



Undeniable

DAISY JANE

undeniable

daisy jane

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Cover Design | Daisy Jane

Beta Reading | Karen Quimby, Jes Vaz, Randi Nash, Laura Davies, Tristen Vigil Sapp

content warnings:

This book contains themes and ideas that may be stressing to some. Please read accordingly for the best reading experience.

Content warning: child neglect, child abuse, abuse, assault, drug use, alcohol use, death and grief.

foreword

“My whole life has been pledged to this meeting with you...”

— Alexander Pushkin (Eugene Onegin)

prologue

...



she likes the ponytail, and i like making her smile.

CALLAN

...TEN YEARS AGO

Age 26

I give the throttle more weight, more unyielding power. My tires leave crushed asphalt popping off like dying embers in my wake. The urge to feel the crushing wind against my chest overwhelms me, and I dash into the horizon.

Speed is only a bandage, but tonight, I'm a desperate fool for even just a temporary remedy. All the noise in my head, all the shit entwined in my choices—*life is crushing me*. The only thing more powerful is the rush of that very same, overcomplicated world against me when I *speed*.

A few minutes is all I get, but I bask in those intense, gasping, thrilling minutes. It doesn't make much sense how doing 120 MPH on the highway at dusk makes me feel safer and more sane than anything else, but it does.

The familiar silhouette grabs my attention in the near distance, and I let off the throttle, my body lurching forward as my bike slows. As the bike's momentum dies, my soul follows suit, shrinking before evaporating inside me. Possibility and growth seem to slow when I'm in that blue house. Planning, dreams, goals—things I've been told my whole life I didn't deserve—I'm ready to have them now, but inside *there*, so much less exists.

And yet inside that house are the two huge reasons why I keep going back. Even though *she* eats what's left of my hope a little more each passing day, *they* bring it back, arms wide, fingers sticky, hearts pure.

It's completely fucked up. I've never been so pulled and torn, so driven and indifferent. I'm talking corners of midnight

meets ray of sunshine level of stark differences inside me. I want to never see this house again and yet, I'll die if I can't be there everyday. Leaving would cure me of one pain, but with it bring another. In my fugue, indifferent state, I head toward the blue house.

I ride the dying fumes to the driveway, and stand my bike up, setting the helmet to balance on the seat. Smoothing my fingers through my hair, I make sure my ponytail is decent. She likes the ponytail, and I like making her smile.

A virulent anger causes my nostrils to flare as I drop my hand on the knob and find it unlocked. A snarl rolls through my upper lip. God fucking damn it.

Ideally her carelessness doesn't get her killed, but the truth that's becoming clearer and clearer each day? I'm not still here because I'm worried about *her*.

"Kelly!" My voice tears through the floor plan, filling open rooms, seeping into the rarely used kitchen nearby. Closing the door behind me, I lift my boot over a heap of clothes littered along the ground, wondering why someone would be naked at ten after two in the afternoon. "Lock the goddamn door," I mutter, collecting three empty bottles of wine from the floor near the sofa. The high-pitched clatter of glass against glass snakes through my veins, adding a second coming to my irritation. This place is a goddamn mess, door is left unlocked—

"Callan!" A tiny but rugged voice calls my name. Sparks of awareness and rushes of warmth wrap me, and through the muddled and darkened haze, I come alive. I turn the corner with a blazing smile. For them.

Bare feet slap the sticky linoleum floor and I drop to a crouch, one knee down, just in time to catch him in my open arms. "Callan!" he hums again, his hot breath flanking my neck, little fingers fishing around the ends of my ponytail.

"Hi my Benny boy," I greet warmly, letting my eyes close, giving myself over to the small moment of peace and love. I peel him away from me, my thumb getting caught in a wear hole in his old t-shirt. I lift the hem of the shirt which drags

along the floor like a goddamn dress. A vibrant blue line stares back at me from the center of his diaper. “Where’s Mama, huh?” I drop his shirt and yank him against my chest, letting his full diaper rest against my forearms as I rise with him. He clings to me, responding to my question as I peer around the filthy little house.

It’s only been three days since I was here last, but looking at the drained Solo cups, dishes smeared with memories of meals, piles of mail and heaps of clothing—fiery, angry guilt overwhelms me, leaving me full of directionless energy.

I knew I shouldn’t have left them. I had to make a run with Marshall and the guys, because when the president of your MC—the one and only club that has helped you get and stay out of trouble since you were fourteen—asks for a favor, you give it. There’s nothing I wouldn’t do for the Broken Wheel, and there’s no amount of favors I can give Marshall that will ever repay all he and the club have done for me.

And I won’t stop trying. But I also needed to be here.

“Mama’s comin’ home,” Benny repeats over and over as I step around a box of diapers, a bag of trash plopped on top. I face him, moving the tip of my nose against his.

“Where’s your sister, buddy?” I ask, holding his eyes. He’s three, and while Kelly has never sat down with this boy and read him a story or even played him a single educational song, or potty trained him, he’s goddamn smart. He’s behind, of course, but sharp nonetheless, thanks to his older sister, a kid more brave and resilient than any kid should have to be. Hell, I don’t think I was even as brave as her at that age, despite the fact our situations weren’t too different.

“Lexi!” he shouts.

“I coulda yelled, buddy.” I poke his belly and grin down at him while reaching into yet another open box of diapers from the hall, snagging a fresh one. I turn the corner to their room and am teleported to a new world. This room is unlike the rest of the house.

Nothing is on the floor, except for a twin sized mattress shoved into the corner. But even that bed is made up, an old floral quilt wrapped nicely around it, two white pillows resting side to side at the top. In the opposite corner, with big fuzzy pink headphones covering her little ears, Lexi sits, notebook on her knees, pen moving like crazy.

I lower Benny to the ground and watch as he races over to her, plucking her earphone from her head. "Callan's home." He speaks well for three.

But my guts roil at how simply he uses the word, not realizing that this isn't *my* home. Hell, this isn't anyone's *home*. Homes aren't covered in litter and trash, homes have loving adults in them, fridges with food, floors that are clean, shelves with books and decorative shit.

This little blue house is indeed a house, with its walls and roof. But it is no home.

She tugs off her other earphone, a smile a mile wide tearing across her face. She drops her notebook and pen to the floor, scrambling to her feet. With the clean diaper in one hand, I loop my other arm around her, exhaling indescribable relief as she sinks into my chest, her soft voice trapped against my collarbone.

"Callan!" she breathes, orange glowing at the corners of her mouth, her voice a little excited. But I also hear the fear and relief, too. I hear what she doesn't say, we've always had that kind of connection. "I was just gonna change him," she says, swiping the diaper from my hand. "Sorry," she adds, her cheeks filling with what I've grown to know is embarrassment.

"Don't say sorry, changing Benny isn't your job." I wrangle Benny in, tickling his belly as I lie him down in the middle of the clean room. "Where's your mom?" I ask, a hard lump appearing at the base of my throat at the familiar sting of my words.

In the three years I've been with Kelly, I've asked Lexi where she is more times than appropriate. I slide the new diaper beneath the old one, and make quick work of the dirty

one. I give him a few wipes and cinch him up, all while Lexi's hand wraps around my shoulder. My ponytail swishes as she fans her fingers through the ends. I pat myself on the back for my choice to put it up.

"Twins," she says, and though I'm not looking as I secure the clean diaper, I hear it in her voice. The lightness, the sunshine, all the possibilities. Once Benny is on his feet, I reach behind Lexi and swipe at her ponytail.

"Twins," I confirm. "Lexi, where's your mom?" I keep my voice steady, even keel, like a ship valiantly sailing calmly through a chaotic sea. I am her stability, and I don't have to have a kid of my own to realize the importance of *a parental role*.

She comes around from behind me; I take the end of my t-shirt from beneath my flannel and bring it to her face. Her front teeth are permanent, but the rest are still baby teeth. Her grin makes my chest tight, and I make sure to place a careful hand on the back of her head as I hold her, wiping the old macaroni and cheese from her face.

"She had to work yesterday morning but Auntie had to work, too," Lexi yawns, her fingers drifting across my chest, landing on my breast pocket. I reach for it, her favorite pen, and pull it from the pocket, sliding it right into her hands. "Keep writing in your journal, morning girl, and I'm gonna clean up okay?"

Such a perfect nickname for a perfect little thing. Morning girl. Golden hair framing her face, cheeks always a little pink, she smiles as I drop a fingertip to the top of her cheekbone, covering the smudge of skin. Her freckle.

I'd started calling her morning girl years back, when I first slept over. I got up real early, unease heavy in my bones. Something about this house always made me restless and achy. When I couldn't find sleep, I got up and wandered out to the kitchen where four-year-old Lexi sat, doodling in a spiral notebook.

I looked out the little window above the kitchen sink, finding the sky still heavy with darkness and dreams. The

green glowing clock on the microwave said it was barely four in the morning.

“Morning girl,” I smiled, and she beamed back.

And I called her that every other morning I was there and inevitably awoke way too early. I’d wander out of the bedroom, leaving a snoring, passed out Kelly tangled in the sheets, and find *her*. Every single morning. She’d be awake, writing, doodling, quietly thinking as she colored—and that’s the way she became my morning girl.

I look at her freckle now, and warmth branches through my chest.

The delicate cluster of pigment strewn about perfectly, leaving behind a glowing morning sun. I’ve never seen a beauty mark look so clearly like something, and the longer I know her, I realize the nickname is a perfect embodiment of her personality.

The beauty mark, too.

A shining, glowing sun. Representing goodness and warmth, and a fresh new day.

“My morning girl,” I call her, tapping the mark on her cheek one more time. She wiggles with satisfaction, adoring my focus. And everytime my attention brings her happiness, I’m engulfed in hot, bitter sickness. Because this is how she *should* live every day. Not when her mom gets a cool boyfriend who feels her pain.

After today, everything will be different.

She nods, curling into her same corner after collecting her notebook. “I’ll keep my headphones off,” she states, smiling at me from across the room. “In case you need me.”

Scooping up Ben, I carry him into the quiet kitchen and slide him into the high chair. I can’t help but stew on Lexi’s words as I collect take out bags with pinched fingers, dropping them into the large black garbage bag I have spread open. Beer cans, wine bottles, an old pizza box, empty packs of cigarettes, dirty diapers—the house is *so* goddamn filthy.

She had to work but Auntie had to work, too. I know what that means. It means these pliant, sweet, innocent kids have been alone in this house for the last *day and a half*. Kelly's sister Trista is the only one to watch the kids, and if she's working at the corner bar, the kids stay home alone.

I've told Kelly to bring them to the shop before leaving them home alone. But she won't do it. Hell, she works at a goddamn doctor's office. It's quiet there, the doctor is local, the office is small. In a pinch, I'm sure she could bring the kids.

But that doctor doesn't know Kelly Fisher. He doesn't know that *she* doesn't care if she has child care, *she* doesn't worry if her babies' bellies are filled, that she pays her dealer *before* she pays the electric bill.

He definitely does not know her the way I do.

Yet *I know him*. Even though I've only met him once, I know him. He's the slimy moron who doesn't see an addict when she's stealing from his business because she's sucking his dick.

Yeah, I know Kelly's been fucking and sucking her boss. I don't care in the slightest, and when I think back on it, I don't know if there's ever been a time when I *would've* cared.

Kelly was supposed to be a quick fuck. A *wham, bam, thank you ma'am*. Nothing more.

And she was... until she wasn't.

I fucked her standing, her back pressed to a torn and tattered KISS poster taped to the wall in the bathroom at The Alley. Her pink panties were looped around one ankle, and I watched them sway as I slammed into her repeatedly. I put the rubber to use, helped her get redressed.

That's where it was supposed to end.

Three years ago.

But it's where things started instead.

She invited me over to her place before our normal outing. I never went home with any of my quickies before Kelly, but

for whatever reason, when she asked me to come over I said yes, without hesitation. I should have said no, especially when she said she wanted me to meet her kids. I didn't want to, but for whatever reason, I did it.

And thank fuck I did.

When Kelly opened the front door, and I caught my first glimpse of that four year old in a cute little dress giving a pacifier to a giggling baby—it changed me. I put my palm against the wood, right over the peephole, and shoved it open all the way. I remember being so eager to meet them.

I still remember that first night. She said she wanted to comb my hair. It still makes my chest tight.

But as time ticked on, the negligence was glaring. One time, I'd dropped Kelly off after a date and found her junkie babysitter/sister passed out on the couch, the kids completely neglected.

Kelly explained that it was her sister, and that she'd probably just dozed off. She swore her sister was usually a great babysitter to the kids. Her lies shimmered brightly, so big and golden that she couldn't argue as I pushed inside. It didn't matter what she said, or how Kelly's sister attempted to lovingly lift the baby from the swing once she startled awake. The lies were in plain sight for me to see.

That was no cat nap and this is a no good mother, those are the two *glaring* truths. Neglect and drug use radiated off that house in sickening, crippling waves.

Guilt engulfed me at the heart breaking sight. I *fucked* this woman who cared more about going out than her two children. I was transfixed, staring into that tiny house that night, watching the little girl soothe the baby as Kelly and her sister disappeared into a hall bathroom.

Kelly came back out, smiling, and introduced me to them. I'd already met them, so many times. But that little trip in the bathroom had her forgetting... everything.

Once I'd had a quick glimpse at their life, for the sake of those kids, I promised myself I wouldn't leave until they were

safe. I didn't know what that looked like. I didn't know how I'd get them help or how I'd improve their lives, but I promised myself right then that I'd be the adult in their lives that I never had. The one I prayed and begged for.

That I'd get them help and it wouldn't be at the hand of some cop or government official. If I were to go that route, they'd be separated, that I knew for sure. They never keep the older kids with the younger ones, especially if one is in the highly adoptable "*still wears diapers*" phase. I wouldn't let them get separated. I've kept my word since, and today is no different.

Ruffling my fingers through Benny's hair, I finish collecting all the random trash from the living room and kitchen, tying off the bag.

As I start sorting the laundry, tossing the soiled clothes into the pop up laundry bins I brought over here a while back, Lexi pads down the hall. Her blue eyes shine, happiness stretching her smile wide as she wiggles with joy.

"It's so clean!" She rushes toward me, looping her arms around my waist, crashing her head into my hip. "Thank you, Callan." Her hug is tight as she looks up at me, a rush of tears making her blue eyes glisten. "I hate it when it's dirty."

I swipe my fingers through her golden hair. "I know, I always did, too."

She sinks to the ground, sitting cross legged at my feet as I continue to toss used towels into the hamper. "Was your house dirty when you were a kid?"

I stop sorting, and hand a talkative Benny a banana cookie from the bag of baby snacks I bought last week. "My mom was like yours, and my dad wasn't around, so yeah, my house was a lot like this." I scratch the back of my neck, not used to the ponytail tickling it. "Only it was an apartment, not a house."

"What's a prison?" she randomly asks on the heels of my response, her small, delicate voice easing all my sharp edges.

No matter how pissed I am at Kelly, they always calm my frothy anger. Always.

“It’s a place where they lock up bad guys,” I tell her, cleaning up the final piece of dirty clothes. I brace my hands on my hips, looking around. The avocado wallpaper peeling in the kitchen reminds me a bit of the place I grew up in, a small apartment where I was often locked in for days on end without my mom coming home. That felt a lot like prison. I’m reminded of her question, so I face her. “It’s not a good place.”

Lexi’s eyes fall to her fingers, which trace the arch of her bare foot. “Oh.”

I lower myself to the floor, sitting in front of her. She chances a glance my way; I love when it sticks on me, so I smile at her. “Why are you asking that?”

She shrugs, and my heart aches when she doesn’t meet my eyes, saying, “Mom said this place is like a prison. This house, her job, everything.” Finally, with restored courage, she looks up at me. “She said she wants to run away and start over somewhere where she isn’t *trapped*.”

Trapped. I have to bite my tongue so I don’t say something I’ll regret, despite the fact that Lexi and Benny can’t understand. Kelly isn’t trapped. She’s a junkie who blames her problems on everything and everyone but the real culprit: *herself*.

Lexi’s bottom lip wobbles. “I don’t want to leave here, Callan,” she says, trying to be brave. The back of my nose burns as I watch this little girl dump her fears out onto me. “I don’t want to leave *you*.”

I pull her into me, and absorb her worried cries as I stroke my hand up and down her back. “I’m not leaving, don’t worry. And your mom, she’s not going anywhere either. Okay?”

She won’t leave because she doesn’t have the money to do anything but get high, so I feel confident in my promise. “She’s not going to move, okay? I promise.”

I wouldn’t make these kids promises I can’t keep, but my mom sang the same song for years. A tune about getting away,

and how all her problems would all but vanish in a different place.

She never left.

And *she* was the problem. Not the location.

I figured the same for Kelly. But of all the times in her life she could prove me wrong, she chose the worst time to do it.

When she got home that night, full of excuses and promises, I waved her off. She clung to my chest, trying to pepper boozed up kisses on my face, telling me how she wanted to make it *all* up to me.

I pushed her off and told her I'd be back the next day. That I'd take Lexi and Benny with me to the store, give her time to nap while I restocked her place with groceries and shit. The truth? I was gonna take them back to my place and leave them with Gram and go back to talk to Kelly. I had a plan that centered around not letting these kids grow up alone and miserable the same way I did.

Lexi runs her fingers through my ponytail as I say goodbye. She presses her little lips into my cheek, giggling at how my stubble tickles her. "See you... in the..." I trail off, letting her finish the sentence we always share.

"Morning!"

"Morning," I confirm, "because you're my..."

"Morning girl!" she squeals.

She kissed my cheek again as I lowered her to the ground, taking Benny in my arms next. "See ya in the morning, bruiser," I kissed his head as he flailed and squawked happily against my chest.

I closed the door behind me, hooked my leg over my bike, and stared at the blue house with the glowing windows. My stomach hurt, but I couldn't pinpoint why, and I drove off into the evening, more eager to get back there in the morning than ever before.

Except, when I went back the next day... they were gone.

one

...



it's less painful when you see it coming.

LEXI

... PRESENT DAY

Age 18

“It’s just not cute at my age, Mom, okay? It’s more like...” I tilt my head, trying to think of something she’ll understand. “Like a grown woman wearing little girl’s clothes. Okay? Separate, they’re fine but together, no good,” I say as I slice my hands out in the most cut and dry gesture I can think of. “Same thing here. Moving?” I shrug, over accentuating the casualness of it as Mom rolls her eyes. “Fine, moving is fine. Though, admittedly, not ideal more than once a year but... still, moving is fine.” I press my palms into my chest, brows pulling together as I implore her. “A senior in high school still being the new girl? It’s...” I wrinkle my nose. “*No good.*”

Mom pulls her long hair off her back, stacking it in a loose bun on top of her head. “Lots of men like it when you dress like a little girl.” She wiggles her brows. *Of course that would be her response.*

“Mom,” I drag out, unsure of what to say or do, because *this is happening*. And it doesn’t matter how much I protest. I just turned eighteen last week and yet, in her eyes, I’m a child. I must be, because she never listens to me.

She has never cared what we wanted. Not for a single one of our moves. And we’ve protested all of them.

“We’re going,” she says, her voice flat and unwavering. She gets to be so sure of herself. She gets to drag us around with her everywhere. It’s not fair.

But that’s life.

Completely unfair.

My shoulders slouch with a sigh as I turn around and toss another piece of my life into an open suitcase. A suitcase that cost \$59 on sale now holds everything I know to be tangible and true. Because I can't count on the ground beneath me, not for as often as it shifts.

"You'll make friends," Mom offers, her words sliding down my back, the sentiment going to the floor right along with it. She doesn't care and at eighteen years old, I don't need a speech. I probably understand things better than she does, considering my brain isn't fatigued from illegal stimulants.

The door squeals open, and the walls shudder as it slams closed.

"Yo!"

Mom turns, rushing out into the hall the way she does when she's coming out of a spiral. She sweeps through, all soft and kind, doting and loving. That's the scariest time—when she's nice. Because it's always followed by the rug being torn out from beneath us. At least this time, I got a heads up. I didn't wake up to my shit already in the car with her yelling, "Let's go!"

I hear her kiss his cheek, and I roll my eyes. I love my mom because she's my mom and that's what you're supposed to do, right? Love your mom? So I do. But I also dislike her most of the time. She's lost and taking us with her, chasing the high and living the fallout. "Son, so glad you're home," she coos, her voice velvety and thick, attempting to sway him with saccharine affection.

The thing is, my brother has mostly been raised by *me*. He's smart. Smart as fuck if I do say so myself. And while we both long to have a come to Jesus moment with *mommy dearest*, we're not hardwired waiting for it. We aren't standing by with bated breath, on our toes, waiting for her apologies and promises. Instead, we question everything in order to protect ourselves.

It's less painful when you see it coming.

My little brother, who is actually bigger and taller than me and has been for a few years, turns the corner, Mom hot on his heels. He flops down across the bed on his back, grabbing the edge of my open suitcase to keep it from sliding onto the floor. “Where now?” he questions, stashing his arm behind his head to look over at me around the pile of clothes.

At thirteen years old, Ben can’t *legally* work. Our birthdays are at opposite ends of the year, so while I just turned eighteen, Benny won’t be fourteen for months. And even though he’s not old enough to work, the apartment complex manager always gives Ben some cash under the table for easy maintenance work. The first time he came home with fifty dollars, I was horrified. I’d always told Ben that just because Mom plays it fast and loose with the law doesn’t mean we do. We don’t do anything that can get us separated, that’s always been my rule. No matter what, if we’re dirt poor and homeless, we stay together.

When I flew into a fit about losing him and us staying together and how scary juvie would be for him, he stopped me with a smarmy grin. He told me he changed lightbulbs, tightened some fittings, and mowed a few strips of lawn.

He’d earned it honestly, and at thirteen, contributed to our rent.

I was infused with pride and overwhelmed with sadness; happy to see Ben be productive and resourceful, a little devastated by the fact he wasn’t out playing football or asking a girl to the school dance.

Our childhoods have never been what others have had. They could have easily been worse, but even so, I always knew that we should’ve had more. I’d always hoped that by the time Ben got older, Mom would have her shit together and at least one of us would have some semblance of normal.

But that wasn’t in the cards for the Fisher kids.

“Oakcreek,” Mom answers, wringing her hands from her spot in the doorway. Peering over her shoulder then back to us, she smiles. It’s fake, twitching uncomfortably on her lips as her gaze veers over her shoulder again.

“If you want to go, just go. We can pack up,” I say, sighing. I used to have so much anger toward her. I used to punish her with the silent treatment or conversely, try and jab at her with sharp words, desperate to inflict unhappiness on her. To make her feel how we felt.

I realized around age twelve that she didn’t care. And not from cruelty but inability. Her care is centered around drugs, which bleeds out into two things: men and money. And men are just a way to get money, and money is always used for drugs.

I stopped being angry, because it only hurt me and Benny, and I promised myself I’d do everything I could for the two of us. I told myself I’d be the mom he didn’t have, I’d be the sister I needed to be, and I’d hold it all together until... she could. Until... I don’t know. Just... *until*.

“Just waiting on a friend is all,” she defends, wearing a crooked smile. She needs a fix, and whether that’s her latest boyfriend, drugs, or both, I don’t know. I don’t worry about it anymore. The only thing I worry about is Ben and me.

That’s all I can handle.

“Why does that sound familiar?” Ben muses, sitting up on my bed, leaving a few clumps of dried grass and Earth on my blanket.

I pinch a piece of lawn from my bed and hold it up for him to see. “You’re getting my bed messy.”

He jumps up and begins brushing it off, only to collect the pieces from the floor and drop them into the trash can in the corner of my room. We clean up after ourselves. Cleaning up shows pride in your things, and having pride is good. We learned that from one of Mom’s boyfriends. The only one we ever cared about. The one I thought was maybe forever. I thought maybe he loved Mom enough to marry her, and I dreamed about that. I dreamed of him making her a bride, so he could be my dad. Because he was nice. And fun. And so smart, and kind. And I wanted that for *us*.

My ears burn, heat spreading down the back of my neck, radiating through my ribs. Oakcreek is where we lived when she was with *him*.

“That’s where we lived in the blue house,” I remember aloud, knowing Ben won’t possibly remember that shitty blue house with the dangerously old space heater and the small rooms with old, creaky floors. I look at Ben, who is sitting on the edge of my bed, rolling socks and tucking them next to my things. “That’s where we lived when Mom dated *Callan*.”

Callan.

His name sounds so strange aloud now. So many years I cried it. I screamed it into darkness. I shouted into my pillow. Tears clung to my cheeks as his name worried my lips repeatedly while I stared out the window, willing to give my soul to Satan just to see his bike roll up.

When I got old enough, I asked Mom about him. Why he didn’t come with us, why he let us go after he promised me he wouldn’t. She said the same thing then that she says now when his name is mentioned.

“That man loved the needle. You were too young to know but he was all tied up in drugs,” Mom says, smoothing her hands down her jeans.

I don’t remember him having track marks up his arms. I don’t remember him having a runny nose, and I surely don’t remember him being detached and elusive, the way Mom was when she was loaded.

But I was a kid then.

All I remember is feeling loved and safe and cared for, feeling hopeful that life would be different, that we could have more. I only ever felt those things when Mom was with Callan.

I haven’t been hopeful since.

“Think he still lives there?” I muse aloud, unsure of why I’m even wondering, much less wondering out loud where my mom can hear.

She snorts with laughter, like the question is ridiculous. “Maybe. If he does, it’s probably in a cemetery. I can’t imagine he’s still around but if he is, he’s probably still chasing whores and highs. Unless he’s behind bars or underground.”

Something about her response doesn’t settle right. Discomfort wracks my body, leaving me shifting on my feet, messing with already folded items in my suitcase. Ben’s hand grabs mine beneath a folded sweater, and his eyes lift to catch mine. His brows pinch, asking me wordlessly what’s wrong.

I clear my throat. “I just don’t remember him that way,” I say quietly. I’m not sure what bothers me more, the fact that I don’t remember him as much as I wish I could or that what she’s saying *could* be true.

“Ride’s here,” she says, after a shuddering knock on the apartment door. “Headed out to work.”

She leaves; we are ninety percent sure she is stealing at the job she’s working at, until we get a call from the police station, we don’t intervene.

Intervening in Mom’s life has always brought us nothing but chaos and harm.

After the apartment door closes, I look over at Ben who dusts traces of yard work from his shirt in the hall. “You sad to move?” I ask, hoping he’s not but also wanting a little bit of company in my misery. I don’t love where we are now, but I don’t want to move back there.

To the town where we lived when I thought maybe, just maybe, life was going to get better.

He shrugs. “Does it matter?”

I give him a small, sad smile. It doesn’t matter. Tomorrow, we’ll be back in Oakcreek again after ten years.

Life never did get better and going back there is just a cruel reminder.

two

...



i never thought i'd see him again.

LEXI

Her long purple nail underlines the printed text as she reads it to me, upside down from her spot behind the desk and partition. “Each subject is seven dollars, or you can buy the entire test at once for thirty-five dollars.” She pops her gum, clasping her hands together on top of the laminated menu. “I advise a la carte, because if you fail two, you have to repay the individual costs to take them again.” She smiles gently, her tone a soft heeding. “Most students need a few tries to pass them all.”

Quickly, I do mental math. Something no one knows about poor kids who move a lot and miss a ton of class—they’re very good at math. How much will I need to pay the core bills? How much will be needed if we want to eat? How much longer do I need to work to get the field trip money? Mental math all day. This morning, the task is easy.

I have around one hundred forty five dollars in my account, and while I’m sure others don’t pass the test on the first try, I will. I’ve been studying for my GED since I was in tenth grade. Reaching into my purse, I pull out my debit card as I slide it beneath the partition. The woman struggles to collect the card because her nails are so long, and eventually drags it off the counter and catches it in her lap.

After she runs the card, I sign my receipt and she sends me off with luck. I traipse through the third floor at Oakcreek School Administration Building, stopping in front of the bank of elevators. The doors pull open with a ding, and I step inside the nearly full car.

When it stops on the second floor, I worm through the bodies and stumble onto the tile hallway as the doors pinch closed behind me. Heading for the registrar’s office, I collect the things I need from my purse, having them ready in my

hand. Approaching the window, I smile at the put-together woman wearing pearls, her manicured nails resting on a gray keyboard.

She looks at me for a moment before her eyes veer off, searching for the parent who brought me. I clear my throat as I slide the documents across the marble counter.

“I’m here to register my brother for ninth grade.” I smile, and she smiles back.

“Mom or Dad with you?” she questions, picking up the documents, her eyes scanning over Ben’s name immediately. I wait for her gaze to come back to me, then shake my head.

“Mom’s at work.” Technically, a parent or adult doesn’t *have* to register you. I know this because I read through the fine print. As long as I have his updated physical, his documents, and a course schedule, that should be good.

“Registration is seventy dollars,” she says, mindlessly inputting Ben’s life into her computer.

I swallow thickly. I read all the details around registering, but never once saw an associated fee. “Okay,” I drag out, mentally deducting the GED test from my balance. If I pay now... “Alright,” I smile, sliding her the card. Truth is, Ben needs school. School for him is non-negotiable. “On the card,” I add.

She runs it and the seconds where it processes have my breath in my throat, my heart hammering in anticipation. I’ve heard “it was declined” more times than I can count, and though I have the money, the sliding of my card always comes with the sting of embarrassment that it may get declined.

“Perfect,” she smiles as she slides the card and paperwork back. And one more elevator ride and I’m moving through the parking lot, clutching my purse strap on my shoulder.

We’ve been back in Oakcreek for two weeks and it’s been... how it always goes when we move.

Mom’s been almost completely MIA, shackled up with her latest man—the man that’s going to undoubtedly solve all of our problems. *Eyeball*. I’ve taken the last fourteen days to

unpack, set up our home with the limited things we have, and find myself a job. Going to school is pointless as I have one year left and likely won't even be in Oakcreek around graduation time. Taking the GED seemed like it made more sense, plus it gave me the ability to work full time instead of part time.

The autumn sun rises from the clouds, lighting the sidewalk in front of me. I can't help but laugh as I tug on my wooly gloves and gather my long hair into a ponytail. The way the universe is illuminating this sidewalk like walking to my shitty job at the bowling alley is some sort of fate? I laugh because if I don't, I just might cry.

A few more blocks through the heart of Oakcreek and I'm standing at the edge of the parking lot facing my new job. In the dim morning light, the sign's dying neon flickers, the word OPEN illuminating for a few riveting seconds.

I cross the parking lot, digging my apron from my bag as I loop it around my neck and tie it at my tailbone. In all the jobs I've had, I think this one will be the best. Not because I want to serve partially carbonated warm beer to drunken fools who think throwing a ball at sticks is the height of entertainment, but because of the *opportunity*.

It's not just a bowling alley.

Attached to it? A pool hall. And an arcade. While I don't expect a lot of tips from kids Ben's age, pool halls and bars usually bring in a fair amount of cash. Especially when I fix myself up to look like a little Kelly.

Wiping the sweat from the back of my neck, I smear my palm down my denim clad thigh. Today isn't a day where I'm mini Kelly. After all my errands and just two hours of sleep, I'm beat. And it's ten after nine in the morning on a weekday. Can't expect this to be a high-tipping shift.

At best, I'll serve some breakfast, spray some shoes, shine some balls. I may not earn a lot of tips, but I'll get to slow down, and I need that. Ever since Mom barged into my room and told me we were moving to Oakcreek I've been busy. Working to get things taken care of, working to make sure

Ben's credits transfer, working to settle us into our new apartment... *working*, period.

I shove my bag under the register and flick on the lights to the popcorn machine. After double checking the till is correctly counted, I unlock the register, start the coffee behind me and reach beneath the counter for the cleaner and rag.

It doesn't matter how much you clean, an old bowling alley will never not smell like nacho cheese had sex with a sweaty shoe. Still, I spray the glass housing all the fancy bowling balls for sale, and chase the dripping, foamy cleaner with my yellow rag.

"Way to use that elbow grease, sweetheart," a man passing by gruffs, shooting me a pirate smile over his shoulder. I smile back, doing a double take as I notice the patch on his leather jacket. *Broken Wheel*. He drifts toward the bathroom in the back of the joint and disappears.

I turn the name over in my mind a few times as I wipe through the aged handprints marring the glass. *Broken Wheel*. I don't know why that name tingles along my skin, pricks at my awareness, and causes my belly to tighten a little. It's like I should know the name, like it should have some profound meaning. Instead, I can't remember why or how I know it, or if I even do at all.

Raucous laughter roars from the pool hall adjoined to the bowling alley, and I twist my gaze to find *many* leather jackets, all bearing the same patch. *Broken Wheel*. My heart hums with familiarity, but still, my brain can't quite place it.

I'm about to refocus my energy on my titillating task at hand when two green eyes cause my breath to seize. My mouth falls open but words abandon me. Darkness pinches in, heat spreading like wildfire behind my eyes.

I fight the urge to touch the spot on my cheek, the beauty mark which he claimed defined me. I didn't fully appreciate it as a child, but it was beautiful and sweet—a very kind thing to say to a neglected, lonely girl.

Brilliant and all consuming, his glossy emerald eyes rake over me as I get to my feet. With those eyes on me, my skin goes ablaze as my mind runs wild like an unbridled horse greeting the morning sun. My fingers splay over the counter as I clutch it, blinking the moisture from my eyes as I stare right back at him.

Him. I can't believe it's him.

I never thought I'd see him again.

But there he is. The only father figure we ever had, if only for a measly three years. The only man I've ever loved, even if I was just a child.

Callan.



... THIRTEEN YEARS AGO

Age 4

I don't know if I want to meet him—my mom's new boyfriend. I have to because that's how it works, Mom says. She tells me what I do and I do it.

The last boyfriend that came to our house touched all of my favorite things, and it made my stomach hurt. He ran his dirty fingers over my favorite blanket on the couch, he put his big gross boots up on the table and left chunks of grass all over my drawings. He ate my snacks and he made my mom cry.

“Put the headband on, I don't want to ask again,” Mom glares at me in the mirror as she slides pink velcro rollers from her hair. “And be on your best behavior. Callan is a nice guy, Lexi. The kind you want to keep.” She plunges her lanky fingers through her rippling waves, made evermore buoyant from the rollers. “I make women jealous when I'm out with

him, too,” she almost whispers, smiling at her reflection as she floods the space with hairspray, shaking out her curls.

“Okay,” I say because I don’t know what else to say but if I stay quiet, she’ll get mad.

My little brother stumbles into the doorway, his hands shiny from slobber. He learned to walk two months ago and he’s so much fun now. I liked snuggling him but I like to play with him just as much. And we still snuggle, too.

Mom glances down at him just as she plucks her favorite lipstick from her bloated makeup bag. “Oh, Benny,” she sighs, inching closer to her reflection, rolling her lipstick up. “Go with your sister. She’s gonna get you ready.”

She shouts at me as I chase him down the hall, making him giggle when I wiggle my fingers in a ticklish threat.

“Are you even listening, Lexi?” her question is sharp and heavy, stealing our fun.

“Yes, Mom,” I shout back as I pull open a drawer in Benny’s room, searching for his brown trousers. It doesn’t take me too long to get him dressed; he’s always a good little listener for me. I use my fingers to smooth his hair down and follow after him as he races out to the living room. The front door opens and by the time Benny and me make it around the corner, Mom and her new boyfriend are in the middle of the living room. Mom has her hands on his chest, pushing him back toward the couch, biting his bottom lip.

He looks happy, smiling and all. But he glances up and his eyes get stuck on me. He lifts hands covered in black ink and takes Mom’s wrists, gently nudging her hands down. He walks toward us, on purpose, and smiles. A real smile. I can tell. It makes my tummy twitch and flutter the way it does when I’m really happy.

He drops to a knee, to be short like us. I like that.

“You must be Lexi,” he says, outstretching his hand. I slip mine into his, and I feel like a princess. His is so big and I like all the black flowers and pretty women on his skin. He doesn’t have hair like a prince, though. Instead of short and fluffy his

is long and dark, a little tangled on his shoulders. I like it. I have a yellow hairbrush with a rainbow on the back and I've only used it on my hair. Benny's hair is too short.

I nod my head as Mom reaches out to pinch my cheek. "Yes, and she normally won't shut up, not sure what's got her tongue now."

"Hi," I finally say, confused why I couldn't say it just a second ago. My heart is beating really fast as I blink at him. He's pretty, if boys can be pretty? He looks kinda mean, too, but my toes don't curl in my shoes the way they did around Mom's last boyfriend. My veins aren't tickly, either. "I want to brush your hair with my rainbow brush," I tell him.

Mom slaps a hand over her mouth, her nails freshly painted cherry red. I held Benny at the salon as she got them done. "His hair—"

The man silences her with a single look over his shoulder, but when his bright green gaze comes back to mine, he smiles again. His eyes are as pretty as his smile, and my chest feels tingly looking at them. "I'd like for you to brush my hair." He looks at my brother just then, smiling at him, too. He prods Benny's tummy with a long finger, and I watch the roses flex around his knuckle. His tattoos are pretty. "Hi Benny."

"He don't talk yet," Mom says, bending at the waist, kissing Benny's head.

"He's one," I tell her, and I know she knows because his birthday was just last week, and she told me one year olds don't need parties.

"Most guys your age don't talk, do they Benny?" He pushes Benny's hair off his forehead. I like how gentle he is. Mom's not that gentle.

"I'm Callan," he says, "your mom's friend."

"Boyfriend," I correct. My face stings as he peers at me, a grin slowly curving his lips.

He nods. "It was nice to meet you both." His leather jacket makes a soft whooshing sound as he stands.

I want to talk to Callan. I want him to stay. I want to show him my room and get Benny's blocks out and show him how many Benny can stack. I want to hold his hand and show him our tomatoes growing out back.

But Auntie comes through the door, and Mom gives her a hug and tells her where she and Callan are going, then they leave and Benny and I are left with Auntie and cartoons.

"We met Mom's new boyfriend," I tell Auntie after she puts Benny to bed a little while later.

"I bet you'll be seeing a lot of him," she sighs, sinking into the couch with a silver can in her hand. She flips the channel to a grown up show, one with bad words. They usually bug me, but after she said what she just said, they don't.

I'll get to see Callan a lot—*maybe forever*—and that makes me happy.

three

...



the happiest and saddest part of my heart, the place where our memories exist.

CALLAN

I can almost hear her bare feet against the linoleum, coming down the hall, golden hair in a chaotic tangle, sleep still heavy in her eyes, sheets still imprinted on her soft cheek. The smell of strawberry jam and cheap coffee roars through my senses as I stare at her.

The past rises from the ashes, engulfing me in potent pain. The urge to stomp over there and collect her in my arms then drown her in apologies overwhelms me. I'd give her sorries that I'm not sure I even owe but am still desperate to give. It's been so long since I've seen her.

She's a woman now.

Grown up.

I drink her in another moment, searing pain tearing through my chest at just how grown up she really is. Grown up... *and gorgeous*. I wonder if she's still the sweetest, most optimistic little thing.

She was when I knew her.

Fuck. My world spins all around me, a hurricane of self-loathing, guilt and happiness overwhelming me.

It's been so fucking long since I've seen either of them. I thought it would be forever, but God showed me mercy. He brought them back. I wonder how Benny is doing, but right now, I can only stare at her and *long*. Long for conversation, for forgiveness, for... fuck, for a moment of her time, I guess.

Grabbing at the back of my neck, I stare at her as my brothers shoot pool, cues pushing balls across the felt and humorous shit talk creating a comfortable ambiance all around

me. Yet, with my eyes on her, my breathing intensifies, and the calm around me dissipates, leaving me with nothing but a sea of memories and a chaotic heartbeat. Standing there, boots planted to the floor, chest heaving, my eyes burning.

She pushes a piece of hair into her ponytail, and my eyes drop to the beauty mark resting high on her cheek. Pain, love, regret—it all swarms together making my chest clench and my guts roil. With my eyes on her, I take another pull from my Stella.

Marshall sidles up next to me, clapping a hand down over my shoulder, giving it a squeeze. “Who we starin’ at?” he asks, sliding the bottle from my hand, lowering it to the cocktail table nearby. “Little early for a brew, no?”

I can’t bring myself to look away. Part of me is afraid that if I do, it will all be a dream. That Lexi Fisher will go back to being a little girl who lives only in the happiest and saddest part of my heart, the place where our memories exist.

“Remember Kelly Fisher?” I ask, her name a distant memory on my lips.

Mars scrubs a hand over his beard, a thoughtful noise bouncing around his chest. “Yeah. The one with the kids you loved,” he remarks thoughtfully. I swallow hard, trying not to be affected by the all consuming truth of his simple statement.

I did love those kids. So hard. They were why I stayed with Kelly for so long. Six months into our “relationship” I’d all but figured out she was a junkie thief on her way to demise. But I couldn’t leave her, because I knew in my heart I was the only solid adult in those kids’ lives.

While Mars and his husband have two daughters now, ten years ago he was a single guy just like me. Yet when I’d told him all about Kelly and the road I saw her going down, he supported me when I said I wanted to marry her. He stood by me when I made the choice to give my life to make sure those kids wouldn’t suffer. The other guys in the MC didn’t get it. They told me to call CPS, to report her anonymously. But I couldn’t do that and risk them being separated.

So I planned to marry her. To adopt those kids as soon as I could. If anything happened to Kelly, *I would be their lifeline. I was ready to be their life.*

I never wanted to be a dad, I never wanted kids or a family. I don't think I want that now, even. But all those years ago, I don't know. I scratch my head as I stare at her, her focus back on cleaning the glass bowling ball case. I don't know what it was about those two kids.

All I know is, outside my Gram, those kids were the first time I ever really loved.

I nod. "That's one of her kids." I swallow hard, surprised to find emotion heavily tangled up in my vocal cords. I clear my throat, ignoring the scorch behind my eyes. Mars pats me on the back.

"How long has it been?"

Lexi stands, now cleaning the top of the case, the apples of her cheeks stained with pink. She knows I'm watching her and I can't stop. I can't take my eyes off of her. "Ten years."

As the facts leave me, I'm hit with a gnarly flashback, left to just stare at her as memories drive through me, staking me to that spot.



...TEN YEARS AGO

Age 26

I came over here yesterday and found the door unlocked, the kids alone, Benny in a dirty diaper, the entire house a goddamn pigsty.

It's why I'm proposing today. I'll take the kids to my place now and come back to explain to Kelly that marrying me affords her kids a safe home, security, health insurance and more. And once the kids are here, safe in my house where the fridge is always full, doors get locked, heat and AC works, everyone has a room and their own bed—it really won't matter what Kelly does. And I can get back to work knowing trusted help will be at my place watching them. And that's what I'm going to offer her today when I slide a ring on her finger.

This plan is the only thing I've been able to focus on for the last six months.

I had an addition put on my house. It was a two bedroom one bathroom, but once I realized what I needed to do, Mars pulled some strings and had an entire crew at my place for a month. When they were done, I had an additional whole bedroom and bathroom.

Last week, I got Benny and Lexi each a full sized bed and decorated their rooms. The pantry and fridge is stocked with their favorite things. A swingset is waiting in my backyard. I have a toddler car seat. I'm ready.

I swing my leg over the saddle and lower my helmet to the seat. Pulling my hair into a pony—for Lexi—I trod up the drive, taking note of all the weeds and trash. That won't happen at my house.

When they're with me, they'll want to have friends over one day because they won't be ashamed of where they live.

I finger the box through my denim, using my other hand to knock on the door. After a minute, I try the knob and unsurprisingly find it open. Thank God I'm doing this now.

I push the door open, and though everything is exactly how it was yesterday when I left, darkness washes over me. Foreboding burns through my veins and my stomach freefalls when I look down and don't see the usual pile of shoes next to the door. I glance around the space and without even walking in, I swear to God, *I know*. The loss wracks me.

“Kelly,” I try, my voice wobbly with what I’m afraid is true. “Lexi? Benny?”

My boot crunches on a few Cheerios as I step inside, closing the door behind me. Treading through the hall, I pop my head into the kids’ room then into Kelly’s room. Vacant.

Hoping I’m wrong but unable to ignore the pinching in my nerves, I make my way to the kitchen where there is a receipt from Walmart on the table. Over the itemized list and corresponding prices is a note written in pink crayon.

Job opportunity I couldn’t miss. Sorry. -Kelly

I sink into a kitchen table chair, the same one Lexi sat in yesterday afternoon while I was here cleaning up. I never suspected Kelly would leave until I opened the door today. Fishing the box from my pocket, I set it on the table, the fancy blue velvet laughing back at me.

I glare at that blue box while the frustration and sadness hemorrhages from me in uncontrollable, cantankerous waves. My fists come down on the table top, sending a small plastic shaker of salt to the floor, rolling under the fridge. I can’t hear my slams, my roars of pain, my howls of agony. All I can hear while I lose control are the words I laid down between us yesterday.

She’s not going to move, okay? I promise.

The table is nothing but particle board and broken legs at my feet when I’m coming to, the fog of my pain finally lifting. Chest heaving, sweat raining down my temples, I take my forehead in my hands and stare at the wake of my destruction.

She left. She took them.

On the day I was supposed to save them.

I waited too long. I failed those kids.

But I will try to find them. I’ll use every dollar to my name, all the resources at my disposal, and I will find those kids.

If it’s the last thing I do.

four

...



we're only strangers now.

LEXI

I can't stop glancing into the pool hall, envisioning him all over again. He's been gone for hours and yet he's all I can think about.

I'm certain it was him. I'd never forget his face. How could I? He was the first man I ever loved, and even though it wasn't romantic love, still, you never forget your first love. He brought so much happiness and kindness with him when he came over. So much hope and care. I'd never felt that before.

As I wad up my apron and shove it under the counter, I debate whether or not I should share today's discovery with Benny. It was different for him, though, because he has and will always have me. And he was very young when Callan was in our lives. A toddler still. He doesn't remember him much and because of that, doesn't quite understand just how good Callan really was.

How much we could have had if he wouldn't have abandoned us. Mom said he broke up with her and said he never wanted to see her again, and that's why she moved us. Because the heartbreak was too real. And then she got a new job and never looked back.

I've had one eye in the proverbial rear view since then, though.

Because like I said, you never forget your first.

The walk back to our apartment goes by faster than usual because my brain is running. By the time I'm climbing the stairs to our third floor unit, I've decided telling Benny makes no sense. Like I said, he doesn't remember Callan well, but he does know how much Callan meant to me. Over the years, I've filled him in on all the things he was too young to understand at the time, because now we're teammates and we don't keep secrets.

Ironic, I realize.

As I'm throwing my keys across the counter and shimmying out of my flannel coat, I have myself convinced it's not a secret or a big deal because I didn't even talk to him. He didn't talk to me. There was no big reunion and even if there was, that's meaningless now. I'm an adult; he left us years ago.

I'm someone he doesn't know anymore, and he is the same. We're only strangers now, and it doesn't matter.

"How was work?" Benny asks, peering at me from his spot at the kitchen table. I slip my shoes off and pull my ponytail free, using my fingertips to massage my tired scalp.

"A wonderful, enriching experience," I deadpan as I unpin my LEXIE name tag from my The Alley polo. I did point out that my name was spelled incorrectly and was met with a shrug. "I got you all registered for school though. So that's good."

"Did you register for your test?" Benny asks, an old guitar spread between his working hands. Benny has always loved music but instruments are expensive. When I was fourteen and Benny was eleven, we started going to the church near our house every Sunday. We made a deal with the youth pastor there; if we mowed the lawns and cleaned the Sunday school bathrooms, he'd let us use their music room for two full hours.

I've never been musical, but I always loved watching Benny play. Guitar was and is always his first choice, but back then, he didn't know how to play. There was a guide on the piano, and he was able to teach himself by following color-coded keys along with color-coded music notes. Now at age thirteen, he's been practicing more and even found an old guitar in the apartment dumpster the day we moved in.

He's been trying to restring it since.

I nod, reaching into the fridge for a bottle of water. "I did."

He may only be thirteen, but at age eleven, Benny hit his growth spurt and he now dwarfs my five feet and six inches with his six foot frame. Hair peppers his top lip and his frame

is making the strange but natural transition from boy to man. His hands and feet are so large now, too. In movies parents always tear up when they look at their grown children and see their babies all grown. I relate to that. Benny is my baby, though we only have a few years between us.

I watch those big hands fiddle with the guitar string before they collapse against the dingy wooden body of the instrument, resting there as he sighs. “I got the prep cards today. Ready to practice?”

I take a drink of my water and eye the contents of the fridge, my stomach burning with hunger. “Let’s eat first, then I’m down.” I move from the fridge to the cabinet, digging around the contents until I find a box of mac’n’cheese. I shake it and he nods, getting to his feet to help.

My whole life Benny has always been generous and quick to give help. Empathy, love and kinship always kept us woven tightly together, knowing not to turn on one another. And he never made it hard on me. Most people grow up bickering and hating their brother, but my brother is my best friend. My only friend.

“How’s the restringing going?” I ask as I hand Benny a pot to fill with water. I pull out a tub of margarine, *the butter of coupon clippers*.

He lets out a sigh and I laugh in return. “That good, huh?”

A shrug rolls through him. “It would be a million times easier if I just... knew someone who could play. Who could teach me. I’m not a DIY learner.”

After getting the milk from the fridge, I measure out enough for two boxes and slip it back in. The electricity bill wavers on the front as the magnet threatens to give up. “I know. Me either. But the truth is, you’ll become one. Because you’ll teach yourself in no time.” I believe that.

We talk about our days, and only once does Benny mention the fact that Mom hasn’t been home since he has. We don’t expect her back anytime soon despite the fact she never

told us she was leaving. I'm only grateful we're old enough to take care of ourselves now.

We enjoy our cheap mac'n'cheese and spend the next two hours sitting across from each other on the couch while he quizzes me with the GED flashcards he checked out at the library.

Benny turns his focus back on the guitar and I decide to take a shower and get to bed. We share a room, me and Benny, because we can never afford an apartment with more than two bedrooms. And even though Mom isn't home, I don't make the mistake of ever assuming she won't be.

Woke up to her having sex next to me while high as a kite once when I was Benny's age. I'd snuck into the bed in the middle of the night but at some point she came home from her three-day date and apparently didn't notice me in there.

That's where my assumption that she was high comes in.

Either way, I slip into bed, quietly and guiltily hoping that Benny spends a bit more time on his guitar before coming to bed.

Turning to my side, I face the wall and analyze the grooves of dried paint as I imagine him again. Handsome. Ten years kissed his features with flames and desire, leaving him mysteriously handsome and ruggedly intriguing.

The man who I loved so much. Who nicknamed my beauty mark and made Benny and me promises.

I reach down between my legs but stop myself, willing his handsome face to leave my mind. Then I make excuses for the deplorable, depraved thing I wanted to do.

I'm tired.

This move was really stressful.

My new job sucks.

Mom is currently gone and I never know when she'll be back.

And as I count to one hundred and force my tired eyes closed, I punish myself in the privacy of my aching head.

He broke my heart. I hate him for that.

But what I hate even more are the millions of butterflies soaring through me at the memory of his face at The Alley today.

five

...



i wanted to sulk and stew alone.

CALLAN

The idea of her hating me flashes bright and violent in my periphery. I can't stomach the thought.

But I understand it.

Who the fuck knows what Kelly told them all those years ago. Then again, Benny was so young. Hell, my morning girl was just that. *A girl*. No matter what Kelly told her, she was just a child, unable to understand anything beyond blinding pain from abandonment.

I promised her I'd stay with them.

She has every fucking right to hate me.

The coffee brews in slow, calculated drips. With my elbows pressing deep into my jeans, I watch it. I watch it and torture myself with the image of her at The Alley the other day.

She's so grown up. Of course, my ass got older, too, so *of course she aged*. I knew if I ever saw her again that she'd no longer be that innocent girl who loved to get up before the sun and could've eaten pancakes for every meal. I fully understand that the young girl who ran to me when she needed help is all grown up. That pink-cheeked child who looked for me at night when darkness was too scary, who relied on me for anything—she's all grown up. Someone completely different now.

Those piercing blue eyes landing on me from across the room told me everything I needed to know—that sweet kid has been replaced by a woman, one who had to raise a little boy and worry about her reckless mother from far too young an age. When they left, my hope for those kids to have more in their lives stayed in that shitty blue house. I think it stayed with me, actually.

I fill my End of the Trail tumbler with scorching hot coffee, and delight in the way the first too-hot sip etches agony onto my tongue. *I want pain.* I want my physical state to match my internal, tortured state. I stare at the business logo etched into the stainless steel. I use this mug daily, but since knowing the Fishers are back in Oakcreek, everything reminds me of those kids.

I worked with my Broken Wheel boys at End of the Trail back when I was with Kelly. Repairing and rebuilding bikes was my life. And though Mars was a brother to me and still is, he was also the president of the club and owner of the shop. My appearances at work were spotty those years, what with always having to take off and nab Kelly from the drunk tank, scrape her off a sidewalk somewhere after getting beat up by a dealer, or to take care of the kids when she pulled one of her famous disappearing acts. Eventually, he told me I should become a silent partner rather than a mechanic. That way I could get paid and not have to physically be there.

That's family—that's the way a real family takes care of one another. Blood or not.

I sold a few of my bikes and did just what he said, taking a small stake of his hard earned company. But the day Kelly left, I needed to busy myself and turning back to the Trail, surrounded by my brothers—it was too much.

I wanted to sulk and stew alone.

So I bought the run down drug store building next to The Alley. And I remodeled it by hand, all by my goddamn self. Turned it into a music store, one where I also give under the radar lessons to kids. Named it Mecca.

See, when I was Lex and Benny's age, I didn't have anyone to keep me company. Eventually Gram scooped me up and saved me from my mom but still, I was lonely. I taught myself to play music, and the songs I played filled my little bedroom with more happiness than I realized would. Saved me, really.

I slip my patch on, followed by my boots, and once they're laced and my beanie is on, I'm out the door, hopping into my

pickup truck. I'm bringing home some amps to repair at my place this weekend, because idle hands and all. Need my truck for that.

The Alley comes into view first as I sail through the sleepy streets of East Oakcreek. Only when I'm in the parking lot can I see the sign for Mecca. I put my truck in park and have the key ready for the lock as I approach the glass door. The bell dances against the glass as I push the door open, the scent of decaying paper from the racks and racks of old vinyls overwhelms me with comfortable familiarity. The old wooden floor beneath the stained blue carpet squeaks as I move through my store, to the back office.

In the early days, I came here and listened to records while I mapped out every goddamn place I thought Kelly may be. Mecca was more of a search headquarters than a music store that first year it was open.

I called motels, hospitals, bars, schools, gas stations, and take-out diners. I emailed photos, had Mars' husband search the Oakcreek Sheriff's Department database, and I even flipped through the obituaries online for *months*.

Nothing.

I stuff my sack lunch in my desk drawer and take a seat, staring at the calendar splayed out before me. I've got a couple of appointments today, but school is starting this week, so I'll no doubt be hit with walk-ins looking to rent instruments for a semester.

Most kids will rent a violin or maybe even a guitar. Learn a few simple chords, play them a couple of times, and move on. Only one in every few groups of kids actually wants to play; wants to understand the mechanics and basics. Those are the kids that excite me, because they're passionate and eager to make music, the same way I was. And those are the kids I especially love teaching.

Stacking my boots on the desk, I sort through some bills, make a few phone calls and head out to the floor just in time to park my happy ass behind the desk and read my book. No

appointments until well after noon, so I have plenty of time to relax.

And I find myself reading the same damn passage in my Louis L'Armour book several times, knowing no more about the creek running down the frontier on the tenth pass.

Because those blue eyes from The Alley are all I can think about.



“And will I get to hold the guitar after this?” Amir asks, curling the top of his quiz sheet repeatedly as his knee bounces, big eyes lasered in on me.

I shimmy out of my patch and drape it over the chair before getting to my feet. Leaning over Amir, I scan his paper, noting that he answered most of the questions correctly.

With the tip of my finger, I tap the drawn guitar on the paper, pointing to a specific chord. “Gotta know your strings before we get into lessons.”

He nods, his head swiveling between me and his quiz. “I do!” He’s practically bouncing in his chair.

Tipping my head, I wait for his gaze to drop to my finger, where I’m pointing to the B string. “This isn’t a D string, Amir.”

His dark brows pull together, a small hand coming to clap his forehead. “Oh man,” he sighs, “you’re right. That’s B!” He points his expectant gaze my way, giddy in his chair as he adds, “See! I do know! I just... had a brain fart.”

“Too many brain beans then,” I reply, giving him a little wink. “No guitar playing until you got the strings memorized, then we’ll do a few basic chords.”

I slide a fresh paper to Amir, the guitar sketch unlabeled, his blank canvas. He blinks up at me. “Thanks for giving me another chance.”

I clap a hand on his shoulder, ready to tease him a little since Amir loves my light ribbing. He comes from a strict house where no one jokes or laughs—his words, not mine—so I make a big effort to offer him humor and lightheartedness while he’s here.

But before I can barrage him with a series of *you’ll be shinin’ my boots for a week for this second chance* type comment, the noisy little bell looped through twine tied around the front door starts singing and dinging.

I rise from my spot in the guitar section in the back of the store, and blink through the jumbled space until I see who entered. Approaching the register tucked deep into the corner of the store, the boy looks around the shop, not spotting me from behind the racks of Fender guitar straps and amp stands. He slaps the bell on the counter, making Amir suck in a surprised little breath, his head jerking up.

Amir first garners the boy’s attention, then his eyes meet mine.

I’d recognize that serene, nearly tranquil shade of blue anywhere. Because I’ve only known two people to have that shade.

“I’ll be right there,” I tell him, while Amir leaps up, heading to the front with me. I don’t stop him, though, because right now, my focus is on *him*.

Benny.

My breathing becomes slightly labored, a lazy panic and slow moving depression rendering me temporarily mute. I blink at the boy, his messy blonde hair and shining blue eyes so much different than I remember and yet, exactly the same. My chest gets all tight and achy at the sight of him, and I swear to fuck I wanna cry looking at him after all these years.

“Hi there, what can I do for you?” I say, trying not to let my eyes roam over his body because I realize a grown man

looking up and down a teen boy comes off highly creepy.

But it's not like that. I want to see if his clothes have holes, if he's malnourished under that baggy hoodie, if he's okay. Though I guess the outside isn't always an indicator of what's going on inside.

Benny laughs a little, awkward and clipped, scrubbing a hand up the back of his head as his eyes peruse the guitars in the case beneath us. "I don't know, I guess... Well," he says, sighing before taking in a deep breath. "My sister works next door," he says, and bumps sprout up on my spine and the back of my neck at the mention of Lexi. "I either sit around the bowling alley all afternoon or, I don't know, check things out." He eyes the guitars then me, then back to the guitars.

"You play?"

He shrugs. "No. But I *am* trying to restring a guitar I rescued from the trash a week ago. Then once I get that done..." He laughs a little. "I don't know. I don't have money for lessons and I don't have internet at my house so before you tell me to teach myself on YouTube, I can't."

I open my mouth to make him an offer—and not because he's Benny but because it's my normal offer—but he rattles on, and I don't get a word in.

"And anyway, I'm a hands-on learner, you know? I mean, I know how to drive because my sister taught me. Not because I watched a video on driving. I just... I can't learn that way."

Driving? He's only thirteen. "You aren't old enough to drive," I say, garnering a low "oooooh" from Amir next to me. I nudge him with my elbow and he giggles.

Benny blinks at me, confused. "How do you know?"

I tap the side of my head. "I'm smart."

Benny smiles.

He smiles at me and I swear to fuck I want to cry.

I want to jump over the counter, pull him into me and blubber like a crazy person at just the sight of his smile. Seeing him again is... not enough. "If you have time, take a

seat and I'll show you what to do after I get done with Rima here.”

Amir giggles, tossing his head back, his prepubescent laughter filling the space between us.

“Ooh,” I say, pretending to have made a mistake. “I’m sorry, that’s backward. Amir, I mean.”

“Rima,” Amir says, his laughter trailing off as he refocuses on the quiz. “You’re too funny, Nallac.”

Benny settles into a seat tucked in the corner of the shop, next to the violas and violins. He flips through a magazine and waits patiently for me and Amir to finish.

“Hey,” I call to him, my heart beating just a bit quicker than before. “What’s your name?”

He looks up, blonde hair shining in the stream of sun pouring in through the glass door. He smiles. “Ben.”

Right then I decide I’m going to teach Benny how to restring a guitar, I’m gonna teach him strings and chords, I’m gonna teach him everything.

And while I do, I’m going to get to know him again.



...NINE YEARS AGO

Age 27

“Anything else?” the woman asks, a mile long smile on her face. I wonder what it’s like to be so goddamn happy for no reason at all.

I shake my head, letting a grumbled “no” slip free. I take my pink box and walk out of the bakery, setting it cautiously on the passenger seat of my truck as I buckle up.

I forgot I had started a standing order at the bakery. When they called me last night, reminding me my small cake would be ready by nine today, I thanked them. Then I sat there, staring down at Gram in her hospital bed, watching her thin eyelids flutter in her drug-induced sleep.

This morning, I drive back to the hospital and slide the cake onto the counter at the nurse's station. I can't bring myself to get rid of it—when you grow up spending half of your childhood hungry, you never commit the cardinal sin of wasting food. So I gift what would have been Benny's fourth birthday cake to the hard working nurses at the Oakcreek Hospital.

Today was supposed to be swingsets, balloons, too much fruit punch, loud laughter and an abundance of love all for Benny. On his fourth birthday last year, I promised him something special for his fifth. I was going to surprise him with a patch of his own, the words on the back reading 'Broken Wheel MC Prospect'. Mars gave me the blessing and none of my brothers gave me shit about so fiercely loving kids that aren't mine.

That jacket is forever frozen in a happier place in time, when they were mine and we had plans.

Families sit in muted blue chairs along the hallway, the overhead tube light turning us all an eerie shade of yellow as it flickers between bright and brighter. Carts full of pills and wires are pushed back and forth, doors open, timers sound, people cough and laugh and chatter.

I just keep walking, immune to all the life around me, immune to all the distractions. The only focus I have right now is getting to Gram. She had a heart attack a week ago, and it's been touch and go since. She's too weak to undergo the anesthesia required for the surgery she needs, so we're opting to live her life out as comfortably as possible. Could be months, could be years. I'm hoping for *many years*.

I push Benny's uproarious laughter from my mind as I tread down the hall, my boots scuffing the old floor as I gnash

my teeth together. *Focus on Gram*, I tell myself, but no matter what, I can't.

It's his birthday. And all I want is to know that he's okay. Know that Kelly remembered.

Lexi would never forget, and that gives me a sliver of solace. No matter what Kelly is or isn't doing today, Lexi would never forget Benny's birthday.

I push into Gram's room, desperate for good news, for some indication that life isn't just loss and darkness, but when I do, I come face to face with a catastrophic scene.

A man is straddling Gram at the hips, his knees driving into her sides as he presses his stacked palms into her chest, massaging her heart. At the head of the bed, two nurses work feverishly to unhook wires, draping instruments over the bed until it's free to wheel.

One of them catches my eye as they begin pushing past me, toward the door. "She coded. We'll update you when we can. We're taking her to the OR."

I understand all those words and yet, I don't respond. I just trail after them, my eyes on Gram's gray skin color, the inky hue of her lips, and the way her head rolls around on her pillow as they depress her chest.

I thought that last year when I showed up at Kelly's and found them gone that nothing would top that moment as the worst of my life.

But five minutes later, the doctor came out and told me that Gram didn't survive. And on the way out of the hospital that night, I saw Benny's cake in the trash, uneaten.

six

...



it's not fair.

LEXI

It's now been six days since Mom has been home. With my phone hovering over the call button, I chew on my bottom lip, wondering what the right thing to do is.

Mom's been working the front desk at a doctor's office and last week, on the second day she hadn't come home, I made the foolish mistake of calling her work and asking for her. Silly me, wanting to make sure my mother hasn't been kidnapped and that she's only just performing her usual disappearing act.

She'd answered and told me to quit being a, and this is a direct quote, *selfish little baby*. She'd told me she felt a strong connection with her new boss—the doctor—and that he was training her after hours all week. “A big promotion is coming my way,” she'd said, though it was delivered as more of a threat than anything. “And this man is a doctor and he likes me. He sees potential in me, okay Lex? So grow up, make some mac'n'cheese for a few nights.”

I don't want to hear her spiel again. I just want to know that she... is okay, I guess. I lower the phone to the counter and rub my forehead with the heel of my palms, trying to knead out all the worry and stress. His face flashes through my mind, and I swear to god I smell his scent out of nowhere, cedar and leather, mixed with tobacco and sunshine. I pick up the phone and hit call, because as much of a flake my mother is, she never left the way he did.

For good.

And I have no business thinking of him at all.

“Mom?” I breathe as the call connects, her end of the line quiet. “Mom, it's Lex, are you there?”

Grunts, shuffling, bottles clanking together, followed by laughter then a click.

She hung up on me.

I stare at the blank phone screen far longer than I should, trying to calibrate the fact that after all these years, we're still here. I'm still hunting her down, taking care of the life she leaves in whatever shitty apartment she shoves us in, and worrying.

Shouldn't moms worry about their teens going out and partying? Getting hammered and making shitty choices? Shouldn't she be pacing, the inside of her cheek worn and raw from how nervously she chewed it all night? Shouldn't she be here and shouldn't I be the one out, hanging up on her?

It's not fair.

Those three words—ones I never allow myself to speak aloud—rumble around in my chest, flying up my throat, resting uncomfortably in my mouth. I slam my fists against the counter as I pinch my eyes shut, nostrils flaring as I attempt to steady my anger. The only thing worse than raw, uncut anger is when it's mixed with utter, soul-deep fatigue.

I'm tired of her. I'm tired of this life. I'm tired, period, and my deep-rooted malaise is twisting so comfortably with my rage, making me unstoppably angry at everything around me.

Because she's not here to yell at. She's not here to absorb my screams and cries. She's not here so my anger diffuses into everything around me.

The front door opens and as much as I love my brother, the sight of his face two hours after he was supposed to be home sends me over the edge.

“Where the fuck have you been?” My pulse throbs in my neck, my anger so intense I'm a bit woozy. But I can't stop. Without Mom's check, we only have enough for rent and utilities, which means I'll be stealing food from The Alley and Benny will be eating at school. It's not the first time, but goddamn it, when will it be the last?

“If I had a phone, I could have told you,” he remarks, letting his aged and tattered backpack slide to the floor with a thunk.

And we’re back to this. The cell phone.

Benny’s been asking for a cell phone for the last year. And now that he’s in high school, I’m not surprised we’re revisiting this conversation. We currently share a phone, but because I’m employed and deal with bill collectors, I have it most of the time. “You want the phone? You wanna try getting extensions from the power company, try to track down Mom and deal with all the losers who still have this number and call nearly daily looking for her?”

Benny grabs a bottle of water from the fridge and sinks into a kitchen chair, running his hand through his hair. “Sorry.”

I take a deep breath, because Benny is not the enemy. I close my eyes and search for calm when I ask, “Where were you, Ben?”

He twists the lid free from the bottle and takes a few, small sips before setting it down. “I’ve been at Mecca,” he says, and I’m instantly caught in an avalanche of guilt. Mecca is the music store next to The Alley. I vaguely remember living in Oakcreek those four years as a kid and Mecca being an old drug store, and when I got hired at the bowling alley, it made me happy to see something a lot cooler had moved in.

Ben has always loved music and I hate being angry at him for doing something he enjoys. But... we have a system. He goes to school and comes home, or he meets me at work. I can’t worry about two people running around. It’s too much.

“For two hours?” I question, my tone easing into less angry territory.

He takes a sip then cautions a glance at me. His blue eyes are more overcast than a cloudy sky, alerting me there’s more.

“What?” I ask, taking a seat at the table across from him, flipping the old cell phone over in my palm repeatedly, nervously.

“The guy that owns the place helped me string that guitar I found. And he’s been giving me some... lessons,” he says, watching me closely for a reaction. He knows how I feel—nobody does something for free. Everything has a price.

“I watch the register for an hour after our hour lesson, and he goes into his office to work. It’s a trade,” Benny adds, clearly aware of where my mind went.

I lick my lips, trying to temper my anger because Benny is thirteen and just trying to do something he enjoys. He deserves that. But still, I need to know where he is. And I need him to respect that.

“You’re too young, Ben! You can’t work anywhere for a long time! He can’t make you work!” I slap my palms to the table top, shoving to my feet. “You can’t make trades like that.”

His brows furrow as he shifts in his chair. “Why not? He gives me an hour of his time, I give him an hour of my time. And I’m home now. What’s the problem?”

I shake my head, disbelieving that he hasn’t thought this through. With my hands resting on my hips I lower my voice and try to make him see reason, though I can tell, he’s got on guitar blinders. “What if money goes missing from that shop? Hmm? Who is this man going to blame? Himself? Or the thirteen year old watching a cash register all alone? The kid, of course.”

“He’s not like that. He’s cool,” Benny tosses out, panic rising in his voice. I know we’re both circling the same point, and he’s hoping I don’t go for it. But I have to.

“You can’t do that, Benny. I’m sorry. I can’t risk him fucking with you and saying you stole or, God Ben, I don’t know. A grown man helping a young teen?” I wrinkle my nose, sickened at the thoughts in my head but real about the world around us. “What’s really in it for him?”

Benny’s anger erupts and I step back as he steps toward me, veins of strain pulsing at his temples as he shouts, “I’m not quitting! I want to learn how to play guitar! I won’t miss

school and I'm careful, okay? I'm doing this and you're not gonna fucking stop me!"

Before I can tell him how very fucking wrong he is, the bedroom door is slammed so hard the apartment walls shudder in response.

I didn't work today, but I will be at The Alley tomorrow. And I'm going in early and I'm heading to Mecca to talk to this pedophilic asshole and tell him to stay the fuck away from Benny.

He'll be angry. He'll be so angry. But if I can save some extra money—if Mom comes through with her next check—maybe I can find a high school senior who would tutor him on guitar for cheap. Maybe I can get him those lessons out in the daylight, in a safe way.

I'll try. Because I want Ben to have what he wants, but I can't lose him to something foolish and preventable.

I need Benny.

seven

• • •



my guilt is huge.

CALLAN

“You did good today, kid. I can tell you’ve been practicing,” I tell Amir as he slides a ukelele over the counter. “You sure you don’t wanna take it home to practice?” My eyes fall to his small hand still wrapped around the headstock, lingering on the way his thumb stays put on the tuning peg.

“I still haven’t told my Dad,” he says after a moment of consideration where he debated lying to me. I could see it in the way his eyes veered around the space a little first.

Six months ago when Amir started coming here, I told him to tell his parents. I explained to him that parents hate not knowing where their kids are. Amir told me that his parents aren’t home until very late as they’re both busy doctors in Oakcreek, and not only would they not know where he actually was, but they’d hate to learn where he was going. His parents believe in studies, and that doesn’t include art in any form. I promised him then that I wouldn’t force him to come clean but that at some point I’d hoped he would let them know.

I always figured I’d have an angry surgeon storming in here one day, but I’d cross that bridge when I got to it.

“Thank you for telling me the truth,” I say to him, passing him a single wink as I pull the ukulele back and slide it under the counter. The truth is, this instrument is his when he’s ready to take it home. He wanted to play guitar until he found the ukulele and fell in love, so for the last few weeks I’ve been teaching him how to play.

“I’m gonna tell him,” he says, tracing the crack in the old countertop with his pointer finger. “I just... I don’t want to quit.”

I sigh. “I know, Rima.” My use of his name backwards elicits a grin from him, and I give him another wink. “Now,

are you good here for an hour?" I toss my head behind my shoulder, toward the back door.

He perches on the stool at the counter, spine straight with pride. Beaming, he nods his head of dark hair. "All good!" Amir taps the tiny timer on the counter. "One hour. I'll come get you."

I slip my jacket on, pull my hair back with an elastic and head out back to the alley behind Mecca. With my sawhorse waiting, I collect my project from the sealed bin nearby and get started, enjoying the heady mix of sawdust and fresh fall air as I work.



The metallic whirring of the circular saw has all but numbed my inner ears. Just when I think I'm hearing something, Amir appears, leaping up and down in front of me, shoes swamped in sawdust. I power off my tool and drag the back of my wrist along my forehead, pushing the cool sweat away.

"What's up, buddy?" I lift my face to the sky. "It hasn't been an hour." There's no way. I'll admit I lose track of time when I'm out here but there's no way it's been an hour—I barely got the neck cut on my new project.

Amir's chest heaves. "There's a crazy lady here looking for you!" His eyes are wide and his face is devoid of color. My brows pinch as I lower the freshly cut guitar neck to the sawhorse.

"Crazy lady?" I run down a *very* short list of former girlfriends in my mind, aside from Kelly, and come up empty. My breakups are always expected and amicable, I don't make

enemies, and my brothers in the MC are the same way. It isn't my style to have an angry, crazy woman here.

He nods again, turning back to the door anxiously, like a masked murderer is after him or some shit. "Yeah, please Cal, come up front." He swallows, dropping his voice to a frightened whisper. "She's *really* mad."

"Alright." I concede, following him through the backdoor, inside the shop. We tread through, the floors' subtle creak sounding ominous under these suspicious circumstances. An angry woman here to bitch me out? I smooth my fingers through my hair, tugging at my patch on my vest over my flannel. I'm ready to face an angry parent or pissed off business owner arguing I shouldn't use powertools out back, but quite literally stop in my fuckin' tracks when I see who the angry woman is.

"You," topples out of my mouth, raspy and low.

I blink at Lexi, her long hair golden and shiny, curtaining her face, rolling down her chest in easy waves. She doesn't remind me of Kelly at all. Kelly was never this alive and beautiful, her passion was never fiery or passionate. The white color of Lexi's knuckles where she grips her purse at her shoulder tells me she's brimming with energy, overflowing with passionate anger. I'd rather have anger than listlessness anyway.

She pinches her gaze on me, taking the final steps to the counter. "You? What the fuck does that mean?"

Her anger is palpable, rolling off her in pungent, visceral waves. And beneath my belt, my body reacts to her energy. I shift on my feet and furrow my brow. "What's the problem?"

The slap of her palms against the counter top makes Amir jump a little. "You're exploiting children," she hisses through clenched teeth, nostrils flaring. I look down at the ends of her hair grazing the counter and for some fucked up reason, imagine her hair doing this very thing while my fingertips are sunken deep into her hips, me behind her, rutting inside of her tight, wet warmth.

I clear my throat, which is seemingly bearing the jumble I feel in my mind. *I wiped her nose and held her when she cried. I waited outside the bathroom at the ice cream shop and helped her win a stuffed panda at the fair. I held her in my arms when Kelly should have been there to do it, and I peppered kisses in her hair when she called me her best friend.* I blink at my angry morning girl, all grown up, more beautiful than ever. And I know it's fucking wrong, but all I can think about is having her beneath me, feeding her every hard inch of me.

"I give lessons to kids who want lessons. And I show them what it feels like to earn something, to feel proud of themselves," I spread the words out, slow and careful, making sure the point isn't lost. With Amir at my heels, it's important to me that she sees the truth clearly.

"Some of the kids I give lessons to don't have the means to otherwise pay for lessons. Some of them," I say, glancing quickly at the head of dark hair standing at my waist. "Don't have supportive parents. Some are just..." I shake my head, knowing she must understand. Because we're cut from the same cloth, me and Lexi. Benny, too. "Idle hands," I add. "So I let them earn their time with me. I let them use anything here at Mecca. And when they leave here, they leave with two skills. Music and a strong work ethic. And I've given them something more valuable than chords to memorize."

My slow but deliberate speech inspires Amir, who adds, "Yeah!" when I'm done. I glance down at my watch then over at him, my eyebrows shooting to my hairline.

"You gotta get outta here," I tell him, knowing exactly how long it takes him to get to the bus station two blocks down. "You're gonna miss the bus, and if you do, I'm not leaving for another three hours. You'll have to stay the whole time."

Amir turns, skipping back through the store to my office, where he stashes his backpack. I return my focus to Lexi, and am horrified to find her gaze resting on me, soft and pliant, her fire completely extinguished. She rolls her plump lips together, and I know my eyes linger on them a moment too long. And

when my eyes come back to hers, the horror inside me intensifies.

I'm hard.

And that's not even the worst part.

I'm hard and...

My chest is tight. Not a *my left arm hurts, call a doctor*, the *I'll love you forever* kind of chest tightness you should worry about. No, this kind of chest pain is more dangerous. It's the kind that shape-shifts. It starts electrifyingly beautiful, imprinting light and happiness on you, sending rolling, drunken waves of happiness through every cell. And in a split second, in a moment, morphs to sickness and pain.

History can reach into my chest and claw that happy tingle, that tight beating, that infusion of warmth. And history can destroy that feeling, leaving my heart to beat off-kilter, crooked and broken, working despite the agony and emptiness that fills in all around it.

Her lips part, and the world around me slows. My life depends on the words jumbled up on her tongue, waiting to spill free. The air between us thickens, everything we know but have yet to acknowledge roaring to life between us, silent, invisible, but the most powerful force.

"Fine," she says, both hands atop her shoulder, clutching her purse strap. She's beautiful. She always was but as a grown woman. Holy shit. I don't know how long it'll take me to accept that she's an adult, but fucking hell.

She turns, giving me a singular head dip to acknowledge her departure. As she goes, I let my eyes roam the most exquisite terrain, one I tread guiltily... but easily. I watch that tangle of blonde transform into ombres of orange as she walks out of the store, into the horizon. Her hips give a gentle sway, and when she's a hundred yards away, she peers back and I don't know if she can see me still or not but it doesn't matter. The final glimpse of her face disappearing into the glow makes my chest squeeze.

"Fuck," I breathe, reaching down to adjust my guilt.

And my guilt is huge.

eight

...



last thing they need is a ghost resurfacing.

CALLAN

“No, the pink tights are for the second dance at recital and it’s too late to find the same pair if they snag,” Mars says into his phone, pinched to his shoulder as he stitches some glittery fucking unitard thing. He nods, listening as he runs the needle through the pale blue fabric, adorned with loud sequins along the sides. “Put her on,” he sighs. A beat passes and Mars’ voice slips into a private, soft tone. “I know, baby, just... put her on, okay?”

Heat prickles along my shoulders and down my spine, warmth finding my cheeks. I watch the President of the Broken Wheel motorcycle club sew a tiny dance costume as he argues with his daughter about not wearing the fancy dance tights to rehearsal. And I’m surprisingly burning up with envy. Absolutely on goddamn fire. With Lex and Ben back, I’m itching for domesticity with them.

The jacket around my core grows tight. I sift a finger beneath the collar of my flannel, searching for respite from the strangling heat. The pressure. The searing agony of *longing*.

I’ve had so many girlfriends. Some memorable, most not. I’ve had a handful of actual relationships, ones where we were working our way to more but lost our foothold on the journey. And in none of those relationships or acquaintances did I feel hollow without them. In fact, breaking up in the past has brought me great relief.

Yet when I think about the little girl I had only a few glorious years to help raise, and I imagine her living a life with *some fucking guy*? I stroke my hand through my hair as I watch Mars, pushing out an unsteady breath as the disgusting image of her and someone else hovers in my mind.

Mars ends the call and snips the thread, shoving his needle into his pin cushion. He finishes tying off the thread, folds the little outfit up and slips it into a bag. Shoving it under the counter, his focus shifts.

“Sorry about that.”

Gripping the back of my neck with one hand, I shake my head. “Dance emergencies are far more important than my bullshit,” I smile.

“But you got bullshit, do ya?” He winks, slipping his vest back on over his black hoodie. “Let’s hear it.”

I sink into a barstool and so does he, only the desk in the shop separating us. Out back, tools howl and men shout, a few guys from the club working on a repair. But they rarely mosey into the shop, so with a deep breath, I tell Marshall the truth.

“I love those kids, you know?” I’ve mentioned Kelly twice in the last week after not speaking her name in years. It’s safe to assume he knows exactly what kids I’m referring to.

“I know you did. You were gonna give your life to ‘em. That’s... that ain’t nothin’,” he sighs, stacking his boots on the desk.

“I still do, too, you know? I mean, I know they’re grown and I don’t know them but... it was years, man.”

Marshall’s nose ring shines as he flips on the light above the desk, fixing his gaze on me more clearly. My words feel more intense in the light. “Lexi came to the shop today. Yelled at me ‘bout giving lessons to Benny.” I wave a hand through my words, because they aren’t the point. Slowly, I force my eyes from my lap to his dark, intense gaze. My chest swells and the back of my throat constricts, but I tell him, even if it makes me look like a fucking sick motherfucker. “I want her. I want her so bad it’s painful.”

Mars arches a brow, studying me for a second before speaking. Finally, he asks, “The kid know who you are?”

I shake my head. “He doesn’t.”

“And her?” he questions.

I shake my head. “I’m almost certain she does but...” I sift a hand through my hair, letting the weight of the world rush out of me in a heavy sigh. “I don’t know for sure.”

He lets his feet slide off the desk, his boots hitting the floor with a thud. Mars levels his gaze on me while his phone rings. “The more you fight it, the more you need it,” Marshall says, his brows lifted. There’s some subtext he’s imparting, that much is clear, but I’m gonna refuse to acknowledge it. Because I have to fight it.

“Just answer your phone. You’re better suited to bike advice than life advice,” I tell him on a sigh as I get to my feet, my head heavy like a stack of tires.

He lifts his phone to his ear but speaks to me, wearing a smirk. “I’m married with two kids. That gives me the right to spout off, you know.”

“Yeah, yeah,” I wave him off over my shoulder and step outside. The sun melts over me as I tip my face to the sky.

I can’t change the past. I can’t rewind and do better, work harder to find Kelly, to get back to those kids.

But I can do the right thing now, and let them be. Last thing they need is a ghost resurfacing.

Being Kelly’s kids is tough enough.



...THIRTEEN YEARS AGO

Age 23

“You’re not jealous of Dr. Schneider, are you?” Kelly’s breath burns up my nose as she pins me to the chair, one of her

knees at each of my hips. I place my hand on her shoulder, guiding her back, giving us both space to breathe.

“I’m not jealous of your boss, Kelly,” I tell her, because the truth is, I couldn’t give a good goddamn what incredible things he claims as his list of accomplishments; none of it matters because at his core, *I know who he is*.

He’s a fucking dirt bag.

She dips her face against my neck, grazing her lips beneath my collar. Her perfume scorches my senses, and when she grinds her groin into mine, I slip my hands under her armpits and lift her off.

Standing, I level a gaze at her. I’m not even angry with her for the reasons she thinks. But it doesn’t matter what she thinks. Six months into this relationship with her and I know where it’s headed: nowhere.

Kelly is about Kelly, and only Kelly. And the things that keep her going? Booze. Drugs. Partying. All of the things she should avoid as a single mother of two young kids she dives into head first.

And this new job of hers, working as the receptionist in a medical office, I thought it was a step in the right direction. A family owned business, local, small. I’d hoped they’d maybe even offer to put her through some basic computer classes, shit like that.

Instead, good old Dr. Schneider is looking to get his dick wet. And with a prescription pad at his disposal, Kelly is putty in his fucking hands. It’s only taken him three months to figure it out.

I don’t give a shit if she sucks him off. But if he gets caught writing her prescriptions for Percocet that she doesn’t need, they’ll both go down. I don’t know how safe he’s being. How often he does this? Who knows he does it? How many people at his practice are aware of his behavior? All those unknowns make me nervous.

If something happens to Kelly, I care because that means something happens to those kids.

“If he gets caught, you’re fucked, Kel,” I tell her, trying to force reason into her, using my calmest, gentlest voice.

She drags her tongue the length of her top lip, eyes hazy as she blinks at me. “No one’s gonna tell.” She smiles smugly, and my stomach grows woozy. “He only does it for me.”

Right.

She huffs out irritation, folding her arms over her chest. “Did you show up to fuck me or lecture me, *Dad*.”

I shake my head. “I don’t have any condoms.” It’s a lie. I don’t go anywhere without a condom, because I’m not looking to be a goddamn daddy. But I don’t want inside Kelly. In fact, I wish she’d never come home tonight.

Kelly looks at her cell phone, which rests on the couch. It blinks and glows every few minutes, illuminating with every missed text or call. “Fuck me or leave, Cal. We used to fuck all the time and now you barely get hard for me.”

It’s not a lie. I was having fun with Kelly.

I was.

Then she brought me here and I met them, and it was like looking into a mirror of the past. I saw the way Lexi self-soothed, the way she knew to put herself to bed, knew to not ask questions. All of it was a sickening reminder of my childhood, before Gram, and I couldn’t walk away.

I’ve been giving Kelly the minimum. Just enough to keep her interested in me, so I can stay around for them. Though as she glares at her phone, her foot tapping against the carpet, I know I’ve got to do more if I’m gonna stay around.

I reach out and drape my hand on her hip, letting my thumb stroke her bare skin. “You got a condom?”

Her pout morphs into a smile. “Plenty.”

Never thought of sex as a duty until now. But I’ll do what it takes to be their constant. To be the constant I never had.

nine

...



i hate promises.

LEXI

A yawn bubbles up my chest, but I keep it trapped in my throat. I've learned that yawns and first pees after boozing are one in the same; once you break the seal, you'll never be able to quit.

I reread the passage in the text yet again.

When prices rise, supply increases. When prices fall, supply decreases.

When prices increase, demand falls.

When prices fall, demand increases.

Which of the following is true?

I can't even make it to the four multiple choice answers waiting for me because what did I just read?

I chew the inside of my mouth, finding the skin worn and sensitive from so much thoughtful chewing. I look across the table at Benny, who has his nose tucked into a copy of *Unbroken*. Reaching out, I tap the cover of the well-loved library book.

"How is it?"

He finishes his sentence and looks up at me, shrugging. His shoulders are set so far apart now, his frame so large. I can't believe my little Benny is a teenager. "Cool. It's about this Olympic runner that gets drafted as an airman in WWII. He gets shot down over the ocean and—" a small smirk curls his lips. "Well, I'll let you know. I haven't finished yet."

I smile. "Sounds interesting."

He nods and when his focus returns to the book, I know I should let him read, but misery and company, you know.

In a split second, I decide to revisit and revise my prior choice to not tell Benny. I clear my throat. “The guy who is giving you guitar lessons...” I start, dipping a toe into the water.

Benny sighs, lowering the book to the table, keeping the pages spread. “Leave the guy alone, okay Lex?”

I shake my head quickly. As much as I think what “the guy” is doing is definitely going to be a problem for him in the future, I do get it. It doesn’t surprise me that Callan is kind and helpful.

He was when I knew him.

“No,” I say, “not that. I get what he’s doing. And if you want to keep getting lessons from him then... I’m okay with that.”

“Really?” Benny’s eyes are full of surprise. Clearly he thought he’d have to fight me the entire time he got those lessons. And the truth is, if it weren’t Callan, he probably would. And it should be the other way around. It should be *because* it’s Callan, the man who fucking left us, I should say no.

But in my bones, I trust Callan.

In my soul, I miss Callan.

“I just wanted to ask you if he looks... *familiar*. Or if...” I sift my fingers through my hair, studying the ends as casually as possible. “If he reminds you of anyone?”

Benny slips a grocery store receipt between the pages of his library book and closes it, resting his hands on the table. “What do you mean?” Genuine confusion is etched across his forehead.

He was so young. I don’t know if he remembers Callan, but he certainly will remember the name. I talked about Callan to Benny for years.

I do remember things from when I was his age, but they’re more of the scary nature. Waking up home alone at all hours of the morning, scary noises, having no one respond when I cried

out for help. I tried my hardest as a young girl not to let Benny have those memories, and as I take in his confusion, I can see I succeeded.

“You were very young,” I start, but that’s as far as my sentence travels. Because Benny’s eyes narrow, poking me for answers.

“Wait,” he starts, his voice airy and light, confusion stretching each letter out.

“It’s Callan, Benny. Mom’s boyfriend when we were kids.” The only one to stay. The only consistent man in our lives. The only man I’ve ever cared about and called out to. “The guy who left us,” I remind him, because as much as I loved Callan and baby Benny did too, it’s important not to romanticize the past because I’m lonely and tired. He indeed left us, or didn’t come looking for us when Mom took us. Either way, he abandoned two children who idolized him. “Kelly said he was a drug user and that we just don’t remember him that way because we were kids,” I tell my younger brother, who has pushed back from the table a little, one knee bouncing as he internalizes the news.

“Do you remember him that way?” he finally asks.

I shake my head, staring at the GED practice test spread across the table. “I mean, I know I was four when we met but when we moved... I was seven.” I can’t do anything but stare at the excerpt of the US Constitution on the paper and tell my brother the truth. “I don’t know for sure but I don’t remember him being like anyone else Mom brought home,” I admit. “He did not seem like a drug user.”

More silence as we both process, then Benny says, “I’m glad it’s him. I mean, all you’ve been saying forever is how much he loved us and how much better our lives were those few years when he was in it.” His broad shoulders lift. “I want to get to know him.”

“You—” I compose my thoughts for a split second. “If what Mom said about him is true, if he left us and was a drug user —”

Benny shakes his head. “I don’t care who he was. If he left us—and that’s an *if* because I don’t believe a word Mom says, then, I choose to believe he had a really good reason. Because the guy I’ve been hanging out with is a good guy.” My brother swallows hard, and I hate the way his eyes are wet. “I love you, Lexi, and you do so much for me. You’ve *done* so much for me. But... I forgive him if he did those things. Because I need to connect with someone else. Being around him makes me feel less empty.”

I hate that my darling brother feels that way, but moreso, I hate that I understand. That he and I both have grown up with a deeply dug well in each of us. Both unable to fill the gaping void, unable to ease the painful clenching of loneliness.

Beneath the surface of the table, I let my hand fall to his knee, and stroke my thumb against him. “That’s good,” I reply, finding my voice threadbare. “I want you to feel less empty.” My words are merely a whisper as I struggle against the overwhelming urge to crumble. To let my own tears free, to unburden the weight of guilt in my chest and let it all go. “I know what you mean, Benny, and I’m glad you’re happy when you’re with him. And I’m proud of you.”

He snuffles, arching a brow as I bring my hand back to my lap. “Why are you proud?”

With my hands clutching my drink, I stare into the rippling surface. “For forgiving him. For believing in forgiveness.”

Benny’s voice wobbles a little. “You don’t believe in it? Forgiveness?”

I meet his eyes, and the concern resting in them makes my heart squeeze. “I don’t know. Isn’t forgiveness just an apology with a promise to change?”

My brother nods.

“Well that’s the problem. I hate promises.”

Benny’s chair scrapes the linoleum as he moves closer to me. His arm is heavy as he drapes it along my back. He’s sweaty but the scent is comforting. Everything Benny is comforting. “Some people keep their promises though, Lex.

We just haven't met them yet. But we will. One day, we'll both meet people who honor and follow through with their words. And then forgiveness makes sense. A second chance at being happy always makes sense."

I twist my neck to look up at my little brother, who towers over me easily. "How are you younger but bigger and wiser?"

He grins. "Nacho cheese fumes at the bowling alley are killing your brain cells."

I snort, thankful that he can break the tense situation with some humor. Even if it is at my expense. I lift a strand of hair from my shoulder and bring it under my nose. "Yep," I say after a deep inhale. "Cheese fumes."

Benny slides his chair back to his side, and lifts his book.

"So you're going to keep up with the... lessons?" I question, not entirely sure of what Callan and Benny do together. "He teaches you guitar?"

He nods, sifting his long fingers through his tousled, messy hair. "Yeah, first we restrung the guitar I found. Then he taught me some basic chords, after I learned the strings."

I take a sip of my drink, my palms suddenly clammy, ruddy cheeks burning. "That's great. I hope you get to know him." When I look up, I smile, because I am happy for Benny to have Callan. I understand he needs that.

I am older, though.

And the seven year old girl inside me that fell in love so hard for her mom's boyfriend? She's alive in me, too. And her heart is so deeply fractured it may never be repaired.

I want to spend time with Callan, too. I want to forgive him, too.

But I'm terrified.

"So wait," Benny says slowly, his blonde brows furrowed as he drags the tip of one finger along the grooves in the wooden table top. "Callan doesn't know it's us?"

I take another drink, but my throat remains dry. My mouth is sticky. “I don’t... I don’t know.”

I swear I see the moment his chest goes concave, when his breath rushes out of him and he pales. “He does know, doesn’t he? He knows it’s me and he didn’t say anything. He didn’t tell me.”

I remember the way he uttered *you* when I showed up at Mecca. I felt his eyes melt over my body, making me unbelievably, shamefully achy. Not only does he know who I am, but he feels the same devilish, sinful pull to me that I do to him. I can feel it between my thighs as I pulse and ache for him.

It’s not right.

I’m so mad at him.

He’s so incredibly handsome.

I miss his husky morning rasp. I miss being his morning girl. I wonder, does he still wake up early? Take his coffee black and read the news? I don’t know. It’s been years.

I’ll never understand how he was with my mom.

I love her but she’s a total train wreck.

“We never mentioned knowing each other,” I tell him, choosing my words carefully, his vulnerability pink and shredded, raw at the surface. I don’t want to hurt him, but I don’t want to imply something untrue. “But I believe he knew who I was, therefore, he would know who you are, too.” I lick my lips, heart pulsing madly in my temples. “I saw him shooting pool at The Alley a few weeks ago. I, um, I knew it was him.”

Benny blinks at me, eyes wet, nostrils flaring. “You should have told me.”

I nod. “I know. And I’m sorry. But honestly I just... I didn’t know if I’d ever even see him again and I didn’t... I don’t know. I didn’t want Mom to know.”

“Does she?” he asks, calmness slowly inching in.

I shake my head. “No. But... he still lives here, Ben. She’ll find out.”

He slowly nods before getting to his feet, leaving his chair pushed against the wall. He treads toward the bedroom, leaving his book spread on the table.

“Hey,” I call, stopping him briefly. “You okay?”

“Fine,” he says, and yet, I know nothing has been less true.

He’s known of Callan for a few weeks and already, he’s hurt. Sinking into the chair, I let out a sigh and blink up at the shitty popcorn ceiling.

Benny would have found out. Mom would’ve found out. Or hell, maybe Callan would’ve eventually outed himself. No matter what, he needed to know.

I had to tell him.

And yet now, I really wish I hadn’t.

ten

...



no matter what.

CALLAN

“Hmm,” Mars ponders, passing his stick from one hand to the other as he surveys the felt. On my barstool adjacent to the table, I lift my beer to my lips, hiding my grin. Marshall’s husband’s nephew is a prospect at Broken Wheel, and for a club like ours, initiation is far from Sons of Anarchy.

The club is progressive. We exist to better Oakcreek. We all grew up low income, struggled, fought, needed guidance. We assembled our club years back to be the good that we needed. Now we serve our town, bridging the gap between needs and wants for homeless and struggling teens. Our club does a lot for our town, and we wouldn’t have it any other way.

But that means initiation is less of the Cohen Brothers kind, and more of a *troll you til you break* kind.

“Now if I take the shot here,” Mars says, tapping his pool cue to the edge of the mahogany. “Nope,” he stops mid thought. “That won’t work.” His long dark hair is down, curtaining his face, presumably hiding his satisfied grin. Mars loves fucking with the prospects.

“Uh, Marshall,” Aaron starts, nervously shifting on his feet, his vest a little too big. He rolls his shoulders, sending the leather vest back into place over his flannel. “Dave has an activity for me at one, and I think I won’t make it if we... uh... play this... *slowly*.”

Mars arches a brow. “What’s Dave got you doing?”

Aaron launches into an entire story about tying red ribbons on the fence at the local grade school, and how Dave, Marshall’s husband and Oakcreek’s Sheriff, is supervising. He wants the entire fence done to surprise the kids when they get to school tomorrow.

But the story goes on and on and as I tune out of red ribbon week, I turn, casting a tempering glance at the counter across from the pool hall. Orange goop melts under a bright light and Lexi is there, her hand on top of the glass case full of melting nacho cheese, holding a tray under the spout. She turns, her long blonde hair loosely braided down her back, flyaways everywhere. A wide smile marks her face as she slides the tray of processed shit to the man at the counter. Her smile falters and my eyes fall to where his hand is on hers, over the edge of the tray.

I tell myself to stand there and watch how she handles it, watch how she takes care of herself. Because she can. She's always been able to take care of herself. And she will—she doesn't need me. And that's exactly what I need to see. That they don't need me to come back into their lives.

And that's exactly why I don't wait to see it.

I lower my beer bottle to the felt and storm through the space until I'm toe to toe with the handsy fuck at the counter.

Without so much as a word, he takes his nachos and heads back down to the last lane in the alley, meeting up with a pack of losers.

Finally, I caution a look at her. Her full lips are pressed together, showing me she's both unimpressed and moderately annoyed. She folds her arms over her chest, staring at me, and even though I don't so much as steal a glance at her perky tits all pushed up under that polo, my cock thickens. And guilt swarms me in response.

Jesus Christ I'm going to get hard whenever I see her then be wracked with guilt. I pull my hand down my face, letting out a weighty sigh.

"I know you know," she says quietly, surprising me with those words. I wondered if she recognized me. I wondered if she even... *remembered me*. Who knows how many other men Kelly brought in and out of their lives as they aged.

"I do." I don't want to lie to her. About anything. Even if it is hard to admit that I knew who she was and haven't had the

goddamn guts to bring it up.

My eyes fall to the tiny beauty mark on her cheek, the pigment that formed like a sun bursting with light and warmth. It's so small, so subtle, but so perfect for such a ray of life like her.

Magenta floods her cheeks when she realizes what I'm looking at.

"How long did you know it was us? Me?" she asks, her voice quiet, but not for lack of strength. Even the mention of knowing each other carries a bleak undertone.

"Since the moment I saw you," I tell her honestly. "The day I glanced over at you, weeks ago, standing in the same spot you're in now." I lift my hand to my chest, kneading the heavy knot in my sternum. "I felt it in my goddamn bones the moment I saw you."

Her chin wobbles but she stops it so quickly, I don't know what I saw.

I step closer, resting my hands atop the counter, her fingertip grazing my knuckle. It's a whisper of a touch, a brush, a simple fucking nothing.

But my blood roars to life, making my entire body flash hot, my pulse hammering in the meaty place between my thighs. Goddamn Callan. This is your morning girl. The sweet girl who needed guidance and love all those years back. Wanting to bury yourself between her thighs and pump your sac deep into her cunt is *not* how you should be feeling.

I lift my hand from the top of the counter, trying to escape the subtle touch and the roar of need it brought with it. Squeezing the back of my neck, I try to find the right words but there are none. There is no greeting card or set speech for wanting to better know a woman who you knew as a girl, who you helped raise as a child. There is nothing I can say that doesn't vibrate as perverted old man.

Even if I knew what to say, Lexi is quicker than me. She speaks first, and her broken confession nearly kills me.

"I'm so fucking mad at you."

I stare into her wide eyes, vivid pools of glistening sapphire, and search for something. Anything. A spec. A fleeting thought. Any sign that she holds more for me in her heart than pain and anguish.

“I know,” I reply, hating what she must think about me. Hating everything Kelly did to them that day she packed up and left. Hating what she did to *me*.

With her eyes still locked on mine, she pushes her hand across the counter, fingertips over the edge. I look down at them and on instinct, lift my hand to hers, bringing our fingers together in a short, singular squeeze.

I didn't find hope in her eyes, but I felt it in her touch.

I'm not letting them go this time.

No matter what.

eleven

...



i can't want him.

LEXI

“It’s not far. I’m fine walking.” I swallow hard and I try as hard as I can not to be blinded by the sight before me. Callan in dark jeans and black boots, his emerald and black flannel buttoned up to his throat, his Broken Wheel vest over the top. His hair, which looks exactly how I remember, is down, shading his face, partially hiding the thin layer of dark hair coating his jaw. There’s ink on his neck, slipping beneath his collar, and that’s new. I’d remember that. I remember every single tattoo on each of his fingers.

He is a dangerous sight; rough and rugged, but handsome and sexy. I know he’s *my* Callan, the man who changed Benny’s diapers and read bedtime stories. And part of me longs to still know him in that capacity, as a father figure, but the part of me that shaves her legs and plucks her eyebrows and clips wedding dresses from old magazines, that part of me wants bad things. Really bad, naughty things I shouldn’t want.

So merely looking at him, with traces of summer sun glowing at his back, is very dangerous.

Yet I’ve invited him to our apartment.

To talk.

“I’m sure you’re great at walking,” he deadpans, handing me the helmet. “But I’m riding. So you’re riding with me.”

I’m scared to ride with him. And it has nothing to do with the motorcycle. I make an excuse. “I don’t want you to give me your helmet. We both need helmets.”

His top lip twitches before he storms past me, using keys from his pocket to slip into the front doors of Mecca. A moment later, he returns with a helmet.

A small black one. With his chest practically in my nose, the smell of sunshine and motor oil making me drunk off him,

he slips the helmet down over my head, pulling the end of my braid over my shoulder. The hair tie rests against my nipple, and knowing he was an inch away from touching my breasts makes the tips pucker under my polo. “There,” he says softly, clipping the helmet under my chin.

I swallow hard, my heartbeat thudding in my eardrums. I watch his broad frame stretch across the bike as he saddles up, tugging his own helmet down over his messy hair. I’ve always loved his hair, and I’m pretty sure, even though I was just a kid at the time, that he loved the way I loved it.

“Come on,” he shouts over his shoulder, peering at me through the closed visor on his helmet. I swing my leg over the bike, slipping into place behind him. The curve of the saddle draws me close to his back, and I instinctively loop my arms around his waist.

There’s a moment, as the bike quietly idles and the horizon waits for us, that we just sit there. Together. Atop the bike. My arms keep our bodies together. My breath hitches as my heart flutters, my fingers digging into the rough leather of his vest. He turns, giving me his helmeted profile. “Ready?” he asks, neither of us acknowledging the current passing between us. Electrical, ethereal, hot, needy. He feels it. He has to. Because he keeps us steady atop the bike for another few seconds before pressing his boot to the pedal. “Let’s go, morning girl.” And before I can respond, we’re diving down the street toward my place, those two words sizzling inside me.

Morning girl.

If I wondered how much he remembers about those few years we had together, I just got my answer.

Everything.

He remembers *everything*.



His heavy footfalls up the stairs behind me have my heart racing.

Callan is behind me. Callan, the man I've missed and dreamt of and thought about for years, is behind me. He's coming into our apartment.

My hand teeters as I slide the key in the lock, pushing inside. Benny is at the table, school work spread out. Normally I make him hang at The Alley with me after school. I think we both feel better when we stick together, and that's something that I find hard to shake even though I'm an adult and Benny isn't far behind. This week, though, he's been skipping Mecca and heading straight home to study.

I hope what I'm about to do is a remedy for that.

"Hey," he greets, lifting his hand while he keeps his eyes on the math book open in front of him.

I step inside and behind me, Callan enters, closing the door behind us. Benny looks up, and the happiness that immediately washes over him makes my eyes sting.

"Callan," he says, saying his name aloud for the first time in years. It must affect Callan the way it does me, because he lets out a deep breath from behind me.

"Hey Benny."

A moment later, we're positioned around the table, each of us holding an off-brand can of diet soda. Benny remembers what I've told him, but most of his memories of Callan are fuzzy. And because having Callan in our shitty apartment and back in our lives does something to me I'm not ready to

address, I waste no time in getting to the one question that has been tattooed on my brain since that day.

“She said you were a drug user, that you left and then she packed us up and left, too,” I tell him, studying his emerald eyes carefully, looking for evidence of truth. “Is that what happened?”

Quickly and steadily, he answers. “No.”

“Did you leave her?” I ask, but I know the answer. The answer is evident in the abundance of crow’s feet cornering his eyes, in the way his nostrils flare and his words come fast and hot, like holding them on his tongue would burn him.

“Never.”

I swallow hard and try for a sip of my Cola Lite. The next question burns its way up my throat, acidic and febrile. “Why did you let her take us?” I’m eighteen years old, freshly, but that question makes me feel seven all over again. I blink past the moisture pooling in my eyes, because I don’t cry. Lexi Fisher does not show weakness. So many years and staying strong for myself, for Benny—I can’t break now.

But as my eyes idle on his, I know that if anyone can break me, it’s him.

“You two weren’t mine to keep. No matter how much I wanted to keep you both.” He shakes his head, his green eyes only leaving mine once to look over at Benny. To impart his answer to my little brother equally, so we both see his truth.

“Did you know where she took us?” I ask, because “did you even try looking for us” feels too childish, too emotional of a response. But I want to know. I’m dying to know. I’ve been dying to know for years why he didn’t find us. Why he couldn’t save us from her.

But he shakes his head, using the blunt tip of his thick finger to trace the wide mouth opening on the soda can. “I didn’t know and I searched everywhere. Called every school, hospital and shitty apartment complex within a hundred mile radius.” He sips the shitty soda and looks at Benny. “I had the Sheriff look for you guys, too. I swear, I looked. *I looked.*”

Then he shrugs out of his jacket and shoves the sleeves of his flannel and henley up. "I've never done drugs in my life," he says, urging us to take in his clean, unscarred arms. He redresses and waits.

I don't know what to say, so I watch my brother and Callan share a moment where Benny is processing and I think Callan is just... hoping. Hoping we believe him.

I do. Even if I shouldn't. I do.

"I got home from a run to Riverside. I went there for a couple of days with the Wheel," he says, mentioning the motorcycle club he's still a part of, judging by the emblem on his back. "And when I got back, I came straight to your place. I was nervous as hell leaving you both with Kelly but..." He lets out a sigh, shaking his head. He finishes his drink and levels his beautiful green eyes at me. "She was your mother. And you lived with her before me. I had to go, and I couldn't take you with me."

"You asked us to go?"

The sigh that leaves him enters me in the form of trepidation and cautious fear. "I didn't ask you guys to come, no. But it was only a couple of days. I'd done... lots of trips like that." His attention is split between me and Benny when he says, "Prior runs, I had asked her to meet me there, in her car, with both of you. Many times. She never would. I went on this run like normal, came back, and it was all normal. I'd planned to talk to her about moving in with me, so I could take care of you guys. But when I came back the next day... well, you know what happened." He lowers his voice and I know his words are meant to comfort us, when he adds, "I never loved your mother, and I never wanted her to meet me on drops because I missed *her*."

My attention dips to his lips, full and perfect. The same lips that pressed to my temple when the morning sky was still sleepy, the very same mouth that uttered "there she is, my morning girl" time and time again. Only now, I'm not longing for those same lips to give me those same creature comforts of knowing and tenderness. I want that mouth on me in

unspeakable places doing things I don't think I could even put into words aloud.

I want him, but he was hers. He was hers and he was ours, too. And the way he belonged to Benny and me before... what I know Benny gets from Callan now... I can't want him. There's no room for it.

"If you sit here today and tell us you looked for us, and that you really didn't leave and it's actually a lie," I say, repainting his words into a questionable light in order to protect myself from losing him again. "That will be it. We won't be able to know you, Callan."

I reach for my brother's hand under the table, and he lets me pretend I'm comforting him, when we both know it's me who is rattled.

"I know you two were young but I want you to know, I looked. I searched, I pulled strings, I fucking hunted for you both. I hunted for Kelly." He swallows, fixing his intoxicating gaze only on me. "Your trust—"

My body tenses and I feel it. The *need* inside me. In my belly. Flooding my bones. Eating up my brain. Tearing through my senses.

I *want* Callan.

But he can never be mine.

So I yank the cord, sending my defenses to the sky in self-protection. "You earn trust, you don't claim it." I face my little brother, and tell him what he already knows, just so Callan can hear it. "I'm glad you'll get to know each other through lessons."

Getting to my feet, Callan does too, stopping me with his abrasive gaze. "I want to know you again, too, Lexi." I don't miss how he looks at my beauty mark before his eyes trace the shape of my body in the hallway. A memory flashes behind my eyes, one of Callan pushing into the locked back door, panicked and angry. Mom had gone to work and told me she was going to a job opportunity after. To look after Benny for her.

I was five.

Callan ran me a bath and while I bathed and got in clean jammies he washed and dried for me, he fed Benny and cleaned up the kitchen, and put fresh sheets on our beds. Pink princesses is what he bought for me, and little red airplanes is what he got for Benny. But I was scared that night. And the three of us, despite the fact there was almost no room, slept in those princess sheets, in my bed, together. Benny laid on Cal's chest and I stayed pressed to his bicep the entire night.

I give him a measured smile. "I'll see you around The Alley, and Mecca when I come get Ben." Another small smile and I'm tucking into my room. Before the door closes, Callan adds, "I'll earn it."

My back thunks against the closed door as I grip the handle, processing his words. He wants to earn our trust, and I think he will. Only, I'm not sure I want it. I'm glad Benny is no longer hurt, that he and Callan have righted things.

And I'm glad Benny is going to get to know him, and I'm happy to know I raised a man who has every reason to be hateful and angry but chooses acceptance and forgiveness nonetheless.

Knowing I need to study, I flop down across my mattress and let my eyes close, pushing away all the things currently clogging my mind. Like what will Mom do when she realizes Callan is still in Oakcreek? Will I pass my GED? Will Mom even come home anytime soon? Will Callan be loyal to Benny or will he break his heart? Will he be loyal to me?

Will he break my heart?



...TWELVE YEARS AGO

Age 5

“Another bite?” Callan offers, holding a spoon full of peas and pears.

Benny, little bare legs thrashing, squeals as the rocker bounces to his aggressive thrusts. He smacks his hands together, sending droplets of pea-pear all over Callan’s face.

Callan just chuckles. Turning his head, he peers up at me, standing on a chair behind him, my hands on his shoulders. “Alright, stylist, I’m ready.”

I nod, aligning the hairbrush at the top of his head.

The first time my mom brought Callan home, I thought his hair was so pretty. I wanted to comb it. And now he lets me. When he’s feeding Benny or reading, I get to be his stylist.

I comb Callan’s hair as he sings counting songs to Benny, getting him to finish the pouch of baby food.

“Cal,” he coos. “Cal, Cal, Cal,” he babbles some more.

I drag my comb through Callan’s dark hair and smile at Benny. Benny is smiling, looking between me and Callan. And when Callan glances over his shoulder at me, he’s smiling too.

This is the best moment of my life.

twelve

...



trust is the basis of everything.

CALLAN

Reaching into the open mini fridge, I wrap my hand around a sweating can of cold Coke, and drag it out. I open it and listen to the carbonation pop before I take the first long, cold pull. The soda hits my veins with a buzz, softening my rough edges.

Benny is on his way to Mecca.

He's been coming by three times a week for the last few weeks. Ever since our talk at their apartment, our time together has been... different. But better. Way fucking better. I love getting to know Ben. I'm chuffed that they moved back to Oakcreek, and that our paths have so perfectly crossed.

I ignore the fear that rises up inside me so tall my fucking eyeballs float. Fear that while I'll get to know Ben, I won't get my time with *her*. Fear that because she was older and loved me so deeply and relied on me so much, she won't be able to trust me again. Even if she believes me that I looked for them, that I didn't want them to leave—a small part of me questions whether she could ever trust me again.

Trust is the basis of everything. And if she's thinking I have one foot out the door or that they're just something to pass time, she'll never let me into her heart again.

That shouldn't pain me like it does, but my Gram always told me *should* is a word created by the devil. I always found that a bit dramatic, and a total old lady thing to say. But as I watch Ben stride across the parking lot, his hands hooked to his backpack straps, a broad smile painted across his face, it clicks.

Should makes you feel like you're failing yourself. I *should* have taken that run. I *shouldn't* have said those things. There is no should. There is only what is and what was, and how you choose to treat yourself.

The idea of Lexi not trusting me does hurt me. It hurts me because I want her trust.

It hurts me because even though I don't know her anymore and there's many years between us, I want her. I want to wake up next to the sunshine on my pillow, I want to slide my hand into hers knowing I'm clinging proudly to a hard-working, trustworthy, loyal woman. I want to hold her every night and make sure she knows that even though there were many bad years behind her, there are only good ones ahead.

"Hiya Ben," I greet, finishing off my Coke as the bell jingles behind him.

"Hey, Cal," he greets, his voice cracking a little. Same little boy who toddled around in a diaper and stuck his slobbery finger in an electrical outlet once is now turning into a man. His body is there, but his voice is catching up. Seeing him so grown up makes me realize how many good years I missed. How many Kelly stole from me.

"How was school?" I ask, and even though I don't greet Amir or any of the other students that come in here this way, with Ben, it feels imperative to know. In fact, I wish I could ask more but I don't want him to be overwhelmed. I remember being a teen and hating when adults bombarded me with questions.

He drops his backpack to the floor as I slide him a cold soda from my mini fridge. Never kept sodas in there until a few weeks ago. And I'd normally be drinking a beer but I'm on soda now. The crack of the can opening ricochets through the cluttered yet empty space. "Fine. Aced my algebra quiz."

I extend my curled fist to him and let him bump. "Nicely done."

He nods his head. Kid is smart. He was even as a baby. And though I didn't then and still don't know shit about babies now, he was smart. Walked early—I was there for his first steps. Surprisingly Kelly was, too. One of her lucky moments.

"Acing algebra doesn't surprise me. You were smart, even as a baby," I say, realizing when the words leave my lips that I

sound like an actual goddamn grandfather with a stopwatch on a gold chain and crackers and cheese wrapped in cellophane in his fridge. I shake my head. “You walked early, I mean.” The clarification comes out husky as I try and reclaim some semblance of youth. *You were smart, even as a baby.*

Jesus Christ.

“It’s kinda weird to think you knew me as a baby,” Ben thinks aloud. “Makes me think you’re like, seventy.”

I snort. “Not even close.”

He eyes me suspiciously. “How old are you, Cal?”

The way he’s fallen easily into calling me Cal makes my hands tingle. I shrug casually. “Old enough.”

He prods me again and I like his determination. Reminds me of *me* as a kid. That makes me both happy and sad.

“C’mon. You know...” he muses, “I could just ask my mom.”

The warm fuzzies shrivel up, and so do my balls.

“Ah, how is Kelly?” I ask, forcing naturalness into my tone more than I’ve ever forced anything. For their sake and their sake alone, I hope Kelly is well. But do I want to catch up with Kelly? Know what Kelly is doing now? Be in Kelly’s life? Nah.

For them, though...

“She’s working at a doctor’s office,” he says with a shrug. “Whatever. It’s the job she always goes for no matter where we are.”

I don’t know if he’s old enough to realize it ain’t the job she’s after but moreso, the man who signs the checks and comes with a magic pill pad. Small town doctors are kind of her thing. I guess I figured that out around month six, but by then, I’d already fallen for them. I was comfortable at the Trail, didn’t have a single other thing going on. I wasn’t lost but also had no purpose.

I stayed with Kelly for another two and a half years after I realized her scam. Getting prescriptions or money from doctors after seducing and blackmailing them. Sometimes she wouldn't even need to blackmail them; they'd just hold full on affairs.

"I'm thirty-six years old," I barter, willing to tell him my age if it means bypassing the Kelly talk. I arch an eyebrow as I lean over the counter on my elbows, my silver chain slipping free from beneath the henley and flannel. Benny eyes it as it swings. "Is that what you expected?" I ask. "Thirty-six?"

His grin comes fast and grows a mile wide. "I thought you were younger."

I shake my head, pushing off the counter to usher him to the back. "You little shit."

His laugh slams into my back as we tread down the hall for our first lesson of the day. Benny sits across from my desk. I pat his shoulder. "I'm gonna make sure Kenny is good for an hour, okay?" Kenny, another student, has been out back using my power tools to work on a project for his grandfather. Now it's his turn to watch the desk.

Benny nods. "Cool."

After Kenny is situated, I return to find Benny strumming the guitar softly, trying to find a steady rhythm.

I slide into the seat across from him, and shamelessly let my ulterior motives grab hold of me. "How's Lexi doing?"

A strand of thick golden hair falls over Benny's blue eyes. He strokes a hand down the whiskers popping up on his chin, grinning at me. "What do you mean, like, summarize how she's been in the last ten years?"

I volley my head with consideration. He's teasing of course but the truth is I *do* want to know how the last ten years have gone. For both of them. "I want to know everything I missed, with both of you. I don't know if you believe that but it's the truth, Ben."

He sits a little straighter, fingers blindly playing with strings on the guitar as he stares at me. Somewhere in the shop

there's noise. The keyboard clattering, soft voices, hushed movements. But Kenny's got that covered. Between me and Ben, the air is nearly unbreathable with unaddressed emotions.

He clears his throat. "I believe you. You don't seem dishonest to me."

I want to laugh. There's no way a thirteen year old has a handle on character judgements of strangers, but I don't say that. Instead, some crazy fucking part of me chooses to believe that Benny believes in me because *we're connected*. Those years the three of us spent together, sometimes with Kelly there but often not, we bonded. And that bond, despite the time stretching vibrantly between *then* and *now*, still holds us together.

"I wouldn't lie to you or your sister." I stroke a hand through my hair, and think of her. The way she loved my ponytails. Then, as Benny practices chords, I find myself putting my hair up, watching his fingers pluck at strings while I think of everything but music.

When he's done running through the handful of chords I'd given him to practice, I take another shot.

"No one ever like... reported Kelly? No teacher or anything?"

I feel like shit asking those things, but I have to. Because my entire childhood, until Gram took over, I always wondered why no one noticed me. My dirty clothes, stashing school milk cartons into my pocket, taking scraps of food from other kids' lunch trays, the bruises, the bad hygiene... no one ever questioned my safety or well being. I'd like to think I slipped through the cracks, but that schools do better now.

Benny shifts slightly in his chair, lowering the guitar into the open seat next to him. "I don't want to talk about this."

"And yet you put your guitar down," I reply, steepling my fingers together while stacking my boots on my desk. "Benny, I was raised by a junkie. By the time my Gram took me in, I'd spent most of my childhood alone and hungry and humiliated. Gram... she got me back on track. Caught me up in school

with tutors, fed me so well I had to turn down dessert more than once.” I let my lips curve into a small smile. “If anyone gets it, it’s me. I just hope that someone noticed.”

He unzips his backpack and fishes around inside, producing a scrap of paper. Over my desk he hands me the sheet. It’s an English literature quiz, with an A written and circled with red marker at the top. “I do fine.” He nods toward the paper. “Lexi and I study together. I help her with her GED flashcards and she helps me with my stuff.”

“She’s a good girl,” I say to her brother, wishing I could take them back once they leave my mouth. Not because it’s untrue—it’s not. Lexi is such a goddamn good girl. But I do not want to identify her as a girl. Not fucking at all. “A good woman,” I clarify.

“Yes,” Benny says, growing protective in a slip with a single word. “She is.”

“GED?” I cock my brow, bypassing Benny’s insinuation that I can’t call Lexi a good girl because I don’t know her well enough yet. He’s not wrong. We haven’t exactly been in contact since I spotted her in The Alley weeks back. Not regularly at least. But the moments we do have—and what I can’t tell him—are infused with so much intensity and emotion that it feels like we’re on the same page.

Yet it’s a very different page than the one we settled into years back.

“When Mom moved us back to Oakcreek, Lexi didn’t want to be a new student her senior year. Mom agreed to let her drop and get her GED. And Mom also knew if Lex quit school, she could work.”

Acid burns my insides as an image of Kelly flashes through my mind. “Your mom contributes though, right?”

Ben is slow to nod, and that is quick to anger me. “She does.”

In my office chair, I roll toward the wall, my boots thudding against the floor loudly as they fall from the desk. I sift a finger through the blinds. Sunlight drops onto my lap as I

peer out against the glare, narrowing my eyes at The Alley next door. If she works there for any prolonged amount of time, at least I can keep an eye on her. Or be closeby. And it's been weeks since she blessed Benny and me spending time together here at Mecca. If she wanted to get to know me the way he is, she would. So if keeping an eye out for her is all I can get, I'll take it.

But I'm not done trying for a bit more, not yet. I'm greedy and selfish and quickly becoming obsessed with Lexi Fisher. My morning girl.

"You heading over there after this or going back to your place?" I let the blinds fall closed as I refocus on Benny. He still isn't holding the guitar. "Mom contributes but Lexi pays most of the bills because Mom isn't reliable, which you already knew."

I nod. "Is she getting better?"

Benny shrugs. "Does it matter? I'm almost an adult, and Lex already is. Once I'm old enough, she and I are leaving."

"Getting away?" My brow curves into a question. I'd have gotten out of Oakcreek at his age too if I had a sister like Lex.

"Not leaving here," he says thoughtfully, "as much as we're leaving *her*."

I scratch my head, doing the mental math to understand how limited my time with them actually is. He's thirteen with a birthday right around the corner which means... a little over four more years and they're gone. When you're doing nothing but thinking and regretting, that amount of time could feel like a lifetime. But when you're reconnecting with two people you've been thinking about and missing for years? That amount of time is nothing. A drop in the bucket.

Not enough.

Rightfully, they got no allegiance to me or Oakcreek, but somehow knowing they wanna leave here in five years makes my gut ache. But I know they gotta do what they gotta do, and they have each other. They're much better off than I ever was at his age.

“But no, I’m not heading over there. Lexi knows I’m going back to the apartment to study. The Alley is loud on Thursdays. I can’t study there.”

I nod, knowing exactly what he’s referring to. The pool hall inside The Alley belongs to the MC on Thursdays. They fill that space, run up tabs, drink and smoke, shoot the shit along with some pool, and don’t leave until they absolutely have to.

“I may head over there after our lesson, see if I can keep her company at the counter.”

Right then I find myself wracking my brain. Trying to remember with all my might just how much I knew as a thirteen year old boy. Does Benny know that I see Lex as a woman, not the little girl I once knew? Does Lex know that my intentions can be and are both sinfully indulgent as well as pure and thoughtful? I pull at the back of my neck while I watch him lift the guitar back to his lap. He rests it on his leg and it’s then I notice how shitty his fucking jeans are.

“Yo,” I call as he begins a simple three-strand chord. He looks up, and for a split second, I see Kelly’s eyes. “You know your waist size?”

He nods. I pass him a piece of paper and tap it. “Write down your sizes. Your sisters, too.” He does, and I stash the paper into my pocket, next to my cell phone, reminding myself to hit up some online retailers later.

We spend the next forty minutes focused on music, and I end up sitting next to Benny, watching his fingers work, stopping him every so often to show him new chord combinations. I can already see in the few weeks we’ve been practicing together that Benny is a natural.

When we’re done, I send him on his way with another Coke from my mini fridge, with my address and phone number in case he or Lex ever need cash for food or anything. He said they’re good, that they aren’t going hungry much anymore, but extra cash can never hurt.

Filling the doorway of Mecca, I watch the setting sun, debating on whether I ought to go next door, like I told Benny.

I *want* to spend time with her. Watch her and learn the way she moves. Get to know her, what frustrates her, what makes her laugh.

I want to memorize every molecule and morsel that is Lexi Fisher.

That enigmatic pull between she and I, it's fucking strong. And while there are plenty of reasons for me to stay at Mecca and mind my fuckin' business, I lock the doors behind me and stomp her way.

Waves of muted bass and the soft clattering of pins swarm me as I enter The Alley, the smell of stale nachos and warm beer tickling my nose. I've spent lots of time here, shootin' pool to make sense of the chaos in my head. Never wanted to be here, but never had anywhere else to go. Now though, as I stomp through the shady space and my eyes catch on the beautiful, voluptuous woman behind the shoe rental desk, an army would have to make me leave.

I slip into a stool at the counter, and watch her count dollar bills into an old man's palm. When he leaves, her attention goes to the new patron at the bar. Me.

"Something tells me you aren't looking to rent shoes or a ball," she says, her long hair down in waves today. Goddamn. My cock is fat and happy at the sight of her. She's makeup free, such a stark contrast to what I remember of Kelly's looks—always painted and done up, yet Lexi's wide blue eyes are clear and vibrant. Heaviness fills my legs and arms, rendering me immobile as the sight of her burrows deep in my chest.

Goddamn *beautiful*. All grown up and so fucking stunning.

Lexi smiles at a patron who comes to the bar for extra napkins, and I notice immediately that her eyes don't lift. She's happier than she was when I met her here before, but it is clear she's still not happy.

Arrogant and narcissistic, maybe, but inside me somewhere I believe I can make her happy. I can push her

from sort of happy to goddamn ecstatic. I can give her anything she needs, and I want to.

“I got shoes and a ball, so no, I don’t need to rent,” I tell her, nodding toward the row of glass bottles behind the bar. “How do they let you serve booze? You’re only eighteen.”

Another jumble of words that leaves me that I regret. *Only eighteen*. I reach down and adjust my cock behind my fly as she strings her fingers through her hair, detangling. I want that silky hair in my fist as those full lips wrap my—

“It’s a *look the other way* type of situation,” she says, smirking. “You bowl?”

I twist to face the rows upon rows of empty, dark lanes. I look back at her. “I do sometimes, yeah.”

She smirks again, and that smirk fills me with gratitude that my lower half is hidden by the bar looming over me. And all the wrongness I feel at getting hard for her is usurped by the unfamiliar, hot tingling engulfing my core and limbs. *I shouldn’t want her this way*.

I clear my throat. “Thought I’d sit up here and keep you company ‘til the end of your shift,” I say, nodding again toward the booze. “Corona,” I tell her.

“You don’t have anything better to do?” she asks, plucking a sweating bottle from the bar edge. She slides it to me after popping the top off, letting the lid join others in a metal bucket.

“Talking to you is the only thing I want to do,” I rasp, my voice hoarse and husky as the admission slips free easily. I think it’s too honest, too overwhelming, too vulnerable, and I’m ready to amend my words and rework them into something less true when she smiles. A full fucking smile. Beautiful teeth, full lips curved, eyes lifted at the corners, a tiny laugh bubbling from her chest.

“I want to talk to you, too,” she finally replies after her gorgeous smile drains. Our eyes idle together, the quiet roar of *The Alley* a beautiful soundtrack to the invisible connection simmering between us. She feels it. *She fucking feels it*.

“You’re eighteen now,” I spit out, hating that the obvious and logical reason I’d be asking her age is also now between us.

She nods, grabbing a neon yellow chamois to swipe along the crusty water rings on the bar top. “We established that so yes, I am.”

A growl rumbles behind my ribs, but I don’t let her hear it. Instead I ask, “You’ve been raising Benny for the last ten years?”

Her nod is silent, but it roars through my veins. Her sacrifices, her pain, her fear and anguish, everything she felt while she got through the last ten years practically alone rises up between us. And I can’t push it aside, it’s far too big and great to ignore.

“I’m proud of you, for whatever it’s worth.” I sip my beer, flavorless and cool. My pulse rockets. “What you did for your brother, for yourself—” Another sip to soothe my nerves. “Most kids would give up. But you fought.”

She swallows. “Like you did.”

I arch a brow, shimmying out of my leather jacket. The flannel and henley are enough. She watches me, and blinks at the jacket as I drape it over the stool next to me. “I remember every moment we spent together, Callan. And I remember everything you ever told me. Including the fact that your mom was like *her*. Negligent and absent.”

I nod, fighting a tangle of unexpected emotion at the base of my throat. She really remembers.

“Remember a lot of Kelly’s boyfriends, do ya?” I ask, trying not to puncture the sentiment but also not wanting to climb deeper into the well of wanting Lexi Fisher. Not if she isn’t down there waiting.

I’m toast with a shake of her head, blonde hair sailing around her shoulders. My insides melt and things happen below the belt from the emotional weight of her admission. “Just you.” I blink down at my palm resting on the bar. Light pink finger nails traverse as her palm comes to cover mine.

She squeezes, and when I look up at her and find a soft smile curving her lips, heat flares behind my ribs, surging through me, making my hand ache. I squeeze her hand back, and my breath catches.

As if she can physically see how that lands, she lets go, changes the subject, veering us straight into another lane. One I was *hoping* to discover.

“I’ve worked since I was fourteen. Mom’s around. Benny and I are used to her coming and going. We’ve had to bail her out of jail a few times. Other than that, things haven’t been awful.”

The Alley shrinks all around me as blood rushes through my ears, my eyes glued to hers. The same unexpected emotion clogs my throat yet again, but I find my voice through all of my awe. “You’ve done so good with the unfair hand you’ve been dealt.”

She laughs humorlessly as those bright blue eyes roll. “Oh yeah, a GED is *real* impressive.”

I finish my beer, my finger stroking over the loose edge of the label. Her eyes fall to my pointer finger, and she watches me play with the pliant paper a few times before journeying back to my face. “It is impressive. You could have quit, but you didn’t.”

A customer steals her away, but I stay there, in my seat at the bar, listening to her help the next handful that approach after the first. I take note of her smile and the way she pushes her hair behind her shoulders when she answers the phone, pinching it in one hand to keep it up off her neck. The slender curve of her bare neck does things to my brain, melts my rational thought and leaves me a drooling, hardened mess. I try not to linger on her beauty mark, and I try not to remember all the times she’d traipse down the hall of the little blue house, her hair wild from sleep, a yawn bursting past her lips as she’d climb into my lap and cling to my shirt. I try to forget the soft “morning, Cal” she’d whisper as she snuggled against me, seeking a few more minutes of morning calm before Benny woke up.

Lexi mentions her shift is coming to an end, and I offer to give her a ride home. She nods, and the way she doesn't fight me or decline makes me feel like I'm a step closer to something with her. Friendship, a pseudo friendship, I'm not sure. But I'll let her take the lead because I need whatever she will offer.

I press my hand to her lower back, and though fabric separates our flesh, my heart races as if we're bare. I make a show of making sure she's sitting where she needs to be, all the while, enjoying the press of her body when she worms against my hand, sliding up the saddle. Touching her feels so unbelievably indulgent, so addictive and good.

With a blissful sunset hanging over us, and Lexi's blonde hair balled in her fist as she straddles the saddle of my bike, I'm overwhelmed by the urge to chase her; to sprint after what I *know* I need. Perched on my bike with that plump bottom lip pulled under her teeth, she swallows hard, and I do my best to keep my dick unaware of the noise she makes when she does.

"Before we go," she says, her words private, despite the fact we're behind Mecca where I park my bike, and no one else is out here. She plays with the strap on the motorcycle helmet, dragging it between her lithe, delicate fingers. Fingers I'd love to see wrapped—*ah, ah, ah, you fuckin' sicko.*

Rational thought steamrolls my fantasies as she rolls her lips together, cheeks turning ruby, even in the setting sun. "Did you love her? Like, were you ever in love with her?"

I know she's talking about Kelly, and I know when she was just a girl, she wasn't able to truly see things between me and her mom. Not the way she could now, if me and Kelly were still together.

I tell her the truth, as vulnerable as it makes me. "I only ever loved the two of you."

The sound of her black work pants gliding against the leather seat as she slides off my bike has my heart fucking kicking. She closes the few feet between us, resting her hand on my pec, over my flannel. "Your jacket," she whispers, glancing at the leather draped over my arm. "I used to draw

pictures of your jacket all the time after... after we moved away. My mom never saved any, but I drew your jacket everyday... for years.”

“Years?” I croak, hungry for clarification. Her admission has me feeling so many things.

“I thought about you so much Callan, and I never stopped hoping you’d come back,” she whispers, rocking to her toes, her Converse blending over the tops of my black boots. I bring my hand to her cheek and cup her face, transfixed by my thumb stroking over her bottom lip and chin. I can’t *believe* I’m touching her this way. I can’t believe she never stopped thinking of me. “Did you think about us?”

“Only every day for the last ten years. And I’d swear my life on it—I really have thought of you two every day. When I saw you in The Alley, I thought I’d dreamed you up.”

“I’m not a dream,” she says, nuzzling into the palm that cradles her face. “And I’m glad you’re back.”

Somehow I find myself inching closer to her, so close that her perky tits press against me as I whisper, “*You* came back. I never left.”

“I’m glad you never left,” she says, her eyes tracing every detail of my lips. I feel it in my cock, each swipe of her blue eyes over my mouth, down my chest, hovering on the dark inch looping my throat. Fuck.

“I’m glad you’re back.” And then, because it’s true, I add, “Benny, too.”

She nods, smirks, and unexpectedly presses her lips to mine. I don’t know what I imagined, or if I even imagined what it would feel like, but goddamn. Her lips are soft and pliable against mine, her slender hand snaking up the back of my flannel and henley, nails curling into my bare back. My cock comes online from the feel of her bare palm against my naked back, despite the fact we’re hidden out back, hidden by layers of clothes, hidden under the mellow shades of early evening.

And whatever is about to happen feels like it needs to stay hidden, and it feels like this setting is the only place in which this can continue.

Jesus Christ, *whatever* this is has to continue. This beautiful woman in my arms, our history, the cool evening tossing leaves around our feet—I'd give up my entire life to have this singular moment last.

She kisses me like she's discovering me, her tongue sliding against mine, her hungry little whimpers vibrating against my lips. She claws my back and eats my mouth and writhes against my chest. I take her hand, the one at my chest, and wrap mine around hers, causing her to fall onto her heels and break the kiss. With swollen, plump lips and a pink nose, she blinks up at me.

With her eyes on me and her body pressed to mine, my willpower crumbles. The lie I've been telling myself about only wanting to get to know her as the girl I once had a small hand in raising, it crumbles, too. Leaving just the truth between us, stark naked, standing tall.

"I want you," she breathes, uttering the very sentiment that flows through me.

I crush my lips to hers, not wanting to pull apart those words and get to the bottom of them. Does she want me right here and right now? But only right here and right now? Does she want me the way she used to have me? I don't know. As she grinds her body against mine, her nails still marking my bare back, I don't care what her parameters are. I don't care if she wants me just for this kiss, this broken moment under the melting sky—I'll give it.

My big hands boldly drop to the top of her pants, easily slipping the silver button free. Her warm breath flanks my face as I unzip her pants. Both of her hands come to the tops of my shoulders, and while I miss her palm against my naked back, we both know why she's holding my shoulders.

Crouching in front of her, I tug her little black pants down with me. Her legs are soft and warm as I drag a rugged palm up one, helping her step out of the fabric. With her bottom half

naked, early moonlight licking at her profile, I put her on the saddle of my bike and crouch again, between her legs.

She doesn't ask what I'm doing or tell me to stop, she just keeps her hands on me as I drape one of her thighs against my shoulder, leg over my back. My thumb makes slow circles on her bare inner thigh as my gaze falls to her panties.

White with tiny little pink hearts. So innocent, so pure.

But when I look up, I don't find the eyes of young Lexi staring back at me.

I only see the woman she's blossomed and grown into, her blue eyes morphing to a shade more needful and wanton. Her fingers curl into my flannel before her palms trail down, coming to the sides of my neck. She plays with the end of my ponytail.

"Say you want me too," she whispers, and it's then I realize I haven't responded. I haven't been able to speak since her mouth was on mine.

"I want you too," I admit, guilt and arousal dizzying me in tandem.

She doesn't smile, but her eyes sparkle. "Then have me."

thirteen

...



i will stay out of my head when it comes to callan hayes.

LEXI

The wind collects at my back as I sink my fingers into the curve of his brawny shoulders.

I'm digging my fingers into *his* shoulders.

"Callan," I moan his name, my vision tunneling on the spot between my bare, spread thighs. He nudges my panties with his nose, inhaling slowly, my entire body tensing, aching for him. Inked hands contrast against my pale thighs, and I swear to God, just looking at Callan's tattooed hands gripping me, his face right at my panties, I swear I could come.

But I can't yet. I can't come until I know the divine and cruel sensation of being adored by Callan Hayes.

Being ravished by Callan Hayes.

Being brought to my proverbial knees by Callan Hayes.

Belonging to Callan Hayes.

I want it all. I know it's wrong. For so many reasons, it's wrong. He's so much older than me, in such a different stage of his life. He used to fuck my mother for Christ's sake. We have a history. He knew me before I had permanent teeth, before I wore a bra, before I knew what a curse word was or knew Santa didn't exist.

He was there before it all and then... he was gone.

But he's here now and wrong or not, I fucking *want* him.

I don't get anything I want, and I know how that sounds. I know that makes me sound like a toddler stomping my foot and maybe that's where I'm at. I've worked since I was fourteen, wiping counters, tearing tickets, taking out trash—whatever I could do. And I've been the voice of reason for

myself and Benny. Fuck, it's *my* senior year and I'm not even in school.

My life motto this far has been *just get through it* and right now, I'm burning alive for a tiny sip of indulgence and selfishness.

Guilt washes over me as I watch Callan's thick finger curl around the crotch of my panties, tugging them aside. I want him for selfish reasons, yes, but I also want him. Flat out. I don't need days and weeks of relearning him. I don't have to know his favorite color or what foods he hates. I know Callan because I know his heart. And all that other shit will come secondarily.

When his eyes meet mine again, they're hazy and hooded.

"Goddamn it you've got such a pretty little pussy," he growls, dragging his closed mouth along my cunt. My core shudders at the tickle he leaves between my legs, his scruff igniting every nerve ending inside me.

I take one hand off his shoulder, keeping the other one there to steady myself. Gently, I reach back and tug the elastic, letting his dark hair fall into a curtain around his face. I tangle my fingers in the strands, holding his gaze.

"You used to like the ponytail," he rumbles, his tongue sweeping his lip as he eyes my naked pussy. I'm exposed to him and he's just an inch away.

I *should* feel insecure.

I *should* itch to cover myself.

I *should* nudge him away.

My cheeks *should* be flooded with burning shame.

Yet, I've never felt as alive as I do with Callan on his knees between my thighs, looking straight at my exposed slit. The one I've yet to share with anyone.

"That was before. Now I need something to *hold onto* while you *eat me out*." Heat flares in my core, and I swear I feel outside my body as I knead his scalp, moaning when my

hand is full of his soft hair. His eyes stay on mine as he moves his lips to my clit.

He presses the softest, most gentle kiss to it but I'm so turned on, pulsing so hard for him that the simple kiss drives me wild. My thighs start to tremble as I grip his shoulder harder, fighting to stay steady atop the bike. The foot that presses to the ground grows tired and right as I think I'm about to slip, he grabs my thigh, hoisting it to his chest.

"Callan," I moan but all fears of toppling off the bike with my pants off disappear when his lips press to my clit. A deep growl rumbles against me and then his tongue is pushing into me, rolling circles over my clit, pulling deep moans from my belly.

"Callan, oh my god," I breathe, closing my eyes, focusing on the way his long hair tangles so easily around my fingers. He looks too good down there. He looks too good, period.

He leaves soft, gentle kisses on my swollen, slick clit before he stops. My eyes pop open and find his immediately, the heat between us unbearably thick. I can hardly think. All I want to do is call his name and writhe against his perfect, beautiful open mouth.

"Tell me you want this, Lexi," he says slowly, his voice thin, almost shaky. My eyes veer to his tattooed hands gripping my thighs tightly to his chest, my nipples physically aching at the sight of him. Or is it just *the sight* of a man worshiping me? The pressure of his hands against me, the way he holds me still and steady. I close my eyes and remember the way he gently sucked my clit, making my toes curl. It's not just the sight of him.

It's him.

"Lex," he calls, bringing my focus back to him in the present.

"I was daydreaming about you licking me," I whisper, my pussy throbbing for his mouth.

He smirks, his lips glistening from my arousal. My heart surges. Our eyes idle as his smile slides away. "You want

this?”

I swallow hard, disbelief cinching my brows. “Don’t you know?”

He’s motionless as he says, “Tell me, morning girl. Tell me you want this dirty old man to lick up this sweet little pink pussy of yours. Tell me you wanna come all over my face.”

I tug his head and his mouth connects with my pussy. My nostrils flare and my voice is low when I say, “Lick me, make me come, show me what it feels like.”

As if those were his marching orders, Callan disappears, slipping into another world as he worships my pussy. He licks my clit as he teases my hole with his finger, never going inside. Instincts have me jerking back but since my bare ass is coated in my own slippery arousal, I slide against the leather saddle. The intrusion burns and yet I know if I want to fuck Callan, I have to be able to take it.

I grind against his face as he licks and eats me, trying to prove to myself I can handle the burning pain, that I can take more.

I want to be able to take him.

Right now, if it were on the table...

“Callan, yes, yes,” I moan, loving how easily his name melts from my lips while his head is tucked between my legs. He sucks my clit between his teeth, rolling it gently, making my spine melt. “Yes, oh God,” I call.

I call to God and anyone who will listen, shouting Callan’s name as he drives his tongue through my center, pleasuring my virgin pussy wide.

He’s dragging me up the hill, and right as I’m cresting, reaching the highest of peaks, he steals his mouth away. “Come, babygirl,” he growls before sealing his lips to my cunt again, eating me in soft yet gently frenzied strokes, right until I burst.

He manages to hold my thighs to his chest with one strong bicep, but my body convulses and thrashes against him

regardless. “Holy shit, holy shit, holy shit,” I chant, because words are a challenge. All I can do is tingle and moan as my orgasm swallows me whole, chews me up and slowly lays me out. I feel myself bucking off the saddle into his face and when he calls me a good, sweet thing, I swear to God I lose touch with my senses for a moment. I’m just floating in numb, colorful, all consuming bliss.

But I do eventually come down, and when I do, I find a barrel-chested Callan standing in front of me in his henley, using his flannel shirt to wipe my thighs clean. He drags the shirt across his mouth before twisting it, tucking an end into his back pocket. I watch his every movement as he collects his leather jacket from the handlebars, and shrugs into it. Tugging his hair back, he gathers an elastic from my wrist and gives himself an incredibly sexy, messy man bun.

He falls to his knees, helping me back into my work pants. The moment is ending, and my chest constricts painfully in response. I want... I don’t know. More time? More... I don’t know. Just more.

Callan pulls my pants up my hips and rebuttons and zips them before taking my face in his hands. His eyes hold mine so intensely my breath sticks for a moment. Finally he brings our mouths together. The kiss is unhurried and careful, his tongue stroking over every part inside my mouth. He sucks my tongue, his thumb slips into my mouth, his palm comes to the side of my throat as he fuses our lips together. He kisses me in all the most gentle, perfect, panty drenching ways and when we’re both breathing hard, he breaks us apart.

“Fuck,” he sighs.

My heart races but still, he makes me feel so emboldened and capable. I lick my lips and glance down at his crotch and though evening is quickly upon us, I spot the undeniable curve pressing into his fly. Long and thick, stretching into places I can’t see. He’s mouth watering.

I reach for it but he catches my wrist. “No, babygirl.”

“Babygirl,” I repeat, the nickname making me feel both naughty and cherished.

He opens his mouth, and I feel it right then. The shift in energy. The moment he starts to think about our past, and tells himself he's done something wrong.

Fuck that.

“Don't say anything else, okay? Just drop me off at home. I don't want you to say something that's going to ruin this.”

And when he doesn't argue, I know I was right. He was going to say it was a mistake. But I didn't give him the chance, and thankfully for my fragile heart he didn't fight that.

The whole ride home, I hold him tightly, loving the roar of the bike between my thighs, the feel of his back against my chest. Boldly I bury my nose into the back of his neck because we're riding and he can't stop me. I suck in and stash his scent, my nipples throbbing at the cedary, hard working smell of him.

I remember that smell. I remember the way my belly fluttered the first time he kneeled next to me and I smelled him. My eyes roll closed the remainder of the drive as I sink into his back and hold him, indulging these few moments where he's mine.

I hand him my helmet when we get to the apartment. I don't let him walk me up or kiss me on the lips, though I don't think he'd have tried the latter. The guilt in his eyes shines. I hate the way he feels like he's done something criminal. I refuse to acknowledge it, therefore, I kiss his cheek and don't look back as I trudge up the three floors to our apartment.

Standing in front of the closed apartment door, I make a choice. Fingering the ends of my hair, which holds the faintest trace of his scent, I make myself a deal.

I won't think about all the reasons why we're a bad idea.

I won't think about us at all.

I will stay out of my head when it comes to Callan Hayes.

Twisting my key, I push the door open to be met with the sight of Benny on his hands and knees, yellow gloves up to his wrists. With a brush in one hand, he uses the back of his wrist

to push sweat from his forehead as he nods to acknowledge me.

“Hey.”

I lock the door behind me, letting my purse fall to the floor. A distinctly sour scent hits my nose. *Vomit*. “What happened?”

Benny rocks to his knees, tugging one rubber glove off by the middle finger, then repeating. “Mom’s back.” He sighs. “And she’s staying.”

fourteen

...



i tasted her lips.

CALLAN

Hot water scalds my spine as I dunk my head and neck beneath the spray yet again. Goddamn it, *what did I do?*

Beads of water scorch my eyelids as I lift my head, aligning it with the fiery showers. I take the abuse, feel my skin burn and ache, and reach down.

I tasted her lips.

I pump my erection in homage. Not even an hour ago, my lips were on hers, all her sweet, sexy little sounds slipped into my mouth. My shoulder burns as my fist works, dying to come as I replay all those moans and whimpers that echoed out back as I tasted her pussy in the moonlight.

Lifting my head, I blink my eyes open into the spray, choking a little. Punishment that I deserve, but for *my* crime? It's not big enough. Burning myself while I still guiltily jack off is not punishment. And the fucked up part is I'm not gonna stop jacking off.

And as sick as I am over what happened... I'd do it again if I had to.

Because I am pulled to Lexi like I've never felt.

The pure love we shared ten years ago lays the foundation for us now. And Goddamn it, we connect. After tonight, I'm goddamn sure she feels it, too.

A few more strokes and I'm there, spraying and grunting, gasping and heaving.

And when my orgasm circles the drain, I grab the soap and get to work, letting my mind wander to only moderately safer pastures.

I feel connected to both her and Benny. I mean, there's an additional layer of deep rooted physical and emotional

connection with Lexi, obviously, but they both feel like *family*.

Rinsing off, I'm eager to grab a towel and get dry. It's still early, and I know Mars is definitely awake.

I hop into sweats and with my hair dripping down my bare back and my towel looped around my neck, I take a seat on the edge of my bed and give him a call.

"Almost midnight," Marshall teases me when he picks up. "I'm surprised you're awake."

"I was in the shower and I wanted to talk to you."

Silence fills the line.

"I love you Cal, but you're on speaker and Dave's here. He's giving you... a look."

I snort, shaking my head at him. Stroking a hand down my face and rephrase my comment. "What's up, Dave? That came out wrong. I was trying to clear my head in the shower and I was going kind of crazy."

Marshall's laugh is deep and rough, and my ear tickles a little. "I've officially become an old man. I'm the guy who people call for advice." From behind him somewhere, his husband adds, "*but your old man spirit is hot.*"

"Alright," I stop them. "Listen." I clear my throat. "Something happened with Lexi tonight."

There's quiet. Absolute silence.

I scratch the side of my face. "Remember, she's—"

"I know who she is, man. The daughter of the woman you dated. One of the two kids you used to babysit."

"Half the time Kelly wasn't even there." I clarify, my spine stiffening as I get to my feet. Pacing the room, I let out a sigh. "But I was more than a boyfriend babysitter."

Dave's voice is gentle. "I didn't mean to devalue your time with them. I just meant to say, I'm aware of who she is because of how much she means to you. How much both Ben and Lex mean to you. So of course I remember." His voice

grows slightly more serious but he doesn't sound like a sheriff, but moreso, a friend. "How old is she now, Callan?"

My skin burns when I hear his question. Shame and guilt incinerate my flesh, and thank fuck they can't see me because I'm red. Burning, cherry red, the memory of tasting her holding me captive. I can hardly breathe. "Eighteen," I rasp, "and the fact that you have to ask that is the reason why I feel like absolute shit."

Marshall lets out a sigh so heavy and long that it resets me. I take a breath. I stop pacing the length of my room. "What?"

"Did you change her diaper?" he asks.

I blink. "What the fuck?"

He sighs again. "I'm saying, if you didn't change her fucking diaper and she's a legal adult, all the other problems ain't problems. They're just facts that you're turning into problems."

I don't say anything in response, and after a few quiet moments, he groans. "Are you waiting for Dave to agree? Is that why you aren't saying anything?"

I scratch the side of my jaw again. "No... but I'm not adverse to knowing his opinion."

Marshall roars with laughter. "Well shit, I've been replaced."

Dave must snatch the phone from Mars because his voice is clearer and louder when he speaks. "Are you concerned with garnering looks from old ladies in the grocery store? You don't strike me as someone who cares what people think."

"It's not that..." I say, wishing it were. Because it would be a whole lot easier to wave off public opinion and convince myself they don't matter. The real problem is me and what I think of my goddamn self. "It feels wrong to want her the way I do, because of our history, I guess. But... even though I feel sick for wanting her... I want her," I growl, the words some of the most honest I've ever spoken. "And I know what you're thinking," I start, throwing my defenses out between us before I can be attacked. "But it's not... it's not only physical." I

can't say it's not physical because when I lick my lips I can still taste her sweet pussy and get hard. But it's not about that connection. "I've never felt connected to anyone this way. I wish it wasn't her. I wish it was someone my age. I wish a lot of things. But again, this is the hand I've been dealt."

"What's she want?" Dave questions.

I shake my head, walking around my house until I'm at the fridge. I pull open the door and dig out a beer and a tray of leftover penne pasta. Slouching into a chair at the kitchen table, I pinch the phone to my shoulder with my ear and pop the lid off the food. "I don't know. I've been getting to know Benny down at Mecca. And it's been good. But me and her... we haven't had that much time together." *Or when we do, I eat her instead of talk to her.*

"And yet... you know you want more with her?" Mars asks.

I stab a cold noodle with my fork tines and stare at it. "Sounds fucking crazy, right?" I push the bite into my mouth and chew, following up with a cold swig of beer. "And I'm not arguing it doesn't sound crazy." Another bite of cold, flavorless pasta and another drink of beer. "But *it is* different."

"Ahh," Mars breathes as they share the phone, "I don't think it sounds as crazy as you do."

I stop mid bite, lowering my penne to the plastic tray. "No?"

"Nah," he offers. "You were gonna give your life up for those kids all those years ago," he comments slowly, like we're both remembering some of the challenging days of the past where I'd recounted to Mars just how shit it was at Kelly's place for those two. How much it reminded me painfully of my life. "You saw yourself in them and wanted to save them. And had Kelly not left, you were willing to marry someone you didn't love and devote your life to her... for those kids."

I don't view it as this big noble thing the way Mars is making it out to be. What would I have really sacrificed in

marrying Kelly? My chance at a *big, pink construction paper heart, I made you a playlist, my initials are inked on your wrist* kind of love? Most people don't find that love ever so pretending I would've missed out on something that isn't even a guarantee is cheap. I don't like it.

I would have traded fucking random women for fucking my fist, but that wasn't even a factor. I saw those faces and held those hearts in my hands and knew what I had to do.

"Never got to though," I say, flashing back to the day where I rolled up on that little blue house and found it empty.

"But you never stopped caring for them. The only thing now is, they're grown. And you're connecting with Benny and Lexi both... just in different ways," Dave adds, and nothing about his tone tells me he's trying to make me feel better. Instead, he sounds like he's in sheriff mode, laying out pieces of a case to make sense of it. "If she feels the same way, I would let your past strengthen your connection now instead of sour it."

"So you helped raise her for a few years. She ain't your kid, Cal," Mars adds.

"Talk to her." Dave says. "Then talk to Kelly."

Kelly. I haven't even seen her yet, and that fact in itself tells me everything I need to know. Kelly hasn't changed. Kelly is still doing whatever Kelly wants to do, and Lexi is still taking care of herself and her brother, the way she's so boldly done for years.

I want to take care of them now, though.

I want to take care of Lexi in ways that make my chest swell and my cock hard. But I want to take care of them both in more conventional ways, too.

I want to be there when they need advice, I want to be their financial safety net so money isn't a worry, I want to be the man who makes sure they always have every goddamn thing they've ever needed—clothes, cars, food, health insurance—everything I know they've missed out on. I know because I missed out on a lot of that, too. Until Gram.

“I’m gonna go over there in the morning and talk to them both,” I tell them, deciding right then and there that I’m going to offer to be in their lives a bit more.

“What about Lex? You gonna tell her that you caught feelings?” Mars asks.

I volley my head as I take another bite of penne. I’m sure when her legs were over my shoulders and I was fucking her cunt with my tongue over my bike she understood just how I felt. But it’s been ten years since I’ve had her in my life—I’m not risking losing her because I didn’t let her know what I want. “I’m gonna talk to her.” I finish my beer and let out a long breath. “It’s crazy how normal it feels to be with her.”

“That’s what you want—that crazy connection.” A pause. “Good luck talking to Kelly about it. I remember she was... well, good luck,” Mars offers before we end our call. I stare down at the remaining bites of pasta.

They want to leave in five years, when Benny is eighteen, he told me as much. But who even knows if they’ll make it that long. Kelly may drag them somewhere else before then, just like she did before. While Lexi can stay, she’d never leave Benny. They’d stick together.

I gotta talk to her tomorrow. I gotta talk to *both* of them soon.

But first, Lexi.



I don’t even fuck with coffee this morning. I didn’t sleep a wink and no amount of bean water is changing how twisted and angry my insides are. *I need to talk to her.*

Before I get on my bike, I consider sending her a text message to let her know I'm coming but I know she's there. I dropped her off last night and it's not even eight in the morning. Earliest she gets to The Alley is half past nine, so she'll be home.

Still, beneath my black hoodie and leather vest, my heart is fucking racing. Even with the wind nipping at my exposed throat and licking at my fingers curled around the bike's grip, I'm still sweating. Burning up with nerves and need.

Their apartment complex comes into view and I start working over my words, trying to figure out what I'm going to say. I gave her an orgasm last night—and now I'm telling her she's mine? I set my helmet on the saddle and stroke my hands through the sides of my hair, tugging at the ponytail. Okay, I won't open with "you're mine" but I will let them both know that I'm here and not going anywhere.

The three flights of stairs feel like ten seconds and even though I have no clue just how to convey how I feel, I'm ready to try. Part of my nerves are actually fear. Fear that I'll knock on this door and no one will answer.

Fear that history will repeat itself.

Don't think I could survive it a second time.

I knock on the door three times with a solid fist, then take a step back and wait. There's not a lot of movement on the other side of the door, so little that I almost wonder if the noises are from the neighboring apartment. But then the door opens, and Lexi is standing there in—

A tee shirt.

My tee shirt from ten years ago.

It's nearly threadbare, bearing more holes and loose strings than anything I own, even. The Rolling Stones lips are faded, and if you didn't know the shirt was a Stones shirt, you couldn't tell.

But I know.

Because that is my shirt. Or, it was.

Back then. It was my favorite fucking shirt. And I didn't know I'd left it at Kelly's.

Lexi folds her arms over her breasts, hiding her hard little nipples from me. Her blonde hair is up in a messy bun on the top of her head, stray strands poking out everywhere. Bags hang beneath her eyes but after a moment of us staring at each other through the threshold of the open door, she speaks.

“Why are you here?”

I take in her long, bare legs, and how goddamn perfect they look peeking out from my shirt.

“I wanted to talk to you and Benny. Before he goes to school and you're off to work,” I tell her, keeping my voice low for the sake of the neighboring apartments. “Can I come in?”

She nods, pulling the door open further for me. “It was first thing in the morning urgent, hmm?” she asks through a yawn, catching it with her hand as she closes and locks the door behind me. At least she's locking the door. I don't like the idea of her and Benny being alone and I know it's fucking asinine because they've been alone most of their lives, but now that I'm in their lives again, I will do everything I can to make their situation better.

I take a few steps inside and spot two old beach towels on the ground, both of them discolored and damp. Her eyes follow my gaze and her cheeks flare with heat. She makes a move to reach the towels, presumably to pick them up and hide them, or whatever. But I stop her with a hand to her hip, stepping toward her, backing her up. We find the wall, and I hold her by the hip against it.

“Don't be embarrassed of the way you live,” I tell her, my voice husky as I try with all my might not to get hard for her right here and now. Her full pink lips tremble a little as I reach up and push silky hair from her face. I know what it's like to live in a place you aren't proud of, but as an adult, I know now that I had nothing to be ashamed of. It wasn't in my control. All I want is to make her see she has nothing to be ashamed of. The life she's built she should be proud of.

Lowering my lips to hers, I don't kiss her, but let our mouths graze as I say, "You should only ever be proud, Lexi. You've done so well for you and Benny."

When she reaches up and slides her hand through the side of my hair, her tits pressing into my chest, I can't help but press my lips to hers. We share a slow kiss, her tongue exploring my mouth like she didn't get enough last night. I let her kiss me the way she likes and when we part, I'm about to tell her everything I've been thinking.

That I want her and Benny to let me help them.

That I want her to want me.

That I want her, period.

But there's a creak, a squealing of hinges, and a cough. Footsteps fill the small hallway adjacent to where we stand, so I drop my hand from her hip and take a cautious step back. Benny will know about us at some point, but I don't want him finding out like this.

I want to have an honest, open conversation with him. With Lexi there.

I wipe my mouth and stuff my hands in my leather jacket pockets and stare down the hall.

Only, it's not Benny that appears.

In panties and a crop t-shirt that leaves very little to the imagination, Kelly appears. She presses a steadying palm to the wall, letting it slide up above her head as she pops one hip, smiling. "Callan Hayes. You found me."

fifteen

...



that orgasm left me boneless.

LEXI

I want to vomit.

“Hello, Kelly,” Callan offers quietly, calmly. I look up at him, searching his eyes for something, for any clues that tell me he is happy to see her. But there’s nothing there but stony, cold green. He looks my way, delivering a wink that fills my stomach with butterflies.

“Mom, there’s a robe hanging on the back of the bathroom door,” I carefully urge. Down the hall, from our room, Benny stirs. I can hear his early morning groan. “Benny’s awake.”

She looks down at the very skimpy remainder of clothing she’s wearing before pressing her hand to her belly, laughter erupting from her. “Don’t worry, Lex. Callan’s seen it all, haven’t you Cal?”

She strides toward him and with every step she gets nearer, my stomach grows a bit sicker. Then her hands are on his chest, and my gaze drops to her bare feet where she’s all rolled up on her toes, pressing into him. Rage fills my veins, dampening my calm. She never appreciated him back then. I don’t care if I was four, five, six or fucking seven. I saw how she left him with us. How she’d never come home. I heard her words, her tone. She never cared about him, she never appreciated him. At all. Does she seriously think that he came back for *her*?

“I’ve missed this body of yours,” she rasps, her voice frail from years of smoking and drinking.

He collects her wrists and slowly moves her hands off his body right as Benny appears behind her, a robe spread between his fists. He drapes it over her before turning on his heel, heading into the kitchen with a yawn.

“Kelly, can I speak to you outside?” Callan asks, and though my body tenses at the fact he wants time with her alone, my gut tells me he isn’t here for her.

And maybe he never was.

Mom wraps the robe around her without thanking or acknowledging Benny, her mascara stained eyes leveled on only Callan. “Sure, sweetie,” she says, dragging her nails down the back of his jacket, over his Broken Wheel patch, as she follows him out. The front door closes and I move quickly, silently plastering myself to the door as I listen. I move between the peephole and pressing my ear to the door, caught between wanting to see and hear.

“So you came back for me after all these years, huh? No one ever tickled your pickle quite the way I did,” my mom says crassly, her voice all syrupy and sweet as she falls into his chest again, this time her hands lifting to cup the back of his neck. With one hand he gently nudges her back. Reactively she folds her arms over her chest.

“I never left, Kelly. Remember? You left. You left without telling me. You left without letting me say goodbye. You left without giving me the option to go with you,” Callan says, clearly trying to keep his voice private but struggling, the veins in his neck growing thick with rage. I don’t blame him. She always does this. She always rewrites history.

“Go with me?” I can’t see her face but in her tone, I hear her smirk. “Cal, I was leaving you. You and all your domestic shit—it was smothering.”

He husks out a laugh, one without humor. “Domestic shit?”

She waves a hand between them. “You were always playing Dad. I didn’t like it.”

He steps closer to her, and my pulse flutters between my legs. “Playing Dad? Yeah, maybe I was. Because they had no real mother.”

Mom snorts. “That’s right Cal, you’re a hero.”

He puts a few paces between them, shoving his hands through his hair. “Kelly—” he starts, and I wonder what he’s going to say, but she doesn’t let him finish his thought.

“So if you aren’t here for me, are you here to play Daddy again?” Mom’s hips sway with confidence as she moves toward him again, eliminating the distance he so carefully placed between them only moments ago. “How’d you find my kids?”

“I met them in town,” he says, telling her the truth.

“How’d you know they were mine?” My mom asks.

Callan’s eyes narrow and he studies my mom for a minute. A minute where I don’t breathe. “How could I forget them? I saw Lex at The Alley and even from twenty feet apart in a crowd with low lights, I knew it was her.”

Mom reaches for his hand but he pulls it back. “Okay so you remembered them. Good for you. If you want to spend more time with them, that would be okay with me. Why don’t we start tonight? Why don’t you come by around eight, take me out to a nice dinner and we can come back here and you can spend time with them.”

He shakes his head. “Why don’t you stay home and spend time with your kids instead of trying to get someone to take you out, hmm?” Callan turns, glancing at the door as if he knows I’m glued to the other side. A moment passes where he internally battles saying goodbye, but with another look at Kelly, he leaves. His boots are heavy down the cement stairs, and the apartment wall rattles a little until he’s at the second floor and we can no longer feel each step he takes.

Mom comes back in, slamming the door and shirking out of the robe all at once. “I’m going to bed,” she announces before disappearing down the hall and closing her bedroom door.

In the kitchen, I look at Benny who stands over the coffee pot, scooping grounds into the hopper. He yawns, rubbing his sleep-filled eye with the butt of his palm. “Callan and Kelly reunited,” he deadpans.

I shake my head. “I need caffeine before I can even process that,” I lie, knowing the real thing that I need to process is the fact that seeing Callan with my mom made me angry, jealous and hugely territorial. I grab my phone from the counter and tell Benny I’m taking a shower, then slip into the bathroom and lock the door.

I send Callan a text and wonder if this is why he gave his number to Benny, at least partially.

Thank you for what you said.

I didn’t know Kelly was home.

She showed up last night.

But thank you

For what?

Telling Mom to stay home.

I mean, I know she won’t. And honestly we’re better without her now. But sometimes, I just wish more people told her the truth. No one ever does.

I wanted to talk to you and Ben this morning

Lunch tomorrow?

Sure

Have a good day

You too. Tomorrow, Cafe Paradise. Noon.

I start the shower and get in, leaving my phone unlocked on the counter. Every few minutes, I reach out of the water and tap the screen, keeping it alive. Something about seeing his words on my screen make me feel closer to him. I reread our conversation, I replay his words to my mom, and manage to get through another long day working a double at The Alley.

When I get home, it's late and Benny has left me a note telling me two important things:

Lex,

Mom took off. And I have my algebra test tomorrow, so I'm in bed early tonight. I left a burger and fries in the fridge for you.

Love ya. Benny

The entire day I thought about Callan. About what we did behind Mecca. Me being perched on his bike, feeling his hair as he moaned into my pussy. His lips on mine and the trail of fire he left in my belly after that night.

I don't even eat the burger and fries. I change my clothes in the bathroom, reread my texts with him one more time, and get in bed. Benny's noise canceling headphones are on as he sleeps deeply in the bed across the room from mine.

He never wakes with those things on. And he's a sound sleeper, thank God.

I move my feet through the sheets and blink up at the ceiling. I'm afraid to close my eyes. Because I know where my brain is headed.

To him.

To the way his thick fingers felt pressed into my thighs as he held me to his broad chest and brought me to orgasm.

My first at the hands of anyone but myself.

I wonder if he could tell that I'd never come with anyone before him. But as parts of that day come rushing back, my lower half thrums with unspent, eager energy.

He stood up to Mom. He's so good with helping Benny without making him feel like a charity case. And I can still see

those emerald eyes raking over me all those weeks ago.

He didn't lie when he said he knew it was me right away.

I reach down, cautioning a glance at a sleeping Benny. He is, as I suspected, still asleep. With my fingers at my waistband, I take a pause, telling myself that I shouldn't do this. Not only should I *not* rub one out while my brother sleeps next to me, but I shouldn't romanticize Callan so much after one incident.

We haven't talked about it, and I don't know where we stand. Who knows, he could have been coming over to blow us off today. I smirk into the darkness at how ridiculous that thought is. Because of all the shit I do have to worry about, Cal being a flake isn't one.

Of that I'm sure.

I roll onto my side, snagging one of my pillows and tugging it down between my legs. Humping your pillow is the poor girl's vibrator, but it's also a lot quieter than fingering myself. Quietly, I shimmy down the old pajama pants and panties, keeping them hooked on one ankle so I can easily find them when I'm... *done*.

Carefully, I slip the pillow between my thighs again, aligning the seam with my pussy. From the side of the bed, I retrieve my phone and trap myself beneath the covers, turning on my phone's flashlight.

I suck in a hot breath, trapping it in my chest. With the light shining on my bare pussy, I reach down and gently run my fingers over my swollen, pink lips. Just thinking about him all day has me a sticky, achy mess. I slide the pillow up so that the edge nudges my clit, and turn the flashlight off.

Slowly, I begin rolling my hips at the perfect speed—quick enough to begin relieving all the burning pressure in my cunt and slow enough not to make the bed frame creak. My eyes flutter closed as I hold the top of the pillow to my body in a desperate hug, my hips roving a little quicker.

The soft down rubs against my center, making my spine roll and my toes curl. I imagine my groin draped over his,

grinding into him, bringing us both much needed relief.

I saw him that evening on the bike. I saw the bulge in his jeans, the way he was thick and hard for me.

The need in my lower half seizes up, pulling together tightly as my hips rove quicker. The explosion has been building since he dropped me off the other night, and as I remember his stubble between my thighs, I break.

Biting hard into my bottom lip, I ride the edge of that pillow pretending it's Callan and I come. I come so hard that copper floods my tongue. I gasp, pressing my face into the pillow as I smooth my tongue over the fresh puncture in my lip, my thighs still quivering as I come down from my orgasm.

I came imagining the noises *he makes* when he comes. I came imagining him inside me, taking the thing I've been clinging to unreasonably for years. I came for him.

And as soon as I'm feeling more sated and sober, I look over and find Benny still sound asleep. If I had an extra ounce of energy to feel guilty about easing the Callan ache between my thighs while in the room with my brother? I'd definitely feel guilty.

But that orgasm left me boneless, and the idea of lunch with Callan tomorrow has me falling asleep with a smile curling my lips.

sixteen

...



maybe a better man would be.

CALLAN

I hadn't planned on asking Kelly for shit. Not for permission, or any other goddamn thing. But I also hadn't planned on seeing her again, either.

Which I realize sounds fucking asinine and likely is because no matter how flaky the woman is, if I'm wanting to have her kids in my life on a very regular basis, I was bound to run into her.

Now that I've seen her with my own eyes and made the unshocking realization that she is indeed the same fucking trainwreck she was all those years back, I feel like a conversation is in order. Not asking her for anything but rather, trying to get her to see reason.

While I have no clue what the fuck I'm gonna say to her to get her to see that reason, I don't have much time to decide. As I'm sitting at the desk in Mecca, working on a project I've been putting hours in on for the last few weeks, Kelly appears in front of the glass double doors.

She cups her hands to the glass, peering in, fighting the way sunlight mirrors into her face. I know the moment she spots me, because a little smirk plays at her lips before she wraps her hand around the door and yanks it open. I swear the bell doesn't even want to clatter as the door traps it in the jam when it closes.

As Kelly storms my way, I motion behind her with a tip of my head. "You closed the door on the bell. Fix it."

She turns, looks at the bell, and continues toward me. "I won't be long, I'll get it on the way out."

That irritates me but it shouldn't. Old dogs don't change their spots or whatever the fuck and Kelly was never a sweet,

caring woman. When I met her years back, I wanted to fuck her. I can admit as much.

But she was never a sweetheart. I learned real quick she wasn't even *decent*. Lexi and Benny are good kids because of Lexi; Kelly's got no claim to it.

"What're you doing showing up at my apartment before eight in the morning, Cal? Hmm?" she asks, leaning onto the glass counter, toward me. Her bracelets clank against the surface, and her cheap perfume singes the hairs in my nose. I lean back into my chair, folding my arms over my chest.

"Came to talk to Lex and Ben," I say, surprised at how normal it feels to be talking about them like this again. So much time is between us and the three of us are so different from who we were back then, but being together again? That feels natural. "Ben's been getting lessons here. I like spending time with him, he's a good kid. A great kid."

Kelly drums her nails, not saying a word. Hell, I don't even know if she heard me.

"I haven't got as much time with Lex," I tell her, heated guilt stalking up the back of my neck as one of Lexi's soft moans flanks my memories.

"But you're planning on it, huh?" she asks, drawing my focus to her long pink nails as she continues to drum them impatiently against the glass surface.

I tip my head to the side, refusing to look where her other hand strokes along her collarbone. That move worked on me ten years ago, but I sure as shit am not looking at her tits anymore.

"That's the plan, yeah." Reaching down, I knock open the little fridge below the counter and snag two cans of Coke, sliding her one. "Listen," I say, extending my leg beneath the counter to push a stool out, indicating to Kelly I'd like her to sit. "I'd like to talk to you a minute."

Kelly sits, pushing her long blonde hair over her shoulders, likely to draw more attention to the way she's got her tits

pushed to her chin. I don't take the bait. "You know, things between me and you weren't ever real serious, right?"

She rolls her eyes, reaching up with her long nails to pluck a clump of mascara from her lashes. Her bracelets clatter together with each movement she makes. "Ah, you got your feelings hurt that I left and you've been waiting ten years to tell me you didn't actually love me, huh?" Her smirk draws zero emotion from me. I truly don't care if she believes what she just said or not.

I shake my head, unable to admit that I need her to know we were never serious because I'm falling for her daughter and it would be weird if I'd loved her first. "I had a ring. I was gonna marry you," I tell her, looking up to meet her eyes.

"For them," I add as she opens her soda can with her knuckle, blue eyes narrowed my way. "I was gonna marry you for them."

"If you fucking love kids so much, how come you don't got any of your own?" she asks, bringing the Coke to her lips. She's missing the fucking point completely. I don't love kids.

"I don't love kids, Kelly. I love Lexi and Ben," I clarify. Then, as she's sipping her carbonated drink, I shoot my shot. The strangest shot I've ever taken, but still, I take it. "Let them stay with me, Kel. You can come hang out with them whenever you want. But if you let them live with me, I can give them stability."

Lifting the can, she tips it sideways, letting a heavy stream of dark soda pour over the counter, down the sides of the glass, into the flooring. "Fuck you, Callan. You think you're gonna come be their hero and bring them to your house, hmm? They're adults now. They don't need you, and they don't need your help. Quit trying to be a goddamn hero!" She spits in my direction. "Pathetic."

I don't give a shit about her pouring soda out or spitting at me in Mecca. Both are just messes that can be cleaned. The mess she's leaving in their hearts and heads, that ain't something anyone can easily fix. And I'd like to prevent as much damage as possible, the same way Gram did for me.

I snatch a chamois from below the counter. I use them to polish guitar bodies and bouts when I'm through with the sanding phase. But they can clean angry soda pours, too.

Coming around the counter, I begin cleaning her mess as I speak calmly to her. "I'm not trying to be a hero. I'm trying to help them."

"They don't need help," she retorts, her jewelry jingling as she tugs her purse up her arm.

"Put aside all your offended shock and just think about it. Okay?" I crouch to wipe the side of the glass counter, and that's when the bell sounds. Peering over my shoulder, I watch the door swing closed with Kelly on the other side, walking away.

Well, fuck.

Now not only is she angry, but if I know her, she's going to try and keep me from seeing Lex and Ben. Today I'd wanted to talk to them about spending more time together and potentially coming to live with me.

I know it's a big bold move after only reconnecting for a few weeks but... vomit. That's what I smelled when I walked into their place yesterday morning.

I don't give a goddamn how well they can take care of Kelly and themselves. The point is, they shouldn't have to.

After washing the soda off my hands and tossing the rag into the laundry hamper that goes to my place, I grab my phone and send Lex a text.

Gotta reschedule lunch for another day.

The way she reads my text immediately makes me feel so fucking guilty to cancel, but I don't know what to say to them now. Kelly is going to try and stop any effort I make with them, at least until a new shiny idiot doctor comes along. In the meantime, I've got to change my tactics.

Bummer but I understand.

I got called into work early so if we aren't having lunch, I'm gonna take the extra hours. I could use the money.

Go. Have a good shift.

Have a good night.

I slide my phone back into my pocket and get back out front just in time to catch Amir sailing through the doors, a huge grin on his face.

"Today's the day!" he beams, skipping toward me, his blue backpack bouncing around behind him.

I can't help but fuckin' smile at this kid. "Today's the day," I say, opening my top drawer to pull out the sheets of music waiting for him. I place them on the counter as he drops his bag to the ground, reaching around the counter to grab his ukulele. I always get it out and have it ready for him when he comes.

He strokes his finger tips down the strings as he eyes the paper. "Lynard Skynard," he reads proudly.

I nod. "You're ready." Then, I make sure he knows what to expect. "It's going to sound bad. These are easy riffs and the tempo is pretty patterned. But it's your first time playing on your own. Don't expect to sound good. But at the same time," I say, cupping his shoulder as I level my gaze at him. "When you get those goosebumps from hearing yourself play an actual song, no matter how pro or amateur you sound, live it up. Nothing feels better than enjoying your own accomplishments."

Amir nods, his eyes wide and glistening. I love how excited he is, how hard he's willing to work, and how he never gets too discouraged.

Amir starts playing and I get a little lost. Not in the off-beat rendition of *Sweet Home Alabama* but in myself.

Kelly asked me why I don't have kids of my own if I love kids so much and I said I don't love kids. But I do love Amir.

He's got a good spirit and a good heart. I genuinely want him to succeed and though stolen guitar lessons brought us together, now, I care far beyond the strings.

I've never met someone I wanted to see the next morning, let alone for a lifetime. I guess I never thought about having kids because the key components to getting them have always been missing. And growing up an only child, I guess I just never imagined having my own family. When I met Mars and the MC, a family came to me, and at the time that was enough.

I'm realizing now that maybe... I want more.

I hate that those words bear a dual meaning. I do want Ben and Lex, I want to help them with whatever I can. I want to do far more than teach Ben the fucking guitar.

But there's a whole other side to the coin when it comes to Lexi Fisher.

I've never put a woman on my bike and eaten her pussy in public before. I've never pushed a woman away when she reached for my cock, either. And though we haven't even gone on a single fucking date, I'd marry her. Right now. To-fucking-day.

I know that's crazy.

Fuck.

But it's true.

It feels like she's what I've been waiting for my whole life. If I'm being real, it felt that way ten years ago when I crouched to a knee and told a four year old girl she could comb my hair. Now it feels the same but... with more.

I put my eyes on Lexi Fisher and a live wire whips around inside me, sending sparks of light and heat all through me, making me come alive like never before.

And it's not a feeling I can fight.

I can only trudge toward it, willing to battle anything or anyone that comes between us. I don't want Kelly to be one of those, but I know she will be.

After Amir's lesson is over, Kenny comes by and brings a friend.

They watch the front for an hour while I lock myself away in the office and drag out the big black box containing my project. I pop in my headphones and get to work, tuning out the noise in my brain as I focus on the task at hand.

I'm so engrossed in what I'm doing, Kenny's knock startles me.

"Callan, my mom's out front. She's honkin' so I gotta go," he says, smiling at me, his mouth gleaming with metal.

I nod. "Thanks, Kenny. See you next week."

I follow behind him, stopping at the desk as I watch him filter out the doors and run into the lot, into his mom's van. With a quick glance at the clock on the wall, I see it's early. I decide to sweep and after that, mopping makes sense. And when I get through wringing out the mop, restocking the mini fridge, organizing the guitar picks, printing new sheet music for Kenny and tuning Amir's ukulele, it's still fucking early.

I hate that I canceled lunch. I hate that Kelly got in my fucking head. Or... I don't know. Was it Kelly or did I just get in my own way? When I lock up Mecca and start off toward The Alley, I don't know if going to talk to her is right or wrong, but it doesn't feel like I have a choice in it.

The need to see her and be with her is overwhelming.

The lights are low in The Alley when I enter, and most of the lanes are empty. It's slow tonight, mostly because there's a football game going on at the high school, and half the town is there.

A few guys from the Wheel are in the pool hall, and I head in there and shake some hands for a few minutes to say hello. But then my skin grows warm and my feet feel all fucking itchy. I have the strongest urge to blow off my brothers and storm through the space until I'm at the rental desk.

Instead, I take a deep breath and move through my friends, talking a few minutes before finally, after the longest twenty minutes of my life, I'm free.

One step outside the pool hall onto the stained, formerly blue and maroon carpets, and my eyes fall on her.

And my chest.

Goddamn my chest.

Don't think a vice grip could squeeze as tight as her gaze makes it clench. A lump of stalled words and heated breaths get trapped in my throat as I slide into a stool at the rental counter. She passes a bit of change back to a patron and slowly turns to me.

Her blonde hair is half up today, with a navy blue ribbon tied around her little partial ponytail. I swear a growl erupts from me like angry, bulldozing lava when I spot the thing. A little fucking bow.

God.

I blink at that bow, wondering if I'm absolutely horrible for wanting a woman so young. Age has always been about experience to me, and despite that little school girl ribbon she's got tied in her hair, I know she's all woman. Pure force mixed with fire and brains to boot. Not to mention, she's drop dead gorgeous.

"Hi," I offer, my throat dry and my voice hoarse. I set my hands on the counter, and enjoy the pride that infuses me as her eyes trace my ink. She likes my tattoos, and I'm glad for that. I remember wondering if they'd scare her when she was a little girl. She liked them then, and I realized I got lucky then too.

It feels like when I'm with her, I'm always getting lucky.

And as she drags her fingers along the glass, her arm outstretched behind her, a seductively sweet smirk on her lips as she comes my way, I have a brief flash of when I got lucky behind Mecca.

Her pussy was the best thing I've ever fucking tasted.

I'm not just saying that.

I reach between my legs and adjust my thickening cock, wondering how I'm gonna get through this night without a

dark spot on my damn jeans.

“Hey, I’m surprised to see you,” she says, stopping right in front of me, but leaning back against the bartending counter rather than over the bar toward me.

She’s so different from Kelly.

I swallow hard, trying to look like my heart isn’t racing and my dick isn’t fucking throbbing. “Yeah... I’m sorry I canceled lunch.” I clear my throat and pull my eyes from her mouth, forcing them to her gaze. “Your mom came to Mecca.”

She arches a brow, but leans forward a bit, off the bar, no longer casual but trying to appear that she is. That’s the abandoned kid in her. I know it all too well. Always hide the panic because if people see, they start asking questions. Never let them ask questions. Always make them believe you’re fine.

Because you could be a whole lot worse.

“Oh God,” she bemoans, licking her lips as she draws nearer to me. “I’m sorry.” She looks at her feet for a split second then back up to me again. “Whatever she said or did, I’m... sorry.”

“Don’t apologize for her, Lexi. That’s not your job.” Kelly fucking grates my goddamn nerves and has for too long. I let out a long sigh. “I think I’m stepping on her toes by wanting to spend time with you two.”

She looks down at the register then back to me. Her eyes are such a rich, vibrant blue that she puts a beautiful summer sky to shame. Thick, dark lashes blink at me as I stare at her, my dick thrumming behind my fly. “We haven’t had much time together,” she says quietly, and when she smirks, I swear to God, I groan. I groan out loud.

“Lex,” I growl, trying to turn the feral, rugged noise that came out of me into something tangible, something less carnal. “Lex, we need to talk.”

I don’t know where I’m taking this but thank God she doesn’t let me get far. “Callan, I’m not wearing any panties tonight. See, I was wearing some earlier but I kept thinking about this guy I like.” She rolls her lips together, and I think

right then and there, if the devil approached me, I'd give him anything in exchange for seeing those things wrapped around the base of my dick.

Fu-uck.

“I was so wet that I actually got sticky and uncomfortable. So I slipped into the ladies room and got rid of them. But now...” she looks down at herself, clutching the ends of her knee-length pleated black skirt in both fists. She teases like she's going to lift it, slowly picking it up before letting it sail down to her legs in torturous slow motion. Or so it feels. “Anyway, I'm just worried that if I don't remedy the ache soon, I'll start dripping. My thighs will get all sticky and...” she swallows, “shiny. And the men here, the men in the pool hall,” she continues, her words lighting a match in my veins, turning my blood to fire. “They'll see, and they'll know. And they'll think it's for them.”

“Stop. Fucking. Talking,” I growl, my nostrils flaring as I struggle to keep my volume in check. She's goading me, begging me in her own way to take her out back and fuck her brains out. “Brat,” I rasp, shaking my head, trying to focus on her playful smirk and not the way my cock is literally pulsing in quaking, rhythmic waves. My orgasm is building, and I hate that it's starting so soon.

“What do you want to talk about?” she asks, glancing back at the red numbers glowing on the wall. “I'm off in twenty. I started early.”

I lick my lips and drag a hand down my beard, needing to refocus. Desperately. “Lex, we need to talk about things.”

“If you're gonna tell me this is wrong,” she starts, taking a few steps backward, a customer waiting at the other end of the bar. “I'm gonna fight you.” She winks then spins, giving her focus to some other lucky bastard.

I take the moment to grab a breath, exhaling through my mouth. If I get inside of her, there's no going back. I know that with all certainty. I want this woman in ways I didn't know were possible.

And I want them now. Immediately. If not sooner.

She returns, adjusting her bow.

I shrug my shoulders, adjusting the fit of my leather jacket on my torso. “That bow,” I growl.

“Like it?” she asks, winking at me.

Goddamn that wink. I lean forward over the bar and spread my knees wide underneath, giving myself room to grow. Which I do, quickly. And painstakingly.

“My house. As soon as you’re off work. I’m taking you there so we can talk.” My pulse is throbbing at the base of my throat, my ears are ringing and my cock is weeping. “Lex...” I trail off, unable to say what I need to. I’m afraid if I do, I’ll scare her, and I’m afraid if I don’t, I’ll lose her. I remain motionless as I say, “You drive me goddamn insane. I can’t stop thinking about you. Morning and night, when I’m riding, when I’m working on a bike, when I’m fucking asleep, it’s you I’m dreaming about. So I know when I get to have you that way, when I get to get inside you and have the honor of making you mine, I know it’s gonna be a one and done for me. One time and you’re mine forever, no question.”

My heart careens, and I don’t know if my admission was a mistake or not but I can’t take her to my house without her knowing where I stand. And I want to be perfectly clear that I want her, and I’m not afraid to admit it.

Maybe I should be. *Maybe* a better man would be.

But as wrong as it feels to fall for a woman whom I held and loved as a little girl, it also feels so complete and so fucking right.

She licks her lips. “Pick me up out back.”

Holy shit. “I will,” I agree, finally allowing myself to discover her body, every beautiful inch. When I bring my eyes to hers again I’m fully hard and already brainstorming all the ways I want to make her come. “But I’m waiting right here for the last few minutes of your shift.”

Of course, she rolls her eyes. “I’ll be fine, you know.”

“You really are a brat,” I comment, because the shoe definitely fits.

Turns out, *I like brats*.

She turns to help a customer but stops short, her hand on the soda water pump as she peers at me over her shoulder. “Why don’t you spank me then, *Daddy*,” she winks and walks away.

I don’t like the nickname, but her smart mouth and tight ass have me wishing I could time travel or that nine minutes would go by way fucking faster.

seventeen

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he ate me out on his motorcycle.

LEXI

Taking off my panties in the bathroom of The Alley wasn't really planned. But when Callan sauntered in looking like an orgasm in a leather jacket, all my good intentions kind of... slipped away.

He canceled lunch and I figured it was because he'd been feeling guilty over what we did. As much as I knew he'd want to talk about things, I also wondered if he'd even let himself get to that conversation. And I was right.

He didn't.

He canceled and I let him, because if there's one thing I know, it's that pressing someone when all they need is a little time and perspective? It never works.

Case in point.

Callan is sitting at the bar waiting for my shift to end, waiting to take me back to his place.

Holy shit, *I'm going to Callan's place*. As a kid, I'd been there a few times but not too often, since he rode a bike. If we ever went there, mom brought us.

As I make the end of evening small talk with a patron at the end of the bar, my till out and in the process of being counted out, I feel his eyes on me.

It feels so good yet so surreal that Callan Hayes is here.

He ate me out on his motorcycle.

I clench my thighs together at the memory, dropping the final handful of pennies back into the waiting register drawer. He wants me to go back to his house and even though we haven't really discussed so many of the things we need to talk about, he did tell me one very crucial bit of information.

He wants to fuck me, and when he does, he won't be able to quit me.

My entire life I've been waiting for Callan Hayes not to quit me. To want me forever and always.

After shoving my apron beneath the counter, I say goodbye to the janitor and the girl finishing my shift, and before I know it, his eyes are on me.

He rises from his spot at the counter, and his large, towering frame, dark hair and ink always take my breath away, but knowing I'm going with him? I'm nearly incoherent.

His gaze crawls over every inch of me, hovering on the hem of my skirt before his green eyes reach back up to mine. "Where's Benny?"

"At home," I tell him. "He's studying."

He licks his lips, and despite his calm composure, his struggle shines in his eyes, pupils heavily bleeding into shining irises. "And he's okay for a few hours?"

"I'll call him," I tell Callan. The truth is, Benny is okay alone for hours. But he's never spent a night alone, not without me.

Callan fishes his fingers between mine as we walk toward the back exit, and it startles me to a stop. I blink down at his art covered hand swallowing my slender one. "You're... you don't care if the MC sees?" I glance back over my shoulder, narrowing my gaze to bring the pool hall into focus. A few men linger, their Broken Wheel vest visible under the melting golden lights.

His dark brows pull together as his thumb strokes over my knuckles. My spine breaks out in a hot sweat, heart racing at the intimate but casual gesture. "You think I'm ashamed of you?"

I shake my head, unsure of what I was even asking now that he's rubbing my knuckles so calmly. "I just... I don't know. I figured you wouldn't want anyone to see us together."

A wild growl ping pongs through his muscular chest, and I raise my other hand to his pecs, pressing it against his flannel. “I’m just... this is new to me.”

His eyes search mine a moment before they fall to my mouth. “This is new to me, too.” He lifts our joined hands, kissing the top of mine before we fall into an easy stride again, coming to the private exit in under a minute.

We’re both new to being together, and being together in his small hometown.

But that’s not quite what I meant.

He hands me a helmet once we’re out back, and slides his on over his messy dark hair. “I’m gonna make that call to Benny now.”

While adjusting the clip under my chin, he nods. “I’m not taking you anywhere ‘til we know what’s up with Benny and if he’s all good.” He finishes tightening the strap, steps back, surveying it once more before going in for a final adjustment. His rough fingertips brush the soft underside of my chin, making my pussy thrum in response, pulsing waves rolling through me.

“Thank you,” I reply quietly, my heart racing from the subtle gesture of making sure my helmet is on right. I pull out my phone, calling the landline at the apartment. As it begins to ring, I get nervous. Then I shoot him a mischievous grin and pop off the helmet. “Do that again in a minute because I can’t talk on the phone with it on.”

He grumbles, but smirks. “Coulda told me that before.”

I smile. “I liked watching you take care of me.” It’s so true, and my stomach flutters knowing what’s potentially coming next.

I don’t know what’s going to happen with me and Callan at his place, but I know that if I can’t get a hold of Benny, I can’t go. Benny is my first priority, no matter how much I want to be with Callan.

Relief has me smiling like a fool when he answers on the third ring. “Hello?”

“Hey Ben, it’s me. How’s studying going?”

He sighs. “I haven’t been able to do much.”

“No?” I put my back to Callan, not because the conversation is private but because the wind picks up, tossing air across the receiver.

“Mom’s here still,” Benny says quietly, “and Aunt Trista is here, too. They’re... *playing cards*.”

Callan appears, arms folded across his chest. “Blocking the wind,” he mouths, then looks up at the moon, focusing on the sky as I finish my talk with Benny.

“I was going to... stay a little later at The Alley,” I lie, hating that I’m lying to him. I don’t lie to Benny, and I’m not lying to him now because I don’t trust him or want to hurt him. I’m lying, as most people do, out of selfishness.

I feel extreme guilt for being so drawn to Callan. I feel guilt for having time with him alone. I know Benny is growing attached to Callan, and I want the three of us to have endless time together. But tonight isn’t about the kind of love *the three of us* share.

Tonight is about whatever is happening between me and Callan and because I have no idea what that is, I don’t know how to talk about it. I don’t know how to answer questions about it.

“That’s fine. I’m okay here,” he says, high pitched giggling sounding off behind him.

“How’s Aunt Trista?” I ask of the woman we *call* aunt but has zero blood relation. She helped us leave Oakcreek all those years back, but once we got to San Francisco, Trista left. And we haven’t seen much of her since.

“Same,” Benny sighs. “Anyway, you have your key, right?”

“Right.”

“Alright. Sorry you gotta stay late but... I’ll see you later,” Benny says with a yawn.

“My headphones are under my mattress, if you want to try and study in our room,” I tell him before adding, “See you later. Night Ben.”

We end the call and I look up to find those gorgeous green eyes pinned on me. “You’re a good sister, Lexi.”

My eyes grow hot at the unexpected compliment. I slide my phone in my purse and hand it to him. He stuffs it under his jacket and zips up, extending a hand to me. “Moment of truth,” he says as I lift a leg to throw over the saddle.

I position myself on the back of the bike, blinking at him through the hazy moonlight. Reaching out, I take his hand, bringing it to my center. “Lift the skirt,” I whisper.

His swallow is audible, and it makes my core clench. The fact that a man like Callan Hayes wants me is drunkening.

I’ve never been shy but I’ve also never been with a guy this way—this playful, seductive, teasing, sexual way.

His fingers curve around the fabric, my focus hovering on his eyes as he lifts. In a split second they grow wide before immediately falling victim to heady, hooded lids. “No more of this. You want my fucking attention, it’s yours. But I don’t want you out there like this, on display. You hear me?”

His words are captivating, arousing, and bold. They’re meant to take care of me, to warn me, to punish me, to show me how much I mean to him. And they do all of those things. I nod, a knot of adoration stuck in my throat.

Dropping the skirt, he grips my chin around the helmet strap and tips my face to his. His grip is tight and menacing, but guiding and transformative. “Say you won’t do it again, babygirl.”

I swallow thickly, my nipples suddenly so hard that the thin fabric of my polo feels like a goddamn cage. “I won’t do it again.”

“Hmm,” he gruffs, stealing his hand away. Then he straddles the bike and wraps my arms around his core, bringing his chin to his shoulder to speak to me. “Hold on

tight, and when we get to my place, you're gonna pay the price for tossing those panties."

I bite into my bottom lip, need and desire fusing together in my chest. I can't wait to get to his place.

I clip my helmet back on.



The drive there is too short. Even though it's twelve minutes from when we leave The Alley until the garage door is closing behind us, it's just not enough time.

I'm afraid that once he gets inside of me, I'll be his. And the thing with being his is that, to me, it's not a temporary thing. I feel so drawn to Callan Hayes that I know if I let him inside my body, if I give him my virginity and let him see how badly I want him, I'll fall. I'll fall so fast, so hard and so deep that if he changes his mind, if I have to go without him again after having him again... I won't recover.

And I'm scared to take that leap.

Callan slides my helmet off my head and smooths his fingers through my hair. "I'll get you back, okay?"

I nod. "Okay."

His lips brush mine, and bumps erupt along my spine when his stubble grates my palms as I take his face in my hands. "I want you," I whisper to him, my voice quieter than I'd like. Telling him I'm not ready is so hard because in so many ways, I *am* ready. Hell, I'm the one who's been teasing him all night.

But if we have sex, I'll fall in love.

Not because he'll be my first.

But because I'm already falling.

“But we can’t have sex tonight, Callan,” I breathe, despising the words that I have to speak. Hating how I have to be strong always. I can never just have what I want, feel what I feel, be young and carefree. I always have to keep a level head on my shoulders. I always have to be smart and vigilant.

I’ll thank myself for this later, though, and as he nods, and brings his mouth to mine, I remind myself that when he’s packed up and moved on, I’ll be so fucking happy I didn’t let myself have this night the way I want.

“First, I want to say, dinner tomorrow, you, me and Ben,” Callan says as he breaks our kiss, both of us slightly breathless. He speaks through panted breaths. “And we’ll have the talk I should have had with you guys today.”

I nod. “Great.”

His lips are on my throat, sliding down until they cover my pulse. He licks and sucks and I moan and writhe, looping my arms around his neck as he kisses me. Grinding into me, his hard length presses against my belly through his jeans, and I drop my hand between us, desperate to feel *how I make Callan Hayes feel*.

But he catches my wrist.

“Only you tonight, babygirl,” he rasps, dragging the tip of his nose against mine before smashing our mouths together again, continuing our searing kiss. I want him, I want to feel every part of his body, from each delicate line of ink to every swollen curve of his muscles. I want to feel his hair between my fingers, his skin against mine... his cum on my tongue or splattering wild and chaotically against my lips... I want to feel it spearing through my walls, filling me, leaving me warm and sated and... *changed*.

But as I hold his gaze, my body on fire for him, I find the truth in those words. *Only me tonight*. Something about that sounds a lot like *I’m afraid to give myself to you, too*. Maybe he would’ve stopped us before we had sex, too. In fact, as our mouths come together again, our kiss much softer now, I wonder.

“I’m serious, I don’t want you leaving your body bare this way ever again,” he says before he bends, places an arm behind my knees and lifts me up easily. Holding me against his chest, he carries me through the dark garage, the smell of motor oil and lawn clippings making me love drunk. I’m in his space, presumably moving through his house, but I don’t know anything for sure until he kicks the door closed somewhere and utters, “my room.” And even though we aren’t going to have sex, what happens now is going to be transformative.

I can feel it in the way my cunt quivers and aches, the way my heart dashes behind my ribs, the way my mind settles.

I don’t worry about Benny for once—I know he’s home, and he’s okay.

I don’t worry if wanting my mom’s ex boyfriend is wrong.

I don’t worry if my inexperience will turn him off.

He lowers me to the bed and the same silence that settles over me permeates the space between us, wearing off onto him. We stare at each other in the dense, dark space, and as much as I want to take in all the details of Callan’s home, I don’t move my head at all.

Memory lane and new discoveries will all be there after this.

I pat the bed next to me, surprised at how bold I am when I’m with him. His grin illuminates my heart. “Lift that skirt and lie back.”

His gravelly voice paired with the way he collects his hair in his hands, wrapping an elastic around the mess to keep it behind his head—it drives me wild. Digging my heels into the mattress, I drive myself back until I’m flush with the headboard. He toes out of his boots and unbuttons his flannel, and drool pools beneath my tongue as he reaches behind himself, grabbing his henley at the back of his neck. With a swift tug, he’s shirtless and I’m putty.

“Did you have all of those back then?” I ask, surveying the canvas of beautiful eclectic art inked into his flesh.

He volleys his head. “Some. Not my chest. Got that... after.”

Kneeing his way onto the mattress, he stops when he reaches my feet, towering over me. I lift my skirt but his eyes stay faithfully trained on mine. “I want you to know that if I thought we could be together safely right now,” I tell him, my voice flimsy as the words take my strength. “We would. Because I want you, Callan. I don’t care that you used to be hers. I don’t care that you’re older than me. I. Don’t. Care.”

A twitch rolls through his hips as he listens. God he’s so handsome. Rugged and tough but behind the leather and ink, with broad shoulders, a square jaw and steely eyes, there’s no mistaking he’s handsome as much as he’s tough looking.

“But,” I continue, but he presses a finger to my lips.

“I know,” he drawls, slow and easy, draining the small amount of nerves from my belly with just that remark. “So let me make you come. Let me have the honor of tasting and touching your sweet, perfect pussy of yours until you can’t think straight.”

I don’t know what to say, so I nod, and clutch the mountainous range of his shoulders as he clamps his mouth to my pussy. “Callan,” I breathe. He moves his mouth against my most sensitive place, pressing a gentle kiss to my clit before circling it with the tip of his tongue.

“Hmm,” he hums against my wet pussy, making noises of pleasure as he teases and tortures my clit. I tip my head back against the headboard as my knees widen. Callan nuzzles into my pussy as he slips his arms beneath my legs, resting them over his shoulders.

On his belly against his bed, with my feet on his lower back, he goes down on me slowly and casually, as if he’s in no hurry to make me come and is instead focused on discovering all of me, making me feel like a vibrating puddle on the way. As my orgasm builds, my spine growing fiery while my limbs slowly lose feeling, I stroke my fingers over his hair, awestruck by the sight of him between my thighs.

He notches two thick fingers at my opening, and though I'm literally a wet, dripping mess and he'll probably slide inside me easily, it feels like he should be warned.

"A towel," I rasp amidst the chaos roaring through me, my orgasm centering low in my belly, hot and explosive. I'm so close. "You—you may want to get a towel."

Callan peers up at me over my mound, the small thatch of blonde curls on my pubic bone contrasting to his dark stubble. "Holy shit, baby, are you gonna squirt?"

I wrinkle my nose, pressing myself up to my elbows. "What? No! I mean..." I consider his question a moment as he kisses my clit, waiting for my response. "I don't think so," I finally decide because in truth, can I really say I won't? I don't technically know because I've never done this before.

"What do you mean you don't think so?" he asks, moving his mouth to the soft flesh of my inner thigh. His kisses make me gush but his scruff makes me giggle and flex beneath him.

"I mean, all the times I've..." I stop at the word *masturbated* because I'm a little embarrassed. But if I don't say the word, it's juvenile, and the last thing I need to do is remind this man that I'm much younger. "Made myself come," I decide, liking that collection of words better than *masturbated*. "I never have then."

"What about with your boyfriend or whoever? Do it with any of them?"

I blink down at him, my body growing heated from nerves.

"Fuckin' teenagers," he sighs. "It's not you, Lex. Eighteen year old boys don't know how to eat pussy."

"I've... the only other time a guy has gone down on me has been in an alley behind some guitar store," I say with a wink. But he breezes past my joke, narrowing his eyes on me as he drags his tongue over my clit.

I reach back to let my hair out of the half-ponytail I'd sported at work all day. I drop the ribbon on his bed next to me. His eyes grow hooded as he watches me shake out my

hair, leaving it to curtain around my face and breasts in untamed waves. “I’ve never had a boyfriend.”

He arches a brow.

I lick my lips, trying to commit the sight of him tucked between my open legs, all bare chested and glistening in the moonlight, to memory. I raise my hand. “I’m the poor girl.”

He shakes his head, but he knows he can’t argue against what I’ve said. Because he was the poor kid. Callan knows the social food chain well.

“But the towel wasn’t for that,” I say quietly, waiting as his eyes slowly lift to mine. I move my feet along his lower back, shaking my head. “Nope.”

“You just... not wanting to see the mess on the bed?”

I love his confusion and I love that I’m no longer embarrassed to say the words. I always thought that when it came down to it and I had to tell my partner that they are my first, I’d be horrified... embarrassed they’d laugh, or be shocked, or start to think something was wrong with me. Most girls I got to know at my last school had lost their virginity by sixteen.

“Callan, I’ve never had sex before. I’ve never been fingered, not actually like, *inside*. Just my clit.” I lick my lips, my skin burning from my admission. “I’m a virgin. The towel is for... *blood*.”

I don’t know what I expect him to do in reaction to that truth but what he does surprises me. Blinking, he tips his head to my thigh, resting it there as his fingertips stroke my legs. His mouth is right next to my clit but still, his eyes are on me.

“Baby,” he crows.

Why all of the sudden I get emotional I don’t know, but I do and I can’t fight it. The back of my eyes burn and so does my nose, too.

“I just didn’t want to ruin your bed,” I whisper, trying desperately not to get emotional. If I cry about my stupid

virginity right now, I'm going to look like a fucking high schooler. "Get the towel," I urge. "Please."

He just blinks at me as moonlight paints his back, illuminating the art permanently on his skin. In this moment of shuddering calm, my senses intensify, and I'm suddenly hit with his scent. The fabric softener he used on his bedsheets, the traces of shampoo lingering on my fingertips after digging my hands into his scalp, the faint bit of his cologne and aftershave, all of it overwhelms me in the best ways.

"I'm not gonna use my fingers," he finally says, and before I can argue, his lips are on my clit again, and I'm humming his praise into the air.

He licks and sucks, using his tongue in ways I didn't know were possible. And when the base of my spine grows hot and my cunt throbs, I know it's going to happen, whether I'm ready for this to end or not.

"Callan," I breathe, "I'm gonna come."

Using one hand, he presses it to my groin, applying pressure as he eats me ravenously. The added weight on my pubic bone does something wild, making my clit extra sensitive. One more stroke of his tongue through my pussy and I'm panting, screaming, clawing at his shoulders as I ride his mouth and come in long, unabashed waves of pure ecstasy.

Trembling, I push to my elbows and glance down at him, my chest tightening at his glistening mouth and engorged shoulders and chest. Sweat shines on him everywhere and though this man just made me come so hard I thought I was going to both cry and throw up, I want more of him.

I want his cock.

"Please," I whimper down at him, the last of my orgasm keeping me suspended in a drunken, hopeful state. "Let me touch it. Let me see it." I lick my lips and swallow down my nerves. "Let me taste it."

"Fuck," he groans, sliding off the bed to stand on his bare feet. He does nothing to hide the beguiling bulge trapped by

his denim, and I do nothing to keep secret the fact that I want it.

I stare at it as my channel tingles, the final sated throbs rolling through. “Please,” I quietly beg. Slowly, my eyes eat up the terrain of his bare, art-coated skin, and by the time my eyes are on his, I’m completely ravenous.

But his green eyes hold mine, dark and tempting. “Not yet.”

“Is it because I’m a virgin?” I ask, feeling a little shy now that I’ve come down from my orgasm. Maybe my virginity is a complete turn off.

He sniffs. “No, it’s more like this,” he says, preparing to lay it out for me as he disappears into his bathroom attached to the room, keeping the door open. He wets a hand towel and I swallow a moan at the profile of his bulge.

Returning to the room, he slowly starts cooling down my heated flesh, running the damp terry over my thighs and pussy. “The same way we aren’t having sex, you’re not touching me.”

“But I *want* to touch you.”

“And I want to know what it feels like to be buried inside you. To have your tight warmth all around my cock, milking me for everything I have. Because it all belongs to you. Everything inside me. My heart, my soul, my energy, my time...”

His eyes hold mine, serious in the moonlight. Too serious. His words are everything I want to hear but right now, his bulge has a hold on me and it’s nearly all I can think about.

“Your cum,” I supply, licking my lips as the terry stills over my belly. His green eyes swirl with need as he looks up at me.

“That, too,” he says, his response thick and husky, like he’s fighting the urge to melt down to nothing and give me every single drop of himself.

“Okay,” I tell him, not wanting to twist his arm to have him. When he’s ready to give himself over, when we’re ready to be together, it’ll happen. “I respect that.”

He kisses my inner thigh. “You hungry?”

At that moment, my stomach growls loudly and Callan smirks. “I’m gonna feed you then eat you.” He reaches over the mattress and extends his hand to me. His hands are two of my favorite things in this world, I swear. “Come on.”

Once he has me on my feet, he yanks open a drawer from the nearby dresser, wasting no time in finding me clothes. Passing me a hoodie that will definitely be a dress on me, and a pair of thick woolen socks, he flips on the light.

The room comes into view for the first time since I’ve been here, and my brain rattles a little at the beauty. I don’t know what I expected, but rich gray walls with white wainscoting trimming the space, thick crown molding, espresso hardwoods and deep white window sills with stark white shutters—his room is beautiful. His *home* is beautiful. “Put this on. I don’t want you wearing that Alley uniform here. I want you warm and comfortable.” He strokes a big hand through my very messy hair. “How’s a burger sound?”

My stomach growls again and that earns me a body-burning wink from Callan. “Sounds really good,” I admit with a smile.

Callan steps into the hall, and flips on the light there, too. He heads toward the kitchen, and then I slip into his bathroom, tugging my hair back with one of his elastics. I turn on the sink, staring in the marble basin as the water heats. His house is gorgeous. He’s doing so well.

And if my mom wouldn’t have moved us away all those years back, this could be our life. Because I believe Callan would’ve stayed with us, even if he didn’t love her.

I splash the warm water in my face a few times, rinse out my mouth and blot my face dry with one of the softest towels I’ve ever felt. If she didn’t move us away, and this was the life

I grew up in, that means... he and I would mirror some father/daughter symbiosis instead of what we are now.

And what are we now? I tug on the hoodie and smile when I look down and find it hanging below my knees. One at a time I pull on the long socks, then let my hair down, finger combing it as best as I can. I stare at my reflection. Nothing is special.

Except my eyes.

I smile at myself, and my eyes lift on the corners, paralleling the feeling behind my ribs.

When I'm with Callan, despite our complicated label, I'm *actually* happy. Hopeful, even. Life can be better than checklists, overwhelming responsibility and unending fatigue. There's more to life, and he is the only person to ever help me remember that. To show me that.

In the kitchen, I find Callan the way he left—shirtless, hair pulled back, beautiful torso on tempting display. He's standing over his range, pressing a spatula into a burger, steam drifting all around him.

He looks up when I enter, and the smile that touches his lips sends a confusing mix of emotions through me. I want him so badly but... if he decides he just wants to be casual, I don't think I can do that. I don't think I can separate our deep-seated connection from years back and all the passion and lust I feel now. They've already fused, creating a heady cocktail of desire and... another word I'm not ready to say.

Not even ready to think.

"In the years we were apart," I say, hopping up on the counter to watch him cook. "What was the best thing that happened to you?"

He rests the spatula on the side of the pan. "Opening Mecca."

I don't know why I hadn't expected that to be his answer, but I didn't. Then I realize... I have no idea when he did that. "When did you open?"

He salts the burgers and slides buns into his toaster oven, retrieving cheese, lettuce and condiments from the fridge as he hums thoughtfully. “The year after you guys left. I spent that first year just... trying to find you. And I exhausted my resources, tired the entire MC out. I needed to focus on something. The spot next to The Alley was for sale so I rearranged some things and went full steam ahead.”

“Does it make you happy?” I ask him. I can’t imagine a job that brings you happiness. All of my jobs have been a means to an end.

He considers my question as he runs a long blade through a ripe tomato over a wood cutting board. “It was the one of the only things that made me happy for way too long.”

I watch him as he slices an entire tomato and moves on to a head of romaine lettuce. “What were the other things?”

Retrieving a plastic container from his cupboard, he arranges some of the fixings inside. “The MC. The guys at the Wheel. Rides on my bike. Working with my hands.”

I nod, imagining him doing all of those things.

“But now you and Benny,” he says, dragging the sentence off a cliff.

“Yeah,” I agree. He didn’t articulate what it means that we have each other again, but I understand what he’s feeling. I feel it, too. And so does Benny, I can tell.

“I’m sending two extra home. One for Ben, one for your mom, if she’s there.”

I hate that he’s thinking about my mom at all, but I tamp down the horrendous jealousy and smile. “Thanks, that’s nice of you.”

With his eyes on me, he wraps two hamburger buns in a paper towel, sliding them into a large Ziploc bag. Watching him cook and be domestic shouldn’t turn me on—grown men usually can take care of themselves after all.

But I’ve taken care of everyone for so long. Watching someone take care of things for not just himself but others?

And so easily, without complaint, I can't help it. It's a fucking turn on.

“What about you? What's the best thing that happened to you and Ben after your mom moved you guys to the City? Did you move a lot after that or just back here?”

Callan passes me a plate with a burger built, and though he didn't ask, he doctored it up exactly the way I like—mustard, lettuce, cheese and tomato. He drapes his hand over my wrist as I stare down at the plate of food, my stomach roaring in pain. “You liked it like this when you were seven.”

Swallowing hard, I tip my face to meet his eyes, despite the fact that mine have suddenly gone hot and watery. I nod. “It's exactly how I like it.” *It's exactly what I need. You're exactly what I need.*

I take a bite because I refuse to cry over the fact that he remembered how I like my burger from ten years ago, meanwhile my mother hasn't celebrated my birthday in four years. When I turned eighteen, Benny and I split a donut and snuck into a matinee. Mom didn't even come home.

“I think the best thing that happened to Ben in the last ten years...” I say, talking around the bite of burger because I'm too eager, I can't wait. I want the burger, but I want the conversation just as much, so I take both at the same time.

I'm a glutton for all things Callan.

“Was you. And I know I should have a better answer. I mean, your answer wasn't about us. But I'm not just saying that to... make you feel good, or whatever.” I take another bite and fight the moan crawling up my throat in response. I point to the burger. “So good.”

He winks, crossing his legs at the ankle, resting his tailbone against the counter across from me. He balances a plate in one hand and with the other, wrestles his burger, tipping his head to the side as he feeds himself a bite.

I swear my pussy contracts and swells at the sight of him eating. His throat flexing. Hands gripping.

I'd likely get turned on watching him blow his nose.

“But anyway, it’s the truth. Music time with you has been everything to him.” I force myself to say the next part with all the strength in the world, despite the fact I could easily sob through the sentence. “He’s never had a man in his life that cared to know him. I mean, teachers don’t even care.” I swallow my bite and sip the Diet Coke he’s set out and opened for me. “You’re it.”

His green eyes idle on mine, the heat searing between us having nothing to do with the hot stove or the warm burgers. “I missed you both every day, you know,” he says finally.

I nod. “We missed you too. And I thought about you a lot, too. Benny and I talked about you a ton for years. But at one point, it became torture. I felt like the high school football star that was stuck in his glory days.” I take another sip, ignoring the carbonation stinging my nose and eyes. “I told myself we needed to move on. That our time with you was wonderful and life changing but... *over*.”

He bobs his head slowly a few times, as if his personal understanding of that sentiment runs deep.

“I think the best thing that happened to me in the last ten years,” I continue, rerouting the moment to something happier. This burger is good, I’m with this beautiful, thoughtful man and he just made me come harder than I thought was humanly possible. I don’t want us to get lost in what we lost. I want to bask in what we have. Where we’re going... wherever that is.

“Probably this burger.”

He snorts. “I believe it. I’m a legend in the kitchen.” His teasing gaze roves over me, and though I know he’s being playful, something tells me everything Callan sets his mind to is probably incredible.

When we’re done eating, he packages up the food for my brother and mom, adding in napkins and cans of Diet Coke. After it’s bagged up and ready to go, he comes to me at the counter, standing between my legs. Without warning or words, he closes in on me, bringing his stubbled face to my neck. Carving a trail of slow, warm kisses, he works down my

throat, to my collarbone, tugging his own hoodie down for more access to my skin.

“I’m gonna drive you home,” he says as his lips skate my jaw. “But before I do, you’re gonna give me one more.”

My nipples pucker beneath the fleece hoodie, and as he pushes the hem of it up my thighs, I can’t help but moan. Looping my arms around his neck, he angles his hand between my legs, stroking me. “I’m putting boxers on you, and sweats, too, before I take you home.”

I thrust off the counter toward his hand, needing to feel more of his rough touch against my naked, wet slit. He taps my knees, urging me to wrap my legs around his waist, so I do. Arms around neck, legs looping waist, Callan carries me to his room, switching lights off on the way.

My back connects with his bed and as my eyes adjust to the darkness, he’s climbing over me, muscled arms caging me to the mattress. Balancing his weight on one arm, he brings his hand to my cheek, the tough, blunt tip of his finger tracing my beauty mark. He leaves heat everywhere he touches, but I’m fine with it. I love burning for him.

“You’re the sweetest thing I’ve ever tasted, and the most beautiful woman I’ve ever laid eyes on,” he says, his voice thick and raspy, his words trailing down my body like velvet. “My morning girl,” he says, pressing his lips to my beauty mark, reminding me again that this vibrant chemistry buzzing between us isn’t just a young, hormonal woman wanting a brooding, handsome man. It’s more than a man wanting to delve into an undiscovered place.

Then he’s unreachable to the world, eating at my clit and lapping at my opening like he was put on this Earth to do this very thing. He coos into me, telling me how good I taste, how hard I make him, how I’m the sweetest thing.

He calls me his, tells my pussy he owns her, reaches beneath the hoodie and fills his palm with my breast, rolling my pert nipple between his thumb and forefinger as he feasts. When I orgasm, I drag a pillow over my mouth to catch the feral moan that erupts from deep inside me.

I don't know if it's the double orgasms, or the fact that I'm having them at the hands of the hottest man alive but my thighs tremble and my heart squeezes. Callan kisses my inner thighs before wiping me up using another damp towel. He discards it into the hamper, and digs out a pair of boxers and sweats, sliding up my legs before helping me to my feet.

"Come on, let's get the food and get you home before I decide you need to give me another."

I giggle as he feeds his fingers between mine, walking me down the hall to the kitchen. "I don't think I could," I say, my groin almost numb from how much pleasure he's given me tonight.

He stops us in the dark hall, the scent of his fabric softener and cologne making me horny and drunk. "Oh you could. But Ben's expecting you home," he says, reminding me yet again that Callan isn't just about me. His care blankets Ben, too, and it's always been part of the reason I've liked him so much.



The ride back to my house goes by in an instant, because I'd rather pull out my own molars with no meds than dislodge myself from Callan's back, where I'm tucked safely and comfortably for the short drive.

We don't share a goodbye kiss, but he cups my cheek and winks at me, making me feel like I've been kissed. "Tomorrow. Dinner. Me, you and Ben."

"Okay," I nod, my breath hanging in the air in thick white tufts.

"I'll call you or... text you," he says, taking the helmet from my hands as I pass it back to him. He hands me the bag of food. "Goodnight, Lex."

“Night Callan.” Then I turn, bundled in his scent, and head upstairs. The front door is unlocked and I don’t even get my mini movie moment where I watch his bike eat up the night as he sails away because not only is my mom still home but she’s still awake.

And she... waited up.

“Hi,” she says, tugging closed her silky looking robe, the one that has the fake fur on the cuffs. I don’t know if it’s expensive or not. I stopped being angry that she has new things and we don’t long ago. It’s easier for me to not harness anger because my hurt does not impact anyone but me and Benny.

“Hey.” I close the door, spin the deadbolt and put the chain on. I lift the bag. “Callan made you a burger. Benny, too.” I look around the messy space, taking inventory of the empty wine cooler bottles on the card table, the ashtray full of butts, and the glazed look in mom’s eyes. “Where’s Trista?”

Mom snatches the bag from me, digging around inside. She pulls out one of the toasted buns and bites into it.

“That’s for the burger. If you eat that, you won’t be able to —” I shake my head. There’s no use. “Where’s Trista?” I ask again.

“He only wants to fuck you to get back at me, you know that, right?” My mom says bluntly, still plucking off chunks of the bun. I stare at the gaping hole in the bun, hoping she stops at this one. I want Benny to have the burger Callan made him, and not some decimated version that went through mom first.

“Did you hear me?” she asks, pulling me from my fixation on the bun. I replay her words and nod.

“I heard you. Callan only wants me to make you jealous, got it.” I cloak myself in an air of unaffected indifference, sliding Benny’s burger into the fridge. “I’m going to bed, there’s a Coke in the bag for you, too,” I tell her, then slip into the room I share with my teenage brother, and sink down to the floor in darkness.

I had a perfect night with Callan.

And now all I can wonder is...

Is she right?

eighteen

...



i don't know what i'd do if i lost them.

CALLAN

...ELEVEN YEARS AGO

Age 25

“No,” I argue, straining to keep my tone private. My throat aches and my ears throb as I lean in, once again trying to talk some sense into Kelly. “You do *not* hit her, Kelly. Do you hear me? That’s why you got here.”

Kelly yanks her arm from my grip, surging forward to bring her face merely an inch from mine. “Don’t you fucking tell me how to parent, Callan. She is my daughter and when I find her, I will punish her the way I see fit.”

My nostrils threaten to flare as a rush of biting anger surges through my lungs and throat, making my breathing immediately intensify. “Lay a hand on her,” I warn, keep my voice light and quiet. Warnings are more powerful when they don’t sound like warnings, and I don’t want to fucking threaten Kelly but Jesus. The only other alternative is kidnapping both Lex and Ben and running far the fuck away from this place. Away from her.

Don’t think I haven’t considered it.

What do I have here? Gram’s been slowing down considerably. What’s that leave? The MC? Mars is married now. He’s trying to start a family. He would understand. And beyond that, I don’t need the world to think I’m a good guy. They can plaster me all over the news for the entire world to see. Hell, I’d love them to see. This man took these children. And anyone who ever met Kelly for a minute of their lives would know that I am not the bad guy.

But if I’m caught, I’m not just torn from them in that moment but I’m in fucking jail. Then prison. I’m not there for them.

I'm smart enough to not get caught. I have money. I don't have to work for a while, not if I didn't want to.

I could take them.

"And what?" Kelly asks, the smell of cigarettes stinging my nostrils. Kelly's a lifelong smoker, and maybe the reason I hate the habit.

"And you'll never see them again."

Those six words, spoken to a mother with a sound mind, are utterly terrifying. A threat to the most important thing to them, a proverbial hand around the throat saying "if you act up then"... But Kelly is another kind.

"I'd like to see you try," she says before laughing drily. "And I'm not going anywhere with you. I'm staying here until she comes back." Her body falls back into the couch and she folds her arms over her low cut dress. "She'll come back."

I shake my head, maddened to insanity nearly. "Kelly, she's six. You're talking like she's an angry teenager blowing off steam." I fall to a crouch at her feet, resting a palm on her knee. "Stay here, calm down. Okay? And I'll go look for her."

In the bedroom, from his crib, Benny cries.

"I'll take Ben for a ride, look for her, get him back to sleep." I swallow hard, my heart racing. For whatever fucking reason, if she says no to me taking Ben right now, I'm going to freak the fuck out.

Rage, anger, frustration... it's ready to take over if she says the word.

But she purses her lips a moment then says, "Okay."

Benny stops crying the moment his little blue eyes fall on me. He smiles, his baby teeth the cutest goddamn shit. "Benny boy, you're coming for a ride with me, okay?"

"Cal," he coos, dragging out the l in a way that makes my chest ache. I press a kiss to the top of his head, sneaking some of his perfect baby smell. Snatching the little bag of diapers and wipes, I grab a bottle from the fridge and tuck it inside, cradling Benny to my chest. He rests his head on my shoulder

and drags his fingers through the ends of my hair and I'm not sure there's a better feeling in the world.

"Kelly, just, stay here and don't lock the front or back doors, okay?" I pull open the front door and stick my boot in the jamb, keeping it open. "Kelly," I say again, drawing her attention up from her phone.

"Okay." She's already looking at her phone again.

Once I'm downstairs, I get in the backseat and clip Benny in. There's clothes and crap everywhere, and I swear to fuck, I'm buying a car. Kelly's is shit. With my seatbelt on, I start my drive, dialing my buddy Marshall as I idle out of the neighborhood, keeping my lights low.

"What's up?" he answers on the second ring, and I glance down at the clock in the car, wondering if I woke him. But panic must've had me in a chokehold, because as I look at the green numbers, I remember, it's still pretty early. She ran out at seven in the morning, Kelly said.

"Lexi ran away," I breathe, holding my voice steady for Benny. I tell myself it's for Benny, who when I look in the rearview, I see sleeping happily with his blankie. "I came by Kelly's around half past seven and Lex wasn't there. I asked where she was. Kelly said Lex spilled nail polish and she smacked her." I grit my teeth, taking a moment to breathe so I can finish the story and safely drive Benny. Fucking Kelly. Always so goddamn impatient and cruel. "Lex ran off. And it's eight now." I swallow hard, forcing myself to remain calm. "I'm driving around with Benny looking but... can you and Dave take the cruiser out? She loves the lights on the cruiser. If she sees his car and she's hiding... she may come out."

There's a rustling in the background, followed by Marshall's husband's voice. "We'll be out there in ten minutes, I'm just getting dressed."

"Thank you," I manage to get out before ending the call.

If Lex is somewhere hiding in plain sight, tucked behind a car or hiding behind a pillar near the grocery store or something, she will come out for Dave.

Dave, being the Sheriff, is well acquainted with Kelly Fisher. Therefore, he's aware of the situation Lex and Ben are in, too.

"I wish I would have taken you both," I tell a sleeping Benny as I flip my blinker on. Kelly's piece of shit car rattles and growls as I turn it to the right, heading to the park where I take her in the afternoons sometimes.

I hope she's there.

Though he doesn't need it, I talk to Benny while I creep down the dark residential streets, peering out my windows at every blade of grass and garbage can out there. I refuse to acknowledge the acid churning through my stomach, into my veins, feeding a sickening feeling to every inch of me.

The park comes into view at the end of the street. Street lights encase it, leaving it glowing. And yet, it's empty, nothing but vacant swings and shiny slides. I feed a hand through my hair, letting out a sigh that bears too much fear for my liking.

"Where would little Lexi go?" I ask Benny as I make my way past the park.

I think about the places Lexi and I go. Besides the grocery store, school and the park... we don't go too many—*fuck*.

Quickly I look over my shoulder to make sure I can easily flip around and when I see the street is dead, and jackknife the car and punch the gas. It's even close to her house, too.

I shake my head, feeling so sure.

And when I pull up to the library and see a little blonde head from behind the book return, I'm overwhelmed with relief. My eyes flood and my nostrils flutter. "We got her. We got her Benny boy." I press a hand to my chest. "Thank fuck."

I bring him with me as I traipse across the cold, damp lawn of the public library. Evening settled in quick, leaving us on the cusp of darkness. "Lexi, baby," I call, lowering Benny to the ground as I fall to my knees just in time to collect her in my arms.

She sobs into my neck, her little nose freezing and the ends of her hair wet. I stroke up and down her spine a minute, letting her wail against me. But I need to see her face. I need to see what Kelly did.

It has to be bad if she ran away.

I peel her back and take note of her face, smoothing my thumbs over her cheeks. The way her bottom lip trembles has me in pieces.

“What happened, Lex?” And before I can let her speak, I add, “I’m so glad I found you. I was so worried, baby.”

I hug her again, trapping her to my chest as my eyes float to a sleeping Benny, snug in the car seat that is too small for him. But they’re both here, with me, safe.

“She whooped me,” Lex cries, trying as hard as she can to stand tall, to be brave. I hug her again, because that’s what feels right. She holds me tight for a minute, and I hold her at arms length, needing answers.

“What do you mean?” I search her red-rimmed eyes, my heart tearing a little more with each tear that slips free.

She doesn’t say anything. “What made her mad?” The answer to this could be anything. Something as silly as spilled nail polish. But Lexi is really upset and I’ve learned to question Kelly’s words.

“She—” she sniffs, and her blue eyes lift to mine, her golden hair tangled and messy around her face. I stroke it back and smooth my hand up and down her arm, calming her. “She whooped my bottom when I spilled the nail polish.”

Kelly wasn’t lying. Hmm.

“She wasn’t mad about the mess until I started crying.”

“Why did you cry?” I ask.

She sniffles. “It was the nail polish you got me. And it made me real sad to spill it. I like it because you got it for me.”

Oh fuck. A lump clogs my throat and my nose burns. “Lex, I will replace anything for you. Never run away because

you lose or break something I got you. Okay?"

She nods, rubbing under her nose with her fist. "But I ran away because of mom. When she asked why I was crying I told her because I broke the gift you got me. And she just got real mad and started whooping on me and kept saying I needed to stop being such a beggar."

In my pocket, my phone rings. "Hang on, okay?" I answer as Lex goes to Ben, sitting next to him. "I found her," I tell Dave on first reply.

"Thank goodness," he sighs. "He found her," he says, probably telling Marshall who is likely riding with him. "Where?"

"Library."

"Good thinking," he says, his radio chirping in the background.

"Thank you. I'm sorry to drag you out." I look at the kids. "I owe you."

"Eh, it was thirty minutes. You don't owe me. Just glad you found her." He clears his throat. "Kelly needs to watch herself."

I swallow thickly. "I know." Lexi rises as Benny stirs awake slightly. "Gonna take them home. I'm gonna sleep there, too, so I know they're safe."

I never want to leave their side again.

I get Lex and Ben buckled up and hit a drive thru on the way home. As they doze on the drive back, I reflect on the last few hours.

They were... the scariest of my life.

Because the truth is, I don't know what I'd do if I lost them.



...CURRENT DAY

Age 36

Mecca is the cleanest it's ever been. Why? Because I'm trying everything I can do to not run next door and see Lex.

Last night was... having her in my home and in my bed, talking about us and our past but also, life... It was incredible. I've never felt this way. Ever. The way she was careful to think about us having sex. Considered both of us and what it would do, how it would change us each emotionally. She made a thoughtful, considerate decision to wait and I couldn't fucking respect her more.

But I think I know why she made that choice. Why she held back.

She's not sure where we are headed.

But after last night, I have zero doubts.

I want Benny and Lex with me.

That's a fucking given.

But I want Lexi to be mine. There isn't a single part of me that isn't head over goddamn heels for her.

I've been here for three hours and I can't wait a single second longer to see her.

Put a *goddamn obsessed with Lexi Fisher fork in me*. I'm sliding into my vest and pulling my hair back, stomping across the pavement to The Alley in no time. But when I traipse through the entire place, she's not there. I even ask the man working the ball rental counter, where she usually is.

She called in, he said.

Immediately I call her, my mind racing. Was last night too much? Is Kelly on a bender? Is Benny okay? She doesn't answer so I get on my bike and head to their apartment.



“She’s not here,” Kelly says through the crack in the door as I shift my weight in my boots, trying to find more patience inside me. I bob my head.

“Okay, can I talk to Benny?” I ask, because it’s Sunday. He should be home.

Kelly opens the door a tiny sliver, and Benny is there, his face pained. “Sorry,” he mouths, then says, “mom’s not lying. She isn’t here.”

The door closes before I can ask more questions. But I get on my bike and take a ride to the library.



My heart constricts at the sight of her, holding her legs to her chest, cheek to knee as she rocks against the library wall. I stomp toward her, leaving my bike in the middle of two spots. Birds sing from the trees, and in the distance a lawn mower bellows but all I can hear are her gentle sobs.

“Lex,” I say her name, which has her scrambling to her feet, her back against the wall. “What’s going on?” When I left her last night, she was happy.

Or so I thought.

“Why are you—” she doesn’t finish her sentence.

“I went by The Alley to see you. The dude behind the desk said you called in. Then I went by the apartment but Kelly and Ben said you weren’t home.” I outstretch a hand to her and my heart nearly crumbles as our palms come together, fingers waffling. “I found you here as a kid once. Do you remember?”

Her eyes go distant for a moment before her attention snaps back to me. “Yeah, now that you say that, I do.” She thinks for a beat, tucking hair behind her ear. “You remembered that and came here?”

I nod. “What’s wrong, Lex?”

Her gaze falls to her shoes. “Last night when I got home, my mom said all this stuff. And I know it’s dumb to like, listen to her for anything really. But she said...” she looks up, bringing her puffy eyes to mine. “She said that you were only interested in me to get close to her or... back at her... or something. I don’t know, I can’t remember.”

I squeeze our joined hands. “You know that’s fucking crazy, right?” I dip my head to make her gaze level with mine. “I did date her for six months, yes. But the rest of the time I was with her, I was there for the two of you.”

She nods. “I know. I believe you.” I believe she does, but her mind is still weighed down.

I’m close to asking if Kelly is just under her skin but she looks up at me, chin wobbling as she fights her emotions.

“What’s wrong?” I manage, the look on her sweet face destroying me.

“What’s wrong is that I want you. Obviously,” she strains, tears sliding down her face, drowning the sun on her cheekbone. “What else could be wrong? Everything else is already wrong, Callan!” She brings her hands to the sides of her head, pushing hair off her face as her breathing grows frantic. “My mother is... Kelly Fisher! I have to raise Benny. He doesn’t get a single bit of normalcy and I have to watch him struggle in this life even though I’m killing myself to be

everything for him! I have to get a GED instead of walk across a stage in a gown. You know high school was my only shot at experiencing graduation. And nope. GED for me. One I have to pay for, even. And I work at a bowling alley, bar, pool hall combo where I get poked and prodded for minimum wage. And if I don't cater to the egos of the frail, low-IQ'd boozed up patrons, then I don't get a tip." Finally she releases her head and takes in a long, deep breath through her nose, pushing it out her mouth.

When her eyes reopen, they're wide and serious, though still damp. "So what's wrong is that I want you, and I shouldn't. I shouldn't because you're in a different stage of your life, because you used to be with my mom, because you can do better than me. But I can't help it. You're the only one to make me happy in my entire life. So I want you. I want you with every fiber of my being. I want you so bad I feel you in my soul and it makes me ache not to be with you, not to have you, not to have some promise of you. It's not even a need, Callan. I don't *need* you—You are *essential* to me now, like water or air, and I don't know how to handle that."

Now.

Now is the time.

Standing outside her apartment, I knew. Looking in at Kelly who refused to tell me if she knew where her daughter was, watching Benny try to help me, with this beautiful woman in my arms, who thank God was brought back into my life, I'm so certain.

"I want you to know that you are the best, there is no one better, not for me. So don't stand here and tell me I'm too old or that I can do better." I lick my lips. "I want you and Ben to live with me. I want to give you guys anything and everything you need. But Lexi, babygirl, I'm in love with you. And I know it might make some people uncomfortable but... I'm not losing you." I can't.

"My mom," she whispers, her eyes full of unshed tears. "She'd never let us live with you."

“I know you won’t go without Ben, and I respect that loyalty. Let me work on your mom, okay? And until then, start seeing me, Lex. Because that feeling you just described? I feel it, too. So let’s stop going crazy apart and figure it out together.”

She nods. “Okay.”

I stroke up her arms as I lean down and steal a salty kiss from her lips. “You said you love me.”

I wink. “I’m not afraid to say how I feel. But that doesn’t mean you have to say it back.”

She rocks to her toes to give me another kiss. “Take me to your house,” she whispers, her words making my neck tingle. “Please.”

I have her on the saddle of my bike in no time.

nineteen

...



forever.

LEXI

Coming to Callan's house today is so much different than it was last night.

The entire ride over before, I was thinking of how I could break it to him that I'm not ready to have sex without also letting him see my fears. Today, clinging to his body as the wind sifts through the ends of my hair, I'm readying myself for it.

Because Callan said he loves me. He came and found me. He cares about me. I love him, too. I know I do. Saying those words have always been hard for me. I wonder about Callan, as the bike roars up the road, his house coming into view. When and how did he shake the sense of abandonment? The fear of loving?

He was raised not unlike me, though his guardian angel, his Gram, came about much sooner and *stayed*. Did she teach him how to love or did he just stop being afraid? I'd like to ask him, but as he parks his motorcycle in the garage, I know we're approaching wordlessness. A time to let our wants and needs, our physical craving and emotional lusting take all the way over.

I wanted him before. But with the promise of more? I have no reason—*no good reason*—to say no.

We will always face obstacles. And I don't know how long I'll be afraid of love and taking risks. But when it comes to Callan, I'm holding on with both hands.

I hand him my helmet after getting off the bike, and he stacks them on the ground, slipping out of his leather jacket. Draping it over the saddle, he takes my hand, leading me inside, not before closing the garage door.

“What about Mecca?” Traipsing down the hall behind him, our fingers locked together, the music store pops into my mind as my brain goes into overdrive.

He stops and looks at me, his dark hair messy, falling free from his ponytail. I reach up with my free hand and stroke the loose ends. “I’ve always loved your ponytail.”

His smile is slow as his eyes come to my mouth, tracing the curve of my cupid’s bow before he finds my gaze again. “You know, until I met you and you told me that, I never wore one. Fucks with my helmet, too. But after you told me that, when I know I’m gonna be around you, I try to put it up. Because you liked it back then. And I told myself that you remembering all the ways you liked me is a *good thing*.”

“I wouldn’t forget you or the things I liked about you,” I tell him as he backs me up against the hallway wall. “Sometimes, thinking about you was the only happy place in my mind.”

He grumbles as he takes a kiss from me. “Mecca’s fine, by the way.” While working his lips down my throat, he pulls back, finding my eyes. “Come work with me.”

I blink at him as I surge my hips off the wall, hunting for his groin. We’re about to make love, that much I know. But stopping five feet away from the place where I finally get to see Callan’s cock is just plain cruel. I grind forward and he pulls back, a sexy smirk devouring his handsome face. Forward and back, my hips and his move, playing the most frustrating game of chase.

“I can see your mind is elsewhere,” he ribs. Throwing my hands around his neck, I rock to my toes and bring my lips to his.

“You stop a few feet away from the gold at the end of the rainbow,” I tell him, eating up all his soft exhales as I bring our mouths together repeatedly. “That’s just mean.”

He loops a hand around my waist and yanks me off the floor without so much as a grunt. Then I feel it—the thing I’ve been grinding pillows over for weeks.

“*Ohmygod*,” the sentiment rushes from my lips, raspy and worn, as he presses his groin between my spread legs. It’s so hard, so thick and invasive, pressing against all of me, from clit to cunt. “I’m so wet for you, Callan,” I tell him, having never said those words before but always wanted to. “I’ve always wanted to know what it felt like to admit how I feel when I’m turned on... and hearing myself tell you exactly how I feel... what my body is doing...” I remove a hand from behind his neck and cup his cock between us, and this time, he lets me.

His eyes roll closed as my fingertips move over the thick bulge, so hot and so fucking hard. I swear I come a little just feeling him for the first time, my channel squeezing and releasing over and over, clit pulsing. I swallow, finding my throat and mouth dry as I try and keep my head up, off the wall.

“You feel so good,” I tell him, nuzzling my face into the crook of his neck. Callan grabs my wrist and forces my hand back to his neck.

“C’mon,” he says, slapping my ass as he carries me the remainder of the way to his bedroom. With the door open and lights off, he lowers me to the foot of the bed. In silence, our eyes idle for a moment, then he begins disrobing.

His fingers easily manipulate each ivory button with ease as his hands skate down the length of his torso, leaving the flannel open. After it’s on the floor, he bends at the waist, snaking a finger through the laces on his worn black boots. When they’re loose enough, he kicks them off, pinching his socks at the toe as he yanks those off one by one. He never loses balance on one foot, and he finds my eyes in between every subtle movement.

My heart gallops unbridled behind my ribs, my excitement to be with this man, my awe to be with him—I’m warm and fuzzy between my legs, anxious for more. He unbuckles his belt and it hits the floor with a foreboding thunk.

“Lex,” he says my name quietly, but gently as he reaches behind him and tugs his gray, worn henley off over his head.

“Are you sure you want this? We don’t have to.” The way his eyes hold mine, how his focus is only on me and what I need—I know that he’d give anything I wanted, even if that thing was *more time*.

But I don’t want more time.

I want him.

“I want this Callan. And I haven’t been like, clinging to my virginity, laying in wait for some prince to come claim it and own me and make me his or anything.” I trace the thick gray stripe printed onto the fluffy bedspread. “A prince found me anyway.”

Callan’s smirk is so sexy that my lower half quakes at the sight of it, pulsing and thrumming, reminding me that even though I’ve never been full, *I’m empty*.

Empty and starved.

I’m not even nervous about the pain.

I only want to experience the man I’ve loved for my entire life finally being inside me, having him in the most private, intimate way two people can have each other.

His art-covered torso has my focus until his jeans are off, and then he’s all tattooed muscle with a hard-on the size of my forearm threatening to rip through his boxer briefs. He cups the bulge, and seeing him touch himself awakens me.

It scrambles my brain and makes me haywire or something. I begin tearing off my jeans and shirt, socks and panties, and before I know it, I’m completely naked on his bed, palms behind me as I blink at him.

“Touch yourself for me,” I urge, almost shocked that the filthy command came from me. But he drops his hand to his cock, and takes my breath away when he dips below the waistband.

“You been with guys your age in other ways?” he asks as I fall into a trance watching his hand stroke his fat cock beneath the plaid fabric of his boxers.

I shake my head. “No.” I think of the dates I have been asked out on. One of them would have definitely taken my virginity and I would’ve given it over easily, too. Sophomore year of high school one of the popular running backs on the school football team asked me out. Said he wanted to take me to a party to see if we were compatible enough for me to be his prom date. I was so excited to be seen that I said yes, despite the fact his invitation was both narcissistic and garbage. In class later, not knowing I was already there, crouched and putting away my books, I heard that same guy tell his friends that I’m super hot “for a poor, trashy girl” and that because of my “WT” lifestyle, I’d likely be easy, too.

I never showed up for that date, and never said yes to another one either.

“You’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever known, and easily the most beautiful I’ve ever seen, so for whatever reasons stood between you and other guys all these years,” he shakes his head as his bicep flexes, his arm working as he pumps. It’s the hottest sight, so I reach down and boldly touch myself right in front of him.

“I’m... I’m glad for those reasons,” he finishes distractedly as his eyes fall to my hand. With two fingers, I rub circles over my clit, the sound of my wet cunt filling the quiet room.

Callan groans as he pumps faster, stepping closer to the foot of the bed as his eyes stay glued to the exposed scene between my spread legs.

When his knees connect with the bed, Callan takes his hand from his boxers, bracing himself against the mattress with his palms as he stalks over me. My eyes stay on the snake hanging between his legs, making the cotton fabric work to contain him.

“It’s going to hurt,” he says quietly as he comes to hover over me, giving me a minute to settle against the mattress. Reaching up, I take his face in my hands, studying the scattered lines at the corner of his eyes, smoothing my thumb down his freshly shaved chin. From above, his scent rains down, musky male and traces of aftershave. Arousal rushes

from me and I strain my head off the mattress, peering between us as his boxer-sheathed cock slides through my soaked folds. “But it will feel good, too, because it’s you and me.”

Lying beneath him and taking in his careful words, a tremble wracks my body. This is going to be good but it’s going to be heavy. He dips to kiss my lips as he slowly pulls the backs of his knuckles down the length of my sternum, all but ignoring the way the tips of my breasts are hard and pointed. “It will feel good here,” he tells me, his words feathering over me, causing my obsolete heady and drunken obsession with him to intensify. “And because of that,” he says, lowering that same hand to my seam, dragging his knuckles through my lips and over my clit. “It will feel a little good here, too.”

I nod, because I don’t know what to do other than chant *fuck me fuck me fuck me*. Callan’s eyes search mine, and with his large body swaying over me like a dream, I find the words on my lips, leaving me before I can measure them and make sure they’re not too much. “Will it feel good for you there, too?”

He hums thoughtfully, but doesn’t lend more words because he’s too busy moving. Between my legs he’s fishing around, and when his motions slow, I glance down to find he’d been kicking off his boxers. I swear my insides actually clench and ache at the sight of his erection, girthy and long, veiny with a shiny, glistening head. Hefty and rock hard, every inch of Callan is devastatingly erotic, and I’m overrun with a spray of emotion as he drops his mouth to mine.

“I’ll fit,” he says, dragging the tip of his nose down the bridge of mine after we break the kiss. “If you were worried.”

I don’t want to think that he’s fit that monster into *other* women.

My mother being one of them.

Don’t think about that now. Do not think about that now.

Trading my hold on his neck, I move to tug the elastic out, and his hair spills over his face when I do. He shakes his head, and a swarm of mint and lavender hits my nose.

“That’s what I wanted,” I moan, my hips lifting from the bed in search of the monster in the room. “I wanted something to hold onto.”

I sift my fingers through his hair, tugging gently on each side as he drops his mouth to mine, kissing me for a hot second before he discovers all of me. A kiss to the top of my shoulder has wetness leaking from between my legs, no doubt marking his bed. Another kiss, this time just above my nipple, and I’m nearly writhing against him.

“Yes,” he says as his lips cover my belly button, my skin erupting in goosebumps at the way he teases me. “I’ll feel it, too. That connection. Because it’s just for us. It’s that thing only you and I share. So of course, I’ll feel it.”

I love you.

The words are there, and I know he deserves to hear them, I want to honor him by giving them back to him, too. But... I can’t say them. As he notches his slick head at my opening, moving around in my wetness to make me moan, they’re on my tongue. My mouth opens to say the first word.

But I just can’t.

“I’m going to move slow,” he cautions, his eyes darting between mine from over me.

“Wait,” I call as his hot, slick head presses against my wet, swollen lips. Holy shit, he’s not inside at all yet and I’m already so aroused. This is going to be insane. “A towel. I’m... I don’t want to ruin your sheets.”

There will be blood. He knows I’m a virgin and virgins are... *messy*. I don’t want it, and now that I’m in the moment, the more I think about it, the more I become embarrassed. *He’s going to have to clean my blood off of him.*

I worm beneath him, the thought suddenly too uncomfortable to sit with.

The unsettled rasp in his tone slows my wiggling. “I don’t want a towel. Hell, I wish there weren’t even sheets on the bed.” He nips at my throat after forcing my head back by way of his head pressing beneath my chin. “I want us to see this spot on our bed for the rest of our lives and remember this night.”

I melt into the mattress as his name drifts off my lips, his mouth finally coming to my breast. He sucks my nipple while growling against my body, his timbre vibrating through my chest, making my insides clench. I want him to fuck me so bad but love the way he’s handling this moment with such intense care.

He wants us to see my blood on *our* mattress... the promise in those heated words have me envisioning babies in my arms and dogs at my feet with cookies in the oven and a slightly silver-haired Callan at my hip in the kitchen, kissing my throat as I wash dishes.

“It started so much longer ago though,” I force out, “our bond, I mean.” I lick my lips to fight the tremble that wracks them as heavy words flood my tongue. So heavy that holding them in may sink me. I have to get them out. “I loved you so much then. And I love you so much now.”

There.

I said it.

And as soon as I do, I begin to float. His lips are on mine, our tongues dance and sway as little moans of praise slip free. Kissing him is quite possibly the happiest and most carefree I’ve ever been. He nips my bottom lip.

“We are one now, Lexi. You hear me?” Another pinch of my bottom lip. “I’m going to push inside of you in a minute, I’m going to be marked with what you gave me, streaked in your sacrifice. Then,” he breathes, taking a moment to find my eyes. “I’m going to make love to you. I’m going to move in and out of you,” he promises, pressing kisses to my mouth now in between every few words as his sleek cap presses into my soaked, swollen lips. “It’s gonna hurt but I’ll talk you through it.” He sucks my nipple into his mouth again, and my

spine curls in response. “And you’re going to be so tight, babygirl,” he warns, though I think it’s more for him than me. “So tight that not long after the burn fades, I’m going to come. You will make me come, and when I do, you’ll feel it. You’ll feel how much I need you when it warms your insides.”

Warms my insides.

Holy shit.

“Put it in,” I whimper, needing to be fucked by him more than ever. More than I’ve needed anything, honestly. He strokes my hair away from my face and kisses my beauty mark.

His voice is so low, my skin heats. “Take a deep breath, slowly.”

I do, and the tip of his nose comes to mine right as the first wave of biting pain takes over. His chest fills as he inhales sharply.

I smack my hand to his bicep. “Ahh,” I breathe, trying to take it like a woman and not squirm and cry. But he’s so big. And it burns. I’m wet and achy but also burning. A hot flare running down my taint, and a visceral stabbing pain deep in my belly.

“This is the part,” he warns, his tone soothing and silky, taking the stinging edge off of all the aching. “That hurts the most.” His hips rove there’s a sudden flood of heat and warmth, a piercing pain shooting through my groin. “There,” he groans, his voice giving way to the fact that despite my discomfort, I feel good for him. He’s holding back his pleasure to bring me calm.

And that makes some of the pain fade, too.

He tips his head down, and his hair tickles my forehead as he peers between us. His hips roll forward as his eyes remain locked on the place where our bodies are barely joined.

“Fuck...” he breathes, his voice hollow with disbelief. “How do you feel? Are you okay?” He lifts his face to mine, green eyes wide. His Adam’s apple takes a slow slide down

his throat as he pushes more of his cock into my tight, virgin hole. Just looking at him eases the pain, I swear.

“It hurt a lot a second ago,” I start, and he cuts in.

“That was getting the head inside. Popping your—” his hips still their gentle, exploratory roving as he brings his mouth to mine. Our kiss is slow and sloppy. When he lifts up he says, “I want to give you more, if you’re ready.”

I nod but grab at his hips before he can move. “Is it messy?”

His eyes search mine, mouth open in silent response. I reach up and stroke dark hair out of his eyes, admiring the serpent inked around his throat. “It’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.”

I sniff. “I want to see.”

“Are you ready, babygirl?” he asks, his naked body heaving over me, blanketing me in heat and the best smell in the world. Him.

I nod. “Yes.”

Reaching above me, Callan fills his palm with my head, careful not to pull my hair, then lifts. I peer between us, first losing my attention on the sheen of sweat making his inked, knotted core glisten. But when my eyes fall to the base of his cock, a tree trunk in size, I can’t help but clench all around the few inches he’s given me.

“Ahh,” he crows, chuckling a little while he kisses my temple. “You like how it looks.”

Before responding, I take the rest of it in. The part of his shaft patiently waiting to enter me, then the portion of him that has already pierced me but slid out some. Crimson blemishes his cock, and on my groin, the same color paints me.

“There’s so much,” I breathe, in awe of my body’s sacrifice to take him.

“You were so good, and I don’t take for granted that I’m the first and only one to be here,” he says, laying me back against the pillow. With his heartfelt words hanging invisibly

above us, he moves inside me, giving me what feels like another few inches.

I gasp that he gives me more at the precise time I think he's done, and a minute later, his groin kisses mine, the raspy grate of his pubic hair sending a shiver down my spine.

My insides still burn a little, and my pussy stings too. But his sated groan as all of him finally fills me? It's so beautiful and raw, it seems to dilute my pain.

"Goddamn it Lex," he purrs, "sex has never felt like this." He moves slowly and I howl gently, pressing my face into his broad chest to trap my cries. It does hurt and I do need to wince but still, it feels good.

He was right.

A slow burn crawls through my chest, spider webbing through me. "More," I breathe, taking note of his slow controlled movements, the tight set of his jaw and restraint glowing in his eyes.

He brings his elbows to rest on top of my shoulder, stacking his palm on top of my head. With my face trapped beneath the framing of his large arms, he keeps me still beneath him, our mouths so close I'm licking his breath from my lips. Only his hips rove, and the slow creak of the bed each time he slides inside me calls my orgasm that much nearer.

"I never wanted to leave you," he whispers against my mouth as he pushes himself into me, sinking as deep as he can. "I'm sorry I couldn't find you. I'm sorry I let you both down," he hems, keeping himself still, buried so deep a cough tickles the base of my throat.

"It's okay," I breathe, not to let him off the hook because we're having sex but because it is okay. I was angry at him for so many years, thinking he'd dumped mom and left us. But of course, deep down, I knew that wasn't true. And I know Callan. He'd have taken us even if it meant risking his life getting caught. "I'm so glad we're back, I'm so glad we're together," I pant as his rigid shaft tickles me, moving in and out of my nearly numb but still thrumming cunt.

“Forever,” he says, his voice breaking a little as he pulses inside me. I know he means the three of us, me, him and Benny. But I also know he’s promising himself to me forever, separately from the family that the three of us make.

I lick my lips. “Forever,” I breathe, and then he’s frantically reaching between us, his large arm braced against my bare body as his thumb strokes at my clit, his pumps gaining subtle momentum.

“You’re gonna take it from me,” he rasps, his fingers tangling in my hairline. “You’re so fucking tight, babygirl, you’re gonna make me come already.”

I nod beneath his focus, loving the weight of him all around me and inside me. “I want it, Callan. Please,” I beg, squeezing my eyes shut as his thumb on my clit delivers the most intense orgasm. My spine shakes and my thighs begin to tremble, and though I’m burning and sore, beneath him I still break.

Shattering into a thousand beautifully broken pieces, I come in almost violent waves, writhing and melting beneath him as I make sure God knows his name.

“Callan, Callan, Callan,” I moan before his mouth seals to mine, eating up my cries, filling my mouth with moans.

Then it happens.

He stops. His cock swells and pulses, and a single, broken groan floods the space between us. Warmth spreads through my walls in long, drenching pumps, and I don’t know what is more hot, hearing him orgasm or *feeling* it.

I tip my hips off the mattress, seeking more of him as he comes, throbbing with each hot wave of release as he slowly roves his hips between my legs.

When the last of his orgasm has trickled out, he smooths my hair from my glistening face and kisses my mouth, slow and tender. Finally he gets to his knees and slips out of me.

“I’d wipe you up,” he says, his eyes centered between my legs, full of awe. “But you need a bath. And a soak might help the soreness.”

I go to move off the bed, but he stops me with a menacing glare. “Don’t you dare move, Lexi,” he warns, tossing the same thumb that stroked me to orgasm back into his chest, between his pecs. “I’m running you a bath and getting you something to drink and then I’m going to make sure she’s alright.”

“She?”

His lips curl as he stands before me completely naked. Scratching a hand up his sternum he says, “Your perfect little pussy.”

My cheeks heat as he disappears into the en-suite bathroom, his naked bare ass tossing heat into my belly.

I lie there for a moment before pushing to my elbows to peer at the mess between my legs. Reaching down, I move my fingers gently over my hole, which feels more sore and swollen than ever before. I press just the tips of my fingers inside, and pull them back out. Creamy white tinged with varying shades of crimson coat my fingers.

Callan appears in the doorway of the bathroom, arm over his head against the door jamb. “How are you feeling?” he asks, bypassing the traces of our intimacy dripping down my knuckles.

He comes to the edge of the bed and scoops me up without so much as a grunt, and carries me to the tub. I love the feel of his chest hair against my cheek, and his flexing belly against my side. Everything about being in his arms feels... right.

Once I’m comfortably in the tub, Callan kneels at my side.

“I feel good,” I finally respond, a little hazy and dazed from the last hour. “Thank you, you know, for going so slow and being so careful.”

He drops a clean washcloth into the water and I watch it drift beneath the bubbles. “There will be time to turn you into my sweet little pretzel,” he says, wearing the sexiest little smirk. “But until you’re ready, we go slow.”

My cunt pulses at his words. I want him again, and yet I don’t even ask because I know it would be incredibly painful

and he'd say no. Still, feeling him lose control, feeling him give me his cum as he gasped and groaned over me was the best feeling I've ever had.

He kisses my head and gets to his feet, moving to leave the bathroom before he turns in the door frame. "You got the whole day off?"

I nod, the smell of eucalyptus bubble bath making me smile. This is so nice and fancy. I've never had a nice bath as an adult. Or really even as a child. "Yep."

"I'm gonna make some lunch and we're gonna eat. Then you're gonna nap, then we're going to Mecca because Benny is coming by today."

I nod. "Sounds good." And right as he's smiling and heading out, panic hits my veins. Until my mom is on board with letting Benny leave, we'll have to stay in that shitty apartment with her. Away from Callan.

Away from the only place I feel home.

I sink into the bubbles, loving the way they curl around my cheeks, and decide that is a problem for future Lexi. Right now? I'm in a tub, replaying the best hour of my life.

twenty

...



four words have never bricked me up so fast.

CALLAN

She took a bath in my tub—the first bath ever to be taken in that thing. I can't think of a better way and person to christen it, either. Then we ate and I made food for her to take back to Benny and Kelly, too. And before I drove her back to Mecca with me, we somehow ended up in the bedroom again.

I say somehow like I don't know how it happened.

I knew the precise moment I'd have her again, despite the fact I had every intention of waiting a day or two so that her soreness would fade.

She was swinging her feet, perched on the cabinet, turkey sandwich in her hands. With a piece of lettuce in the corner of her mouth, she blinked at me, her eyes wide. "Weird," she said, drawing the word out.

I swallowed a mouthful of sandwich and pulled a napkin across her lips. "What's weird?"

She lowered the remainder of the sandwich to her plate and turned on the counter, where I sat next to her, and faced me. "I felt you just now," she said.

My brow furrowed.

"Leaking out of me."

Four words have never bricked me up so fast. And now she's beneath me, half-eaten turkey sandwiches still sitting in my kitchen as I slowly pump into her.

I've not made a habit of blowing inside women over the years. Not only did I want to avoid the nickname player, I also didn't mind escaping the more significant designation of *dad*.

But I couldn't sheath myself before getting inside Lexi. Not the first time and not this time. And though my periphery blurs as the pressure in my groin intensifies, her cunt swallowing my shaft each time I give her another inch, I'm not so into the moment that protection escapes me.

We should be using it.

I should be the one mentioning it.

Both adults or not, I'm the sexually experienced partner. I should not be hard and leaking inside of her, much less blowing full loads without even attempting to pull out.

She felt so good the first time and this time somehow feels even better. Knowing I'm the only man to be here, knowing that every flutter, every flinch, all the moans and heavy breaths are *exclusive to me*—it does not help the desire to bury my seed deep inside of her.

I've never wanted to bury my cum deep and hope that it turns to more, hope that it gets someone pregnant and that we become parents together.

Never.

I pin her wrists above her head with one hand and reach between us, finding her clit again. "You're bleeding again," I tell her, looking down to see faint traces of red streaking my cock. "But you're doing so good. You are taking me so well."

Beneath me, sweaty and limp, she licks her lips. "I love you."

This session is less intimate than before, but still, promise and intimacy hang in the air, following us wherever we go. "I love you," I tell her, thrusting my cock deep for the final time before my resolve snaps.

"That feels so good," she breaths as my cum spreads through her insides, one thick pulse after the next. She strokes fingertips up my bare spine. "Your cum feels so good inside me." She bites the bottom of my earlobe as I empty the last of my load deep inside of her. "So warm."

When I finally get the nerve to pull out of her, I'm soft and she's sticky, and neither of us want to move. But she brings her lips to my ear, asking me for something straight from our past, and I can't say no.

After cleaning her up and getting her comfortably in a pair of my sweats and one of my Broken Wheel t-shirts, she gets on her knees behind me, one hand on my shoulder. "Tip your head back," she murmurs as her fingers stroke through my hair.

I do as she says, tipping my head back. My eyes fall closed as soon as the brush comes to my hairline, and warm tingles spread through my core as she begins combing my hair.

"After the GED," I start, enjoying the way it feels to have her combing my hair again. She loved doing this as a kid only this time, I think we'll skip the butterfly clips and glitter gel. "What's your plan?"

She hums as she combs. "Well, in theory, college. But I don't know if colleges take students with GED versus the actual diploma."

I make a mental note then and there to look into it. "I'll look into it," I tell her. "I didn't go to college. I graduated high school then joined the workforce." I think about that, and how I could not have wanted to continue school any less. But she does, and though I don't know the first thing about college, I'll find out. And I'll help her get there, if that's what she wants.

"Did you ever want to go to college?" she asks, pulling the comb through my ends softly.

"Ah, no," I deadpan. "Never."

She giggles. "Knew you were a motorcycle riding guitar player even back then?"

I nod. "That and I've never been a book learner. I've always learned best visually, and digging in, with my hands." I look at my bare feet stretched out before me, and my gaze spills over to the empty hallway, straight into the spare bedroom. I think of Benny, and how much alike we are despite the fact I have no claim to him that way. "Like Benny," I say

to Lexi. “He learns like me. I watch him at Mecca, with the guitar and he’s a lot like me.”

Lexi makes a noise in her chest, never letting it slip free. We both know we face a hurdle convincing her mom to tell them to come stay with me, but I think we’re both trying to ignore it. If just for the afternoon.

A thud comes down at my front door, and from somewhere in the house, the motion detector on my doorbell camera sings.

“Who’s that?” Lexi asks, her hands falling from my head. I get to my feet and toss on a sweatshirt. Looking between us, my body warms. We’re both dressed in my sweats and a t-shirt and though she’s drowning in my clothes, still, I love seeing her in them. Casual and comfortable. I love seeing the proof that she’s mine.

I steal a kiss from her lips. “I’ll go check.”

I find myself not cursing and grumbling the entire way to the front door, like I usually do. But when I pull it open, that same grumbling and cursing comes my way from the person on the other side.

“She’s here, isn’t she?” Benny asks, his head tipped to the side, his mouth curling up on the ends with a knowing sigh.

I nod. “She is.”

“She ran here?” he asks, and I read the subtext. She was upset and came to me, not him. He’s her person, and right now, he’s feeling displaced like crazy. And the fucked up part is, it’s actually the opposite. We’ve been bonding and the closer Lexi and I become, the closer we all get.

I shake my head. “She went to the library.” I swallow around the discomfort rising up, because the next part is from the past, from a time when only Lexi and I could make memories together. Benny was just a baby. “She went there, as a kid. When she’d fight with your mom, she’d run off to the library.” I scratch the back of my head. “I don’t know if you remember that or not, but she went there. So I went there today and... well,” I tip my head behind myself into the house. “I brought her here to talk and calm down.”

The red spot etched into my bottom sheet flashes through my mind, and I find myself clearing my throat.

Lexi appears at my side, wearing my clothes, which look pretty fucking guilty right about now. Benny's eyes come to mine, and though he's only thirteen, he's Lexi's protector. Her only protector until now, and I let him size me up. I take pride in the fact that he wants to defend and protect her—he's a good kid, and a good brother.

"You gotta wear his clothes to talk, huh?" he points the question at Lexi, but his searing gaze never leaves mine.

"Ben—"

"Thought we were a team, Lex. Aren't we a team? Haven't we *been* a team? And yet you're here... with him. And I'm at the apartment, stuck with her," Benny hisses, anger making his nostril flare. I've never seen Benny angry, and by the wide eyed look on Lexi's face, she's never seen him this way either.

"What is this? Huh?" He motions a finger between the two of us as he cautiously takes a step backward off of the porch. "Whatever it is, it's nothing, right? Because if it were something, you'd have told me. That's how we are, and you wouldn't all of the sudden change for him, like Kelly does, right?" His question pierces Lexi with its passive aggressive pointed nature. Her shoulders slump as she steps toward him, at the same time, he takes another step back.

My eyes veer to the edge of my lawn, where a bicycle rests on its side. Benny is backing up and on the bike in a matter of seconds, Lexi surging forward, running down the porch steps and into the lawn.

"Benny!" she cries after him, but his first few revolutions on the bike are heavy and strong, taking him down the street quickly. She turns to me, bare feet in the wet grass, blue eyes rimmed in red.

"We'll go after him. We'll talk to him." I take a breath, refusing to let chaos seep in. I panicked when I came to her house before and found they were gone. Had I kept my cool, maybe I'd have better been able to track or trace them. I don't

know. But I won't repeat my mistakes. "Calm down, go get your shoes on, and we'll go find him."

I lock up as she gets her shoes on, and pulls her long, still damp hair into a bun atop her head. She slips onto the saddle behind me, her hands woven tightly together at my chest as she clings to me. Then we ride in the direction he went, and I promise myself, this day will not end until Benny is with us.



Though neither one of us suspected a teenager would run away from home to school, that was the first place we checked. Then Mecca, though him being angry with me meant he'd likely not be there, it seemed stupid not to check. We followed a mental list of Lexi's, thinking of all of the places he'd be, and when they all came up empty, we went back to their apartment.

After taking the three floors of stairs very slowly, worry eating up all our free words, we pushed into the apartment to find my biggest fear: no Benny.

But worse than no Benny?

"Mom," Lexi breathes, reaching for one of her hoodies draped over the couch. She feeds her arms through and pokes her head out, tugging it over my MC shirt. Though I love seeing her in my things, with Kelly's searing glare turned toward us, I'm grateful she's covered up.

"What are you two doing?" She asks, putting her hands on her hips. It's midday and the glaze in her eyes tells me she's already been drinking.

"Looking for Benny. He's... upset," Lexi says, turning to face me where I'm still standing by the front door. "He's not here so we can go."

With my hand on the door handle, I'm ready to continue the hunt when Kelly's words stop us.

"Did he tell you, Lex? Hmm? Did he tell you all the plans he made for you?" Kelly's voice is worn thin from years of partying. Lexi turns, wrapping the cuffs of the sweatshirt around her hands, crossing her arms.

"Tell me what?"

Kelly steps toward us, her eyes veering between me and her daughter. "He's gonna take you and Ben away from me and be your new parent." She grins. "Isn't that right, Callan? You're a big old hero waiting to rescue them from their evil witch of a mother."

There's a lot of shit that fuckin' pisses me off.

A lot.

But shitty parents who try to gaslight their children into thinking they don't deserve better? I step toward Kelly, realizing that this is the thing that pisses me off most.

"I'm not trying to steal them from you Kelly. I'm trying to give them a goddamn life that isn't filled with stress and worry." At my sides, my hands curl into fists, my frustration quickly growing. "Do you have any clue how hard Lex works to keep it all going? For you to what? Try to make her feel like shit when she has an opportunity for more?"

"My kids do not want to escape me!" she shouts, but I can see she herself doesn't even believe them by the way her eyes frantically search for validation in Lexi's.

I take a calming breath as Lexi's hand slips into mine, weaving our fingers together. The simple notion brings me calm, and my chest begins to deflate as she sends me a passive squeeze.

But Kelly's eyes fall to our connection, and her breathing intensifies as she spins up into a flurry of chaos.

"Kelly, please," I start, but her eyes are so laser focused on our joined hands, she can't even speak. I take another shot as I move my arm only slightly, tucking Lexi behind me. I don't

trust Kelly. “Let them stay with me. I ain’t askin’ to adopt Benny. I’m not telling you that you can’t see them. But what you’re doing to them,” I say, lowering my voice, hoping the softness finds her. “It’s not right. Please.”

She steps into me, cupping my cock with her hand. “What’s not right is Daddy fucking his daughter,” she breathes, fingertips tightening around my soft dick. “You tryin’ to use her to find your way back to me? Hmm, Cal?” she drops her voice to a husky whisper. “Come on, Cal, you don’t have to fuck her to get to me. I’m right here,” she breathes and before I can stop it or even realize what’s going on, Lexi’s hand is no longer in mine.

Kelly stumbles back as Lexi surges past me, striking her mom in the face with a curled fist.

“Shut up! Shut up! *Shut up, shut up, shut up!*” she cries, lunging forward, her hand reared back with an open palm. I catch her wrist before she can slap Kelly, and press my hand into Kelly’s collarbone, urging her back.

Blood trickles from Kelly’s nose, but she surprisingly doesn’t speak.

Lexi’s legs thrash as I pin her to the wall with my hands around her biceps, groin pressed to hers. “Stop, stop, baby, stop,” I soothe, urging her to give up the fight.

“Baby?” Kelly snarks from behind me. Then, goddamn it, she loops her arm around me from behind, cupping my cock again.

Lexi’s eyes widen. “Get your fucking hands off of him!! He’s mine! This isn’t about you! Not everything is about you!!” she screams, tears wetting her cheeks.

Collecting her in my arms, she wails against my chest but I walk her to the front door, on a mission to get her out of this apartment. Kelly tosses cruel words at our backs but I choose to ignore them as I hoist Lexi into my arms and sail down the stairs with her. At the bottom, I lower her to the last cement step and take a seat next to her.

“She’s angry and... surprised, that’s all,” I say of Kelly’s cruel words and accusations. “But I have to tell you, whether she gets over it or not, it doesn’t matter to me. I want you and Benny to stay with me, and that’s all we gotta focus on right now.”

Lexi turns to face me, bottom lip wobbly. She holds out her pink hand. “I punched her.”

“I saw.”

She swallows, blue eyes teary, tip of her nose pink. “She deserved it for saying what she said.”

I don’t say anything.

“That’s not why I hit her, though.”

“No?” I arch a brow and drop my palm to her knee, kneading it soothingly as we stare out into the shitty apartment complex parking lot, made of cement pylons and weeds.

“I hit her for touching what’s mine,” she breathes, her voice quiet but not weak. No, I don’t think a single hair on Lexi Fisher’s head is weak.

She weaves her fingers through mine, joining the spot on her knee. “And it’s not completely up to her. I want to live with you, and I want Benny to live with you, too.”

I stroke a hand through my hair. “I want that, too.”

“No,” she says, pushing off the step to stand before me, my sweats still hanging off of her. God she’s beautiful, even in old sweats. “We’re going to live with you Callan. I’m not letting her keep Benny from potentially having a normal life for high school. He doesn’t want to share a room with his sister, he doesn’t want to miss out on the AP classes because we can’t afford the assessment, he doesn’t want to not play sports or go to dances because we don’t have a reliable ride or money. It’s not fair to him and I’m sick of trying to be enough. I want your help. I want your help to make Benny have the best four years of high school. The way it should be.” She swallows, paying no mind to the tears that streak her cheeks because she’s so passionate about her brother’s happiness. “The way he deserves.”

Briefly, I consider what will happen if Kelly were to call the Sheriff. Benny is a minor, but Dave, the Sheriff, is also well aware of Kelly Fisher and her bullshit. Either way, if I get arrested, Lexi is an adult. She can still stay in my house, and then it can be Benny who goes to stay with her. It's worth the risk.

"Okay," I tell her. "We need to find Ben and talk to him about..." I think about the way he saw us earlier, and how he suddenly felt cut out of his own world. I fucking hate that. "Us," I say, finally verbalizing the reason Benny was hurt. "Then you guys are with me. No more of... That," I say, nodding behind me to Kelly's place.

"Good," she breathes, beginning to pace. "But I'm worried. He doesn't have a cell phone and I don't know where else he'd be."

I reach into my pocket and dig out my phone, sending a quick text to Mars.

Dave working?

Mars wastes no time to respond, thank fuck.

Yeah. What's up?

I pull at the back of my neck, rethinking my plan. Had Dave not been on the clock, I'd have asked him to look for Benny with us. But since he is working, we can't make Benny's whereabouts official Oakcreek business.

Ben ran off. Round up Maverick and Hawthorne?
Help us look?

Meet me at End of the Trail in ten.

See you soon

Thanks man

After shoving my phone away, I give Lexi the good news. "We're gonna go to End of the Trail, you know, the bike shop I

used to work at.”

She nods.

“And a few of my brothers from the MC are gonna ride Oakcreek, okay? We just gotta meet up with them first to give them some ideas, then we’re gonna disperse. We’re gonna find him, we’re gonna sit down and talk and get it worked out. Okay?”

I get to my feet and take her face in my hands, stopping her trembling lip by pressing my mouth to hers.

“Okay? It’s going to be okay, Lex. I promise.”

She nods. “Okay. I believe you.”

twenty-one

...



i believe you.

LEXI

My hand throbs inside the kangaroo pocket in my hoodie, where I have it hidden. I can't believe I punched my mom.

Then again, seeing her hand on him brought some cavewoman side of me out. The side of me that has only ever come out before when mom hit Benny. I attacked her then too but as a ten year old, I didn't get too far.

Today, I did.

It was for her touching Callan that way. But it was for everything else, too. Every night she never came home, every time I changed Benny's diaper as a fucking child, every single time my stomach burned with hunger because she hadn't left either food or money, every time we were asked where our parents were, every time we were teased and ridiculed for being poor. That's why I hit her.

I know violence is bad. But I also know that hitting her is the second best thing I've felt lately.

I'm on the curb, a cup of hot coffee at my feet as I wait for Mars and the other guys to arrive. Callan's making phone calls in the shop but I need fresh air.

Three motorcycles roll up, three men getting off them as soon as they've killed their engines. All with long hair but distinctly different looks, the man with the longest dark hair and a silver nose ring comes to sit next to me on the curb while the other two move past me, into the shop.

"I'm Marshall," he tells me, extending his palm.

I shake his hand. "I'm Lexi. I've seen you in the pool hall at The Alley," I tell him.

He nods. "Gonna age myself a little here but... I remember when you were just about this high," Marshall says, stacking

his flattened palm in the air, not too much higher than his head.

I snort. “Yeah... that does make you sound like an old man.”

He twists his head to look my way, one eye pulled shut as he analyzes me. “Callin’ me old?” he asks, a smile tracing his lips.

I shrug. “If the motorcycle boot fits,” I say, earning me a hearty chuckle from the burly biker next to me. Growing somber, I drop my voice to a hush when I turn to him and ask, “Think finding him will be hard?”

Marshall wrinkles his nose. “Na. I’ve lived here my whole life, so have the guys. We know every damn inch of Oakcreek and if he’s still here, we’ll find him.”

“He only has a bicycle, which isn’t even ours, so I don’t think he’ll have left.” I certainly hope not.

Inside the Trail, Callan talks to the two guys in leather jackets, and Mars and I look on, holding conversation as we watch. “I remember when Callan told me he wanted to marry your mom,” Mars starts, surprising me by taking such a private detour. He turns to face me, holding my eyes with serious intensity that makes my heart stutter a bit. “He’s the only person I’ve ever met who was gonna give up being single and dating, give up going out and late night rides—give all that shit up to marry her, just to make sure the two of you were safe.”

My eyes warm and the back of my nose does, too. But with Benny missing, I don’t want to cry. Once I start, I’m afraid I won’t stop. I sniffle just once and smile. “I hated that she took us away, but I’m glad she did. I mean now I am. Because I wouldn’t want him to have made that sacrifice for us.”

It’s true. I love Callan and I’d never want his happiness to take a back seat to anything. If he did that, part of me realizes I’d likely not have him the way I do now. He’d be a father figure, and likely only that. “I’m glad it never came to that.”

“Not sure he’d agree with you,” Mars says thoughtfully as Callan and the other two men come out of the shop, heading toward us.

We get to our feet and the two men hang back, letting Callan come to me alone. He nods to the open parking lot at my back. “Don’t think we’re gonna have to look for him,” he says softly.

I turn to see Benny standing at the edge of the parking lot, the stolen bicycle between his legs, his chest heaving. He lets the bike clatter to the pavement as he swings his leg free and runs to me.

We fall into a deep hug, his soft panting becoming stifled cries. I sift my fingers up the back of his head, smoothing them through his hair the way mother’s soothe their children. I’ve seen plenty of TV moms do it.

“I’m sorry I ran off,” he breathes into my neck before we pull apart. “I knew,” he starts, looking at his worn sneakers as he speaks. “I knew you two were... I knew more was there. He asked about you a lot at Mecca.”

All the tears I’d been avoiding seem to make their grand appearance now. Wiping my cheek I shake my head. “I wanted to talk to you about things, but I promise you, Benny, the only reason I hadn’t is because I wasn’t sure until just yesterday what was happening with Callan and me. I swear on my life.”

He nods. “I believe you.”

“We’re always a team. Me and you come first, you know that. And I’m so sorry I made you feel like I’d split up our team or put Callan first.” I shake my head. “I love you Benny.”

He hugs me again, the smell of teenage sweat and morning sunshine stinging my nose. “I love you too.”

I pull away from him, and hold his hands with me, leveling my gaze on his. “Would you like to come live with Callan?” I lick my lips. “I am not living with him without you, and I will hold nothing against you if you decide you don’t want to. But he’s got a home. You could have your own room. You could play football if you wanted.” My lips tremble though I fight to

keep them steady. “You could have a few years of *normal* at his house.”

He rolls his lips together. “What did Mom say?”

“She doesn’t like it. But it doesn’t matter what she likes or wants, okay? This is about what you want, Ben. And I won’t go without you.”

He swallows hard, a strand of blonde hair falling over his forehead. “Will you have your own room?” he asks carefully, wanting to know the status of things between Callan and myself without having to say the words.

I squeeze his hand. “I think I’d sleep in Callan’s room. Unless that makes you feel weird. In that case, I could have my own room.” He’ll be eighteen in five years, and that time will fly by. I can stay in another room for that time, if it means giving Benny peace of mind. Callan and I would still be together, under the same roof. We can still be a couple without sharing that room, if that’s what it takes for Benny to want to be there.

He shakes his head. “No, I want you to be where you want to be, too.” He smiles at me, his smile a little lopsided. “I don’t say it enough but I know how much this sucks for you too. Thank you for being a mom even though you should only have to be a sister.”

Callan approaches as Benny and I share another hug, this one solidifying our choice to move forward together. Without worry of Kelly. Nope, not anymore.

With one hand clamped down on Ben’s shoulder, Callan passes him a sweatshirt with the other. Benny ran off in a t-shirt and jeans, and it’s hardly over forty degrees out.

“Thanks, Cal,” Benny says, slipping into the overly big hoodie. I notice that this hoodie isn’t Callan’s but rather, it’s brand new, branded with the End of the Trail logo on the breast plate.

“Keep it,” Callan adds. From his back pocket, he pulls out a can of Coke and a granola bar. He passes it to my brother. “Here.”

Marshall and Callan exchange private words as Benny and I take a seat on the curb. He eats the granola bar and drinks the Coke, done with them both in less than two minutes. With mom home, it was almost a guarantee Benny had been so busy taking care of her that he hadn't eaten.

Callan strolls up only to crouch in front of Ben and outstretches his hand. The two of them shake, and Callan keeps their palms together as he says, "I got you, kid. I know I'm not your dad and I'm not trying to be... I'm just trying to show you that I care for you and I have since I met you when you were just a baby. I only want what's best for you both. Truly."

"He wants us to live with you," I tell Callan. Callan looks to me then to Benny, tempered excitement shining in his eyes.

"Yeah?"

Benny nods. "Yeah."

Callan clears his throat but holds my brother's gaze. "I love you both, but how I feel about your sister transcends how I feel about you. You get that, right?"

My brother nods. "You're *in love* with her," he says.

Callan nods, and my heart burns with awareness. "Yes," he says. "I'm in love with her. But I love you both, and would do anything for either of you."

Benny nods. "I just want my sister to be happy, too," he says quietly, his voice uncharacteristically shaky. "Thank you for letting us live with you. And for everything else you're gonna do for us. One day, when I'm your age, I'll repay you Cal. I promise."

Callan smiles. "I know you will."

Marshall appears in the doorway of the shop. "Ben," he shouts to Benny. "Help me fix this bike." The big biker plucks the cycle bike from the ground, analyzing the broken piece of chain. Must've snapped when Benny dropped the bike.

"You can work here at the Trail or over at Mecca," Callan tells Benny. "But right now, you're working with Marshall to

fix that bike. Then we're taking it back to wherever you stole it from."

Benny nods. "Yes, sir."

Callan stops Benny with a hand to his neck. "We're gonna get you a bike, okay? You'll have one of your own. You won't need to swipe one."

With that, Benny is jogging across the dilapidated parking lot toward Marshall, and Callan's lips are at my ear.

"Me and the guys are gonna go get your things from the apartment, and you're gonna stay here with Marshall and your brother. Marshall is like my brother, and I love him the way I love you both. So you're safe, okay?"

I've never had anyone tell me that when they left me, I'd be safe as is. And as the words feather over me, I realize I needed to hear them. Nodding, I say, "Okay."

"Tell me what I need to know," he says. "You got shit in the kitchen or just the room you two share?"

"We share a dresser in our bedroom. Everything we own is in that dresser."

His face pulls up tight, lines of confusion marring his forehead. "Just the dresser?"

I nod. "Yeah, nothing else."

After getting me situated in the office at Trail, Callan and the other guys head out, on a mission to rescue our things so that Benny and I can, after all these years, finally live.

twenty-two

...



we're family.

CALLAN

For as fucking level-headed as I can be about things, when it comes to this specific thing, I've become an irrational asshole who I don't even recognize.

"God, baby, you're so fucking tight." My orgasm treks down my spine, burrowing in my groin, intensifying my need to come. "One day I'll fuck you for hours," I promise as I skate my lips against hers.

She nods, moaning, a complete mess in my arms beneath me. "God, Callan, you're so big," she whines, doing nothing for the urgency brewing in my balls.

"One day ain't today," I continue, plunging my aching erection in and out of her, hips pumping between her open legs. "God, I'm leaking already," I tell her.

I reach down and find her clit, stroking her a few times before I give myself a break and pull out, clambering to her pink, glistening pussy with my mouth. I suck her clit, while at the same time, grab my cockhead and hold it tight, making sure I don't make an asshole out of myself all over my bed.

"Callan, *ohmygod*," she breathes, her thighs clamping around my ears as I feast. "Put it in, put it in me," she begs, her voice gaining volume and momentum. I place a final kiss to her throbbing, swollen little bud and make my way back up over her.

Our eyes idle as my cock finds its way to her opening and I slowly push back inside. She's so tight and so wet and so fucking warm, I can't help the unhinged growl that rattles through me when I sink in.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck," I growl, my jaw clenched as I fight the urge to come right this second.

But then she's clenching up all around me, her walls constricting as she moans my name, moans her orgasm, milking me.

Burying my face in the crook of her neck, sucking in her soft floral scent, I gasp and moan as I fill her with every drop. I come in blinding waves, each pulse of cum thick and abundant, leaving no part of her womb untouched.

"Yes," I find myself panting, making noises I've never heard myself make as my hips slow their chase, petering to a slow roll. "God..." I breathe, finally managing to lift my head.

Beneath me, her pouty lips curve into a sated smile and she reaches up, sifting her fingers through my hair. I catch her palm with my mouth, placing a kiss in the center as I slowly empty her. From beside us, I grab the towel I'd stashed there earlier, and move to wipe her up.

I know I shouldn't be coming inside of her this way, I know I shouldn't be pumping every single load I have straight into her tight warmth, but I'm a dangerous man when it comes to Lexi Fisher.

I can't stop.

I could not pull out of her and come on her stomach if my life depended on it. It's not just because being inside of her bare feels *good*.

Hand warmers in your gloves while you're in the snow feel *good*.

Being inside her is intoxicating. When I'm sliding in and out of her swollen, soft cunt, all I see is happiness. A full life with Lexi, and it all starts here, with my cum buried deep. But it's a terrifying thought to voice, and though she and Benny are living here, and we've exchanged those meaningful words in every capacity we can, still.

She's eighteen. I'm thirty-fucking-six. I should put a fucking condom on and give her the chance at whatever goddamn future she wants. I know that whatever she chooses, I'll be there with her.

Pressing the soft terry to her tender flesh, I look up at where she blinks lazily at me, the setting sun dropping oranges streaks along her bare breasts and cheek.

“You know how you mentioned college a month or so ago,” I say as I use the rag to collect stray beads of cum. “I looked into it and so long as you finish your GED, there are a handful of places that’ll take you. There’s a bunch of grants and other stuff, too.”

She nibbles at the corner of her mouth, feeding the end of the comforter through her hands mindlessly. “Cal State Riverside?” She questions of the state school just twenty miles from here.

I nod, hoping she’d choose that school over the rest, but ready to let her spread her wings.

“That way I can commute, you know, once I can save up enough to put down on a car.”

I roll my eyes at her.

“What?” she quips, glaring at me. My cock twitches a little at her attitude. Turns out, I guess I like a little brattiness from time to time.

“I’ll buy you a car.”

She folds her arms over her chest, which earns a disappointed little grunt from me. Sprawling out along the bed next to her, I take her nipple into my mouth after lifting her arm for access. She giggles as I lick and bite her bare breast, the tangy flavor of our sweat becoming familiar to my taste buds. I like that.

“Okay stop,” she laughs, pushing me off her overly sensitive breast. She feeds her fingers through my hair, still giving me a salty stare. “Now. You will not buy me a car.” The cerulean overtakes the sapphire in her eyes when the sun is just rising. All that brightness intensifies the ombre of blues she sports in that gaze. The one currently narrowed in on me.

I can’t imagine there is anyone luckier.

“Just because I’m living here and you’re feeding me, clothing me, keeping me in essentials and everything doesn’t mean I’m going to be a mooch off of you.” She wrinkles her nose. “No way.”

I want to laugh, but she’s so determined I don’t want to undermine her moment. And anyway, I know what she’s saying. When you grow up the way we do, being someone’s charity or pitied by them becomes an overwhelming fear. Something about it erroneously feels shameful, when the truth is, a child has no say in whether or not they need help. They simply need it or they don’t. And I did. But I was afraid to ask, and more afraid of being pitied.

I don’t want her to think it’s pity or charity. I kiss my way down her still bare belly, and sink my mouth into her warm, used cunt. I can taste myself there, tart and sticky. With my tongue, I explore her everywhere, coming to land on her clit. She moans my name, still fighting the car.

I kiss her clit.

“I’m getting you the car.”

I kiss it again, then gently drag my stubbled chin over it.

“Not because I feel bad for you or pity you.”

I kiss her with tongue this time, the tip circling her clit.

“But because you’re mine.”

I suckle at it, gently roving my teeth back and forth, making her hips surge.

“And I’m in love with you something wicked.”

I drive a finger inside, groaning at how tight she is, despite the fact I can’t keep my filthy hands and fat cock away from her. I’ve been inside her more times than I can count. If she so much as pours the morning coffee with a certain look on her face, I’m gone. Between those thighs, pushing my way inside, growling naughty promises in her ear.

“And I want to take care of you. Both of you.”

I manage to bring up Benny without having to say his name. Doing that while I'm fingering her and eating her out after fucking her ruthlessly for weeks feels a little shitty.

"So I'm buying you a car, and when the time comes, he'll get one, too. Either yours or one of his own," I tell her as I keep my fingers curling into her as I reposition myself in the bed, my mouth at her ear now. "I'm gonna give your pussy a break," I tell her as she spasms around me, bearing down on my fingers. She's close again, and I'm not surprised. I make her come like crazy. She comes like crazy. It's... insane. I'm actually sweating my refractory period a little because... well, hell, thirty six is not even close to twenty-six, much less eighteen.

I don't want to disappoint her.

"And I'm gonna fuck your mouth." With one finger, I trace her jaw, slowly angling her mouth to mine. I line her lips with the tip of my tongue before bringing her mouth to mine. I kiss her deep then pull her back a little. "I have to stop coming in you," I say to her, my voice so thin it's nearly transparent. She swallows as she processes my words, her eyes falling to my lips. When she meets my gaze again, she's breathing a little harder, I can tell.

"I feel so shameful that I have been," I whisper, my cock rising against her thigh, heavy, fat, and aching to be with her. With her eyes focused on mine, it feels easy to admit the truth and tell her how I feel. "I know it's selfish, and I love you. I want you to have the life you want. But once I get inside you, I just... I can't pull out."

She puts her hand on my chest, stroking me gently as I fuck her with my fingers, adding a third. "I don't want you to," she whispers, her voice just as thin as mine, just as nervous as mine.

"Fuck," I groan, pumping my fingers in and out of her now, focus on the pounding movement against her g-spot that I know she loves. "Once you come on my fingers, I am one hundred percent putting my ugly, fat, hard cock in your pretty little mouth," I thrust my cock against her hip. "But it's a

shame,” I tsk, my heart beating insanely fast after her admission. She doesn’t want me to stop coming inside of her. “I’ll come like hell down your throat but not coming deep inside your sweet little pussy feels like a sin. And that’s why I can’t pull out.”

She slides down the bed, curling her knees into my ass as she takes my cock into her throat.

“Fu-uck,” I grit out, a little alarmed by how goddamn good it feels already. She’s new to oral sex, but gives a hell of a blow job. This, though, is different. So deep right out the gate. Fuck me. “Are you gonna suck me when I come? Hmm?” I stroke the pad of my thumb along her cheekbone, watching her flush. “Are you going to suck the cum from my cock because you need it inside you so bad?” I drag my thumb down the bridge of her nose. I start to move my hips a lot, taking her head in my hand. Her hair is silky between my fingers, and the slick glides of it makes my nipples hard. “You’re doing good,” I praise, my voice low and serious, imparting the truth. “So good, baby,” I add, my chest hit with a sudden rush of melty, oozy appreciation for her.

“I love you,” I tell her, and she nods her head, her mouth full of my cock. “Now let me feed you my cum, okay?”

She nods and I grab the base of my cock, tugging gently as her tongue explores the underside of my shaft. My vision starts to tunnel, my balls tingly and my belly clutches tightly—I’m going to come and it’s going to be extremely explosive.

“Fuck, fuck, I’m gonna come,” I warn, and before I can say more, I’m rocketing off down her throat as she nestles closer to me, taking me deeper as I spray. She coughs a little, sending a vibration up my cock, which still pulses and twitches every few seconds, somehow having more cum to expel. She swallows a ton. So much that I lose count.

Once she’s done taking it all, she slides off me with a pop, and I lift her up the bed, taking her in my arms. “I feel like we live in this bed now,” I yawn into her hair as my cock grows soft and sticky against her belly. She giggles.

“Me too. But I like it.” her voice grows serious. “I like it here so much. Thank you, Callan. We love it. Benny loves it, too. He really does.”

I stroke my knuckles down her bare back. “Don’t say thank you. We’re family. And now... we’re back together. That’s it.”

That’s the way I see it. She’s going to be family in two weird ways. Two such vastly different ways that some people won’t like us simply because I used to date Kelly. I used to watch Lexi as a young girl. As a child.

But she’s a woman now, and she’s my goddamn woman. And I don’t care who doesn’t like it.

She’s going to be my wife. She’s going to be the mother of our children, too. So fuck them. “I love you,” she says softly, a passive barter. I kiss the top of her head.

“Okay, I gotta get to Mecca. I need you to work the desk. Amir’s coming in but I have something to finish in the office so maybe you can help him with something else?”

She nods, sitting up. I sit up, too.

As she puts her hair in a ponytail she asks, “What are you working on?”

I wink. “Wouldn’t you like to know.”

She grins, wiggling her eyebrows. “I’ll blow you if you tell me,” she teases.

I grin. “You’ll blow me even if I don’t because the sight of my cock drenches you, and you’re needy for it all the time. Aren’t you?”

Her jaw drops but she shakes her head, finally whispering, “Yes.”

“Alright, so back to Mecca—”

She slaps my chest. “Tease!”

I slide out of bed and get to my feet, grabbing yesterday’s jeans from the floor. Fuck it. May as well wear yesterday’s flannel too.

“At least a new henley,” Lexi says as she dresses on the opposite side of the bed, her back to me.

I smirk, and grab a new henley from the drawer. She knows me well. And I truly believe, as fucking *horoscope checking and lock of hair under my pillow* as it is, we’re meant to be together.

Benny and Lexi have been living with me for a month, and collectively, aside from the mind blowing sex and all the love, it’s been the best month of my life. Easily.

After we eat a quick bite, we head to Mecca, the name never more fitting.



As I close myself into the back office at Mecca, I steal one last glance at Lexi and Amir at the front desk. He looks at her like she hangs the moon and it only makes me like Amir that much more.

“How about you practice reading it out loud to me, and we’ll figure out what needs changing together?” she offers, her attention moving between the handwritten speech in her hands and Amir bouncing on his toes in front of her.

He nods excitedly as she drags a stool out for him to sit on. I close my office door, set the alarm on my phone for an hour—gotta make sure Amir gets home on time—and get to work. I’ve been working on this piece for the last few months and usually I’d have it done by now.

But my new routine means a lot less free time at Mecca, and I’m not mad about that.

Still, with the classics pumping from my phone, I know I can get it done in the next day or two. Maybe even wrap it up

this afternoon if I get in the zone.

Just imagining the gift with its owner puts me in the headspace to finish. And with Lex out there, in my music store, befriending the people in my life, I've never felt more enthused to work.

twenty-three

...



everything i need in the entire world is in this kitchen right now.

LEXI

Benny swipes beneath his eye and I waggle my finger in his direction, my lungs burning from laughter. He grabs a balled up napkin coated in pizza grease from the counter and chucks it at my head. I duck, but it still clips me, and he erupts into more wild laughter.

“OR,” he starts, laughter chipping at his determination. I wipe my eyes as Benny sets his shoulders, trying again as his smile slides off his lips. “ORGANISM,” he finally states.

From the hall, Callan appears, his hair wet and stringy on his shoulders, a damp t-shirt clinging to his chest. A purr rumbles between my legs, but I ignore it, having promised myself to never let my unending all consuming horniness for Callan weird out my little brother.

Because of this, I don't even let my eyes roam his gray sweats. Nope. Not going there. I lift a slice of pizza to my mouth. “Sorry—sleep well?”

Last night, Callan brought home something he's been working on at Mecca for a while. He said he only had an hour or two left before it was complete, but didn't want Benny and I at his place alone. He brought it back and holed up in the garage all evening while me and Benny ordered pizza, watched Netflix and had one of the best, most relaxing nights of our lives.

We sat in a warm home, on a comfortable sofa and binged TV shows, ate as much pizza as we wanted and went to bed. In our own beds, in our own rooms. Knowing the door was locked. Knowing we were safe.

I'm not sure what time it was when I finally felt Callan's arm wrap around me as he tugged me into him. With his lips at

my neck, he coated me in a few hot kisses, and then we fell asleep.

This morning I woke to the smell of reheated pizza, and couldn't help myself. That got Benny and I talking about how his last presentation in biology went and he recounted that he'd accidentally said orgasms instead of organisms.

Maybe that would've earned a snort or a chuckle in the past. I realize now why happy people are always happy. Because I'm happy now, and when you're like, really happy, it's hard to let the little things get you down.

I've been seeing that in Benny lately, too.

"First part of the night I slept great," he says, curling his hands around the tops of my shoulders as he dips down to kiss the side of my throat. Benny doesn't look away, but he doesn't really watch either, and knowing that he's not only accepted us but is used to it is literally all I need.

In fact, everything I need in the entire world is in this kitchen right now.

With his mouth grazing my ear he says, "The second part sucked."

We share a short kiss and he's on his way to the coffee pot, where a full brew awaits. He fills a tumbler and leans back against the counter, steam wafting off his mug. "Studying this morning?" he asks, eyeing the papers scattered across his kitchen island as Benny snags the last slice of pizza.

I nod. "Yeah. Benny was helping me go through the pretest one more time," I tell him, bypassing the slight detour we took for his high school biology orgasm snafu. Some things are still just Lex and Benny things.

"She's ready," Benny nods, so sure of me. The truth is, I think I'm ready, too. I'm surprised at what I've learned in three different schools over three years, but more so, surprised at how well I did this year on my own. Not many students my age could self-pace their senior year but I did it. And I'm pretty sure I'm about to pass and earn my GED.

“Couldn’t have done it without you, Ben,” I tell him, passing him a serious smile.

He shimmies his shoulders, his entire oversized teen body fluttering on the bar stool. “Ah, feels, do not give me feels right now,” he teases, jerking to avoid the heavy sentiment of my appreciation.

I laugh, and refuse to acknowledge the burning at the back of my nose. Callan smirks between us, enjoying our moment, or maybe just enjoying being part of our everyday moments. He looks at us like that often. Like he truly enjoys the three of us being together again.

“Fine, fine,” I wave off, wiping my fingers on my napkin. “I’m going to go get ready.” I look at Callan. “It’s three hours so—”

“I’m staying,” he deadpans, refilling his mug of coffee already. “I’m driving you and I’m staying the entire time and we’re going back to Mecca together,” he says, reaching beneath the counter to drag out a pan. His brows raise as he looks between me and Benny. “Eggs? I know you guys had pizza but I’m gonna make some eggs.”

Benny looks interested. “I’ll have eggs.”

“You just ate!” I laugh, carrying my plate to the dishwasher.

Callan takes it from me, swatting my butt. “Go get ready. I’ll load the damn dish.” He points his spatula at the fridge. “When I was your age, I was a bottomless pit.”

“See,” Benny hedges, “it’s a guy thing. I *have* to eat nonstop. I’m growing.”

Callan smirks at Benny as he pulls a crate of eggs from the fridge, snagging a bowl from below the counter. “You crack and whisk, I’ll scramble,” I hear Callan tell him as I work my way through the house, down the hall.

“I don’t know how to make eggs,” my brother protests softly.

The last thing I hear before I close my bedroom door is Callan's soft response. "You will after this morning."



"When I was your age and I took the SATs, we had to wait like, weeks to get a piece of paper in the mail with a response," Callan says as I work my fingers through his hair. I'm on the saddle of his bike and he's between my legs, letting me calm my nerves. Playing with his hair has always been my favorite thing, ever since I was a little girl.

"Did you have to ride your horse to the post office, too, pepaw?" I tease. He jumps to his feet, a playful snarl in his lip as he grabs my hips and crushes his mouth to my neck. Playfully nibbling, he growls and I giggle, squirming against him.

The pinching noise of an old door sounds, and Callan pulls away from me in time for us to see the paper being hung on the glass doors. The woman taps her long fingernail to the glass, smiling our way. "They're up."

Callan nods me on. "Go."

In my oversized Carhartt hoodie and leggings, I slowly trek toward the building. As I make the short walk, I look down at myself, at my new things. Despite the fact that Callan has bought us a ton of things to wear, I'm hopelessly addicted to wearing hoodies with his scent etched in. Nothing makes me feel better than a midday hit of Callan, courtesy of my nose buried in his hoodie.

I approach the glass and bring the collar of his sweatshirt to my nose and take one quick hit for confidence. My skin ripples with goosebumps as his musky scent hits my veins, and I press my finger to the sheet, looking for my name.

When I find it, my heart leaps into my throat as I trace the dots to the color-coded box. Green. Pass. I swallow hard as I stare at that green box.

I passed. After the moving and the chaos, the nights of no sleep because I was worrying about Mom or Benny or both, missing so many days and feeling so lost, after everything... *I am a high school graduate.*

When I turn, Callan is there, right behind me, collecting my face in his large, rough hands. The ink etched along his throat seems to blur, or maybe my eyes are wet, I don't know. I just know that he feathers words of praise all over me as he peppers kisses on my forehead and hairline, along my cheekbone and down the bridge of my nose. Then I'm glued to his chest as he holds me tight, telling me how fucking proud he is.

A GED isn't much to most.

Callan knows my struggle. Callan knows my life. He knows that the deck was stacked against me here, but I did it. No benevolent state service, no help from a caring teacher, nothing helped me but me. And my brother. And the man who is currently holding me in his arms.

He pulls back, blinking down at me with a gorgeous smile. "Let's celebrate."

"Yeah?" No one has ever celebrated anything in my life or Ben's, and something tells me Callan knows that.

He nods, stroking the back of his knuckles over one of my breasts. "Yeah. I'm gonna take you home," he whispers, kissing behind my ear, pushing hair off my neck. "I'm gonna bounce you on my cock and make you come." His lips skate over my collarbone before nipping at my chin and taking my lips. Our kiss is slow and languid, and it ignites a fire in my belly, making my pussy hum for him. "Then we're gonna get Benny from Mecca and we're gonna celebrate, for real. Since his 14th birthday is right around the corner, we'll have a big feast."

I nod. “Okay.” I feel weightless and breathless as he hoists me onto the saddle. I loop my arms around his waist and burrow into his warm back. The ride across town to our house is filled with traffic, honking cars and potholes.

But the vibration of the motor and Callan’s strong back pressed to my chest, my nipples hard, breasts physically aching for him—it’s the best ride. One that has me drenched by the time we’re home.

Callan tosses me over his shoulder, carrying me to our room while stopping at Benny’s door to make sure he is indeed gone. It’s Saturday afternoon and Ben actually has plans. In the last few months we’ve been living with Callan, Benny’s changed so much. Being clean and fed with new clothes has done so much for his personality. He’s really started to bloom. So much so that he’s out with friends this afternoon.

“Makin’ sure,” Callan says, pulling Benny’s door closed as he moves us to our room, swatting my ass as we breach the threshold.

There is no time for artistic disrobing because the moment my feet hit the floor, we’re stripping our clothes off like they’re full of bees... and on fire.

“I’m so wet,” I tell him, my words a rushed jumble as I nearly trip to get my leggings off. “God, Cal, I want you so bad,” I murmur as I crawl onto the bed and ready myself for him.

“Get on all fours,” he commands, his voice thick and gruff. When he sounds like that, all I want is to be used by him. To have his big hands all over me, pulling me, grabbing me, pushing me, doing with me whatever he wants because no matter what, he always makes me feel good.

I scramble to my hands and knees and a featherlight moan slips my lips as his hands grip to my hips. “Tell me what you want,” he starts, smoothing one hand up and down my spine as I wiggle my naked butt against his bare, hot, hard cock.

“I want you to use me, fuck me how you like, Cal,” I pant, the pressure in my clit growing to insurmountable levels. “But

please, just... fuck me.”

In one swift push, he drives inside of me. I gasp at the immediate fullness, the pulsing, hard intrusion. He feels so goddamn good, even if it always burns a little to be so full. “Oh God,” I breathe, feeling like the world is right when he’s this deep in me.

My neck burns as he fills his fist with my hair, gently jerking me back. Then it’s his groin slapping against mine, echoing around the bedroom as he fucks me doggy, hard.

I want nothing more than to ask him to pump every hot, delicious drop of cum deep inside my pussy. I want nothing more than my womb to be full and ripe with a baby he put inside me.

But I equally love feeling the warm spray of cum against my skin, watching his cock pulse in his fist as he tugs himself over me, seeing the way his face sort of melts when he reaches his breaking point. It’s beautiful.

He reaches around, melding his body to mine as his cock slams into me with force, his big hand grabbing my breast, tweaking my nipple.

“Fuck, baby, I love your tits,” he groans, his big balls tickling my clit each time he hammers into me deep. He rolls my nipple between his thumb and forefinger before pinching, tugging it hard enough to make me yelp and jerk back against him, sinking his cock even deeper into me.

“Cal,” I moan right as he drops his hand from my breast to my clit, smearing my arousal around. “Ohmygod, that feels so good,” I breathe, my instinct to bear down on his cock getting stronger as my orgasm nears.

“That’s right, come on my cock,” he rasps, his breathing frantic and broken, his hips hammering out of rhythm as he works to make me come without relinquishing his own release.

“I wanna feel her, I wanna feel that tight little cunt of yours squeeze my fat cock, I want her to beg my cock to give her cum.” He slaps my ass, still stroking my clit with his other

hand. “Beg for my cum, baby, beg for it. Let me feel you,” he says, talking to my pussy. When he talks directly to my cunt, it sends me over the edge. Something so feral and crazy about him telling my pussy to give it up for his cock is just insanely hot.

I find my toes curling and my spine sagging as my orgasm rips through me, making me twitch and shudder all around his length. “I’m coming,” I moan, writhing back against him, needing to feel his balls against me while I lose it. His hand leaves my clit as he smacks my bare ass, this time on the opposite cheek.

“Come on it, keep coming on it,” he groans, giving me a few shallow, short strokes. Pulsing, fluttering, my walls tighten around his cock as much as they can, the rippling waves of satisfaction and relief causing me to gasp and moan.

Finally, with sweat glistening on my forehead, I collapse against the bed. Callan grabs my ankles, flipping me onto my back with way too much ease. His biceps and chest ripple as he yanks my body near his, one hand falling to his meaty erection.

Over my body, he strokes and the sight has me reaching for my clit again, despite the fact I just came.

Never thought I’d be sexually insatiable but I never belonged to a man who brought it out of me until Callan. “Oh God,” he groans, hooded eyes falling to the place where I’m stroking myself. Watching me touch my pussy, especially after he’s made it pink and swollen from sex, sends him over the edge.

Groaning, his fist tightens and slows, wrapped around the head of his cock as he angles it toward the canvas of my bare body. In pulsating waves, he comes, each shot warm and thick. He moans his way through his orgasm, watching the way he marks my body with his release. And when the last drop is curving around his head and finding his knuckles, I use my hands to collect his cum from my body, and finish my second orgasm using his cum as lube.

When I'm done, we're both sticky messes so we opt for a quick midday shower. I've learned to use a showercap because nothing says "*I just had a messy fuck*" like midday wet hair. Again, for Benny's sake, I wear the shower cap.

Out and redressed, Callan texts Benny on the phone he got him, trying to find out where he is so we can pick him up.

Callan smiles at the screen, and though I never ask what they discuss, it warms me to see how their relationship has not just been rekindled but brought so much to them both. He looks up at me through his dark lashes. "He's at The Alley. Let's grab him then come back here to celebrate."

"You don't want to go out?" I question.

"After," he says, sliding his phone into his pocket before grabbing his flannel from the chair, feeding an arm through at a time. Black boots, a henley and a flannel. Those three things have become deadly to my vagina.

"After what?"

"After I give him his gift." He strokes his fingers through my hair, kissing my temple. "I have a gift for you, too. He helped you pass the GED, and you've gotten the both of you through the hardest, worst years of your life. If those things don't deserve a little reward, I'm not sure what would."

I stroke my fingers along the pattern in his shirt, over his taut pec. "You didn't have to."

"I wanted to. I want to do everything for both of you, and guess what?" he says, smirking as he brings his lips to mine. "I get what I want."



Forty minutes later, we're back at our house. Benny and I are standing around the kitchen island while Callan moves around in the garage, the door propped open a sliver by his boot. A few weeks ago, when we left Mecca, we picked Benny up from school and he drove us to the cell phone shop. He bought us both brand new phones, saying it was important to him that we be able to contact each other.

That was such a big gift, I can't imagine what's up his sleeve now.

A moment later, he appears, a gorgeous, excited smile on his lips. I've never seen him this outwardly happy. "Ben first," he says, placing the long brown box in the center of the counter.

"I can't wrap so it's just a plain box."

Benny blinks at the box then looks up at Callan, clearing his throat to rid his voice of emotion. "Whatever it is, thank you."

Callan pulls my brother into a hug, and slaps him across the back a few times. "Love you buddy," he says.

"Love you too, Cal," Benny says, reaching for the box to distract himself from the heavy, happy emotions of the moment. His fingers curl the lid and he gently lifts, but from where he's standing, I can't see the exposed contents of the box.

I only see Benny's head turn, the glassiness in his eyes and the knot in his throat. "For me?"

Callan dips his head. "For you." The corner of his mouth twitches. "Started on it the first day you came to Mecca, before you knew—"

"It was you," Benny finishes. "When I thought you were just the guy who owned the guitar place."

Callan nods, chuckling a little. "Right, when you thought I was just a random dude. That's when I started working on it."

Reaching into the box, Benny lifts and turns, and it's then a see what it is.

“Mahogany body, spruce top,” Callan starts describing the elements as Benny turns the piece over in his hands, eyes full of awe. “It’s got a urethane gloss finish, so you can polish it a lot.” He scratches the back of his head. “I did that a lot before I knew a lot of chords. Polished it, just dreaming of a time when I could play more.”

Callan doesn’t play guitar much now, not unless we’re at Mecca. Sometimes he’ll pass his own old acoustic back and forth with Benny at home, but mostly, he keeps his music at Mecca. He’s also let me know that it wasn’t always like that but now “I’ve got much better things to do at home than play guitar.”

Me. I’m the thing.

“It’s... Callan, man, thank you,” Benny breathes, hugging Callan while holding the guitar away from Cal’s body. “I love it. Thank you.”

Callan pats Benny’s back again before they separate. “You helping your sister with her GED was solid,” he says. “But you deserve this regardless. Got that?”

Benny nods. “Got it.”

I’ve noticed that Callan is slowly building Benny’s self worth, using words of affirmation or positivity. I love that he truly wants the best for Benny, and not because he’s the brother of the woman he loves. But because he loved me and Benny platonically and organically first, before the rest.

Callan turns to face me, and I wipe beneath my eye to hide how happy I am that we’re all three just... happy together now.

Everything is finally so right I can hardly breathe.

He shoves his hand in his pocket and produces a key ring with a key on it. “I said I’d get you a car, so this isn’t much of a surprise, but,” he says, closing the gap between us to lower the key into my open palm. “I got you a car. So you can commute to school.”

I literally do not even care what the car is. I leap into his arms and pepper his face with kisses, breathing thank you

while simultaneously apologizing to Benny for having to witness what we try to keep somewhat private.

He takes me to the garage, and Benny joins. With the light on, he lowers me to the ground and the three of us stare at the most perfect, adorable little blue car. I don't even know what it is, but I fucking love it. Because he thought of me, and he's thinking of my future.

My mom flashes through my mind.

It goes against natural law to dislike your own mother, and I try to fight it. I do. I don't want to hate her. I understand she's lost in her own troubles. But as I blink at the car and the care, love and adoration it represents, I can't help but be hit with a wave of anger toward her. But I channel it to love, turning to face Callan.

"Thank you so much," I say, forcing strength into my wobbly voice.

"Check the front seat."

Benny goes with me as we loop the car and tug open the door. On the passenger seat, there is a small stack of papers. I grab them and as the words move through my mind, I try to process it. Callan's all capital masculine handwriting is everywhere.

Over my shoulder, Benny reads, "California State University, Riverside."

"It's a college app. I filled it out. I paid the fee online already. You just need to attach a copy of your GED and we can drop it off today. Thought we'd take the car for a spin and head that way, actually."

Tears slither down my cheeks as I nod. Benny pulls me into a hug. "You deserve it."

We head inside, and I'm in kind of a haze as Benny tugs on his End of the Trail hoodie, the neon logo on the breastplate uniquely bright. "If you don't mind, Cal, I'm gonna head back to The Alley. The guys are bowling and—"

Callan lifts a palm. “That’s fine. Lex and I will ride up to Riverside and get her app turned in, then we can all meet up later for a nice dinner. I’m thinking Cafe Paradise here in Oakcreek.” He looks at his watch. “I’ll call and get us a table while we’re driving. Want us to pick you up?”

“Text me,” Benny says, toeing into his sneakers. “If bowling gets lame I could ride my bike that way.”

“Need money?” Callan asks, digging his wallet from his back pocket. Benny shakes his head.

Callan ignores it, and slaps two twenties down on the counter. “Be safe. And I’ll text you when I have a reservation time, okay?”

We exchange goodbyes, and Callan and I ride out to Riverside, taking the country roads to make the short drive last a bit longer. I turn in the application and Callan drives us back to Oakcreek so I can thank him beneath the steering wheel. I swallow every drop as I make him come, and then we pick up Benny and enjoy one of the best meals I’ve ever eaten.

I’m eighteen but today feels like the beginning of my life.

twenty-four

...



you ain't a reese's, baby.

CALLAN

Morning creeps into my consciousness, brightening my bleary senses. Awareness zips down my spine as my toes curl. Reaching under the sheet, I fill my hands with silky hair and peer down at the most beautiful fucking sight: Lexi tucked between my thighs, warm blankets pulled up all around us, my morning wood deep in her throat.

I don't know how I got so lucky to feel so intimately connected to a woman but to also have that woman be utterly gorgeous with a libido greater than mine?

Literal fucking jackpot.

"Fuck," I groan, yawning awake as the tip of her tongue skates over the bumpy skin of my hot, full sac. "Good morning to me."

She pops off. "I woke up and you were already hard, even though you were asleep. So I started playing with myself but..." she looks down at the veiny, nearly purple erection in her hands. "You're so tempting. I have no willpower."

Then her mouth is full of me again, throat, too. The noises she makes when she sucks my cock make it impossible to last beyond five minutes, but this morning, I don't even try. In under a minute, I'm filling her throat with a hot morning load, and the sound of her swallowing every drop has my heart racing.

Fucking perfect way to start the day, if I do say so myself.

"Cal," she whispers as she climbs up my body, pressing her chest to mine. She stacks her fists on my pecs and rests her chin on her hands, peering down at me as my heart evens its wild beating. "We've really been bingeing each other hard for months," she says slowly, using the tip of her finger to trace invisible patterns onto my chest.

“Yeah,” I agree, equally slowly, because clearly more is coming.

“Sometimes, when I really want chocolate, I’ll binge it. I’ll eat so many Reese’s that I think I’ll actually die if I even smell peanut butter, and then I can’t even look at candy for months.”

“You ain’t a Reese’s, baby,” I tell her, following perfectly the subtext of what she’s saying.

“No one thinks they’re going to be tired of the thing they once loved,” she says carefully, her eyes finally coming to meet mine. My chest clenches when I see trace amounts of fear sparkling back at me. “Promise me, Cal, please. If you binge me and you get sick of me, whatever you do, please, *do not get sick of him.*”

A stray tear slips down her cheek and my heart nearly fucking shatters at the sight of it. I flip her onto her back beneath me, and cage her to the mattress by leaning down on my forearms. My soft, sticky cock presses against her center. “I will never get tired of you,” I tell her, holding her gaze to impart my truth.

She nods, her silky hair fanning out along the pillowcase. “I know. But if you do. Please. Never get tired of Benny. Never quit Benny. He’s thriving here, with you. He needs you.”

I crush my mouth to hers, trying as hard as humanly possible to eat up all her fears, to rid her of any residual worry. I’ve done nothing to make her suddenly worry—that much I know. Why do I know that? Because we’re alike, me and Lex. She’s been left her whole life therefore, it is and will be her primary concern. For a long time.

Every single day of my life will be spent showing her that I’m not going anywhere.

“I need both of you. I’m not leaving either of you. We’re a family, Lex, you hear me?” My cock grows fat from the emotional intensity of the moment, and beneath me, her thighs part enough for me to enter, so I do.

Her eyes fall closed as I sink inside, moving in easy, careful strokes. She whimpers as I make love to her, kissing her eyelids, kissing the tip of her nose, licking my way down her throat. In and out, I fuck her slow as I suck her nipple into my mouth, causing her spine to arch. “We’re together forever,” I feather the promise over her bare body as I make slow, perfect love to her.

In a matter of minutes, we’re both at our breaking point, her tight, warm comfort bringing me to the edge. “If I thought I’d get tired of you,” I urge as I stroke my erection into her again. “I wouldn’t constantly be trying to bury my cum inside you, Lex. I wouldn’t be trying to spray your womb with my seed and put my baby inside you. But I am, aren’t I?” My hips pump quicker and precum slips past the slit, adding to the slickness of her channel. “So know this, my morning girl, you are mine and I am yours. There is no getting tired of the best thing that’s ever happened to me.”

She goes boneless beneath me, becoming nothing but harsh breaths and jumbled words. With her ankles hooked behind my back, she pulls me in deep as I let go of control and empty myself inside of her.

“Yes,” she purrs as my heat roars through her body. “Come deep,” she urges, my beautiful woman with the filthy little mouth. I slam my mouth to hers as the rest of my cum tears out of me, flooding her insides.

When I have the energy to pull back, my chest constricts at the wide smile painting her face. “I’m sorry I let doubt creep in for a hot second,” she grins.

I bring my mouth to hers. “You can be doubtful as much or often as you need.” I move inside of her again, despite the fact I’m growing soft after two back to back orgasms. “I’m here to make sure you know you’re my everything, I’m staying, and you’ll never be alone again.”

“Benny either,” she reassures herself, and I nod.

“Benny either.”

She lifts from the pillow to bring our mouths together in a slow, sizzling kiss. Her tongue slides against mine, gentle moans moving between us. When we finally part, it's because her cell phone alarm is deafening us from the nightstand.

She hasn't been working at The Alley in a while. Instead, she comes to Mecca, with me, and runs the front desk. It's given me the opportunity to spruce the place up a little. I've swapped the matted old carpet in the office for hardwood, and am working my way through the store installing the same flooring.

"We gotta get to Mecca," she says, silencing the alarm and I roll to sit and get out of bed. "Amir's coming a little early."

He doesn't usually come on Saturday but his parents are working doubles. He called yesterday and asked if we'd be in today. Though we didn't have plans to be there, Lexi and I both decided we'd head in. Give Amir a place to go, give me some extra time working on the floors, and honestly? Why the hell not?

I find myself eager to mop the goddamn floors and pay bills these days, as long as she's there. Another day at work? Why not?

We shower and get dressed, and I force Lexi to eat a bowl of fruit with some yogurt, despite the fact that she's been telling me that in recent weeks, she thinks she's no longer a breakfast person.

In the kitchen while pouring a tumbler of coffee, Benny pads down the hallway, yawning as he runs a hand through his messy hair. "Mornin'," he yawns, nodding to both of us.

"Morning," I greet him. "We're going into Mecca for a few hours. I'm gonna work on the floors and your sister is going to hang out with Amir. Wanna join?"

Benny yanks open the fridge, grabbing out a carton of orange juice. I pass him a glass because if I don't, he will drink straight from the source. He finishes it off, and from the barstool, he grabs his End of the Trail hoodie.

Sliding me her empty bowl, Lexi wrinkles her nose, directed toward Benny. “Have you ever washed that thing?”

Benny glances down at the hoodie bearing my buddy’s shop logo. “It’s clean.”

He looks up at me. “I’m going out today, so thanks for the invite but my friends are getting together to play music outside. Thought it would be cool to bring my new guitar, even though I still suck.”

“What friends?” I ask.

“The same friends I was bowling with last week.” He reaches his hand out and we bump knuckles.

“Okay, well if you want a ride, call me. And I’m gonna grill some steaks tonight, if any of the guys want to come over.”

Benny nods and says goodbye, then right as we’re loading into her little blue car, my phone rings.

I dig it out, finding Marshall’s name on the screen.

“What’s up?” I answer. It’s not unlike him to randomly call me, after all, I’ve bailed on a handful of runs with the guys lately. The last one, a trip to the old folks home over in Riverside, I feel real shitty about missing. We go there twice a year and hang their Christmas decorations, put up their trees, the whole nine yards. We go back around Valentine’s Day to clean it all up. But on that day, Lexi was stressing her GED, and with Benny studying for an algebra exam, it was on me to stay and be a study buddy to both of them.

Never thought with serpents and weapons inked on my fingers that I’d be a study buddy to anyone, but for them, I’d likely shapeshift into anything. Study Buddy included.

Because I missed my favorite Broken Wheel run of the year, I feel obligated to agree to whatever he’s bringing me now.

“Someone threw a brick through the glass at the Trail,” he says, not angered but more so, tired. “I have the girls down

here because Dave's working. Hawthorne and his brother are headed in to help, but I could use you."

I nod my head in compliance as Lexi starts her car, the garage door lifting behind us. "Be there in a few." I end the call and face Lexi. "Someone broke the window at the Trail. Mars needs help cleaning it up and he's got the kids with him."

She smiles. "Don't worry, I can open Mecca alone. I'll hang with Amir and we'll wait for you."

I reach across the cab and squeeze her thigh before I plant a hot kiss on her lips. "Thanks, baby." Spinning the key ring in my hands, I free the silver key for Mecca from the loop and pass it to her. "If you have any issues or need anything, call me, okay?"

She nods and sifts her fingers through my hair before kissing me again. "Will do."

Then I'm on my bike, driving behind her until we hit the fork at the end of the road. She goes left toward Mecca and I make a right, heading to the Trail.

twenty-five

...



the thing i forgot...

LEXI

“And you don’t think they’d be proud of how far you’ve come?” I ask Amir, stroking my hand up and down his back, his shoulders currently wracked with continual and unsteady sobs.

He shakes his head, sniffing. “I’m not supposed to learn music, though! It’s a waste to him.” With the end of his sleeve, Amir wipes beneath his nose.

“I understand. My mom was never very interested in the things I was,” I tell him, forgoing the part where my mom was never interested in me at all. “Would you like to take a break from thinking about this? I have a college application to check on. Do you want to watch me do that?”

He wipes the stray tears from his eyes, nodding fervently. “Yeah!”

I smile and wake up the computer at the desk. It’s old and reflects that Callan works with his hands, not computers. But it has the internet and I have my login information in a note app on my phone. I pull out the paper after navigating to the site and begin keying in my mandated passcode.

“I bet you got in,” Amir says, oblivious to GED and grade point averages, letters of recommendation and extracurriculars. “You’re so nice.”

I can’t help but smile at him. “Thanks, Amir. You’re so nice, too.”

He rests his chin in his hand cradle, leaning over the desk. We both wait in anxious silence as the page loads. We have internet access on this dinosaur but it’s stone age internet, still, we’re patient.

“Hmm,” I hum, my puzzled sentiment earning me a curious stare from Amir.

“What?” he asks after the screen fully populates.

“Well, I thought the woman at the registrar office said that admissions would be posted online by the 2nd week of this month.”

Amir’s feet swing from where he’s perched on the stool. “It’s the third week of the month,” he announces proudly, dropping his finger to the calendar beneath my arms on the desk. “Look.”

I glance down, knowing he’s right because I knew Benny had finals last week.

I pull my hair off my back and stack it on my head in a messy bun, an uncomfortable feeling slithering down my back. “Benny’s finals, Riverside admission, and a week from now, Benny’s 14th birthday, and what else? I’m forgetting something.” I list slowly, trying to remember the other thing that was supposed to be happening around that time. I stare at the calendar as Amir slips off the stool and starts digging around in the mini fridge below the counter.

“Did you have to go to the dentist?” Amir offers, trying to help me remember, bless his heart. But I shake my head.

“That’s not it.”

He sips his Coke, shrugging.

I look at the calendar again. Something was supposed to happen after Benny’s final but before admissions were released. As I wrack my brain, I drag out my phone to send Callan a text.

Am I hallucinating or did the admissions lady say I’d find out this week if I got in?

Also, I hope the Trail is okay. Hope Marshall is doing okay, too.

He writes back immediately, and there’s something about something as simple as a quick response that settles warmly over me.

By mail

Next week they're putting it online.

Oh, now that you say that, I kind of remember her saying that

Guess I'm just nervous

Don't be.

Mars is fine. Trail's all good. Another hour or so and I should be heading back to Mecca. I'll text you.

Sounds good.

“Tell him I say hi if you're talking to Callan!” Amir says, dropping his empty soda can into the recycling bin by the door.

Amir says hi

Tell him I said hi

Love you Lex

Love you too

I slip my phone into my pocket at the precise moment that two big things happen: first, I remember the thing I couldn't remember, and second, a very tall handsome man wearing a white coat over seafoam scrubs pushes inside Mecca, anger and fear stretching his eyes wide.

“Welcome to Mecca,” I say slowly, trying to gauge who this man is and why he's rushing into a guitar shop dressed like he's about to perform surgery.

“Amir, where is Amir?” His voice is deep but doesn't hold as much anger as his eyes, thankfully. From around the corner, Amir appears, wearing his backpack. He was about to leave. My eyes veer back to the tall, handsome, angry man.

“Dad,” Amir says, shock hollowing his tone. “How did you know I was here?”

The man stalks toward Amir, reaching into the unzipped compartment on his backpack, retrieving a small silver device. “Your AirTag,” he replies. “Your teacher called me and said you didn’t stay in during recess to study like we talked about, and you’ve been distracted lately. So I put the tag in your bag to see if you were up to something.”

He looks around the guitar store, which looks much better than it did even a month ago. Callan has really been putting in the time. “And you are.”

“Music,” Amir whines. “I come here to learn how to play music. You make it seem like I’m cooking marijuana.”

As hard as I can, I bite the inside of my cheek to not laugh. If this man cannot see how honest and wholesome his son is right now, he’s a fool.

“You don’t cook—” The tall surgeon shakes his head. “Nevermind. Come on. We don’t discuss private matters around others. I have to get back to work, you’ll sit in the waiting room until your mother or I are off.”

He refocuses his attention on me. “I will be calling *you* tomorrow.”

They’re out the door in a split second, and before I can stew and panic over the fact that Amir’s dad clearly thinks I’m the one having him come here to learn music instead of whatever his parents wishes are, my eyes drop to the calendar again.

The thing I forgot...

My period.

Making a quick, off the cuff decision, I grab my stuff and lock up Mecca, and make the ten minute drive through Oakcreek, pulling up outside of End of the Trail.

Along the front of the ship several bikes are lined up. I recognize the last one as Marshall’s, and next to it is Callan’s. Good. He’s still here.

Yet when I get out of my car, I'm frozen to the ground.

I'm late. But that doesn't necessarily have to mean anything. I'm panicking. Sure. We've had unprotected sex lots of times but I had my period just a few weeks ago and—I reach up and grab my boob.

Fuck.

It's sore.

My mind reels with possibilities and before I come in here like a total drama queen, I need facts. Quietly, I get back into my car and drive a mile down the road to Boon, the tiny corner drugstore. I use my new debit card to purchase a pregnancy test and a bottle of water, then I hole up in the bathroom, chugging the water until I have to pee. Seven and half minutes later, I have my answer, and I'm back in the car, trembling and emotional as I head back toward the Trail.

This time when I pull up, Mars is outside, a broom in one hand, the other fed through his onyx hair. I get out of my car and as soon as his eyes are on me, I burst into tears. The broom knocks against the concrete as he drops it and rushes to me, taking me by the biceps in his big hands.

“Lexi, are you okay? What's wrong?”

“I—” I sob, surprised at how uncontrollable my cries immediately have become. “Cal—” I try to get the words out but fortunately, I don't have to.

“I'm a girl dad,” Mars says softly, tucking hair behind my ear to get it off my face. “It's okay. Crying is a release. But let's go find Callan, okay?”

I nod, somewhat less panicked already. Mars is such a sweet guy. It's hard to believe he's the President of the Broken Wheel, and owns End of the Trail. All the ink, leather and muscles threw me off. Then again, one look at Callan and I guess people would assume he's trouble. But he's been better to me than anyone else, aside from Benny.

Don't judge a book by its cover is so true.

“Hey,” Callan is there, his man bun a little windswept, henley pushed up to his elbows revealing the art on both forearms. He looks between me and Marshall and then Marshall slowly excuses himself.

Callan wraps his arms around me, hugging me tightly, sinking his fingers in my hair as he kneads my scalp and calmly soothes me. “Whatever it is, it’s okay, baby. It’s okay. It’s okay...” he soothes before I finally stop sobbing long enough to speak.

“I’m...” I gasp, looking up at the most concerned set of eyes that have ever looked at me. My chest constricts, and all my nerves melt into a simmering heat, a bone deep happiness, and heart-fluttering excitement. I swallow, taking my time now. “I was checking admissions with Amir,” I tell him, and surprisingly he doesn’t jump out and mistakenly think my emotions are from college admissions news. It feels like, as he holds me, stroking my cheeks with his thumbs, he knows it’s bigger. “Anyway it had me looking at the date.”

His mouth falls apart just slightly, maybe to let free some of the trapped breath he seemed to have been holding.

“I realized I was due for my period,” I tell him, searching his eyes for any hints of disappointment, any stashed away glints of regret. But they sparkle and he nods, but still doesn’t say a word.

So I say the words he’s waiting to hear.

“I’m pregnant.”

His chest goes concave as a breath rushes out of him. “What kind of tears are those?”

My nose burns. “Happy.” I blink back a fresh wave of tears because I want to remember this moment forever. “Are you—”

“Happy?” he breathes, bringing our mouths together. “The happiest.” He’s feeding his hand through my hair, pulling me in as the sound of boots against gravel disrupt us. We step apart, and Marshall is there, a bottle of water and some tissues outstretched in his hand. I take them, and smile.

These are definitely happy tears.

The happiest.

twenty-six

...



my vision goes hazy

CALLAN

After Marshall steps away, I bring my hand to her belly, and stretch my palm across. “Tell me I put my baby in you and this is the start of our big ass family.”

Her grin makes my heart skip. And I’m not exactly the heart skip kind of guy.

“You put your baby in me,” she whispers, rocking to her toes, wrapping her arms around my neck.

I pull her close to me, and drag my stubbled chin along her throat, making her writhe in my arms. “I’m gonna show you just how that makes me feel once we get home,” I croak, doing my best not to get hard in the parking lot of the bike shop.

As I’m doing a quick readjustment, Dave’s cruiser coasts into the parking lot, and his brake lights go off in a parking spot near the front of the shop. He steps out and turns back to face us, not twenty yards away. Dave raises a hand and waves.

“Callan, Lexi,” he says.

I nod to him, ready to say hello when Mars slips out the front. They split the distance between them and share a hug. Mars presses his mouth to Dave’s neck, and though he pulls away and they turn to us, Dave’s face is stoic but his cheeks are flush.

“Lunch date?” Lexi asks them as they tread toward us.

Dave nods. “Yeah. We’re getting sushi because last time we went, it was so good, it’s literally all I can think about.” He glances at his husband who nods in acknowledgement.

“He has mentioned it no less than fourteen times in six days.”

Dave shrugs. “It was really fucking good.”

Lexi snickers, and I shake my head, always a little taken aback when Dave curses. You don't expect it with his wholesome Ken doll vibe. Slicing through the laughter is the high pitched chirp of Dave's radio, positioned tightly to his chest.

He reaches for it, standing casually as he connects with dispatch.

"You've got the Sheriff," he says, his eyes idling over the top of his shiny black boots as he waits for more. There's a pop, some static, then an older woman's smoky voice.

"Accident on Gull," she says, the radio clicking off silently again.

Dave's face falls and Mars loses all color. "I had an accident out there a few years back. Almost died."

I look over at Lexi, who has her hand cupped to her mouth in shock. I recall that time, and I remember Dave, covered in blood and earth after carrying Marshall up the hillside at night in the rain. He saved him.

I'll never forget that, either.

"It's dangerous," Dave says finally.

The radio comes to life again. "Looks like a head on collision. A truck with four passengers, all teens, and a sedan with an elderly couple."

I feel like we shouldn't be hearing this, so I reach for Lexi and loop my arm through hers, knowing she'll start to worry for strangers if we stick around.

Plus, I want to celebrate.

Dave sends a message to dispatch, and more information comes through the radio right after. "Another accident happened on top of it. There was some music equipment on the road." There's a pause. "A speaker or amp or something. Someone hit it. We've got medics en route but there's a bad pile up going already."

Dave turns to Marshall, who is already shaking his head and waving him off. "Go, but be fucking safe," he warns. They

embrace but as they do, the radio howls again, spewing more vile details into the air.

“One found, ejected from the car. Weak pulse. Looks to be about fourteen, blonde hair, gray sweatshirt.” Another pause. “Ingram, the officer on scene says the kid’s wearing an End of the Trail hoodie.”

My vision goes hazy and my ears start ringing. *Woom. Woom. Woom.* Thudding, rushing, waves of heavy horror sweep through my chest.

I catch her before she falls, and she does indeed collapse. Her entire body goes boneless, heavy, her sobs so deep, so painfully guttural that I feel physically sick. I swallow down scorching stomach acid.

Marshall explains things to Dave, I hear their voices, close but hushed. I know the ground isn’t moving beneath me, but I become queasy like it is. My knees fall victim to weakness as I stutter step, clutching Lexi to my chest as tightly as I can. But I can’t hold her up. I can’t stay up on my feet with the knowledge that Benny is out there.

That Benny is the one on the road.

It’s too heavy. Too unbearably heavy for us to do anything but sink. Sink and sob as I try to hold myself tight to her, to absorb her pain as I release my own.

Marshall helps us to our feet as Lexi’s sobs turn to shuddering breaths and then tearful, terrifying silence. Dave is gone, and I don’t know when that happened.

Marshall is talking and his hand is on my shoulder. I tune in, and catch up, knowing that if I’m going to keep my woman and my baby safe, I have to be strong.

“Let me take you both with me, okay? We’ll go there now.” He blinks, searching my eyes. “Callan, say something.”

“Wh-what?” I stutter, fear and panic burning up through my boots, eating up my legs, threatening to take over every bit of me.

Benny has to be okay.

She won't recover if he isn't.

I won't, either.

And Kelly. Where in the fuck is Kelly? Goddamn it, a day ago I was glad she never chased Benny. And now I'm angry for being so selfish. For not chasing her down on Benny's behalf. Because now we need her. She has to know her son is injured. What if they need parental consent for something or some shit? *Fuck.*

"They're taking him to the hospital back in Oakcreek. Come, I'll take you there. Then we'll know more." He pats my cheek, and drops his voice to a slow, quiet tone. "We don't know anything yet, okay?"

I nod. "Okay."

I collect Lexi and we slide into the back of Marshall's SUV. Baby toys litter the floorboard, but I keep my focus on her as Marshall drives us to the hospital.

I don't know if it's going to be okay, so I tell her what I do know.

"I love you." I don't impart romance with those words. This time, it's comfort. It's assurance. It's safety. It's to let her know that I am here, no matter how tough the tough gets going.

She sobs.

She sobs so hard she vomits, but by the time it happens we're outside the hospital. Marshall gives her a bottle of water from his SUV and she takes a few sips, steadying her nerves. Ambulances are outside of the ER, all their lights flashing, their wheels torqued to indicate an immediate and emergent arrival. My stomach sinks. Oakcreek isn't big.

How many terrifying emergencies are happening tonight?

How many teens are wearing Trail hoodies and traveling with music equipment?

I don't want to hope for more.

Marshall speaks to a nurse. The lights are so bright. Everything is vivid and yet, I can't remember a single detail. Just rushes of color and noise, and the feel of Lexi against my chest, her sobs soaking my shirt.

The nurse says something to Marshall, and when he responds, his voice is hearty and thick, like he's arguing with her. I don't know what they're saying but as clear as day I hear the words curtain six, and nothing else. I kiss Lexi and look into her eyes. "Let me go see what I can find out. Okay?"

Marshall returns, standing next to her as he imparts an unspoken warning on me in one heavy glance. A lump forms in my throat as Lexi sinks into a chair against the wall. Mars sits next to her, and I turn around, headed for curtain six.

Three.

A few more steps, some noise.

Four.

More walking and the noise becomes clearer. Men are straining.

Five.

Men are breathing hard and grunting, even. More walking.

Six.

I step into the doorway of the small, cordoned off room made into several small areas. In the first and only occupied bay are three men and a woman nearly on top of a body, one applying pressure to a gushing wound, and the other doing CPR. I take one more small step inside, but their bodies shroud the victim's face.

I step nearer but their movements completely halt. No one moves.

"Call it."

"Time of death, 1600 hours, 50 minutes."

Their feet slap the patterned tiles as they slide off the gurney. One of them, a nurse maybe, meets my eyes. Hers are

wide and so full of sadness that I'm surprised she's not crying. That sadness must be for someone else. That's not for me.

I point behind her, to the body they were working on. "Is he—is he wearing an End of the Trail hoodie?"

The way her eyes hold mine for a long moment tell me everything I need to know. But she replies nonetheless.

"Yes."

In the background, it's now I notice a nurse has been bandaging the body, stopping the blood from making a mess. There's a man with them, and I think now he was likely there the whole time. He moves to meet me at the door, his long white coat spattered in crimson. The sight makes my stomach roil.

"I'm... I have his sister out there. I'm family. He lives with me." He has no obligation to step aside, but he does.

And I wish he hadn't.

Or more so, I wish I had made Benny come with us to Mecca. We wouldn't be here had I done that. We'd be together, at home, laughing and having a good fucking time.

I step away from him, not wanting to see him that way. My back hits the wall and my chest twists; I have to tell her that Benny is dead. That he's gone. He's not injured badly, he's not in surgery, they aren't trying their best.

He's just plain dead.

The woman with me tells me things. Things about where I can pick up his things. Where the body will go. Things she should tell Kelly, or his father, things that bear so much weight and importance that telling me feels disrespectful to Benny.

Who am I? The man who let his mother take them away, ruin the bulk of their youth, and then, upon my return, can't even keep him alive?

Suddenly I'm dizzying, my fingertips scraping down the slick hospital wall as I fall to a crouch, my muscles weak and achy.

“Benny,” I croak, my head tipping to the side as my nose and eyes start to burn.

But Marshall rounds the corner and stops in his tracks, and our eyes lock. A beat passes, a sorrowful, painful, excruciating beat wherein my physical state tells him everything he needs to know. He helps me up and we walk back to Lexi.

I tell her.

I tell her the worst thing she could ever hear. The worst news of her life. The most awful thing. She releases shuddering sob after shuddering sob, and I hold her, trying my best to absorb them, to ease even a sliver of her pain. She falls apart against me. Time no longer holds value or meaning as we sit together in devastation and loss, wishing we were living in a dream. Wishing this wasn't real.

Eventually I get her home and in bed. She hasn't spoken since we've been back but she's finally asleep.

Today was the best day of our lives.

And then it became the worst.

And no matter how much it hurts, now we absolutely must go on.

For our baby.

twenty-seven

...



after all, it's just me and him.

LEXI

...FIVE YEARS AGO (LEXI, AGE 12, BENNY, AGE 9)

“Did you punch him back?” I hand him a glass of water as I ask, then make my way back to the sink to wet the dish towel. He sips the water as I return to him, blotting his forehead.

“Benny,” I urge, “Did you punch him back?”

I don't know what answer I want to hear. Yes would mean he defended himself and popped the little jackass that did this to him. And no would mean that he's listened to me when I've told him not to fight. If kids like us fight and we're innocent, we're still at fault.

“I didn't punch him back, I couldn't. He had three friends with him,” he says, and I know he also means he was alone. I hate mom at this moment, because she's the reason he was alone today. We're always alone when we're apart because we move so much we can never make and keep friends for long.

I blot the markings on his forehead, trying to get rid of the old blood without making him bleed again. “You did the right thing.” He sips his water and my stomach hurts at the way his face looks. “I'm glad you're okay.” And because his face doesn't move in the slightest, I get on my feet and start a grilled cheese for him. When it's done, Benny gives me half, and we watch *I Love Lucy* reruns on our tiny TV set while mom laughs and giggles in her bedroom, the door shut.

After Benny is asleep, I creep down the hall and tap on mom's door a few times. A man's voice vibrates through the door, and the room goes quiet for a second before she pulls open then door.

“I told you, don't bother me when I have company. There's Cheerios on top of the fridge,” she growls.

“Benny got hit. Can you call the school tomorrow? Get them in trouble?” I worry my lip with my teeth, adding, “I wouldn’t ask you if it wasn’t important.”

From behind her, a tall man appears, his hand gripping the door as he yanks it open further. “Tattling ain’t the way,” he says, bending down to get into my face. “He needs to hit back if he wants to be tough.”

Mom turns and drags her nails down his bare chest. “You’d know wouldn’t you,” she giggles, pushing him back into her room, using her foot to kick the door closed. “Tough guy,” she murmurs.

I didn’t think she’d help but I had to try.



In the morning, I steal a few dollars from mom’s purse after sneaking into her room and covering my face. From my periphery flesh is blinding, but I stay focused. After waking Benny for school and putting first aid cream on his eye, I tell him to get ready fast and that I have a surprise.

We walk to the donut shop around the corner from the school, and we each pick two of our favorites. I’m a few cents short, but the woman doesn’t seem to mind. Then, in our little booth with a sprinkled cake donut, a classic glazed donut, a bear claw and a maple bar spread out between us, I ask.

“What’s his name? The one that actually hit you?” I ask as he takes his first bite of bear claw, his blonde hair tousled and messy. Using the neck of the sweatshirt he’s got on, he wipes his mouth after he takes a sip from the tiny carton of milk the woman working here gave us.

“I don’t know,” he says, staring at the slivered almonds on his pastry.

“Benny,” I urge, anger pumping through my veins as I stare at the reddened spot on his cheek bone.

“David, okay? His name is David Eaton.”

I nibble at my maple bar. “Thank you.”

He pushes hair off his face, his eyes clear and glittering. “Why?”

I don’t lie to Benny. I can’t. It’s me and him against the world, and it always has been. At least since we left Oakcreek years ago. If I lie to him, that’s a wedge between us. We can’t have a wedge. We can’t risk fracturing our bond.

“I’m going to give his name to the principal at your school,” I admit. “And you can’t tell me no. What they did to you was wrong, and just because we don’t have Mom marching down there to complain doesn’t mean what happened is okay or fair.” I reach over the table and grab his wrist, garnering his attention. “I’m reporting him.”

He sighs. “You’ll just make it worse for me.” He slouches in the booth, glancing at the door which dings when an older man strolls in, tugging off his winter cap as he approaches the counter.

I don’t want to make it worse for him, and I don’t know why I never thought of that. If this David asshole tells his friends that we “tattled” even though we have every right to report physical violence, he will tease Benny endlessly.

I sip my milk and take a bite of donut, the sprinkles going everywhere as I do. I swipe my hand over the table and send the colored bits flying.

“So we want to let him know what he did was wrong, not to do it again, but do it in a way where he’ll be embarrassed to tell instead of emboldened to tattle?” I tap my chin, smirking at my little brother.

He follows my lead when it comes to emotion and tone. I learned that when I was only eight years old. If I get upset and worked up, he’ll follow suit. And likewise, if I’m hurt, he hurts too. We have some symbiosis closer to twins, even

though there's years between us. That's what a neglectful parent will do, I guess.

"I'm sure if he had a taste of his own medicine," I start, plucking a sprinkle from my donut as I watch Benny's reaction.

"I can't fight him," Benny says, "and anyway, we can't fight."

We can't fight. Something I've instilled in him since he was old enough to swing his fist. The poor kids can't fight. Everything is always our fault, our punishments are more severe, and we're branded much more easily than other students. We have to mind our p's and q's extra if we want to have a chance at high school.

"Fighting is bad, but one punch could really get the point across," I tell him as my fist tightens around the cold, waxy carton of milk.

"I can't hit him, they'll pummel me," Benny breathes, looking around the small shop as if our conversation can't be overheard.

The man who came in a minute ago is in a back booth, munching on a cruller while sipping coffee and reading the paper. I nod toward him while keeping my focus on Benny. "It's fine Benny."

He sighs, nerves and anxiety clearly forming. I don't want to make him feel worse, but no one hurts my little brother and gets away with it.

"And anyway, I'll hit him. Just once. Right in the stupid face." I swipe my hands together to rid them of stray sprinkles as Benny blinks at me in shock.

"They'll tease me for having a girl defend me," he argues, without much fight in his voice. The corners of his eyes are starting to lift. I like that.

"Then he'll have to admit a girl punched him and I don't think that will happen," I tell Benny as I pull a napkin from the dispenser and start wrapping up the two extra donuts. I lift the

glazed. “Put this in your bag and eat it in the bathroom for lunch.”

He nods. “You’re really gonna hit him?”

I smile. “Never hit anyone. It’s not good to be the kid that hits. But for just this one time? Yes, I’m going to hit him, because no one screws with you Ben.”

He’s quiet for a moment, gone all thoughtful and introspective as he traces the top of the carton with his finger. Finally he looks up at me, deep appreciation glittering in his eyes.

“I wish we had a mom,” he says quietly, and I know what he means.

He means I wish you didn’t have to do this for me, I wish we had someone who fought with us, I wish we weren’t on our own, I wish, I wish, I wish.

Me too, I think but I don’t say because again, I set the tone.

I smile, not for the idea that I’m going to hit a boy for hitting my brother, but for Benny. I smile for Benny, because I want him to know that despite this hiccup in the road, I’ll always have his back and we will be okay.

“Hey, I don’t care. I’m not worried about any fallout, okay? It’ll be okay.”

He nods thoughtfully before finally peering up at me, smirking. “Make it count.”

I sit back against the booth and start to wrap up my extra donut. “Oh I will.”



I end up seeing David Eaton right before the bell rings. Benny is already inside his classroom, and I'm about to go to mine when I see it. The youth football jersey bearing the name Eaton. I tap his shoulder and he turns.

“What?”

“Is your name David?” I asked as the crowd of students dwindled quickly, everyone eager to avoid being tardy.

He nodded, looking me up and down. His eyes caught on a stain on my sweater before dropping to a hole in the knee of my leggings. A smirk formed on his face but before he could speak, I did.

“Don't touch Benny Fisher or else.”

“Or else what?” he snorted.

I closed my fist, reared back, and popped him straight in the eye. He stumbled back a few times, mouth open in shock. I closed the gap between us and said, “Tell your friends a girl hit you, I dare you.”

He stepped back and I stepped closer again. “Leave Benny alone.”

My hand hurt for three days after that, but seeing the look of awe and appreciation on Benny's face that afternoon was worth it all.

After all, it's just me and him.



...CURRENT DAY

Age 18

I physically cannot let go of Cal. I can't. My mind is a terrible place to be right now, and if I let go of him for more

than a few minutes, everything seems to spin out of control.

I'm not sure what day it is, or how long it's been. Everything since then has been a wretched, nasty blur. I've never experienced pain so big and intense that you can't walk, breathing is painful, taking in sunlight is excruciating, and thinking that wanders to anything tedious or commonplace for even just a second is horrifying. I don't want to think about anything trivial, I don't want to move on because that means it's real, he's gone, he's not coming back, and we have to breathe, eat and smile anyway. And another part of me does want to move on, to move away from this extreme, soul sucking pain.

It hurts so bad I can hardly breathe.

Callan sits me up, on the edge of the bed, and slowly raises my arms. The backs of his fingers graze my bare belly as he removes my sweatshirt. He's careful and slow as he crouches at my feet, sliding my leggings off. My eyes are unfocused and hazy as I watch him disrobe, too. Then moments later, I'm gasping and crying as warm water flanks my back. I'm clawing at Callan's chest, screaming as he holds me, stroking his fingers through my hair as the shower drenches us.

Words are spoken to me as he lowers me to the ground, letting me sit on the shower floor.

Get you clean—

Don't worry—

You're gonna be okay—

I love you—

Suds swim all around me and lavender fills the air. How can I smell good and be clean? How can that simple pleasure still exist in a world without Benny?

I start to cry again, deep cries that make me wretch and gag, and Callan is there to smooth his hand down my back. He's there to pull me from the shower and dry me off. He drags a brush through my hair and gets me in clothes. He lotions my hands and puts warm socks on my feet. I don't

know if I speak but I don't think I do. I don't know if I can. I'm so tired.

He presses a closed fist to my chest as he holds his lips to my head, kneading my heart as he softly chants, *it won't hurt this bad forever baby.*

I don't know if it's true, and I don't know if I care. All I know is how unfair this is. How much it hurts. How much I wish it weren't true. How much I want him back.

We were a team. I can't go through life without the other half of my team.

Callan's voice vibrates against my ear as he holds me balled up in his lap, his fingers stroking through my hair gently as he speaks to my mother on the phone. The hospital had tried calling her many times, I hear him tell her. He delivers the news, his voice breaking, his hot tears sinking into the top of my head.

He loved Benny too, and as he relives the bad news in order to notify my mom, I cling to him more tightly, using his body to absorb a fresh wave of sobs that ripple from me.

I stay there in his lap, what feels like the only safe place left in the world, as he makes funeral arrangements.

They talk about Benny's body and it makes me sick, causing me to leap off of Callan's lap and wretch in the sink. He puts me to bed after that, but comes back to our room a few hours later to collect me.

He feeds me soup, bite by bite, while stroking my face and holding me close. The weight is too great, and my eyes flutter closed, reopening later to find I'm still in Callan's lap, but this time, we're on the porch. My eyes close again and when I open them again, we're in our room.

It goes like this for what feels like weeks.

He keeps me clean and fed, he holds me, he wipes my tears and sometimes, he cries with me. And on the day of Benny's service, he speaks for us both. He delivers a speech about what a good human Benny was, a speech so gripping

and beautiful that even the MC in attendance breaks. And then, at the end, we circle his casket and we cry.

We cry for a life gone way too soon. We cry for the unfairness. We cry for the loss it leaves in our lives.

But I cry for Benny. My sweet, smart, funny little brother who had so many plans, so many goals, who had just started to taste what life could be like. I cry for all that he will no longer get to experience, and for the things he did experience in his short time.

Kelly is at the funeral. I no longer refer to her as mom and Callan doesn't let her speak to me at the service. He handles it all, and I choose to ignore the painful sobbing that comes from her.

I blame her, and nothing can change my mind.

There's a celebration of life after the service. Callan takes me home and puts me to bed. It's amazing how much you can cry and never dry up. I lay in bed, wearing my stupid black dress, in Callan's arms, and I cry until my body is too weak to continue, and I drift off, wishing it were all a bad dream.

There's a baby growing inside me, and I'm with the man I love. And yet, I've never felt more hopeless than I do now, crying in the shadows, missing my other half.

twenty-eight

...



she's getting better.

CALLAN

I bring the carafe to Dave's mug and fill it up again, then Marshall's too. I'm still on my first cup. My stomach hasn't been right in weeks. Ever since...

"Is it catatonic like?" Dave asks, keeping his voice low, his brows pulled together in concern.

I volley my head as I sift a hand through my hair. "It can be. But she does speak. Not a lot but she can communicate with me if I need her to. I just... I haven't been pushing."

Marshall nods. "I know you want to do it yourself, brother, and that's commendable. It really is. But sometimes, we can't do this shit on our own." He reaches out, squeezing my wrist. "She may need help."

I shake my head. "She needs more time. She's... in shock. I think she's only just now begun to process what happened. I don't think she needs professional help. I don't." I think of our baby, and how much I want both her and the baby in our home, in my arms.

Marshall nods. I don't look at it and none of us move to acknowledge it, but he places a business card on the counter, the edge slid beneath the plate of pastries. "In case," he says simply.

Dave sips his coffee, shaking his head in thought. "We should start a petition to close the bend. We can't keep having the same accident over and over," he says. The place we lost Benny is the same place he almost lost Mars.

"Any word from Kelly?" Marshall asks, reaching for a donut hole in the center of the kitchen island. They brought all of her favorites, but she's still in bed.

She's been in bed for the last six weeks.

I pull her into the shower with me almost daily. I hold her hand and have her walk up and down the street with me, for exercise and fresh air. She sits around the island at meal time and eats on her own, though not much she at least doesn't need me to force it.

She's getting better.

But it's been a long, terrifying six weeks.

I wonder if my own pain will ever slow. If my own guilt over not being able to do more for Benny will ever cease. And while I know that Lexi will never be the same woman again, I wonder if she'll ever truly be happy again. If we'll ever truly be happy again, because Benny meant so much to us, existing without someone so crucial seems impossible.

And yet, we continue to do it. We continue to live.

The world keeps going.

The sun comes up and it goes down.

Grass grows, birds chirp, cars crash and bills are due.

Life keeps moving, so we keep moving, too.

"Rehab," I reply, reflecting on my conversation with Kelly that night. "She said she was going to get into rehab. Turn her life around." I move the coffee cup around on the counter mindlessly. "I told her about our baby. She cried. Promised to get healthy for her grandchild." I shrug. "We'll see."

"And how's the pregnancy going?" Dave asks gently.

"Her first appointment is in two weeks," I tell the guys. "For the baby."

Dave smiles, and so does Mars. I know they believe the baby will bring us back to life, and I hope it does, but I don't know... I know my pain is big and ugly and real. But hers? It's got to be so much worse.

Just then, Lexi appears in the hallway. Her blonde hair is over her shoulder in a braid, one I put in last night after I helped her get ready for bed. Stray hairs stick out everywhere, her eyes are wide and cheeks are pink.

“Hey baby,” I call to her, immediately off my stool and closing the space between us. She hasn’t gotten out of bed and come out on her own yet. Not til now.

“I—I felt it.”

Dave and Marshall get to their feet behind me. They say hello and goodbye to Lexi, who stares at me with wide eyes. They press kisses to her cheek and she says a vacant goodbye, but her focus stays on me. Once the door shuts, she laughs a little, broken and short, but a laugh indeed.

And then tears streak her cheeks as she repeats, “I felt it.”

She reaches for my hand and brings it to her belly, which is a little more swollen than before. “The baby,” she adds, “our baby. I felt him kick.”

I hold my hand there but I don’t feel anything, but it’s okay. She felt it. She felt it, and it has her remembering that there is more outside this pain, that life exists outside of this cruel thing that happened, and that for this life, we have to keep on.

“I miss Ben,” she whimpers, nostril flaring as tears cascade down her cheeks. “But I felt our baby, Cal. I felt our baby inside me, moving, telling me he’s excited to be here, that he wants to meet us, that he can’t wait to be in our arms. I felt all that in one little kick, I swear I did.”

I nod. “He can’t wait to be in our arms, and we can’t wait to have him.” I smile down at her before using my hands to hold her face and bring it to mine.

We kiss.

It’s the first real kiss since *it* happened eight weeks ago. It’s a kiss that holds so much promise.

We will try to keep going.

We will love each other through this.

We will stay strong and healthy for our child.

We will never forget him.

We will love him forever.

Her tongue sweeps mine as she brings her body flush to my chest. Her fingers tug at the ends of my ponytail a minute before they slip under my collar and veer over my bare collarbone beneath my flannel.

“I need to feel you Cal,” she whispers, her rasped voice infused with need. “Please,” she moans as her fingers skate the length of my torso, unbuttoning my flannel in record time.

We leave a trail of clothes through the house to our room, and I’m over her, pushing inside of her in a matter of minutes.

“Ooh,” she breathes as her body accepts mine. “Ahh,” she coos, eyes fluttering closed when I push all the way inside. I hold myself there, to the hilt, and stare down at the woman I love most in the world.

“You’re going to be such a good mama,” I tell her as I slowly start to move my hips. I want to make her come. I want to give her a few minutes of pure respite from all the heavy emotions and make her blissfully happy with an all consuming orgasm.

I drop my thumb to her clit, holding myself on one arm as I rut into her in slow, dizzying strokes. Her thighs spread to accommodate me, she moans as I feed her every hard inch of my cock and she sighs when I slide it out of her, only to push it back in again.

She loves it slow and tantalizing, and today, it feels like everything both of us need.

Pinning her wrists above her head, I drag my mouth along the sleek curve of her throat, my lips coming to rest atop the pebbled tip of her breast. She moans as I suck her nipple into my mouth, using my tongue to swirl the sensitive, nubbed skin.

“My perfect, beautiful little mama,” I crow, my hips still rolling between her legs as I make love to her unhurried. I’m in no rush to worship the woman and I love and show her how much she means to me. How much this life of ours, despite the jagged edges and unfair twists, means to me.

“I can’t wait to watch your belly grow, to feel our baby grow inside of you,” I murmur, letting kisses rain everywhere they can. Over her breasts, along her chest, on her belly, up her throat, I shower her in kisses of love and adoration as I move inside of her.

Her palms caress my back as she holds tight, moaning with every kiss I give her. “I love you, Cal,” she whimpers, and without warning, her walls tighten around me, milking my cock, bringing me to erupt right along with her.

“Oh god, yes, Lex, yes,” I groan, my orgasm shattering, sending ripples of cum through her body as my cock pulses inside of her. It’s been weeks since I’ve been in this mindset, since I’ve been inside of her, since I could feel anything but hollow.

The baby kicking and our love making was a great reminder that though it hurts, it’s also quite beautiful that life does indeed go on.

As we come down from our orgasm, I stay inside of her as I smooth her hair off her face and stroke my hand down her arms. She smiles up at me, and though we don’t acknowledge them, silent tears slip free, sinking into her golden hair.

“It felt so cool,” she whispers as I slide out of her and collect her in my arms against my chest. I tuck a few pillows behind my head, propping us up some, as I cover her with a blanket and hold her.

“Yeah?”

She nods against me, and hearing her voice again does more for my mood than I realized it would. I have hope in my veins, and suddenly, there’s a light burning bright on the horizon, telling me actual life is still livable.

She nods, pushing up to her elbows to look at me with wide, hopeful eyes. So much hope swims in those blue irises of hers, my chest fills. I stroke my fingers down her hair, listening to her tell me about what it felt like, excited when I can feel it myself.

“Our first appointment is next week,” I tell her when she’s done talking. We should’ve probably gone in weeks ago, but when I explained our situation to the doctor, he understood, telling me to keep her on prenats and make sure she eats well. A few weeks late on the first appointment is okay, considering what we just went through.

She smiles softly. “I know. And... I’m realizing that... it’s okay to be excited.”

I fold my arm behind my head and peer down at the woman half my age but nearly double my wisdom, I swear. “You amaze me, you know that?”

Her cheeks flush. “Why?”

“For everything.” There isn’t a single description that could embody why I feel the way I feel, so everything feels the most fitting. “Do you want to find out the gender?”

She wrinkles her nose. “I don’t think so. Do you?”

I tell her the truth. “I want to do whatever makes you happy. We’re having a baby together, and all I care about is your health and happiness.” I mean that more than ever before.

She rolls off of me, onto her back, and pulls back the covers, exposing her nude body. “Get inside me, Cal, please. I’ve missed you so much and I’m so sorry I—”

I press my mouth to hers to stop the ridiculous apology that was coming. After I maul her mouth with mine and position myself between her legs, I push inside and eat up the gasp that falls from her lips.

“Don’t apologize for your survival.” I kiss her again, and her mouth is salty from her tears, so I lick them from her lips. “Don’t apologize for grieving and mourning.” I kiss her harder, taking more from her with each pass. More emotion, more need. I bring my fingertip to her beauty mark, and trace it. She’s still her, and she’s coming back. “I knew you’d come back to me. We’ll be okay. Together. But don’t apologize.”

I thrust a bit harder, my words making me a little frantic to make her come, to bring her another burst of joy. She tells me she loves me and within minutes, we’re coming together, our

mouths locked the whole time. It's intense, one of the most intense things I've ever experienced.

And then, midday, we drift off together, with her head on my chest and my hand on her belly.

It won't be the life we thought, but we'll make it.

We will keep going.

twenty-nine

...



he would've cried when he saw him.

LEXI

...SIX MONTHS LATER

Age 19

The simple chords come together with ease, and the complex ones seem to do the same. I watch in rapt amazement as Amir finishes his first song. He chose *Sweet Home Alabama*, and I'd have to think it was partially to please Callan.

When he's through, I clap and cheer, and Amir's little cheeks fill with color. With my hand atop my belly, I use my other to push off the desk, getting to my feet. Amir's dad, in his casual clothes every time he's come in since that first terrible time, outstretches his hand to Callan.

"He sounds great. Thank you." He adjusts the knotted tie at his throat, looking around Mecca a bit. "This place really looks a lot different now."

Callan nods, his messy man bun is a special state of disarray this morning. The thing about being nine months pregnant with a very hot boyfriend is that horniness hits me and when it does, I have zero reason to say no. I used Callan's man bun as a grip as he brought me to orgasm in the back office just an hour ago.

"I've been working on it for a while but..." he says, surveying his own shop. New hardwood floors, new racks, stands for the guitars, an entire new area in the back with stools and headphones, designed specifically for group music classes. It's beautiful, and it's all thanks to Callan, who put his grief to use turning Mecca into the place he always envisioned. "It's done now," he says with finality.

"Look, Callan, I'm really sorry," Amir's dad starts. Callan waves him off.

“I get it. You want your son to focus. And I never want to come between a parent’s desires for the kid. I’m just glad he’s still here.” Callan ruffles Amir’s hair. “He’s a good kid. He’s got talent, too.”

Amir’s dad shakes his head, and I watch as a heavy sentiment passes silently between him and Callan.

They shake hands and a moment later, Thom—we learned his name months back—looks at my belly before grinning at us both. “Soon, huh?”

I rub my belly. “Any day now.”

He passes another smile to Callan, and I’m sure Cal doesn’t miss the flash of sadness in his eyes. We get that look a lot. We try not to let it pull us into a bad day. At least, that’s what Dr. Longo has told us to do.

We started seeing a therapist, one recommended by Mars and Dave, trying to find tools to help us work through our grief while also preparing for a monumental change in our lives. One of the many things Dr. Longo has taught us is that bad days will happen, and on those days, we may feel like it’s the *day of* all over again.

We just have to get through them.

The pain will never go away, but we’ll learn how to make room for the pain and make room for happiness again too.

Callan walks them out, and I watch him wave them off as I position myself atop the stool again. When he returns to me, his hair longer than normal, a small beard now inhabiting his chin, I’m overwhelmed with love.

One thing we talk about in therapy is Callan’s coping. Because he’s done everything to take care of me, and grief care shifted to pregnancy care, and there hasn’t been much time for Callan to just... process for himself. Dr. Longo suggests that we make it a daily habit to discuss only Cal’s feelings, and as much as he assures me he doesn’t want that and he’s fine, still, I take Dr. Longo’s advice.

He rubs my belly as he comes to sit on the stool next to mine. “Amir sounded good.”

I agree but ignore the comment. I reach for his hand and weave our fingers together, kissing his knuckles. “How are you today? It must be hard seeing Thom? Are you okay?”

Though I can see the truth glowing in his tapered gaze, he struggles with his words a bit, but powers through. “He’s...” He stops, staring at the place where my thumb strokes our joined fingers. “Yes,” he finally says. “It is hard seeing him. I think of that night, and I see the things I saw.” His wide green eyes come to mine. “I want to forget what I saw, and I’m afraid that every single time I see Thom, that’s all I will see.” He swallows. “Benny, on that bed.”

We learned at Benny’s service that Amir’s dad was the doctor who tried to save Benny that night. When Amir showed up graveside with the tall, handsome Doctor in tow, I nudged Cal, trying to bring him a moment of happiness by pointing out that his student came. Callan went white.

Now, though, Thom has come to understand what Cal set out to do with Mecca, and more so, he’s grown to see what value Cal has brought Amir over the last year. I wouldn’t call them friends, but he no longer tries to keep Amir from Mecca.

“One day, you will look at Thom and see him for the helicopter parent he is,” I tease lightly, hoping to take the serious edge off the conversation. “Instead of anything else.”

Cal laughs. “I’m sure you’re right.” Then he looks at his watch and back at me. “Our order at Cafe Paradise is ready. I’m gonna go grab it. You wanna ride with me or you gonna stay here and wait for Kenny?”

I look at the clock on the computer. “I’ll wait for Kenny.”

He nods and kisses my temple. “Okay. Love you. I’ll be back in twenty. And in case they forget, did you ask for ranch on the side?”

I nod.

“Perfect. Later, baby.”

From my seat in the center of the store, I watch Callan through the glass doors as he gets into our SUV.

Turns out, with a baby on the way, hot biker Callan has turned into practical, safe Callan. He didn't sell his bike, but he sold my little blue car and instead bought us a very safe SUV. He waves at me through the windshield, knowing I'm watching but unable to see me from the glare on the mirrored doors.

I'm about to snag a caffeine free Coke from the fridge when a rush of liquid hits my ankles, soaking through the top of my red Vans sneakers. I hold my belly and stare down at the wet spot on the hardwood, and take note of the small trickle slipping down my thigh.

"Oh my god," I breathe, lifting a foot cautiously to gauge the stickiness of... my broken water. "Oh my god!" I scream, nervous and excited but more terrified than anything. I rush to grab my phone, and it goes skittering across the desk, under the computer keyboard. I grab the handset on the landline, and call Callan.

He answers over bluetooth, an old Smashing Pumpkins song playing softly in the background. "What did I forget?" he says when he answers, because I always forget to tell him the extra accouterments I want, then he pretends it was he who forgot.

"My water broke," I say, then I start laughing as more fluid leaves my body, creating a bigger pool at my feet. "And I'm still leaking! Shouldn't it stop?" I step back and start to panic at the size of fluid pooling.

"Take a breath," he instructs, his voice unwavering. Exactly what I need. "It's normal. It will keep... leaking," he says, the word sounds like an uncomfortable piece of jagged metal on his tongue.

"Okay," I breathe, reaching for my cell phone beneath the keyboard. I stash it in my purse and turn off the computer. "You're coming back right?"

"I'm almost already there," he says. My heart thuds wildly.

"Good," I breathe, a wave of discomfort rippling through my abdomen as I stand at the desk, waiting to see our SUV.

The entire pregnancy, I've been calling the baby a he, and I don't know why, I just feel strongly that it's a boy.

Callan told me there's no way of knowing, and I know he's right, but deep down, he's so wrong. This is a boy and I'm positive.

"Cal," I rasp, my voice shuddering as my belly tightens with pain. "If I'm right—if it's a boy," I breathe, spotting the headlights through the glass. Thank God.

"If you're right..." he says, audibly throwing the vehicle into park, the gear shift grinding.

"I want to name him Matthew."

I've always liked the name. I don't know why. Maybe because I've never known a bad Matthew, or many at all. It sounds wholesome and sharp, and when I think of myself pinching the chubby cheeks of my adorable boy, calling him Matty just feels right.

Callan doesn't say anything, but stalks toward me through the parking lot on his cell phone.

"Matthew *Benjamin* Hayes." I swallow around the immediate knot in my throat. "For Benny."

Callan yanks open the door to our business and stands in the threshold, chest heaving from how fast he came back to me. His hair is windswept, his ink glowing as the sun licks at his profile. "Matthew Benjamin if it's a boy," he agrees, nodding his head.

And then I'm in his arms.

And then we're at the hospital.

There's screaming. Mostly me but once from Callan when he thought the nurse wasn't going to give me the pain meds.

There's crying. I cry. I cry so hard and for so long, I don't know if my eyes are swollen from pushing or crying.

Callan cries.

And Matthew Benjamin? He cries, too.

And I hold him against my bare chest to soothe his cries, and his daddy and I sob quietly over him.

There is so much love, so much that my chest is physically aching. So much that I clutch it as I cry. I'm so happy and I love him so much. I love *Callan* so much. But the ache wracking my chest is also for Benny. How much I wish he was here. What a good uncle he'd be. How much he'd love him.

He would've cried when he saw him.

Callan holds me and I hold Matthew, and in that tiny hospital bed, we lay there and we feel. We feel the loss, we feel the love, we feel it all.

thirty

...



he's like his dad; he eats fast and likes breasts.

CALLAN

“C’mon little buddy, Daddy needs you to cooperate,” I whisper down to Matty, who is all smiles on the changing table this morning. Happiest baby ever. And I’m *trying* to get him to cry.

Just for a minute.

I thumb through the books adjacent to his diapers and find one I know he used to hate. Thus why it’s shoved in the back. It’s about going to bed. I hand him the book and before I show him the cover I press my lips to his forehead and say, “I’m sorry buddy, it’s for a good cause.” Then lift my hand.

He wails.

Shamefully I internally cheer a bit. I scoop him up to hold him to my body in an early morning celebratory hug. He still clutches the book and screams, and I know when he’s this worked up, he’ll need the boob.

I dip my hand into my pocket quickly, press a kiss to Matty’s head, then reposition my hands at his diaper. “Here we go,” I whisper, winking at my son.

“What’s the matter, buddy?!” I ask with more volume in my tone.

“What the!” I shout again, which earns me a groggy string of curses from our bedroom down the hall.

I wait a beat then I hear it—bare feet clambering down the hall.

“He’s fine but what is this?” I ask, hovering over Matty as a groggy Lexi rushes in behind me, peering around my arm. She blinks at our son who is already sniffing, the book on the floor the moment his mom walked in.

“Oh!” She squeals, clutching my bicep as she points at the book on the floor. “He hates that one, remember—”

She stops as she sees what’s lying in my palm. “Marry me.” It’s not a question because in my heart, I know the answer. “I love you. I love Matty. I love our life here and at Mecca.” I swallow, surprised that I’m suddenly a little emotional. I clear my throat, and look down at our son. My chest inflates, my limbs warm and my smile grows. I return my gaze to my beautiful morning girl, standing in a ray of sunshine that pours through the split blinds. “My beautiful morning girl,” I rasp. “Marry me.”

Her eyes fill, but her smile is so wide, I smile right back. “Yes,” she says. “Mrs. Lexi Hayes. Mrs. Alexandra Hayes. Mrs. Callan Hayes. The hot biker’s wife.” She wiggles her nose playfully. “They all sound good.”

I take her hand and slide the ring on, and I swear nine-month-old Matty watches the whole thing.

“Now, bring me our son so I can feed him, and then fuck me,” she breathes, pressing her lips to the back of my neck. I groan, but stay focused on the task at hand, snatching a new diaper from the caddy adjacent. “Hard and fast, because he only naps for twenty minutes now after his first feeding.”

I scoop up my son when he’s freshly diapered and pass him off to Lexi, who is positioned in the overstuffed loveseat we purchased for the nursery. We got a slipcover for it, on advice of the internet because babies are messy, and it’s guitar print. I know why she chose it, and it goes perfectly with the guitar we have mounted to the wall above his crib.

In a cruel twist, the guitar I made Benny survived the accident. It was recovered roadside and I repaired the snapped strings, buffed and polished, did some other stuff—and there it hangs, above Benny’s nephew’s bed.

As Lexi feeds the baby, I choose to spend my time preparing. I’d love to stay there and watch her feed him, get hard to the way she peers down so tenderly before looking up at me with a sinister little smirk. She’s fuck hot as a mom, which does not surprise me in the least.

But he's like his dad; he eats fast and likes breasts. I have fifteen minutes, and I need to catch a shower since I hit the weights in the garage this morning.

I take a shower but make it quick, and as I'm brushing teeth, she saunters in. "I have a fiancé," she beams as she steps behind me in the bathroom, looping her arms around my waist. Her hands dip below my waistband immediately, finding me thick and aching from the ring glittering on her finger.

"You do, and as soon as you say the word, you'll have a husband." I spin in her arms and hoist her up, tossing her over my shoulder with ease. I lay a smack across her ass as she tells me I shouldn't, as she tries to say she's too heavy.

"Stop with that shit or I'll mark your ass up, babygirl," I warn. Then I've got her on top of me, my back sunk into the mattress. It smells like her in here. Her, and our son. She reaches between us to grab my cock as she rocks up off her knees just a little. A smirk washes over her face, and my chest tightens and my core warms. She sinks down, taking every last inch on the first drop.

"Fuck," I murmur.

"Yes," she whispers.

Then she just sits there, my aching dick all the way inside of her, throbbing in her hot, tight little channel. Begging to spill. Aching to flood. Desperate to fill. "I want you to ride my cock and give me another baby, Lex," I croak, reaching up to take her plump, shiny breasts in my hands.

Breasts postpartum are a goddamn trip.

The best trip.

They're always so full and warm to the touch, and when I turn her on and it's been a while since she's nursed, I'll squeeze her breast and she'll leak a little.

She'll moan, too.

I take in the beautiful terrain of her body, the smooth curves and the luscious valleys. She's so goddamn perfect.

And I've surpassed the highest achievement of making her mine—I've had a child with her.

We've made someone to raise together, and that's the ultimate bond.

I give her breasts a squeeze and she tips her head back in response. The sight of her bare neck has me throbbing, but my eyes fall to my hands where I'm squeezing her tits.

A thin stream of white trickles down my hand and on the other side, even more going so far as curling my wrist. This time, I keep my eyes on her tits as I squeeze them, realizing she's begun slowly rocking her hips over me, moving my cock around inside those sweet, wet, warm walls. At the pink tip of her swollen breast, white bubbles and beads, forming a beautiful white droplet for a moment. It slides down the underside of her breast, and slips onto my hand.

"You're leaking," I grind out, a painful burst of arousal zipping through my balls as I say those words. I have the strongest urge to sit up, to rock her in my lap and latch onto her breasts, to taste the way her body nurtures our boy. To taste more of her, to know her in the most intimate fucking way.

But that's personal. That's beyond anything sexual we've ever explored so far, and postpartum is no time to try some shit.

I clear my throat just as her head tips forward, and her drunken eyes pop open. She glances down at my large hands groping her heaving tits. Her eyes come to mine, slowly, like a cat dragging a mouse just for fun.

"Do it," she whispers, the tip of her tongue traversing her bottom lip seductively but playfully. It's that goddamn subtle mix that has me bricked up damn near all the time.

I don't know how I'll ever stop trying to keep her full of me.

I sit up, and her hands come to the tops of my shoulders to steady herself. Slowly, she rides, rolling her hips as her little cunt gulps and spasms around me.

“You ride my cock so well,” I praise, slowly bringing my mouth to a wild stream of milk dripping down the underside of her breast. I trace it with my tongue, letting it take me on a journey to the source. I can’t taste a lot yet, maybe something slightly sweet—I can’t tell.

But then I’m there, at her nipple, my lips hovering as she arches her back, her cunt spasming around my cock. I’m so deep inside her pussy that I could probably see my cock in the back of her throat if I looked. She presses into me, and I seal my lips around her, using my hand to knead her breast toward my mouth.

“Oh fuck, Cal, oh my god,” she hums, her voice raspy and hoarse as her hips rove, rolling tight, fuck hot circles over my cock. I’m leaking inside of her, dripping and throbbing as she teases me with her tight little pussy and her sweet, creamy milk.

And it is sweet. It is creamy. It’s absolute perfection, just like her. I latch as my cock pulses, sending another warning signal that I don’t have long before I’m pumping rope after rope of cum deep into her womb.

“You fucking taste like honey, baby. Honey and pure heaven.” I skate my new scruff along the velvet valley between her breasts, then take a taste of the other side. The milk is slower to come but when it finally does, her moans are deeper, her pussy quivers, and I feel her fall apart.

“Coming,” she pants as she grinds down against my cock, using me like her fuck toy as I suck her sensitive, plucky little nipple and drink her down.

She brings her hands to the side of my face, pulling me off. “Deep,” she whispers as she grinds me hard. “Put it in me so deep.”

I come right then, those hot little words sizzling between us. It’s so good with Lexi.

She rides as I fill her, taking my mouth in long, tangled kisses as I start to moan, careful not to wake Matty. When I’m

spent and my nuts feel empty and my cock is twitching, I lift her off me and give her breast another quick kiss.

I pull on sweats as I get ready to get up and make us breakfast. “Know what I was thinking?” I say, still catching my breath from that incredible start to the day. “Instead of a wedding, we could spend the money setting up a scholarship, and some sort of non profit music lessons for low income kids. I mean, I don’t know what it would take, but we could find out. And we’d still have a wedding, you know you can have whatever you want. But, I don’t know, instead of—”

“Stop babbling. Of course I want to do that.” She comes to my side of the bed, having just slipped on a t-shirt and panties. “That’s perfect. I love it.”

We kiss, and I can still taste the milk on my tongue. “You taste like fucking heaven by the way.”

She grins, and flushes a little. “You might have mentioned that.”

I kiss her again, and try to take the taste with me. “I liked it. I like to know that side of you.”

Her lips slip down in a moment of pure awe. “That’s sweet.”

I shrug. “I love you.”

She smiles. “I love you too.”

I make pancakes that morning, flipping each slowly and carefully as I get lost in reality.

I’m going to marry who I know without a doubt is my soulmate.

We’re going to give our kids the lives we never got to have. We’re going to raise them with love and care, we’re going to be present and reachable and reliable. We’re going to do all the things we were cheated out of, and we’re going to be fucking great at it.

Because we’re a great team.

And we have a great guardian angel, too.

The End.

epilogue

...



is and has always been.

LEXI

... NINE YEARS LATER

Age 28

“You better hurry up you dirty old man, I only have twelve minutes,” I purr, lifting my pencil skirt to rest around my hips. His palm urges me forward as my hands connect with my desk. His belt clatters and then his hard, hot cockhead is pressing into my wet folds, making me moan.

My mouthing off ceases as soon as he’s fully inside me, his hard cock thrumming as he settles deep.

“All I gotta do to keep you quiet is keep you well fed and fucked,” he rasps, the words trickling down my back leaving drops of sweat behind.

“Fuck me,” I whimper as he continues to hold himself still inside of me, unmoving and therefore *torturing* me. “Please.”

He flips me over and my head knocks the keyboard to the floor, which makes me giggle. “Unbutton or it’s going,” he warns, nodding down to my champagne colored chiffon blouse. Quickly I work the tiny pearl buttons until my heaving chest is exposed to him. He growls as his thick fingers work the tiny clasp on the top of the strap, leaving my breasts to spill free while the bra remains in place.

“Even when you’re done nursing, you better keep wearing these bras,” he comments, his hips roving as he brings his mouth to my nipple, sealing his lips around me. Needles worm their way down my chest, flooding my breast with staggering heat and fullness as he engages letdown, and I easily fill his mouth with milk. His swallow is audible and makes me clench all around his cock.

“Easy access,” he says around his mouthful.

Then both of his large palms are splayed over my breasts, his jeans banded around his thighs as he hammers into me. I moan gently into the back of my wrist, making sure to stay at least a little quiet, and he slams into me harder. Wetness trickles down my ribcage and slips past my collarbone, filling the hollow of my throat as he squeezes my breasts so hard, I'm leaking and spraying all over his hands and my body.

It's a waste of precious breastmilk, yes, but goddamn it's hot to be so messy and feral.

Once he makes me come on his cock, he gives me his orgasm, flooding my groin with so much hot cum that it trickles onto my desk while he's still inside me. And before he pulls out, he takes care to trace each stray stream of milk with his tongue, cleaning me up and turning me on.

Sticky but sated, I drag a tissue around my collarbone and slip back into my blouse. Callan tucks his cock away and buckles his belt before he helps straighten my skirt out and fix my hair.

Finally, I turn in his arms and we share an unhurried kiss. "Hey," I whisper.

"Hey," he says, moving his thumb beneath my eye to clear away the traces of eye makeup that melted during our romp. "We still good for dinner with Mars and the family tonight?"

I nod as I tug my hair into a tight chignon and adjust my wedding band. "Yeah, in fact, I meant to text Dave and tell him I picked up some bundt cakes for dessert so for him to not fuss with anything."

Callan drapes his hand on my hip and kisses my cheek. "I'll tell him. Good luck this morning," he adds thoughtfully as he moves toward the closed office door.

"Thanks for the booty call," I smirk, shooting my handsome husband a naughty wink.

"I thought I was coming to grab the car seat from your car but this is better. Much better," he grins, pulling the door open. There's commotion far down the hall, but where my office is tucked away, I have lots of privacy. Another door stands

between my hallway and the lobby, thankfully. Or else booty call's definitely wouldn't be a thing.

Smoothing my hands down my skirt, I do a double check of my appearance in the small mirror that hangs on the wall next to the office door. "Grab the carseat, too," I smile, "and Dave's gonna pick the kids up, right? Or is his mom dropping them off because if she's dropping them off—"

"Nope, she's dropping them at Dave & Mars' so we're all good." One last kiss in the doorway and Callan is headed back to Mecca where a class full of twelve students waits.

Our venture to teach music for free to kids who can't afford lessons has really taken off. In the first few years, it was our usuals. But now, nearly ten years on, we're booked. Every single class is booked out, months in advance even. The Ben Fisher Guitar Academy isn't the only massive success we've had with Mecca, either.

The Alley got a facelift, and that brought new clientele, which trickled over to Mecca. Once the free guitar classes took off, word of mouth started to spread, and we now have three Mecca locations—one in Oakcreek, one in Riverside, and another in Willowdale.

And as much fun as I had working side by side with my gorgeous husband, after I got my bachelors degree and masters degree—yep, Lexi *GED* Fisher got her masters degree—I was ready to explore the other things that impassioned me.

While being a social worker isn't glamorous work, helping kids that remind me of me and Benny is. My life's goal is to make one kid's life better every week. I can't save them all and I can't help them all, but I can definitely try.

Two years into my profession, before I'd even officially gotten my masters, I'd been promoted to the Head of Child Welfare & Family Services.

A lot of what I see is challenging. It takes me back to cold, dark nights in empty apartments with Benny in my arms, whining about wanting his mom when he was too young to understand. Having lived these circumstances myself, and

being married to a man who also lived them for most of his life, no one can better understand these kids than me.

After three different placement meetings in the morning, I head back to my office, utterly exhausted and ready for a lunch break when my phone rings. I sink into my desk chair and lift the receiver, the recording already playing as I bring the phone to my ear.

“Hello. This is a free call from an inmate at the California Department of Corrections: Willowdale Center Industrial Complex. To accept this free call, press 0. To refuse this free call, hang up or press 1.”

With a sigh, I press 0 and within seconds, my mom’s voice floods the line.

“Lexi, it’s mom, how are you? How are the kids? How’s Callan? I miss you all.”

My eyes veer past the stack of folders and papers on my desk to the framed photo. Callan in his leather jacket, sitting on his motorcycle, the twins in each of his arms, our oldest two, Matty and Dean, at his feet. Everyone, surprisingly, is smiling, and as much as I’d have loved to be in the photo, I equally love a photo of all my boys as happy as clams.

“Everyone is good. Luc and Sebby are celebrating their first birthday in a few weeks,” I tell her.

She goes on to tell me about what she’s making and sending them, and how well she’s doing. I listen, like I always do, and sincerely hope everything she’s saying is true. For her sake.

Mom did go to rehab, and stayed there for several months, actually. She was doing really well for a while and then after a few years, she slipped. That single slip just so happened to be buying drugs during a sting operation. She was sentenced to five years, and she’s been there four.

I don’t take the kids to visit her. I go alone every few weeks, to prove to myself that I’ve healed from everything I went through as a child. But if and when she gets out, our relationship will be on my terms, at an arm’s length.

Because Callan and I are happy, our twins are turning one, Matty is nine now and Dean is six. Between Mecca and my job, the kids and the house, we're blissfully busy.

I stay on the phone with my mom for a few minutes, but have to cut the call when an emergency placement case comes in. Some hours later, my heels are off and I'm on the rug at Dave's house, playing with all of the kids, laughter heavy in the air as the men grill and chat, sipping beer as I sip my wine.

Over dinner, I update Callan on how Kelly is doing, which earns me a surprised snort from Marshall.

"Still can't believe you give your time to her after everything," he says, a bit jaded because he's got his own troubled relationship with his deceased parents.

I understand where he's coming from, and I still harbor anger and resentment toward my mom. But there's one important truth in it all, the one that keeps me forgiving, that keeps the doors open for communication and healing.

I stab a glazed green bean with my fork as I say, "If it wasn't for her, I wouldn't have Cal. And Cal is..." I look at my husband, whose green eyes are locked onto mine, his mouth an unwavering line as his chest rises and falls. "Everything to me."

Beneath the table his hand slides over my thigh and he squeezes.

I slide my palm under his, linking our hands. My chest still warms at the connection, all these years later. Because it's true.

Callan Hayes is and has always been my everything.

want to read dave and marshall's story?

. . .

INTERESTED IN SHERIFF DAVE AND BROKEN WHEEL PRES
Marshall? They have their own book! After the Storm is
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Enjoy this sneak peak from their book!

after the storm prologue

...

ingram

“DISPATCH, 1250.”

“1250, go for dispatch.”

“Gull Road. Abandoned motorcycle. Looks like a Harley.” I narrow my eyes to analyze the bike’s details. There’s a bronze emblem over the tank and the exhaust is custom, done dark. “Custom Fatboy. Plate 50LUCC1.”

The radio chirps as the plate is verified. “Five-Zero-Lucy-Ugly-Charlie-Charlie-One,”

“10-4. Looks like a Broken Wheel member.” A moment passes as dispatch types.

“Roger that. Registered to Marshall Grant.”

“Thanks dispatch.” I secure the radio to my chest.

Remnants of rain drip onto my sleeve from the door. I grip it as my legs swing out, then click it closed. I make my way up the dirt shoulder, towards the abandoned bike. The cruiser lights flicker against a sea of trees, illuminating everything in short, fleeting bursts. The rain has stopped, leaving the night air warm and balmy.

Gull Road connects Oakcreek with neighboring Lakeside. It sees plenty of traffic. At night, though, the crowding lets up and it’s pretty quiet.

It’s a mountain road with limited guardrail and lighting, making it no place for distracted drivers. We don’t get too many accidents out here because locals know better than to drive like a fuckhead on Gull. When we do, though, they’re almost always fatal.

Approaching, I notice the Fatboy is in pristine condition, standing tall and proud on a kickstand. The keys hang motionlessly from the ignition, an all-black helmet perched atop the leather seat.

Clearly, there hasn't been a fatal accident. And *someone* is around here somewhere.

My hand skates across my chest to my radio. Thumb and knuckle resting on the sides, I stare out toward the landing.

You'd have to be an Oakcreek local to know about the landing out there. It would take more than that, though.

You'd have to *really* grow up here. Spend your afternoons and weekends as a curious kid, climbing, hiking, walking, investigating *everything*.

That's how I found the overlook, the name I'd given the landing.

As a lonely and curious thirteen-year-old boy.

In my years in law enforcement, I've patrolled this area more times than I can remember. Not once have I found any lovers, high school kids or jumpers out here.

Until tonight.

It stormed hard earlier. I'd driven Gull in the rain many times before but if I had the choice, I'd wait until the rain stopped.

Can't imagine doing this road in the rain *on a motorcycle*.

I like coming out here *after* a storm. Steam drifts off the lake in the distance, the air is pregnant with possibility. My lungs *fill* with that possibility and I feel, if only for a private moment, *okay*.

As if the weighty repression inside of me isn't keeping me tethered to unhappiness. As if one day somehow, it will be okay.

I will be okay.

I needed that tonight. To feel that hope. That fucking *dream*.

I longed to hear the gravel crunch under my boots. To feel the wet rocks through my uniform as I slide down the mountainside to the find overlook. To watch the lake lap at

itself as the once-white clouds fill with gray and descend down low over the mountaintops, smothering their vibrant foliage.

It's somber after the rain, everything is so still.

I like it.

I didn't expect to find someone else out here when I headed this way at the end of my shift.

My hand routinely drifts to my sidearm as I hike down the slight hill leading to the small landing. I swat back a few overgrown arms of Oak and call out, giving *whoever* another moment of privacy.

There's no response as I step over a lurch of twisted roots bubbling up from the Earth below me.

Then there's the moon again. It's so much brighter from here without the cottony cover of rain-filled clouds. It gets my focus for just a second longer before I move my hand over my chest, grasping at the radio which chirps out loudly into the darkness.

I silence it for a moment.

The landing is an intimate sized space at approximately six feet long by six feet wide. It isn't a place to picnic or get comfortable, rather, a place to stand and observe.

And I do.

The moonlight pours over a large man. He's well over six feet tall. He lies flat on his back, knees all the way up with the toes of his boots hanging off the edge of Earth. Despite the small space, he seems comfortable on his back, gazing off into the mercurial sky.

In the limited light, I can see ink covering his forearms. From there, bulbous biceps and a wall of chest are hidden under a fitted long-sleeved t-shirt, shoved up to the elbow. He must hear my boots crunch the gravel below as I shift to better see him. Surely, he heard the dispatcher check in on me. Still, he remains unmoving.

I blink a few times, working to bring his features into focus.

His elbows out, fists stacked under his head, I watch his chin sluggishly tilt to the sky. The moon light drops over his face as the trees move around us in a silent breeze. A single drop of rain slaps my cheek.

Dark eyes stare back at me. A silver hoop in one nostril, the rest of his features are hidden under a dark, neatly trimmed beard. His hair is messy, but I can't see where it ends as his edges fade into night under the inadequate moonlight.

"I didn't know anyone else knew about this place," I say.

The casual comment seems to hang in the air as the large man shifts in the shadows, rising to his feet. There is just a foot between us once he stands.

This man hovers a few inches above me, not counting the pompadour of dark waves standing another few inches off his head. The moon hides behind his large frame but traces out his edges, making him glow.

"Marshall Grant?" I question, outstretching half of a handshake to him. "Sheriff Ingram."

He dips his head in a slow nod. "Ingram," he repeats my name without confirming his own.

"You okay out here, Grant?" I ask, as the Sheriff.

A breeze moves between us and the light streaks his face again. His eyes pinch mine in a way that makes my pulse hammer in my throat. I force down my unexpectedly rising chest.

His scent is brought to my nose and I don't inhale but still, I smell him. The wind, a day of riding with the sun at his back, traces of soap and cologne, worn leather and strength.

I swallow thickly as his hand curls around mine. His grip shudders up my arm and shoulder, swimming into my chest. Electricity zaps between us as the afterthoughts of the storm reverberate through the sky.

"I'm good," he says, our joined hands bobbing before breaking apart.

“Somebody call about my bike?” The timbre of his voice is that of a tree falling in the forest, quiet yet thunderous. Its weight ricochets inside my chest.

My body tenses inside of itself. My ears grow hot as raindrops gain momentum against the side of my face.

“No,” I husk, finding my voice falter.

He shifts until he’s at my side, our shoulders touching.

Heat moves around inside me, settling in my tailbone like flecks of arrant dust, glittering and shining in the sun. It pricks inside my lower half everywhere; it feels good everywhere.

I shift my weight on my feet, trying to adjust the building pressure. We both stare into the night.

With a few words, I temporarily silence dispatch. After a never-ending moment, I turn and make my way up the hillside to the shoulder.

It’s not against the law to be on the landing.

When I make it back up, I’m surprised to see that he’s followed me. We stand in front of the cruiser, the piercing white light causing us to angle ourselves, as if our conversation is part of a play on a stage.

“I’ve been coming out here since I was a kid. Great place to think. Especially after a storm,” he says, raising his voice to be heard over the passing wind. It’s louder on the road and headlights that pass by remind me it’s not private here.

Nowhere is.

“That’s why I was coming,” I reply, studying the casual way he stuffs his hands into his jeans, rocking on his feet. “It’s beautiful after a storm.”

“The only thing beautiful here,” he adds.

Our eyes pull together under the smoky purple sky. My lower half awakens, the real storm only now settling in.

“Nice to meet you, Sheriff Ingram,” he says with a faint curl of his lips. He shoves a tattooed hand through his single

wave of dark hair then disappears into the shadows. Moments later, a bike roars to life.

Back in the cruiser, I stare vacantly out the windshield.

My thighs flex under the steering wheel and I cradle my jaw with my thumb and forefinger, smoothing over the light stubble. I curl my toes in my boots as my spine relaxes against the seat.

My eyes close to the image of that man outstretched on the overlook, the moon pouring over him like soft light on a fine piece of art. My grip tightens around the steering wheel and reluctantly but unable to stop myself, the hand that cradles my jaw slips away....

...to my lap.

“Marshall Grant,” I whisper out in the privacy of my cruiser, parked out on a desolate road, in the middle of night.

I say it again, and again, while I can.

While it's safe.

I let myself enjoy the way it feels rolling off my tongue. I appreciate the way my teeth snap together on the last letter of his name.

I think about his hand gripping mine as I grip myself, in this quick stolen moment in the dark cab of my cruiser.

A moment where I am *me*.

after the storm chapter 1

...

ingram

“LISTEN,” I SAY, THOUGH IT’S VOICEMAIL SO IT HOLDS NO power. “I’m just...” I trail off, not knowing what there is to say. I’m a fucking despicable creature. I don’t deserve to be heard. I know I don’t. My heart forces me to beg, anyway. “Please fucking call me.” I swallow hard as I end the call.

My heart hammers and my gut is sour.

I fucking hate myself.

“Sheriff Ingram,” a saccharine voice pierces my brain, adding a new dull throb inside of me.

I turn to see Gladys Mark, my mother’s long-time ally in bible study gossip as well as best friend in all other walks of life. They’re attached at the hip so much so that I duck down to peer into her sedan, looking for my mother.

“Oh, she’s not with me today,” she jabs a wrinkled hand between us. “She and your father are picking out new wallpaper.”

I scratch at the back of my head. “Wallpaper, huh?” They still make that?

She smiles broadly. “I’ve got two quarts ice cream in the car. I’ll see you at Sunday dinner,” she fusses, pressing a kiss to my cheek. I smile and nod her off with a wave as she drives away.

I scrub my cheek. She probably sweats Estee Lauder.

I head back into the bakery, where I’m having breakfast with my best friend, Anna. I slouch into my seat and drag the coffee cup to my lips. She reaches across the table, wrapping her fingers around my wrist.

“No answer?” she asks softly.

I shake my head and make a pass for another chocolate croissant. When they’re freshly made, so soft and buttery,

they're the best fucking thing I've ever tasted.

I try not to think of making them with *him* last year on his birthday. He wanted to learn something new together. I bitched and moaned and complained the entire fucking time. Made us drive two counties away to take a cooking class at a community college. Even then, I kept my wall up in public.

I swallow the bile that rises in my throat at the memory. I'm fucking awful and have been for a long time. I twist my hand around the back of my neck, leaning over the table.

"God, I've been such a fucking asshole," I breath out, the rush of memories weighing on my brow, making my eyes feel heavy. "For so long."

Anna folds her arms over her chest. Her ring sparkles loudly in the sunlight. "So, stop being an asshole, Dave," she says flatly.

I don't want to be an asshole. I really fucking don't. For a million reasons, all of them are hard to say aloud, hard to accept, hard to... everything.

I know the adage. *Life is hard. Choose your hard.*

But this is why I'm a fucking asshole. Because as much as I want to choose the *right* hard, I can't. Another fatal flaw of Dave Ingram.

"Dave, stop denying all of it," she says, her tone merely a whisper.

"I told *you* about it," I counter. "Denial means *not* admitting it."

She cocks her head to the side, lips twisted in displeasure. "You deny it to the *only* person that matters." She leans forward and smiles softly, sadness pulling at her eyes. "You."

I snort and shake my head. "You think it's me just repressing some shit, huh?" I snark out, my lip curling as I hiss out my words. "I'm someone people hold to certain standards," I say, clenching my jaw, "to certain values."

She leans in and lowers her voice to me, angrily. "Values?" she says with a serious type of laugh. "Dave, don't even go

there.”

Her eyes are solemn, as if we’re discussing her *own* life. She’s Marshall’s greatest advocate, through and through. They’ve become close since meeting not all that long ago.

But I’m going there. Because to her it’s all so simple.

Dave’s just afraid of the truth.

Fuck that.

I may not like the truth, but I’m not afraid of it. Rather, I know what the truth means because I’m not living in some rainbow bubble filled with hearts and stars. I’m a fucking law enforcement officer, for Christ’s sake. I abide by the rules of the town because that’s how we all best operate. Whether it’s what I want or not. It’s how things work best for *the collective*.

Small town, God’s country, all that. I was raised in private Catholic school and while the divide in flavors of Christianity thrives, everyone here is nonetheless a firm believer. Which leaves little room for a homosexual sheriff to be *with* the vice president of the local (and highly progressive) motor cycle repair shop *and* club.

“Oakcreek isn’t looking for some Brokeback Sheriff,” I grumble angrily. “They wouldn’t fucking have it, Anna, and you know it.”

She recesses back and her face goes all thoughtful and soft, as if she hadn’t actually considered the career ramifications for me. Her eyes glitter up at me, misty.

“I’m sorry,” she says quietly. “I just, I don’t want to believe there isn’t a way.”

I nod. “You and me both.” I look up at her and though her smile is empathetic, it still makes me feel a bit better.

I won’t tell her but being able to share my pain over this with someone means everything. For years, everything had to be bottled up. Having someone know and just... be there, it adds fuel to the tiny ember inside of me that burns for him and me, igniting it to a low flame.

I need that flame, no matter how small, to remind me it is real. Despite it being in the shadows, it is real. We are real.

Even if I ruined us. I *had* the real deal for a few good years.

“I still think you should go over there,” she says, plucking a piece of strawberry frosted donut up off her plate.

I look down at myself. Black hoodie sweatshirt, gray sweatpants, some running shoes. I haven’t shaved in four days since I’ve been off work and my hair is a disaster. I look like shit.

“Not like this,” I shake my head. I’m not vain but hell, I don’t want to look the part of heartbroken fucking asshole.

She snaps her fingers in front of my face, jerking my eyes to hers. “Yes, like that. Show him how you feel, Dave. That’s why you’re in this situation,” she overly mouths the word, as if it doesn’t quite fit and she’s forcing it. “You show him the *bad feelings* more than the good.”

I partially roll my eyes at her. “What the fuck does that mean?”

She smirks. “You’re not a very good gay guy if you don’t get that.”

I roll my eyes again. “Don’t say shit like that. Now tell me what it means,” I gruff out, knowing I’m fortunate that Anna sees my heartache. Otherwise, she’d not let me be this much of an ass to her. I make a mental note to apologize to her once I’m through this.

“He knows you’re scared of everyone *knowing* and you showed him as much by what you did two weeks ago on Halloween,” she says, folding her arms over her chest again. I groan. “But do you show him all the *good stuff*?”

I open my mouth and she lifts a finger for me to cease speaking, so I do.

“Before you say anything, don’t lie to me or yourself.” She lowers her voice again before posing a question that takes my

mood from *shitty* to *absolute fucking trash*. “Do you give enough?”

When she asks it so simply, the answer is glaring.

I never gave enough. Not ever.

He always did the *giving* to be with me. The sacrificing, the changing, the molding so we could fuse. He always did. I hate myself for that but even now... I can't. I just can't change.

I just... I can't let go of him, either.

She lifts a manicured hand in the air, waving over the high school girl working at the bakery.

The Wilting Daisy is a staple here in Oakcreek. Want to see your grandma, the sheriff, the guy who taught you seventh grade PE and get a bomb loaf of bread *and* a sugar cookie shaped in the letter of your first name? This bakery is a one-stop shop.

The girl bends at the waist, cheeks growing rosy as she gives me a shy smile. High school girls are bold these days, flirting with men in their late twenties this way. It isn't the first time I've seen that twinkle in their eyes. Thinking they're going to fuck the hot sheriff. I nod at her and Anna ignores how the girl wraps her fingers around the heart locket that hangs from her neck. She studies me as she loads her tray, and I do my best to ignore her, slipping the leftover donuts into a bag.

“We'll take half a dozen chocolate croissants and half a dozen of the classic sugar cookies, to go, with a box of black coffee. The house blend, if you have any left,” Anna smiles, pulling a bill from her wallet. The girl takes the money and smiles, accepting the order with a nod. She casts a few over-the-shoulder looks my way as she retreats behind the glass cases of pastries.

“Go there now,” she says, pulling the strap of her purse up her shoulder. “You may not be able to fix everything but being sorry is better than nothing.”

I shake my head. “I’ve been trying to apologize for two fucking weeks,” I grit, feeling my anger bubble up in my veins. I can’t even fucking apologize because I’m being ghosted.

Fucking ghosted, after five years. I may be an asshole but ghosting me? I shake my head again. “He’s being fucking impossible. Not answering his phone.”

She rises from the table and takes the pink box from the girl, who waves goodbye to me as she fumbles her way back behind the counter.

“He’s hurt, Dave. You hurt him.” She shoves the box into my chest as I rise. “Go there now and apologize, in person. He won’t answer? The solution isn’t to keep calling. Go see him.”

She doesn’t give me any time to dispute or argue. She smiles and holds her phone up to her ear. “I’ll call you tonight,” she says, with a warning in her tone. If I don’t go see him, then I’ll have two people pissed at me.

I drop another bill on the table, despite Anna’s more than generous tip, because no one remembers what I drop, they only remember if I *don’t* drop it.

I sit behind the wheel in my pickup for several quiet minutes. I am sorry. I don’t know if I’m sorry about the shit he wants me to be sorry about but fuck it. I can’t fucking take this radio silence bullshit he’s pulling. Two weeks is too goddamn long.

I reach behind the passenger seat, draping my arm over the back as I peer behind me, reversing onto the road. Shifting into drive, I head towards his house.

I can’t do another day like this.

I can’t think, I’ve written three tickets in two weeks that I didn’t even remember to sign, I’ve left my badge on the hood of the cruiser and I slept a total of maybe fifty hours in two weeks. My stomach hurts, my joints ache, and my...

My chest is the worst of all.

It aches. When I roll to my side, it swells against my ribs, sending an aftershock of pain throughout. When I stand on my feet, it hurts enough for me to press my palm to it, attempting to diffuse the pain.

Sitting, showering, walking, talking. It hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts.

“No more of this shit,” I grumble as I drift to the curb near his house. Scooping my baseball hat off the passenger seat, I tug it down over my unruly hair. Feeding my hands into my sweatshirt pocket, I take the porch stairs by two and knock with a tightly closed fist.

after the storm chapter 2

...

grant

“I KNOW THIS ISN’T AS GOOD AS YESTERDAY’S BUT GUESS what? Your uncles are assholes and they ate all the leftovers. So today we’re having banana muffins.”

My large fingers finally connect with the edge of the paper liner that holds the muffin. Unwrapping a muffin with just two curse words shed is my personal best so far.

Max slams his fist through the muffin, splitting it down the middle. He fists at the broken top, stuffing tiny handfuls into his open mouth.

“You seem fine with the switch so I’ll remember that. Muffins are easier than mini cinnamon waffles, anyway.” I slide some scrambled eggs from the pan onto his tray, next to the desecrated muffin.

“Now, sir, your mom says we save the milk for after nap so it looks like we’re having,” I pull open the fridge, letting my sentence hang. Being nine months old, Max lets it slide. “I guess this,” I say, pulling out the jug of Annie’s organic apple juice.

I swipe a hand through my beard, studying the contents of the fridge. I thought I bought extra juice last week?

Then again, I could’ve just thought of needing to buy it. My head has been a goddamn mess lately. I can’t focus on anything but Dave. Just thinking his name infuriates me. I want to drive my goddamn fist through something every time his number appears on my phone.

Yeah, his phone number. Because after five years, he still isn’t programmed into my phone. “*In case.*”

I close the fridge with more force and misdirected anger than necessary. The fridge has never hurt me. I should take it easy.

I fill Max's cup as he pinches bites of scrambled eggs, bringing them to his face. He whines as they drop to the tray before making it to his mouth. I stroke his hair and tell him to keep trying as a fist moves against my front door.

A snarl curls my lip. I know that kind of knock. A standard three-pound, all-knuckle, like that of a sheriff.

I'm fucking angry. I'm fucking tired of his shit.

I push my hand through my hair and tug at the hem of my flannel. I take a deep breath before opening the front door.

Like the true fucking prick that he is, even his angst looks good.

Sweats, hoodie, and a baseball cap that throws a band of darkness across his eyes—fuck. The feelings knocking around my chest force me to casually lean into the door frame. Seeing him after not for two weeks, it's all the pleasure of the first time irrevocably fused to the pain of today.

His head droops forward for a moment and I wonder if he's going to make me talk first, after coming here. My knuckles burn as I grip the doorframe, pushing myself to stand.

My eyes move over him, digesting his state. Dave is the kind of man that runs at six in the morning on Sundays. He has a standing haircut at the local barber shop every two weeks. He's on my porch, jaw blanketed in unkempt stubble, wearing sweats.

I don't see him nervous that often. In the beginning, yes.

The man was made of nerves for the first six months we saw each other. It was all new to him. Me even being in his world, all of it. And I found his inexperience and hesitance attractive.

Now his inability to understand *why* I feel *how* I fucking feel just irritates me. I'm not physical in my relationships but many times I've wanted to slam Dave against the wall and hold him there by the throat of his shirt.

His inability to see what's in front of him enrages me like nothing or no one else ever has. His hesitance that used to be attractive is now maddening, causing me to bite my tongue and clench my jaw.

I'm a traditional dominant male. I make choices, I guide, I lead, I have control. Until Sheriff Indecision came into my life.

To have him, I had to relinquish the control I had over life as I knew it. I traded my idea of traditional power to *have* someone. I gave up the high of control for *us*. Having him. It didn't feel like a mistake at the time.

But I don't have him. I was never going to have him.

I don't know myself, either. I changed how I functioned on a core level to be with him. I was willing to do that in order to have him take steps towards me. *He'll take baby steps*, I told myself. *He will get there*, I fucking believed.

He won't let me program his name in my phone. After five years. He wouldn't even go to a party with me. I walk away from the open door, back to the kitchen where Max is finishing his eggs.

I'm more lost than ever. And he's standing there, making my body physically hurt and thrum, confusion blending with passion to make some new breed of pain.

Blonde and muscular, in some lighting so fucking beautiful and in others, ruggedly handsome. Right now, he's in pain. I see in his eyes, the weight of sadness that droops over them, he's miserable.

And I'm so fucking weak. I nod toward the stool on the other side of the counter.

"I haven't answered your calls because I have nothing to say," I say to him, honestly, as he takes a seat. Reaching out, he tugs the high chair towards him and begins stripping another muffin for Max.

"Are your hands clean?" I ask. He rolls his eyes as he sets the muffin down then crosses past me to the sink. He washes his hands and dries them before returning to Max and the muffin.

I watch as he crumbles the bottom of the muffin into small pieces before separating them on the tray. For someone who never had a younger sibling, caregiving seems natural. He shoves his fingers through Max's long, dark hair. He's a spitting image of his mom, my baby sister Delilah.

"I didn't know you're watching him this week," he says, keeping his eyes on Max. He's smiling softly as he hands pieces of peach to Max from the tray. I don't even know if he's aware he's smiling.

"Delilah is having some of the kitchen redone at the deli. Ry and Thorne are running the End of the Trail until I get in there." He nods and it takes everything in me to not say *as if it's any of your goddamn business*.

Max takes a piece of peach from Dave's hand and giggles triumphantly before missing his mouth. The peach falls to the ground and Dave rises, going for the paper towel.

Seeing him move around in my house as if he belongs, as if he's comfortable—I can't do that right now.

I raise my palm out and he meets it with his chest. We stand shoulder to shoulder, both staring off. His chest is solid under my hand. It rises slowly and I can hear his broken breathing.

"You need to go," I say. Knowing the words are true don't make them any easier to deliver, even when they taste so bitter.

He drops his head. I don't look but it's unavoidable in my peripheral, his chin is to his chest.

"I'm sorry," he says. His voice is low and tender and instead of softening the tightness strapping through my chest, it adds torque. In five fucking years of having a relationship, he's never allowed himself to be vulnerable.

He is *now*. Great. Fucking great for him.

Now, it's too late. I didn't ask him to go down on a goddamn knee with a ring in town square. What I asked for was a fucking molecule of give on his part. Fuck, it wasn't

even a molecule. A whiff of a goddamn atom. That's all I wanted.

I'm a fucking fool for thinking he could do it. Give me a tiny bit after all this time. I should've seen the signs. They were all there, every day, plain for me to see.

"Good for you," I say, stepping forward. I can still feel the heat of his shoulder against mine even after I've walked away.

"Grant," he attempts to keep me there by uttering my name in a broken tone.

I know he's hurting. I see it in his disheveled appearance and the fact that he came here.

But forgiving him would only bring us both more pain in the future. What's the point?

"Just fucking go," I say, not giving him another look. I reach under Max's arms as he holds them up to me. He knows that after breakfast comes the fun. Crawling around my house while I do laundry and clean, talking to him like my own personal therapist.

I tell Delilah she owes the shit outta me for watching my nephew as much as I do but truth be told, her deli needing work has been a blessing in disguise. Watching Max has been the only escape I've had from all of it.

"You're just going to walk into your bedroom with Max and go about your fucking day, then?" he gruffs as I'm half way through the living space between the kitchen and hall.

I turn and lower Max to the floor as he squeals and kicks. He loves dragging himself down the hardwood hallway. He begins his scoot.

Facing away from him, I still. "I am," I reply.

"Not even gonna look at me now?" he asks. His pain pokes up through his somber demeanor and this time, it fucking pulls me in.

This is why I can't be in the same room with him. Because as angry as I am, as much as I want to shove him down the steps and lock the fucking door, I can't.

Slowly, I turn. He tugs off his baseball cap and pinches the bill together in his hands. His hair is a fucking mess. I've never, not once, seen him this way.

It should do something to my heart. It should do something *good*. But it doesn't. My fists curl together at my sides. With the hat gone, I can see dark half-moons resting under his big blue eyes and the usual clarity in them is replaced with blood-shot fatigue.

It's now that I realize he set a pink box and brown box on the counter when he came in. I see it behind him. He follows my gaze to the goodies and then looks back to me, a small glimmer of hope in his eyes. As if sweets will be this peace offering that makes me forgive his selfish fucking ass.

"You went out like that?" I ask, hating my own curiosity.

Sheriff Ingram looks like something you'd find in a men's charity calendar. You'd see that sharp jaw, piercing eyes and say, *hell, arrest me*. Knowing that he went out like that is surprising to me.

He looks down at his sweats and up to me before he nods. "I didn't want to come over here like this." His eyes are troubled and hazy when they come back up to mine. "I'm sorry, Grant. You know I'm fucking sorry."

I shake my head, trying to get the apology out of my space, afraid if I don't keep moving, it will start to settle in. "Your truck's out front. Get out of here. Before someone sees you."

It's a zing. He knows it and I know it and like most zings, it doesn't feel nearly as good to say as I thought it would. In fact, its bitter intent seems to sour me even more, leaving me feeling worse.

I peer down the hallway to see Max sliding his way back to me, drool glistening on his chin. I smile and my heart smiles, too. Thank God for this fucking kid.

When I look up, I see that Dave has closed the distance between us and my heart zips at his proximity. I'm angry and I'm a wall of a man, but I'm fucking weak and pathetic when

it comes to him. I step back, *needing* distance, and he steps in again.

“Stay the fuck back, Ingram,” I warn. He steps in again and our faces are so close. What must we look like to others? Two huge men, one six-two and the other six-foot, face to face, bodies nearly touching. Though that’s the whole problem, isn’t it? *No one can ever see us.*

My eyes are pinned so tight on his that I don’t realize he’s reached out until I feel his calloused hand wrap around mine. His thumb strokes the top of my hand and I don’t hide the sharp inhale his touch causes.

Max is a baby but I wonder if he’s understood some of my grumblings over the last two weeks because as my resolve softens under that single stroke of Dave’s thumb, Max reaches up, wrapping his arms around one of my ankles, whining.

It’s what I need to be jolted away from him. From this.

I reach down and scoop my nephew into my arms. His sticky fingers move over the exposed art the peeks out from the collar of my shirt. Dave’s eyes flick to the ink on my collarbone and he watches Max touch my tattoos for a moment. He blinks a few times and I see his chest move quickly as his eyes come back to me.

“I don’t know what to do,” he admits, his tone so low that it could be a whisper.

“Just go,” I say, shifting Max to my other side. He strokes his tiny fingers through my beard. If Ingram had shown up here before today, I would’ve looked a lot like he does. But because Max loves to grab, I trimmed and shaved this morning.

He opens his mouth, his eyes moving from Max’s hold on me back to my eyes. He closes his mouth, shoves a hand through his unruly hair and pulls his cap back down. His eyes are gone from my sight and after a moment, he’s gone, too.

I stare at the closed door. I handled that with my brain for once. As much as my heart fucking hurts, I realize my heart would be way worse in the long run had I given into him.

I've given in too much.

It's time to move the fuck on.

After folding my laundry, sweeping and mopping my floors, singing the alphabet a few times (that was for Max's benefit) and making a new batch of cinnamon waffles (that was for Max *and* my brothers benefit), we lie down for a nap.

Max grips my arm like his own personal blanket and dozes off in a matter of minutes. I lie there, on my back, staring up at the stark white ceiling. Max's snorts and soft breaths flank me and the calm it usually instills on me isn't there today.

My chest is tight and when I let my eyes close, memories of that night two weeks ago come flooding back.

All we were going to do was go to the town Halloween party with Anna and Maverick.

That's it.

We weren't going to wear fucking matching salt and pepper costumes, we weren't going as fucking Ace and Gary, the ambiguously gay duo.

I didn't ask him to out himself.

I didn't ask him to treat me like a partner in public.

We were going as a group. It's no secret to Oakcreek that the Sheriff is in good with everyone, even the progressive Broken Wheel motorcycle club I partially head up. It wouldn't have turned anyone's heads to see the four of us show up together.

Maverick is a longtime family friend. Anna is his fiancé. We're all close.

I was going to meet Dave at Anna and Maverick's place out on the water to have a drink and roll into town together.

Dave has to go to all this shit because of his job. Truth be told, I like being involved in the community and attending all of the events. It's good for the club to appear mainstream and visible. Fucking Sons of Anarchy making people think bikers are bad.

As soon as I pulled up out front, a tight knot formed in my throat and heat prickled in my ears.

I fucking knew.

His truck wasn't there.

Dave Ingram is a man who plays by the rules. Punctual and polite, he doesn't arrive late... especially without warning. Still, I set my helmet on my seat and made my way up the long driveway. It seemed never-ending that afternoon. Each step I took brought me closer to the house and further from what I wanted.

Anna's face when she pulled open the door.

I can't forget it.

Lips a thin, sad line. Eyes wide and watery.

I laughed.

Maverick appeared behind her, ushering me in. I went in, but I don't know why. There's nothing they could've said that would matter. Not really, at least.

Maverick pinched my shoulder as I settled into a chair at their table. Four glasses sat out, with a pitcher of margaritas in the middle. Dave pretends to hate margaritas but I know he fucking loves them. The untouched pitcher made me so angry. I don't think I can see that murky lime color ever again without acid rising up my throat.

Everyone is always trying to make him comfortable but why? He's never given us a sign that he's capable of being comfortable being him. It was that moment in the kitchen, watching condensation move down the sides of the glass pitcher, that I finally accepted what we were.

Key word: *were*.

We *were*. And we could never be more. Because he would always be afraid of being himself.

He texted me right then and I saw Anna and Maverick's eyes skate over his number on my phone. I swiped it open, not trying to hide the screen from them.

I never had to hide anything because he never gave me anything to hide.

Ingram: *I'm sorry. I thought I could but I can't.*

I snorted at the message. How else should I have reacted?

I open my eyes and watch Max's chest rise and fall gently; his soft breaths warm on my arm.

He couldn't show up at a party in the same group as me. The reality still feels as bad today as it did two weeks ago.

The ridiculousness of my hope that he would have come around in the last five years causes me to curse quietly into the room as I stroke my fingers through Max's hair.

I'm as mad at myself as I am at him.

I should've known he'd never be comfortable with himself, much less with me.

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about the author

Daisy Jane is an Indie Author writing contemporary romance with kink. In her stories you will find small towns, ordinary people and extraordinary sex lives.

When not writing romance, Daisy enjoys reading, finding new ways to eat peanut butter, black coffee, funk music and cool cover bands, Yosemite, browsing Reddit, true crime, and so much more.

She lives in California with her husband of fifteen years, their two daughters and three cats.



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