

always  
magnolia

REBECCA RATHE

Always Magnolia

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*For Rachel*

*I'd be lost without your support, friendship, and unyielding confidence in my ability to accomplish my dreams.*

*Also, you're my favorite bitch to bitch about bitches with. Life, and this crazy journey, would be significantly harder and infinitely more boring without you.*

## Author's Note

*Always Magnolia* is a contemporary MMFM romance where the characters do not choose between their love interests (#whychoose). This story will contain dark themes and triggering content, including but not limited to: death of a parent, child abuse and molestation, spousal abuse, sexual assault and rape, accidental/forced pregnancy, miscarriage and abortion, domestic violence, and depression.

Rape, abuse, and miscarriage are shown on page. None of the abuse takes place between the main characters/love interests.

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# Prologue

*Matty*

I can't believe she's leaving.

She's been my best friend—*our* best friend—for as long as I can remember. The four of us have done everything together. We have celebrated every birthday and every holiday, every win and every loss. Everything. For as long as I can remember.

Although it's always been the four of us, I've always felt an extra connection with her. Ryan has Dare, and while my brother and his best friend are part of our circle, it isn't the same. Without her, I worry the group will fall apart, and I'll be alone. And she'll be alone, so far away from us.

"Don't go," I choke out in a rough whisper.

She startles, lost in her own thoughts as she sits on the lowest branch of the magnolia tree. This tree, hidden a little way into the woods behind her house, is our spot. It's our meeting spot. It's where we have always played, where we go to both be alone and with each other. It's been our special place since we were five and came across it one day while exploring past the boundaries that had been set for us. Then, just like now, this place was meant to be ours. As if God himself had come down from heaven and gifted it to us. After all, we'd just met our new best friend, and she had the same name as the beautiful tree with the fragrant white blossoms.

The massive sprawling branches are strong and wide enough to climb almost to the very top, but the lowest branches are where we usually sit, the four of us tucked behind the foliage and hidden from the rest of the world. We chose it for her, because of her.

She looks over at me when I climb onto the branch next to her. The sunlight filters through the branches in the late autumn twilight, glinting off the huge, dark green leaves. The huge white blossoms are full and heavy, their perfumed aroma seeping into my memories.

Every time I smell magnolias, I'll think of this moment. It's fitting.

She looks at me, but says nothing, her dark blue eyes welling up with tears, until fat, wet drops cascade over her red-rimmed lids. With as much as she has cried in the week since her father was found dead at the bottom of their stairs, it's been hard to remember her wide smile, or the way she throws her head back and laughs with her whole body.

I wonder if I'll ever hear her laugh again.

"I don't want to," she says plainly. She doesn't need to finish the rest of the sentence.

Her only remaining family lives halfway across the country, and at only thirteen years old, she can't just *decide* to stay. She's at the mercy of whoever holds the paperwork.

"You could live with us. My dad loves you, and we could make a room for you."

"It's not my choice," she whispers.

"I know. I'm sorry. It's just... so soon." *We had so many plans.*

"We'll talk on the phone tons, and email. Maybe your aunt and uncle will let you have your own phone so we can stay in touch every single day. And I'll have my driver's license in two years, so we can come visit."

She nods sadly, looking up through the branches, the colors of the setting sun illuminating her face. I take a mental picture, promising myself I'll never forget how pretty she looks in this moment, even with the wet tracks of her tears glittering.

Reaching over, I wrap my arm around her shoulders and pull her against me so she rests her head on my chest. My other hand rests in my lap, where she winds her fingers through mine and we sit together, simply enjoying the moment and not wanting it to end. Eventually, the spell breaks and she looks up at me as if seeing me for the first time.

“You won’t forget about me?” She asks, her cracked voice barely a whisper.

“Never.”

“Promise?”

“I promise. I’ll forget absolutely nothing about you, Magnolia Crawford. Nothing” She scrunches her nose at my use of her full name. “You’re my best friend, always. More than that even.”

“More than that?”

I swallow so my suddenly racing heart doesn’t escape from my throat, and force out a chuckle to try to cover how nervous I feel.

“You’re worried about me forgetting anything, but you’re the one with the memory problems, my friend. You and me; Ryan and Dare—we have a future together, remember?”

She makes a sound that could have been a laugh, but it gets caught behind her tears and makes snot come out of her nose instead. Without a word, I hold up the arm that is still attached to her hand, bringing my flannel sleeve up so she can wipe her face. She looks mortified, but accepts the makeshift tissue.

“You’re talking about pacts we made when we were five, Matty.”

“And?”

“We’re thirteen now. And that’s ridiculous. Not to mention unrealistic.”

“Bullshit. I meant every word then and now. Didn’t you?”

“Matty, be serious. The three of y’all are going to move on, make new friends, have girlfriends, all that. Besides, I couldn’t marry all three of you, pretty sure it’s illegal in all states. Those were silly pacts made by kids who didn’t understand how the world really works. And it’s not like y’all like me like that anyhow, so I don’t know why we’re even talking about it.”



I turn my body so I'm facing her, bringing a leg over so I'm straddling the tree.

“Who says?”

She looks at me blank faced and exasperated. It's almost comforting having the normalcy of her rolling her eyes at any one of our antics.

“Noli—“ I start, but my words get caught on my tongue, which feels like it has swollen to three times its normal size.

We stare at each other for I don't know how long. Eyes locked on each other, neither of us wanting to be the first to look away. I'm not even aware of how close we've moved toward each other until our foreheads are pressed together and her mouth is mere inches from mine.

This is a moment I've been dreaming about for about a year now. Ever since I got old enough to start seeing Noli Crawford in a new light. I started noticing her lips and budding body in a different way, and it made me feel things. She's been one of us, one of the guys, for our entire lives. But it's been changing, at least for me. The way she leans in to me makes me think maybe she's been having these kinds of thoughts, too. I inhale everything that is Noli and lean down, ready to—

“Matty and Noli, sitting in a tree! K-I-S-S-I-N-G!”

Their voices ring out through the clearing as they approach from the opposite direction that I did, probably coming from Dare's house.

Inches away. But of course, those two jackasses had to ruin it.

Noli pulls away sharply. The moment Ryan and Darius get close enough to see our expressions, they both sober. Noli's face is red and blotchy from crying for a week straight, and I'm pissed as hell that they interrupted my moment with her.

“Seriously, you two idiots can't pull your shit together for one night?”

“No way, bro. It’s our last night. Noli wouldn’t want us to pretend to be anything other than what we are, would you Noles?”

She attempts a sad smile, but doesn’t say anything. I feel like she’s trying to avoid my gaze. It’s unlike her to be embarrassed around any of us.

“Besides that,” Darius cuts in, “you can’t leave us out. It’s against the rules.”

Noli makes a choking sound and covers her face. I take off my thin flannel overshirt and toss it in her lap, in case she needs to wipe her nose again. She stares at it a moment before wrapping it around her back and pushing her arms through it. It’s so big on her that she has to push the sleeves up to see her hands.

“Oh, so you’re jealous?” I taunt my brother and best friend.

They look at each other and then back at us.

“Well *yeah*,” says Dare.

“Duh,” Ryan joins, like it’s the most obvious thing. Then again, maybe it is.

When we were five, we all pledged our undying loyalty to each other. Even as kids, I can look back and see that it was different from promises made by normal friend groups. It meant something. When we made our pledges, it was Noli pledging to us; and us three pledging to her.

That we’d always be there for each other.

That we’d always love each other.

And that we’d never do anything important without each other.

We’ve always been a unit. “Noli’s Crew” is what her dad called us. I’ve never questioned us as a group, even when I started thinking beyond friendship. Was it selfish of me to want to kiss her first?

Maybe.

Do I care?

Not as much as I should.

“I think we’re going to need an official meeting to sort this out,” Noli says, her voice rough as she tries to push past her pain and act like it’s any other day than this one. *The one where she leaves us.*

We haven’t held an “official meeting” since we were ten. Well, the guys and I were ten. Noli is a year younger, but she got to start kindergarten early because she could already read, and we all have late fall birthdays, so we have always been at the same grade level.

Grinning, I hold out my hand to help Noli step over me to assume her “official” spot on the tree, while the other two climb up. Once we’re situated, we all stare back at our queen. Dare and Ryan sit on the branch opposite me, while I’ve scooted down a bit on the same branch I was on. Always the focal point of our group, Noli sits in the Y-bend of the branches slightly above us, looking at us like the loyal servants to her that we always have been and always will be.

“Okay,” she says, a hint of insecurity in her voice, “I officially call this meeting to order.”

Ryan’s hand shoots up as he shouts, “new business!”

With a slight chuckle and eye roll, Noli waves a hand to concede to Ryan’s new business.

“Matthew, my very own *twin* brother,” he says accusingly, “has violated the decrees that hold this honored group together by initiating a first kiss, and we, Darius and me, that is, declare bullshit.”

I can’t help but snort out a laugh. No matter how much older and smarter we get, these meetings are still about as mature as they were when we were eight. But it feels right, and oddly comforting, to have a meeting on our last night together.

Noli smirks, a real honest to goodness smirk, and I decide that I’m glad we got interrupted after all.

“And how do you suggest we move forward?” Noli always did sound the smartest at these meetings. Probably because she *is* smarter. *What are we going to do without her? What am I going to do without her?*

“I think a vote is in order,” says Dare importantly.

“It’s two against one,” I point out.

“So,” he says, and sticks out his tongue. *Yep, just like when we were kids.*

“Do I not get a vote now?” Noli says incredulously.

“Well, then we’d have a tie,” I say, winking at her with a cocky confidence that I don’t actually feel. We lock eyes as her cheeks slowly turn the same color as the sun setting on the horizon, and I know I need to claim this for us. After a few awkward moments where I can’t speak over the thumping of my heart, I blurt out, “I invoke the rule of firsts.”

“What?!” Both Ryan and Dare shout in mock outrage. I have a feeling that despite their interruption and call to order, they don’t actually mind me getting Noli’s first kiss. They know we’re all equal in her eyes, and also I suspect they might have already had their first kisses with each other, not that I’d call them out on it.

“As the firstborn, I invoke my right to have first choice.”

“Isn’t that rule for choosing the biggest slice of pizza or cupcake with the most frosting?” Noli deadpans. Her face is flaming red now.

“It seems appropriate to me,” I respond with a shrug, the blood rushing through my body, making my voice quiver more than I’d like it to.

Ryan and Darius put their arms around each other in a mock huddle before straightening up and simultaneously nodding their agreement.

“We concede to the rule of firsts. However, we humbly request secondzies and thirdzies, in the usual order, as is tradition.”

“If Noli wants, of course,” Dare throws in. Ryan shrugs, like this isn’t an important detail.

We all turn our gazes to Noli, who flinches as the automatic twinkle lights flicker on now that the sun is almost completely set. The sudden surge of light makes the blush creeping up her neck more obvious. It is the most beautiful I have ever seen her.

For a moment, I think we’ve made her too uncomfortable and start to suggest that we should back off.

“I’d like that,” she answers abruptly, cutting me off before I can voice my hesitation. With more confidence than I can muster, she rises from her seat and climbs down to stand at the base of the tree. Lost in my thoughts, it takes me too long to figure out that she’s waiting for me.

“Are you coming?”

I look up at Ryan and Dare, who both grin back at me. Honestly, you’d think *they* were the twins in this group. They’re always so in sync.

“Go get her, big bro,” Ryan says encouragingly.

Nodding, I look around me as if I haven’t grown up in the branches of this very tree. Like I haven’t climbed down hundreds of times before.

My descent isn’t as smooth as I’d like, but I finally make it down to find Noli leaning back against the trunk of the tree, watching the last rays of light sink below the tree line. I watch it too for a while, until I’m aware of Noli’s eyes on me instead of the horizon.

I take a step towards her, my recent growth spurt putting me nearly a foot taller than her, so I have to look down once I’m close enough.

Meeting my gaze, she pushes her hands out of the warmth of my flannel shirt and places them on my chest, her eyes round and unsure.

“We don’t have to—”

“Shut up and kiss me, Matty.”

That's all I need to swoop down and put my lips against hers. Our first kiss is short and awkward, as first kisses are. But she smiles up at me in such a way that I think the sun has risen again.

“Rule of firsts, huh?”

Chuckling, I swoop down again, capturing her lips in mine and moving them against hers until we find a rhythm that sends shivers down my spine.

I'm breathless when we finally pull away. Her lips are swollen and red, and her eyes almost look sleepy with the way they look up at me under heavy lids. Not ready to let her go just yet, I slide my palm along her jaw and tuck a stray hair behind her ear. Just like in the tree, I lean my forehead to hers and ask for a promise.

“I want all your firsts, Noli. All of them.”

# Present Day

## *Noli*

I've been staring at the ceiling so hard it almost looks like it's moving. The popcorn texture seems to wriggle and writhe with the rhythm of Jake's jagged and wheezing breaths. He's been asleep for over an hour now, but I'm afraid to move from under the arm that has me pinned down and wake him. He only drank a little before he passed out. Was it enough to keep him from waking up so easily?

*No time like the present.*

My heart thuds violently in my chest. I try desperately to tame it, convinced he'll hear it and wake up. It wouldn't be the first time my heart has betrayed me.

*This isn't about you. Be brave.*

*Thump-thump. Thump-thump.* The sound of it fills my ears until I can't properly listen to his breaths.

Taking a deep breath to strengthen my resolve, I gently push Jake's arm off me. He lets out a disgruntled snort and tightens his arms around me.

I freeze. He nuzzles into the back of my neck. "Where do you think you're going?" he teases, pulling me against him. His smell invades my nostrils and I have to fight the nausea building in my stomach. Jake is a mixture of booze, cigarettes, motor-oil and stale sweat, concealed in a haze of cheap cologne. It reeks of violence and hostility.

"Just had to pee," I lie, trying to keep my voice even and sleepy sounding.

Jake murmurs something else unintelligible and grinds his erection into my ass.

Might as well get this over with.

Swallowing down my growing nausea, I arch my back in a fake yawn, which pushes my ass further against him.

The weight of his arm leaves as his hand caresses over my waist. He squeezes my breast roughly and I wince. It encourages him, and he moves his hand to my thighs, pushing up the long t-shirt I wore to bed and digging his fingers into the fleshy parts of my ass. Jake wouldn't know foreplay if it smacked him in the face. Even then, it probably wouldn't be worth the effort. This isn't about me.

Without much preamble, Jake rolls himself over me, pushing my face into the pillows as he settles himself over my back. I turn my face just enough to take pressure off the right side of my face where the evidence of earlier still stings, but not all the way to the side so I can avoid having to fake anything.

He rustles around for a moment before pushing himself into me, or at least trying to. His dick keeps hitting all around his target, pushing into my labia and the bone structure around where he is supposed to be. When he finally locates his goal, he forces himself inside without an ounce of moisture to ease his way in. It's lucky he isn't very big, otherwise it would hurt a lot more. As it is, I screw up my eyes and grit my teeth as he saws back and forth, the friction burning.

One hand presses my face against the bed as the other grips my ass cheek. Involuntarily, I cry out when he moves his hand from my ass to my hip bone, where a deep bruise is forming from a fall earlier. My cry of pain spurs him on, his thrusts becoming frantic before he stills. The warmth and smell of his breath against my ear, still carrying notes of Jack Daniels, makes me gag, but I try to suppress it so I don't upset him. His weight lands over my back as he grunts his release, spasming on top of me.

Finally, he rolls off me, giving my ass an appreciative smack as he lights a cigarette and reaches for the bottle on the bedside table. He turns it up and takes a few heavy swigs as I slowly edge my way off the bed and walk towards the bathroom. *That should be enough.*

Our bathroom smells like off-brand body spray that's marketed to teenagers, the cloying kind that follows you around malls. I shudder and try not to think about how that



smell is going to cling to my hair and clothes until the next time I have a chance to shower.

Cleaning myself up, I take comfort in the snores that have grown deep enough that I know he's unlikely to wake. *It's now or never.* I pull a small bag from under the sink that I packed the bare essentials in. In the front pocket is a tiny bag of crushed up sleeping pills I have slowly been gathering so as to avoid drawing attention to their absence from the bottle. I pull it out and assess how much I have left. I only hope it is enough.

Turning out the light, I let my eyes adjust to the darkness before opening the bathroom door and tiptoeing through the bedroom to Jake's side of the bed. The tiny bit of light that filters in through the window isn't enough to tell if his eyes are open or not, and my fear that he is faking his snores makes me shake so hard I nearly knock over the bottle of whiskey as I attempt to empty the tiny baggie into the bottle. A little more can't hurt. Now that he's drunk enough, the taste won't be as obvious.

*Fuck. Calm down, Noli.*

My breaths won't come normally, so I settle for holding it as I sneak out of the room. I lock the door from the inside before softly latching it closed. If he does wake up and leaves the room, he'll make a lot of noise doing it. At the very least, I'll have a warning.

Holding my small go-bag to my chest, which has all the cash and change I've managed to save up, important papers, and the title of the car that Jake paid cash for, I sneak down the hallway to Jamie's room.

Kneeling down at her bedside, I brush the hair from her face.

"Jamie, baby, wake up," I whisper.

"Mama?"

"Hey baby, I need you to wake up and follow me, but be real quiet, okay? Daddy is asleep and we can't wake him."

Her deep blue eyes, so similar to my father's, get big and round as she nods and sits up. At only eight years old, she understands what's happening and the dire circumstances of getting caught.

I help her slip on a pair of pants and thread her bandaged arm through a t-shirt.

"We'll carry our shoes and put them on in the car, okay?"

She nods, and my heart wrenches at the terrified look in her eyes.

"It's going to be okay, baby," I whisper, and hug her tight to my body.

Jamie picks up her favorite stuffed bear, one from my own childhood with ladybugs embroidered on it, and holds it close. Before I take her hand to sneak through the hallway again, I pull a duffel bag from her closet that I have hidden beneath a mound of stuffed animals.

Quietly, we walk across the house to Jake's "office". It's more of a junk room, but this is where he likes to play his online video games. Pausing to quietly move some clutter aside, I open the window and punch out the screen. There are alarms on all the other outside doors and windows, but since this one is higher up, Jake didn't think we needed to secure it. It's the only exit from the house that won't set off the alarms and wake him up, since I don't have the alarm codes to turn them off before leaving.

Tossing out both of the bags, I stop to listen for any sound or movement from within the house. Knowing that this is the only way, I lift Jamie through the window and carefully lower her down onto the air conditioning unit. She climbs down and waits by the bags while I climb through the window, shut it by pulling a cord tied to the latch, and hastily replace the screen enough to make it less obvious how we got out.

Making a wide arc around the yard to avoid the view of the cameras, we walk quickly but silently to the end of the driveway where one of Jake's more usable "project" cars is parked in the road. It had a flat tire, but I patched it while Jake

was at a bar with his friends. It looks like the patch has held so far. Hopefully, it'll make it long enough to get us far away from here.

There's a tarp over the back of the car to protect the cracked back windshield from rain, but it was also effective for hiding the pillows and blankets that I stashed in here. I try to make it as comfortable as possible for Jamie to be buckled in and still be able to sleep through most of the drive tonight. If she isn't too wired from fear, that is.

Holding my breath and saying a prayer to a God I haven't believed in for twenty years, I turn the key. The engine starts, interrupting the silence of the night, and I flinch, my eyes cutting towards the house to see if any lights turn on. Miraculously, we're able to drive out of the cul-de-sac, down the street, and head out of town without a hitch.

I release a breath and don't look back.

*This is just the beginning.*



Twenty Years Ago

## Letters

Guys,

*Ugh, I miss y'all so much. I hope you don't mind me writing to you all at once this time, but I only have a few minutes before church and I want to make sure I can drop this in the mailbox downtown so it'll go out first thing tomorrow morning.*

*It's different here. Our town is small, but this place is something else. It's like one of those small towns that you see in old movies. Everyone knows everyone. The sheriff is basically treated like God, and oh yeah, they all go to the same church and judge each other constantly. Little old biddies peer out their curtains when I'm riding my bike through the neighborhood. Every move is gossiped about like I'm the only thing interesting to happen here in a hundred years.*

*School starts next week and I'm actually a little nervous. I've met a bunch of the kids at church and they don't seem to like me much. They stare and whisper a lot. Hopefully, once we all get to know each other, it'll be fine. You know me, I'll make friends with anyone. I'll have this two-stoplight town eating out of the palm of my hand in no time!*

*Maybe I'm looking at this all wrong and I should be more excited. Remember when Matty and Ry's mom came to visit when we were nine and told us about "manifesting our futures"? I know Matty is rolling his eyes and saying that we shouldn't listen to Bonnie because she's crazy—but who knows, maybe she was onto something? Can't hurt to try.*

*Okay, ending this here because Aunt Dana is yelling up the stairs for me. She's making me wear A DRESS to church AGAIN. Apparently this is going to be a regular thing??*

*I love you. I love you. I love you. (One for each of you.)*

*Always,*  
*Noli*

*\*READ THIS FIRST BEFORE OPENING THE PACKAGE!\**

*Dear Noli,*

*I'm sending this on behalf of all of us to make sure it gets to you as quickly as possible. Dad is going to overnight the package to you to make sure it gets there in time.*

*We still have a couple more weeks until school starts, but since you're already starting, you might need a little reminder that you're one of us, the queen of our crew. (I still can't believe we're starting high school without you...)*

*You're probably wondering what's in the package. You can open it now—*

*Remember last year when we thought it would be funny to walk into our first day of high school wearing matching t-shirts? I thought maybe you'd get a kick out of these. I made them myself with fabric spray paint and sharpies— here's a picture of us wearing ours. Wear it proudly, unlike Matty, who is being a giant loser and says he won't wear his.*

*Also... We all decided that we need to see proof that you wore a dress. We're taking bets on what kind of shoes you wore. Matty says flip flops, but Dare and I think you went with beat up sneakers. I'm hoping you wore those white skater sneaks that I decorated for you.*

*Pics or it didn't happen!*

*We love you back x3*

*Ry*

# Noli

“How was school, Maggie Moo?”

I cringe at the nickname as I climb into the passenger seat of my uncle’s station wagon. First of all, I hate being called Maggie. It’s honestly bad enough that my dad named me after a damn flower in the first place, but Maggie happened to be the name of our neighbor’s evil pet emu that used to get out and prowl the neighborhood. That thing was terrifying as hell.

Unfortunately, James Crawford was so distraught after losing his wife in childbirth that he didn’t consider the repercussions of his choices. He wanted to name me after my mother’s favorite flower, and was obsessed with the symbolism of it. “Magnolias mean strength,” he would say. “And they bring luck, just like my little ladybug does.”

Secondly, why *Moo*? I mean, I’m definitely not what anyone would call skinny, but I’m not exactly chubby either. I’m just... average. Average height: average shoulder length, wavy dark blonde hair, average blue eyes, a few average freckles on my nose. There is nothing special about me, I’m just plain ole Noli Crawford.

“Noli is fine, Uncle Paul. And school was okay. It’s a little intimidating being the new kid, but it was fine.” I force a pained grin, choosing not to say anything about how I seemed to have pissed off the wrong people and how they did their best to make my first day of school a shitshow.

Back home, I was friends with just about everyone, no matter their popularity or what clique they belonged to. We hung out with band geeks and theater nerds, the jocks and cheerleaders. With the exception of one jealous bitch, I got along with anyone and everyone.

But at least I understood Jessa, and honestly, I felt bad for her. She’d basically been in love with Matty since the fourth grade, and he never gave her the time of day, which she blamed me for. I thought it was just because she was an annoying, wannabe mean girl with a grating, nasally voice that



made my teeth grind. Apparently, there *was* more to it. I guess she saw what was right in front of me before I did.

I wonder if she'll get to him now that I'm out of the way. The thought settles in the pit of my stomach like I've swallowed rocks. I can still hear his words to me before I left, "*I want all your firsts, Noli. All of them.*"

The rocks churn, and I am shaken out of the moment when Uncle Paul reaches over to pat my leg. It would be a friendly, comforting gesture, but his hand lands too far up my thigh, lingers too long. I nearly jump out of my seat when his thumb moves over the denim and finds a tear in my jeans. Coughing to cover up my discomfort, and scooting over infinitesimally, I ask, "Where are we going?" I'm not very familiar with the town yet, but I know we're supposed to turn right before we hit Main Street, and he's gone a different direction.

"I thought we'd celebrate your first day of school with a slice of pie," he says jovially, giving my knee a last little squeeze as we pull into the parking lot of a dingy old diner. The sign says "Rosie's Shiny Diner", but the shine has long since worn out of the chrome siding.

"It's a hole in the wall, but you can't get better food in the whole county," Paul says as he climbs out of the car.

I don't care what it looks like or what the food tastes like. I'm just happy to be out of the car and around other people.

He points down the street and I follow where his finger is pointing. "The post office I work at is just around the corner, so I come here a lot. And sometimes I meet the guys here before we go bowling."

Nodding, I feign interest in my surroundings, enjoying my personal space outside the confines of the car. The air feels fresher in my lungs, clearing my head of a panic I don't quite understand beyond knowing I don't like being alone with Paul. Something about him has set me on edge since they came to Tennessee to help me bury my dad and take me home with them.

The day of my father's funeral, he kept rubbing my back. It wasn't comfortable, but I didn't want to be rude. The guys said he's creepy, and I heard Aunt Dana fighting with him about it. I think he's a little overly friendly, is all. I'm sure it's nothing. But I try to keep my distance where I can, because it does make me uncomfortable.

I perk up a little when I notice a small brick building about a block in the opposite direction of the post office. "Is that a library?" I ask hopefully.

"Yeah. You like reading?"

"I do, very much." *And it's a great place to escape after school, so I don't have to be home alone with you.* "It's a perfect place to study. And since we brought my bike and I know the way now, I can get myself to the library and then home after school. So you don't have to take any time out of your day to come pick me up."

"It's no trouble, Mag—"

"Noli, Uncle Paul." No more stupid nicknames, please. "And I insist. Y'all didn't invite me into your home to have to cart me around everywhere. I promise I'm quite independent. I rode my bike everywhere back home and Daddy never worried." Granted, I had three protective escorts, so Daddy knew he didn't have to worry about me. But Paul doesn't need to know that.

"I'll talk to Dana about it," he concedes, putting his hand on the small of my back. "Now come on, let's get you that pie I promised."

The inside of the small diner is overly warm and smells like old cooking oil.

A few people greet my uncle as we walk through the diner and slide into a booth. I sit across from him and pull my knees up to avoid accidentally knocking into his legs that are taking up too much space under the table.

An older woman with over-processed dark black hair and thin eyebrows comes over with a pot of coffee and starts to pour a cup for my uncle. "Well, who is this pretty little thing?"

she asks with a smile. She's nice enough, but the way she stares at me through her caked on makeup and spidery lashes makes me feel like I'm being appraised.

"This is my niece, Magnolia. She just moved here from Tennessee. Maggie, this is Barb."

Suppressing a sigh over his continued use of "Maggie", which by the grin on his face he seems to think is cute and funny, I smile up at the waitress. "Nice to meet you," I say politely.

"That's an interesting name, *Magnolia*." She says my name like she thinks it's "lah-di-dah" fancy.

"It means strength," I say timidly. I don't know why I always feel the need to justify my name.

"Ooh, and that cute little southern accent? They are going to eat you up, honey."

Who are *they*? No one knows. The subject is changed, and Uncle Paul orders for me. Barb bustles off to get us chocolate pie and strawberry milk. It's an odd combination, but he swears by it. I don't have the heart to tell him I'm a little sensitive to dairy. I mostly just want to get this over with so I can go to the library and be away from him.

Sitting alone with my Uncle Paul is awkward. He's staring at me like he's expecting me to say something. Instead, I smile awkwardly and excuse myself to the restroom the moment I've finished eating.

My uncle is chatting with a skinny guy in a trucker hat when I return to the table. He introduces me, but I forget his name the moment it hits my ears.

"Do you mind if I go check out the library? They might have a computer; I can send my friends back home an email."

Uncle Paul seems disappointed, perhaps by my rudeness at not immediately turning on my "southern charm" to everyone in this restaurant. Or maybe it's because I'm skipping out on his little outing. Whatever it is, I put a lot of extra pep and hopefulness into my voice so he won't be able to say no to me in front of his peers without looking bad.

I practically run to the library, taking my first breath of peace the moment I walk in the door and get a nose full of paper and ink. No matter where you go, libraries smell the same. Like books and possibilities. It's comforting when you need it the most.

The first thing I do is set up a library card. I thought they'd need more information, but I suppose the one benefit of being such a small town is everyone knows everyone else and everything about them. They're able to use my aunt and uncle's address to set up an account to borrow books and use the computer. There's only one, and it's quite old, but it's not typically very busy since most people have one at home these days. My aunt and uncle aren't exactly tech savvy, though, so this will have to do.

Immediately, I send the guys emails. I called them when we arrived, but it was such a short call because my aunt and uncle didn't want me on the phone too long. It doesn't take long to fill them in, since not much has happened and the few moments of interest aren't worth complaining about. I don't want them to worry that I'm unhappy here already. It's going to take some time to get used to, is all.

I pick out an old favorite—*Pride and Prejudice*, partly because I think a familiar read will help me relax and partly because the library is woefully short on anything new. After talking to the librarian about the possibilities of requesting specific books from the nearest libraries when I inevitably need more to read, I head back to my uncle's car, feeling much better than I did before.

It's going to take time. Everything's going to be fine. And if it doesn't get better, there's less than five years before I turn eighteen and can go back home. Back to my three best friends and back to my life.

## *Letters*

To: MattyBoBatty@your-email.com

From: NolisTheName@your-email.com

Hey Matty!

First day in a new school without my three best friends and I survived! It was weird, and I'll admit a little lonely, to walk through the front doors without you.

I wore Ryan's t-shirt though, and it definitely helped. I know you said you weren't going to wear yours, but... just humor me, okay? It's like looking up at the moon and knowing that y'all could be looking at it at the same time—almost like you aren't so far away.

Anyway, I found a library between school and home, so we can email now! It'll be a lot easier, and then y'all can't make excuses about not writing, because I know you're over there playing that nerd war game on your computer.

Just a few more days before y'all start school! Did I tell you they wouldn't let me take advanced English here? They said since I registered so late, that I couldn't complete the reading list. I told them I'd already read most of it and could catch up really quick, but they won't budge. My teacher seems really nice though, and after talking to her, she says that she'll let me take the advanced placement tests to see if she can get them to bump me up next year.

I can't wait to hear about your first day.

Talk to you soon.

Love you.

Always,

Noli

To: IDareYou2@your-email.com

From: NolisTheName@your-email.com

Dare,

My first day of school was as good as it could have been. It's not much fun being the new kid. I cannot tell you how much I missed you in my Human Anatomy and Physiology class today—we were so looking forward to taking that one together! The level of maturity in this class is next-level, let me tell you. One of the girls actually swooned at the sight of a fetal pig in a jar. I can't wait to see how she reacts when we dissect one.

Force Matty into the t-shirt, if only for long enough to snap a picture.

Oh, and I'm mad that y'all canceled paintball for the twins' birthday! I'm sure one of you could have found another partner—although, good luck finding someone with aim as good as mine.

Have a great first day back. Let's compare classes when y'all have your syllabi.

Love you always,

Noli

To: Rynocerous@your-email.com

From: NolisTheName@your-email.com

Ry,

Some asshole nearly ruined your shirt today. He walked right into me and poured an entire bottle of red sports drink down the front. I think I got most of the color rinsed out, but it might be a bit pink. Can I wash it with regular laundry detergent or maybe color safe bleach? I don't want to ruin it anymore than it is. I'm heartbroken over it!

You might be the only one of us left to feel excited about starting high school. I know you're really looking forward to meeting the art teacher—didn't you say he had some kind of exhibition in New York City or something?

I bet he's still not as talented as you.

I'm not going to be there to keep you in line, so try to behave. And if you can't, you better write to me and tell me every detail.

Love you.

Always,

N.

## Matty

Here we are, walking through the doors on our very first day of high school, and all I can think about is what's missing. *Who's missing.*

I'm so used to planning my whole life around Noli, my brother, and Dare, that I feel a little lost. I've got my schedule in my hand, but all I can think about is which advanced classes Noli would be taking with me. Where she would sit. How ridiculous we would all look wearing matching t-shirts on the first day of school.

If she were here, I'd do it. There'd be no question. It's how it has always been. All of us just fall in line, ready to be part of whatever makes her smile.

I'm pretty sure she's used that to her advantage more than once in the eight years that we've been best friends.

I can imagine exactly what she'd wear with the t-shirt Ryan made us all—ripped black skinny jeans, her dirty red Van's—no, she'd wear the white ones that Ryan colored in with comic-style caricatures of all of us. She'd probably call her outfit “the Ryan collection” and insist that he needs to decorate some pants for her. Then he'd make a dirty joke...

*Sigh.*

Ryan and Dare are wearing their shirts, although Dare's is covered a bit by his open button-down shirt. I said I wasn't going to wear mine, but I'm wearing it under my shirt. Weirdly, it does give me some comfort, a sense of closeness to her, even though she is hundreds of miles away.

The whole day feels off, and it's like everyone else can feel it. In every class, the seat next to me is left open until it's obvious that no one is going to sit there, and then whatever student is the last to arrive ends up sitting next to me. Until my fifth period English class, Jessa Holcrum sits down next to me like she'd been waiting to swoop in wherever I landed.

“You're quiet today, Matty,” she says kindly. “You alright?” Her hand rests on my bicep, and I find myself staring



at it until she pulls away.

My tone isn't harsh, but it's probably not kind enough either. I'm not in the mood for dealing with Jessa's antics today. "I'm fine."

The day just gets better from there. The English teacher tells us to keep our seats, because *surprise! We're going to be working together on a collection of short stories throughout the semester!*

Just great.

Neither of the guys seem to have had much better of a day. Dare admits to being distracted most of the day. Ryan almost punched someone for teasing Dare and asking if now that our girlfriend is gone, if we're all going to start fucking each other. And then, in Ryan's art class, they were assigned to sketch a quick self-portrait. He apparently sketched a picture of Noli instead.

The picture he holds up takes my breath away. I forget how talented my brother is sometimes. The sketch is a perfect picture of Noli—her back leaning against the tree, looking up at me just the way she did that last evening. The moment after our first kiss, frozen forever.

Later, when it's his turn to make dinner and I'm supposed to be setting the table, I slip the portrait from Ryan's bag to stare at it more. It's easy to fill in the charcoal shading with color and imagine every little detail. I fall asleep remembering what it was like to stand above her, soaking in her warmth, looking down into her dark blue eyes.

## *Letters*

*Dear Noli,*

*I hope you are settling in okay.*

*What is it like there? Whenever I think of Kansas, all I imagine is yellow brick roads and flying monkeys. And it's either farmland or a town that has to be larger than ours, right?*

*The guys and I are still meeting at our tree, like we promised we would, but it's different without you. Everything is different without you. Quieter, but also louder at the same time. I know it sounds corny, but I never realized how much of my life was focused around you. Still is, I suppose, except now I just focus on all the empty spaces that you used to be in.*

*I especially miss you in biology. We're about to start the chapter on human anatomy and Jessa Holcram keeps shooting me weird looks whenever Mr. Brice mentions "the male appendage". Apparently, she still remembers the time that Ryan pantsed me in front of the cheerleading squad during basketball drills.*

*Ryan and Dare are gonna put their letters in with mine.*

*I miss you, Noles.*

*Matty*

*Hey Noli!*

*I'm gonna need you to come back now. That Jessa bitch from the cheerleading squad is trying to get in Matty's pants and it's gross. He's obviously not interested, but I think she only ever stayed back because of you.*

*Dare and I are going to try out for the varsity football team. Pretty sure Dare will make it, and I know the track coach is going to be pissed if he loses his star runner. But he says he isn't going to join the team if I don't get on too, and we've been training together. If we get any concussions, we're blaming it on you not being here to tell us not to.*

*Oh, that drawing I made of you in the magnolia tree won first prize in the exhibition and is going to be displayed at a museum in Clarksville! We're going to go see it displayed next weekend. I wish you would be there too, if only to keep Dare from puking on me. Remember the time Dare got carsick on that trip to Dollywood and blew chunks all over the back seat of your dad's van? I still swear I got some in my mouth.*

*Anyway, we miss your face. Matty made me hang up a bunch of my drawings of you so we could still look at you. I also did a quick sketch of the way you looked after we all kissed you, but that one has mysteriously disappeared.*

*I'm including a drawing of the four of us at our spot, so you can't forget how good looking we are.*

*Love ya, mean it!*

*Ryan*

*Noli,*

*I hope you're doing well in Kansas. I looked up some facts about the nearest city to you—did you know they call Manhattan, KS “The Little Apple?” I can't decide if it's cute or dumb. I feel like you would say it's both.*

*There's a butterfly museum there. I don't know if it's open during the winter, but maybe in the spring you can go and remember all the butterflies in our field back home.*

*Do you think your aunt and uncle will let us call again soon? I know they didn't like you being on the phone for very long when you called to tell us you arrived.*

*Can you believe Ryan talked me into trying out for football? I told him team sports aren't my thing, but he says I need practice for when you come back. Not sure if he means what I think he means, nor am I sure how to process those thoughts...*

*Things aren't the same without you, but we're getting along fine. I think we're just getting used to you not being here. It's funny how you don't realize how much someone has been there for you until they aren't. And I definitely realize that with you gone.*

*I miss my best friend. And Ryan desperately needs someone to gossip with.*

*Don't worry about us. I'm keeping these boys in line.*

*Write soon.*

*Darius*

*Dear Matty,*

*If you can believe it, this town is way smaller. Like, two stop lights small. Kansas is pretty boring so far. It's very flat, there aren't any hills or mountains here, but the sky at night goes on forever. Sometimes I look up at the stars and imagine that no matter how far away you are, you're looking at them too, and it helps me feel a little less lonely.*

*It's been a rough start at the new school, but I'm sure it'll get better. This town isn't much bigger than ours, so it's a similar situation where everyone knows everyone and outsiders stick out like a sore thumb. Once I'm not the new kid, it won't be so bad.*

*I tried out for the choir. The instructor is really nice and invited me to join her competition choir. I'm not sure how I feel about doing show choir—you know how I feel about heels. Imagine me dancing in them!*

*Tell Jessa that I said whatever she may or may not have seen last spring is none of her damn business and that you all still belong to me! Seriously though, if you ever get tired of waiting for me, I'll totally understand. Just, please, for the love of God, NOT HER.*

*Please make sure to get pictures of Ryan's exhibition. It's heartbreaking to miss it.*

*I'm putting in my responses to Ryan and Dare's letters with yours. Aunt Dana says I'll have to get a job to pay for postage if I want to send so many letters.*

*Always,*

*Noli*

*Dear Ryan,*

*I am so excited about your art piece going to the exhibition! I'm so proud of you! But I'm not surprised at all. I've been telling you since we were five and you drew a picture of the four of us getting married that you're the most talented person I've ever met. Whatever happened to that picture, anyway? That's one I'd like to frame!*

*Please be careful if you're going to play football. My dad said playing high school ball messed him up before he could ever try out for college. But I'm sure you'll both make the team and do great.*

*I told Matty to relay a message to Jessa for me, but if she starts getting handsy, I'm expecting you and Dare to handle it.*

*I miss your face more.*

*Always,*

*Noli*

*Dear Dare,*

*I heard you're going to be a big shot football player soon! I'm proud of you. I know that you're going outside your comfort zone playing a team sport. I can't decide if Ryan's joke is sweet, hilarious, or gross. But I suppose I'm glad that it worked to get you to join a team. You're going to be great!*

*I told Matty this too, but I know you won't forget—I NEED a photo of Ryan's exhibition. I'm so excited for him.*

*I asked Aunt Dana if we'll be making any trips into Manhattan and she said it's unlikely. She works a lot. But hey, just a few more years and I'll be able to drive myself. I'm thinking about getting an after-school job to start saving up.*

*Words cannot express how much I miss you all. I feel bad about all the smears on these letters—some are tears, some are snot. I'll let y'all figure out which is which. But at least you know I've sent these letters with a piece of me attached.*

*Always,*

*Noli*

## Noli

I lay on my bed, watching the ceiling fan turn, listening to my Aunt Dana have a fit over something that I'm trying desperately not to overhear. They're always fighting about something, and I can't ever pinpoint whose fault it is. Or maybe they're both just miserable old assholes and this is how they communicate.

They've definitely fought a lot since I've been here, but not like this. I've been listening to them fight since I got out of the shower, and my hair has almost completely air dried.

My stomach growls. I'm going to have to come out of my room eventually. They've probably forgotten that someone else lives here, too. They might not like it much, but it's not my favorite place either. I would much rather be back home.

For the most part, we acknowledge that the circumstances suck and keep to ourselves. I don't ask them for anything if I can manage, and I do chores and stuff around the house to try not to be a burden. I try to stay out of the house, hanging around at work or the library, but not too late because that makes Dana mad too. If I'm home, I really don't leave my room except to make myself something to eat.

Something crashes, and I flinch. Maybe I should check on them?

A mixture of curiosity, concern, and stupidity gets me up off my bed. I pull a sweater over my t-shirt even though it's warm in the house. I'm more comfortable hidden under multiple, loose layers. It is safer that way.

Quietly, I crack open my door and peek out. Aunt Dana is screeching across the house. She's in the living room, I think, but I don't hear anything from Uncle Paul. Did she finally kill him?

Pretending that I don't notice the rage fest happening, I creep past them towards the kitchen. Out of my peripheral, I see that Aunt Dana has completely wrecked the living room. All the decorative knick-knacks and pictures have been swiped



off the mantle, the coffee table is overturned, and a lamp looks to have been smashed against the wall.

My uncle notices me walking by, and Dana's head nearly does an Exorcist move and turns completely around to look at me.

“You!” she roars accusingly.

I back away from her, surveying if she's holding anything else that could be a weapon. As bad tempered as she is known to be, I've never seen Aunt Dana quite this spitting mad. Her face is contorted into such ugly rage, her blue eyes bloodshot and rimmed in red, her limbs trembling.

She's pissed, but I can see that something has hurt her. She looks sad beneath her obvious anger. Dana is a royal bitch, but she's still family. The inclination to comfort her is both defensive and genuine. I don't know what else to do, so I step forward, hands up as if attempting to calm some kind of wild animal.

“Aunt Dana, are you okay?”

“Don't act all doe eyed and naïve, you little slut. You're as much to blame as he is, strutting around here the way you do,” she hisses out at me. Her words are laced with a venom that I am not prepared for.

*Uh, do what?* “Excuse me?” I try to dampen the sarcasm and outrage in my voice, for it to come out as a question rather than an accusation. “What... What are you talking about?”

“Like you don't know,” she spits. The blatant hatred and hurt on her face makes me take a step back. “Get the fuck out of my house.”

“Dana—”

She spins on her heel and rounds on Paul again. “Don't you fucking say a word, Paul. Don't act like having her here isn't the problem.”

He speaks to her in a placating voice. “I told you, Dana. I heard a sound. The door was locked. I only looked in the window for a split second to check to see if she was alright.”

“You needed to do that with your dick in your hands, did you?”

*What the?* “Can someone please tell me what is happening?” I look at Paul for an explanation, who seems to be the only one able to converse without spitting or throwing something at the moment. “Window?”

Uncle Paul’s forehead scrunches into an expression that might resemble concern, but he’s a terrible actor. I know immediately that whatever’s about to come out of his mouth is a lie.

“You’d been in the shower for a long time, and I thought I heard a thud. I was worried that you might have fallen, so I knocked and tried the handle, but it was locked. So I went around the outside and just popped my head up to glance in the window—just real quick—just to see if you were okay. Dana saw me and got the wrong idea. It’s all just a misunderstanding, that’s all.”

All the blood leaves my face and extremities, realizing that he saw me in the shower. I know what he saw, and he’s the last person I’d ever want to see me that way.

I’m not sure if my stomach is growling or churning, but I don’t feel hungry anymore. I feel nauseous. He’s lying. It’s not even a good lie.

This isn’t the first time they’ve fought about me. Since the day they showed up in Tennessee after my father died, he’s been... off. The way he wrapped his arms around me the day they picked me up from Matty and Ryan’s house, where I’d been sleeping while I waited for my new guardians to arrive, was uncomfortable. The way he’d always put his hands on my shoulders, rub my back, or squeeze my thigh. The way his hugs always lingered a little too long.

I just thought he was overly friendly, but Aunt Dana started getting on him about how he looked at me or watched me, and any time she walked in the room while he was trying to get close to me in any way, he’d jump away like he’d done something wrong.

It took less than six months of living here to figure out that Uncle Paul was more than overly friendly. He's never tried anything, not really, but it's enough to make living here very uncomfortable. It's why I spend nearly all my time at school, the library, or the diner. I'd applied for a job the moment I turned sixteen, which is what they said their minimum age requirement was. I'm saving up to buy a car and get the hell out of here the moment I can... only two more years.

My gaze shifts from my uncle to Dana. I blink slowly, my brain slowly catching up to this escalation of fucked-up-ness. "So, let me make sure I have this right... you caught him peeking at me through a window, and you think it's my fault?" I hate how weak and broken my voice sounds. I feel small, which at the moment, feels worse than feeling scared, which is maybe how I should feel.

If there was even a flicker of care in my aunt's eyes, it must have been imagined, because her gaze hardens as she looks back at me and straightens her spine.

"Don't try to act like you're some little innocent white flower, *Magnolia*." She spits out my name as if it were a curse. "As if you don't have those three boys calling here all the time, having flirty little conversations right in my own damn kitchen. All the letters and pictures..."

The temperature of the room increases by at least ten degrees, sweat starting to bead up beneath my layers of clothes.

"Those are my friends. I've known them my entire life."

"They're teenage boys. Men. And men only think about one thing. Clearly, because you've seduced my husband into following you around like a puppy dog."

My blood feels like it might be close to boiling.

"The fact that you're married to a pervert is bad enough. The fact that I walk around in layers of baggy clothes to avoid said pervert is bad enough. To think that I'm to blame, that I've been seducing him since I was barely thirteen years old is probably the worst of all of this. You're delusional, Dana."

“Don’t you talk to me like that, young lady. This is my house. I took you in and gave you a roof over your head, food and clothes—”

“And I have been genuinely appreciative of that, despite the fact that you’ve been cold and hateful to me since I got here. And I suppose now I know why, but that’s just sick.”

“Don’t you walk away from me—” Her voice follows me back across the house, down the hallway and into my room. Not only do I lock the door, but I shove my desk chair up under the handle. After making sure the window is locked tight, I pull the curtains and then cover the window with an extra throw blanket. The last vestiges of the waning light are blocked out, and when I turn out the lights, it’s pitch black, save for a sliver of light under the door.

Climbing into the twin size bed, I pull the quilt around my shoulders and lay facing the door, shaking.

“She’s got to go. Maybe my cousin in Albuquerque can take her, but she can’t stay here. I’m not having this in my house, right under my nose.”

Paul shushes her, trying to calm her down. “There’s nothing happening, Dana, I promise. It was just a misunderstanding. She’s not even my type.” There’s a pause where I imagine I can hear Dana scoff. “I’ll prove it to you. I’ve been meaning to bring Jake over, maybe introduce them over dinner? I think he’ll like her a lot. I swear the only thing I’ve ever thought about her was what Jake might appreciate.”

“What will the neighbors think, Paul? Have you heard these rumors going around about her at school? Do you hear the snickers at church?” Her voice lowers, but not enough that I can’t still hear her. “She’s ruining our life here.”

Silent, angry tears fall as I listen to them continue to argue. They’re right that I’m not popular here. I don’t dress the same as the other girls, and I don’t fall in line and act the way they tell me to. I got on the wrong side of the wrong people. But I’m never rude or disrespectful—okay, that’s not true. I’ve had to be pretty disrespectful to stick up for myself to Candy Cane and her bunch.

Why does everyone think I'm interested in their men? I've literally never looked at any of them twice. In fact, I avoid it. I don't know what it is about me that rubs these people the wrong way. All I want to do is live my life peacefully until I can get the hell out of here.

*Two more years. Two more years.*

I continue to repeat that in my head. For hours, I imagine what the guys and maybe even their parents would do if they knew what was going on here. Eventually, my hopeful thoughts of them are enough to relax me into sleep. I forget to set my alarm, and the blanket I placed on the window last night to protect me from the outside blocks out the light from the rising sun, so I accidentally sleep late.

Maybe I should, but I don't care. So I skip school, and just sleep the entire day away. Protected from the world and safe in this small space. For today, at least.

## Letters

Dear Ryan,

*I'm sorry I haven't called. Aunt Dana and Uncle Paul are weird about me using the phone. I told them about the cell phone idea, but they are super against it. They said I'm not responsible enough to be trusted with a cell phone and they don't want to end up having to pay crazy high bills because I won't track the minutes properly. I tried to explain how the prepaid services work, but they won't hear me out.*

*At least I'm 16 now though, and I'm old enough to get a job. There's a diner halfway between school and my aunt and uncle's house. I'm thinking about applying there. It's really close to the town library, too, so maybe I can send emails more often. At the very least, I'll be able to buy my own stamps. By the way, tell your dad I say thanks for the book of stamps and stationery he sent for my birthday, and also tell him that he's a way better chief of police than the guy they have here. Last week, a bunch of high school kids vandalized a convenience store, and he didn't do anything about it. Aunt Dana said it's because they can't prove anything because the camera got spray painted, but I think it's because he's a gross old racist. He has a Confederate flag on his property and pretends he can't understand the owner because he has a little bit of an accent, but he's perfectly understandable to me.*

*I hate it here.*

*Anyway, I gotta go get ready. Uncle Paul is having a friend over for dinner tonight that he seems excited for me to meet, which probably means they're going to get drunk and pinch me (insert eye roll here). So, I'm going to wear your brother's huge jersey that he sent me and three sports bras so they don't accidentally pinch me anywhere interesting—because obviously I'm saving all the interesting pinching for y'all ;)*

*Missing you,*

*Always.*

*Noli*

*Noles,*

*I swear if some creepy asshole is pinching you anywhere interesting, we will come up there and bash his face in. Don't let him touch you, Noli. Tell him to lay off our girl.*

*I'll write again later when I can think of anything else to say other than issuing threats to a stranger who isn't likely to read them. They're lucky I haven't gotten my license yet. Or a car... But it won't be long before I can...*

*Ryan*



*Dear Matty,*

*Sorry I haven't written much. It's hard to find time. By the time I get home after school and work at the diner, I'm so tired and have mountains of homework to do, but I'm forced to stay out in the living room with my aunt and uncle and Jake until past midnight sometimes. Apparently, "it's rude" to try to keep up in school when your uncle's creepy nephew might need you to fetch him another beer.*

*I promise I'll try to write real soon, and even better than that, I'll try to call from the pay phone this weekend. I've got a jar full of quarters saved up just for y'all.*

*Talk soon,*

*Noli*

## Darius

“Oh fuuuck...”

Warm breath fans over the inside of my thighs, and it's nearly enough to set me off. He hasn't even touched me yet, but I'm wound tighter than an instrument at the sheer anticipation of having Ryan's mouth anywhere near my junk.

We've touched and played, with ourselves and with each other, but this time he's taken it one step further. Ryan pushed my sweatpants all the way off my hips and then peeled them off my legs. Now I'm sitting on the bed, leaning back on my arms, my eyes straying to look up at the artwork all over his side of the room, trying to form any sort of coherent thought.

My eyes wander to a portrait of Noli. It looks almost as if she's looking right at me, right through me. Like she can see all of my thoughts, but the small smirk on her face makes it look like she doesn't disapprove—quite the opposite. It spurs me on and gives me the courage to look at Ryan.

His dark eyes hold mine, his pierced eyebrow raised, and I think he knows I was just thinking about her. He doesn't seem to mind, though. That hunger in his gaze is more present than ever.

Any further attempt to use my brain is thwarted by his hands on me. With slow, gentle strokes, he examines me closely, making me shiver all over. His breath gets hotter over my skin and then he licks a warm, wet path up my shaft. I jerk and suck in a breath, and he does it again, a small smirk falling over his lips as he gauges my reactions.

Heat creeps over my cheeks. I hold my breath, ready to erupt at any moment. My hips jerk so hard I nearly fall off the bed when his mouth closes around the head, his tongue swirling around the drops of fluid gathered at the tip. His eyes roll back in his head a bit and he groans as if *he's* the one getting his dick sucked for the first time.

Almost too enthusiastically, he lowers his mouth down to my lap. My thighs and abs are tense. The effort to stay still and not blow my load five seconds into this is taking more

concentration than I anticipated. I worry that he's going to gag or choke, but he keeps going down further, until I can feel the back of his throat.

Part of me worries that it's hurting him, but most of me is wrapped up in the euphoria of hot, wet nerve endings. I moan loudly, *so close...*

Ryan releases me from his mouth as my toes start curling. "Not yet. I want to keep trying stuff a little bit longer." He laughs at the pained expression on my face. "Just a little more... I, uh... I like it."

I can see the proof when he sits up a little straighter. My mouth waters and I understand what he means. I'm constantly thinking about how he looks, feels... how he might taste. The only thing that ever interrupts those thoughts is thinking about her, usually with us.

I can't form words, just nodding. I can hang on a bit longer.

Understanding that I can only hold on so long, Ryan wastes no time getting back to business. He hollows out his cheeks and moves his hot, wet mouth up and down the shaft, sucking hard. The suction adds a whole other layer of sensation that I wasn't ready for. My hips jerk, accidentally pushing me further into his mouth.

Ryan grunts and I pull back, but his hands come down on my hips, holding me in place. He impales himself, experimenting with how far down he can go, until I'm so deep his nose is touching my pelvis. He looks up at me and our eyes lock, this image will be seared into my mind for the rest of my days. . My body tightens, an intense tingling sensation starting at the very base of my spine and building throughout my body until I feel like I am going to combust.

"Fuck, Ryan, I can't... Fuck, I'm going to... Shit." A string of obscenities is the only thing holding me back for a scant few seconds before the whole world explodes. My vision fuzzes as the blood leaves my brain, and I understand the expression 'seeing stars'.

Cradling my face, his forehead pressed against mine, I manage to come back down to earth and calm my breathing. He kisses me gently, and I taste myself on his tongue when I deepen the kiss.

“That was intense,” he murmurs against my lips.

I chuckle back. “You’re telling me,” I exclaim, still breathless. I’m the one that just had my soul leave my body.

“Do you think she’d mind?” he asks, solidifying that he definitely noticed me looking at her picture.

The thought brings me back to reality, and I consider it for a moment. “No,” I say, shaking my head. “I think she’d be happy for us.”

“Do you think... Do you think she’d still want to be *with* us?”

My lips turn down, thinking about it from a different perspective. The truth is that I don’t know. We haven’t actually spoken to her in a while, all but completely lost touch. For the last year or so, her letters have been different. *She* seems different.

That could be because we’re all growing up. Graduation is just a year away. It could be that she’s growing out of the childish dreams we used to have. The hope that we’d all be together always, the four of us in a relationship together? How would that be sustainable? How would it work... physically? My imagination goes a little wild for a moment.

Ryan smirks, his eyes darkening at my physical reaction to the salacious direction my thoughts have taken. “What are you thinking?” he teases, pushing me back and climbing over me.

Tucking my lips in and pressing my mouth closed, I shake my head. Nope, not gonna say it. But my eyes betray me, flicking over Ryan’s shoulder at the picture he drew of the four of us, arm in arm, near the magnolia tree.

He hums his understanding, the grin on his face turning wicked. Lowering his head to trail kisses up the side of my neck to my ear, his voice makes goosebumps break out over my skin. “Wouldn’t she look so beautiful between us? Do you

think she could take us both and still have room for my brother?”

*Jesus Christ*

Ryan starts trailing back down my body, looking up at me as I process the visuals that his words inspire. But the visual that will live rent free in my brain forever is the way he licks his lips, his dark hungry eyes looking like he might decide to eat me whole now that he's had a taste. And I'd let him, but first...

“Uh-Uh. My turn.”

## Letters

*Dear Noli,*

*I'm not sure if I'll send this, because it might cross a line. In the event that I do send this, stop here if you don't want things to get uncomfortable. But I find myself constantly wondering if you think of us as much as we think of you.*

*Remember I told you about that portrait that went missing? The one I made of you that last night when we all kissed. I found it and another, more graphic, drawing under Matty's pillow, and I caught him looking at it and jerking off. He moans your name when he's in the shower, and despite having girls fling themselves at him from every angle—some of them are even more aggressive than Jessa—he never so much as spares them a glance. He compares every girl that walks by to you. (PS if he knew I was telling you this, he'd gut me, so don't mention it—I promise there's a point to me even mentioning it.)*

*It's different for me and Dare, because we have each other. I've mentioned before that Dare and I have started taking our relationship to the next level, but what I didn't tell you is that sometimes I think of you there with us. Yesterday Dare and I were fooling around and I noticed he was looking at a picture of you on my wall, so I asked him about it. And, well... this level of our relationship apparently now includes discussing scenarios of what it would be like if you were between us. So, you're welcome. You're officially the topic of all of our dirty talk and thoughts.*

*Is this healthy? This obsession with someone we haven't seen in years, whom we barely talk to much anymore?*

*Do you think of us this way? Do you think of anyone this way? Or is this yet another curse of being a teenager of the male persuasion? Like, I remember when we were twelve, and you started your period and how much that sucked. But I'm starting to think that maybe this is worse,*

*because instead of 3-5 days, it's constant. My dick may start chafing soon.*

*Anyway, I'm sorry for this long, weird letter. I probably won't send it, it just helps to get it all out.*

*P.S.*

*Now I'm having memories of the day you got your period. It was so red against those white shorts you were wearing.*

*Remember how freaked out Matty was? If a twelve-year-old boy going to the store with your dad, who was also horrified, to buy an entire store's worth of pads and tampons isn't proof of love, I don't know what is.*

*Weirdly, I think that's when Dare started getting interested in medical stuff. I said he could be a gynecologist, but he said there's only one vag he wants to look at.*

*I just wanted to paint with it.*

*Okay, I'm 100% not sending this.*

*But I love you, and I miss you. And I think of you all the time, mostly dirty thoughts, since we're being honest and you'll never see this.*

To: NolisTheName@your-email.com

From: Rynoceros@your-email.com

NOLI

WHATEVER YOU DO, DO NOT, I REPEAT DO NOT OPEN MY  
LAST LETTER WHEN IT GETS TO YOU.

PLEASE FOR THE LOVE OF GOD DON'T OPEN IT.

IT WASN'T MEANT FOR ANYONE TO SEE, BUT MY DAD SAW  
AN ENVELOPE WITH YOUR NAME ON IT AND THOUGHT I WOULD  
WANT IT MAILED OUT.

PLEASE DON'T OPEN IT

I'M SORRY!!!!



# Noli

“What the fuck is this shit?”

Uncle Paul and my “friend” Jake are standing in the living room when I get home from a late shift at the diner. It’s been raining and my ride home was cold and wet. My fingers are freezing. All I want to do is take a hot, relaxing shower and sleep for a week. I’ve got a mountain of homework that I’m behind on, so I can’t go to bed yet, but I’m hoping that a hot shower will shake some of this brain fog long enough to make a dent in it.

Instead, I’m looking at the two people I want to see the least, their faces contorted in anger. Paul has a look of disapproval, like I’ve done something bad and he’s judging me for it. Jake looks enraged. I have no idea what they’re all worked up about.

“What. The Fuck. Is this shit?” Jake repeats slowly, either out of pure rage or he thinks I’m stupid. To be fair, I’m rapid fire trying to process what’s happening and failing.

There’s a letter in his hand. I don’t recognize the handwriting on the return address, but I recognize where it came from immediately. It’s a letter addressed to me. My name is written in Ryan’s handwriting, the address must have been filled in by someone else.

Either way, it’s a letter. Addressed to me. And they’ve opened it and read it.

The anger that surges through me makes my breath catch. “That’s personal—” Jake jerks the letter away from me, out of my reach.

“I didn’t know you were such a little freak, Maggie. How come you been holding out on me?”

“What are you even talking about? Give me that!” My voice raises and I try reaching for the letter again, only to have it held above my head, teasing me like a child. Instead of reaching for it and playing his game, I cross my arms.

“Isn’t opening someone else’s mail a federal offense? Couldn’t you lose your jobs?” I point out, glaring at them both.

“You’re still a minor,” my uncle reminds me. He shakes his head, not allowing me to change the subject. “I’m really disappointed in you.”

Rage continues to seethe to the surface, my blood boiling hot. As if that old pervert has the right to say shit to me.

Jake relaxes his arm while I’m focused on Paul, and I strike. I tear the letter from his hands, ripping the envelope and one corner of the page.

I look down at the letter, written in Ryan’s hand. My mouth drops open. A blush creeps up my face, growing darker the more I read. Finally, I have to tear my eyes away because I can’t read this in front of them.

“I don’t know what this is. It’s some kind of joke or something,” I say. “They’ve never said anything like this in their letters before.” Not that it’s their business, but for some reason, I feel the need to defend them. To defend my honor.

“Your little *friends* are perverts,” my uncle says disapprovingly. I narrow my eyes at him. Like he is one to talk. He, my aunt, and I have been pretty openly hostile to each other since the night Paul got caught peeping through my window.

Jake is just icing on the cake. My uncle started bringing him around after he got caught, to try to prove that he’s not attracted to me. Instead, my home has become a bubble of uncomfortable ‘jokes’, teasing, and little pinches.

At first, Jake was actually nice enough. He made a real effort to be friendly. It was obvious that my aunt and uncle were trying to push us together, but he at least acted like he wasn’t part of it. He’d take me out somewhere just to get me out of their hair, even taught me to drive. And yeah, he’d flirt some, but nothing too bad or inappropriate, especially considering he’s nearly ten years older than me. He works at the post office, but he’s also my uncle’s grown nephew by

marriage. So Paul had a lot of excuses to invite him over at first.

Excuses aren't made any more, he's just always here now. The flirting is a little more obvious. My aunt and uncle push harder. His hands have replaced my uncles, always on my shoulders, rubbing my back, pinching me, or swatting my ass 'playfully'. Paul watches from a distance, eyes always on the little ways Jake stakes his claim on me.

*Get over yourself. You think you're too good for him?. That's just playful behavior that is to be expected from a more mature young man. You're so lucky he's given you the time and attention he has. You're barely even worth it.*

I gag as the spiteful words that Aunt Dana has thrown at me surface in my mind. Like I'm supposed to be thankful that Jake pays any attention to me.

It's been hard enough to dodge his attempts to hug or kiss, or hold my hand, to straddle a line of being polite enough not to anger him and keep enough distance. He already thinks I'm his girlfriend, and I've had to stop correcting him after he punched a hole in the wall, inches from where I'd been standing.

The way he's looking at me now makes me afraid that it's about to get harder.

"I didn't know you were so slutty, Maggie. I would have tried a little harder. Now that I know you like—"

"I don't *like* anything, Jake. I told you, this must be some kind of joke or something."

"You don't have to make any excuses for me, babe. I don't mind a more experienced girl, although I might have to get you tested now that I know you're such a little slut for them." Jake and my uncle laugh. My shame and fury reach a boiling point.

"It's not like that! I'm a virgin, for god's sake!" I yell and then instantly regret it.

Why am I even having this conversation with him? He's just going to think I'm interested. I sigh and look back up, my

stomach dropping at Jake's expression. I swallow thickly at the look he's giving me. It's primal and heated. Predatory. And for the first time since being moved here and always feeling uncomfortable around Paul and then Jake, I feel more than discomfort. I feel unsafe.

Gathering what little confidence I have, I try to control the trembling in my arms and fold the letter back up to stuff it back into the envelope. I don't look at either of them, knowing that I have to be careful about what I say.

"I have a terrible headache," I lie, although there's definitely enough tension in my head and neck to become one. "I'm going to have a shower and go to bed. I'll see you this weekend."

Last week, Jake realized that everyone had forgotten my seventeenth birthday, so he decided we needed to celebrate. I don't want to spend too much time with him alone, so I suggested we do something with the family. Uncle Paul wants to go bowling, and Jake has some kind of surprise planned for me. I'm neither interested in, nor looking forward to, either prospect. But I am glad to officially be just one year away from getting the fuck away from these people.

*One more year.*

Surprisingly, no one bothers me and the house is dark when I emerge from the bathroom, having taken the quickest shower ever, fully clothed with a towel around my hair. A quick peek out the window shows me no cars are in the driveway, which means they must have gone down to the bar. Dana and Paul like to go line dancing on Thursdays, so they won't be home until late.

Despite being home alone, I still tiptoe through the house to grab a granola bar and lock myself back in my room.

I try to focus on my homework, but an hour into trigonometry my eyes are crossing. I'm off work tomorrow. I'll go to the library after school and get caught up. One more day isn't going to hurt me much.

It's not like I'm failing completely, but my grades have fallen pretty badly. I'm just so tired. Every day I go to the library or to work after school. Though it seems I am working more often than studying these days, focusing single-mindedly on every cent I can save up to get out of this place. When I get home, I'm expected to 'spend time with my family' even though we all know we hate each other. Mostly I just fetch beers and try to keep my face passive until it's late enough for me to make excuses. I made the mistake of falling asleep on the couch once, and woke up to Jake kissing me, my uncle watching open-mouthed from his recliner.

Shoving the book back into my bag, I pull out the envelope that has been burning a hole in my psyche since I laid eyes on the words there.

My heart beats rapidly, as if he's in the room with me, as I read the words in Ryan's small handwriting.

*"...sometimes I think of you there with us."*

I've known for a while that Dare and Ryan were together. I tried to push back any thoughts of jealousy. After all, I still had Matty, who is completely devoted to only me. But there was something inside me that wanted all of them, no matter how wrong and unfair it may be.

Does it make me a bad person to feel good that they're thinking of me when they're together? Does it make me wrong, or dirty, to imagine what kind of scenes they could be conjuring?

My thighs squeeze together, an ache between my legs throbbing in time to my restless heartbeat. Eyes roaming around the room, I confirm that all doors and windows are locked and covered before I flick off the lights and climb under the covers.

Call me paranoid, but I rarely do anything private. I get dressed under my towel, and always have a baggy shirt and sweatpants on, lest I get accused of trying to seduce anyone.

That day in the shower, I'd been... experimenting with the showerhead. I still don't know how much he saw, and it's

turned me off from touching myself at all. But the more I go over Ryan's words in my mind, the more I imagine what it would be like to have him whisper those words in my ear—the more I imagine what it would be like to be touched by him. By *them*.

It's an ache I can't ignore.

Beneath a thick comforter and layers of clothes, my hand caresses over my belly and pushes beneath my cotton panties. My fingers rake through my soft curls, parting my lips and tentatively running a finger up and down, dipping inside just slightly. Is it supposed to be this wet?

Eyes tightly closed, I explore the slick folds, my fingers coming to a stop at the top, where a jolt of electricity catches my breath. My body tenses in shock before my fingers roll over the sensitive spot again. I press harder and lighter, move my fingers up and down and in circles, testing and figuring out what feels good.

My other hand pushes up under my sweater and cups my breast, imagining what it would be like to have their hands on me. Pushing my middle finger into myself, I rock against my hand as something builds inside me. Pressure and electricity grow low in my belly. Heat prickles over my skin as I get closer and closer to fall over an edge that I don't quite understand.

It builds and builds, a blinding wave of light reaching a crest that may pull me under and I want to let it. But just as I pant out a breath, thighs shaking and so close to release, a car door slams outside, my aunt and uncle's voices getting closer as they make their way inside. As if I've been caught doing something bad, my hands return to the top of the covers, straight out at my sides. My body protests, the fiery ache now a sharp pulse that begs for me to continue. .

"You know, if you didn't get so drunk we might have done well tonight," Dana's voice sounds annoyed, but then she laughs. "What's gotten into you?" The sound of my uncle trying to get into her pants is enough to make me retch, and

the need I had just moments ago disappears quickly and is forgotten.

Holding the pillow around my head to block out their voices, I wish more than anything that I could just let it all out. I want to scream and cry as loud and as hard as possible, let the world know how much I hate this place. Instead, I lie there and stare at the hole Jake made in my wall last week and count the days until I'm far, far from this place.

*One more year.*

## *Letters*

*Dear Noli,*

*Ryan got his eyebrow pierced last week, and I thought Dad was going to blow a gasket. He already can't stand Ry's hair or the way he dresses, which I don't really understand. It's different, sure, but he's clean and his clothes fit well. Although his pants are a little tight. Tight enough to catch Jessa Holcrum's attention. I should feel bad for him, but I'm mostly just relieved she's turned her attention away from me.*

*Don't think I'm too pathetic or anything, but I'm sticking around town for a while after graduation. I'm giving thought to applying to the police academy, but I'm not really sold on it. Maybe I'll have more direction by the time you get here.*

*Send me a message back and let me know you got this. Even just a quick one-word email to know you're okay. It's been weeks since we last spoke.*

*Matty*



*Dear Guys,*

*I'm not sure if you'll get this. I'm writing this at my job at the diner, and I'm hoping to send it on my way home, directly from the post office, if I can make it there without getting caught. It all depends on who's working, because I have a strong suspicion some of Uncle Paul's coworkers are helping him block my mail under the guise of "keeping me safe from predatory boys".*

*I overheard my uncle answer the phone and tell one of you off the other night. He said that I'd moved on and was happy with my new life.*

*It's a lie. I'm not okay.*

*My aunt tried to kick me out, but my uncle put his foot down to let me stay until I got my GED. I quit school, by the way. I know what you're thinking—how could I, right? Don't worry, colleges will still let me in with a GED and I got a good score on my SATs last year. But I just couldn't be in that building anymore. Some nasty rumors got started—completely untrue, but I couldn't stop them if I tried and it got bad. And anyway, it was just too miserable.*

*Truth be told, I wish my aunt and uncle would kick me out. I'd rather live on the street than here with them.*

*Uncle Paul acts weird around me, and Aunt Dana is constantly accusing me of trying to seduce her husband or doing drugs. I don't know what to do or how to act, so I just try to stay invisible. Especially when Paul's nephew (by marriage) comes around. Jake scares me, like his smile is a mask and there's some underlying sickness inside him. Both my aunt and uncle keep trying to push us to spend time together. He practically lives with us at this point, and my uncle got him a job at the post office with him.*

*I wish I could come home.*

*I love you guys, and I'm sorry I've shut you out. It's not on purpose. They figured out you're the only thing*

*they can punish me with. I don't know if any of my letters are being sent, and if you've sent anything, they're making sure I don't get them...*

*I tried to set up a post office box in the next town, but I'm not old enough yet. I'm not sure what my next move will be.*

*I love you. I love you. I love you.*

*ALWAYS.*

*Noli*

(letter blocked)

*Noles,*

*You're driving us crazy! Why haven't you returned any of our letters, calls, or emails?*

*Is it because of that weird ass letter I sent? God, did you read that? I swear it was just like a diary thing—you weren't supposed to see that. It was inappropriate, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry.*

*We all got cell phones for Christmas... Do you think your aunt and uncle would let you have one if we sent and paid for it? We could pool our money and do it easily.*

*Please write back, or call. Send smoke signals or something.*

*Anything.*

*Ry*

*Dear Noli,*

*It's been months since we've heard from you. I've officially called your aunt and uncle so many times that I think they might've made good on their threat to block my number. It just rings and then disconnects.*

*Did we do something wrong?*

*If it's just that you're tired of holding on to the past, I totally get that and will respect your wishes if you don't want to keep in contact anymore. But we need some kind of signal that you're okay.*

*I'm sorry for whatever it is that's turning you away from us.*

*We still love you, you know. And I have so much to tell you about everything that's been happening here—Matty and Ry's mom came to town, which was a mindfuck. She didn't seem to like me much. I think maybe she could tell that Ry and I are a bit more than just friends... There are a lot of developments on that front as well that I wish I could talk to you about.*

*I miss you.*

*Please check in soon.*

*Darius*

*Noli,*

*I thought you were going to call this weekend? I called your aunt's house, but I think she's got us all blocked. I used a friend's phone, and it went through, but if they have caller ID they might guess it's us based on the area code.*

*I don't like the sounds of this guy. Ryan asked if he's the same one that was pinching you last year? Also, what the actual FUCK. Why didn't I know about this?!*

*Do you want us to come visit? If we have to pee on you like dogs to mark our territory, we will.*

*Wish I was kidding.*

*Matt*

(letter blocked)

## Ryan

Sweating and shirtless, I push myself back against the rough bark of the magnolia tree. It digs into my bare shoulders, but I pay it no mind as I pull Dare against me so he can continue to explore my naked torso with his mouth..

“Do you ever feel guilty?” He mutters between hot, wet kisses as he follows a path down my neck and over my collarbone.

“About what?” I ask breathlessly, distracted by the direction his mouth is taking.

He pauses as he reaches my navel, swirling his tongue inside and then nipping the patch of sparse hair that leads below my jeans. My cock is so hard I’m afraid a button might pop and hit him in the eye.

“That we use this spot to meet up and she isn’t here?”

This tree used to be sacred, our special place. But Noli Crawford has ignored our letters and our calls for over a year now. Her aunt and uncle assured us that she was okay, but other than that, we have no idea what is going on with her. Only that she seems to be done with us. They threatened to block us if we kept calling, and I assume they made good on their threat. There’s been no more calls, no more letters, no more sneaking emails during library visits. Nothing but radio silence. We gave up trying about six months ago, but we all still talk and think about her often.

Begrudgingly, I pull Dare up from his knees and bring him to face level, holding onto either side of his face and running my thumb along his jaw. “Is this really what you want to talk about right now?” I ask him before sucking his bottom lip into my mouth.

He groans. “No... I just still worry, and this place makes me think of her.” I can almost see the reflection of a memory in his dark eyes.

*“Hey! You two! Quit sucking face and give us a turn before Aunt Dana figures out where Noli is and sends her creepy*

husband out to chase us off!” I called down to the base of the tree where my brother and Noli were getting surprisingly hot and heavy.

Dare and I dropped down from our branch, landing in front of Noli with what I’m sure looked like hungry, predatory looks. Matty backed away, but didn’t leave the space to give us the same privacy we had tried to give them. It was probably inevitable that Dare and I would approach this together. We’ve always done everything together.

We’d talked about what it would be like to kiss Noli, to touch her, or see her body. She was the fuel for all of our fourteen-year-old fantasies. It was her that was the catalyst for the first time we kissed each other, touched each other, or saw each other’s bodies. We all felt things for Noli that were quickly blooming into something much deeper than friendship, but none of us had felt hurried to declare our feelings to her or each other until it was too late. She was leaving us and this was our only chance.

The way she looked up at me, her lips rubbed raw from her kiss with Matty, still open slightly. Her eyes were bright, her gaze electric, and her chest moved with the force of her deep breaths. When I pressed myself against her, I could feel her heart beating frantically.

Looking down at her, I asked if she was okay. In answer, she reached out a hand to Dare, pulling him into our embrace. She moved away from the tree, still with one hand bracing herself on the strong trunk, and we sandwiched her between us and just held her for a while. Eventually she tilted her head back, pushed herself up on her tiptoes, and kissed me.

I hadn’t minded giving her first kiss to my brother, especially considering that it wasn’t my first kiss. Dare and I had started kissing months ago, not quite hiding it, but also not ready to talk to anyone about it. We were afraid it would change the dynamic of the group more than anything, and I wasn’t one hundred percent positive that my dad or Dare’s parents would approve.

*My first kiss with Noli was softer and surer than my true first kiss, and I was thankful to have had that bit of practice so I could make it good for her.*

*I felt Dare's hand caress my face as I held hers in my hands. When I looked up, I saw that his other hand was wrapped around Noli's back, cradling her jaw. He kept his hand on my face when he lowered his lips to hers, and then a few moments later, pressed his lips against mine, too. Maybe it was his way of letting her know we'd be okay, that we still had each other. Or maybe he just didn't like the idea of keeping anything from her.*

*If she was surprised, she didn't show it. Her eyes were wide with interest, and we kissed back and forth this way until we finally did hear her aunt calling for her. With fresh tears, she gave us each one last kiss and walked away from us forever.*

Shaking my head from the memories, I look into Dare's eyes. "Well, we have two courses of action we can take. Either we find a new spot, or we give this spot new memories. My vote is for option two," I say, rolling my hips and pressing my erection into his.

His pupils grow darker. "What did you have in mind?"

Pulling him against me, I take his mouth in a kiss that grows to a deep, passionate frenzy. Our teeth clash together and I can feel the ball of my new tongue ring hit his retainer.

Sinking to the ground, I unbutton his dark jeans, lower the zipper, and release his thick, hard cock. The hard length bounces in front of me. I push his jeans down his legs as I tease the tip of his cock with little licks. As he braces his hands on the tree and steps out of his pants, I fist the base of his cock and take the head into my mouth. Swirling my tongue around the head, I run my jewelry through the slit, gathering up drops of pre-cum before I open my mouth wider to suck him. Dare hisses out a groan as I bob up and down on his thick length.

Releasing him with a soft *pop*, I look up at him looming over me.



“Come on, Dare, do it.”

His face looks pained at my words. “I don’t know if I’m comfortable—”

“I’ll tap out if it’s too much, please I want you to.”

He still looks unsure. I look up at him under my dark lashes and fondle his heavy balls in one hand while I pump my hand slowly over his cock. I give the tip a tiny nip that makes him squirm.

“Please, Dare...”

“Say it,” he grunts out. “I need to hear you say it.”

“I want you to fuck my face, Dare. I want you to shove your cock in my mouth and down my throat, again and again, mercilessly, until you’re ready to blow. And then I want your hot cum all the way down my throat—”

That’s enough for him, because he wraps his big hand around the back of my head and pushes me back on his dripping cock. I allow my head to rest in his hand and relax my throat, encouraging him to thrust harder with my hands on his hips.

Finally, he relents, dropping his control and picking up speed. His cock hits the very back of my throat as he thrusts harder and faster, his fingers gripping the longer hair on top of my head to control the movements. I nearly gag once, but keep it together as my watery eyes watch his expression change as he gets closer to release. My hands roam, pushing up and down his crack, teasing his asshole. There’s saliva dripping from the sides of my mouth. I wipe some of it away and use it to wet my fingers.

The moment one of my fingers breaches his ass, I feel his balls tighten and he moans loudly. “Fuuuck, Ry.”

My finger moves in and out of him, pressing on that soft nub inside that drives us both crazy. He cries out and thrusts hard, hot cum splashing against the back of my throat. I suck him until every last drop is spent, and then pull him down to the ground with me.

On our knees facing each other, we don't stop kissing while Dare reaches down and releases my rock hard cock from my black skinny jeans. He pushes them down my thighs while he pumps my cock.

"I'm ready," he says, and at first I'm not sure what he's ready for. "Did you bring lube?"

Little does he know that I've started carrying little packets of lube with me ever since we started getting more experimental. We've done a lot of mouth and hand stuff, and the lube helps, especially since Dare has had up to three of my fingers in his ass so far. We haven't fully done the deed yet, neither of us in a hurry, but as I pull a packet out of my back pocket and remove the rest of my clothes, he turns around and presents his ass to me like a cat in heat.

Bending down, I bite the flesh of his cheek, just enough to get a little yelp out of him.

"If we're doing this, I want to look at you," I say, turning him around and pushing him to lay on his back. Opening the packet, I squeeze a little of the lube on my fingers and start to play with Dare's ass, first with one finger, then two.

I start scissoring my fingers, and his cock starts to harden again, which makes my already painful erection twitch with need. Dare has this enviable ability to have multiple orgasms, and it drives me wild with a carnal need to make him come as many times as I can.

"Are you sure about this?"

"Yes, I'm sure. Please, Ryan."

I groan, my hand spreading lube over my throbbing erection. *Well, this is certainly one way to make new memories.*

Crawling over his body, I spread his legs with my knees so I am settled between them. Positioning the tip of my cock at his entrance, I look down into his eyes.

"I love you, Dare." I'm honestly not usually one for sentimental crap or too much seriousness, but this feels big and needs to be said.

His eyes flash, and he pulls my face down to his, kissing me passionately. “I love you, Ryan West. Now, fuck me already.”

With my forehead pressed against his, I slowly push myself through the tight ring. The squeeze over the head of my cock is almost enough to make me come right then and there, but I manage to keep it together. Watching Dare’s expression to make sure he’s okay, I slowly pull back out and then push in, a couple of inches deeper. Each time I pull out and slowly push back in, I give him a couple more inches, until I’m buried to the hilt, our hips fused together. I hold there for a moment, trying to gather the strength not to come too soon, but Dare starts to writhe against me.

Still slowly, because I don’t want to hurt him or finish too fast on our first time, I start to roll my hips, thrusting into him as gently as I can. But Dare isn’t having it, and pulls his legs up to wrap them around me, encouraging me to move with him.

Satisfied that he’s going to be okay, and knowing that I’m very close to the point of no return, I sit up on my knees and snap my hips against his ass. Dare’s eyes roll back in his head and his cock jerks between us.

Steadying myself with one hand on his hip, I wrap my other hand around Dare’s cock and pump it as I thrust into him. He moans loudly and I nearly come undone from just the sound of it. I know that I’m not going to last much longer. This feels too good. *He* feels too good. Pumping his cock in my slicked-up hand, I speed up my thrusts until he is moaning unintelligible words and I can feel his tight ring squeezing me as his hips jerk, cum splashing onto my chest.

I come hard, pounding into him and spilling into his ass, yelling out into the hot afternoon. Pulling out of him slowly, I groan at the sight of my cum leaking out of his ass and into the soft grass beneath us. I consider leaning down and licking it up, but I’m too overcome with exhaustion to have the “how weird would it be if…” conversation. All I want to do is pull him to my chest, bask in the afterglow, and take a nap.

Hours later, my brother unceremoniously wakes us up.

“You’re seriously just going to lay out here, butt-ass naked, not worried at all about who might come by?”

Dare hurries to hide his nakedness, but my brother and I bathed together as kids and, for the most part, have the exact same bodies—although he’s starting to get wider with muscles. I can’t be bothered to cover up, I’m just annoyed to be woken up and torn from the moment with Dare.

“I’ve been calling you.”

“I turned my phone off. I didn’t want to be bothered.” I say pointedly, conveying my irritation that he’s interrupted this moment.

“No shit. Dad wants to talk to us. I think he heard about your new piercings and wants to yell at you about getting a job.”

“I have a job,” I grump back.

Dare looks up at Matty, who prefers to go by Matt these days, but fuck that. He’s my brother, my *twin* brother at that. He can’t pretend to be cool around us. “He got that apprenticeship at that tattoo shop.”

Matty looks impressed, but then scrunches up his forehead. “How are you going to get there? Isn’t that in Clarksville?”

“Yeah. I’m going with Dare. He’s starting his college courses there in the fall.”

“Oh,” says Matty.

I have a momentary flash of guilt for making plans to leave town without him, but he’s made it very clear that he has no plans to leave until Noli is back. It doesn’t matter how long it’s been or that she doesn’t write anymore, he’s still so stuck on the idea that she’ll come back to him. It’s not that I don’t wish the same, but it’s just not realistic. She’s lost to us.

“You could come with us,” Dare offers, obviously feeling the same way.

“I’m, uh—I’m sticking around here for a while, I think. Taking a gap semester to figure out what I want to do. Dad’s trying to get me to join the force.”

Our dad would like nothing better than to have us follow in the family tradition of joining the police force. *Hard fucking pass.*

“Well, I guess we better make the most of this summer, then.”

“Actually, I had an idea about that,” says Matty, apprehensively.

Somehow, I immediately know where he’s headed with this. “Matty...”

“If I could just see her and know she’s safe and happy, I can let it go and move on. You two have each other. I need this to move on.”

I stare into his eyes for a moment, having one of those silent twin conversations that Dare always laughs about. “Alright then, let’s do it.”

“Road trip?” Says Dare excitedly.

“Road trip,” Matty and I say together.

## *Letters*

To: NolisTheName@your-email.com

From: MattyBoBatty@your-email.com

Noli,

Graduation is next week, and yours has already passed without a word. No answer to our letters, emails, calls..

I don't know what the fuck we did to deserve you just shutting us down like this, but could you at least let us know if you're alive?

I'm mad as fuck right now, and we're all confused, but you're in charge. Always have been, always will be.

If you decide to come back around someday, I can't promise we'll be waiting.

Matt

To: NolisTheName@your-email.com

From: MattyBoBatty@your-email.com

Noli,

I'm sorry, I didn't mean what I said in my last email. I tried to unsend it but it was too late. I was just upset.

I just... miss you, you know? I thought we'd talk more, or visit. But it's like you've forgotten all about us. About me.

I've loved you since the day your dad had our parents over for a barbeque and we went exploring in the backyard. I have a very vivid memory of how you looked, in your dirty t-shirt and ripped pants, hair coming out of those pigtails your dad used to put it in, standing in the clearing in front of that huge magnolia tree. You saw a challenge, a perfect tree to climb and see who could go higher. Ryan saw a canvas to chisel our initials into. Dare saw the poetic symbolism of our new friend finding a magic place named after you.

I wish you'd tell me what was going on. Your letters and emails got weird and then just stopped. If you've moved on, that's okay. Just please let me know what's happening.

Write back. Or call. Please.

Matty

To: NolisTheName@your-email.com

From: MattyBoBatty@your-email.com

Email delivery failed. Recipient address does not exist.



# Noli

*Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.*

This can't be happening. Please, no.

I look down at the innocuous stick, pee still dripping off it, and a damning plus sign that feels like a living thing. It's growing pinker and larger, while what little future I had gets darker and smaller. I focus on it until the edges seem to be pulsing, the deep pink of the result bleeding the way I've failed to for the last six weeks.

The only reason I haven't sunk into an oblivion of depression was the plans I'd made to get out of this place. The moment I turned eighteen, I was driving out of this place, going back to the only place I've ever felt happy and safe. I've been saving every sparse penny I've made at the diner so I can buy a car good enough to make the trip. I'll figure out the rest when I get there.

But now...

Now I'm fucked. Jake will never let me go now.

Nausea bubbles up and I dry heave for another twenty minutes, the events of the past few months running over in my mind. One specific memory has me heaving so hard, the bitter taste of bile fills my mouth.

*"Jake, please, just wear the condom at least." There's no point in trying to fight him off. It just makes it hurt more. Maybe if I make it less interesting, he'll grow tired of chasing me around.*

*"Fuck that. I can't feel shit."*

*"Jake, I—"*

*"Come on babe, relax. You know I'll take care of you."*

*How did I get here? What did I do to deserve this? Jake has always made me uncomfortable, mostly because of his connection to my uncle, but he was nice enough at first. It just... escalated. He couldn't decide if he liked the idea of a chase or was pissed off by me politely brushing off his*

*attentions. Before I knew it, he was waiting in the living room every night when I got home, forcing himself in my path when I'd try to walk by. Always teasing and trying to flirt. I had to balance avoiding his attention with being polite to family. Knowing I would pay the price if I did neither.*

*Uncle Paul and Aunt Dana all but forced me to date him. They looked away the first time I came home in tears, refusing to acknowledge the reality of what was actually happening. He's older than me by almost nine years and works at the post office with my uncle. His family owns a local business, and the sheriff is a family friend, so they think I should be grateful for his attention. After all, who else is going to take care of me? The concept that a woman could take care of herself or might not be interested in the "most eligible bachelor" in town is just absurd.*

*"An older man is going to have certain expectations, Maggie," my aunt told me. Her voice was gentle, but her words solidified what I already knew. The only way I was getting away from Jake was if I left town.*

*He was always pushing. Pushing my boundaries, pushing me to tell him where I was at all times. Pushing me to touch him, to kiss him... Pushing my head down to his lap...*

*And then I was dumb enough to expose myself as a virgin and give him another reason to chase me.*

*"I'm saving myself," I told him, hoping it would get him to give me some space. He thought I meant for marriage. But what I really meant was that I was saving myself for someone specific. That there were three specific someones waiting for me wasn't his business. Not that they've written or called in months.*

*And now, here I am, staring at the ceiling and trying to pretend I'm somewhere else while Jake pushes even more. Pushing himself inside me, past a barrier that I wasn't ready to cross. Not now, not with him.*

*The knowledge that I'm giving a first to someone other than Matty hurts more than the burning and tearing of the intrusion. The bitter smell of Jack Daniels invades my nostrils.*

*His breath is hot against my neck as he grunts with every thrust. I hold my breath to avoid getting sick on him.*

*At least it's over quickly. Jake leaves me crumpled on the couch to go find a cigarette, a trickle of blood and cum leaking out of me as I choke back tears.*

Someone bangs heavily on the door, and I snap up from my crumpled position on the floor. I put the damning results back into the box and wrap the whole thing in toilet tissue, shoving it to the bottom of the trash can, and then wash my hands. I splash cold water on my face and hope that my shame washes down the drain along with it, where no one can guess what has happened.

Aunt Dana stands outside the door with her arms crossed and an expression of bored anger on her overly made-up face. She swipes her frizzled eighties bangs off her forehead and her scowl deepens.

“Why the hell are you always cryin’? Such a damn drama queen. Got nothin’ to complain about.” She looks behind me suspiciously, her black-rimmed eyes trying to see past me into the bathroom. “Were you doing drugs in there?”

“What?” I ask incredulously, although I shouldn’t be surprised by anything she accuses me of these days. It’s hard not to feel that this is partially her fault. Jake wouldn’t be in my life at all if she hadn’t blamed me for her husband being a pervert. “No, I wasn’t doing drugs.”

She stares at me, visibly irritable, while I try to edge around her, desperate to escape. There has to be a way out of this. I can’t stay here in this town with these people any longer.

“I suppose you’ll be moving in with Jake soon?” Dana asks, and I stare back at her incredulously. There’s no way she knows...

“Why would I be doing that?”

“You’ll be eighteen soon. I expect you’ll be ready to find your own way by then.”

“I’ll be out of your hair the moment the clock strikes midnight,” I promise solemnly. I’ve been planning for years to drive away from this hellhole the very day I turn eighteen, no looking back. Hell, I’m not likely to even stop to say goodbye.

I have to figure this out first, though. I can’t let this happen.



There’s no bike rack outside the clinic, so I pull it behind the bushes and wrap the bike lock around the back wheel so it can’t be stolen. I don’t want to have to replace it for a third time, and I’m too far from home to walk.

After using the library to do some research, I used the ancient payphone outside the diner to call and make an appointment at the Free Women’s Clinic and Resource Center two towns over. *Pregnant and scared? Hell yes I am. I’m terrified!* I don’t want there to be any risk of being recognized, so I gave a false name when I made the appointment. I figure I can correct it when they write me a prescription.

There is sweat pouring off my face as I walk into the building and check in with the overly friendly older woman at the front desk. It isn’t even that hot out, but I’m exhausted and sick all the time lately. Twenty-two miles didn’t seem very far when I was mapping out my trip, and I’m glad I planned for extra time in case of a flat tire or something, because it took me nearly three hours to get here. I’m really not looking forward to the trip back.

“Megan?” It takes me a second to respond to the fake name I gave them. The same woman from the front desk leads me back, and I’m wondering where the rest of the staff is. Where are the doctors?

The lady leads me to a bathroom with instructions to leave a urine sample, and then walks me to a small room that doesn’t look like a doctor’s office at all. There’s a loveseat and an older box style television, a coffee table with pamphlets, and an old wingback chair.

“This doesn’t look like any doctor’s office I’ve been to before.”

“We want you to feel safe and comfortable during this difficult time. You just have a seat in here, dear. We have a little program for you to watch while you wait for the counselor.”

*Counselor?* “You mean the doctor, right?”

She smiles kindly, but doesn’t seem to have heard my question, guiding me to sit on the overstuffed sofa and pressing play on an actual VHS player. *They still have those?* “Now, make sure that you pay attention, because the program has a lot of important information that we are required to go over. Would you like anything to drink? We’ve got water, apple juice, chocolate milk?”

I shake my head no but she hands me a water anyway, which I admit helps me feel a bit better. The video is confusing. It’s a lot of information about the dangers of abortion, about how it can result in future infertility and the high correlation of abortion and breast cancer. My brain cannot find a connection between those two things, but honestly, I’m so tired from the ride over here that most of the information goes in one ear and out the other. I don’t care how dangerous the procedure is, or what happens to me in the future. Me having this baby and being tied to Jake is far more dangerous than anything else described in this video.

I’m halfway to dozing off when the program ends and someone promptly knocks on the door. A balding, slightly pudgy man with smudged glasses and disturbingly wet lips peeks his head open and asks if I’m decent. He laughs at his own joke before coming into the room and sitting down in the chair across from me.

“Hello Megan, I’m Fred Walton. What brings you in to see us today?”

Is he serious? He’s got a clipboard with what I’m sure is the glaring evidence of the reason I’m here—in a Women’s Crisis Pregnancy Clinic. Why the hell does he think I’m here?

“Well, Dr. Walton,” I say slowly, but politely. “I’m in a bad situation and a couple of days ago I found out that I’m pregnant. I don’t want to be pregnant. I *can’t* be pregnant. I need an abortion, please. I did some research and, if I understand correctly, I’m still early enough to take the abortion pill. So, I’d like to do that as soon as possible.” I take a breath. “Please,” I add, although I don’t know why I feel I need to plead with him when this is what their entire office is for.

Dr. Walton looks at me with kind, sad eyes, but I can see the judgement behind them. He flicks his gaze down at the clipboard to look at my file.

“Well, Megan. It looks like congratulations are in order. You are, in fact, pregnant.” *Did he just congratulate me? Did he not hear what I said?* “I am happy to discuss your options with you today, but nothing is as easy as taking a pill and having everything just disappear. There’s a life growing inside you, and you need to think of what is best for that child. Did you pay close attention to the program that Lottie played for you?”

There’s a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach. I did think it was going to be as easy as taking a pill. Yes, I knew there would be cramping and bleeding, but I didn’t think there was much to do before that. “I understand that there’s a child growing inside of me, Dr. Walton. That’s why I’m here. I can’t do this. I don’t want to do this. And, yes, I understand the risks. I did my research, and I paid attention to the program. There was certainly some information that I’d never heard before, but I honestly don’t care what the risks are—I can’t be pregnant.”

“But you *are* pregnant, Megan. And such a blessing it is!” He picks up one of the pamphlets on the table in front of me that I haven’t had a chance to study yet. Opening what looks to be a thin booklet, he shows me some pictures, but his voice sounds muffled and far away. “You need to make a mature decision about what you’re going to do next, and I know you’ll make the right one. You don’t look like a murderer to me.” There are graphic, bloody, terrifying images of what

looks like bludgeoned babies. There's no way that's scientifically accurate. The sinking feeling in my stomach is growing and I am becoming increasingly uncomfortable.

Dr. Walton keeps talking, asking questions like, "Have you considered adoption?" and "What does the baby's father think?", "Does the child's father know?", "You don't want to be a murderer, do you?"

I need some air. I stand up to walk outside, but Dr. Walton puts his hands on my shoulders and I immediately recoil. He tries to use a reassuring tone of voice, but I have the distinct impression that he doesn't give a fuck about my wellbeing.

"I feel sick," I force out weakly, blackness fuzzing my vision at the edges.

Dr. Walton sits me back down on the couch and calls out to Lottie. She rushes in, gently patting at my face with a cool cloth. The majority of my nausea passes, but I can still feel my body trembling. Like my fight-or-flight instincts are kicking in.

"Oh dear, let me grab you some crackers and juice. Stay right here, now. Don't you go trying to stand up for a bit." She returns a minute later with an open package of crackers and a jar of peanut butter, and hands me another apple juice.

I'll admit that I haven't spent a lot of time in doctor's offices. I've been lucky enough to be pretty healthy, and my aunt and uncle never put much stock in regular checkups, saying they were a scam to get money out of us. I had all my school vaccines already, so I rarely needed to see a doctor. This office is nothing like the pediatrician's office I'd been to, nor the urgent care I visited once when I had the flu a couple years back.

Once I've eaten a couple of crackers and drank the juice, Dr. Walton comes back in with more pamphlets. He starts talking to me about "my options", none of which are what I came here for.

"Dr. Walton, I honestly appreciate your thoroughness and kindness, but I am not looking for *options*. There is only one

option that I am interested in. I need an abortion.”

“We do not condone or perform abortions at this office.”

“Your website and the woman on the phone, which I believe was Ms. Lottie, if I’m not mistaken, very much suggested that you do.” Now that I’m thinking about it, while abortion was mentioned and discussed, nowhere did it specifically say that abortions were provided here. She absolutely understood what I was coming for, though.

“This is a crisis pregnancy center, not an abortion clinic.”

“Then what services do you offer exactly? What kind of clinic is this?”

“This is a judgement free office where we provide guidance and options for young women who are facing the uncertainty and fear associated with the consequences of their actions, such as yourself.” I can barely hold in my gasp of outrage. *Judgement free my ass.* The vibes I was picking up on earlier are much more direct, although his voice is still laced with false comfort. He keeps talking as if he doesn’t understand, or doesn’t care, that my mind is clearly made up. “I’d like to get you scheduled for an ultrasound. It’s a bit early now for an external sonogram, but I think in two or three weeks we should be able to see your healthy baby’s heartbeat, and I know you’ll make the right decision.”

“Dr. Walton, I thank you for your services and information. I would like a referral to somewhere that actually offers the services I need.”

“What you need, Megan, is a clear head, prayer, and guidance from people who care about you. It’s very normal for pregnancy hormones to make you feel a bit scrambled. You just need someone to help make these important decisions for you... Now, you didn’t provide an emergency contact on your form here. Is there someone I can call? I bet if we got the baby’s father in here, you would feel so much better.”

“*Prayer and guidance?* That’s what you’re prescribing me? Are you even a real doctor?”



“I am not a physician, but I am trained to provide guidance and reassurance—”

*You have got to be fucking kidding me.* “You’re not even a doctor? Do you have any medical training at all?”

“I apologize if you assumed—”

“Maybe because you’re parading around in a white coat in what is clearly a scam masquerading as a legitimate clinic. What a load of bullshit!” I yell. My face is hot, and if I don’t get out of here, I’m going to throw something, or puke, or both.

I stand to leave, and Dr. Wal—*Fred* tries to block my path. “Jesus wants you to let your baby live, Megan. He knows you’re scared and in need of guidance—”

“What I *need* is to not be knocked up by an abusive rapist and trapped in fucking Podunk for the rest of my life. What I *need* is for people to stop trying to make decisions about *my* life and *my* body. What I *need* is to not have ridden a bike, eight weeks pregnant in the heat, for twenty-three goddamn miles for some asshole to scam me and waste my time. What I need is for you to get out of my fucking way, *right fucking now!*” I’m breathless and heaving, my face is red and my eyes are burning with unshed tears. The heat that started in my face has spread across my entire body. Rage feels like fire in my veins. I’m almost afraid I could actually combust.

“Megan, if you’d just calm down and let us discuss with you the word of—”

“I’d. Rather. Burn. In. Hell.” Hot tears break through the barrier I’ve tried to hold them behind and stream down my face as I push past the scam artists, blocking out the bible verses and creepy prayer chanting while I struggle with my bike.

Finally, I manage to climb on my bike and speed away, my fear and rage fueling the first third of my ride home. I run out of steam down a long stretch of country road, though, pulling over and falling to my knees in the grass outside a barbed wire fence.

Sucking in breaths like I've been underwater, I place my hands on the soft ground and press my fingers into the earth. At first, the clouds provide welcome shelter from the glaring sun, but as slow drops of rain start to fall on me, I lose the last vestiges of any control I have.

I scream so loud the goats on the other side of the fence startle and run away, bleating their displeasure at having been disturbed. I scream and scream, letting out every last bit of emotion and energy I have left, until my throat is raw and it's all I can do to lay down in a fetal position and let the rain fall on me.

It's starting to get darker outside, although I honestly can't tell if it's getting late or if worse weather is moving in. I can't be bothered to care. I feel numb. Part of me knows I need to pick myself up and buck up, figure out what's next. Another part of me considers if I'd be better off just lying here until I die.

At some point, the rain tapers off and I have to peel myself off the wet ground. I pick up my bike and walk it down the rural road, slowly trudging towards what feels like my death.

*I'm going to figure this out.*

I'm going to get out of here, I'm going to go back home to Tennessee and maybe, if I'm lucky, Matty and Ryan and Darius will be there waiting for me. But even if they aren't, I'll be safe there. Maybe even happy someday.

*I can do this.*

Jake's truck is parked outside when I make it back to my aunt's house. I think about walking away, but I'm sodden and dirty, have no money on me, and nowhere else to go. With a swallow and a deep breath, I stow my bike and make my way up the steps.

The moment I open the door and see my aunt, uncle, and Jake sitting around the living room, my stomach drops. The opened pregnancy test box sits on the coffee table in front of them.

Jake crushes a can in his hand and looks at me expectantly.  
“Where the hell have you been?”

## *Letters*

*Guys,*

*I think it would just be better if you stop calling and sending letters. It's just making things harder, and every time I think about getting in contact with you, it makes me feel like I'm spiraling. I don't want you to see who I've become. What I've become.*

*I feel like a liar and a cheat, because I promised you all my firsts and that I would always stay in touch. But I'm honestly not even trying that hard, because I don't want you to be ashamed of me.*

*I've grown up and lost who I was. And I probably never deserved you then. I certainly don't now. I'm not even Noli anymore. No one has called me that since I left Tennessee. I'm Maggie to everyone around here now. At this point, it's not even worth correcting, no one cares anyway.*

*There's no Noli anymore.*

*Move on.*

(burned)

## Darius

“Ouch, shit! Matty, what the hell was that?!”

The car swerves again, and I straighten up to look over the dashboard.

“Apparently we’re getting real close to Kansas, because someone dropped fucking hay bales all over the goddamned highway.”

I crane my neck to look behind us at the minefield he just drove us through. “Jesus. Well, can you give us some warning at least?”

“I swear to god, if y’all are jerking each other off back there, I’m kicking you out and you can walk the rest of the way.”

“Ha. Ha. Ha.” I deadpan.

“I am totally serious.”

“No one’s jerking anyone off, douchebag. I was giving him a Sharpie tat,” Ryan says to his brother. “Of course, now I need to incorporate a giant slash through it.”

“Aww man, not the magnolia tree?” Matty sounds genuinely disappointed.

Ryan drew a magnificent version of our magnolia tree on my bicep that I legitimately want to have tattooed. We’ve been talking about getting our first tattoos together. We’re going to ask Noli if she wants us to wait until she’s 18 and can get one with us too, since her birthday is just a few months away, or if she’d like to go with us and watch.

“Nah, I was drawing something else. It’s cool.”

There’s silence for a while, and I crawl up into the front seat so Matty doesn’t feel like a third wheel.

“What do you think her reaction is going to be when she sees us?” I ask the guys. I’m full of nervous excitement, a buzzing in my veins growing stronger as we get closer to our destination.

We decided to check in to the motel before heading to the diner Noli works at and surprising her there. There was consensus that not meeting around her aunt and uncle and staying on neutral ground would make for a happier reunion. Ryan thinks they don't like us because they don't like anything that makes Noli happy, but maybe they're just being protective? It's hard sometimes to read between the lines of Noli's letters, or it was, before she stopped sending them.

"I've been imagining scenarios," Matty admits with a smirk that is so different from the one his brother makes. To me at least, it's the biggest difference between them—visually, anyway. They're nearly impossible to tell apart if you don't know them as well as I do, but that one little gesture is as different as their personalities are. Matty's smirk is amused and playful. Ryan's is devilish and almost scary sometimes.

"Tell me," I say, leaning back in the seat and closing my eyes as if he were about to tell me a bedtime story.

"Well... We'll have to watch from outside to figure out what her section is. When a table opens, we walk in casually and just sit down. Then, she comes to take our order. She's not even looking up at us yet, just down at her check with her pen held ready to write down what we want. When we don't answer, she looks up and gasps. Drops everything in her arms and stares at us in disbelief before she breaks out in happy tears and then jumps into my arms."

"And then what? She'll just make out with you right there in the booth?" Ryan chuckles from the back, where he's stretched his long legs across the seats.

Matty shrugs. "I don't see why not."

Grinning, I imagine his scenario instead of the ones my anxious brain has come up with. In my daydreams, she's flirting with a table of guys and then gets angry and embarrassed when we walk in.

I like Matty's scenario better. I run it over and over in my mind until it becomes as real and tangible as a memory. And I drift off to sleep imagining an even less likely scenario where

we put our arms around her and walk her out of that place,  
flipping birds as we take her home. Far, far away from here.



Something wet and warm fills my ear and jars me out of a fleeting dream that involved ten-year-old Noli standing next to me with a garden hose. I'm blinking the memories of the mud wrestling pit from our childhood back as I swat away Ryan's face.

At first, I think it's Matty giving me a wet-willy. "Ugh gross, dude," I complain, but then choke back a groan as teeth graze my earlobe. That is definitely not Matty.

Ryan chuckles. "We're here. Matty went in to pay and get a key. He seemed to think it was best if we waited in the car."

"Probably because you can't ever behave. You draw attention, and then people wonder what we're all doing together."

Ryan just wags his eyebrows, not bothering to feign innocence. "Because I don't give a fuck what they think."

Matty takes a long time, but finally walks back to the car with a red plastic keychain dangling out of his hand.

"Thank God," I say. "I need to take a leak. What took so long?"

He rolls his eyes as he gets in and drives around to the back of the building, parking in front of room six. "You'd think a motel would be more used to out-of-town visitors. Dude asked a lot of questions. Nosey bastard. I only got us settled for the night. We'll have to find an ATM or bank tomorrow. They only take cash," he says incredulously.

Ryan scoffs, unfolding his tall body from the back seat and grabbing our bags from the back. I take the key and make a beeline to the door. "You're serious? Are they not aware that it's the twenty-first century?"

"Dude, this place looks like nothing's changed since the seventies," I call out as I open the door. The carpet is a dingy burnt orange color, the two full sized beds are sunken in the



middle, and the covers are faded, the fabric pilling. I don't want to know what decade those blankets were last washed in, and I'm glad Matty badgered us into bringing our own pillows and blankets.

The small bathroom has the same faded teal tiles that my grandma's bathroom does, although hers don't have a yellowish tinge in the grout between them. When I wash my hands, the water is cold and comes out brown for the first few seconds after I turn it on.

"This place is kind of gross," I say as I walk out of the bathroom, where the other two have descended into chaos. They might be identical twins, but they couldn't be more different.

Matty has one of the beds stripped, the covers in a heap in a corner and the mattress off the bed, up against the walls, examining the edges with an actual magnifying glass. Ryan is laying across the other bed, dirty covers and all, holding a shrink-wrapped plastic package.

"I swear to God, Ryan, if there are bed bugs here and you're just laying in them without a care in the world, you aren't coming back in the house until you've been sanitized and properly checked." He sees me leaning against the wall, laughing at the two of them. "Ah, good, Dare—will you please open that mattress protector?"

"Is that what this thing is?" Ryan says, tossing it to me.

I struggle with it for a while. "What the fuck is this fucking package made of? Goddamn Vibranium?"

Ryan pulls himself up to sit over the edge of the bed. "Here," he says, holding out his hand to grab the package, before pulling me between his knees. With his other hand, he opens a huge switchblade while smirking up at me. My cock twitches and he absolutely catches the movement.

Raising a brow, he stares me right in the eye as he extends the blade and slits open the package, knowing exactly how he affects me.

Opening a mattress protector should not be that sexy.

An hour later, the mattresses have all been deemed safe, albeit horrifically uncomfortable. They have been zipped into their waterproof, bedbug suffocating, plastic smelling bags. Matty threw all the pillows and linens in a heap outside the door for housekeeping to pick up, which is probably wishful thinking on his part that there would even be housekeeping. The beds are now covered in our own pillows and the blankets that we brought from home.

After all that, Ryan is once again comfortably laying across one of the beds, and Matty is heading for a shower. Once we've all had a chance to clean up, we're heading toward the diner that Noli works at to surprise her.

As casually as possible, because I'm pretty sure they're going to laugh at me, I pull some candles out of my duffel and set them around the room.

"What are you doing?" Ryan says, watching me.

I ignore him, and take advantage of the distraction that Matty offers me when he yells out from the bathroom, having walked under cold spray from the shower. I'm assuming he manages to get it warmed up, because he quits cussing eventually.

"Dare, what is this about?" Ryan asks me gently. He's climbed off the bed and comes to stand at my side, bending slightly to kiss my neck right below my ear.

"It smells like stale smoke and sadness in here," I tell him. Which isn't a lie, it's just not the whole truth.

"So you just happened to pack all of these in your bag, just in case the room didn't smell good enough?"

Well shit, he's got me there.

"Ooorr," he says, pulling me against him and lowering his mouth to my ear again. "Were you hoping to set a mood? Are these for me or for Matty?" he jokes.

"What if she comes back here, even just to talk? I wanted it to be nicer. I want her to be impressed." Saying it out loud makes me realize how much more pathetic I am. "It's too much, though, isn't it? I'm trying too hard?"

“You’re being yourself,” he says, tightening his hold around me. “Which is perfect. Although you brought this particular candle, and now I’m wondering how much we can defile this room before Matty gets out of the shower.” His low voice against my neck sends gooseflesh over my entire body.

The candle in question is a huge three wick candle that we often use to “set the mood”. It started because we wanted some light, but not too much. And it became a thing.

“I will literally maim you and leave you for dead,” Matty mutters as he walks out of the bathroom. “But I’m going to walk over to that convenience store down the street and grab a few things, so if you’d like to... whatever... in the *shower*, where all the evidence gets washed away, *before* I get back, that’s your business.” He shudders, pulling on his jeans and grabbing a t-shirt. “I’ll make sure to grab some bleach while I’m there.”

Making a point not to look at either of us, he exits hastily, pulling the door shut behind him. We hear him trip over the discarded linens in his hurry, his complaints about a lack of housekeeping getting fainter as he storms away.

My laughter is cut short when Ryan’s tongue licks a hot path from my collarbone to the space behind my ear. He starts to pull me towards the bathroom, the steam still dissipating from Matty’s quick shower. He cranks the water back on, testing the pitiful stream until it’s hot enough to start filling the room with steam again.

I have a flash of guilt about Matty’s swift exit. Funny as it was, I don’t want him to feel like too much has changed. Having grown up together our whole lives, I’m pretty comfortable with the dynamic between the three of us. Matty makes underhanded jokes sometimes, but I know he’s happy for us and loves us the same as he ever has.

But I also know that being around two people who are as into each other as Ryan and I are, especially the last couple years of horny teenage hormones, bothers him more than he lets on. He’s been lonely since Noli left us, hasn’t even so much as looked at another girl.

There's also the fact that, since discovering that it feels good to touch each other, Ryan and I have ended up "defiling" every inch of their shared bedroom and he might have walked in on us a time or two over the years. And now that we've added actual sex to the roster, well...

I'm comfortable with our dynamic as best friends, but I also don't want to make him uncomfortable, or like a third wheel, on this trip.

My mouth opens to suggest that we should go after him, but Ryan's tongue makes it into my mouth before words can escape. He knows exactly how to kiss me. His tongue moves against mine in deep, sweeping strokes that pull the breath from my body and distract me from everything else happening around us. It's basically how I got through exams without having a panic attack, and how he talks me into doing whatever it is he wants to do, without saying a word.

I melt into him, our bodies curving around each other as I'm pushed back onto the bathroom counter. Our mouths pull apart, but not before Ryan's teeth capture my bottom lip, pulling a groan from my throat.

And like that, I've forgotten everything—Matty's tantrum, the dingy grossness of this motel, my nerves about seeing Noli again—my mind is a blank canvas for nerve endings only.

All I am now is a vessel for tongues and teeth and limbs. For him. We both hurriedly tear off our clothing, and I rock my hips against warm flesh as our bodies press against each other.

Pushing off the counter, I slam Ryan into the wall, deepening the kiss almost painfully. I do it for the sheer pleasure of how riled up he gets. A rumble, almost like a growl, starts deep in his chest and he pulls away from our kiss, giving me his devilish smile. *I'm in for it now.*

"Oh, is that how we're playing, then?" He says, gripping my dick tight, like a vice grip, and moving me closer to the shower.

In one swift move, Ryan flips me around and holds me against his chest, his hand repositioned on my cock. He pumps me hard and fast, until pre-cum is weeping from the slit and I'm so, so close. My stomach and my balls tighten and I groan, ready for the release to wash over me, but Ryan stops right before the moment of no return.

Without a word, he holds my hips and pushes me forcefully in the back. My arms fly out to catch me, putting me in the stream of the shower with my hands against the tiles. The hot water hits my back. It feels almost cool against my heated skin.

Ryan's hands leave my hips momentarily, and I hear the rustle of our clothes being moved around. He returns before I even have the wherewithal to look over my shoulder, still reeling from being edged so close. My cock juts out between my legs, dripping and twitching with the force of the blood rushing through my body.

A spurt of liquid splashes down my crack, followed by a thick finger. Ryan kicks my legs farther apart and works one, then two digits into me, spreading and stretching me. I'm all but crying, unable to keep the desperate moans from falling out of my mouth.

"Fuck, please Ry..."

"Please what, Dare?"

He pulls his fingers back, and with a frustrated moan, my body pushes out, chasing after them. Ryan's thick cock lands heavy on my lower back and I roll my hips into him, trying to get him where I want him.

"You want this cock, Dare?" He teases, his voice low and growly. He's going to make me work for it.

I have a love-hate relationship with Ryan's dirty talk. On one hand, it's delicious and sends shivers up and down my spine. On the other, it's the tiniest bit humiliating to be reduced to a trembling pile of desperation. Nonetheless, my cock jumps at his voice.

“Tell me, Dare. Tell me you want my hard cock to fuck you so good you forget your name.”

“God, yes, Ryan. I want your cock!” There’s the slightest lilt of irritation in my voice that I don’t hide, a definite tone of *put-your-goddamn-cock-in-me-right-this-second!*

Ryan laughs under his breath. He knows exactly what he’s doing. I know the very smirk on his face right now, even without looking. “Come on then, Dare... Beg me for it.”

I’m about to stand up and remind him that he wants it just as much as I do, but my response is cut short, replaced by a strangled moan as Ryan lines up his cock, just barely pushing in before retreating. He rubs it up and down my ass, back to tease my quivering hole, and then down again. I try to push back on the wall, to lift my hips and get more pressure, more friction.

Putty.

“Okay, okay! Please. *Please* fuck me. I want your cock so bad, Ry—” It’s meant to sound sarcastic, but reeks of desperation.

My cries are cut off when Ryan lines up and thrusts himself into me, knocking the breath from my body. Eyes rolling back, my hands slip against the wet tile. Ryan pushes my shoulder blades down and I comply, bending until I’m almost doubled over, with my ass up in the air. Fingers gripping my hips, Ryan sets a punishing pace. Water splashes everywhere, a pool of it collecting where my feet are pulled up onto their toes.

The steady beat of his hips and pelvis as they hit my ass, his cock moving over that one little spot he knows so well, the thud of his balls against mine, the sound of skin against skin and the cooling water falling over my back all run together into one wave of sensation. Heat and the tingling of my descent towards oblivion start in the pit of my stomach and radiate outward.

“Fuck, Ry, I can’t—I’m coming, fuuuuucckkkk.” My words turn into unintelligible garble as my knees shake, the

force of my orgasm shooting through my body. My cock jerks, bouncing around with the force of each thrust, spurting cum everywhere. Momentarily, I'm unable to keep myself up on my toes and Ryan has to hold me up as I fall apart.

I'm not a small guy. An inch taller than Matty and Ry's six foot two frames, I'm only a bit leaner than Ryan. Most of my weight is on my hands, but he's having to do a lot of work to keep us steady. You wouldn't know it though, the way he holds my hips up, slamming into them as I ride out my climax.

Once I get my bearings, he pulls me up straighter and lifts one foot to the ledge of the tub. His thrusts are slower, but still hard and deep, his cock hitting that perfect place inside me again and again until a shiver racks over my body. My orgasm has barely waned and I feel it building up again.

"That's it, baby. Come for me one more time. I know you can do it." The gruff rasp of his voice makes me want to do anything, give him anything and everything that he asks.

Steadying myself with one hand, I grip my re-hardening length in the other. It hasn't even had the chance to get soft again, but with the constant pressure of Ryan's cock against my prostate, it's throbbing with new life.

Ryan's breaths shorten, and the jerk in his hips tells me he is close. I know the one thing that will pull him over the edge. Stroking myself harder and faster, bucking back against Ryan's hard cock, I ride the edge of another orgasm.

My ass clenches and Ryan grunts, slowing his thrusts and rolling into me as we fall over the edge together. When we've finally come down enough for Ryan to pull out of me, he pushes me fully into the shower. A rag and a bar of soap in his hands, he gets down on his knees and almost reverently washes me.

By the time Matty returns, we're both showered and dressed and snuggled up in one of the beds, half asleep in our post-coital bliss.

Throwing a few bags down on the other bed, he smacks my thigh and pushes Ryan's foot.

“Come on fuckers, let’s go see our girl.”



## Noli

There's a black smudge on the dingy beige tile beneath my feet. Kicking my toe at it, I scrub at the scuff mark until part of it starts to rub away.

I wish it was as easy to scrub away the mess that my life has become.

"Jake Denin and Magnolia Crawford?" My aunt and uncle stand, and I try to pretend I didn't hear my name. Jake is outside smoking, but he throws his butt in the grass near the sidewalk when my uncle flags him down through the window.

"We're up, 'darlin'," he says, grabbing my hand and pulling me into the courtroom. My stomach cramps with nerves.

The smile on his face, and the way he looks down at me almost fondly, would probably be enough to fool an outsider. But I've gotten better at reading him, and I can sense the tension in him. I can see it in the set of his shoulders and feel it in the way he squeezes my hand, too hard to be considered loving.

It's a silent warning, but it's unnecessary. Honestly, where would I go? Now that everyone knows the truth, there are eyes on me everywhere. Everything I do, even at work, gets reported back to him. The sheriff is a family friend, and that gives Jake enough clout in this shithole of a town to make him hot shit. And he's likeable, and good looking enough that it gives people a false sense of security. Only I see the real Jake.

He's got them all fooled into thinking he's the one who was swindled into falling dick first into the town whore, seduced no doubt, and he's doing right by marrying her. *What a good guy.*

They're all more than happy to keep tabs on the slut that trapped the most eligible bachelor in town.

He's more possessive than ever now. I can't get privacy anywhere to make any calls or research where to go. I don't have a car, or any friends, or anywhere or anyone to go to that

can help me. Even if I did have somewhere to go, I've been too sick to make any more long trips on my bike.

It's hopeless.

I'm stuck.

The magistrate straightens his lapel and beckons my aunt and uncle forward to sign consent paperwork since I'm still underage. Jake gives me a sharp look before painting his fake charming smile back on his face and walking me up to stand in front of the podium, taking my hands in his.

When the magistrate starts to speak, I don't hear a word. All I can hear is the rushing of my blood through the veins in my temples. My legs are dangerously close to giving out, so I focus on looking up at Jake and keeping my knees straight. Or am I not supposed to lock my knees? I can't remember which is right, and fleetingly I wonder how long they would postpone this travesty if I passed out. They probably wouldn't even bother.

I wonder if I'd be punished, or if I could use the pregnancy as an excuse. Not that it's gotten me any leeway at home. Or with Jake.

Now that I'm already pregnant, there's no reason for me to say no, right? Fighting him doesn't make anything better. I've got the bruises on my body to prove it, my punishment for fighting back.

And now I'm about to be his lawful wedded wife. In sickness and in health.

Love, honor, and obey.

Jake squeezes my hands hard enough to make my finger joints crack, drawing me out of the bubble I've been in for the entire ceremony. He's looking at me expectantly, impatience in the lines of his fake smile, the cut on his lip tightening and threatening to rip open again. *It'd almost been worth it for a moment, to see him bleed.*

"Oh, I'm sorry... Um, I..." I've never wanted anything less. I'd rather deal with this pregnancy alone, living on the streets in some terrifying city far, far away from here.

What would they do if I said no, turned away, and ran out the door right now? Or if I looked the magistrate in the eye and said that I didn't want to be here, that they were forcing me? That I just want to go home to Tennessee and pretend to be the girl I used to be.

A million scenarios run through my head. And all of them end in the disappointment I'd see in their eyes when I came back home, pregnant and defiled. Ruined. A million more end in Jake finding me and forcing me to do whatever it is he wants me to do.

Nausea rolls through my body and my stomach cramps. I whisper, "I do," with a tear rolling down my cheek.

## Letters

*Dear Matty, Ryan, and Darius,*

*You'll never get this letter, because I'll never send it. I'm going to destroy it as soon as I've gotten this all out.*

*The letter wouldn't reach you even if I did send it. And on the off chance it wasn't picked out of the mail, you've probably all moved on and forgotten about me. I can't even be too upset about that. It's for the best, anyway.*

*Tomorrow my aunt and uncle are taking me to the magistrate to marry Jake. It hurts me to even write these words.*

*I'm pregnant.*

*It's my fault. I should have fought harder. I should have done something gross to get him to change his mind. I did try telling him that I had my period the next time he came to me, but once he figured out I was lying, that just made him angry and it hurt more.*

*I'm a different person than I was when I left. Older, sure. Wiser, I hope. But more than anything, I'm not the girl I used to be. I've done things I'm not proud of. I'm sad a lot, and angry all the time.*

*I was trying to save enough money to buy a cheap car so I could leave here and move back to Tennessee when I turn eighteen. But when my aunt found out about me being pregnant, she ransacked my room and found the stash of my tips that I've been saving. Everything I have, everything I am, and everything will be belongs to him now. There is no escaping this.*

*Part of me wonders if running away and hitch-hiking home would actually be preferable to whatever life is being planned for me, but I can't bear you all seeing what I've become. It wouldn't be fair to you. And we were probably always meant to say goodbye.*

*I hope there's some part of you that knows I still love you. All of you.*

*Love you. Love you. Love you.*  
*Always.*

(burned)

## Matty

“It’s not very shiny,” I say, taking in the beat down façade of the diner. It says “Rosie’s Shiny Diner”, but it doesn’t make any sense. The paint is a flat grey, peeling and dirty. There’s nothing shiny about it. Even the fake chrome edging around the bar and stools has lost its luster, although you can almost see that it was present at one time.

This place is sad. This whole town is sad, actually.

“Are we sure it’s the right diner?” Dare asks.

“It’s the *only* diner.”

“It’s no Darcy’s,” Dare mutters under his breath. Darcy’s is our favorite diner back home, and there is no place like it.

“Well, let’s find a seat before we cause a scene,” Ryan suggests, and we shuffle over to a booth in the corner. There are only a couple tables filled and a few people sitting at the counter, but everyone is openly watching us.

An older woman comes to the table and passes out some laminated menus. The name tag on her blue apron says “Barb”. The menus are sticky to touch, and I’m really hoping Noli makes an appearance soon because, so far, this whole trip has been a disappointment and is starting to feel like it’s not worth it..

The waitress doesn’t even introduce herself, starting off with, “You boys ain’t from around here.” Maybe I’m just being sensitive, but it comes out as more of an accusation than a greeting.

“No ma’am, just visiting a friend.” Dare smiles, putting on the charm. Barb cuts her eyes at him suspiciously.

I don’t like the way she’s looking at him, and I don’t want to cause an issue at Noli’s job, so I do my best to capture her attention. Dare and Ryan are comfortable enough with each other that they probably don’t realize they’re sitting so close to each other, too close for the other people in the diner, Ryan’s arm thrown over the back of the booth behind Dare. In our hometown, which honestly isn’t a whole lot bigger than this

place, their relationship is old news. And even the disapproving types know to keep their mouths shut.

But I can see the stares they are getting from around the room, and it's hard not to feel unsafe. There's also an uncomfortable number of cars, houses, and shirts with Confederate flags on them, and I haven't seen another person of color yet, which puts a second target on Dare.

This place sucks and we need to get out sooner rather than later. We need to get her out. No wonder all of her letters came off strange and then petered out. She was dealing with this shithole.

Barb takes our orders—I manage not to make any snide comments about the complete lack of anything fresh on the menu. She drops off our round of coffees, and I try not to wince at the stained and chipped mugs. When she turns away, I wipe the rim with a napkin before taking a hesitant sip. Ugh, the coffee tastes as toxic as the atmosphere in the diner.

A few minutes later, I look up at Ryan and Dare. They're both looking at me strangely, a mixture of worry and amusement on their faces.

“What!?”

Ryan's recently pierced eyebrow raises. “You just straightened the table and wiped all of our mugs down, and you won't make eye contact with either of us, that's what.”

I did? Jesus. I'm out of control. *Where is she?*

“Do you think maybe she doesn't work today?”

“I'm pretty sure she works doubles every Saturday, keeps her out of the house,” replies Dare. “Maybe she's just on a break? Or maybe she's sick?”

“We're just gonna have to ask, probably.”

When Barb comes by with our food—burning hot plates of trans-fats and carbs, drowning in butter and grease and, in Ryan's case, gravy.

Ryan immediately digs in, shoveling half a sausage gravy covered biscuit into his mouth in one bite. Dare douses his

French toast in syrup.

I smile politely at Barb, “You’ll have to forgive my brothers. They’re basically feral.”

She almost cracks a smile. “You boys need anything else?”

“Actually,” I say, “We were wondering if Noli is working today?”

“Who?” she asks, the creases on her face deepening as she scrunches her face.

“Maggie,” Dare supplies.

Oh, that’s right. They call her Maggie here. She hates that nickname. “Yes, sorry, Maggie. Maggie Crawford?”

“About to be Maggie Denin. She hooked her a sucker and they’re down at the courthouse right now, probably.”

“What? No. I’m talking about Magnolia Crawford. Dark blue eyes, dirty blonde hair, soft-spoken? Moved here to live with her aunt and uncle when she was thirteen.”

“Yeah, that’s her,” Barb says with a sigh. “Been giving poor Dana and Paul a run for their money since the day they brought her back. Damn girl is ungrateful. Now she’s pulled the town’s most eligible bachelor into her web.”

“I bet she ain’t even pregnant,” mutters another waitress, pouring coffee at the table next to ours.

One of the guys at the table chimes in. “You don’t think he’d make her show proof? Ole Jake is smarter than that.”

“Not smart enough not to fall into her trap,” the waitress spits.

“Jealous much, Susie?” Barb asks her, but she’s looking at us. “You boys alright?”

Dumbstruck isn’t the right word. There isn’t a strong enough word for the current that passes through the three of us.

Dare looks pale and sets down his fork. Ryan’s eyes bore into my own, a silent conversation happening between us.



There's no way.

Barb stares at us curiously. When I break Ryan's gaze, I notice her trade looks with the jealous waitress. The men having coffee in the booth next to us stare openly.

I've never given much care for the judgement of others, especially strangers. But I don't want it getting back to Noli that we caused any problems, so I try to brush off the panic creeping over my scalp and hope the guys follow my lead.

Shrugging, I say casually, "Hmm, is that so?"

"Well, congrats to the happy couple," nods Ryan.

Dare doesn't say anything, adding yet another sugar packet to the rancid sludge they call coffee. I do my best to close off my features, indifference blocking out any hint of emotion. If I let one slip, the whole mask will fall. And I am feeling very close to falling right now.

It takes a few moments before the attention is turned away from us. Even after Barb and the other waitress move on, it's obvious that the patrons of Rosie's Shiny Diner are watching. Listening.

The guys have thankfully caught on, and we make mundane conversation as we finish our meals. We eat quickly, but not too quickly, and pay our tab in cash.

Ryan casually slips the keys out of my hands as we walk out into the parking lot. "Let me drive, Matty. Just sit and breathe for a moment."

I give him a sharp nod, keeping my composure all the way across the parking lot and into the car, and as we pull out onto the road. Once we're out of eyesight, I fold over in my seat, putting my elbows on my knees and locking my hands behind my neck.

"This is a mistake," Dare says from the back. "They were talking about someone else, or playing some kind of sick game. Right?"

None of us speak for a while. Ryan drives us to the motel, but we just sit in the parking lot for a moment.

“The courthouse is probably just downtown,” I say to no one in particular. Ryan puts the car in drive and pulls back out onto the road.

Downtown consists of one tiny stretch of road. Town Hall is on one end, a surprisingly large church at the other. In between are various businesses—a salon and barbershop, a consignment store, a Jazzercise studio, a sandwich shop, insurance adjuster’s office, and an empty storefront that looks like it used to be a general store.

We park in the small lot across the street from Town Hall and get out of the car, standing next to each other, staring at the front of the building.

“Should we go in?” Dare asks hesitantly.

My teeth grind together painfully. I’m not sure if I want to. “I need to know,” I grit out.

I take the lead, crossing the street and making a bee-line for the front door. Ryan and Dare flank me, lengthening their steps to keep up with my hurried pace. We must look foreboding, three tall, broad, tense strangers walking into the building like we have something to prove. The security guard straightens up, a hand on the baton at his waist, watching us warily.

“Magistrate’s office?” I ask brusquely.

“Around the corner on the left, across from the restrooms,” he answers. I notice him pull out a phone as we walk in the direction he suggested.

Slowing my pace some, the three of us make our way around the corner. There’s a set of double doors with small windows. A quick peek inside is all it takes for everything to come spiraling down around me.

She’s in there.

She looks different. Thinner, paler, with dark circles under her eyes. Her dirty blonde hair is pulled out of her face in a low ponytail, and she’s wearing a faded blue sundress and a thin white sweater that clashes with her pale skin. I have a

fleeting thought that she looks like the color has been leached out of her.

Her profile is all I can see, the man next to her obscuring much of my view. She turns her head to look up at him, a strange look in her eyes as her lips turn up in a smile. More of a grimace, really, but maybe that's just wishful thinking.

The man grabs for her hand and pulls her behind him, heading for the door.

“Shit, move!” Ryan whisper-yells, pulling me across the hall and into the men's room.

I resist at first, rooted to the spot. It takes everything in me to let him pull me back, when what I really want to do is confront her. To stand in front of her and make her look me in the eye—look *us* in the eyes—and hear what she'd have to say.

I'm not sure what kind of excuse would make it hurt less.

I stand at the sink, staring at my reflection. Ryan stands behind me, his identical eyes locking with mine in the mirror. The pain there reflects my own and makes me feel slightly less alone. He has Dare, though. And I feel like I've just lost everything.

The rage, however irrational, isn't tempered much by the splash of cool water I throw over my face.

Ryan turns around to use the urinal when the door swings open. Dare disappears into a stall. The very same man I just saw standing before a magistrate with my childhood best friend walks in, talking on a cell phone as he takes a urinal next to Ry.

“Yeah man, that's that. Ten minutes and a few signatures and I've got me a pretty little wife.” I tense, listening to him chuckle into the phone, unworried about anyone in the bathroom hearing his conversation. He seems happy, and I can't begrudge him that. I hope he knows how lucky he is. “Now I've made an honest woman of her, she'll be waiting on her knees for me every day when I get home.” He pauses, and then laughs, presumably at something the other person says.

He zips his fly and stands at the other side of the sink. “Nah. I was going to take her up to the cabin, but she says she’s too sick. So we’re just going to celebrate at home, if you know what I mean...”

Something inside me breaks, and I stomp out of the bathroom, throwing open the door just as I see the women’s bathroom door close behind the swish of a blue sundress. I don’t think, I just follow.

The door crashes against the wall, masked by a stall door slamming. I stand there, fuming, waiting for her to come out, imagining what I’ll say to her, or if I’ll say anything at all. Maybe all I need is to look her in the eye and let her know that I know she betrayed me, and then walk away forever. I just need her to see me, to remember me.

The sounds of her vomiting come from the stall. As if I could have forgotten the rumors that she was pregnant, the proof echoes off the walls in sobs and retches. It cracks through my rage and slaps me in the face with reality.

What will it accomplish to look her in the eye? Would she feel bad, or embarrassed, that we showed up like this? Will she care? Or will she see the truth— That I’ve pathetically waited for her all this time, remembering a childhood promise and taking it so seriously that I’ve thought of no one else. That I waited and saved every part of myself for her, while she grew up and moved on.

All the anger drains from my body at once, replaced by a sadness that turns my veins to icy steel. *How could I be so immature?*

I push the door open, only slightly more aware of my surroundings. Dare stands outside the door, looking worried. With a small shake of my head, I start walking. It’s not until I’ve made it back to the car that I realize the guys are behind me. I sit in the back seat, needing a moment to pull myself together.

“I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t ruin her special day.”

Ryan and Dare exchange a look that I'm sure they don't think I notice, and climb into the front seats. The ignition starts, and loud fuzz comes out of the speakers. Ryan messes with the dial, trying to find anything but country music. It's pure luck that he stops on a slow, sad song when we all notice Noli leaving the building.

The self-satisfied man from the bathroom walks beside her, a hand resting on the back of her neck. He stops and pulls her face to his. I think we're about to be subjected to watching them kiss, but he pulls away from her with a jerk. Her aunt laughs and pats Noli on the shoulder, then pushes the happy couple together for a picture.

"Why is she wearing a sweater?" Dare asks.

"What?" I ask, looking away from the tragedy playing out in front of me.

"A sweater. It's like ninety degrees out."

"Girls will do some crazy shit to look nice. You ever seen Jessa Holcrom's shoes? Teetering that high off the ground can't be comfortable." Ryan shakes his head, baffled by the mystery that is womankind.

"That's not how our Noli rolls, though," Dare answers.

I clear my throat and nudge Ryan to start driving before the wedding party crosses the street.

"She's not our Noli anymore."

## Noli

The floor around me wavers, my vision fuzzy at the edges. I sink down to my hands and knees to avoid passing out, my palms slipping some on the wet tile. My head swims and nausea roils, my gut cramping harshly.

Pregnancy or too hot of a shower? It's anyone's guess, but usually it passes more quickly than this.

And then I notice it.

*Drip. Drip. Drip.*

Dark red drops of blood splatter against the floor. Little rivulets of it are streaming from between my thighs, starting to form a tiny pool. Instead of feeling fearful, the overwhelming numbness that I've succumbed to over the last week completely blots out all conscious thought. Sitting back against the edge of the tub, I just watch as the blood slowly pools beneath me.

I'm aware enough to know that I'm probably miscarrying. Instead of crying or feeling afraid, I find myself captivated by the color of the blood, the way the droplets of water from the floor and dripping from my hair swirl into the growing puddle of deep, dark red. Hypnotized by it, I push my fingers into the viscous liquid, painting the inside of my thigh. The contrast of the dark red blood, pale skin, and light blue bruising is striking in a macabre sort of way.

Jake calls out from the other side of the door. "Maggie?" I don't answer him, savoring my last few moments of solitary silence before the door opens. It's not locked. I never lock the doors anymore. I know enough not to and it's pointless, anyway. My new husband gets his feelings hurt if he feels like I'm trying to shut him out.

"Jesus Fuck, Maggie! Oh my god, oh my god. Okay, it's going to be okay—shit!" Jake runs out of the room, coming back with a nightgown and long sweater. "Hands up, babe. That's right, it's going to be okay. We're going to go to the hospital, alright? It's going to be okay. Fuck, there's so much blood. Shit Maggie, why didn't you call for me?!"

Either he thinks I'm in shock or doesn't notice that I'm beyond caring. Part of me is aware of a faint sense of disappointment that I was found before I could bleed out.

Listlessly, I let him pull the clothes over my head and lift me into his arms. He grabs a bunch of towels on the way out, putting them on the seat before settling me in the front seat of his truck.

The tires spin on the gravel driveway as we pull out of Jake's driveway—*our* driveway, I suppose. He punches the gas and flies down the rural roads towards the closest hospital, which is normally about forty minutes away, but at this rate, we'll make it in twenty.

While Jake flies down the highway, anxiously muttering and cursing under his breath, I lean my head back on the seat and look out the window. The streetlights and headlamps from passing cars blur, but my attention is on the moon. As always, I wonder if they might be looking up at the same moment, except this time it doesn't give me much comfort. What they must think of me...

My stomach cramps, and a wave of dizziness hits me. I pull my legs up to try to avoid getting blood on the seat.

Jake reaches over and holds my hand, unaware or uncaring about the dried blood coating it. "It's going to be alright, Maggie," he says gently. His tone reminds me of how he used to talk to me, before he gave up chasing me and forced me to be his.

My eyes close, welcoming the warmth behind my eyelids, wanting to just escape from it all. If I fall asleep, will I wake up? *Do I even want to?*

"Babe, wake up, we're here," Jake says, lifting me out of the truck. The lights of the ambulance bay are bright, the buzzing sound of the fluorescent bulbs in the emergency room sign ring in my ears as Jake yells, "Someone help us!"

He holds me in his arms like some kind of damsel in distress, hurrying through the automatic doors and laying me on a gurney that someone has pulled into the lobby. Jogging

along my side as the medical staff wheel me into a room, he tells them how he found me and answers questions.

Everything seems to move too quickly and in slow motion at the same time, like a stop-motion movie. My eyes aren't focusing properly, the fluorescent lights jumping out at me while the motion of people moving around me, their figures a blur. I'm vaguely aware that a woman is asking me questions, and I do hear her words, but I can't seem to make the words process to give them meaning.

I just want to sleep.





“Mrs. Denin?”

My eyelids are heavy, but I manage to blink them open. There’s only one person in the room with me... weren’t there a bunch of people in here just a moment ago?

“Where is everyone?” I croak, my voice raspy. “Did I fall asleep?”

“You lost consciousness, but we’ve got some fluids started. My name is Dr. Cline, I’m the OBGYN on call. Do you know what happened to you?”

“I... I had a miscarriage?”

She nods sympathetically. “Yes, you did. You may—”

“Where’s Jake?” I interrupt her, my head lifting to look around, suddenly aware that he isn’t in the room. Is he mad?

“Your husband had to go move his car from the ambulance bay, and the registrar needs to get some information from him. He’ll be back shortly, but I wanted to get a chance to talk to you privately.”

“Okay.” My eyes flit towards the door. I don’t trust that he isn’t standing outside listening, waiting for me to say something stupid.

“Mrs. Denin, or do you prefer Maggie?” she asks kindly, but I only stare.

“Well, when we were taking care of you, I couldn’t help but notice you have some bruises, including on your abdomen?” she poses it as a question, probably hoping to lead me into some kind of confession.

I don’t say a word.

“Are you safe at home?”

My eyes roam around the room, looking for anything to focus on that isn’t her searching, concerned eyes. They land on a bag of personal effects, blood smeared all over the inside of

the clear bag, the clothes inside saturated in it. I don't think that's going to come out.

Dr. Cline is still talking, but I've zoned her out. Not on purpose. I just can't deal with what she wants to talk about right now. Has Jake been a bit rough? Yes. Do I have some marks here and there? Also yes, but I have very thin skin and bruise easily, so it looks worse than it is, really.

Am I safe? I'm not sure I know what that means. Not anymore.

"I slipped," I lie, still not looking at her, my voice barely my own. "In the shower. I slipped and landed on my stomach on the side of the tub. It's my fault this happened."

"Oh, no no no. It's never your fault, Maggie. These things happen, accidents happen, and it's also possible that something unrelated could have caused it. Miscarriages are more often caused by something wrong with the fetus, although trauma can cause damage too. Were you having any bleeding or cramping before you... slipped?"

"I was cramping pretty badly the day before yesterday. And I was really sick, but I just thought it was nerves and morning sickness. We, uh, just got married this past weekend."

She doesn't offer any congratulations, which I'm thankful for. "I see. Did you have any odd discharge or spotting?"

"No, I don't think so." I don't know why I lie about it, but I'm afraid I'll have to give more details and explanation if I do.

"Have you received any prenatal care yet?"

"Oh, um... No," I say guiltily. "I only found out a few weeks ago, and I might have been in a bit of denial." I don't mention that I was desperately trying to get an abortion before anyone found out, nor that I'd done some sketchy internet searches about how to end the pregnancy myself, not that I'd been brave or stupid enough to try any of them.

"That's okay. I'll include a list of OBGYN's in your area with your discharge paperwork, so you have someone to follow up with and a good place to start if or when you decide

to try again. Now, a lot of times when a woman miscarries in the first trimester, the fetal tissue passes on its own and the bleeding is heavy, but not as heavy as you're bleeding. I recommend that we do a small surgical procedure called a D&C, which is where we dilate the cervix and use a small tool, called a curette, to gently scrape the uterine wall and help pass the rest of the tissue. It's a simple procedure that we can do right here, without going under anesthesia."

"Try again?" Not one bit of what she says scares or phases me, except those two words. I hope my face doesn't portray my horror as much as my voice does.

"If you want to, yes. I'd recommend waiting for at least two weeks until after the bleeding has stopped to have sex. But if you're comfortable, you can absolutely start trying again at that point. Or we can start you on birth control if you'd like to wait for a while."

"Y—"

"Oh, that won't be necessary, doc, but thanks," Jake says, not looking twice at the doctor as he comes to my side, kissing me on the forehead. "You okay, babe? You had me worried there for a moment."

"I'm sorry," I whisper, unsure of how to respond. He just keeps kissing my forehead and my hands, looking truly concerned.

"I'm just glad you're okay," he says, and it's hard not to believe him.

Dr. Cline watches us curiously and then stands. "I'm going to give you a few minutes while we get set up for the procedure. The nurse will come in to start some antibiotics and give you something for pain. We use a local anesthetic for the procedure, so you'll be awake, but we can give you a sedative if you prefer."

I nod quietly. Sedation sounds good, even without having a medical procedure. To be able to shut my brain off for even a little while feels like the greatest gift. "Thank you."

"We'll be right in with it."

The moment she's gone, Jake pulls his chair closer to me, affectionately moving the hair out of my face and behind my ear as he attempts to look into my eyes. But I can't make eye contact with him, not right now.

"I'm so sorry, babe."

Tears build up behind my eyes, but not because his words and the sincerity I hear behind them mean anything to me. What hurts and scares me is that it makes me realize he isn't giving up. Part of me must have assumed he'd be so mad that he'd want me to leave, because he only married me due to me being pregnant, right?

"I promise I didn't mean to hurt you or the baby. I just... I can't control myself when it comes to you. I don't know what it is. It'll never happen again, Maggie, I promise."

The nurse comes in with blessed oblivion in a syringe, injecting the medications into the IV bag. A tear rolls down my cheek, my thoughts focusing on the events of the past couple of days.

The ceremony at the courthouse. Getting sick in the bathroom. I was too sick to go out to celebrate with everyone, so Jake took me home so I could have a nap and went out. He came home later and woke me up, wanting to "consummate" the marriage.

*"No, Jake, come on, I don't feel good. Let me rest, please?"*

*"Come on, now, don't deny me on our first night as a married couple. This is supposed to be our honeymoon at home, remember? Since you didn't want to go to the cabin?"*

*Still half asleep, it doesn't occur to me that it could be a bad time to get snarky. "Yeah, because going to some old dirty fishing cabin that smells like mildew and trout sounds real romantic."*

*The blankets are ripped off me, and suddenly Jake's hands are gripping my thighs tightly and forcing them apart. The smell of Jack Daniels and the pain of his fingers digging into my flesh rouses me finally. Fully awake, but still not smart*

*enough to make better decisions, I twist my body away from him, trying to resist.*

*The last time I tried to fight him off, I split his lip when I accidentally head-butted him. He'd been drunk then, too.*

*But I can't not fight. So I kick out my legs, catching him in the jaw. While he's thrown off balance, I run for it. The back door is the closest exit, so I speed through the kitchen and to the sliding glass door. The minute it takes me to fumble with the lock costs me, and by the time I am three steps out the door, he catches up to me, throwing me down over the deck railing. The wood hits me hard in the gut, knocking the breath out of me. Nausea and dizziness overtake me at impact, and I crumble to the ground.*

*Grabbing me roughly by the hair, Jake lifts me up to my knees.*

*"You know what I think?" he says as he lowers his face to mine. "I think you like it rough. Because otherwise you'd know better than to deny me, wife."*

*I spit blood in his face, ready for pain rather than submit anything to him.*

*"You are my fucking wife." His grip on my hair tightens painfully, lifting me higher by the roots as he stands. Bending down over me, he growls, "I know you thought you could just leave with those idiots, but no one else can have you now. And they know it now, too."*

*That gets my attention, and I still, my gaze flashing to his. "What are you talking about?"*

*"Don't lie to me, Maggie, there's no point. I know they were here. What did you think, that they'd steal you away and take you home? Take you even though you've got my bastard in you? You're damaged goods now, babe. No one else would have you."*

*"Who was here?" I'm almost positive I know who he thinks he's talking about, but that's not possible. They wouldn't have come all this way without letting me know, without saying anything to me. Without seeing me.*

*“Don’t pretend—”*

*“I don’t know anything,” I grit out. I want him to believe me so he’ll let me go, but instead he screams in my face, an enraged roar, and kicks me away from him. My back hits the railing of the deck with a sickening thud. I fall and immediately curl up into a fetal position, arms around my stomach, coughing and gagging. Vomit wells up in my throat, blood and bile streaming out of my mouth.*

*Jake stalks away, leaving me there as a cool mist starts to fall. I lay there, for I’m not sure how long. I drift in and out of an exhausted doze once my breath returns. All I can think of, outside of pain, is that they might have been here and left. Which means Jake is right. They left me here. They just left me here with him because they think this is the life I signed up for.*

*Moments before the rain starts in earnest, Jake comes back out, muttering under his breath and shaking his head at me. He lifts me to my feet and guides me inside.*

*Calmly, gently even, he supports most of my weight and helps me inside and to the bathroom. He turns on the tub, removes my wet, dirty nightgown, and lowers me into the bathwater. He’s silent the whole time, and I can’t help but feel that although his movements are gentle and actions kind, there’s a sort of denigration about it. Like he’s placating someone in hysterics, judging me for my actions that caused his outburst.*

*Somehow, the worst of it all happens during these gentle moments. He washes my body and my hair, rinses the soap from my body, even brushes my teeth. As he’s drying me, his lips fall on the back of my shoulder, making me flinch. Not noticing or maybe not caring, he continues a path of wet kisses to my ear. The sound of his breath paired with the wet intrusion of his tongue inside my ear makes me recoil. He freezes, but I feel more warned than comforted by his pause.*

*He continues to dry the water from my battered body, deep bruises already formed across my abdomen. He kisses them, moving up my body until he reaches my mouth. I don’t fight him, but the way he thrusts his tongue and waggles it around*

*in my mouth is enough to make the vomit start to well up again.*

*Burying his face in my neck, he sucks the skin while picking me up. I have to wrap my legs around his waist to avoid falling, his hands gripping my ass and thighs as he carries me to the bedroom.*

*I don't fight. I lay there, pliant and silent, while Jake consummates the worst day of my life. I'm not sure if his gentleness is an apology, or if his claiming me is a point he's making. Either way, I know that every hickey and mark where his fingers dig into me, every thrust against me as I lay there like a dead fish, is a breaking point for me.*

*When he's done, there's blood on the sheets, but he either doesn't notice or doesn't care. I don't say anything.*

*It doesn't matter.*

*Nothing matters.*



Sunlight pours in the hospital window. Dr. Cline is here again, with a nurse at her side. Jake is nowhere to be found again.

“Your husband is getting some coffee. He’ll be back quickly, I’m sure.” *Why does that sound like a warning?*

She continues, a look of understanding on her face. “Before I complete your discharge, I wanted to check in with you again about birth control. We didn’t get a chance to—”

“Yes,” I say, too quickly and firmly. I try to calm myself down. “I’d like birth control, please.”

“Okay, no problem. I can write you a prescription. Have you taken birth control pills before?”

“No ma’am. Are there... um, more permanent options?” I let my eyes connect with hers for the first time, hoping that she can see my desperation without knowing all of my other truths.

“I can administer a contraceptive injection today. It’ll last three months, and after that, you’ll need to follow up with a doctor at home to continue them.”

“I’d like to do that, please. Can it be done quietly?” I’m hoping she understands my meaning without me having to spell out for her that Jake wouldn’t appreciate it. I don’t want the fight, but more than that, I don’t want to get knocked up again.

“Of course,” she says sympathetically.

A tiny flicker of hope sparks to life in my chest. Maybe there’s still a way to get out of this and go home after all.





Present Day

## *Letters*

*Dear Guys,*

*I finally did it, I left. I packed a bag and took Jamie, and we escaped in the middle of the night.*

*Every shadow scares me. Every person might be looking for us. Every grey truck might be his.*

*I don't know what to do or where to go. I'm scared, and alone. I'm trying to put on a brave face for Jamie, but she's smarter than that. Still, I refuse to cry in front of her, to let her know just how terrified I really am. She needs to see me strong. She needs to believe, for as long as I can keep this up, that I am capable of keeping us safe.*

*But what if I'm not? There's danger no matter what we do. People preying on people in every crevice of this country, everyone trying to take advantage.*

*I'm out of money and running out of time to figure out our next steps.*

*I wish the universe would send me a sign.*

*Yours Always,*

*Me*

## Noli

“That’s not what we agreed on.”

The man looks down at me, clearly thinking that because I’m smaller than him, a woman, and a child in tow, he can bully me into not giving the amount we agreed on for the car. Unfortunately, because I’m on the run and don’t have time to track down another buyer, he’s probably going to get away with it.

“A grand is my final offer.” A full five hundred less than what we agreed on, which was already a dirt-cheap price. But I suppose it’s to be expected when you’re making shady deals in a shopping center parking lot.

Gritting my teeth, I glance back at Jamie. She’s sitting in the back of the car, watching my every move, wide eyed, quiet and patient as always. *Will she ever just get to be a kid?*

My brain does some mental math gymnastics. We’re supposed to pick up an RV tomorrow to deliver cross country, from Casper, Wyoming to Raleigh, North Carolina. I’ll get paid half up front, so we’ll have some money for gas and food, and then the other half on delivery. Once that’s done, I should have enough to buy a cheap cash car and move on from there.

“Twelve hundred.” I can make that work, even if it’s bullshit that I should have to renegotiate the whole thing, now that I’ve driven almost seven hundred miles to get here.

I notice the way he looks back at Jamie, and then at me. My anxiety and paranoia are running high, thinking that somehow he’ll know we’re on the run. I’m half expecting him to call the cops at any moment. But he looks at her, the splint on her arm, and then back at me. Even with my sunglasses and ball cap, I’m sure he can clearly see the purple welt along the right side of my face. My cheekbone is still swollen.

He nods. “Alright, twelve. You got a ride outta here?” The tone of his voice suggests that I don’t ask him for any more charity than the fair price he’s negotiated, despite it being less than originally agreed upon.

I nod confidently. “Bus comes at four. We’re headed down to Cheyenne to visit grandparents.” Finding this guy would be a feat, but if anyone tracked us this far, I’d prefer to keep them going in circles.

Everything I’ve done to get this far has been methodical. It took me months to come up with the plan, and then weeks to set things up just right. I ran across an article about getting paid to travel, and one of the methods it mentioned was transporting vehicles across the country—people would actually pay others to drive their cars, RV’s, or trucks from one location to another. I did some research and started following forums, and when I knew it was time to make our move, I found someone that was far from home, in a direction that I didn’t think anyone would assume I’d go in, that needed a vehicle transported. I used a secret email address to post in local forums for a cash buyer for the car. I was paranoid, so I always deleted my browser history before leaving the library. As a last fail safe, on the way here, I drove eight hours west and then dropped my cell phone in the bed of a truck with Texas plates, hoping that if it was being tracked, it would lead south. Only then did I start heading north, to meet this jackass to renegotiate a done deal in front of a busy shopping center with an ATM.

My anxiety doesn’t stop at over-preparing and worrying about some rando calling the police. I haven’t stopped worrying about every tiny possible flaw in my plan. Even this far away from Kansas, I’m still looking over my shoulder, convinced that Jake is right behind us. On the other hand, I’m convinced I might have put too much of the crushed up sleeping pills in his booze. *Did I kill him?* Am I going to be hunted down for murder? Will they understand that I did what I had to do, or will they lock me away and try to give my daughter to my now elderly aunt, who let every bad thing happen to me when I was young?

*There’s no way in hell I’ll let that happen.*

Once we pick up the RV, we’re headed nearly all the way to the east coast. And then, to be perfectly honest, I’m not sure what our next plan will be.

First thing's first though, I need this money. While the man steps over to the ATM, I get Jamie and our bags out of the back. A large black trash bag holds our pillows and blankets.

The man inspects the title, and we exchange cash for the car. Before he walks away, he gives me an uncertain look, glancing down at Jamie's arm once again. "Stay safe," he says before getting into the car and driving away.



“Do y’all need anything else?”

I startle and accidentally dribble water down my chin. Clearing my throat, I wipe my face and turn to the friendly man that was helping hand out trays. With my eye on Jamie to double check if she looks like she needs anything, I face his friendly but concerned face to answer. “Sorry, I was lost in my thoughts there. Didn’t mean to make a mess. I think we’re okay, thank you so much.”

“Are you sure? We’ve got some extra pasta and juice boxes left. And there are rice Krispie treats,” he says, practically singing the last few words in Jamie’s direction.

The promise of sweets certainly gets her attention. He bends down to her level and points over to where the treats are. She gives me an unsure glance.

“It’s okay, baby. I’ll watch you the whole way,” I assure her.

“Is it alright if I sit?” he asks, and I immediately stiffen.

*I’d rather you didn’t.* “Um, I—yeah, of course,” I tell him. I can’t bring myself to be rude to someone who is feeding a room full of strangers off the street. It’ll just draw more attention to us, anyway.

He sits across from me, looking over his shoulder to follow my eyeline where Jamie is nervously standing in line. I give her a reassuring smile.

“Poor thing’s a bit nervous,” the man says. His tone of voice is cordial and non-judgmental, but he’s definitely asking a question rather than making a statement.

“It’s been a tough week,” I say vaguely.

The man smiles kindly and folds his hands in front of him. I can tell he’s gearing up to say something—to ask questions or make judgements. It doesn’t take a genius to figure out why we’re here, both in need of a shower, Jaimie’s arm in a

makeshift splint, my face covered by sunglasses and a ball cap pulled down low to avoid being recognized. To hide the bruises. I know it's obvious. I see the knowing, pitying looks from the other people in line for a free meal.

"My name is Carl. I'm the pastor here," he says. "The looker over at the treat table is my wife, Maureen."

"It's nice to meet you. I'm Mag—" I answer on instinct, stopping myself midway. I shouldn't tell strangers our names, but also I don't ever want to be called *Maggie* again. "We're just passing through from out of town. Thank you for opening up your kitchen."

"It's our pleasure. Once upon a time, some people showed me similar kindness, and it changed my whole future. Now I'm finally in a position to give back, to take my tough weeks and turn them into turning points for other people. Kind of like a pay-it-forward sort of deal."

Pressing my lips together, I smile uncertainly, keeping my eyes on Jamie. She's almost reached the front of the line.

"Is she safe?" Carl asks, watching his wife speak to my daughter. The woman smiles and hands Jamie an armload of marshmallow treats.

I consider not answering the incredibly intrusive question, but I'm afraid that authorities will show up if I don't say something. "She is now," I say quietly.

"Well, I don't want to keep you, and I don't want to pry. I just wanted to let you know that, should you need any shelter or help with anything while you're in town, we work with a shelter downtown. It's just a few blocks from here. It's a safe place to stay, lots of other kids there, and a lot of other resources for women escaping bad circumstances. We provide meals there a few nights a week as well."

"Thanks, I—"

"Just consider it. I, um... I knew someone that went through something similar to what I'm pretty sure you're going through. I have respect for your strength and resolve to get out and provide your daughter with a safe home."

*Home. I don't even know what that is anymore.*

My eyes prickle again at the mention of something I may never be able to properly provide for my daughter. Where are we going to go? What are we going to do?

Jamie runs back with her armload of goodies and piles them in front of me. “She said most people like the ones with chocolate on them, so when I said we like the plain ones because we want to taste the marshmallows, she gave me a bunch of extras!”

“That’s great, baby,” I say, smiling back at her as my mind reels over what to do next. My plan only got us this far.

Now that I’ve dropped off the RV, we don’t have a free place to stay while on the road, and we can’t exactly just keep driving around forever. Jamie would probably appreciate sleeping in a bed instead of the back seat of the tiny hatchback car I bought the day before yesterday.

I didn’t think this through well enough.

Maybe the shelter is a good idea.

Carl slides the paper over to me and stands up. Inside the folded piece of paper is a line of scripture and a few folded bills. I start to call out to him before he walks away, not comfortable accepting too much of anyone’s charity. They’ve already fed us, and I do have some money in my pocket, although it isn’t much and tomorrow we might not be lucky enough to stumble upon a free meal. Humility burns my cheeks.

“Thank you,” I whisper.

“You’re welcome, and good luck.”

There are so many people at the shelter when we find it. I park on the side street while we watch as what looks like a hundred women, and many children, file into the old building. I recognize some of their haunted expressions—the fear, the uncertainty, the exhaustion.

“Mama, what are we doing?” Jamie asks me from the backseat. “Are we going in there?”



“I’m not sure yet, baby.”

The door to the building is being held open as the line is slowly processed. There’s a metal detector and two officers inside. And so far, I haven’t seen one person check in without pulling out an ID of some sort. What if they make me show identification and there’s some sort of warrant out for my arrest? Or an Amber Alert for Jamie?

A harsh knock on the driver’s side window makes me jump. Jamie shrieks. An officer is standing outside, bending over the window frame. I roll the window down a few inches, my heart thudding so violently I’m worried I won’t be able to speak without throwing up.

“Wha-what can I do for you, officer?”

“Ma’am, there’s no street parking here after five.”

“Oh! My goodness, I’m so sorry. We were just leaving anyway. Thank you, officer,” I say quickly and politely, cranking up the car and hoping he doesn’t ask me for any sort of license or registration. The tags on the car aren’t expired, thank goodness, but I haven’t done any sort of processing paperwork for the car and I don’t plan to.

It takes me three tries to crank the engine, and I grind the gears a bit, but the officer lets me drive away. I let out a breath.

A quick glance in the rear-view mirror shows me Jamie’s worried gaze out the window as we watch the line of women and children disappear into the distance.

“You know what... let’s spring for a motel. Just for tonight.”

The motel that we find has peeling wallpaper and smells heavily of cigarettes and weed. It’s the only one we can afford that had any vacancy. It’s not hard to see why. There’s no hot water, the bed is sunken in, and it’s loud, with thumping music coming through the walls and the parking lot. People walk right by the window constantly, talking, laughing, cussing, or fighting loudly. But it’s not the car, which is a nice change.

We make the most of it, turning up the television and watching cartoons until Jamie is so exhausted, she can't hold her eyes open anymore. I wrap myself around her little body and try to buffer most of the noise with pillows around her head.

"Mama, my arm hurts," she whimpers.

My heart sinks. I'm scared to take her to a doctor, but I think I'm more scared not to. Where can we go? We have no insurance, barely any money, and I'm terrified that they'll call the police or child protective services and take her away from me.

I shake out a dose of children's chewable ibuprofen and hand them to her. "I know, baby, I'm so sorry. I'm going to get you taken care of, okay? It's going to be alright."

She finally falls into a deep sleep. I'm beyond exhausted. I've been too afraid to sleep for more than short dozes at a time this entire trip. Tonight, I jerk awake at every little noise. Twice I think someone is jiggling the door handle. I'm starting to think that maybe the car was better. Parking lots and rest stops are dark and scary, but at least they're reasonably quiet.

Eventually, the noise quiets down. It must be late, or maybe it's early morning by now. I finally drift off to sleep, overthinking every step of the road we've taken so far, and where we should go next. I don't have a plan from this far out. Part of me thought we could just travel all summer, seeing the sights and enjoying our time together, pretending we aren't on the run. But I took for granted how hard it would be to make money on the road. We've stopped at libraries here and there to use the internet, but I haven't found any transport or other odd jobs that would be safe to take Jamie to.

I don't sleep for long. My fear and anxiety won't let me. Instead, I close my eyes and imagine where we might go next. When they open, my eyes are attracted to what seems like movement on the wall. I try to focus in the dim light of the rising sunset through the thick curtains. No matter how much I blink and focus my eyes, the wall still looks like it's moving, the surface rippling.

I try to convince myself that it isn't happening. It's just an illusion. The darkness is playing tricks on my eyes. My fatigued and fragile mind runs through every possible scenario until I've freaked myself out. There's just enough light coming through the threadbare curtains to know for sure that there is, in fact, something on the wall.

It's probably something gross. Oh god, what if this room is so infested in bedbugs that they're starting to climb the peeling walls? Or roaches?! *Fuck this.*

I jump out of bed and turn on the light, freezing at what I see.

On the wall are ladybugs. Dozens of them.

"Where did they come from?" Jamie asks sleepily.

"I don't know, baby." They weren't there last night, not even one. They aren't even near the door. *How did they get there?*

My eyes fill with tears, and as dumb and superstitious as it may be, I feel like everything's going to be okay. I choke out a little laugh. I haven't thought of my dad in a while, but right now, I feel like he's with us.

*Is this real?*

"I don't know," I repeat to myself, "but I know where we need to go now."

## Ryan

“Dude, stay still.”

“I’m just grabbing my phone. Calm down.”

“You say that, but I’m also pretty sure that you don’t want me to fuck up this line.” It irritates me to no end when people can’t fucking stay still when they’re in my chair. I’m pretty sure my brother does it on purpose, too.

“Don’t be a grouch,” he says with a dumbass smirk.

“Where do you get off calling me a grouch? You are the most surly motherfucker I know.”

“I would know,” he says simply. Bastard.

“I’m going to tattoo a giant dick on the back of your shoulder,” I say with a deadpan expression.

“Do it,” he says, daring me to make good on my threat.

“Don’t think I won’t...” *I totally would.*

The door chimes go off, and Dare walks in. He chuckles as he looks at our faces, letting himself behind the counter to come sit with us. He doesn’t even need to hear what was said to know we’re bickering.

“What the hell are you two going on about now?”

“He called me a grouch because I don’t want him moving around and fucking up my piece.”

“It’s my arm, Ry.”

“It’s my art, *Matty*.”

“Don’t call me that.”

Dare shakes his head at us, used to our bullshit. But there’s a weird look on his face.

“What’s up?” I ask him.

“Huh? Nothing, I’m good.”

I put the tattoo gun down on the table and lean back, crossing my arms. “Bullshit, Dare. I’ve known you your entire

life. We've lived together since we were eighteen years old. My tongue has been in your asshole more times than I can count—”

Matt throws his hands up. “Dude! I'm right here!”

“I'm just saying, I can tell by the position of your eyebrows on your face and your posture that something's up. So spill it.”

“Okay, yeah, he's right. You seem off.” Matt turns his body, so now we're both looking at Darius expectantly.

“I'm not entirely sure I can tell you.”

“What's that supposed to mean?” Matt asks.

Ahh, I get it. “Has to do with a patient?”

Dare nods at my observation, but then raises his hand in a ‘so-so’ gesture. This happens sometimes, where something happens at work and he desperately wants to tell me, but can't because of privacy laws and boring bullshit like that. It's actually one of my favorite games to try guessing, which he hates because this town is small enough that sometimes I get stuff right.

“Is Jessa Holcrum, or whatever her last name is now, pregnant again?” That poor girl has six kids. Maybe she's happy being barefoot and pregnant all the time, with all those brats running around constantly. I don't know, I don't like kids.

“Why would he be upset about that, though?” Matt's just glad none of them are his, considering how often he fucked her down the summer before we all moved away from home.

“I'm not upset,” Dare protests.

“Yes, you are,” we say in unison.

“It's creepy when you do that.”

I raise an eyebrow on purpose, knowing that Matt is likely making the same expression. “Stop deflecting. It just proves us right.”

Picking up the tattoo gun again and tapping Matt on the shoulder so he knows I'm starting again, I get back to shading the piece we've been working on all day. Since his job is intensely physical and he's constantly sweaty, we generally do larger pieces of work right before he takes a few days off. He's renovating part of the gym he opened two years ago after his stint in the military ended, so we're doing a huge piece that covers the back of his shoulder and half his back while he has the time off.

I have to put it down for good when Dare finally does speak.

"She's back."

All of the air is sucked out of the room. I watch my brother closely, at the ticking of his jaw and the way his bulky muscles tense. It's like watching a bomb ticking, getting closer to decimating everything in the vicinity if he's not diffused. His chest expands in an audible breath. As if breathing deeply will disperse the burning tension building inside him.

He doesn't need to say who. She might be the only one on earth that doesn't need to be named in any conversation where she might come up. Even Matt, who to my knowledge hasn't spoken of her at all in nearly fifteen years, knows immediately who Dare is talking about. But he asks anyway, unable to hide the disbelief in his voice.

"Who?"

"You know who," Dare says quietly, his eyes burning with empathy. He doesn't want to set him off, but with just a look lets him know he's not fooling anyone.

Matty stands up quickly, nearly knocking over the table. He stalks across the room and grabs his shirt.

"Matt, stop. Let me cover that first." But he doesn't listen, pulling the fabric over his fresh, and unfinished, tattoo. "That's some of my best work. Don't fuck it up!"

"Fuck you," he snaps, grabbing his wallet and keys from a drawer behind the front counter.

Darius steps in front of him. "Matt—"

“Get out of my way Dare, I’m fine. I don’t even care. I spent twelve years in the military forgetting all of this shit, and I’m fine. Sorry, I don’t particularly want to sit here and listen to the two of you moon over her. I’ll see you later.”

“We need to talk about this, Matty.” I say, standing to clean up the workstation. We’re obviously not going to be finishing this piece today.

“I’d prefer not to. And don’t fucking call me that.”

“No, you’d prefer to go beat on a bag of sand until your knuckles bleed and your new ink is irritated and fucked up rather than have an adult conversation, because you’re afraid it’ll bring up old feelings. But you’re a grown ass man now. Pull it together.”

“I’m FINE!” he yells.

“Obviously.”

Darius holds his hands out. “Y’all, stop. You’re brothers and we’re all family here, for fuck’s sake. Ryan, tone it down a notch. Matt, you can’t avoid this. I don’t know how long she’s going to be in town, but you’re liable to run into her. Wouldn’t you rather talk this out and be ready for whatever feelings might come up?”

“No, I wouldn’t,” Matt says as he makes his way to the door. “I don’t have any feelings about it, and I’m not interested in revisiting old feelings, okay?” The door chimes as he pulls it open and turns back to us, trying a little too hard to act casual. “I’ll see y’all later. Do you want me to lock this?”

“Yeah, sure. Are you coming home or?”

“I’ll stay in the loft again tonight. My stuff is still there.” Among the renovations he’s been doing to the gym, he’s been fixing up a space over the gym as a living space. He was living at the old Crawford place, but he wasn’t comfortable there, so he’s been living with Dare and me until now. As much as I like having our privacy as a couple, I’ve gotten used to having my brother with us. It’s like old times, except he’s even more serious and broody. If that is even possible.

“Alright.”

“Later, Matt.”

There are a few moments of silence after Matt turns the lock and closes the door, walking off into the darkening evening.

“Let him get it all out, and then he’ll be ready to face it. Or more ready, at least,” Dare says, resting a hand on my back as we watch Matt break out into a run at the end of the street.

“Who would’ve thought that it still affected him so much?”

“I’m going to be honest and say that I was surprised at how much it knocked the wind out of me.”

I nod, understanding. Even the knowledge that she’s in the same time zone is making my skin prickle with awareness. I want to know everything. Is she here alone? How much has she changed? Is she happy?

I settle with, “How is she?”

“Different. She was surprised to run into me,” he says with a small laugh. I feel like there’s so much he’s not saying, but I also understand that he has to maintain a certain amount of professional courtesy as well as not break privacy laws. “She has a daughter,” he says softly.

That gives me conflicting feelings. It makes me sad, maybe because it’s a reminder of the finality of that day years ago, when we saw her walk out of the courthouse on the arm of her new husband. I want to be happy for her even if I’m selfishly not, but when I think of her as a mother, it makes my chest feel full.

“Wow, she’d be a teenager by now, right?” I can’t believe it’s been nearly fifteen years. Are we really old enough to potentially have teenage children? I still feel sixteen most days, so this is an odd gut-check.

“This little girl was only eight, actually. I almost slipped up and asked about an older kid, but I didn’t want to pry or give away what I already knew. Didn’t seem appropriate.”



My fist absentmindedly rubs over my chest, soothing an ache that has always been there, but was forgotten, for a while. Dare is avoiding my gaze, putting my tools into the autoclave for sanitation. It's obvious to me that there's more, but he's struggling to know what and how much he should share.

"Are you okay?" I ask, moving to stand behind him and wrap my arms around his waist. He sighs into me, his spine melting into my chest. He closes the machine and starts it up, he turns around and rests his head on my shoulder. When I finally coax him into looking at me, his eyes are red from holding back tears.

"Jesus, Dare, what's wrong?" I say, kissing him and pulling him in for a hug. I've only seen him this upset one other time, when he had to tell a patient's parent that their three-year-old had markers for leukemia.

"It's, um... it's not my business, but..."

"Dare, you know I'd never tell anyone. I know you aren't supposed to talk about patients, especially when I know who you're talking about, but I'd never say anything. You can talk to me, get whatever this is off your shoulders."

He clears his throat, straightening his shoulders. "She, Noli, that is... I think maybe she's been hurt, or abused? She was really, I don't know, cagey about answering questions. I felt like maybe she was scared."

My spine stiffens.

"It's nothing I know for sure, of course. But the way she was acting, combined with a bruise I saw, and the little girl's arm..."

"You think someone's hurting the girl, too?"

"I don't know for sure," he says quickly. "She deflected a lot, and seemed really jumpy. When I asked what happened, Jamie was silent, and Noli answered with some kind of excuse that didn't sound truthful."

"Jamie?"

"That's the little girl's name."

A small smile crosses my face. “She named her after her dad.”

“Yeah, I noticed that too. It’s the only smile I got out of her, actually. But, Ryan...” he takes a breath, struggling with whatever it is he wants to say. “Everything about her said ‘flight risk’ to me. She had this nervous energy that seemed to get worse the more questions I asked, like she’d made a terrible mistake coming here.”

“We should go talk to her,” I say, already walking.

“Ryan! We can’t just hunt down my patients and interrogate them—”

“It’s not just a patient, though, Dare. It’s Noli, and she’s hurt and scared... And if there’s any chance she might just disappear, don’t you think we should make sure she’s safe? Isn’t that what’s most important?”

He looks pensive, finally answering, “I don’t even know where she is. She could already be gone for all I know.”

“It’s a small town. If she’s still here, it shouldn’t be hard to find her. Come on, I’ll drive.”

I don’t know what takes me straight to her father’s old house first, but my intuition serves me well. There are lights on in the house, despite it being empty for a few years now. A family was renting it for a long time, but there’s been no one since they moved away. The ‘for rent’ sign is still in the front yard.

We sit there for a long time, staring at the old house. Until I notice the curtains move and am sure she knows that someone is out here. I’m torn; I don’t want to scare her by continuing to sit here like creepers, and I don’t want to leave without seeing and talking to her, but I feel frozen in my seat. Like if I move, none of this will be real and she will disappear again.

Dare and I make eye contact across the car, and he drops his hand down to hover over the center console. “You ready?” he asks.

I place my hand on top of his, smiling at the memories of all the times we did this before, as if we're still on the JV football team, getting ready to play in the championship. Instead of making my hand flat on top of his, though, I lace my fingers through this.

“Yeah, let's go.”

## Noli

Tucking my daughter into bed in the same room I slept in as a child is surreal. Of course, it's completely different now. The walls have been painted, the furniture moved around, but the bed frame and dresser are the same. The one thing that stands out the most, however, is a framed drawing on the wall. It's a magnolia tree sketched in charcoal—it's *our* magnolia tree. I feel positive that I recognize the work, but why would it be here? Did the owners buy it from him, or did he maybe gift it to them?

I don't even know who the owners are. I didn't even really expect the house to still be here, much less in such great condition. And I certainly didn't expect it to be vacant, furnished, and have running water and electricity. To top it all off, the spare key was still in the same spot my dad always kept it in. It was all a little too easy, actually. But the temptation of a real bed and a hot shower were too good to pass up.

We're nearly out of money, and finding odd jobs on the road with a kid has been even harder than I thought it would be. The main priority—my *only* priority—is to keep her safe, and that's been harder than I ever anticipated. I thought it would be easier.

The pleading look she gave me when we walked into this old, empty house gutted me. After all she's been through, all she wants is a bed in a safe place. It's the least I can do to give her that, and just hope no one finds us here. We made a deal to keep the light and power usage to a minimum so we don't put the owner out. I didn't have the heart to explain trespassing to her.

Now that I'm here, standing in the dark with my own thoughts, I realize how stupid and impulsive it was to return. I probably shouldn't have come here. But after our scare two nights ago in Raleigh, I just started driving and ended up close enough to home to start recognizing signs. I needed the comfort of the last place I was happy and safe.

I don't ever remember there being much crime or anything scary happening in our little town growing up, although I am sure there was. It helps that Matty and Ryan's dad was chief of police. Knowing this helped me come to terms with trespassing—maybe the police wouldn't be too harsh on me if we're found out.

Walking through the halls of my childhood home, with my daughter tucked in and safe in my old bedroom, I allow myself a moment of weakness. Sinking onto the bottom step, staring at the spot where I found my father, I let the tears that I've been holding in for too long fall until I'm choking back sobs.

*What am I going to do?*

We can't stay here. It's the first place they'll look for me, and now I've been recognized. I couldn't wait any longer to bring Jamie to a doctor, and I knew I could afford to bring her to the walk-in clinic that I went to when I lived here. I gave them a fake name and paid cash at check-in, but within ten minutes they knew everything I'd given them was falsified.

I wasn't expecting Dare—*Doctor Darius Bishop*—to be the attending physician. I mean, I always thought he was good-looking, but adulthood suits him. No man has the right to be so beautiful. He's tall and lean, with a chiseled jaw and delicious stubble replacing the boyish softness that I remember. His rich, dark skin sets off the impossible lightness of his brown eyes, making them shine like gemstones.

My tears stall in their tracks and my mouth waters as I remember seeing him again for the first time in years.

What a mortifying way to run into someone that you're apparently still ridiculously attracted to. Not to mention how inappropriate it was for me to be even having those thoughts while my daughter is getting x-rays and a cast for a broken arm that's been neglected for two weeks.

*I'm a terrible mother.* Or my brain is so addled from fear and sheer exhaustion that I'm not capable of thinking straight.

Out of habit, I pull an old notebook out of my bag. It was one of the things I made sure to leave with when we fled.

More than half the pages have been torn out, and the cover has seen better days. Clicking open the pen, I start to write:

*Dare,*

*I saw you today. The real you, not the version of you I see only in my dreams. You're so... grown. And yeah, okay, I know I'm grown too, but it's jarring to see someone for the first time in almost twenty years. It really drives home that we're not the people we used to be. My body and heart know this, but seeing it...*

*Oh my god, you're still gorgeous. And a damn DOCTOR?! I mean, I'm honestly not surprised about that—more surprised that you're still hanging around this small town, instead of working in some big fancy research lab like you thought you would.*

*I've never been as simultaneously happy and horrified to see someone as I was today when we ran into you. Happy to see a friendly face, to see someone I've loved for so long. Someone I've thought and fantasized about my entire life. But then the horror of you seeing me like this, to see the pity in your eyes as I deflected question after question.*

*You don't want to know, Dare. You just don't.*

*Meanwhile, I've been replaying how obvious I was, gaping at you while you took such gentle care of my daughter's arm.*

*Were you disgusted with what you saw? What I would give to have you look at me the way you did when we were thirteen, after you gave me my third first kiss.*

*I don't think I'll see you again. I can't stay here, in the one place I've always wanted to be. Knowing we need to leave, and soon, aches in ways I can't describe. Especially knowing that at least one of you is still h—*

Movement outside jolts me to my feet, nearly knocking the table over. *Fuck, someone's here.*

Running to check the front window, safely hidden in the shadows, I see a Jeep in the driveway. Whoever is inside is just sitting in the car. Waiting?

Maybe they're waiting for the police?

“Shit. Shit. Shit. Shit. SHIT.”

I stand up and back away from the door, in a dark corner where I can hide but still see through a window to the front porch.

Two car doors slam. I hold my breath, listening to footsteps walking up the front steps, coming to a stop on the porch. I can't see them clearly, but I can see the silhouettes of two large men, lit from behind by the streetlamp outside.

They speak in hushed voices.

“She's definitely in there. The lights were on when we pulled in and I'm pretty sure that's the same car in the carport.”

*Ohmyfuckingsgod*, they know who I am? Who are they? Did Jake send them? Is he with them?

My heart is thrumming so hard, I'm afraid it'll give my hiding spot away. I can barely hear their murmured conversation over the rapid beating.

“Maybe she's asleep. We can come back in the morning.”

“What if she leaves before we get the chance?!”

“Come on, Ry, let's—”

“No, Dare. No. I want to see her. I need to see her.”

*Ryan? Darius?*

Oh my god, *they're here?*

I want to run to the door, fling it open, and jump into their arms, but I'm frozen to the spot. We aren't thirteen anymore. What if they don't like who I've become? I don't think I could stand their rejection. I never considered that I would see them

again, even when I decided to stop here. I assumed they'd be in the city like we planned, or out traveling the world being amazing at everything they set their minds to. Now that I know they're here, I both want to be near them and want to run far, far away. It twists in my gut like a knife.

It's silent outside now. I think they've gone, but the moment I realize that is also the moment that I realize I can't handle not getting to see them while I'm here.

"No!" I gasp, standing from my crouched position, running in my sock feet across the hardwood floors and sliding into the glass panes with a thud.

If I leave tomorrow, at least I can say I was brave enough to look them in the eyes.

Ripping the door open, I'm expecting to have to run down the driveway to catch them, but I open the door to find both of them standing just inches away from me. Ryan's hand is raised like he was about to knock, Dare's hands on him as if holding him back.

My breath leaves me in an audible rush, as if I've been hit. I all but crumple in on myself. It feels like my heart is retaliating against me, a sharp shock of pain fissuring through the useless organ, like someone's used a defibrillator to jump start the beating again. The shock hurts, but brings me back to life.

I don't even have words, but if I did, I couldn't get them out. The sight of them renders me completely rooted to the spot, unable to move as if suspended in the thick summer humidity.

It's not until I'm crushed to Ryan's chest that I shake myself out of this stupor, throwing my arms around him and gripping for dear life just to get closer. Dare steps beside us and joins our embrace and my heart lurches painfully again, little pieces of me being put back together.

I sob into Ryan's neck, great heaving cries muffled by strong arms as the three of us lower to the ground. We stay tangled that way until my bawling subsides. Ryan holds me



against his broad chest while Dare tenderly strokes my hair, murmuring comforting little affirmations like, “It’s going to be okay,” and “We’ve got you now.”

It occurs to me that he doesn’t even know what’s wrong to know it’s going to be okay, and they don’t have me for long because I can’t stay. But I let myself melt into their embrace anyway, thankful for the first bit of comfort I’ve felt in nearly twenty years.

Once I’ve calmed down, I pull back, wiping my eyes. I’m thankful for the dark. The waning moon casts just enough glow to see each other, but not make out any distinct features.

“I’m sorry,” I say, feeling ridiculous and embarrassed at my outburst. “I wasn’t expecting you.”

Ryan chuckles. “You didn’t think you could come home and avoid us, did you?”

“I didn’t know you were still here.” I need to change the subject. My eyes travel over him, soaking in the details I can make out in the dim light. He’s tall and broad, with strong arms that are covered in tattoos. “You’ve, uh... grown up,” I say, my voice coming out breathy.

*Oh, my god I did not just say that.* I am not trying to flirt to change the subject!

“Yeah, so did you.”

Cringe. How much of my body, changed so much over the years, could he feel? I look down at my clothes, an old pair of boxer shorts and an overlarge t-shirt that I found folded in one of the dressers. It seemed like they’d been in there for a while, but they were clean. All of our clothes went into the washing machine. It’s been days since we visited a laundromat and we each only have two outfits with us.

“I, uh, wasn’t expecting company,” I say, self-consciously pulling the t-shirt away from my sweaty skin.

“I meant it in a good way.”

A piercing over his right eyebrow catches the light. My hand reaches up to touch it lightly before I pull back. *What am*

*I doing?*

“I remember when Matty wrote and told me about you getting this, about how mad your dad was,” I’m laughing now, remembering how I used to close my eyes and pretend I was there with them. I could imagine the look on Chief West’s face so vividly that it was easy to make believe I’d seen it in real life. “I see you added to it?” There’s another piercing through one nostril and his septum, and a stud set just under the swell of his bottom lip.

“There’s a lot more you can’t see,” Dare says, and my entire body flushes at a suggestion that I’m not even sure he’s actually making. I’m thankful for the dim light, hiding my reaction from them.

Subject. Change. Again.

I lean back against the wood siding of the house, pulling my legs in and hugging my knees.

“So, Doctor Darius Bishop has a nice ring to it,” I say to Dare, impressed but in no way surprised. He always was so fucking smart. He shrugs like it’s no big deal. “And what about you, Ryan West? What are you up to these days?”

“Oh, you know, disappointing dad and helping more people look like me. I have a small tattoo shop in town.”

“Wow, we’re getting progressive here, huh?”

“It’s a work in progress, but we’ve been getting pretty good at pushing people’s comfort zones,” Dare says jokingly.

As we’re catching up, I notice that Dare and Ryan haven’t moved away from each other. Still sitting on the porch in front of my front door—not *my* front door anymore, but someone’s front door—they lean into each other so naturally, it’s obvious that they’ve been together forever.

“I’m happy to see you’re still together,” I say without thinking. Knowing they had each other all these years, that they were happy and in love, gives me some semblance of peace.

They smile at each other and then at me, and I'm glad I haven't made anything awkward.

"How's Matty?" I ask tentatively. I know he was the one that was hurt the most when I stopped writing. I'd received a few messages that were mad or upset. Hell, we'd had entire fights over email as teenagers, before everything... well, before everything took a turn. I never stopped feeling guilty for ghosting him.

Ryan answers. "He's good. He moved back a couple of years ago, actually. He's opened a gym in the old theater building."

"Oh wow, that's great. Geesh, a doctor and entrepreneur brothers. You've all done so well. I can't believe you're all still living in this small town. I always expected that you'd all move to the city or something." I'm genuinely happy for them, and it's easy to forget for a moment that I've done basically nothing with my life, until one of them asks.

"We did, for a while. Decided we'd rather be here, though. It's home, ya know? But what about you? What have you been up to, Noli? What brings you back?"

"Noli. God, it feels good to hear that name again," I say with a wide grin. I'm deflecting, but it's true. Being called the wrong name for two decades does something to your brain. Hearing it is like a vivid reminder of who I really am. It strikes something visceral inside of me, and I close my eyes to soak it in, letting out a soft sigh. Another little piece of myself that I've lost along the way snaps into place with another loud thud of my heart.

When I open my eyes, both of them are watching me with dark, sad, serious looks. I turn away, looking out over the lawn.

"I can smell the magnolias from here. It's so familiar. If I close my eyes for long enough, I think I might be able to pretend I'd never left. It's the smell of all my happiest memories, and some of the hardest ones, too. I could smell it on your letters..." The words get caught in my throat and another tear drips over my lashes. "It's funny how you don't

realize just how much you've missed something until you sense it again."

They let me ramble, but eventually I don't have anything left to say, so we sit in silence. I don't want the night to end, because I know that tomorrow we'll have to move on. I don't want to let them go, not again. But I don't have a choice.

*I don't have a choice. I've never had a choice.*

I repeat it like a mantra in the back of my head as I wipe away the tracks the tear made on my cheek and stand.

"It's getting late," I say, smiling like I'll see them tomorrow. It takes every ounce of strength I have left not to sob some more.

They stand too, understanding the polite dismissal for what it is. Dare takes one of my hands in his, threading his fingers through mine. The way I'm squeezing his fingers is probably too obvious. His eyes cut to Ryan, who steps closer to me.

I didn't realize just how tall they both are until now, especially Ryan. That extra inch or so is almost menacing as he takes another step, hovering over me. Instinctively, I shrink back, and he pauses. Instead of coming closer, he reaches up and cradles my face in his big palm. At first, he looks deep into my eyes, so intensely that I trick myself into believing he might kiss me. I should be ashamed of how much I want him to. But then his gaze moves over the still-healing wound on the side of my face, down to the nearly healed cut across my bottom lip, and then back up to my eyes.

There's a mixture of pain and anger in his expression. "Noli—"

My name on his lips is soothing, persuasive even. But there's no point in this conversation, so I cut him off. "I'm so glad I got to see you both." I look over at Dare. "Thank you so much for taking care of my little girl."

Another two breaths, and I'll walk away. I have to. I don't have a choice.

*One. Two.*

One of the pieces of myself that came back together in the past hour wrenches free again, but I twist the doorknob and back through the door. Tomorrow, they might tell their parents or their friends that I was here. They'll figure out that I wasn't supposed to be here. A few days from now, they might get a visit from some police officers, asking where I might have gone.

“Noli—”

“I should get to bed. Jamie will get scared if she wakes up and I'm not there.”

And I close the door, knowing I'll never see them again.

## Darius

The door clicks shut softly, but with a finality that shudders through my bones. Admittedly, I wasn't sure about coming here tonight, but now that we are, there's no way I'm leaving.

"No," I say, with a firmness that surprises even myself. Before she can turn the lock, I'm forcing the door back open.

I'm not an intrusive or intimidating person, and I don't think I've ever even considered forcing my presence on someone. But this is... different.

She needs us, I know she does. Even if she doesn't want us, even as friends, there is no doubt in my mind that she's in trouble and doesn't want to tell us.

Right now, that's all this is about. I wouldn't presume to hope for more, although I knew from the moment I saw her that I still love her and would do anything in my power to protect her. I always have and always will, no matter what happened in the past, or what happens from this point forward.

This isn't about what I want or need, this is about saving Magnolia. From what or who, I'm not sure. Maybe just from herself. Whatever it takes, I'm not letting her run from us.

"No," I repeat, more softly this time. She's backing away, trembling. "Please don't be scared, Noli. I'd never hurt you, baby."

Her expression darkens, and it occurs to me she's heard these words before. My stomach twists with rage and sorrow. I had a strong idea of the possibility that she'd been hurt, but watching her crumble before me now feels like confirmation.

Ryan sees it too. His spine stiffens, his intimidating presence filling up the room as his voice drops menacingly. "Who hurt you?"

Her eyes fly in a hundred directions, avoiding us. Possibly looking for a way to escape. Unconsciously, we've backed her into a corner. Her back is against the wall, and we've spread out to approach her at different angles.

I back off immediately, not wanting to scare her further. Instead, I grab Ryan's arm and pull him back, too. "Ryan, wait. Give her some space."

"She's had twenty years of space, Dare. Look where that's gotten us."

"Yeah, and she needs another minute. Look at her. She's terrified," I whisper. He looks at her again, and his expression changes. His entire face and posture transforms, eyebrows knit together, dark eyes pained to see things from this different point of view.

"Shit, Noli, I'm sorry. We'll hang back, but please, just talk to us. Just talk."

"I don't have anything to talk about," she croaks out, tears and fear making her voice hoarse. "I think you should go."

"No," I say again. "I'm sorry, but we can't leave until we know you're safe. We can help, Noli—"

"You don't know that!" she snaps. I can feel her gearing up to lash out. How do you console someone who is so afraid they can't see the forest for the trees?

"Tell us what's going on, and we'll see if we can help."

"There's no point. I don't need help, and there isn't anything to tell."

"You're lying," I say softly, but firmly.

Thinking it'll help us seem less frightening, I flick the switch on the wall next to me. The harsh light fills the rooms. As our eyes adjust, her face comes into focus and I wince at the sight. It's possibly less scary for her, without the shadows to make us look menacing. But it's infinitely more frightening for me, looking into her sunken eyes and seeing the proof of her fear and pain.

I saw her in the light earlier today, but she was wearing a hat and large sunglasses. The discoloration of a bruise was still apparent, but in the light now I can see how bad the damage actually is. It's not just a bruise, but a deep cut that looks like it needed stitches weeks ago.

Ryan grunts like the air was just knocked out of him. His voice is deep and dangerous in a way that I've never heard from him before. "Who. Did. This?"

I meant to give her space, but I can't ignore the wound. Even though she shrinks away from me, I crowd her, taking her hands in mine and examining the wound. "That's going to scar, but it doesn't look infected or anything. It's closed nicely. The butterfly bandages were smart."

"I know how to take care of a little cut," she says quietly, keeping her eyes down and not looking at me.

"What I'm hearing is this has happened enough that you're used to treating your own wounds?" Ryan says, his voice barely above a growl. I shoot him a sharp look, silently urging him to calm down before he scares her off again.

"It's really fine. I'm fine. It's time for you to go, though," she says, moving to turn the light back off.

I block her efforts, covering the switch with my hand. "We'll give you some space, but we need to talk. We aren't going anywhere until we have a better understanding of what's going on. I don't want to wake up tomorrow and find you disappeared without a way of tracking you down, because I get the impression that you're not going back there to him."

"Let us help you, Noli. Please," Ryan says, the growl in his voice no longer present, replaced with gentle persuasion.

"You can't help me, Ryan. You can't, okay?" She turns her attention to me, shrugging and softly shaking her head. "You're right that I'll be gone in the morning. I can't stay here, for multiple reasons. I shouldn't have stopped here in the first place. It was stupid of me."

"Why would coming home be stupid?" I ask.

"Because it's the first place anyone would come looking," Ryan answers, not taking his eyes off her. "Tell me I'm wrong."

She doesn't say anything, just looks away from him and down at her feet. I reach for her hand, drawing her into my arms, wanting to hug and comfort her, to show her that she's



safe here with us. Her body is stiff and unyielding, not willing to let go like she did outside. Slowly, I lead her across the foyer to the living room, pulling her to sit on the couch with me. She sits, pulling a throw pillow against her chest, her legs tucked beneath her.

“What about Jamie?” I ask, desperate for any angle that will get her talking. It’s a bit of a low blow, but we have to get her to see some sense. “Assuming you’re running from something, or someone, how long can you stay on the road like this?”

Her gaze is fixed on the empty space of the room, like she’s pretending she’s anywhere else but here.

“How long have you been running?”

“About two weeks,” she whispers. “I don’t even know if they’re looking for me yet.”

“Who?”

“My... my husband. My aunt. The police.”

“Did your husband do this to you?” Ryan asks, straining to keep his voice even.

Her head moves infinitesimally, the slightest nod to confirm our assumptions.

“And Jamie’s arm?” I ask. She doesn’t need to answer beyond the tears that suddenly spill over her cheeks, a dam bursting inside her.

“He’s always had... anger issues, but he never turned them on her until the last few months. I was there the first time. She didn’t even say or do anything. She was just in the wrong place at the wrong time, and he shoved her.” She swallows hard and lets out a shaky breath. “I thought I could just keep her out of his way, stay in front of her at all times. But I was wrong, and...” she covers her mouth with the back of her hand, a sob exploding from her chest.

Ryan and I exchange looks while she tries to compose herself. If I know Ryan at all, he’s planning a road trip to find and end this bastard. Honestly, if I didn’t know it would cause

her more pain or trouble, I might consider it, too. But we need to do this right if we're going to truly keep her safe.

"I drugged him before we left. I haven't seen any signs that he's come after us yet. What if I accidentally killed him? I've been checking the local news on the internet whenever we pass a library, but there's been nothing mentioned."

"That means he hasn't called the police, either. Hasn't reported you or Jamie missing."

"It's a small town and everyone knows him. They'll notice us gone, eventually."

"Maybe he'll tell them you moved out?" I say, trying to think of an easy answer for why there haven't been signs of him looking for his wife and daughter.

"No, you don't know Jake. He's not going to be made a fool of in public."

"If they suspect what's been going on at home—"

She cuts me off with a bitter laugh. "They know. Everyone knows."

That makes my blood boil. How is it possible that people could know that a man was beating his wife and turn a blind eye? And their little girl, too?

"It goes a lot of ways, actually," she says, reading the questions on my mind. "I'd say most of them probably just look the other way because it isn't their business. But the rest of them think I deserve it. I haven't exactly been a popular member of society since I moved there."

"Why in the hell would anyone deserve that?" Ryan asks, sitting across from her on the coffee table, pointedly looking at the scar on her face.

"Well, there's the 'spare the rod' crowd that believes a man should punish his wife for her wrongdoings. Yes, I'm serious," she says, holding up a hand to Ryan's protest. "I can't tell you how many times some well meaning old lady patted me on the shoulder and told me just to do my best to please him, and that I'd learn in time."

“That’s disgusting,” I say under my breath. She shrugs.

“It’s the way it is there.”

“What about the others?” Ryan interjects. “Some of the people that think you deserved it had these nonsense religious ideals. What about the rest of them?”

Noli takes a deep breath and looks down at the pillow she’s holding. She picks at the frayed edges of a seam. “I don’t have a good reputation in that town. More than a few people got the wrong idea about me and decided a long time ago that I deserved whatever I got.”

“Why the fuck would anyone think someone deserves to live like that?” Ryan’s voice starts to raise again, and I have to nudge him with my foot to get his attention. He ignores my warning look, pressing her. “What could you possibly have done to make anyone hate you so much?”

Surprisingly, she answers. “Grew a woman’s body before I understood how to hide it, accused my uncle of unsavory things, seduced the town’s favorite bachelor, got knocked up at seventeen.” Her voice is small, and she doesn’t look up from her pillow.

*Got knocked up at seventeen.* She doesn’t know we already know this little piece of information, but now there’s an opportunity to ask more questions about that.

“You have another child?” I ask.

“No... I, uh, miscarried a few days after we got married.” Her forehead scrunches up, as if trying to remember something. “Weird question...did y’all—”

“We came to visit on the day you got married,” Ryan says. “We’d just graduated and wanted to surprise you. We showed up and overheard some things at the diner you worked at.. We didn’t know you had a boyfriend or anything like that. It was just dumb teenage boy stuff.”

“So you *were* there,” she says. “I wonder how different things would have been if I’d been working that day.”

“We would have taken you out of there in a flash,” Ryan says.

“I was underage and pregnant,” she points out.

“We still would have,” I say, agreeing with Ryan. “The only reason we didn’t say anything to you was because we thought you were happy. We didn’t want to ruin your special day.”

“I actually thought he was making the whole thing up.” Noli laughs darkly. “Jake told me that people were saying three guys showed up to see me. He wasn’t a fan, especially after he opened a letter that he wasn’t meant to see.” Her eyes flit up to meet Ryan’s, blushing furiously as she returns her attention to the pillow.

I desperately want to know what that look was about, but I can ask Ryan later. Right now, we need to focus on what we’re going to do to help Noli.

“I really do believe we can help you. We can get some advice from Matt and Ryan’s dad, and hire a lawyer—”

“I don’t need you to do all this.”

“Maybe not, but we want to. Just, please Noli, don’t run away. Give us two days to see if I’m right. For Jamie’s sake,” I add, probably unfairly, but I’ll do what I need to do to keep them safe.

Noli stares at both of us fearfully, but nods. The relief in the room is palpable. She rests her head back on the couch. “Two days,” she whispers.

## Noli

Soft light filters in through the living room windows, disorienting me momentarily. Blinking myself awake, I remember where I am and realize that I'm not alone. My cheek is rested against a muscular chest, my leg thrown over a denim covered thigh. We're still on the couch. I must have fallen asleep last night while we were trying to come up with a plan. But how did I end up in this position? I've never once cuddled up to Jake while sleeping.

There's a small pool of drool on Ryan's black t-shirt. Because why not make this more embarrassing?

He stirs beneath me, pulling me tighter against his body. I freeze at first, but then my body rebels against my instinct to flee and relaxes against him. I've never felt comfortable sleeping next to another person. And yet, I can't think of a time when I have ever slept more soundly.

Ryan shifts, and rather than tucked up against his side, I end up practically on top of him. My breath catches, his thick thigh positioned precariously between my bare thighs. The boxers, which were too large to begin with, have ridden up so much that they are barely covering anything. The pressure of the fabric pulled against me, combined with the muscular leg pressing between my legs, causes a throbbing that I'm not entirely sure I'm comfortable with.

The hand on my back rubs down my spine, landing on the bare part of my ass. Ryan groans, pulling me tighter against his body. My hip presses against the large—*I mean, holy shit, what is that*—bulge in his jeans. I gasp and his eyes flutter open.

His eyes blink rapidly, clearing away his sleepy confusion. "Uh, hi," he says, voice deliciously rough with sleep. "I'm sorry, I didn't..." he makes a face, a cross between amused and embarrassed. "I had such an interesting dream and then I woke up to, uh, this."

"Same. Except for the dream part, I guess." Wide eyed, I move to slide off his lap, but he shifts at the exact same

moment, his hands holding me at my waist to move himself from under me.

Our simultaneous movement just presses our bodies together harder, a shock of electricity shooting from my clit directly up my spine. An involuntary whimper escapes me, a sound that Ryan definitely heard based on the way he freezes. Neither of us moves. I'm torn between running away and rolling my hips against him, chasing that feeling. Judging by the pained look on his face, Ryan is thinking something similar.

His hands move from my waist to my hips, his abs flexing under his tight shirt as he lifts himself, and I think he is going to kiss me. But when he squeezes my hip to pull me tighter against his body, his fingers unknowingly dig into a sensitive spot. I suck in a breath before I can hide my reaction.

"Shit, I hurt you," he says, pulling his hands away from me. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," I say, embarrassed at my behavior now that the bubble has popped. I try to scramble back off his lap, but he follows my movements. Without squeezing my sides again, he holds me against him while he moves into a sitting position and I'm now straddling his lap. He looks in my eyes first, but I don't get the unexpected, sexy vibes that I was getting a minute ago. Instead, there's a different kind of tension present in his eyes and the firm set of his jaw.

*Did I upset him?*

"I'm sorry," I say quietly as I tentatively try to get up again.

Conditioned as I am, I freeze when he continues to hold me in place. I don't try to get up again, zoning out a bit as his eyes leave mine and travel down.

He bunches the t-shirt in his hands, raising it to expose my torso. Tears spring to my eyes, partly because I'm afraid, but also because I'm mortified by the way my body looks. The scars, stretch marks, bruises old and new. My eyes roll to the ceiling, pretending I'm somewhere else and trying to keep the

tears at bay. Even I am sick of how much I've been crying since these two have been here.

Ryan's grip on my shirt tightens as he uncovers the majority of the bruises. I'm thankful that he doesn't try to slip the boxers down to expose the entire area of mottled skin. He does, however, lift the shirt higher, tracking the various scars and bruises over my stomach and back. Just before the shirt lifts high enough to expose my breasts, he stops. He continues to stare at my body, that tense look that I can't read on his face.

Some of these I deserved, I want to tell him.

"Mommy?"

*Oh!* "Hey baby, good morning!"

"Dr. Bishop is in our kitchen making us pancakes." Her little face is scrunched up, unable to decide between confusion and excitement.

"Is he now?" I say, laughing, as I finally climb off Ryan's lap, smoothing down my clothes as I stand.

Jamie leans to the side to look behind me. "Who are you?" She asks curiously, eyeing his imposing figure warily.

Ryan quirks an eyebrow. "Who are *you*?"

Her eyes widen, looking back at me with alarm. I smile and nod, letting her know it's okay.

"I'm Jamie Paige Denin," she answers, confidently at first, but then she lowers her voice. "Are we in trouble for being here?"

My face gets hot. I managed to completely forget that we're basically squatters. I agreed to give them two days, so we're going to have to find somewhere else to stay. I definitely don't have enough money to stay at the bed-and-breakfast, but I can probably swing a night at the motel on the outskirts of town. I need to figure out how to make some money, anyway.

I'm about to start explaining myself, but Ryan's hand comes down on my shoulder, answering Jamie before I can open my mouth to speak.

“Nah, we know the owners,” he says, giving her a little wink and walking to the half bathroom.

*Great.* They’ve known the whole time that I wasn’t supposed to be here? This is somehow better and worse. Just another tiny layer of shame for the circumstances I’ve gotten myself into.

“Good morning!” Dare declares as we walk into the kitchen. There is a literal mountain of pancakes in the middle of the table, a tray of bacon, and he’s transferring a huge pan of scrambled eggs into a bowl.

“Um, good morning. What’s all this?”

“I was hungry,” he says, looking down at the table. “I might have overcompensated a bit, but we’re three growing boys, so I’m used to making a lot of food. Hey Jamie, you wanna grab some silverware out of that drawer under the microwave?”

“Three?”

“I invited Matty. I hope that’s okay?”

My heart thrums in my chest anxiously. “Of course. Listen... I planned to leave some money to the owners. I just wanted to be home, and the key was in the same spot.”

“It’s not an issue.”

“Really though, I—”

“Hey, speak of the devil...”

I turn around slowly, wishing like hell, once again, that I was wearing more clothes. Why didn’t I go get dressed the moment I had a chance? Put some makeup on? Anything?

Matty looks back at me, so different and yet the same. It’s certainly easier to tell him apart from Ryan now, just based on the sheer size of him. Matty’s dark hair is close cropped, the longer part on top brushed back, where Ryan’s hair is longer and falls into his face. He doesn’t have any piercings that I can see, but he has a fair amount of ink on his arms. His posture is stick-straight and tense, and he doesn’t look particularly happy to see me.



My eyes fall to the floor. “Hey, Matty.”

“*Maggie*,” he greets, and he may as well have stabbed me in the heart.

The other two might believe that there’s still a little of the old me left, but Matty seems to instinctively know better. Dare’s hand rests on my shoulder from behind me. I flinch a little, but he doesn’t move his hand, standing next to me. It feels like he’s backing me up, but it’s unnecessary.

Ryan steps into the kitchen next to Matty, and Jamie gasps. She drops the last fork on its place setting and comes to stand right in front of the two men. Hands on her hips, she looks up at the two giant men, looking back and forth. I’m not sure that she’s seen many men as large, or as decorated, as these two men, but seeing two of them standing side by side is, admittedly, quite a sight.

They’re nearly as tall as Dare is, and they both have the same dark hazel eyes, although if you look very closely, Matty’s are more on the green side and Ryan’s are more amber. Matty looks like a soldier, buzz cut and straight posture. When we were young, even their bodies were the same, but there’s a vast difference now. They’re both muscular and have wide arms, but Matty is huge, like he lifts weights for a living.

“What?” Ryan says, raising an eyebrow at Jamie.

“There’s two of you,” she says.

I can’t help but laugh. “You should have seen them when we were growing up. You could barely tell them apart.” Even their mom got them mixed up sometimes, but I don’t say that aloud because it’s a testament of how absent she was most of their childhood. Bringing it up now won’t help the situation.

Matty’s eyes soften the moment they land on my daughter, and my shoulders lose some of their tension. He smiles down at her. “You must be Jamie,” he says, getting down on one knee and holding out his hand to shake. “My name is Matty.” He winces a bit, like he didn’t mean to say that.

Jamie shakes his hand confidently. “Nice to meet you. Are you coming to have breakfast with us?”

“I am, if that’s alright with you.”

She thinks about it for a moment and then smiles and nods. We all break out laughing when she looks up at Ryan and says, “I guess you can join us, too.”

Ryan looks at his brother incredulously. “You’re serious?”

“What?”

“Bullshit, that’s what.”

Dare shushes him. “Dude, language.”

“It’s okay,” Jamie says, choosing her place at the table. “I’m used to it.”

I can’t decide how I feel about that. I don’t particularly care if she hears curse words, but I know the context that she’s heard them in can’t have been healthy.

Dare sets the eggs on the table, Ryan grabs the coffee pot, and Matty pours orange juice for my daughter before sitting beside her, chatting about how many pancakes he’s about to demolish.

*I’m surely having some kind of fever dream.*

“You alright?” Dare asks, reaching over to lay a hand on my arm. I flinch again and feel bad about it. I give him an apologetic smile. “Don’t. It’s okay,” he whispers, “I understand.”

“I’m okay. It’s just really strange to be sitting around the table with the three of you like this. I never thought I’d be here.”

“We’re glad you are,” he says. I quirk an eyebrow. “Well, okay, Ryan and I are glad. Matty will come around. He seems quite taken with Jamie.”

Normally anyone showing her any manner of attention sets my hair on end, but as I watch Matty joking around with Jamie, making pancake faces and seeing who can take a bigger

bite, I feel the most insane warmth take over my chest. It hurts knowing we won't be able to stay.

"We'll look forward to having a lot more breakfasts like this in the future," he says, his hand enclosing mine.

I give his hand a gentle squeeze and offer him the sincerest smile I can muster. It's not that I don't trust the guys to do their best to help me, I just don't have a lot of trust in the system. I tell him as much, and Matty overhears.

"What kind of records do you have, if any?" Matty asks outright. "Hospital records, police reports, photos?"

I clear my throat, taken aback by the sudden switch in the overall mood of the table.

"Jamie, honey, you look like you took a bath in that syrup," I laugh with her as she touches her sticky cheeks. "How about I set you up with a nice bubble bath?"

She's pretty excited about the prospect, but holds up her arm sadly.

"I can wrap your cast in a plastic bag to help keep it dry," Dare offers.

Five minutes later, I return to the table. It's been cleared off, notepads and a laptop have appeared in place of plates and food scraps.

"She'll be good in there. The door's open, but I'm playing some music for her."

"She's not going to, like, drown or anything?" Ryan asks.

"She's eight, not two, dumbass," Matty says, pouring himself another cup of coffee. I smirk.

"What?"

"Do you... have kids?" I don't know why I'm hesitant to ask. It's not like we don't know that we've had relationships over the past twenty years. The guys didn't mention any kids or a wife, but I also didn't ask. There's no ring on his finger, but there isn't one on mine, either. And you certainly don't have to be married to have kids.

“Not that I’m aware of,” he says cryptically.

I understand the implied meaning, turning toward the refrigerator to hide my involuntary cringe at his words. I open it to grab the creamer that I know Dare brought this morning, thinking I’ll have a second cup of coffee. I am shocked to find the fridge is full of food, though, not just the stuff he used to make breakfast.

“Dare, did you bring all this?”

“I figured if you were in hiding, you might not want to be seen in town. So I grabbed a few things when I went out to pick up breakfast supplies.”

“You didn’t need to do that.” I don’t want him thinking that I can’t take care of myself and my child, even though honestly, I’d started skipping meals days ago and had been choosing the absolute cheapest options we could find. We’re dangerously low on money. “I’m not sure what we’ll do with it all.”

“You’re supposed to eat it,” Ryan says sarcastically, walking into the room with wet hair. He must have grabbed a quick shower upstairs. I should really do the same. Or put some actual pants on, but at this point, what do I have to hide? “Don’t think we didn’t notice how little you ate this morning.”

“I ate enough,” I argue, balking at the idea of anyone monitoring what I eat. The truth is, I’m too jittery to eat much, and after having an empty stomach for enough days to matter, I didn’t want to make myself sick with a lot of rich foods. I had some eggs and a plain pancake without syrup.

“I’m sorry, I’m not trying to sound ungrateful. But we’re probably going to need to check into the motel on the outside of town. I can’t stay here, obviously.”

“I said it wasn’t an issue,” Dare reminds me.

“Yeah, and Ryan said you know the owners, but—”

“*We* are the owners,” Matty says bluntly.

“*Y-you* own it?” I stammer, again embarrassed and ashamed. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to impose...” I’m at a loss

for what to say here. My meager breakfast churns at this revelation.

“It’s really okay. We’re glad it was here when you needed it,” Dare says sweetly. Matty doesn’t look like he agrees.

Ryan comes and wraps an arm around my shoulders, ignoring my flinch and pouring coffee into my still empty mug. He adds a little cream, and Dare stirs a spoon of sugar into it. Neither of them acknowledges that this is happening. That they both noticed how I took my coffee, and are just making it while the mug is still in my hand. While I stand in the house I grew up in, which they purchased.

I blink, overstimulated by all the thoughts and feelings I have being surrounded by these three.

“We all went in together to buy it about, I dunno, twelve years back? We stayed here for a while, but decided to rent it out. Then Matty stayed here when he got back from the service. It’s been vacant for a minute, though,” Ryan says.

So much makes sense now. The familiar sketch upstairs, the clothes left behind. “Oh god, whose underwear am I wearing?” *Please don’t say Matty, please don’t say Matty.*

As if they can read my mind, everyone *except* Matty starts to laugh. Of fucking course.

Taking my coffee and walking away in my stolen underwear, I sit on the window seat once everyone else has chosen a chair around the table. I need some physical space.

Matty is right back down to business. “So... proof?”

I can’t help but bristle at his tone. Logically, I understand that he is asking for proof for legal reasons. But it still stings. It’s like he needs more proof than what he can see on my face, although I’ve caught him staring at it multiple times this morning.

“Not really, no.”

“You never needed to go to the doctor for any injuries? Or sought help from the police?”

“You don’t understand—”

“Noli, baby, he’s not judging you. He’s just too fucking blunt for his own good.” Dare shoots Matty a glare, and Ryan smacks him on the backside of his head.

Matty rolls his eyes. “Of course I’m not judging you. But we need to know these things. But out of curiosity, why *didn’t* you go to the doctor or the police?”

“I went to the hospital twice, but neither time is likely to prove anything, especially as I denied any abuse.” I tell him, turning to meet his accusatory gaze. “Don’t look at me like that! What could they have done? I was alone. I was scared, and I had no one on my side. The most they could have done for me is give me the number of a local church or some bullshit shelter miles and miles away, which would have gotten back to Jake. Same with the police. If I’d called them, they would have talked me down, told me I was just upset and that I should go work it out with my husband, or called him their damn selves. You don’t know how many times I heard, ‘Oh, Maggie, you just have to learn to quit getting on the backside of his temper,’ or ‘Honey, what did you do this time?’ And what was I supposed to do with a baby in tow on top of that? Tell me, Matty. Tell me what you would have done.”

I’m standing and my whole body is shaking with an undercurrent of frustration. My heart is beating furiously, the coffee so lovingly made for me sloshes over the edge of the mug and hits the floor. The hot liquid splashing back on my bare feet and legs makes me come to my senses when I see the mess I have made.

“Oh my god, I’m sorry. Fuck.” I grab a roll of paper towels and get down on my hands and knees, mopping up the coffee with trembling hands. *I’m going to need a mop, otherwise this is going to get sticky and attract ants or smell bad. There’s got to be some cleaner around here.*

“Maggie, stop, it’s just spilled coffee. Calm down.”

“DON’T CALL ME THAT!” I yell, gasping at my own outburst. Every once in a while, when I get really overstimulated, I blow my top and then regret it. “I’m sorry.

You're here trying to help and I'm being hysterical. I just need a second."

They help me clean up the mess, and I check on Jamie, who didn't hear a thing, thankfully. She's singing along to her favorite songs, playing with suds and cups and whatever else I could find. She's not ready to get out, even though her fingers and toes are pruned, and dangling her cast over the side of the tub is making her arm fall asleep.

I can hear the guys whisper-yelling at each other before I make it back down the hall. I'm not exactly sure whose voice is whose, but I can make out most of the hushed conversation.

"Why the fuck do you keep calling her that? You're such an asshole."

"What? I thought that's what she went by now."

"Bullshit Matty, you're trying to put distance between you because you're still butthurt over something that happened fifteen goddamned years ago."

"She made her choice."

I step into the kitchen and confront him. "You think I chose this?"

"Yes—NO. No, I don't think you chose to get beaten up by your asshole husband. I'm not even talking about that. I'm talking about you moving on and finding a boyfriend and getting married in the first place. Back before it all turned into this, you chose to stop writing and do your own thing. Which is completely fine. We were kids, whatever. *I'm over it,*" he says those words firmly to Ryan and Dare before turning back to me. "I absolutely do not think you chose this, nor do I think you deserved it or should ever have had to deal with it. I wish your whole life had turned out differently. And if I'd known then, I would have dragged you out of there. I'm here to help if I can, but I don't see a point in getting all mushy with each other over shit that we said as kids. We're fucking adults. Can we please move on and get shit done *like adults?*"

I nod quietly, looking down at my feet. "I'm very thankful for your help, all of your help. And I'll do whatever it takes to

keep Jamie safe, so I'm ready to hear your thoughts."

They all look at each other and I know immediately that I'm not going to like what they're going to say next. "What?"

"To build a legal case, it's helpful to have some documentation. Since we don't have any police or hospital records, it might be a good idea to take some photos of the bruises you currently have."

"Yeah, okay." I can handle that. It's not like it's easy to hide it, anyhow.

"All of them," Ryan says with a dark look.

My throat contracts, rebelling against the simple act of swallowing. *All of them?* He lifts an eyebrow, knowingly.

*How am I supposed to take pictures of... Oh.*

"I promise we'll be respectful," says Dare. "But it needs to be done."

It's all I can do to stand there and blink, my mind reeling with possible ways that I could do this on my own.

"We need the clearest, most detailed pictures we can get. We can do it in my office, as part of a physical, it'll all be super professional. I can have a nurse join us—"

"No!" I say quickly. "Just you. No one outside this room, please." It'll be bad enough seeing the pity in their eyes. I don't want it from a stranger that I may or may not have gone to elementary school with.

"Okay, whatever you want."



## Matty

“Hey dad,” I say after knocking on the door frame. “Do you have a minute?” His door is open, almost always is unless he’s in a meeting. So when I pull it closed behind me, he knows it’s important.

“What’s up, Matt?”

“I need some legal advice—not for me,” I assure him quickly. “It’s for someone else, but until I know what’s safe or not for you to know, I need to keep the person anonymous.”

“Your brother and Dare okay?” He asks, and I nod. Satisfied with that, his entire posture and demeanor changes. His spine straightens, and he leans forward over the desk, forearms down and fingers knit together. He’s moved into cop mode, and that’s exactly what I need from him now. “Okay, shoot.”

“I’m not exactly sure where to start,” I say, realizing I didn’t really think of this beforehand.

“Just start at the beginning, son. You can tell me whatever it is, you’re safe here.” *But is she?*

“Okay. I have a... friend who lives out of state. She just showed up in town, and it turns out she ran away from her abusive husband, she...”

“So Noli *is* back then?” he asks, interrupting me. I should have known that I can’t keep anything from him. This man has eyes and ears everywhere.

“How did you—”

“Sheriff’s department reached out about two days ago, asking us to put out an APB for Magnolia Denin and an eight-year-old girl. They’re trying to ascertain whether Mrs. Denin is in trouble or if it’s a parental abduction situation.” My dad’s concerned eyes shift from the folder he’s holding out to me.

“Off the record?”

He nods curtly.

“Noli took the girl. But for a good reason. The husband got violent, Noli’s got bruises all over and her daughter has a broken arm. I don’t know how often these types of injuries have occurred, but according to Noli, the husband has ties to the local police department and she can’t trust them. She ran to keep the kid safe.”

He sits back in his seat, crossing his arms and lifting his chin in thought. His eyes don’t leave mine.

“You believe her?” I know what he’s not saying. He’s asking me if I believe her, despite everything that happened in the past. For the longest time, if anyone brought up her name, I’d have an outburst, ranting about what a lying bitch she was. Looking back, I’ve grown enough to recognize that my feelings and reactions were escalated because I was immature and didn’t know how to get over her in a healthy way.

I’m old and wise enough now to see that we were just stupid kids that got caught up in our first crush. She moved far away and had to live her own life. She was so beautiful and kind, of course she found a boyfriend and moved on. Maybe she only kept writing out of pity, or because she felt obligated. It would have been better if she’d just been honest, said she’d met someone and was moving on. Maybe I would have processed it differently. But I can see now how she was just as immature and caught up in her own feelings as I was.

I’m trying not to revert back to that old grudge. Doesn’t mean it doesn’t still sting though. I can’t help it, I’ve held it for so long it’s become a part of who I am. The moment I heard her name again, it all came crashing back. My all-encompassing obsession with her, how much I missed and pined for her, how much it hurt when I’d felt her betrayal. And then seeing her again... it was like unlocking a safe, where all those memories and feelings have been hiding. I am still angry and hurt about what happened in the past, but that doesn’t mean she deserves to suffer.

“I believe that she’s been abused, and fears for the kid, yes,” I answer simply. That much is obvious, and I can see the truth in her eyes.

“She have any proof?” He asks, back in cop mode.

“No police or medical reports that she thinks would be admissible. Dare is going to help her get photos of her current injuries. It’s been two weeks, but there are still a lot of marks.”

He nods, thinking. “She’ll need to write out a detailed account of the abuse. I mean dates, times, exactly what happened and how.”

“Okay,” I say, making a mental list of what needs to be done.

“Taking the child out of state was a bad move, but I think with the right evidence and legal counsel, we might be able to get her out of trouble there. Lisa Jacobs is a shark. I think she’d be a good person to call.”

Noli might even remember Lisa. She was only a year ahead of us in school. Maybe a familiar face will help her open up.

“Anything else I need to know?” I raise an eyebrow, wanting to make sure we’re still on the same page. He sighs, but answers my unspoken question. “Off the record.”

“She might have drugged him. To get away.”

My dad grimaces. “Any idea what she used?” I shake my head. I hadn’t thought to ask.

“It could hurt her, but the report didn’t mention it.”

“If we’re lucky, maybe he didn’t notice. She said he’s a drinker.”

“Fingers crossed, but plan for the worst. Make sure Lisa knows. I, officially, do not know any of this. I have to remain objective in case this goes public, to protect her best interests.”

“Of course.”

He pauses. “How is she?” Noli was such a big part of our family. Her father was one of my dad’s best friends. He loved her like a father, and would have taken her in if there hadn’t been a family member to claim her.

“Different. Skittish and angry.”

Nodding sadly, he says, “That’s understandable. Sounds like she’s been through a lot. How old is the girl?”

“Eight.” My father makes a confused face. We’d told him that Noli was pregnant when we got home from our disaster of a road trip. “I guess she lost the first one. I don’t know the details.”

There’s a moment of silence. He’s not looking at me, but I know he’s waiting for me to have something else to say. If there’s one thing about my dad, it’s that he’s a good listener, and always waits for you to come to him rather than pushing.

I feel bad for how much he put up with that summer before I decided to enlist. I was a teenage nightmare. Drinking and fighting. Fucking anything that moved as if I could exorcise Noli from my memory. If I’d had anyone else for a dad, I might have ended up in jail. He let me rage, taking me to the police station gym to let me take it out on a punching bag. And then he’d listen once I’d worked out enough aggression to let my emotions out.

Ryan and Dare had each other, but they were also hurting. It just would have amped me up more to talk to them. I needed my dad’s outside perspective.

How different would Noli’s life have been if she’d still had her dad?

“Jamie looks just like her,” I say with a small smile. “Same messy blonde hair and dark blue eyes. Same sassy attitude, too.”

“She named her after James,” he says, his voice filled with emotion as he reflects on the man he once knew.

When James Crawford died, part of all of us died with him. He was a good person, a good friend, a substitute father when our mom ran off and our dad was working. More than anything, he was a devoted father who loved his girl more than anything.

He’d roll over in his grave if he knew what became of her.

“Where’s the girl now?”

“We’ve got them set up at the Crawford house. When I left to come here, they were discussing whether to let Jamie hang out with the church camp. Noli remembers and always loved Mrs. Bishop, but she’s got a thing about churches now. Doesn’t want to let Jamie out of her sight. She’s afraid he’s going to show up here.”

“Tell you what we’ll do. I’ll call over to the Bishops and give them a heads up. We’ll treat it like protective custody. They won’t let anyone in or out they don’t know. That’ll give Noli some space to talk to the lawyer and do whatever she needs to do. If we’re lucky, they can get her set up with a real protection order and we can put an officer on them.”

“Okay, thanks dad.”

“Matt,” he says with a serious look in my direction. “Be careful.”

Is he talking about getting in too deep with the legalities of what we’re doing? Or getting too involved in general? I don’t know, but he doesn’t have anything to worry about.

“It’s all good,” I say, getting up to leave as my dad picks up the phone, greeting Reverend Bishop.

This isn’t about the past, or about old feelings. All I’m concerned about is making sure they’re safe.

## Noli

“I’m not so sure about this,” I say warily as we park at Dare’s family church.

Dare’s father has been a reverend here since before any of us were even born, and he grew up in this church. I knew and loved and even trusted his family once upon a time, but leaving my daughter in anyone else’s care right now is terrifying to me.

Jamie doesn’t look so sure about it either.

Dare squats down to her level and adjusts the sling he put her arm in. “Hey,” he says, gently. “Do you trust me?”

She thinks about it for a second and then looks at me. I try to keep my face friendly and passive, wanting her to listen to her own gut about things. It’s a discussion we’ve had a lot as she grows up, and she knows she can always come to me. I’m on her side and I’ll protect her, whatever the cost.

Her little face is serious as she considers him, but then she nods and folds her little hand into his giant one. I think my heart might burst.

“Alright then, come in here and meet someone special.”

Passing through the doors is another blast from my past. My dad wasn’t big on organized religion, but since Dare practically lived here, we ended up playing here a lot. And Mrs. Bishop always invited me to summer camp even though I wasn’t a member of the church.

“Oh my goodness gracious,” I hear as we walk through the entry hall. Dare’s mom doesn’t hesitate to hurry over to me and wrap me in her arms.

I think I’ve been hugged more in the last twenty hours than I have been in the last twenty years. I haven’t cried this much in twenty years either. The tenderness I am being shown is foreign to me and it is a lot to get used to.

Mrs. Bishop’s hug is tight and comforting, and I have a feeling that she already knows at least some of what’s

happened. This is confirmed when she pulls away, holding my face with both her hands. To her credit, she doesn't look much at my bruises. She looks right into my eyes instead.

"I'm so sorry, sweet baby girl. No one deserves to be hurt by the person who is supposed to love them the most." She pulls me into another hug, enveloping me in her warmth and care. Thankfully, I can avoid further eye contact and try to choke back yet another fresh wave of tears. "Dear heaven, look at this one!" Mrs. Bishop releases me and turns to look at my daughter, who watches us with wide eyes. "My goodness, you look exactly like your mama when she was your age. My name is Susan Bishop. What's your name?"

"Jamie Paige Denin," Jamie answers sweetly. It's hard not to fall under Mrs. Bishop's spell. I'd forgotten just how comforting her presence can be. She was a mother figure to all of us growing up, especially considering that three of us grew up without a mother.

As nervous as I was on the way here, I feel good about leaving Jamie in her care now that I'm watching them chat amicably.

"Hey mama," Dare says, kissing his mother on the cheek. "Dad in the office?" She nods and pats him on the shoulder, listening to Jamie tell her about how much she likes to draw.

Jamie pauses and looks up at her and Dare. "You're Doctor Bishop's mom?"

"Yes ma'am, I am," Mrs. Bishop says proudly.

"I thought we were past the whole 'Dr. Bishop' thing? You're hurtin' me, girly." Dare grasps his chest dramatically.

Jamie giggles, "Sorry, *Uncle Dare*."

Dare gives me a wink as he walks toward the office, presumably to speak to his father. By the time he comes out, Jamie is begging to stay behind, having seen all the craft supplies in the Sunday school classroom.

"Someone wants to say hello," he tells me quietly, so Jamie doesn't overhear. "Head back into the office."

I slip through the main office and knock on the door behind the reception area. Reverend Bishop opens the door and smiles warmly down at me. “Well, look what the cat dragged in, Mark,” he says and pulls the door open wider to reveal Matty and Ryan’s father, leaning against the edge of a giant cherrywood desk.

You’d think that my tears would be dried up by now, but seeing Mark West breaks yet another layer of the dam I’ve built up over the past two decades. This man was my father’s best friend and seeing him now stirs memories that threaten to spill out as tears. He was a true uncle to me, unlike Paul. The emotion in his eyes reflects my own.

“You know, I can barely believe that my own two boys are all grown up. But seeing you after so long is kind of a kick in the gut,” he says, chuckling and wiping an eye.

“Tell me about it,” Mr. Bishop agrees. “I’ll let you two have a moment. Noli, it’s good to see you, child. Let’s get caught up soon, okay? Promise?” He gives me a pat on the shoulder and a soft kiss on the top of my head before closing the door behind us.

Chief West stands. “Can I—*oof*”

I really hope he was about to ask for a hug, because I all but fly across the room and throw my arms around his torso. There are very few people who I need a hug from more right now. His arms wrap around me in a warm, fatherly embrace and hold me there for a long time. Hugging him is the closest thing I’ll ever get to hugging my dad again.

When I pull away, wiping my nose and eyes with the sleeve of my thin sweater, I apologize for the wet marks on his uniform shirt.

“Don’t you worry about that.” He stands straight and his voice sounds serious. “Now listen, I had you come back here because I wanted to see you, and I wanted you to know that I’m on your side. But if I’m going to be able to help you, I can’t officially know that you’re in town. Otherwise, I risk getting in trouble and that could jeopardize your case. I’m doing what I can behind the scenes.”



“Thank you,” I whisper hoarsely.

“Jamie will be safe here. They’re going to keep the campers inside today, playing hide and seek and doing crafts indoors. I put in a report about some vague trouble with vandalism, so we’ll have a car in the parking lot all day today, looking for anyone unfamiliar. Doors will remain locked, and they’re going to have one of the volunteers at the door the whole time.”

My shoulders relax, and my eyes continue to water. “Thank you, Chief West.”

“You’re an adult now, Noli. You can call me Mark,” he says with a laugh. “But you don’t have to thank me. We’re going to do whatever it takes to make sure you’re both safe. Do you hear me?”

I nod and restrain myself from hiding my face in my hands and bawling. I’m so ashamed that I’m creating all of this trouble for everyone. These people that I loved twenty years ago who don’t owe me a thing are dropping everything to help me. I don’t write for years, and then I just show up and toss everyone’s life into drama that isn’t theirs to deal with.

“I’m sorry.”

“What in the world would you be sorry for?” He places his hands on my shoulders and leaves them there, a gentle squeeze guiding me to look up at him. “You have nothing to be sorry or embarrassed about. You’ve gotten yourself this far, give yourself some credit.”

I don’t intend for the indignant scoff to leave my throat, but give myself credit for what? For getting knocked up by an asshole? For letting him hurt me? For letting him do it for so long that he became a danger to my daughter?

“Magnolia Rachel Crawford, you look at me,” he says sternly. My eyes flick up to his. “You know why your daddy named you that, don’t you?”

“Because he had a weird sense of humor and thought a symbolic name would make up for not having a mother?” My answer comes out sarcastically, though I don’t mean it to.

“He named you that because he could see immediately that you were something special. That you were going to change the world somehow. That you were beautiful and strong. He was real big on that symbolism shit,” he says with a laugh. “But he wasn’t wrong. You’ve lived up to your name, sweetheart.”

I don’t have the heart to argue with him. There’s nothing special about me. Maybe I used to have some potential to do something special, to change the world somehow. But all I am now is broken.

He promises me he’ll keep in touch and stay vigilant before I leave the office and head back to check on Jamie. I hear Ryan’s booming voice from down the hall.

“Oh man, a lock in? Those were so much fun when we were kids.”

“Hopefully little Miss Jamie here wouldn’t give me quite as much trouble as you four did,” Mrs. Bishop laughs. “But she’s welcome to stay the night if she wants,” she says to me as I walk to join their conversation.

Jamie looks simultaneously interested and apprehensive. As much as I do trust them, and honestly am comfortable with her being with the Bishops and a bunch of other kids from town, it’s hard to fathom being away from her for a night. She’s never even slept over at a friend’s house or stayed with family overnight before. I had a hard time trusting anyone. I quit my job at the diner and found a work-from-home job just to avoid her ever being babysat by my aunt and uncle. Even after Paul passed, I wouldn’t let Jamie over there without me.

“Maybe next time, okay? Let’s give it a day or two and then we’ll do a check-in and see how we’re feeling.” Jamie nods enthusiastically and gives me a tight hug. Surprisingly, she also hugs Dare, and then shocks us all by giving Ryan a hug as well. His response is hilarious. He freezes up, stares down at her wide eyed, and pats her gingerly on the back with one hand.

We’re still laughing as we walk back into the parking lot. The mood sobers a bit when Ryan asks what ‘a check-in’ is.

“It’s just my way of making sure she’s safe.” They both look at me quizzically before Ryan climbs in the back seat, gesturing for me to sit up front with Dare. I don’t know what to say without making things awkward. “I didn’t have a parent to check in with me, to ask how I feel about people or things. I want to make sure she’s happy and safe. We talk about how she’s feeling, if people are treating her okay... that sort of thing.”

“I guess Aunt Dana wasn’t much of a maternal figure,” Ryan says from the back seat. I snort. Understatement of the century.

“I wish we would have known you were unhappy,” Dare says, reaching over to hold my hand.

I shrug. “Not much you could have done. I lived.” I am trying not to cry and there are some very specific secrets that I am not ready to tell. Not yet. Maybe not ever.

Ryan catches my eye in the rearview. I swiftly move my gaze away from his.

Twenty minutes later we’re sitting at Darcy’s, and I’m actually moaning as I stuff my face. It’s like I’ve never tasted food before, it’s just that good. When I finally take a breath and look up from my plate, both Ryan and Dare are staring at me with odd expressions.

“I’m sorry, I have no manners, do I? I forgot how good food could taste.” They turn toward each other, having a silent conversation. “What?”

We’re thankfully interrupted by the arrival of Matty and a familiar face. It takes me a few moments to remember where I know her from. She went to school with us, but she’s grown up quite a bit. Wearing a sharp looking tight pencil skirt and a silk blouse that brings out the green of her eyes, she looks like she could be a model. For all I know she is, but Matty introduces her as a lawyer. Everything about this woman is perfection, from her perfectly smooth, tan skin to her sleek dark hair that tumbles in waves down her back. And she’s here. With Matty.

I'm not one to compare myself to others. In fact, I'm not sure that I ever have before. But sitting amongst the three men that have haunted my dreams and fantasies for as long as I can remember, I can't help but do it. Next to her I feel like barely warmed over garbage.

I overcompensate to make up for my self-conscious thoughts and inability to remember her name. "Hiiii!" I say, standing up to greet her with a friendly hug. In my awkwardness, I turn to hug Matty as well, but it's more like a pat on his *ridiculously muscular* shoulders. I groan internally. *Why am I like this?*

With a hand on her lower back, Matty gestures for *Lisa* to sit before scooting into the circular booth where we have been eating. I want to kick myself for the internal pang of jealousy when I find myself considering whether they're together.

*Not your business, Noli. You have zero claim over any of these men. You're married, for fuck's sake. Even if you weren't, you're used up, damaged goods. They wouldn't want you now.*

Lisa orders a simple cup of tea and gets right to it. Internally body shaming myself, I push my half-eaten plate away. Regardless, it doesn't take long before my appetite is gone. Lisa asks a lot of questions that I'm not immediately comfortable answering, especially around Ryan, Darius, and Matty.

I don't want their pity, nor do I want them to think I'm incapable of taking care of myself. But more than that, I'm embarrassed about how abysmal my life sounds as we're discussing the past fifteen years.

"Is it safe to assume that this incident is not the first instance of abuse in your marriage?"

I nod affirmatively. The men on either side of me stiffen.

"How long has the abuse occurred?"

My eyes stray to the table, reading the news clippings and bits of town history that are displayed beneath the glass tabletop.

“Is it okay if I call you Noli?” she asks, getting my attention again. I nod. Anything else would feel unnatural. *Magnolia* is too formal. I’ve never preferred my long name, anyway. *Maggie* makes me cringe. I do not want to be her anymore. *Mrs. Denin* has always made me feel like a dead person, like *Magnolia Crawford* never existed.

“Okay, Noli...I want to be blunt and honest with you, no sugar coating. We can send these jackasses away if it’s preferable, but if this goes to trial, it’ll all be public knowledge. You need to get comfortable saying these things out loud, because it’s going to take every dark memory to prove to the court that you were too afraid to do things the right way. Otherwise, he’s going to win, and you could lose custody of your daughter.”

My head snaps up. “I will never let that happen,” my determination is palatable.

“You’re ready to fight. Good. Now let’s lay it out on the table.”

Three hours later, I’m feeling raw and I’m exhausted. My skin feels like it’s been scrubbed with a wire brush, my eyes are red and burning from wiping them so much. Stepping out of the diner into the sunlight makes my sensitive eyes want to water. Only they can’t. There is no moisture left in my body after the puddle of tears I left behind in that booth. My shirt is wet with them, the tracks of the spilled tears visible on my face.

No one speaks, which I’m grateful for. Matty left abruptly after escorting Lisa to her sleek, black car. He seemed angry, and I can understand why. We just spent the whole morning going over the sometimes-graphic details of my stupidity, and just how much work it’s going to take to fight this. And he didn’t even have to listen to the worst of it. Lisa suggested I write out detailed accounts of all the incidents I could remember, with approximate timelines.

True to her word, she didn’t sugarcoat anything. Moving Jamie out of state without permission is going to cause trouble for me. She’s going to talk to a judge and see about getting

temporary emergency custody, but warned me that the state of Kansas will have jurisdiction. Which means we'll have to go back at some point, probably soon, and fight this in person.

*If I go back, he'll kill me. And then Jamie will be stuck with him, alone. I wonder if it's just better to run.*

My thoughts must be loud. "You promised us two days," Ryan reminds me, pulling me from the car. His words and his expression are gentle, but troubled.

"What if..."

Ryan's entire demeanor changes. His eyes grow menacingly dark, his posture stiff. "If he so much as steps foot in this town and looks at you the wrong way again, or breathes in your direction, I'll fucking kill him."

I take a step back, bumping into Dare. I suck in a breath and freeze. My heart beats too fast, and my thoughts take a sharp turn.

Is it a normal defense mechanism to feel aroused? I'm sure I should be afraid. After all, he's far larger and scarier than Jake. Nothing Jake *ever* did aroused me, but especially not his violence. *What is wrong with me?* Ryan's head ticks to the side, studying my reaction. He takes a menacing step forward.

From behind me, Dare holds my shoulders. Not able to see my face or reaction to the way Ryan is looming over me, he shuts him down. "Whoa, Ry, take it down a notch. Were you not listening to all the shit she's gone through?"

Ryan stops, looking down at himself as if unaware that he'd taken steps forward. He looks up at Dare almost sheepishly and then, right over my head, gives Dare a kiss. It's short and sweet and casual, but it's also about two inches from my face and does nothing to dampen my confused libido.

When Ryan walks away, leading the way to the clinic I have an appointment at. Dare pulls me to his side. "He can be almost as intense as Matty sometimes," he says apologetically.

"I wasn't scared," I whisper, my voice hoarse from all the talking and crying in the diner, my confession the longest I have spoken at once in twenty years. Dare looks down, sees

the blush creeping up my neck, and probably notices that I am completely avoiding looking him in the eye.

He huffs out a chuckle, bending low to my ear before we enter the building. “But god is he sexy when he gets all worked up, am I right?”

The shiver his words leave behind makes my knees weak and does nothing to minimize the arousal growing in my core.



“I have an idea,” says Dare, after we’ve picked Jamie up from the church camp. “Why don’t we pick up some takeout, grab a picnic blanket, and eat dinner under the tree like old times? We’ll relax and enjoy ourselves, maybe share a bottle of wine, before we have to take the pictures.”

“I like picnics!” Jamie says.

My brow furrows. When has she ever been on a picnic? She’s acting weird, but I can’t quite put my finger on what’s strange about her behavior.

Am I being overly sensitive? Maybe, considering the day I’ve had. After getting mentally reamed all morning, we spent the rest of the afternoon at a clinic for a full check-up, including a pap smear, STD testing, and blood work. And then we had to go shopping, which I think the guys thought would be fun for me. Maybe it would have been, but I felt incredibly awkward and self-conscious about letting them buy things for us.

“Are you sure everything’s alright?” I ask her, pushing her to tell me more about her day. “You had fun at camp? People were kind?”

“Yes, definitely. This place is so much fun. I made a friend, her name is Lainey. Our names rhyme, so she’s my new best friend. We ate pizza for lunch, and oh! Mom! Mrs. Bishop let me paint as much as I want!”

Ryan starts asking her about her painting, and it occurs to me that Jamie isn’t acting weird at all. She’s acting like an

eight-year-old child. Happy and free.

On the walk back through the yard, arms loaded with food and blankets, Dare tells me that we'll get the pictures done after Jamie goes to bed.

“Awfully presumptuous of you to assume you'll be around all night,” I joke, trying not to think about it. It was bad enough having to do the pelvic exam with them outside the door, since I wouldn't let Dare do it himself. The idea of baring my body to them, all my shame visibly on display, is daunting.

“Sugar, we aren't letting you out of our sight until the moment we have to. And, honestly, you'll be lucky if you can ever get rid of us now.”

My brain short circuits, and I waver between swooning and worrying over his words.

*They don't know what they do to me, these boys.*



## Ryan

It's funny how you can go so long without seeing someone that you forget what it's like to be in their presence. But then the moment they're there again, it's like a favorite, comfortable sweater that you never want to take off.

Being around Noli is like that. I can see how she's changed, how so much of her light has been dimmed by pain and anguish, but her presence is still like sitting beneath the rays of the warm sun. Watching her greet our special place like an old friend, her hand on the trunk of the tree like she might feel its heartbeat, I feel lit up again.

We give her some space while we set up our picnic, and she climbs amongst the lower branches, settling herself into 'her spot'. She stares off into the sunset, deep in thought, but with a sense of peace about her that I haven't seen since she returned. Confident that she isn't looking, I snap a picture on my phone. I don't want to forget a single detail, my fingers itching to sketch her profile.

Over dinner, we discuss fond memories and catch up on friends and people in town, where they are or what they've been up to. Jamie tells us all about her new best friend, who turns out to be one of Jessa Holcram's kids.

Her enthusiasm is a nice break from the heaviness of today, and the thoughts of all that comes next.

"I have the hardest time imagining Jessa in full mommy mode," Noli says while we sit back and watch Jamie try to catch fireflies.

"I think she's been pregnant for the entirety of the past ten years, but she seems really happy. She married Terry Baker—*yes, that Terry Baker*—and they own a salvage and renovations company."

"That's amazing. I'm really happy for her," and I know she means it. "You have to admit though, that it sounds like a corny romance novel. The Queen Bee falls in love with the class stoner, they get married and live happily ever after. With a million kids, because they just can't keep their hands off

each other.” She sighs in a sarcastic, dreamy way and we all laugh. I’d never thought of it that way.

“We’re all just happy none of those babies are Matty’s,” Dare says jokingly, but then realizes his mistake when I throw a wooden chopstick at the side of his head. “Oh, shit. Sorry Noli.”

“That’s okay. It’s his life. What he did then or now is none of my business. Not like I have room to judge,” she says casually, but I can see a hint of pain beneath that reasoning.

“What do you mean by that, not having room to judge?”

“In what world would I have any right to expect anyone to wait for me, to save themselves for me? We were thirteen when we made those silly promises. We had no idea what life would throw at us.”

“He did, though,” Dare says in a low voice. I shoot him a glare. This is the first time she’s seemed happy since we arrived. I don’t want to ruin it by bringing up Matty and how he coped after he knew she was lost to him.

“Did what?” she laughs.

“Waited for you. Until after we visited, that is. Once we got home, he went kind of off the rails.”

“Darius.” I say, warning him to back off from this subject.

He rolls his eyes at my firm use of his full name. “I think she has the right to know.” He turns his face back to Noli. “Matty loved you. He loved you so much, he never looked at another girl. Jessa, and a few others, it didn’t matter how much they threw themselves at him. He legitimately wasn’t interested. It was an obsession. Seeing that you’d moved on hurt him, he felt betrayed because he felt like we were all still in this tight relationship.”

“I felt that way too,” she whispers, fiddling with the hem of her shirt. “I didn’t mean to disappoint anyone.”

“It’s okay, Noli. We were kids. I’m only telling you this so you understand why Matty has been acting like a dick. That trip changed him. When we got back, he kind of lost it. And

then he enlisted, and we only saw him briefly between tours for the next twelve years. He says he's over it all, that he exorcized all of his demons or whatever, but I think he's feeling some of that pain again. Please give him time. I'm sure he'll come around."

"I don't *have* time," she reminds us softly. "But also, I don't deserve his forgiveness. Maybe I had my reasons or maybe didn't always have a choice, but I still went back on those promises. Promises that meant everything to me." A lone tear tracks down her face, and I'm reminded so much of the girl she was the night before she left. Helpless and heartbroken.

"I can't help but feel like there's more to it all than you've let on," I say gently.

"What do you mean by that?" I don't want her to feel like I'm accusing her of anything, but she's understandably defensive.

"What do you mean by not always having a choice, Noli?"

"I didn't want to get married. I didn't want to be pregnant. I didn't want to be any part of it," she says, sniffing.

My stomach clenches at the words she's saying and the possible meaning behind them.

"*Any* part of it?" I parrot, silently asking for clarification. Dare looks up at her with horrified eyes.

She laughs darkly and doesn't meet either of our eyes, watching her daughter in the distance. "Don't mistake me. I didn't fight it. It's not like he—"

"Did you want it?" I ask, trying to keep my voice even despite my rising blood pressure.

"It's in the past, Ryan. It doesn't matter."

"Did you want it?" I ask again, more firmly. She shuts down again, looking anywhere but at us, searching for a way out of this conversation.

"I think I should get Jamie to bed, thanks for dinner—" she stands, smoothing down her clothes and starting to walk

toward the meadow.

“Answer him,” Dare says adamantly, surprising even me with the amount of hostility laced in the words.

She rounds on us, but I’m already on my feet. Her eyes widen when she sees that I am not willing to accept her non-answer. “Look, I didn’t—”

“Did. You. Want. It.” I bite out each word as I stalk forward.

“No!” she bursts out. Birds startle from the tree and take flight, petals and leaves raining down from the fragrant tree. Jamie stops what she’s doing to look back at us, concerned. The silence following the echo of that one damning word is deafening.

She takes a breath. “No, I didn’t want it. But I also didn’t fight him. I just... gave it to him. And it broke me. I broke knowing that I was giving this piece of myself away, part of myself that I had promised the three of you. That’s when I stopped writing as much. I couldn’t even pretend anymore that I was happy or hopeful, there was no going back from it. I still counted down the days until I could come back here and beg you all to forgive me.”

“Noli, we—”

I try to cut in, to comfort her, but she’s not done. She holds up a hand, demanding her space and taking back her time, so I give it to her and listen.

“And then I found out I was pregnant and I was screwed. I knew I’d never get out of there, never get away from him. Yes, I should have been honest. But I was embarrassed and heartbroken. Everything died inside me the day that they made me stand beside him and promise to *love, honor, and obey*. Everything.”

“We were there, at the courthouse,” Dare admits. “We left because we thought you were happy. The guy—Jake—we overheard him on the phone talking about how happy he was, and how in love with him you were. We had no idea...”

“Like I said, I didn’t fight.”

“If we’d known—”

“If you’d known, what? You’d sweep me away? Transport a minor across state lines? Raise my illegitimate baby?”

“Yes,” I say firmly. “Whatever it took, we’d have done it. And we’re ready to do it now. We might have asked for only two days, Noli, but you’re not getting rid of us ever again.”

She turns to walk away, but I grab her arm, my hand slipping down to lace my fingers through hers. Dare stands and holds her other hand.

“I promise you that we will stand by your side every step of the way. We will support you in any and every way we can, and we will continue loving you the way we have since we were five years old.”

My words connect with her mind and she shrinks in on herself. The bravado she has so fiercely displayed all day nothing but a balloon waiting to be deflated. She doesn’t even cry, she just... folds. Her legs all but buckle and she slumps. Dare holds her up, pulling her body against his in a tight hug, whispering loving encouragement in her ear.

He holds her like he could keep her together if all of her pieces fell apart, turning to shield Jamie from seeing her mother crumble.

Noli has had a rigidity about her since we intruded on her last night. A steel rod in her spine, a wall built around herself, a protective layer of impenetrable hardness. No matter how much she’s cried or made admissions, she hasn’t once let that guard down.

She does now, though. The moment she understands that we’re all in, that we still love her and accept her as she is now, no matter what has happened in the past, her façade cracks.

Dare ducks down and presses his lips to hers. What starts as a tender, comforting press of lips grows as their lips open tentatively. I see a flash of tongue, and she gasps. The kiss deepens, a low moan issuing from Dare’s chest.

Noli’s eyes fly open and she freezes. As if she hadn’t realized what was happening, she pulls back, face red, arms

wrapping around herself. “I’m sorry. I don’t know what came over me.”

“No, I’m sorry,” Dare says. “I didn’t mean for that to be... I mean, that was... I don’t want to push your boundaries or make you feel pressured.” His eyes land on mine, a mixture of sadness, concern, and arousal calling out to me.

“We should probably get inside,” I say. The mood drops, everyone sobering for what’s coming next. I pick up the second bottle of wine that we haven’t cracked open yet. “We’ll bring this.”

Quietly, we pack up our picnic and walk to the house. On the porch, Noli looks back over the property, watching the last rays of sunset disappear.

Her spine straightens, her armor back in place, and she opens the door to let us inside. Jamie hugs us both goodnight and follows her mom upstairs to bed. We wait patiently, unsure if we should go upstairs or wait down here.

Noli eventually comes back down, wrapped in what looks like one of Matty’s old flannel button downs. It’s meant to fit loosely on Matty’s huge frame, so it swallows Noli, covering her to her knees.

“I don’t have a robe,” she explains unnecessarily. I pass her a glass of wine and she takes a large swig.

Dare looks up from his hands, where he’s been fiddling with the settings on his camera. “Where do you want to do this? We’ll get it over with quickly and then we can do whatever you want to do—watch a movie, kick us out and have a hot bubble bath—whatever.”

I quirk an eyebrow at him. Both of us know I’m not leaving this house, and neither is he. She’ll be lucky if she gets a moment of alone time ever again because I’m not sure I’m capable of letting her out of my sight.

“I was originally thinking that the fluorescent kitchen light is probably brighter, but now I’m realizing how many damn windows there are down here,” she says, worrying her lip.

“Let’s go upstairs then. I can use the flash and we can bring in an extra lamp if we need it, but I think it’ll be fine. We’ll make it work wherever you feel the most comfortable.”

She nods solemnly and drains her glass. I hold up the bottle and offer another, but she shakes her head. “I like to keep most of my wits about me,” she says.

Upstairs, we make a space in the master bedroom against a blank stretch of wall. I move a chair and small side table, and Dare tests the lights. Then we wait in silence while Noli stares at the spot that she’s supposed to stand in, her arms pulled inside the large flannel shirt.

After a few long moments, she stands up from her spot on the bed, unbuttoning the flannel as she walks towards the light.

All I want to do is to wrap her back up, to kiss that numb, stony look from her eyes, and tell her how fucking brave I think she is. Anything to protect her from the pain and humiliation that I’m sure she’s feeling right now.

My stomach drops when the flannel does. I wrench my eyes away from her body to find her avoiding eye contact, her gaze trained on a picture across the room. It’s a sketch I made of the four of us when we were around Jamie’s age. It was a simpler time, for sure.

As much as I don’t want to look, my eyes are drawn to the scars and marks that mar Noli’s pale skin. I knew there was more than what we could see on her face, because I basically forced her to let me see part of it this morning. Otherwise, she keeps herself relatively covered up. It’s worse than I imagined.

The bruise on her side is deep purple, fading into brown and yellow on the edges where it’s starting to heal. It covers from her waist to her hip, some spots mottling the skin as far down as her thigh. Of course, there’s the wound and bruises on the side of her face, which I now know occurred at the same time as the abdominal bruise and are the result of being thrown down a staircase.

Beneath the discolored newer bruises, there are older scars. It’s hard to tell which scars are naturally occurring, like the

one that runs across the bottom of her stomach from a c-section, or which might be from injury. A long healed jagged cut on the inside of her bicep catches my eye.

Those are only the most glaring marks. I do my best to keep my eyes on hers, not wanting to make her uncomfortable with both of us looking so closely at her body. She does eventually meet my eyes when Dare gets close to take a picture of another bruise or scar on the inside of her thigh. She inhales a breath that sounds like a small whimper, her lower lip quivers when she meets my eye. Shame and pain reflect in her deep blue gaze.

I decide here and now that I will spend the rest of my life making sure that no one ever hurts her again. I know, without a doubt, that Dare will join me. Together, we will make sure that she is shown every comfort, every bit of tenderness and all the love that she deserves.



## Noli

Keeping my eyes fixed across the room, I slowly turn so Dare can photograph every inch of my body.

*Click.*

I stare at the picture on the wall, a sketch of four precocious little kids that lived in happier times. The dirty shoes and scuffed knees, a twig caught in my wild, untamed hair.

*Click.*

I turn to the side, focusing on the small window and the bright moon that shines behind the white lace curtains.

*Click.*

I face the wall, wondering how it's possible that a few moments could drag out for so long.

*Click.*

I feel inhuman.

*Click.*

An animal on display.

*Click.*

A wounded beast in a cage that is waiting to be set loose.

*Click.*

Dare lowers himself to kneel at my feet, getting a closeup of the scar on my arm, the bruise on the inside of my thigh. I honestly don't remember what the bruise was from, but I remember the cut.

*I shoot awake, a searing pain in my arm. Blinking the grogginess from my eyes, I try to process everything that's happening around me.*

*"All you have to do is cut it out. It's not even deep. She'll be fine," I hear a familiar voice say. It sounds like my aunt is speaking through a tunnel, or a tin can with a string.*

*Jake bends over me, his knee on my shoulder, holding me down. My body is awake before I am, trying to push him off with my free arm. I squirm and kick, managing to lift my knees up high enough to hit Jake in the back.*

*The pain in my arm intensifies, and I scream out in pain.*

*“Jesus Fuck, Maggie. Now look at what you made me do!”*

*“What happened?” My aunt asks, but I can’t see her.*

*They’re talking, but I can’t figure out where her voice is coming from or process what they’re talking about. The dosage wasn’t enough. He can see the edge? All I know is my arm is on fire and the weight of Jake’s body on top of me is making it impossible to breathe.*

*Jake wipes the sweat off his forehead with his arm. His hand is bloody and he’s gripping what looks like a box cutter.*

*“What are you doing?!” I scream. “Dana, where are you? Help me!”*

*“Oh hush, child. It’s the same thing they’d do in the doctor’s office. You just have to hold still. You’ll be thanking us when it’s over.” She’s not here. Her voice is next to my head, coming through the speaker of Jake’s phone propped up on the bedside table.*

*“Shit, there’s blood everywhere now, Maggie, Jesus,” Jake criticizes, as if it’s my fault he decided to dig into my arm with a box cutter.*

*He digs in again. The fog in my brain clears, I’m able to put together what he’s trying to accomplish, and I feel sick. I’m frozen in fear, and I don’t dare jerk or kick or squirm any further. Not that I could fight him off.*

*Finally, he holds up his prize. A tiny plastic bar.*

*Click. Click. Click.*

Feeling sick, I look up and find Ryan’s eyes on mine. He’s not staring at my body with revulsion, or ogling the evidence of my past hurts. He’s watching *me*. There’s a tenderness in his eyes that manages to make me feel even more vulnerable, although in a different way. It’s a vulnerability that gives me

the strength to let Dare continue. I keep my eyes firmly locked on his until a gentle touch startles me.

Dare is still on his knees in front of me. His hands gently encircle my waist, his thumb caressing across the deepest parts of the bruise in a barely there touch that makes my skin erupt in goose flesh. He rests his forehead on my navel, and takes a deep breath, as if to steady himself.

There's a pained look in his eyes that he turns up to me.

"I'm sorry," he says, so quietly I barely hear him.

"It's not your fault," I whisper back.

"I know, but if things had been different—"

"There's no point in thinking about it."

He presses a light kiss on my hip bone, and I freeze. My first instinct is to tense up, to recoil. Dare stops immediately, pulling away and standing with an apology on his lips. He moves back to turn the lamp off, leaving only the overhead light.

Not able to find words, I shake my head vigorously, reaching for his hand and gently nudging him back down. This is not Jake, or someone trying to take something from me. I don't stop him when he presses a light kiss on my other hip bone, trailing feather-light kisses and whispers that I can't make out over my battered skin. Slowly, he kisses every bruise, cut, and scar. As if he can heal them with his tender touch.

Warmth spreads from my core, my pale skin flushing pink. I watch him as he turns my leg out at an angle and leans down. A violent shiver wracks over my body that I don't understand. It's not fight or flight, it's...

"Has anyone ever made you feel good before?" Ryan's voice startles me, despite how low and gently he speaks. I blink up at him, unsure of how to answer. He steps closer, watching me, analyzing me. His low, deep voice sends chills over my already sensitive flesh. My nipples pebble almost painfully.

Timidly, I shake my head no. There were maybe times when it didn't hurt, but I didn't think it was ever meant to feel good. I remember being on my own and feeling the same tingle I feel now. Having a need and a *curiosity* about where the feeling might go, but the few times I'd attempted I'd been caught and punished in one way or another—by my own shame or by someone making me feel shameful. Sex was for him. It's what he wanted, what he was entitled to. What he *took*.

It never occurred to me that it could be something pleasurable for me, too. If it weren't for this aching need inside me, I might scoff at the mere idea that a man might be able to make me feel anything good. But the tightening of muscles I've never used tells me there's more to it than I've experienced before. There's a *want* inside me that I don't understand.

“Can we touch you?”

My back rests against the wall, my body trembling with a mixture of fear, anxiousness, and desperation. Ryan's simple question churns something inside me. I nod, but barely.

Dare kisses my leg, just above my knee. His hand rests on my calf. Ryan lifts my chin, forcing me to look up to meet his eyes.

“Do you *want* us to touch you?” I nod again, my eyes wide and fixed on his. “Listen to me, Noli. No one will ever touch you without your permission again. We will not touch you without your explicit instruction and permission. Do you understand me?”

I nod, thinking he's going to kiss me now. My eyes close, but no one moves. When I open them again, Ryan is looking down at me, waiting patiently for... oh.

*Can I do this?*

“You can touch me,” I whisper, my face flaming. There's a second where they still don't move. I crane my neck, pushing my mouth closer to his. “Please touch me?”

They both move at the same time, in slow, methodical movements. Ryan's lips press against mine, slowly coaxing them open. His tongue touches mine and an electric shiver shoots down my spine, colliding with the rush of feeling that is happening in the lower half of my body.

Dare kisses a hot path up the outside of my thigh and across my hip. Ryan's kiss deepens, pulling my tongue in to dance with his. I'm lost in it, in the feeling of both of their mouths on me, the breathless, weightless feeling of anticipation.

Dare's kisses have trailed up the inside of my thigh, my leg turned out so he can administer treatment to the welt there. He attends to it with tender loving care, but then buries his face between my legs and licks. The shock of sensation jolts me out of my trance. I gasp into Ryan's mouth and throw out a hand to balance myself, accidentally hitting the switch on the wall.

I'm not so uninformed that I don't know my own anatomy, and I knew, or had seen on screen, that oral sex for women is a thing. I really thought it was just theatrics, a show put on for the sake of men's arousal in pornography. Jake certainly never did it. He thought it was gross, even though watching it on screen got him excited.

I knew it was 'a thing'... but I didn't know *anything* could feel like *this*.

Dare's tongue flicks out and does it again, pulling my clit into his mouth and gently sucking. Limp in Ryan's arms, I look down at Dare, and the sight of him worshiping my body this way makes me feel *powerful*. It is an unfamiliar feeling and I want more.

Ryan's mouth trails down my neck, his hand gently cupping my small breast, testing the weight of it and rolling the nipple between his thumb and forefinger. It sends a jolt right down to where Dare's mouth is moving against me. I moan into Ryan's shoulder, lifting up onto my tip-toes to direct the pressure of Dare's tongue.

Dare pulls back. I whimper. In the light of the pale moonlight, I can see his smirk as he reaches for both mine and

Ryan's hands and pulls us over to the bed. He pulls me closer and kisses me deeply. The taste of myself on his tongue is heady and intoxicating.

They turn me around, setting me gently on the edge of the bed. Dare kneels down between my legs again, but I stop him with a hand on his shoulder.

"Can I... see you? I don't want to be the only naked one here."

"We'll do whatever you want," Dare says. "But understand that just because we're naked and excited doesn't mean you have to do anything about it. We're here to make you feel good."

As he speaks, they both strip down to their underwear. Their excitement is definitely apparent. There's a moment of intimidation, realizing that I'm in a room, naked, with two men with *massive* erections. But when I check in with myself, I feel more curious and aroused than truly intimidated. It's the newness of the circumstances, not the men themselves, that is making me feel that way. No one has ever cared how I felt or what I wanted, but they do. For the first time, I feel safe and wanted, despite the nerves that have my skin breaking out in gooseflesh.

Dare's smooth, dark skin glistens in the beams of light that filter in through the sheer curtains. I can't quite make out the shapes, but I can see tendrils of ink along his well-defined chest. He's perfect.

Ryan is a full work of art, very few spaces left untouched. His ink covers almost all of both of his arms, one shoulder, his entire chest and abdomen, both thighs, and down one leg. The art moves with his lithe muscles. There are barbells through each of his nipples.

These are probably the most beautiful men on the planet, and they're in here, looking at me like they'd like nothing more than to worship my body and the ground I walk on.

They give each other a look before they both pull off their boxer briefs. Two jutting appendages stare back at me. Dare's

is long, thick, and smooth, a band of darker skin around the bottom of the head, curved slightly upwards. Ryan's is just as long but twice as thick as Dare's, something glinting in the moonlight. My head cocks to the side, trying to see better.

Ryan steps closer, holding his erection closer against his body so I can see the double row of studs along the bottom, five on each side. "Oh," I breathe out. I don't think I knew you could get piercings there. That *is* intimidating.

"They don't hurt, they actually feel amazing," Dare says, coming to Ryan's side. His hand caresses over Ryan's shaft, fingers rolling over the metal balls. Ryan's abs contract as Dare's hand moves over his cock. "The size is something to work up to, though," he says with a breathy chuckle.

I stop just short of asking to watch them together; I'm not sure it's appropriate or would be appreciated. I'm second guessing everything right now. My eyes must be saucers, because all I can think about is how in over my head I am. Dare kneels in front of me, not touching me, just giving me space to adjust to what is happening.

"Hey, don't think about it too much. Like Ryan said, no one is going to touch you unless you explicitly ask. Neither of us would ever pressure you or even think about getting near you unless we know for certain that it's what you want. Okay?"

Ryan steps back into the shadows a bit, giving me a moment to think and recalibrate. That alone immediately makes me feel more comfortable. Not because he moved away from me, I actually don't want him to go anywhere. But because he thought to give me the space.

I reach out my hand to him, beckoning him to my side. I press my mouth against his, deepening the kiss myself this time.

Feeling bold, I open my legs slightly. "Don't stop? Please."

That's all they need from me. Dare crawls forward, kissing his way up from the inside of my knee until he's buried his face in my core, his tongue resuming its slow torture. Ryan

holds my face in his hands, swallowing my mewls and whimpers. He guides me to lie back on the bed, kissing down my body, pulling a peaked nipple into his mouth to suck. Dare pulls my hips down, throwing my legs over his shoulders. He works his tongue through my folds, lapping up my arousal with sloppy, wet sounds until I'm a panting and crying mess. My hips move on their own accord, shamelessly grinding into his mouth. Just when I think I've reached a peak, Dare clamps his mouth around my hood and sucks my clit into his mouth. He sucks until everything shatters around me.

I think I might be dying. A bright light doesn't come from the end of a tunnel, though. It comes from inside me, engulfing my entire body. My back bows off the bed, stars exploding behind my eyes, muscles seizing and pulsing rhythmically.

I forget how to breathe until I come down, tears springing to my eyes with a rush of mortifying emotion.

Blinking up at the ceiling, I take stock of my body. How am I still here in one piece after my whole body detonated, bursting into so many fragments of raw sensation? How is it that my body could contain that much feeling? Did I *pee*?

And how is it that after all that, those tingles, that curiosity that I now know has a spectacular ending, is still building inside me? My pussy is contracting in a needy sort of way that says *more, I need something more, give me something more*, only I don't know what that something is.

Both of the men are watching me with varying looks of awe. I don't know how to ask for what I want. I don't know how to name it. I have an idea, but there's some anxiety about how I'll feel about it once I get it.

I want them inside of me—or rather, one of them. Without thinking, I'm reaching for Dare's cock. My hand wraps around it, testing the feel of the smooth skin, the way the skin moves over the head. He moans and my pussy contracts again. This. *This* is what I want.

I know I want it. *Need it*. But there's also a good amount of trepidation holding me back.



His eyes meet mine and he holds my gaze, as if reading the thoughts in my mind. He turns his head to look at Ryan, a silent conversation happening right in front of me. They both stand, and I lay back.

But Dare doesn't climb over my body as I expect him to. Instead, Ryan pulls me up to a sitting position while Dare climbs onto the bed, sitting against the pillows. I pull my legs up, shifting to sit on my knees, watching curiously as Ryan roots around the room, looking for something.

Finally, Ryan leans over Dare and kisses him deeply. Watching them feels illicit, like I should look away, but I can't. They're too beautiful, too perfect.

I watch in surprise as Ryan secures each of Dare's arms to the headboard. He uses a belt for one arm, and a scarf for the other. When he's done, Dare tests the restraints with a few firm tugs before looking at me.

"Take what you need from me," Dare says, gently but also huskily. "Don't be afraid. I won't move unless you tell me to. Do you need protection?"

"N-no." Stunned, it still takes me a second to figure out what they've done here. My heart melts a little more. I already felt safe with them, but they're offering me free rein with an extra safety net.

Tentatively, I crawl over the bed toward Dare's outstretched legs. I kneel between his knees with my hands on his thighs, getting a closer look before I reach out and touch him again. My hand wraps around his shaft, stroking up and down, rolling my thumb through the pearl of liquid that drips off the tip.

I've obviously seen a penis before, and handled one in various ways, but never like this. My experiences were always hurried or forced. Now, I take my time, until the pulsing between my legs becomes insistent and I'm feeling brave enough to use Dare to my advantage.

My mouth meets his in a passionate kiss. His tongue is softer and more pliant than Ryan's is, but those same tingles

travel down my spine. The tingles become sparks as I rub my sensitive pussy over his hard length. With my hands gripping the headboard on either side of Dare's head, I slide up and down until I feel close to that peak again. Tipping my hips, I whine into his mouth as I try to line him up to my aching, wet entrance.

Movement comes from my left. A warm hand rests on my lower back, and I'm proud of myself for not flinching off the bed entirely. My awareness of Ryan in the room watching us has not abated. If anything, it's made me wetter. Ryan's hand lets me know he's there, so when I feel his hand between our bodies, I know that he's simply assisting before he steps back. He holds Dare's cock still against my entrance as I test myself, sitting back on it little by little. Once I'm seated, accommodating to the fullness of Dare inside me, Ryan gently kisses my temple and moves away.

"Please, don't leave," I choke out. He sits in the chair next to the bed, his hand slowly stroking his huge, pierced cock.

My attention returns to Dare, patiently watching me through heavy-lidded eyes, holding his breath. His face is screwed up in concentration, but his eyes are soft. I lean forward again and kiss him, one hand leaving the headboard to rest on his chest, where his erratic heart beats in time with mine. Slowly, I roll my hips, watching his mouth drop open.

"Oh my God," he whispers hoarsely.

I continue to roll my hips, gripping him tight between my thighs and leveraging myself up and down his long shaft. I test every movement, watching for how he reacts, but also learning what I like. So far, my favorite is pressing my chest to his and grinding down, but I want the pressure of his arms around me.

I find a rhythm, riding Dare's body, but still needing more. My breasts push up against his face as I reach to untie his arms. He sucks a nipple into his mouth and I cry out, my hips moving faster against him.

Ryan appears to help me let Dare's arms out of the restraints, and then Dare holds me against him, helping me move my body. So close...

“More,” I pant. “Tighter. Hold me tighter.”

Dare’s arms lock around me, pressing my breasts against his smooth chest, his hips thrusting upward. It feels so damn good, but I still need more.

“Do you trust us?” Dare half whispers, half grunts as I continue to impale myself. His legs widen, giving him more leverage to meet me thrust for thrust, and he reaches out towards Ryan.

“Yes!” I cry, more in response to the slight change in position that has his cock hitting some kind of sensor inside me that I feel may tip me over the edge. But I honestly do trust them, so when Ryan’s body appears behind me, I tense some but don’t freak out. I know he wouldn’t do anything to hurt me.

What he does do, however, is shock me. Because while I’ve seen a few scenes of Jake’s porno tapes that he keeps, I couldn’t in my wildest dreams imagine being pinned between two men.

Ryan’s chest presses against my back, giving me the perfect amount of pressure. I moan as Dare’s cock rubs against that spot inside me while my clit grinds down on his pelvis. Then Dare cries out and I nearly orgasm on the spot, feeling Ryan move against my ass and realizing that he’s inside Dare at the same time Dare is inside me.

We move together, a sweaty mass of limbs, moaning and mewling and panting. A tiny expel of breath is all I hear from Ryan, but it’s enough to make my hips twitch, setting me off. The orgasm rolls over me like what I would imagine getting caught in an undertow would feel like. It takes control of my body, every muscle clenching and releasing, clenching and releasing with the tide of absolute ecstasy that steals my thoughts and my breath all at once.

I clench down on Dare so hard that he cries out, “Oh fuck!” and Ryan speeds up his thrusts behind me. Dare spasms and jerks beneath me, thrusting and emptying himself so deep I have the fleeting thought that it’s a good thing I can’t get pregnant again. Ryan moves his hands to my hips, but thinks

better of it mid thrust. He grunts out his release, falling backwards without anything to hold on to. Cum sprays my ass, splattering against my skin as I ride out the last waves of my orgasm. Ryan groans and moves away.

I collapse on top of Dare, his arms wrapped tightly around me. My whole body is jelly.

“Holy... wow.” Is all I can say, my breath is as impossible to catch as the words to describe this feeling.

Ryan returns with a warm, wet cloth and starts wiping the cum from my skin. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to pull out at that moment. I didn’t want to hurt you, and then I fell back.” He sounds embarrassed, and for some reason, that makes me laugh.

“It’s okay... I, um, kind of liked it,” I admit groggily, my face in Dare’s neck as he slowly pulls out of me. Ryan gives me an odd look as he continues to clean me, and then Dare. “Is that weird?”

Did I just manage to go from a thirty-two-year-old woman who has never had an orgasm to an insatiable cum slut in the span of an hour?

“It’s not weird at all. In fact, it’s really kind of hot.”

“Seriously?” Is he just trying to make me feel better?

“Noli, if we weren’t trying to take it slow here, I’d eat Dare’s cum right out of your swollen pussy and then use it as lube to pound you both into the ground. But I’m behaving myself. This time.”

The angle that the shadows are falling over his face makes it impossible to tell if he’s kidding, but I swear to God I have never heard such filthy talk in my life. My nipples are immediately at full alert again and despite being bone tired, I think I could maybe be up for trying that...

“Sleep, little flower,” Dare whispers, kissing my sweaty forehead. “There’s always tomorrow, and the day after that... We’re never letting you go now.”

## Dare

My phone buzzes from across the room. I blink groggily, not quite awake yet. My body is overheated and slick with sweat from the bodies glued against either side of me. I don't mind it at all, though.

I don't think I have ever been more comfortable. Noli's head is on my chest. Ryan's arm reaches across my stomach to rest on the outside of her leg that's hiked up over my thigh.

*Buzz buzz. Buzz buzz.*

Oh shit, it's the alarm. I wanted to make sure one of us was up early in case Jamie came looking.

Carefully removing the surrounding limbs from my person, I extract myself from the bed and hurry over to where my phone is laying on the floor. The alarm has been going off for nearly half an hour. It's lucky I'm such a light sleeper, I wouldn't have heard it at all otherwise.

There's also a text from Matty.

**Dropping by in about 30.**

It was sent about fifteen minutes ago, so he's probably close to getting here already. I pull on my clothes, not bothering with retrieving the belt that's still hanging from the bed frame.

Last night was transcendental. First, being able to give her the power to take her curiosity and sexuality into her own hands. Getting to watch her as she gained the confidence to use me for her own pleasure. And then having Ryan join us—the fullness of his big cock filling me up while Noli ground herself down on me. The tight squeeze of her walls when she came.

Otherworldly.

I take a moment to watch them sleep, curling in on each other in my absence. A fullness like I've never felt before wraps around my chest and squeezes. This. This is how it was meant to be.

I leave a little note on the bedside table. *“I’ve got Jamie. You sleep.”*

As I walk down the stairs, I hear Matty’s deep voice outside. He and Jamie are on the porch swing, laughing about something. She must have come downstairs first, and found Matty waiting. The low timbre of Matty’s deep voice carries, but I can’t hear their conversation. I give them some time while I warm up some muffins and brew a pot of coffee.

“Okay if I join you?” I ask, sticking my head out the door. Jamie nods encouragingly, her eyes lighting up when she sees the tray I made. “We used to have porch picnics a lot when we were kids, especially if it was raining.”

“We love when it rains,” Jamie says, reaching for a muffin. “Mama used to open the back door and we would lay with our heads near the edge so we could see it falling. Or sometimes, if daddy wasn’t home, we went out and splashed in mud puddles.”

I nod, remembering how we used to do the same thing on the edge of this very porch. “She’s always loved the rain, and I have a lot of happy memories of doing the same things when we were kids.”

“What was she like?”

“Your mom?” She nods affirmatively. “Well, for starters, she looked exactly like you.”

“Except her hair’s lighter and I have more freckles. Mrs. Bishop kept saying that.”

“Spitting image,” Matty agrees, relaxing his head on the back of the porch swing.

“Very much so. And your mom was a firecracker.”

Jamie giggles. “A firecracker?”

“Oh yeah. She was always in for anything and up to something. Always laughing and making jokes, running and climbing, coming home every day covered in dirt and skinned knees. She gave your granddaddy a run for his money, that’s

for sure. She was full of life and laughter. We had a lot of fun growing up together.”

Her little freckled nose scrunches up and she closes her eyes.

“You okay there, ladybug?” His use of the nickname surprises me.

“I was imagining mama happy,” she says simply, like she’s not sure she believes me. Matty and I give each other meaningful looks. “Why’d you call me ladybug?”

Matty chuckles, and I get the distinct impression that it was an accidental slip. “It’s what your grandpa used to call your mom. He said she was his good luck. Magnolia trees are a symbol of good luck, too.”

“Why did he die?”

“Why or how?” Matty asks. Jamie shrugs her shoulders, mouth full of muffin.

“I suppose no one knows why exactly. The doctors couldn’t find an underlying condition or anything...”

Matty chimes in, “He means he wasn’t sick or anything. They don’t know what caused it.”

“Daddy says mama caused Grandpa’s brain to explode because she was bad.”

“That is absolutely not true,” I say sadly. What this poor girl has overheard or been told her entire life, it’s heartbreaking.. Once they’re safe, they’re both going to need a lot of therapy. “The thing he died from is called an aneurysm. Basically, he had a vessel that burst inside his brain.”

Jamie looks a little sheepish, and her eyes get watery. “Sometimes my mom writes letters. She used to forget I can read, so I read some of them before she threw them away or burned them on the back porch. She said she died when grandpa died,” she looks up, as if remembering and trying to form her next thought. “Mama said that it was the *cat-list* of her life falling down around her... But I looked that up and it didn’t make sense because it was about chemicals. I couldn’t

ask Daddy because he gets mad about mama's letters for some reason."

I nod, appreciating the girl's intellect. "Are you sure you're only eight?"

"Yes," she giggles.

I narrow my eyes jokingly before I answer her question. "A catalyst is something that sets off a reaction or makes a reaction happen faster. It's a word that's used in chemistry a lot, but in this instance, she meant that it was the event that changed her whole life. When your grandpa died, she had to move very far away from her home and away from us. It changed a lot for her. For us too."

"Would she have been happy if she stayed?" Her deep blue eyes look pensive and sad. "She would have been happier if she never met my daddy and had me," she says quietly, a tear rolling down her cheek.

Matty wraps an arm around her and pulls her close, kissing the top of her head. "Hey now, you listen to me. I know for a fact that you are the best thing to ever happen to your mama. Whatever else bad happened, you're her good luck and her happiness. You're the most important part of her life, and she'll do anything to make sure you're safe and happy."

Jamie swallows, her voice cracking through her tears. "But if she didn't have me, she could have run away a long time ago. He... he hurts her. And I'm not strong enough to protect her," she says, holding her injured wrist against herself.

"It's not your job to protect her, Jamie. It's her job to protect you, which is why she brought you here. Now we're here to help you and your mama. We're going to do everything we can to make things better, okay?"

She sniffs and nods into Matty's side before straightening up and wiping her face. She looks up at Matty with a serious gaze, the blue of her irises impossibly darker, her watery eyes rimmed red from her tears.

"I heard mama say that she doesn't want me to talk to the police or in a court. But I want to help. I don't want to go back



home, I want to stay here. Can I tell them that?”

Matty looks at me, and I shrug. I don't know what to do. Honestly, I had agreed about Jamie not testifying until I spent much time with her. She's a smart girl, mature for her age, and very observant. I have no doubt her testimony would be helpful.

“It's not our decision, ladybug. But if she asks for my opinion, you have my vote,” he says. She seems to find this a good enough response and moves on.

“I think if we stay, mama will be happy. I've never seen her smile or talk so much.”

Smiling, I say, “Well, that makes me feel good to know,” and it's not a lie. I've all but started planning out our futures together. I'm all in on this, and after last night, I feel like she is too.

“Do you love her?”

“What?” I say, surprised by her question.

“My mama. Do you love her? Are you going to be her boyfriends?” I notice that she's pluralized boyfriends, and for the first time in my life I've questioned how or what we would tell people if we did pursue a relationship with us all together.

“Yes, we love her.” I don't feel bad at all roping Matty into my *we*. He can deny it all he wants, but Ryan and I both know it's a bullshit façade. “Your mom is our best friend, and has been since Matty here was still wetting the bed. I don't know about the boyfriends thing. Right now, we're just focused on trying to help keep you both safe.” It's a little white lie, sure, but if she does end up testifying, I'm not sure that “my mommy has three boyfriends” is going to help our case.

Satisfied with my answers, she takes another bite of her muffin and we finish our breakfast in relative silence. I nearly spit out my coffee when I hear a very distinctive sound come from a window just above the porch. A *bedroom* window, the bedroom I just left, to be exact. No one else seems to have heard it, but those are not the kinds of questions I want this observant little girl asking me.

Clearing my throat and jumping up quickly, I challenge her playfully. “Hey Jamie, you wanna race us to the magnolia tree and see who can climb the highest?”

Her grin is huge as she takes off like a rocket, Matty and I laughing as we run after her.

## Noli

I dream of tattoos. In my dream, each and every one of my scars and bruises gets covered with them, until I'm as much a walking piece of art as Ryan. Dare is there, too, his head buried between my thighs to distract me from the pain of the needles. The shock of pleasure of his tongue flicking against my clit is so vivid that I wake up, panting and twisting the sheet beneath me.

“Good dream?”

Ryan is laying on his side, arm bent to prop up his head. His hazel eyes look clear and bright in the sunlight. His pierced eyebrow is quirked, a smirk painting one side of his face.

“I, uh... yeah, I think it was.”

“Seemed like a good one,” he says casually. I avoid his eyes, embarrassed and questioning myself.

What did I do? Did I talk in my sleep? Oh god, what time is it? *Jamie*—No, she's okay. Dare's got her, I can hear her laughing outside the window.

“I... don't... remember. Much, anyway.”

“Liar,” he whispers, leaning over me and taking my lips, slowly coaxing my tongue into a kiss that awakens every nerve ending on my body. *What would the ball of his tongue ring feel like kissing me in other places?* I moan into his mouth. “Hmmm, yes, that's what it sounded like. Tell me, love, what was happening in your dream to make you moan and roll around like a cat in heat?”

I laugh out loud against his lips. “A cat in heat, you say? I feel so sexy now,” I joke, deflecting from my present circumstances of being mortified.

“You think it's funny?”

*I do now.* I can't stop laughing.

Until Ryan kisses a path from my collarbone to the spot underneath my ear that gives me palpitations in a good way.

My giggles become short pants, cut off immediately by a low string of words that short circuit my brain and make it impossible to swallow.

“Hmm, I don’t know. I think it’s pretty sexy to hear your little kitten purrs.” My spine melts. His hand slides down my side, over my hip, trailing down and then up the back of my thigh. Hooking my leg around his, I pull myself closer against his body.

Movement under the sheet that covers Ryan’s middle catches my eye. After the events of last night, I’m feeling loved up and confident, for possibly the first time in my life. It makes me brave enough to act on my curiosity.

Slowly, I grip the edge of the sheet and pull it away, unveiling Ryan’s rapidly growing erection. It’s even larger looking in broad daylight, the piercings that decorate his thick shaft glinting in the filtered sunlight. I want to feel it. After all of the tenderness last night, I am eager for it and the man it is attached to, any feeling of being intimidated by him washed away in the morning light.

My eyes meet Ryan’s hooded gaze. He seems to understand my unspoken request, and relaxes back against the pillows with his hands behind his head, giving me unfettered permission to explore to my heart’s content.

My fingers graze the long shaft, feeling along the bumps and ridges of the piercings along the bottom of the shaft. Last night, I thought that there were ten studs, but there are actually five barbells, spaced maybe an inch and a half apart. Even more surprising than the piercings is Dare’s name tattooed along the side in curly, scripted letters. I didn’t even know you could get a tattoo there.

Testing out the girth of the monster in front of me, I wrap my hand around it and feel the bumps along my palm as I stroke the shaft. It grows impossibly harder, the purple head throbbing and glistening. My mouth waters.

Bending down, I slowly lick a path from the base of his cock to the tip, my tongue feeling the ridges of the ladder between the warm metal balls. Ryan leans his head back and

moans quietly. His abs contract, a ripple of muscle showing me just how hard he's working to stay completely still.

My lips shroud the bulbous head of Ryan's cock, my tongue swirling around the tip. The slightly sweet, metallic flavor of his pre-cum sends a shiver down my body, warmth building in my core. Ryan sucks in a breath, hissing when I take more of him. Mouth open wide, I slide down his long, thick shaft, as far back as I can go. His hips jerk when he touches the back of my throat.

Who knew that I'd ever want to do this? That it could make me feel so empowered... So turned on.

Rivulets of my spit, drip and gather at the base of his cock as I take him as deep as I can. My own arousal is dripping down the inside of my thighs, much like the saliva that drips from the corners of my mouth. Wrapping my hand around the base, I spread the wetness, using it to slide my hand up and down the bottom part that I can't fit into my mouth while I lick and suck enthusiastically. Every once in a while, his hips twitch or try to roll, but he stops himself, staying stock still.

"Fuuuuck... Noli, you might want to slow down or I'm going to come." My eyes trace the way his muscular chest is heaving in heavy breaths, his hands fisting the pillow behind his head.

I want his cum. But I also desperately want to feel him inside me. Releasing his cock, I climb up Ryan's body and kiss him passionately. He moans into my mouth, pressing up against me but not moving his hands.

"Ryan," I say against his mouth. "I want you. Please touch me."

His arms wrap around me, crushing me to his body. He turns us over so he's on top of me, the delicious weight of his body pressing me into the mattress.

His kisses are slow and deep, stoking the flames that are burning me from the inside out. He separates my legs with a knee, settling his body between my thighs. I mentally prepare for pain, but his fingers are the only thing that touch me,

breaking me out of my anxious thoughts, so all I can think about is the pleasure of his hands on me.

My hips start to rock against his hand, chasing more of the delicious friction that will throw me over that edge again. These orgasms are quickly becoming addictive.

I cry out, the wave spilling over me. Ryan swallows most of the noise, drinking in the sounds of my pleasure. He kisses me breathless, leaving me before the aftershocks have finished, only to bury his tongue inside my quivering pussy. *Oh, that's what it feels like.* The waning orgasm sparks to life again, my thighs shaking violently.

Just when I think I can't take anymore, Ryan returns to my mouth, letting me taste myself, feeding me my own cum from his tongue. With a finger still teasing my oversensitive clit, he enters me in one slow thrust.

He stills, and a pained expression crosses over his face. "Don't take this the wrong way, but holy fuuuuck."

The burning stretch of my pussy as his generous cock pushes inside me takes my breath away, but the friction of the steel balls and the continued movement of his fingers against my clit quickly turn the pain into something far, far more intense. As my body accommodates him, I grab on to Ryan's strong shoulders, pulling his body against mine.

He takes his time, undulating his hips, each thrust a delicious roll that drives my body even higher.

Another orgasm, or maybe it's the same one, extended beyond what I could have ever thought possible, builds inside me. Every tiny sensation, every brush of his chest against my nipples, every gasping breath, every stroke of his long, hard cock inside me hitting some invisible spot that wants to swallow us both whole... It all culminates to an explosion that rips an inaudible scream from my chest.

The sound and breath are stolen from me, sucked out by the force of my climax, rendering all body functions useless. Ryan doesn't stop; neither slowing or speeding up. He just keeps moving in that perfect position, dragging out my orgasm

until my vision threatens to leave me as stars explode behind my eyes.

When Ryan comes, he holds me close, muffling his shuddering groan in the crook of my neck. He keeps moving until the fluttering of my pussy finally gives way and my faculties are slowly returned so I can breathe again, soft whimpers falling from my lips.

“Jesus Christ,” I whisper.

“No, Kitten, just me,” Ryan smirks, pulling out of me slowly. A rush of liquid follows. The absence of him inside me makes me feel strangely empty.

Ryan curls his body around mine, lightly rubbing my back. I could easily doze, but I know it must be late in the morning. I should really get downstairs to Jamie.

We have so much to figure out. I’m terrified of the prospect of going back to Kansas to fight Jake for custody. I know, without a sliver of doubt, that if he gets his hands on her, he’ll never give her back. And all of his anger will be directed at only her, without me to buffer.

I’d go back to him before I let that happen. As much as it would kill me.

“Wow, that didn’t take long,” Ryan murmurs against my shoulder.

“What?”

“I could sense the moment your thoughts and anxiety kicked in,” he says gently.

Oh god, now he’s going to feel like I didn’t enjoy it enough, and that’s definitely not the case. “Shit, I’m sorry, I just—”

“Shhhh,” he soothes me, kissing me lightly on the side of my neck in the place he knows by now gives me goosebumps. “It’s okay. I just wish I could take it all away. But we’ll figure it out. Together. Until then, whenever you need to get out of your head, you just let us know and we’ll gladly fuck those thoughts right out of your brain.”

I laugh and turn my body so that I'm facing him again. Kissing him deeply, I try to convey all the feelings that are overwhelming my senses. The love. The gratitude.

"You better get your sweet ass up and showered, or I'm liable to keep you here all day," he says begrudgingly.

Hmmm. That doesn't sound so bad... but, yeah. There's a long road ahead of us that starts with getting out of this delicious little sex cocoon and taking a shower.

Begrudgingly, I leave Ryan in bed and take a shower. I use a little makeup and leave my hair down, my confidence blooming after being so loved up. I choose one of the sundresses that Dare made me buy yesterday while we were out, light teal with white flowers.

Ryan isn't in the room when I get out of the shower. I find him on the back porch, double fisting coffee cups, one of which he passes to me. Of course, it's perfect. Just the right amount of cream and sugar.

Maybe my bar is low, but this tiny gesture makes me feel important, and so loved.

He leans on the railing and clears his throat. "So... if you don't want to talk about it, it's okay. But last night, you said you didn't need protection. I just want to follow up and make sure—"

"You don't have to worry. I got my tubes tied after Jamie was born. She came early, and it was a long labor that ended in a c-section. Since Jake was in the waiting room, I asked to be sterilized. I wanted them to take it all out, but this was the best they could do. It was quick and easy, and Jake couldn't reverse it. He never even found out, just thought I was broken after that."

That was probably too much information. "Sorry, apparently I'm an over-sharer now."

"Better than the opposite." Ryan looks right at me, his voice solemn. "And I want to know, *we* want to know, everything about you."

*I'm not sure you do.*



“Where is everyone?” I ask, but I get my answer when I hear a shrieking, playful laugh in the distance. Darius must have taken Jamie to the tree.

The back yard is slightly overgrown, but the wildflowers are flourishing. They tickle my bare calves as we walk, hand in hand, to the magnolia tree.

I’m surprised to find Matty there with them. The three of them are playing ‘tag’, running and laughing as they tag each other, declaring loudly who’s ‘it’ and chasing each other. My throat clogs with emotion, mostly joy, watching them.

Is it so wrong that I could imagine us being a family?

## Matty

Noli walks through the meadow like something out of a movie, her hair and the skirt of the sundress blowing in the slight summer breeze. She looks a hundred times better than yesterday, but it's not just her hair and the dress she's wearing. She looks... content. Happy even. Peaceful.

Her hand is in Ryan's, fingers laced in his as they stroll up and watch us play. Immediately, my eyes flick toward Darius, but he's watching them with a goofy, love-struck look. Neither of them have the same hangups that I do, obviously, and they've jumped in head first. I'm still on the outside trying to hold on to my dignity.

My thoughts and emotions war with each other, each separate feeling fighting for dominance in my chest.

My first instinct, unfortunately, is to melt into a puddle along with my brothers. To succumb to whatever torture we'll all undoubtedly experience if or when she has to move on. It might not even be her fault, but she has a daughter and a legal marriage to contend with. There are too many circumstances that have the potential to end with her leaving again.

I'm simultaneously happy for the three of them, and also not at all pleased with this new development. I can barely admit to myself the small pang of jealousy I feel toward my brothers. Not just because they spent the night with her, which is something I've fantasized about since I was old enough to think of such things. But because they get to be on the receiving end of her warmth and happiness.

And there's anger. Anger which, I'm sure, is more derived from fear than anything else. I'm angry that I'm too chicken shit to get close to her again. I'm angry that she had no one to protect her, that I wasn't there to protect her, even though there's no way I could have known. And then there's my irrational anger that she got herself into this situation at all. If she'd just chosen us...

I *know* it's irrational. But what was she doing messing around with her 'uncle's creepy nephew' in the first place? All

of her letters suggested that she wasn't comfortable around him, that he scared and repulsed her. How many of those letters were lies? I still have them all. Last night, I pulled my beat-up shoe box out of storage and read each and every one of them. Nearly one hundred letters that I'd received from her, from the time she left until the time she finally gave up on us. I put them all in order and read them, one by one, looking for the signs of when she started to pull away, when she started lying. We were seventeen when the most noticeable changes started, when she stopped giving as much detail about her life and the letters came less often. Is that when Jake switched from being creepy to someone she was interested in?

I could never blame someone for being abused. However heartbroken and angry I am, she absolutely didn't deserve to be treated that way. None of that is her fault. My stomach roils every time I look at her face, and Dare suggested that I'm lucky I didn't have to see the rest. He sent me the pictures this morning, which I promptly forwarded to the lawyer without looking. They've been burning a hole in my brain, but the extra skin on display today tells me I've made the right choice in not looking at them. Every mark on her pale skin is encouragement and justification to do something stupid.

If this Jake asshole were here, he'd probably be dead. I killed a punching bag, imagining what I'd do to him if he were here.

But she still chose him over me, over us. What happened after doesn't change the fact that she lied. It doesn't change the fact that it broke me, and her presence here is just a reminder of the pain I've been running from for too many years.

I pull back while Noli plays with Jamie, seeing how high they can climb in the tree that holds all of my fondest memories.

"Has it finally happened?" Ryan walks up to me, breaking me out of my spiraling thoughts.

"What?"

"Your face. Has it finally frozen in a permanent scowl like Grams used to warn us it would, or are you really just trying to

ruin everyone else's day?"

My eyes roll in annoyance. "Are you done fucking around with the married woman?"

"Don't belittle this like it's some debauched affair."

"Isn't it though? She's married, Ryan, and she has a kid!"

"So, what? You think because she made a mistake years ago, she should have to live with it?"

"That's not what I'm saying. I'm concerned about their safety and I want to see them in a better situation. I'm doing everything I can to help. But as for me trusting her? I'm smarter than that," I scoff. I am not here to play house like these two who seem to have just welcomed her back with open arms, as if she didn't lie to us and then leave us without giving any reasons or answers.

"You're an idiot. We both know you want her."

"I don't—"

"Tell me, brother, who are you punishing?" Ryan's voice tells me he won't let this go until he gets an answer from me. Well, fuck him.

My anger is rising, heat creeping up my neck. I round on him, ready to pull him out of Jamie's view so I can kick his ass, but my phone rings.

"Hello," I answer, a little too sharply.

*"Matt, it's Lisa. I've got some news. Are you all free to meet up in the next half hour?"*

"Yeah, same place?"

*"See you there."*

Giving one last seething look at my brother, I call out to the others. "That was Lisa. She wants us to meet her right away."

Everyone's face falls, apprehension reflecting in their serious gazes. I should tell them that she sounded hopeful, but I don't want to be mistaken. And there's part of me—a very

mean, petty part of me—that feels justified in bringing them down a notch.

We all head towards the cars. Noli, Jamie, and Dare pile into Ryan’s SUV. Dare asks if I want to ride with them, but I’d rather drive myself.

Lisa is waiting in the parking lot when we arrive. To save Jamie from the stress of overhearing everything, Noli sends her inside to get a table and order herself some chocolate milk. Ryan’s still pissed off at me, so he decides to go in with her, even though I know how uncomfortable kids make him.

I chuckle to myself, watching him through the windows. Seeing how stiff his posture gets when Jamie scoots in next to him instead of sitting on the opposite side of the booth. *Serves him right*. I almost wish Jamie was a brat and would give him a hard time, but she’s honestly pretty awesome.

“I have some good news, but I don’t want anyone to get ahead of themselves, okay?” We all nod affirmatively before she continues. She hands a folder to Noli. “We filed for a temporary protective custody order under the Uniform Child Custody Jurisdiction and Enforcement Act. Keep in mind this is very temporary, and it can be fought.”

Noli trips over her words, stumbling to thank Lisa. “Oh, wow. This is... I’m going to be honest and say that there were a fair number of words that I maybe didn’t understand completely, but... Oh god, I’m rambling. I’m sorry. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me yet. We still have a hard road ahead of us. If Mr. Denin has good legal counsel, they could demand that the trial take place in the home state. Our best-case scenario is if he decides he doesn’t want his dirty laundry aired and he cooperates.”

“That’ll never happen. Jake’s too stubborn to let anything go,” Noli says, sounding downtrodden.

“Then we’ll fight,” Lisa says resolutely. “Listen, I have to run. There’s some material in that folder that should help you write out your abuse log, questions to jog memory, and also a

template of details to include if you remember them. The sooner you can get this to me, the better, okay?"

"Will do. And thanks again, no matter what happens. I'm very thankful for your help."

Lisa nods and shakes Noli's hand, then Dares. When she reaches for mine, I step in closer to her and place my hand on the small of her back, just low enough to be flirty and still get away with calling it chivalry.

"I'll walk you back to your car," I tell Lisa, even though the car is less than twenty yards away.

Lisa's brow furrows, but she lets it happen, allowing me to escort her as far as her car. When Dare and Noli are inside the diner and we can't be overheard, she turns on me.

"What was that about?" she asks.

"What? I can't be a gentleman?"

"First of all, no, not really. Dare could probably get away with that, but on you it just seems forced. Second of all, exactly what the fuck was that about?"

"Nothing," I answer her. I don't step out of her personal space, chancing a tiny look over my shoulder.

Lisa cants her head to the side and she looks at me with an eyebrow raised and a smirk on her lips. "Matthew West, are you fucking kidding me?"

"What?"

"Are you seriously trying to make your childhood girlfriend jealous? With me?"

"No," I say, obviously unconvincingly, she already knows I am lying considering the way she crosses her arms and narrows her eyes. Even so, she doesn't try to step back or put distance between us.

"You and I both know that this," she points her finger back and forth between us, "is never going to happen."

"I didn't say it was."

“We tried it already, remember? About fifteen years ago, right when I knew for sure that men were not for me. You were my gay awakening.”

“You’re welcome for that, by the way. Glad to have been of service.”

I sigh. “Fine. I’m not so much trying to make her jealous as I am letting her know that I’m not interested.”

“You know, usually when someone puts this much effort into proving that they aren’t interested, it usually means quite the opposite.”

“Not this time.”

“Please. I remember how completely in love with her you were back then.”

Frustration creeps up my neck, my spine and limbs stiffen. “Yeah, well, that was then, and this is now.”

“So then why—”

I cut her off. “Because she lied, Lisa. She lied.” My voice is raising and my body continues to tense up. “That whole time we were writing letters to each other and talking about our plans to be together. She was seeing someone else, got pregnant by him, then got married to him. I’d never in a million years wish the life she’s had on anyone, but it doesn’t change the choices she made before.”

Lisa’s mouth presses into a thin line. “Maybe there’s more to the story.”

“Or maybe, without me having to say the words and sound like an asshole, she just needs to know that I’m not interested in her that way.”

“Except that you are.”

“No, I’m—”

“Admit it and I’ll play along.”

We stare at each other, waiting for one of us to give in. I could totally turn and walk away now, but if I leave an angry Lisa behind me, it’ll just make me look stupid.

“Fine,” I huff. “I have feelings about her being here, but that doesn’t mean anything.”

Lisa quirks her eyebrow and waits for me to finish my confession. I huff.

“Okay, yeah, fine. I spent twelve years in the military and another two years building a business, all in the pursuit of forgetting her, forgetting the child that I was, obsessing over her the way I did. And then she turns up here, and it all comes crashing down at once. Every wall that I’ve built just started to crack...”

Now that I’ve started, I just can’t stop.

“...especially once I met her little girl. I don’t know if you remember Noli when we were all that age, but Jamie looks just like her. She has that same fire in her eyes that Noli used to have. I’d do anything to protect her from losing it. But it’s also a reminder of what I lost, what I could have had if I’d seen the signs and gotten there sooner.”

Her face softens. “You couldn’t have changed anything if you did, Matt. You were a kid, so was she.”

I’m talked out now and ready to flee this conversation before it gets any deeper. The relief I feel at getting some of it off my shoulders is unsettling.

Lisa pats my shoulder and then wraps her arms around my neck. I return the hug and she allows it to linger for a moment, playing into my admittedly immature scheme to give Noli the wrong idea. Then she kisses me on the cheek and says, “I’ll add the therapy session to my bill.”

Chuckling, I open her car door for her and see her off, waving as she pulls out of the parking lot.



## Noli

I sip my coffee and order my biscuits and gravy with a straight face and a level attitude, trying to keep my attention on the drawing lesson Ryan is giving Jamie, instead of looking over at the parking lot. It takes everything in me to try to act completely natural, like seeing Matty with another woman doesn't bother me.

I'm failing, so I try to cover the real reason I keep looking over at Matty and Lisa.

"Do you think everything's okay? Looks like an intense conversation." Matty's posture is almost menacing, and he's so big that he completely blocks Lisa from our view. His back is turned away from us, so we can't see either of their faces.

"Well, it's Matty. Intense is sort of his thing," Dare reasons. He's been watching them too, his brow furrowed in confusion.

Ryan rolls his eyes. "He's probably being a giant douche, that's sort of his thing, too." He looks down at Jamie, who is busy drawing a face using the proportion lines Ryan showed her. "Sorry, kid."

Jamie shrugs, and Ryan grins sideways at her. Taking in the scene across from me, I don't say anything out loud about how well the two of them are getting along. Looking at him now, you'd have no idea that Ryan supposedly doesn't like kids. He's got an arm on the back of the booth, bending over her picture to show her how to tweak her drawing to make it look more realistic.

Dare catches my eye with a knowing grin, and we share a silent laugh. I'm pretty sure Dare even snaps a picture on his phone.

At that moment, my eyes betray me again, and I look outside. Matty rakes his hand through his short-cropped hair and it comes to a rest on the back of his neck. I can't see his face, but he seems upset. His wide shoulders raise and then lower as if in defeat, of what, I don't know, but it doesn't do anything to quell this jealous feeling building inside me.

“I just hope it’s not about my case. Maybe she didn’t want to give me any bad news. He’d take whatever it is better than I would, probably.”

“Nah, Lisa won’t talk to any of us about the case unless it’s relaying messages. You’re her client, and she’s a good lawyer. Whatever they’re talking about is personal between the two of them.”

“I hope I haven’t caused them problems.”

“You couldn’t, and they aren’t even together,” Ryan scoffs.

I watch as Lisa wraps her arms around Matty’s neck. He lifts her into a big hug, and she talks into his ear. “Could have fooled me,” I say. “But either way, that’s his business. It’s not like I have any claim on him. He could be screwing the whole town if he wanted to.”

The words come out of my mouth before I can censor them, and my eyes dart to Jamie. I have zero doubts that she heard every word, but as usual, she minds her own business and doesn’t let on. She’s always been good at that.

Ryan huffs, and Jamie and I pretend not to hear him when he mutters under his breath. “He’s already done that.”

Internally, I wince. Maybe there’s something wrong with me, or I’m just a selfish person. Because while I truly do feel like it’s his life and he has every right to be with whomever he pleases, it hurts to know about it. Despite the fact that I just had the most amazing night and morning with these two perfect men who seem all in and ready to take on the world with me, I still feel like a piece is missing. Like someone is missing.

It’s my fault. It’s not as if I could truly expect them all to wait around for me. If Ryan and Darius hadn’t had each other, they might have gone their separate ways too, and I wouldn’t be a welcome addition to that mix.

One by one, the mistakes of my past are coming together, but this is one thing that I’ll have to accept can’t be fixed. There’s hope on the horizon that I can keep my daughter safe, which is what matters more than anything. I’d like to believe

that Dare and Ryan are in for the long haul, but I'm trying to keep my love-starved heart calm so my desperation doesn't scare them away.

I'm still staring out the window, lost in my thoughts, when Matty joins us. He pulls a chair to the end of the booth, wiping it down before he sits.

Everyone's staring at him. "What?"

"Have a good talk?" Ryan snaps at him.

"What's it to you?"

"Isn't Lisa—"

"How about you mind your damn business?"

"How about you stop being a douche for five minutes?"

I take an even breath through my nose and out my mouth, keeping my face passive even though I feel like I've gotten myself caught in the middle of a bullfight.

When women are mad, why can't we puff ourselves up to look bigger and meaner? I feel like I just shrink in on myself. I've spent so much of my life trying to make myself smaller that I actually feel envious of these two hotheads that look like they're one insult away from blowing.

Without trying to seem upset or make a scene, I nudge Dare to let me out of the booth. "I need to use the restroom," I say, excusing myself and quietly reaching out my hand for Jamie. She gladly reaches for my hand and walks away with me.

The moment the door is closed, I kneel down and get eye level with Jamie.

"You okay?"

She nods stoically. "They wouldn't hurt us." It's a strong declaration, a statement of truth, but there's enough hesitance behind it to suggest that it's a concern.

My heart shatters.

“No, baby, those three would never ever lay a hand on either of us. But that doesn’t mean we have to be around them when they’re being angry and scary. It’s okay to take a break from people when you need it.”

“They’re bigger than Daddy.”

“Yes, they are. And that can make them seem extra scary. It’s okay to be afraid, and it’s okay to have your boundaries. Everyone gets angry, and everyone has feelings that are bigger than what their hearts can hold sometimes, but my boundaries say that I don’t want either of us around when someone gets that angry.”

“Daddy wouldn’t have let you walk away,” she says quietly.

I sniff back tears. “Probably not. That’s because he didn’t have good boundaries, and because mommy didn’t stand up for herself when we first met. But that’s something I’m trying to fix, okay?”

“Will they be mad we left?”

“I don’t think so, but it doesn’t matter. You do what feels right for you at the moment. People will either understand, or they won’t. I think Dare and Ryan, and even Matty, will understand that we needed space, and if they’re mad about it, that’s their problem, not ours.”

“Can we get space at a playground?” she asks hopefully, and I laugh out loud. It’s amazing how resilient children are. They can absorb everything around them and find a way to heal and move on. And I am bound and determined to make sure that my baby girl doesn’t absorb any more negativity than is absolutely necessary. Not anymore.

“Yeah, I think that sounds good.”

When we make it out of the bathroom, the guys all stand up, looking worried. I’m sure it wouldn’t take a genius to put together why we got up from the table, but if they couldn’t figure it out, they had Dare to put them in their places.

Reaching past Dare for my bag, I tell them that Jamie and I are going for a walk to the playground. There’s one just a

couple of blocks from here.

“I can drive you,” Dare offers.

“It’s okay. I think we’ll enjoy the walk, y’all stay here and work out whatever you need to work out.”

To show that there are no hard feelings or upset on my part, I plant a sweet kiss on Dare’s cheek. Ryan whispers an apology in my ear as I kiss his cheek, too. When I turn around and Matty is right in front of me, I almost kiss him just on instinct, but pat his chest awkwardly instead. He stays standing while the other two sit down, watching us leave.

“Oh no, Mommy, I forgot my drawing book!” Jamie says as soon as the door closes behind us. She turns on the spot and runs back inside, nearly colliding with Matty.

He moves aside to let her pass, and I assume he’s going to his car, but he steps towards me.

“Noli—”

“It’s fine, Matty—Sorry, *Matt*. We both know you didn’t mean anything by it. We’re just a little sensitive still.”

His face contorts with pain. The way his voice sounds, you’d think he’d been kicked in the stomach. “You think I’d hurt you?”

“No, of course not, but the three of you are a bit intimidating on a good day. When the two largest start acting like they’re about to throw punches... You’re entitled to your anger, but I don’t want it around me or my daughter.”

“I’m sorry,” he says stiffly. “I’ll try to keep that in mind.”

*Where is Jamie?* I’d really like to be able to escape this conversation right now. I crane my neck to see if she’s coming out, but I see that she’s still inside. She and Ryan are talking to the owner, Ms. Darcy herself, who is bending down to sign Jamie’s cast.

Matty is looking at me expectantly. I don’t know what he wants me to say, though.

“Look, it’s none of my business who you’re with or what you’re doing. I don’t know why Ryan is so mad about it. That’s between the two of you, but I’m not upset. More than anything, I hope you’re happy.”

Matty scoffs. I was being sincere, but he’s so wound up that it doesn’t matter what I say to him.

“Well, thanks for giving me your permission,” he snarks.

“I didn’t mean it that way and you know it.”

“Do I? Because I have a history of taking your words at face value, and it didn’t serve me well before.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It doesn’t matter anymore. I came out here to apologize for scaring Jamie, not to start more shit with *you*,” he spits.

My deep breath sounds like more of a sigh, probably making me sound more irritated than I actually am. More than anything, I’m just sad, and it’s clogging up my respiratory system, making it harder to catch a full breath.

“I’m sorry I hurt you, I—”

“Whatever, Noli. I’m not going there. I don’t need to hear it. I’m done.”

“Okay, I understand.”

But he’s not actually done, because he keeps going, keeps digging that hot knife deeper into my heart. “You don’t understand, Noli. You don’t. Because if you did, you wouldn’t be here trying to weasel yourself back into our lives. Yes, I was hurt. But so were they, Noli. And no amount of tears or fucking can take that away. The only reason they didn’t turn out like me is because they had each other from the beginning.”

I recoil, hearing my deepest fears used against me. “You didn’t turn out so bad,” I say, trying to lighten the mood before he has a reason to accuse me of weaponizing my tears. I can only hold them back for so long.

“Twelve years in the military, multiple tours overseas, thousands of miles between us, and I still couldn’t outrun you. If I’d known you’d show back up, I would have enlisted for another tour.”

“Ouch.” It’s the only word that comes to me, but the pain is so much worse. And when Matty doesn’t stop, it spreads through me, stabbing into my heart.

“If you’d just been honest, we wouldn’t have driven out there. We wouldn’t have had to have our hearts ripped out of us with no warning. You were all in, we made all of those plans, then nothing. We worried, we obsessed, we traveled over six hundred miles just to find out you’d simply met someone else.”

“I didn’t choose to—.”

“Yeah, yeah. No one chooses who they fall in love with, I guess. But some honesty still would have been nice. It would have let us down gently instead of pulling the rug out from under us.”

“I—”

“Just stop, Noli. I don’t want to fight with you. I’m going to help keep you and Jamie safe, because it’s the right thing to do, but that’s it.”

“Don’t do me any favors.”

“It’s not about you,” he says, turning to leave just as Jamie comes bounding through the door. Matty approaches her and drops to a knee. I hear him apologize for scaring her, and his promise to keep his cool around her from now on. She gives him a big hug and invites him to the playground with us, but he says he has plans before storming off to his car.

“Mom! Ms. Darcy gave me chocolate milk to go and a whole doggie bag with snacks! Isn’t that funny? She calls it a doggie bag. She said snacks will make my arm feel better. Oh, and she put something in there for you, too. She says it’s your favorite. Peppermint cookies sound weird, but I want to try it.”

Jamie doesn’t stop talking until we’re about a block away and Ryan calls out to us to wait.

When he gets to us, he makes a show out of catching his breath. Which is funny, but also bullshit, considering he's exceptionally fit and I know full well what kind of stamina he has. Jamie finds him hilarious.

"I just wanted to apologize again," he says, talking to Jamie more than me, which I love and appreciate. She needs more adults, especially men, taking her seriously. "And I thought of a way I could make it up to you. Is there any chance you two would like to go to the Museum of Art in Clarksville with me tomorrow? I might know one of the artists being displayed."

Jamie gasps. "You do?! Who is it?"

"It's me," Ryan answers with a big, cheesy grin that shows off all of his perfect white teeth.

"No way! You're a *real* artist?"

"Dude, you wound me. Yes way! Who do you think drew all of these?" he asks incredulously while gesturing to all the ink on his arms.

"*You can draw your own tattoos?!*" Jamie turns away from him and looks up at me seriously. "Mom, I want a tattoo."

I laugh so hard that some of the tears I'd been holding back stream down my cheeks. "When you're eighteen, we'll talk about it."

"Ten more years, Uncle Ryan, ten more," she says exasperatedly. I think he blushes a little, but I can't prove it. "What about the museum though, can we go?"

"Duh, absolutely! I've always wanted to see Ryan's work displayed. I missed his very first exhibition when I moved away. Uncle Dare sent me pictures, though." *Pictures that Jake burned.*

"Yes!" Jamie exclaims, pumping her fist and running off down the sidewalk, the playground in sight.

Ryan reaches for my hand, threading his fingers through mine as we follow behind her slowly. "I'm sorry about Matty. But I'm more sorry that I let my anger get the best of me,



especially sitting right next to Jamie. I'll never forgive myself if I ever make either of you feel anything more than safe."

"I deserve Matty's anger. I probably don't deserve you, though."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that he's not entirely wrong. I could have been more honest that things weren't great. I just... I didn't want you to worry, because what could you have done about it? It was easier to live in my happy, fun, pretend world that we built in our letters. Like the one where we all were going to move into a dorm together. Which reminds me, does that picture still exist? Because I'd like to see that," I laugh, trying to diffuse the tension.

Ryan isn't letting me change the subject though, and stops walking within view of the playground where Jamie is on the swings. "You didn't do anything wrong, Noli. You were being molested." I wince at the word. "And raped." I wince even harder, looking away.

He holds my chin gently, tipping my face back to look up at him. "Matty doesn't know all the facts, and he's a bullheaded grouch. He doesn't have the benefit of having Dare around to pick up on things the rest of us assholes don't. Once he figures out—"

"No, don't tell him," I say firmly.

"But—"

"I said no, Ryan. First of all, I don't want anyone's pity. Second of all, what if he thinks that I'm making it up to get him back? Third of all, he's clearly not interested, and that's okay. I'm not trying to hold anyone down or back. But most of all—I don't want any of this causing a rift between you all. I'd like us to find a peaceful way to settle into whatever this new normal will be."

"If he—"

"Ryan. Please," I say in a demanding tone. "I don't want to sound ungrateful, because I am so thankful for everything you all have done for me. I can't take anything back, or change

things that happened in the past. What I can do is live in the now. And I'm not going to try to convince anyone to love me."

*Fuck, did I just say the L word?* I blanch, waiting for him to run away. Instead, he cups my jaw and looks me directly in the eye. "We do love you, Magnolia Crawford. Always have, always will."

## Ryan

Noli pushes herself up on her toes and takes me by surprise with the force behind her kiss. I feel every ounce of passion, love, and gratitude that pours into me from her mouth. Gratitude that is absolutely unnecessary, but it's what she feels, not what I asked for.

I don't want anything except her and Dare in my life, happily ever after and all that corny shit. I can see the future that we always imagined, right there on the horizon, so close to us. There are minor differences now, updates that make us better and stronger. Like Jamie, she's a surprisingly welcome addition. That kid will have me wrapped around her little finger by the end of the week, if I'm not already there. All I can say is that there are now four people in my life that I would kill or die for.

*We do love you, Magnolia Crawford. Always have, always will.*

It's the absolute truth, and it includes my hard-headed brother. There's got to be a way to talk his head out of his ass, but lately we've been butting heads harder than ever. We can't seem to be in the same room for too long without fighting.

I understand that he's hurting. He never processed losing Noli, he just ran away from it. He put all the love and pain he held for her in a box and buried it deep, deep inside himself. He joined the military and traveled the world, trying to escape this place and the future he once thought it held for him. We pretty much had to bully him into coming back home, and even then, he didn't come back until he felt like he didn't have anywhere else to go. Nowhere else felt like home.

The kiss grows heated, stoking the flame I've held inside me from the moment I saw her. A horn sounds, and we jump, instinctively separating from each other.

"Y'all trying to get kicked out of a public park, or what?" Dare pulls up beside the sidewalk, laughing. "You know if my mama sees you, she'll kick your ass, right? This is a small

town. We're gonna have to have some conversations with our families before you go cuckolding me in public."

"Whatever, your mom loves me," I retort.

"She won't if she thinks you're out here cheating on me," he says, still laughing.

Noli looks horrified, her face turning redder than I've ever seen it. "Oh my god," she whispers.

"Look at his face, Kitten, he's kidding." Dare throws back his head and laughs, apparently finding our girl's distress amusing.

"I really am. It's okay. I'm just messing with y'all. Mom isn't likely to be on this side of town on a weekday," he says, eyes full of mirth. "On a serious note, can I join you? You can tell me more about this 'kitten' business..."

Oh, well, will you look at that? I was wrong. She *can* blush harder.

"Breathe, Kitten," I say in her ear, nipping her lobe before pulling away. "Not my call, babe," I say to Dare. "You weren't one of the assholes, though, so you might be okay. I, however, am going for a jog to punish myself for my jackassery." That gets a giggle out of Noli.

I give them both a quick kiss before I set out. It's lucky that I happen to almost always wear workout clothes, because it isn't a planned jog. I need to speak with my brother and clear the air. It'll be easier without Dare and Noli worrying about us.

Noli will worry that we'll fight over her and end up hating each other. I admit this might be a problem, because if he disrespects her again, I might not be able to walk out of there without throwing a punch at my own brother. And Dare will want to be there to make sure no one throws said punch. It's only happened once, shortly after we got home from that infamous trip, but it wasn't pretty. We didn't speak for a long time after that, and the next time he came home on leave, we just pretended it never happened. We haven't brought it up since then.

It's a quick twenty-minute jog to Matty's place. There aren't many places he'd go after storming off, and sure enough, when I open the door, I can hear the sound of fists hitting the bag.

Our father taught us how to box. He used to box semi-professionally. Other than the one fight when we were eighteen, it's been how we settled all disputes. Usually, once we punch out some energy, we're able to talk it out.

I don't announce my presence right away, taking a seat on a bench behind him and watching the way he moves around the bag. He boxed in the military, even won a medal at an international competition before his last deployment. It's hanging up in the office behind me, or was anyway. I haven't been here since the construction started.

"You got anything to say, or are you just here to take my measure before you start something?" Matty walks over to the end of the bench and takes a swig from his water bottle, not even sparing me a glance.

"The new ink doesn't look any worse off," I say, starting with a neutral topic. He glares at me. "I just wanna talk. Figured you'd be here."

A pair of gloves hits me in the chest. "Wraps are in the cabinet."

Sigh. "Or we could just talk, you overgrown caveman."

"Scared?"

I scoff. He might be bigger, bulkier, and better trained, but I'm no slouch. I can hold my own. Realistically, he'll probably beat my ass, but as long as I can get him talking, it'll be worth it. "No, just thinking that Noli and Dare aren't going to appreciate me coming home with my pretty face fucked up."

"Keep your hands up, then." My signature move is letting my opponent get a good hit in so I can come at them when they think I'm reeling. I've won a lot of fights with that move, though I've never used it on Matty. As a rule, we don't usually go hard to the face, and he'd probably see it coming, anyway.

“So, how many hits do you need to get in before you’ll speak to me?” I ask, wrapping my hands and pulling on the gloves.

“I’m speaking to you now,” he says gruffly, pulling the plastic covering off the ring.

“You know what I mean.”

“Yeah, I do, and I honestly don’t know. I don’t want to talk about it. There isn’t anything to talk about, and I’m not in the mood for your bullshit,” he says as he steps into the ring.

I climb in after him, already sick of *his* bullshit. “You seemed in the mood earlier, pulling whatever that crap with Lisa was.”

“Oh, come off it. If anything, that was a kindness.”

“Well, my apologies! I didn’t realize you flaunting your womanizing ways in front of an emotionally fragile woman who has been in love with you since the age of five was a *kindness*.” I say incredulously, circling and waiting for him to throw the first punch.

“She was never truly in love with any of us. You do realize that, right?”

“You’re cruel when you’re pissy. When’s the last time you got laid?”

“Not all of us are interested in picking off someone else’s plate.”

I drop my hands just enough to give him a good scowl. “What the fuck does that even mean?” He swipes at me, and I duck, giving him a quick jab to the stomach, which he blocks. “Ooh, going for the hook so soon?”

“She’s legally married to a man that she drugged and left for dead. I’m not saying he didn’t deserve it, but getting mixed up in that is just going to cause everyone problems. Would have been easier if he died, but it still wouldn’t excuse everything else.”

“We agree on that much. As for the rest, no one needs to know what happens behind closed doors.”

“As if anyone couldn’t see you all mooning over each other and put it all together.”

“Jealous, Matty?” That gets him moving. He comes at me, swinging his big fists and I slip under his arms, rolling into his body, landing a few quick jabs before he pushes me off. “Are you aware that you’re full of shit, or do you really believe that you don’t have any feelings for her at all? Tell me you didn’t look her in the eyes and have everything come rushing back at once. Because that’s how I felt and it’s how Dare felt too.”

“Fuck you,” he says, coming in hot. He lands a few punches, but I’m able to throw him off and land a good one on his cheek. It isn’t too hard, but he looks pissed. Good, now I know he’ll break eventually. So I keep pushing.

“You know what I think? I think you’re so fucked up from mom leaving that you’re projecting all of that anger on someone who doesn’t deserve it. She’s not mom, Matty. She didn’t leave because she wanted to. And despite what you think, she never meant to lie to us.”

He backs off for a minute, breathing hard, but I can tell he’s got something to say, so I don’t advance on him like I would in any other match.

“I don’t get it, man,” he says snidely. “You’ve got this amazing relationship with someone that you’ve loved your entire life. You and Dare are perfect in every way, but you’re willing to risk it all for *her*?”

“*She* is someone we’ve *both* loved our entire lives. Maybe there’ll be some logistics to work out, especially with her having a kid and whatever legal stuff happens, but it’ll be worth it. You might refuse to see it, but she’s still the same Noli, just with some scar tissue.” And I don’t just mean physically, Noli is going to need to heal from her emotional wounds, too.

“She had nowhere to go. You’re delusional enough to think she isn’t settling for the first port in the storm? Are you so love struck and pussy whipped that you can’t see the forest for the trees? You got your first taste and just fell in, like a fucking idiot.”

I laugh. I can't help it. I'm dangerously close to snapping.

"I don't see how that's funny."

"Well, for one, you're getting dangerously close to crossing the line and disrespecting my family. Second of all, your jealousy is showing—again. But for your information, I've never tasted anything more delicious."

He comes at me hard, throwing vicious punches, physically and verbally, backing me up against the ropes. "Family? That's rich. You all gonna move into the old house and help raise the kid? You gonna be Jamie's new daddy?"

"Don't you dare bring her into this," I say with a hard cross punch that lands on the side of his head. *This is going to get ugly.*

"What? You need to think rationally, brother. What are you going to do with a kid? Or multiple kids, if you're not using protection."

"We'll fucking figure it out, *together*. Meanwhile, you'll be alone and miserable, as usual. How far are you going to move away this time, Matty?"

"Jesus Fuck, Ry, you've got to be kidding me. Are you really that stupid? You're seriously not using protection? How fucking dumb are you—"

"Not that any of that is any of your god—*punch*—damned—*punch*—business, but of course we discussed it. Dare's a fucking doctor, you massive—*punch*—fucking—*punch*—douche!"

Our breathing is too heavy to talk for a few minutes while we exchange hard blows. The unspoken rules that we have always followed are quickly disappearing. I swarm him, punching over and over again, crowding him and throwing powerful hits. I don't block at all, taking his hits to get close to him. Just as I land a sharp uppercut, he fouls me. His foot flies out and trips me, taking me down to the mat.

"Are we moving on from boxing now, brother?" I ask, standing up and spitting blood on the ground. "Can't fucking take it, so you've got to fight dirty? You're so full of shit,



Matty. Running away from your problems, parading Lisa around like she'd have anything to do with you, being a fucking dick to Noli. You're fucking pathetic."

He runs at me. He's bigger, but I'm quicker. I sidestep him each time, biding my time while he tires himself out. He lunges again, and this time I manage to dodge his body, but catch his arm across my gut. The breath is knocked out of me, and I heave, trying to keep my hands up and wits about me while I recover.

Matt stands back and uses the opportunity to get some verbal jabs in. "I'm pathetic? You took one look at the girl that ruined all of us and just rolled over like a goddamned golden retriever. I'm the only one thinking logically here. I'm the only one that seems to remember that she fucking lied to us. She strung us along like fucking assholes, all the while she was fucking that pile of human excrement."

"That's not what happened," I cough, rolling my shoulders, ready for whatever else he has to throw at me. He's the better boxer by far, but his emotions always get the best of him. "I can take as many punches as I need to end this one way or another. Either you get your head out of your ass, or get the fuck out. Run away and join the fucking circus for all I care. At this point, I don't care which you choose."

He sneers at me. "You're letting some girl get between us, and next she'll get between you and Dare. She's a liar, Ryan. All those fucking rumors, all that bad rep—what if it's all true? I'm not slut-shaming, I don't give a rat's ass who or how many people she fucks, but—"

Nope. We're done here.

My patience finally snaps, and I lunge. It takes him by surprise, and I manage to tackle him to the ground. We grapple for a while, but being smaller and angrier pays off, and I gain the upper hand for long enough to straddle his waist and land multiple punches to his face. The crunch of his nose breaks through my rage and I slow down. He's conscious and absolutely capable of fighting back, but I think me losing my composure this violently has shocked him.

He lays there, blood pouring from his nose, and says weakly, “she promised me all her firsts. Then she didn’t even have the decency to let me down easy.”

“Grow up, Matty.”

“You’re right, you know? It all came rushing back as soon as I saw her. My fucking brain is fried. All I can do is reread old letters and fucking relive it. She broke me, Ry. However weak or immature or irrational that is... She fucking broke me.”

“Get therapy,” I say, wiping blood from my cheek. That cut is going to require stitches. “But more than that, fucking listen to what we’ve all been trying to tell you. She didn’t have a choice.”

“I don’t suppose she did since she got knocked up, and I genuinely feel for her. It’s taken too much restraint not to drive back to Kansas and fucking end him for hurting her and Jamie. But that doesn’t change that it happened in the first place—”

I can’t listen to this anymore. “Shut the fuck up and listen to me—Fucking LISTEN! She was *raped*, you fucking dimwitted neanderthal. That asshole had been chasing after her, fucking fondling her and shit for years. And then he fucking *raped* her,” I scream at him, my eyes filling with hot tears. “*That’s* how she got pregnant in the first place. He raped her. She never wanted him.”

“What—no, she—”

“And while he raped her, she laid there thinking about how she was letting *us* down. Thinking that because she didn’t fight hard enough that it wasn’t what it really was. But she never asked for it, never fell in love with him, and never had a moment’s peace or tenderness before she came back here. So, yeah, maybe I’m a simp, but at least I’m not an ignorant fucking asshole, digging in and making her wounds deeper.”

Matty gapes at me, but has the decency to keep his mouth shut, or maybe he’s too stunned to speak. He looks more dazed than he did when I broke his nose. His gaze is locked on mine, searching for the lie, or the weakness.

Disgusted with my brother, and not feeling one bit guilty that I just dropped a bomb that he may never recover from, I remove my gloves and throw them down, holding his stare. Then I turn on my heel and leave him laying there, bloody and grief-stricken.

## Noli

“She’s really something special, Noli,” Dare says softly as we close the door on my sleeping daughter.

It was a big day today. Since she’s not been in school, I’ve been letting her stay up until the sun goes down, which at this time of year is pretty late for her. But tonight, she passed out early, exhausted after spending the day running and playing at the playground. We’d spent the afternoon at the roller skating rink with Dare and she was worn out before we even got home.

“I don’t think she’s ever had this much fun. You’re amazing with her, all of you are. Even Ryan,” I say with a laugh.

“I’m pretty sure that Jamie has officially won over Ryan. Did you see the way they were drawing together today? That was precious, and I need to make sure to remember to give him a hard time about it.” Dare says, smiling at the memory of the two of them at the diner.

“And I’m pretty sure Jamie feels the same way. She told me today that she wants a tattoo. Oh, and he wants to take us to the museum tomorrow to see his piece in the exhibition. She’s totally impressed that he’s a ‘real’ artist.”

Dare laughs, and checks his phone again. Where is Ryan, anyway? Dare said he went to go take care of something, which sounded ominous. Now it’s near sunset and we haven’t heard from him at all.

He catches me looking. “No messages, but it’s not like we normally check in with each other super often. Usually we’re both at work, but we both had a few days off scheduled for the exhibition and a piece that Ryan was doing for Matty.”

The mere mention of Matty makes my chest hurt. Dare leads me to the couch and tucks me in next to him, hugging me close. I love that he’s figured out how comforting I find their arms around me, like they’re holding all of my broken pieces together.

“He’ll come around. His head can only remain stuck up his ass for so long, otherwise it’ll become permanent, and he’s smarter than that. He’s just... Well, honestly, he needs a lot of therapy. I think the shit with their mom might have something to do with it. We’ve all been obsessed with you since we were kids,” he says, grinning. His face quickly sobers. “But it was on another level with Matty. As we got a little older and his mom came and went the way she did, I think he latched on to you. It’s not healthy, and it’s not okay—I’m not excusing him or anything, but I think that’s why he can’t see what’s right in front of him.”

“I don’t know how to fix it,” I say softly.

“It’s not your job to fix someone that isn’t ready to be fixed. Either he’ll come around or he won’t. But he’ll never disrespect you again.”

“I don’t want to come between you...”

“Hard truth?”

I nod, steeling myself for the rest.

“You are both what made us so close, and what came between us. But it’s not your problem, or your fault. It’s his actions, and his bullheaded idiocy, that are his own undoing. That being said,” he says with a look that reads like pity, and I immediately tense. “If he knew what we know.”

I should have seen that coming. “What if he doesn’t believe me?”

“Why wouldn’t he?”

“Because no one ever did before, or they thought I asked for it. I don’t think I could handle it if Matty thought that, too.”

Dare stiffens. “Noli, Matty is an idiot, but he isn’t that cruel or that stupid. He’s fucked up and acting really fucking immature right now, but he’d never think you deserved to be *raped*.”

God, I wish they’d stop saying that word. “He still might not believe me, though. To him, I’m just a liar. And Dare, the

worst part is whether I had an excuse or not, he's right."

"You have more than an excuse, Noli. Half of your letters weren't even sent because your uncle and Jake were stealing your mail. And no one could blame you for wanting to live in that fantasy land we'd painted. I rather enjoyed it there."

Desperate both for his hands on me and an end to this conversation, I press my body against his, kissing between the words muttered against his soft lips. "You know, though, *you* never once wrote me anything dirty or suggestive in any way. Always the gentleman..." I lick the seam of his lips, and he opens for me, our tongues twining together.

"Trust me, I was thinking it. I was just too shy to send it to you. Ryan and I... uh, we used to talk about different scenarios."

"Hmmm, tell me," I murmur, straddling his lap.

"We, uh..." he takes a breath as I shimmy my ass in his lap, making room for my knees on either side of him. Is he that embarrassed or *oh*, maybe he's embarrassed, but he's also *quite* hard. "We bought a toy. It was supposed to feel like a woman's vagina. And we'd use it on each other."

*Holy fuck, that's hot.* "And you were thinking of—"

"You, Noli, always you," he says quickly. Gripping me gently below my thighs, he picks me up and shifts me so I'm laying on the couch beneath him. Kissing me deeply, he rolls his hips into me, grinding his hard length against me. I moan and reach to undo his belt, while his fingers find their way between my legs. "God, you're so wet," he says, palming me over my panties and pressing his fingers against my cotton covered clit.

"How did it feel?" I ask, both curious and wanting to hear him say salacious things. To tell me all the things that they did and all the times he thought of me. I don't know why, but I crave Dare's sweet mouth telling me dirty things.

Finally, I get his belt open, reaching inside to grasp his smooth, hard cock. The tip is wet with desire. He bucks into my hand.

“Nothing compared to the real thing. You were...”

I squeeze and stroke him, wanting him to feel the way I feel. “I was what?” I ask against his mouth, breathing in his short panting breaths.

“You were so warm, burning hot, and so fucking tight. And when you came, I could feel every ripple of your pussy squeezing me so hard that I couldn’t hold back. And then Ryan...” he huffs out a strangled breath. “I’ve never come so hard in my life.”

A full body shudder makes me feel hurried, like if I don’t have his cock inside me right this second, I might break something.

“I need you, now,” I say urgently, pushing his pants down over his ass.

Dare sits back on his knees and pulls my underwear down my legs. He doesn’t enter me straight away, earning him a moan of impatience from me. Instead, he rubs the length of his cock through my wetness, brushing over my clit. Looking down at my pussy, he grinds into me, the friction driving me higher with need. He watches through hooded eyes as he coats himself in my wetness.

“Dare, please,” I whimper. I can’t take it anymore. “Fuck me, Dare.” I writhe beneath him, pleading.

“God damnit, you’re so fucking perfect,” he says, laying his body over mine and kissing me deeply. My legs wrap around his waist, his cock lined up perfectly...

The door slams open. Dare falls off the couch, and I pull my dress down to cover myself.

“Shit, I’m sorry. I forgot that the screen door was loose. I didn’t mean to—*Oh*, shit. Fuck. I didn’t mean to walk in on...” Ryan blows out a breath, momentarily distracted from whatever had him barging in like he did in the first place. “This is hotter than the time I walked in on you masturbating in the bathroom after your first tattoo.”

“Well, you could join u—Jesus, Ryan, what happened to your face?”

“I had a talk with Matty,” he says simply. He’s tense and agitated, out of breath and covered in blood and sweat. “I’m going to go take a shower.”

Dare stands, pulling his pants back up.

“I’m fine, Dare. Stay with her, finish what you were doing. I’ll be down in a bit to see if I can help.”

“Quit trying to avoid me and let me look,” Dare says, flipping the light on. I suck in a breath. It’s worse in the light. “Christ, Ry. You might need stitches.”

“You should see the other guy,” he jokes feebly.

“I’ll grab my kit and meet you in the master bathroom.” Dare shoos Ryan upstairs, then kisses my forehead and looks down at me apologetically. “Hold that thought, okay? I’ll just make sure he’s okay and then I’ll be right down.” But before he follows Ryan, he turns around and presses me against the wall, hitches my dress back up over my thighs, and thrusts two fingers inside me. I gasp, my pussy clenching around his fingers. He groans, then releases me, taking his sweet relief with him. He licks his fingers as he steps back, shoves my panties in his pocket with a wink, and then runs up the stairs.

I’m too stunned to consider whether I should try to help. Once I’ve regained my senses—the image of Dare licking my arousal from his fingers will live rent free in my mind forever—I go back and forth over whether I should go up there. They’d tell me if they needed me, or even wanted me to come up, right? Or are they giving me space to make my own decision again? Or do they need their own space?

Mind reeling, I stay rooted to the spot, staring at the staircase until I hear tires on the driveway.

Matty’s truck parks haphazardly, blocking everyone else in. I watch from the porch steps until he finally gets out of the truck. Even in the dim light of the sunset, obscured by heavy rain clouds, I can see that Ryan was right. Matty is much worse off than he was.

Like a magnet attracted to pain, I slowly approach him. Thunder rumbles in the distance, like a warning of things to



come, the moment my hand touches his face. I drop it quickly.

Pain, anger, and exhaustion pour off this behemoth of a man, but it doesn't make me feel anything but sympathy. I can relate to those feelings. The difference is that I don't feel the need to resort to hitting things when these feelings build up. I've just always written letters that I'll never send, dousing them in my tears, which does nothing to stop them from burning to ash when I inevitably set them on fire to try to hide the evidence of my love and longing for them.

"Dare is patching up Ryan in the master bathroom," I tell him. "You should probably let him take a look at you as well. Just don't wake up Jamie with any of your bullshit."

Instead of seeing him inside and following him in, I walk off toward the backyard, barefoot and bare assed, since Dare stole my panties. I need space to breathe, and Matty takes up too much of that space. He makes me doubt myself when I've had my first tastes of freedom and happiness in what feels like a lifetime.

The air is heavy, the humidity thick enough to drench your skin before so much as a drop of rain can even think of falling. A storm is coming. The clouds are growing thicker and darker, rolling across the sky like a living, breathing beast. Pressure in the air is reaching a breaking point, but the thunder is still distant enough. It might start to sprinkle soon, but I should have a little while yet before I need to run inside.

Storms are like fights. All of that pent-up turmoil and anguish, clashing together in a fury of wind and rain and lightning. Chaos and fear wreaking havoc. Until it's over. If I think of it that way, I can understand the need to unleash on someone else, or a punching bag. And then it passes and peace settles, leaving only the aftermath to clean up from.

*I'm not responsible for their aftermath.* I repeat it to myself until I'm under the branches of the magnolia tree. It shelters me from the tiny drops of rain that start to fall. It smells like my childhood here, like home.

The rain picks up, but instead of making my way back to the house, I walk up to the trunk of the tree like an old friend,

caressing the places where Ryan had carved our initials.

“They’re just scars now, barely visible.” Matty’s deep voice startles me. I spin around and press my back to the tree, as if it would protect me if something bad happened. He stands back, outside of the shelter of the branches.

“Seems we have that in common,” I say.

I don’t know what else to say. We stand there, staring at each other meaningfully, but neither of us seems to have the words to convey all of these heavy feelings that hover in the air.

Just like the buildup of the storm, there’s an expanding pressure in the space between us. It grows and grows until even the weather can no longer stand it. The downpour unleashes suddenly, the wind pushing the swollen raindrops through the air at a biting angle. There’s a flash of lightning, followed by an almost immediate crack of thunder, so loud it shakes the ground.

Matty falls to his knees into the mud that is quickly forming from the intense rain. It splashes up on his jeans, and it’s a testament to how out of it he is that he doesn’t balk at it.

“I’m sorry,” he screams out over the roar of the wind and the rain. “I’m so fucking sorry.”

It’s almost as if the force of the storm is coming directly from him. The violent sobs that wrack his body mimicking the intensity of what the sky is releasing upon the earth.

*He knows.*

“I never wanted to be with him,” I yell over the storm. “I never wanted anyone but you, and Ryan, and Dare. Never anyone else. Never anyone but you.”

He buries his hands in his hair, the rain washing rivulets of blood down his face and onto his white t-shirt that is plastered to his body. He shakes his head violently, as if he could rid his brain of the truth.

I step closer, hesitantly, until he’s maybe a foot from me, still kneeling on the soggy, flooded ground. The rain drenches

me the moment I step out from under the shelter of the tree. His hands are in fists against his thighs. Holding back. Always holding back.

He held himself back for me. Held himself back from other girls, from leaving for college, from living a normal damn life. And then he held himself back from the truth, because oftentimes knowing hurts more than the anger it takes to sustain the illusion.

*I am not responsible for their aftermath.* But I'm still sorry it happened.

"Matty, I'm sorry I wasn't honest with you. I died the day he started taking the pieces of me that were meant to be for you. I stopped sending letters because I didn't want you to know... I was so ashamed. I blamed myself. I still think things could have been different if I'd—"

"No," he yells, and the wind picks up. "I'll die before I let you blame yourself for any of that. I'm the one that should have said something, done something. I was a coward and ran away, assuming the worst. Please forgive me," he pleads, dropping his head against my knees. In this moment, his pain and anguish feel more violent than my own. It's a force of nature; dangerous and beautiful, terrifying and heartbreaking.

"There's nothing to forgive, Matty," I say, running my hand over the side of his face and trying to get him to stand. He looks up at me, rain pouring over his face. The wind and rain are picking up, the intensity of the storm reaching a fever pitch around us.

"We were there, in the courthouse."

"I know."

"I followed you into the bathroom. I was going to confront you, ask you why."

My eyebrows fly to my hairline. "Why didn't you?"

"I thought you were happy, which at first made me so fucking angry, but then I heard you throwing up and I realized that it wouldn't make anything better for either of us. I didn't want to ruin your special day."

I can't help it, I snort. "It was one of the worst days of my life," I admit quietly. I think he still hears me over the storm, because his arms wrap around my thighs, his head against my stomach, hugging me. "But even if you'd confronted me, it wouldn't have made a difference. I was stuck."

"We could have called my dad, gotten advice on how to get you out."

"Could've, would've, should've. It doesn't matter anymore." He lets me loosen his grip, pulling back as if burned. *Does he think I don't want him to touch me?* I join him on the ground, kneeling into the mud in front of him, not caring how dirty or soaked we are. "We can't change the past. All we can do is fight for the future."

"You were always the smart one," he says, and maybe it's just the rain falling in our eyes and obscuring my vision, but he looks awed.

Taking his face in my hands, because I want him to hear me; I need him to hear me and understand what I say next. "You were always my future, Matty. It was always going to be the four of us. I never stopped wanting that. I'm sorry that I lost sight of that future." He tries to shake his head, but I touch my hand to his mouth, stopping him because he needs to know how I feel. "I don't want you because I'm running toward something better than what I had, or because I need a savior. I want you because I always have and always will."

His mouth crashes against mine, wet with tears and rain. We release every ounce of pain and torment we've been holding over each other, pouring it into a kiss as devastating and violent as the storm that roars around us. I wince as Matty lifts me by my waist, unfolding my legs from under me and pulling me against him so my legs instinctively wrap around him just as his arms wrap around me tightly.

The wilder the storm blows around us, the wilder the kiss feels. Matty is a force of nature, bucking his hips against me. The soaked fabric of his sweatpants squelches against my bare pussy, cooling my heated skin as I bear down, rolling my hips against his erection.

Matty stands, holding me in place, my legs wrapped around his waist, as if I weigh nothing. He walks us beneath the shelter of the tree. Water drips rapidly from the branches, but it's nothing compared to the massive downpour around us. He presses my back against the tree, pressing his body into me.

My skin is flushed and fevered. I grasp Matty's shoulders desperately, using every bit of leverage available to me to rub myself against him. The friction isn't enough.

"If you keep rubbing against me like that, we aren't going to make it to a bed," Matty growls into my neck.

"I don't need a bed, here's fine," I say hurriedly, a chill shooting down my spine.

He chuckles, but it ends in an almost painful groan.

"I'm not going to fuck you against this tree, Noli. I could hurt you. You deserve—"

He stops short when I grab his hand and put it between my legs. "Quit thinking about what I deserve and think about what I want." Another groan, and a distinctly heard mumble about it being unfair that I'm not wearing panties. "You won't hurt me, but if you do, I'm pretty sure I'll like it or I'll heal."

His brow furrows, his eyes filling with... pain? There's a tenderness there I haven't seen before, but I can't name this expression.

"What's wrong?" I ask, halting all of my not-so-dry humping, leaning back against the tree so I can see him better.

"Decision paralysis," he says with a nervous laugh. "I want to do this right. Beneath this tree is perfect, but I'd rather it be on a soft blanket on a clear night, with candles all around. All romantic-like, so I can lay you down and beg you to forgive me while I make love to you."

*Aww.*

"That's beautiful. But we're here, living in the now. I want nothing more than to put the last twenty years behind us and move on into the new us. I want *you*. I want to feel *you*."

He kisses me again, slowly. Stoking the fires even higher, all kinds of illicit fantasies flashing behind my eyes.

“I’m also incredibly worked up and can’t stand it anymore. So maybe you should just make love to me right here, right now, in the rain and mud, before I’m the one that resorts to begging.”

His hand blessedly returns to my pussy, lightly running his fingers through the slick folds, continuing to taunt me. I whimper, positively dripping with need, close to a breaking point.

“What’s got you so worked up?” He asks in an exasperatingly teasing voice.

“Well, for starters, I’ve spent the last fifteen years hating sex, thinking it was boring, or painful, or disgusting. A duty to perform, nothing more. And then magically I find myself here, surrounded by the very men who have lived in my heart and m-my fantasies...” I stutter, distracted by the way Matty is kissing and licking up my neck, sucking the rain water off my skin. Electricity that rivals the flashes of lightning buzzes up my spine and spreads over my skin. I’m not cold at all, and yet I’m covered in gooseflesh and shivering.

“Keep talking, Noli,” he says, pulling away when I don’t immediately start speaking. Oh, so it’s like that, is it?

“S-so n-now I’m suddenly this w-wanton slut who can’t get enough,” his shoulders stiffen, but I keep talking, fully throwing myself on a soapbox. “And then tonight, Dare got me good and worked up—that’s who has my panties, by the way. He teased me into a frenzy, and then just as he was about to give it to me, fucking Ryan storms in, fresh from your little fight. Then Dare does this fucking licking his fingers bullshit that made me want to die. And then you were there, angry and broody and too damn sexy for your own good, fucking soaked to the bone and on your knees in front of me, and now we’re just standing here, me with no panties, wetter than the damn rain, and you want me to talk about—” My rant ends on a hiss, a forceful expulsion of the remaining breath in my body so that I couldn’t say anything more if I wanted to.

All coherent thought and ability to speak is shattered because Matty has pushed two thick fingers into my desperate pussy and covered my mouth with his. His tongue licks in slow strokes, in time with each thrust of his hand, his fingers beckoning me toward a quick release. My thighs flex in a frenzied attempt to ride his hand, so close. So close...

I don't care if we have to fuck in a mud puddle; I need him right fucking now. Struggling to peel the dress off my body, I settle for pushing the top down so the whole thing is bunched around my waist, baring my small breasts, nipples peaked. When Matty reaches forward to take one into his mouth, I wiggle until I can get my hands between us, reaching for the waistband of his sweatpants.

"Noli." My name sounds like a warning, but I'm far past caution. I push the waistband down, the heavy waterlogged material falling down. His hard, thick cock springs free, hitting me in the ass. It feels just as big and thick as Ryan's, but without any jewelry that I can tell. There will be more time to get to know each other later. Grasping his cock in one hand, my other arm flung around his neck for stability, I line him up and attempt to sink down.

"Look at me," he says gruffly. My eyes leave the obscene view of his cock breaching my entrance and lock on his. "I want you to look at me when I take you, Noli. You're home now."

The rain and wind whip around us, the thunder crashes and the lightning strikes. But for one moment, everything is still and quiet as Matty leans into me and whispers, "I love you, Magnolia Crawford. Please forgive me."

On his last words, he plunges into me, bottoming out with one thrust. I cry out, my voice stolen by the storm. Thunder cracks so loud it jars my teeth, or it could be the force of my back hitting the tree.

Matty rocks inside me, *so good*, then slowly, agonizingly, pulls almost all the way out again. "Forgive me!" he cries, thrusting into me again. And then again. And again.

Each rough drive of his hips into mine forces me higher, pushing me towards the brink. And each harsh thrust is accompanied by his own expletive, a repetitive plea. “Forgive me, I love you.”

“Forgive me, I love you.”

A guttural scream bursts from my throat, an orgasm that I can feel from the tips of my toes to the top of my spine ripping through my body. My vision wavers and my body locks around his, my inner walls clenching so hard that my stomach contracts.

“Oh, fuck!” Matty shouts. “Fuck, Noli. Fuck! Forgive me, please. I’ll spend the rest of my life making it up to you—”

“Yes!” I scream. “Yes! Just. Never. Stop. Fucking. Me.” My words scramble into unintelligible nonsense as Matty readjusts our position, hooking his arms under my legs and driving into me harder and faster.

His cock hits me at a new angle, reaching some invisible magic spot inside me that draws out my orgasm to the point of pain. A sob escapes me and I surrender to the will of the force of nature that is Matty, fucking me against our tree like it’s the last thing he’ll ever do. When he comes, he thrusts so deep inside me that I’m sure I can taste it, salty and metallic.

The storm finally dies down as we come back to our bodies. I’m trembling for no other reason than my nerves being completely shot and overstimulated. I’m so sensitive that I cry out when Matty eventually pulls out of me, still half hard.

He kisses me sweetly as he settles me on my feet, but keeps an arm around me to support my weight. Once he pulls his pants back up, a chore with how soaked they are, he helps me right my dress. With one last kiss, he swoops me up and carries me back to the house. I’m so exhausted and strung out on love that I don’t bother protesting. It’s not like I could walk if I wanted to.

“So, do you forgive me?” Matty asks one last time, as he climbs the steps to my childhood home.



“I already did,” I whisper, laying a soft kiss on his neck and resting my head on his shoulder. “But you can apologize again anytime you like.”

## Dare

The storm was worse than we thought. There are power lines down and debris strewn across town where the news says a tornado touched down. Between the rain, intense wind and thunder, we didn't even hear the sirens and we are lucky to have power at the house.

"I need to go check on the gym and make sure the new addition made it through, part of the roof wasn't done yet." Matty says as he walks through the door, back from dropping his waterlogged phone off at the repair shop. "Is she still sleeping?"

"Yeah, what the hell did you do to her?" I joke quietly, not wanting little ears to overhear.

Jamie is preoccupied in the living room, drawing on the one leg that Ryan hasn't completely covered in ink. To keep her busy this morning and let Noli sleep in, he handed her a sharpie and told her to go to town.

"Nothing I didn't explicitly ask for," Noli says groggily, shuffling into the kitchen. Her hair is in tangles, the touch of makeup she wore yesterday is smeared under her eyes, and she's wearing another oversized flannel shirt. She's a mess, and she's so fucking beautiful.

Like a moth to a flame, I move in for a kiss.

"I have morning breath," she pouts.

Just for that, instead of the chaste peck on the lips that I'd planned, I pull her in for a long, deep kiss, licking inside her mouth and drawing a gasp from her.

"Mmm, my turn," Matty says, cutting in to lay his own sloppy kiss on her. He lifts her up like the caveman he is, and her legs instinctively wrap around him. "You're running a bit warm, Noles."

"I've barely woken up and already had two tongues down my throat. What do you expect?"

Matty laughs. “No, I mean, your skin is warm. Dare, feel her face.”

It takes me a second to shake myself out of a mental image of feeling her ass, since it’s plainly obvious from my point of view that she’s still not wearing any panties. He’s right though, she’s definitely running a fever.

“How do you feel?” I ask, pulling out my bag. I have a few disposable thermometer strips in my first aid kit. Matty settles her on the counter and I take his place.

“Fine. Tired, I guess, and I have a slight headache, but that’s normal for me with all the weather pressure. I’m surprised I didn’t have one all day yesterday, actually.”

“101.2. Not terrible, but you should probably rest and hydrate. I’ve got some Tylenol if your head gets bad, but I usually recommend letting the fever do its work unless it’s over 102 or you’re feeling really shitty.”

“Am I contagious? We were supposed to go to the art museum today,” she says, looking downtrodden. “Jamie will be so bummed.”

“Ryan and I can still take her, if you’re comfortable with that.”

“Are you sure?” She looks apprehensive, which I can understand, given what they’ve been through. I’d be hard pressed to let her out of my sight, and she’s not even my kid.

“Positive.” And I mean it. Jamie is amazing.

Even after just a few days, all three of us are completely smitten with the little spitfire. We never considered having kids, or at least the conversation never came up, especially since Ryan basically hates them. But even he is wrapped around her finger.

We’d die before we’d let anything happen to that little girl.

“If she’s okay with it, I am.”

Our favorite firecracker bounds into the room at just that moment. “Okay with what? Also, mom, you forgot to put on

pants,” she informs Noli seriously. She looks at the rest of us like we’re all nuts for not noticing.

I mean... we definitely noticed.

Noli laughs. “This shirt is so big, it kind of works almost like a dress, don’t you think?” Jamie looks unimpressed. “But what we were talking about is our museum trip today. I’ve got a bit of a fever and a headache, so I need to stay home, but Dare and Ryan will still take you if you want. Or we can all go another day very soon, your choice.”

She doesn’t hesitate, immediately saying she still wants to go. It fills my chest with an emotion I’m not sure I can name.

After Ryan shows off his ‘new ink’, which turns out to be an honestly pretty impressive drawing of Noli, Jamie runs upstairs to grab socks and shoes.

Matty gives Noli another kiss and tells her he’ll drop by later, depending on how bad the damage is. He drops a kiss on Jamie’s head and says, “See you later, ladybug.”

“I’ll probably just work on the paperwork Lisa gave me, and lay down if the headache gets any worse.”

Matty writes his office phone number down near the house phone receiver in case she needs anything. I write both mine and Ryan’s cell numbers, and promise to check in.

“Alright, you—rest. Take a bath, take a nap, hydrate,” I say as we’re walking out the door.

“Yes, Dr. Bishop,” she teases.

“Watch yourself,” I warn her, with a stern look that isn’t fooling anyone. I just can’t smolder like the twins can, but she seems to appreciate it anyway.

“Bye mom!” Jamie shouts, followed by Ryan’s echo. “Bye mom!”

“Have fun!” she shouts and waves us off. She lets her mask fall just before we’re out of sight, and I know she needs the rest.

It's a forty-five-minute drive to Clarksville, but it feels like less. Jamie does not stop talking, barely pausing to take a breath, but she's honestly fascinating. She tells us all about her favorite classes at school, and how she likes to read chapter books and watch scary movies.

"Have you ever heard of Goosebumps?" I ask her.

"Like when your skin gets all prickly?"

"No, the books. There's a series of chapter books that I was obsessed with when I was your age, that are all scary stories, and each book is different, so there's all different kinds of creatures, or creepy houses, stuff like that."

"Ooh. I'm in," she says enthusiastically.

"There's a chance my mom might still have some of mine. If not, we'll go book shopping." Her eyes widen with so much excitement, I decide right then and there that I'll be taking her book shopping no matter how many books my mom has stored in the attic.

"Uh-oh, I know that look," Ryan says with a chuckle. "Well, kid, you just made Dare's day. He's been looking for a book buddy."

"I love books," she tells me. "We have library day once a week at school, but sometimes my teacher Mrs. Waterman lets me go extra if I finish my work early or if I want to skip recess."

"What?!" Ryan shrieks from the driver's seat. "Who the hell would want to skip recess?!"

I give Jamie a look and roll my eyes dramatically. "He's acting like a dweeb, because I used to skip recess to go to the library and make him go with me." She giggles.

"All of you have known each other for a long time."

"Some longer than others," Ryan says sarcastically.

"Ryan and Matty have obviously always known each other, but the rest of us met in pre-K. All of our birthdays are close together, and we didn't meet the cutoff for starting

kindergarten yet. So, our parents put us in pre-K at the church that my parents run. We were five when we all first met.”

“That’s a long time ago.”

“Dude, did she just call us old?” Ryan whispers theatrically. *I love how into this kid he is, I never thought I’d see the day.* Watching him joke around and converse with her is freaking precious.

“Not my fault you’re ancient,” she deadpans. I whoop with laughter, while Ryan gapes and threatens to book-block us and not let us buy any books, earning a fresh round of giggles from Jamie.

“I’ve never been to a whole store just for books,” she says pensively.

“Are you telling me that *your* mom has never taken you to a bookstore? That girl was even more book obsessed than Dare!”

“We go to the library a lot, but daddy doesn’t let her use the car and there aren’t any bookstores in our town.”

That breaks my heart on multiple levels, but I try to keep the conversation upbeat. “Well, it looks like y’all made a good move, because our little town has the best bookstore. There’s even a little café, with the best hot chocolate you ever tried, guaranteed.”

“Mmmm,” Ryan says agreeably.

“Can we go tomorrow?”

“You in a hurry?” I ask teasingly.

From the backseat, her voice comes out extra small. “What if daddy comes and takes us and makes us go back?”

I swallow and turn to meet her eyes, keeping my voice even so she’ll feel comfortable to answer honestly. “Do you want him to?”

She shakes her head no, a solemn and very serious expression on her face. “I don’t want him to ever find us,” she says, barely above a whisper, her eyes watery and full of fear.

Ryan mutters a string of curses to himself before he abruptly pulls the car over, pulls off his seatbelt, opens the back door, and slides in next to Jamie.

“You listen to me, baby girl... No matter what, we’re going to protect you. Me and Dare and Matty, we’re not going to let anyone hurt you, or your mama, ever again. Ever. Okay?”

The poor thing bursts into tears. Ryan pulls her into his arms, tucks her head under his chin, and holds her, whispering that it’s going to be okay. When he looks up at me, I feel every emotion I see in his eyes, brimming with unshed tears—pain, torment, anger.



“That was amazing!” Jamie is bouncing off the walls after walking around the museum so quietly for the past couple of hours.

When we got to Ryan’s piece, she stood there for the longest time, absolutely captivated by the abstract drawing of two people with their limbs tangled together. She’s very astute, and despite the picture not being obviously romantic or sexual in nature, she said simply, “They’re in love.”

Ryan smiled proudly and confirmed that the piece is about love.

“That’s you and Dare?” she asked.

“How could you tell?” he said, surprised. She’s very observant. There are no tattoos or anything to make it look like us.

“I can just feel it,” she said casually, and then moved on to the next piece.

Ryan looked up at me, amused and impressed by this precocious little girl. The entire time we were there, she was fascinated by everything, constantly asking questions to both the staff and Ryan.

“I don’t actually know that much about art,” Ryan admitted. “I just like to draw. But if you want, maybe we can learn some of this stuff together?” By the end of the tour, Ryan had started making a list of different techniques and styles for them to research and try.

And that’s how Ryan became best friends with an eight-year-old little girl. That, and by suggesting pizza and ice cream for lunch, even though it’s already late. I’ve been trying to check in with Noli. We didn’t have a signal in the museum, but now that we are out, I can see there’s a missed call from her about an hour ago. I’ve tried calling the house, but the line has been busy every time I’ve tried to reach her.



“She’ll call us if she’s worried,” Ryan says. “Kid’s gotta eat, right?”

Over an hour later, Jamie is asleep in the back seat before we even make it out of the parking deck.

“It’s still busy,” I say, trying to call the house again.

“Try Matty, but call the gym. He doesn’t have his cell, remember?”

I dial and wait, the phone rings and rings, finally going to voicemail. I try ringing two more times, hoping someone will hear it ring, before I leave a message. “Hey Matty, it’s Dare. We’re trying to let Noli know that we’re on the way back, but the house phone has been busy. We’ll be home in under an hour. Call me back if you get this.”

“I’m just gonna try her one more time,” I say, starting to feel agitated. When the busy tone starts up again, I stare at the phone.

“No luck?” Ryan asks. He doesn’t bother placating me with reasons why the phone might be busy. Instead, he leans on the gas pedal, trying to get us home a little faster.

*Something doesn’t feel right.*

## Noli

Damn, my head is still throbbing. It's better than it was earlier, I suppose, but I was hoping a nap would help. Maybe I slept for too long... No, it's only been just over an hour.

Why am I even awake? I'm so sweaty, maybe my fever broke? I thought I heard something, but there's nothing now.

It's easy to feel spooked in a big, old, creaky house like this. Especially after spending hours writing about terrible things in a journal. Before my headache got too bad, I was trying to write out all the information that Lisa wants for our case. She's given me a template to work with to help pinpoint important details, which is helping, but all this remembering and focusing is making my headache worse.

I'm using my old notebook that I used to write letters in, and then destroy them after. It feels poetic that all of this should go into my unconventional diary. Except this time, I'm not burning it. This time, I'm not hiding anything.

I'll never have to hide again.

There's a noise, like something moving across the floor. It sounds like it's coming from downstairs. Maybe Matty is back? He called earlier to check on me and tell me he'd be gone longer than anticipated. The storm last night apparently did a good amount of damage to some of the new construction at the gym he owns.

Because of course he owns a gym. Gawd, those muscles...

Okay, that was definitely the door. Matty must be back.

Switching out the clothes that I was wearing, because they're drenched in sweat, I pull on a pair of Matty's boxers and a clean flannel shirt.

I don't hear anything or anyone as I walk slowly down the stairs. The front door is hanging open, but I still don't hear anything.

Leaning over the staircase, I look down the hallway where the half bath and pantry are. The living room is empty, same

with the dining room.

“Hello?” I call out, starting to feel scared, but also silly. “Is anyone there? Matty?”

The hair on the back of my neck prickles as I check around every corner. There’s no one. But I could have sworn I heard something.

In the kitchen, I reach for the phone, dialing Dare’s number first, then Ryan’s. Both calls go to voicemail. I don’t leave one, because what am I going to say? Hey, I’m just checking in, I had a fever dream that someone was in the house.

But the door *is* open. Should I call the police? If I do, they’ll just think I’m crazy or dramatic. And it could end up drawing more attention to my already precarious situation.

I dial Matty’s number next. On the fifth ring, it goes to voicemail. “Um, hey Matty, it’s me. Noli. I’m just checking in and seeing how things are going. I, uh, I don’t know, I’m probably just being silly but I thought I heard something, and the door is open, and—” out of the corner of my eye, I notice that there’s an overturned glass of water on the kitchen table. The notebook I’d been writing in is gone. “I think I might call your dad, actually, I—”

Cold, sharp steel touches my throat. My spine straightens painfully. My head and heart begin to pound violently when the familiar smell of a particular brand of body spray, stale cigarettes, and Jack Daniels assaults my nose. Nausea and panic combat each other for dominance.

“Drop the phone, Maggie.”

My hands tremble so hard that I miss the cradle, dropping the phone. Jake pulls me away by my hair, leaving the phone to dangle from its cord, swaying against the wall.

An odd memory flashes; me sitting on the floor beneath that very phone at all hours of the night, giggling and gossiping with Ryan, talking about books with Dare, or making plans with Matty. It hurts to know that my future will never be as happy, or as safe, as my past was. At least I had

these last few days with them. And at least Jamie isn't here to watch this.

I have no doubt that Jake is here to kill me. What will happen to my daughter when I'm gone? Will Jake get away with my murder and get custody? Will she be left to fend for herself the way I was, to have all her hopes and dreams broken by people that will be intimidated by her light?

*No.*

Breathing through my nose, I will myself to think clearly despite the fear that threatens to overwhelm every one of my senses. *Think, Noli.*

Because I can't let this happen. I can't, I won't, leave Jamie to fend for herself in a world that broke me.

Over the years, I've conditioned myself to not fight, not react. I learned early on that fighting back made it worse for me. Every time I did, it hurt more, it took longer. It excited him more. The one time I did try to call the police, they called it a *domestic dispute* because I'd left a scratch mark across Jake's cheek defending myself. There was no point in fighting.

But right now, I'm fighting for my life. For my daughter's life. Because I can't watch over her if I'm dead.

Jake yanks me across the room and throws me across the dining room. I try to catch myself, but I run into the wooden edge of the window seat face first. Pain blooms just above my eyebrow, blood pouring from the wound and getting in my eye. Half blinded, I scramble to stand, to defend myself.

"Sit your ass down, Maggie. We're gonna have a little talk."

The only thing within reach is a wooden chair. Picking it up, I try to block him from advancing on me, brandishing it in front of myself like a deranged lion tamer. I get one good jab in on his first lunge, but it just pisses him off more. He grabs the end of the chair and pushes hard. The top rail of the back of the chair smashes into my throat before it is ripped from my hands and thrown against the wall, splintering into pieces.

My knees hit the ground hard, my vision wavering at the edges as I cough and sputter, trying to suck breath through my damaged windpipe. I'm still struggling to breathe when Jake advances on me again, using my hair to pull me up from the ground and scream in my face.

"What the fuck were you thinking?" he shouts, twisting my hair painfully before he throws me down again.

This time I don't get up, trying to gather my bearings before figuring out my next move. I scramble back along the floor, pressing my back to the wall and hugging my knees to my chest, trying to catch my breath and also keep my eye on him.

Jake paces back and forth across the floor in front of me, waving the large kitchen knife around before sitting backwards on a chair and staring at me, furious and red faced. When he finally does speak, he does so with the air of a man who believes himself to be the calm, rational person in the relationship.

"First of all, where is my daughter?" Interesting that he asks this first, considering he's literally never taken an interest in her. He's been trying to conceive a son since the first time he forced himself on me. I learned later that it'd been Dana's idea to not use protection and hope I got pregnant on purpose. I still choose to believe she didn't know he was raping me, because I choose not to look too far into it.

"Clarksville," I croak out, my vocal cords constricting painfully. "My friends took her to a museum. I stayed home because I'm sick."

"Well, when are they coming back?" he asks impatiently.

*Soon, hopefully.* "I don't know."

"What do you mean, you don't know? What kind of fucking mother are you? Jesus, Maggie. First, you fucking drugged me, then you steal my fucking car and fucking run off to fuck knows where. Now you sent my kid off with some fuckboys?"

“They aren’t fuckboys, they’re good men. She’s safe with *them*.”

He scoffs. “Where the fuck have you been?”

“All over. We went north to Wyoming and then all the way to Raleigh. I came here because I was out of money and Jamie needed to see a doctor,” I tell him honestly, no reason to lie at this point. He’s already found us and the more I can keep him talking, the better.

“What, she sick too? You probably picked some shit up whoring yourself at the truck stops. Gotta teach her early so she can learn how to catch a husband like her mama.”

“She needed to see a doctor because her arm is broken,” I spit out at him, barely able to control my anger, but knowing I need to if I want to make it out of this. “Or do you not remember the fucking rampage you went on the night before I left?”

“You better watch your mouth,” he says warningly, brandishing the knife. I nod. I need to keep him talking so I can come up with a plan, or at least give the guys time to get here.

“Why do you think I left, Jake? I’ve let you do whatever you want to me since I was seventeen years old, but you hurt our daughter.”

“Not my fault she’s clumsy like her mama, she needs to learn to stay out of my way. And you need to remember your goddamned place.” I should have known that he’s far past reasoning with.

“You don’t own me!”

Jake stands abruptly, knocking over his chair. “The hell I don’t! You’re my property by right of God. No one else would have you, anyway. That fucking trap between your legs is all you’re worth, but it’s no use to me now that it’s all stretched out and sloppy. Tell me, Maggie, did you take all three of them all at once?”

“Not yet,” I snap, the last of my control leaving my body.

The moment those words come out of my mouth, I know I'm done for. He freezes, his hand white knuckling the kitchen knife. His breaths get shallow, a vein in his forehead pulsing with rage.

He advances on me with heavy steps. "You're going to fucking pay for that," he says, backhanding me with enough force that I'm sprawled out on the ground. Pain swells across my cheek and nose. Before I can get up or try to scramble away, he's on me, hands wrapped around my throat and pushing my head down into the wood floor.

"I guess a few weeks away is all it took to make you forget all the lessons you learned in our first few years together. You're not strong enough."

I try to buck him off, digging my nails into his hands to get them to release me.

"By all means, Maggie, try to fight me off. You know how much I like it." To prove his point, he grinds his pelvis against my chest as he chokes me.

Taking one hand off my throat, which unfortunately does not provide much relief, he rips the first few buttons of the flannel shirt open, exposing one of my breasts. Some, but not all the pressure stops, enough that I'm able to wheeze in a few breaths and fend off the impending unconsciousness.

"Let me tell you how this is going to go, *Mrs. Denin*. First, I'm going to make sure that mine is the last dick inside you before you die," he says, roughly tweaking my nipple. "Then I'm going to let you help decide how you're going to kill yourself."

My eyes, which were pinned across the room like they normally are when he starts touching me, snap up to him. What does he think he's doing?

"Oh, yeah—I hope you don't mind. I borrowed a piece of paper from your notebook. And I wrote a little note about how you're real sorry that you told all those lies about me, and you just don't think you can go on. I had plenty of time to get the

handwriting just right while I was waiting for you to wake up from your little nap.” He smiles down at me menacingly.

Releasing me roughly, my head hitting the floor, he stands up and holds out his hand like he’s offering to help me up. I stare at it wide eyed, not capable of words, until he reaches down and grabs my arm tightly, yanking me up from the ground.

“As I was saying,” he says, pulling me in close and smoothing my hair back affectionately. My stomach rolls. “I brought quite a few options with me, so you can take your pick. I’ve got the knife, we can slit your wrists. I’ve got some rope in the truck if you’d like to hang from your precious magnolia tree, actually, oohh, I like that. Whatever you choose, let’s do it out there, very poetic—Magnolia kills herself under the magnolia tree. And I also have this.”

From his back pocket, Jake pulls a gun. I don’t know what kind it is. It’s on the small side, and silvery grey. I don’t need to know what kind it is to know it’s lethal.

The tip of the barrel presses against my temple, pushing into the still-healing wound on the side of my face. “Mmm, I like this. We should have borrowed this sooner. Your aunt is probably going to be pissed that she isn’t getting this back. She thought I was borrowing it to help you decide to come home. But that was before I got that fucking order of protection or whatever it was served to me *at work*. So now everyone knows that my fucking whore of a wife ran off and is trying to screw me over.”

He presses the gun harder. There’s a click, and I flinch. Jake laughs darkly. “That was just the safety, babe. You have some work to do before I put you out of your misery.” He steps back, unbuckling his belt with one hand while the gun is still pointed at me. “I’m not going to so much as try to make this good for you.” *As if he ever did*. But those words don’t come close to slipping from my lips. I’m well and truly afraid now.

“On your fucking knees, whore.” Trembling, I obey. He pulls his dick from his jeans. With one hand pressing the gun



to my head, the other holding my hair, he slaps me across the face with his erection until I relent and open my mouth to him. He pushes himself into my mouth with a groan. I recoil, gagging, unable to breathe through my nose as a result of him backhanding me earlier.

I can't help it. Vomit erupts from my throat, spraying out the sides of my mouth and all over him. He pushes my head back forcefully, so that I fall backwards onto the broken chair.

“What the FUCK?!” He yells, looking down at the vomit coating his dick, thighs, and pants.

This is my chance. With every ounce of strength I can muster, I grab a leg of the chair and swing it wildly, smashing Jake upside the head. As he staggers back, holding his head, pants down around his ankles, I take the opportunity to sprint through the open door. A shot fires, hitting the doorframe as I throw myself outside.

Dizziness from my head wound and getting up so quickly makes me slow, and Jake catches up to me surprisingly fast. I scream as loud as I can, hoping the neighbors will hear me despite not having full use of my vocal cords. The houses are too far apart though, the driveway set too far back from the cul-de-sac.

He tackles me from the back, knocking the breath out of me. I land face first in the soggy ground, desperately trying to suck oxygen into my body, sputtering mud and rainwater from yesterday's storm.

Hot, burning pain explodes and spreads across my lower back as the knife slashes at my skin. The sound of fabric ripping follows the pain, the boxer shorts forcibly removed from my body. Jake's pants are already undone, having only pulled them up enough to run, so it takes seconds before I feel him jabbing at me from behind. The time it takes him to locate my vagina gives me the opportunity to twist my body away, flailing and landing a kick to his side. Then I lift my leg at the knee and force my heel right into his crotch.

He yells out and falls, bent at the waist, on top of my body. I kick and twist wildly, trying to get away from him, until the

knife plunges into my stomach.

It takes a moment to process what's happening. Adrenaline keeps me scrapping my way out from beneath him, but as I free myself, I double over. A sudden and severe sharp pain radiates from my abdomen. The flannel shirt rapidly soaks in blood, my hands coming away coated in deep red.

I'm stunned long enough for Jake to recover. He stalks to his truck bed, parked less than ten feet away. Cradling my stomach, I try to run in the opposite direction, towards the street where I can try to call for help.

A thick length of rope is wrapped around my neck from behind, and Jake yanks me back. I fall to my knees, scrambling up. I'd rather die than submit to him ever again. And as my life currently feels as though it is rapidly slipping through the fingers that I'm pressing over the wound in my stomach, I might as well make the most of it and try to take him down with me.

I fight every step of being dragged behind the house and across the yard, kicking and flailing, no matter how much the rope digs into my skin. Jake stops in the middle of the backyard, looking around. He knows the tree that I spoke of and wrote about in the letters he stole is back here somewhere, but that's about all he knows. I doubt he remembers the details of the drawings.

The tree is huge, the dark green leaves rising high above the canopy of the other trees, just across the small meadow. Jake sees it and starts dragging me again. The large white blooms, so fragrant in the summer air, beckon me, even as death looms.

He's right about one thing, it will be poetic. And this is truly the only place I'd want to be, in life or in death. I hope they bury my bones here. Maybe the afterlife will turn out to be real and I can haunt the branches.

The walk is harder than usual, debris from the storm scattered around the yard cutting into my bare feet with each step. Finally at the tree, Jake plants his booted foot at my stomach and pushes me back into the muddy ground. Pain

shoots through my body, and my vision wavers like I'm standing on the deck of a boat in a rolling storm. I'm too busy reeling to notice what Jake is doing until he grabs me again, dragging me under the tree.

When the rope around my neck tightens, I realize what he's done. He's thrown the other end around one of the higher branches, pulling until I'm barely holding myself up on my tip-toes.

Jake may be strong, may be stronger than me, but he's not as strong or as smart as he thinks he is. He can't get enough leverage to pull the rope the right way to lift me all the way off the ground for more than a few seconds.

His failure effectively prolongs my suffering. I'm intermittently strangled until my vision starts to fade, and then I'm scrambling to find my footing, sucking in just enough air to keep me conscious. My hands desperately claw at the rope biting into my neck. The cut on my forehead is throbbing, the eye below it so swollen that I can't see through it. I'm cold from blood loss, pain from the wound in my stomach radiating out into my limbs. Blood and vomit coat my tongue.

I'm all but ready for this to end. The agonizing minutes of being suspended at the brink of death, yet fighting to stay conscious, are wearing on me.

For a split second, I give up. For a moment that seems frozen in time, I let my body go slack, looking up into the green canopy of our tree. When you look at the ground, all you can see is destruction from yesterday's storm, tree limbs and debris, mud and muck. But looking up, all I can see is the bright blue sky, rays of brilliant sunshine glittering through the leaves and branches, illuminating the large, white blooms that were my namesake.

*Magnolia means strength.*

Strength is what it took to grow up without a mother, though I had the most amazing father to raise me. Strength is what it took to deal with his death and cope with moving far away from my home. Strength is how I survived years of rape

and abuse. Strength is what got me and my daughter far away and back to a place where we are happy, and loved, and safe.

And strength is going to save me now.

Because I am strong enough. Strong enough to live through all of that. Strong enough to save myself and make sure my daughter never has to fight this hard.

With a fury of adrenaline that comes from pure willpower, I lift my hands not to the rope around my neck, but to the rope above me. Using the leverage of my grip, I swing my legs out, surprising Jake and kicking him hard under the chin. His head knocks back so sharply that he falls to the ground, releasing the rope.

Falling on my back, I wheeze and choke on air. My head spins violently as I flop myself over, trying to get up, but falling every few steps. I stumble away, but trip over a large branch. Jake roars behind me, getting up from the ground and storming towards me.

My hands wrap around the end of a piece of the branch I tripped over and I spin around, swinging the branch wildly with every ounce of might I can muster. It hits Jake in the side of his head with a sickening thud and he drops like deadweight into the mud.

Too stunned to move, I watch him warily, indecisive about what to do next. I should run. But what if he wakes up, continues chasing me, or shoots me in the back of the head instead of bothering with his futile suicide plan? Where is the gun?

My eyes trace over the ground frantically, keeping Jake firmly within my periphery. He doesn't so much as twitch or make a sound. Is he dead? Did I kill him?

The handle of the gun is sticking out from beneath him, still in his back pocket. I stare at him for a long time, both fearful that he is dead, and fearful that he isn't. I should go get help.

*Don't leave the gun behind. If he does wake up, you're dead.*

I crawl towards him hesitantly. My heartbeat is rapid and loud, muffling my ears, but I welcome it, considering it's a miracle it's still beating at all. Slowly, I grip the handle of the gun with my fingers and drag it out from under him. The moment it's free, I snatch it and back away, right into the trunk of the tree.

Sitting at the base of the tree, I lay the gun in my lap and wrap my arms around my stomach. I need to take a moment to catch my breath before making a run for it. Three deep breaths, and I'm going to run to the house, lock all the doors, and call the cops.

Inhale. What if I killed him? Will they understand it was self-defense? Exhale. *One.*

Inhale. What if I didn't kill him, and he uses this to take everything from me? It wouldn't be the first time people have believed his lies over my truth. Exhale. *Two.*

Inhale. Whether I go to jail or not, Jamie and I are better off if he's dead. We have no life with him controlling us. Exhale. *Three.*

On shaky legs, I stand, reeling as I do. Holding the gun in one hand, pressing against my stomach wound with the other, I point the barrel down at Jake as I limp sideways, trying to skirt around his body.

Indecision wracks my brain. He tried to kill you, for real this time. He'll hurt your daughter. You'll never get free from him as long as he's alive. He will never stop.

The gun shakes in my hand, and I lower it with a sob. This isn't something I'm strong enough for.

I hold the gun loosely and look up to the house. I'm not sure I can make it that far. *You have to keep fighting for Jamie.*

As I limp past Jake's body, his hand reaches out and grabs my ankle.

Panicked, I scream loudly and trip over him. As I do, the gun goes off. I fall onto the branch that I bludgeoned my husband with, landing on my stomach. An uneven edge jabs

into my stomach, too close to the existing wound. The wound opens further and blood pools beneath me.

With short, feeble breaths, I turn my head to look at Jake. His eyes and mouth are open in what looks like surprise. He coughs up blood and doesn't move his eyes from mine. Neither of us is able to move, only lay there and watch each other die.

My body starts to shake uncontrollably. I fight to stay awake, but a heaviness pulls me down, down, down.

I think I hear shouting in the distance.

No longer able to keep my eyes open, I draft my last letter to my family in my mind, while I succumb to the end.

*Dear Guys,*

*I'm sorry I wasn't strong enough. I hope there's enough evidence of how hard I fought to stay here with you.*

*I was worried about what would happen to Jamie, but I'm realizing now that you'll never let my past happen to her. I know you'll take care of her and keep her safe. And she'll grow into a strong, beautiful, happy young woman with the three of you to protect and guide her. She's the piece of me I'm most proud to leave behind.*

*Let my daughter know she was my strength. Just as the three of you were.*

*I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you.*

*That's one for each of you, and Jamie.*

*Yours Always,*

*Magnolia*

Peace washes over me. My body relaxes, and there's no more pain. Just love. And darkness.

## Matty

“What a fucking mess,” I say out loud to no one, and shrug. Time to get to work, I guess.

I should probably be more distressed about half the roof of my new addition caving in. Hell, if this had happened two days ago, I’d probably be on a rampage. The damage is bad, and will take a lot of time, money, and effort to rebuild. But it doesn’t feel impossible or like the world is against me. After last night, I can see things more clearly.

Man, I spent way too much time bitching about all the things that seemed to happen to me, as if the universe had time to dole out individual punches. This morning I feel like a new person. A person I actually like for once. I hope this feeling stays.

Before I get started, I pop into the office for a notepad and pen. Walking around the building, I make notes of what needs to be done, including which professionals I’ll need to call. All of their numbers are in my waterlogged phone, which is being repaired, and there’s no internet currently, so I’ll worry about calling them later and get started on what I can fix.

I give Noli a quick call to check in on how she’s doing and let her know I’ll be here awhile. She’s headed for a long nap. “I love you,” I tell her before we hang up, feeling slightly guilty that she probably got sick from being out in the rain too long last night.

“I love you, Matty.”

I’ll never get tired of hearing it. “Tell me again, just one more time, and then I’ll let you get some rest.”

She laughs, and the sound of it is like a shot of adrenaline right in my veins. “I love you, Matty,” she repeats.

“I love you. I’ll see you later.”

I crank up some music and get lost in work after that, salvaging what equipment and materials I can, and making a disposal pile for the rest. More than half the day passes before

I realize how long I've been working. I'm hungry, I'm exhausted, and my muscles are aching.

I'm happier than I've ever been.

I head back into the office to eat some power bars and check on Noli. There's a couple of missed messages, but I ignore them for now and pick up the phone to call Noli first. It goes immediately to a busy signal. Thinking I'll call her back in a few, I check my messages. There's a short one from Dare, and a really long one from the house that I'm assuming is a mistake. Looks like Noli might have called and then didn't hang up properly.

I listen to Dare's message first.

*"Hey Matty, it's Dare. We're trying to let Noli know that we're on the way back, but the house phone has been busy. We'll be home in under an hour. Call me back if you get this."*

Then I listen to Noli's, expecting to hear an actual message and then static. Maybe I'll get lucky and I'll be able to hear her singing to herself or something. Is it creepy to listen in if she doesn't know she's still on the line?

*"Um, hey Matty, it's me. Noli. I'm just checking in and seeing how things are going. I, uh, I don't know, I'm probably just being silly, but I thought I heard something, and the door is open, and—" She pauses and then lets out a small gasp. "I think I might call your dad, actually, I—"*

Shit. What's happening? "Noli!?" I yell into the receiver, but that's fucking stupid because it's a voicemail.

*"Drop the phone, Maggie."*

Who the fuck is that?

The phone clatters loudly. There's a crash, and then the sounds of what I'm imagining is the phone bouncing off the wall. I'm up out of my seat, ears straining to hear what's happening. Please tell me I'm imagining the sounds of a struggle, imagining the sound of Noli crying out in pain.

*"Sit your ass down. We're gonna have a little talk."*

Is that her ex? Jake?



There's a violent crash that jars me out of my confusion. *Fuck! Fuck, I need to get to her. How long ago was this message?*

*Oh, my god it's been almost an hour. Fuck Fuck Fuck.*

Part of me wants to keep listening to know if she's okay, but I can't listen and get to her at the same time. Slamming the phone down on the receiver, I start to run out of the office, but turn on my heel and pick up the phone again. I dial my father's cell and pace in tiny circles, frantically tapping against the receiver.

"Come on, pick up, pick up."

*"Chief West here—"*

"Dad!"

*"Matty?"*

"Dad, I need you to call someone out to the Crawford house. Anyone, everyone. I'm pretty sure Noli's been hurt, or taken, or worse. I'm headed there now."

*"Son, slow down, where—"*

"There's no time, Dad! Just trust me and send help, NOW!"

I hang up and run as fast as I can to my truck, tires spinning as I dodge or barrel my way through storm debris. Every second feels like it's stretching on forever. It's taking too long to get to her. *It's been almost an hour since her call. Why wasn't I paying better attention?*

Please be okay, please be okay, please be okay.

*I'll fucking murder that bastard with my bare hands.*

Please be okay, please be okay, please be okay.

*I'll never forgive myself.*

I finally reach the cul-de-sac and pull into the driveway. My worst fears are confirmed when I see a grey pickup with Kansas plates blocking the driveway. The door is wide open. I barrel inside, looking everywhere, calling out for her.

“Noli!? Where are you? I’m here!”

The kitchen table is turned over on its side, one chair tipped over and another smashed near the wall. There’s blood splattered everywhere, and vomit on the floor. Some of the blood tracks outside.

I follow the trail, finding muddy prints across the lawn up to a patch of mud. Mixed in with the muck is a frightening amount of dark red blood. *Fuck, what happened here?*

Finally, I can hear sirens in the distance, but they sound so far away. Why is it taking so long?

I’m trying to pick up on any other tracks or clues, but I’m no hunter or tracker. I just follow my gut until I hear something that makes my blood run cold.

A blood-curdling scream echoes out from behind the house, and then a gunshot. The silence that follows it is the worst sound of all.

“NOLI!” I scream, tearing off toward the sound, toward our tree. “Noli!” I keep yelling, hoping she’ll call out for help, for anything.

The scene that awaits me is worse than I could have imagined.

“Oh no, no no no no no. Fuck, No. Noli!”

Jake is laying on his back, eyes wide, choking on his own blood. My Noli is passed out less than two feet away from him, sprawled on the ground. Her eyes are closed.

“Oh my god, oh my god, Noli? Noli! Wake up!” Dropping to my knees beside her, I try to assess her injuries or check her pulse, but I don’t know what to do. I feel for a pulse, I think I can feel something, but it’s faint. “Fuck, Fuck, Fuck, Noli, please no. Stay with me, baby.”

“NOLI? MATTY?” Voices come from the house.

“WE’RE BACK HERE! HELP!”

Ryan and Dare run full speed, slipping in the mud, horror-struck expressions on their faces when they find us.

Dare runs over to me and Noli, and immediately takes charge. “Matty, help me turn her over gently, support her head, pull that branch away so we can lay her flat. Ryan! Don’t let Jamie see!” The little girl is running across the lawn, just beyond view of where we are, yelling out for her mom. “Take her back to the house and let the EMT’s know where we are.”

Ryan pivots and runs back, picking up a panicking Jamie on the way. I can hear her struggling and screaming, and I know she’s seen at least something of the gruesome scene before us.

Dare has torn open the filthy flannel shirt she’s wearing. Her stomach is almost black with the amount of blood caked on it, and there’s fresh blood seeping quickly from the wound. He rips his shirt over his head and presses it to the wound, looking over her body at the other injuries.

Jake makes a gurgling sound next to us.

“Shit, um, turn him on his side and find out where the blood is coming from.”

I spare a glance for the bastard on the ground and make sure to hold his eyeline when I say, “Fuck him.” Instead, I place my hands where Dare’s are to take over, putting pressure on Noli’s wound while he assesses the other injuries.

“Noli, baby, stay with us,” he yells at her, and feels for a pulse again. “Shit, no. Noli, don’t do this!”

While I’m putting pressure on the wound, Dare places his hands on top of each other in the middle of her chest. He starts pumping her chest, intermittently whispering numbers or “come on, come on baby”. The force of the compressions makes her whole body jerk violently. The shirt I’m holding on her stomach is quickly saturated with her blood and my hands are covered in it..

It feels like hours before emergency services arrive. One of them calls over the radio for “another bus”. There are EMTs and paramedics from the fire station swarming the yard. Looks like my dad called everyone.

Some EMT's take over Noli's care. They put a mask on her face with a squeeze bag to force oxygen. A clean towel replaces Dare's dirty shirt. They put a board under her and lift her up onto a gurney, rolling her to the ambulance as quickly as they can. We run after them, not caring how the dying man behind us fares with the paramedics who are trying to save his life. I couldn't care less if he dies, except maybe that death would be too easy. He deserves to suffer.

The ambulance pulls away, sirens blaring. My truck is blocked in.

"I need to get out!" I call out, ready to chase after the ambulance.

"Now hold on, son, take it easy." My dad puts his hands on my shoulders, holding me back. He couldn't hold me back if I pushed by, but I respect him enough to listen to what he has to say. "She's getting the help she needs, and you're not going to do her or anyone else any good by getting in a wreck on the way there. They're just going to make you wait in a waiting room, so you might as well hang back a sec and help here."

He's right.

He releases my shoulders, and I take a breath to clear my mind. I can hear Jamie screaming and crying in the house and look over my shoulder.

"Ryan's got her. We'll bring her with us to the hospital, but I need to take a quick look around and get my team cordoning off the crime scene. What do you know?"

"She left me a voicemail that she thought she heard something in the house. He attacked her while she was leaving the message. I didn't listen to the whole thing. I called you and came here."

"Don't delete that message. We'll need it for evidence." I nod my understanding.

My dad starts directing his officers. One starts blocking off the area with caution tape, two more enter the house, and a few head down the lawn to where we found Noli. The paramedics are pushing another gurney with Jake on it, a sheet

covering his body. I look away and head inside to get Ryan and Jamie.

“Wait,” Dare says, holding me back. “You’re covered in blood.”

“So are you.” I take off my shirt and do my best to wipe as much blood from my hands and arms, passing it to Dare so he can do the same.

Ryan comes out of the house, holding Jamie with her head tucked into his shoulder. “She wants to come to the hospital with us,” he says, and no one argues. We want to be there too, in case...

*No. Don't think it.*

“Alright, let’s go,” my dad says, opening the door to his police SUV. Ryan climbs into the very back with Jamie. Dare sits in the first row, and I climb into the passenger seat. Quietly, Dare and I give details of what we saw when we arrived on the scene. Ryan holds Jamie and sings something softly to her so she won’t hear.

We get to the hospital quickly thanks to dad’s liberal use of the lights and sirens. He takes us in the back entrance and speaks to the charge nurse, who has us sit in a private waiting room for a while.

“I have to get back. Let me know when she wakes up.”

“Thanks Dad.”

Before he leaves, he kneels down to talk to Jamie, who is nestled into Ryan’s side. “Whatever happens, you’ll be okay,” he says. “Be brave, Jamie. Be brave like your mama was today.”

I cough to cover up a sob, and excuse myself to the bathroom. Dad follows me out and stops me.

“If she lives, son, I think she deserves forgiveness. For it to escalate this badly, it must have been rough for her to be with that man for so long.”

“You don’t know the half of it,” I say in a weak voice. “I’m the one that needs to be forgiven. We started on the path

last night, and we made up, but...”

“Then, if anything else, she knows how much you all love her. I don’t know how this sort of relationship would work out, but there’s a lot of love between you all. If I can feel it from here, I’m sure she could as well.” He pats my shoulder before he walks away.

I take as much of a bath as I can in the sink, washing away the blood and mud from my torso, arms, and hands. My jeans I can’t really do much for. Dare joins me after a few minutes and passes me a pair of scrubs.

When we’re both as clean as we’re going to get, I go back to the waiting room. Dare heads to go see what he can find out from the staff. He does regular shifts in the ER, so he has some privileges here.

In the waiting room, Jamie looks up at me with eyes so watery and sad that I can’t talk over the bubble of emotion in my throat. Instead of words, I sit down on the other side of her and take her in my arms. She cries into my borrowed shirt while I try to hide my own tears from her, hugging her maybe too tightly because I’m so aware that this little girl may be the last piece of Noli left in the world.

Ryan catches my eye, asking with unspoken words what I think Noli’s chances are. All I can do is shake my head. *I don’t know. It’s bad. I don’t know.*

By the time Dare returns, Jamie is asleep in my lap. Ryan and I straighten up. “Anything?”

“She’s in surgery. Her injuries are all manageable, but she lost a lot of blood.”

“Is she going to make it?” Ryan asks quietly.

“The key is making it through surgery. If she makes it through that, then we should be in the clear.”

Ryan and I expel heavy breaths at the same time. Dare’s lip quirks, but he doesn’t quite smile.

“When she’s out of surgery, she’ll be in the recovery ward for a bit before she moves to a room. I got them to let us head

to the room to wait there. It'll be a bit more comfortable.”

The room is large. There's a pull-out couch and an empty hospital bed. Dare says they'll bring Noli in her own bed, so I can let Jamie lay down. We cover her in warm blankets and I take the chair next to her. Ryan and Dare sit on the couch, arms around each other.

No one speaks, or fidgets much. We just sit there stiffly, holding our breaths.

Waiting for a miracle.



*“Trauma creates change you don’t choose. Healing is about creating change you do choose.”*

Michelle Rosenthal



# Noli

*Wow, I feel like shit.*

My mouth is so dry I'm not sure I can pry it open. I think my eyes are glued shut, because they won't open. My body feels overly heavy and incredibly sore, but the pain is not as bad as it was after I got stabbed.

*Wait.*

*Stabbed.*

*I was stabbed! But I'm... alive?*

Where am I? Trying not to panic, I check-in with myself. There's something on my face and around my head. There are blankets on me, machines are beeping.

I try moving my toes and fingers and then feel a warm hand on my arm. "Mrs. Den—I mean, Magnolia?"

My eyes crack open, and bit by bit, the woman bending over me comes into view. She has dark auburn hair and green cat-eye glasses. Her kind, green-grey eyes look down at me softly.

"Welcome back," she says when I am blinking enough to be considered awake. I can't turn my neck, there's a collar around it, so I look around with just my eyes. "You're in the hospital, sweetheart. Do you remember what happened?"

*Do I remember? I know it was something bad. Do I want to remember?*

"It's okay if you don't. You're going to be groggy for a while. But let me tell you this, Ms. Magnolia, you're a damn fighter and the world is glad to have you back. I'm going to call the doctor and let him know you're awake."

*I'm a fighter...*

*Jake.* He tried to kill me. I thought... I thought I was dead. I'm not sure how long I lay there replaying everything in my head, but the nice nurse returns with a man in a white coat. At

first, I feel wary, but he has warm eyes and a gentle voice, and as he talks to me, I feel more comfortable.

“Hey there Magnolia, I’m Dr. Morales. Your, uh, *family* gave me very explicit instructions not to call you by your married name. Is Magnolia okay?”

My voice isn’t ready, my throat feels raw and sore. I nod to let him know it’s okay.

“Alright Magnolia, let me know if this is all too much. Just put your hand up if you’re not ready to talk, okay?” I nod again. “You went through quite an ordeal. You lost a lot of blood and had some internal damage from a stab wound. That, and a concussion, is the worst of it. Your neck and throat are likely to be quite sore for a while. There’s significant bruising, and the swelling was bad enough that the EMT’s had to do a tracheotomy, which means they made an incision in your windpipe to help you breathe. You’re pretty cut up and bruised, so the next time you chance a look in a mirror, it might be a lot to process, okay?”

The doctor continues talking to both me and the nurse, whose name is Anne, but I don’t absorb a lot of what’s said. I have so many questions. Where is Jamie? Is Jake alive? Did I kill him? Am I going to jail? Where are my guys?

“Shh, it’s alright,” Nurse Anne says, noticing my distress and soothing me. “We’re going to do a quick checkup and then we’ll move you to a room. Your family is waiting for you.” She smiles kindly, and my eyes fall on something that peeks out of the neckline of her scrub top.

Lifting my arm to point, I force out a rough whisper. “Ladybug?”

“Oh, this?” She pulls the necklace over her top, holding it up so I can see the silver, black and red ladybug charm more closely. “It’s kind of a talisman of mine. Ladybugs are lucky. Magnolias are too, you know.” She winks and continues to write down my vitals, and I take a moment to relax.

Whatever happens next, I’m alive.



“Hasn’t she answered enough questions?” Matty asks his father accusingly.

Chief West sighs and looks at me apologetically. “I have to be thorough and do this by the book so you don’t end up with problems later. If you prefer to get Lisa back here, we can wait, but the quicker we get these things over with, the better.”

“It’s okay,” I croak out. “I don’t have anything to hide.”

As soon as I had been told that Jake was dead, I knew there would be questions. It was unavoidable. According to Lisa, proving self-defense is actually harder than we would think it is, especially since I fought back so hard. If my self-defense isn’t proven without a shadow of a doubt, I’ll be charged with manslaughter.

Chief West pats my foot affectionately before he opens the door and welcomes the detective in.

“Hi, Mrs. Denin. My name is Tobias Stevenson. I’m a homicide detective with the State Bureau of Investigations. Thank you for agreeing to speak with me today. I’ll keep it as short as I can. Do you mind if I record?” He holds up a small recording device.

Clearing my throat a bit, my voice still rough, I shake my head. “I don’t mind you recording, no. But if you don’t mind, I prefer Crawford, not Denin.”

“Fair enough,” he says. He turns on the recorder, says some introductory words and the time, and has me confirm my identity out loud. The witnesses in the room, Matty and Chief West, identify themselves as well. Dare and Ryan took Jamie out to a park to get some air, and so she didn’t have to overhear any gruesome details.

Detective Stevenson has me start from the beginning, giving him a detailed version of events. Some of the parts, like the parts where Jake forced me to give him head and attempted

to rape me, are especially hard to talk about in front of Matty and his father, but I'm determined not to hide anymore.

The detective stops me at various points in the story to ask more specific questions, making sure that every last detail is recorded. Some things I can't properly remember, like what shoes Jake was wearing or where exactly he produced the rope from. The end of the events is where he has the most questions.

"Tell me again how you ended up with the gun?"

"I was afraid he would wake up and come after me again. He'd already shot at me, so if he woke up, he might shoot me while I was running away. So I took it away from him. I pulled it out of his back pocket, from under his body. When I tried to walk back towards the house, he grabbed my ankle and I fell. The gun went off. I didn't actually mean to shoot it—I was startled."

He asks some more questions about the exact position I fell in, and where I thought the shot landed. I don't actually even know. I never saw a bullet wound.

"I was lying on the ground and couldn't move. I saw him cough up some blood, and then I lost consciousness. I think I knew that he was shot, but I didn't know where."

"You think you knew?"

"I'd been trying to stay conscious for the better part of half an hour, and I was sure I was dying. It was a lot to process. Still is."

The detective closes the interview and stops recording.

"Well, Ms. Crawford, I'm going to tell you what I think, but bear in mind that I'm not a prosecutor. I think between your testimony and physical evidence, you might actually avoid trial. The voicemail recording that Mr. West provided is really the key to avoiding manslaughter charges. But it's not a done deal. There's a lot of precedent for women going to jail for defending themselves, I'm afraid."

Chief West steps in. "Her lawyer has also managed to get some archived medical records from a hospital stay fifteen

years ago. They don't explicitly state abuse, because at the time Ms. Crawford wasn't in the position to admit her situation, but the physician's notes and the nature of the injuries are likely to show a long history of violence."

The detective nods. "Honestly, even if they determine that it's not admissible, in a trial that could sway a jury." He stands up and reaches out a hand to both Matty and Chief West, and then to me. As he shakes my hand, he says, "Ma'am, I wish you the absolute best. Whatever a judge or court says, I believe your record of events and would testify under oath if you need me to. I think you have to be damn strong to have lived through what you have."

I give the detective a watery smile and whisper out a thank you as he leaves.

"Alright, you need some rest. Nurse Anne threatened me that if you don't take a nap today, we can't bring you home tomorrow." Matty kisses me on the forehead, and then tenderly on the lips when I tilt my face up to him.

### *Home.*

After just over two weeks in this room, I'm more than ready. Thankfully, the neck brace is gone, I can walk and talk, and my wounds are healing well. Considering it could have been so much worse, I know how lucky I am.

## Noli

“I’m ready, I promise,” I whine. “Dare! You’re a doctor. Examine me, damnit.”

I’ve been home for one month and three days and everyone is still treating me like I’m fragile. I still have scars, obviously, and some of them aren’t pretty, but they’ve all healed pretty well and don’t hurt. Unless someone kicks me in the stomach, I doubt there’s much they could do to hurt me at this point. And if it did hurt, I have a feeling it’d be very worth it.

They’ve basically been teasing me mercilessly this entire month. For the first couple weeks they barely touched me at all, and Matty, whom I’ve started referring to as The Caveman, literally carried me everywhere. Since he wouldn’t listen to me, Dare finally had to step in and tell him that walking and gentle exercise would actually help me heal, not hinder it. He still didn’t let me shower by myself, but I didn’t mind it.

It took fifteen days before anyone touched me. Fifteen days of watching them walk around in boxer briefs or come trotting out of the shower butt-ass naked. Fifteen days of absolute erotic torture. The only breaks were when Jamie was home from Mrs. Bishop’s summer camp, where we’d all do family stuff, have dinner, and watch movies. But as soon as she went to bed, and I was alone with them, the shirts came off and the unyielding teasing would start again.

Ryan takes the most pleasure in torturing me. Every time he catches me ogling one of them, he reaches over and pushes my jaw up to close my mouth, or pretends to wipe drool off my face. It was Ryan who figured out how much it was driving me crazy and started walking around shirtless or in his underwear on purpose. Then he got Matty in on it, and once Dare caught on it was a constant onslaught of ohmygodwhyaretheysobeautiful.

Matty wouldn’t touch me because he was afraid to hurt me. Ryan was enjoying getting me worked up too much. Dare was my only hope.

I honestly didn't mean to weaponize my tears, but what started as a frustrated albeit funny conversation about how it was meant to get me all worked up and deny me constantly ended in me breaking down a bit. In my defense, I was still on pain killers. I broke down and told him that I was starting to worry that they found all of my scars unattractive, and maybe wouldn't want me anymore. He pulled me into a hug and assured me that was far from the case, and that they were all waiting for the very moment that they knew it was safe.

Thus began a mortifying and yet also very stimulating conversation about masturbation. When I explained my hang-ups about touching myself, and how I've not been able to bring myself to orgasm because of my past experiences, he immediately decided that it was his new mission to help me learn how to pleasure myself.

"Why do I need to do it myself? I have three boyfriends. Three!"

"It's self-discovery, and very healthy. I'm not a therapist, but I'd imagine getting over that hurdle could be a significant step toward self-healing. Besides, the more you know about your own body and pleasure, the more you'll get out of sex with another person."

"I can't imagine getting more out of being with the *three* of you." My experience before all of this might have been limited, but each one of them seemed to know exactly how to touch me.

"Do you trust me?"

I sighed. "Of course I do, but—"

"No buts. Unless having your butt touched gets you off. Which... same." He grinned proudly at his little joke, leading me to the bathroom and running a bath.

I was self-conscious, at first, by letting Dare sponge bathe me, but it took exactly two swipes of the loofah over my breasts to have me panting. Isn't it funny how you forget to care about what you look like when you're in the throes of desperation?

Dare pushed me to lie back in the tub, guiding me to bend my knees and spreading my legs so they leaned against either side of the porcelain. Where I would normally have been incredibly self-conscious for anyone to look at my body this way, naked scars and stretch marks on display, baring the most intimate parts of myself, I only felt... treasured. Worshiped. His eyes watched me with unbridled lust and love, and any doubts I had about my body melted away.

His fingertips traced a barely there path from my shoulder, over my breast, and down my stomach. His light touch sent chill bumps over my body, my nipples pebbling.

“Follow my touch,” he said, directing my fingertips to glide along my body the way his did. It wasn’t quite the same, but I felt incredibly empowered by the effect that watching me was having on Dare.

“Now, lower,” he rasped, guiding my hand with his. With his hand over mine, he brought my fingers between my legs, running them over my spread lips. “What feels good?” he asked in a low voice, pressing my fingers to caress through my folds. When our fingers reached my clit, I hissed, a shock of pleasure shooting up my spine. I’ll never admit it, but the contracting of my abs hurt, but not enough to stop.

Dare continued to guide my fingers, circling them around my clit, changing up the pressure and speed until I whimpered, “there!” and then he pulled his hand back, encouraging me to continue. For a moment I faltered, having trouble getting into the rhythm without him, but when he pulled out his cock and started stroking himself, I quickly found it again.

The room filled with the echoing sounds of our heavy breaths as we watched each other and brought ourselves to climax. Dare came first, throwing his head back and groaning as his abs contracted until they were painted with cum. Watching him orgasm was a heady experience, and it pushed me over the edge. It was good, but it wasn’t enough, until Dare reached into the water and inserted one finger inside me, slowly pumping in and out, crooking his finger against that secret place inside me, until I came hard enough that I could feel my muscles contracting and squeezing his finger.



After that, they at least decided that orgasms were safe.

The next couple of weeks were admittedly full of some amazing orgasms. Dare and I started taking more regular baths together, where we would either touch ourselves or each other. A few times, Ryan woke me up with his tongue. And I learned that Matty had a bit of an exhibitionist kink about him, because he would find somewhere to hide and finger me while I did everything in my power to stay silent. One time he followed me into the bathroom at Darcy's and literally watched me pee before he set me up on the counter and pumped his fingers into me until I squirted all over the front of his shirt.

My life is honestly delicious outside of the ongoing manslaughter investigation, and I should be satisfied with what I have, but I need at least one of them to stop being so damn sweet with me and fuck me. I want to feel them inside me, to have them coat my guts in their cum.

More than anything, I want to stop feeling like a victim of a heinous crime and dive into our new normal. Which I really hope includes getting dicked down fairly regularly and not being treated like I might break.

Dare joins us in the bedroom, where we've replaced the queen-sized bed with an Alaskan King. It had to be specially ordered and delivered, and has been well worth the wait. With guys as big as these, it's still a little tight, but I've grown quite comfortable sleeping in a tangle of limbs. I've never slept better, actually.

"Dare, you're the most reasonable," I tell him, which the other two balk at, but when I raise an eyebrow, Matty concedes that I'm probably right. Ryan snorts next to me. "It's been over a month since we got home. Six weeks and four days after surgery, to be exact."

"You been counting the days, Kitten?" Ryan purrs, kissing me on my neck. His hand traces up my thigh.

I try to ignore him, but it doesn't take much to put me in a haze. I'm an addict, and his mouth and fingers are really good at giving me what I need. But I'm not falling for it. I'm ready.

I want *more*. I want *normal*. I want to be connected in every sense of the word.

“Didn’t the surgeon say six weeks? You’ve been to all my checkups, and I’m healing great. You heard it yourself.”

“Healing being the operative word,” Matty says. “It’s not like we don’t *want* to have sex with you, Noli. We’re all dying here, too. We just want to make sure you’re safe. It’d kill me to see you hurt again.”

“Can I not be trusted to tell you if I’m hurt?”

“I hurt you that night at the tree. You had scrapes all over your back from the tree bark. The moment I was inside you, I lost control, and I was so rough. What if he’d succeeded, and it hurt more because—”

“He’s gone,” I say firmly. “And he didn’t succeed, because I fought back and *I won*. Because I’m strong. Stronger than I ever gave myself credit for.”

“You’re the strongest person I know, Noli, I—”

“And I’m strong enough to decide what I like.” I stand up on the bed, tired of being loomed over by his hulking caveman frame. “I *liked* it when you lost control. I *liked* the way the tree felt against my back, and the way I felt you so deep inside me I thought I could taste you. I *liked* being sore the next day.”

“Well damn,” Ryan whispers hoarsely, groaning and adjusting himself through his boxer briefs. Matty gapes at me with the largest erection I’ve ever seen.

Dare clears his throat, suddenly aware that we’re all looking at him. “It has been six weeks, and you’ve technically been medically cleared. I don’t see a problem with it as long as we don’t do anything too crazy.”

“Oh, thank God,” I exclaim, immediately starting to pull off clothes. “What? Are we doing this thing or what?”

All three of them chuckle. I throw my shirt at Matty, because he’s closest in front of me. I’m standing on the bed, dressed only in a pair of lacy boyshorts underwear that I know make me look like I have more of an ass than I actually do.

My scars are all on display—the knife wound still pink and puckered, my thin, raised c-section scar, the stretch marks that always seem iridescent. Right now, however, they don't make me feel weak or ugly. They make me feel strong, because I know I've lived through so much. And they make me feel beautiful, because I know these three men love every inch of me exactly the way I am—not in spite of my scars, but because they are part of me.

Their eyes trace over me and I feel like a goddess. Ryan sits up on his knees behind me, running his hands up my legs and burying his face in my ass cheeks. It makes me giggle, but also sends heat to my lower stomach. Matty takes two steps closer and reaches for me, cupping my breast tenderly and rubbing his rough, calloused thumb over my nipple. My eyes flutter closed, lost to the sensations of their eyes and hands on me. The opposite nipple is sucked into a soft mouth as fingertips graze lightly up my thighs and across my stomach. I don't need to open my eyes to know that it's Dare.

Ryan loops his thumbs into the waistband of my underwear and slowly pulls them down my legs. As I step out, Matty stoops and buries his face between my legs, licking the arousal from my wet folds. My knees buckle.

Together, they lower me to the bed. Matty's skilled tongue laps and swirls around my clit, driving me higher until I shatter over the edge, gripping the bed sheets and grinding into his face. One, then two, thick fingers push inside me, rhythmically rubbing against my pulsing walls. At the same time, two mouths clamp over my breasts, one softly swirling their tongue over the hard peak while the other bites down gently. Hands touch me everywhere, softly caressing, gently grazing fingernails. A mixture of soft and rough that explodes into a flurry of warring sensations.

I cry out, and my mouth is quickly covered. Dare swallows my passionate cries while Ryan whispers in my ear, "Shhh, quiet purrs, Kitten, or you'll wake the house."

Their hands and mouths leave my body momentarily while I catch my breath and moan, the aftershocks of my orgasm still sending tingles in all the right places.

“Touch yourself, baby, keep it going,” Dare says. There’s a rustle of fabric, jostling the bed as they adjust and undress.

More for them than me, I bite my lip and touch my fingers to my pussy, rubbing through the slippery evidence of my orgasm. What started for them quickly becomes for me, my fingers rubbing circles around my clit, building myself back up again before I can even come down.

I’m lifted and pushed up so a large, muscular body can settle behind me. Matty pulls me back against his chest. His naked flesh is hard and smooth, the large, thick erection like steel against my spine. He bends his head to lick and nip a path from my shoulder to my earlobe, his fingers joining mine.

My eyes open to see Ryan and Dare sitting on the very end of the bed, watching with dilated pupils. Their erections jut out from their bodies, large and proud and wanting.

How do we do this? How does this work? Can I handle them all? How do I handle them all? At the same time? Surely I’d be split open. One at a time? The more I think about it, the more I can’t decide what the best course of action is.

“Shhhh,” Matty whispers in my ear, lazily pumping his fingers inside me. “Don’t think, just feel. What do you want?”

Well, for one, I want him to never stop touching me. I’m so wet that his fingers are making sloppy, obscene sounds, and I am thinking maybe we needed a tarp for his exercise.

“I want to see you together,” I say to Ryan and Dare, blushing, but not at all ashamed of my arousal.

“What do you want to see, Kitten?” Ryan asks. “Do you want to see Dare fuck my face, see how I swallow that delicious cock? Or do you want to see me make him come with my fingers and cock stretching that pretty little asshole?”

*Holy fuck.* I can’t even respond to those words, my breath is caught up in a full body shiver, gooseflesh erupting all over my body.

“Mmm, she liked that,” Matty says, hooking his fingers inside me and palming my clit. My hips chase the friction,

rolling and grinding into his hand. “She’s so wet for us, brothers.”

I admit to being sheltered. But I never imagined in my wildest dreams being in this position, hearing words like these, so dirty and illicit they make my head spin. So when Matty pulls his fingers out of my pussy and holds them out, my breath catches. Dare reaches forward and takes Matty’s fingers in his mouth, sucking off my juices and then turning to kiss Ryan. They kiss deeply, tongues flashing, passing the taste of me between each other. A whimper escapes me. I clench so hard that I nearly come on the spot, warm fluid leaking out of me and soaking into the comforter.

With a salacious grin that turns more of my bones to jelly, Ryan drops to his knees and swallows Dare’s long, hard cock in one dip, taking him to the root. I’m both impressed and aroused, watching Dare take control, holding Ryan’s face reverently, thrusting inside his mouth with long, slow strokes at first.

Dare looks down at Ryan lovingly, moaning and murmuring, “Yes, God, you look so beautiful with my cock stuffed so far in your throat. Fuck, I love it when you do that with your tongue. Are you ready?”

I don’t know what he’s talking about, but *I’m* fucking ready. My mouth gapes open and I could fill a small pool with how wet I am.

Ryan takes Dare all the way and groans affirmatively. Dare turns his face from watching Ryan to look at me. “Look how flushed and ready our girl is, watching you swallow my cock. I can see how wet she is from here.” Matty dips his fingers in my slickness and spreads it over my lips, turning my face toward him so he can lick and suck the flavor from them. His cock twitches against my back and I lean into it, pushing my ass back.

Dare moans. “Damn, baby. I don’t know if I can hold on much longer. What do you want me to do with this cum?”

It takes me a second to realize he’s talking to me. He wants me to decide what to do with his orgasm. I give Matty another

quick kiss, nipping his lip as I push myself up and crawl over to the guys.

“What does Ryan like?” I ask, moving close enough to run my fingers over Ryan’s studded erection, enjoying the bumpy texture and the way it twitches.

Ryan slowly pulls back, releasing Dare’s cock and adjusting his jaw like a snake does after swallowing something of immense size. The irony is not lost on me. A string of spit keeps them connected. Eyes on me, Ryan holds Dare’s cock and licks it from base to tip, then licks and sucks the swollen tip like a lollipop. Dare sucks in a breath and runs his fingers through his short-cropped hair.

“I like his cum however I can get it,” Ryan answers in a raspy voice. “I like swallowing it, or having it on me. My favorite, though,” he says, turning from the cock in his hand and darting his tongue out to lick my bottom lip, “my favorite is holding it in my mouth and then bending him over and using it as lube to take his sweet ass.”

My eyes are so wide that the air feels dry, but I can’t bring myself to blink. “That,” I say, transfixed. “That’s what I want to see.”

Ryan takes my mouth in a short but searing kiss. “Whatever makes my kitten purr.” And then he turns back to take Dare’s cock in his mouth again, moving his head up and down the shaft, bobbing forcefully until Dare takes control again. Moaning and panting, Dare takes Ryan’s face with short, rough thrusts.

My face is level with the action, both because I find it incredibly sexy, and because I feel like this is a learning opportunity. I all but forget that my ass is up in the air until Matty suddenly grabs it and buries his face. From behind, he licks and sucks my pussy while I watch his brother get face fucked. His tongue thrusts in and out while I rock back, fucking myself on his tongue, forcing myself to keep my eyes on the scene in front of me.

“Fuck baby, you ready?” Dare says as his abs tighten, and then he groans, rolling his hips slow and deep. Holding Ryan’s

head in one hand, he grasps the base of his cock in the other and pulls out. Ryan keeps his mouth open, sticking out his tongue so I can watch Dare's cock spurt cum over the pink surface.

My pussy throbs, pushing back on Matty's tongue harder. "More!" I say, close to coming undone again.

Everyone adjusts. Matty sits back on his knees and pulls me against his chest again. Ryan stands and takes control of Dare, gently pushing his chest down to the bed. Dare's hands settle on the bed on either side of my thighs. I watch as Ryan spreads Dare's cheeks and, keeping his dark eyes on me, slowly lets the mouthful of cum trickle from his lips to fall. It splashes down on Dare's ass, and Ryan spreads it down, probing his fingers into Dare's ass.

Matty reaches in front of me and spreads my legs to straddle his knees. His hand cups my pussy and then wipes, gathering a handful of wetness and pulling it back to stroke himself with my juices. My eyes roll back as Matty's cock appears between my legs, grinding against my spread open folds, lubing himself up on my dripping arousal. Holding me gingerly around my waist, he lifts me up, lines himself up at my entrance, and then lets me sink down, inch by delicious inch. I'm so wet and ready that the stretch is nothing more than an added layer of perfection. Finally.

At the same time that Matty is entering me, Ryan bends his knees and pushes into Dare. I shiver and push back on Matty, watching as each ball of Ryan's piercings disappear into Dare's asshole, surely stretched to its limits. Dare's eyes roll back in his head as Ryan bottoms out. Ryan puts his hands on either side of Dare's body, leaning over him to kiss his back and start thrusting in earnest.

Matty's hands grip me around my ribs, guiding my body up and down his long shaft. For a while, the room is nothing but heat and panting and soft moans. It feels so good, so right, to be so full and together. I'm lost in it, finding my rhythm and rolling my hips.

“God, yes,” Matty growls into my ear. “You’re so fucking perfect. So fucking beautiful. Fuuuck, feel how good we fit together. Yes, baby, ride my cock, just like that. Fuck, yeah baby.”

My hips pick up, rolling and grinding, chasing that rising pressure that rushes through my veins and spreads over my whole body.

“Fuuck this is so hot,” Ryan groans. My eyes open to find him watching me, intermittently looking down to watch his cock ram into Dare’s ass. He stops but stays inside him, indicating to Dare to move his legs up onto the bed so he’s on his hands and knees right in front of me. Ryan stands up straight, grabs Dare’s hips, and pulls him back on his cock. He snaps his hips and sets a punishing rhythm, the sound of skin slapping together becoming my new pulse as I speed up my own hips.

Dare moans, his hanging cock hardening again. The force of Ryan’s thrusts pushes his face against my thigh. My hands reach out to touch him, fingers running through his hair and over his face. His lips catch my fingers, sucking and biting them gently, before he tilts his head and pushes himself forward.

I freeze, momentarily stunned. Matty holds an arm around me and keeps me steady while he thrusts into me from below. Dare’s mouth lowers to lick my clit while Matty’s cock moves in and out of my pussy, the pressure changing each time Ryan thrusts his hard cock into Dare. My climax quickly builds to an unfathomable peak, my gasps and pants increasing.

“Yeah, that’s right, come for us Kitten,” Ryan growls as his thrusts jerk and he snaps his hips even faster. “God yes, take it, baby. Fuck, baby, you feel so good. Are you ready for my cum?”

Ryan’s eyes lock on mine as he comes, pounding into Dare’s ass. Dare’s mouth clamps down on my clit as he moans, steadying himself with one arm holding onto my thigh while his other hand pumps his cock. Matty thrusts up harder, rutting



into me and clamping his mouth down on my shoulder to muffle his shout as he reaches his climax.

My whole world snaps and shatters around me. Every nerve ending is both ice and fire, the burning rush of blood and euphoria through my veins and the electric shiver of chill bumps that runs up my spine.

“Oh, fuck!” Matty calls out, wrapping his arms around me and covering my mouth to muffle my scream. His thrusts falter as my pussy clamps down, my walls rippling and squeezing him with the force of my orgasm. “Fuck, fuck, fuck baby, God yes, you’re fucking milking me. Shit.” His hand tightens over my mouth, curses turn into an unintelligible string of murmurs against my skin.

Ryan groans as he pounds out the last of his orgasm, then lifts Dare by the nape of his neck so his back is flush with Ryan’s chest. Ryan reaches around and grasps Dare’s cock, pumping it furiously until a thick shot of cum shoots out and splashes against my spread out pussy as Matty and I ride out the last vestiges of our orgasms.

Everyone collapses in a heap. Matty falls back with his cock still inside me. I fall on top of him, my back still to his front. Dare collapses on his stomach with his head next to my thigh, which he kisses sweetly. Ryan lays half on top of Dare’s side, his spent cock laying over his ass, a mess of cum dripping from the tip.

It’s all I can do to breathe and not pass out. I’m boneless. I am completely spent, physically and emotionally overwhelmed by the intensity of my orgasm. My skin is buzzing and oversensitive, so much so that I whimper when Matty slowly pulls out of me.

“Are you okay?” Matty whispers against the back of my neck, peppering me with gentle kisses.

“Mmm hmm,” I hum, nodding. It’s the only response I can muster, quickly headed for what I’m sure will be the deepest sleep of my life.

Dare makes a sort of “ope” sound as he pulls himself up, gathering me in his arms. I whine, not wanting to move. “Come on, baby, you can’t fall asleep until you pee.”

*What?* “No, I don’t need to, I need to sleep.”

“If you don’t pee now, you could get a UTI,” he says. *Mood ruiner.*

Ryan chuckles and kisses both me and Dare on the foreheads. “My responsible doctor, always taking care of us. Come on, Kitten, I need to get cleaned up too.”

While I pee, Ryan gets the shower started. He doesn’t watch me like Matty does. When I step into the shower, he takes a washcloth and starts washing away the cum and sweat from my body. I wiggle a little, trying to be discreet, but there’s no room for bashfulness in this family. With a knowing grin, Ryan kneels down and very gently parts my legs, throwing one calf over his shoulder. Slowly, and very gently because my pussy is still swollen and sensitive, he puts a finger inside me, swirling it around and coaxing the cum to trickle out to be washed away.

Despite being exhausted and yes, quite sore, my body reacts to him touching me even though it wasn’t meant in an entirely sexual way. One finger becomes two, and I roll my hips gently against his hand, my arousal building again.

A few minutes later, Dare sticks his head in to let me know that Matty changed all the sheets, and finds me panting against the wall with Ryan’s face buried in my pussy. Curious as to what made Dare stop talking and gape, Matty comes into the bathroom to see what’s going on.

We’re going to need a bigger shower.



*~One Month Later~*

“I’m not saying I didn’t enjoy it. I’m saying that we’re going to get caught and have a lot of things to explain to your dad if you don’t watch yourself in public,” I tell Matty, swatting his hand away with a laugh.

Matty wiggles his eyebrows. “Oh, I know you enjoyed it. And speaking of watching...” he lowers his voice and looks around conspiratorially, “I recorded the whole thing so Ryan and Dare can see how thoroughly I defiled you in that courthouse bathroom.”

A shudder passes through me, my cheeks heating. I look around the room at the people milling about, but no one seems to be paying attention to us. Shifting in my seat, I feel the dampness of my cum soaked panties and clench despite myself. Matty grins lewdly, but straightens up when the judge enters the chambers again.

A hush falls over the room, and everyone rushes back to their seats. Lisa takes her seat on the other side of me, Matty close to my other side because he won a particularly ridiculous game of rock-paper-scissors to be the one to accompany me and “keep me calm”.

“Will the defendant please rise?”

Matty squeezes my hand encouragingly, and I take a steadying breath. I stand, my spine straight and chin raised, ready for whatever might come next. This is only the preliminary hearing and is likely to be the beginning of a long and drawn-out trial.

*I am Magnolia Crawford, and I am strong enough for anything.*

“Ms. Crawford, in my forty-some years of sitting on this bench, I have not heard a story as harrowing as yours. Your

strength and perseverance in the face of years of suffering and abuse are, in my opinion, to be admired. I've listened to testimony from both sides, and I've done some research regarding the precedents for cases like these. There is an unfortunate paradigm in the courts of this state and country, that many women who defend themselves as fiercely as you did and come out the victor are punished or prosecuted for their actions. At best, even the ones that do win in the end are forced to stand trial and defend every step of the abuse they've endured. It is my hope that your story may serve as a new precedent.

In the matter of the state v Magnolia Crawford, I hereby dismiss all charges against the defendant with prejudice.”

My breath catches.

With those last words echoing in the chamber, she bangs her gavel. The people around me erupt in cheers, pulling me in for hugs and patting my back. I can only think of one person, though...

Stepping away from the table and in front of the aisle of spectators, which include Chief West, Detective Stevenson, Nurse Anne and two doctors who saw to my injuries at the hospital, Mrs. and Reverend Bishop, a handful of people from town, and... standing at the back of the aisle, Dare and Ryan flank my daughter, who sees me and comes running.

Dropping to my knees, I wrap my arms around her and sob.



When I close the door to the room that used to belong to me, but now belongs to my daughter, I lean my forehead on the door and take a slow breath. It's been such a crazy, emotional day that I haven't had a chance to adequately process.

In the space of three months, our lives have gone through incredible changes. We ran from pain and fear, dove into a world of uncertainty, and fought our way to the other side. Now, we have a happy home where my daughter is safe, where the three people that I have loved my entire life love and support her like a father is supposed to. She and Ryan have started hand painting her walls, half of one wall already covered in colorful art. I walked in the other day to find her sitting on his shoulders to paint a tiny ladybug on the top of a giant magnolia tree that he sketched and she painted. Matty has started teaching her how to box and is her favorite movie night pillow. Dare is considering coaching the town rec league soccer team that we signed her up for. And next week we'll be walking her into her first day of a new school, which she's not at all nervous about because she already has a best friend from Mrs. Bishop's summer camp, who happens to be the daughter of none other than Jessa Holcrum.

Life is funny. It's hard and messy and scary, but everything can change in the blink of an eye. Change comes for better or for worse, whether we're ready for it or not. All we can do is do our best, be strong, and do what's right.

"Hey, you okay?"

I turn myself around to face Dare and give him a genuine, but watery, smile. "I'm just so... happy. And relaxed. And I realized that I'm starting to get used to it."

"You didn't even flinch just now," he points out.

"I know, right! It's almost too easy, too good to be true."

“I don’t believe that for a second,” he says, taking my hand and pulling me close. “We all—you most of all—fought for this. You deserve to be happy and free and relaxed.” He kisses me sweetly, and then leads me down the hallway. Instead of heading to the bedroom like I hoped he would be, he leads me downstairs where his mother is sitting in the living room, watching television.

“Mrs. Bishop?”

She smiles affectionately at us, lifting her cheek for Dare to press a kiss. “Thanks for babysitting, mom,” he whispers. “The downstairs bedroom is all made up for you.”

“Babysitting?” What’s going on here?

Lifting an eyebrow in what I hope is mock disapproval considering the grin on her face, she says, “you kids have fun,” and turns back to her true crime documentary.

“Where are we going? Should I change?” I changed into a pair of cotton shorts and one of the guys’ tanks the moment we got home.

“We’re not going far,” he says cryptically, kicking over a pair of my flip-flops before he leads me down the steps and around to the back of the house.

“So...your mom, she’s okay with this? All of us together?”

“*Okay* might be a strong word. But she loves all of us. And she also figures we’ll get enough judgement, so the least she can do is show the world that she loves and supports our family wholeheartedly.”

*Our family.*

“Wait... what’s this?”

As we make it around the side of the house, I find a little candle on the ground. A few feet away is another, and then another.

There’s at least two dozen leading down the path to our tree.

“Come on,” Dare says, leading me down the path. From the meadow at the edge of our lawn, I can see the magnolia tree, all lit up with a fresh set of twinkling lights.

Beneath the tree, sitting amongst the branches, Matty and Ryan wait for us. On the ground below is a canvas tent, the front opening pulled back to reveal a comfortable-looking pallet of blankets and pillows. Candles in big jars are set here and there around the trunk and outside of the tent. Combined with the lights in the tree, it gives our little sanctuary an ethereal glow.

This is still our sanctuary. Our special place. It took about a week of being home for me to come out here. I decided it wasn't fair to let Jake take anything else from me, especially one of the most special parts of my life, and I forced myself down the path. I expected to feel scared, or sad, or sick remembering what happened to me the last time I'd been out here. Instead, I looked at the ground where both of us bled out, and I felt grateful. It was the tree that gave me the reminder I needed to gather my strength, as well as the branch that took him down. That was the day I took my life back.

Matty reaches a hand down to help me climb up into the branches, settling in 'my spot'. Dare climbs up after me and sits next to Ryan.

Clearing my throat, I lift my chin in an authoritative manner. “Alright then, I officially call this meeting to order.”

I'm joking, of course, but Ryan's hand shoots up, and he shouts, “New business!”

Laughing, I wave my hand and give him permission to speak. “State your business, sir.”

“Matthew, my very own *twin* brother,” he says accusingly, “has violated the decrees that hold this honored group together by defiling you in public, taking a video of said defiling, and then not showing us said video of said defiling. I would like to make a motion to officially declare bullshit.”

Pursing my lips to keep from laughing, I cover my rapidly heating face with my hands. “You guys are so immature. Are

we thirteen again, jealous over a kiss?”

“With all due respect... Duh,” Matty says, laughing at my embarrassment. “Because that shit was hot. I had her bent over the sink with that sexy pencil skirt pushed up over her ass. Mmm,” he exclaims with a shiver of delight.

I can’t help but smirk. It was pretty hot. “You fail to mention the fact that you let me think the door was unlocked and that anyone could walk in at any moment.”

“Tell me you didn’t like it... or that my fat dick didn’t help you calm your anxiety.”

Dare raises his hand. I roll my eyes but gesture for him to speak.

“I second the bullshit motion. I would also very much like to see the video.”

Sighing, I look over at Matty. His hazel eyes are twinkling with glee, enjoying nothing more than stirring shit. “How do you suggest we move forward, Mr. West?”

“I think a vote is in order,” Dare interrupts.

I can’t believe we’re up in this tree having a “crew meeting” like kids, except we’re up here talking about an unauthorized sex tape. But I’m just as bad as they are, because I’m highly amused and loving every second of it.

“Fine,” I say in an exasperated voice. “All in favor of watching the video, say aye.”

Three voices ring out, “aye!”

Laughing, I try to push Matty’s ridiculously sturdy frame out of the tree. “You guys are ridiculous!”

“You’re in charge, Noli. Always have been. If you don’t want us to watch it, we won’t, and I’ll delete it. Just say the word.”

“No,” I say, shaking my head with a grin. “I want to watch it too.”

“God, I love you,” Ryan says.



Matty pulls out his phone and holds it up. The video is a little rough, but you can clearly see me, bent forward over the sink, holding on for dear life while Matty plows into me from behind. My panties are around my ankles, skirt hiked up over my ass, blouse and bra pushed up so my breasts are dangling and swaying with each snap of Matty's hips. It was quick, and dirty, and delicious. When I came, Matty had to hold his hand over my mouth to keep me from making too much noise. And when he was done with me, he pulled my panties up my legs, straightened my skirt, and then grasped a breast while he leaned low to kiss me. Instead, he grumbled, "Don't clean up. I want you soaked in my cum for the rest of the day." My jaw dropped, and then the video cuts out.

"Damn," says Ryan, adjusting himself.

Dare nods in agreement. "The 'don't clean up' bit was a nice touch," he says, complimenting Matty. "And did she obey?"

I roll my eyes, but watching that video and hearing those words again has me squirming in my seat. "Yes," I say. "But not because he told me to."

"Oh, yeah?" challenges Matty. "Then why did you do it?"

"Because I wanted to," I say, raising a challenging eyebrow.

Matty raises his hand. "New business," he declares.

"Proceed," I say with a sardonic grin.

"I'd like to invoke the rule of firsts."

"For what, exactly?" I ask.

"For making you cum tonight," he answers nonchalantly.

"What?!" Both Ryan and Dare shout in mock outrage.

"As the firstborn, I invoke my right to have first choice. And I choose to have Noli ride my face so I can eat that sweet pussy until my face is covered in her cum."

I don't have a response for this, as my brain is currently overloaded. Will I ever get used to their dirty mouths?

Ryan and Darius put their arms around each other in a mock huddle before straightening up and simultaneously nodding their agreement.

“We concede to the rule of firsts. However, we humbly request secondzies and thirdzies, in the usual order, as is tradition,” Ryan says.

“If Noli wants, of course,” Dare throws in.

Choking out a laugh, I shrug. “I mean, if tradition demands, who am I to deny the request? I don’t know about sitting on anyone’s face, though. That seems awkward and uncomfortable.”

“Sorry, non-negotiable, it’s already been agreed to,” Matty says, climbing out of the tree and reaching up to help me down.

The other two follow after us. “It’s a sacred agreement, Noli,” Ryan agrees with a wink. “But I’ll make you a deal…” He leans forward conspiratorially, whispering loud enough for everyone to hear. “How about instead of eating your pussy, I’ll eat your ass and get it nice and lubed up for Dare to take it tonight?”

My spine melts with arousal and nerves. We’ve been doing a lot of experimenting lately, and after watching some of Ryan and Dare’s ass play, I’ve been getting in on it more and more. Over time, they’ve teased and acclimated me so that I crave it now. But Dare’s cock is a lot more than two fingers.

He sees me staring at the bulge in his black pajama bottoms and chuckles. “Don’t worry, baby, I’ll be gentle,” he says sweetly before turning away to pull his shirt off and throw it in the corner of the tent. He walks back to me and has me lift my arms above my head, removing my shirt and bralette while Ryan pulls my shorts down. Right as Ryan bites into my ass cheek, just enough to make me hiss, Dare whispers, “We’re going to paint your insides tonight, Noli.”

*Holy shit.*

Matty has stripped and laid back against the pillows in the tent, slowly stroking his cock as he watches Dare and Ryan

undress me. By the time I walk over to him and slide onto the mattress, I'm a quaking pile of need and have very little shame left.

As I crawl up his body, I can't help but stop and admire the goods. I give it a little lick, just intending to tease a little bit, but the intake of breath and the tiny drop of pre-cum on my tongue make my mouth water for more. I take his large head in my mouth and swirl my tongue around it before plunging straight down, taking him as far as I can go, before hollowing out my cheeks and sucking up and down. I'm able to get a little farther down each time. Ryan's been giving me some lessons, but I don't know if I'll ever be able to unhinge my jaw the way it looks like he does.

"Fuck, baby, that feels good. My little brother is teaching you well." I moan with his cock against my throat, knowing he can feel the vibrations.

"That's right, Kitten, purr for him," Ryan says, as he and Dare join us in the tent. "Can I help?" He asks, and I nod enthusiastically.

Ryan's fingers comb through my hair, gathering it into a ponytail and using it to take charge of my movements. He pushes me, not too hard or too deep, up and down Matty's shaft. "That's perfect," he coos. "Now, stick your tongue out and keep going, yes like that, Kitten. Suck my brother good and hard. How's that feel, brother?"

"So good," Matty moans. "But this isn't what we were here for."

"He's not wrong," Ryan says, pulling me off abruptly. He kisses me deeply before smacking my ass. "Now, Kitten, be a good girl and climb on up there. That's right. Don't be shy, baby, he loves it."

By now I'm so turned on that I barely have the capacity to be shy. I crawl up the rest of Matty's body and hover over him with my knees straddling his head, but I'm not sure how to proceed.

He does the rest for me though, reaching up to glide a finger through my wet folds and spreading them apart to expose my aching clit. “So wet, baby,” he says approvingly as he leans up and gives my clit a tiny lick. “But not wet enough for how hard I’m going to fuck you tonight.” With that, he locks his arms around my thighs and pulls me down, latching onto my pussy. He licks, sucks, and fucks my pussy with his tongue, until I’m shamelessly grinding on his face. I come with a full body shudder, gasping as he sucks harder, drinking up all of my cum.

When I lift off his face, he licks my arousal off his lips. “Fucking delicious,” he says, sitting up and throwing me on the bed. Roughly, he flips me over and pulls my ass up, slamming into my sopping pussy in one thrust. I cry out into the night, fisting the bedcovers as he lifts me by my hips and fucks me hard and fast. My pants get louder until they become cries.

“Ryan, can you get off your man’s dick for a second and come help me out? I think maybe she might need something to muffle that mouth of hers.”

A pierced, tattooed replica of the cock currently stuffing my pussy appears in front of me and I open my mouth eagerly. Ryan helps position my head just right, and Matty slows for a moment so Ryan can ease his cock into my mouth. As I get acclimated, Matty resumes his punishing pace, effectively doing all the work by pushing me forward.

Pinned between the twins, I am a tool, a sex toy with nerve endings. I give myself over, trusting them to take care of me while I roll my eyes back in absolute ecstasy. An orgasm builds and crests more quickly than I expect, locking my limbs just as Ryan is the farthest back in my throat he’s ever been.

“Fuck, yes, squeeze my cock, baby,” Matty grunts, slamming into me and filling me full of his cum.

Ryan and Matty pull out of me at the same time, leaving me empty and whimpering, but not for long. Ryan beckons Dare over to take his place and moves around to the back of my body, kissing and nipping over my hips and ass cheeks

before gripping them and spreading them open. My mouth opens on a gasp and Dare's cock slips past my lips. I moan around him and he groans.

“Don't even move, baby. Just stay there and keep me warm and wet while I watch Ryan get your delectable ass ready for me.”

I whine and moan against the illicit tongue bathing my asshole is getting. I nearly choke myself on Dare's cock when Ryan slips his fingers into my pussy, lubing it up with his brother's cum before he slips his first finger inside my ass. Slowly at first, and then faster, he pumps his finger in my ass while his other hand reaches down between my legs. His fingers push through the mess of Matty's cum, pushing it back inside me and then circling my clit while I push my hips back, fucking myself on his fingers. The second finger slides in easily, greedily. He pumps his fingers and separates them, slowly stretching me while he plays with my clit and my hips rock against him.

Meanwhile, I'm slobbering all over Dare's cock, rivulets of spit falling out of my mouth. To gain control of it, I push him further into my throat and swallow. He groans and bucks into my mouth. Not able to stand it much longer, I close my mouth around him and suck hard, bobbing up and down on his shaft enthusiastically. “Oh shit, Noli. That's cheating. Fuck. I'm not going to last too much longer if you keep that up.”

Ryan's fingers withdraw from my ass and I release Dare's cock with a 'pop'. Without hesitation or needing anyone to tell me what to do next, I turn around until I have Ryan in front of me and Dare behind. Ryan's cock bobs tauntingly in front of my face. I want that, too.

Making a last-minute decision to be bold, I push Ryan back and climb into his lap, sinking down on his cock before he even knows what's happening. He doesn't seem to mind. His hands encircle my waist and he lifts me up and down, leaning back to watch his piercings disappear inside me. I tilt my hips and roll, and he lets go, leaning back against the pillows with a guttural moan.

I look back at Dare, watching us hungrily while stroking his long, smooth cock. Giving him a flirtatious look over my shoulder, I lean forward, presenting my ass to him as an invitation to join us.

It's like our first time, only the guys are reversed and Dare is going to be inside my ass.

Dare's fingers reach between my legs to where Ryan's cock is moving in and out of me. He touches us both, gripping the base of Ryan's cock, rubbing my sensitive clit, rubbing the sides of my pussy, all stretched out from our man's fat cock. He pulls his hand back and rubs our juices, mine and Ryan's and Matty's, over his cock before lining himself up.

He teases me, pushing in just a small amount before pulling me back. He does it again and again, pushing in a little farther each time. The stretch of my ass around his cock while my pussy is similarly stretched is heady, and I savor it. I writhe and moan, encouraging them to give me more, more, more.

I am overwhelmingly full and suddenly worried that the force of the orgasm building inside me might actually tear me apart. Despite my fear, my hips seek it out, moving against both of them at once.

"You don't know how beautiful you look right now," Matty says, wiping strands of hair from my sweaty forehead. "You're so amazing. Our perfect Magnolia, strong and beautiful and perfect for us."

He keeps murmuring how perfect I am while I lose myself in the sensations of the two men inside me, Matty's hands and words caressing me everywhere else. The feeling that I might explode crests, and Matty reaches his hand between me and his brother to press against my clit, setting off the bomb that has been ticking inside me.

I scream, my face muffled in Ryan's neck, and accidentally bite down as my body seizes. Both men fall, my pulsing muscles pulling their climaxes from them, greedily accepting their cum into my body as they shout my name and empty themselves into me.

Collapsed in a sweaty pile of breathless panting, a wave of pure euphoria crashes over me.

*This is my fucking life.*

We always knew it would be the four of us. Life tried to tear us apart, tried to keep us apart, but we made it back to each other.

***The End***

# Epilogue

## *Noli*

“It’s supposed to storm tomorrow,” I say, feeling more than seeing the evidence as I look out over our backyard. “We can watch it from the new porch.” We’ve been renovating the house over the last couple of years, and have finally finished the screened in back porch. I can’t wait to sit outside and watch a good summer storm.

“Sounds perfect,” Dare says, wrapping his arms around me from behind and kissing behind my ear. In one of his hands is a sweating glass of iced tea, which I know is going to be the perfect amount of not-too-sweet.

They’re so good to me.

“Alright, hear me out—” Ryan comes marching outside with a piece of paper, as if he’s prepared notes to confront me with.

With a grin, I interrupt him. “I already told her yes.”

“Really?” says Matty, quirking an eyebrow at me from his patio chair.

“Yes, really. It’s just a piercing. It’s not like I’m letting her get a tattoo. A piercing isn’t permanent unless she wants it to be.”

“You don’t think—?”

“I think she’s fourteen and can make her own decisions about her body.”

“She’s not fourteen yet,” he grumbles sullenly. It’s hard for him to have our little girl grow up. She spends less time with us and more time with her friends, doesn’t need to be held or carried, and certainly doesn’t need her overprotective father figures up in her business constantly.

“Three days, dude. It’s happening,” Ryan says, his lips turned down in a frown.

“Y’all still have *stuff*, though. Ryan, you have your art and her newfound fascination with body modification. Dare has the soccer team. I’ve become the uncool dad.”

I try not to chuckle, setting my glass down and walking over to bring him some comfort. Pulling my long maxi skirt up over my legs, I straddle him and hug him close. “First, a nose ring does not



qualify as a fascination with body modification. Also, look at all of us. What did we expect?” Ryan is now covered from his neck down to his torso, and new ink is climbing up his bare leg, starting with the portrait of me that Jamie drew on his leg so long ago. Matty is almost just as covered, Dare has a fair few, even I have a half sleeve of magnolia flowers on my left arm. “And you still have boxing. She’s just in the middle of soccer camp right now. Give it some time. She’ll always come back to you.”

Matty mutters his agreement, but it might only be because he’s distracted. He’s started gathering up the bottom of my dress and pushing it further up my thighs.

“Where is she, actually?” Dare asks, looking out over the meadow and towards the lush green canopy of our magnolia tree, a crown of fat, white blooms perfuming the air. We can only see the top of it from here, but we usually prefer it that way since it’s where we sometimes go to get some alone time.

“At the tree with Kay,” I say casually, rolling my hips against Matty’s hardening erection. “She’s got an alarm set so she won’t be late.”

“That’s the one with purple hair, right? From the soccer team?” Ryan asks.

“It’s emerald green now,” Dare corrects.

“Do we want Jamie at the tree with Kay? Alone? *At the tree?*” Matty asks, barely able to hold on to his train of thought.

“I trust her to make the right decisions. She’s a smart girl,” I say before bending down and kissing him. My phone alarm buzzes nearby. “It’s time to go.”

“But—”

“Y’all need to break it up anyway, Jamie’s on her way back up,” Dare warns us, and we all shuffle down the stairs and around the side of the house to meet her. She climbs into Ryan’s SUV silently, sliding in next to me in the middle, blushing furiously. I raise my eyebrow.

It’s not her swollen lips that give her away, but the goofy, dazed look in her eyes that I remember well. *I think my baby just had her first kiss.* I smile at her knowingly and she gestures that we’ll check-in later.

I spend the next 45 minutes looking over my notes and shooting daggers every time Matty tries to question Jamie about her friend Kay. He worries so much, and I think a large part of that is because of everything I went through at her age. He still blames himself for not recognizing that I was in trouble. It's honestly sweet, if not slightly overbearing, and I'm glad she has such a supportive family to check in with her and make sure she's happy and safe.

The nerves don't start until we pull up at the convention center. I silently wring my hands together in the elevator and tear up the corners of my notecards as I sit in the front row of a packed meeting room.

The woman currently speaking introduces me, but I don't process anything outside of recognizing that my name was said. Jamie squeezes my hand, and each of the guys reaches out a comforting hand on my way past them to the podium.

"Um, hi..." I say into the microphone awkwardly, flinching at how loud it sounds to my ears. "I'm sorry. You'll have to pardon my nerves. This is my first time speaking in front of such a large and important group."

Clearing my throat and taking a steady breath, I start again. "My name is Magnolia Crawford. It's been five years since my name was on the news, five years since my daughter and I escaped in the middle of the night after a particularly violent outburst. Five years since he chased me halfway across the country, breaking an order of protection to kill me. Five years since I fought back for the first time in my life, and ended up killing him in the process.

"During the aftermath of that attack, I learned about the state and national statistics of conviction for women who defend themselves during a violent attack from their spouse. The vast majority of women are convicted, and even the Stand Your Ground laws enacted by so many states don't seem to apply to abused women. I was warned that my trial would be a long and hard one, that I would have to unpack every moment of pain I'd lived through for the last twenty years. I would have to account for the reasons why there were so few police reports or medical reports. I'd have to explain why I didn't fight back for so many years, but also defend the fact that I dared fight back the day he died.

"I was a lucky minority that had a good defense, an accidental audio recording of the beginning of the attack, and a caring judge that dismissed my case. But this is not the norm."

I look out over the crowd, all seats filled and a few people standing along the back of the room. There are a lot of familiar faces from the support groups I started attending years ago.

“You are here because you are powerful people—lawmakers and members of law enforcement, health care providers and advocates, press and yes, some who are against the legislative changes we seek to make. But amongst you sit some people whose power and strength have been overlooked. People whom I would like you to meet, to talk to, to hear their stories about how the system has failed them. I was asked today to give a speech about my experience. But I thought that talking to just a handful of people who can show you, with their stories and tangible evidence, of how changing the way domestic violence is reported, investigated, and convicted will save lives and protect the people that need it most. Ladies, if you could stand, please?”

About two dozen women stand up, holding their case files. Some of them shuffle nervously, others straighten their backs and lift their chins defiantly.

“And for the ones who aren’t with us today...” I nod over at Jamie, who, with proud tears in her eyes, presses a button that illuminates the screen behind me, playing a video that she helped me make. On the screen are faces, some smiling, some bruised. On each page of the slideshow are the names of women, men, and children who have died due to domestic violence in the last year. The crowd is silent, watching in horrified reverence at the visual reminder of why we’re here today.

“Please, for our remaining time, I implore you to speak with the women that stand before you, hear their stories about how they overcame being powerless to their partners and to the system that held them down. And then,” I say as the screen freezes on a logo that my daughter designed and drew herself, the words Strong Enough on a white magnolia background, with a QR code for more information about how they can help, “I hope you’ll join us in making our state and country safer and more equal for all of its citizens....”

I look around at the brave survivors standing in a sea of people they’ve always considered to be sharks.

“We were strong enough to endure. And we are strong enough to make a difference now, to change the world.”

With that, I walk off the stage and into the arms of my family before I head into the crowd to change some minds.



*If you are willing and able, it would mean everything if you could support our [Fundraiser for The National Domestic Violence Hotline](#). The fundraiser will continue until April 23, 2023 and every \$5 donation enters you to win a signed paperback and swag of Always Magnolia! Just find the pinned post in [Rathe's Ratchet Readers](#) and share a screenshot of your donation confirmation. If you are unable to donate, sharing the fundraiser would help us spread the word far and wide!*



*Thank you for reading **Always Magnolia**. Please consider leaving a spoiler-free review on [Amazon](#), [Goodreads](#), [BookBub](#), and/or any of your favorite bookish sites. Your reviews are what keep indie authors like me moving forward, and it is so very appreciated! And if you enjoyed this book, consider joining my [reader's group on Facebook](#) for lots of ratchet fun, discussion, giveaways, and exclusive access to my ridiculous antics. Come find out what the “good girl jar” is all about...*



Becca

# Afterword

*Always Magnolia* was a strangely cathartic book to write, despite the triggering nature of the trauma Noli lives through. While this book is absolutely a work of fiction, each of the hardships that she experiences are actually inspired by real life stories. It felt good to write the happily ever after that she deserved.

The truth is, however, that women in the US are not always so lucky.

Roughly 4,000 women die every year due to domestic violence, 75% of them are murdered attempting to leave the relationship or after they've escaped.

In the United States alone, more than ten million women and men experience physical abuse by an intimate partner. This equates to nearly twenty people per minute.

One in four women and one in nine men experience severe physical violence, sexual violence, and/or other trauma from their intimate partner.

One in five women and one in seventy men have been raped in their lifetime, nearly half of these by an acquaintance or intimate partner.

One in fifteen children are exposed to domestic violence every year, the vast majority of them witnessing the trauma first hand.

*More than 20,000 calls are made to domestic violence hotlines every single day.*

To make matters worse, women are punished for defending themselves. When women fight back, complaints to the police are often downgraded to "domestic disputes". Consistently throughout the United States, the systems that are put in place to protect victims fail women, especially women of color. And when a woman fights back and ends up killing her abuser to save her own life, more often than not she is prosecuted for homicide, no matter the records of abuse or evidence shown of domestic violence. Even in states where "stand your ground" laws keep armed vigilantes out of prison, women are prosecuted for defending themselves. Our prisons are full of survivors.

These statistics are just the tip of an alarming, harrowing iceberg of trauma and violence, made worse by a broken system that often penalizes or otherwise ignores victims.

We can help make a difference. Please consider donating to local women's shelters and national domestic violence organizations, and be sure to support candidates and legislation that supports victims.

Another way you can donate is by purchasing ["Letters To Yourself"](#), a paperback journal made exclusively for this project. All proceeds will go to The Women's Center in Raleigh, North Carolina.

*Thank you, thank you, thank you for your support.*

# Acknowledgements

Firstly, I want to acknowledge the survivors. People who have lived through the worst and come out on the other side. People who are still fighting, or waiting for their chance to escape. You are strong, you are worthy.

Darcy Bennet- this book wouldn't have happened without you. Not just because of all you do to reign in my flighty, neurodivergent brain. But because of your absolute confidence in me, the unyielding support and excessive fluffing that you only get away with because I know you mean it. I'll always work hard to live up to your praise and confidence.

My editor Raeleen- you literally are a witch. Thank you for making my writing better, for helping me tell the stories that live inside me much more eloquently (and with significantly fewer ellipses).

My street team- I'm not sure I deserve everything you do to help me so I can focus on the writing. You're like my own little cheer squad and I appreciate you so much!

My ratchet reader group- thank you for being my happy place and keeping me entertained, even when I can't engage because I'm constantly in Facebook jail. Keep that #ratchetratheshit going, because you make the hard parts tolerable.

My pervert writers group- your support and expertise make me a better author, and our chats keep my brain moving in a more productive direction. I idolize you. I don't know what I'd do without you all!

To every person reading my words- You've turned a hobby, something I've dreamed about my entire life, into a reality. You've given me accomplishment, confidence, pride. I'm a different, better, happier person because of you.

My family- my husband, my boys, my mom and sisters, my best friend- I've spent a lot of time recently thinking about how different my life would be if I hadn't left when I did, if my mother hadn't left when she did... I am so fortunate to live this life. I love you so, so, so much.

And lastly, the ladybugs on the wall. Because as silly as it might sound, once upon a time they gave me something soul-deep. *Hope.*

I love you all.

Always.





# Books By This Author

## Progeny.

### Book 1: Progeny

I don't know who I am or what happened to me.

I know that I've been running, but from what I don't know. And I know that the five men surrounding my hospital bed are important, possibly even precious to me, but they all swear they haven't met me before.

They say they feel it too, this familiarity, this connection.

So when danger comes looking, these five strangers take it upon themselves to hide me away while we put together the pieces of my past. What we find instead is darker. A twisted conspiracy that ties all six of us together in an unexpected and terrifying web of danger.

Progeny is a multi-POV contemporary MMFMMM romance. For a thorough list of sensitive content, please visit [Linktr.ee/RebeccaRathe](http://Linktr.ee/RebeccaRathe)

### Book 2: Retribution

I came to warn them, but instead I put them in the line of fire.

Now one piece of my heart is missing, while the other pieces are forced to leave behind everything they've ever known to protect me.

The truth about who I am and where I came from weighs on me. Is anything real?

All I know for sure is that the people responsible for bringing me into the world are the very ones putting the only family I have ever known in danger. But I will stop at nothing to keep

them safe. I will use everything they gave me against them and risk everything to take them down.

Little do they know, a reckoning is coming.

Also part of The Progeny Duet  
IGNITE: Side character novella (read last)  
SPARK: Prequel novella (read anytime)

## Revelations

Diya Steele, born of violence and condemned to the prejudice of heaven and hell alike, wanders the earth consumed by fear. Fear of the realms determined to kill her, and fear she will hurt innocents if she ever loses control.

The Dzhavo, a fearsome team of elite demons, are ordered to capture Diya and bring her in to face the Legion. Instead, they keep her for themselves, determined to get answers from her by any means necessary. Fighting through their lust with brutality, they discover nothing is as it seems.

With Earth caught in the crosshairs of a war between realms, Diya and the Dzhavo must find a way to work together to save the world.

How far will Diya go to save the worlds that branded her as an abomination? Will the Dzhavo be able to overcome the lies they've been told and trust the one person that might save them all?

Is a relationship built on fear and desire strong enough to keep them fighting for each other, or will their prejudices keep them from stopping the evil that threatens the world as they know it?

Revelations is a DARK paranormal MMMFM romance where five main characters, including monsters and demons, find

love together. The path from enemies to lovers is a torturous one, and the story contains sensitive content. Please visit [Linktr.ee/RebeccaRathe](https://linktr.ee/RebeccaRathe) for explicit trigger warnings.

## Books By This Author

### [Letters To Yourself](#)

A paperback journal made exclusively to raise money for The Women's Center in Raleigh, North Carolina