’s the latter.

“Here we go,” Tim says, as we all watch a dark form move from the shadows of the bushes.

“And there he goes,” I mutter. “Drug dealers get robbed too.”

The assailant is wearing a mask in Florida during the dog days of summer—never a good sign. My target sees the barrel of a gun raised to his head just in time. He flips around and knocks the man in the mask off balance.

One shot goes wide.

Two people in the house burst through the front door. A man I haven’t identified yet takes the kill shot, and Adder falls to the ground.

That's when the getaway car comes into view. Tires squeal on pavement and a barrage of gunfire hits the house.

A guy who came from inside the house is hit in the shoulder when he tries to pick up the bags of money. Two others return fire toward the street. So many bullets fly, it's good this happened in the early morning hours, or someone would've been caught by a stray.

We watch the car speed off. The second guy who got hit is dragged to a van in the driveway by the other two. The only thing they bothered to grab were the bags that had fallen next to Adder's dead body.

"That was fast," Brax said. "The office flagged both plates in the system. We'll see if the license plate readers pick them up around town."

"I'll get surveillance on the other known locations." I sigh and look around the house. I'm not sure things could've been worse. Adder is dead and the stash house is burned. "They'll turn up eventually, even if they don't come back here."

"There won't be anything to come back for in about another hour," Carl quips. "Time to get this shit hauled out and logged into evidence. I'll catch up with you later."

"Let's get out of here before the media realizes the feds showed up and report it to the world," Tim says. "Shit like this always happens on the weekend. I have a tee time this afternoon that I'm going to have to cancel."

"Keep your tee time. I've got this under control. I'm going to run home and grab a shower before I head back to the office and catch up on the transcripts." I head out of the house with Brax and Tim on my heels.

Tim goes straight to his car down the street, probably heading for his clubs before the next calamity hits.

But not Brax.

He falls in stride next to me. "You know what's not cool? When your partner that you've worked with since the academy has no life and you find out he slept somewhere other than home or the office and doesn't tell you shit. What am I supposed to do in this scenario?"

I throw him a glare. “Mind your own business like any self-respecting man would?”

“No fucking way.” I refuse to look at him, but I do hear a smile in his tone as he continues to jab at me. “If you don’t fess up soon, I’ll bring out the big guns and tell my wife. And since Landyn’s hormones are raging, you’re going to be in fucking trouble.”

I grab his arm to stop him and jab him in the chest. “First, when do you give two shits what I do when we aren’t together. Second, when did you start talking about scenarios and sticking your nose in my business? You sound like Cole Carson. And third, if you tell Landyn anything, it’ll go to blows.”

“So you are afraid of a pregnant woman.”

“I’m not afraid of anyone,” I spit. “I don’t need her hormones thrown in my face just to appease her need to know where I am twenty-four-seven.”

“You mean where you spend the night and why you’re too busy to answer the phone?”

I lower my voice. “If you put any ideas in your wife’s head, we’re going to have a problem.”

A sly smirk appears. “Family dinner at our house tomorrow, as long as my daughter doesn’t make an early appearance. Landyn wants everyone together one last time before we’re knee-deep in diapers and sleep deprived.”

If Brax threatens to sic his wife on me, I’m not going anywhere near his house—new baby or not. “Rocco mentioned it. I’ll see if I have time since my case blew up twice this week and since you’re about to disappear to bond with a new human, I’ve got to pick up your slack.”

“You’re Brian’s Godfather. Are you really not going to be there for the birth of my daughter?”

“Not if you tell Landyn I’m not sleeping at home.”

“Landyn will know the minute we part ways, and you know it. I tell her everything. There’s no avoiding the hormones.”

“I know you tell your wife everything. Even when cartels and the mafia are

involved, and it's the worst idea ever."

"Hey, that was the best decision of my life. She followed me across the country and is about to give me a second child."

I've had enough and turn away from him muttering, "I followed you across the country too."

"Which is why we want you to be the Godfather—again."

I stop in my tracks and turn back to him. "Again?"

"What do you say?"

"I thought you'd ask Rocco this time," I say.

He shakes his head. "He's not ready. Maybe the next one."

"The next one? You haven't even had this one yet."

He shrugs like it's no big deal. "There will be another one."

"I'm honored," I say before adding, "again. Seriously."

"Now, who were you with last night?"

"Did you ask me to be the Godfather to your unborn daughter just so I'd tell you who I was with?"

He crosses his arms. "So you were with someone. I knew it."

I turn for my car. "I'm not telling you shit."

"Why not?" he calls after me.

"You must have a shit memory, Cruz. Because you didn't tell me shit and then showed up in love with the mafia princess."

"Don't call her that," he warns. "That was a whole different situation. I couldn't talk to you at all without the risk of being tortured and killed."

I turn on my car and roll the window down. "Are you going home or to the office?"

"Office for a couple hours. I've got some shit to do."

“I’ll see you there.”

“Hey!” he calls one last time. “Act surprised when Landyn asks you to be the Godfather.”

“I will, as long as you don’t tell her I spent the night with someone last night.”

“Just tell me, are you seeing someone or was it a one-off? Because I don’t know when you’ve had the time to meet anyone to do either.”

I roll up my window and put it in drive. There’s no way I’m telling him shit.

Not that there’s anything to tell.

Yet.

DONUTS ARE THE NEW TACOS

Evie

“I ’m her sister, dammit.”

I didn’t have a chance to say hello. All I hear is my older sister arguing with a man on the other end of the phone.

“Cadence, are you okay?”

“When my father finds out that you are trying to keep me from my baby sister in her time of need, he will have your ass.”

I roll my eyes.

“Cadence,” I bite. “Who are you talking to?”

“Bitch.” And there it is. She’s turned her attention to me. “I am at your door and this guy that Dad hired is threatening to take me down on your lawn. Little does he know, it’ll be a knock down drag out. He’ll be embarrassed when I kick his ass. I don’t work out two hours a day for nothing. Now get out here and tell him I’m not the killer before your HOA has a hissy fit.”

“Don’t you dare get into a fight on my porch,” I warn, as I run down my stairs on bare feet. “He’s only doing his job.”

I turn off my alarm, flip the deadbolt, and open the door to find Cadence Litchfield Patterson in a standoff with the new guard who started his duty

shortly after Micah left this morning.

“There she is.” The guard has positioned himself between her and the door. She points to me over his shoulder. “Tell him I’m your sister and to get out of my way so I can come in. We have cocktails to shake and shit to talk about.”

“I’m so sorry.” I hope my eyes express my remorse. “She’s my sister. She can come in.”

The guard shakes his head but looks relieved he doesn’t have to go to blows with a woman. “I had to make sure, Dr. Litchfield.”

Cadence pushes past him and rolls her eyes. “I told you.”

I let my sister pass and keep my attention on the guard. “Thank you so much. Are you sure I can’t get you anything to drink or eat?”

He shakes his head. “No, ma’am. I’m set. It’s what I do. I’m used to it.”

I’ve offered more times than I can count. I even offered my bathroom. Every guard insists their job is to watch their surroundings constantly. I’m not going to think about the bathroom situation. All I know is my father doesn’t mess around when it comes to things like this, so I’m sure he’s paying them well to pee in a bottle.

“If you change your mind, let me know.”

He waits for me to shut and lock my door before stalking back to his post. Honestly, does anyone get paid enough to put up with my sister?

Cadence has made herself at home in the kitchen. She’s wearing a tennis skirt with a cropped athletic top that shows two ripples of her six pack. She was not lying when she said she works out two hours a day. I don’t have to ask where she’s been. Pickleball might be her hobby, but she plays tennis every Saturday.

I go to the mountain of dirty pots and pans and start to load the dishwasher as I talk. “You don’t have to be so extra, Cadence. He’s only doing his job.”

“If you wouldn’t have sent me to voicemail twenty times in a row, I wouldn’t have to be extra. That was your fault, you know. You’re normally a loner, but that’s off the table when your husband is in jail and someone is after you and

Chase. Get over yourself.”

I hear bottles hit the marble as she moves around the kitchen. “I was busy cooking and my hands were dirty. Only you would be selfish to tell me to get over myself when I’m the one dealing with a crisis.”

She huffs in disgust. “You don’t get to pull the loner card during a crisis. Why are you cooking, anyway? Your husband is in the slammer, and Mom told me Chase would be at their house until this is settled.”

At the mention of Chase, I pull in a breath and try to keep my shit together. We FaceTimed a little bit ago. Mom said they were busy most of the day. He never takes a nap anymore but does hit a wall later in the afternoon. They were going to watch a movie and let him catch his second wind.

He didn’t ask to come home.

I should be thankful for that.

I jump when I feel my sister’s arms circle me from behind for a hug, pinning my arms to my sides. She drops the Cadence attitude when she presses her cheek to mine. “If I could track down the beast that Jeff hired and kill him myself, I would. Jeff is lucky he’s behind bars, because if I could get my hands on him right now, they wouldn’t be able to identify the body, and he’d be gone forever. I can’t do that, but what I can do is keep you company. I told Denny I’m staying the rest of the weekend. He and the girls can fend for themselves until Monday morning.”

I flip off the water and grab the kitchen towel. “The weekend?”

She gives me a squeeze and lets me go. “Yes. I brought enough liquor to keep you chill and relaxed while I get some rare one-on-one time with my baby sister. Don’t you worry, Cadence is here to get you through.”

Counting the hours since Micah left is a new level of depressing that I refuse to focus on at the moment. I’ve done everything I said I would. Chase’s room is clean, I have three heaping bags to take to the Miami Women’s Shelter for donations. I was about to start on my closet, but seeing Jeff’s things on the other side of the space almost sent me into a tailspin. That’s when I came straight to the kitchen and started cooking.

But I haven't heard from Micah for more than eight hours. Eight hours and forty-five minutes, to be specific. He hasn't called or texted. I have no idea what to expect from the man. I'm blaming my current life drama on the fixation of the strange man whose arms I slept in last night.

I'm not sure what I'm going to do with Cadence when Micah returns.

If Micah returns.

"What the hell is going on here anyway?" she asks.

I turn and toss the towel to the counter. As much of a pain in the ass as she can be, I love my sister and know what she's trying to do. "I'm keeping myself busy. I usually wish time would stand still just to catch my breath. Any other time, I'd be happy for a break from life—a few hours to myself outside of work and being a mom and pretending my marriage wasn't in the shambles it's been for longer than I care to admit. But this is hard."

Tequila, vodka, three bottles of wine, liqueur, and sparkling mineral water are arranged on my island along with bags of fruit. "We're going to have a night of it. I was going to order food, but it looks like you've taken care of meals for the next week. I've got the makings for sangria, but brought the hard stuff in case you need it. I'm going to give you a pedicure and I brought stuff for facials. But first, I need a shower. I came straight from the club."

"You really don't need to spend the whole weekend here. Don't the girls have stuff going on all weekend? You don't want to miss that."

Andrew and Cadence are close in age, only eighteen months apart. To this day my parents insist I wasn't an accident, but I came along years later. It doesn't take a mathematician to figure that out. My siblings and I don't have the traits of normal kids in the birth order.

My parents basically had two families.

I might as well be an only child. My parents' focus was solely on me by the time my brother and sister were off to college. My family accuses me of being too serious and a perfectionist.

Andrew is domineering and takes charge of any situation. He also takes himself too seriously.

Which makes Cadence the baby. She demands attention in everything. She's outgoing and fun-loving. She's also the most uncomplicated person I know. When it comes to Cadence, you always know what you're getting.

I'm actually surprised it's taken her this long to barge into my house.

Even as an adult, nothing has changed. My siblings are in different stages of life than me. My nieces and nephew are much older than Chase.

"The girls have plans with friends all weekend. Daria can get Misty where she needs to be. Denny has a tee time first thing in the morning." Cadence holds out her arms and flips her high ponytail over her shoulder with more pizzazz than necessary. "I'm all yours, baby sister."

My eyes wander to the clock on the other side of the kitchen.

Cadence's arms drop to her sides. "Way to make a girl feel wanted."

I turn my full attention back to her and plaster a tight smile on my face. "Sorry. I have banana bread in the oven. I don't want to lose track of time."

Her face screws up. "Since when do you bake?"

"Since I have so much nervous-energy that I can't sit still." I shoo her off with the flip of my hand. "Go take a shower while I clean this up. I've got to get this stuff portioned and in the freezer. I have enough meals prepped to get Chase and me through next month."

She puts her hands on her hips. "Why are you acting so weird?"

"Oh, I don't know. Probably because a killer is after us."

She has the nerve to shake her head. "That's obvious. But for some reason, I don't think that's it."

I turn back to the dirty dishes. "You don't know me well, then. Right now, all I care about is Chase."

That's a lie. And I don't know what I feel worse about—obsessing over a man who isn't my husband or using that man as a distraction from missing my child. But Micah and I had a connection last night. The type of connection I haven't had with a man in years. In fact, I don't remember the

last time I felt like this.

“Hey,” Cadence calls. “If you’ve been stuck at home, where did you get these? They’re the best in town, and I know for a fact they don’t deliver because they never know what they’ll have in stock. Trust me, I’ve tried.”

I turn and find her standing at the island where she’s flipped open the box of decadent donuts.

I say nothing, but she keeps talking. “Dad said he was here yesterday morning. And we both know he doesn’t do donuts. And don’t tell me it’s your security guard.”

Shit.

“Evie,” she clips my name in a way it might as well be a demand.

My shoulders slump. Who am I kidding? Even if she hadn’t noticed the donuts, I probably would’ve told her about Micah anyway. “If I tell you something, you have to promise not to tell Mom and Dad. And definitely not Andrew. You really can’t tell him.”

Her eyes widen. “Evie, what are you talking about?”

I move to her and snag a donut. It’s my fourth one today. In fact, I haven’t eaten anything all day besides what could be described as the best donuts on earth.

And here I thought it was waiting on Micah Emmett that was making my stomach uneasy. I thought it was stupid butterflies, but now that I think about it, it’s probably the refined sugar and gluten.

The way it’s going, there won’t be any left for Micah, because Cadence pulls out the barstool next to mine, grabs her own donut, and talks with her mouth full when she demands, “Tell me everything.”

Micah

TAP.

Tap-tap.

Tap-tap-tap.

Tap—

“If you don’t cut that shit out, I’ll throw your cell out the fucking window.”

I turn my gaze from the target’s house to Brax. “What?”

He motions to the cell in my hand that I was clicking on the console to the beat of the music that’s been set to low just to break up the silence. “What’s with the nervous tic? You’re never like this. I swear, you’ve never been wound this tight—and you’re wound snug even when you’re relaxed.”

I look back at the house that’s seen no activity since this morning.

After I showered and raced back to the office, a call was logged on the wire. They talked about Adder getting killed, the attempted heist, and how it was too hot for them to go back to the house to get their money.

They’re pissed. They should be.

Hell, I’m pissed too. This puts me five steps back from where I scraped and crawled to get. I just located that damn house.

I don’t respond to Brax.

He switches the station to a sports podcast and turns up the volume.

Any other day, it would have my undivided attention, and I’d have more opinions than any armchair quarterback should.

But not today. I can’t handle the background noise.

I turn it off.

“Are you on your period?” Brax asks.

“Eat a bag of sweaty dicks,” I mutter back.

“Yep.” He sighs and shifts in the driver’s seat. “That time of the month for

you. I didn't realize you were so fragile. My apologies."

I toss my cell to the center console and reach for my bottle of water. "Can we just sit here and stare at this damn house in silence?"

"I get it," Brax keeps talking.

"Fuck me. He just won't shut up," I say to myself.

"You met someone," he goes on. "It was different than it usually is. You actually put some effort into her. If I had to guess, you slept with her and you liked it."

I roll my eyes.

"But it was more. You had a connection. That's great. But it doesn't always mean she will too. Everyone gets dumped at some point."

I turn my glare on him.

"Everyone but me. I've never been dumped. Hell, Landyn was into me before she knew my real name—"

"Fuck you. I was not dumped."

"It's okay, Micah. You put yourself out there. That's a big step. You made yourself vulnerable, and women like that. Well, most of them do. Apparently not the chick who dumped you. But the next one will. Or not. But you'll find one who does eventually. Just don't stop trying."

"Who are you?"

"I'll let Landyn know you won't need a plus one for tomorrow."

I look back out the window and mutter, "You've lost it."

"Someone broke your heart. I'm here for you, man." He leans back in his seat. "I'm going to stop on the way home and get Landyn some flowers just because. You reminded me how much it sucks on the other side. My wife is the shit."

"Let's get something straight," I growl. "I didn't hook up with anyone. Yet. And no one fucking dumped me."

My asshole partner pops a piece of gum into his mouth. “If you say so.”

“I’m not talking to you for the rest of the day. Not one fucking word. And if it weren’t for the Godfather thing, I’d boycott your house for every fiesta you throw from now until the end of time. Do not fuck with me, Cruz. I’m not in the mood.”

“You need some chocolate and a chick flick. You’ll be better in a few days.”

“It’s official. I hate you.”

“You’re not processing your feelings. You’ll get over it and love me again. Maybe you need some flowers too.”

“I’m done.”

“You say you are and you keep talking. You just can’t stop me.”

“When this case is over, I’m putting in for a transfer back to New York. The heat has fried your fucking brain.”

“You can try to break up with me, but when it comes down to it, you won’t be able to.”

“Watch me.”

“I told you no one has ever dumped me. Like, ever.”

“Your wife needs a new playlist, Tay-Tay.”

He barks out a laugh. “Yeah, you got me there.”

My cell vibrates in the cup holder, and despite my stardom on the field as a D1 football god, thoughts of the good doctor have fucked with my reflexes.

Brax tags my phone before I have a chance to.

“Fucker!” I yell.

I reach for it, but he blocks me.

“Who is it?” he demands.

I side punch him from the passenger seat, but he doesn’t care. He plants an

open palm on the side of my face and pushes, which gives him the two seconds to read the notification.

We end up throwing punches, but in the process, my cell falls to the floor.

Brax pushes me back and turns his wide eyes on me. “Did that fucking say what I think it said?”

Shit. “Give me my fucking phone.”

He doesn’t reach for it and shakes his head. “You didn’t…”

“Depending on what the hell you’re talking about, no. I probably didn’t.”

His voice booms through the car. “You fucked your target’s wife?”

I exhale. “No, I did not do that.”

“Then why are you acting like a hormonal teenager and why the fuck is she texting your personal cell on a Saturday night?”

“Chill out, man. I didn’t fuck her.” I look out the windshield and add, “I could have, but I didn’t.”

“Shit,” Brax bites.

“Yet,” I amend. “I’m pretty sure it’s going to happen.”

“You’re pretty sure it’s going to happen?” he booms.

I turn back to him. “You’re one to talk. Do I need to remind you how you met your wife?”

“That’s different. We were already married.”

“You fucking weren’t, and you know it. And Evie’s marriage has been over for a long time. Her husband paid to have her and their son killed. It’s not like I’m a homewrecker, asshole.”

He reaches down, tags my phone off the floor, and throws it at me. “Tell me what she said.”

Brax and I are tight. I don’t trust anyone like I do him. I’d give him every password I have if I had to. But right now, I’m fucking relieved he doesn’t

know how to unlock my phone. “Did you forget about the part that I’m not talking to you?”

I hold my screen so he can’t see it.

Evita – Soooo, I hope everything is okay.

Evita – I just wanted to let you know, if you don’t feel like coming back, there will be no hard feelings.

Shit. That actually sounds like I might get dumped before anything happens. I should have let her know sooner that this damn day is never ending.

Bubbles and no bubbles and then more bubbles play on the screen—teasing me with what’s going through her mind. It’s like she can’t decide if she actually wants to talk to me.

I’m about to answer, but she flips a one-eighty.

Evita – I really want you to come over. Please. PLEASE come over!!!!!!!

Evita – xoxoxoxo

I frown.

“She dumped you, didn’t she?” Brax asks.

I flip him off.

Me – Are you okay?

Evita – OMG.

Evita – OMG!

Evita – Ignore that. I’m so sorry. SO SORRY.

Me – Do you always scream over text?

Evita – Holy shit, no!

Evita – I mean, no. No exclamation points. Never again with the
!!!

Me – Gotta admit, I do like the begging.

Evita – That was my sister. She came over today to keep me
company. She's so annoying.

Huh. That explains things. But it also sucks.

Evita – I mean, if you're not busy, you have some donuts to eat.

A slow smile spreads across my face.

“She must not have dumped you,” Brax observes.

“She wants me to eat her donuts.”

Brax cringes. “Is that some new sex code? Are donuts the new tacos? I haven't been married that long. How do I not know these things? And that type of sharing is uncalled for.”

“Might I remind you I had to listen to you and Landyn on the wires? I think I threw up every other day.”

“You didn't hear shit,” he grits.

“We heard enough.”

I put my fingers back to the screen.

Me – That's good, because I'm starving.

Evita – OMG.

Me – You're screaming again. I do like that. I'll let you know when I'm on my way.

“Micah,” Brax calls for me.

“Chill out over there, Latin lover. I'm not telling you shit.”

“No, look. They showed.”

My head pops up and I grab the binoculars off the dash. “They sure fucking did. One of them better know who the contract killer is.”

“What do you want to do?”

“They murdered someone, and I want to question them. We’ll wait for backup and pick them up.”

I call it in on the radio.

But we don’t have time to sit and wait.

I point to the house. “Fuck. Look at that.”

Brax puts the car in drive and hits the gas. “Looks like we’re on our own.”

PAVE THE WAY

Evie

“**T**his is what you’re going to do. You’re going to get in that shower and shave yourself from your chin to your big toes. Do you understand what I’m saying? Bare, Evie. That’s what a real man likes, not that you’d know since you married a blood-sucking, murdering pussy. I haven’t even laid eyes on this gun-toting mountain of a man, but I like him already because his name isn’t Jeff-fucking-Michaels.”

I take the razor she shoves at me and stumble back a step when she gives my shoulders a shove. “I don’t know, Cadence.”

She narrows her eyes on me and puts her hands on her hips. “Look, you know I love you—”

I’m offended and interrupt, “Why does that sound like it’s going to be followed up with a but?”

“Because it is. I love you, *but* you were boring as hell in college. So straight-laced, I doubt you veered two inches off your goodie-two shoes, kill-me-now yawn of a life. Have you ever had a one-night stand?”

I cross my arms. “Maybe.”

“Bullshit. That man wants you, and you’re going to take advantage of it. If he’s not a maniac in bed, you can move on and call it a basic life experience that you should’ve had fifteen years ago and you’re just catching up on shit.

But if he is a maniac..." She takes a step back and gives me a curtsy. "You're welcome. You'll owe me for life."

"I don't know. Last night I was ready. I was emotional and we shared things—important things. It felt right. But I've had all day to think. Overthink ... everything. This could be a really bad idea. I mean, I'm a doctor. What if he has an STD?"

"Condom."

"You can catch something even with a condom. Did you not pay attention to anything in health class?"

She rolls her eyes. "Then be awkward and ask him. Blame it on being a healthcare professional."

I pull in a big breath. "I wish it would've just happened last night. It wouldn't have been awkward. I wouldn't be self-conscious. I'm afraid I won't be ... amazing."

"We have no time for porn. We barely have time to blow your hair out and slap some polish on your toes. Just do the opposite of what comes natural." She takes me by the shoulders, spins me around, and gives me a shove. "Now get in there and shave your body."

She slams my bathroom door behind me.

Holy shit.

What's happening?

She's not wrong. This is new for me. Call it being the only-child-third-child syndrome and having all my parents' attention focused on me all the time. I never pushed the boundaries. Never broke the rules. I've only had sex with two people, for goodness sake.

I shouldn't have told Cadence. This has the potential to end badly. Very badly. Like when she introduced me to tequila my sophomore year of college when our parents were out of town and I got to stay with her instead of Andrew.

Bang, bang, bang. "I don't hear water! Get in the damn shower, Evie!"

Shit. Too many exclamation points for one day.

Micah

SOMEONE IS AT THE HOUSE.

Someone who isn't a friend of my target by the looks of it. They drag their gun-shot-wounded friend back into their car and take off.

It takes no time for Miami PD to fall in behind us.

"Now they know what's happening." I put the comm to my lips and say, "If they separate, you take the second car, we'll keep up with the first."

When Brax hits his lights and sirens, both cars speed. We're running hot in and out of city streets.

"That didn't take long," Brax says.

The second car hits his brakes and turns. Brax swerves, and I grip the dashboard. We barely miss them. I'm thrown back into my seat, but we stay on them.

"If he gets on the freeway, this might not end well," I say before radioing in our location.

But he passes the entrance and turns east.

"He's a fucking idiot," Brax says. "He's going to run out of land."

The Port of Miami is what makes the city epic for the DEA. It might be the cruise capital of the world, but it's also the cargo gateway to America on the east coast.

It's also over five-hundred acres.

"There's our backup," Brax says as he glances at the rearview mirror. Another marked unit joins the chase.

“This is going to get sticky. He’s headed for the cargo lots. He’s lost or stupid.”

Semis and flatbed trailers line the narrow roads. At least everyone knows to get out of the way with the barrage of sirens heading into the area.

“Forklift!” I yell.

Brax hits the brakes.

The driver might as well be a deer in the headlights. He’s got headphones on and didn’t hear shit. He shuffles the machine in reverse.

“Dammit,” Brax bites as he takes off again and turns between two rows of cargo containers stacked three high. “They’re nowhere in sight. They must have turned again. Do you see them?”

“No, and this place is a fucking maze.”

Brax kills the sirens and headlights. I radio for the marked unit to break off north and we go south. Brax weaves through the rows of containers. The sun has almost set—soon it’ll be impossible to find anyone.

“Stop,” I bark and grab my gun from my ankle holster under my jeans. “Runner.”

We’ve done this more times than I can count. Brax says nothing when I jump out of the car. He guns it, and I take off into the shadows.

No one runs in the Miami cargo lots for no reason.

I make it three rows in and nothing.

I finally stop and put my back to a container before I move to the next row. Feet hit the pavement in quick succession.

I glimpse around the corner and see him moving away from me. He hasn’t had time to change out of the red shirt he was wearing when he starred in the surveillance recordings last night. It’s him—Adder’s right hand man. His light brown, shaggy hair swings as he runs.

Without taking the time to let Brax know where we are, I follow with my gun drawn.

He turns right.

The sound of footsteps come to an eerie silence. I halt just shy of the next row.

There's a shuffle.

And heavy breathing.

He needs to hit the gym instead of dealing drugs.

Call it intuition or a sixth sense, but I brace.

The moment it happens, I'm ready.

An arm swings around the corner fisting a handgun.

With my free hand, I fist his forearm and pull him from around the corner.

He pulls the trigger.

The shot goes wide and ricochets off a metal container above us. The sound echoes through the cargo lot.

"Police." When I identify myself, he widens his eyes. "Drop the gun before you get into more trouble."

He doesn't cooperate. He makes the wrong choice and fights back.

He might not be able to run a marathon, but he's no slouch and tries to headbutt me.

"Oomph." I jerk back, but not far enough. I catch his forehead on my cheekbone.

"Fucking pig. I'll kill you."

The radio clipped to my belt clatters to the ground when I flip him and press the side of his face to the metal. It takes three times, but he finally drops the gun when I slam his wrist and arm above his head. I keep his hand held against the container and my forearm between his shoulder blades.

"Your friends dropped you off at the port. What are you running from?" I demand.

“Let me go,” he seethes. “They’ll come back. You don’t want to know what we’ll do when it’s all of us against just you.”

“I have friends, too, asshole. If you want to add resisting arrest to your list, be my guest, but we have things to talk about.”

Tires screech from our sides, and we both tense.

“Fuck,” the guy mutters.

“Yeah, this sucks for you. My friends found us first,” I grit, holding him tight to the metal.

The Miami PD marked car pulls up behind Brax, and they all run to us. Brax nudges the gun to the side with his foot and picks up my radio as the PD officers take over, cuff the guy, and read him his rights.

He’s not done being Mirandized when they flip him around and I get a good look at him face-to-face for the first time. “What the hell am I being arrested for?”

I let the officer finish and add, “Money laundering. Possession of illegal narcotics. Distribution. The list is long.”

“You can’t prove shit.” he yells.

“Then I guess it’ll be your word against the video. Good luck with that.” What I don’t tell him is that we’re going to have a conversation when he gets to the station about a certain hitman. But I’m saving that as a bargaining tool. I barely get a look at his shocked expression as the PD officers turn him back to their car. “Thanks, guys. We’ll catch up with you at the station. Appreciate the last-minute backup.”

“It’s always an experience with you two,” one of them says.

“They dropped this guy and took off,” Brax says as the officers walk off. “Another unit stopped the car on the way out of the cargo lot. An ambulance is on the way to tend to the gun-shot victim, and the rest are being taken into custody. We can let them be processed and question the rest Monday morning, but we want to talk to that one tonight.”

I touch my cheek with the back of my hand when I feel blood drip from my

face. “It’s been a day, and it’s about to get longer.”

“Did he bitch-slap you?” Brax hands me my radio, and we head back to his car.

I wipe the blood on my jeans. “He headbutted me. I need to clean it out.”

“My medical kit is in the back of the car.” He beeps the locks and grins at me as he opens the back hatch. “Nothing a doctor can’t handle.”

I glare at him.

“Looks like you picked the right target’s wife to sleep with.”

“Fuck you,” I mutter as I climb into the passenger seat to dig through the med kit for alcohol wipes. I flip the visor mirror open and inspect my face. “I need to talk to that guy. If anyone knows Adder’s contacts it’ll be him. I need some good news to deliver to Evie.”

He backs up. “I guess we both have wives to get back to. Only yours is someone else’s wife.”

“Kiss my ass, Cruz.”

“If that’s what it takes to get you to come over tomorrow. Landyn wants everyone there, and I want Landyn happy. You’d better not ruin the vibe just because I learned your dirty little secret.”

“You’re not exactly making me want to be around you.”

“Bring the doctor.”

My cheek pulls when I widen my eyes to glare at him. “You want me to bring Dr. Litchfield, Jeff Michael’s wife, to your house for dinner? Won’t Tim be there?”

“I’ll fill him in. You know ... pave the way.”

“I don’t need anyone to pave the way for me. You pretty much paved the way when you fake married your wife. It’s going to be pretty hard for me to stoop lower than that.”

“Hey, nothing was ever fake about Landyn and me.” Brax pulls onto the

interstate toward the office. “The doctor will be sick of being stuck in the house all weekend. I’ll let Landyn know you’re bringing a plus one.”

“I’ve known Evie for approximately three minutes,” I say as I throw everything back into the kit and toss it in his backseat. I refuse to tell him about taking Evie to a funeral, or that I told her about Hannah, or the fact that the more time I spend with her, the more she consumes my thoughts. “She might want to wait for us to find the killer who’s after her before she ventures out to Sunday dinners with strangers.”

“She’ll be safer at my house with a team of agents and Rocco than she would in that mansion she calls a house.”

He’s not wrong.

I change the subject. “You’re going to name your daughter after her Godfather, right?”

Brax doesn’t look away from the road. “Landyn might not hate you anymore, but that’s never going to happen.”

I pull up the text string I can’t stop thinking about.

Me – I’ll be back, but it’ll be a while.

FORGET

Evie

“I think you should have a drink. I made sangria while you were shaving your bits.”

I run my fingers through my freshly blown out hair. My sister can be a pain in the ass, but she deserves a gold medal for her work with a good hairdryer and round brush. “Stop telling me to have a drink. My nerves are shot, and my stomach might as well be a hurricane. Combine that with alcohol and sugar, and I’ll throw up and ruin the night for good.”

“If you’re not going to drink it, then I’m taking it home with me. I’m not going to let a good batch of sangria go to waste.”

“Be my guest,” I mutter.

“When did he text you? It’s been over two hours.” Cadence peeks out the window before looking back at me with a frown. “Did you say something that would make him run away?”

My arms flop to my sides. “I said *okay*. What’s wrong with that?”

“Did you add an emoji or an exclamation point? Maybe all caps so he knows you’re looking forward to it?”

“Holy shit, no. That’s not me, and you know it.”

She cuts across the room with purpose, grips my shoulders, and looks intently into my eyes. “For someone so smart, I don’t understand how you’re not getting the gist of what we’re doing here. It’s time to break out from the *you* you’ve been and be a new you. No more Evie. Be the Evita Mom named you after.”

I pull out of her hold. “Mom loved Andrew Lloyd Webber and was obsessed with the music before they even wrote the musical, and you know it.”

“You don’t have to remind me. You and Andrew got the good names. I’m basically a synonym for rhythm. It doesn’t matter. Evita was brave, but she also slept around. It’s time to live up to your namesake.”

“Evita worked for the poor and working class. She’s not exactly a role model for getting it on with the guy who arrested your husband.”

“But she did sleep her way to the top, right? Or am I getting that mixed up with another musical?”

I shake my head. “Did you not pay attention to anything growing up?”

“We both know the answer to that,” she deadpans. “Can we just focus on the subject at hand? This is about you playing outside of your comfort zone for a change.”

I pull in a breath. “I don’t even tiptoe outside of my comfort zone.”

“I know.” Cadence finally softens her tone. “And look where it got you. You thought Jeff was the safe choice all those years ago. He turned out to be the deadly kind of toxic. I’m not saying you should marry this guy the moment you’re divorced. Hell, if you don’t see him again, you’ve got another notch on your bedpost that I hope will rock your world during a nightmare. I want you to live a little. I’m not saying strip down the moment he gets here, but see where things go. If your clothes start to fall off,” she waves her hand, motioning up and down my body, “you’re prepared.”

I pull in a deep breath and roll my head around to stretch my neck. “Just see where things go. I might be able to do that.”

“That’s my girl.”

I open my eyes to my older sister beaming at me with pride. Hell, I don't think she was this proud of me when I graduated from medical school.

"It's not too late for a sangria," she starts, but doesn't get any additional words out.

The doorbell rings at the same time my security system app buzzes my ass.

I freeze.

She jumps up and down and gives her hands a little clap. "This is so exciting."

I freeze.

This is not exciting.

This is traumatic.

She skips to the door like Magic Mike is on the other side and he's here for a private show.

"Cadence!" I yell but that doesn't stop her. I barely have time to unarm my system when she swings the door open without checking to see who it is, like I don't have a killer after me.

It's not Magic Mike.

It's better.

Micah stands in the wide opening with his arms crossed and another bag slung over his shoulder. His hair is damp with an unruly lock kissing his forehead. He frowns when his gaze lands on my sister until it wanders through the house and lands on me. That frown softens into a lustful stare when he takes me in from head to toe. "Hey."

"Hi," I squeak.

Holy shit.

I actually squeaked.

"Well," Cadence chirps. "This could not have turned out better had I written

the script myself.”

Micah frowns at her again. “Who are you?”

Cadence holds her arm out. “I’m a Fairy Godmother. You’ll do just fine. I’m also leaving.”

I might be desperate enough to argue with my sister and beg her not to leave, but I notice a cut on Micah’s cheek as he walks through my door.

“What happened to your face?”

He shakes his head and drops a small duffel at his feet. “It’s been a day.”

Focusing on the gaping cut is easier than fixating on the funny feeling in my underwear since I did what Cadence told me to do and became one with my razor. I erase the distance between us, lift on my toes, and tilt his face to me to get a better look. “You need to close that for it to heal properly.”

“You can stitch him up,” Cadence announces. “Which brings us to the subject, Micah, when is the last time you’ve had blood work to test for communicable diseases?”

Micah turns and positions himself between my sister and me. “No shit, who are you?”

She juts her hand out. “Cadence *Litchfield* Patterson—note the Litchfield. Evie is my baby sister, and I was here to keep her company while you work to throw my asshole soon-to-be-ex-brother-in-law in prison forever and ever until he dies a depressing death.”

Micah turns to me. “The text?”

I bite my lip and nod.

“You didn’t answer me,” Cadence continues to rule the room. “Have you been tested recently? I mean, since the last time you ... *communicated* with anyone? Evie is a doctor and if she’s going to stitch you up, she needs to know these things.”

Micah doesn’t answer my sister, but looks back at me. “I don’t have the test results on me, but I’m good.”

“My work is done.” Cadence exhales as if she just won a pickleball tournament. She moves around the special agent, who I’m surprised hasn’t run away after the Cadence show, and gives me a peck on the cheek. “Call me if you need anything. Otherwise, I’ll reach out tomorrow.” She hikes a brow at Micah before looking back at me with widened eyes. “To catch up.”

And with that, she’s out the door.

For the pure excuse to kill time, I follow her, flip the deadbolt, and arm my security system.

I pull in a deep breath, pray it will deaden my nerves, and turn to Micah. “I’m sorry. She’s a lot.”

“She is that,” he agrees. “Were you adopted?”

“Unfortunately, no.” I quickly change the subject to something within my slim comfort zone. “I’m just going to run upstairs and get something for that cut.”

He shakes his head. “I already cleaned it. I stopped at home and took a shower. It’ll be fine.”

“Why don’t you stick to arresting people and leave the healthcare to me. It could get infected not to mention the ugly scar you’ll get. Or uglier. If you’re hungry, there’s food in the fridge and some donuts left. Help yourself.”

I hurry up the stairs to the hall closet where I keep a stash of medical supplies. The hellion portion of my son has needed them more than a few times in his short life. I grab everything but decide to bypass the surgical gloves. It’s not like I’m stitching him, and with what’s proposed for the rest of the night, gloves feel odd.

When I make my way back to the kitchen, Micah is popping the last bite of a donut in his mouth and talks with his mouth full. “You really made a dent in these.”

“I’ve had a bad week. I refuse to apologize for eating my weight in baked goods. Sit.”

His fine ass finds a barstool, and he spreads his thick thighs to make room for

me.

The only thing keeping my heart from beating out of my chest is his cut. I'm laser focused and not paying any attention to the heat rolling off his muscled body.

"I need to tell you something," he says out of the blue. I'm a doctor and know for a fact those words rarely mean anything positive.

I drop the medical kit on the counter next to us. "I'm not sure things could get worse than they already are."

He winces.

"Wow. That bad? Tell me," I demand.

"Adder," he starts. "The guy on the tap who—"

"I know who he is," I snap, interrupting him. "That's not really a name I could forget given he's the go between for Jeff and the killer. What about him?"

He shakes his head once and hooks a finger in my waistband giving me a yank. "It's not good, baby. He's dead."

My eyes widen, and my jaw goes slack. "No."

"I'm sorry. There was a dope house I had pole cameras on, but it wasn't really a dope house. It was a cash house. They dropped drug money there before it was divvied out to be laundered. This is why I was called out this morning. There was a holdup and then a shootout. Adder was killed."

I shake my head and close my eyes. "What now?"

He pushes a lock of hair from my face. "We arrested more targets today who were with them in the house. We questioned them but they knew nothing about a hitman that Adder worked with."

My heart races for a man I didn't know, but it's for purely selfish reasons. He was the one person on this earth with the information I need.

I say nothing. There's nothing to say to that. I rip open an alcohol wipe, but my bedside manner is shit when I snap, "How did this happen?"

He grabs my hand. “Baby, wait. We didn’t get an answer tonight, but that doesn’t mean we’re going to quit looking. *I won’t stop looking.*”

I pull in a big breath but don’t pull away from him. “I’m scared.”

His hand dips behind my neck, and I get a squeeze. “I know. I’m sorry. The only thing I can do is promise that I won’t stop until I find him. I promise.”

“I appreciate it, but that’s something you can’t promise. I’m a doctor. I know more than anyone, nothing is guaranteed.”

This time he frames my face with both hands as I stare into his expression that’s intense and resolute. “Baby, this is something that I will promise. If I can’t find him through investigations, I’ll glue myself to your side and make sure he doesn’t get to you or Chase. I swear.”

It’s everything I can do to control my emotions. “Please don’t do that.”

“Do what?” he demands. “Tell you the truth?”

“Yes,” I whisper. “That and be sweet. I can’t take it.”

His eyes drop to my lips as his thumb strokes my jaw. “He did a number on you.”

I shake my head and pull his hands from my face. “I need to clean this gash.”

“You can do anything you want as long as you believe me.”

“Believing you would be like a fairy tale.” I look back to my medical kit and get what I need. “Tell me how you got this cut.”

“I was headbutted while trying to wrestle a gun away from someone.”

I stop what I’m doing. Damn. I could get lost in his blue eyes. “You had to wrestle a gun away from someone?”

He shrugs. “The guy who I questioned tonight. We arrested him, and he’s now in jail with your husband.”

The tips of his fingers dance on my hip as I work, causing the damn butterflies to dance in my stomach. “Besides association of guilt, what else did he do?”

“Aside from being a target on the case that your husband is tied to—”

“Stop,” I interrupt. My nerves have had it. The bad news Micah just delivered pushed me over the edge. “Can you please not call him that?”

One corner of his lips tip to the sky. “I’d love to not call him that.”

“Thank you.”

He starts over. “Aside from being a target on the case that the asshole who used to live here is tied to...” His words trail off and he lifts his brows in question.

“Much better. Thank you.”

Micah nods. “He also has an outstanding warrant for murder.”

My eyes widen. “That’s horrible.”

“That’s my job,” he amends. “After we arrested him on drug charges, we found out he had a warrant for homicide. You deal with death—I deal with drugs and murder. It is what it is.”

I turn back to his wound and finish cleaning it. “I’m trying to figure you out, Micah Emmett.”

“What you see is what you get.” His words brush my skin in a breath of sugar, cinnamon, and vanilla from the donut. I want to taste it on his tongue.

“I don’t think that’s the case. I think there’s a whole lot to you that you don’t allow anyone to see.” I peel open a butterfly bandage. “Don’t move.”

He doesn’t obey and moves. His fingers go from teasing my hips to a tight grip as he pulls me tight to him. I’m pressed to the bulge between his legs and have to pause to take in every ounce of his intensity. “You moved.”

“I did.” His grip on me tightens. “But I’m good now. I could stay like this all night.”

I pull in a breath and focus on my task. “You went to a funeral with me.”

“That’s not a question.”

“You moved again. I can’t put this bandage on when you’re talking.”

“Then stop bringing up shit you already know.”

I adhere one side of the bandage and pull his cut closed. I add another and toss the wrappers to the counter next to us. “You just said we both deal with death in our jobs. And you went to a funeral with me even though you knew it would be painful for you. I could tell it was.”

His voice is low and guttural. “Still not a question, Evie. Get to it.”

I run my bare finger lightly over the butterflies to make sure they’re smooth. “Keep that clean and dry.”

His hands part. One works its way up my back and the other lands on my ass. My hands land on his pecs. His body is rock hard, warm, and he smells clean and crisp. My senses are in overload. I press into his muscles as he holds me close. “You’ve yet to ask me a question.”

I give my head a small shake. “I changed my mind.”

His eyes narrow. “Is it about what your sister asked me? Because I swear, I’m clean.”

“No, not that. I mean, I appreciate knowing that. For some reason, I trust you. If I didn’t, you wouldn’t be here.” Then the words rush out of my mouth. “I am too. Clean.”

A slow smile touches his lips. “That’s good to know, since you’re a doctor, and you said you haven’t been with your husband in forever. I’m still waiting for your question.”

“I told you, I changed my mind.”

A wrinkle forms between his blue eyes.

“I just want you to know that you going to the funeral with me means a lot. And it means even more after you told me about your sister. I don’t remember the last time someone was that selfless for me.”

He stares at me.

“So, thank you,” I add. “It means even more to me now.”

His arms constrict around me, holding me impossibly tight. I couldn't get away if I wanted to. He tips my head back, and I think this is it. That he's about to kiss me, and this really might happen.

"That asshole who used to live here," he growls. "He didn't deserve you. He doesn't deserve you. Know that, Evie. Don't let your shit marriage fool you. Anyone who has you right here, like this? Expect them to hand you the fucking world." I lose my breath when he presses on my bottom, holding me tight to his cock. "You deserve it."

I shake my head, not because I don't understand, but because everything he just said hits me somewhere deep.

A place I've closed off and ignored. I pretended I didn't need it from anyone, especially the person I should've expected it from the most.

"Promise me, Evie. Demand the fucking world, because I have a feeling you give it in spades."

He instantly blurs when my eyes well. "I don't understand why you're here. I'm a shitshow. A prisoner in my own home. I have nothing to offer you besides a decent homemade marinara and fresh green chili sauce. I didn't even save you very many donuts. Hell, Cadence ate two of them."

"I don't want to talk about your sister or food." From the sound of it, he doesn't want to talk about my homemade sauces either. "I want to talk about you and pick up where we left off this morning."

I fist the thin T-shirt covering his muscled chest. "I'm not going to lie, Micah. I'm nervous."

His embrace loosens a touch, and his face backs away from mine. "About me?"

I shake my head and hold him to me. "No. Not you. It's just been..."

"It's been what?" he demands.

I pause, not wanting to say it. Not at all wanting to admit just how depressing my life has been.

My marriage.

The accident.

Loneliness...

“Evie.” He bites my name with a tinge of desperation and anger. “What?”

“I haven’t had sex in a long time,” I spit. “And you know what? I’m not sorry. My marriage was bad for years. I didn’t want him, and he certainly didn’t give a shit about me. That’s evident. But, it’s still been a long time. I...” I close my eyes and exhale. I’ll feel better if I get it out. When I open my eyes, his are imploring, begging for my next words. “I don’t want to be a disappointment.”

His expression relaxes, and so does his hold on me. But that doesn’t mean he lets me go. Gone is the intensity that overtook him moments ago.

“Micah?” I call to him. “What’s wrong?”

His hands return to my hips. I’m forced to grip his shoulders to hang on when he lifts me.

Now I’m wrapped up in the special agent in a whole other way. My legs straddle his hips. My sex is pressed to his cock. I feel it through the thin shorts I threw on after I shaved everything.

And his hands.

One has worked its way up my tank, hot on my bare skin with only my thin bra strap separating us. The other is plastered to my ass again holding me tight. And the promise of what’s to come, if I just let loose and don’t overthink this the way I overthink everything.

His lips take mine. This kiss isn’t soft nor does it ease me into anything. Micah devours me, drinks me in. If he could consume me, I think he might.

And I’m here for it.

I’m here for all of it.

I sink into him and take every ounce.

His hand on my ass slides to my bare thigh and squeezes. His hold on my bare skin does things to me. Things that haven’t happened in a long time.

A flush warms my skin. Every nerve ending in my body is alert. My heart speeds.

I'm wet.

And alive.

Damn, I don't remember the last time I've felt so alive.

I slide my hands up his chest, his neck, and into his hair. Just when I think I can't get closer to him, he pulls away from me.

His heated eyes hit me. "I don't want to know what you're afraid of. I can handle any fear you throw at my feet. I only want to know what you want."

I don't answer, but I do shift my hips and grind against his hard cock. I feel abrasive denim through my shorts when all I want is him.

His heated gaze drags over my face and drops between us quickly before he mutters, "I've never had a shot at anyone like you. Tell me what you want, Evie."

I force myself to swallow over the lump in my throat when I finally admit, "I want to forget everything."

His tongue peeks out and wets the crease of his lips. It's like he's begging for more. I wonder if he's imagining what I'll taste like on the tip of his tongue.

Because I've imagined the same.

My thoughts ... they've been all over the place.

I want something the old Evie would never dream of.

I do something selfish. Something that could be reckless if I allow my heart to get involved. Because that's definitely a possibility. I don't do anything in life that isn't led with my heart.

"Make me forget everything..." His hand wrapped around the back of my thigh gives me a firm squeeze as I finish. "But you."

He easily stands with me in his arms. He's impossibly big and strong and makes me feel like a feather. We're up the stairs and down the hall before I

know it. He takes me straight to the room I shared with Jeff since my parents bought us this house as a wedding gift.

To a room I went from loving my husband in to hating him in. I might have pretended everywhere else in my life that my marriage wasn't spiraling down the drain, but not in here. Here, I was the ice queen, and he let me know it at every turn.

But not now.

I'm smoldering.

My feet hit the floor before we get to the bed, and Micah grips the hem of my tank and pulls. It's over my head and on the floor before I know it. His eyes drop to my breasts at the same time he pushes my shorts over my hips. I kick them to the side. My nipples are peeking out of black lace that matches my thong. It's the sexiest lingerie I own, and I had to dig it out of the back of a drawer. It's not comfortable, it's itchy, and there's been no reason to wear it.

But from the look on Micah's face, I know I chose well.

At least, I thought I did until he takes a step back and drops to a knee in front of me. His gaze is zeroed in on my scar.

His hands frame my rib cage and this thumb swipes the pink puckered skin on my abdomen. "What's this?"

I try to cover it up, but he pushes my hand away.

"No." He frowns again and demands, "What happened to you?"

"Surgery." I grab his forearms and try to pull him to his feet but he doesn't budge. He's eye level with my breasts and he's gone from ripping my clothes off to inspecting my body.

"This is fresh." He inspects my scar that starts from the middle of my rib cage and angles down.

"You said you saw the report from the accident. I had internal damage from the impact. My liver was ruptured. If an internal bleed is minor, it can sometimes heal on its own, but not mine. I was rushed into emergency surgery to repair it."

He splays a hand over my scar and looks up in question.

I shrug. “Laparoscopic really isn’t an option when your blood pressure falls and your heart rate shoots through the roof.”

“Evie,” he mutters and turns his attention back to my abdomen.

“I never think twice about it. I see scars all day, every day. My patients have lived through a lifetime of accidents and sickness. I’m used to it. I said I was nervous, but not about this. It saved my life. I’m grateful for it.” I tense in his hold. “Does it bother you? If it does, we can stop.”

BENDY

Evie

His answer is quick and resolute.

“Yes, it fucking bothers me.” He climbs to his feet. His hands frame my face, and a force bleeds from him like I haven’t seen before. “The man who was supposed to protect you did this. Just looking at this scar is bad enough, but knowing it was put there by the man who married you makes me fucking irate.”

My chest heaves with emotion. “In my defense I didn’t know it was caused by him until you knocked on my door. So, when you put it that way, yes, it’s bad. But all this time, I was just grateful I was alive and nothing happened to Chase.”

His gaze drops to my lips before he takes my mouth again. This time it’s not desperate.

It’s reverent.

His lips move slowly against mine. His tongue, that looked like it was begging to taste me just moments ago, laps and savors me.

I lose his kiss but he stays close, his fingertips brush the hair away at my temple. He reaches into his back pocket and produces a stack of condoms.

My insides flip and flop when I see how many he brought. “You came prepared.”

He tosses them to the side, and they land in an array on my bed. “I did. And it’s a good thing.”

I don’t agree. It’s better than good. It’s a great thing.

He reaches over his head and yanks at his T-shirt. It lands on the ground with my clothes. This time, it’s my turn to look and touch.

I see bodies all the time—all day, every day—but not like his. I run the tip of my index finger down his abs, over every beautiful mountain and delicious valley. It’s my turn to wonder what he tastes and feels like on my tongue. A smattering of hair runs across his chest and below his abs, leading to the bulge that cannot be hidden.

“Evie,” he calls for me.

I look up and wonder if desperation is written all over my face since it’s bubbling inside me.

“Baby.” He slips a finger beneath my thong at my hips and gives them a nudge. My heart races, but this time it has nothing to do with my car crashing into a pile of construction barrels. It only has to do with the effect this man has on me—emotionally and physically. He leans in and presses his lips to mine, but I don’t participate. I gasp when his fingers find my sex for a full swipe right before he cups me. He looks deep into my eyes as he states his intentions. “I’m going to fuck every memory of that asshole from your beautiful head. Are you ready?”

“Holy shit.”

“I’ll take that...” He swipes through my drenched sex to find my clit, and gives it a firm circle. “And this, as an answer.”

My eyes begin to fall shut, but fly back open when he pinches me ... *there*.

The sensation shoots through my body, and I feel it from my scalp to my nipples and down to my toes as I exhale through parted lips. “And you’re going to watch every moment. I want it burned on your brain so when I’m

not right here, you'll always remember how you deserve to be treated.”

As if he can read my mind, he brings his hands to my breasts and circles my nipples through the lace. I feel oddly more exposed than I should standing here in only my bra.

“Watch,” he demands, and my eyes fall to my chest where he’s still taunting me through lace. His touch through the lace shoots straight between my legs. I’m drenched and squeeze my thighs together for relief and sanity. But I do as he said and watch every slow movement he makes on me. What I don’t expect is for him to dip his fingers beneath the lace and pull.

I moan as my body responds to him in every way. My nipples harden, my breasts swell from the spike of oxytocin shooting through my system.

Or, in my case, a strong shot of Micah Emmett.

“There we go,” he mutters as he circles my nipples with nothing between us. Skin to skin.

He takes a step back to get a good look at me.

“Micah.” His name is a plea on my tongue. I have no idea what to expect next. The anticipation is as much of an aphrodisiac as my reality. “What are you doing?”

He rips at the button fly on his jeans and dips his hand down the front of his boxers to adjust himself. His tip sticks out the band and glistens at me.

All of a sudden, I want to taste it.

I’ve never had that desire in my life.

“I might faint again,” I whisper.

His gaze drags up my body—my very bare body, thanks to my own desperation to impress him. He takes his time, licks his lips, and I wonder what he’s thinking.

“You’re not going to faint,” he assures me. “There’s also no reason for you to be nervous.”

“Micah, please,” I beg, but not for the reason he probably wants. I feel

smaller than ever, and he feels impossibly powerful. “I can’t stand here like this much longer.”

He tips his head a touch. “That’s too bad, because I think I could stand here and stare at you for the rest of my life.”

I shake my head and start to fold my arms across my body.

But he’s faster.

He takes my wrists and holds them against the small of my back and bare ass. Pressing against me, his bare chest is warm against my sensitive breasts, and his lips are so close to mine, his breath becomes one with my skin. “There’s no reason for you to be nervous, baby.”

I tip my head to look up at him. “Since I’m the one standing here almost naked, I disagree.”

A satisfied smile tugs at his lips. “You can’t be dressed for what I’m about to do to you.”

I suck in a swift breath.

“And you don’t have to be nervous, because you don’t have to do a thing. I’m going to take care of you tonight. Consider yourself here for the experience.”

I gulp. “The Micah Experience?”

His smile swells. “You said it. Not me.”

He leans in and brushes his lips against mine right before he drops to his knees again. My bare hips are framed in his big hands, and he pulls me to him, this time to kiss the scar he was so angry about.

Lord, this man is going to kill me.

“So fucking beautiful,” he murmurs as his hands move, and I feel his thumbs on my sex.

I moan when he massages my lips there before pulling them apart. “Take a step.”

I move my right foot a few inches as he proves I can be wetter than I was,

which I didn't think was possible.

“Wider, baby.”

Oh, shit.

I shift my legs wider.

“Perfect.” I feel the words on my sex. “So fucking perfect.”

And then I really feel him.

I was right about his tongue. It very much wanted to taste me.

His thumbs hold me wide, and his tongue dips inside, lapping me from deep within to my clit.

I moan and thread my fingers through his hair. His fingers press into my skin as he circles my clit.

It's been so long. I have no chill. But more than that, I can't deny the fact it's just him. If I could lock my orgasm out and keep it at bay just to enjoy this for a few minutes, I would.

Micah isn't having it. He's merciless and wasn't kidding when he said he was hungry.

He sucks.

Licks.

Moves against me with vigor.

I fist his hair so I don't topple over when my orgasm creeps embarrassingly fast. It takes over my body, but Micah doesn't let up. One hand snakes around to my ass to hold me up when my knees shake.

I'm not sure I've ever come this hard.

“Micah.” I gasp and call out for him. I never want this to end even though I'm desperate for him to stop. My body is under his control, and I'm positive this room has never heard noises like this. I moan and writhe and shake.

I'm not sure I can stay standing. Micah feels it and takes pity on me. He

sucks one last time before letting go. When he stands, he takes me with him. He picks me up like a virginal bride on her wedding night with not one problem in the world to worry about.

This couldn't be more different than my reality.

He leans down and pulls my nipple into his mouth and gives it a sensual bite.

"You're going to be the one to kill me," I mutter through labored breaths, not recovered from the life-changing orgasm. "Either that or you're going to ruin sex for me for the rest of my life. And we haven't even had sex yet."

"If that's a hint of what it'll be like to be buried deep within you, then you just ruined pussy for me for the rest of time. There's nothing that can stand up to that. I say we're even."

"How can words be so crude and sweet at the same time?"

He smirks. "I've been called crude a lot, but never sweet in the same sentence. You're the sweet one, baby."

My back hits the bed with an unceremonious bounce. He leans over me, with his hand next to my head, his arm straight. His eyes rake over my sated body. I fold one thigh over the other and bring my hand up to one of my breasts that are still pushed out of my bra.

"The way you look at me so unapologetically is unnerving."

He takes my hand that's trying and failing to cover my body with his free one and lifts it to his lips. He pries my fingers open and kisses the palm of my hand. "I don't plan to apologize for memorizing your body. Maybe the better word would be captivated."

I shake my head.

"Consumed," he adds. "Fascinated. Obsessed."

"Stop it." I turn my hand in his and pull him to me. He falls to his tattooed forearm and takes my mouth. And just like I said, he does it unapologetically. The taste of me on his tongue is heady as the word obsessed bounces around my head like a jumping bean. I wrap my arms around his neck and hold him close until I hear the crinkle of a condom wrapper.

“I can’t wait much longer, baby.”

My insides flutter, like he didn’t just rock my world moments ago. I lose his heat when he stands.

This time it’s my turn to stare at him. The moment his jeans and boxers hit the floor, I mutter, “Holy shit.”

He rips the condom open with his teeth.

My eyes follow his movements south straight to his long, thick erection. It’s standing at attention, teasing and tempting me, proving what I know to be a fact, since I’m a doctor—that all humans are not created equally.

There’s no greater evidence of that than Special Agent Micah Emmett.

His tip is engorged, purple, and looks like it’s ready to explode. He never breaks our connection as he fists himself, giving his cock two strong pumps.

I lick my lips.

“Later,” he grits. “That’s definitely happening later.”

I hike a brow at his presumptuousness, but I don’t argue. I can’t say that blow jobs are on my most-loved list of activities, but they might be for the man standing in front of me.

He’s a god among mortals.

He slides the condom onto his cock, and I’m almost sad. I want to feel it against my skin. Touch him, take him in my hand, and feel its strength inside velvety-smooth skin.

He doesn’t waste any time and puts a knee to the bed between my legs and climbs over me.

But what he does next surprises me. He dips a hand under my back and rolls, taking me with him. My legs part and fall on each side of his hips. He flips my bra clasp and it instantly goes slack. “Off with this.”

He pushes me to sit on his abs and my bra falls down my arms. His hands go from my breasts and feel their way down to my hips.

“Up, baby. I want to watch you take every inch of me.”

When I lift to my knees, his fingers come to my sex and dip inside. He fills me with three, and I’m impossibly wet. When he circles my needy clit again, my head falls back. “Yes.”

“You’re greedy,” he says on a smile. “I like that.”

I look down at him beneath me. “You’re generous. That’s new for me.”

He loses the smile and positions himself at my opening. His tip presses at my sex, and I’m not nervous anymore.

I’m anxious. I want this more than I’ve wanted anything in a long time.

He wasn’t kidding when he said he couldn’t wait any longer. His grip on my hips tightens and doesn’t ease me into anything.

He lifts his hips and yanks me down at the same time.

My lips part as my body forms to his.

Quick.

Hard.

And so good.

I take in his expression—his heated gaze is heavy on me. It’s overwhelming.

Everything is overwhelming. Everything is out of my control.

But this.

“Micah.” His name is a breath on my lips. He holds me down on his cock, molding us as one. This man who was a stranger just days ago.

When he bends at the waist, I feel him everywhere. We’re chest to chest, skin to skin, nose to nose. And he’s inside me so deep, it takes my breath away.

His hands part—one dips into my messy hair and the other firm on my ass when he takes my mouth. I cup his jaw in my hands to hold him to me, but he pulls away.

I not only hear his words, but feel them everywhere when they vibrate through his body. “You feel so fucking good. Dammit, Evie. I’m desperate to fuck you and dreading the moment I come, because I don’t want this moment to end.”

I rock into him once and press my breasts against his wide chest. “This is the only good thing in my life right now. I give desperation new meaning.”

“We’re going to need more condoms. Are you ready? There are so many ways I want to fuck you, baby. But this first time, I want to look into your eyes.”

I don’t have time to ask or dream about all the ways he wants to fuck me. We’ll need more condoms, because I can’t wait to find out.

Without losing our connection, he holds me to him, puts a knee to the bed, and flips me to my back.

Missionary.

It’s basic and run of the mill and completely vanilla.

But looking up at Micah, big and strong and beautiful, it doesn’t feel like any of those things. I thought when I decided to do this, it would be for me, just like Cadence said. I thought it might be wild and rough and quick. But it’s not any of those things.

I never imagined it would be this.

Intimate.

Micah drops to his forearms, caging me in. His breath mingles with mine, and the tips of our noses brush when he slides out and pushes back in.

So full. I forget about me and get lost in him.

I pull my knees up his sides, and my toes play on his ass. He licks his lips and presses in more.

He likes that.

He reaches down with one arm and hooks it behind my knee, pulling me impossibly wide. This time he slides back in quicker and harder.

“Fuck,” he mutters against my lips. “I’m going to have to savor you next time.”

He angles his hips and grinds into my sensitive clit.

“Ah,” I moan on a breath. “Yes, do that again.”

He does, but this time it’s harder.

My head tips back, and I arch for more.

“You like that,” he growls.

“So much.”

I think I won the sex lottery.

Every bulky muscle in his body tenses as he really starts to move, proving there’s nothing vanilla about Micah even in a vanilla position.

He slams into me with a force I didn’t know was possible. Every time we come together, he hits my clit with such force, I feel it again. I’ve never orgasmed during sex. But I’ve also never been with a powerhouse of a man before.

Every time he takes me, it’s raw and unchained and completely carnal. I can hear our bodies come together and my wet sex.

I can’t believe I’m thinking this, but I want more.

“Harder,” I beg and wonder who I am. I’ve never begged for anything in my life. “I’m close.”

“Come on my cock, baby.”

His hand at my head fists my hair as he pulls my head back. The pull at my roots along with the way he’s taking me is too much. I close my eyes and lose myself in him. I feel it low in my belly first.

I want it so much. I’m desperate for it.

Our bodies collide with a sheen of sweat and the room is filled with our heavy breaths and moans.

This is new. I had no idea this could be so good.

My body tenses and my sex quakes around his cock that continues to move inside me.

“Fuck, yes,” he groans and dips his head to the side of mine as he fucks me even harder.

His strong jaw presses against my temple when he becomes relentless. He’s surrounding me, filling me, and possessing me. I’ve never felt so imprisoned, dominated, and so...

Safe.

I call out as my second Micah-induced orgasm washes over me. He slams into me again and again and one more time before he stills, planted so deep within me, I know he touched places I didn’t know were possible.

He gives me his weight, and his breaths come hard as he presses me into the bed. Neither of us move or utter a word.

All I can do is wrap my arms around his neck and wish it would never end.

Micah just made my reality melt away and took me to a place I thought of nothing but him and me—of us.

When he moves, he doesn’t pull out. I’m not sure how, after what we just did, but he’s still semi-hard inside me. He presses in.

I feel it in my sensitive clit.

He turns and puts his lips to the side of my head. “I’m still inside you and can’t wait to do that again. You’re very...”

He lets his words trail off. I turn my gaze to him quickly and tense. “I’m very what?”

The sides of his lips tip on one side. “Bendy. That’s a bonus I wasn’t expecting. What did you think I was going to say?”

I relax and exhale. “Oh. I like yoga, but I don’t have time to go as often as I like.”

He pulls on my hair and tips my head to give himself access to lick up the column of my neck. “When this shit is settled, I’ll do everything I can so you can do all the yoga you want. Sex with a contortionist ... goals I never knew I needed.”

What I don’t say is I never have time between work and basically living as a single mom inside of my marriage. If I can fit in ten minutes of stretching at the end of the day, I call it a win.

But what I really focus on is him talking about sex after this is settled.

“I’ve got to deal with this condom. Don’t move. I’ll be right back.” I bite my lip and nod, but he doesn’t move. He presses into me one more time and adds, “And just for your information, there was no reason for you to be nervous or anxious or whatever the fuck you were. I thought I wanted you before I had you. Now I really want you. I hope you’re ready.”

He leans down and presses his lips to mine one last time before he slides out. I feel every inch as he leaves me.

I’m going to be sore, but in the best way ever.

I watch as he climbs out of bed and stalks across the bedroom to the bathroom. Every gorgeous muscle on display. Micah naked from the back is as good as it is from the front.

I grab a pillow and stare at the ceiling.

I did it.

Cadence was right, and she was also wrong.

Micah rocked my world.

But he also nudged something else deep inside me, in a place that’s been dormant for so long, I forgot it existed.

Shit.

What am I thinking?

This isn’t that.

No matter what place inside me it touched, I can't go there. It was sex. That's it. I need to separate that from everything else.

The only thing I have the emotional space for is getting Chase home.

SEX GOD

Micah

It's not lost on me I just spent the night in another man's house.
Fucking his wife.

In his bed.

Then I fucked her in his shower.

This morning, I gave her an orgasm while she sat on his kitchen island.

Okay, fine. Calling this his house is a stretch that's even bendier than his wife.

Jeff Michaels' name is not on the deed. Hell, he's not even listed on the homeowner's insurance policy or the utilities.

My work is based on facts, and since I'm fucking good at my job, this is hands-down fact. I looked that shit up as soon as I identified him as a target. This house—if you can call it a mere house when it's really a small mansion—is paid off and solely in Evie's name. There has to be a story there somewhere, especially given the prenup Jeff was forced to sign prior to their marriage years ago.

He's like the asshole friend who crashed on your sofa in college and you couldn't kick out no matter how hard you tried.

I wasn't kidding when I told Brax I'm not a homewrecker. That is one line I will not cross. My parents have been married thirty-eight years, and have been through thick and thin. I'm not sure how they would've survived losing Hannah if they didn't have each other. Hell, I barely did.

Do I want what my parents have some day?

Hell, yes.

Someday being the operative word.

I look across the house to the subject that has made me a homewrecker in definition only. She's curled into herself, her bare legs and feet tucked beneath her in the corner of the sofa. Her hair is still wet from our shower, and she's wearing a pair of cutoff shorts and a tank. I know for a fact she didn't bother with a bra since I had my way with her on the island.

Once the clock hit eight, she kissed me and apologized that she'd have to ignore me so she could FaceTime her son.

I told her to never apologize to me for wanting to spend time with him. Then she apologized again and told me I'd have to be quiet and stay out of the video feed.

If she wasn't so anxious to talk to him, we would've had another discussion on why she feels the need to apologize for things that she damn well shouldn't.

But she was anxious, so I let that slide and had to figure out her complicated espresso machine on my own.

She smiles into the screen, but I can tell it's not genuine. Her expression is tight and full of anxiety. They talked about what he did yesterday. Every time Chase asks when he has to come home, Evie deflects better than a politician in the hot seat.

"Grandpa will be home today," Evie tells him. "What are the three of you going to do?"

His little voice comes across the phone. "Grandpa got us a model plane to build. It's a goodbye plane."

Evie tips her head and she looks like she's holding back tears. "You mean a biplane?"

"That's what I said." It sounds like he's running in circles with the phone. "Grandma is making me read and it's not even school. I don't want to, and I don't like the book she got me."

"Grandma used to make me read too. I didn't always like it but it made me smart, and it will you too. I'm sure it's not long. Does she set the timer?"

"Yeeees," he drawls. He sounds like his grandmother is torturing him. "It takes, like, a bagillion hours."

"Chase, don't tell your mama fibs," a woman yells from the background. "You read for fifteen minutes. You need to be ready when school starts so you're put in the smart groups."

Chase groans, and Evie rolls her eyes as she lowers her tone. "You can sit still for fifteen minutes. She used to say the same things to me when I was little. Your grandmother is competitive."

"I heard that Evita!" I assume that's her mother.

She makes a face into the phone at her son, and he giggles.

"When do I come home, Mama?"

Evie's eyes glass over but she holds it together. Since it sounds like Chase has been running, jumping, and has dropped his grandfather's phone three times since they started the conversation, I doubt he notices.

"But you're having so much fun," Evie says in a tone that's unnaturally high. "I go back to work tomorrow. It might be easier for you to stay there this week since I haven't hired another babysitter yet. You don't want to go to work with me again, do you? You get so bored there."

Reverse psychology. Nicely done, baby.

"I miss my toys," he whines.

Evie wipes away a stray tear, but keeps her tone even. "I miss you, baby. I'm looking for a babysitter to stay at home with you until school starts."

“I don’t want a babysitter who makes me read,” he groans.

“It’s not that bad, Chase,” his grandmother coos. “Why don’t you say goodbye to your mama for now and let me talk to her. You can call her again later.”

“Bye, Mama. I need to go find Grandpa and tell him it’s time for the plane.”

Evie’s voice breaks. “Love you, baby. I miss you so much. I’ll call later. Be good for Grandma and Grandpa, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Hey, what do you say to your mama?” his grandmother prompts.

“Love you, Mama!” Chase yells, but it sounds like he’s probably twenty feet away already.

And that does it. Evie turns her head to the side and gives into the emotion of being apart from her child.

Her mother tries to comfort her. “Evita, he’s really doing well. We’re keeping him busy. That was the first time he’s uttered a word about wanting to go home.”

Evie nods and looks into the phone with her tear-stained face. “I know. I can tell he’s fine. I just miss him. And the fact that it’s not safe for him to be here or with me in general is wearing on me.”

“Are you okay?” her mother asks. “Everyone has been to see you but me. But if I leave, Chase will ask to come with me. We think it’s best for me to just stay home. He’s used to your father leaving for work. Me, not so much.”

Evie nods. “I know. Thank you for everything you’re doing. I’m a mess, but I know he’s happy. If he weren’t, I couldn’t handle this at all, and at the moment, I’m hanging on by a thread.”

Her mother goes on as I stand in the kitchen. I don’t even pretend that I’m not listening. “What are you doing to keep yourself busy? I’m sure you’re absolutely miserable being stuck at home alone.”

Evie fidgets on the sofa. I wonder if she’s sore from being *miserable by*

herself. If they only knew I did everything I could last night to keep their daughter from being miserable, and I was far from it myself. I feel like I'm in fucking high school again hiding from her parents. "I promise I'm okay. Cadence stopped by last night. We hung out."

"Your sister is so sweet."

"Yeah. She's the best," Evie agrees. It's hard not to bark a laugh since I've met her sister. Evie is sweet—her sister is a tornado. I wonder if Mrs. Litchfield really knows her middle daughter. "I've got to go do something with my hair before it turns into a frizzy mess. Can I talk to you later when I call Chase?"

"Of course, darling. Take care of yourself emotionally. I hate it that I can't be there with you right now."

It's okay, Mrs. Litchfield. I'm happy to take care of your daughter.

"Thanks, Mom. And thank you for keeping Chase so busy. That's not an easy job."

"Well, it's because he's so smart. Thank goodness he took after you and not his father. I know it might be too soon for this after all you've been through this week, but as soon as the police catch this..." she pauses and whispers, "*murderer*." She clears her throat. "Then this will all be for the best. Jeff has shown his true colors. You and Chase will be done with him for good."

I cross my arms and lean back on the counter and feel fucking good about myself. Mrs. Litchfield gets it. I'm no homewrecker.

"Can we at least wait for them to catch the killer before we go into the whole *this is for the best* or *everything happens for a reason* stage?"

"Too soon?"

"Yes, Mom. I'd like for my son and I to come and go without a bodyguard before we send up prayers of gratitude for Jeff putting his family through hell."

"Okay, sweetheart. I'll be grateful quietly until we can all celebrate openly."

Evie looks like she wants to throw her cell across the room, but instead she

cuts her mom off for good. “I need to dry my hair. I’ll talk to you later.”

“Love you.”

“Love you too.”

She flips off her phone and tosses it to the sofa next to her. “Something to know about my family—my sister is the inappropriate version of my mother. They mean well, but holy shit, they’re a lot.”

I push off the island where I stayed out of the way so her family didn’t know I was here. Not that the security guard outside couldn’t rat me out to her dad since that’s who he officially works for. But I don’t give a shit. She’s an adult and can do whatever the hell she wants.

I pick up her phone and sit next to her. “Your family loves you.”

She shifts to face me and leans her head on the back of the sofa. “They do. I can’t hold that against them.”

“And they hate the asshole.”

She sighs. “I knew I wanted a divorce, but the hate I have for him is a new development. My family has always hated him, but I don’t hate easily. They’re not hiding it like they used to. At least they’re not throwing it in my face yet.”

I take her hand in mine and thread our fingers. “Is that something they’d do?”

She shakes her head. “Not really, but any mention of him feels like it. I made a horrible choice when I married him. When I look back on it, I’m able to see things so clearly. I wonder how I was blinded to who he was. He never loved me. He loved the idea of marrying into my family. I feel like a failure.”

“You can’t change the past so there’s no point in worrying about it.” I drag one of her legs over my lap and change the subject. “What are your plans today?”

She throws her hand out and motions around her quiet, big-ass house. “I’ve got a full day, as you can see.”

I run my hand up the back of her thigh. “Seriously, you’re a doctor and a

mom. You have a free day. What are you going to do with it?”

“Micah, last night was amazing.” She pulls her hand from mine and tries to do the same with her leg, but I hold tight and frown. She finally gives in but she doesn’t stop talking. “But you don’t have to babysit me. You have a life—or, I assume you do. Everyone has a life. Well, everyone but me at the moment. It’s your Sunday. The guards changed a little bit ago. I’m sure he’s rested and ready to take on the world on my behalf. You don’t have to hang out with me all day.”

What the fuck.

Does she think she’s getting off that easily?

I stare at her for a bit too long. She’s about to open her mouth to spit some more bullshit about me having a life, which I’m not about to admit couldn’t be more wrong.

I blurt it at the same time I know this is going to come back and bite me in the ass. “We should get out of the house today.”

Her brows shoot up. “Are you trying to get me killed?”

“You’ll be with me. And where I’m going to take you, you’ll probably be safer than in your fortress.”

“It’s not a fortress. Not usually, anyway,” she snaps. “I don’t know. It doesn’t sound like a good idea.”

“Are you going to work tomorrow?”

“Of course, I am. I never miss work. And since I work around germs, I’m never sick. And if Chase was sick, Jeff would be forced to stay with him if the nanny at the time refused.” She drags a heavy hand down her face. “He’s such an asshole.”

“We’re not going to talk about him today. Not one mention, got it?”

“Right.” She looks up at me with conviction. “Fuck him. I’m done talking about him. But I am going to work tomorrow. Don’t try to talk me out of it.”

“My point, Dr. Litchfield, is that if you’re willing to go to work tomorrow,

then you can get out of the house with me today.”

She pulls that lip between her teeth again.

“Unless you want to stay home and fuck all day. I don’t want to be presumptuous, but you do seem into me, and since I’ve made it my mission in life to distract you from reality with my cock—”

“Okay, okay!” she interrupts. A hint of pink simmers below her olive skin. “You know I’m into you. You made me tell you twice this morning.”

I smirk. “I didn’t make you do anything. I asked and you answered. It’s official—you’re into me.”

She swats me in the pec. “No, you demanded for me to tell you that I’m into you.”

I act offended. “You’re the one who said it. You certainly didn’t have to. No one was holding a gun to your head.”

“No, you were holding something else to my head. To my mouth to be exact.”

I narrow my eyes. “Are you playing hard to get now?”

Her smile is small, and she shakes her head like she’s giving up. “How do you do that?”

“I can’t help that I’m a sex god, Evie. It’s better to not question it and just let the magic happen.”

She leans into the sofa again and claims my hand. “How do you always make me feel better?”

I shrug. “It’s the sex god thing.”

She pulls my hand to her chest and holds it tight. “Thank you.”

I lift my chin and ask, “So what’ll it be? Sex or am I breaking you out of here?”

“If we have sex all day, I won’t be able to walk tomorrow. But I reserve the right for more sex tonight.”

“Fair enough.”

“Where are we going?”

I give her a yank and pull her onto my lap and look into her eyes. “Just know that I’d never take you anywhere you weren’t safe. I, on the other hand, will not be safe from the shit they’ll hand me for pretty much the rest of my life. But they’ll love you. Are you in?”

She brushes the hair from my temple. “That makes no sense. I shouldn’t trust anyone after what Jeff put me through. And, yet, here I am, letting a man with a gun take me to an unknown second location after I let him have his way with me. I’m doing all kinds of things that are out of character.”

“I have a badge to go with the gun—that should make you feel better about the second location. The sex god in me will have surprises for you later.” I slide a hand up her back and into her damp hair to pull her to my mouth. I kiss her slowly before tipping my forehead to hers and try not to think about the shit show that I’m about to create with everyone in my life.

“Get ready, baby. It’ll be an experience, that’s for sure.”

SWEET?

Evie

Micah tried to give the guard the afternoon off. Then Micah tried to convince him to stay and watch my house while we were gone since I'd be safe with him.

Word must have traveled fast through BioNova about the first guard getting fired. This gentleman proved to be dedicated to his job and insisted on coming with us.

I look out the window and see him parked on the street behind Micah's SUV.

When Micah said he was taking me somewhere this afternoon, I didn't know what to expect, but it wasn't this. A backyard bar-b-que with federal agents, a police officer, and their families. The gathering isn't huge, but it's certainly not small.

"It's unnerving having someone watch you all the time, even if it's a good guy. How are you doing?"

I turn to the beautiful, young blonde with her hand resting on her swollen belly. "I'm sorry. It's still foreign to have people follow me. I can't help but wonder what this week will be like."

We're at Brax and Landyn Cruz's new home. It's in an up-and-coming neighborhood with street after street of houses that aren't big but aren't small either. They just moved in a couple months ago, but you'd never know. It

looks like they've lived here for years. They needed an extra bedroom for their daughter who's due soon. Family pictures litter the space, proving the pregnant woman in front of me is living the dream. Their son, Brian, has a full head of dark hair and looks exactly like his father.

Brian is a rambunctious little boy who's younger than Chase. Besides a couple teenage girls who have claimed their real estate on the large sectional and have focused on nothing but their phones since we got here, the group is made up of federal and local law enforcement.

I met Tim Coleman and Brax Cruz at the DEA office the day I tortured myself by listening to my husband explain in detail how he wants his family dead. Tim's wife, Annette, and their two teenage daughters, Samantha and Teagan, are here. Rocco is younger than the rest of them. He arrived late and finished two plates of food before the rest of us finished our first.

Landyn grabs my hand and pulls me back to the kitchen. "Forget he's out there. Let's get you another drink."

I've had two glasses of wine and do not need another one. I'm not a big drinker unless Cadence is encouraging the party.

But nothing screams *fill me up* like your life spiraling to hell, being forced to send your son away to keep him safe, and hooking up with a strange man who's becoming less and less strange by the minute.

"I'd love another drink, thank you. Everything was amazing. I feel bad I didn't bring anything, but Micah didn't tell me what we were doing or where we were going."

Landyn looks back at me with her impossibly bright blue eyes. Pregnancy really looks good on her. "Please. Brax did everything on the smoker. Everyone else brought the sides. I guess that's the good thing about being this big—everyone wants to wait on me."

The lunch spread at the Cruz home is more than this group could possibly eat if they tried, and I've sampled all of it. I was starving by the time we walked through the front door almost two hours ago.

Donuts, no dinner, and sex can really take it out of you.

Landyn pours me another glass. The wine has chilled me out enough that I've slowed down apologizing for everything.

For not bringing food, dessert, or even drinks.

For showing up uninvited.

For my asshole husband.

There's so much to apologize for.

I take a big gulp. "This is good. Too good. Don't give me another one. I can't be new and stupid among strangers."

Landyn lowers her voice. "No one here is going to judge you. Everyone knows what you're going through."

I raise my cup to her, as if she's drinking, which she certainly isn't. "At least I have an excuse."

She leans in farther. "But what we don't know is what's going on with Micah."

I lower my voice in turn. "That makes two of us."

I jump when Annette comes up behind me and joins our conversation. "Is she talking? Because I have to know."

Landyn's gaze shoots to Annette. "Not yet. But she's on her third glass of Chablis. I have high hopes."

Annette turns to stand shoulder to shoulder with Landyn to face me. She might be ten years older than me, tall, and fit with long dark hair. I heard her talking about pickleball when we walked in.

I should introduce her to my sister.

Annette looks from Landyn to me and points over my shoulder. "I've known Micah since he started working for Tim in New York. I've heard that he's had women in his life from time to time, but he's never..." she pauses for effect and pins me with her dark eyes, "*never* brought a woman to one of these things. And we get together a lot."

“I haven’t known him as long as Annette has, but I agree. I’ve never seen him with anyone,” Landyn adds.

I’m not sure what to do with that information, so I make an excuse for the man who’s given me more orgasms in the last twenty-four hours than I’ve given myself in the last year. “I think he feels sorry for me since I’m stuck at home alone. I’m sure that’s all it is. He’s so sweet.”

“Sweet?” Landyn asks with wide eyes

Annette says nothing but rears back at my words.

“What?” I ask.

Landyn hikes a brow at Annette, and I can tell she’s being careful with her words. “I just haven’t heard anyone describe Micah that way.”

“Me either,” Annette adds.

I take a sip and turn it back on them. “How would you describe him?”

The two women pause and glance at each other. It’s Landyn who speaks first, and she sounds like she’s being careful with her words. “Loyal.”

“Fierce,” Annette adds. “But in a good way.”

After having sex with Micah three times, I can agree with that. Though, I’m sure that’s not the way she meant.

“Hard working,” Landyn says.

“*Obsessive* about working,” Annette clarifies.

I look at them unimpressed. “That’s it?”

Annette hikes a brow. “Okay, fine. He’s had his moments of being a player.”

Landyn turns to her. “Seriously?”

She shrugs. “I’ve known him longer than you have.”

“But he’s thirty-two. If a guy stays single that long, haven’t they all been a player at some point?” Landyn asks.

“Wait.” I can’t think about anyone being a player. “He’s thirty-two?”

“Yep. He’s younger than Brax,” Landyn says. “He went to the academy straight out of college.”

“Tim says he probably could’ve gone to the draft,” Annette says.

I frown. “Draft?”

“The NFL draft,” she explains like I’m from another planet. “He played Division 1. Offensive lineman. Protective by nature.”

My back is to the room, so I turn to peek over my shoulder through the glass doors to the backyard. The mountain of a man who has inserted himself into my life is standing on the patio with the rest of the men holding a beer in one hand and wrangling Brax and Landyn’s son in the other. Brian has climbed him like a jungle gym, and Micah is lifting him over and over again like he’s curling a two-pound weight.

When Brian laughs like a loon, Micah goes from curling to swinging the boy.

I can’t stop staring.

Chase has never had that from his dad. From his grandpa, uncles, and older cousins, sure.

But never Jeff. Not once that I can remember. And since the event would have been a rare one, I’d definitely remember.

And here Micah is doing it for a child who isn’t his and is carrying on a conversation at the same time like it’s the most natural thing in the world.

“He’s great with Brian,” Landyn says. “We asked him to be the Godfather for our baby girl too.”

I turn back to the women and try to erase my expression from the jealousy coursing through me on behalf of my son. “I knew you were close, but not like that.”

“Micah and I didn’t get off on the right foot. He didn’t trust me or even like me. But that was him being loyal to Brax.”

“It was also him being a hard-headed asshole,” Annette adds.

Landyn shakes that off. “That’s a story for another day. Or never. Either is fine with me. What we’re saying is we haven’t seen that man over there be sweet. Ever. So if you think he’s sweet, then I wonder if we have a revelation on our hands.”

“Micah Emmett,” Annette mutters and stares over my shoulder. “Turning over a new leaf.”

I’m not sure I want to know what that means.

I take another big gulp of my wine and do something I never do with anyone but Cadence and Naomi. I confide in these women who were strangers to me just two hours ago. I blame it on the wine and the asshole sitting in jail. “I’m thirty-four.”

They’re both surprised by my odd admission.

“Ah, I’m twenty-seven,” Landyn says, obligated to reciprocate.

“I’m older than both of you, dammit.” Annette rolls her eyes. “But I’m closer to forty than fifty. I’m going to leave it at that.”

I point at both of them with my wine glass. “My point is, I’m older than Micah. And I’m almost thirty-five.”

Landyn frowns. “What difference does it make?”

A huge grin takes over Annette’s face. “You go, girl.”

Landyn lets out a little laugh.

I don’t know what’s wrong with me. I cracked the dam with the admission that I’m older than him and shit is falling out of my mouth that I might not even tell my sister. “I slept with him.”

Two sets of eyes widen before me.

I lower my voice into a desperate whisper. “Three times. I don’t even know him. You say he’s an asshole and a player, but he brings me donuts, gives me earth shattering orgasms, and distracts me by bringing me here even after he said he’d take shit from his friends because of who I am. And he only did it because I’m upset about sending Chase away to keep him safe. It doesn’t

reconcile.”

They stare for a moment before a slow smile creeps over Landyn’s face. “Wow.”

“Right?” I agree. “What have I done?”

Annette nudges her pregnant friend to the side and grips my shoulders. “Tim told me everything. You’ve had a shit week.”

I try not to slosh my wine and nod.

“And he makes you feel better, right?”

I bite my lip before answering. “He’s the only good thing that’s happened to me since I found out about Jeff.”

“Then go with it. Whatever happens next doesn’t matter. It’ll shake out in the end.”

Landyn grabs Annette’s forearm. “Have you seen Micah with a woman since we moved to Miami?”

Annette shakes her head. “Not one. Hell, I haven’t even heard his name mentioned in the same sentence as the opposite sex since we moved here.”

“Yeah, Brax tells me everything. I would know. I agree with Annette—go with it. But I think it’s safe to say, he’s not playing you.”

“When Brax told Tim about you two last night, Tim was not happy. More like, he was pissed. Brax calmed him down, so at least it wasn’t a surprise when Micah showed up with you today.”

Landyn rolls her eyes. “I’m surprised he was surprised after what he went through with Brax and me.”

I look at Landyn. “What about you and Brax?”

She shakes her head. “You’ll need another bottle of wine for that—maybe two. Today is about you.”

“I can’t lie,” Annette says with a smile. “I’m excited.”

I turn to look out the back of the house again, but this time I catch blue eyes staring at me. Micah's not swinging the little boy any longer, and he's not paying attention to what his friends are saying. His gaze is hot and never wanders from me when he puts a beer bottle to his lips and takes a pull.

"Damn," Landyn says. "That man is in another world, and all he sees is you."

"That's hot," Annette mutters.

That is hot. Wetness surges between my legs because the only other time he's looked at me like that is when my clothes are in a messy pile on the floor. I have no doubt our thoughts are in the same place. He drags his thumb over his bottom lip to wipe away a drop of beer before his tongue follows suit.

"If that man is playing you, he deserves an Oscar for foreplay," Annette announces.

"He's not playing you, Evie," Landyn agrees. I turn back when I feel a tug on my hair. "I think you need a day of pampering. I know you can't come to the salon right now, but you're safe here. I'll recline you back in the kitchen, put a mask on your hair, and give you a scalp massage. Nothing makes you feel better than a good blowout."

"Trust me, Landyn is the best. She's been doing my hair since she was halfway through school," Annette says.

"I'm due for a trim, but I could never ask you to do that. You need to stay off your feet."

Micah gave me the lowdown on everyone on our way here, including the women. Landyn just opened her own salon last year and rents space out to stylists. Annette teaches high school literature.

Landyn waves me off. "I'm only taking a few appointments a week. And once this little girl makes her appearance, Brax will do everything. I'll go stir crazy. A wash and blowout are nothing."

"You should take her up on it. She wouldn't do it unless she wanted to. All I can offer is a refresher course on Romeo and Juliet—and you don't need that kind of bad juju, you have enough. No offense," Annette says.

“None taken.” Their kindness is overwhelming. Not as overwhelming as Micah, but touching in a whole other way. “I appreciate it and will definitely take you up on it.”

The door opens from the outside. Rocco stalks straight for the refrigerator like he lives here. He’s well over six feet tall and built of lean, solid muscle. His hair is clipped short on the sides and back but perfectly shaggy on top. It fits him and his age. He looks like he just stepped off the runway, even though I can tell he’d never step onto one to begin with.

He grabs another beer, cracks it open, and leans a hip on the counter next to Landyn. “I know what’s going on out there. I want to hear the other side of the story. I knew the great one would fall eventually, but I didn’t see this coming.”

Landyn feigns innocence. “We have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Is that the story you’re sticking to?” He takes another drink. “Because that’s not what they’re saying.”

“If you think Micah and Brax are tight,” Annette explains before motioning to Landyn and Rocco. “These two are tighter.”

Landyn shrugs. “He needed a best friend, and I was his only choice. It stuck.”

“I have friends, but Landyn likes to boss people around. I let her think she can.” Rocco defends himself on a grin that probably has South Beach dropping their bikinis left and right. He looks back to me before he takes a drink of his beer. “I’m a giver.”

Landyn looks put out, but I can tell this is something that probably happens often between these two. “He wouldn’t know what to do without us.”

Rocco turns his playful, whiskey eyes on me. “Your date out there is calling in favors left and right to find your hitman.”

“Rocco!” Landyn does more than elbow him this time. “We’re trying to make her feel welcome. Don’t remind her of that.”

Rocco doesn’t look the least bit sorry. “If there’s a killer after you, I doubt anything is going to make you feel better.”

“He’s right,” I say. “It’s really okay.”

Rocco’s expression turns serious. “It should make you feel better. If anyone can get shit done, it’s Micah.”

“They’ll all help,” Annette says. “They’re going to figure out who’s after you and stop them.”

“I’m counting on it. I want my son at home with me, and I want a divorce. I’m ready for this nightmare to be over.”

COMPLICATED

Micah

Brax frowns. “You told her the only guy who knew who the hitman was was killed?”

“Yes, I told her. Why wouldn’t I?”

We’re outside standing by Brax’s new pool. Rocco just went for a refill, and Tim stepped out to take a work call. It had better not be about my case. Usually, I don’t care. There are weeks I work every day without a thought.

But I want a day with Evie.

“I wasn’t saying you shouldn’t have told her. I wonder how she took it.” He crosses his arms and nods inside the house where the women are huddled in the kitchen with Rocco. “Because she’s here, and she doesn’t look that upset.”

“She was upset,” I assure him. “She’s...” I look through the glass doors and catch Evie’s dark eyes. She’s drinking another glass of wine. She needs it after what I had to tell her last night.

Last night.

I take a drink, but don’t break our connection. She rolls her lips in and wets them, the tip of her tongue peeking at me in a way that reminds me how she dropped to her knees in front of me in the shower. She licked my shaft once

before I dragged her up my body and told her she could do that another time. I hadn't had enough of her pussy.

But her lips playing front and center with my cock is something I'll never forget.

Damn.

I need to make that a reality soon.

“Whoa. If you look at her like that much longer, you'll knock her up from a distance. Keep it PG. My son is in the vicinity.”

I ignore my friend and send Evie a slow wink.

She tries to bite the smile off her face but fails and turns her attention back to Landyn.

“Congratulations. You'll be a dad in nine months.”

I look at Brax. “You wish your powers were as great as mine.”

Brax puts a big hand to Brian's head and stops him mid-track when he's running by us. “You ready to swim?”

He jumps up and down. “Finally!”

“Go get your trunks on,” Brax instructs.

Brian uses all his strength to slide the big glass door open. “Uncle Roc! Will you swim with me?”

When we're alone, Brax lets loose. “So you're fucking Jeff Michaels' wife. I thought I'd seen it all, but this is a new level of *what-the-fuck*, even for us.”

I take another drink and don't comment. He's not wrong, but since I'm feeling pretty good about my current situation, I refuse to apologize for it.

“I don't want to know the details—”

I interrupt him. “Don't worry. You're not getting any details.”

“But.” He emphasizes the word as if it's a slap in my face. “You've only known her for a matter of days. Are you her rebound palate cleanser and

she's a fun toy for a week or two, or..."

I frown. "Or what?"

"All I want to know is if I need to warn Landyn not to get attached. You know how my wife is." He motions around us. "She's hell bent on making this as meaningful as possible. She has no family of her own so this means something. I see her wheels spinning from here. So if Micah the homewrecker and the drug-runner's wife is nothing but a fling, then I need to go in there right now and make sure Landyn doesn't start adding to the family tree."

"Landyn is stronger than you take her for," I mutter.

"My wife is stronger than anyone I know. But that doesn't mean I won't do everything I can to make sure nothing breaks her heart. Her parents already did that. I won't allow her to get her hopes up about you and the good doctor in there if it's nothing."

I exhale and look around before my gaze lands back on my friend. "It's something. She's different. At this point, that's all I know. It should be complicated."

"Look at who she is." Brax bites. "It is fucking complicated."

"But the thing is, it's not." I glance back at Evie. She's laughing at Brian as Rocco dangles him upside down by the ankle. I turn back to Brax. "I know complicated and this isn't it. In fact, when I'm with her, it's the least complicated thing in the world."

Brax stares at me a beat and takes in what I just said. Finally, he hikes a brow and says, "Then you'd better make sure it's the same for her. If my wife gets attached and the doctor leaves you, I'll have to kick your ass."

"You wish you could kick my ass. Watch my college highlight reels and say that again. You're lucky I've never let loose on you."

Brax smirks and gets back to the topic at hand. "It's never complicated when you're thinking with your dick, but trust me, it is. I've been there. And she has a child."

“The fact that you’re implying that I might’ve forgotten that pisses me off.”

He holds a hand out low. “Chill the fuck down. You know what I mean.”

“I do, which is why I’m pissed. Do you think I’m that much of a meathead that I don’t take anything seriously? I fucking do. Especially when it comes to a kid.”

He crosses his arms. “Fuck me. I’ve never seen you like this. It really isn’t complicated for you.”

I luck out—my Godson saves me from having to confirm what Brax has finally opened his eyes to. Brian comes running and is about to jump in the pool, but Landyn yells from inside, “Brax, put sunscreen on him!”

Brian trudges back to his dad and groans.

Rocco follows him out as he yanks his T-shirt over his head, kicks off his slides, and smirks. “Not exactly the Olympic-sized pool you had when we met, but it’ll do.”

Brax wrangles Brian as he slathers him up. “Anything for you, Roc.”

Tim’s youngest daughter, Teagan, walks out and claims a lounge. Tim walks around the corner and frowns when he sees her. “Good luck having a daughter, Cruz. I’m fucking outnumbered at home. Annette assures me every teenager wears shit like that, but I can’t stand it.”

I do not look her way, because Teagan is barely sixteen. She’s followed Rocco around like a puppy dog for years. Everyone sees it and it drives Tim crazy.

Brax drops the sunscreen, picks up his son, and tosses him into the pool right after Rocco jumps in. Water hits everyone and Teagan squeals. “It’s cold!”

Rocco ignores her and tosses Brian into the deep end.

“Kill me before I kill someone else,” Tim mutters.

Brax smirks and looks at me. “You guys staying to swim?”

I turn back to the house and see Evie set her empty wine glass on the counter. “No. In fact, we’re leaving. Evie will want to call Chase soon. I need to get

her home.”

Tim sighs like he’s giving up on life. I’m not sure if he’s more pissed about how his youngest daughter is dressed or the fact I’m about to take home the wife of a drug runner with every intention of distracting her from reality with my cock.

I hold up my beer to them one more time before I down the last swallow. “Here’s to not seeing or hearing from you fuckers until tomorrow morning. Thanks for today.”

I walk into the house and go straight to the woman who’s taking over my every thought and motivation. She looks up at me through dark eyes I could lose myself in.

I ignore Landyn and Annette and speak directly to her. “Time to go, baby.”

I can’t tell if Evie is relieved to get out of here or as anxious as I am to get naked. All I know is her answer comes swift and could mean many things. “I’m ready.”

So am I, Evie.

So am I.

Evie

CHASE YAWNS through the small screen.

The wine and my frazzled nerves are a dangerous concoction. Emotions mixed with anger from not being able to snuggle my son before bed are proving to be too much. I have no tears tonight. Anger is winning, and I don’t like it.

My parents are kicking ass at the grandparent gig. Chase is exhausted. Too exhausted to miss me. He hasn’t asked when he gets to come home.

That should make me feel better, but it doesn’t.

“Mama?”

I swallow my rage and even my expression. “Yes, baby?”

“Where’s Dad?”

Shit.

Every emotion I had melts away, and panic replaces them.

I wasn’t prepared for this. Not over the phone.

“Why can’t he stay with me until you find a babysitter?”

“Chase, it’s almost time for bed.” My mom tries to distract him. “Tell Mama you love her.”

“No, Mom. It’s okay,” I interrupt. She’s deflecting for me, and I love her for it. But I’m done protecting Jeff. Even if I don’t tell Chase the whole truth, I can ease him into our new family of two instead of three. I look at my son’s dark eyes through the phone and pray he’ll forgive me someday for not protecting him better. “Do you remember a long time ago when I said Dad was going to move out and live in a different house?”

His little face screws up the way it does when he’s tired and he has to think harder than normal. “Maybe.”

“Well, it’s happening. Your dad won’t live at our house any longer. Very soon, your dad and I won’t be married anymore.” It kills me to lie to him, but for as long as I can, I’ll bend over backward to hide the fact my son’s father is a monster. “We both love you more than ever. That will never change.”

Memories of the accident flood my psyche. I wonder if he remembers the last time we had this conversation. I don’t want to trigger him—he’s done so well in the car recently.

“Where will he live?” Chase asks.

I muster up a smile and hope it doesn’t look pained. “Not here. He’ll live somewhere else. I’m not sure yet.”

There. Not a lie. I have no clue which prison he’ll be assigned to.

“Do I have to go stay with him?”

This time I do not hold back. “No. Never. You never have to leave our home to stay with him.”

“But Lanie has to leave to see her dad. You said I’d have to do that too.”

I shake my head. “Not anymore. I want you to understand that. Okay, baby? You’ll never have to stay with him.”

“Okay.” The tension melts from his little frame and he yawns. “I’m tired, Mama.”

“Be good for Grandma and brush your teeth. I love you, baby. I miss you so much. I’m doing everything I can so you can come home.”

He nods and blows me a kiss. “Love you.”

I return his kiss. Gone are my anger and panic. My eyes well. All I want to do is hug him. “Love you too. Only a few weeks left until school starts. Maybe Grandma can help you look for some new shoes online. I already have your uniforms.”

“I want light up shoes.”

“I’m sure Grandma can do that,” I say.

“Light up shoes will be a distraction at school,” my mom says from the side. “I’ll buy you two pairs—light up shoes for at home, but no lights at school.”

If Chase knew how to roll his eyes, I bet he would. He’ll start doing that sooner than I realize.

“Goodnight, sleep tight.”

“Don’t let the bed bugs bite,” he finishes.

We blow kisses one more time before I finally hit the red button for the night.

I fall to my side on the sofa. I sat down to call the moment we got home. Micah has been attentive all day. He made sure we left early enough so I’d have time to talk to Chase. He kissed me on the head and said he’d give me privacy.

Though I'm not sure why. He didn't do that this morning, even though it didn't bother me.

He went upstairs when I got on the phone. I haven't been this alone all day.

It feels weird. A new security guard is sitting out front for the night shift. I'd feel bad about them being here, but my father pays well. At least I know they're being compensated. When this is over, I'll make sure to send them a bonus. This isn't what they signed up for.

I drag myself from the sofa and head for the stairs. I need a shower before bed. I have no idea what's in store for me the rest of the night, but a shower seems like a good idea.

"Micah?" I call as I make my way through the house to the stairs. "I'm off the phone. You don't have to hide out anymore—"

That's when it happens.

It's not loud but it is distinct.

Glass. A pop and a shatter from behind my closed plantation shutters.

"Micah!"

Another pop.

An instant stinging sensation burns on my left hip.

Footsteps sound as they clomp down my wood stairs. "Are you hungry or are you ready for bed—"

I look down.

Blood seeps through my chambray shorts.

Another pop, followed by three more. A vase on the back of the house shatters. The noise sets off the alarm.

Sirens ring.

Micah calls for me. "Evie!"

I scream.

Micah comes barreling at me from around the corner as I stare at my own blood on my fingers.

Confusion courses through me, even though my brain understands what has happened. Micah gets to me before I force myself to move or drop to the floor.

“Fuck,” he growls as he wraps his arms around me and lifts.

My feet are clean off the floor.

One hand goes to my head and another to my waist. Pain shoots through my hip as we move.

He goes straight to the kitchen and hits the lights before he goes to the island. Darkness surrounds us, but the shots keep coming through the front windows of my home. I feel his gun pinched to my back as he holds me tight.

“The guard,” I cry.

“Hang on, baby.”

Micah moves to my home office. It overlooks the guesthouse and pool and is at the back of the house.

My feet hit the ground and Micah pushes me against the wall behind my desk. “Sit. Get as low as you can.”

His gun is drawn, and his cell is to his ear as he moves to the windows and peeks through the closed curtains of the French doors.

“This is Special Agent Micah Emmett with the DEA. I’m at the house of Dr. Evita Litchfield.” He turns to me. “Baby, what’s your address?”

I tell him, and he rattles it off.

“We’re under fire. Shots are coming through the front of the house. There’s a private security guard out front. I have no clue where he is or what happened to him.” He pauses. “We’re in the back of the house.” He looks back at me, and his eyes roam over my body in the darkness. “Dr. Litchfield was hit. We need EMS. Yeah. And I’m armed. I’ll stay on the line. Let me know when they get here. If anyone walks into this room unannounced, I’m shooting.”

He peeks between my shades to the backyard when I realize he has a second cell phone. “Hey. We’re under fire. Yeah. Through her front room. I have no fucking clue. The blinds are shut. Yeah, she was hit. Hang on, I’ve got 9-1-1 on the other phone. Get the fuck over here.”

I slump down the wall. “Who are you talking to?”

“Brax,” he clips as we hear more gun shots through glass from the other room.

I cry out.

Micah puts the first cell to his ear. “They’re still fucking shooting and I can’t leave her.”

When he moves to the door, I beg, “Please, don’t go. Please!”

He slams the office door and comes to me. “I’m not leaving you. Lie down, Evie. Flat. Not one fucking window is open for anyone to see through. They’re finding their target another way.”

I wince as I shift to the side and fall to the carpet. Lying down is an easy request. My head is woozy. I grip my hip and put pressure on it.

“Micah,” I moan, and not the way I planned on tonight.

Micah puts the cell on speaker and drops it on the carpet next to my head as he pulls my hand away. He peels my shorts back when he clips, “What’s their ETA?”

I hear the dispatcher radio the units before coming back. “Approximately three minutes.”

“Fuck,” he growls.

“It stopped,” I whisper. “The shooting stopped.”

Micah’s eyes snap back to mine and presses my hand back on my hip. “Shh.”

With his gun in his hand, he swiftly moves back to the windows. He doesn’t have a chance to peek through the closed curtains when it happens.

Closer and louder than before.

I scream for the man who hasn't left my side in the last twenty-four hours.
And all hell breaks loose.

DESPERATION

Micah

Bullets whiz past my head and ricochet off the wall above Evie.
Fuck this. I take a step back and raise my gun.

Screams come from behind me as I shoot blindly.

Ten shots in quick succession. I move to the side of the French doors that are busted to shit and peek through the war-torn, ragged curtains. The back yard is lit just enough for me to see a shadow race between the palm trees framing the farthest part of her yard to scale the privacy wall.

I've got six rounds left.

I use them all.

The shadow stutters before it disappears over the top.

“Fuck.”

I turn back to Evie. Her arms are wrapped around her head where she's rolled into herself. I exhale when the sirens break through the night and drift through broken glass.

“Agent Emmett, are you there?” the dispatcher calls for me over the speaker.

“I'm here. The shooter jumped over her back wall. Send units to canvas the

neighborhood and surrounding streets.”

“Ten-four. Officers are about to arrive on the scene.”

“I’ve got a victim with a gunshot wound to the hip. I think it’s a flesh wound but don’t know for sure. We’re in the back of the house in the office. It’ll be faster for EMS to get a gurney around the house rather than through it.”

Sirens ring through broken windows as I pull her arms away to look down at her. “It’s over, baby. Look at me.”

Evie opens her eyes, and all I see is pain. But not the kind created by a GSW.

“He’s still alive, isn’t he?” Her voice is thick as emotion bleeds through her words.

I clench my jaw and don’t answer, because he is. I didn’t get him, and I’m a good fucking shot. “He was halfway over the wall when I saw him and got a round off. I’m sorry.”

“I’ve never wished anyone dead before.” She shakes her head. “But if he were lying in my backyard immobile, that would’ve been okay.”

I get up to turn on the light. “You’re a better person than me. I’d be fucking thrilled if he were dead in your backyard right now. Let me check you out.”

She watches me pull her blood-soaked shorts down her hip. “Can you see an exit wound?”

I shake my head. “There’s no entrance or exit. It clipped you. You still need to go to the hospital, so don’t try and tell me you’re fine. This is the second time I’ve had to call EMS for you. You’re the worst patient I’ve ever seen. Don’t argue.”

She closes her eyes as if she’s bracing for something. “It’s not like I can stitch myself up from this angle, dammit.”

“Evie.” I put my hand on the side of her face and wait for her to open her eyes. “You were shot with a fucking bullet. Whether or not you can stitch yourself up is beyond the point. You’re going to the hospital, and I’m not leaving your side.”

She tries to sit up. “I might not need stitches—”

I shake my head. “Stop it. You’re not doing this again. Stay right where you are.”

She puts her hand on mine that rests possessively on her cheek as she nods. She’s about to say something else, but the police call for us from the backyard.

“In here,” I yell without taking my eyes off her. When someone reaches through the broken glass to unlock the door, I add, “My duty weapon is on the desk and credentials are upstairs. I’m not leaving her—you can search the house for it yourself.”

“Emmett, how did you get yourself tangled up in this?” I look up to see Rocco’s lieutenant. He glances around the house before focusing back on me. “We’ve got units canvassing the neighborhood. We’ll scour the backyard for clues. I’ve got more officers on the way.”

I don’t have a chance to say anything because two EMS come through the door.

I look back down at Evie. “Cooperate.”

When she sighs, I feel the fight drain from her body. She wraps her fingers around my hand, and I lean down to kiss her before I shift out of the way for them to work.

I MIGHT AS WELL BE an emergency medic.

I was right.

She was hit even though it was more of a graze. More like a bite of her flesh. There was no bullet to dig out, thank God for that.

I watch as they work on her. They cut her shorts off and she’s covered from the waist down with a sheet. Everyone in the room looked at me like they expected me to leave, which I was not about to do. Someone will have to

wrestle me into a pair of cuffs and drag my ass off if they want to put any space between me and the woman on the exam table.

Evie instructs the resident how she wants to be stitched. I was right—she’s the worst patient ever.

I look from my cell to Evie where she’s on her side getting worked on. “Brax is here. He and Tim brought my car from your house.”

She looks up at me through worried eyes. “Did they say how the security guard is?”

“It seems the hitman is a good shot and has a conscience. The guard was hit with a tranquilizer. He had his window cracked open and was shot in the neck with a dart. He’s here being treated with IV fluids. He’ll be fine. Brax talked to your father and brother at your house after we left in the ambulance. Your father is going to try to make it here before we leave.”

She closes her eyes. “Great.”

I had a similar thought but with a different sentiment. I actually can’t wait to talk to her father. Their security is shit. It’s been proven twice now. They might know how to secure a building, but personal security is a whole different ball game. I’m going to have to find a nicer way to inform Mr. Hugh Litchfield of this.

Brax – I need to talk to you.

Me – Someone almost killed Evie and probably did it by using thermal imaging. That means the hitman is not some thug off the street. He’s skilled. I’m not leaving her side.

Brax – Then answer your damn phone to talk to me. I have news.

The call instantly comes through. I give her hand a squeeze as I take two steps away from her to answer. “If this is more bad news, it could’ve waited until we got out of here.”

“Not bad news,” Brax states. “More like the opposite. You didn’t miss.”

I pause because there are two nurses and a resident in here. I can’t say

anything I would normally, like *what the fuck*. “How do you know?”

“There’s blood at the scene. Other than Evie’s. I hope she’s prepared to recarpet that office.”

“Get back to the first thing you said. They got samples?”

“Yes. As soon as they realized the hitman was hit himself, they called in forensics. It’s outside, but they think they got to it soon enough. They’ll be running it through the system. If he’s ever been booked, we’ll have a name and face.”

“That’s good news. Really good news.”

Evie looks at me with wide, hopeful eyes.

“It’s a start,” I add. “Anything else?”

“Are you taking her back to her place tonight?”

“No way in hell.”

“Her parents’ house?” Brax asks.

“That seems like a worse idea after what happened tonight,” I mutter, thinking of Chase and how much worse it could have been if he would’ve been at home.

“I agree,” Brax says. “That leaves one place, unless you’re planning on taking over our nursery before the baby comes.

“We’re not crashing your new house,” I inform him.

“Then you’re taking her home with you,” Brax mutters. “Why do I question your judgment, yet still think it’s a good fucking idea?”

“Because you’re right on both counts. I don’t trust anyone. I’m taking care of this myself.”

“I don’t blame you. Your bag is in your car,” Brax says. “We’ll wait until she’s done to make sure she’s okay and meet you out front. You both talked to the police?”

“Yes. We can fill in any details they need tomorrow. It’s late.”

“Tell me about it,” Brax says. “Your case is interfering with my sleep before the baby comes.”

I can tell from his tone that he’s giving me shit, but I’m distracted by Evie taking control of her own healthcare like a boss.

“Please don’t knot it like that. Here, let me show you.”

Evie already instructed the resident to give her zig-zag stitches to prevent scarring. We must look like a real pair. I still have the butterfly bandage on my cheek.

“I think we’re about done,” I say to Brax as I watch her tie off and clip her own stitches. The resident is up and muttering instructions to the nurse as he leaves our curtained area.

“I assume you know how to take care of that,” the nurse says. “Would you like a prescription for painkillers?”

“No, thank you. I’ll take something over the counter if I need it. But, I do need some scrubs to walk out of here, please.”

One thing about Dr. Evie Litchfield, if she’s going to boss people around, she does it with manners.

I offer her my other hand to pull her to a sitting position. She winces but keeps the sheet over her lap since she’s naked from the waist down.

“Brax, we’ll be out soon. I’ll meet you in the waiting room.”

“No, I’ll bring your car around. Meet you in the circle drive.”

“Thanks.”

We’re finally alone—or as alone as two people can be in an emergency room bay with only a curtain for a wall.

Gone is the steadfast and polite-bossy physician she was moments ago. She looks up at me, and I swear her olive skin pales. “I’m not going to lie, Micah. I’m afraid to go home. If you hadn’t been there—”

I stop her mid-sentence. “But I was there. Don’t let your mind wander.”

“And we thought we’d be safe if Chase and I weren’t together. That’s not the case. Someone tried to kill me tonight. All I can think about is someone doing the same with Chase.” She shakes her head and pulls in a shaky breath. “I can’t let that happen, Micah. I’m done being apart from my son. Tonight proved it didn’t do any good.”

I cup her face and don’t say a word. Tonight was bad. And she’s right, being separated from her son did her no good.

I brush her cheek with my thumb. “Baby, you know you can’t go to work after what happened. You’re too exposed.”

She looks like she might choke on a boulder as her eyes well with tears. “I know. It hurts my heart, but I know.”

A voice breaks into our moment and the nurse places a pair of pants next to where Evie sits. “Here are the scrubs, Dr. Litchfield. I hope that heals up nice and fast.”

Evie swipes at her tears. “Thank you for seeing me so quickly.”

When we’re alone again, she drags the scrubs up her legs beneath the sheet. I take her hand to help her from the exam table as she gently pulls them over her wound.

“Commando under scrubs. This is a first,” she mutters.

“I won’t be able to think of anything else.”

She pulls in a big breath and looks up at me. “Micah, I’m not kidding. I don’t want to go home. And I’m afraid to go to my parents’ house. What if someone follows me there? I can’t lead them to Chase. I have no idea what to do.”

I lean down and press my lips to hers.

Soft, slow, and with no tongue.

I don’t recognize myself.

When her hands come to my chest, her desperation bleeds through me. I rest

my forehead against hers before dragging my lips to her ear. “Baby, you’re coming home with me. And then I’m going to figure out a way for you to be with your son.”

TECHNICALLY AND CARNALLY

Evie

Micah rushed me into his SUV, slammed the door, and didn't stop to talk to Brax or Tim. He was hell bent on getting me out of there.

We also did not wait for my father.

After getting shot at in my own house, I was in no mood to sit around and chat in the hospital parking lot. The very hospital I frequent to visit my patients.

Now I wonder how long I've been followed.

The one highlight to my day was when Micah spoke freely on the way home. When he got shots off at my house tonight, he didn't completely miss.

DNA.

Thank goodness for the science I believe in.

Now I just need the hitman to be in the national database.

Micah unlocks the deadbolt and nudges me inside, but he doesn't turn on the lights. He slams the door and locks it before his bags hit the floor and he starts to lower the blinds. "The kitchen is through there. Help yourself to whatever you want."

His condo is efficient and masculine. A worn leather sofa the color of

caramel faces a television that's bigger than mine mounted to the wall.

Not bigger than the screen in the media room, though, but definitely bigger than the one in the family room.

Now I wonder if Micah has seen the media room yet. Judging by the size of his TV, I think he might like it.

I quickly push thoughts of Micah, Chase, and me having a movie night out of my head.

Dammit. Get a hold of yourself, Evita.

Maybe if I talk to myself in my mother's tone, it'll kick me back into reality.

I cannot let my mind go to places like that. I have bigger things to focus on.

"You want to watch something?"

I look over and Micah is standing in the middle of his family room—arms crossed and assessing me.

"No," I answer too quickly. "No, sorry. I'm in a trance. Lots of, you know, stuff."

He moves past me and presses his lips to my head on his way to the kitchen. When I follow, he's already digging through a messy cabinet beside the refrigerator.

He turns and hands me a bottle of painkillers. "I'm not going to pretend to know anything about healthcare, but they deadened your hip. You need to take something to get on top of the dull ache you'll have in a couple of hours."

"Thank you."

"Oh, and there's a really good possibility those are expired. You're just going to have to deal. Maybe take an extra to balance it out."

I give him a small smile and shake out three pills while he cracks open a water and sets it in front of me. I down the pills and state the least of my problems at the moment. "I don't have anything here. We didn't think ahead to pack a bag before the ambulance whisked us away from my house."

He crosses his arms. “I can have someone go back to your house tomorrow. But we do need to talk about what’s next.”

I shake my head and am thankful I thought to grab my phone. At least I have that. I look at the screen. “I need to call the practice manager and explain what happened. Rescheduling my patients will be a nightmare. My associates can fill in. Then I need to call Naomi.”

“Who’s Naomi?”

“My nurse. You met her, but not officially. Then I need to touch base with my parents. They’re going to insist I move in with them.”

He leans a hip into the counter and crosses his arms across the T-shirt that’s still stained with my blood. “Tell me what you want.”

I shake my head, afraid to say it, because there’s no way I can make it happen. “I want to leave. Get as far away as I can from whoever was paid to kill us. Even if it’s not forever. I want to be a mom and spend every minute with Chase that I can.” I wave my hand around. “This puts everything into perspective. Is it weak that all I want is to run away?”

“No, baby.” His eyes are soulful in the dim lights of his kitchen. “Would you really pick up and leave?”

I shrug. “This morning I was determined not to allow this to disrupt my patients and my practice. But I also didn’t expect to be attacked in my own home. Chase is down to one parent—not that he ever had two. All I want to do is jump on my father’s jet and tell the pilot to take me as far away as he can.”

Micah’s brows rise in unison. “Your father has a jet?”

I bite my lip because I forgot that Micah isn’t familiar with my family. “It’s a corporate jet. My father’s company is—”

“I know all about your father’s company, Evie. I investigated your husband ___”

“Whoa.” I stop him right there with a hand and frown. “I thought we had an agreement.”

He drags a hand down his face and pulls in a deep breath. I wonder if it's for patience. He certainly didn't sign up for all this. "It's been a long day. I'll start over. When I investigated the *asshole*, your family was an extension of it."

It's my turn to cross my arms. "Seriously?"

He cuts the space between us and captures my chin in his fingers, forcing my face to his. "It's my job, Evie. I had to rule out involvement from anyone in his life."

The thought of being investigated sours my stomach. Logically, I understand Micah had to do his job. Even so, it makes me sick to my stomach that this is just one more thing Jeff brought on me and my family.

Micah keeps talking, and I wonder if he's trying to make me feel better, because it's not working. "You could've died tonight. This is not the time for secrets. I'm going to lay it all out there, baby. I know your net worth. I know how much you make a year. I know how much money is in your trust fund. And I know your father's corporation has doubled its revenue in the last three years alone. What I did not know is that he has a corporate jet. I probably should've assumed, but it didn't make any difference. Once I realized the asshole was working alone, I quit spinning my wheels."

My jaw goes hard. "You tapped me?"

He has the nerve to smirk. "Do you mean technically or carnally?"

I narrow my eyes. "You know what I mean."

"Because the answer to that is, yes. But you were there for the second one, so that's not a surprise."

It doesn't matter how much I'm obsessed with his touch, I grab his wrist and pull his hand from my face, but he doesn't allow me the space I so desperately want. He twists his hand to claim mine and pulls my front to his.

I put a hand to his chest and push, but he claims my ass and holds me tight, like any invasive, tapping jerkwad would.

"Micah," I clip.

“Baby,” he croons.

Damn him.

Why is he this way when I’m angry?

“Am I still being tapped?” I demand.

My ass gets a possessive squeeze, and he holds me there. “We’re going to have to be careful because of your hip, but I do not plan to stop tapping you anytime soon.”

“You know what I mean.”

He leans down and puts his lips to my neck and sucks.

All of a sudden I’m reminded that I’m not wearing panties.

Ugh.

I do everything I can to ignore the wetness between my legs. “Answer me.”

He kisses the tip of my nose. Since I’m angry, I file that away for later because it’s sweet and tender and very unlike the man who is talking about tapping me carnally.

He sighs. “No. But if you want the whole truth, I very much enjoyed the technical tapping. I didn’t understand why the asshole was fucking up his life when he had someone like you. That was before I met you. Now I’m convinced he’s a masochist or something.”

“How long?” I whisper.

“Months.” His answer comes quickly, which is new and refreshing after spending years with Jeff when I questioned everything he did and said because I never got a clear answer.

I nibble on my lip as I stand here in his arms and process everything. I think about every conversation and text that I assumed were private.

“And now?”

He shakes his head. “No, Evie. I cut it off last week. You have to understand

my position. You're married to a man who was running drugs that are linked to one of the biggest cartels in Central America. Tapping you helped us keep track of him. We can take down those loads before they get to the streets, but I needed the asshole to keep moving shipments so I had time to expand my case. You were the roadblock that stopped that."

"Can you blame me for being upset?" I huff. "This hasn't exactly worked out well for me either."

He tucks a few strands of my hair behind my ear as his eyes roam my face. "It's shit, I'll give you that. But I wouldn't change one thing."

My cell vibrates on the counter next to us. I glance over to see my father's name flash on the screen. "I need to get that."

He doesn't let me go and pulls me tighter. "Do you trust me?"

Shit. "I think it's fair to say I shouldn't trust anyone at this point."

I feel it from my breasts to my sex when he pulls in a deep breath. My body is too attuned to this man for my own good.

"That's not an answer," he presses me. "Do you trust me?"

I tell him the truth. "I feel like an idiot, because, yes, I do. I actually hate myself a little for it."

A satisfied smile settles on his lips. "Then let me take care of you."

I say nothing.

"You want one thing—to escape. I want to give it to you. A private jet would make that easier. Call your dad and make that happen."

My lips part as I suck in a breath of air.

He kisses the shock off my face.

Then he hands me my phone. "Private jet, baby. I'll take care of the rest."

Micah

I FEEL it before I open my eyes.

I glance at the time. We have a few minutes before we need to get up.

A morning wood is normal for me, but not like this.

This has happened ever since I laid eyes on Evita Litchfield in the flesh.

And now she's in my bed.

Naked.

She rolled away from me in the night after tossing and turning. Anxiety and apprehension plagued her after the plan was set.

Were her parents happy about it?

No fucking way.

But in the end, they proved they trust their daughter as much as she trusts me.

I held her close and answered every question she had. I did my best to calm every nerve and crush every fear.

It was all new for me.

I'm like a new and improved Micah, and I have no fucking idea where he came from.

I've never given a shit about another human outside of my family to expend that much energy into making someone feel better. I have no idea if I succeeded, but she did finally pass out—in a better way this time—against my chest.

I roll to my side and press my dick to her good hip and splay my hand across her abs.

Her eyes flutter open, and her head rolls on her pillow.

I slide my hand south.

Her sleepy eyes fall shut when I slide my fingers through her pussy. I'm not

the only one who woke up ready. She's wet.

I press my lips to her forehead when I circle her clit.

She moans and parts her legs.

For me.

"Look at me," I demand. "Do you need meds? Are you achy?"

She lifts her hips this time. "Yes. But not the kind painkillers will fix."

"How about this?" I cup her as I slide two fingers inside while pressing the palm of my hand to her clit.

"Yes," she drawls.

But I push away my instinctive selfish asshole because the last thing I want to do is hurt her. "This is all you get this morning. Your stitches are too fresh."

She gives me her endlessly dark eyes, but that's not all she gives me. She wraps her slim fingers around my cock.

I'm so fucking hard.

I can't help myself. I instantly press into her hold, and she gives me one pump.

"You do that much longer, you're going to have a mess on your hands. I'm not going to pretend I haven't thought about coming all over you, baby. I just didn't think it would be because I had to be careful not to hurt you."

"I need to shower before we leave anyway. Borrowing your clothes will be interesting."

I finger fuck her, circle her clit, and pump my hips into her hand. She never breaks our visual connection as she jacks me off. I feel like I'm in high school again, fucking around without really fucking.

But it was never like this before.

Hell, it's never been like this.

I kick the covers off us, and she puts her feet flat to the bed. Her hips move

with my fingers for more. I look down and her knees fall to the side. I take us in, both of us with a death grip on the other.

Death grip.

Those words have a different meaning today than they ever have.

I pump into her fist, over and over, fucking her hand as I finger fuck her while I'm pressed to her side. So much fucking with literally no fucking.

"You're so fucking beautiful," I mutter.

Her breaths are labored and shallow. We're sweaty messes, and I love it.

She's close. There's nothing I want more than to roll over and fuck her until she comes on my cock.

Her body starts to quiver.

"Do not close your legs, Evie," I demand. My own words are forced through gritted teeth. "I want to watch you—watch us come at the same time."

She grips my dick tighter, and I rock into her hand faster.

I'm about to lose it watching her with my hand between her legs. She's so wet and hot, I can't help it. I release her just long enough to give her a smack.

Her eyes snap wide, and she lets out a surprised yelp the instant my hand connects with her pussy.

But that yelp goes straight into the most erotic cry I've ever heard when she comes ... hard.

Her back arches, and her head presses into the pillow.

My grip between her legs is firm, maybe too firm, but I can't help it. I bury my face in the side of her head, the scent of her thick hair fills my senses as I shamelessly fuck her hold on me. Our groans and moans fill my bedroom as we come together.

If sweat and my sticky mess are any indication of the chemistry we have, I might never be the same. We didn't even fuck, and I've never experienced anything like this. And I'll have the memory in my bed forever, which could

be good or really, really bad.

Her small tits rise and fall as she catches her breath. We're still gripping each other like we're afraid to let go.

She looks up at me from her pillow. "You spanked me."

I feel like I'm back in college doing two-a-days in the Florida heat. "You liked it."

She bites her lip like she doesn't want to admit it.

I press my semi-hard dick into her sticky hold. "You just proved you can lead me around by the cock, so I think we're even."

"You're younger than me," she states out of the blue.

"By two years," I add. "Earth-shattering orgasms must wipe the memory from your brain. I investigated you."

"I've never been with anyone younger than me," she admits.

I give her pussy a squeeze. "I thought you said you'd hardly been with anyone."

"True."

I lean in and press my lips to hers. "Stick with me, Evie. I'll teach you how to get your freak on."

Her hesitant expression breaks into a self-conscious smile.

I change the subject. "You ready for today?"

"More than ready."

"Let me get some meds in you and clean you up. We don't want to be late."

She lets go of my dick and rolls to her side, pressing her bare body to mine.

Bare.

I like that thought more than I should.

The need to get my shit together is as great as it is to get her out of town.

Both are a pretty big fucking deal right now.

COWBOYS

Evie

“My man Micah has leveled up,” Rocco mutters.

“Shut up, Roc,” Micah snaps as Rocco pulls up to the BioNova Learjet and puts it in park right on the edge of the runway.

I barely had a chance to dig through Micah’s sweats to find something I could cinch around my waist tight enough to get me to the plane. I put on my bra from yesterday and topped off my ensemble with a worn charity softball T-shirt from six years ago with the New York City skyline across the front.

It’s so soft, I may never give it back. If this is the souvenir I get for making it through this chapter of my life, I’ll take it.

Maybe I’ll do some shopping for Micah to replace it ... when it’s safe for me to be out and about by myself again.

Micah opens the back door where he sat next to me on the way to the BioNova hangar on a private airstrip. He folds out and offers me a hand. I’m slow to move as my stitches pull as I climb out after him.

Rocco pops the trunk and looks around. “Are you taking an entourage?”

“No,” I assure him. “But it does appear we have a send-off party.”

My father’s Tesla is pulled up right next to the plane, alongside two

Suburbans with the BioNova logo.

Security.

Though, after the last week, my father is doing a top-to-bottom revamp of his so-called security. The Merc and Cayenne pulling up the rear mean that Andrew and Cadence have decided to join the party.

I sigh.

I look down at myself, still pantyless, this time in Micah's old sweats.

Whatever.

I'm an adult and was almost killed last night by a hitman hired by my not-ex-yet-husband. My hair is wet, and I'm in another man's clothes.

My mother will be mortified.

Cadence will be ecstatic.

I do not have the energy to worry about what my family thinks of me right now—good or bad.

I can't wait to get on that plane.

Micah grabs a duffel big enough to haul a moderate-sized human from the trunk. He takes my other hand and turns to Rocco. "Thanks for the ride."

"No problem. Watch your back."

Micah glances down at me and gives my hand a squeeze. "Where we're going, that won't be an issue."

"When will you be back?" Rocco asks.

"We're going to give it a week. Lab results should be back later today to see if the DNA hits any databases. We'll go from there."

"Talked to Brax this morning. They're checking all the hospitals for GSWs," Rocco says before looking to me. "Besides yours."

Well then. Something I have in common with my hitman.

“Thanks for the ride, Rocco,” I say, anxious to get to the plane. “I swear, I’m never this much trouble.”

He chuckles. “Sure you’re not.”

“I’ll keep in touch,” Micah says to Rocco.

He lifts his chin. “You’re bailing on your Goddaughter’s birth. I’m going after your spot while you’re gone. It’s my time to shine. I’m starting an entire political campaign—my entire platform is that I’m better than you.”

Micah doesn’t seem worried. “They’re not going to call in the JV team when they can have Varsity.”

Rocco folds back into his car. “Enjoy the private jet.”

This time it’s me who gives his hand a yank. “Come on. I can’t wait.”

I ignore the dull throb in my hip and walk up the stairs. Micah is close on my heels with his hand on the small of my back. I barely turn into the main cabin when I hear him. “Mama!”

My face breaks into the biggest smile. I don’t remember the last time my heart was this happy, and I’ve only been away from him for a few days.

Chase throws himself at me. I don’t care about my stitches when I pick him up and wrap my arms around him. “Baby. I missed you so much.”

I hold onto him for as long as he’ll let me. He pushes back and his precious face is full of excitement and innocence from what we’re running from. “Grandma said we’re going on a surprise trip!”

I shift him to my good hip, but refuse to put him down. If he’d let me hold him for a week I would. “We are. I think we deserve a vacation. What do you think?”

Chase has no desire to be held and slides down my body. I turn to my parents and siblings. “Hi.”

My mom has tears in her eyes as she pulls me into her arms for a warm hug. “I don’t know what to say. I’m scared for you both, Evita.”

I hold her tight as Cadence proves she’s not scared for me despite my fresh

stitches or why they're there. She's nothing but thrilled as she looks back and forth between Micah and me. If she had a spare razor in her back pocket, she'd probably give it to me in front of everyone.

My sister beams. "You look absolutely amazing."

I ignore Cadence and give my mom a squeeze before pushing her away the same way Chase does to me. "For those of you who haven't met him, this is Micah Emmett."

Cadence's smile is bigger than the sun. "Don't worry, I told them all about your agent and how special he is."

"Good to see you again." My brother steps forward and offers his hand. "If our security team hadn't failed at keeping my baby sister safe, I wouldn't be happy about this."

I glare at him. "Then it's a good thing no one cares how you feel."

Micah tosses his huge duffel on the sofa and doesn't seem bothered by my brother. "Where we're going, they'll be safe. I promise."

"Once you explained it to me last night, I agree," Dad says to Micah. "And this is what Evie wants." He looks to me. "Raised you to be strong and take care of yourself, Evie. You're doing it. I can't argue with that."

"Thanks, Dad."

"Despite..." Cadence glances at her nephew. Thank goodness she thinks before she speaks. "What happened, I don't remember the last time you've looked so happy."

"Relieved," I correct her as I watch my son jump from chair to chair that face each other.

"I am too," my mom agrees. "Micah, thank you. If you hadn't been there last night—"

"Can we just say goodbye?" I interrupt. "I'm ready to go, and we're scheduled for takeoff shortly."

My family forces Chase to give them hugs and kisses followed by more from

me and handshakes from Micah.

Except for my mother. She forces the man who gives good orgasms into an awkward hug.

My father saves Micah and the rest of us from a more delayed goodbye. “That’s enough, Irena. They need to leave.”

They finally exit the plane, and it’s just the three of us.

Chase points to the elephant in the room. “Is he coming too?”

I realize that Chase isn’t prepared for this, and I’m not either. Hell, I’m not even divorced yet. I’ve never once given any thought as to how I would introduce Chase to a man, no matter how that man came to be a part of my life.

For the second time, I watch Micah hold a fist out for Chase to bump. “I am. I’ll be your tour guide.”

Chase looks so small standing between me and Micah, looking up at the man I do delicious things with. “Where are we going?”

Micah looks to me. I give him a small smile before putting my hand to Chase’s head. When he turns to me, I answer, “Montana.”

Micah

I’M USED to kids in small doses.

Brian Cruz is my Godson, but that doesn’t mean I spend more than a few hours with him at a time, and never without his parents. I’m like the fun uncle who gives really good birthday presents and dumps a little bit of money into a college fund in his name. I give him candy when Brax and Landyn aren’t looking, and I always have gum and quarters.

Eventually, Brian will move from quarters to fives and eventually twenties.

The point is, he’s a cool kid and he loves me.

Even if I do buy his love most of the time.

What I've never done is fly from one corner of the country to the other with him.

Chase is a year older than Brian and has had my undivided attention for more than four hours. I've never answered so many questions in my life. It was like taking the polygraph when I applied to the DEA all over again.

The kid is a machine gun of curiosity. I was fucking riddled for hours.

But my first experience on a cross-country private flight did not completely suck. The mini bar is fully stocked. I don't care what time of day it is, Evie and I put that thing to use.

You can tell they're used to traveling above first class. Chase ate half a jar of maraschino cherries, and Evie nibbled on the lunch that was waiting on us. Then she decided to consume her daily serving of vegetables in the form of Bloody Marys.

I wonder if it's possible for us to fly around in her father's private jet forever. She's relaxed and smiling. I have a feeling part of that has to do with being reunited with her son.

It took Chase three hours and forty-nine minutes, but he finally fell asleep just before we landed.

Evie is sitting across from me with her bare feet propped on my thigh. She changed into a loose dress that hits her above the ankle. She even put on some makeup. Cadence was tasked with going back to her house and packing, and by the number of suitcases and bags that Evie dug through, we could stay for weeks if we wanted.

I'm considering it.

"I'm sorry," she whispers as she drags her fingers through Chase's hair. His head is resting on her lap. "You're like a new toy, and he hasn't seen me in a few days. I swear, he's not this overwhelming all the time."

I shake my head and wrap my hand around her foot. It's impossible to not touch her all the time. "He's a talker, but he's a good kid."

She smiles. “He is. I’m sorry to say that this little nap will energize him. You might need to brace for the rest of the day.”

I look down at the boy who favors Evie. “He’ll have plenty to do. We’ll wear him out.”

“I still can’t believe you did this,” she says. “I took you up on this trip so fast because I’m desperate. But now you’re away from your case. Away from work, and right when Brax and Landyn are about to have a baby. The fact you’re doing this for me—for us—means a lot. More than a lot. It’s everything.”

The plane starts to descend, and I glance out the windows at the mountains and landscape. I haven’t been back since I moved to Miami. I can count on one hand how many times I’ve been back in the last decade. When I was in college, it was different. But after that I blamed the academy, work, and more work. It’s the easiest excuse and not a total lie, so it sat on my conscience easier.

“I can manage my case from here. Tim will have my back after the baby comes. They’ll have a week to find the guy, and you’ll have a week to recuperate and relax.”

“Prepare for landing,” the pilot says over the speaker.

She lowers her voice. “Don’t make it sound like this isn’t huge. I don’t know how I’ll ever repay you.”

The only move I make is to slide my hand up her bare leg. “I can think of a few ways.”

A smile touches her lips.

The wheels touch the ground, and we bounce lightly before the pilot hits the brakes and we roll down the runway to a stop.

Evie leans down and presses her lips to Chase’s head. “Wake up, baby. We’re here.”

Chase stretches as he pries his eyes open as if he slept for hours rather than minutes. “When are we going to see the horses?”

Evie pulls her feet from me and wiggles them into her sandals. She ignores his question and repeats what she's said at least ten times since we got on the plane. "Remember to use your manners. And if I see you jumping on the furniture, you will get the look from me. Micah said there will be plenty of places to run and play outside."

I stand and offer her a hand to pull her to her feet. "Relax, Evie. He'll be fine."

Chase moves to the sofa on the other side of the plane. "Yeah, relax, Mama. I'll be fine."

Evie's eyes widen, and her gaze shoots to me. "He did not just tell me to relax."

The pilot exits the cockpit and opens the door. "Welcome to Bozeman, Dr. Litchfield and Mr. Emmett. I'll be in touch through your father. I hope you enjoy your stay."

"I hope they enjoy it too," I add. "Thanks for the safe flight."

"Thank you, Gary," Evie says.

"My pleasure. Give me a minute, and I'll have your bags ready. Is your ride here?"

I grab Chase's booster seat and put a hand to Evie's back. "I just got a text. It's waiting for us."

"Get your backpack, Chase," Evie instructs and picks up her own bags and turns to me. "I can't lie, I'm nervous."

I give her a push to follow Chase who's already out the door and on his way off the plane. "There's nothing to worry about. I haven't been back in years. When I explained what's going on, they insisted. Hell, they'll probably beg you to stay forever. They hate visiting me in Florida."

The minute we step onto the tarmac, I see him. He stuffs his hands into the pockets of the same leather jacket he's worn for decades. I can't remember him being in anything else this time of year.

"It's cold!" Chase yells.

Evie slips a sweater up her arms. “It’s not cold. You’re just used to Florida. There’s a sweatshirt in your backpack.”

My dad walks up and puts a hand on Chase’s head. “The wind whips through this valley this time of year. You stay here a few days and you’ll get used to it.”

“Who are you?” Chase asks.

“My name’s Hank. Who are you?”

I’ve learned that Chase requires a minimum number of words spoken a day, so I let him go for it. “Chase Litchfield Michaels. I’m going to go to kindergarten soon and my best friend is Lanie. And I don’t like carrots. I still have my training wheels on my bike, but I can read.”

My dad focuses on Chase. “Carrots are for horses, and there are no training wheels on a ranch. We just go for it. You ready to learn how to be a cowboy?”

Chase’s dark eyes widen. He turns to Evie and then back to my dad, and an expression falls over his face like all his dreams that he never knew to dream are about to come true. “Really?”

“There’s no free ride on a ranch. You’ve got to earn your supper.”

“What’s my supper?” Chase asks.

“Dinner,” Evie butts in and extends a hand to my dad. “Evie. I apologize now for the conversations you’ll be forced to have in the next week. Thank you for opening up your home to us.”

My dad looks from Evie to me and pulls in a breath before he nods once. “Good to meet you. I’ll do anything to get my boy home. Now that you’re here, I can tell it won’t be a hardship.”

I step forward and pull him in for a one-armed hug and a slap on the back. “It’s good to be back. You look good, Dad.”

He frowns. “You look tired.”

So fucking Dad. He tells it like it is. “I’ve been busy.”

“You need the fresh mountain air. Your mom is anxious to see you and meet the two people you’re willing to come home for. Let’s go.”

And with that, he picks up two of Evie’s suitcases and stalks back to his truck in his boots.

I look down at Evie. “Told you it will be an interesting week. But you’ll have over a thousand acres to put between yourself and the rest of the world.”

IN YOUR SOUL

Micah

I've taken the easy way out of adult life when it comes to the home I grew up in.

My parents haven't guilted me. It might be selfish—hell, who am I kidding, I am selfish—but they never called me on it. Even Mom, who enjoys guiltting me about everything else.

Like still being single or keeping them from being grandparents. She lays that shit on thicker and thicker as the years tick on.

They made it to as many college games as they could. Getting away from a working ranch isn't easy, but they made it happen even after we lost Hannah. Maybe more so then. It didn't matter how deep they were buried in their own grief—they always worried about me.

My mom's helicopter ways have trickled into my adult years, and my father is just as crotchety as ever. But that doesn't keep them from being the best.

They just are.

They visited me in New York and now in Miami, even though they hate big cities. I don't talk to them daily, but we do talk often. I always know how the cows are doing. How much rain they've had. And how many grandchildren my mother's friends from church have.

That tally is a number I'm constantly reminded of.

I don't know how they live here. It's hard to come home. Everywhere I look, I'm reminded of my sister who was only eighteen months younger than me. We might've fought when we were young, but as we got older, we were close, especially in high school. Even though all I ever wanted was to leave and all she ever wanted was to stay, Hannah and I were tight.

Hannah was a homebody. The ranch's business is cattle, but my dad would bring home every animal she wanted. And not the run-of-the-mill dog, cat, or fish. Hannah had chickens, pigs, goats, and more. She refused to have anything to do with 4-H. They were hers for life. She wanted to go to veterinary school and live on the ranch we grew up on.

I wanted to live anywhere but.

When I signed to play at one of the biggest college football programs in the country, I knew what I wanted next.

The NFL.

Our dreams couldn't have been more different.

Every time I'm here, it hits me like a freight train.

Hannah's dream was stolen from her.

Mine was changed because of it.

But Evie, Chase, and I have been here for a total of four hours, and it feels different. I'm not haunted by Hannah's memory this time.

Is she everywhere I look?

Can I feel her in every room I walk into?

Fuck, yes.

But the house isn't quiet with just me and my parents this time.

Quiet isn't a thing with Chase Litchfield Michaels around. He's not the only one filling my senses. Evie casts a light on the shadows that have haunted me since we lost Hannah. There's something good for me to focus on in this

house for the first time in over a decade.

Mom had dinner ready when we got here. She made too much food, but she said she didn't know what the doctor and her son liked. The spread was elaborate and varied, and Chase wasn't forced to eat carrots. He made a mess with spaghetti and chased it with chicken fingers.

Now he's sticky from ear to ear from roasted marshmallows.

S'mores were a staple in this house growing up. I can't remember the last time I had one.

I do know. It was with Hannah.

Since I met Evie, this is the first time we've spent time together with her son. I've become obsessed with touching her anytime she's near me. Keeping my hands to myself is a chore. Since we got on the plane with Chase, we've kept a safe distance other than the precious minutes he passed out.

Chase hasn't once asked about his dad—even though the asshole has only been out of their lives for a few days. It doesn't matter what this thing is between me and Evie, I can't go there in front of her son. Keeping my hands off her in front of Chase is the right thing to do no matter how hard it is.

They'll be sleeping across the hall from me in Hannah's room. This week might do me in.

“How do you be a cowboy?”

Chase stands next to where my dad is reclined in his Adirondack. Just like my father is with everything in life, he doesn't care who he's talking to, he delivers his answer with no nonsense. “No one can *be* a cowboy, Chase. You've gotta love it. It's in your soul. You either are or you aren't.”

“What's my soul?” Chase asks as he licks chocolate from his fingers.

My dad smacks him lightly on the chest. “It's in your heart.”

Chase looks down at his chest before he turns to me where I'm standing next to him by the fire. “Are you a cowboy?”

“Nope. I was forced to be when I was your age. I had to earn my

marshmallows.” I reach down and give his hair a rustle. Chase cackles since he has quickly realized he can get whatever he wants to eat under this roof and he doesn’t have to earn any of it. “Being a cowboy isn’t in me. But you can try it out tomorrow and see if it’s in you.”

Chase turns to my mom. “Can I have another marshmallow?”

My mom has given the kid anything he wants since we walked through the front door. But this time, she has the decency to check with Evie. “It’s up to your mom. You don’t want a tummy ache. You need to get a good night’s sleep if you’re going to try to be a cowboy. It takes a lot of energy.”

Evie is wrapped in a blanket and sitting across the fire from where I stand. The flames dance in her dark eyes, and there’s a peace about her that’s new.

I like it.

I like it even more that I gave it to her.

And I like that she found it here.

She smiles. “I can’t say no to you today, can I? One more, then you need to shower and get to bed. It’s been a long day. With the time change it’s late.”

I listen to Chase and my parents make plans for tomorrow and the rest of the week, but Evie and I are quiet. I stoke the fire and listen to them talk about cows, riding horses, and fishing.

This is new. New for me, and new for them.

Evie stands and folds her blanket. “It’s time for bed, baby. What do you say to Tess?”

Chase moans and complains about having to go to bed, but finally looks to my mom and says, “Thanks for not making me eat a salad.”

“Chase,” Evie admonishes him. “That’s not what I meant, and you know it.”

My parents laugh, and Chase finally says, “Thanks for the marshmallows.”

“You’re very welcome.” My mom beams at him before looking up at Evie. “The bathroom is stocked with clean towels. Help yourself to anything you need. Make yourself at home.”

Evie nods and crosses her arms to hug herself. She's cold. Damn, I'm itching to wrap her up in my arms.

And here I was thinking I could give her a week with Chase where they'd be safe and she could relax. But faking the fact I'm not fucking her is hard. This week might be heaven for her, but I'm in hell having to pretend I don't want her.

Chase runs to the house and Evie follows. She wraps her hand around my arm and looks up. "Thank you for this."

I lift my chin and don't give a shit what my parents think when I say, "I'll find you after Chase is asleep."

She pulls her lip between her teeth and gives me a nod.

I'm surprised Mom waits long enough for them to get out of earshot before she starts in with the questions. "Well, Micah, this is a surprise."

I pull in a deep breath, because I knew this was coming. When I called and told them we were coming, I explained their situation, but didn't say anymore. "Yeah, that's a good name for it. I don't know what it is, but it is a surprise."

"I like her," my dad states as if he gets the final word when it comes to any woman I bring home, which he doesn't. I also don't bring women home—until Evie. "She's smart, she works hard, and she lets that boy be who he is. He's an ornery little shit—I like that about him."

My mom glares at him. "Evie doesn't know us or the fact that you calling her son a little shit is actually a term of endearment. This is the first time Micah has brought anyone home. Can we not run her off, please?"

Dad huffs. "Micah was a little shit too. It's all good, Tess."

Mom rolls her eyes. "We're trying to make a good impression, and you're not helping."

"It's not an interview, Mom."

"It is," she bites. "Do you know how many of my friends' kids break up with their significant other because they don't like their potential in-laws? We're a

part of the package, and I take that seriously. Maybe you'll thank me later. Maybe not, but it won't be because we didn't try our hardest."

"I'm not trying," my dad kicks a rock into the fire. "I am who I am and I'm not apologizing for shit."

"You do remember why we're here," I say.

"How could we forget," my mother whispers, as if Evie is hiding around the corner eavesdropping. "Murder for hire. It's just like Dateline."

"Only it's connected to a cartel," I remind them.

"I'd like to see anyone come after them here. This is Montana, not Miami. I'll take them down myself and won't apologize for it."

"That'll put me knee-deep in reports," I mutter. "I'll put this fire out if you guys want to go in."

My mother ignores me and keeps on about the woman who's gotten under my skin. "Don't try to make this something it isn't. I watched you two all night. It's obvious you and Evie are pretending this isn't something when it is. I know you, Micah. You can pretend all you want that this isn't something special, but this is different. You'd never bring a woman and her boy here if they didn't mean something to you."

I narrow my eyes to get her to shut up, but the sheer fact is, she's right.

"Leave him alone, Tess. He knows what he's doing." Dad spears me with his you'd-better-not-fuck-up look but keeps talking to my mom. "There's a child involved. Micah knows what's at stake. Leave him alone. He'll do what he needs to do. If anything, he's keeping that woman and child safe while they need it."

My mom stands and does that thing that moms do and pick up everything in sight so they don't have to make two trips. With her arms full, she stops in front of me and looks up. "You're a good man. I know it because that's how we raised you. You knew what that woman and her child needed and brought them here. You might do it with a frown on your face, but you always do the right thing."

Dad sighs. “He doesn’t visit often enough, proving he’s still a little shit. That’s not doing the right thing.”

Mom lifts up on her toes and kisses my cheek. “He comes home when it matters. And this matters.”

She finally carries everything back into the house and leaves me and Dad in front of the crackling fire.

He says nothing, and allows me the first quiet I’ve had all day.

I knew I could count on him.

But fuck me, I haven’t once wished for it to be quiet.

And I really like the quiet.

What the hell am I doing?

“Whatever you do, remember there’s a child involved.”

I don’t look at him and stare into the fire. “Trust me, I know.”

“That boy is oblivious so far, but I can tell he’s smart. Figure it out fast, Micah, yeah?”

“Yeah,” I agree, knowing that all too well. This isn’t the one night we started with because we couldn’t resist the pull.

This is more.

Hell, I knew she was more from her first phone call that came through on the taps. When I look back on it, I became obsessed with a woman married to a drug runner.

Every conversation she had with that asshole made me want to pummel his face. The way he put her off, refused to help with his own son, and the way he talked about her to his friends.

Listening to phone calls between her and her sister about how she needed out of her marriage stuck with me. And the endless discussions with her brother who drew up her divorce papers fucking elated me.

Dad stands up and slaps me on the shoulder. “I don’t give a shit about the reason, it’s damn good to have you home.”

I look over at him and tell him the truth. “For the first time in a long time, it feels good to be back.”

He gives my shoulder a squeeze and gets back to regular programming. “Make sure that fire’s out so you don’t burn the house down.”

“Got it.”

I watch him walk inside and do everything I can to cling to what little patience I’ve got left from being with Evie all day but not really being with her.

And it has nothing to do with fucking her.

It has everything to do with months of listening to her on the taps distressed about her marriage and preparing for her divorce. But even more, listening to the man who was willing to kill her and Chase as a work around to the prenup he signed to get his dirty hands on her money.

I knew she was good before I pounded her door down to deliver the news about a hit on her life. That was when my obsession started. Pretending anything else would be a lie. To myself and to her.

But bringing her home...

Anywhere else in the world, I’m level headed and have my shit together more than the general population. But not here.

This is the one place that drains me.

Leaves me bare.

Fuck.

I can’t reconcile my head with my fucking heart.

I barely have the patience to let the fire burn out on its own. It’s down to embers and smoldering ashes.

Not unlike my nerves as this day goes on.

There's no way I can go into the house I grew up in and pretend it'll be easy to sleep across the hall from her.

I stuff my hands in my pockets as the cool summer night creeps in without the heat of the flames. Hell, if I have to sit out here and freeze for hours to avoid what's waiting for me inside, I might.

I look up at the stars. They're bigger and brighter here, just like everything else at home.

Everything is intense and heightened. Like I'm under a microscope.

Every-fucking-thing.

I've avoided it for over a decade.

I look at my watch. It's late.

My phone vibrates.

Evita – Chase is showered and asleep.

Damn.

Me – Good, baby. Do you need anything?

Bubbles tease me before they disappear and reappear again.

Then gone.

Me – Evie.

It's a demand. I need to know.

This time I don't get one bubble. Just one word.

Evita – Yes.

That's all I need.

I pick up the shovel and cover the last of the embers with dirt. There's another fire I need to deal with.

The one flaming within me.

Me – Be ready.

STAY

Evie

My damp hair flips over my shoulder when I spin from where I was pacing.

I'm surrounded by the history of Micah Emmett. And it has nothing to do with the DEA agent I begged to stay at my house and invited into my bed.

High school and college memorabilia, trophies, medals, and pictures litter the walls and bookshelves.

It took me all of five seconds to spot Hannah Emmett when I walked through the front doors of this house. She hasn't been the topic of conversation, but she's everywhere.

And I feel like I know her.

She was beautiful, loved animals, and her family. Her bedroom is just as much of a shrine as Micah's. Hank and Tess Emmett raised athletes. Hannah was tall and fit, and has as many volleyball accolades as Micah does for football. They both ran track and have the pictures together to prove it.

Her hair was blonder, and her eyes were bluer than her older brother's. She was the brighter, feminine version of the man I can't get enough of.

I look from pictures of him to the real thing, standing in the threshold to his

childhood bedroom. He fills the doorway—tall and wide. Reading his expression, pensive is not a strong enough word to describe who I'm looking at.

I pull in a breath and whisper, "Chase is a deep sleeper."

He doesn't whisper. His words are gruff and cut through the thick air separating us. "My father is not."

He takes a step inside and closes the door behind him. The sound of a lock clicking has never turned me on before, but my wet panties are proof Micah can move mountains when it comes to my body and my heart.

This isn't what my sister pushed me into.

Micah rocked my world the way I needed in the beginning.

That was before.

But my heart is definitely in play. I can't deny it any longer.

Micah cuts the distance between us and stops toe to toe with me. His fingers find the ends of my freshly shampooed hair, and he winds it around his finger, not taking his eyes off the motion. "You showered. I smell like smoke."

I reach up to take his hand. "You smell like a memory I never want to forget."

His gaze finds me. "And what is that?"

"Your family. Your home." I pull in a deep breath and try to control my emotions. "Your parents are warm and generous. It's clear how much they love you. I like them."

His blue eyes might as well arrest me for life, they're that possessive. "I like your son. He's unapologetically selfish like a kid should be. That's a testament to you and no one else."

"I don't know what this is," I admit. "It scares me. I need to be careful because of Chase. I can't afford to be selfish, but I can't ignore what I want."

One hand slides around my neck, and his other drops to my ass. The space

between us disappears and I'm surrounded by his warm, strong body. "I take it very fucking seriously that you have a son. Don't ever question that, baby."

"I can tell. You haven't touched me all day. I feel like your kryptonite."

His tongue sneaks out to wet the crease of his lips. "You're a lot of things, but never that. You're more like my drug of choice. I'm addicted. Today has been fucking hell."

I melt into his chest. "I need to do what's best for Chase. I need to tread carefully with him. You understanding that means everything."

"I'm not completely selfless. My parents are all over me about you. I can barely take it—you didn't sign up for that." He rips off his sweatshirt and T-shirt before he drops his hands to the hem of my tank. Before I know it, I'm standing before him topless, and he's gently pulling the loose lounge pants over my hip where I just bandaged my stitches. "Does this hurt?"

"No."

He pushes my pants, and they pool at my feet. His eyes pop up to my face. "Commando again. I like it."

"Micah." I slide my hands up his chest, and take in every contoured muscle. "Today is everything. You gave me my son back and made it safe for both of us. I'll never be able to repay you."

He hesitates for a moment. I think he's going to say something, but he doesn't.

His hands find my face. His lips land on mine with a passion that's backed with tension wound so tight, I'm afraid what will happen if it snaps.

I feel it to my toes. I understand it. I've felt it all day.

Being reunited with Chase.

Escaping Miami.

Coming here.

And doing it all at Micah's side, while acting like he's nothing but a friend doing a favor for my son and me.

Nothing could be farther from the truth.

My bare back lands on his childhood bed and his hand finds my sex. It's just like it was this morning but more.

He's not being careful with me.

He's lost all the control he's been hanging onto for the sake of my son.

Two thick fingers spear me. His tongue suffocates my moans when he claims my mouth.

Hell, I can't lie to myself.

The man has claimed every part of me.

"Micah," I gasp, pulling away from him as he stretches me with a third finger and this thumb gives my clit a firm circle. I frame his face with my hands as the truth spills from my lips. "You overwhelm me."

His head dips, and my nipple is sucked between his lips. I thread my fingers through his messy hair and hold tight, taking in every sensation. His teeth sink into my sensitive skin there, almost in a dare. Like his goal in life is to overwhelm me in every way.

This time when I moan, he squeezes my sex, in a warning.

Oh, shit.

For the first time, we're not alone under one roof.

He lets go of my nipple with a pop. "Someday I'll have you to myself, when we're not new, in a house full of people, and you're not hurt. I can't wait for that, baby."

"I don't even know what that means, but I can't wait for it too."

He pushes away from me and stands. His jeans, boxers, and socks that smell like a campfire land on top of my clothes on the floor before he rummages around his bag for a condom.

His cock bobs and teases me, the tip glistening. I remember what it felt like in my hand just this morning while in his bed.

And here I am, ending the same day in his childhood bed with my son sleeping, safe and sound, across the hall.

I don't remember the last time I felt so at peace. So happy.

Happy.

It's been a long time since I've thought of that word.

He rolls on the condom, and I take him in as he places both hands on either side of me. "Roll to your good side, baby. I don't want you to have to stitch yourself back up, though, I'm sure you could if you had to."

I bite back a smile, and put a foot to the bed to roll to my side. He crawls in behind me, his body warm and strong and controlling as he wraps me up. His thigh nudges my top leg, and he nips the skin below my ear. "I want to make your pussy desperate for me. Arch, baby."

What I want to say is that he won't have to try. Desperate isn't a strong enough word to describe my emotions when it comes to him.

I arch.

He positions himself behind me, and demands, "No, baby. You're going to take all of me. Arch."

I push my ass back and jut my breasts out.

"Fuck, yes." His words are a breath in my ear at the same moment he takes my breath away.

He slams into me from behind, and I moan.

He curls his body around mine. His hand slides from my breasts to my sex. Three fingers part my lips there and land on my clit, but he doesn't move. He stays buried deep inside me.

He's so big.

I'm so full.

He works my clit at the same time he dips his head and sucks at the skin on my shoulder. "Quiet, Evie. I'm going to make you come so hard, but I don't

want to hear a sound. I fucking love your moans and cries, but they're for me only, you got it? They're mine."

I file that away for later when I have the wherewithal to process it. I can't think about anything else other than the magic he's creating between my legs. My lungs pull in a shallow breath and I try my hardest to not complain when he lets up on the delicious pressure.

"What are you doing?" I was at the door of my orgasm, about to go through and have my world rocked by Micah again.

Instead, he cups our union, purposefully gives my clit nothing, and leaves me on the brink of implosion. "I need to tell you something."

I exhale a huff of frustration. "Now?"

He pulls out a few inches and pushes back in. "I don't come home often. I fucking hate it here."

That sobers me and pushes my impending orgasm to the side. I have no idea what to say.

But he doesn't give me a chance to respond. "I knew this was the one place I could bring you to keep you safe. It's the first time in over a decade I haven't hated being here. It's because of you."

"Micah." I realize what's going on and relax into his chest, but he instantly squeezes my sex.

"Arch, baby. I want you as deep as I can have you. Do not let my cock go."

I arch and sink deeper on his shaft.

My clit gets his attention again. "Fucking love you here."

I mew at his words and his touch.

He nips my earlobe. "Seems all I needed was you. You dull the pain."

His fingers move—faster and harder. I was so close before when he left me teetering on the edge, that it doesn't take long. My orgasm starts to take over with him inside me, and he starts to move.

Driving.

Ruthless.

Mindless.

His other hand snakes up my body where he holds me in his arms. He wraps his hand around my mouth.

Oh.

I moan beneath his fingers. Why is this hot?

I come hard.

Micah takes advantage.

He moves.

Slamming into me over and over again. I ride my orgasm as he takes me. His power makes me feel powerless, yet at the same time, safe.

I dulled his pain.

And not the way I normally do with treatments or medications or therapy.

All it took was being me.

When he finally comes, I have to work hard to catch my breath. His hand slides from my mouth to my throat. And this is where we lie, connected.

In more ways than one.

He doesn't pull out when he asks, "What time does Chase wake up?"

I don't move away from him. "With the time change, the sugar, and the new environment, I have no idea."

He presses his lips to my temple. "Stay with me, just for a while."

I nod, because staying with him feels like the easiest thing in the world.

If I could stay here forever, I might.

ATTACHED

Micah

“Watch out for the hook, Chase. Your mom might be a doctor, but I’m not sure she can stitch you up all the way out here.”

“He’s right, baby. I didn’t have room for my medical kit on the horse. Please don’t stick yourself.”

The kid had never fished before today. I might not be a cowboy by choice, but living almost six years on this earth without throwing a lure is a sin. Especially since his dad had a deep-sea fishing boat.

But I guess that’s what happens when he only used the boat to run drugs for the cartel.

I’ve been home for almost twenty-four hours. I wasn’t shitting Evie last night when I told her it felt different. Time usually drags here, but not this trip. I blinked and lost a day.

Chase looks up at me as I unhook his most recent catch. The boy has a knack for reeling them in one after another. “Why do you always throw the fish back after I catch them?”

I crouch down near the bank to give the fish another chance at life before I stand and wipe my hands on my jeans. “Do you eat fish?”

Chase screws up his face. “Ew, no!”

I reach for his pole to bait his hook for the millionth time today. “That’s why. If you’re going to kill something, you have to eat it. It’s a rule of being a good cowboy.”

He nods, contemplating that notion as he takes the rod to cast it again. He’s shit at it, and I have to watch that he doesn’t hook me in the back of the head. He wants to bait the hook himself, but I’m not about to let Evie’s son draw blood on my watch. I don’t care if she has a doctor bag at her disposal back at the house.

The horses are grazing and drinking from the lake where we left them in the shade.

My dad doesn’t mess around when he’s teaching someone how to be a cowboy.

So far, Chase has groomed a horse, shoveled shit out of the stalls, and rode double with my dad to check on the herd. That was the only time Chase has been out of our sight since he woke up this morning. I didn’t know what Evie would think about that. But she’s so relaxed, she didn’t show a second thought about sending her son off with my dad.

And on a horse, for that matter. No car seat, and the only seat belt was my dad’s arm wrapped around his front.

I barely remember riding with him like that when I was young, but I do remember following behind when he had Hannah in front of him.

Mom and Evie drank coffee on the porch for most of the morning while I chopped firewood. Fall and winter come quicker in Montana, and this is something I can do for them while I’m here.

When Dad and Chase got home, we threw together a lunch and headed to the lake on the other side of the ranch.

“I want to ride my own horse,” Chase demands.

I pick up a flat rock and skip it three times across the water in the opposite direction Chase is throwing his line. “You think you’ve mastered being a

cowboy in half a day?”

Evie might look chill as she relaxes on the picnic blanket staring at the late-day sky through the trees, but she lays down the law with her son. “You’re not riding a horse by yourself.”

“Mom, please?” he begs in too many syllables.

Evie pops up on her elbows and glares at Chase. “Since when did I become *Mom*?”

“Because I want to ride my own horse and not be treated like a baby.”

“A horse is not an extra marshmallow. No way.” Evie lays back down. “You sound like a teenager. That needs to stop immediately.”

Chase ignores his mom as he awkwardly reels in his line to try to cast again. This one goes short, but he doesn’t care, and it doesn’t stop him from asking questions. “Why do you live in Miami when your mom and dad live here?”

I sit next to where Evie is sprawled on the blanket. There’s space between us but not a lot. “I moved there for my job.”

“My dad doesn’t have a job,” he says matter of factly. He looks over his shoulder to us. “Why doesn’t Dad have a job?”

Evie pushes to her ass this time. I wonder how often she covered for the asshole in the past, because it looks like she contemplates her answer for a moment. “I don’t know, baby. I honestly don’t know.”

I bet if she could tell him that she has no fucking clue why Jeff Michaels is the way he is, she would.

“Lanie’s dads both have jobs. Micah has a job. He gets to put bad guys in jail.” He turns to look at me and gets the tip of his rod stuck in the tree branches above us. “Right?”

I stand and take the rod from him to fix the mess he just made. “Right. Say no to drugs.”

He rolls his eyes like he dares me to tell him something he doesn’t know. “Mama already told me that.”

I wonder if the kid is a teenager, but at least he's back to *Mama*. Evie will be happy.

"Pretty sure I pounded that into your brain," she agrees and goes on the offense, probably to avoid more questions about her soon-to-be ex-husband. "What do you want to do when you grow up, baby?"

I hand him back the rod without bothering to re-bait it since he can't sit still. All he wants to do is cast anyway. This time it lands three feet in front of him. "I wanna be a cowboy and ride my own horse. But I don't want to shovel horse poop. It stinks, and it's heavy. And then we had to wheel it out to the poop pile. It was gross."

Evie laughs. "You can't pick and choose. Horse poop is a big part of being a cowboy. Ask Micah."

I'm not sure if my smile is more about our detailed conversation about horse shit or the fact that Evie actually laughed. "Don't grow up too fast, Chase. It's a trap. Once you're there you can never go back."

"Yeah," he mutters. "And grownups have to eat gross food."

I reach over and tug on the end of Evie's hair. "He has a point."

Evie pulls her knees up, hugs them, and looks over at me. "Maybe we should just stay here. Chase can fish, you can chop wood, and I can watch."

"You like to watch," I mutter. "I knew it."

"She's always watching," Chase complains.

"Because I love you," she reminds him without looking away from me. "I've loved watching you learn all the new things since we got to the ranch."

I'm about to ask her more about that, but my phone vibrates on the blanket.

"Oh, shit," I mutter.

"What is it?" Evie asks.

Chase laughs. "Micah said shit! Mama's gonna be mad!"

I read his text and then download my email that's slow as hell in the

mountains.

“Micah,” Evie demands as I scan the report. “There are too many things going on for you to read that without telling me what it’s about.”

“The DNA.” I look up at her before glancing at Chase to make sure he’s not paying attention. I find her dark, anxious eyes. “There was a hit in the National Database. We have an ID.”

Evie

I DECLARED we were done fishing.

Today might be my first day on the back of a horse, but that didn’t stop me from wanting to kick my heels into that poor geriatric mare.

Tess’s horse is named Spirit. She doesn’t get ridden much anymore because of her age. She’s as slow as molasses, and Micah said she was the only beast of an animal he’d trust for me to ride since she’s as sweet as she is slow since Chase rode with him.

The sight of Chase sitting on a horse with Micah made me all kinds of emotional. Watching them fish together was something my heart could barely take. My son has had more attention from the Emmett family in one day than he has from his father in two years.

My heart has gone from happy to sad to angry for my son. He’s beautiful, smart, and full of life. He deserves to be loved by both his parents. To think that complete strangers are willing to give him that when his own father wanted him dead...

Some days I feel like I’m living in an alternate realm. A horrible and unrealistic one that doesn’t deserve to be anyone’s reality.

I pull Micah up the stairs and into his bedroom by the hand. The moment we walked through the front door, I instructed Chase to eat cookies with Tess and to stay in the kitchen.

I shut the door behind us, locking us in his same childhood room we had sex in last night, and look up at him. “Who is it?”

He crosses his arms. “You know what I just realized?”

“Oh no, what? Is it worse?” I panic. “No, how could it be any worse? Unless it’s someone I know. Is it someone I know?”

He licks his lips and shakes his head. “I just realized that, as a horny teenager, my imagination was shit. I never once jacked off to thoughts of an older woman dragging me into my bedroom, locking the door behind us, and sucking me off.”

I give his rock-hard chest a poke with my index finger. “Don’t call me the older woman.”

“You’re so fucking hot, even when you smell like a horse.”

“Micah Emmett. If you don’t tell me exactly what happened...” I let my words trail off and cross my arms to mirror his stance, because I have no clue what I’ll do.

He narrows his eyes. “What? Are you going to tell my mom?”

“Stop it and tell me.”

He drops his arms, pulls me to his chest, and presses his lips to my forehead. “You don’t know him.”

“How do you know I don’t know him?”

He sighs. “Do you know anyone by the name of Delcan Braim?”

I shake my head. “No.”

“I told you. He does not run in circles with the elderly or those who fly on private jets.”

I choose to ignore the private jets comment. “What do you know about him? And how are you going to find him?”

He doesn’t answer. Instead, he captures my face in his strong hands that still smell like fish. Normally that would gross me out, but all I can think about is

the fact they smell like fish because he was spending time with Chase.

When he pulls my mouth to his, I have to lift on my toes to meet him halfway. His lips move over mine. He's not in a hurry, and his tongue slides inside my mouth to give mine a delicious lap.

My grip on his wrists tightens. What started as light and tender becomes deep and passionate. I forget about fish, hitmen, and my husband who I can't wait to call my ex.

Hell, I can't wait to call him an inmate.

He backs me into the bed and follows me down when I land on my back, barely losing our connection. I am forced to bite back a moan when he wraps a hand around my breast for a firm squeeze through my thin T-shirt.

"Everyone is downstairs," I whisper as his lips move down the column of my neck. "And I need a shower. I smell like sunscreen and sweat."

He licks the salty skin across my chest that's framed by my thin tank. "Baby, as much as I want to, I'm not going to fuck you in the middle of the day with my parents and your son awake. You can come back tonight when everyone's asleep, but you're going to have to wait until then."

I exhale and pull his face up to mine. "Do you think they'll catch him?"

"Yes," he answers firmly. "He's from Georgia, not that he'll do anything by his real name, unless he's a total idiot. We have a picture and description. He'll slip up eventually, baby. But we have a name and a face. We're not looking for a ghost anymore. This is good."

I relax into a relieved smile.

"Brax and Tim are on it. Miami PD is on the lookout. And we're here for six more days. No need to hide out on the ranch."

"Thank you for today. For spending time with Chase."

He kisses the tip of my nose. "Told you I like him."

"You did." Emotion floods me. It's all I can do to tamp it back and focus on his blue eyes that I now know he got from his father. That detail seems

inconsequential in the big scheme of things, yet it's still intimate. I swallow over the lump in my throat. He's given me so much today—I want to give him something back. “Being with you all this time, I'm getting a little attached.”

He leans down and presses his lips to mine. “Attached isn't a strong enough word.”

“Mama!” Chase's voice echoes through the old, beautiful mountain home.

I smile and whisper, “I'm really glad you like him.”

Micah's smile swells. There's a relieved peace in him I haven't seen since we got here. I wonder if it has to do with today or the news about a man named Delcan Braim. “I really like that he's a deep sleeper. Tonight, right here on your back, baby. You'll be naked and wrapped around me with my cock buried in you. And that's only round one. I can't wait.”

I lick my lips. “You're a planner.”

“I am now that I know what it's like to have an older woman in my bed.”

I smile and shake my head as Chase stomps up the wood stairs like a T. Rex.

Micah kisses me one more time before standing straight and pulling me up with him. “At least we can hear him coming. He's his own cowbell.”

I barely get the door open when Chase comes barreling around the corner. “What's going on?”

“Tess said it's supposed to rain tonight and that I could pick a movie and she'd make popcorn!”

“I've got some work to do before dinner.” I feel an incognito hand land on my lower back and slide down my ass for a quick feel before he slides by us in the hallway. He looks back at me and smirks. “Take a shower, Evie. You smell like horse poop.”

Chase cackles as he runs back down the stairs to ask someone else a million questions.

BREAKFAST IS GOING TO BE AWKWARD

Evie

The weather has turned cool and rainy the last couple of days. I'm more grateful than ever that Cadence is a heavy packer by nature. I'm prepared for any weather and could stay for a month without having to wash or repeat an outfit. My sister's mentality is that if we can travel on the private jet, our bags should be heavy and many.

I'm wrapped in a blanket and tucked into a chair in the deep front porch looking out to the mountains of Montana. I take a sip of my coffee as I watch my son follow Micah back and forth across the yard through drizzling rain.

Hank had to leave town for a few days for business. Hank is a man of few words and only says what he thinks. Even so, the house seems quieter without him.

We're on day five of my escape to Montana.

Two more days.

Two days of no patients.

Two days of safety.

Two days of no anxiety.

Two days of Micah, completely and wholly.

We spend every waking minute together with Chase.

And when the house settles in for the night, I slip across the hall to his room to spend the night lost in us.

I'm desperate for it to not end.

What I'm trying not to think about is Delcan Braim. He's still on the loose and could be anywhere at this point.

When I ask Micah about this in the dark of night, he tells me not to worry. At the beginning of the week, I didn't.

But ... two days.

A gentle hand lands on my shoulder. "That little boy is hell-bent on being a cowboy."

I look up at Tess who is not bundled in a blanket or a coat. She's thrown on a thin sweatshirt and jeans as she claims the chair next to me with her own cup of coffee.

"I must look like an idiot bundled up like this—the Floridian who's not used to the cold."

She shakes her head and shoots me a sly grin. "This is summer for us. I've got to bask in it while I can before the snow comes."

I look back out to the yard. "It doesn't seem to bother Chase. He's nonstop. He's never slept as well as he does here."

"He can also eat, but then again, he's working up an appetite. Look at him go."

Micah has chopped wood every morning. If I hadn't seen his high school and college pictures all over the house as proof of how much weight he put on after he left home, I'd swear every muscle that I know so well was from working on this ranch rather than defending an offense on the football field and staying in shape for his job.

But he's not chopping this morning. Today he clomped down the steps after chugging a cup of coffee and proceeded to load the small trailer of the side-

by-side with wood and move it to the side of the house.

His shadow followed wearing Tess's rain boots.

"Chase has to be freezing," I note. "I'm not sure what good the rain boots are when he's soaked to the bone everywhere else."

"I'll make him some hot chocolate when he's done. Don't want him to catch a cold." She looks over at me. "I know you're a doctor, and doctors say you can't catch a cold from being cold, but I kindly disagree."

I smirk back. "You don't get a cold from the weather."

She waves me off in a teasing manner. "Like I said, you're wrong. No matter, Chase will need hot chocolate with marshmallows after a hot shower."

Tess has settled into her role of hostess and quasi-grandmother like a rockstar. As the week has gone on, she's stopped asking me before she gives Chase what he wants, and she's unapologetic about it. Chase loves her, but I might love her more. I've secretly watched her watch her son as intently as I've watched mine. It's like she's drinking in every moment she has with him.

I turn back to Micah and Chase. My son struggles with one split log at a time compared to Micah who tosses them like toothpicks into the trailer. Once it's full, they make the short trek back to the house and carefully stack them in a neat pile under the overhang to keep it dry.

This time when Tess speaks, she sounds different, like she's been transported to another moment in time ... and one that isn't at all happy. "Haven't seen him like this in years. Even after we lost Hannah, he was devastated, but he was still himself. When I look back, we lost him after the trial."

I turn away from memorizing Chase mimic Micah in every move he makes and look at his mother. "Trial?"

She nods like she's in another world. "Yeah. Micah never got over that. He thought he knew Tyson. Heck, we all trusted him. Including Hannah."

I glance back to her son—the man I'm falling harder and harder for as the minutes click on—before asking something I know I shouldn't. It's none of

my business. If Micah wants me to know something, he'd tell me himself.
"Who's Tyson?"

She pulls in a breath that looks like what my patients do when they try to manage their pain.

Physical pain.

Not the heartbreak kind.

"Tyson Tivey. Micah's best friend growing up. He's the one who slipped Hannah those drugs that turned out to be deadly."

Holy shit.

"Tess." I reach for her hand and give it a squeeze. "I had no idea."

"As if losing Hannah wasn't enough, Micah's worn that guilt ever since we found out it was Tyson. Hannah trusted him because he was Micah's friend. It's why he hates it here so much. Everything is a reminder." She motions around us to the beautiful blue hydrangeas. They're tall and plentiful, and line the deep front porch. "Heck, she planted all these when she was in middle school. She made Hank dig out the thorny bushes that we threw in the ground when we moved in. When you live on a working ranch, you don't have time to keep things pretty. But Hannah loved the earth. We're surrounded by her. Every time I sit here, I see her blue eyes staring back at me."

I look around at the stunning flowers. I can't tell if they make her feel better or worse.

I'm desperate to make Tess feel better, even though I know in the end, nothing in the world could. "I don't think he hates it here."

She pulls in a big breath and looks out to her son and mine. "He does. It's okay. I get it and so does Hank. Heck, it took a long time for us not to hate it here. What I do hate is that Micah carries that guilt. He won't let it go. He changed after that. His whole trajectory shifted. He gave up his football dreams for the DEA."

"He saved me." This gets her attention, like I've pulled her out of a dark

place. “He saved me and Chase. He’s very good at what he does.”

A sad smile touches her lips. “Don’t get me wrong, Evie. We’re proud of him. He could work up at the corner store, and we’d be proud. Because whatever he does, he does completely. This life wasn’t for him, and that’s okay. All I ever wanted was for my kids to be happy and productive members of this big, bad world and find a way to make it better.”

My emotions get the best of me. I didn’t think I could fall harder for Micah Emmett, but learning this piece of his puzzle does it. He loves his family deeply.

“He’s amazing,” I say on a whisper.

“He is,” she agrees unequivocally. “We’ve always known that. But he’s back—really back. And that’s a new development. Hank and I might be old, but we’re not blind. It took about two minutes to see that it’s all you.”

The side-by-side fires up, and we both look out. Chase is sitting on Micah’s lap steering.

And he’s doing a horrible job of it.

Chase veers toward a tree, and I let out a little yelp.

But I should have known better.

Micah grabs the wheel and wraps my son up in his arm of steel.

From the sounds of laughter we hear from both of them, they’re just fine.

“Yeah, my son is back. I’m sorry to say, it might not have to do only with you, Evie. That little guy has a way of forcing you to the light whether you want to be there or not.”

Tears pool in my eyes, and I don’t look at the woman next to me or try to make her feel better, no matter how happy I am for her and Hank that they see a little bit of their son that they lost so long ago.

I’m allowing myself a moment to be selfish.

Because I’m happy for me.

I haven't felt this way in a long time.

Micah

"WE CAN'T STAY HERE FOREVER," I say in a low voice as I make my way upstairs. "The private jet goes wheels up the day after tomorrow. Evie wants to get back to her patients, and Chase starts school in a few weeks. I need to get back to Miami. The guilt is wearing on me that I'm not carrying my own weight on my own case."

"Teddy Koenig."

I stop in the hallway before I hit the stairs. "Who's that?"

"Your guy, Micah. The number one you were looking for. We got him coming out of a house tonight. We've got facial recognition on him. He was processed when he was eighteen for some shit vandalism charge. Now we just need to follow him. But he's the one."

I look through the back of the house into the dark night. "You're sure?"

"Yep. We triangulated the area and found his phone. The wire should be live by tonight. Tim rushed it through with the judge. Give me another day to confirm, but I'm as sure as I've ever been."

That says a lot.

I exhale. "Now I really need to get back."

"Take it easy," Brax says. "I've got you covered until the baby comes. That said, if my daughter doesn't make an appearance soon, her mom might go crazy. Landyn made me clean behind the refrigerator last night, and it hasn't even sat there for two months. Ask me how many times I've ever cleaned behind a refrigerator."

I round the top of the stairs and move down the hall. "I'm not asking because I don't give a shit. Why are we talking about this?"

He keeps on like I'm not here. "Zero, that's how many. I have never once moved a refrigerator to clean behind it, but I did last night, and it wasn't fucking dirty. But I did it for my wife and pretended it was the best idea on earth. We need a baby to focus on so I can stop spinning my wheels cleaning shit that isn't dirty. My daughter isn't here yet, and I'm exhausted."

I turn the handle to my bedroom door, but stop in the doorway.

Evie is standing in the middle of my bedroom waiting for me.

And she's proven to be a little klepto snoop.

I've lost all interest in everything happening in Miami as I stare at her. She's wearing my high school football jersey. I haven't seen it since I stuffed it in the back of a drawer after my senior season. I was thirty pounds lighter then—all of it muscle. It wouldn't fit me now if I tried to pry it up one arm.

But Evie might as well be a flagpole the way it hangs on her small frame. It hits the middle of her bare thighs and hangs off one naked shoulder. I haven't given one thought to that jersey in years.

The need to rip it to shreds to see what's underneath overwhelms me.

"I've got to go," I growl into the phone.

Evie's smile screams that she's proud of herself.

Brax continues to vent. "Landyn just texted me with a list for me to do as soon as I get home. It includes power washing the patio furniture, getting on my hands and knees to clean the baseboards, and washing the insides of the windows. And the only reason the outside of the windows isn't on that list is because I did them last week. That's just today's list. There will be another one tomorrow. This shit isn't going to stop until she goes into labor. And since there's no way I'm allowing her to lift a finger, *we* means *me* in every nesting scenario she throws down. What I'm saying is, I'm your bitch until my daughter is born."

Evie licks her lips as she twists a dark curl around her index finger.

"Great," I mutter. "Don't go home until you find Delcan Braim. If you could make that happen in the next forty-eight hours, I'd appreciate it."

The name doesn't affect her like it did in the beginning. But we're across the country, and no one knows where she is.

She proves how much she isn't affected when she grabs the hem of my jersey.

Bare legs, the bare pussy that whipped me into someone I do not recognize, and perfect tits are my answer to what's beneath.

"I'm on it," Brax says. "I pulled every agent available across the division to kick in. We're doing surveillance day and night—"

"Perfect," I bite. "I've got to go."

"Wait," he says as my old jersey hits the floor. Evie walks butt-naked and stops toe-to-toe in front of me, proving my reality is better than a dream. I barely make out what Brax is saying. "I didn't get a chance to tell you what I actually called about. I think we have a lead where the money was going—"

"Don't make me hang up on you, Cruz. I've got to go."

"Wait. You need to hear this."

My cock knows what I need right now, and it has nothing to do with what's going on in Miami.

Her tits are too perfect and right in front of me. I reach up with my free hand and twist one.

She sucks in a deep breath and reaches for my waistband. Before I know it, my button fly is no longer buttoned, and my cock stands at attention, bobbing between us, proving magnetism is a real and physical thing.

He wants her, and no one but her.

Then she drops to her knees.

Brax starts talking about money and Panama and I don't know what else. Maybe his laundry. My brain does not process. The only head that's working on my body is the one on the end of my dick, and it's never been happier as I watch it disappear between Evie's perfect pink lips.

"Bye." I barely get the word out on a groan, disconnect the call, and throw

my phone across the room. If it lands in a million pieces, then I guess I won't have to communicate with anyone ever again but the woman sucking me off.

Her type of communication is something I've decided I can't live without.

I rip my shirt over my head and it lands on top of my old jersey.

I thread my fingers through her thick, dark hair. "Baby, you are not good for my career."

She sucks me farther into her mouth. I might have an out of body experience when my tip hits the back of her throat.

I can't help myself. I fist her hair and press my hips in before pulling out.

When I look down, all I see are big brown, heated eyes staring up my chest as the tips of her fingers press into my thighs through denim. I fist her hair, pulling her off my cock until it springs completely free from her lips and tip her head back to look up at me.

I cup her face with my other hand and run my thumb across her cheek. "You're going to make it really hard for me to take you back to reality, baby."

She nods, her face still in my hand with the tip of my cock bouncing on her bottom lip. "I know. This is too perfect. I'm afraid to go back."

"This is perfect," I agree. "You're fucking perfect."

She glances down at my cock before looking back up my body to my face. "I need to tell you something."

I shift my hips so my cock drags across her cheek. "Besides you going through my shit, what else is there to tell?"

"When I'm with you, I'm not scared," she whispers. Her tits rise and fall as she pulls in a shaky breath. "You saved me. You have to know, you saved me in so many ways."

It's my turn to pull in a deep breath. "Tried to deny it, but I was obsessed with you when I was listening to you on the taps. I had no business thinking about you in any other way than a target. Saving you was selfish. I wanted

you to myself before I recognized the feeling.”

“I’ve never known what it’s like to want anyone like this. I also forgot what it was like to be wanted. I’m afraid to go home. Afraid this won’t be the same and afraid of Braim.”

“Nothing will change, baby. If you think I’ve taken care of you up to now, you haven’t seen anything.” I drag my thumb across her lip and she swipes the tip of it with her tongue. I replace it with the tip of my cock. “Evie, I want to control this.”

Her eyes flare.

Fuck, now I want this more than ever.

“Arms behind your back, baby.”

She hesitates a moment and gives my thighs a squeeze where she was hanging onto me, but she does as I say. The moment her hands grip each other behind her back, she leans in and kisses the tip of my cock.

I can’t help but smile and shake my head. It’s like she’s daring me to control her.

“Arch,” I demand. “And shift your legs apart.”

“You’re very specific.”

“You’re very tempting. Do it.”

She shifts her legs and juts her tits forward. “Like this?”

My cock wars with my brain, but my brain wins. I want to remember this forever.

I take a half-step back to get a good look at her. “Just like that. You’re fucking perfect. Be careful, Dr. Litchfield. I may never let you go.”

She doesn’t move, but her demeanor sobers. “Don’t tease me, Micah.”

I close the distance between us and her lips part for me. I’m as serious as she is. “I would never, baby. Not about that.”

Her eyes drop to my cock. My chest clenches when she swipes the underneath with her tongue. My hand goes back to her hair, and I fist it at the back of her head. With my other, I take my cock and direct it between her lips.

“Fuck,” I hiss as I hold her still and glide in and out of her wet mouth. When I pull out, she circles my tip and when I push in, she takes it so good. I don’t look away from her or our connection.

I move in and out, fucking her mouth, pulling her onto my dick, keeping it slow and controlled for her no matter how much I want to let loose.

To be like this without anything between us, a thought courses through my brain that’s never once been there before.

The need to throw the damn condoms out the window. The need to take her—just her—is too much.

Dammit. I can’t think about that right now.

My balls tighten. I’m close.

“I’m going to come,” I warn her. “If you want to stop, now is the time, Evie.”

She doesn’t stop.

Her suction becomes more intense.

I rock back on my heels as she takes me over the edge. Her hands land on the backs of my thighs to hold on.

When I come in her mouth, it’s fucking heaven. She doesn’t let me go. She sucks me dry until I can’t take it another moment.

I reach down and pull her up my body. She licks her lips as she wraps her legs around my waist where I feel her pussy tempting me.

We both freeze besides our lungs that have to work to catch up to our beating hearts. I feel hers beat against mine, skin to skin, which is nothing new.

I have no idea how I’m still hard after coming for the first time in her mouth, but I am.

And it has everything to do with where we are.

She never takes her eyes off mine as she draws her knees up, causing her pussy to sink.

She's open and wet and so fucking perfect.

"No teasing, baby. You're mine. I don't care how long it takes us to figure this out, we'll do it. This is too perfect. I'm not walking away."

She moves against my chest and sinks farther on my cock an inch.

Fuck.

"This is dangerous," she whispers.

I shake my head. "This is perfect, and you know it."

I pull her to me and take her mouth. Somehow she knows it's her call.

The deeper I kiss her, the farther she sinks on my cock.

And the further I fall.

Words swirl in my head that are foreign—yet basic—and have never meant anything to me.

The moan on her tongue vibrates on mine when she hits my root.

We both break our kiss and stare into each other's eyes. I pump into her once.

"Again." The word is a breath between us and lands somewhere between demanding and begging on her lips. "Just once more..."

My arms constrict around her. This time I pull out and thrust back in with more force.

She drops her head back and closes her eyes. "We need a condom."

"We do," I agree.

We're trying to talk ourselves into something our bodies want no part of.

I turn and bend without letting our connection go. Her back is to the bed, and I give us two more thrusts.

“Yes,” she calls, way too loud for sharing a roof with my parents and her son.

I kiss her hard. “Breakfast is going to be awkward if you don’t shut your mouth, baby.”

Then I do something I don’t want to do.

I pull out.

She lets out a complained mew until my mouth hits her clit.

This time I don’t have to tell her to arch her back.

The bottoms of her feet hit the bed, and she lifts her hips for more. Fuck, she’s wet and tastes so damn good.

I let her do whatever she wants.

And she’s greedy.

She moves against my mouth, and I’m here for it. It’s all I can do to keep my old bed from creaking on the wood floors, but she doesn’t care, and I’m right there with her. All I want is to get lost in her forever.

And forever is a clear and real vision, even with the biggest hurdles in the way.

Like a divorce and a hitman.

I don’t let go when she stops moving. I fist the globes of her ass in my hands and take over. I hold her to my mouth and do what she did for me—not letting up. If I can torment her with my lips and tongue, I will.

She manages not to scream, but the bed continues to complain.

I don’t care.

Her hips fall to the mattress, and I reach to my bedside table where I stashed the condoms. I can’t rip it open fast enough.

I roll it on and slide inside again.

When I fill her to the root, her heart is pounding, and her eyes are heavy.

“It’s not the same,” she utters on labored breaths. “Everything with you is perfect, but it’s beyond perfect with no condom. I’ll get a prescription as soon as we get back.”

“It’s like I didn’t just come so fucking hard. This is what you do to me,” I say as I pump into her, over and over. Harder and more brutal than we ever have.

When I come for a second time, my body tenses. Together, we’re hot and sweaty and fucking fantastic.

I give her my weight and turn my head to press my lips to her temple. “My heart might beat out of my chest. You challenge the athlete in me like no coach ever has.”

Her arms and legs wrap me up.

I pull away just enough to look down at her. “Did I hurt your stitches?”

She shakes her head. “That was amazing. And you’re right. Breakfast is going to be awkward. I’m too happy and sleepy to care. I’m sure I’ll hate myself in the morning.”

I roll to my back and take her with me. “We’re bringing my jersey home and you’re going to wear it for me like lingerie.”

She lifts her head and looks down at me with messy hair and sated eyes. “Is this domineering thing normal for you?”

“Does it matter? You got off on it.”

She narrows her eyes but doesn’t say shit.

“You just don’t want to admit it,” I say the moment my hand lands on her ass.

Her jaw drops as the crack of skin echoes in the room.

“You didn’t just do that,” she whispers through a wide smile.

I lean up to kiss her. “If we’re going to make breakfast memorable, baby, we might as well go for it.”

HERO

Evie

“Thank you so much.” I hug Tess before I do the same to Hank. It’s all I can do to swallow back my tears. “This week has been everything I needed and more. I’ll never forget it.”

Chase sneezes from where he stands next to us. He woke up this morning with red, itchy eyes.

“Come back anytime,” Tess says and squats to pull Chase into her arms as she looks up at me. “You might be the doctor, but I told you he was going to catch a cold out in that cold rain.”

“Don’t tell the doctor how her son got sick,” Hank says and looks to me. “And don’t come back just anytime. Make it soon and bring my son with you.” Hank turns to Micah and frowns. “No more going longer than a year. I know Uncle Sam gives you a shit ton of vacation. Get on a damn plane and use it.”

Micah puts his arm around his dad’s shoulders for a side man hug. “I promise. It was a good week, Dad.”

“Hell, yes, it was. You might not be a cowboy but you sure can chop some wood.” Hank stuffs one hand in his pocket and places the other on Chase’s head. “You, on the other hand, are on your way to mastering the cowboy ways. Good job this week, little man. You gotta come back so I can put you

to work again.”

Chase coughs and proves Tess right. He really is catching a cold. “Good luck working without me, Hank.”

Hank proves he’s not nearly as touchy feely as his wife, because he backs up three steps when Chase wipes his nose across the outside of his sleeve.

“That’s disgusting,” I mutter and push a tissue at him. “Blow your nose, please.”

Chase takes the tissue but doesn’t do as I say. He barely wipes it and stuffs it back into my hand.

This will be a long flight.

Micah puts a hand on the small of my back. “The pilot is waiting.”

“I’m having a harder time leaving than you.”

Tess places a motherly hand on my cheek. Her expression says more than her words. “We’re pretty special that way. Bring Micah back soon.”

I nod and pull in a big breath to keep my tears at bay. “I will. I’ll never forget this week. It’s the best gift I’ve ever received.”

Hank puts his arm around his wife’s neck and pulls her away from us. “That says a lot since she flies around on a private jet, Tess. Let ‘em go.”

I’m about to pick up my tote bag and Chase’s backpack but Micah gets to them first. I shuffle my lethargic son to the stairs to board as Tess calls to us, “See if they have any hot chocolate on that fancy plane!”

I turn back and smile one more time.

Chase flops down in one of the big leather seats and rubs his eyes. “I’m cold, Mama.”

I put my hand to his forehead. “Great. You have a fever.”

The pilot says a few words before he disappears into the cockpit while I dig around in my huge tote bag for the children’s pain reliever. Then I go to the mini bar to see if I can find some juice or maybe some oranges for Chase to

snack on during takeoff.

When I turn around, I stop in my tracks.

Chase has moved to the seat across from where he was sitting. He's pushed the armrest up and is snuggled into Micah's side.

Micah has his arm around him and frowns up at me. "You're the doctor. Don't you carry medicine around with you just in case? He's burning up."

For the second time in a matter of minutes, tears form behind my eyes. But this time, I can't stop them.

The plane starts to taxi, and I reach out to grip the back of a leather recliner.

"Evie," Micah bites. "Meds?"

I nod and slip into the seat across from them. "Chase, sit up and drink this."

Chase downs the purple syrup and takes the juice after I pop the straw in the box. "When are we going to be there?"

Since we're just taxiing down the runway, I don't answer that. "Drink. You need the fluids and it'll help your ears when we take off."

Micah lifts his chin to me. "Buckle up, baby."

"She's not a baby," Chase mutters and scoots farther into his seat to stretch out.

Micah looks down at my son. "It's just a saying. Chug your juice."

Chase barely takes a sip as I grab my sweater from my bag to cover him. "Try to go to sleep. The trip will go faster. We'll be home in no time."

Micah's gaze turns to me, and his stare is heavy.

I know exactly what it's about.

Home.

The destruction from the attack on my house has been fixed. My father pulled every string in the book to have it fixed right away.

New windows.

New doors.

Cadence even picked out new carpet and put a rush on it so my office would be blood free. I don't even know what it looks like and told her I don't care. As long as the memory was wiped from my home.

Everything is back in order.

Other than a certain hitman that's still on the loose.

We escaped for a week. It was beautiful.

As much as I miss my job and my patients, I'll never be able to focus. Not with Braim on the loose and worrying about Chase.

"Evie." Micah calls for me and pats his lap. I kick off my sneakers and rest my feet on his thick thigh. Chase doesn't say a thing. The three of us have eased into a weird sense of togetherness.

Together...

But not together.

Micah certainly hasn't kissed me in front of Chase. Hell, we haven't even talked about it. I think it's better this way. Whatever we are is organic, and we're rolling with it.

"Close your eyes, baby," Micah says in a low voice since Chase's are already closed. "It's all going to be okay. I promise."

I recline back in my seat and glance out the window as we lift off the earth. The mountains get smaller and smaller.

The safety and refuge of the Emmett ranch is nothing but a memory as we race across the country toward reality.

Reality that is no different than it was when we left.

The plan ... well, I can't say I'm excited about it.

Of all the options, it's the best one, even if it is the most awkward.

But I'm not wavering.

It is what it is, and I don't give a shit what anyone says.

Especially my mother.

Micah

"HE'S DEAD WEIGHT, baby. I'll get him and the car seat if you can get the bags."

Chase slept on and off throughout the flight. He coughed and sneezed all over me.

He's a cool kid, but it was disgusting.

His fever broke about an hour ago, and he's a sweaty mess. But we're back in the land of beaches, humidity, and palm trees. At least we don't have to worry about keeping him warm.

"Come here, buddy." I stand and drag his dead weight up my body. He lays his head on my shoulder as I wrap one arm around him and pick up his car seat with the other.

Evie scavenges through the snacks and mini fridge one more time so she's stocked up on the ride home before she turns to the pilot. "Thank you again."

"It's always a pleasure, Dr. Litchfield. I look forward to your next trip. I'll make quick work of getting your bags."

I need to ask her if she's traveled by private jet her entire life or if this is something you get used to. She doesn't act like it's the big deal that it is.

I'm out the door first, and our entourage is waiting, just like they promised. Brax, Tim, and Rocco stand at the bottom of the stairs. Brax and Tim are armed with their duty weapons on their hips.

I'm done fucking around and want to get out of here. Being out in the open is not my idea of a good time after what happened at Evie's house.

But none of them show any urgency. Not at all.

What the hell.

Two government cars are parked on the private runway. The plan was for a caravan and extra agents.

Brax tips his head as I come down the stairs with Chase in my arms. He slowly peels his shades from his face before putting fists to his hips and shakes his head. “Well, that didn’t take long. In fact, you officially hold the record. I’ll hand over my trophy when we get back to the office.”

I squint through the Florida sun and push the car seat at him as soon as my feet hit the tarmac. “Shut up, Cruz. I want to get them in the car. And I’m not going back to the office until I get them settled.”

Brax takes the car seat. “Chill. We need to talk. There’s no need to panic, but your case was active this morning.”

“What happened?”

“I’ll fill you in on the ride. But we’re going straight to the Division. You have a meeting waiting on you, and it can’t wait.”

“Let me take those for you, Evie,” Tim says and grabs our carry-ons. “You look good. The mountains agree with you.”

She smiles at my boss. “Thanks, Tim. I wasn’t ready to come back.”

Brax climbs into the back of the SUV to buckle in the car seat before I can demand to know more.

Chase wakes up with all the activity and looks around. He comes alive so fast, I’m jealous. I wish I could wake up like that. “We’re home!”

He pushes out of my arms, and Evie tilts his face to inspect him. “I’m sure you’re not over it that fast, but for the time being, your fever broke. Does your throat hurt?”

He sneezes in her face and pulls his T-shirt up to use as a tissue this time. Shit, I had no idea kids can be so gross.

He looks up at his mom and brushes her off. “Sort of.”

Brax climbs out of the car. “Load up. I know you had wifi on the plane, but this was not a conversation to be had over text.”

Rocco throws our suitcases in the back of a black Suburban before turning to me and holds his arms out wide. “You can thank me anytime.”

“What am I thanking you for?” I ask.

“Dude, I found your guy.”

I pause taking in what he said, but Evie definitely does not pause and steps in front of me. “You found him? Braim?”

He lifts both shoulders and exhales like he’s the shit—which if this is true, then he is. “This morning. I was on my way home from my shift and stopped to get gas. There was a guy in the next bay doing the same with a ball cap pulled down wearing a pair of shades, and the sun wasn’t even up. It was like the Unabomber all over again. When he turned to the side, he looked familiar. So, I thought what the hell and called his name.”

“You’re never going to believe this,” Tim mutters.

I run my hand through my hair. “You just called his name?”

Roc looks around at the group like we’re the idiots. “What, did you want me to tackle him right there at the gas pump? I didn’t know for sure if it was him.”

“Wait.” Evie grips my arm. “You mean, he’s in custody?”

“It wasn’t that easy,” Rocco explains. “The moment I called his name, he jerked his head down, jumped in his car, while it was filling up, and peeled out. I took off after him and called for backup.”

“In your personal car?” I ask, trying to picture what went down on the streets of Miami.

“Like I said,” Rocco keeps on. “I’m the shit.”

“At least it happened before the early-morning rush,” Brax adds. “It was all over the news.”

“It still is.” Rocco’s smile swells into a wolfish grin. “It was epic. You can watch the highlights later.”

“This is the best news ever,” Evie says, leaning into me as Chase hangs on my other arm and swings back and forth.

I put my arm around her and hold her to my side but look back at my friends. “You’re sure it’s him?”

Rocco looks put out. “You’re questioning my skills?”

“It’s Braim,” Tim assures me. “He’s been processed and questioned. He even has the GSW to the thigh—his little memento from you.”

I exhale. “You could have at least texted me. We spent the whole trip here tense about what we were walking into.”

Evie tugs at my tee. “You said you weren’t worried.”

I tip my head. “I lied.”

Brax frowns at me. “That’s no way to start a relationship.”

“You’re one to talk given your marriage was based on a lie in the beginning,” I mutter.

“Can we go to Grandma and Grandpa’s now?” Chase whines.

I stop swinging him. “Change of plans. You can go home.”

“Really?” Chase squeals.

“Eventually,” Brax amends. “Sorry, Evie. We need to swing by the office since it’s on the way to your house. Everything is happening at the same time, and if Micah is not at this meeting, all hell will break loose.”

I look around. “You caught Braim and there’s more?”

“It’s been a busy day,” Tim says. “Let’s just say your case ran into someone else’s case, and that someone else is not happy.”

“I’m tagging along for the show,” Rocco pipes. “I wouldn’t miss this for the world.”

I look at Evie. “Are you okay to make a quick stop at the office? I won’t let it go long.”

She looks down at Chase who is running in circles. “As long as everyone knows he’s sick. By my calculations, we have a couple hours before the meds wear off and he’s lethargic again.”

I look around the group. “Let’s get this done so we can get Chase home.”

“Micah the family man.” Rocco smirks and turns to Tim and Brax. “You losers owe me fifty bucks on the over-under.”

Tim pulls his wallet out and peels off a couple bills.

“I’ll get you later,” Brax says.

I put a hand to Evie’s back and give her a nudge. “Ignore them. They bet on everything.”

We move to the Suburban as Rocco keeps talking. “The line was three weeks. I believed in you, Micah. Damn, I’m on fire. I caught the bad guy. Called the ball and chain catching Emmett by the ankle. I can’t wait for this meeting. What else do you need help with? The DEA will be knocking my door down to recruit me. Step back, losers. A younger badass has entered the building.”

Brax slaps him on the back as we load up. “Remember, we’re not telling Landyn any of this. She doesn’t need the stress before the baby comes.”

“She’ll find out if she watches the news,” Roc calls when he gets in the passenger seat of Tim’s car. “I’m everyone’s hero.”

Evie climbs in next to Chase but stops me before I shut her door. “It’s over. I can’t believe it.”

There’s nothing I want more than to lean in and kiss her. We’ve eased into touching each other in front of Chase. “It is, baby.”

She glances over her shoulder at Chase who’s buckling himself into his car seat. When she looks back at me, she says, “We’re going home, and you’re coming with us, right?”

“Yeah, I did not see this coming for at least a few more weeks,” Brax

mutters.

I ignore Brax and reach up to cup her face. “It’s nice of you to ask, but if I was willing to butt into your parents’ estate to be with you, you bet your ass I’ll be at your house.”

“Micah said ass!” Chase calls from his car seat.

“So Rocco gets a pass, but I don’t,” I mutter.

She places her hand over mine and smiles but talks to her son. “It’s okay, baby. Just this once.”

THE BAND

Micah

“**W**hat the fuck?”
There are no words.

Actually, there are.

And I don't mind letting all the fucks fly since I left Evie and Chase in the conference room.

“What in the actual fuck?” I echo my own sentiment.

He holds his arms out wide and smiles. “And just like that, the band is back together again.”

Brax shrugs as Rocco whistles and pulls out a chair like he's settling in for a show. “Shit, I'm glad I stayed. I knew this was gonna be good.”

I look at Brax. “You told me my case bumped into another one. You didn't tell me it was being puppeteered by the CIA.”

The man at the center of attention looks at Tim. “I told you he loves me.”

Cole Carson.

CIA Officer Cole fucking Carson.

He was the one who embedded Brax deep undercover with the Marino Cartel for two years.

Cole is arrogant, brazen, and ballsy.

He's really fucking good at his job.

He also never stops talking.

The man needs an editor.

“I had so much fun playing with the DEA last time, that when a case came across my desk that was so intriguing it actually gave me a hard on, I said to myself, what the fuck, let's do it again. I'm always down for a good time, and you special agents of the narcotic variety prove to be a shit ton of fun.” He looks around the room at his audience and exhales triumphantly. “And here we are. It's good to be back.”

Point made.

My attention is pulled to the sullen, pissed-off man leaning against the wall at the side of the room. His hair is dark and shaggier than mine. He's built more like Brax than me, but unlike my friend who looks like he could step off a fashion magazine at a moment's notice, there's nothing polished about this guy. His T-shirt dates the World Series more than eight years ago, and if his jeans are from this decade, then they've been through some stuff.

Just like him.

“Who are you?” I demand.

The guy glares at me.

If Cole is good for anything, it's filling a void. “Micah, if you looked into a mirror and saw yourself in someone else, this would be it.”

I turn my glare on the CIA officer. “What does that even mean?”

“He's said the same thing to me a hundred times now, and I have no fucking clue what it means,” the stranger bites. “All I know is your cash house was funding my case, but the funds dried up. Now my year-and-a-half mission in Panama was for nothing. That's a long fucking time.”

Brax shrugs, unimpressed, and mutters, “Just saying, I did two years.”

The guy glares at Brax. “I know who you are.”

“Everyone knows who he is,” I interrupt. “But we don’t know who you are.”

“That’s not by accident,” he says.

Cole takes a step toward the middle of the room that could turn into a showdown at any moment and holds his hands out low. “I’m the common denominator here, per usual. Let me explain—”

I stop him right there. “I hope this explanation includes why you didn’t deconflict. I know I did, and my case didn’t tie into anything active.”

“Micah,” Cole drawls my name way too long. “We worked together the entire time Brax was under. You know I don’t do that.”

“Fucking CIA,” I hiss.

“We’re all a little irritable at the moment, but can we move past this and focus on what we can work with?” Cole keeps talking. “Everyone, this is Kingston Jennings. Or, as he likes to be called, King.”

I cross my arms, because this cannot be real. “King?”

“The one and only,” the self-proclaimed royalty confirms.

“One of your assets?” Tim asks.

“No.” Cole smiles. “Well, sort of. But only in the way Brax was. King is one of yours. At least he was for a short time. I nabbed him when he was a new agent working on the border in Texas. He was only there for a year when one of his cases graced my desk. He had no idea the potential that he uncovered —”

“I don’t know how many times we have to go over this,” the man named Kingston bites. “I fucking did—I knew it from the get-go. My case is that epic.”

Brax barks a laugh.

King narrows his eyes.

Fuck. The egos in this room might blow the roof off the building.

“New agent?” I ask. “No offense, but you don’t look new.”

“I’m hardly new,” King states.

Of course, Cole takes over. “King might be new, but he isn’t green. Let’s just say the DEA is his second career—something of a retirement job.”

“And what was your first job?” Tim demands.

King shrugs like it’s no big deal. “Special ops. Blew my knee out when I was about to re-up. I couldn’t pass the PT after that. Decided to take retirement and pursue something else. The DEA fitness test was playground material in comparison, so here I am.”

“He barely squeaked under the age cutoff to get hired,” Cole adds. “He was experienced but unknown. I swiped him up.”

I think about Evie and Chase waiting for me in the next room. I need to move this party along.

“Look, this is a shitload of fun,” I lie and focus on King. “But I’ve got a kid in the next room who could burn through his meds at any moment. We need to get him home. Shutting down that cash house was not my idea. In fact, it fucked up my case. So don’t come in here blaming me for shit when I had no idea you or your case existed until two minutes ago. Brax and I talked on the way here. We’re ready to round up, and it’s going to happen tomorrow. We need to get this shit done. I’m drawing up the op plan when I get home and Brax will gather the troops.”

“Can we just take a minute—” Cole tries.

“No. We do not have a minute,” I stop him. “We just identified the cartel’s number one guy in Miami. We’re ready. Doors are being kicked in at six tomorrow morning.” I motion to King. “They’ll find another way to funnel your money to Panama. They always do.”

King shakes his head in disgust. “I know that, but now we’re starting from scratch. If you’re kicking in doors tomorrow morning, I want in on that. The closer I can be to my case, the better.”

I look at Tim. “That’s your call.”

“Let me just add, when King said he was Special Ops, that was an understatement. He was a mastermind. You could say he was the king.” Cole hikes a brow. “I wish I could take credit for his greatness, but I just found him after the fact.”

“If Cole vouches for him, I’m good.” Tim sighs. “I want that op plan on my desk yesterday. I’m going to have to push it through. This shit should be done before breakfast tomorrow. Let’s just hope no one has a baby before then.”

Cole puts a hand over his heart and turns to Brax. “Man, I heard. Congratulations. A daughter will fuck you up. Welcome to the edge of your seat where you’ll sit for the rest of your life. You’ll never be the same.”

“That’s the truth,” Tim mutters.

Brax frowns, and I mirror it. They might as well be speaking Latin.

It’s time to put an end to this.

“I’ve got to go. Check your email for the op plan, and be here at four in the morning to brief. It’s time to wrap this shit up.”

On my way out, I hear Cole say, “Rocco, I saw you on the news. It’s like you grew up before my eyes.”

“Yeah.” Rocco rubs his chest triumphantly. “I saved the fucking day. If I were already active on SWAT, I could help out tomorrow.” He turns to Tim. “Can I come anyway?”

“No. No fucking way. Go home, Roc.”

“Maybe I’ll drag my ass out of bed and meet you gents for breakfast when it’s all said and done.”

That’s the last thing I hear before I’m out of the conference room door.

Chase is stomach down on an office chair spinning in circles. Evie is on the phone, but her gaze shoots to me where I stand in the doorway.

This entire scene brings me back to the day we met.

“Mom, it’s all good. I’ll see you in the morning when you come to the house to stay with Chase. We’re safe to go home.”

Chase drags the toes of his sneakers on the carpet and stops himself but trips to the side when he runs to me. “Can we go now?”

I lean down to toss him into my arms. “Yeah. We can go home.”

He coughs in my face. “Are you coming with us?”

I do my best to wipe the germs away, but it’s Evie who answers that question, and she announces it to the room. “Yes, Mom. He’s coming home with us.”

EVIE FAN

Evie

I roll and look toward my bathroom. The door is cracked and the light is set to low.

I grab his pillow and pull it to my face.

It smells like him.

Like sex.

Like us.

I hear the water turn on and off before the light clicks and he moves through the dark.

“Are you sneaking out on me without saying goodbye?”

His large, shadowed frame stops. When he bends to flip on the lamp, I see alert blue eyes and messy damp hair kissing his forehead.

He sits on the side of the bed next to me and brushes the hair from my face.

“Why are you awake?”

I roll to my back and look up at him. “This getting up in the middle of the night for one of us to leave needs to stop.”

“It does,” he agrees.

“I have a feeling you downplayed what it is you’re doing this morning.”

He shakes his head. “We’re going to arrest some people. If they’re where they’re supposed to be, it’ll be a lot of people.”

My eyes travel down his body through the dark room. “Your pants have a lot of pockets. I’ve never seen you wear anything like that before.”

“It’s not a big deal, baby. The whole thing will be done before you can fire up your fancy coffee maker.”

I take his hand in mine, pull it to my chest, and hold it over my heart. “Is this similar to you lying about not being worried to return with Braim on the loose?”

He narrows his eyes and pulls in a deep breath. “This is different. When we didn’t know where Braim was, we were on defense. I’m on offense today. Good guys always win.”

I pull his hand to my lips and kiss his palm. “Be careful, Micah. If I have to dig a bullet out of you, I won’t be happy.”

He smiles and leans down to kiss me way better than I’ve ever kissed him. “You being happy is the best reason for me not to get shot. I’ll do my best.”

I catch him behind the neck before he has a chance to sit up, or worse, leave me. “You saved us. Chase and I are attached. You can’t leave.”

He takes over my kiss. It’s not fast. It’s slow and lingers on my lips in a way I wish it would last forever. There’s nothing I want more than to crawl out of my covers, wrap my arms and legs around him and beg him to stay.

When he finally lets me go, he tips his forehead to mine. “Just found you, baby. I’m not going anywhere.”

He kisses the tip of my nose and tries to stand, but I catch his hand one last time. “Are you sure that you’re not a cowboy? I could totally be a doctor in the mountains and you could chop wood.”

He gives my hand a squeeze. “I’ve got to go, Evie. I can’t be late to my own party. It’s a big one.”

“Be careful,” I say, but it comes out on a plea.

He says nothing.

But he does lift his chin.

Then, he’s gone.

Micah

FIVE DOORS KICKED IN.

Twenty-four in custody.

Six cars.

Four boats. We knew about one, but not the rest. But, then again, everyone in Miami has a boat, so why wouldn’t they have four?

And guns.

A fucking armory.

What was more of a surprise was what was in the warehouse. We knew about the cars. What we found was a dummy wall packed from floor to ceiling with cocaine.

We’re still processing it, but so far it’s over seven-hundred kilos and counting.

That’s a lot of fucking cocaine. That’s not including the loads we took down when they were shipped across the country before it hit the streets.

Now I can tie the case to the cash house.

The group has been dismantled in the U.S. Their revenue streams and transportation are severed for good. We have so many charges on these guys, they won’t smell freedom for decades.

But in that long list of shit that we seized and people we arrested, we did not

find Teddy Koenig.

In the last couple of days, Brax and the team have pinpointed two locations where Koenig hangs. He goes back and forth.

But, today, he was nowhere.

I need to start interviewing targets. Someone will want a deal and spill what they know about him. They always do.

I go back to my government car and open the back hatch. They're clearing the warehouse and processing drugs and evidence across town. I just finished up at one of the houses.

"Not bad."

I look over my shoulder to see King Jennings stalking toward me in his own BDUs and POLICE tee. He rips off his vest he borrowed, pulls it over his head, and tosses it in the back of my car.

I hike a brow and rip the Velcro of my own vest. "It's not Panama, but I'll take it for Miami."

He sets his long gun and helmet next to mine.

We hit the doors in full raid gear—it would've been a wet dream for Rocco. King, on the other hand, ran an entry team and chased down a runner before the sun rose.

He was useful.

"I need to talk to you," King states.

The only person I want to talk to is Evie. I owe her a phone call to tell her it's done. The last thing I want to do is hash this shit out with the DEA agent who went rogue with the CIA and how my case fucked up his. "Look, ask my boss and anyone in my group. I deconflicted my case. I had no fucking idea you even existed until yesterday, let alone your highly confidential case with the CIA. You cannot blame me for killing your money line."

His glare is heavy. "I can blame whoever I fucking want. That's not what I want to talk to you about. I need a favor."

I turn to him fully to take him in. He's no slouch. He wouldn't completely get his ass kicked as a lineman. Maybe just marginally.

I cross my arms. "Most people try buttering up their targets before asking for favors."

He looks put out. "I told you the lick this morning wasn't bad. What more do you want?"

This guy has the personality of a rusty bicycle. "You're barking up the wrong tree. I keep my nose to the ground and work my ass off. I'm also by the book, which I assume you are not since you hooked up with Cole Carson. No one likes to push boundaries more than he does."

"He's the one who told me to come to you. He said you'd have more pull because you're by the book and our cases are linked. You might've brought down the battalion in the U.S. but there's a whole fucking army behind them. If you think this made you look good, I can make you look better."

I tip my head. "I look fine just the way I am."

He has the nerve to scowl. "But this is big."

I shrug. "You think I don't know how big shit is in Central America? That's where the dope came from that I took down this morning. But I'm just collecting it once it gets here."

What I don't tell him is that nothing is dragging my ass away from Miami. If he would've asked me before I laid eyes on Evie, I might've thought about it. Most likely I would've said no, but now the answer is a fuck no.

But I don't know him so he doesn't need to know that.

"Man, I'm not inviting you to Panama."

"Then what do you want?"

He looks to the side and pulls in a deep breath.

"I've got shit to do," I say, thinking of Evie. "Spit it out."

He turns back to me. "My case is shot for the time being. I'm going to let my targets get their shit together and create a new pipeline. A shit ton of cash is

funneled through Panama. For now, I don't need to be there to work it."

"So go home and work it. I'm still not sure why you need me."

He looks like he's in literal pain when he says, "I want to do that from Miami. My problem is everyone wants to work in Miami. I need someone to pull some strings."

"Ah. I get it." I rock back on my heels and shake my head. "You gave me shit yesterday for ruining your case when your case's security clearance is so tight, most top brass in DC don't have access to it, so now you're asking me to do you a solid. This is quite the turn of events."

He puts a hand up and starts to leave. "Never mind. I was going to go to Brax because he'll probably have documentaries made about him someday and figured he'd have more pull, but he just sped out of here like a streak of shit. You're my next option."

I drop my arms and stop him. "Wait. Brax left? I thought he was still at the warehouse."

He shakes his head. "Nope. His wife went into labor. He took off hot—lights and sirens."

"Shit. He didn't call me."

"I know you have a big head, but trust me, he was not thinking about you."

"I've got to go." I pull out my phone to check for messages. All I have are three texts from Evie demanding to know if I'm okay. I look back up. "Why Miami?"

He stuffs his hands in his pockets and his jaw goes hard.

I slam the tailgate and give him one more chance. "I've got a ton of paperwork, subjects to interview, my Goddaughter is about to make her grand appearance, and I have an important phone call to make, which needs to be done before all the other shit on my list. If you think Brax is the only one with pull, you're wrong. He might be the star in the documentary, but I'm next in line. I can help you. I'm just curious—why Miami? You can do this job anywhere."

“Shit,” he bites, but finally gives it up. “I could feed you a load of shit, but I do not have that kind of imagination. Someone is here. I need to be here too.”

I can’t help but laugh. “There’s a lot of fucking people in Miami.”

“I’m not going to beg. Put in a good word or not. I’m done.”

King turns to walk away, but I call after him. “I’ll talk to Tim.”

He doesn’t thank me or even have the decency to turn around to give me a glance. He keeps walking and barely offers a lazy wave.

“I’ll mention it to Brax after the baby is here too. He’ll be in a good mood. I’m sure he’ll make a call.”

King is halfway across the parking lot at this point.

I raise my voice. “All I have to say is someone had better be named after me someday. You don’t know me, but I’ll never forget this moment. You owe me, Jennings!”

He disappears around the corner, and I lose sight of him.

Kingston Jennings is one moody asshole, but I’ll talk to Tim.

It might not be so bad.

Having King around will make me look like Mr. Rogers.

But I have more important things to do at the moment and hit call on the new number one contact in my phone.

She answers immediately. “Seriously, that took you longer than you said it would. Please tell me I don’t need to turn around and head to the hospital.”

I embrace my new, less moody self. “I can’t lie, baby. Feels good that you’re thinking about me.”

I hear heels echo in a quick clip down a hallway. “It’s the first time we’ve been apart in I don’t know how long. I miss you.”

“Where are you?”

“BioNova headquarters. Andrew called right before I was leaving the house.”

The clicking stops, and she pulls in an audible breath. “Micah, the asshole signed the divorce papers.”

I drop my head and stare at the ground in front of me. I haven’t given the finality of her divorce much thought. In my head, she’s always been mine.

Even before I knew her.

Touched her.

Made her mine officially.

When I heard her voice through the taps, I pictured her at my side.

I pictured myself at hers.

My tone is rough with something I don’t recognize. “That’s good, baby.”

There’s a pause. “Are you okay?”

I pull in a deep breath and tip my face to the sun.

To the light.

“I don’t remember being this good, Evie. Sign the fucking papers, and let me know when it’s done. I’m sorry I can’t be there with you.”

I hear heels again and wonder if she’s wearing something that hugs every beautiful curve on her body with those sexy shoes. “It’s okay. I just want it done.”

“Me too.”

“Micah?”

“Still here.”

“We need to talk about Chase. We’ve sort of ... I don’t know. Evolved. We haven’t had an official discussion. He has to be my main priority, Micah.”

“He absolutely does. You tell me what you want, and I’ll follow.”

The heels stop again, but she says nothing.

I climb in my car, crank it on, and turn up the AC. “Baby, you there?”

“Thank you,” she whispers in my ear. “I’m not used to this.”

“To what?”

“To anyone making us a priority.”

I lean back in my seat and take a moment. I have too many things on my plate today and not enough time, but she needs to understand she’ll always be at the top of the list. “I don’t have to work hard to make you and Chase a priority. If you need me, I’ll make it happen. If you need something done, I’ll take care of it. Chase needs a man in his life, and if you choose me, I’ll be there. Don’t ever question that.”

“You’re going to make me cry before I meet with my brother.”

“Be sure and tell him it’s a good cry. I don’t need the Litchfields on my ass.”

This time I hear a smile through the snuffle. “You don’t have to worry about that. Cadence would never allow it. She’s a big Micah fan.”

I put my car in reverse and check for cars. “I’m just an Evie fan.”

“I’m about to go in and sign the papers. Can I call you back?”

“I’m headed to the station and then the office. Then I need to get to the hospital when Brax gives me the all clear. Landyn went into labor.”

“She did? I want to go.”

“What’s your day like?”

“Catching up on my patient files from last week. I’m at the clinic all morning. I just got word that I have a funeral tomorrow.”

I pull out onto the street. “I’ll go with you.”

“You don’t have to do that. Braim is behind bars. I’ll be fine.”

“Funerals are your thing, and no one should do a funeral alone. I might not be able to go to every single one with you, but I’ll do my best.”

She lowers her tone, and I think she might be crying again. “You’re really good for the health of my soul, you know that?”

“Never heard that one before, but I’m pleased the doctor of science thinks so.”

“Call me when you hear from Brax,” she demands. “My business is the elderly. I never pass up a chance to hold a baby—the newer the better.”

“I won’t rob you of the experience. We’ll get there as soon as we can. Enjoy the hell out of signing those papers, baby. We’ll celebrate tonight.”

I smile thinking of all the ways we’ll commemorate today.

ABSOLUTELY PERFECT

Evie

Baylee Patricia Cruz.

Seven pounds, fifteen ounces, and twenty inches of pure, innocent sweetness.

She has a dark smattering of hair, the bluest eyes when she peeked at me through a yawn, and if I could bottle her smell and lather myself in it forever, I would.

“She’s perfect,” I whisper. “Absolutely perfect.”

“Then it’s official,” Brax states and leans down to kiss his wife. “The doctor said she was perfect. We make good babies.”

Landyn’s expression is content and blissful as she gazes up at her husband who’s still dressed in all black, wearing the same pants Micah left the house in earlier this morning with a scrubs shirt thrown over the top.

“She is perfect,” Landyn agrees. She’s propped up in bed eating a cheeseburger. Micah stopped on the way to the hospital and picked up more food than the two of them could eat.

“You know, she’s not going to be so perfect when she sneezes and coughs in your face,” Micah mutters. “Just saying, it happens.”

I look up at Micah and smirk. His expression is dead serious. Talk about trial by fire. There is no easing into kids with an almost kindergartner.

“Next time I’m not leaving you alone this close to your due date,” Brax says. “I don’t care what I have to clean. You waited way too long, and we barely got here in time.”

Landyn licks ketchup off her fingers. “My contractions were so light—I didn’t think they were real. Then everything happened so fast.” She turns to me. “Brax didn’t have time to change clothes. My doctor said he’d never had a dad running in straight from a drug raid.”

Baylee stretches before curling back into herself. I look up at Micah. “Are you ready to hold your Goddaughter?”

“Chase literally used me as a human tissue all day yesterday. You shouldn’t even be holding her.”

“I washed my hands. And I’m around sick people all the time. I never get sick.”

He shakes his head. “If Baylee gets sick, it’s not going to be on me.”

“She’s not going to get sick.” I look back down at the bundle of joy. “But we should go. They need their bonding time.”

I stand with the baby and am about to offer her to Micah one more time, but I’m caught in his intense, blue-eyed gaze. He’s sitting on a pleather sofa, reclined with an ankle resting on the opposite knee. His stare on me is intense, and it has nothing to do with the fact kids are germ bombs. “You’re sure?”

He doesn’t take his heated eyes off me. “I’m not as confident in my immune system as you are. Baylee and I will have years to bond over obnoxious toys. I’ll wait until I know for a fact I haven’t caught the Chase Plague.”

I roll my lips in to keep from smiling, because he does not at all look upset about possibly catching a cold from my son.

I really need to be more diligent about teaching Chase coughing and sneezing manners. More things to add to the list.

When I turn to hand baby Baylee back to her mother where she belongs, Landyn and Brax are wearing the same expression—satisfied grins that are not aimed at their new daughter.

They're focused on Micah and me.

Landyn looks up at her husband who is standing possessively at her side. Her grin shrinks to a smirk. "I told you so."

He leans down and tips her head back to press his lips to hers. "Chica, I already lost one bet on them. Don't make me pay up on the day our daughter is born."

"I'll give you a pass today."

"Thank you, baby."

Micah clears his throat from behind me to interrupt their moment. "We'll get out of your hair. Let me know if you need anything else, like a change of clothes so you can get out of that raid gear."

I carefully place the newborn back into her mother's arms. Landyn presses her lips to Baylee's forehead and can't force herself to look away from her baby when says, "Thank you for the food. I needed it."

Micah claims my hand and pulls me to the door. "You're welcome. We'll stop by when you get home."

Brax barely gives us a wave. He sits on the edge of the bed where his focus is where it should be.

His family.

It's late, and Micah and I haven't had dinner. I glance over as we walk down the halls of the maternity ward—a part of the hospital I never visit for my work. "I need to get home before Chase goes to bed so my mom can leave. I had groceries delivered today. We can figure out dinner there if that's okay?"

He lets go of my hand to wrap his arm around my neck and pull me close. "I can't think of anything better. We have things to celebrate."

I think about all the things that have happened today. Micah shut down the

organization that my now ex-husband ran drugs for. He has a new Goddaughter. We're on our way home to spend the rest of the evening with my son, and I'm officially divorced.

There is so much to figure out, but now we can do that freely and safely and without anyone interfering.

Micah presses his lips to the top of my head before opening the security door for me.

There's only good on the horizon.

I feel it.

THREE LITTLE WORDS

Micah
One month later

“Did you hear?”

I spin in my office chair to face Brax who sits at his work area across from mine. “Hear what?”

“King Jennings got a transfer to Miami.”

My brows rise as I whistle. “He owes you and me. Probably Tim too. Not many get lateral transfers into the Division.”

Brax shrugs. “It’s not what you know, it’s who you know. He has shit to wrap up in Panama. He’ll be here in a couple months.”

I thread my pen in and out between my fingers. “Yeah, I was just lucky enough to ride your coattails.”

He shakes his head. “Your name carries its own weight. Have you looked at the headlines today?”

I have.

And I’m not happy.

“Is this what it feels like to have your name plastered all over the news? I fucking hate it. I hate it even more that Evie is being dragged through it

because of her ex-husband, but the press fucking loves the murder-for-hire story. I don't know how you and Landyn did it after your case wrapped. Her name was up there with yours."

"The media has the memory of a moth. Hang tight until the next big news story hits. You and Evie will be old news before you know it."

The case was all over the news the day we busted down doors. But this week is different. My name hit the press when we went to court for motions and filings and all the other legal shit for trial prep.

I can handle it. I've done it before and will do it again.

But this time is different. It turns out, divorcing might sever you in the eyes of the law, but not society.

Charges against Jeff Michaels were filed this week, and Evie is being dragged through it because of that asshole.

Those charges included transportation of cocaine into the U.S, as well as premeditated murder.

Times two.

The last month has been quiet. I haven't once slept at my condo, and most of my things have made their way to Evie's. Chase started kindergarten and has notes sent home at least once a week that he talks too much in class and tries to teach his "table friends" in a way that does not follow the teacher's lesson plans.

Evie is beside herself with mortification.

I think it's a sign that he's a natural-born leader and told her not to squash his spirit. It's not like he's bullying kids, he's organizing them. He's smart. He wouldn't do it if they didn't need it.

She rolls her eyes and informs me that I'm not helpful. But she does it with a smile on her face, and it usually wins me a kiss.

The only thing that needs to change about Evie's son is blowing his nose into a fucking tissue and coughing into his elbow. I caught one hell of a cold after we got back from Montana. I was sick for a week. I knew I would be. I even

missed a day of work, and I can't remember the last time I missed work because I was sick.

But Evie didn't sneeze once. Her special powers allowed her to carry on like the rockstar she is. She's half my size and made of a bulletproof vest when it comes to germs.

I yank my tie loose and undo the top two buttons. I had to be in court today. Hell, I've been in court all week. But everything is going according to plan.

Other than Teddy Koenig.

He's nowhere to be found. Defendants tried to give him up in exchange for lesser charges, but in the end, they were feeding us a load of shit as a last-ditch effort for a shorter sentence.

They didn't get it.

These assholes are going away for a long time.

"Hey, Landyn's been itching to have Sunday dinner. Baylee is a month old and we're not close to getting our shit together or sleeping through the night, but apparently it's time to host a dinner. Will you guys be there?"

"I need to check with Evie, but I don't see why not. Chase's last T-ball game was last weekend. He's not going to miss out on a chance to hang with Brian."

"Let me know. Landyn wants a count. When do your parents get here?"

"Next week. I can't hold them off any longer. They used to hate coming to Miami, but they met Evie and Chase, and now they're clamoring to be here."

Brax smirks. "Why did you hold them off?"

"We needed a minute. Hell, I took her to Montana before she was officially divorced. Evie's mom hated me just because I'm a man. That lasted for about a week. I'm not sure what happened, but I have a feeling Evie's sister took care of that shit. Irena Litchfield has turned the other cheek. She either loves me, or she's the best actor on earth."

"I put money on the latter."

“Fuck you,” I mutter and swivel back to my computer to answer emails before shutting it down for the day. Evie found a nanny to pick Chase up from school and stay with him until one of us gets there. If she’s late making rounds, I usually beat her to the house.

I pick up my phone and hit go on her number to see where she is.

She answers immediately. “Hey. How was court this afternoon?”

I lean back in my chair. “Everything went as expected. The highlight of my day was having lunch with you. I’m sick of wearing a suit, but it’s done until the trials start. That’ll take months.”

A door slams, and everything echoes. “I had a patient to see across town. The timing was perfect. I’m on my way home from the hospital. I had to discharge a patient. It turns out she was only dehydrated and needed fluids. She’s happy to be heading home.”

“That’s good, baby. Brax invited us over for dinner Sunday.”

“Landyn invited you over for dinner.” Brax calls in a raised voice from behind me. “I’m exhausted from not sleeping more than three hours at a time.”

I turn and frown at him. “Correction. Brax doesn’t want us there, but Landyn insists.”

“Tell Brax and Landyn to sit back and relax. I’ll call Annette—she and I will plan it and bring everything to them.”

“You know, you’re going to make me look bad. I’d never do that.”

“That’s because you’re a man. I love you, Micah, but men don’t think that way.”

I freeze. “What did you say?”

The quick clip of her shoes that I’m used to hearing when she’s multitasking stops. “What?”

“What did you say?” I demand.

“Um...”

“Um what?”

“I said you were a man,” she whispers.

“I know that and so do you—intimately. The other part. The part that I did not know before a few seconds ago.”

She starts walking again, but slower this time. “Can we talk about this tonight?”

“No,” I push her. There’s no way I’m waiting until tonight. “I want to talk about this now.”

“Micah.” She pulls in a deep breath. “Please.”

I smile listening to her try to back pedal out of this. Our shit has become more and more intense, all while it’s become easy. So fucking easy, I wonder how anything good can go this smooth and be real. I knew it was good while we were in Montana, but we were in an alternate universe. It wasn’t real life.

But since we got back to the daily, mundane grind, it’s been even better. Maybe having Chase is the perfect distraction. He has a way of demanding attention in a way I like. When he’s awake, our focus is on the three of us. And when he goes to bed, all we have is us.

I’m not sure why, but Chase hasn’t questioned why I’m around.

More specifically, he hasn’t asked anything about his dad. Not where he is, not why he hasn’t seen him, or if he’s coming back.

That shit burns a fire in me and makes me want to be better.

Hell, it makes me want to be the best I can be. The kid deserves it.

“Baby, please,” I beg, because all of a sudden, there’s nothing more I want to hear than those three words from her lips directed at me.

“Micah.” Her tone changes. Just when I think she’s had enough and decide that I’ll wear her down while we’re in bed tonight, a panic tone hits me over the line in a whisper. “Micah, someone is standing at my car.”

I forget all about the three words I’m desperate for. “What? Who is it?”

Heels click faster. “I think it’s him.”

“Who? Are you in the parking garage?” I bite. “Go back. Go back to the hospital, Evie.”

“I’m trying. Shit, Micah. It’s him.”

“Who?!” I stand so fast—my chair shoots out from behind me.

“What’s going on?” Brax calls.

“Evie.” I grab my keys, gun, and badge. “Dammit, are you there? Who is it?”

She’s running. Her breaths become desperate over the line. “Oh my—”

Tires scream on pavement.

But my skin crawls when I hear another scream.

Hers.

“Evie!” I yell, as if that will make her answer me. “Where are you?”

“What the hell’s going on?” Brax demands from behind me.

The line goes dead.

“Fuck!”

I push through the doors not even bothering with the elevator. I race down the stairwell three flights to the parking garage.

“Dammit, Micah. What happened?” Brax bites.

“I don’t know. She said someone was at her car. She panicked and started running. I lost her.”

I hit go on her contact, but it goes straight to voicemail. “*You’ve reached Dr. Evita Litchfield. If this is an emergency, please hang up and dial—*”

“Dammit. She’s not answering.” I hiss and push the door open to the parking garage in a flat out run.

“I’ll drive,” Brax says. “I’ll call 9-1-1. You call the hospital. There have to be cameras. She didn’t give you any clue who it was?”

“No.” I climb in the car, desperate to find the number for the hospital security.

I put my phone to my ear and tell the operator who I am and that it’s an emergency. At the same time, Brax speeds out of the parking garage as he explains the situation and demands marked units be sent to the location.

The lady asks me to hold—like I have time to hold. I fucking don’t.

The sunny, late-afternoon light hits us as Brax pulls out and flips on his lights and sirens.

THE ONE THAT GOT AWAY

Evie

He was leaning against the tailgate of my SUV when I walked around the corner.

I don't know him, but I recognized him from pictures.

When we got back from Montana, Micah showed me the surveillance and asked if I recognized him as someone who knew Jeff.

I didn't.

But I remember his face from those pictures

He was the one that got away.

Him standing by my car was bad news. I ran.

I even kicked my shoes off and was in a flat-out sprint when a car almost hit me from the side. A man jumped from the driver's seat and ripped my cell from my hand.

He pushed me into the trunk right after he threw my cell and smashed it on the concrete wall of the parking garage.

We took off at a high speed. From what I heard, I'm guessing he broke through the gate at the exit. He certainly didn't stop to pay the fee.

My head is throbbing where it was bumped on the side of the car. I might be petite, but I've never once in my life felt like a rag doll.

Until today.

And I thought my life was out of control when I found out Jeff hired a hitman. I had no idea what it felt like to be unsafe.

It's hot, and the air is stale. We've been driving for what feels like forever. But I guess that would be the case when you're kidnapped.

The car makes two more hard turns. My body crashes into the back of the trunk when the car hits the brakes.

I reach up and touch my temple where a bump is forming. The engine revs once more before the car finally comes to a stop, and the engine flips off.

The sudden silence makes my skin crawl.

All of a sudden I hate myself for wearing such a tight-fitting dress.

I loved it this morning when Micah looked at me like he wanted nothing more than to rip it off me before I left for work.

And at lunch when he actually described in detail how he planned to rip it off me tonight.

But, at this moment, I hate it.

The driver might've smashed my cell against the wall, but I held onto my Mary Poppins-esque tote bag with a death grip when he threw me into the trunk. My fate depended on it.

Despite how badly my head throbs, the first thing I did when they slammed the trunk closed on me was unearth my other cell from my tote.

I do not mix work and pleasure. I keep my patients, their records, and communication separate from my personal life. I might not keep a pager like some old-school surgeons, but my work phone is always on me.

I didn't even mess with dialing 9-1-1.

I went straight for the emergency buttons. I was so afraid to utter a word, that

I whispered my name and what happened. Then I left the phone on and stuffed it into my bra under my arm.

I was on the phone with Micah when the car came barreling at me. Those little words that have been playing on the tip of my tongue for far too long slipped out sooner than I wanted. I feel needy enough when it comes to him. There are some things that can wait until the time is right.

The time was definitely not right. Professing your love for someone for the first time in passing over the phone with a *but* after it is not ideal.

I'm so damn awkward.

But at least I was on the phone with him. He has to know something is wrong. And as long as I can keep my cell on me, the police might be able to trace my location.

It sounds like a heavy, metal garage door rolls shut and slams to the ground. I'm pressed to the back of the trunk when light floods the dingy space.

"There she is." All I see is Teddy Koenig's evil expression. He didn't even try to hide his face in the parking garage, and there are cameras everywhere. Even if he were an idiot to not think every public space is being surveilled these days, signs are posted everywhere. I'm confident the whole thing was caught on camera.

I'm counting on it.

I say nothing but stare up at him and another man I don't recognize.

Teddy puts a hand to his chin and rubs his stubble. "My entire organization went to shit last month. I didn't know how it happened ... until today. Get out of the trunk."

As much as I want to be anywhere but right here, I shake my head. I'm not sure I could climb out of here if I wanted to.

Teddy lifts his chin but never looks away from me. "Get her out."

The other man reaches in and clenches my bare arm in his fist. I scream in pain as he drags me from the trunk.

I barely break my fall with my other arm while doing everything I can to keep my cell planted in my bra where it needs to stay. I'm on the gritty ground at their feet.

"Get up. If we have to move you, you won't like it," Teddy growls.

I look up into his light brown eyes and pale skin. He drags a hand through his greasy hair before he crosses his arms.

I'll do anything to keep him from touching me, so I scramble to my bare feet, and get a good look around for the first time.

It's a warehouse—big enough to house four trucks on one side and a cigarette boat parked on a trailer on the other.

I turn to the two men, back up as far as I can before I run into a folding table, and stutter to a stop. I have no idea what to say, but I can't let Teddy know that I recognize him. "Who are you?"

He drops his arms and cuts the distance between us until he's leering down at me so close I can smell his sweat-soaked shirt. His eyes roam over my body before his hand comes up to claim a lock of my hair in his fingers.

He twists it.

I swallow over the lump in my throat and squeeze my arm to my side when I feel it vibrate with a notification.

"Dr. Evita Litchfield in the flesh. You know, I wondered how things went to shit so fast for my business. It wasn't until I got a text from your husband's attorney this afternoon that I put it together. Do you know what he had to say?"

I should probably keep my mouth shut, but the sheer fact he called Jeff my *husband*, pisses me off. That anger lights something in me and I find my voice. "You must have me confused with someone else. I'm not married."

His light eyes snap to me, and his yellowed teeth instantly come into view when he sneers. "Semantics."

My jaw goes hard.

Teddy reaches around and pulls a cell from his back pocket. After a few swipes of the screen, he turns it around for me to see.

Oh shit.

All the oxygen escapes my body. I'm left empty.

I stare at the screen. It's a picture of Micah and me. I'm in the same dress I put on just for him this morning. His lips are glued to mine, and his strong hand is cupping my ass.

It was a goodbye kiss.

And a grope.

All of it was perfect.

I remember not caring where we were or who saw. I was deliriously happy.

That seems like a lifetime ago.

In reality, it was only about four hours ago.

We'd just had lunch and were going our separate ways. I was going back to see my afternoon patients in clinic and he was headed to court. We made plans for tonight.

My eyes well with tears wondering if we'll ever get a chance to introduce Chase to *The Sandlot* in the media room with popcorn and candy. Those were our plans for the evening. It was going to be perfect.

"See there?" he drawls. I'm forced to look up at him when he slides the phone back into his pocket. "Now you get it."

Shit.

The only thing I get is that I have to find a way to get back to Chase and Micah.

Micah

I GRAB Brax's comm from the dashboard when the dispatcher radios the last location her cell hit and let them know we're on our way.

Security from the hospital told me they found her phone in a million pieces on the garage floor. Thank God she carries a separate one for work.

They also explained in detail what happened to her and emailed a screenshot zoomed in of Teddy Koenig.

The fucking ghost who was so good at laying low. I couldn't find him ... had no idea where the fucker was.

But now he has the woman I'm going to marry.

My plan was to take it slow. The ink is still wet on her divorce papers.

I could kick my own ass for thinking slow was the right answer to anything. I had to fight every instinct not to tell her exactly the way I feel and convince her to be my wife as soon as possible.

Like yesterday.

The moment she's back in my arms, I'm going to make sure we don't take our time with anything. She deserves the world. I'm going to give it to her and do the same for Chase.

"Fuck," I bite. "They're two streets over from the warehouse where the drugs were stored. How did we miss that?"

Brax changes lanes to pass a string of cars. "We didn't miss anything. They did a hell of a job hiding it. We'll get to her. Keep your shit together."

I shake my head and point to the right. "Take the shoulder. There's no way we'll make the next five miles in rush hour if you don't."

This isn't the first time Brax and I have sped down the highway with lights and sirens pushing the envelope. Debris and trash fly up behind us from driving the part of the highway that never sees traffic.

"Koenig," I grit. "We knew he was on the loose, but fuck. Had I known she'd be a target..."

"No one had a reason to believe she would be. Braim has been behind bars

for weeks—they're connecting cold cases to him left and right. There was no indication Evie was on anyone's radar."

"Her name has been in the news because of Michaels. I didn't think anyone in the organization gave a shit about him."

The radio comes alive and alerts us that units in the area are closing in on the warehouse. The lieutenant on duty instructs the officers to stay back and wait for backup.

Fuck that. I'll go in guns blazing by myself if I have to.

"Dammit. Hurry up, Brax."

He hits the gas. I reach out and hold the dashboard as the SUV narrowly fits between traffic and the guardrail.

"If I take the next exit, I can take the backstreets through the warehouse district. Do you want me to chance it at rush hour?"

"Do it. The closer you can get me, the better. I'll go on foot if I have to."

"Shit. Hang on." Brax grips the steering with both hands as the right side of his government car squeals against the guardrail to avoid a minivan that's hugging the shoulder. I look out the back to see sparks fly in our wake. "Tim will love that. We're getting off this damn highway. I hope you're ready to run in that suit."

"Just get me as close to her as you can."

FOREVER

Evie

“The way I see it, you hooked up with the DEA agent to rat out your husband. Don’t try to tell me that guy with his hand on your ass and who looks like he could inhale you in one breath isn’t a pig. The attorney saw you himself this afternoon and watched him in the courtroom while motions were made against my people. His name is Emmett and he’s a fucking narc.”

Teddy has lost his patience.

I cry out when he jerks me to the side and pushes me into a folding chair. The cell phone shifted in my bra. I yank myself from his hold and cross my arms to hold it in place.

And pray someone gets here fast.

Teddy turns to the other guy who’s been content to witness the show his boss is putting on. “When will they be here?”

He looks at his watch and shrugs. “Anytime, but you know he’s always late.”

Shit. There are more coming.

Teddy turns back to me and stoops to a crouch. He brings a hand up, and I jerk when he touches my bare knee. That doesn’t deter him, and he draws circles on my skin with the tips of his fingers.

It doesn't matter how hot and sticky this warehouse is, goosebumps spread across my body in disgust.

“Don't worry. I'm not going to hurt you, Doc. I need you in one piece. See, I've made a deal. Your husband was a dumbass and got caught running drugs across the water. He literally had one job. Just one, and he fucked it up. Someone's got to pay for that.”

I shake my head. “He's not my husband. I swear. We're divorced. And I didn't know what he was doing. I didn't tell anyone anything.”

His clammy hand wraps around the top of my thigh and slides north. I try to shift and pull away, but his hold tightens. “Here's the thing, I don't believe you. But what's done is done. I've got a new deal.”

I squeeze my thighs together and try not to tremble.

“I hate cops. Now that I know you switched teams and you've spread your legs for the narc, this will hurt him too. Two birds, one stone. Kiss your cushy life goodbye, Evita. I've got bidders who are willing to pay a pretty penny for you. Enough that'll get me by until I get my business up and running again.”

“No.” I barely hear the word in my own head, but as the moments tick by, the reality sinks in.

Fucking reality.

We should've stayed in Montana.

“No!” I scream in his face. I rip my leg from his grasp and kick.

Because he's balanced on the balls of his feet, he falls back on his ass. I jump up and run. There's a door on the other side of the trucks. It's my only chance.

“Get her!” Teddy yells.

Something sharp breaks through the tender skin of my foot.

“Ahhh!” I call out in pain, but keep running.

I'm not fast enough on bare feet. I'm whipped around so hard, I fall. But so

does the cell. It slips through my dress and lands on the ground next to me.

“You little bitch!” Teddy yells and launches for the phone at the same time I do.

I bump it with the tips of my fingers, and it slides across the dirty floor.

Desperation takes over even though I know I’m outmanned and muscled. I pull up to my hands and knees, doing everything I can to get to the last form of communication I might ever have.

“Umph.” Someone lands on top of me. I’m face down on the floor, pinned to the ground.

Bang-bang-bang!

I freeze.

I can’t see him, but I can hear him. Teddy is on top of me and yells, “Finally. That’s got to be them. She’s a pain in the ass. I want my money.”

Bang-bang-bang! “Police! Open up”

I scream as loud as I can.

Teddy wraps his hand around my mouth and muffles my cries.

But they’re here.

They found me.

Everything is going to be okay.

Until I feel something hard in the side of my ribs and a hiss in my ear. “I’ll fucking kill you before I let you go free, bitch. If I’m going down, so are you. Forever.”

Micah

BRAX SPED through the city streets and cut through three parking lots. We got

here on the tail of three police units.

I run up to the building with my gun drawn. Six officers stand at the door—the first two are swinging back a ram. I barely get to the end of the line when it bashes through the deadbolt, splintering the door and jamb.

“DEA,” I call to alert them. The officers recognize me and Brax and move to the side.

“Micah!”

Thank God. It’s her.

“Shut up!” a low voice snarls.

“Fuck,” I hiss and peek around the corner before I enter through the busted door.

“Go,” Brax says in a low voice. “I’ll cover you.”

I turn and enter the building. Four old trucks line the warehouse. I stoop low as I move around them.

Muffled screams come from the other side.

She’s here.

She’s alive.

And she’s close, but still so far.

I glance around the bumper and see them.

Teddy Koenig is pulling her up from the ground. He has a hand around her mouth and a gun pressed to her side.

“Let her go, Koenig,” I warn. “You’re not going to like the way this will end otherwise.”

My stomach turns as Evie twists and fights in his hold.

There’s nothing I want more than to take him out.

“Shut the fuck up.” He shakes her as tears stream down her face. Her dark

eyes are pleading and full of fear.

One second, baby.

“Let her go—” I start.

But Brax yells at me from the opposite side of the warehouse. “Micah!”

From the corner of my eye, I see him.

He pops up, but I’m faster. He’s raising his gun toward me, but I swing my arms around and get off two quick rounds.

He falls to the floor.

I’m turned back to the woman I plan to marry just as soon as I fucking can, and say, “You’re surrounded. More officers are pulling up as we speak.”

“Give me the word.” Brax calls from the other side of the room. “I’ve got a clear shot.”

Koenig spins toward Brax with Evie in his arms. Her feet drag the ground—blood seeping from them.

This will be the last time she sheds blood from the hell that asshole has put her through.

It’s easy. In fact, it’s the easiest thing I’ve ever done.

It only takes one shot.

Evie screams.

The bullet goes straight through his head.

His arms go slack, but he still takes her down with him.

Brax and I rush them from opposite sides. Officers swarm the building and come out from where they were covering us behind trucks and a boat.

I pull Evie into my arms as Brax kicks Koenig’s gun across the concrete floor. I can’t get her out of here fast enough.

I swing her legs over my arm and hold her to my chest where she grips the

lapels of my suit.

Her tears stream down my neck where her face is pressed.

“Shhh, baby,” I calm her as I get her out of the building. “It’s over.”

One of the officers calls for an ambulance before she reports the scene that just unfolded.

Evie hiccups. “Micah.”

“Don’t talk. Let me check you out.”

“No.” She shakes her head, pulls her face from my neck, and lays a hand on the side of my face. “Micah, please. Stop.”

“What, baby.” I can’t help it. I’m anxious and out of patience. One side of her face is scraped from top to bottom, she’s got a gash in her foot, and tears stain her beautiful face. “I want to get you as far away from this fucking place as I can. We might not wait for the ambulance. I’ll drive you to the hospital myself.”

She lays a finger over my lips, but it’s her tone that stops me in my tracks. “I love you.”

My hold on her tightens.

Her dark eyes don’t stop crying as she slays me. “I should’ve said it before. I mean I said it, but I took it back. I’m sorry. I meant it with all my heart and don’t care if I freak you out. I love you. I love the way you are with Chase. You didn’t know what you were getting into with us. I’m so sorry, but I love you.”

I take two steps and set her ass on the hood of Brax’s car. Then, careful for the cuts on her cheek, I take her face and press my lips to hers.

I can’t get enough.

Finally, when I hear commotion behind us and sirens in the distance, I force myself to drag my lips from hers. “Fuck, I think I loved you the day I held you down on your floor. There was nothing more I wanted than to be close to you. I love you so fucking much, baby. You and Chase. Damn the germs,

maybe I'll be as strong as you someday. I want you forever. Both of you.”

She falls into my arms.

Where she'll stay for the rest of my life.

BY THE BALLS

Evie

Micah reaches across the bed where I'm resting and steals the remote. "You've had enough of that for a lifetime."

He's right, but when you're in the headlines, it's hard to look away.

The news.

It's like I can't get away from the bad decision that is Jeff Michaels.

"I can't help it. It's everywhere."

He climbs in bed next to me and splays a hand across my abdomen. "Chase is finally asleep."

I roll to my side so we're facing each other. "Did he ask any questions? He's too smart for his own good. I don't think he bought my story that I stepped on glass and slipped."

"I doubt he's ever seen you fall. The only thing he sees you do is bust your ass working or twisting yourself into a pretzel on a yoga mat. But no, he didn't ask any questions. Well, he did. He asked a fuck ton of them. Just not about you falling or why we were late coming home. I distracted him with football talk."

My expression relaxes into a relieved smile. "Thank you. And thank you for

putting him to bed—that’s not the easiest task. I have a newfound appreciation for my patients when they have trouble walking. These crutches are going to drive me crazy for the next week or two.”

The gash in the bottom of my foot was deep. I have another set of stitches thanks to my ex-husband. These are worse than the ones on my hip, because I can’t put any pressure on my leg. The doctor said I’d be on crutches for at least two weeks—maybe three.

Once Micah loaded me up in the car to bring me home, I told him I planned to ditch the damn crutches after a week. I know my body. I’ll up my protein, and I’m a fast healer anyway.

He shook his head and muttered something under his breath about me being the worst patient in history.

I can’t deny that he’s right.

But I’m done.

All I want is a fresh start with Chase and Micah. I have no desire to get back to normal.

Normal was hell.

I’m ready to do anything and everything to make sure I never live normal again.

Though getting shot and kidnapped isn’t what I was looking for.

I’m ready for happy.

Micah pulls me back to the present. “Your mom thinks we’re BFFs. She’s called me three times in the two hours since your dad and brother dragged her out of here. I finally convinced her that I can answer Chase’s questions and convince him to go to bed. Shoot straight with me, baby, do I look like that much of an idiot that I can’t take care of a kindergartner?”

I fist his T-shirt and pull, but since he’s well over two-hundred pounds of solid muscle, he doesn’t budge. I scoot closer to him and fit my body to his. “You’re more than welcome to silence her contact on your phone. We’ve all had to do it from time to time. She’s demanding.”

He wraps his arm around me and presses his lips to my forehead. “Are you trying to get me kicked out of the club? I’m the new guy. That sounds like the worst advice ever.”

I tip my face to his and steal a kiss. “I won’t allow anyone to kick you out. You’re stuck, Micah Emmett, and you’re just going to have to deal with it.”

His hand slides south to my ass. “You’re sure you can’t stay home tomorrow?”

I shake my head. “It’s Friday—I only have appointments until noon. I can manage that long. I promise to lay around all weekend and do my best to entertain Chase from the sofa.”

Micah brushes a thumb under the scrapes on my cheek as his eyes roam my face. “How’s your head?”

I wrap my hand around his. “It’s fine, I promise. No headache. No concussion. This isn’t me being a bad patient. The doctor at the ER said so.”

He pulls in a deep breath, and I feel it from my breasts to my thighs and everywhere in between. “You make it hard not to worry about you, baby. Do you know how badly I want to lock you up and keep you here for a year to make sure there aren’t any more ghosts from the past to sneak up on you?”

This isn’t the first time he’s said something like that. He’s repeated it over and over in many forms from the time he carried me out of that warehouse. “Please stop. It’s not your fault.”

The conversation takes a turn. “Slow is a relative word. I thought slow would be good for you and Chase. Before I knew you were okay today, I hated myself for taking things slow. If anyone knows that tomorrow might not look like today, it’s me. I’m done with slow, and I hope to hell you’re on board.”

When I tense in his arms, his muscles constrict around me. It’s instant and instinctive, like he’s holding onto me so I don’t disintegrate before his eyes.

“You’ll have to explain what on board means,” I whisper.

He does not whisper. His words are rough and gritty and come straight from his heart. “What I mean is we’re making this official as soon as we can. You

hooked up with a guy who is not good at romance, baby. I'm not prepared. But before I found you today, I swore to myself that if you were okay, I wasn't going to waste another minute. I don't have a ring tucked away, and I don't know how you want to handle this with Chase. But, right here, between you and me, I need to know that you're mine. I love you, and I can't take another minute not knowing that you'll be mine forever."

Tears form for the second time today, but these are the good kind. I can't form words.

But I do nod.

"You say when, baby—we're getting married. But I'm just saying, if you think Chase needs more time, then I'm marrying you on the sly. We can do it again when he's ready. Hell, I could marry you a million times over and never get tired of it."

I slide my hand from his chest to his neck and frame his strong jaw. "That was the best non-proposal in the history of non-proposals. And you say you're not a romantic guy."

His thick thigh slides between my legs and fits tight against my sex. "Then it's done. We're getting married."

I smile wide through my tears. "Only because you promised to do it a million times over. For someone who isn't into romance, that's quite a promise. I might hold you to that."

He rolls to his back and pulls me with him. My legs part and fall to either side of his hips. "You've got me by the balls baby. I'll do anything you want."

"I want all of you, not just your balls." I grind my sex onto his cock even though my words don't match my actions. "I love every part of you, but it's your heart I'm obsessed with. I don't care about a ring or wedding or anything official. All I need is for you to love me."

His hand dips into my hair and he pulls my mouth to his. His kiss is deep and intense and full of promise. When we come up for air, I feel his words, and they come straight from his heart. "Loving you is the easiest thing I've ever done. Chase is a bonus I didn't know I needed, but I'm already attached. I'm

ready to tell the world that you're both mine. I love the three of us, baby. Don't make me wait."

"No more waiting." I finger his messy hair as mine falls around us. "Make me yours, Micah. The sooner the better."

I FOUND YOU ON A WIRETAP

Micah
Four months later

“E vie!”
I toss my keys on the island and go to look for my wife.

My wife.

It's a new development.

One I couldn't be happier about, even if it did take two months.

She told me she wouldn't marry me unless the world knew. It turns out, it didn't take two months to get Chase on board with the idea. He asked at least fifty questions about weddings, fifty more about me being his dad that lives with him, and then moved on to whatever else plagued his brain that day.

Chase and I are tight. If I'm not at work, I'm with him and his mom. I'm no cowboy, but Chase and I have bonded over guy shit. I'm pretty sure I like it as much or more than he does.

But it turns out it does take two months to coordinate a wedding in Montana during the middle of winter.

Evie insisted.

My mother was ecstatic.

My father grumbled with all the activity on their land, but he secretly loved it. I could tell.

And since a thick blanket of snow can be a pain in the ass to work around, it wasn't easy. In fact, it wasn't Evie or my mom who whipped that shit together. It certainly wasn't me.

It was Cadence and Irena.

I don't often think about how the family I married into is in a much different tax bracket than the one I grew up in, but it was hard to ignore it when the activity started.

In a matter of six weeks, an enormous barn was erected on my parents' land. No expense was spared. Once my dad okayed the wedding project, an army descended upon the ranch and didn't leave until every detail was perfect.

When Evie and I argued that it was too much, Hugh and Irena blew us off. They said that being a little cowboy made Chase happy and all Evie wanted was to get married in the place where we fell in love.

I made it clear to everyone that I'd fallen long before I took her to the ranch, and until then, Evie was just using me for my body. It took a trip to the mountains for her to get on board.

Our wedding took two months longer to happen than I wanted, but in the end, it was perfect. Now my parents have a kick-ass barn bigger than their house outfitted with a full kitchen and two spare bedrooms.

The wedding itself was small. We had only our immediate families and close friends. If I had to wait two months for it to happen, at least it was exactly the way we wanted it.

"Evie!" I call for her again as I trudge up the stairs to our bedroom.

Nothing.

Until something catches my eye from the window.

My wife is deep in the backyard on her hands and knees, digging in the dirt by the back wall and guesthouse. It's pretty much in the same location I shot her hitman before he climbed over it.

We've made a shit ton of memories in this house since the first day I stood on her doorstep and demanded she open the door to talk to me. Evie said she didn't care where we lived, but she did want to make sure Chase didn't have any more disruptions to his life. The asshole gave him enough.

We decided to stay and erase the bad memories with good ones.

I jog down the stairs and make my way through one of the glass doors that lead to the backyard oasis.

"What are you doing?" I demand.

She looks over her shoulder and frowns. "What are you doing here? You weren't supposed to be home until tonight."

It's her day off. Chase doesn't get home from school for another hour.

I come to a stop beside her and stare down at my wife covered from head to toe in dirt. "Work is slow. I came home to take advantage of you and dirty you up. This is not what I had in mind."

She stands and brushes her hands off on her filthy shorts before wiping the sweat from her brow with the back of her forearm. "Dammit, Micah."

I cross my arms and don't look away from the plants, fertilizer, and mulch piled in a mess at our feet. "You have a team that swoops through here every Friday. They mow, weed, and trim no matter how many times I've told you I'll do it. And now you're out here with your hands in the dirt all by yourself? If you want to hurt my feelings, this'll do it. Are you a closet gardener?"

She's pissed or frustrated or both. "The one day you choose to come home early."

"You're mad that I'm home early?"

Her arms flop to her sides in frustration. "Yes. This was supposed to be a surprise. And it didn't feel right to hire someone to do it. This is something I wanted to do by myself for you."

I look around again, because I don't get it. "Baby, I just sold my condo and it didn't have one living thing in it besides the leftovers that got pushed to the back of my fridge. This backyard is a living haven and looks like it belongs

in a magazine. Some of this shit is so well taken care of, it doesn't even look real. It's not lost on me why you don't want me to take care of it—I'd probably kill it. Unless you buried someone under this bed who I hate, then I have no clue why you'd do this for me."

"Everyone you hate is in prison or on their way. I might go to a lot of funerals, but this is not that. This is..." she tips her head looking for the right word, "more of a memorial garden, I guess."

"Memorial?"

She bites her lip and hesitates before she explains. "Hydrangeas. Blue hydrangeas. At least, I hope they'll stay blue. From my research, their color depends on the soil nutrients. I had no idea when I started this the color would be up to chance, but I'm doing my best."

I look at the garden bed she obviously dug herself. The row of potted plants and tools and bags upon bags of supplies.

It finally clicks.

Hydrangeas.

She shifts to stand next to me, and we both look at the mess. "For them to grow in this region, they need shade. This is the only place in the yard that gets shade most of the day. I don't know if they'll live, but I'm going to try my best. Maybe the landscapers can help when it's done. At least they'll know what they're doing."

I turn to her. "You planted hydrangeas for me."

She looks defeated. "When we were in Montana the first time, your mom explained that Hannah planted the ones in front of their house, and they remind her of your sister every time she looks at them. You moved in here for us. A new start in a new house for us would have made sense after what we've been through, but you agreed to stay for Chase. You never once balked because it was the best thing for him. I want to do a little something to make it *home* for you. I want you to look out the back of our house and see a little bit of your sister."

I stare down at my wife in awe as my heart does that thing that surprises me

when Evie or Chase do or say something that reminds me how fucking lucky I am that I found them on a wiretap.

But only for a second.

I grasp her dirty, sweaty face in my hands and take her mouth.

“Damn,” I mutter against her lips. “Just when I think we’ve settled into a new normal, you bring me to my knees all over again. Thank you, baby.”

She looks up at me through her beautiful dark eyes. “Don’t thank me yet. I don’t have a green thumb. I can’t even keep a houseplant alive.”

I smile. “That’s interesting since you’re in the business of keeping humans alive.”

Her eyes flare. “That’s not lost on me.”

I press my lips to her once more before I let her go and start to unbutton my shirt.

“What are you doing?” she demands.

I toss my shirt to the grass and pick up the shovel she was using to cut out the grass. “I’m helping. Let’s get this done together.”

Her smile is wide but she doesn’t move. “Maybe I’ll get some wood shipped in just for you to chop. I can sit and drink wine while you work half-naked.”

I put a foot to the shovel and stomp on it. I unearth a hunk of grass and dump it to the side before I look down at her. “Baby, you just say the word, and I’ll be completely naked for you in a heartbeat.”

She returns to the plants and yanks one out of its pot. “You chopping wood makes my panties fall off. It’s the kind of dinner and a show that I prefer.”

“If that’s what you want, then that’s what you’ll get, baby. I’ll bend over backward giving it to you.”

EPILOGUE

Evie
Two years later

“Will this ever change, baby?”
“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You know exactly what I’m talking about.”

“Then why did you ask if you already know the answer?”

I feel the bed move next to me, but I can’t look up. I’m too focused on the bundle snuggled on my bare chest. I didn’t know it was possible to fall in love three times in one lifetime, but here I am.

And it doesn’t matter what this little guy put me through to make his way into the world. “He’s perfect.”

Micah leans down to kiss the top of my head and cups his son’s in his big hand. Zane Emmett has thick, dark hair and the bluest eyes. Bluer than Chases were when he was born. I hope that means they won’t change. I want them to be the same color as his dad’s.

Chase and my family went home a little while ago. The agents have come and gone. My hospital room is full of balloons, flowers, stuffed animals, and love for our new son.

Now it's just the three of us.

"Get comfortable, baby. I ran into your doctor in the hallway. He said he doesn't care how well you think you can take care of yourself at home—he's not discharging you until the day after tomorrow. You had major surgery."

I brush my fingers along Zane's chubby cheek and study his little hand that's fisted on the swell of my breast. "You can't blame me for trying."

"He just didn't want to come out. Who can blame him? His mom is perfect. I don't want to come out either when it's time."

I look up and do my best to give my husband a dirty look but force myself to bite back a smile. "Don't talk that way in front of our son."

Micah's tone turns serious. "You know we're not done, right?"

I look back down at Zane. "Says the younger man."

"Says the man who thinks we need a girl to round out the family," he amends.

"I don't know. I think I'm a boy mom. I'm not sure I can do pink and hearts and flowers. I'm surprised you don't want an entire football team. You're on your way with Chase."

"But Chase won't be a lineman. I won't allow it for any of our boys. It's too hard on their bodies. With Chase's hands and footwork, he'll be a quarterback. We'll see how Zane turns out. Maybe his older brother will teach him a thing or two about throwing the football."

Our boys.

It's only been a couple years, but Chase is closer to Micah than he ever was with my ex. I refuse to call the sperm donor by anything else. He was never a father and doesn't deserve to be referred to as one.

Micah has stepped into that role with so much love and devotion, there's nothing *step* about the kind of dad he is to Chase. A loving parent has nothing to do with blood. Micah has proved that.

I can't believe I'm about to say this, given what I just went through. "I'm not

getting any younger. If you want to do this again, we can't wait too long."

Micah's fingers find my chin and forces me to tear my eyes away from our baby. He leans in and touches his lips to mine. "I'm going to hold you to that. I want everything with you, baby. Too much is not a thing when it comes to us. Might as well fill up that big-ass house with babies."

I look into my husband's blue eyes through the dimmed lights. "You saved me in so many ways. I love you, Micah."

"Love you, too, baby." He shakes his head. "And that's cute that you think you were the one who was saved. I was lost and didn't even know it. Don't ever question who the real MVP here is. Hands down, it's you."

"Every day with you is better than the one before. We've got a lot of happy, Micah."

"Best life ever, baby. Best life ever."

From the bottom of my heart, thank you for reading. If you loved Tapped, please consider leaving a kind review.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Every book I write is a different experience. I have to peel the layers off each character as I go, and am always surprised with what I find. Micah is nothing as I expected him to be when I created him in *Possession*. He is so much better.

I love it when this happens. Writing is pure magic, I tell you.

Evie is pure goodness. I loved that she loved her family, was passionate about her patients, and was unapologetic about Chase and let him be his true self. I just want to point out to my readers that I wrote a book about two characters and they both had good parents. It's been a while since I've written a story like this!

Hadley Finn, what can I say? I guess I should say "I'm sorry" for once again asking you to work up to my deadline with me. What am I even saying? I moved my deadline with this book ten million times. Thank you for being my cheerleader, my editor, and my friend, as I continue to push the boundaries of my sanity.

Annette, thank you for your daily support and friendship. You go above and beyond what any PA should. I'm blessed to have you in my life.

Carrie and Beth, you are the best proofreaders around. I'm not sure what I did to deserve you. Thank you for always having my back.

To Emoji for the technical help and man-speak inspiration. The man banter in this book was some of my best to date.

Michele, thank you for reading chapter by chapter, like you always do, and being patient. You have permission to demand words from me faster from here on out.

MSB Design – Ms. Betty's Design Studio absolutely killed it with *Tapped's*

cover. Betty, thank you for your patience and knowing exactly what this book needed more than I did. The cover is absolute perfection.

I don't hand out many ARCs these days, and it's for a reason. My review team is the best. Thank you for always wanting my words and crazy love stories.

And finally, thank you to my Beauties for hanging with me on a daily basis. There are anywhere between 362 to 363 days a year I do not release a new book. That's a lot of time to talk about things other than new releases. Thank you for all the chats, cow posts, and collective love for Travis and Taylor. You make every day bright and happy. Love every single one of you!

ALSO BY BRYNNE ASHER

The Agents

Possession

Tapped

Exposed

Illicit

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Standalones

Blackburn

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Brynne Asher lives in the Midwest with her husband, three children and her perfect dog. When she isn't creating pretend people and relationships in her head, she's running her kids around and doing laundry. She enjoys decorating and shopping, and is always seeking the best deal. A perfect day in "Brynne World" ends in front of an outdoor fire with family, friends, s'mores, and a delicious cocktail.



READ A SAMPLE OF VINES BY BRYNNE ASHER

Vines

Prologue

“**A**RE YOU SURE I can’t show you something in the District? Perhaps Georgetown or a brownstone in Arlington would better suit you. Your commute from way out here will be a bear.”

I stare out the window from one of the top-floor bedrooms, wondering what I’ll do with all this square footage. Shit. I wonder what I’ll do staying put for more than a few days at a time. Looking over the snow-covered mountains, or what they consider mountains in Virginia, I think about space and privacy. I need both now more than ever.

She moves closer, her spiked heels clicking on the aged wood echoes through the empty room. “With your loan approval, you can afford a lovely penthouse overlooking the Potomac. Do you boat?”

Fuck. Do I look like I boat? I wish she’d shut up. I’m sick of her talking. My loan approval is a fake, because at this point, it’s none of her business I’m paying cash.

“Mr. Vega?” she calls for me and I have to exhale to keep my patience.

Ignoring her, I deliberate on the only drawback to the property. I wanted three hundred and sixty acres so I don’t have a neighbor. “You said this is

two hundred and seventy acres. Who shares the section of land?”

It’s her turn to exhale, her voice going bored. “A vineyard. I looked into it when you insisted on viewing this property. It’s changed hands four times in the last nine years. Apparently, everyone thinks they can make wine. The new owner has seen some success. There’s no need for anxiety. The building and land are on the National Register because of its history and the age of the original structure. I believe it dates back to the sixteen hundreds. Properties such as these are hardly ever broken up. If you insist on the country life, your neighbor shouldn’t be of concern.”

I’ll run that background myself.

Turning to her, I cross my arms. “You said the outbuildings have heat and water?”

She sighs, realizing she isn’t going to sell me a penthouse in Georgetown. Not that her commission on this place won’t be a mint.

“Yes. The previous owner was a mechanic specializing in large farm equipment. There’s heat for the winter and air for summer months,” she utters, flipping her jeweled hand toward the window.

We won’t need much heat and absolutely no air in the summer. It’s part of the program—they have to learn to live in the conditions.

I nod, looking back out over the countryside thinking this could be it. I’m ready for something different, ready to retire from the life I’ve lived the last ten years, even if it means I have to train my replacements.

“I need to make a phone call and look at the outbuildings.” I turn back to her and raise an eyebrow, glancing down at her feet. “You want to trudge through the snow with me, or should I meet you back at the cars?”

Her look turns resigned, her voice bland when she replies, “Take your time. I’ll draw up the paperwork.”

I reach for my phone and start for the door mumbling, “Perfect.”

When I reach the bottom of the stairs, my call has barely rung once when Asa answers, a smile in his voice. “Vega. What’d ya think of Stacey?”

“Fuck you, old man,” I growl as I head out the front door to round the house.

“Me?” he feigns. “That was Stacey’s job. You didn’t like my welcome home gift?”

“Don’t know if I’m home. It’s been a long time.” I crunch through the snow in my combat boots.

“You’re home, boy. Don’t question that,” his voice turns serious.

I make my way through the barren woods that’ll be perfect when it’s thick with growth, toward the largest outbuilding. There’re three, but I only need to make one comfortable or Grady’ll be a thorn in my side.

“I need a favor,” I say, my breath visible in the cold.

“Thought I was doing you a favor by sending Stacey,” he grumbles.

I ignore him. “If these buildings check out, I’m making an offer today. Ready to get this shit done.”

“Fine, what now?” he complains.

“I need a background check on the owner next door. It’s a vineyard on a quarter section, adjacent to this property. I need it in an hour.”

“Done. I’ll hit you back.” He’s all business and abruptly disconnects.

As I make my way up the so-called mountain, I stop when I come into view of the neighboring property. The vines are bare like everything else, but there aren’t any houses or buildings in view.

I turn and look back to my new house, thinking this is good. No direct sight—I can make use of the far side of the property for privacy. As long as the owner’s background comes back clean—this is it.

A new chapter. A new start. And fuckin’ finally, just maybe, a life.

Chapter 1
Cows Are Girls
Addy

“HARRY!”

“Moo.” Scarlett nudges my shoulder roughly.

I push my hair out of my face. My naturally frizzy locks haven't been the same since I moved here. If I had known the humidity was this bad, I never would have settled in Virginia. It doesn't matter what the temps are, the humidity in the middle of summer is the worst. Heaven forbid it rains, not only is it bad for the vines, the humidity jumps to a gazillion percent.

I've got to get Morris to fix this section of fence. Harry has over forty acres to roam. You'd think forty acres would be more than enough for five cows. It's not like I have a herd. Harry's always the loner, poor girl.

I trudge up over the hill in my Hunter rain boots. The ticks are thick this time of year—no way am I going to risk walking with the cows in anything else. It gives me the heebie-jeebies just thinking about it. Over the last year, I've come to enjoy my morning walk with the girls. I don't get out here every day—it depends on the schedule. Today is Thursday and it's slow. The tasting room doesn't open until eleven and even though I have meetings, my first event isn't until late this afternoon.

“Harry!” I call again.

“Moo.” Scarlett nudges me harder than before.

“No-no.” I try and push her away. “You're so needy and it's too hot for you to crowd me. Go graze with your sisters.”

Of course, she ignores me and nuzzles my ear. Jimmy, Maria, and Jax act like normal cows, grazing the way a cow should while lazing their days away in the meadows. Scarlett lives up to her namesake—she's melodramatic and boisterous. And poor Harry, she only wants to be by herself, to the point of escaping to the neighbor's property. She knows her space—she's lived here longer than me and cows are smarter than I ever would have guessed.

I never thought I'd own a cow, let alone five, but I inherited them when I bought the vineyard. I also inherited my caretaker, Morris, and his wife

Beverly. Oh, and there's the winemaker, Van, the tasting room manager, Evan—who's barely old enough to legally taste wine himself—and the chef, Maggie. I didn't know all these people came along with the vineyard when I bought it, but the day I signed my closing papers and walked into my new home and business, there they were waiting for me. They proceeded to tell me how things ran and why the previous three owners didn't work out for them.

That first day, I got the distinct impression I was interviewing to be their boss. It didn't matter whose name was on the loan or officially owned the establishment. When they explained to me all the reasons the past owners failed, I knew then and there if they didn't like me, I'd fall flat, too. It didn't matter that I'd sunk every penny to my name into a struggling winery.

Morris and Bev live on the property in the caretaker's home where they've been for eighteen years. I might own that teensy little house on the far side of my land, but it's very much theirs. Morris knows the land and vines well. No way could I get rid of them, even if he is ill-tempered.

Bev doesn't officially work for the winery, but she's usually around. Actually, she's always fussing about like she owns the place since they've lived here so long. She keeps all the flowers watered, the tables wiped, and when the spirit moves her—she'll wash a few dishes. I asked if I should make it official and put her on the payroll. She insists she likes to hang around when she feels like it but when she doesn't feel like it, she can go her own way. She quickly informed me I pay her plenty in wine and she's pretty sure that in the end we're—in her words—*Even-Steven*. I've learned to go with the flow and keep her in wine because she's as lovable as Morris is irritable.

I might've bought a vineyard, but I'm a beer girl who happens to be creative when it comes to business. I knew nothing about wine but when I found a great deal on a small struggling vineyard. All I saw was opportunity. I immediately knew how to turn it around.

As finicky as Van is about crafting wine, I knew I needed him. I try and ignore all the female customers whose sole reason for visiting is to lust after him. He's a manwhore in his forties who resembles a young Robert Redford. There's no other way to describe him. The women know he's a manwhore, but they don't seem to care one bit. I've never seen anything like it, but he

brings in his share of business, so I've learned not to care, either.

Maggie is a young widow in her early fifties who can make a mean soup and sandwich. Her desserts are hit or miss. Well, mostly miss. I've started ordering from a local bakery even though it pisses her off. Lately she's been experimenting with fancy salads for summer—so far, they've been a hit. Is she really a chef? No, but she runs an interesting deli out of the tasting room kitchen and customers seem to like her creativity. Even after a year, she still frightens me a tad.

Evan's been around slightly longer than me and though he's merely twenty-four, I'll never be as refined as the likes of him. Somehow, he can taste ripe apricots glazed with brown sugar butter in a white wine, and a woodsy fall day underlying a white pepper and smoky cheddar in a red. People ecstatically agree—wondering how they didn't taste it on their own to begin with. Customers eat that shit up. I don't get it— It all tastes like wine to me. But the customers love him and so do I.

There was no way I could get rid of any of these people when I took over. I had no choice but to work hard to make them like me. I think I've done okay. One thing's for sure, I've never had so many people in my life.

I climb up the hill, toward the old fence that's rotting away to look for her.
“Harry!”

“You lookin' for someone?”

I shriek, jumping at the sound of a deep voice coming from my side. I must have startled Scarlett because she moves quickly, pushing me off balance. Letting out another yelp, I fall to my ass with a thud, landing in the morning dew-covered grass.

“Ouch,” I mutter, twigs and rocks pressing into my palms where I tried to catch myself.

“Moo.” Scarlett nudges the side of my head.

“You okay?” I hear and look up.

When I do, I have to squint. Blinded, I can't see his face so I bring my hand up to shield my eyes from the sun.

The man with the voice is standing across my dilapidated fence, looking down at me. I still can't see his face, but his body's covered in a sheen of sweat. He's wearing an old wife-beater and a pair of cargo shorts with running shoes. The tank is plastered to his tanned skin, covering muscles so distinct, every swell of his chest and abs is visible through the dirty, sweaty material.

"Need a hand?" he asks and starts to move my way, easily stepping over my broken fence.

He's tall and muscular, so when he moves his body blocks the sun, letting my eyes travel to his face. He's scruffy, to the point I wonder if he's starting to grow a beard. I bet he hasn't shaved in over a week, but underneath the scruff are facial features so rough and masculine, I let my eyes widen to take all of him in.

Standing over me, he extends his long sinewy arm, offering me a big callused hand. "Help up?"

"Uh, sure." I brush gravel and grass off my hands before putting my left in his right.

His big warm hand envelops mine, he gives me a yank and I'm instantly pulled to my feet. Steadying myself and looking up, I'm face to face with the sweaty stranger standing on my land.

His dark brown hair is sticking to him, falling onto his forehead where perspiration's dripping down his temples. I let my eyes travel to his lips. They're full, but frowning. This makes me yank my hand out of his and retreat quickly, pulling myself out of my surprised haze.

"Who are you?" I clip, putting space between us.

He tips his head ever so slightly, narrowing his deep brown eyes, matching the dark themed package he's got going on. They might be dark but what they are is sharp. In fact, now that I've stepped away to take him in all at once, I realize everything about him is razor sharp. His eyes, his expression, even how he holds his body. As much as he's sweating, he's not breathing hard as if he was working out. His breathing is relaxed, like he was lounging on the sofa. He appears to be a bevy of contradictions—aloof yet alert, tense

yet relaxed, detached yet discerning. Everything about him is simple, but still, he's exceptionally complex.

I'm jerked out of my contemplation when his full lips form the words, "Your neighbor."

Oh, thank goodness. I let out a breath of relief. I don't care if he is tall, dark, and gorgeous, he's a tad scary looking. Plus, I feel like he snuck up on me. I'm glad to know he's my neighbor and not a creepy trespasser.

The tension leaves my body. "Sorry, you startled me. I didn't even hear you. You bought Mr. McCray's farm?"

Without taking his eyes off me, he simply answers, "Yeah."

"Okay, now I feel bad," I exclaim. "I knew it sold. Mr. McCray used to come over often. We even had a little going away thing for him in the tasting room. I knew he moved to be closer to his daughter, but I didn't know the new owner was in yet. Mr. McCray said the buyer would be doing some modifications before officially taking possession. I should've come over to introduce myself."

"No problem," he utters without a change in facial expression.

"Addy," I offer, stepping forward and extending my hand. "Addy Wentworth."

He offers me his big right hand again. When it folds around mine, engulfing me tightly, my breath catches.

"Vega," his deep voice informs me. Then he keeps on and strangely adds, "Crew."

I step back and frown. "Excuse me?"

"Crew. Crew Vega."

I frown deeper. "That's your name?"

Still no change in facial expression. "Yeah."

"Oh, sorry. That's just a little," I pause, raising my eyebrows. "Unusual."

“I know.” He finally offers me a set of new words, but alas, not a new facial expression.

“Well,” I breathe, finding him difficult to converse with. “Welcome to the neighborhood. I’m pretty new, as well, I’ve lived here a little over a year. I own the vineyard. Have you met the Kanes?”

He shakes his head. “Nope.”

“They’re great.” Motioning in back of me, I blather on. “They own the horse farm across the highway. They have three kids, all teenagers. They seem okay, the teenagers, that is. Not that we would hear rowdy teenagers here with all this land around us. I’m still getting used to living in the country. What do you do?”

Finally, he raises his eyebrows. Not much of a facial shift, but at least I know he’s alive when he answers, “Government contractor.”

“Huh,” I huff. “You and every other person around here. Everyone works for the government.”

“They’re a big employer.” He strings a group of words together—more proof of brain activity.

“They are,” I agree. “Do you drink wine?”

“Only to be polite. When I’m forced to be polite.”

This makes me smile. “I was that way, too, until I bought a winery, of course. Now I love it. You should come by the tasting room—I’ll give you the neighborly discount. One hundred percent off. All the neighbors love it and use it regularly.”

“Free?” He reverts back to simple words.

“There’s no money in wine tastings. My Buy-a-Barrel program, yes. The Wine Club, sure. Wedding receptions and private parties, absolutely. But a wine tasting? I barely break even. Plus, I hardly have any neighbors, so it’s not a big deal,” I explain.

“Thanks, but no.”

Before I have a chance to talk him into it, I hear, “Moo,” coming from afar.

I look toward my neighbor’s property and here comes Harry, slow as a snail stuck in peanut butter.

“Moo!” Scarlet answers, bellowing from behind me.

“You raise cows?”

“What?” I ask distracted, as Scarlett starts to crowd me again. I try to push her back as I explain, “Well, I have cows, I don’t raise them. They were cows when I got them.”

“I meant raise to butcher.”

“What? No, of course not.” I frown. “Why would I do that?”

“You a vegetarian? Why else would you have cows?”

“I’m not a vegetarian, but I’d never butcher them. They came with the property and I guess I’ve come to like them. By the way, sorry about the fence. I’ll try and get Morris out here today to do something about it.”

He ignores my comment about the fence and frowns back. “They’re pets?”

“No, they’re not pets.” I glare at him. “They came with the vineyard. I have forty acres of vines, forty of pasture and the other ten make up the farmhouse, tasting room, and other buildings, but they’re scattered amongst the pasture. A dog is a pet, a cat is a pet. A cow is not a pet.”

“Moo,” Harry calls as she slowly steps over the broken fence to join us. The second she does, she comes straight to Scarlett and me, joining the crowd.

I give the little black mark on her white forehead a scratch and scold her, “You need to stay on this side of the fence, Harry.”

“Harry?” I hear and look back over to my neighbor.

“Yes,” I sigh, because someone else is about to give me shit for naming the cows. When I started walking with them, I had to name them. “This one’s Harry because of the birthmark since it looks like Harry Potter’s scar.”

Crew’s expression finally cracks, even if it is by only a touch. His eyes

turning from sharp to amused. “You do know cows are females, right?”

I stand up straight and immediately become defensive. I’m tired of people mocking me about the cows.

“I know cows are girls. Do I look like an idiot? Look at her face,” I say and point to Harry, the sweetest of them all. They’re Black Baldies, all black with white heads, but Harry has a sweet little birthmark on her forehead. The minute I saw her the first time, she reminded me of Harry Potter. She’s been Harry ever since. “See? Harry Potter. This is Scarlett, she’s loud and obnoxious. I have Jax, Maria, and Jimmy, but they’re off doing what cows are supposed to do—grazing.”

Crew Vega moves, even if it is slightly, tipping his head and crossing his arms. A smirk spreads across his scruffy face, and as if out of nowhere, a dimple appears. Smack dab on his left cheek. A dimple. Proof there’s soft under the sharp. Hell if that dimple isn’t the hottest thing I’ve ever seen, even if it is covered in scruff, sweat, dirt, and hidden under a sharp toughness.

“Jax, Maria, and Jimmy?” the dimple asks.

I look up to his deep dark eyes, now creased because of his dimpled grin. “Well...yeah. I named them after my favorite characters. Besides Harry, I’ve got Scarlett O’Hara, Jax Teller, Maria von Trapp, and Jimmy Fallon.”

His head tips the other way. “Jimmy Fallon’s a person, not a character.”

“I know, but he’s funny,” I spout.

He nods, letting his arms fall, probably tired of talking about my cows, but agrees. “True.”

Okay, moving on.

“Sorry about the fence.” I try to change the topic of conversation. “Like I said, I’ll try and get my property manager to take a look at it today. I don’t want Harry wandering onto your property again.”

“We share the fence. I don’t have a property manager, all I have is me and I’m busy. Send me a bill for half, we’ll share the cost.”

“It’s really okay. I’m the one with the cows—you don’t have a reason to fix

the fence.”

“It’s both of our responsibilities,” he keeps on.

“Yes, but you just moved in. I really don’t mind.”

“Send me a bill for half,” he insists.

I sigh. “Well, it probably won’t be much. Just consider it a ‘welcome to the neighborhood’ gift.”

“Addison,” he bites out, getting my attention because no one calls me Addison. Not even my mom when she was alive. And more specifically, I didn’t introduce myself as Addison. “Send the bill.”

I frown and cross my arms. “Fine, I’ll send you a bill. Now that I’m thinking it through, I’m sure it’ll be astronomical. At least what I’ve spent on molasses cubes for the cows in the past year. They really like their molasses.”

He shakes his head with a half-smirk. “If it means I don’t have to play fetch with your pet cows when they wander onto my property, I’ll pay it.”

Tired of talking about my cows, I decide I’ve stood here long enough. I’ve got purchases to process, bills to pay, and ordering to finish. I don’t have time to stand here and argue about the cost of the fence with my new neighbor. I was only trying to be nice.

“If you decide to be neighborly, come for a tasting. If not, maybe I’ll see you around, but I don’t like being snuck up on, so don’t do that again.” I start to move out from between Scarlett and Harry. The instant I do, Scarlett crowds me but I have to make kissy noises to get Harry to follow.

“Send the bill,” his deep voice demands.

“Don’t hold your breath,” I yell without looking back.

Marching off in my rain boots, I swipe the hair away from my face. It’s only then do I realize during the whole encounter with my new neighbor, I’m not only wearing rain boots, but cut off shorts and my old UCLA Track and Field t-shirt I acquired years ago. And holy shit, I’m make-up free and my hair’s a mess. Not my finest first impression, but we can’t all look great covered in sweat and dirt. What kind of name is Crew, anyway? I’m sure it’s a stupid

nickname his buddies bequeathed upon him.

“Come on, girls,” I call for the cows. “I need to get Morris on that fence right away. I don’t need our new neighbor complaining about you.”

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