

JEANNIE RANEY

THE MANGLED PASTS OF STRANGELY INTERTWINED  
FAMILIES THREATEN TO RUIN ALL FUTURES

# Better Left Unsaid



## Better Left Unsaid

*The mangled pasts of strangely  
intertwined families threaten to ruin all  
futures...*

Jeannie Raney

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*For Me.  
Only Me.  
Because nobody has believed in me in a long fucking time.  
So, screw you guys.  
I'm writing books.*

# Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Chapter One: Released](#)

[Chapter Two: Caged](#)

[Chapter Three: Stranger](#)

[Chapter Four: Mercy](#)

[Chapter Five: Coincidence](#)

[Chapter Six: Me](#)

[Chapter Seven: Friends](#)

[Chapter Eight: Mistake](#)

[Chapter Nine: Revelation](#)

[Chapter Ten: Belle Monde](#)

[Chapter Eleven: Persistence](#)

[Chapter Twelve: Sacred](#)

[Chapter Thirteen: Waste](#)

[Chapter Fourteen: Karma](#)

[Chapter Fifteen: Tell](#)

[Chapter Sixteen: Bite](#)

[Chapter Seventeen: Power](#)

[Chapter Eighteen: Aftermath](#)

[Chapter Nineteen: Re-Do](#)

[Chapter Twenty: Atlantis](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One: Dirty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Two: Lies](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Three: Loss](#)

[Chapter Twenty- Four: One](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Five: Comfort](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Six: Better](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Seven: Left](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Eight: Unsaid](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Nine: Theresa](#)

[Chapter Thirty: Nikolai](#)

[Chapter Thirty-One: Juniper](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

[About The Author](#)

# Chapter One: Released

I haven't spent longer than ten minutes without a headache in three years.

They say the medication is supposed to help. That the symptoms they caused would subside once they got the combination right... but it was never right. I dumped every damn pill down the drain, except for the anti-anxiety that I had been on since I was a teenager, as soon as I stepped foot into the transitional home's communal bathroom. At least he wasn't able to change everything, or maybe he didn't even try, once he knew I wasn't a threat.

I have no interest in getting to know anyone here; I won't be staying long. I would not stay at all if it weren't a strict condition of my release to live here until I have a steady job and housing lined up. Independence and all that bullshit... and they don't care what you say, how you beg, if you cry... it all just adds to the comical assumption of "crazy" you are labeled as soon as anyone knows about your past, especially if they saw or took part in any of it like the nurses at the facility, or those that run the houses for released patients.

Have you ever wondered how it would feel to have every bone in your body broken by the rounded rocks at the bottom of a shallow river, and the gravity that pulled you there? I have—once—but I didn't truly want to know.

I'm not fucking crazy.

But that's what crazy people say... huh?

"Juniper, you're in room three with two other women, Kelly and Willow, and don't forget to sign out when you leave, and come back." Seriously?

"How long do I have to do that...?" I leave enough of a gap for him to fill in; apparently his arrogance and shitty attitude made my muddled brain deem him unworthy of remembering. Something about his twitching brow seems to register that. Maybe it's a common occurrence considering the habitants...

“Seth,” he corrects with a measure of disdain, “and as long as you’re here. I don’t make the rules...” He grumbles as he slips out of the tiny, shabby room and closes the paper thin door with more force than is necessary. No time to waste, I suppose.

I quickly, and with no particular reasoning, pick a bed and locker-like wardrobe, stuffing my things away and taking only my ragged over-the-shoulder bag with a faded Beatles logo on it. Signing out with Seth, I then set out towards Crossridge Nursing home, where my Nana has been living while I was away.

Away... maybe I shouldn’t say it like that. Then people will think I had a choice in going to that place. *Who’s even going to ask?*

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“Whitlock? Oh yes, Grace is wonderful! I’ll just have you sign in and take a pass.” The peppy brunette receptionist holds out the clipboard, smiling brightly. She’s pretty, and immediately gets on my nerves. I sign the page, clip on the visitors pass, and walk down the hallway towards Nana’s room.

The home is gorgeous—surely expensive. Good thing I don’t have to pay for it... Massive windows fill the entire inner ring of the facility, opening up to a beautiful pond and garden space in the center. There are folks strolling, feeding fish and ducks, playing cards and having lunch. It seems peaceful, and I’m happy for my Nana. She deserves this.

As I knock gently on the door, it swings open to reveal a room that looks like it’s right out of the lake cabin she lived in before she was forced to sell everything, decorated just the same. Blankets and pillows galore, crochet and needlepoint everywhere. True grandmother fashion indeed. Her brilliant blue eyes light up and she pinches my cheeks with frail fingers, yanking me into a stiff embrace before throwing a shawl she said she spent the last few months making over my shoulders, securing it with a safety pin in the front.



“Take a breath Nana, we have all the time in the world now.” I take her hand and tug her over to the bed. She smooths a wave against my face and grabs a handful of my honey brown hair from behind my shoulder, running her fingers through it and chuckling when they get stuck in the knots.

“I’m so glad you’re here Juni, oh how lonesome it’s been. The ladies here tolerate me but it’s just not the same.” I chuckle in response and adjust, still fuzzy from the meds and not used to interacting with... anyone. I prefer solitude. *I prefer silence.*

“I missed you so much, Nana. I’m sorry you had to...” The heat starts and I can never seem to push it down anymore... wasn’t one of the medications for that?

“Stop it love, you don’t need to explain a thing to me. That man was awful and what he did to us was despicable. I will take a page from your book, dear child—learn from what happened, and work to move on.” She wipes a tear of mine with her thumb and raises my chin with immense care. I don’t have the heart to tell her I am not some fragile, broken thing... I just am. Nothing at all.

“It’s the only thing to do now.” I go on to tell her about the absolute hell that was the asylum; why I couldn’t even reach out, let alone help her when he went after her too. She was unable to stop my ex from taking her house, and her assets as well as mine since he lied his way into acquiring power of attorney when I...

I’ll never forgive myself for the ruin that he caused. That I didn’t see it coming sooner.

They say the abuse you face isn’t your fault, and not being able to leave isn’t either... Then why does everyone treat you like it’s your fault? They blame you either way, they look at you with disgust and see the fragile, stupid woman who stayed... and then tried to end it all the “easy way”.

If only they knew just how difficult that “easy way” is. Anyone who can end their life without having that decision impacted by the devastation they will leave behind is truly

choosing the hardest way of them all... but I suppose you don't get to that point without experiencing too much devastation yourself to care about how anyone else would feel. You only want peace. Relief. *Silence*.

I chose the true easy way. I chose life. I chose to face my mistakes, and I am the one who survived.

Take that, fucker.

Nana Grace insisted on us going out into the garden since it was a nice day. She chose a weathered stone bench, and started braiding my hair while I read *Pride and Prejudice* to her like I did as a little girl, something I would never say no to. It's still my favorite book, and she allows me to read my favorite parts to her today... She just wants to hear me talk. Nana does *not* like silence.

“The wisest and best of men, nay, the wisest and best of their actions, may be rendered ridiculous by a person whose first object in life is a joke.” ‘Certainly’ replied Elizabeth—‘there are such people, but I hope I am not one of them. I hope I never ridicule what is wise or good. Follies and nonsense, whims and inconsistencies do divert me, I own, and I laugh whenever I can. -but these I suppose, are precisely what you are without.’...” I set the book down in my lap as I felt her tying the end of the last braid. She attempted to smooth the wisps of my unruly waves in the knots and sticking up from my face, but she sighed, apparently remembering how useless taming my hair is.

“That was always your favorite part, you are Lizzie Bennet.”

“I'm not sure that's a compliment... She's constantly threatened to become a spinster, her boundaries and attitude leave her unwanted,”

“By all except her true partner, Mr. Darcy.” I turn to face her on the bench right as the same brunette caretaker from the front desk appears in the doorway, announcing the end to visiting hours for the day. So, we make our way back to her room and talk even more until she needs to prepare for dinner, and I ask the receptionist about the visiting schedule.

She happily gives me pamphlets of information, some showing the activities put on in the facility and speakers or visitors for crafts, even a few field trips to pools or shopping centers throughout the year. They have all kinds of things for them to do which makes me feel a bit more solid about Nana not being cooped up in the facility... but I still hate that she's here in the first place. *Because of you.*

“Oh—give me a moment and I'll be right back, I need to check someone in,” the brunette smiles; I don't think she ever stops. I almost warn her about the lettuce stuck between her teeth, but decide against it. Signing out, I drop my visitor's pass on the desk, stopping in my tracks when I overhear the caretaker's next words...

“Of course, we've got you right here. Vincent Bardot, do you have a preferred name or title?” I know that name. *From where?*

“Just Vince is fine.” I try to get a better look at the man, somehow thinking that seeing someone I don't recall meeting might help refresh my mind, but his white combed-over hair and deep set eyes revealed nothing as our gazes meet. The corners of his mouth raise in courtesy. I don't reciprocate. Then the nurse takes his wheelchair handles and pushes him down the hall, squawking about the facility as they go.

“Are you alright?” the second receptionist asks, with the same plastic Barbie smile as the other one but with crooked teeth and long blonde hair.

“Sorry, I just thought I recognized him. Could I get a print out of the visiting schedule please? I don't have a phone at the moment.”

“Of course...” Vincent Bardot... Fuck these meds... I quickly scrawl the name on the page the nurse hands me before leaving the home, and I get back on the bus to leave the nice area of Garrow, Colorado and head back to the shit hole of a house they assigned me.

---

Seth didn't care where I was, but made sure to remind me of the strict curfew and service times for food in the house as I stomped back to my room after signing back in.

"Dont slam that fucking door, or I will gut you in your sleep," a woman shouts before I can even take a second step in,. Oh good, what a wonderful first impression. The wood clicks behind me as I push the bottom of my foot into it until it meets the frame.

"Willow or Kelly?"

"Kelly, Willow is never here. She has better priorities." She pretends to inject a fake syringe into her arm with her other hand, and rolls her eyes back, pretending to pass out against the wall behind her bed. Gross, and annoying. Fuck.

"I'm Juniper, don't get used to me."

"Good, I like having my own room. And I don't like people," She slides on her headphones and proceeds to scribble on the nightstand with a broken pencil... I need to get the fuck out of here as soon as I can.

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## Chapter Two: Caged

I'm an imposter in my own fucking mind.

In my body. In my life.

This is not me.

---

“Get up, it’s breakfast, and I’m sick of listening to you snore.” I don’t snore... Well, I didn’t. Before...

“Yeah, I’m up. Why don’t you put those headphones to good use then?”

Kelly scoffs and crosses her legs, dramatically flopping on the foot of my bed. *Personal fucking space who?*

“Want to know a secret?” Rubbing my eyes aggressively with the hopes of ridding myself of yet another splitting headache, to no avail, I peer sidelong at her. Then I throw up my hair and slide my feet into my ragged sneakers, standing enough to smooth the covers under me.

“Not really, but I know you’ll tell me anyway.” We grin at each other—not a friendly kind of smile, but one that’s bloomed through days of being stuck in a room with someone whose life is as bad as yours. A compassionate, understanding and also completely sarcastic one.

“They don’t work, and I don’t have anything to listen to. But people leave you alone most of the time, and I can sing all the music that never shuts up in my head. People only look at you like you’re a little insane when you’re blurting out music in the streets and you have headphones in.” She wiggles her eyebrows, then pounces for the door, leaving it wide open as she scream-sings Ke\$ha all the way to the dining room.

Now, Kelly is fucking crazy. But me? *You are too.* Rolling my eyes, I prepare for another bout of consciousness.

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I don't even remember how to apply for a job; that's how badly they messed me up in that damn place. It took me two days to figure out how to work the washing machine because I refused to ask for help. I won't be taken down by a household appliance.

I also can't seem to remember if I walked down this road or past this strip mall yesterday, either. I was hoping a few days off the meds would be enough to make me feel like a normal person again but... what is normal anyway... *you've never been normal. Even before...* My hand automatically finds the aching spot in my hip, fingers digging into the scarred flesh.

Three days I've been wandering around the shops and buildings where the transitional home is located. The one time I mustered up the courage to enter a simple boutique at the end of the strip closest to the house, and hand them my resume, I was laughed at... Do people really not do that anymore? I have no computer or anything.... how does society expect one with nothing to make a sizeable effort at rebuilding when not a fucking soul cares enough to give us a break? The institution helped prepare us for the outside world again in only a very minor way, and of course with the regimes and pills, it was fairly useless. Not practical—*completely unrealistic*. I cope better on my own than I did in there.

I was only twenty when he forced me into that place, still so naive, still going to college and attempting to work on a degree to teach English and writing. I have no interest in that, or school, or kids, or life anymore. My resume is filled with the waitressing and babysitting jobs from my teens, and the one internship I did during summer, but not a single person who would recommend me for a new job... He ruined everything. Even now that he's gone, his influence continues to ruin everything.

I'm so fucking angry. But I don't wish to live that way.

*'The best revenge is to live, Juniper. It matters not what anyone has done to you, only what you do for yourself. Life is an opportunity to learn. That's really all it's good for.'*

My mother was a wonderful soul. I wish I had trusted her. I learned, way too late, but oh did I learn.

The worst things occur when good people do nothing, giving space for bad people to take advantage. It's arguable what exactly a good or bad person is, though, and therein lies the trouble. But regardless, I swore that I would never do *nothing* again. I plan very much to uphold that.

I guess the best place to start would be a phone... I wouldn't be getting a job or getting out of that house without one. So, first stop, a cheap prepaid phone and some fucking food that doesn't taste like cardboard.

I am so focused on getting to the only main store I'd noticed while wandering around the area that I nearly trip over a two foot tall sculpture of a horned owl sitting outside a chain link fence, to a building that looks like an old house but has a sign reading "Bao's Antiques and Costumes" above the doorway. Loud grinding and shouting in another language resonate from the building as I shade my face, taking it in, and convincing myself to do more. I take note of the eccentric vibe that seems to pour through the cracks of the place, and the convenient *help wanted* sign in the window. It's the only thing that's stood out in the fog my brain has cast over this city so far, since I decided it is as good a place as any to restart in.

As good a place, and as good a time as any... right? Who knows when I will feel like... doing anything again? I have to just DO it. *Go, do it. It's okay...*

I spent the entire walk to the store, the whole set up of the crappy, prepaid flip phone, and the whole walk back convincing myself just to enter the damn building. "*You don't even have to ask, just go in and look at stuff, take the first step...*" I stand on the porch mumbling motivation to myself, but realize that as long as I ponder it, I won't act. So I stop thinking and push in the heavy door.

Antiques are an understatement... This is a standing portal into the past. Ancient but pristine artifacts sit on every shelf and surface, and the walls are caked with all kinds of decorations. I am immediately overwhelmed and regret my

decision. Right inside the door is a massive throne, covered in feather boas and masquerade masks. Along one side are racks and shelves of every hue of fabric, hats, and accessories—like a circus and a Victorian Noble woman threw up their lives into the house of a carpenter and collector.

If the bell above the door had not sounded my arrival, I would have turned on my heel and ran out. The grinding has ceased, but the shouting has not. Only a moment later, a short and rather colorful woman steps out from behind a paper screen leading to, I presume, the stairs.

“Hi there!”

My heart starts pounding in my ears, and my throat goes dry, but I manage a smile, thinking of how the pretty brunette greeted people at the home.

“Hi, um, I saw the sign on your door... I mean, window. Are you still looking for help?” I shuffle my toes against the eroded wood floor, resisting the urge to pick at my nails. Always my nails.

“As a matter of fact, I am. And you seem perfect! When can you start?” She barely lets me finish my sentence before replying, and is already asking me to start... I have nothing better to do, and I could really use the money.

“My name’s Juniper.” I extend a hand and she grabs it gently by the fingers, shaking once, then points at a box on a table just inside of the archway. I think it was once a living room. I shrug off my orange and white plaid flannel and set it on a half polished, high back wooden chair with my bag. “Do you need my resume?”

“Nah it’s fine. I’m Quynh, like Harley but its spelled all fucked up. My dad’s Bao, he’s the carver.” She doubles down on random armfuls of clothes, wigs, and bags of stuff. “I’ll pay you twenty bucks an hour to help me clean and organize this place, however long you can work, whatever days. I just need help, desperately.” She smiles, I smile back, trying to seem sincere. I wait for her to start up the stairs before scooping up the heavy box and trailing after her.



The top floor is just as bad as the bottom, but slightly less... jumbled. Three closed doors, and then the one we brought the items into. I want to pay attention, I want to listen and learn but... I can't make myself care. A side effect of being given nothing to care about for too long. Now it just takes far too much effort to do something that requires none of most... and they can't understand why I don't react the same.

Quynh dumps everything onto a very worn loveseat in the center of the room and starts putting wigs on false cream colored heads, then hanging them on hooks on the far wall. Tearing open my own box, I start pulling out the neatly packaged paper banners inside. 'Happy Birthday' 'Here's to retirement' 'Congratulations'... Quynh was speaking. Shit... *how much did you miss?*

"... what's your deal?" I don't know how anyone is supposed to answer a question like that... even with more context than what I tuned into.

"Um, it's a little hard to explain. I'm from Denver, life got... messed up and now I'm here..." Wow, so descriptive. "And not doing very well... I'm just trying to start fresh and hopefully find something I'd like to do forever." She hands me a basket with a few other packs of banners to sort into, and when I dare to look into her dark eyes, I see that she isn't pitying me, which is the only way most people look at me now if I tell them... anything at all. Her face never falters—sweet, open, a dimple forming at each corner of her mouth even with just a slight upturn. How does someone live so radiantly? I want to do that... I used to be radiant. *You used to be weak.*

"Well, I'm very sorry for whatever messed up life for you, even if it was yourself. But you're going to be fine. I can tell, you're strong."

"How do you know that?" I sound so desperate... and that's the last thing I want... I'm so needy for validation, but again, she radiates calm as she takes the basket back and sets it aside, then wraps an arm around my shoulder and guides me into the hall. Into a spare room with a few pieces of furniture, boxes, and a mirror. No... *don't look... you don't know who that is.*

“Because you are a woman, we are born strong. And because I see the greatness in you that you have had stripped bare, thrown to the wolves. You just need to reclaim it and make it yours again. It belongs to nobody but you.” For the first time in three years I stand in front of a mirror without flinching, shrinking, or forcing myself to look away...and I take myself in.

I am plain and simple. My hair is nice, I have great bone structure, but I’m... beat up. I wear leggings, t-shirts and jackets that prioritize comfort and leisure, and I don’t remember the last time I brushed my hair two days in a row. When was the last time I even wore makeup? *Covering bruises...*

I lift a hand to my cheek and brush my bluish circles, the skin of my prints tender and thin from being nervously gnawed on, the silky thin layers under my eyes, the sunken pit in my cheek... Pulling my hair loose from its ponytail in its kinked tufts and re-wrapping it into a bun on top of my head, I take a silent inventory of my physical assets... of the things that were once so normal and are now lacking, just as I once wished and begged they would be... Quynh only watches me in the mirror, standing a comfortable distance away, radiating her positive, sweet energy into me with her coal lined gaze.

Reclaim it. Make it yours.

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“I could use some help tomorrow too if you’re free, my dad is getting up there and can’t take care of the shop like he used to, so I’ve been coming in more to clean and do or schedule the repairs.” We spend at least a few hours opening and closing boxes, hanging and shelving items, and rearranging inventory in the cluttered room. I don’t talk much, but Quynh doesn’t seem to mind and is more than happy to fill the spaces with random stuff about the area or the shop, never once asking me to put in my own two cents about the tasks or strings of conversation; or, more importantly, pressuring me to give any details of my own life.

“He lives in the room at the end of the hall, “she goes on, “and unfortunately it’s just us; his mother fled Vietnam with him when he was just a baby, and my mother passed shortly after my sister was born, when I was about ten. So now it’s up to me to take care of everything. My father did for so long, he deserves to do whatever he wants. And now that I have you, I hope handling everything will get a bit easier.” She flashes me a huge smile that crinkles her eyes and nose, and I find myself chuckling at her silliness.

Chuckling. Really. *How nice...*

“I am free tomorrow, and I’m glad I could help.” I should probably say I’m free anytime, but I don’t want to sound desperate... again. So instead, I offer something of myself. The therapists in that hellhole insisted that sharing something about yourself and life is the first step to establishing meaningful connections... They also emphasized how much more difficult that first step is for people who have been traumatized by others they once trusted. “My nana actually lives in a nursing home not far from here, and if I had the chance to live with her instead... it wouldn’t even be a decision. The universe had other plans for us though...” I force myself to stop speaking, halting the thought right in the middle of it. And redirect. “I’m just glad I have the chance now to do something, I have no idea what, but I will do something useful—with my life, that is.” Quynh slaps a hand down on the floor and the sharp sound makes me jump. Old houses should not be so hollow. They should be forever filled with life, and love, and generations of voice. *Even voices need a hollow world to echo into...* What does that even mean? Quynh is watching me shake my head... at myself.

“That is the spirit I like to hear about Juniper. Now, you can be very useful to me by lugging these empty boxes to the back yard so we can break them down and shove them into the dumpster tomorrow.” She holds out a few smaller boxes for me to stuff into a larger one on my way out, and I notice the faint sound of a stringed instrument being plucked gently, *sweet just like Quynh*. It sparked a thought I once had during a creative writing class in college... Doing things with purpose does not always mean it is loud, or in your face. Some of the

most important jobs are done in silence, by people you would never suspect, let alone see.

And they would never tell you their title held such importance... Of course, the lessons were about grammar and structure, but could all lessons taught in a classroom not also have meanings that can be applied to many aspects in life?

I want to be more than I look. I want to have more to offer. I want to feel, and care, and drive, and radiate... I want to be me. I will relearn myself, and I hope that when I do, I like who I am. Because not liking myself is no longer acceptable.

---

When I re-enter the living room from the hall leading to the backdoor, the metallic shriek of the sander has begun again, and Quynh nearly barrels into me rushing down the stairs. She shouts in Vietnamese and weaves through the maze of furniture leading into the even more cluttered once-dining-area, now workshop. I have to follow her of course, not wanting to be rude and miss potential work... but also out of curiosity.

*What does curiosity get cats like you?... Killed. Shut up.*

And I thought the entrance was bad... Wood shavings coat the floor; discarded scraps, broken planks, half carved statues, and pendants litter the tables that I can actually see. Larger pieces sit unpolished and their bases bare. Furniture is disassembled and scattered; shelves are thrown aside, and papers are taped to the walls because there are no free surfaces. Even some scribbles in pencil are on the doorways and baseboards, as far up as my head on the peeling wallpaper. A true, erratically-created room of love and passion. I suddenly become incredibly aware of the fact that my head has stopped hurting, regardless of the shouting and the sanding. It all became white noise as the art sucked me in, and it was beautiful... I missed it.

I miss finding such beauty in such simplicity, and being removed from reality long enough to appreciate it. There are not enough things with the influence to occupy a space in my brain for longer than a few minutes among the fireworks of thought. I blame not being stimulated enough, and being told to stay calm on repeat in that place. *Hell, it was hell. Worse than hell.* Of course it was for you, but you got to disappear.

“Juniper?” I flinch as reality jumps back at me, both of us suddenly unsteady and overwhelmed. Quynh instantly throws up her hands in sacrifice. Had she been reaching for me? “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to startle you. Is there anything you like? We can polish it and you can take it with you.” She brushes past to admire a bunny on a large bear carving, being sure to give me a wide berth as she does. Very few people immediately understand the reaction to unwanted, or unexpected, voices or touch. Almost always because they have experienced something that left them reacting similarly at one point. Disciplined for not constantly paying attention, belittled for... no. Stop it. That is not your life now.

This is. *And you’re going to ruin it with that shit.*

I underestimated the saying “Reality is a wake up call” when I was younger. But I do not anymore. Reality is not real unless you manipulate it for yourself. Life does not happen for you. It happens *to* you, and you must make the most of it, or it will claim you as it passes you by.

“I don’t have anywhere to put one of these.” I point to a totem pole among a handful in the far corner, beside the kitchen, with unfinished spaces between those that were already carved. An eagle on top, a lion, a goat next, then a fox, and before the last space at the bottom, a field of flowers. I wondered what would go below that—ants or worms? It stands a foot taller than me. I wouldn’t even know where to begin with moving the hunk of wood, let alone displaying it...

“Well, it’s yours now. You can keep it here until you do find a place, and you will decide how to finish it.” She then gestures to her father, who had shuffled over from his work table. The table stretches from the kitchen along the inside wall all the way to the living area we had come through, but

only about a third of it is free and usable. “This is my dad, Bao. He’s a bit much, and a bit scatterbrained.” He playfully shoves her aside and she laughs loudly, hugging him. “This is Juniper,” she says. Instead of shaking my hand, he folds his over it and bows his head slightly.

“We greatly appreciate your help. I don’t get along like I used to, and my daughters have their own lives. Thank you for offering to help.” A clouded, distracted air comes over him and he turns, shuffling back to his work. He quickly brushes a deep brown stain over some smaller pieces, carefully, but with shaky hands.

The smile Quynh gives me this time does not reach her eyes; it does not trigger her dimples, nor does it crinkle her nose. Normal people would ask about something bothering someone right? Especially if they’re trying to make friends? *Yes, stupid.*

Needing no further encouragement than from myself, I ask, “So, you mentioned your sister. Does she come and help at all?” I regret it. All of it. I want to shrink back into myself, run home and pull the covers over my head. The panic sets in the moment her sad face turns back to me at the foot of the stairs, clearly pained and trying not to tear up.

“She passed away a few years ago. My dad... he doesn’t remember most days. He has early dementia, and it is only getting worse. I’ve applied for a nurse just to sit with him during the days for now, until he deteriorates more... but it’s a long list and there are many more needy than him. For now I handle it, as best as I can.” I follow her as she trudges the last steps back up, carefully. Quietly.

“You promised him that you would take care of him, I understand. Like I said, if I could, I would do the same in a heartbeat.” She barely acknowledges me and I know that is a sign of this conversation being done. We finish the rest of the room in silence. It doesn’t take much longer, but I notice the sun starting to set as we walk out onto the porch and she locks the door behind us.

It smells of rain, and I love more than most things on the earth to walk in the cool, fall rain. I feel... excited. For once, something positive. *Something good.*

“So tomorrow,” she confirms as she pulls some loose bills from her purse and hands them over, barely counting. She starts toward the street. “Fridays are my only legit day off of my main job, so I’ll be here first thing in the morning.” She spins back to me and places a hand gently on my bicep. I’m still staring at the hundred dollars she gave me for half a day’s work... “Come by whenever you can. Oh! phone number.” She hands me her phone and cocks her head like a puppy with a peculiar sound at my hesitation to take it.

“I actually just got one, so I don’t know my number, but here.” I tug the clunky plastic from my jacket pocket, flip it open, and offer it to her. She once again only smiles as she slowly dials in her number and name, then hands it back.

“You’re not a murderer or something, right?” I can’t help the exasperated chuckle that forces its way past my teeth, but I wish I could have.

“I swear I’m not,” I say, taking the papers from my bag. I force my now-folded-up resume copy into her hands. “It’s on there, but I was in Becknam up north for a little over three years.” The reply I was expecting did not come, but I held my breath, waiting for denial. She opens the page, scans it briefly, and crumples it up, tossing it into the metal bin right inside the shop’s fence line.

“Never heard of it, and I don’t care where you came from, you’re here now. Do not feel obligated to tell me anything just because I handed you some money. I like you, Juniper. You remind me of myself before I was truthful about what I wanted. Which gives me an idea...” She turns on her heel with a new air and struts over to a white convertible top car. Throwing her bag in, she yanks out a small planner. “I don’t have any dinner plans tomorrow night, so I would like to make some with you. What do you say? We can go to this nice place a few blocks up that one of my roommates’ boyfriends works at, and you can get out and see the area. I’ll buy us some drinks and something good. We can dance. We’ll be

friends. Please,” she adds in my silence. I don’t think she would accept no as a valid answer anyway... With a tight but grateful smile, I nod. *This will be good for you.*

“Yay!” Quynh squeals and jumps, tossing the book back onto the seat. She skips back over excitedly, then drops her outstretched arms slightly as if to ask permission. I appreciate that more than she will ever know; people do not tend to catch on to non-verbal queues very quickly. I appreciate it so much that I let her suffocate me with that embrace, though only for a moment, and I may have even patted her shoulders in return. And it did not make me feel uncomfortable. Well, not like it would have. *Progress.* Indeed.

---

It pours, and I enjoy the feel of every drop soaking me down to my skin on the walk back to the home. I did it, and I am more than proud of myself. Almost a week out and I have a fucking job. One more piece, retrieved. Once more, glued back in its spot.

“You look way too happy,” Kelly snaps the moment the door closes behind me, but my brows furrow and I cannot not hide the annoyance that overcomes me. She will not bring me down, not now. I get her, but I hate tolerating her already.

“I guess you could say I am,” I reply with pride and an air of haughtiness, because I do feel better than her, even though I know I am not. I kick off my shoes, then pull out my phone and money, tucking them under my pillow when Kelly goes back to her scribbling. Ready for a shower and trip to the basement to see about doing some laundry, I start peeling off the wet layers and throwing them into a pile. I only have three pairs of clothes, and one of the first things I will be doing with that money is replacing my tattered tennis shoes, which are even worse after the day’s rain and half-run—but that was a necessary celebration. I’ll be buying something I actually want to wear instead of the duffle bag of random clothes from my late teens that jackoff left at the facility for me.



Two pairs of leggings, a pair of sweats. Two shirts, one long sleeve. One hoodie, two flannels. Three sets of underwear, none matching, and all different socks. And my pair of red Converse sneakers that I've had since high school... and none of it anything that makes me feel like a person, let alone one that's moved on from the girl who did wear all of these things... She isn't me now.

"You might want to clean up your shit before someone else does it for you." Kelly eyes my messy bunk, and I almost consider it a threat. But she laughs, placing her headphones on and skipping from the room. I try to figure out what she meant, but it could have really only been one thing. And I mean, sure I woke up a bit later than I wanted because of not having an alarm so I didn't make breakfast, and the showers were occupied all morning so I just left the house in a huff and started walking before I ended up at Quynh's.

Gathering my basket of toiletries and towels, throwing my blankets on the bed, and stuffing the rest of my crap into the locker to appease my roommate-from-the gutter, I tuck my phone and cash into my bra and head to the main bathroom, where I have to sit around in the hallway for one to become available. As soon as I step in and face the curtain so the water can run down my back, I see another girl standing at the sink in the corner, scribbling something into the tile next to it. I make sure to stay silent until she looks around, seemingly not hearing the shower or even noticing it's on. Her eyes are wide, larger than average or enhanced for some reason, and her hair is a matted nest on her head. I hadn't seen anyone looking like her living here, and this is creepy as fuck.

She goes on her way, and I try to shake the uneasy feeling the strange actions leave in the pit of my stomach, but curiosity takes me over once again. So, wrapped in my towel and still dripping, I slowly pad over to the sink and see:

~~Amena~~

~~Celia~~

~~Chelsea~~

~~Omi~~

~~Karen~~

~~Priya~~

Juniper

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## Chapter Three: Stranger

I sleep with one eye open that night. Actually, I don't recall sleeping at all. Every time I drift off, I wake up with a start... a terrible bout of muscle memory from the time I was not allowed to even close my eyes without permission.

I learn from Seth that the birds-nest-haired woman is actually Willow, on one of her rare occasions where she's appeared. But she did not stay in our room last night, and I thank whatever god might be sitting around watching us all like ants for keeping her far away from me.

"I think those would be the women she's gotten kicked out, or maybe people who shared a room with her... I don't really know," is all Kelly provides me with before I head out, and honestly... I'm not sure I really want to know after all.

I know my appearance reflects the incredibly restless night, but Quynh says nothing when I show up promptly at nine in the morning and we get to work in the downstairs shop area.

The day is fairly uneventful, and I thank the universe for that one. It hasn't been very kind in my experience, so I'll take any break it decides to cut me. I stock racks of period costumes along one of the back walls, clean the floors, and reorganize an entire aisle made of cube shelves vomiting accessories into the walking space. *It would not do.* I even polish some finished wood pieces and re-write their price dots. When Quynh comes back from a run to the post office and bank, she squeals and says again how wonderful I am.

I don't think I will ever get used to compliments that aren't laced in ill intentions. But the feeling that blooms in my chest when the accomplishment can be physically seen and felt... that is something I could strive for. Substance to find.

"Want to work on your totem pole? Dad's going to take a break to eat soon. I can show you the other animal templates we have." She wiggles her eyebrows above her sandwich and takes another huge bite.

“I can pick what to put on it?”

She nods and responds without bothering to finish the food in her mouth, but she covers it with the back of her hand. She doesn't care much for other people's opinions, and that's just one more thing I envy about her.

“Of course—it's yours!” I don't need more prompting; this is important to her for some reason, and I don't have anything unique of my own that has a story or history... not anymore.

There are five open spaces. I choose the worms in the dirt for the bottom, just like I had imagined. And I choose four of the animals based on what little I remember about their representations in literature, and you know, just stuff that I like. Not everything has to be deep. *Simple is not bad.*

The moose. The bobcat. The badger. The scorpion. I hand the stack to Quynh and she looks confused.

“I want you to pick it—what do you think is like me?” She doesn't have to look, and she beams as she holds up the card with the spaces showing the bird-like face.

“A raven. Like Edgar Allan Poe, right?” I can't tell if it's rhetorical but I nod anyway, and she goes on. “Mysterious, dark, but always perceptive, always learning and adapting. Quick to sense danger, quick to run, quick to defend those they bond with. You're a raven.” She triumphantly slaps the card down with the others and hands the stack back. “My turn now.” Then she jumps up on the table, throws her head back, and strikes a pose. I don't have to look for long, myself.

“Butterfly, and I don't think I need to explain why.” Through her chuckles, she insists I do anyway. “Colorful, light, fluttering around the room. Radiant, majestic, drawn to pretty things, something every caterpillar strives to be.” And for a second, I'm satisfied with that answer.

“You know,” she says, almost as if she prepared specifically for this. Smooth as silk she leans in, only inches from my face, and whispers, “I've heard ravens devour caterpillars as snacks.” With a wink, she sweeps over to the

tools, coming back with a pencil and some tape. “You’re gonna trace them, me and dad will carve them. Sound good?” Taking the items, I agree. She chats my ear off about the shop and pieces she likes sitting on various surfaces while I fit the thick paper to the wood spaces, carefully trace the lines, and then admire the finished task. I cannot resist the urge to celebrate every small victory now that I am allowed—well... able to. *That’s a better word.*

The hardest part of moving on without closure has been retraining my thoughts. I never noticed them before therapists pointed out how I talked about myself or the things I did... Like I was a servant who had to ask permission to speak, to think, to BE. But to be fair, that is exactly how I felt.

Quynh stood behind me, and in a rare moment of quiet here, she sighs deeply. “It’s perfect.” I only nod in agreement, for I fear if I spoke then, I won’t be able to hold up my walls. Perfect... *you’ll never be.*

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“Okay, finish these boring forms so I can take you out for something delicious and we can get to know each other a little better.” She slides the stack of papers across the table and I start scratching away, thanking the miniscule help they offered in the facility for making it easy enough that I did not have to ask for even more help... I despise asking for help.

Quynh taps away on her phone and looks over a few times when I pause to read, but she doesn’t offer help I don’t ask for. She is pushy, and excitable, and nothing at all like me, but she doesn’t overstep. I desperately need this job, pay, and flexibility if I plan on getting another soon... which I have to do.

And I desperately want a friend even more than I need money and a new place to stay.

I have a phone, an address, and a bank account. A room, and now a job. At the very least, I am a functioning adult. At the most, still a pathetic excuse for a person... but I

will work on that every day until I feel differently. I have come too far. *Get over yourself...*

“Boring papers, all done.” Tucking them into her bag, she shoots to her feet and runs out onto the porch, the door loudly banging against the wall and the bookcase against it, making me jump slightly as I quickly gather my own jacket and bag. I barely register her footsteps on the stairs bounding toward her car. She yells over her shoulder at me—

“I’m starving, let’s go!” When she throws open her car door, I close the shop behind me. She adds, with slight annoyance, “Hurry!” and waves a ‘come to me’ with her hand, quite dramatically I might say, before firing up the engine.

She makes me smile, again.

My stomach growls. *Food. Food.*

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By the time we arrive at the club/restaurant, park, sit, and eat, I am convinced Quynh knows every single person in this town. Granted, it is not very big—her personality is significantly bigger. But she knows all of their names, and those she doesn’t, she promptly asks for and addresses them by—all while I tag along like a little puppy, awkwardly grinning at anyone who bothers to notice me in her wake.

I prefer to be small and unseen. Better than being a target. But shitty people don’t care about your character, only about how they can exploit it.

Overall, it is going really well. Quynh tells me a lot about her life and school. She also lets me know she is actually a marine biologist, and she works at the aquarium nearby most mornings and pretty much all weekends temporarily, while waiting to hear about a mission she applied to go on. Something about tracking great white shark patterns in the Pacific. Something fascinating. Something worthwhile. She is an absolutely wonderful well of endless information and conversation, and the more time I spend with her, the more I feel myself smiling without making myself, and wanting to open up without barriers.

“Okay, don’t look now,” she whispers as she leans in close, “there are most definitely two hot guys sitting at the bar who will not stop staring over here.” She straightens her neck to look over the barrier splitting the stairs from the level with the restaurant tables again, right as a far-too-handsome-to-be-a-waiter waiter appears from the same stairs with two bright pink cocktails. Little umbrellas and a toothpick with a lime slice and cherries; it’s so frilly and outrageous that I slap a hand over my mouth to keep from bursting, but the waiter smirks and gestures to the men. Quynh smiles seductively in their direction, and turns her attention then to the free drinks, the excited light in her eyes instantly dying. “What the hell is that?” I let the laughter loose then, but wasn’t expecting it to be so loud. Quynh stares at me like a deer in headlights.

“Does this happen a lot?” I calm the giggles enough to ask. The waiter nods, his own stare unwavering as he leans over slightly to grab the empty dish I had nudged away. The darkness of the club hides the true color of his eyes, but the flares of spotlights from the DJ booth on the other side etch his sharp jawline coated in stubble. He smells of mint, and I like his attention.

“Well, it is a bar. But...” he places the drinks in front of each of us, “they never guess correctly.” The arrogance that lines his comment makes me want to hear more, his gruff voice awakening something in my core, something I not only don’t trust, but cannot control.

“Does that mean you think you can?” I immediately regret the words as soon as they pass my lips, and even more so when he leans far closer than necessary to retrieve my empty water glass. Close enough to see the amber shine in his irises now; close enough to feel the heat his breath releases as he speaks.

“A complicated beauty, a simple drink...” He adds the glass to his loaded tray, righting himself with confidence. “Gin and cranberry. Coming right up.”

Quynh scoffs and gapes at me as the waiter winks, walking away. He didn’t bother with confirmation, and I ordered tequila when we first sat down... but he is, very

strangely, right. I used to drink nothing but that in college. I'm still sitting baffled by the exchange when Quynh goes on again.

“You have got to be kidding me. He hasn't said more than two words to anyone in years and you get his undivided attention in two seconds flat?” She shakes her head and attempts a sip of the neon cocktail, only to make a nasty, sour face and gently push it away. As she's shaking off her grimace, I start to ask who the waiter is, when suddenly the men from the bar slide into the seats beside each of us—completely uninvited and seeming not to care about whether or not we want them there in the first place. You give an inch...

“Hello gorgeous.” I don't bother responding, Quynh locks eyes with me across the booth and we both scoot into the wall. She reaches across and grabs my hand so both gentlemen could clearly see. “Didn't like the drinks?” *Run. Run.*

“Maybe, don't assume a frilly mixed drink is every girl's dream. Something simple like you, maybe a shot is more likely to work.” We both chuckle at her comment, and I tense as I feel the man's hand grip my knee. My fingers curl lightly around the stem of the drink. *No...*

“Maybe you should be a little more grateful for the attention and free beverages. Now, are you going to be a good girl and play nice?” I plaster a devilish smile on my face, which distracts the prick enough for me to slowly dump the bright liquid down the front of his cheap button-up and khakis.

“Oh, it looks like I don't need to play at all since you've gotten your drink back.” I had nearly forgotten that look of pure hatred that comes across one's face before they decide to hurt you, but I haven't forgotten the fear that makes me instinctively throw my arms over my head.

“You little—”

“You're going to need to leave, gentlemen.” The waiter's voice was much more stern than before, none of the playfulness, but it was soothing among the thoughts flooding my mind. The main one being—why the fuck did I just make



myself a target after determining staying hidden and quiet was the way to go forward?

I dare to peek between my elbows, and he's staring intently at me, something like worry or disgust hooded behind his stunned gaze, while the bouncer drags the man who was seated beside me from the booth and shoves the two of them toward the door.

"Hey, it's okay, Juniper." Quynh quickly switches to consoling, taking my hands, which pulls my attention from the waiter while he wipes the table and booth.

"I shouldn't have done that" he scoffs, tossing the rag over his shoulder. Then he disappears down the stairs before I could think about something to say... Did he tell the bouncer about them?

"No, you definitely should have. And I'm glad you did; it's good to see that you have more of a backbone than I suspected." A new waiter appears, nowhere near as handsome, significantly younger... and sets two glasses next to our still-clasped hands. He smiles—but it stirs little in me. *What the hell was that?* I don't know.

"Two gin and cranberries, on the house. Enjoy, ladies."

I haven't downed a drink so quickly since college either, but Quynh wants to dance. I want to feel free and loose after such a tense moment that reminded me far too much of everything I escaped... So we dance and dance until the alarm I set on my phone goes off telling me it is nearly curfew and I need to head back to the home, but I only tell Quynh I am starting to get overwhelmed and tired. Though, asking her about her job in the morning seems to bring her back to reality, and we leave the club laughing, nearly forgetting about the confrontation from earlier on...

Nearly.

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## Chapter Four: Mercy

*Three years, eight months, two weeks, and four days earlier.*

I wasn't supposed to answer the phone when he wasn't home, but my Nana had called four times that evening. It wouldn't stop ringing and making me jump, and I already broke a champagne flute... and I just wanted her to think I was okay... "Hey Nan, I can't talk right now..."

"Juniper?! Where's your mother? I haven't heard from her in days!"

"Nana relax, she's in the hospital, remember? She had surgery two days ago. I doubt they're letting her take calls yet. Are you sure you called Unison Memorial?" I could feel the frustration emanating through the phone before she answered. Panic was setting in at how close to the end of the day it was...

"I forgot the number... Can you call them for me?" I sighed and looked over my shoulder at the front door to the apartment I shared with my fiance... I only had minutes left to finish the dishes. And I wasn't allowed to talk to Nana when he wasn't there...

"I can call in the morning, okay? I promise. I've got chores to do, Nan, I'll talk to you soon okay?" I didn't return the phone to the receiver on the wall before the key clicked into place and the lock turned... Suds dripped down my arm onto the beige rug that lined the kitchen. He was early, but that didn't matter... only that I disobeyed. I took a deep breath and prepared for the punishment I would be dealt. There would be no point in hiding, or lying... that would only make him angrier.

Just another normal day... I hoped it was a good one for him. Or it would be significantly worse for me...

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Blood.

I taste blood... where am I?

“Get the fuck off me!” A grunt, a muffled shriek. Hands on my throat... hands... head... hair... *blood. Run, Run, Run!*

My head feels full, and my lungs are so empty...

I finally force open my pounding eyelids, only to see my shattered phone on the asphalt and the humiliated prick from the bar standing over me.

No... it wouldn't end like this. *Run... or fight! DO SOMETHING!*

“Fuck you.” I spit a mouthful of blood into his shit face and force every ounce of strength I can muster into raising my knee into his groin, but the power I need to get him off of me isn't there.

“You're gonna regret that, bitch.” He raises his hand, and I know all too well what to expect. I smile, and he pauses, confused at my response this time. He thought I would cower like I did in the bar, when my knee-jerk reaction told me to protect myself. But I was already hurt, already a target... already out in the open, pinned down...

When you are already targeted, making yourself smaller only makes the chase greater. Insulting your predator only angers them, and fighting back only makes them push harder, but what do they do when they realize their anger and their blows won't change your mind?

They realize that they have lost, no matter the physical pain they inflict... no matter what they take from you.

His fist came down a moment later, and my fist closed around a broken chunk of black-top just inches from my head.

The rock won.

I will never know if it was because of my fast thinking and refusing to back down, or because the handsome waiter's long fingers wrapped around the man's wrist just before I broke his nose. His face took the full impact of the rock first,

and then many, many impacts from the waiter beating the hell out of him, giving me time to scoot away.

The other prick releases Quynh and she drops to the ground, gasping. We take one look at each other and start toward the alley door of the club, where a guy who I assume is the chef exits next. The sharp click of the shotgun in his hands as he loads it stops the second guy from interfering with his coworkers' rage.

“Freeze, pendejo.”

Quynh runs straight into him, giving him a sidelong hug before stepping behind him and into the hall that leads to the kitchen.

“Thank fuck, Alex was working tonight.” She pulls out her phone and dials the police, relaying the details of the night and staying on until the operator says someone is on the way. I just stand there. I may have wiped the blood from my lip... feeling useless.

*Being useless... you should have run. And leave Quynh? And do nothing? Save yourself... no. I'm not selfish. I am. Then it's a good thing you're not real... I am you.*

You are my fear. You are *nothing*.

Quynh motions for me to join her back at the door, which is still propped open. The wet thumps of flesh and bone connecting with more flesh and bone still rings through my ears, but the waiter brushes past us. Alex and Quynh talk for a few minutes, or it could have been seconds. I can't breathe. I stare after him like an idiot, trying to force myself to thank him, to say anything... A crimson-stained white towel falls as he turns the corner into the kitchen.

“Hey, Juniper right? Here, let's get you guys inside,” Alex sets the shotgun in a small broom closet-like-office and locks the doors, then leads us back into the cleared-out club. I hadn't realized we stayed so late... I check my pockets, and briefly my bag, for my phone before remembering where I had last seen it...

“Dammit,” I mutter, but my own exasperation is interrupted by a loud slam followed by shouted curses much more colorful than mine. Alex smiles, almost looking pained as he searches for words. We sit at the bar and he pulls two bottles of water from a hidden mini fridge.

“Don’t mind Nikolai and his shit temper. I’m Alex, I cook and sometimes bartend here. We’ll take care of the cops and everything, just sit tight for a bit.” Another crash. Quynh starts guzzling away her water. Alex’s thick eyebrows furrow as he scratches his shaved head. “I’m gonna go check on him and make sure he doesn’t destroy the place. There’s a phone around the corner by the bathrooms if you need to use it. I’m sorry about yours.”

“Thanks.” He gives me a crooked smile, rounds the bar to the front door and secures the latches, then stammers to defend himself.

“I promise you can still leave whenever, I’m not trying to be weird, you’re not locked in here.” He shuffles his feet for a moment in place, probably wondering just how weird that sounded, before vanishing through the hall we came back into the restaurant from.

“He’s horrible with people, especially girls. Other than Sera, my roommate; his girlfriend,” Quynh says. She pauses briefly—only briefly enough to catch her breath, not long enough to trigger a conversational switch in my mind. “I’m so sorry about tonight,” she adds in a hushed tone, tearing up as she turns her barstool to face me. I’m still getting my bearings back... “I just wanted to take you out to thank you and it turned into all this... whatever the fuck. I feel so horrible...” That’s not what I want...

“It’s okay, really, you could never have known something like this would happen. Especially in a place you love, and around people you seem to know... I’ve been through worse, are you alright?” She ignores my question entirely, holding onto the dismissive statement instead...

“Worse than that?” She gapes again, avoiding my eyes, drinking water, and fidgeting with a string on her shirt hem.

*Not now...*

How long have I been picking at my fingers? I force my hands still and lift my chin just like my Nana has always told me to do.

“Yes, worse than this. Regularly. But we’re here now, like you said. The past doesn’t matter.” The sentence has barely slipped out and she’s throwing her arms around my upper back, her sudden sobs forcing her to heave deep breaths. My own tears fall onto the lacey shoulder of her blouse, but silently. For I learned long ago that loud sadness is more likely to be ignored, and nobody cares how sad you are... most of the time.

As we embrace, I tell her a bit about the home I’m staying in as a condition of my release, and that the police may not believe me because of my past... She tells me not to worry, that she’ll do the talking, and for me to just worry about not getting in trouble. She’s already such a good friend... and I barely know her.

I call Seth, who assures me that as long as I’m back soon and not in any legal trouble that he’ll take the phone call as my curfew check in, only because he doesn’t want to deal with the paperwork. Then he mumbles something about junkie bullshit before hanging up... I nearly forgot about Willow. I suddenly feel nauseous, and want nothing less than to go back there. But what choice do I have?

Nikolai and Alex make their way back into the front of the club just as I am joining Quynh again, two police officers in their wake. Nikolai ignores us entirely as he stalks around the bar, wearing new clothes and having cleaned up from the... interaction. He lugs a large duffle bag over his shoulder and starts toward the main exit. My feet move before I can remind myself how horrible an idea speaking to him again will be after how he brushed me off... *you’re stupid...*

I reach the door just as he yanks open the last latch. “Nikolai.” A cold, stern face greets me. Totally a different person than the smirking, funny waiter from earlier... “Thank you, you shouldn’t have had—”

“Don’t thank me. Maybe just don’t act like careless teenagers around clearly dangerous people,” I’m taken aback and downright offended at his mocking tone and rude jab at my character... He may be right but, who is he to say it out loud? I wipe a stray tear that I feel falling from my right eye—always the right one. *He doesn’t know you.*

And he doesn’t care about my opinions either, which is why he leaves it at that, shoving through the doors...Quynh has taken over speaking to the officers on our behalf, and Alex is pretending he didn’t hear everything. He leans on his elbow, wiping a glass with a rag in true bartender-in-a-movie fashion while I adjust on the stool. “Look, I know he’s a bit judgemental, and totally stand-offish. But Nikolai really is a good guy—”

“I... really don’t care that much.” I realize by the tightening of his mouth and re-stacking of demeanor that it came out more aggressive than I intended. “I didn’t mean... it’s just been a long day.” He lets out a tiny huff of understanding and nods. I follow his eyes to the officers approaching. Quynh stays right at my side.

She has told them everything; they just need to confirm it with me and get my details. Apparently they tried to bribe Nikolai to roofie our drinks. He kept the drugs and money—which the officers say they believe is counterfeit—and turned them into the cops when they got here. They make sure we are alright and we finish the report. Quynh gives them her number for the both of us, and Alex turns over a copy of the surveillance footage which shows them fleeing to another club across the street.

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They leave after letting us know they will be taking it very seriously because they assume they’re the same men connected to a series of similar cases from Denver up to Gallow. Aren’t the police supposed to take everything seriously? *Yes... but they don’t.* Not even close.

Alex walks us to Quynh’s car, and we have a slightly awkward and mostly silent ride to the group home. I’m almost

inside when Quynh shouts from the car, “Text me as soon as you get a new phone, okay? I have a great idea!” I wave and tell her I will, I just desperately want to sleep.

I knock on Seth’s door and give him the information from the officers proving that I was where I said I was, but he waves me off and says to show him again tomorrow. *I’m tired of this...*

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My bunk has been ransacked... I hastily reach into the pillowcase I had stuffed part of the money I saved into. “Fuck!” Burying my head into the crappy fluff, I scream until I go hoarse and crawl into bed in my clothes to loathe the universe. *You need help...* I don’t have any fucking help, but there’s no sense in wallowing.

Of course, it never ceases to amaze how shitty things pile and multiply onto a desperate heart. You cannot trust anyone but yourself to look out for you, but occasionally, you run into someone that you can trust to aid you in looking after yourself. You need to have the courage to stand down and let them help, as much as you would to stand up and refuse.

Courage comes in many forms. Sometimes, it’s trust.

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## Chapter Five: Coincidence

Seth practically laughed in my face when I mentioned that someone went through my room and stole something. I didn't specify, and he didn't care. "There are no locks on the rooms, and doors are always open anyway. Do you really think there's any way to figure out who did it?"

"I know who did it, but—"

"But you can't prove it. Story of the lives of every person here. My advice? Keep everything important on you, and move the fuck out of here as soon as you can." What a waste of space. Obviously it couldn't be the cushy life, living with a bunch of rehabbed and released young adults and dealing with their drama... but surely there was something in place for thieves? *They don't care about you...*

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Public Transportation is the worst invention in human history. It's settled. If I have to ride between one more newborn baby whose mother would rather scroll on Instagram than tend to her screaming child, or an arrogant teenager with no regard for personal space—or hygiene for that matter—I might just...

"Next stop, Third Street," the bus chimes. I shoot to my feet and almost trip rushing into the facility. By the look on my Nana's face when I enter her room, I am not the only one with something to share.

I let her flit about the room showing me what she has been up to since I saw her a few days prior. She smiles the whole time, and I feel horrible telling her about what had happened, but she's the only person who understands me. Who knows everything and loves me just the same.

So I tell her about my new friend, about what happened after we had our great dinner, and about the guys who helped us. I briefly mention that one of them seemed less than pleased to play the hero, where most men would revel in getting to beat someone to a pulp for a woman... but she just cupped my

cheek, her glistening eyes searching me for wounds, physical and emotional. I reassure her I am fine and give her my new cell phone number that I replaced this morning before taking the bus over here.

“We are going to have lunch the next time I come, alright? I’ll bring whatever you want, I love you.” She gives me the biggest hug and reluctantly returns the sentiment as I close the door behind me.

My mood is lifted after seeing my Nana, as it usually is. I round the corner to the front desk. The bobbed brunette smiles her plastic smile at me and I leave my badge, the not-so-false smile fading from my own face the moment I whip toward the door, ready to be alone.

Because there’s Nikolai, looking like a completely different person, holding a shallow succulent arrangement and a bag of beef jerky. His own name tag is scribbled with something starting with an ‘M’, and his amber eyes narrow as realization hits him too.

This time, I’m smarter. I keep my mouth shut, and I don’t give in to that little voice—that fucking curiosity that wants to know. Because I don’t. *Me either...*

Just keep moving on, brush it off. To the bus stop. “Hey.” To the bus stop. “Stop, please.” He doesn’t even know my name. *Why did you stop, you stupid fucking...*

“Juniper.” I whirl back, and he is so much closer than I anticipated after the automatic step I took forward. “My name is Juniper.” My breath catches as I stare up at him, so much taller than me. His mustard yellow shirt compliments the natural tan of his skin perfectly, rolled up at the sleeves to expose his thick, veiny forearms. *Perfect to hurt you with...* I don’t need that.

I remember how he acted the night before and use that to fuel my response. No longer do I give people the benefit—actions stick with me. “Stop following me. You made your feelings pretty clear last night. Just leave me alone.” I mean it, because no matter what could possibly be... I don’t want it. I

can never give someone that part of me again, and anything else is just a rocky fucking slope to... No. *No, thanks.*

I sit at the farthest end of the bench, right below the seventeen bus sign to head back to the shithole. I bought the cheapest set of earphones at the store, too. The only good thing that came out of the place was this lesson, I suppose. Even though my new phone still can't play music, I now have a reason for people to leave me alone on the bus. Or stupid pricks to leave me alone at the bus stop.

I watch from the corner of my vision, pretending to stare off at something in the distance and pay him no mind, as he disappears back into the nursing home. But, as my luck would have it, he exits just a few seconds later and joins me on the bench.

Because of course he would...

He scoots closer. *Tell him to go away.*

And when I still don't pay him any mind, he squats in front of me, causing me to crack a smile. He smirks... I like the way his eyes wrinkle at the corners when he's amused, or smiling. *He's handsome.* I take out my headphones.

"I'm sorry, Juniper." He makes sure to emphasize my name, showing that he listened. And applied. "I was having a really shitty day, though that isn't an excuse for my behavior..." I don't believe he thought through this conversation... and I don't blame him, considering this is a complete surprise.

"Quynh told me they tried to bribe you, to drug our drinks." It isn't a question, but he nods, returning to his full height and causing me to crane my neck to see his face. I prefer looking at his face, *especially like this.* What does that even mean?

I have to shield my eyes from the sun to see him, and I don't even notice the bus pull up until it hisses to a stop behind him. What the fuck is going on? I thought the fogginess had passed... *this is different.* How?

“Can I give you a ride home? Or wherever you’re heading?” I wouldn’t have bothered to control the snarkiness that came out if I was able to...

“No, thanks, I don’t really feel like further being judged by a weirdo I met one night ago, about shit that wasn’t even the slightest bit my fault. Oh, and whose first move was to whisper in my ear during your shift about drinks, or did you forget about that part because of all your tantrums?” I would not have it. *Brutal... What happened to all that nice shit?*

“Juniper, honestly...” I don’t care for his words, and I don’t listen to them. He couldn’t bother to listen to me last night, just made assumptions and didn’t give someone a chance to prove or defend themselves... *good riddance.*

I know I’m better than this, but I take a seat on the bus, replace my earbuds, and look back against my better judgment to see the automatic doors slide closed behind him. He picks up his stuff from the desk and walks down the hall toward the rooms.

Who does he have there that he loves? *Why do you care?*

I shouldn’t have told him off when he was sincerely trying to apologize... Do I really even know if he was?

*You didn’t bother to listen, you just stayed mad... so who knows.* Okay, enough. Seriously. Just, stop it. Do not Rabbit Hole.

I need to progress, I need to be better. Not worse.

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## Chapter Six: Me

I remind myself that I am not here to get close to anyone, nor to worry about anyone's feelings or healing except for my own.

Me. That's who this is about.

I'm not supposed to project, but I am supposed to remember... What happened the last time I allowed someone to interrupt my existence? My goals? Invade my fucking thoughts?

He took them from me. I'm still locating them. *And some you will never get back.*

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So, I find myself walking into a computer store a few blocks from the group home, where a lovely redhead in a My Chemical Romance shirt, not much younger than me, helps me find a super cheap, refurbished laptop that does the bare minimum. But that's all I need.

This and my replacement phone have eaten up all of the money I have left after the incident. I suppose one of the perks of the transitional housing being low cost, with free, albeit disgusting meals, is how much I was able to save so quickly. And not having anything to spend it on definitely helps...

I even compose myself enough to ask Seth about some leads for up-to-date listings of rooms for rent. He seems less argumentative than usual, overall less of a dick, and actually helps with a few sites to look into. Unfortunately, there are no affordable leads anywhere near Bao's. Some near the nursing home in the nicer part of Gallow, but nothing I would be able to afford in the next few months even with another job...

Tucking my new prized possession under that thin scrap of a pillow, discouraged momentarily, but still hopeful, I retrieve my new phone and text Quynh. I'm just standing to stretch from my position against the wall on my bed, with my

legs folded underneath me like usual, when the phone chimes and makes me jump. I click the volume button down to vibrate immediately and place a hand over my chest, willing my startled heart to calm.

Some things take years to recover from. Others take a lifetime, and occasionally... one can ruin your existence no matter how much time has passed since its occurrence.

*Q: So great to hear from you! How are you doing?*

*J: Good, I actually wanted to ask if you knew of any places renting a room, I need to get out of here*

*Q: Oh no! Let's grab an early dinner tomorrow and chat! I've got a busy night and just finished with the fish \*fish emoji\**

*J: Only if you swear it will be better than last nights*

*Q: OMG I promise! :( please don't hate me*

*J: I don't hate you lol. Sounds perfect, have a good night :)*

*Q: <3 you too!*

Believe that things will be better. *Start with believing in yourself...*

I have a sudden realization that I haven't run into Kelly in a few days. Peering over at her bunk from mine, I see that her usual knit blanket and white box of belongings under her bed are gone. Yanking open her locker that's beside mine, I find it empty. I make a mental note to ask Seth, only because of the coincidence of her being gone right after Willow presumably showed up, targeted me, and stole my money... Maybe Kelly and I didn't have such an understanding after all. Maybe Kelly didn't want to make friends, or be a good person. Another misjudgement on my part. *Don't be so hard on yourself...* Oh, pick a damn side.

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The wifi connection at the group home is spotty at best. Even after spending the majority of the last two days looking

for places to rent, I've only sent a handful of inquiry emails. I haven't gotten a response yet, and I know that I need patience but... that has never been one of my strong traits.

"So, calamari?" Quynh slaps her menu closed and shakes her head up and down dramatically. The sweet barista who comes over to take our order giggles a little too much at the action.

"Hell yes, calamari. And I'll just have a lemonade." I turn my attention back to my friend. "I had a late lunch right before you called, so I'm fine with just the appetizer."

"Well, I'll have a bacon burger with no veggies, and an extra large side of fries for us to share." The barista leans in and whispers in Quynh's ear, spurring a slightly condescending look from myself. The wide grins on both of their faces when she vanished to punch in our orders is not surprising, but leaves me curious.

"What did she say?" I ask inconspicuously when the sweet woman shoves through the swinging kitchen doors. Quynh covers her face like she's ashamed, which is interesting because she doesn't know the meaning, splitting her fingers to look up through her lashes at me.

"She told me she gets off in an hour and to leave my number on the table if I want to hang out." We both burst out in excited laughter. Genuine, loving, hilarious laughter that makes my side hurt. *She's great...*

"Are women easier to date than men?"

Her face twists in thought, then she shrugs nonchalantly and sighs, heaving her shoulders much more than necessary.

"I wouldn't say it's easier, it's very different. But personally..." In unison, we glance at the sweet waitress, now bringing over our drinks. "I really do prefer women." Quynh's laughter is contagious. I find myself feeling her positivity whenever I spend time with her now, and I thoroughly enjoy every moment. It's a shame I don't prefer women, because she is amazing. *What about Nikolai?* Shut up.

“I did a bit of digging for you, mostly because I felt so bad about the other night but also because I do not want to hear about you being stolen from and nobody giving a shit about it ever again!” She rifles through her purse and pulls out some crumpled printouts of room listings for the area, and thankfully a few of them are different from what I found. “But do you remember that idea I told you I had?”

I flip a page, and eye her suspiciously over the top of it. “Yes... go ahead.”

Rolling her eyes so far back they almost get stuck, she laces her fingers together and places her hands under her chin. “I’ve applied for a live-in nurse for my father, but they won’t be assigning one for at least a few weeks. And there are two rooms upstairs. You remember the one with the mirror?” And the vaulted ceilings, and the french window, and the claw foot tub in the attached bathroom... I didn’t realize I noticed so many details about the room, only being in there for a few minutes, not until I felt my heart start soaring at the beginning of her statement... and my brain starts rolling like a snowball down a hill. “Well, you could move in there. No rent, I’ll just pay you a tad bit less...” In the absolute worst moment, my head forces a zone-out, because I cannot fathom the break I’m receiving....

“Yes. I don’t care what the stipulations or cost are, please yes. Fucking yes, thank you so much Quynh.” For the first time, I throw myself on her, and she laughs like a banshee in my ear while I hold in tears of joy.

“Jesus, if this is what you sound like finding a room, I can only imagine what you sound like in the thralls of pleasure.” She pats my back and I release her. I definitely don’t want to give the wrong idea, though I know she’s joking. I settle back into the seat and glance around, but I don’t care if anyone saw me. *This is huge...*

“Well, you’ll never find out.” I try my hand at a response that’s like hers, playful but with a serious vibe. She raises her eyebrows, then follows it with a dramatic pouty face, before going back to our normal conversation. “I have to make sure it’s cleared with the admin at the group home, and



probably talk to my doctors, but it shouldn't change anything. This is what they want, after all. I don't know what I did to deserve this, but—"

"You are trying hard. That's what you did, Juniper. And honestly, you'd be doing me a huge favor. My lease won't be up until the end of the year, and I'm starting to worry about him being alone at night. Even with the outdoor cameras and locks I've installed, I would feel much better to have someone I trust staying with him." I don't believe it... *she trusts you...*

"You trust me?" The pretty blonde drops off our food, lingering to smile at Quynh.

"Of course I do; you've proven it to me so far. Now eat." She trusts me... which means... I can take the next step. I can speak.

"Okay, but only if you let me tell you about how I ended up here." Her heartwarming attention is all I need in confirmation this time, and she absorbs every single word with care and delicacy.

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"Six months after ovarian cancer took my mother, I was finally ready to leave him. And after over a year of hell and convincing myself I could do so, *so* much better than that... I went to my favorite bridge to solidify my next steps. The same bridge that I visited whenever I decided I was not strong enough to handle life anymore... where I would... think." I don't need to explain what I mean by that, not to Quynh. She isn't like most people; she listens, and nods when I meet her eyes, continuing to eat as if it were any other normal sort of lunch.

"It was January; I distinctly remember the sprinkle of snow that started coming down as I walked the length of it. Metal creaked, the small trickle of water in the river below flowed slowly, and birds sang of their afternoon flight. It was peaceful. Then I saw headlights coming toward me. Something in my gut told me I wouldn't make it if I didn't act

right then. So, I willed myself to run, but... I knew I wasn't going to make it off that bridge at that point...

“I had barely yanked my beat-up car door open when my ex-fiance's slid to a stop behind me. He got out and started yelling like he always did... There was no speaking with him. Spewing hate, and insults right off the bat, yelling about the things I wasn't allowed to do with him... especially going anywhere without telling him first—projecting how he felt about himself onto me as the therapists love to say.” The scoff that follows is like second nature at this point. “I did as I always did when the yelling started... backed away, shut down, stayed quiet so he wouldn't push me more... but it didn't work. He was furious I wouldn't speak, and I refused to partake in his confrontation in my most precious space. I just kept backing away... until my ass hit the metal railing that keeps vehicles from going straight over the side.

“Then the goading and shaming began when he saw that the screaming wasn't digging in to its usual depth... telling me I should have just saved him the trouble of dealing with me long ago, that it never would have gotten so bad had I just... given him everything he ever wanted, and ceased to become a person. He glanced over the edge, below at the river, and he told me that I would be dead before I could ever wonder what it would feel like to jump again. Even in what he believed to be my last moments, he had to remind me of how worthless he believed I was, how many issues I had caused in his life... But I became fed up with his speaking. I did the worst possible thing I could think of, and I fought back.”

We both sit in silence for a long moment. Quynh polishes off the last of her burger, and I munch on a few fries before continuing.

“He won; I never could have been a match for his physical strength. But even with all of the abuse he inflicted on me over the years, personally and from afar, he never broke my mind. At least, I never considered it broken. Cracked, damaged, sure. But broken implies the possibility that it is permanent. Broken implies it may not heal well, or may not at all... I don't believe in broken.

“I went over the railing, and I knew I would get my answer to the question I had wondered more times than was deemed normal... What would it feel like to jump... and to survive? I never wanted to die. I just wanted to feel anything except anger, fear, and loneliness. Feel anything except what HE made me feel. Pain can jump-start anyone’s logic. And it sure as shit started mine back up again—”

“What... how did you end up in the mental hospital though?”

“He lied to everyone, including my Nana. She knew about my frequent spots. She knew about the challenges I faced with him, and thoughts that troubled me... He had told her that I left in a fit and went for a drive, which of course made her think of the bridge, too. It was somewhere my mom used to go when she was upset. She started taking me, and it became my favorite after she died. My Nana sent the police after me, because she was so worried... and they found me. Unconscious, half frozen, barely alive. I had lain there for half a day and the entire night. I could not move.

“I was in a coma for two weeks, and when they finally woke me up from the induction, I was met by a psychologist who informed me that I attempted to commit suicide—did not ask if I had, told me I did—and only succeeded in breaking seventy percent of the bones in my body, rupturing my spleen, fracturing three vertebrae, and shattering my right hip—which took most of the fall, instead. I also lost three toes on my right foot, and the hearing is messed up in my right ear from hitting my head. Almost all of my time spent in the facility was in a designated Physical Therapy room they had converted to hold a bed and my medical equipment. I was having three P.T. appointments a day until a few months before my release, when they said I was able to do it myself, and then... I was locked in that room and saw no one else until they released me.

“I still suffer massive migraines that will probably never go away fully, my hip always hurts, and I can’t walk around without socks on. Or stand to hear my phone ring because of the... abuse. The physical reminders are such a

small part of everything he took from me, everything I will never get back. But I don't want it to be like that. I'm determined to change it.

“They only told me exactly what was going on when I was led out of the facility, handed a plastic bag of things that seemed like they were from another dimension, and was read a script of my own life like I were about to be acting a part of someone else from then on... It did not feel real. It still doesn't on most days...

“One of the more stuck-up guards that loved to torment people in Becknam said that after the attempt, I was found by police, deemed mentally unwell based off what my ex fiancée had provided, and stuck in this facility. On my own dime, which he had seized all of, because I signed power of attorney over to him if something ever happened to me. But I had never actually done that. When I woke up, I had a lot of fog and couldn't remember most of the accident, which did not help my case, but I argued and fought like hell to convince them of the abuse. They chalked it up to me being unwell, confused, and aggravated because of the confusion and memory loss... even after I remembered. Even after I told them what really happened, proved it even, somehow his reach kept them from doing anything. It was always chalked up to me being crazy...

“They told me I was being released because he died in a car accident two weeks prior, and I wasn't paying for the facility anymore, and they needed the money more than they actually cared about my mental health. Which makes sense as to why they never listened to this cash cow. So they had me take a test. The same test I had taken every month for over three years... and wouldn't you guess that I had suddenly passed barely enough for them to deem me fit to care for myself again? Just like that?

“I was given a voucher for a taxi ride from the shuttle bus stop to my assigned group home and the paperwork for a bank account that was set up for me, and was shoved out the front gates of the damn place... I didn't feel like Juniper Grace Whitlock anymore, I was a ghost.” A deep shudder starts at the base of my spine and shakes me. I thought I was doing well...

but not thinking about the pain doesn't make it less chronic. Just lessens its hold over you, and only temporarily. My hip *aches* something terrible in this plastic, non-supportive chair...

Quyhn spoke firmly. "That's why you want to become someone new, and you should. I will never judge you. I've known so many women who have experienced something similar. And I feel so lucky to have never had the experience to make me know what you mean, but I will always show you love, or sympathy, or rage on your behalf. Whatever you need, whatever you want. You'll always have it with me."

My right eye's well lets loose and two tears fall, one right after the other.

She continues. "I know all too well what it's like to want to change and be better, but to not have the resources or support to do so. It was insane when I decided not to hide who I was anymore in public, or school. But that's a story for another day. I promise you Juniper, I will support you."

"You know, you're the first person I have told that much about my life."

She gasps audibly, slapping a hand over her heart and fanning herself with the other. Leaning back in her chair, she feigns a southern accent. "Well, I never! It is such an honor to be bestowed such information." She catches the waitress's attention for the check and refuses to let me help pay. "Let's get the hell out of here so we can move you into your new room, huh?" And for the first time in a long time, I have something to look forward to.

I have an entire life to look forward to. *You're getting there...*

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## Chapter Seven: Friends

The last week has solely been dedicated to working, moving things around the top floor of the shop when not, creating a new resume with Quynh and her roommate Sera's help, and looking for jobs to apply to—online this time, of course—that might actually consider me with the limited schooling I have while I attempt to work toward something better.

I have absolutely no idea what that 'better' might be, but... you have to start somewhere, find a foothold to keep climbing, right?

It would be much easier if I had some inkling as to what I wanted to do with my time, but... it's really difficult to make something of a life you never considered you'd be able to live again. Three weeks out... I still can't manage to get a grip on it.

I've spent a lot of time with Bao too, of course, getting to know him and his schedule and where he likes things around his house. The last thing I want to do is make him feel like I'm intruding on his space or his craft. It's fascinating to see him carve, too. He's incredibly fast, and the details are so elegant. If I didn't know him myself, I would suspect he is no older than in his forties, and of completely sound mind. *Overrated...*

But having met him in real life, I know the ugly truth. And I prefer it. Knowing he's made all of these beautiful things with his own two hands regardless of the hardships he has faced, knowing his brain is forever against him but he still does all this... it's inspiring.

Not to mention he is hilarious, and has a fancy for really old-school pranks. Like making the floor in front of my room sticky since he knows I always wear socks. I suspect honey. Once, I think, maple syrup. He likes to wrap rubber bands around the sink nozzle so it sprays me when I turn it on, and rig the door to drop feathers or glitter when it is opened. Mostly harmless, and almost always a laugh. It only lasted for

the first few days, but now he prefers to just start the wood cutter or the sander when I'm in another room. Especially when I'm under the impression that he is upstairs... and especially after he tells me he's going to take a nap.

"Your father is the worst roommate ever," I shout over the hum of said sander the moment Quynh steps into the shop, with a smile to follow, of course. She takes the inventory list I had been working on while I switched the counted bin for one with uncounted pieces. "But I have to say, his parties are more fun than most of the ones I went to in high school. And he actually cleans up after himself." Quynh chuckles; she seems tired today. She slaps down the clipboard with enough umph to inspire a dirty look, which she ignores.

"Speaking of parties." I'm already moving away from the table and the bin she's working with, and my chest becomes tight at the thought... "It's nothing crazy, my roommates and I are throwing one on Friday night. I would love it if you'd come, even for a little while. I can always get you a car back if you aren't feeling it." The sanding stops. I check the clock on the wall above the entrance. Lunch time.

"I don't think that's a good idea... I haven't been around more than a handful of people at once in... a long time." *It is a good idea, you're just no fun...* ignoring that.

"Isn't one of the ways to overcome to do exactly what makes you anxious? Face the fear kind of thing?" My mouth goes dry. I don't want to look at her through the thoughts flooding my mind. I can't sort them... can't make sense of them... "It's really alright if you don't think you can, Juniper, I just thought I would extend the offer. Sera and Alex will be there and you've met them..."

"Will Nikolai be there?" Why the fuck did I ask that...? *Because you can't stop thinking about him*—he stares at me like she's wondering the exact same. I hadn't even told her about the weird run-in I had with him and his apology yet... or how I responded, so she only knows he was rude to me. "I didn't..." She throws her hands up as if to convey 'I said nothing'.

“If that will get you to come, I will make sure he’s informed about it. Do I want to—”

“No. No, you probably don’t.” Distraction. Go get the next box. Fucking just— “But... there’s something about him,” I stop myself from taking the first step up the stairs, and instead face my fear. My emotions. *Finally acknowledging them...*

“Is that so?” Again, no judgment stains her tone, just curiosity. A longing to understand, maybe.

“I ended up running into him the day after that dinner, at my Nana’s nursing home. What’s his story?” If I was going to possibly see Nikolai again, I want to have some idea of who he was... other than what I saw, and the bad day he was having.

“Hmm, that’s interesting. But really, he’s a mystery. He’s been here a few years, and he works on and off at that club. We don’t really see him around outside of when he’s there, or going to Alex’s place for holidays. He’s gone over there for The Fourth and Thanksgiving for two or three years now, I want to say.” She absently glazes over the contents of the bin, then realizes I’m still waiting for more. Why was I waiting for more? “I don’t know anything else, I swear. He’s usually pretty chill, has a bit of a temper which I don’t think I need to remind you of... that’s really it.” She returns my pose, throwing her hand on her hip mockingly. “What are you thinking?”

What the fuck *am* I thinking? “I... wasn’t the nicest when he tried to apologize, when we ran into each other,” I say, stumbling over my words. I fold my arms across my chest and clear my throat, then whisper reluctantly, “I want to see him again... I can’t think of why but, I feel bad, and it was strange to see such a drastic change in him... literally night and day.”

“I’ll tell Alex to invite him.” She winks, scribbling on the inventory sheet. I feel that flush of embarrassment come over me... *don’t, this is progress too.*

“But, please don’t say... anything about—”



“Relax, Juniper.” Her signature eye roll follows, and her usual brushing off. “I will just mention that he should extend the invitation, and possibly have him mention you to Nikolai if he seems unenthusiastic about attendance.” She raises her shoulder, acting cute, then snaps her fingers as she assumes her rightful place as Queen of the Antiques, flopping into the chair and crossing her legs over the arm. Placing an invisible crown on her head, clearing her throat, list in hand, she gestures to the bins with her pen. “Count them off, Lady Love!”

Insufferable. I like her. *She’s everything you wish to be...*

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“This was not a good idea,” I mumble, shivering in my thin black flannel tied at my waist in the front, my typical black leggings, and Converse. I don’t have anything ‘party’ suitable, and when I texted that to Quynh she told me to show up half an hour early and she would find something for me.

“Get your ass in here, Juniper!” a very clearly already intoxicated Quynh shouts from beyond the door, so I steel myself as best as I can and nervously shove it until it gives.

“She looks fine! You made it sound like she was wearing a potato sack!” Sera yells from the kitchen as she pops open a bottle of wine. I know my style is... outdated, but come on. I’m comfortable... *and in a pinch...*

Two other girls sit on the couch with Quynh, and Alex rounds the corner from the hall, gives me a wave, and joins Sera in the kitchen. “I have the cutest jean skirt that would go great with that, and if we roll up your sleeves it’ll look sexy. Come on.” Quynh jumps up, sets her glass on the coffee table, and takes my hand, dragging me down the hallway to the farthest room.

It’s exactly what I pictured her room would look like. She even has a bright pink neon sign above her window that makes the whole place look like a rave. Posters and dangling stars, orbs, and flowers pinned in every corner. But I gravitate

to the giant aquarium she has beside her desk and the awesome, alien-like creatures lurking in its waters.

“What on earth is that thing?”

She gets to work pulling out articles of clothing, more than just the aforementioned skirt. That one track mind that comes with drunkenness... *not good*... “Axolotls, you’ve never seen one?” I shake my head, staring in awe at the strange, slimy creature... The flaming bristles coming from its face are glorious, pretty but so weird. “They’re critically endangered. My work rescues them and I’ve adopted five in the last few years. There are three in there right now...” She shoves the skirt into my chest and then points to the axolotl who is just as mesmerized with me as I am it.

“That’s Genvieve.” She takes a green net and drags it along a sharp corner of a rock, lifting it enough to see another smaller slimy body, missing half of the frilly gills on his face. “That’s Pauly, he was attacked by another axolotl who had to be isolated when they were young adults, and unfortunately they just never grew back the same, which is rare. We were surprised the stubs reformed without the feathers growing back.” She moves the small net over to the garden of live plants growing in one corner, where a larger, darker colored one casually swims with no rush to the rock outcropping since its home was disturbed. “And finally we have Karen, named so because she’s a big rude bitch and has to poke her nose in everything. I’ve had her the longest.”

“They’re really unique, and super cool. How long do they live?”

“Like ten years if they’re cared for properly. Now quit talking about the amphibians, I do that with most of my days.” She throws herself onto the bed, then props up on her elbows as she gestures to my skirt. “Oh, come on, I swear not to pounce on you, see if it fits!” Closing—and locking—the door first, I slip out of my leggings and put on the skirt, but when I finally look at Quynh she sports a face like she just ate a lemon.

“How do you feel about borrowing a very clean pair of underwear?” She cringes at my scoff. I put my hands on my hips and turn to see my panty lines. They’re not *so* obvious...

“I don’t really expect anyone to see them...”

Quynh becomes sinister and yanks a lacey black thong from her dresser, pulling on the still-attached tag for emphasis.

“The beauty of a house party is not expecting it, but it happening anyway.” Without waiting for an answer, she tosses them on the bed and skips out. “See you in a minute!” she calls after me.

There is no way in hell anything is going to happen tonight... A flash of Nikolai smirking in his yellow shirt at the bus stop flies across the forefront of my mind and I... don’t hate it. *You’re welcome*... pick a damn side!

Maybe it wouldn’t hurt to prepare for something unexpected... live life. Have fun, right? Just not *too* much fun.

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I put on the lacey fucking underwear, and I feel like something is stuck up my ass... ironic, since that’s kind of what I’m trying to avoid. But I did the thing. I yank my hair free from its bun, throw it upside down to fluff it, and briefly check my appearance. “You look hot,” I say, unconvincingly, and immediately follow it with a defeated chuckle. *Very smooth*...

I stride as confidently as my conscience will allow into the living room, where Sera introduces me to the other two roommates who share their house. Heather is a nurse just like her; they work at the same hospital, just different departments. Then there’s Jackie, whom Quynh met when she interned at the aquarium last year and now works as a wildlife preservation officer at the National Park outside of Gallow.

They have so much to them... but they don’t pry with me, just welcome and ask me what I like to drink.

“Gin, rum, vodka, wine, whatever you have that isn’t beer.”

“An easy date, that’s what we like in a friend.” Jackie hands me a cup of something that wasn’t anything I had answered with, and is far stronger than my preferences. But I’m determined to let loose, and have fun with my new friends.

The house becomes very full, very fast. The alcohol continues to flow, people dance and talk, and I can’t remember half the names of anyone I’ve met when I stumble onto the patio for a breather. Alex is on the phone, sitting in a lawn chair and having a beer.

“Hey, party girl.” He gives a casual ‘catch ya later’ to whoever is on the other line, then pats the chair beside his invitingly. “Smoke?” Popping open a pack of cigarettes, he takes one for himself. I wave him away, and he lights it, tossing the lighter onto the plastic-topped table with a smack. Smoke and the smell immediately coats my senses and makes me want to hurl.

“I never acquired the taste,” I say, trying to hide my reaction. He gives me a crooked smile as I take the seat, and to my surprise, he squishes the cherried tip into the blue tray sitting in front of him.

“Good, they’re disgusting. Not a fan myself but... addiction’s a bitch. And I’ll take the lesser evil.” I nod my understanding. I never had the issue with drugs, but... love is just as addictive. I drop my head back against the rest and pull my knees into me, before stopping part way when I feel the cool breeze on my bare ass cheeks and remember the skirt... That’s why I don’t wear them. I cross my knees instead and focus on the stars.

“I get that...” I suddenly feel so tired. My head is so heavy. “I never thought I would go to a party again, or meet people like you... who have all had their fair share of bullshit and don’t dwell on what someone else’s problems might be.” He laughs, a sharp, unsavory sound that forces a belligerent one from the pit of my diaphragm.

“We’ve all been through difficult things, and we never know who’s had it worse. The difference between people who know and people who don’t care to, is in comparison. We

don't compare hardships, and we don't compare success. It's a lot more fun as an adult that way." I allow my head to loll to the side and crack my lids open, seeing only a blurry outline of Alex.

"Does Sera like to dance? Because I think I want to dance, but I'm too nervous to do it myself. Even with as many drinks as I've had."

"She loves to dance," he answers right away, then jumps to his feet and offers me a hand. "I'll ask her for you. Wanna go back in?" As soon as I take it and try to stand, I am incredibly appreciative of the assistance, because I completely forgot about the whole sitting down thing... And the dizzy spell feels like it lasts the whole walk back inside... but soon I stand with Sera and Quynh in the middle of their living room, with a mix of 'As it Was' by Harry Styles playing, surrounded by other just-as-drunk idiots. And I fucking dance until sweat beads on my brow and the songs that followed fade together.

The cheer in my heart makes me spin, and spin, before it nearly shrivels and dies when I spot Nikolai walking through the front door with two others on his heels. Slightly older like him, and far too refined-looking to be at a bunch of twenty-something's house party in a not-so-great area... Nikolai's chocolatey eyes, the amber of them glowing, meet mine and I melt into a puddle of skin. The coil of panic and heat in my core sways with my body... That weird fucking pull is so confusing I want to shove it away. My feet stay firmly planted between my friends, and I let the music come over me once again, forcing me back into ignorance. And for a moment, I really forget he showed up. Then, the song ends, Sera wanders off to find Alex, and Quynh drags me over to the refreshments, where the men just so happen to be standing. A crash-landing back to reality, and a toss back into my awkward, bone-filled skin. *Why are you panicking?*

One of the gentlemen, the cuter one, steps up to me only seconds after I take a sip of a beer. Even drunk, I still hate beer. "Hi, I'm Erin." He brushes the hair off my shoulder as he leans down from his height so I can hear him; I involuntarily jerk away. Trying to train the bitchy look that I know has

overcome my face, I smile lightly, and speak louder than he did so he'll get the message that I don't want him so close to me, and he doesn't need to be for me to hear him.

“Juniper. You're friends with Nikolai?” I gesture to him standing at the wall, glaring so intently at me you'd think he didn't hate me... or maybe it's because he does. Something about other men intimidates men more than strong women ever will, which is bullshit. *But so is life...* Erin rubs his jaw, looking back over his shoulder, and hesitantly nods. Suspicious...

“Yeah... coworkers. How do you know him?” It's so obvious he doesn't really care, and is just appeasing my question.

“Quynh, and Alex I guess.” Why is it so hard not to look at Nikolai when I know he's staring holes into the side of my head right now? Shouldn't that deter me? *Because you can't stop thinking about him and now he's here*—okay, stop. It was rhetorical.

“Oh, cool. So, you looked like you were having fun out there.” No space between subjects. He gestures to the living room where others are still jumping and grinding. My brows scrunch in anticipation. “Do you maybe want to dance with me?” *No!* I can't stop it, my head whips back and sure enough, Nikolai is leaning against the frame of the door leading to the hall, blocking my only way to hide, solo cup in hand. I notice he's wearing a flannel too... much like the orange and green one I wore to the nursing home when we ran into each other. God, he looks good... what was I doing? *Dance, or don't...*

“Uh, yeah, sure.” I really don't want to but... Setting the drink on the table, I allow him to lead me to the floor, and I want to enjoy myself, but my mind is stuck and it's not on Erin. *Not even close...*

“What do you like to do for fun, Juniper?” That seems like such an old person thing to ask... Do people just ask each other what they like to do? *Yes, it's called small talk... learn it.*

“I like to read, and dance I guess.” The moment his hand touches my hip, I feel a heated rush, like a gust of wind

knocks me off balance. Everything feels so hazy because of the alcohol. I think I might just need to sit down, so I lean into Erin, placing my hand on his chest.

“I’d really like to cut in, Erin, you mind?” No fucking way... *yes*.

“Course—”

“What if I mind?” I mutter.

Erin takes the opportunity to back away already, and I’m feeling unsteady again... Nikolai wraps an arm around my waist, but I stumble away, shoving him back as I make my way to the hall. *Escape*.

Clear my fucking thoughts. Stop this. *You are being stupid—*

“Juniper, stop.” My shoulder meets wallpaper,—such pretty wallpaper. Nikolai’s rough fingers brush the skin of my wrist as he tugs me into the bathroom and locks the door behind us.

Wait... what the fuck... *no, run!*

“Why are you here?” I snap. That fucking smirk is on his lips again; he crosses one foot over an ankle, crosses his arms, and leans his upper back against the door.

“I thought you wanted me to be here?” Dammit, Alex... *damn you*.

“I... I felt terrible because you tried to apologize and I was... cold. So I’m sorry.” The silence that sits between us is long, and so loud because of the absence of the music and chatter. I don’t want to look at him. I just want to get out of this bathroom, get out of this house, and go curl up in a ball and feel bad—

“You’ve been thinking about me?”

“What? I... didn’t mean that,” *Try not to be so defensive...* Nikolai’s knuckles slide across my jaw. His fingers stretch and wrap around the back of my neck, and when I look up at him he’s smiling—not grimacing, not

smirking—a real smile that shows his teeth. One of his canines has the tip chipped off. *That's sexy...*

“Really?” His sudden closeness backs me into the sink. “Because I haven’t been able to stop thinking about you, and seeing that lowlife touch you... how he looked at you... made me wish it were me.” Mint, and liquor... chocolate, and... Heat floods my cheeks. He pulls my chin to look up at him and scoffs when my eyes stay closed. “Look at me, Juniper.”

“I can’t...”

His voice drops to a low rumble in my ear. *Oh yes...* “Why not?” Heat pools in my core, turning molten between my legs...

“I don’t trust myself not to do something stupid.” I thought it would push him away, give me space to think... to breathe.

“You won’t be doing anything... so, look at me...” But what if I do, and it’s all in my head? What if I do and I’m alone here? What if I do, and... “Please.” The desperation that cakes that word, his fucking voice... Not a second after I stare up at him, he looks down at my lips. He smiles again and pulls me by my neck into his kiss.

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## Chapter Eight: Mistake

*Nikolai*

I shouldn't be here. I shouldn't have even come.

There is so much other, smarter shit that I need to be doing... and I'm at a party chasing some girl—like a horny teenager who for some fucked up reason has taken hold of all thoughts and stripped me of all reason...

And right now, my tongue is in her mouth. Nothing has ever felt more right.

When Alex called me earlier and told me about the party, I immediately shut him down, just like he expected I would. But when he said her name... and that she *asked* about me, *asked* for me to come... how could I refuse?

There was simply too much... too much in common, too much coincidence, too much familiarity. There was just no way for two people to come across each other this often and under such circumstances... When I asked my grandfather about her yesterday afternoon, he recognized her name. I knew then that it was more than just a coincidence. I know this is destiny, and I've never once believed in such a ridiculous thing. But Juniper... just being in her orbit makes me believe there is some reason, a purpose... and we are the start of it.

"...please." I would gladly beg for her attention. I would do anything for her to look at me like she did when I first walked in: the surprise, the awe, the longing she tried to bury and ignore... It couldn't just be me who felt this... there's no way.

Her eyes, those gorgeous, grayish pain-stricken orbs that make my knees fucking buckle. I want her... It's a horrible idea. I can't take anymore bullshit, but... There has to be more to this, and I must know what it is...

I have to keep chiding myself not to get carried away. I'm not drunk enough to excuse this as stupidity or a lapse of judgment... and she's just drunk enough to regret it.

“Nikolai...” God, I fucking hate that she uses that name... I want to tell her every messed up, confusing thing about me. I’ve never felt this rush... this pull. I need her.

“Shh,” I whisper in her ear. I trail kisses down her neck, along her collar bone, and across her chest. Her panting, the way her hands fumble and tug on my shirt—the one I chose just so she would notice me, that just so happens to be like the one she was wearing the other day... She’s the closest to calm I’ve felt in years. I need more.

Without letting up, I lift her by her waist enough to slide her onto the sink; it causes her skirt to rise on her thighs, and I suck in a sharp breath, pressing myself between her legs, but the tightness of the material won’t let me make contact where I really want to. Where we need to...

Threading my hand into her wild hair, I part her lips with my tongue and kiss her with every bit of heat I’ve felt since that insane night... I wish I had never taken it out on her. Just some stranger, just some girl... how different could things be now if I hadn’t let my temper get the best of me? If I hadn’t refused to acknowledge the feeling that crushed my lungs to ash when I first laid eyes on her?

Her legs wrap around my hips, allowing me enough access to feel her against the length of my cock, finally. Her moan slips down the back of my throat when we collide. My pulse begins to quicken. Her gentle hands unravel from the fabric of my shirt and fumble with the buttons...

“Not so fast,” I joke, and immediately wish I hadn’t. Juniper’s hands cease movement. She grips the counter on the outside of each thigh instead and glances down between us at my bulge. She seems as though she could shatter into a million pieces with just one wrong touch... so sweet, and fragile. So shy, but not at all, simultaneously. How does she work?

I want to know what happened to her, what made her so afraid of rejection. What made her so hesitant of a man throwing himself at her. What made her so oblivious when other women are so quick to notice even the smallest things.

What makes me so drawn to her when no one has even turned my head in years?

“Sorry...” Her bashfulness is cute, but she doesn’t need to be like this with me. How do I show her that she can be who she is? That I want her to be free? Especially when I can’t be myself around any of them... “It’s just been a really long time since—” Oh... *oh*. Shit.

That was not expected.

“Whenever you want to stop, we can.” The hesitation in her ‘okay’ shouldn’t have accentuated my want the way it did, but her knowing just as well as I do how bad of an idea this is... makes it even harder to hold back. I give her a moment to decline before tugging her hips into mine and diving into her neck again.

Juniper feels like the first whiff of a freshly cut pine tree before Christmas, before it starts to wither and die in your home. Like the beginning of something that may end in tragedy, but will be most entertaining, and thoroughly enjoyable throughout. I love Christmas, and I love how she feels against my skin... How would I feel inside—

“Oh, yes.” Her exclamation and approval at my hand making its way up her thigh make my cock twitch, and I nearly lose control. But I rein it in, determined not to be a disappointment for her today. She probably has far too many of those for my comfort as it is...

I feel my frayed thread of control unravel farther as I dip into her panties, coating my fingers in her delicious warmth. Her head presses back against my hand, and it tightens around her waves, tugging lightly, which causes her to buck into my fingers for more. Her heels dig into my upper thighs, begging me to satisfy her... “You feel... perfect.” The word makes her skin pebble, and my tongue drags from the base of her neck up to her earlobe. It’s too much... and absolutely not enough. I need to be closer.

I press my thumb ever so slightly against her clit, and she tightens her grip on my shoulder. My lips find home on the hollow of her neck, right under her chin, because I want to

hear her pleasure. I slip another finger into her, feeling her dripping with excitement, and as she starts to cry out I place my other palm over her mouth, gritting my teeth with restraint as she arches, rubbing herself greedily into my thumb. She wants more too, and now I know what she likes...

She writhes and moans beneath me. "Not too loud." I coax her along, but she roughly pulls her face free and proceeds to bite into my shoulder, hard—which makes my adrenaline thrum, pulsating through my body and lingering where I wish I could feel her most... I would not give up so easily. I can do feisty and rough. Not such a good girl... I like this better.

I drive my fingers deep as they will go, gripping the back of her knee, pulling her leg upward, forcing her to spread even wider for me, then rubbing vigorously with my palm until she is forced to unlatch to yelp her enjoyment. Her screams could lead us to trouble, mostly because I never wanted to stop hearing them now that I know the hold they have over me...

The descending moans continue even after I force her mouth to mine, and I gobble them up. She has barely started to breathe again when she reaches for my belt, but before I can turn her down, there's a sharp knock on the door.

"Juniper, are you in there?" Quynhs voice is tinged with worry, which means we have been in here for too long to be unnoticeable. Fuck, I messed up.

"Oh my god," she whispers, and tries to turn away, hide her face, get off the counter, and pull her skirt down all in one motion. This was a mistake. She... regrets this, and I assumed she would. "Yeah, I'm fine. Be right out." She returns to her normal volume. There is none of the awe, the longing... the pull when she acknowledges me again.

"You don't have to say anything." Trying my best to be casual, to keep calm, even though panic is ripping me to shreds, I shrug. It's not the right move, and we both know that. I try to make up for it with a kiss, and she stops me with a hand to my chest. Also not the right move.

“I’m sorry... this was not smart,” Juniper fumbles the door knob on her way out, attempting to stifle her sniffing... Fuck. I didn’t mean it like that... Why do I feel so fucking tongue-tied around her? Why can I not will myself to go after her and tell her what I *do* want to say?

I shouldn’t have come here. I only make things worse. This was selfish.

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# Chapter Nine: Revelation

## *Juniper*

I still can't seem to shake the feeling of Nikolai's lips, his tongue sliding against mine, his fingers...and what they drew from me. Not to mention the dreams every damn minute I'm asleep; they don't help at all. When I woke up on this stormy Tuesday morning, it was just like every one since the party, except for a voicemail from an unknown number.

Quynh gives me the day off after I tell her I have an interview later in the week, and that I want to go buy some new clothes and see my Nana earlier in the day. Heading to the bathroom to start getting ready, I press play.

*'Hi Ms. Whitlock, this is Anya Terrence from Becknam Psychiatric Hospital. We were informed of your change of residence and got your new number from Seth Dete. We just need to confirm details, and we also wanted to inform you that you are eligible to receive your care through Gallow Center Hospital going forward, so please call me back so we can transfer you. Thanks!'*

It baffles me how the same doctor who had revealed my situation to me after deeming me unworthy of caring for myself, and believing what was said over my own experience, was now the woman in charge of continued care for the 'released' patients. I can face it and say it now: that place isn't a hospital. It's a fucking prison. How many others were in there against their will? With no knowledge of their situations, without any way—or even hope—of getting out?

"No, Dr. Terrence, I don't think I will call you back," I mutter, running a comb through my waves, giving up as soon as I hit a snag and throwing the bird's nest into a bun. But I won't cut my hair, because of *him*.

I have already dealt with finding a new doctor, therapist, and medication. It's curious that they are calling me a week after I made sure none of my health was within their grasp anymore... and it is insane to me how they speak as if they didn't literally abuse me and keep me confined in a glass

box for three fucking years, all because some man told them I was a danger to myself. Sure, I didn't make my time there easy on them... but I didn't need to be there. *Fuck them all.* Indeed.

It was a terrible, shitty idea. I never should have gone to that party. The thought screams in the back, and front if I'm honest, of my mind the entire bus ride to the nursing home, all because I'm dreading that I might run into Nikolai again...

I only left in a rush because I was so embarrassed for not having more control... for so easily giving in and letting him see that side of me, letting him *have* that much of me without knowing him at all... I still feel embarrassed because of how much I liked it. *You shouldn't...* Can you leave me alone?

My gaze flits around the bus to confirm I didn't speak aloud... It's been more difficult to control myself in general ever since I met him... *because he's good for you...* No. No, he is not.

Quynh didn't ask about my sudden mood change, or why I wanted to go home. She organized an Uber for me since she was plastered, and I was driven away within minutes of slamming that door in Nikolai's face. He didn't come after me, so he must have felt the same. *He didn't come after you because you told him it was a mistake...* It was.

Quynh made sure I was okay when I got home, and I explained most of what happened yesterday during work, but I feel so fucking weird. Like I should not be thinking about him still, especially after... *that.*

I am dreading seeing him again. I know I can't run forever. I know I'll see him at another event or around town... or while visiting Nana. Why do I feel so ashamed for running when it's the only thing I have even been successful in? *Because you liked it...*

I can't help the twitch of a smile... but I wipe it away when I see my reflection in the window. I did like it.

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“Hi, Juniper! Just a reminder there’s only about another hour for visiting before our reading event starts. We did lunch a little early today too.” I envy the people working here; they really are amazing from what I’ve seen so far, and they truly care for those in the home.

“Thanks,” I say, giving her a polite grin. I sign in and take the pass from her pasty, polished hand. As I come to the T-shaped hallway, I force myself not to look down the opposite side, but I feel the pull... and as I shove through the door to Nana’s room, I catch sight of him. Like a fucking firefly, alone in the center of a field at midnight, I spot him without even trying.

The mustard yellow shirt, now that I see it, is more of a sweater, and it hugs him so much better than the flannel, which has been replaced by an earthy brown leather jacket. His seemingly-signature stance is what gives him away, though. He leans against the frame of a door in the hall, probably whatever family member he’s visiting, looking down at his phone. His stubble is longer, rougher—stop it. His hair is loose and frazzled compared to the combed-back look he sports—*stop it!* I thought you liked him?

Noticing so many details in such a short time is so irrationally unlike me... what the hell is going on? *He was a distraction, now move on...*

“Juni, oh my goodness, do I have some wonderful news!” The next sentences that tumble out of Nana’s mouth are as incoherent as the nearly-muted television.

“Oh, is that so?” She loves to talk, to explain every little detail of her days, and I indulge her whenever I can. I cherish being able to see her a handful of times a week now, whenever my schedule allows for it. She tugs me over to the armchairs circled in front of the small TV on her wall, playing *Golden Girls* on repeat.

“I just discovered something, and you’re not going to believe it!” Resisting the urge to tell her to just spit it out, I tug off my hoodie and lay it over the back of the chair. “I had an appointment with my doctor, and while I was there I overheard



him setting up an appointment for none other than... Vincent Bardot!" Oh shit. I still can't remember who he is— *Oh, I do...* What? She's waiting for me to present equal excitement.

"I would love to share this, Nana but honestly... I don't remember. I recognized the name when I heard it a few weeks ago at the front desk, but I couldn't..." I feel myself becoming frustrated. The heat in my cheeks starts to rise and hot tears start to well up. I hate how badly my memory has been shot; I thought by now things would be normal, but... I think this is my new normal. Nana grabs my hand. "I'm sorry."

"Nonsense, dear. I haven't talked or even thought about him in so long... because I was under the impression that when he was drafted to Vietnam, he never came back." Suddenly, realization hits and it's as if someone unlocks Pandora's box inside my head... not only memories of my childhood, but so many little things about my mom, the dad I never knew, so many things that happened to me during my relationship that I had repressed, drifting back like solving a very large and complex puzzle. I try to appear present, even though I'm suddenly warped into the past.

"I do remember you speaking of him, so he's... here? That's amazing news, Nana. Maybe now you'll be able to make up for lost time." Her story has always been one of the saddest, most unfortunate ones I've encountered. She has the biggest heart, and never recovered after Vincent. Now I feel bad for not recalling who he was.

"Yes, I hope so, too. He is secluded most of the time from what I've inquired, because he has severe memory loss. But I caught a glimpse of him last week being wheeled back into his room at the end of the other hall while spying. I would recognize the circular scar on the back of his head anywhere, from when he busted it open on the hood of his car after we broke down on the side of the road one weekend." The memories cause her face to turn sour; no matter how fond the time they had was, thoughts of their separation have always gutted her. She breathes in slowly and returns to the present,

“I’m not entirely sure what happened after the war, but is this not a sign?”

“Of course it is. I’m so happy for you. The possibility that you will meet again is phenomenal, really. I do hope you get to.”

The blue in her eyes seems to rise a shade as the skin around them crinkles in response to her grand smile. The biggest I think I have ever seen. Then she raises a gray eyebrow and grips my hand tighter.

“That’s not all, I met his son! Or grandson, I’m not too sure. But he seems only slightly older than you, and so handsome! A charming man, mature. I’ve been paying extra attention the last few weeks, and it seems he comes to visit on Tuesdays and Thursdays during the afternoon visiting hours!” Oh, lovely.

“Nana, thank you, but I’m really not looking for anything. I just want to focus on myself and on setting things straight in my life.” *And think about a certain older man...*

“Oh, I know, Juni. I just want you to be happy.”

“Why can’t I be happy alone?” I don’t mean to snap, I’m just... frustrated already knowing Nikolai’s here, and now this... “Sorry, I’m feeling a bit stressed, but that’s all, I promise.” She softens again, but is clearly suspicious when she continues talking about Vincent.

“Well, regardless of your life, mine is coming to an end.” She rejects my interruption with a wave of her hand; I only smile and shake my head at her. “I wasn’t trying to get you to speak to him for you, dear. I was proposing that maybe you could ask him to arrange a date with Vincent and me, since I’m not sure when or how to see him again. And frankly, I am far too shy to ask. Do your grandmother a favor?” We both howl with laughter, because she’s rarely asked for anything in return for raising both me and my mother alone. She knows I will deny her nothing, and she knows I am just as shy as she is, if not more, around strangers due to my anxiety. *Good thing I’m not...*

“Oh fine, I’ll brave it for you Nana. You’ll have to point him out to me when I have some more time.” I check the clock above the TV it reads two thirty—shit, that means he might be here, too. “I have a few things to do this afternoon, though, and I need some time to convince myself of this socialization. I don’t even know what to say yet,” I add to solidify the notion that I am not up for this today. She agrees to help talk me up for it, and then she starts on the old stories she’s kept close to her heart and rarely ever speaks unless it was a holiday, or the date he left her, which is one I will always have memorized, right next to my birth and my mother’s death. Or the date of my accident, or when I left that cage.

The conversation drifts into my move, which I had only days ago mentioned to her, then to work and the jobs I had applied for. One of the nurses enters to let us know their event is starting soon and to help prepare Nana for it.

“I don’t mean to intrude, but I heard you discussing jobs.” The bobbed brunette helps my Nana from her chair and into her cardigan. “Would you be interested in some information about jobs at the home? We have many positions opening, since some of our assistants are now leaving for nursing positions. The company pays for your schooling if you decide to commit to a position.”

“That actually sounds really great. I would love to hear about it. I’m not sure if they will refuse because of my past, though...” The words come out before I can think about what I’m saying, and due to the spark of joy on my Nana’s face at the interest I showed, I would not take it back.

“We don’t discriminate based on your past. I’ll get you the information when I’m done here!” I do want to do something useful, something helpful. Why not help those whose lives are beginning to come to an end?

I say goodbye to Nana and follow the nurse back to the desk where she cheerily prints off some pages, points to a few bullets in a pamphlet, and writes down some websites and starting dates for the next courses.

She's incredibly knowledgeable. I mean to ask how long she's been there and if she only worked the front desk, but my mind swims with possibilities of the future. I let my lifted spirits carry me all the way to the bus stop. That's when I notice, too late, that Nikolai is waiting, leaning against the sign post.

Hands in his jacket pocket, feet crossed at the ankles... He smiles as I approach, *with teeth*...pushing off to meet me. I do not reciprocate the excitement. He sighs, defeated as I take a seat on the bench, tuck away my papers, and plug my headphones into my ears. It does not deter him, and he sits beside me just like the first day.

I try my hardest to seem distracted, refusing to look at him even though I feel his warm gaze drilling into the side of my face. Fuck... *maybe he's not so bad*—make up your mind.

“What do you want?” I ask, seeming as bothered as I possibly can, even though I'm not really at all. He plucks the earbud from my fingers and pops it into his own before I can protest.

“Just as I suspected. I used to do this in college. Great for getting people to leave you alone.” That fucking condescending smirk. Why am I blushing?

“Leave me alone, Nikolai—”

“Don't...” he interrupts, then stops, brushing a hand through his hair. He looks distressed as he gives the earbud back. I tuck them away since they have been rendered useless with him. “I go by my middle name, Mercer Bardot.” Standing, he extends his hand like he wants me to shake it. He stares at me expectantly, but I feel my face flush. Whether with anger or embarrassment, I'm not sure, but I do know that he played me for a fucking fool.

“Your grandfather is Vincent Bardot?” His hand drops as he comes to the conclusion that I am indeed taking it personally. *Run...*

“Yes. Your grandmother is an exceptionally kind woman, if not a little nosy.” You have got to be fucking

kidding me.

“How long have you known?” He turns away, toward the lot, stretching his arms up to the sky. He looks uncomfortable. *Good*. I no longer want to wait for the bus to come, so I get to my feet and start toward the next block where I know the same bus will be stopping in fifteen minutes. If I walk fast enough, I can make it in time. And if not—

“Juniper, wait. I’m sorry.”

“For what?” I pivot back around so fast my head spins, or it could be the rising blood pressure as I attempt to suppress my angry tears.

“I should have said something, but I didn’t think it mattered, or that you’d listen. And Friday night... I’m sorry.” So he knew— *Not worth it...*

“You knew who my Nana was, you knew how much your grandfather hurt her and that they ended up in the same facility, and you chose not to say a fucking thing to me? You want me to forgive you for taking advantage of me being ignorant instead of choosing to speak to me, to tell me? God, men are something else.” I mutter the last bit just loud enough to make sure I’m heard as I storm back off to the bus stop. He lets me for a few minutes. Then his shiny black sports car starts to slowly tail me as I stomp down the street.

The window rolls down with quiet ease. “Juniper, I didn’t know he hurt her. Just please stop!” I don’t, not until his brakes screech, and he abandons his fancy vehicle in the middle of a very busy street to run after me himself.

“Are you stupid? Get back in your car and leave me alone, Nikolai... Mercer... whatever the fuck your name is. Just go away.” *There you go...*

The creases that form around his furrowed brow as he struggles to find words, and the lines around his mouth corners and his eyes, reveal that he is significantly older than me. I didn’t really think twice about it before, but... No wonder we don’t get along.

“I want to know what you know, because the story I know of my granddad’s past isn’t that he hurt her. It’s that he loved her more than anything in the world, and he lost her. So please, Juniper, help me understand what you mean.” Cars had started piling up behind his, and he didn’t seem to care in the slightest. How does a waiter have a fucking sports car in the first place, and the money not to care about leaving it unlocked in the middle of the street?

“Why do you care?” I fold my arms over my chest, holding fast to the attitude—push him away. I finally see the anguish strewn across his troubled face.

“Because I can’t stop thinking about you, and if it’s important to you then I want to understand. Especially if I did something to offend you.” He pulls out his phone and seems to check the time. “I’m already incredibly late for a meeting that I’m now canceling, and I haven’t had lunch yet,” The bus goes speeding by us, and he chuckles at the expression of annoyance that I must have clearly put on display. “Wanna grab a bite to eat and talk about this? I can take you home or to Quynh’s afterwards?” I deeply consider going anywhere with this man... *You shouldn’t... you don’t know him*—stay out of this.

“Fine, but only to talk about them. I don’t want anything more to do with you after this, though.” His disdain at my response is just as clear. Oh yeah, definitely older than I thought. Is that a bad thing? *What are you doing...*

“Whatever you say, Gin.” The condescending slime coating that spontaneous nickname lurches me into an instant fit.

“We’re not friends. Don’t do that. That’s not my name.”

“I’m sorry, Juniper, it’s...” He decides against whatever more than likely idiotic thing he was going to add and gestures to the road instead. “What kind of food do you prefer?”

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## Chapter Ten: Belle Monde

I've never stepped foot into this rich ass part of town, let alone the five-star French restaurant Nikolai— or Mercer, whatever—pulls up to.

He valets his car even though the lot and building are both practically empty. He tells me to wait while he tosses the keys to a well-dressed gentleman and opens the door for me.

Opened. The- Door. For me. Like... what? Who does that anymore?

“I think I might be a little underdressed for somewhere like this...” I say as I stare up at the red neon sign and the adorable umbrella picnic tables sitting out front.

“Nonsense, you're beautiful.” I forget who I am for a moment. I should run. *I told you...*

No, I fucking won't. Nana asked me to do this for her, so I will. Even if it's the most uncomfortable lunch in history.

He doesn't wait for a host to seat us, and they only smile as he guides me through the maze of tables to a thin hallway, and then to a small, private room in the back near the kitchen. I don't even notice until he leaves my side to speak to someone that his hand was resting on the small of my back.

Concealing my blush, I choose a booth and sit down. Mercer joins, removing his jacket and tossing it onto a lone chair nearby. As much as I try to remove my eyes from the muscles under that perfectly complementary sweater, I just...

“What are you thinking?” He's taking me in from across the glossy table, smirking again as if knowing exactly where my mind is. The veins in his forearms thrum as he tugs up the sleeves and folds his hands together, resting his elbows before him. But I keep my own face taut, trained on seriousness. Having uncontrollable emotions doesn't always mean they are on display. I have a wonderful mask. *Most of the time...*

“I'm thinking, what the hell is all of this?”

A waiter enters, full bow tie and all. I can't help but chuckle, which makes Mercer smile, with his teeth. *Stop it.*

The waiter places a bottle of wine and two glasses on the table from one hand, and a dish of pretzel sticks with some sort of cheese dip from the other. It smells heavenly. I thank him out of politeness and try to ignore the small rumble in the pit of my stomach reminding me that I was actually going to get food at the mall.

“Well, I am the youngest of three boys. My oldest brother is a business manager; he and his husband own six restaurants in the U.S. and three in Paris.” My eyebrows rise, willing him to get to the point. “The middle is a conservationist, and travels Africa fighting poachers with kindness, mostly saving elephants.” He serves us each a nice glass of wine. I use the chance to make fun of him.

“And you are a middle-aged waiter who takes women on spontaneous first dates to expensive restaurants? Your parents must be very proud.” I take the wine and take a small sip, and it's delicious and full. Sweet, just like I prefer.

“I never knew them.” Oh fuck. *You're not good at sassy...*

“I'm sorry—”

“It's alright,” he immediately interjects, “we're not friends. I wouldn't have expected you to know anything about me before now.” Ouch. Okay then, if that's how he wants to be. *You started it*—pick a fucking side... *His.*

At this point, I don't want to be here and I'm starving. So I eat, and endure the awkward annoyance of his presence across from me until he emits a deep chuckle and speaks again.

“You don't have very good judgment, Juniper.” Was that a statement, a question, or an insult? *Can I pick again?* No, shut up.

Absolutely baffled, I half choke out, “Excuse me?” around a piece of pretzel, trying to convey my offense this time since he was apparently unsure of it earlier.



“The guys at the bar, flirting with the ‘waiter’ who paid you special attention,” he uses air quotes around the word referencing himself, “dumping a drink on some prick and causing trouble for yourself, needing someone to defend and save you... then coming to an unknown location with someone you barely know and sitting in a secluded area. Do flattery and money usually cause your judgment to lapse?” I’m literally in shock. My mouth falls open like an idiot and everything. I understand getting back at someone for a joking insult, but I won’t stand for this. I throw down my half-eaten piece of pretzel and grab my purse, now determined to put as much distance between him and me as possible. Nana will understand what a douche he is.

“I just cannot fathom how a grown woman can be so cautious and completely careless at the same time. You are so intriguing that I can’t take my mind off you. Just consider all the similarities, the coincidences...” Is he genuinely attempting to form this into a compliment now? That was so rude... “I guessed you liked gin. I knew I was right. That was my Gramp’s favorite drink, and it’s made from Juniper—I hadn’t ever heard your name at that point. My mother’s name was Virginia—Ginny—also a nickname for your name. It has to mean something, that we are so intertwined, that everything is so similar, that we keep ending up near each other. Please —”

“So it’s just some stupid fascination to you, then? That gives you the right to insult me, my name, and my actions? That was rude as fuck. And, you’re an asshole.” I start to leave again, but he nearly falls from the booth reaching to grab my wrist. I yank away, taking a step back. “Do not touch me.” *Get away from him.*

“Juniper, I didn’t mean it that way... I’m really bad at speaking my mind. It’s been a long time since I’ve been open with anyone or... even cared about someone else’s opinion of me, let alone cared about anyone else as a person... it is a sort of fascination, I suppose. I get shit for the way I talk often, and I’m working on it.” This is him... caring about me? What on earth... I can’t deal with this.

“What do you do then, if you’re not a waiter? You’re mysterious, and evasive, and it’s infuriating.” I don’t take my seat again, but I lean a hip against the side of the booth. Mercer resettles in his place, looking less confident than he did when we first came to this overly-fancy dig at my character.

“You’re one to talk...” he grumbles with annoyance before returning to his usual tone. “Both Belle Monde and Bon Chance, the club-slash-restaurant where we met, are owned by my brother. I was just helping out at the club because Alex told me someone quit. I happened to be free for a few weeks while they interviewed new servers. But I’m actually an architect by day. I chose to bring you here because I occasionally get some decent service, and I have a site not far off that I need to grab some prints from. You said you liked Italian food—this is the closest I could get. Sure, I thought it might impress, but also allow you to see the area. Maybe show you that I am trying...” He glances at me still standing, then shifts uncomfortably. “Can you please sit back down? It’s really odd to apologize when...” He gestures with a wave to me, then to the height difference with him sitting, before placing the hand under his chin. I shouldn’t feel bad. I should revel in his defeat. But I’m not that kind of person, and honestly... something like pity mixed with understanding wills me to take the seat again. Maybe just so I could see him light up instead of that pathetic frown... make him smile. *Stop it.*

“Apologize for what?” I give in, just a bit. *Stop it.*

“The night we met, for a start. I didn’t really properly apologize. And of course... the party.” Those rich, chocolatey eyes shoot to mine across the table, and I swear my heart skips a beat. Like a silly romance novel... not like real life. *That shit doesn’t exist.*

“Why? Are you sorry about what happened at the party?”

He seems to take a moment to think. Then, bringing the glass to his lips slowly, without looking away from mine... “I’m only sorry it happened there, and that we were interrupted.”

A small gasp escapes me, which makes the corner of his mouth twitch upward, creasing his cheek before he sips his wine. I clear my throat, straighten my spine, and change the fucking subject before I lose my shit. *Shake it off.*

“My Nana, Grace, met Vincent at a summer camp where they worked their last year of high school before they went to college. He was from here—Gallow. They spent the entire summer and year after together. He even decided to stay and apply to community college in Denver so she could go to the university. He was drafted to Vietnam right before the gap year he took ended, before he could apply. When she said goodbye to him at the bus stop, that was the last time she saw him. He didn’t come back like he promised, and she finished college without so much as looking at another man because she was waiting for him. She never even got a letter. Then her father arranged a marriage with one of his friends’ sons, and she only accepted because she couldn’t find anything out even though she tried. She had to move on to please her parents.”

Mercer rubs his forehead, cursing under his breath, before downing the rest of his cup. He pours himself another glass and motions to mine, but I wave him off. “I had no idea of any of their detailed history, honestly. Gramps was severely injured toward the end of his contract and was sent home. He had no recollection of life after high school due to a piece of shrapnel piercing the front of his brain through his left eye, which he no longer has. Only after a few fleeting moments where he seems lost, had he ever mentioned Grace. But I had heard her name a few times through the years, from family or under his breath. I just never thought anything about it. In recent years he would be lost in a daze, like he were a million miles away and shout her name, before coming back to reality.

“After about two years of him being back, he was able to live a normal life, other than the huge chunk of memory missing, and the difficulty retaining new information. My great-grandparents also set him up with one of their friends’ unwed daughters who was older when they married, and who despised the idea of being tied to a man. She grew to despise the man himself, because Grace forever lingered inside his head. They had constant issues because of his PTSD. He

would spend weeks in and out of hospitals and specialized facilities receiving treatments. Things were manageable, and they ended up having a daughter, my mom. Five years later, he woke up and couldn't remember his current life. It was like the day he was injured all over again, and he believed himself to be a high school graduate. He spent then until about ten years ago in a facility in West Ridge, asking about Grace every so often, or why he was there. But he could never remember more than a few hours to a few days. His wife visited him for a while, until they discovered she was slipping him homemade cyanide and had started giving him even more in hopes that he would die and she could claim his estate and money. She was arrested, and he slowly got better. My mother was raised with his sister and her husband.

“She could never care for him, and her husbands never allowed her to. She died when I was a kid and my father abandoned us. We were adopted by a nice older couple who have long since passed on now. My brothers grew up and had lives, I... stayed around to clean up the pieces, I suppose you could say.” Something about that seems... untruthful. But only about himself. Why would he hide something so trivial?

Before deciding against continuing the conversation, I'm asking for more. “Was there anything else you wanted to do, for work or school?” His sly smile betrays the friendly tone I had set forth.

“I thought this wasn't supposed to be a date? Just talking about our grandparents?” Shit, I have nothing to add there. “Besides... you know a lot more about me than I do about you now—”

“I was just indulging your ego since you couldn't seem to hear enough of your own voice. There's nothing to know about me. Sorry to misjudge, or mislead.” He raises a thick, dark eyebrow—possibly surprised by me talking back. He then calls over a waiter by name, who's standing half hidden in the corner of the room. Maybe giving Mercer a taste of his own sarcasm and attitude will bother him as much as he's bothering me... *Not likely...*

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He pays for the food and wine, then guides me back out onto the street, this time at a distance. Maybe I offended him... but why should I care? *You shouldn't.*

“Thanks, see you later.” I want to revel in his stunned face, but I turn toward the mall I spotted when we pulled into the parking lot. I have shit to accomplish. A life to never waste again.

“W-wait, I can give you a ride, Juniper!” he calls after me, and I have to suppress my laugh. The sidewalk crunches as I look over my shoulder; he is indeed shocked. Good.

“I’m okay, I have stuff to do before heading back to Quynh’s.” Shrugging, I add, “You said you had work. I like to walk. Besides, it wasn’t a date.”

“Can I have your number at least?” He wastes no time, which I suppose is fair considering he waited around for me today and missed a meeting. Pausing, I listen to the few cautious steps he takes at my back. “Since I’m sure we’ll be seeing each other around...” He is extending his phone to me when I face him. So, I take it.

“Only because my Nana wants to get in touch with Vincent again.” I type in the number, and save it under my name with a plant emoji and hand it back, yanking it away at the last moment just as his fingers brush the corner and the outside of my hand. His brows rise in question but before he can continue his attempts at dazzling me, I snap, “Don’t ever call me without asking first. Text only.” I give him a copy of his arrogant smirk, then walk off with the mall set in my sights.

I’ve never felt this way... and I’m still deciding whether or not I should hate it. Until I can, it is much better left unsaid. Kept in the only safe space feelings are, inside. *Safe, you say? Well... mostly.*

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It takes every mantra I can remember to control my immediate feeling of being overwhelmed as I step through the

sliding glass doors and into a department store. I don't even look at the name because I can't care less, and can't be bothered to remember after everything that happened. I feel too warped and drained.

So, I just choose the first place that isn't covered in pink and frills. Half of this store has more business attire, but focusing on comfort. The other half has delicate, lace-covered skirts and dresses. And I actually love lace; it's pretty but sophisticated.

My tennis shoes, which hadn't seen weather in three years, are now falling apart from all the walking, so I choose a solid black pair of slip-on shoes and a pair that looks like non-skid work shoes. Nothing fancy. "I can take those to the counter for you if you're still looking around," an oddly familiar voice calls from a rack of clothing to my side. When I look into the petite blonde's face, it's like looking at a ghost.

"Kelly?" Mumbling a curse, she approaches me. She looks... completely different. "I... can't believe it. You work here?" Her hair is short, with bangs and dyed platinum now. Thin-framed glasses on a beaded string around her neck, flattering makeup, and dark blue button-up rolled up to her elbows, with a black pencil skirt. She's wearing heels. *What the fuck...*

"Juniper." Nothing but duty in her tone. She takes the shoe boxes. "It's nice to see you again. It's actually my first week, I... had some rough patches." I want to question her about the money, but... she's healthy. She's gotten help, she's trying to do better. I don't care about fifty dollars if it helped her turn her life around, and I don't actually know if she had anything to do with it or it was just another weird fucking coincidence. *There seem to be a lot of those going on.*

"Well, you're here now." The smile that plays on her lips reminds me of Quynh saying the same when I told her where I came from... and that's all that matters at the end of the day. Progress, change. "Do you work on commission here?" She confirms shyly, and I decide to take full advantage of her services. I'll consider it payback if she did steal from me, and if not, then she'll just make some extra cash.

I ask her to help me choose a nice, semi-business attire outfit for the upcoming interview I have, and she guides me along different racks piling pieces into my arms, then directs me to the changing rooms. Right beside the room, there's a mannequin in a cute spaghetti strap dress: lush-pink lace over cream skirts, and a front tied, white button shirt over top. If love at first sight does exist, that explains my feeling about that damn dress.

"It's on sale, the last one. Do you want me to pull it for you to try on?" I set the clothes in a dressing stall and think about it. *It's perfect...* I need to save money.

"I... don't know where I would even wear something like that, and don't know if I can afford it, either. But thank you," I only try on a few sets of clothes. Some of the things are not really my style, but I wanted Kelly to pick what she liked as well. She seemed to be enjoying making choices for someone else.

Deciding on a simple black blouse and a stretchy pair of matching pants, I make my way to the counter, where Kelly already has a fancy gift-looking bag sitting there. Her smile could blind a trucker on the highway.

"I took it upon myself to cross-reference the size of the dress to what we picked out, the shirt as well, and they are your size!" *Weird...*

"I really can't—"

"It's my treat," Her wide grin falters and she glances back at a door labeled 'employees only' before leaning in closer, "I know what Willow did, because I caught her in the room, and I didn't stop her. She promised she would help me if I didn't tell anyone. But she took things from Seth and a few others too... and we were both kicked out of the home because I knew, and I... can't lie anymore. I tried to ask him for your contact info so I could tell you, and apologize. So please, consider this my apology. I don't care if you never forgive me, but part of my path to forgiving myself is making amends for every possible thing I can." Her already-cloudy eyes turn red and strained, so I place my hand on top of hers on the counter.

“I forgive you, Kelly. Thank you for telling me and not leaving me to wonder. Because I was. I do not blame you, and I’m really happy to hear you’re improving your life too.” Our exchange finishes with me paying, and her recommending a better pair of black flats that are more versatile and fit with the dress as well. She even lets me know that they’re hiring in a handful of places in the mall, and since it’s a nicer part of town, the pay is really good.

She’s surprisingly a really nice, normal person. Whatever normal is, I’m still not too sure, but she definitely represents it. Maybe... maybe people aren’t crazy. They are just led into those emotions and reactions because of the situations they are put in. Situations that they don’t always have control of, and can’t choose to just up and leave.

If I ever see Willow again, I will forgive her too. Wish her luck and strength in leaving her situation to create something better. *Being the bigger person suits you...* well, for now.

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## Chapter Eleven: Persistence

It's incredible and relieving to experience the hospitality of the town now that I also represent what would seem to be normal... when, just a few years ago, people acted like getting too close to me would give them the plague.

They would take in my sunken eyes and cheeks, the bruises coating my arms and neck, and they would see someone less than them. As if I *let* him put those marks on me. As if it were a *choice* to stay. As if he didn't try to kill me when I had finally decided it was enough. If only they knew... But they aren't entitled to my truth, to a reason *why* I am how I am. *Yet they still expect it.* It doesn't matter. I'm healing at my pace, not theirs.

It takes two buses and a little over an hour to get back to the shop. I knock on Bao's door to let him know I'm back, and he happily starts down the stairs saying he's going to make us some dinner. It's a bit early, but I don't complain. I *love* his cooking, and Vietnamese food is amazing.

So while food is being made, I put my things away and take my laptop to the downstairs workroom to look up information about what I need to do for the classes at the nursing home. It turns out, I can apply for the assistant/caregiver position with only an eight-hour course completed, and I can become a nurse there in six to eight months.

Less than a year from now, I could have a normal life, just like everyone else. I could find contentment if not happiness, and learn to enjoy meeting people and helping them at the ends of their lives. I could *be* something. Show that fucking lowlife from his grave that I am anything but worthless... *You are strong.*

My phone buzzes against the wood beside my laptop. I lean back, flipping it open and expecting it to be Quynh checking in, but it's a random number.

?: *Hey, it's Mercer.*

*?: Thank you for hearing me out today. Nana Grace is a charm btw.*

I'm unsure of how to feel after that exchange. But judging by the flush that overtakes me and forces me to grin from ear to ear at only a message, it's safe to say that my heart is *not* safe around him. I need distance. Catching my reflection in the black screen on my sleeping laptop, I feel sullen that he makes me feel good, and I can't put my finger on exactly why he seems off. Why would he lie to everyone in town about his name and only tell me? And after claiming it's because he cares about me... *for some reason...*

I close the phone with new determination and focus on myself. It's too easy to forget about my position when he's around. I pull up my old college records to see what might be done about credits and email my old college about my situation. Bao and I have a lovely dinner, and I tell him about my upcoming interview and the last few days, and he talks about his work—even showing me a few pieces that still need to be polished and sealed before being sold. He's so fucking talented. I can't stand to think about all the potential pieces tucked away in the clusterfuck of a shop... *Unearth them- I shall.*

We clean up and do the dishes, and I spend a while sweeping the work station for Bao for tomorrow before heading up to my room to finish digging. Before I know it, three in the morning rolls around, and I've finally deciphered how I'm going to do things.

I apply for the receptionist position—fuck the cashier interview—with a note about the woman who recommended me; and that I've registered for the required classes for the caregiver's license that will allow me to also work as one for them. After that, I'll be applying to their continuation program that they actually hold in the facility my Nana is at, but in a different building. I'm doing this.

The night gets away from me, but I don't have to work at the shop for more than a few hours, enough to drag out trash and clean up for the weekend to accommodate Quynh's

schedule—so I start a bath. Just as I'm slipping off my leggings, my phone vibrates.

*Mercer: Is there any chance you would be up for accompanying an old night owl to the Sacred Bean on Cameron Street?*

Sitting on the bed, reading his message in my comfortable underwear and oversized sleep T-shirt, I try to shove the anxious and skeptical feelings that boil away and attempt to concoct a viable response. After a few deep breaths, of course.

*J: Are you asking me on an official first date over text in the middle of the night?*

*M: Well you told me not to call you, and I see your lights are still on so I figured you were awake*

My hand slaps across my mouth, silencing a gasp before I register it. I take a few cautious steps over to the window and pull aside the curtains in an unnoticeable corner just enough to look onto the sidewalk. "Fuck," Sure enough, Mercer is standing there in his leather jacket. I can just see the collar of his mustard sweater poking from the top of it... He stumbles and waves his lit phone screen up at the window with a childlike demeanor. *Great.*

I crouch to the floor, then immediately question why the hell I'm hiding from him before I remember the bath... and my lack of clothing. *Get your shit together.*

*J: I don't remember telling you where I live, creep.*

Sending the message with a flurry, I shut off the water and pull on a pair of pajama shorts, also from the store earlier, from my dresser. As I'm ripping off the tag, he responds.

*M: Actually, you did mention going back to Quynh's... I went to her house first because I thought you might be one of her roommates.*

*J: Are you some sort of psycho?*

*M: Can I call you now?*

*J: No.*

*M: Will you come with me?*

*J: Is this another bizarre test?*

The phone rings in my hands. I can't control the reaction, and it slams into the mat sitting outside the tub. I'm fine. *Answer the phone. Nothing is going to happen to you, just press the button... click.*

“For the first time in a long time, I drank way too damn much, ‘cause... it’s not important. And I—all I wanted was to talk to you. I couldn’t get the shit today out of my head, and I keep fucking up around you but... I haven’t been comfortable with anyone in a long time and I...” The words jumble and bounce around, *drank way too much indeed*. “Please come with me. Or maybe hang out for a bit, so I can...” He fades off; it almost sounds like he’s trying not to be emotional. *What the fuck?*

I hardly liked him when he was sober, and with what happened the last time we were drinking and alone, even though I’m not now... “I’m confused. You berate me for my carelessness, then tell me I have bad judgment for going with you for lunch because of not knowing who you are. You barely tell me anything about yourself so I *can* know who you are... and less than a day later show up outside my house—uninvited—asking me to go somewhere with you again, but in the middle of the night, after walking all around town figuring out where I live?” His silence is answer enough for me. He hadn’t for a second thought about how this would look. Probably because of the alcohol and how shitty it makes people act. “No Mercer, don’t call me again. And go away.” Pressing the button to end the call before he can argue, I get to my feet and stomp across the room, shutting off all the lights except for the bathroom’s.

I pull back a curtain again enough to see the whole length of sidewalk and street in front of the shop. Everything is so dark, but I don’t see him. I’ll just take a bath and calm down, tell him tomorrow that I don’t want to see or speak to him unless it’s for my Nana... I start pulling off my shirt when there’s a sequence of taps on the window I was just looking through, and movement in the inch of space that’s still open.

Mercer is crouched on the roof ledge, his hands clasped together in a pleading motion, an awkward grimace on his face. I shake my head *no* as angrily as I can convey in silence, fixing my shirt and making sure my face matches my anger—even in the dark, even with the surprise. I don't want him to be confused by what I want again. His foot slips, causing him to slap a palm against the glass. Too loud to be a bird or a bug...

“Son of a—,” My head snaps to the underside of my bedroom door to see if there are any other lights on, but it's dark, which means Bao is asleep. I press a finger to my lips to shush him. His grin widens, and against my better judgement once a-fucking-gain, I open the window.

He not-so-gracefully tumbles inside, knocking over a bottle of water from the rickety desk as he has to hop over it. My nipples prick instantly at the chilly air. It's an old house with old windows; there are no screens, and it's about to be autumn in Colorado, so instant goosebumps coat me. I shiver, fumbling with the latch, and when I finally face him, he's scanning the shabby room, taking in the boxes—one even being used as a desk chair since I haven't had the courage to ask about one of the carved ones downstairs, even though I know Bao would insist on giving me my choice.

“Are you unfamiliar with the terms ‘no’ or ‘go away’? I would be happy to explain them to you.” I fold my arms across my chest. His gaze lingers at the hem of my probably-too-short-to-be-around-him shorts... Taking it to heart, I throw on a hoodie from the pile on the floor that goes down my thighs farther than the shorts do. “Quynh's dad lives here too, you know. This isn't okay, you really need to leave.”

“I'm sorry, but...no, I... I need you to hear me.”

“I do not want to hear you, Mercer, get out—”

“My wife left me five years ago for a friend of my brother's... someone I thought was a good friend of mine, too... They dropped some incredibly fucked-up news on me, and I... fled. I moved almost an hour away, to my Gramp's hometown that I had never been to, but he always wanted to

come back to. I've never been able to talk about it. I've been in therapy for two fucking years and have never been able to say half the things I've been able to tell you in a matter of weeks...

“I told everyone here my name was Nikolai so I could start fresh, and so if anyone who did know me came across the name it wouldn't ring any bells... You and my grandfather are the only ones here who call me by the name I prefer. Something about our instant connection, and all of the shit about our families just... it made me feel like I could trust you. That maybe you were just as fucked up as I am somehow.” He gets so... very... close... rubbing his hands up and down my forearms before taking both of mine in his. I don't know how to feel. He's so cold... but I don't pull away. Maybe because I'm stunned at the confession, or maybe because I *do* actually want to hear him. “Tell me you don't feel something similar, this insane fucking... thing that keeps begging me to go to you, and I promise I'll leave... I'll never contact you again. I just—I need to know.” What if he hurts me, too? Will it be worth the pain, what he could so easily strip from me that has taken so long to rebuild? I'm not even remotely stable enough to start a relationship, but... hasn't this already started?

I want to know, too. *Be careful...*

So, I give him a small smile, accompanied by a quick nod. “You can still buy me that coffee if you're up for it. A very strong one, considering I'm sacrificing my bath for this.” His smile is more intoxicating than any drink I've ever tasted, making me feel more energetic than a triple shot... That chipped tooth. I want his story. I want him. I shouldn't deny myself that out of fear of what could be... I can't live in fear any longer.

*But you should...to protect yourself.* No. I shouldn't.

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## Chapter Twelve: Sacred

How much deeper does this run for him?

I always thought there was no one who could get what I experienced unless they had the same exact thing happen to them. And I mean, what are the chances of that? But... maybe him being just as fucked up as I am, in a different but just as absurd way, can bring us to understanding. *It's a stretch...*

Mercer waits for me in the hall while I change, drain the bath, and calm myself. I also send a text to Quynh that she could have warned me, or just not told him where I was, but she doesn't answer because it's nearly four a.m. now. Before I open the door, I have a thought. I grab a stack of post-it notes, write a quick message to Bao, and pull off the top one before tossing the stack and pen into my bag. Mercer is leaning against the cupboard in the hall right outside my door and pushes off when startled by the noise. He smiles at me with glossy, half-dead eyes and follows me like a lost puppy across the landing so I can put the note on Bao's door.

We quickly and quietly leave the shop, and I shiver as I lock the door behind us. Mercer stretches his arms up into the sky, exposing his midriff, and I catch myself staring at the thin trail of hair that gets thicker as it disappears into his waistband...

He seems to be much less attentive than he was during lunch. Whatever happened in the time between then and now, it really hurt him. It hurt him enough to want to break his silence, to take the chance... with me. *You, for some reason.*

We walk for a few minutes without saying anything, and honestly, I can't determine where to begin, or what exactly to share... I'm still wrapping my head around his confession.

"For the record..." He breaks the silence finally, and I feel tension rolling off my shoulders because he does. "I'm not that drunk anymore." I snort instead of laugh, which makes him chuckle. What I would give to bottle that sound and use it whenever I feel sad, or angry, or envious. To keep it so it is only mine. "I'm really sorry, Juniper. I didn't mean to come

across as creepy, and I completely get how you saw it that way. I just wasn't thinking. Like I said, I'm not good with people—it's easier to say nothing or tell a white lie to avoid the questions or worse—pity." *Yes.*

He does understand. Do I want to let another person in so quickly? I've barely convinced myself to trust Quynh. But... that turned out alright. Where would I be if I hadn't come into the shop, if I hadn't met her and trusted her, if I hadn't accepted her help? She has single-handedly helped put me on a better path. That's what starting over is truly about, is it not? Letting strangers in, hoping they will not hurt you but being prepared for the fact that it's a real possibility. And just the same, the possibility of friendship, or something more. *Don't do it...*

"I had a fiancé, years ago..." I blurt out after the moment of hilarity passes. "It was unhealthy, to say the least. He... hurt me. Ruined my life, took far too much time from me. That's why I'm here, too, just trying to start over." He doesn't need to know everything. Not just yet, and maybe not ever; but for now, I can give him a little piece of me. Just to see...

"I don't want to pry or confuse you—or make you feel like you have to talk to me because I dropped that on you. I'm sorry for that as well, I didn't know how else..." I reach for his hand; he slows to my pace and laces his strong fingers around mine as soon as he feels my skin. My thumb rubs across the lifted veins and tendons stretching along the back of his hand. Those fingers do amazing things. *Stop it, this is not the time.* "I also don't want to give you the impression that I am trying to test you. What did you mean by that? Is that how you felt at Belle Monde?" I struggle to take a steady breath, like he just sucks all the oxygen out of the atmosphere near me.

"I'm trying to think of how to say it without sounding malicious... It just felt like you were looking down on me. Especially with how you talked about my choices. Because for a while, I didn't have any choice. That and all the shit the night we met, and those guys... I thought this might be the



same kind of thing as lunch. Like you might be testing whether or not I had good judgment again.” Shame starts to flood me for putting some of the thoughts that have kept me from him into the ether. Mercer stops walking and tugs my hand so that I have to face him. When I won’t look at him, he murmurs my name, lightly brushes his knuckle over my jaw, hooks his finger under my chin, and guides me to meet his warm, completely encapsulating eyes. So dark and serious due to the shadows. Only one neon light places a bar of orange down the side of his cheek, perfectly illuminating the ring of gold wound around his pupil and the reddish tint in his deep chestnut hair. The smell of liquor and mint, and... I don’t hate it. Don’t shy away.

“I never meant to make you feel like I was making a fool of you, or make you uncomfortable... shit,” He starts to turn away, but I hold his hand to the side of my neck before he can drop it, “I want to make it up to you. I wish I could explain exactly what I meant, but...” He struggles to finish, his brows furrowing deeply. The crows feet accompanying the dark circles on his face deepen. His anguish is so apparent... I want him to feel better. *No!* Stay out of this!

“It’s alright. Maybe next time,” Giving him a light smile, I force a step toward the shop. He tightens his grip on my hand, making me look back at him. Without wasting another second, he brushes past my ear and grips the back of my neck, forcefully but filled with kindness instead of that primal want. His lips meet mine and they part for him like we’ve been doing this for years. I lose track of everything around us until a car door slams somewhere up the street, causing me to jump, but Mercer hugs me to his chest instead of letting me leave him at that moment. Willing my heart to still, I release his hand and instead, wrap myself around the small of his back. The cool leather of his jacket on my skin reminds me of how real this is... “So, are we still getting coffee? Because I’m exhausted.” His grin is a beacon of perfection in a storm. And I’m going to follow it, hoping I can trust it to lead me around the rocks and safely to shore. *Don’t drown me... please.*

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“I’ve been wondering... what happened to your tooth?”

He scoffs, running his tongue over the missing tip of that canine while giving me a side-eye from the depths of hell. Then he takes a seat on the rocking chair closest to the shop door and motions for me to take the other while setting his coffee cup on the table between them. *Cocky.*

“It’s a good thing I’m not self conscious about it or anything then, huh?” I almost question him on the sarcasm, but take a sip of the vanilla latte I ordered and sit, tucking my legs up underneath me, which leans me into the table, closer to him, “One of the first jobs I took after college were these two loft apartments being built on the top floor of a high-rise in Colorado Springs, and after the final inspection, I slipped on a piece of plastic coating the wood stairs.” He makes a falling motion with his hand then smacks his palm into the arm of the chair, “Busted my mouth on the railing on the way down. If it weren’t the bottom of the stairs, I probably would have broken more. But the new owner felt horrible and insisted on paying to have it fixed. I told them to just add it to the bill when we finished the job. Never got it fixed because I needed the money more, but it’s a good memory, and a great story.”

“Wow...” He perks up at my interest. “Definitely a great story. I like it; it makes your smile even more unique.” The recoil to the words coming out of me is slight, but I’m still happy that I felt the confidence to say it. I wrap my freezing hands around the warm cup, the flavored bean juice nearly gone but having done nothing for my tiredness. I see Mercer smoothing his facial hair from the corner of my eye.

“What else is unique about my smile, then?” No, I’m not fucking good at this. *You started it...* and I can’t finish it.

“How old are you?” He doesn’t like when I change the subject, but that.... I can’t do that. Embarrassment rises the longer he takes to answer the question, or maybe just because I —*stop it.*

“How old are you?” I didn’t realize I was avoiding his gaze, and I also didn’t realize how close he had gotten, leaning

across the small space. But as soon as I turn back, his lips meet mine again, only briefly this time before he settles back. He places an ankle on his knee. “I did ask first, but...thirty-seven, if you want to know and weren’t just using it as an excuse to avoid flirting with me.” Oh, no, no, no!

I cover my face with the sleeve of my sweater. “I was, sorry. But I was also...curious.” He finishes his own cup, the chair creaking as it smacks against the wood lightly with his movement.

“You don’t have to apologize for avoiding things that make you uncomfortable, Juniper, just tell me. I won’t always know if you don’t tell me.” Mercer leans his head back against the house when I finally glance up and set my cup down. I can’t think of anything to say. So I only sit and stare.

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The sun starts peeking over the horizon. Mercer is snoring lightly in the rocking chair, just as he has been for the past hour, and I have to pee. But I don’t want to disturb him.

Carefully standing and catching my own chair before the back can slam into the side of the shop, I scoot around his long legs. He said he wasn’t sleeping at night, so I don’t want to wake him now that he finally is. This just seems... off. As they would say in the romance books right before something bad happens, too good to be true. *It always is.*

Speaking of... After doing my business, I grab the Colleen Hoover book Sera lent me when I was eyeing their bookshelves last time I visited, two bottles of water, and a few blankets from the cabinet under the stairs. Before going back outside, I scribble another note to Bao and stick it on the coffee pot that will be auto-brewing soon. It’s his house, and I am a guest here, so I always let him know what I’m doing. Especially if it involves someone else being at his home, even though Mercer is not in it... right now, anyway.

When I come back to the porch, he’s readjusted, but is still snoring. *Louder, now.* Setting the rest of the pile on the porch, I throw one of the blankets over him and nearly crush

his phone, which has fallen onto the planks. Picking it up and respecting his privacy, I set it on the small table face-down. Then I toss the empty cups before getting settled back in the chair and flipping to my bookmarked page.

I can't focus on more than a sentence through my racing thoughts. How handsome I thought he was when he appeared at the booth with those drinks... the way my chest soared when he kissed me in the bathroom... *Steel your childish feelings, you stupid girl. He clearly has a lot going on, and you know you do. Focus on your job. Your life...* Jeez, have you been holding it in? You hardly say more than a few words to me most days.

I don't feel like a person most of the time now. Just a ghost, going through the motions, struggling to blend in and act like everyone else without understanding how they do it. And Mercer is the closest I've found to a similar heart, but... he would look at me with the same pity as everyone else does if he knew of the true scars I bear. Physical and not. He's only had the smallest taste of me. And it was the sweetest... but under the surface, it is nothing but bitter-laced hate. It doesn't get better. I only have one desire—change. He cannot help me with that... can he?

Drinking some water, I spend a while watching the sun fill the sky, turning it to a pale blue. And I breathe, pushing away the evil thoughts that were planted there in careful manipulation to grow and thrive. I know I need to rip them out, but I keep missing pieces, and they keep coming back. *Surprise.* My eyes roll back in my head. *I saw that.*

Finally, I get through a chapter of the book. Two. And it's *really* good. The street starts to liven up, and I check the time. Bao will be leaving soon for his doctor's appointment. I mark the page and go to nudge Mercer's knee when his phone vibrates. And again... and again. Then it starts to ring. I assume that it will wake him up, but he is one hell of a heavy sleeper, and I have the curiosity to murder several cats.

I pick up the phone and see that someone saved as the skull and crossbones emoji has tried to call him and has sent

him a few texts. Placing it back down, still trying not to intrude, I poke Mercer's shoulder. He doesn't move.

"Mercer, wake up." People walking along the street to the other shops on the strip are starting to stare. I lock eyes with a little girl and smile as she clings to her mother. *Don't do that...* I'm just trying to be nice, normal even. *Well, don't.*

"Few more minutes, Tess." I swear my heart drops into my ass. Who—his phone vibrates again. Instead of leaving it this time, anger catches me... misplaced anger. I pick it up again, and this time I read the texts that have popped up on the screen....

*Skull: where are you?*

*Skull: ???*

*Skull: answer your damn phone*

Ringling again, it vibrates in a long, steady buzz, the emoji blowing up to fit the screen, and for some reason I'm irritated. We are absolutely not anything, but... who is Tess? *I told you not to do it...* Get out of here.

The phone leaves my hand and, like a moron, I have the audacity to look at Mercer with that irritation plain as day on my face... but what the fuck?

He doesn't seem to notice the blanket as he rises, letting it drop from the chair and onto the floor, and moves to the opposite end of the porch, purposefully keeping his tone quiet so I can't hear him... I knew it was too good. It always is. *You're an ass, you did that.* Are you ignoring me now too?

"... give me an hour, okay? I overslept... alright. Yeah." He hangs up and takes a few sulking steps back. I try to pretend I'm distracted, but I've read the same sentence five times while eavesdropping... He looks conflicted, upset, and also like he wants to explain.

I make a small show of marking my book and setting it down, then handing him the other water bottle with an apologetic smile. He doesn't return it, but takes the bottle, nearly finishing it in one go.

“Good morning.”

I manage a small chuckle at his nonchalant attitude. “Well, for one of us I suppose.” It doesn’t come out nearly as light and playful as I’m expecting it to, and it makes the crease between his eyes deepen. I shouldn’t have said anything.

He opens his mouth, but my anxiety grips my tongue and I cut him off. “You don’t owe me an explanation either. We barely know each other. I’m not going to be offended.” *You fucking liar. You jealous little liar.* Leave me alone, right now.

Taking his seat again, he heaves the deepest, most world-resting-on-his-shoulders breath I think I’ve ever seen. Shit, did I say that out loud?

He looks straight through my eyes and deep into my heart this time. “You know how I said my life was complicated?” I nod. “Well, that was the biggest fucking understatement I’ve ever told. But I’m not ready to say more. Yet,” he adds, and the way those lines soften, the way he seems to sag in relief around me... I never want it to stop. But do I want to become a part of his complications, and eventually add to them?

“I have to get going, but thank you for this. I would really like to see you again... maybe under less creepy circumstances?” He stands and starts off the porch, and I realize I never got to ask him about Nana meeting Vincent, so I hastily follow him to the sidewalk.

“I would like that. Are you going to be at the nursing home on Tuesday?”

Quickly turning back with a questioning smirk as he throws open the gate, he answers. “I knew she was stalking me. Your Nana is not as sneaky as she thinks with that walker, you know.” I love his sense of humor, and I love how often he makes me burst out in laughter. That he doesn’t shrink back in disgust or tell me to be quieter... he’s so... different.

“She is not, but if you think your Gramps might be up for meeting her again sometime soon, I know she would really appreciate it. After all they have been through, they deserve a chance... I know how silly it sounds, but...”

“Do you believe in true love?” Caught off guard by the question, I only shrug.

“Once I did, but... it didn’t get me far.” He points to the porch, to the book he saw me reading... which means he’s familiar with the style. “Yeah, but romance books, fantasy, fairy tales—they’re just stories.”

“Just stories...” Falling a bit flat, he shoves his hands into his pockets and kicks a rock with the toe of his polished shoe. “Our grandparents’ story is just that, and somehow they ended up in the same place at the same time. I hope that someday you will believe in true love again. Because regardless of the bullshit I’ve been through, I still do. I have hope for them, and I have hope for us, too.”

“I envy you, Mercer. I want to believe, I’ve just never been given a reason to.” His car pulls up right as I finish my sentiment, and Alex waves from the driver’s seat through the rolled-down windows. “Seriously?” Mercer gives Alex a thumbs up, and he rolls up the windows. “And what does he think he’s picking you up from?” The shit-eating grin that accompanies the scratching of the back of his head isn’t promising.

“I will make sure to tell him it was absolutely nothing at all, I swear.” I’m still half-frozen when he closes the space between us, rests a hand on my hip, and gives me a gentle peck on the cheek before opening the passenger door. “Am I allowed to call you now?”

Biting my lip in debate, Alex says hi, and I bashfully wave back. Mercer refuses to close the door until I answer, so I nod. “Yes, okay, fine.” His nose and eyes crinkle with the severity of the happiness on his face, and I don’t want him to go. I want him to call me, to talk to me... to stay with me. But he closes the door, and they drive away. *You’re too soft*— and you’re not ruining this for me today.

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## Chapter Thirteen: Waste

I haven't heard from, or seen, Mercer in over a week.

Ten fucking days to be exact, but I've been told by Nana Grace that it's childish to count. Is it not just as, if not more, childish to have that kind of night and not even a peep? I'm livid. But do I really have any right to be?

More than that, I'm angry because I told my Nana everything Mercer said about Vincent, everything she didn't know. And that Mercer would help us reunite them... I know I shouldn't have, because he didn't agree to anything. He actually, very explicitly, avoided agreeing or disagreeing when I asked him, and that's on me, I guess. I don't feel like I'm in the wrong for being upset... *You're not in the wrong, but you are being ridiculous.* I liked it better when you were curt, or just plain quiet.

"Stop all that worrying, child," Nana chides me over her crochet work-in-progress. I don't even remember what she told me she was making when I first got here. The devastation is plain as day on her face still, but she keeps busy every second lately to forget about things she can't control. Why can't I take that page from her book? *Because you'd rather feel sorry for yourself*—Go away, dude. The hook stops, and she stares at me expectantly... She knows about the shit in my head. Just not the extent.

"I'm trying, Nana." I just continue looking out the wide window beside her bed that shows the shrubs full of deep purple berries, and my mouth twitches happily for a moment, remembering Nana telling me why she chose this room—the Junipers, transplanted in this corner of the private garden, only in their first year and so small right now, but will flourish in a few months. "I just can't believe he disappeared on me like that... Even Quynh and her roommates haven't seen him. It's so strange..." Stop it. This isn't what I'm here for. "So, I applied for the receptionist position, and I have an interview in about two weeks. I've already taken the required class to be an assistant caretaker, and if I get the job, I'm going to be able to go to school for them. Maybe even be a nurse here..."

“Oh Juniper, that’s the most wonderful news!” I allow her to gush over my progress for a while. She joins in at the window, and we discuss details, because I *am* feeling sorry for myself regardless of how far I’ve come... and all because of some guy.

I don’t want to run into him unexpectedly again...My nerves can’t take it. And because of that, I don’t stay long today. I have to head to the grocery store and pick up some of the ingredients to cook dinner tonight with Quynh, Sera, and Bao. I’ve been looking forward to it ever since she burst through the door one afternoon last week yelling about how she hadn’t cooked for her father in too long... Admittedly, I believe I mostly look forward to it because I want to ask about Mercer, but maybe also because I want to complain about him. *Or both.*

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I am not, however, looking forward to my phone ringing right before I enter said store a few blocks from the shop, or Mercer’s name to pop up on the screen. I debate not answering. My palms become sweaty the longer I stare at his amended name on the screen, but...

“Hey, stranger. I thought you might have forgotten—”

“...Hello?... Who is this?” The crackling static and distant, very angry, female voice catches me so off guard that by the time I find my own voice again, the line cuts out. What the actual fuck...

*J: um... care to explain?*

I shouldn’t be letting this occupy as much space in my damn head as I am... trying my absolute best not to dwell on who that might have been or why he’s not talking to me.

Shake it off; his life is complicated. *And you have no idea what that entails...* Just wait for him to explain and accept it, or move on and forget.

I grab the food and few personal items I’m in need of and walk the couple blocks home, juggling the fabric bags Quynh’s insisted we use to help the environment.

Home. It's finally starting to feel that way. I don't know what I did to deserve this, but I'm so grateful. I finally feel... safe. That's a miracle in itself. Quynh and Bao have become family in the short time they've been in my life, and what a difference they've made. I'll never be able to express my gratitude in this century. But I will most definitely take every chance to give back to them.

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“Trouble with your... gentleman friend?” Bao doesn't even need to look over from his workstation to hear my constant sighing and maniacal typing on the keyboard. *You've barely known him for a few weeks.*

“That obvious, huh?” His slender shoulders rise and fall slightly as he replaces his chisel on the wood he's focused on, then taps the end a few times to chip away at it. Journaling hasn't helped with my erratic emotions, nor anything *else* for that matter, but talking about it might. *I can hear you.* I roll my eyes. Bao goes on.

“He hasn't been around, you haven't mentioned him... which is not abnormal for you, but all this moping is.” His slight accent plays on the words, emphasizing the first letters. I hear a clink of metallic tools on the table before his stool swoops to face me. He scans my legs kicked up on the dining table, laptop where it should be, and me shrunk into the chair. Then, he holds out one of the smaller chisels to me. “Come, take your mind off it and destroy something. It always helps the thoughts that are sticky in there.” Gesturing to his brain, he turns back to his project without waiting for me to answer. Sticky thoughts... What a perfect way to describe the things that you can't shake regardless of how much you try.

“Alright, I'll ruin some sculptures with you, just give me a moment...” I trail off as I have a brilliant and probably detrimental idea: social media. Even before I found myself in the asylum, it was never something I wanted to be a part of, and then I wasn't allowed to... but Mercer said he was married, so maybe...

I've gotten a decent bit of typing practice through journaling, trying to prepare for the receptionist position in case they ask about my proficiency or skills because I have none. But now, I can at least type fairly quickly. So in a matter of moments I have Facebook pulled up, a new profile created since I never had one, and have his name typed into the search bar... Before hitting enter, I erase 'Nikolai' and replace it with 'Mercer', because he wouldn't have used that name, knowing it could be traced back to him from here.

He's the very first, and only, Mercer Bardot that pops up. I would recognize those stunning eyes anywhere, but his face... He must have been ten years younger, and he looks even older than he does now. He's wearing a tie and a blazer, and an apparent stick up his ass. The crease between his brows, the dark circles... the lines leading to his smooth, syrupy eyes. All so familiar now, things I've come to enjoy... but absolutely loathe on the man sitting on this screen. I don't even want to get started on the woman, but she's fucking gorgeous. My heart sinks into my feet this time, regardless of their elevation on the table. Straight to my soles.

"Fuck." Why am I tearing up? He's not with her anymore... and she ruined his life. *You don't know if he's with her anymore...* Stop it. Her straight, golden-dyed hair drapes over his shoulder as she leans into him, a brilliant forest growing in her irises, flawless makeup complimenting her perfectly tanned skin... not a pimple or crease in sight on her. *Are you jealous of his ex? Why are you digging for shit instead of waiting for him to tell you himself? Causing drama, being an idiot! Stupid! Ugly! Worthle-* Shut. Up!

The laptop slams shut so hard Bao turns with a jump. His head cocks, and he takes in my more-than-likely anger-and confusion-stricken visage..."I'm sorry, I just..." He shakes his head slowly and extends his hand, a chisel and a small mallet resting in it. "He's nothing to me, but I can't shake this feeling that he's living some other life or something... I don't think I'm ready for..."

"You do not need to speak unless you want to. The work will do it for you, anyway. If you do it properly." With

his small wink, I smile genuinely for the first time in days. Taking the tools, I pull up a second stool to the bench. Bao is working on three toads, seated on mushrooms with the ‘hear, speak, see no evil’ motions. He sets a blank rectangle of wood in front of me, then also sets a wooden heart, carved in haste. I eye him and he wags his finger at me. “Cut it up, you’ll feel better. Then, with that newfound calm, make something new.” Something about how he says the word... like you will always find it, like it’s always attainable... if only you wish and work for it.

“How did you find out this was your passion?”

He scoffs, waving a hand and blowing a stack of shavings to the floor. “I don’t believe in passion, not like... that. No matter whether or not you enjoy doing something, there will always be hard work. Sweat, tears, blood, sacrifice, to get to the praise, money, and fame. And sometimes, you’ll never get there. So going into something you love, thinking that just because you love it means it will make you successful... That is not the right way to approach anything. A level head, an unbiased heart, and a well-thought-out plan. Those are the only ways to truly succeed. But we all make mistakes while we are learning, and you are always learning. So you must also learn that it is a journey that lasts your entire life, and there is no such thing as an end to the struggle. Only the ease that comes with learning how to handle, and how to react.” I haven’t heard more than one sarcastic sentence at a time come out of this old coot’s mouth since I walked through that threshold... and he just put every therapist I’ve ever had to shame in five seconds.

“You are the wisest man I know, Bao.”

“Well, that doesn’t mean much; if most of the men you’ve encountered are anything like I know them to be.” His raspy chuckle catches me off guard; his jokes are always witty. And deeply dug.

“That is very true.” His chuckles stop. He always does this. “You know I’m kidding, don’t give me that.” Nudging my shoulder, he starts his fit of laughter. Then he hops down and shuffles to the kitchen, returning with two bottles of green tea

—his favorite. I don't mind it, but I much prefer hot coffee, "Thanks." I take a sip, stabbing the chisel into the middle of the heart. Bao holds up the handle of the mallet. I smile again and take it.

I bring it down, and there's a solid crack as the heart splits straight in half. Exhilarating... a flash of river rocks... a flash of blood, and bone, and bare gray sky... Dropping the hammer, I force a shaky inhale. I wince as my thumb drives into the scar on the back of my hip... the deepest spot, where the flesh and plates give way... where it always pains me to sit for too long.

"Juniper."

I can't breathe... *Fucking breathe you stupid bit—*

"I'm okay, sorry... I... I'm okay." Bao cautiously runs the back of his withered hand over my brow, which is somehow instantly covered in sweat even though I couldn't... It was only a moment...

"Never apologize for what you lived through. You did not ask for this." He cautiously offers me a hand... When did I get to the floor? Bao helps me back into the chair and settles beside me. As I revel in the calm for a few moments, he breaks it with an even more cautious tone.

"When Quynh was still in school, she suffered much bullying because of her sexuality. Her sister Vivienne did as well. But because she refused to partake in anything 'fun' and the one instance they convinced her to..." The anguish flashed over him and was gone. He does remember. Maybe not always, maybe not everything. But he remembers how it hurts... "When Quynh went to prom, she wore a suit. Her girlfriend at the time wore a beautiful canary-yellow dress. I thought it was hideous, but they looked marvelous together. A few hours after they left, I got a call from her girlfriend, crying hysterically because someone threw a punch at them while they were taking their pictures. You know what Quynh did?" I'm listening far too intently to answer, but he continues, "She held her head high, wiped her date's makeup on her sleeve and told the photographer to take the pictures anyway, because

she was going to have memories of that night. No hatred would stop her from enjoying her life the same as everyone else did.”

“That sounds like something Quynh would do, but—”

“And as they were leaving the venue,” he starts again, “she spotted the two boys who did it, bragging in the parking lot and talking about some after party... She shoved one of them over and gave him a fat lip.” He mimics an angry face and raises his fists. “The other tried to run, but he tripped and hit his head on the bumper. She dumped his flask all over him, took pictures with her phone, and posted them all over the school’s media pages. She was banned from walking for graduation.” He nods his head, concluding the story. But I want to hear more...

“What did you do about it? Did you punish her?”

He lets out a hoot, his head throwing back and all. “I bought her a new car and threw her a party. She wasn’t bullied again through college because most of the kids knew her, and it’s a bit more tolerant. She went to Denver. And if she was... she never told me, she handled it herself. My point is, there will always be hate. There will always be struggle, and loathing, and obstacles. All that matters is how you face them, and the outcome.” Almost as if on cue, Quynh and Sera throw open the door, scream-singing some pop song Taylor Swift I think. I don’t actually listen to very much music when I’m not around them.

“Time for some delicious, homemade food for my best friends!” Oh no, she’s been drinking already. I help them unload groceries and start prepping veggies while they blare the radio and Bao finishes his project for the day.

Best friend. I’m not even sure what that means...

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“You should go to his house if he’s still not talking to you! That’s what I would d,” Sera blurts as she’s pouring herself a fifth glass of white wine. We’re sitting around the cluttered living area in what used to be a huge living room.

Now there's only space enough for a sofa, chair, and coffee table, and space around the fireplace that they only use during winter. Dinner was a delicious casserole recipe with Asian flair, courtesy of Quynh and Bao spicing it up. It was different, but I enjoyed it. He left us after the second bottle of wine came out, saying he wasn't up for girl talk tonight.

I have only had two glasses myself, and I don't think it nearly as good an idea as Sera, or Quynh, judging by her aggressive nodding in agreement, thinks it is. "I don't know..." They only know half of it... but maybe I should tell them about the weird shit and not just the gooey stuff... Patting my jacket pockets, I go searching for my phone, which hasn't moved since pre-dinner, so I scoop it up from the table and stop in the doorway to the living room. Three missed calls, and two texts from Mercer, the last only about thirty minutes ago.

*M: I'm sorry Juniper*

*M: I want to explain, please give me a chance*

*M: I've been out of town, it was unexpected*

The last message pops up just as I'm about to close the phone... but I don't respond. Instead, I ask Sera to fill my glass, and I fill them in on everything about him so far, including the midnight coffee date and what I saw on his old facebook profile. Everything except for his name, which remains only mine. *And hers.*

"I just feel like it's totally irrational to be attracted to him because of all the mystery."

"Are you kidding? I'm attracted to him just based on all of this; the mystery is hot as fuck—" Sera cackles.

Quynh slaps her leg, then adds, "I'll give it to you, there are definite red flags. But if you really like him, you should hear him out and give him another chance. Just imagine if you are making assumptions. It could be so good!" Or I'm totally right, and it could be catastrophic... "Hear him out, but make him work for it!"



Sera chimes in with a ‘yeah, yeah’ in tune to the song playing.

“I’m no good at playing hard to get.” Or playing anything at all...

“No playing! Just don’t let him dictate everything; make it on your terms, too. Set your boundaries. Better to wallow in potential misery and then move on, rather than sit around worrying and waiting, stuck in limbo of misery. Just don’t let him get away with whatever he wants with words, or.. you know.” She wiggles an eyebrow at me, and I don’t know if it’s because I enjoy her as a friend or because of the alcohol, but I laugh hysterically. Quynh knows about what happened that night now, and she nearly burned the skirt I was wearing because I didn’t tell her immediately, but she understood.

“Honestly though, we’ve never known him to be a bad person or anything. Just really kept to himself. Quiet. That’s not a bad thing, you know? Talk to him, Juniper. Work it out. It will either bring you closer, or bring you closure.” Sera finishes her drink after an imaginary toast to the air, then begins to flail about the room. I take this as good a time as any to step out onto the porch and figure shit out.

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I stare at the messages for probably too long before deciding on a response. I blame the wine.

*J: Baron’s, Tuesday night. 7 sharp. Don’t be late*

*J: Chocolate cosmos are my favorite flowers, good luck finding any this late in the year.*

I’m just about to head back inside, satisfied with myself, but the cold rattles my spine almost as hard as the vibration from his return message.

*M: Not fair, you didn’t even let me ask you out*

The phone rings not a moment later, but I hold fast to it this time, allowing a moment for the butterflies in my chest to settle. Quynh whistles at me through the window, which I have forgotten is open. Now there is an audience to my call. Great.

“Yes?”

“So, will you go out with me say... Tuesday night? Seven, the Baron’s?” I’ve missed his voice, his snark. Rubbing my already-running nose, I stifle a laugh. *You’re supposed to be mad...*

“Huh, that’s weird. It’s almost like you read my mind.”

A door closes in the background on his end, and someone speaks inaudibly. “I want to pick you up, and I promise I’ll explain everything that I can. I didn’t mean to ignore you... I’ve gotta get some work done, but is that alright? You can put those cosmos in water before we go.” How could I ever say no to a proposal like that? *Because the last time someone was this nice to you you almost died—stop it!*

“It’s a date.”

Happiness, or maybe it’s relief, floods his voice. I can clearly hear his smile through the phone. “Good. Thank you, Juniper. I’ll see you in a few days—oh...” I stop with my hand on the doorknob. “I like sunflowers myself.” The call ends. And I’m smiling so fucking hard you’d think he didn’t ghost me for ten days, especially when I was that easy to get ahold of...

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“So that sounded like it went very well.” Quynh throws an arm over me and shoves the glass I still hadn’t finished back into my hand. I giddily down it.

“Where’s the nearest florist? I have an errand to run.” They both cheer and shout to the point that Bao stomps on the floor, we laugh like hyenas into the dead of night.

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## Chapter Fourteen: Karma

*Mercer*

*It's going to be fine. You can do this. You WILL do this.*

I haven't smoked a cigarette while sober in almost twelve years. I haven't wanted to... but thinking about Juniper, and telling her everything... anything about the bullshit going on, has me ready to lose my lunch or leave a hole in the drywall. So, I need a cigarette.

I've dealt with enough bullshit in the last two weeks to last a lifetime, and unfortunately I've got at least six months of it left. How can I possibly ask her to wait for me to tell her the biggest fucking part... for half a year?

"Don't get me wrong, it's good to see you and all, but... what's up with you?" Alex asks from across the bar. I really need to stop frowning. It's making me look old.

"What do you mean?"

He sets a glass of water in front of me, then snaps the towel against my bicep, causing me to back away from the counter. "You know what I mean. Do you think people don't talk? *Girls* don't talk?" Shit.

"I—"

"No, you know what, shut up. Sera was *crying* the other fucking night because she felt so bad for Juniper, because she wouldn't stop asking about you, if we had seen or heard from you. She was devastated that you practically forgot about her after making a scene and seeking her out like that... que verguenza." He rests his forearms onto the bar, coaxing me forward with a finger, glancing at the few patrons that aren't close enough to hear a whisper. "I've never given a fuck about your attitude, your charm, or your ego. But you and I both know that I will not clean up your mess. If you really feel anything for that girl, you'll get your shit together, or you'll leave her alone. And that's the last I'll say about that, 'cause listening to them talk about it is shitty, and it's even shittier because I know you're a good dude whose head is in a million

places—I don't know why, and I couldn't care less, bro. But don't fucking put people through preventable bullshit over your selfishness." He slaps my shoulder, then extends his hand. I shake it, and we're back to being buddies.

"I know I told you that I was married a long time ago, but... did I ever tell you about Tess?" He snags a glass and tip from the bar where someone left it, then pops open a beer, replacing my water with that instead, dumping it down the drain.

"You've mentioned her, a long time ago. I wanna say the first Thanksgiving, you got blackout drunk and spent the night on my couch, remember? Kept bumming smokes but insisted you never smoked." Yep, that was me.

"Yeah, well... My wife didn't exactly leave me. She told me that my daughter, the little girl I raised for six years... was never mine. Then she told me she was going to take Tess and disappear if I didn't move away..."

"I think we're going to need something a little bit stronger..."

"I do have a date tonight, this is just a warm-up. And I think it's time for me to trust you guys." I reach out a hand again and he eyes me like I've lost it. "My name is Nikolai, but I prefer going by my middle name. Mercer. It's nice to finally meet you as I am, and not as what I've been pretending to be."

"Mercer... my fucking boy." He pours two shots of tequila—top shelf, I think. Pretty bottle and all... Shouldn't I know this shit? But I haven't drunk much in recent years.

"So... she was my high school sweetheart... and Tess's real dad was some fucking lowlife who stalked her and groomed her for nearly a decade... After six years of being with me and me taking care of them, she drops the bomb on me one day that she's willingly going to be with him... He's changed after rehab and college, has a great job—better than mine because he was a doctor—she'd say it's only right since he's her real dad..."

Once it starts, it doesn't stop until every single piece of information and everything I've held in has been spilled... like the handkerchiefs from a magician's mouth, one after another after another. Two hours later, Alex sits on a stool next to me. He pats my back and shakes his head in disbelief.

"I knew there was so much more to your 'mysterious' vibe." He mocks Sera's eternal description of my standoffish nature, but once people get to know me I have no problem being bubbly. I actually like being social. I like interaction. I just haven't felt much up for it as of late. "I'm proud of you, dude. And Juniper deserves to know every fucking thing you just told me. If you want her to trust you, you'd better tell her..."

I'd better tell her...

---

Maybe I drank a little more than I should have.

"Hey, pretty-boy! I remember you!" Oh fuck, I most definitely drank too much... *Call Alex.*

My phone fumbles from the pocket of my jeans to the concrete, even though it's blurry—fuck, I should be wearing my glasses.

"You ARE the one who beat Sam's face in!" This cannot be happening. Not right now.

I scoop up the phone and start down the alley of the club. I'll round the back and go in through the side.

Which would have been a great plan if these two assholes weren't hell bent on revenge and following me... and the side door wasn't locked.

"No, fuck fuck..." I bang on the door and dial Alex's number, right as a fist knocks the wind from my lungs, and something yanks me by the collar away from the door... phone... fuck!

"You didn't really think your buddy would be able to save you this time did you?" Jaw, stomach, jaw.

“Get him up, let’s go.” No... this is not fucking happening because I defended Juniper... This is not fucking happening *at all*.

“Let go of me,” My lip is split, and my head hurts... Did he bash my head into the door before he got me to the ground? *I promised I wouldn’t do this anymore.*

“Not so tough without an advantage, huh?”

“Not so tough drugging women to get your dick wet, are you?” The ugly fucker, still sporting bruises under his eyes from the broken nose she awarded him before I decorated the rest of his face, rears his hand back, but before he can, I slam the broken bottle I got my hand on into his head. “*Déjà vu*, huh?” Quickly as I can, I get to my feet, leaning against a car for support. They’d dragged me into the middle of the parking lot.

Alex kicks open the back door, phone held to his ear and trusty shotgun pointed at the farthest guy... but Sir Fuckwad doesn’t seem to notice the odds have reversed until the compact pistol I keep strapped to my ankle is pressed against his sweaty forehead.

“Cops will be here any second. Don’t fucking move. They’ve been looking for you guys since your last visit.” My... fucking leg...

There is... a piece of fucking glass... sticking out of my leg...

I collapse, and there’s a gunshot. Followed by shouting, sirens and tires screeching, and then I see fluorescent lights on the ceiling...

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### *Juniper*

The florist wasn’t far, and it was a small mom-and-pop shop. I choose a small bouquet of three sunflowers with a few white lilies spread around them for a nice pop. They wrap them in a nice silver paper and tape. It’s elegant, and I hope he likes them. *He better like them.*

I also go by the drugstore and grab some tea and, well, condoms—because you can never be too careful, and I’m not expecting anything to happen, but we’ve already done some stuff... I smile to myself as I round the corner and the strip mall turns into the familiar old homes that have been converted to different types of shops. I seriously never even noticed them before I moved into Bao’s; amazing how blinding grief and self loathing are.

Switching the bags to one hand, I pull out my phone to check the time and messages. None of the latter, but it’s about five p.m., which means I’ll have some time to get ready and relax and prepare myself for...

“Juniper?” The ragged sound is familiar. I can vaguely make out the shape of someone sitting on the rocking chair as I close the gate and approach the stairs until he comes into view... and I drop everything at the top of the steps.

“Holy fucking shit, Mercer?!” Rushing over, I crouch between his legs, and he winces as I brush hair from his eyes... He’s bloody and bruised, and... “Oh fuck, Mercer, you need to go to the hospital.” Without thinking, I pull off my dark green flannel and tear the shoulder seam where a hole has been forming for years, then tie it around his thigh. I don’t even think he’s... He starts nodding off. “Mercer, wake up, let me take you to the E.R.—”

“No!” His grip tightens around my wrist and a wild, fearful look overcomes him before he settles not a second later. I shrink back. *Run, run...* I stare at the shard of glass poking through his jeans, through his fucking *knee*. “No, just please call Sera.” I’m sitting against the railing now, half stunned and unable to speak until he says my name again, but it’s so distant.

“She’s picking up Quynh from Denver... It’ll be at least an hour or so before she can get here. *That* needs to be dealt with *now*—”

“Stop, Juniper. I can’t go to the hospital, okay...?”

“What the hell even happened?”

He sighs deeply and winces, attempting to lean forward and reach for me. I don't let him. Instead, I grab my bags and stand awkwardly at an unfair distance. Right on the faded welcome mat.

“Those assholes from the restaurant the night we met... They saw me leaving after I picked up my check and talked with Alex. I had a few drinks and they just... it was fucking stupid. But, Alex took care of everything, they're at the police station. I'm fine, other than, well...” He gestures to the shard, which looks to be part of a beer bottle.

“You couldn't take them this time, even with Alex?”

His deep chuckle cuts through the chill air, right to my core where that pull has been waiting... wanting. *Get a fucking grip.* Butt out. “I can't go to the hospital because I can't have anything bad happen, nothing that makes me seem... weak.” He seems pained and tongue tied, and not just because of the fight. “It's hard to explain... and I really want to just...”

“It's okay, Mercer.” I offer him the torso part of the flannel, but he looks at it with slight apprehension, as if it's not already torn to shreds. I'd gotten some food on the way back and stuck the napkins in a bag, so I start rifling through them, only for the condom box to fall to the wood with the reverberation of Thor's hammer on his anvil...

Wincing at the embarrassment, I refuse to look at him as I hand him the handful of rough paper and toss the box back into a bag, busying myself with the front door to conceal the shame on my damn face... *You're ridiculous.*

“I didn't realize there were so many expectations from our *first* date.” The ease with which he can respond to even the most awkward or angering things with sarcasm is a true talent. Especially in a situation like this.

“Well, we've already done more than most people have before a first date.” I toss the bags inside the door, forgetting about the flowers for a second, but also... not really caring for the time being. He's bothering me with all of this... “Why did you come here? Why no hospital, Mercer?”



“I didn’t want to disappoint you again... It was the closest, and first place I thought of... I missed you.” After a moment of consideration and gruff silence, he adds, “What reason do you want?”

“The truthful one. The straightforward one... I’m confiscating your keys.”

“That’s fair.” Does he not hear the annoyance in my voice, or is he purposely ignoring it? *He is a man; that’s what they’re best at.*

“You’re avoiding this again, Mercer.”

Saying nothing, he folds his hands in his lap and looks down at them with defeat. “I told you Juniper, my life is complicated...”

“Yeah, well, that doesn’t mean I have to accept your non-answers. Nothing to ease my mind, no real explanation...” Mercer wallows for too long for my liking, so I take note of his refusal to add, and I go inside. Finding some tattered towels in a cupboard, I knock on Bao’s door and let him know what’s going on and ask if it’s okay to take the towels. He waves me off and tells me to be careful and take whatever I need, also giving me an old T-shirt and pair of basketball shorts for Mercer to change into and saying he will be down in a little bit to make dinner. He has eternally earned a place in my heart.

“Alright, Mr. Sunflower. Get your ass up.” I make up a spot on the sofa and cover it as best as I can with the towels and an old sheet so he won’t bleed all over it. I also text Quynh and Sera both, and Quynh says they will be here as soon as possible. It’s relieving, not needing to explain every single detail of everything in order to be believed or to get help. I set the flowers in his lap, and he twirls them around before looking up at me—for the first time tonight, I realize.

“Thank you, Juniper, I love them. But I shouldn’t stay.”

“Well, you’re either going to lay down here in the cold and wait for Sera to patch you up, because they’re on their

way, or I'm taking you to the hospital. I can drive. I'm pretty sure you need stitches..." So much blood. "Did they do that to you?" He seems to appreciate my care for his well-being, and I can't help it. I do care... *too much*.

"No, they just sucker-punched me and beat my ass pretty good. This was an accident... they were dragging me into the parking lot and I grabbed it, smashed it over one of the guys' heads, and... I don't exactly remember how, but I'm pretty sure I fell on it..."

"You're pretty sure?" I smile before catching myself, remembering the rock that started it all... and how he saved me.

"No, I am sure. I nearly passed out, and Alex almost shot the dude who went for my..." He pauses, and averts his gaze, rubbing his forehead, then smearing the blood on his dirty jeans.

"Your what?"

"I left your flowers in my car. I'm sorry..." He can't be serious...

"We can get them later, Mercer. Let's go inside..." He groans as he stands, leaning a good portion of his weight on me through his arm over my shoulder, but he doesn't let go of the bouquet. Not until I sit him on the couch, and he cries out, tossing it to the coffee table so he can manually elevate his leg. Blood drips from the back of his knee to the floor almost instantly. I grab the first aid kit and rubbing alcohol, handing it to him to think about where I last saw craft scissors...

"This is so fucking weird," I mumble quietly as I move things around on the work desk, searching for scissors.

"I shouldn't have come." Obviously, I was not quite as quiet as I thought... "They were arrested. Alex almost shot the guy who I fucked up that first night because he reached for my gun after I nearly passed out. I've carried one for years, it's all legal." He glances over at me, now holding out the scissors and spare pair of clothes to him. Does he expect me to be

weird about him owning a gun? I've seen so much worse... if only he knew that. *Maybe you should tell him.*

"I'm glad we don't have to worry about them anymore."

"You were worried because of them?" The haste of his response... the possession...

"No," I say, resting my hand on his good knee as I fill the space beside him. "I did think about it only because of... my own past. But no, I wasn't worried. I'm relieved they've been taken care of, would be a better way to say it."

As I cut down the length of his pant leg, then around the knee to expose the injured part, I have to look away. I'm not normally squeamish but I haven't exactly been well-introduced to gore after my own accident and isolation. Maybe now is a good time to... "Who called me from your phone earlier?" *really?*

"Where the fuck is this moron... Juniper?" Sera's panic-stricken voice breaks through the rotting wood before the door slams open by the force of the estrogen, panic, and very little sleep.

"We came as fast as we could." Quynh abandons her luggage in the foyer and hugs me, glaring daggers at Mercer as Sera immediately grabs his leg, paying no attention to his groaning and 'ow's while assessing it.

"You need stitches, and I only have numbing gel and vicodin. You need to go to the hospital. I'm not even supposed to be doing this..." She gestures to where she's holding gauze to the glass and slowly removing it.

"I'll organize the remodel on your kitchen for half the cost of labor, and I'll eat some of the materials..." He looks from Sera to Quynh, desperation setting in when they don't say anything. After a long pause, Quynh nods.

"You're the weirdest fucking dude I've ever met. Take this now." She throws a bottle of pills in his hand. I quickly run to the kitchen and grab water for us all, and Sera gets to work by first telling him to strip. She's holding onto a shirtless

Mercer while he struggles to kick his shoes off when I pause in the doorway.

Quynh gestures to his other side. I snap back, moving to help support while Sera cuts his pants off... and he's standing nearly naked in front of me for the first time, with my two best friends, and a smirk on his face that says he knows exactly what I'm thinking, but he doesn't say it. And I'm caught up with the bruising covering the right side of his ribs, the deep cut along his pec, and a small heart tattoo on his sternum with a cursive T in the center. My stomach twists into a billion knots... I'm going to be sick.

I excuse myself once he's sat down, but he grabs my hand before I can get enough distance between us. "Please stay." I think he might actually be scared... regardless of my head telling me no, *do not fucking stay*... I let him squeeze the blood from my hand until it numbs, until my wrist and tendons crack. I feel the pain the needle sliding through his flesh causes him... and I don't even know what to think.

*You should be mad! Furious! Boundaries! Make him stop, make him leave—*Shut the fuck up. I swear. You're the worst... *I am you.* Yeah, I'm starting to get that.

---

After the worst is over—after I can move my hand freely again and Mercer is relaxed, bandaged, laying down—I decide to take a look at my totem pole. Sera finds me in the workroom. She's cleaned everything up and calmed us all down. She's an amazing person and nurse.

Quynh is talking Mercer's ear off at her normal, insanely loud volume.

Sera speaks softly. "He really likes you, hun. It's clear as a mosquito bite in the dead of summer. I think you really like him too, or you wouldn't have gone through the trouble..." She nudges her elbow against mine, then runs her fingers over the fox's snout.

"I think you're right, but I also don't think I can do this." Sera doesn't know nearly as much about me, but I have

mentioned some struggles and cried with her.

“Love doesn’t care about what the universe has set up for you. And no amount of ignorance, or dread, no timeline or any event, is going to make it go away—or hinder its grip. You know we don’t choose who we love.” I hate that fucking word. It terrifies me, because I thought I knew it... I thought I *had* it, and I was so wrong... I have so many doubts.

“Thanks, Sera. I appreciate you.” The exhaustion on her face is no match for the bright smile of perfectly-white teeth that she gives me before throwing her arms around my neck. I hug her back.

“I appreciate *you*, Juniper. Let me know if you need anything. We’ll always be here for you.” With that, I’m alone again. I can’t decide if I prefer to be alone anymore, or if I like their company better. Can I enjoy both? *You can... for a price.*

This seems like a shower thought.

So, without telling my friends and... whatever Mercer would be considered... I climb the stairs, running into Bao in the hall. He says nothing, just passes me at the top and moseys his way down, turning toward the kitchen.

I shower, consider, ponder, change, and stare at myself in the mirror in my shorts and fluffy sweater, the scars from my surgery peeking from the hem on the bottom. Lifting my shirt, I can see the way they stretch along my side from the bottom of my ribs down to my thigh... not to mention all the scars that aren’t from surgery. His life is complicated—*and you have no room to judge, you’ve said less about your own complications than he has... You both owe each other some damn words.* Okay, fuck.

I take five more minutes to sit on my bed, cross my legs, straighten my spine, and breathe, focusing only on that, and what I might begin to say... then I make my way back downstairs.

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## Chapter Fifteen: Tell

“He’s out. I gave him a sedative and wrapped up his leg so he doesn’t pull it off while sleeping. Five stitches.” Sera gawks at me, then prods when I don’t immediately spill the details. “So what the actual fuck happened to him?” she whispers over the small four-chair dining table in the kitchen.

Quynh makes a pot of coffee and brings out some snacks, and I tell them everything Mercer had mentioned about the evening. That we had a date planned too, and that’s mostly why he ended up here. Quynh beams and sips while fighting to keep her eyes open, and as soon as I finish filling them in, I insist they go home.

“I can handle it from here. I’ll sit in the armchair and make him take the meds later.” Sera is able to scrounge up a few antibiotics from her bag and makes sure I have no idea where they’ve come from before agreeing to let me have them. “I’m sorry I dragged you guys over here for this... I—”

“Nope, shut up. None of this is your fault, and I don’t care how you want to relate it back to the bar and dumping the drink on that dick, but no. *None* of this is because you defended yourself, babe—now, I’ve got an early day and dolphins on my brain so yes, we’re gonna go.” Quynh gives me a meaningful bear hug, and Sera joins in—I have friends, and I love them.

“I love you guys,” I mutter into Sera’s scrubs. When did the tears start? Sera sympathetically joins me in my sorrow as soon as she hears the strain in my voice and we’re a puddle of limbs and cries. Bao wanders in and, filled with regret, he turns right back out and returns to his desk, causing us to break and cackle.

“I only wanted a cup of coffee but I don’t want any of that!” he shouts over our laughter, which increases in volume again until I remember that Mercer is sleeping, and I shush them. We say goodnight, and Bao walks them out to Sera’s car. On her way out, Quynh points into the den and wags her

eyebrows and winks. I can hear her without her saying a damn thing. “*You won’t know unless you try.*”

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Mercer is still out cold. It’s only about eight-thirty, and I realize I barely ate dinner, since I wasn’t sure of the situation of our date and since we were going to get food. Bao wanders into the kitchen after me, makes some coffee, and asks me to order pizza after I spend a few minutes rummaging through the fridge. I happily accept, and the pizza is here by nine. We eat, Bao bids me goodnight and runs off to bed or whatever else he does in his room, and I grab my book. Slowly and carefully, I step around the creaky spots I’ve noted in the living area, nearly stumbling over soiled bandages and garments that I couldn’t care less about with the excitement of the day.

I just want to sit in peace and read. Maybe stare at Mercer as he sleeps. That tuft of hair between his pecs that attaches to the very, very happy trail and leads down his—*Stop it, Juniper, you stupid girl!* That’s not fair. I can look...

But it no longer matters what I yell at myself in my head. My eyes, my hands, my mouth—they all have minds of their own and they all want *him*. Nothing but—*remember what happened*—I don’t need to remember. *It seems you do.*

As hard as I try to read the words on the page in front of me and block out the intrusive thoughts, my eyes wander over the edge of the book to take him in... so content. He adjusts slightly; the blanket he had laid back with his torso wrapped in falls away from his shoulder, his arm draping over his abdomen. My gaze trails from his neck, down his shoulder, and follows a prominent vein from his elbow to his hand, still caked in dirt and dried blood.

“Ah... fuck.” His stitched knee knocks into the coffee table as he tries to rest his foot on the ground, grunting as he sits up and looks around, confused. He only calms when he sees me. I stop pretending to read and give him my full attention right away. *Really?* Not now.

“How are you feeling?”

He relaxes back into the pillow, propped on the arm of the sofa, as if knowing I’m here helps him settle. I hope it does, because he soothes me just as much as he confuses me.

“I’m a little cold.” That usual air of joking makes my heart lift. He holds up the shirt Bao lent him, clearly a few sizes too small.

“Sorry about that... Do you have clothes in your car? Or I can go to your place and grab some if you—”

“No, it’s fine.” That was a bit rude. “I’d take another blanket, though.” The polite smile to cover my irritation is pasted across me before I can stop it.

“Of course.” Just assume it’s because he’s in pain and tired. I rush to grab a spare blanket, a wool one with pink X’s, making sure to shake out some stiffness from its years in storage under the stairs. Then I toss it over him, only to lose balance because of my fucking toes. The space on my foot hits the leg in the center of the couch. I barely catch myself on the back, but my breath seizes in my chest when I realize Mercer’s holding me too... one hand on my waist, but the other...

“How did this happen?” I hate that question. *Any* questions about them. Instead of releasing me so I can stand, he takes advantage of my shit balance and pulls me into his lap, right between his legs: one perched up, bent and laying against the back of the couch, and the other open, foot flat on the floor. Leaving a perfect space... just big enough for me.

I struggle to inhale, and he’s not looking at me... only my scars. *The only thing that gets attention once it’s drawn to it...* I tuck my right leg under me, laying my thigh across his lap, and his thigh above his stitches. I like how much it makes him squirm. Just as much as he enjoys how I shiver as his fingers touch and run up my leg...

“Surgery.”

“Why?” The follow up is abrupt. I don’t owe him that ‘why’-he’s never given me an answer, why should I? *He actually asked...*



My silence will have to suffice, because even thinking about telling me what the last person who touched me like this did to me... Since I was already crying earlier, my dams have no problem letting more of the flood through. *I will never be weak again.*

I open my mouth to speak, and he does the same as well. We both stop. He smiles. "Go ahead." I shake my head slightly in response, because I can barely think. But he just stares intently, slowly dragging his thumb across one of the longer stripes from the stitches, to the waistband of my shorts, and back up.

"Fine. I feel bad that you're hurt and it might actually be partially because of me, but I also really want to kick you out because I have never felt so confused and... nervous. And you—"

"I'm complicated..."

"No, Mercer, you just won't tell me anything." He pulls his hands away and runs them through his hair before crossing them over his chest. He won't look at me. "You've said so much and still, absolutely nothing. I feel like I don't know you at all." *He still won't look at you.* "Why do you keep doing this if you don't want us to get to know each other and..." When that dark, intense gaze finds mine this time, every single brick falls straight out of my wall. It crumbles to nothing as it hits the ground. "I want this. I want you. But not if I can't have all of you..."

He forces himself into a sitting position, so-fucking-close I choke on the presence of him. "I really, really do want you. I want you to know, but I can't. I thought I was able to let you in little by little while I worked my life out because I couldn't fucking stay away from you no matter how hard I tried..." This is one of the rare occasions I've left my hair down recently, and he brushes a piece from my face, tracing my jaw with his knuckle in that way that makes me float. "I thought I could keep parts of my life separate, but... there are some choices that are made for us, and we don't get to change them without..." His fingers wrap around the back of my neck, so close at the nape to another of my hidden scars. "I

didn't choose to start over, to make a new life, and I had to do it without a huge part of me. If I had stayed, it would have driven me mad. I wouldn't have been able to stay away. I had to be strong, and bide my time and watch from afar as what I sought was dangled and tugged away every time I made progress..." This doesn't make any sense... I don't want to cry any more.

He sighs. "I'm finally reclaiming the life I never thought I would see again. A new one. A better one. You don't deserve to be another complication in the web of bullshit that is my life... It will only hurt you."

"Isn't that something I'm supposed to decide for myself, not something you just assume while keeping me in the dark?" Sighing again, he wraps his thick forearm around my waist and pulls me flush against his bare torso, only half covered in the blankets. He grunts in frustration and presses his mouth against mine, but I'm not letting him get away so easily. He keeps me held to him and only allows me a few inches of leave, but I push away. "You think I'm a complication? And... you're reclaiming..." I don't know what to think. "Are you going back to your wife?"

"No, fuck no, Juniper. I—no..." I'm still so confused, but I want to reward him for the nothing he gave me... I want to be rewarded... *What the fuck.* "I wish I could just tell you."

"So tell me." His chest is hot and heaving, and I can't resist my fingers trailing up his pec, just avoiding his nipple, which makes it stiffen, to match his favored grip on his own nape. "I want to know *you*..."

"She ruined my life. She took every fucking thing from me. I... I'm finally getting the only part I care about now back. I'm finding myself again, too. My work has never been better, and it's been so much easier to overcome these obstacles... It has to be because of you. Because of the potential you bring, the positivity... Something happened when you walked into the bar that night. Our lives snapped onto the same track. Just please... give me a little more time. I have... legal shit that I have to deal with, and I absolutely cannot step out of line or I will risk everything. That means I

can't have a relationship, not a real one... But I can't *not* see you, touch you, kiss you..." He presses a gentle peck to my nose, then a deeper kiss on my lips. Lingered, but not taking.

"My ex-fiancé lied his way into having me committed to a mental institution for over three years. He pushed me off a bridge. I almost died. I was only released because of his own untimely, supposedly-accidental death. His family refused to take part in what he had done to me, just as they had always turned a blind eye to the bruises and... everything else. The day we met, that was the first time I'd gone out since then. I was released days before, and this..." I lay my palm flat against his chest and stare at the heart with the T... "This is the first time I've had anything like that since then, either. I'm terrified, and I... I do not want to add to your complications, Mercer. I will only make things worse..."

He hisses in pain as he pushes me back, adjusting on top of me, gently laying my head into the cushion as he presses himself between my legs and takes my tongue, making me his. The ever-so-thin clothing does nothing to hide his arousal... If only my own were more visible. *What are you doing?*

"You could never make things worse, Juniper," he pants against my lips, refusing to put space between us again. One of his hands works its way under my sweater and makes contact with roughly-scarred skin but he doesn't pull away, only pauses to give them special attention before his lips move to my neck. The opposite hand runs down my thigh to cup my knee and force my legs open wider... I don't regret that I allow it just to feel him move against me, and he does... the tip of him lingering right where...

"If this is what you have in mind for our first date, we should at least go somewhere that we can't accidentally be walked in on, even though I hate the thought of you stopping..."

He bites me gently on the collarbone, and I force myself not to jerk away, but he notices my sharp intake of breath and pulls back.

“Sorry, no teeth. Noted. But if you’ll help me, I would love to go somewhere more private. I did clear my night... just in case.” He regretfully backs away and sits on the sofa, shrugging off the blanket and offering me a hand. I laugh because he can still hardly stand on his own, but he has enough energy to... The tent his shorts create as we stand and he puts his weight on me is impossible to miss. *What are you getting yourself into? Two hours ago, you wanted nothing to do with him and wanted him out—*

And now I want him to fuck me until I forget about anything in the world except for him... What a surprising turn we’ve experienced. *If I had a face I would be rolling my eyes.* You’re getting a bit too comfortable here. We slowly make our way across the room, up the stairs...

*What the actual fuck are you doing... this is not going to go well. This is not going to end well—you’re going to regret it, and he’s going to—*

Taking a deep, steadying breath, I push away the fear. Letting love, and happiness, in for once.

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## Chapter Sixteen: Bite

“You probably shouldn’t take a shower because of the stitches, but... I could help you clean up if you want?” I swear the click of the door shutting echoes through the room as I turn to face him, and it is only... us. He closes the space between us before I can get a grip, and kisses my forehead gently before limping into the bathroom, gripping the doorframe on his way in, making the veins in his arm pop... Why could I think of nothing but those arms wrapped around me? *This isn’t like you...*

“I think I would like that,” he calls, checking over his shoulder and smirking slightly. I grab a towel and a few washcloths from the dresser and meet him in the bathroom. As I help him onto the ledge of the tub and fill it slightly with warm, soapy water, I feel his gaze on me the whole time. Then he sits on the edge of the tub beside me, so close the hairs on his leg tickle my own thigh.

Gently picking up his hand, I dip the cloth in the water and start by carefully, but with some elbow grease, scrubbing the grime and blackened blood from the creases between his fingers and the ridges of his swollen knuckles. None of the blood here is his. *Good*. Not good—that means he’s too used to hitting things, or his knuckles would have split.

“You’re too nice, Juniper.” He’s far away, somewhere that isn’t here, now.

“Really? I guess I just got tired of being stuck up all the time.” How do I even begin to elaborate something like that?

“I know how that feels.”

I remember the picture I saw of him on Facebook. “You said she left you for a friend...” He doesn’t move or acknowledge, so I add, “Your wife—”

“Ex- wife. Yes, and no, I didn’t suspect anything, but she was always... distant. She threatened to take... something

from me if I didn't move, so I did. And she dangled it above me."

"Is her name Tess?" Mercer pulls his hand away and stares me down like I just smacked him over the head with a bat...

"How do you know that name?" No... I can't stand this side of him.

"You said it in your sleep, in the rocking chair..."

"Tess is *the* complication, Juniper. And I literally cannot say more than that, so please... Please don't ask and make me say nothing, or worse... force me to lie. Because I will not jeopardize what I'm fighting for." He sets his hand back on my thigh, but maintains the distance he put between us in that split second... Brick by brick, the wall shall rebuild.

"Fine... Skull and cross bones?" I mumble and he, to my surprise, laughs... an actual laugh.

"You're too fucking nosy for your own good, you know?" Tapping my nose with a freshly-scrubbed finger, he grabs the second cloth from the floor where I dropped everything and starts wiping his face, while allowing me to do his hands and around the stitches, though not without some whining.

Just as his usual evasive nature. He doesn't answer me. But I'm a little too distracted to really care at the moment...

---

"I... thought I was in love. I thought *that* was what love was, and I... never knew until it was too late how fucking wrong I was."

"It may have been love, maybe for you. But... not for him." Mercer and I are lying shoulder to shoulder in my tiny bed. I'm staring at him, and he finally turns to look at me instead of the ceiling. He still has no shirt on, and he doesn't seem to be complaining about the proximity... or the cold anymore. "You don't do this..." He turns onto his side and props an elbow and hand under his head, sliding my sweater

up to expose the rings of scars following my metal hip bone. His nails drag along the still-sensitive skin. "... to someone you love. And you don't do this..." He brushes a loose wave from my forehead, tracing a line from temple to temple. "... to someone who loves you. Even if you don't love them back." How am I supposed to breathe when he's so close that I can see the stars in his pupils...?

"Were you in love... with her?"

He nods sadly, letting his finger drop to my lips. The pad brushes my bottom one before he drapes his wrist over my ribs.

"Yes, and I thought we would be together forever. But forever is a very long time, and people change more often than you think. Though sometimes, people don't change at all. Both can equally bring deal-breaking issues to relationships..." Sera thinks I love him. Do I love him? Am I even allowed to know how that feels? "What are you thinking?"

Fuck.

"I... really like you, Mercer. And it's terrifying, because I don't know what the hell that means."

"Don't for a second think that I know any better than you do in that regard. I'm as big a fool as any; I've just spent a lot of time reflecting."

"Well, we can be fools together, then."

His thick eyebrows raise in amusement. "Together?" His nails dig into my side as he pulls me to him, and barely an atom's length from my lips, he breathes, "I like the sound of that," before kissing me with such vigor it seems we may fuse together.

I want him, all of him, and I want to be wrapped in him forever... bathed in him, drenched, absolutely *soaking* in him... *Never leave me...*

His fingers creep below my waistband, and I allow him to tug the shorts over my butt and down my legs with a few shimmies. But he goes to roll down one of my socks and I grab his hand, my heart skipping... because I never take them

off. And he focuses back on me, my mouth on his, and the heat his tongue feels against mine, but I want him to have all of me, too.

So I yank them off and toss them aside. He's barely more than a silhouette beside me, but I lift my foot and press the two remaining toes against his good shin, then the space where the other three used to be.

"Very cool," he whispers in my ear, and as he kisses my neck I remember the way I had reacted towards his teeth when I wasn't expecting it...

"Uh... there's more, obvious ones I should tell you about if we're..." Shit, I ruin everything...

"We are." He doesn't seem deterred in the slightest, more reassuring than anything, and he's playing with the band of my underwear... a cuter new pair I put on just in case. "As long as you want to." Sitting up, but not pulling away, I take the sweater and throw it to the floor where the rest of our clothes are collecting. I drag my hair to the side to expose my upper back in the camisole I have on. Then I swing my legs to the floor, for the first time in years feeling cold, solid wood on my bare feet, and I show him the most shameful scars I bear.

"Juniper..." He ever-so-carefully, as if I might crumble, places a hand on each shoulder, his fingers stretching toward my collar bone. His thumbs press into the center of each bite mark that was left on me. One for each time I disobeyed, one for each part of me he took, no matter how many times I said no... My own personal baker's dozen. Thirteen is the unluckiest number of all.

"This is the one part of me I truly hate. Shame that will follow me forever. He will always... fucking always have *his mark* on me. I'll never be able to take it away. It haunts me."

"You're wrong. You can take it away."

I scoff without meaning to, throwing my hair back to cover them and crossing my legs, facing him on the bed. "I've considered tattoos, but I don't think I could stand it, and... the money is—"



“No, I mean by removing the power they have over you.” He takes in my confusion, then holds each of my hands. “You are continuing to let them hurt you because of the memories tied to how you got them, instead of letting them empower you because of what you survived. How much stronger you are, more mature, smarter now. He can never take who you are, because you are *here*. And you are perfect, even if you don’t see that.

“I see it. I see you, Juniper. You’re mesmerizing, and it is petrifying for you, but it doesn’t have to be.”

There go the bricks again.

---

I can’t pinpoint who moves first, but we are crashing like the currents mixing between two seas where they meet. *He understands you... He sees you. He thinks you’re fucking perfect...*

Avoiding the outside of his knee, I push him back on the bed and straddle him. It’ll probably be easiest, considering... and I remember the box of condoms in the bag, next to the living room sofa, as he’s tearing off my shirt and throwing it who-knows-where.

“Wait...”

“Nope, not doing that.” Like he read my mind, he reaches into his pocket and sets two condoms—not the kind that I bought—on the nightstand where he put his phone.

“And you were making fun of me for—”

“I’m just glad we had the same mindset.” Mercer lifts his shoulders off the mattress just enough to envelop me in his strong arms again, dragging me to the bed with him. With no small amount of effort, I weave my own around his neck and head, grinding against him, causing him to grunt as he resists bucking back. I can’t think; I can’t breathe. But I don’t want him to hold back, and I can tell he doesn’t want to... I am not so fragile that I cannot do whatever he desires.

Scooping the comforter off the foot of the bed where we moved it, I toss it over us, and follow his lead from before... trailing kisses down his throat, his chest, his abs, and skipping down the happy trail until I reach the shorts. He sucks in sharply. I cup him through the silky material and gauge his response, which is to throw his head back in misery, anticipation... I'll give him exactly what he wants.

Tugging the elastic down enough to expose him, I feel him lift his head to glance down at me because I've paused, but he's... much bigger than I've had. Especially for—*suck it up*.

“You don't have to—*oh*.” I'm not doing anything I don't want to.

Licking the tiny drop of pre-cum from the head of his length, I stroke gently at first, as I inch him down my throat, agonizingly for him, I'm sure, but curiously for myself. I want to explore him, and tease him as much as he did me in the bathroom...

He props up his head with one of his arms and the other hand pulls my hair out of the way, giving him a better view. And just as the tip of him reaches the back of my throat, he lets out a shaky breath. My eyes meet his, and he bites down on his lower lip.

I pick up the pace, my eyes watering from the constant resisting of gagging, but I want him close... My hand works his base, occasionally fondling him lower to make him really squirm. His hand tightens in my hair, and right as I'm going to drive him crazy, he fists tight enough to hurt just a bit... I wasn't expecting to like it. But he comes free of my mouth after yanking me up, and I loosen my grip.

“My turn.” He practically spits with how worked up he is, but I oblige and slowly climb up him again, giving him space to shake the shorts off before settling with just my lacy panties between his throbbing cock and my dripping core... This is where I am meant to be.

Mercer hasn't let go of my hair, and I don't want him to. He seems to take note and pulls me to meet his lips, pulling

the crotch of my underwear aside to slide a finger—two, into me. He swallows the moans instead of hearing them. He likes to feel them as much as I do.

Repeating the same motions as our adventure at the party, his thumb finds my clit and presses just hard enough to make me freeze. Taking advantage of my impending climax and releasing my hair, he gently pinches my nipple, and my head falls back in triumph.

A shrill wave of bliss rolls over me; I have to remind myself not to scream, so I slap my hand over my mouth and sit up, feeling the end of the tide pull back to the sea.

“You’re so loud; I love it.” Love... The crinkle and rip of the condom wrapper. Mercer grabs my ass firmly, his tongue running up the length of my earlobe as I rest and he prepares... Love...

He doesn’t bother waiting to actually take my panties off... or maybe he can’t. I can’t.

I’m ever so thankful I didn’t when he slowly presses into me, and the sensation of fullness and minor pain gives way to absolute... perfection.

“Ah, Mercy...”

“Shhh, I’ve got you, Juniper.”... Love... Juniper...

I can tell how difficult it is for him to hold back, but he does, until he’s placed himself so deep inside me I fear I cannot move... but I don’t have to. *Perfect.*

Pulling the blanket to my shoulders, he hugs me calmly, finds my mouth, and fills it with his tongue as he begins to roll his hips. After I adjust, I bring myself up slightly, and almost topple over at how much better the position feels... Deeper, shifted forward... Mercer agrees with an aggressive buck that causes me to cry out.

He sits up intently, ready to stop in fear of hurting me... but I am far from hurt. And I let him know by throwing my arms around him and riding him until his panting meets mine and his blunt nails leave marks in the flesh of my hips...

Until he whispers my name and stills with a great sigh after we climax one after the other... and he won't stop kissing me.

He makes no move to release me, like he is in no rush to stop... like he doesn't want to immediately get away from me and hide me for the shame I would bring him in daylight, no... Mercer is caring, and kind, and a little weird, but... he is perfect. *Perfect.*

“Mercy, huh? Kind of hot,” Flipping me onto my back, he pulls out and discards the condom, but finds my mouth again with ease before grumbling, “I want to hear it again.”

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“For a second, I forgot you were injured,” I tease.

He bumps his leg again, moving me by my hips to the edge of the bed so he can get better traction and hang his bad knee over the side. “I might have, too. You're just that intoxicating.” He's ripping my underwear off, but won't put any distance between us. Like we're magnets being forced apart, but always working to be together over any other solution.

In what seems like barely a second he's re-sheathed and thrusting into me again, and even not at his best... this is the best I've ever had, and not just the sex.

“Mercy.” The groan that leaves him as I tickle his ear sounds almost painful, and he nuzzles deeper into my neck, tightening his grip on my hips. “Mercy... ah.” He pulls back to just the tip and leans over to flick his tongue against my nipple, kneading the other, and agonizingly... slowly... “Please...”

“Oh, I might like that better than the pet name...”

“Please...” Another inch... and another...

I arch, my feet working to find purchase, and reach for him, but he keeps me at arm's length... drawing it out.

“You're even prettier when you're impatient—”

“Ah!” He drives in hard, without pity and without an ounce of that softness he showed me he possessed... not this time.

I cling to him as he pounds into me furiously, my calls for Mercy going in one ear... and straight to his— “Fuck, Juniper.” Tears are streaming down my face, and I can barely breathe between the shudders of pleasure. I dig my heels into the backs of his thighs, and my nails into his shoulders, and I forget every-fucking-thing but this... this painfully beautiful moment... where I release all the burdens the past has convinced me I must still shame myself for. If Mercer can see what I am and love me... why can't I?

“Yes, oh God, yes!” Smelling of sweat and sex, his hand slithers over my mouth to silence me, but I lace my fingers through his and bite down onto his knuckles. I ride my pleasure as he quickly finds his, and he slows his pace until he's milked himself dry.

“I never want this to stop.” He forces his hand from my teeth and captures me, deepening the kiss when I tighten around him. The arousal is infinite.

“I was thinking the same thing.” And though I'm sure we could have gone all night if we really wanted... I release him only long enough for him to discard the wrappers and grab a towel to clean off. I'm not going to ask if he wants to stay... I don't want to be needy—*Yes, you do. Tell him to stay*—

“Do you have work tomorrow?” Mercer saunters across the room, tugging his boxers over his fine ass slowly enough to make my eyeballs pop out of my head. *Look at all those marks you left on his chest... his back...*

“Yes, but it is just downstairs...” Forcing me back on my elbows on the bed, he hovers over me—menacingly, but fuck is it hot when he does this. You'd think I would hate it but... because it's him? Never...

“Oh good, you'll let me stay then?” A quick, anticipating peck, then he rests his forehead against mine.

“Absolutely.” With that beautiful-chipped-tooth smile, he gives me the kiss he really wants, but stands abruptly.

“You’re going to have to get dressed then, because if I lay in this bed with you and you look like that,” a dramatic gesture with both hands before he feigns praying, “I won’t be able to resist you.”

“Ugh, fine...” I nearly trip while rolling off the bed, but catch myself on the footboard. I don’t even need to look at Mercer to feel his damn brows rising at me. I find one of my sleep t-shirts and a more comfortable pair of underwear. When I turn back, he’s leaning against the headboard with a pillow propped behind him—eyes for nothing but me. I love that he makes me feel like the center of attention... and that I don’t hate it. I revel in it; it brings out this side of me that I didn’t even know was hiding in there... It feels so fucking *right*. “You don’t look like you want me to put anything on...”

He props his good knee up, rests an elbow on it, and looks me from toe to head... lingering on his new-found favorites. “I don’t.” My thighs make contact with the rough wood of the footboard, hiding his *most* favorite part, and I toss the clothes into his lap. “But I desperately need you to, or I’m not walking out of this house any time soon...”

“What if that *is* what I want?” A small grin, accompanied by a chuckle.

“No, Juniper. You don’t... I think you like your legs.” He tosses the shirt back. I barely catch it, then he’s right in front of my face at the end of the bed. “And if you want me to keep making you scream ‘yes’, you’d better learn to accept when I say ‘no’.” Jokingly, he nuzzles his nose against mine before settling back onto the pillows.

*Oh fuck, you are in DEEP shit.*

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## Chapter Seventeen: Power

*Bzzt. Bzzt. Bzzt.*

*“You don’t deserve any-fucking-thing. Do you hear me, whore?” I couldn’t stop him this time. I hadn’t eaten in days because of the house being empty. I didn’t even know what day it was... “If you fight me, I will fucking kill you,” he hissed into my ear, his hand a vice grip on my jaw, and it aches... aches...aches... Just let it be over. Let him do whatever he wants so he ignores you again... It’s so much better when he ignores you...*

*“Ow, no...” His teeth sank into my shoulder again and my fist formed, slamming into the back of his shoulder before I could suppress my fight-or-flight... Flight was impossible. Fight meant death...*

*“You stupid bitch.” Muffled screaming... mine... and I fucking fought and fought until there was nothing but silence... and the never-ending abyss of voices that wouldn’t give me peace even when he finally left...*

*Bzzt. Bzzt. Bzzt.*

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*Bzzt. Bzzt. Bzzt.*

Lifting my head from Mercer’s bare chest, I have to remember what happened and where I am for a moment... while also trying not to freak the fuck out because... what?

Some part of me was convinced this was just a good dream I had finally granted myself to have in the swarm of nightmares that always plague my sleep, but I gaze up at his serene and totally adorable, sleeping face, mouth slack-jawed open, snoring slightly... I don’t think we moved all night.

*Bzzt. Bzzt. Bzzt.*

I thought that was just a part of the nightmare too...

Carefully propping myself up, I reach across and hesitate over the phone, facing down on the nightstand

—‘*You’re too nosy for your own good...*’

Well, maybe I wouldn’t be if he gave me answers, but... I agreed to give him time.

My hand’s already closed around the cool metal. The screen reads ‘Tessie’ with a fucking heart.

“*Tess is the complication...*” Tess isn’t his ex-wife... then... What is she to him?

*You are fucking stupid. You ignorant, blinded by intimacy, trusting fucking FOOL!*

It falls with a deep thud, and Mercer stirs, but is fully awakened when I throw the blanket off and quickly get to my feet, putting on my sweater and shorts from the night before.

“What the...”

*Bzzzzzt.*

“Fuck, Juniper, stop—” He’s barely getting his bearings when I slam the door and skip stairs to make it to the front door. I throw it open and don’t care to close it because I need air... I need to breathe before it’s too late...

The flood gates are breaking. I cover my ears to stop the roaring, but it’s so much louder when it’s only in my head... Crouching to the floor, I put my back to the rail and my head between my knees, willing the burn in my sinuses to stop. *Please just fucking stop...*

The sun has begun to paint the sky with pastels, and I’m not sure how much time passes before Mercer steps onto the porch... fully clothed in dirt and blood except for the shorts he borrowed.

“I’m sorry Juniper, it’s... it’s not what you’re thinking. I—”

“Then what is it?” Don’t look at him, don’t fucking look at—god dammit. He’s all I can look at.

“I will explain everything as soon as I can.” I forgot my socks... My feet are so cold.



“Why not now?” As I pull myself up with part of the rail, he steps toward me, and I put my hand up willing him not to.

“I told you why...”

“No, you told me Tessie is the complication,” *why did you have to say her name like that?* “So who is she, your girlfriend? and that’s why you don’t want to tell me anything?”

“Juniper, please... I can’t give you the answers. Please. I... I don’t know how else to convince you to trust me, but I’m trying so hard to give you all I can without jeopardizing my life... hers, and yours.” Whoever she is... she is more important to him than I am. I cannot accept this non-answer.

“Who called me from your phone yesterday?”

Shoving the bundle of his stuff under an arm, he crosses them, finally realizing or accepting that he has to give me something... *more* than his body. “Skull and crossbones, after I told her she would never know anything about you or my new life. She saw your name on my texts as soon as she picked up my phone, hid it, and tried to call you. I didn’t get it back until whenever I called you, because... well, ‘no’ is not in her vocabulary, which is one of the reasons I *need* it to be in yours.” He offers me his hand, and a softening to the sternness he’s presenting. “I’ll have to deal with her a lot over the next few months because of legal shit, but please trust me when I say that it is you I think about, you I want to be with, and no matter who it is... you that comes out of my mouth when I speak. I am utterly infatuated with you, Juniper. You’re the only person I’ve wanted to share my life with, but you are going to have to be patient with me if we continue doing this.” I want to keep doing this more than I’ve wanted my life back. He makes me happy.

“Okay.” It comes out forced, even though I try to put a little effort behind the response... It is not okay. But if I have to be okay with it to keep him in my life, to keep this part of him? I will make it okay.

“I have to go now, and you need to prepare for your day. So, walk with me to my car so I can give you your flowers, at least? I promise to make up for our date, very soon if it ends anything like this...” it’s hard to smile right now, when it’s usually so easy with him... *just another complication.*

I take his hand, and we—slowly, because of his limp—make our way a few houses down where he ended up parking. The shiny black sports car is a beacon of money between the beat-up lemons almost everyone around here drives.

The first thing I notice when he opens the door and reaches in to grab the bouquet from the dash is a deep purple book bag on the passenger seat floor... with an embroidered patch of stars and planets near the zipper.

Bright red and velvety maroon flowers, wrapped in some gorgeous felt of the same colors... they’re stunning. And I don’t deserve them, I don’t deserve him... The chocolatey smell of them wafts under my nose, and it causes the strange pit in my stomach to swell instead of calm.

*He could be just like you... but he may not be ready to share yet. He didn’t push you... why are you pushing him? You spent months working on this exact thing—you brought up these scenarios for a new relationship, you prepared for this... moving on.*

I do not want to move on. I will have *Mercy*...

He looks so much better from just a few hours of rest, and I’m sure some well-needed release of tension, considering how I felt last night after years of... yeah.

“Thank you.”

“No, thank you, Juniper.” I love the way my name rolls off his tongue. “Can I call you?” His head jerks, tilting like a puppy who hears a sound they aren’t sure of, and it’s so fucking cute...

“Yes,” I say with very little hesitation, regardless of the bundle of nerves and emotions I’m feeling—Yes, I want him to call me. Bringing me to him, he runs his thumb across my

lower lip, gazing at them with such hunger I think he might just pull me into the car with him. Then he takes my jaw in his hand so gently, so carefully, and kisses me with all the love he's been expressing through his actions. Love I think I'm starting to feel in return.

"That's my girl." My fucking knees are going to give out, and a tear slides down my cheek. The most contented tear I've ever cried. I quickly brush it away just as his eyes of chocolate, deeper than the darkest parts of these flowers, and amber like the deepest gold of a sunflower, open on mine. Wonderful, full, calm... complication and sorrow... justice and perseverance... so much more than they seem. Then he slips into the car and closes the door, giving me a wave and following me at an ant's pace back to the shop, where he waits for me to climb the porch and open the door before rolling the window down and raising his voice to carry. "Goodnight!"

I can't help the laughter that claims me. It's clearly not night time anymore... and I won't be going back to sleep anytime soon. I just wave and go inside; he calls me fifteen minutes later saying he's about to head up to his apartment.

"I can't wait for that first date, Mercy," I answer the phone with instead of my normal annoyed bullshit, and his tenor chuckle responds.

"Maybe some more sleep will do you well, you're hysterical. Goodnight then."

"Goodnight."

---

*You have no power over me anymore. You are dead, your memories are dead, your reach is dead, your power is dead and buried in the ground with you. "Wherever you are, I want you to know... that you are just as dead to me as you are to the rest of the world. You don't own me, and you never did."*

I drop the last picture I have of that man into the first lit fire of the year in Bao's living room hearth, and I smile as my ex-fiance's features crinkle and burn. Just as his world

surely did, just as his body did in that car after it wrapped around the telephone pole. “This is power, and you’ve never even had a taste of it.” I scoop the ashes into a coffee can, and I dump them into the toilet. Finally finishing this where he fucking belonged all this time—the sewer.

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## Chapter Eighteen: Aftermath

Mercer calls me every day now—sometimes more than once. But I haven't seen him since he left that morning.

I was hoping he would be at the nursing home when I visited my Nana on Thursday, but no luck. He texts me, letting me know before I even head out that he won't be there because he has some stuff for work to finish up after his court appointments in the morning. I run into Vincent in the hallway and say hello, and I introduce myself, but... not as anyone to Mercer or Nana Grace, just as a person who might be working there soon.

After my visit and an extra talk with the current receptionists about how they like working there and what the expectations of the position are, Nana gives me extra grief about my mood and not being so snappy, or quiet as I usually was. She assumes why before I even give her a hint, because she knows me far too damn well. But I tell her everything, and right before I leave, she whispers something that's really stuck with me... and something I think she may be right about.

---

Friday morning. Quynh joins me at the shop, and I beat around the bush avoiding her questions before she corners me at a Victorian-era garment rack, my favorite costumes to re-piece and hang, and forces me to spill the beans. I do, not leaving out anything unless she squeezes her eyes shut and yells 'next!' which makes me nearly roll through the store with embarrassment and laughter.

"Maybe it's just normal divorce stuff, or has something to do with it. If they've been living apart so long and were just separated, they could just be getting to it..." Sighing deeply, she insists I tell her whatever it is that I haven't. Which would be Tess... all of the nothing I know so far about her.

"Holy shit... Okay, well... it could be his sister, or maybe a niece or something. Maybe his ex's family member since he's so secretive about it and he still sees his ex a lot..."

As she tethers her brain around a plausible assumption, I continue stacking and dusting the feather hats that go with the garments. Until I have an idea...

“The other night, Sera suggested that I maybe go to his house and surprise him. I did tell him I would give him time and I would do things at his pace, but... I also want to make sure I’m not wasting my own time, and my feelings. It seems like he’s trying too hard to keep me in the dark.”

“I think you should go for it.” Not bothering to give it another thought, she’s far too on board with shenanigans. “Maybe set up a date after your next make-up, and instead of going through with it, just...” She jumps down from the stepladder she used to stick a box on the higher shelf. “... show up. Surprise! He’ll probably hate it, because most men do. But—” She elongates the word for effect, dropping her pair of scissors on the inventory sheet I was marking off to be sure I’m paying attention. “Maybe it’ll force some answers if you show up at his door, and honestly, it’s super weird that he’s never tried to take you home. That’s usually a go-to.”

I never really thought about it like that before. “So, do you think I should try and get him to take me to his place after our next date, and maybe go through with that surprise pop-up if he won’t? Or if things are just as weird and sketchy-feeling after that date?”

“I think you’ve got it all figured out without asking me, but I also think that’s the most perfect, slightly diabolical way of going about it. If you’re just as important to him, if he wants you to stay and deal with this, you can’t do it so blindly. And that *is* what you are.” Fuck me. *He already did that, before even taking you on a date.* “Take charge, Juniper. How much time does he expect you to give him when you barely even know anything about his life? Would you blindly merge your life with his like this?” Fuck. I already did this once... *Never be weak again.*

“You know what Quynh, you’re so fucking right.”

“Oh, guess what?”

“I’m not guessing, just tell me.”

She stomps her foot and pouts. “No fun. Well, Alex is helping Sera move to their new apartment that they just rented. And he mentioned seeing Mercer going into the building across the street from him over the weekend when he was finishing up the paperwork. I’ll ask him to find out the apartment number, and tell him it’s only because you want to send him something.” A quick wink, and she snatches the inventory from me. “Text him now, set that shit up. He’s already slept with you; it’s obligatory to take you out within a week, you know.”

How would I know?

*J: What is your favorite kind of food?*

*M: No favorites, but I’ll never turn down a good chinese buffet.*

*J: Typical lol*

*M: What?*

*J: Oh, nothing. Just very fitting. Vague, lots of options...*

*M: Ouch.*

*M: Juniper?*

*J: Yes?*

*M: I don’t need options.*

*J: Re-do. China House on fifth, seven pm, tomorrow night.*

*M: I’ll be there at 6:30*

*J: I’ll be waiting*

*M: Perfect :) just like you*

“Alright, I did the thing. We’re on for tomorrow.” And it will never not feel weird to hear or see him say *that*... well, maybe not never.

*You’ve barely known him for a couple months; what the hell are you doing? Ignoring you, for one.*

“And you’ll either get some answers or some good *dickkkk!*” Quynh sings from beyond the graveyard of costumes, prompting me to sarcastically laugh loudly enough to hear me wherever she has been consumed. They must have made her one of them, but I doubt she would have fought them with how often she holds fashion shows during work hours with the claims that it’s to ‘check the integrity’ of the piece and see if it needs repairs. I don’t believe her for a second; she enjoys it too much.

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### *Mercer*

“You’re a fucking idiot, Nik.”

“Hello to you too, brother of mine.” He isn’t wrong, but is that any way to greet your youngest sibling after not seeing or speaking to them in over a year? Well... maybe under these circumstances.

“Two fights, two police reports, your fucking *gun* out in the open for all to see, in a matter of weeks. Honestly, are you just a moron now, or has finally getting laid again messed with your priorities even more?” How the fuck... that bitch. I’d never say it to her face, or to anyone else, but I’ve never fucking hated someone as much as I do Lizette.

“Relax, would you? I’ve handled it all—”

“Because of me, and your fucking friend. Does he even know who the hell you are, or is he just as in the dark as your girlfriend?”

“Don’t talk about her. You don’t even know her. And neither does Liz, so whatever she told you—butt. The fuck. Out.” He takes a step back, shoving his hands into his navy dress pants. I’ve always found it incredibly hard to believe that Darren and I are cut from the same cloth. The middle one, Jacob? Absolutely. We could be twins, in personality as well as looks. But this selfish prick... “You’re helping her, aren’t you?”

His deep black hair shimmers like stars as he steps under the fluorescents in my kitchen, with all the gel it’s



slicked back with, it'll be a miracle if he doesn't catch fire near an open flame. "I'm helping Theresa."

"Don't give me that bullshit, you and I both know she's better off here. She hates France, and I don't blame her, considering Liz just abandons her in the hotel room or whatever villa she's rented for the week. Do you think Tessie doesn't tell me how she fucking treats her? She can't pay attention to her daughter for one week, and you think it's a good idea to take her to another country where you know I cannot go?" The disbelief must be much more prevalent than I was hoping, because he actually shrinks. I may be bigger overall, but he still towers me by a head, and he never backs down.

"Look I don't really think it'll be better for her, but you guys being at each other's throats constantly is not alright. I don't really care which of you gets custody, but Lizette is family..." What the fuck. Fuck family.

"She's more your family than I am? What does Leith think about all this?" His chest puffs at the mention of the husband he left behind to deal with our mess at the beck and call of my ex-wife. That's the brother I remember.

"He thinks you're both childish, and if it were up to us, neither of you would get to take Tess. Neither of you have your fucking lives together..." It suddenly clicks. They have been applying to adopt for six fucking years, Lizette is suddenly keeping Tess from seeing or talking to me and having an interest in my life... her wanting to "move" but making no real physical progress for doing so...

"You're not taking my kid from me, Darren. I don't know what the fuck she's said to get you here and get you on her side... She's a pathological liar. Did she tell you that? Clinically documented, dude." His sharp features contort into disbelief, and then anger, and then nothing. The true face of Darren Bardot, The Blank Slate. Too bad his business tactics don't work on me, I suppose.

"And you're an alcoholic with anger issues—"

“All of which I have made significant progress with. Traceable progress. At least I never abandoned my daughter to go to parties and sleep with random people, while being married. I’ve worked on my anger issues, I’ve worked *hard* with my drinking. Tess likes staying at *my* house more than hers. You might want to open your eyes and see who the real better option is.”

A terrifying glint sparks in his brown eyes, one of the only things we share. “She isn’t your daughter, Nik. Her father is dead. Just because Liz never forced you off the birth certificate when he was alive doesn’t mean anything—”

“No, it doesn’t. But the nearly seven years raising that girl while Liz fucked off and did whatever she wanted, lied about it all, fabricated an entire fucking world that didn’t exist while stringing me along and feeding me just enough of the pieces to believe her... that means everything. And the fact that you believed her? Helped her spread her lies? Chose them? Blood.” I spit at his feet, not giving him the respect he’s willed from us through intimidation for too long. “Blood doesn’t mean a fucking thing. You and Leith picked your side when she kicked me out of the house and got the upper hand on my downfall. I was the only parent Tessie knew for the beginning of her life, and you played a hand in stripping her from me. For what? For *her*? So you could get your pathetic hands on a *baby*? Or has this been your plan for the last five years?”

“You do not—”

“*You* do not get to stand here when I called you hundreds of times, begged you for help, begged you for a place to stay, begged you to aid me in figuring out my life. Even Jacob went out of his way to fly back here in the middle of his work, but not you. You were too busy living it up with my wife, my friend, and my daughter while I was in a pit of fucking agony with no way out in sight. You will never have my daughter.”

“Is that a threat?”

“Get out of my fucking house.”

“Nik—”

“Get out of my house!” I smack the white vase full of faux posies from the small marble dining table; it shatters against the wall beside the door. Darren does not flinch, does not break eye contact. He just backs away enough to tug the handle. “You need to talk to Lizette, Nikolai.” He slams the door behind him. A framed picture of us three brothers at Jacob’s high school graduation falls from its nail with the vibration, cracking right between Darren and me.

Irony is just as much of a bitch as my ex-wife.

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## Chapter Nineteen: Re-Do

### *Juniper*

“Shit.” My phone screen reads six thirty-two, but I haven’t seen any car lights stopping yet. Then again, he could have parked.

I quickly slip on my flats and pause to check for the hundredth time that I look okay in the mirror. The lace layer of the dress is so pretty, and I paired it with a black cardigan instead of the white blouse to match the flats. I hate wearing makeup, but Sera insisted on letting her do mine when they came by earlier on, and I don’t actually hate it. I look... nice. But I’m late.

---

“You look amazing, but you always do.” Mercer is leaning against one of the pillars at the top of the porch’s stairs, his hair is slicked back like when he was waiting at the club, and the night-black button up hugs him tight enough to see every contour. *If the front looks this good... his shoulders are probably about to rip through—*

“Thank you,” I say, stepping outside. I lock the door behind me. With a flourish, he whips a bouquet of all-colored cosmos from behind his back and presents them to me with a kiss on the cheek. “You’re pretty stunning yourself.”

“Unfortunately, my chocolate cosmo contact is out of town for the week.” I take a deep whiff of the beautiful flowers and stick out my lip with a deep pout. Rolling his eyes, he sticks out his elbow. As soon as my fingers slither around his bicep, I can’t fight the urge to squeeze... He flexes into it, and I gasp, mostly because I thought I was being subtle. Clearly, based on his full head-thrown-back burst of laughter as we walk through the garden gate and onto the sidewalk, I was not. And now the heat rises from just my core to my neck and face, too.

He maneuvers his head down enough to hiss in my ear, “Don’t worry, you can grab onto me as much as you want to

after dinner,” spurring a flower-fisted hit to the same bicep—merely a mosquito bite to him, I’m sure. He chuckles again as we make it to his car, pulling open the door for me and gently shutting it after I settle in.

As soon as he sits in his own seat, I clutch his face with both hands and kiss him deeply; he gives no objection. In fact, he parts my mouth with a probe from his tongue and forces a sensually-fueled smile, which he uses to his advantage, gnawing my lower lip so carefully before giving a final peck and forcing himself away. One hand goes to the steering wheel. He clears his throat and adjusts his belt... and the crotch of his charcoal slacks.

“Sorry,” I tease and cross my legs in an attempt to take some pressure away from my own arousal...

“I missed you.” His response surprises me, but I smile and reach across the console to kiss him again, caressing his jaw and making him look at me instead of his blank stare out into the empty road. He seems so distant tonight, and that’s the last thing I want.

“I missed you too.” The tension seeps from him as he takes me in. I could watch him looking at me forever. He’s the only one whose heavy gaze I don’t squirm and ache under now. It took some time and understanding, but I cherish this. I need to know what’s going on before it’s too late for me to save my heart... because he makes me not care about whether or not he breaks it so long as he continues to look at me like *that*. Continues to make me feel *this*.

“Are you sure you don’t just want to skip dinner?” My hand drops, just missing his half-staff as it slaps his thigh. He jumps at the proximity.

“No, you owe me a date. You’re gonna have to do better than flowers and an injury, even an internal one, to get into my pants again.” Adjusting in my seat, I reach for the seatbelt, and as I press it into the latch, his hand shoots across the space and slides halfway up my thigh.

“But you’re wearing a dress...” As I smack the top of his wrist playfully, he reluctantly relents and puts his own

seatbelt on, starting the engine and pulling from the curb.

---

### *Mercer*

The only time my head has been clear in years has been around her, and now it's muddled all over again... Ever since I had her, it's consumed me. It is all I can think about at the absolute worst times, like in the fucking car. Or right now, as I watch her petite fingers—the same ones that wrapped around my cock so perfectly—gently take the stem of the wine glass and bring it to her luscious lips. I thought the chocolate cosmos were a little funny, only because that's exactly what she tastes like. Sweet, and rich, and fucking addicting. I can't wait to get under that skirt as soon as I get her—

“Are you alright? Seems like there's a lot on your mind tonight...” Oh fuck, if she only knew.

“Drama. My brother showed up without any notice. And after five years of practically pretending I didn't exist. The last few days have just been a lot.” And I haven't been eating, sleeping, or thinking straight...

“Should you... go home?” Probably. She's even cuter when she's worried. But I am the last thing I want her to worry about; my burdens are not hers to bear. Scooping her free hand from the table as she twirls her fried noodles with a fork in the other, I gently kiss the tops of her knuckles and savor any bit of contact I can get right now... If this were Darren's restaurant, I would have the fucking room emptied so I could bend her over this goddamn table, and there wouldn't be a soul around to hear her scream my name... or beg for it.

“No, I'm right where I should be.” If I can make her this happy as long as she'll let me, It's good enough. Juniper will leave just like everyone else does when they figure out who I really am, the baggage I carry... I just want to savor it and do everything I possibly can to help her improve her life. I know how hard this must be for her. I'm okay with being a stepping stone. “I have a gift for you.” The way she abandons

her fork betrays the look of confusion she tries to push through the veil, but I see her.

I lean back in the seat enough to slide the thin box from my pocket. Silver- and red-striped wrapping leftover from last Christmas is what Tess decided would be best. I trust her judgment over mine any day, and with the way Juniper's usually icy and untrusting eyes melt as soon as she sees it... she was fucking right.

“Seriously? You should not have—”

“Just hush and open the damn box.” The way her eyebrows meet her hairline makes me question my tone. “Please?” I add with emphasized pity. She obliges without need of more prompting. I like her begging better.

“No fucking way...” The squeal fades as soon as she's aware of her volume, but not before earning us some looks from the other patrons, and I can't help but be amused by the childlike giddiness. I could shower her in gifts every day, but Juniper is not the kind of girl that's impressed with money or physical trophies. I knew that the second she gave me the time of day instead of desperate distaste.

Juniper wants thoughtfulness, care, ease, and attention—public attention. To be shown what I think of her. To be ravished and worshiped simultaneously, praised and caressed in private... She wants someone to understand, yes; but more than that, she wants to be shown that they listen. No use for trinkets or jewelry, no want for fancy clothes or makeup... but what woman doesn't like the occasional shiny surprise?

“It's about a decade old, from when I was in college. But I made sure it still works, and I set up an iTunes account for you, which I can give you the information for later. But there are a few playlists on there of stuff I used to listen to until you get around to putting your own music on there.” The entire time I speak, trying to coat my own nerves, she sits across from me in utter shock. Maybe I fucked up.

“This is the nicest, most thoughtful thing anyone's ever done for me.” Well, I'm sure that's an exaggeration, but... if the bar is set so low, why not try to raise it for the next guy?

She deserves so much more than I can ever give her, but I want her to know her worth.

“Now you can actually ignore people with music instead of imagining it.” When she finally tears herself away from the screen that she hasn’t turned on, there are black lines of tears running down her face. Oh no... I fucked up.

But instead of yelling, or storming out... Like a tiger pouncing on unsuspecting prey, she circles the booth table, and then her arms are around my neck, squeezing the life from me. “What’s your favorite song on it?”

I just say the first thing that comes to mind from the playlist I glimpsed a few hours ago. “The Funeral, Band of Horses. Got me through a lot of tough times back then, and even more now.” Juniper plops down in the seat beside me, nearly on top of me, and I am not complaining. I leave my arm behind her back, scooting just enough to make sure she won’t fall off the bench. My stubble-coated chin picks up hairs as I rest it on her head, and she leans into my chest. “Not so hungry now that you’ve got music?”

The softness of her response is brutal, like she’s utterly in awe of all of this. “I’ve never been on a real date. That’s sort of why I wanted this to happen so badly, but...” Holy shit.

“Never? Wait... how old *are* you?” She didn’t answer me when I asked back out of frustration, but that was just because I was thinking my age would be a deal-breaker for her. Three years in an asylum...

“Twenty-fmm.”

“Juniper... I think we’re a little past that. Should I start with something easier—favorite color?”

“Green.”

“That one was easy...” I force her head up. She avoids my gaze entirely.

“That one isn’t embarrassing.” When she realizes I’m unsatisfied, and still insistently waiting, she mumbles, “Twenty-five.” Fuck. Fuck. Fuck... She stands to go back to



her side of the booth, but I catch the back of her dress, right at the waist where my hand was resting.

“Please sit down.” She seems to contemplate for a second too long, and I’m sure I’ve fucked everything up just by asking.

“I know, okay? You’re too old for me. I’m too young for you. Whatever. It’s fine. Can we at least finish the date? It’s been nice...”

“Wow, I didn’t realize you were under the impression I was shallow enough to care about your age. If you didn’t care about me being significantly older than you when you asked, I don’t care about it either. I only asked because I was working out how old you were when...” She easily deciphers the rest without needing me to finish, and she slips the iPod onto the table before turning in the seat to face me.

“I was twenty-two, barely.” She was barely even a person... and he fucking destroyed her. Not just partially... broke every piece he could reach.

“What was his name?” She hesitates again, looking anywhere but at me. I only want her to look at me. “Juniper —”

“It doesn’t matter; it’s in the past.” No, no it’s not. Not yet.

“Please tell—”

“Who is Tess?” Fuck! My fist is balled and making contact with the wooden table, rattling the dishes, causing a scene. *Get it the fuck together, right now.* “Take me home, Mercer.” No... god dammit.

“I’m sorry, Juniper, but you know I *can’t* tell you that. You just *won’t* tell me...” She’s leaving, she’s fucking *leaving*. Holy shit. I can’t think, I can’t move, I can’t feel anything but fucking mad, but... I should let her walk away.

“Let’s go.” She’s... not leaving. She’s waiting impatiently, with her arms folded and foot tapping... I slap way more than enough cash down on the table and grab my jacket. The walk back to the parking lot, wait for the valet, and

start of the drive is excruciating... and I can't think of any fucking way to save this. *I shouldn't. She's better off without me...*

"I do not speak his name. And I won't... even for you. Not until I know that it holds no power over me. It doesn't matter who he was. He's gone. And he's never coming back, so I'm safe." She senses exactly what I want to add, but she doesn't need me to say it... She's only safe from him. She's not safe from the trauma he left her with, or anyone else who may bring it up and cause more damage. *Which is exactly what I'm doing, fucking idiot. I literally know exactly how she feels... I'm doing the same fucking thing.*

"My ex-wife's name is Lizette. Skull and crossbones. She's... too much." I literally have no other words to use to describe her. "She was always too much for me, but I thought that I could become too much to match, and we'd be perfect. But the problem was that she never wanted me to begin with. I was a guinea pig until something better came along. Or I guess, came back." This is more than I've really told her about those... people.

"I don't want to go home," she blurts suddenly, right as I'm about to take the freeway exit to her neighborhood.

"I will take you wherever you do want to go, so long as you let me stay with you for a while, and make sure you're okay. Because I feel horrible..." I swear she scoffs, but when I glance over, just after passing the turn off, she's looking at me like she could eat me... and I don't know if I like that.

"Take me to your house, and you can show me just how horrible you feel..." The click of her seat belt unbuckling, and then her mouth is scorching on my neck. She hastily gropes me, and it takes nothing at all for me to be ready for her, but fuck...

"I... can't. My brother... Fuck, Juniper." Her nimble fingers start on my belt buckle. I see a green sign for a Hilton at the next turn off, and I don't bother asking before swerving across the next two lanes without a signal to make the turn.

“Put your fucking seatbelt back on,” I order. She obeys, which makes my need for her skyrocket.

Juniper makes it incredibly difficult to think about anything but her thighs on each side of my head. The constant thoughts of disappointment that I was unable to do exactly what I wanted and how the last time because of my leg drive me crazy, so this adventure is starting with tasting her.

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Juniper only considers declining momentarily as we pull up for the valet.

I wave them off and open her door myself. She looks upset... I'm determined to fix that. She won't remember being upset with me in a few hours, until I'm gone. But then it won't be my problem anymore.

“Whatever you have on the top floor.” My I.D. and card slap onto the quiet lobby desk with an echo.

“Right away, Mr. Bardot.” The blonde man standing at the desk smiles at Juniper for just a second too long for my liking, and I can tell by the way she impatiently grips the fabric at my forearm that she saw my jaw clenching.

“Relax, you're the one going to the room with me.” Her remark does nothing to ease my jealousy; instead, it makes me want to wrap my hand in her hair, and pin her against the wall, and—

“Here you are Sir. Miss.” Ouch. Juniper's knuckles turn white from gripping my sleeve tighter. “The Atlantis Suite—one of our best.” I can't rip the keys from his fingertips fast enough, and we don't acknowledge any of his spiel about luggage or check-out, because nothing else matters in this moment.

Nothing except for her, and making sure she knows just how much she means to me... I'm afraid I may never see her again. It may be for the best... but that doesn't mean I can't enjoy her now. I don't want her to forget this.

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## Chapter Twenty: Atlantis

### *Juniper*

A fucking hotel... seriously? I don't know why I can't just let it go and do what we're here for... that I know we'll enjoy regardless of being irritated with each other.

We actually might enjoy it more by being irritated with each other... *That's not the point.* "Are we really going to stay the night here?" The elevator is like a tiny glass box, magically lifting us into the sky. I can't help but peer over the side to the lobby quickly leaving us below. It gives me shivers... and horrible flashbacks to the bridge.

"That is usually what hotel rooms are for." Well, among other things... "Among other things."

"I... was just curious if the 'other things' were going to be the only things, or if we'd get to spend some more time together." I suddenly feel silly asking for so much... So small and needy, clinging to him.

Whatever our feelings are for each other, Mercer has made it incredibly clear that nothing more than random dates every now and then that lead into very... very... hot and satisfying hook-ups will be happening between us. Possibly nothing more—ever.

"We should at least enjoy the privacy and opportunity to do whatever your heart desires. You seemed to have quite a few ideas in the car—"

"I still have quite a few ideas, but I would have preferred your house—or mine," I add with haste so as to not seem like that was most of the goal behind what I initiated in the car, "over a suite, when we..." I realize I don't know how to finish that sentence without offending him or making things worse.

"When we what?" I've already offended him. I don't know how to save this now. I untie my arm from his and slide it along the small of his back instead. He accepts the embrace;

I rest my chin on his sternum and stare up at him with what I hope are utterly pathetic, puppy dog eyes.

“It doesn’t feel like you want to be with me, beyond... you know...” My cheeks redden, and his hold on me tightens. He places a long kiss on the center of my forehead.

“I do, Juniper. I know my words have been lacking, but... I really am trying to show you what you mean to me as best as I’m able to. I admit I’m struggling to juggle it all—”

“Then don’t. Let me help you. I’ve told you so much —”

“Stop. Please don’t make this a competition. I’ve said my piece, and if you feel for me like you seem to... you’ll respect that.” Straightening, he stares ahead at the doors. I’ve messed it all up... *You knew this was coming. Suck it up, enjoy the night together, and hope he can forgive you for being a prying, spoiled brat—*

“Remember what you said about love?” I fear his teeth may pop out of his skull due to the friction he’s causing... “You don’t do this-” I run my fingers across the space just above his eyebrows, just as he had, indicating harming the mental state. “-to people you love.” The elevator halts, sounding a sharp bell as the doors part.

I snuck a look at the room number while Mercer was busy brooding on the way up, so I leave him standing there and waltz down the hall to find it. There’s only one room to a wall up here. As I’m approaching the first door that is not ours, Mercer starts to gain on me without really trying. He is significantly taller than me and doesn’t seem to like being teased.

It’s a shame. I like teasing him. And if I’m not going to get anything more out of this... then I might as well make him work a little harder.

Picking up pace to a fast walk, which doesn’t seem to put any more space between us, I begin to skip, taking the sides of my skirt in my palms and swishing them side to side as I do.

“Juniper... Are you seriously making me chase you?” The next door comes and goes, and now he’s jogging. I can’t help but smile when I glance back at him, until I see the determination in his glare. Rounding the corner to the next hall, I take off at a full sprint so I can catch him off guard and disappear down the next one before he catches up. I’ll sit outside the door, since I went the opposite direction when we stepped onto the floor on purpose, and pretend I did nothing at all.

I’m far too smitten with my plan. Panting, slowing down as I approach the corner, I duck behind it to catch my breath and wait. Peering out, I see that he’s not coming down the hall. I don’t hear footsteps. My heart races faster instead of calming. I’ll just go to the door, and he’ll probably come walking down after me right? I mean, he didn’t seem happy about my antics but... would he really just leave?

Quietly stepping to keep an ear out for his usually-heavy steps, I approach the door. Still nothing from either side... *What the fuck?*

Shaking my head, I lean my pelvis against the heavy door and take out my phone, dialing his number. It only rings once before I am falling... falling? *Falling?!* But instead of the freezing creek bottom... it’s a solid but soft, warm and wanting body, ready to catch me.

“I don’t play games, Gin, but if you’re going to make me?” His bare forearm snakes around my abdomen and pulls my hip, twirling me to face him. Still reeling from the sudden weightlessness, I cling to his shirt and pant, “I’m going to win.”

“That wasn’t very nice.” Before the light from the hall has been cut by the door shutting, Mercer has backed me into the nearest wall, the scruff on his cheeks brushing my neck as he peppers it with love that makes my skin prickle.

“It wasn’t very nice to run from me, either. If only you’d have asked—I’d have told you I had a track scholarship in college. Now...” Gently wrapping each hand around my wrists, he brings them over my head, pinning them to the wall

too. “What’s my reward?” Fuck, take whatever you want...  
*Say something!*

“What did you have in mind?” His presence leaves me, and I’m left in a dripping trance.

“I’m glad you asked.” Lights switch on, but only in one section of the room...

“Holy shit, that’s amazing!” The barrier dividing the main part of the suite from the bedroom is a gigantic floor-to-ceiling fish tank filled with all kinds of exotic fish, and of course, the city of Atlantis-themed decor, including fake mermaids. “I’ve never seen anything like this...” Mercer fades into the background as I approach the tank with awe, watching all kinds of colorful specimens floating or swimming through the greenish-blue water.

“I want you to spell Atlantis for me.” The bass from his voice in my ear startles me, but only for a moment. He places a hand on each side of my head against the tank, and when I slowly turn to face him, my curiosity piques. His sleeves are rolled up past the elbow, and the top two buttons are undone on his shirt so I can see the hair on his chest peeking through.

“A—” A sinister smile draws across his face as he shakes his head, tracing my lips with his thumb now.

“You didn’t really think I would make it so easy on you, right?” Refusing to break eye contact, he gets down on one knee. The impending question in my mind dies as it gets to my throat because of his massive hands trailing up my thighs to the band of my panties. The ones I picked and wore just for him... black and lacy, with little sunflowers stitched all over the front.

But his eyes are on me; the pads of his fingertips dig into the skin near the waistband before expanding, taking the cloth with them and sliding it off with ease. Pulling off each shoe as he takes the garment down and away. *Why would he care about the color of your underwear right now?*

“Will you punish me for misspelling, ‘Sir’?” I mock the front desk boy with a newfound giddiness; something about sex with him just makes me want to act out. His grip when it returns to my thigh, guiding my bad leg onto his shoulder as he scoots closer, tells me exactly how he feels about being teased right now. It doesn’t deter me; it makes me want to misbehave instead.

“I guess you’ll have to find out.” Disappearing under my skirt and pawing my ass, he dives between my lips...

“Ah—” I claw for traction; the glass gives me none, so I twist one hand into his hair. He mumbles something I can’t hear. “Huh?”

“Start spelling,” the voice that leaves him is husky with arousal, hot, hungry.

“A—” The tip of his tongue delicately traces one side, up to my clit, where he circles only once before continuing down the other side, then teasing just under it again to complete the A. “Fuck—” A sharp, unexpected slap to the same area he was just caressing with his other hand makes me jump, but not enough to stop.

“T—” He briefly delves into my vagina before ever-so-slowly dragging his tongue up, fanned out across the nerves, then thrashing back and forth to form the top of the T. “Ooh,” I moan, tightening my cinch on the fistful of his thick hair to indicate that I like it, right before he stops entirely. Waiting for his next letter...

“L—” Starting again from the bottom, his tongue glides straight up and straight back down as he plunges his middle finger deep enough to make me squirm at the sudden fullness. My head falls back against the glass. “Yes, ahh...” Another smack; this time I hiss in response and tug his head. The rumble of his laugh against the delicate nerves makes me ache for his touch to resume.

“A—” Another tease; he purposefully misses the bundle of nerves and it would have irritated me if not for the constant pulse of his finger curling against my cervix... Fuck, his fingers are almost as long as his—



“I’m waiting.” The movement stills entirely.

“N—” I breathe impatiently, longing for the heat to resume, and he happily obliges, but N does nothing for me.

“T—hey!” A smack to shut me up, because I dared complain about the absence of his touch. When another finger enters with the returning first, the moan that leaves me is unnatural... straight from my core, but the length of his exploration is shortened with each letter.

“So impatient...” The jingling of his belt coming undone make my pulse throb in my throat. My protest ends before it can begin when he finally gives me the T—

“Mmmm, I—” The only letter he chooses to use the lowercase version of, and I don’t complain. His fingers pull back to the entrance as he licks from bottom to apex. His lips enclose around the bundle of nerves, and I nearly forget who I am when the fingering resumes. “God, I’m gonna—” Smack. I have to bite my lip to keep from shrieking. That one stung.

“I’ll be your God, Juniper. Come for me...” His hand doesn’t dare stop again, and any time his mouth needs a break his thumb fills the space.

I don’t make it to S—and something tells me he knew I wouldn’t be able to. My legs wobble, and my toes curl against the silky fabric clinging to his back. I throw my head back and let loose, not caring for once about anything but this phenomenal pleasure that seems to roll off him and enter me. When the storm finally passes and the deep thrills of the orgasm have subsided, he sets my leg down, then swiftly throws me over his shoulder as he stands.

We pass the bed. “What—” A harder slap, which I return to his shoulder. He takes me to the bathroom, which is fucking huge. The shower is as big as my room at Quynh’s. Gently setting me on my feet on the bathmat, he pulls his belt free and drops it to the ground.

“S—” He leans into me, as if he will kiss me, but instead he reaches past to pull open the glass door and turn on the hot water.

“Discipline suits you.” His thumb drags along my lip, but he pulls away... like he’s going to leave me here alone, after all that. Catching his wrist, I yank him back to me, wrapping my hands in the collar of his shirt to force him to kiss me with everything that I have, everything that I am. The brown and tan tiles fade together with the running water; sight and sound meshes as I deftly work the buttons on his shirt. After tearing off his shirt and warming, I reach to unzip his pants and he kicks off his shoes. Then he pulls my dress up over my head, not caring about the cardigan or any fastenings, just wanting to feel my skin. And *fuck* do I want his against me.

“Wait, your stitches—”

“Fuck the stitches.” Hoisting me by the backs of my thighs until they wrap around him, he walks us into the steaming water and presses my back against the cool wall. The contrast is delectable agony and easy to forget when his mouth closes around the peak of my breast. He strokes himself right under me, dripping and ready, but he suddenly stops everything. “If we stay in here, I’ll have to pull out...” I know I should, but I just don’t fucking care right now. His face is unreadable beyond the clear drive of lust, and I can’t tell if he cares either, but I just nod and smile so that he’ll continue.

Instead, he takes a step away from the wall and sets me down. I don’t like being unable to read him.

“What’s wrong?” Not allowing him to distance himself from me, not now, I caress his face in my palms, rising onto my toes and spreading my thighs to give space for him to slide between.

“You make me want to lose control. You make me not care about what’s best, or consequences, or anything.” He directs me into the water; it runs between us, much like our passion. Desperate to soothe and cleanse, but fueled by a fire we can’t comprehend.

“So lose control.” The corner of his mouth twitches; those smile lines brighten his serious face. Gathering my half-

damp hair into one fist behind my head, and forcing me back against the wall, he points to the tiled floor.

“Get on your knees.” He’s the only person in the world I would allow to speak to me like this... and the only one I could begin to obey. He watches me like a hawk as I slowly sink to the floor.

“Like this?” Tensing as I grip the back of his legs, right under the curve of his cheeks, he continues to watch me open my mouth. My tongue flicks against the underside of his head, making his entire dick jump, and he shudders. “So impatient...” He smiles for only a moment at my jest until I take him into my throat, and his expression turns to ecstasy. He only takes the force from the back of my head when my eyes start to water, and I’m nearly out of air, his palm slapping against the wall. His spine involuntarily curls forward when the tip of him chokes me again, and he looks down at me with awe and surprise, releasing my hair, but I don’t pull free until I’m unable to continue.

As he abruptly lifts me by my armpits to stand, I’m lightheaded and gasping, but he captures me with a burning kiss before forcing me around, chest and face against the wall. He yanks my hips back, with a hand resting on the small of my back and the other continuing to stroke himself against my entrance. “Are you sure?” I answer by pressing into him, and he sucks in a sharp gasp, slowly plunging in to the hilt, where he rests momentarily while we both get our bearings. “I can’t hold back, Gin...” God, I hated it when he first coined the nickname, but like this, I am at his command.

“I don’t want you to...” The pressure is unbearable and so fucking good all at once. One of his arms hooks around my waist, locking me in place with a finger just reaching between my lower lips. The other snakes under my arm, his hand carefully wrapping around my throat.

“Is this okay?” he asks, squeezing just enough to make me feel like I’m free-falling. I nod against his hand, and he kisses my shoulder... then pulls out to the tip, and hammers back into me hard enough that I yelp. It doesn’t stop him. His fingers grip the flesh on my hip like it’s malleable fabric. He

uses every bit of his strength to keep me in place even when my feet start slipping, and I start to feel hoarse from the sounds that have never been coaxed from me by anyone... With a grunt, and obviously considerable effort, he pulls free, leaving me panting, chasing the spark of the start of my own orgasm.

He's stroking to try and keep the pace he was fucking me at, but I take matters into my own hands—and mouth. As I drop back to my knees, he lets me get a few passes in before setting his own pace and continuing the same aggression but with my throat... and I take it, adding my hand at the base of him to make up for what won't fit. "God dammit, Juniper." My name comes out more like a moan in itself, right before he bursts. He tries to turn away, but I cup his balls, forcing him to stop. I continue the strokes as he releases, most of the evidence of his pleasure washing away with the water, some finding its way to my chest and thighs.

"Maybe you need more discipline." Smiling at him being the most disheveled I've ever seen, I take the opportunity to step into the spray of the water and wash myself. He opens the shower and towels off, wrapping it around his waist as I clean up.

When I step out, he fastens a towel around me too, planting a kiss on my cheek before vanishing into the other room... just like that. *Something isn't right.*

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### ***Mercer***

Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck!

The more we do this, the harder it's becoming to hide things from her. To keep her locked out. I don't know how much more of this I can take.

This has to be the last time.

"Is everything okay?" Juniper peers into the room where I sit on the bed, clearly not putting up a good front this time. Her hair's still dripping, and... fuck, I can't believe I just let her do that.

“Of course.” That was not convincing, and judging the quirking of her expression, she knows so too. This is one of the more impressive rooms of the hotel, and yet she’s completely unimpressed—only interested in me. Because she didn’t want to come here in the first place... “I just have a lot on my mind.” And so fucking much I can’t share.

“Do you want to talk about it?” No. She takes a few steps towards me, just into the light from the aquarium, and it sets her skin ablaze with color, the rippling waves making her look like a mirage in the desert when you’re dying of thirst. I am dying of fucking thirst...

“Y-yes.”

“Really?” Oh my god, how could I ever break her fucking heart...?

“I’m going to be going out of town for a week or so.” I even feel the confusion that follows after that dumbass answer. Juniper shifts to the other leg and hooks her fingers together in front of her.

“When are you leaving?” Fuck.... Fuck!

“The day after tomorrow.” Stop fucking talking. She nods and pulls the towel loose from her chest, bundling her hair in it instead. Then she saunters over and sits buck naked beside me, with those crystal gems that could bankrupt any man... I can’t do it.

“Are you coming back?”

“What?” How could she possibly have...

“You’ve been acting really strange... and distant.” I can’t do it.

“I don’t know.”

“Why wouldn’t you just tell me?” The crack that shatters the last word she speaks destroys everything in me. I’m doing this to her: the same bullshit Liz did to me.

“Because it... is not that simple, Juniper...”

“I don’t care how complex it is; don’t you think I deserve to know at this point? You’ve dragged me into it this far, why not just tell me? If you love me—”

“I never should have told you that I have feelings for you at all.” It snaps out like a rubber band breaking from the tension... Why the fuck wouldn’t I say anything but that?

“But you do, don’t you?” I can’t bring myself to do anything but stare at my hands. “Mercer?” She’s not going to wait forever... She’s not going to wait at all now. I destroyed this.

“Yes, of course I do. I’ve done nothing but attempt to make it clear exactly how deeply I feel for you, but that does not mean I need to tell you everything right now.”

“I think it does... Why don’t you?”

“Lizette will stop at nothing to destroy both of our fucking lives if she knows about you, that I like you, and that you’re important to me. Let alone more than that.”

Clicking her tongue, she gets to her feet and swiftly stomps to the bathroom again. “I don’t feel important to you. You’re truly so scared of your ex-wife that you’re not allowed to move on? That’s... that’s insane, Mercer.”

“Yes Juniper. Yes, it fucking is. I told you, my life is complicated.” I hate the anger that accompanies the words as they come out, and I regret it even more when Juniper comes back out in her dress with her hair up in a bun. “No, wait, please... don’t leave.”

“Why should I stay if you aren’t on the same page as me? I want this, I’m ready—despite everything—to be with you. More than seeing you occasionally, on your schedule, and sex. And I know it’s fast, but—”

“I want that more than you know, but like I said before, I don’t have a choice. As soon as I do know if I’m coming back, I promise you’ll be the first person I tell.” She lets me take her hand. I don’t recall moving to the entrance of the bathroom to be with her... in such a trance and panic making sure she stays that I can’t control my fucking body.

“It’s not good enough...” No... Not like this.

“It’s all I have, all I can give you... You just have to trust me, please. I’ll tell you everything soon...” That dainty, gorgeous little neck, her life force, bobbing and considering... I reach around her head to her bun, pull it free, and cautiously coax her into a deep kiss that I never want to end but know could very well be the last... and I don’t fucking want it to be. I dread this being all I have of her.

“I love you...” she frantically whispers against my lips between locking with them. I’m not going to waste any more chances. I have to come back. With or without Tess. Juniper will understand; maybe she’ll choose to move if I ask her, but I can’t fucking leave. I can’t abandon this. “You’re crying...” she gasps. Be fucking honest for once, shithead...

“I don’t want to lose you.” Now she’s crying, too. “I love you, Gin, so much more than I ever expected to.” She lets me pick her up, and I bring her to the bed, with a headboard of sea and life... She is still wet, and inviting, and free, because I confiscated her sunflower panties that she no doubt chose just for me.

“Please come back to me.” Fuck... I’m in trouble.

I can’t answer with my words, because right now, they won’t stop if they start. I answer in the only way I can manage—keeping her mouth on mine, where it belongs for the rest of time, I maneuver her onto her side, facing the beauty that only accentuates her own. She spreads so nicely, so fucking perfectly like she was made for only me, and I bury myself so deep inside her that she makes an adorable squeaking sound against my tongue.

I want to immerse myself in Juniper. I never want to be parted from her. I use my hand to reach around to make sure she gets off this time, since I know she didn’t in the shower due to my lack of self-control. “Mercy...”

Her fingers thread behind my head to steady herself, and she stares into my fucking soul while she finds her climax. Quickly, thank fuck. Holding myself back as her inner muscles tighten, I quicken my own fingers, pumping my hips in small,

quick bursts, burrowed as deep as I possibly could be... for what feels like an eternity, until I can continue. I want her to feel every part of me. “I love you.” I repeat it again and again. Between feathered pecks to her neck, ear, wherever I can reach—I love her.

And as she ascends to her peak again, those heavenly moans echoing through the high ceilings—she calls for Mercy, pulsing around my cock as she comes down from the insanity of it. I’m about to remove myself and be completely satisfied with her deciding to stay, hopefully for the rest of the night, when she grinds her ass against me, driving me back into her core. I groan, resisting gnawing on her shoulder. Juniper then leans forward invitingly, pressing herself into the bed, her ass spreading as I draw out to the tip, coaxing me to finish again... and I’m a fucking idiot, so I would rather dive back into her than risk letting her leave me.

Sliding an arm under hers, I hook my hand over her collarbone so I can drive her down onto me with lengthy thrusts. The other keeps my weight from being too much for her. I breathe in her delicious scent, and she screams into the mattress while I pound her senseless. I don’t want to let up until I lose myself inside her... but I realize how much I would fuck my life over even more, recalling the consequences of such things.

Forcing myself to push free from her, way too close to too late, I finish in the towel I was wearing before all of this shit started up again. Her pants subside to deep, steady breaths, and she makes no move to adjust or cover up.

“Juniper?” I pull her skirt down over her perfect, still slightly-perched and on-display rear end.

“Hmm?” Exhaustion plainly coats her barely audible response. I knew I was going to take it too far... tracing soft circles around the scars lining her voluptuous hills of flesh that have wound their way around the fibers of my mind.

“Let me clean you up, and we can get some sleep.” Silently agreeing, she lets me help prop her up against my chest enough to unzip the dress and tug it off her shoulders,



down her torso, and over her magnificent hips... I should have held back, but seeing her lying in those creamy sheets, content even though she's probably furious, trusting me enough to care for her after claiming her... This is the hardest thing she's ever had to do. She never wanted to trust me, and yet I couldn't stay away.

I should have stayed away and saved us both the mess. When lives are nothing short of complicated, feelings are much better left unsaid.

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There's no point in dressing while I get ready to lie down with her, and I refuse to not feel the bliss of her skin sticking like taffy to mine after all we've done tonight... so I turn out the lights except for the aquarium and get some water—one for her, too. I set her bag and clothes on the nightstand where I tucked her in, only to check my own phone and find a few missed calls from Lizette. Nothing abnormal there, but what was, was the recent call from Darren. An hour ago, and a text immediately after.

*D: Tess had to go to the hospital, call me ASAP.*

Fuck, fuck... FUCK! It takes everything in me not to sling my phone across the room—mostly the thought of her sleeping in that bed, waiting for me. I can't catch a goddamn break in this world. Juniper may understand some day, but... it'll be far too late. She's never going to forgive me for this.

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## Chapter Twenty-One: Dirty

### *Juniper*

I wake in the stunning luxury hotel suite, totally naked but protected by warm, silken sheets, with fish overhead. I stretch out on the big bed, searching the other half... only, it's empty and cold. As if he were never here at all, as if it were one fantastic dream. *No, if it were a dream, he would have chosen you...*

The curtains have been drawn, and thin strips of light trickle onto the floor clear across the room. Throwing my head back into the soft pillow with a huff, I see my things on the nightstand, accompanied by a folded note and a fancy hotel-labeled water bottle. I'm ashamed at how quickly I snatch up the fucking card and devour his words... I can't do this.

Nothing I say is going to excuse you waking up alone  
this morning,

but please know just how sorry I am

There was an emergency, and I'll explain as much as

I'm able to if you'll call me when you wake up.

Everything is taken care of for the room, tell the front  
desk your name and they'll call a car for you, all  
arranged.

I'm in love with you Gin, I'm coming back for you.

I promise, Mercy.

*"I promise it won't happen again, Juniper..."* How many fucking times did I fall for that shit before I opened my goddamn eyes and saw what he was doing to me? *Never be weak again. Never do nothing again...*

My fist closes around the thick paper and I let it fall to the ground. A quick call to the receptionist tells me I still have an hour before check-out, so I retrieve my phone, don't bother opening the few waiting messages from Mercer, and hit the call button for Quynh.

“Hello, love. Did you have a good night? Dad told me you never came back...”

“I need you to ask Alex for Nikolai’s address. I need it by tonight.”

“Anything for you, but why do you sound more like an angry ex and less like an absolutely infatuated new beau?” I’m so not in the mood for this.

“Well... I’m not exactly sure what’s going on right now, to be truthful.” *Don’t lie to yourself.*

“Babes, you can always be truthful. I’ll text Sera as soon as we hang up, but do you want me to come get you? I’m at the store so I’ll finish up and swing by?”

“Oh my god, yes, please.” I give her the name, and she teases about how expensive it must have been for him to just leave me here... I just don’t even want to think about it. I want to confront him. I want answers before I decide to close my fucking heart off for good.

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I ask Quynh to take me to the nursing home. I need my comfort-person.

As soon as Nana and I fall into our usual visiting routine, I lay out the plan I have for tonight. “I think it’s good, Juni. You need to come to common ground before he leaves. It’s the least you should have if you can’t come to an understanding.” One way or another, Mercer is going to give me answers.

“I don’t know if he’s going to see it that way. But, one way or another, this needs to end.” I take in my Nana’s somber face. I know she feels sympathetic, but I also know that she’s sad herself, too. Knowing the literal love of her life is in the same building as her, and some days doesn’t know who she is... and she can’t see him freely. She’s passed him by in the hallway and he’s smiled and waved at her, but beyond that, they haven’t had much interaction. Nana Grace is so strong. I need to channel some of her today.

“Well, you know that I believe patience is an allowance someone earns when they have shown their true selves to you, but there are so many limitations with it. You need to be stingy with it, or you too will waste years of your life hanging on to him by a thread. Hope is not a comfort, and does not care how much time passes.

“Not everyone has the same course in life. Some people orbit each other like planets, constantly rotating in and out of their lives. Others collide because their pull is too much, and they create chaos in surrounding atmospheres. Maybe, one is in a sun, and they love an earth who depends on, or wouldn’t survive without, them. Maybe the moon to the earth, tied to it only because it has no other way—no other choice...”

“How are you supposed to know who will be who?”

Setting her crochet hook back in the case with the other sizes, she moves her yarn so she can scoot in the chair to face where I am sitting on a cushion in the large window, staring out into the garden like I’ve come to enjoy here.

“Oh child, you can’t. Not until you’re close enough to be affected by their gravity. Close enough to be harmed by it, or cause harm to it. Sometimes even then you wouldn’t,” she adds with a somber smile that doesn’t meet the mirrors of her eyes... We’ve both known such pains. But we’ve always overcome them.

“What do I even say?” Placing a hand at my brow to block the afternoon sun, I stare at the Junipers lining this side of the garden walk. They’re no longer tiny shrub-like plants. They’re getting taller, turning into twisting trees with ashen trunks. Growth is all around us, part of us... but I’m not sure if Mercer is fertilizer or a weed-killer.

But I do know that I am a weed. I’m determined to grow towards the light through the cracks of the cement. My roots will flow and find sustenance. I will fucking survive, even when it kills me.

My phone buzzes on the window sill, and I don’t bother checking who it is before dismissing the call. But when

it vibrates again a second later, I flip it open immediately and read his message.

*M: Please call me Juniper. They told me you didn't take the car when they called to confirm check out, I just want to make sure you got home alright.*

*Don't do it.* Another short buzz.

*M: I love you*

*Don't do it.* Leave me alone.

*J: I'm not home. Can I see you tonight? Before you go?*

Fuck. What am I doing? He *left* me... fuck! It takes far too long for my comfort for him to message me back. I'm just about to give up or tell him 'never mind' when the phone rings again.

Nana glares at me over the tops of her reading glasses, then resumes her project, pretending not to listen intently. But I know she is.

"Yes?"

"Where are you?" Are you fucking kidding me? The overbearing tone, the jealousy... *he left me.*

With a dash of his own attitude, I counter, "Where are you?" I quickly cross the room, stepping into the hall. Strangers will force me to keep my composure. I cannot trust myself even speaking to him...

"I... am at the hospital... It's a long story. There was an accident, and—I'll tell you tonight. I can come over around ten, if that isn't too late." I don't want to agree. I don't want to deceive him, but I fucking need to know.

"Okay. Can I ask you for a favor?"

"Sure," he sounds exhausted and impatient.

"I want you to put me on your Grandpa's visitation list. If you're not going to be here, he deserves someone to talk to and who will regularly come and see him." There's a vast silence.

“Of course. Juniper?” I can’t do this.

“I’ll talk to you later.” *Good.*

“Wai—”

My phone slaps shut just as one of the newer nurses stops in front of my Nana’s door to give her meds before going to lunch. Realizing I’m starving myself, I quickly recite the gist of the conversation and tell her goodbye, making sure to stop by the reception desk to let them know he will be adding me to Vincent’s list.

“Hey, Juniper!” The blonde who originally pushed me to apply walks past and heads to the staff rooms.

“Hi, Rose.” She stops at the end of the desk to take her badge and daily folder from Maria.

“Can’t wait to see you here more often. Maria is quitting for a better position in Denver, and since we only have a few applicants, you’re nearly guaranteed to get the job. Especially since Grace lives here.” I wasn’t aware of just how much I needed a piece of good news today. The relief and the pressure that untangles from around my lungs feel so good.

That’s one more thing. Progress. *Being better.*

“That’s too bad Maria, I’m sure it would have been amazing working with you.” The older woman smiles and goes on with her typing. “And thank you for the heads up. The emails have all been really positive so far, so I’m hoping they like me for the in-person.” Ooh, fuck. That’s tomorrow afternoon... How the hell could I have let myself forget about this? This is so much more important than him.

*Don’t you see what he’s doing to you? He’s pulling your focus, disrupting your thoughts, your goals—it is NOT the same.*

“Well, good luck.” Rose gives me a quick hug, and I’m on my way. I take only one step outside the sliding doors when my stomach growls deep enough to make me keel over... This always happens when I’m stressed and emotional. I don’t eat, and don’t even notice until I’m starving.

There's a diner a few blocks away. I dig in my bag for the iPod. I haven't had the chance to add any new music but I need something to fill the space in my head so my fucking thoughts can't...

Mid-2000's Mercer had interesting taste. I wonder how much of this stuff he still listens to... I listen to much of what I did in high school and college, but I always associated it with the best time of my life, before things went to shit... so maybe he doesn't, because that time was difficult for him.

One of the songs that has popped on actually breaks through the fog. I check the screen and it reads *A Murder of One, Counting Crows*.

I've always hated the uncanny feeling of a song relating to exactly what you're experiencing... and the circumstance of how I'm coming across such accurate lyrics. It's probably why I don't listen to music as much as I read.

As the singer croons about letting him in, I rip the headphones free of my ears, then wrap them angrily around the hunk of metal. I'm nearly there anyway. And the last thing I want to be reminded of is all the bullshit that can't be fucking touched. There are way too many secrets between us, and only a handful are mine.

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It's hard to believe that it's been a couple months since I got out of that hellhole. Sometimes it still feels like I was just there... or at least, just woke up from being there.

There is an overwhelming bout of nerves pooled in my stomach as I prepare for this ludicrous game. But I haven't had a glimpse at the play book, never attended a practice... *You never even tried out for the team.*

"Okay, nope. I know that look." Quynh, Sera, and Alex met me at the shop after they had dinner at a place not far from here. They also got extra meals for me to take to Mercer's. I have no idea what to expect. "You're not backing out of this. In fact, you're going to be knocking on his door at nine-thirty on the dot. Maybe you'll catch him just out of the shower and

then you'll thank me." I attempt to smile, but I can only think how the complete opposite is much more likely. But this was my plan.

"She looks great. Stop messing with it or you're going to give her a unibrow." Quynh tosses the brown pencil she was using onto the dresser, and I check over the makeup in the mirror. I do look great... It's a pity I feel so fucking down. Sera comes up behind me and hugs over my arms, resting her chin on my shoulder. "Green is gorgeous on you, and he would be a complete fool to ignore you at this point. Everything will be fine."

"One way or another," I add with a forced smile.

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"You have got to be kidding me..." The fancy restaurants, cars, hotels... it all clicks the second we pull into the parking lot of his building. Just a few streets away from the nursing home, the richest fucking neighborhood in Gallow... and he lives in one of two top-floor lofts. "This... this can't be right."

"I said the same fucking thing." Alex leans against the wheel to see the top of the high rise. "Fourteen stories, and the building was barely finished five years ago. If he owns that place..." A shrill whistle leaves his lips.

"Just one more thing I apparently don't know about him." I know good architects make a shitload, but... holy fuck. And yet, he never really acted flashy or stuck up... I don't know if I was supposed to infer that he was rich just by the dates, his style, and his car. But don't most guys obsess over cars or shoes or...? Fuck. *You don't know Mercer at all.* Not the time.

"Don't be discouraged; you deserve this. And he deserves getting his ass chewed out," Sera scolds. I suddenly feel nauseous. And underdressed... The emerald green, tea-length skirt and black blouse I borrowed from her seem so... silly. Just like how I've acted. *He hasn't been any better.*



“Call me if you need anything, or if you need me to come get you. We’ll be just across the street.” Quynh gestures behind us, although Alex and Sera’s new house isn’t *technically* across the street... because these fancy apartments are tucked behind their own nature park, and a garage with a ticket booth, for residents only. We had to pull into the lot for the just-as-fancy convenience store beside the high rise, which Alex confesses is how he actually saw Mercer walking into the building.

“I was getting munchies one night, and he was going up with another guy, both of them in fancy-ass suits so I barely recognized him. Called his name and everything, which now I guess makes sense as to why he didn’t answer...” We had informed Alex about everything with Mercer as well, and he’d looked guiltily like he was holding back information of his own, but he even refused when Sera pressed him. Alex isn’t my problem anyway, and if he’s keeping secrets for his friend—I can’t fault him for that. He’s the one who went into his building and snooped the mailboxes, risking being seen and a really weird confrontation. So, I’m grateful.

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## Chapter Twenty-Two: Lies

I can do this. I can't do this.

The elevator stops with a gentle jingle, and music flows faintly through the hall. Only two doors, just... one step at a time.

I don't know why I am tiptoeing, but it feels like the right thing to do. My stomach is in knots and this feels so fucking wrong... I am an intruder. I am not supposed to be here, I was not invited... I was not told to... What if there was a reason he kept me away?

Knock, knock, knock. *No, what are you doing? No, LEAVE!*

In a swift motion, the door swings open, and... it's not Mercer. He faintly resembles him... taller, slimmer, with paler skin and darker hair. A seemingly-permanent scowl.

"Can I help you?" *Meaner.*

"Uh, hi. Is Mercer here?" The smirk... oh no. The smirk is the same. I fucked up...

"He will be any minute now." What the fuck am I doing? Should I lie, like he did when he first met me? Surely he'd understand...

"I'm Juniper. Are you... his brother?" I take a long, casual step back, and he motions into the house.

"Why don't you come inside? I'm surprised he's talked about me at all." *What the fuck are you doing?!*

My feet are moving before I can wrap my head around what the fuck I'm doing. I set the olive-colored fabric bag down on the pristine, white island in the dining area. I have to force myself not to gape in awe at the modern-ness of his home. I didn't think he would... This just doesn't scream 'him' to me.

"Have you not been here before?" Shit. I'm way too obvious for this kind of thing... What was I thinking?

“Um no, actually. This was sort of a surprise...” Taking a sip of the beer I didn’t realize he was holding, he raises his brows and nods.

“My little brother is not a very big fan of surprises.”

“No, I could guess not. Unfortunately it wasn’t supposed to be a... good one, so I don’t particularly mind the interruption. It’s actually nice to see that he told the truth about at least one thing.” No, oh my god.

“I’m not surprised you have a smart mouth; you’d need to to maintain any sort of conversation with Nik.” *Get out.* I can’t think over the sudden and all-too-familiar rush of sheer panic.

“Maybe I should just head home and give him a call later.” I move toward the door, but he easily steps in my way. Far too close, reeking of stale whiskey and cheap cologne. *Get. Out.*

The door pushes inward, and the woman from Mercer’s Facebook page walks through. Her aloof, relaxed demeanor immediately shifts to cold and disgusted when her piercing gaze lands on me.

“Who is *this*?” she asks *him*. She doesn’t acknowledge me, letting the door slam and throwing grocery bags on the counter like she lives here.

“This...” The brother saunters over to the counter with her, allowing me to back towards the door, “is Juniper. I was expecting you and, poof. She and Nikolai are... friends? Friends,” he confirms, shrugging and settling on the word without even actually consulting me. What the fuck did I walk into? “But—she’s never been here.” That seems to be the end of the statement. She starts unloading produce before crossing her arms and leaning a hip against the counter.

“Not his typical type. You’re pretty, though.” Is she waiting for...?

“Uh, thanks. It’s nice to meet you, Lizette.”

One finely-drawn eyebrow quirks at the use of her name. “You’re pretty, too—”

“I know. So look, Juniper, you need to leave.”

“I was just—” A memory snapped into place... one the drugs must have muddled or clouded, and I had a realization about her familiarity.

“No, you know what? Nikolai is not the kind of person you want to get involved with. You can’t handle him. He hides things, lies, and makes a fool of himself with his childish antics and reckless spontaneity. And besides, between his career, his family, and all the bullshit he gets himself into, he does not have time to waste on making a spunky little thing like you see stars. And he will, for a while, and then he will abandon you. ...” She allows space for it to sink in, and oh my fucking god. “You don’t want to be in a position like me, spending years searching for where he up and disappeared to, only to discover he lives an hour away from the home he left you and your daughter in. Then when you allow him back into your bed, he knocks you up again and tries to leave you for someone else, right?”

What the fuck.

*Move. Door, hall, slap elevator button. Button. Button.*

Lobby. Close, *Close. Breathe... breathe...* I start calling Quynh. I can’t see the screen through my fucking tears... Jingle.

Elevator. Mercer.

Mercer. Daughter... His daughter’s cheek on his shoulder, drooling.

“What the hell are you doing here?” Those words shouldn’t be full of venom or malice...He lied to me... He played me for a fucking fool, and he’s angry.

*Angry at you?*

*“Hello? Juniper?” Move. Do not stop moving.*

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Lobby. Door. *Cold.*

“Please come back and get me...” I don’t know how I manage the words; I don’t know how I wander to the front of the convenience store and wait in a daze as I try to process... I should have fucking known. Tess... Who would ever be more important than a new relationship, even a serious one?

Your fucking child. That little girl... Oh my god, she was beautiful. Long, caramel blonde hair, tanned skin. Asleep and draped over his back, and the fucking agony on his face... He hissed those words at me like an insult. He was carrying the purple bag that was in his car...

I shouldn’t have come. *Yes, you should have. Now you know.*

“Juniper!” Mercer yells from the front of the apartment building, making his way across the street. Alex pulls up at the perfect time, and I rush to the car. Quynh jumps out, consoling and ushering me inside; when Mercer gets closer, she starts ripping into him... even without knowing anything.

“Stay the fuck away from her, Nikolai. I’m not sure what the hell just happened, but this is not okay!”

“Quynh, just hang on—” Before the door can close, Alex is speeding from the lot and back to their parking garage that’s halfway down the main street. Sera must have stayed back at the apartment because it’s just them... and I can’t breathe.

“We’re going to have a sleepover and get wine drunk in the living room, okay? It’ll be alright, love.” She tries to be comforting, but there’s just nothing that will fix this right now.

“I... I don’t know where I went wrong. I never should have believed him. I knew in my heart, in my gut, that he was hiding something. I just didn’t expect this.” And I should have.

Nothing good lasts forever.

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They order Mexican food through DoorDash. I get carne asada fries, since I didn’t get to eat anything I brought to Mercer’s, and the four of us polish off six bottles of wine

while I tell them absolutely everything about him and his life, his family... and everything Lizette had said, too.

“Fuck him, nope. I wouldn’t be able to handle all that even if I had a heads-up. Kudos to you. Huh, babe?” Sera looks down at Alex, who had passed out in her lap, strewn across the couch, an hour ago.

“You’re going to be fine, Juniper. You deserve so much better than that. Someone without such complexity, who’s going to keep things from you instead of bring you in and make you a part of their world. If he really cared about you... you wouldn’t have ever felt the need to walk into that house this evening. It’s not your fault.” Yeah, it seems like nothing ever really is, and yet, I continue to be the one getting hurt in the end.

I chug my bottle of water and shrink into the blanket they provided me in the fluffy, giant beanbag chair they have in the center of the living room. And I sleep the hardest I have in weeks.

Other than the night before this... before everything changed. *Again*. Not in the mood.

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## Chapter Twenty-Three: Loss

*Mercer*

“What the fuck did you say to her?” I blurt to Darren as soon as the door slams shut behind me, but Liz rounds the corner. Tess must be in her room...

“Exactly what she needed to hear. That fragile little thing you wooed cannot handle your fucking life; she can’t even handle her own. I did you a favor.” I have never been so close to my boiling point in my life. Everything flashes before my eyes... every fucking moment with Juniper, as well as everything that could have been.

“Get out of my house, Liz. I will bring her over in the morning, just... get the fuck out.”

“You are not going to win this, Nikolai. Sign the damn papers so we can all get on with our lives—why do you even want the reminder?”

“She’s not a reminder, she’s a fucking person. Do you hear yourself? Tess is my daughter. She wants to stay. I will keep fighting until I go bankrupt, or until you let her speak so she can tell the courts where she would really prefer to be. She’s old enough to choose for herself.” And she has, many times over. But because we don’t share blood, and Liz decided to prove it to the judge, my rights are hanging on by the thinnest goddamn thread. And now Darren offers her a manager’s position at a restaurant just to spite me.

“She is my daughter, and I will do what’s best for her,” Lizette snaps.

“Right, and when did that start...?” Her bright pink mouth opens to respond, but I cut her off. “Oh, right. The moment you left me for her real father, who abused you, again, after you used me for years to take care of his kid unknowingly. Fuck you, Liz. Get. Out.”

Her face contorts with rage, but she scoops up her purse and storms toward the door, ripping it open so hard the knob slams into the opposite wall. Darren tilts his head back,

downing the last of his beer and leaving it on the counter for me to clean up. He claps his hand against my shoulder as he passes to follow her. “That girl showed up here on her own to talk to you, and you know if Liz can use her against you, she will. If you can’t convince the courts you’ve got your shit together and you’re stable, they’re not going to look at you twice.” He gestures to the room. “This, *her*, whatever the hell just happened to you—not stable, little brother. My advice? Stay away from her until this is over, for your own good and hers.”

“I don’t really think you’re anyone to take advice from anymore. You don’t care about Tess. You don’t care about Liz. You’re an asshole who’s always had it out for me, but that’s not enough to drive you to this. What are you getting out of this?”

“If you really like her, because she sure seems to like you, keep her out of this. I told you to talk to Liz, but clearly you didn’t. She’s pregnant, and she says it’s yours.” There’s no fucking way, but by the time I come back to reality and go to correct him, he’s gone. The door is closed. Everything is silent.

And I am ruined.

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“I love you, Daddy.” Tess is already in bed, watching one of her shows on her computer from the bed, when I come in to check on her and say goodnight. She’s so much smarter than Lizette gives her credit for. She still thinks Tess is in the dark about everything except the fact that we’re split and she’s going to be moving... She’s twelve, for fuck’s sake.

“I love you too, baby. Get some sleep, alright?” I give her a tired smile, and she tucks into her lilac-cased pillow. I pull the door closed softly and rip my phone from my pocket so violently that a stitch at the top pops in response as I start back down the spiral stairs to the main floor.

I’m already dialing Juniper when my sight lands on the boxes of takeout. What the hell was she doing here? I never



told her where I lived... I never told her anything...

So she found out for herself. By keeping her in the fucking dark, I ruined everything. But if I hadn't, it would have ruined it all anyway... This was doomed from the beginning.

No answer. Again... no answer.

*M: Please call me*

Again. No. Answer. My phone rings, and it's her...

"Juniper, please—"

"It's not Juniper, it's Quynh. Leave her the hell alone, you lying sack of shit—"

"Please let me explain. I don't know what my ex said to her, but it's not the truth—"

"Mercer, that was only the final straw, man. Do you not look at the bigger picture? Do you really think that she would have left you or pushed you away because of Tess?" Fuck. "I know she told you what she went through. There's no way you haven't seen how bad it is. She fucking trusted you with the biggest part of her, and you couldn't do the same."

"You don't understand, it's deeper than that—"

"Well, it's a good thing I don't care. I'm not the one you should have taken the time to explain just exactly how deep it was to, and now you may never get the chance because you blew it. Leave her alone."

The line drops, and so does my chest, crushed by the weight of all the bullshit I tried to suspend, that I spread myself thin to keep apart... split in half while each horse runs the opposite direction.

It can't end like this. Having Juniper in my life was worth every shred of dignity I tried to maintain in keeping the truth from her. I was so fucking scared of being laid bare, for being judged for being taken advantage of... and instead of coming clean and letting her in, I judged her for the same. It's a wonder she gave me a chance at all. I have to fix this.

Unlocking my phone again, I type in an unsaved number for an unsaved person. One who knows more about asking for forgiveness than he does about himself. “Jacob, I need that favor.”

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I’ve never needed to explain myself to him, so when I tell him the bullet-list of what occurred, he doesn’t need any convincing to get in his car and drive over. Jacob is indeed a conservationist, but instead of being in Africa like he’s told everyone from his old life for the past few years, he’s really been living on the outskirts of Gallow, in his R.V. in the trailer park there, paid for by me.

Jacob lost his position and sponsorship when it was discovered that he owed thousands to a dealer in the city he was living in during his assignment there, because he became addicted to heroin and the complete silence of the plains while he waited for problems he didn’t cause to emerge. He dropped the ball on his work, and then on his life. When he reached out begging for help, I didn’t think twice. He’s my brother, and unlike Darren, he actually acts like it.

“Hey man,” he says with a gentle smile, embracing me at the door, and fuck do I need it. He’s the shortest of us, sharing most of my features but favoring our father’s darker hair. His appearance is the same, but his personality has changed drastically. I wish I could wash away my hatred and anger like he has. The self-loathing consumes me some days. “I’m glad you called. I’ll always be here to help you out.”

“Thanks, Jacob, I... really fucked up.” What an understatement, but he just holds me at arm’s length and takes a deep breath.

“If you think there’s a chance, and you think she will forgive you, then you need to talk to her.”

“I don’t know what the fuck to say anymore...”

Jacob tucks his hands into his jacket and walks over to the pebble-gray sofa. This place has always looked more like a

museum than my home unless Tess is here... because I never am.

“Say every word you’ve told yourself was a bad idea, every phrase you’ve suppressed, all the things you didn’t give her. That’s the only way to right this, Mercer. Flay yourself before her and hope she can forgive you for not doing it sooner.” Why didn’t I call him when Darren and Liz showed back up? I promised he’d always have peace in his life now, but I can’t handle this alone. Not anymore.

“And what if she doesn’t?”

A small shrug. He cautiously sits and crosses his legs. “Would you forgive you?”

“Not a chance...”

He nods, the longer layers of his hair brushing his jaw before he looks at me. “Then I guess you should hope that she’s a better person than you are, and that she loves you more than you respected her right to decide for herself whether or not you were someone she wanted to build a life with. You don’t get to make decisions for other adults, Mercer. And it seems like that’s what you tried to do. You’re treating her like a fragile little girl that needs protection. You’re projecting. I don’t know more than you’ve mentioned about her—but that is not how you treat someone who was abused by an ex they trusted. You should know better than that.” I’ve known, and been telling myself this for weeks, trying to avoid exactly what is happening.

I wanted to shelter Juniper from the absolute hell of my life, for fear of losing her and Tess, instead of bringing us to the same page and letting her decide if this was a path for her and accepting if she said no. I didn’t want her to say no, so I only gave her the reasons to say yes.

“I’ll be back as soon as I can. She won’t come down until morning, but if she does, call me right away and I’ll talk to her. Thanks again, Jacob,” I say. He scoops up the T.V. remote with a wave. This is nothing for him after all I’ve done, but he doesn’t see it as needing to pay me back. Just helping because he can, and I told him how much it would mean to

me. I close and lock the apartment, completely un-ready but determined to fix this.

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Just after midnight, I park against the curb of the shop and feel like I've been punched in the gut when I see the top floor completely dark... but a tiny light coming through the downstairs curtains where I believe the kitchen is.

Nearly convincing myself to abandon this shit and try again tomorrow, I rap my knuckles against the old door. It opens in less than a minute, but it's Quynh's father. "Hey, Bao, right?" An unamused nod. Fuck. "Is Juniper here?"

"No. And you shouldn't go looking for her. She doesn't want to see you, so you won't find her." Defeat floods through me. I don't even know what to say, so I turn to head back to my car. "Wait..."

"Yeah?"

"Why don't you come in and have some tea? Let yourself calm down. What's your name...?"

"Mercer..." I scratch the back of my head in contemplation. Fuck. "Alright, yeah."

We sit at the small, wooden dining table. He's already got a pot made, almost like he was expecting me to show up, and he sees me eyeing it curiously. "Quynh called me after she talked to you, and she told me a bit of what happened. That Juniper would be staying somewhere else tonight, and that you may come to see her..." My nerves are fucking shot, and I don't drink tea. But I down the bitter liquid as soon as he sets the cup in front of me, and he refills it with a heavy pour. "I am just a simple old man. You seem like a kind, young gentleman who needs someone to hear him, who wants to do better... So why are you not?"

"That's something I ask myself a lot."

"Well, if you want to speak, my memory tends to fade after a few days anyway." He winks, bringing his saucer and cup to his lips with a shaky hand to take a long drink.

“It’s been five years and I can barely talk about it. Sometimes it seems like as long as I keep it inside, it won’t be true... but the minute I speak it, accept it, it becomes permanent. It’s an excruciating reality.”

“Reality does not cease to be just because you are in denial.” Isn’t that the fucking truth.

“My daughter... is not biologically mine. I’ve been fighting for more rights and custody for months now with practically no progress but potentially losing access to her altogether... My ex has all the support because she’s her mom, and I’m just the guy who was conned into raising her. Her biological father was supposed to be fighting my rights, and they wanted to remove me from her birth certificate so I’d never see her again... then up and move to France, but... he died, unexpectedly. So because I won’t give in, and Liz, my-ex, won’t stand down, it’s just constant I-say and she-says and apparently the time I spent in college, working, and raising my daughter alone doesn’t make much of a difference. The proof of my ex lying, cheating, stealing from me, leaving her alone when she’s not old enough, that doesn’t matter nearly as much to the judge as her being with her mother. Even if that mother has made horrible decisions and put herself and Tess in danger.” Silence fills the room. I rack my brain over what I’ve said and hope it makes sense, but I don’t even know. I just need to word-vomit and ramble until there’s nothing left. Maybe then I can think again.

“Can I see her? Your daughter?” Welcoming the distraction, I pull up a picture from earlier in the day, at the hospital.

“She fell down at the pool at Liz’s hotel and had to get some stitches on her hand, and she broke a bone in her wrist. She’ll be thirteen in a few weeks... and it still blows my mind how fucking smart she is.” Catching my curse, I glance over at Bao, but he’s just staring at Tess on the screen. “Liz just started letting her come over again for weekends in the past two years. Our divorce was finalized not long ago.” A couple months before I met Juniper. “So as of right now, that’s the only time I’m supposed to get with her. And the moment Liz

can get me to sign off my rights and remove me from her birth certificate, I'll never see her again. So I've been stalling, and slowly giving the courts new text messages and random crap to keep it up as long as I can, hoping she'll give up and just stay so I can have time with her."

Bao hands back the phone, tears welling in his eyes. "Blood means nothing, but bonds do." He understands... so easily, he understands. Maybe I should have given Juniper the chance to understand.

"I don't care what any test says, she's my daughter. And I will do anything for her... We were careless in our twenties, and thought we were untouchable, non-stop partying all the time, and... I thought it was just an accident." Bao suddenly stands, and I think I may have overstayed my welcome, but he dumps the pot of tea into the sink.

"I think we may need something a bit stronger. Do you like rum? Or gin?" Fucking hell.

"I love Gin." Too many coincidences. Too many intersections... setting a half-filled glass on the placement instead, I continue, because it feels so goddamn good to talk about. "So I step up, get through college, get a great job, and stop all the stupid shit. And just after she turned seven, we were arguing. Liz was out all night and came home with bruises on her arm, her neck... hickies on her shoulders. Claimed she was raped. I didn't know what to believe... I tried to be calm and listen, but when I wouldn't accept the vague answers and questioned further, she screamed at me that Tess wasn't mine... and worst of all, her father was someone I'd known for years. A dear friend of Liz's, and her boss. When that came out she swore up and down it wasn't rape, and she just said that at first because she wasn't ready to admit it.

"Two weeks later when she got the paternity test done, and it revealed that Tess wasn't mine, I was devastated. She was moving on, and she told me I needed to move and give her space, give her the house, money, whatever she wanted... or she would make sure I never saw Tess again. And she could, because she wasn't mine. I believed her without looking

into it. I was heartbroken and just didn't know what to do. I'll never forgive myself.

"I moved, and I heard nothing from her except when I begged and pleaded to speak to Tess, to video chat with her, to drive back up for her dance recitals and soccer games. I surprised them once at school pick-up and found out she moved in with the guy right after I left and spewed a completely different story to every single person we knew... I was the bad guy, the cheater, the man who abandoned his wife and kid. He was the savior who stepped in when I couldn't handle it. Countless times, Liz called me to get Tess because she left her alone at home and went out with him; he hurt her, and wouldn't let her leave... He didn't care about either of them. He only cared about the heroic attention it granted him, and as soon as the shine wore off, his true colors came to light... I was always there for Liz, and for Tess. I was a fool, but I fucking loved her. And Tess... she didn't choose the life, her mother did.

"So I bit the bullet for two years, where she played with my emotions and kept me pushed just far enough away that I thought there would be progress... that she chose me this time, instead of settling for me because I was going to be a good father. And then, the fucker died. Liz bawled and screamed, and blamed me for the fact that he drank himself into a stupor and got behind the wheel. That's when I knew just how fucked she was. I always knew deep down, but... it hit the surface then."

"My goodness, son, you've been dealt an entire hand of tricksters. No use, and full of problems." I couldn't have said it better myself.

"Do you really think I should leave Juniper alone, or was that Quynh's words coming through you?"

A scratchy chuckle leaves him and he takes a long, long drink. "Oh, if it were me, I would not give up. Perseverance is what won my late wife over, and she was engaged when we met. Arranged, but back in our time, if your parents arranged your engagement, it was set in stone. We were together for over a year before she convinced them to

break it off, and we were married without anyone's blessings or permissions just weeks later. Her parents never forgave me, and they never met my daughters because of it. No grudge or negativity should ever keep you from happiness that could have been and people that you could have loved. There is no greater sacrifice in this world than for love. But you have to risk it all—you can't pick and choose. It truly is all, or nothing."

I tap my now-empty glass, and he passes the bottle for a refill. I pour only half of what I would have five years ago. That alone is visible progress, proof of how far I've come.

"I'm terrified that my ex is going to hurt her, if she hasn't totally crushed her already by dragging her into this, and... that's the last thing I want. This is my battle, and Juniper doesn't deserve to have to fight for me. So why am I having such a hard time doing what's best for everyone here?"

"Because you are being stupid, and that is not what's best." I choke on a laugh at the casual nature with which he said it, but he speaks truth. "That is what's easiest, and what is easiest is never the right path. Do you really believe that keeping your daughter and the woman you love separate is a good idea? They will eventually be nearly equal in importance to you... and if that is not the goal, then why care about whether or not her opinion of you is ruined? Let her heal and move on in peace, if that is the case."

"Fuck..."

"Fuck, indeed." At some point, we finish the bottle. Bao wavers in the chair and places his hand over mine on the table, his dark eyes full of sincerity. "I've lost one of my daughters, and I know what it's like to lose a wife... You've known now what it's like to have Tess in your life, versus not, yes?"

"Yes," I say, recalling the fucking agony, constantly waking up thinking I heard her door open, or heard her calling for me in those years... spent in a drunken stupor of self-pity before I fought for her. I should have always fought for her

"Do you feel the same about Juniper?"



Fuck. “It’s not the same.”

“No, no, of course it’s not. But... you do?”

*“But you do... don’t you?” Juniper asked me in the hotel...*

“Yes... I—” His wrinkled fingers wrap around mine. “I didn’t know this was possible, for someone to bring so much light into such a horrific fucking place. If this isn’t love, then I’m afraid I’ll never really know the meaning of the word.”

“Do not give up. Give her some time, but do not give up.”

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## Chapter Twenty- Four: One

### *Three weeks later- Juniper*

I got the job within five minutes of walking into the interview, and started a few days later. I moved in with Quynh the same day Mercer was supposed to be leaving to go wherever, and do whatever. Sera's room became my room, and I've been working the front desk with a few other ladies and Rose for about a week now. One of the women who took a nursing position from the home actually became Bao's nurse shortly after I moved out, so thankfully he hasn't been alone.

I have to say, it's really nice. I get to have lunch with Nana every day, and I've gone to visit Vincent a few times, but each is like the first meeting. It's extraordinary—he's so kind and welcoming, sharing about his life and his family before his memory fades. He's great to talk to, but I feel almost guilty that I have been able to see him and she hasn't.

“Hey Rose, can I pop in and visit Mr. Bardot for lunch today?” She quirks her head to the side and presses a finger to her ruby red lips, pondering.

“No, sorry.” Grabbing an armful of folders from the desk, she marches around me without explanation. What the heck...

“Juniper?” No... Come on, no. *Pull yourself together.* Cautiously, I spin around, and he's leaning against the counter... mustard fucking shirt. But he looks so tired and broken.

“I can't do this here, Mercer. I can't do this at all.” I cannot lie to myself, and I will not play this game.

“Give me ten minutes, coffee, a walk, anything... please. I'll beg for as long as it takes for you to give me a chance to explain.” I've already determined this case closed. I'm done.

“I... I really can't—”

“Please, Gin.” When I don’t move but don’t answer, he adds, “Atlantis... Tess fell and went to the hospital. I had to go get her because Liz was drunk. I have cameras in my apartment because Liz is such a... backstabber. I know what she said to you now, and it’s not true. Please, let me explain.” *Give him a chance...* Whose fucking side are you on?

“My lunch break starts in twenty minutes. You can have that.” What the actual... I swear to god I lose all sense of self around him. Three weeks hardening, rebuilding, telling myself it’s for the best if he doesn’t come back, and the moment he does—poof. Like fucking magic. Like it was never there and we are face to fucking face with nothing holding us back. Fuck. *Fuck.*

“I’ll be waiting in the garden.” And there he goes. I’m so fucking angry with myself for giving in so easily, after all that bullshit...

---

Before heading back to the main lobby to find him, I duck into my Nana’s room and tell her about him showing up and asking to explain. “Well, maybe you should hear him. For so long you wanted him to tell you... and now you find out what she said was a lie, so...”

“I don’t know... How can he possibly explain his wife... and a kid, and potentially a baby? I mean... that means they slept together... recently.”

“Oh, stop it. Do not speculate. He’s here, you told him yes, so go out there and face the music, child!” Fuck... I can do this. In a softer tone, she adds, “I’ve never seen you as happy as you were talking about him, how he made you feel, the things he said... and how sad you are now without him. You love him, Juniper... You did go there uninvited. Just give him another chance.” Nana will always root for true love... and what if it is?

Quick knocks on the door from a nurse, and it opens, but Mercer is in her company. “Mr. Bardot has a very special

lunch waiting for you ladies in the garden.” He comes straight up to me, and I can’t look away... I’ve missed him so much.

We silently start out the door, and I whisper to him, “What is this?” He leans closer than necessary to respond.

“I do actually like surprises, and I hope that you do too.” That sinister smile that means he’s up to no good. But as we step out the doors into the crisp breeze, I see just how good this surprise is...

Vincent is standing beneath a giant arch of chocolate cosmos. The tables have all been moved except for a few covered in food near the arch, and Nana freezes immediately seeing him.

“Vincent?” she says, and I can’t help my gasp and unstoppable grab of his hand that makes me blush and feel so fucking sad all at once. Vincent turns, and his entire face lights up when he sees her. I’ve never seen his smile like that.

“Grace, my love? Is that you?” I clap a hand over my mouth. Mercer pulls his hand free and wraps his arms around me instead, and I cry my damn heart out into his chest. Nana and Vincent embrace. They start talking right away and forget we’re even here. We watch them for a moment. Finally, after so many fucking years... they can have peace.

“Thank you, for doing this for them.”

“I did this for you too.” Without removing his arm from my shoulders, he guides me to another table with some sweets and sandwiches, and a standing bouquet of red cosmos and sunflowers.

“Why... did you do this?” I can’t look at him but I know he’s trained on me as we sit.

“I made a mistake, and I want to fix it.” He tries to reach across the table for my hands, but I move them to my lap before he can, so he sits back in his chair instead.

“You lied to me.”

“I never lied to you, Juniper. I specifically did not lie to you—”

“You may as well have.”

Hurt flashes across his face before he looks toward our grandparents and resets.

“I know that now. I can’t apologize enough for what I did, but it won’t change anything. Now, all I can do is tell you the truth. I thought I was protecting all of us by doing it this way, and I know now that that was wrong... I don’t want you to hate me, but it’s understandable. I just needed to talk to you.”

“So—tell me.” As I fold my arms across my chest, his expression remains trained, none of the happiness or smugness I’ve come to love.

“Gramps hasn’t been doing so well the last few months. That’s why I was avoiding them meeting, or disappointing either of you with an outburst of his if they did... but recently, his doctors said that it might be better for them to spend time together and ignite the parts that have some memories, over nothing at all. I’ve been organizing this from my hotel room in Denver for the last two weeks while I was dealing with selling the house that Liz and I had, because she is moving to France in a few months. She wants to take Tess... my daughter, as well.” The pause, the exasperated sigh... with such relief I would think... “It’s so much deeper than that...”

“Don’t hide from me; you’ve already started. Keep going.” Please keep talking... There’s so much more. I can feel it rolling off him.

“The thing is, she’s... not biologically my daughter.”  
Oh my god.

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*Mercer*

Everything. All of it. I don’t know if it makes sense. I don’t know how much I jump around, but I tell her everything. About Liz and Tess’s father, about everything I sacrificed, how Liz left me and played me, our divorce. Even about Darren and Jacob. And last of all...

“Yes, Liz is pregnant, but there’s literally no way it could be mine...”

“But you’re saying... you slept together?” No, no, no... be fucking honest.

“Yes, before Tess’s bio dad died, when I thought she was... coming back to me. I was desperate, and still not in a good way...”

“How long ago was this?” Fucking... fuck.

“Three or four months before we met...” God, I feel fucking ashamed. Juniper just nods, probably making sense of it all... but then she asks the strangest question.

“What is Lizette’s last name?”

“What?”

“Humor me.” So stern... so serious. What is she thinking?

“It’s the same as mine... but her maiden name is Pineda. Why are you asking me about her?” Her expression doesn’t change, like she’s just had déjà vu or something. “Juniper, you’re scaring me—”

“I think I’ve met her before, and... it was just really strange... I think I’ve just been a little too stressed and scattered because of the way we left things.”

And yet she didn’t respond to a single one of my messages... but I can’t blame her for that. I haven’t reached out since that first week. I haven’t been any better.

“I don’t want to end up like them, Juniper.”

“What do you mean?” She looks between our grandparents and me curiously.

“I don’t want to end up full of regrets and alone one day... regretting time. We can’t predict what will happen. I don’t want to wake up tomorrow and continue regretting the fact that I let you walk away that night, or that it got to the point of you feeling that you needed to confront me at all. I don’t want to run into you in the future and wonder about how

things could have been. I want to experience it... and only with you.” She lets me reach across and take her hand this time.

“I have one condition.” Yes, fucking please.

“Anything.”

She smiles, a real, teeth-showing smile. Fuck, I missed her.

“Talk to me about these things now, please. Keep letting me in; it is something you’ll have to *keep* doing. Half-truths are not honesty, pieces of you... are not *you*.”

The metal chair scrapes loudly against the concrete as I lean over the table to kiss her, and it takes so fucking much to pull away, remembering where we are.

“Best deal I’ve ever made.” I want to make her smile again. I want to spend every moment with her... forever. “I want you to come over for dinner tonight. I’m cooking.”

“You can cook?” As I answer with a small nod, she just shrugs. “What are you going to make?”

“I hadn’t decided, since I didn’t think this far ahead. I wasn’t sure you’d even give me the time of day.”

Like a smart ass she whips out her phone and recites the time.

“Very funny. Food?”

“I like everything and have no allergies. Surprise me, yeah?”

“Two good deals in one day; it’s a new record.” Those wonderful, soul-sucking eyes light up and she looks immensely better than when I saw her standing behind that desk typing earlier. I grab a piece of chocolate from one of the trays and pop it into her mouth, and she takes it happily. “Come over whenever you want. I’ll be there.” Since she knows where I live now, I don’t really need to elaborate.

We finish some food with little chatter, and then she has to go back to work, so she says her goodbyes.

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“You look so very much like Grace when she was younger,” Gramps says as we approach.

“Thank you. Do you remember your time together?” He is laughing and holding Grace’s hand. They’re so sweet.

“It’s one of the only things I really do remember. Everything after the war is foggy, it comes back in bits and pieces, and I can’t make sense of most of them. But I remember my childhood, my home, and I remember everything about Grace.”

Juniper’s trying not to cry as she finds her words again. “I’m so glad, and thank you for seeing her today. I hope you’re able to spend some more time together now that the doctors think it could help.”

“No, thank you, and my grandson. If it weren’t for you, I never would have left that room. I wouldn’t know she was right down the hall. I felt so sorry that I couldn’t remember new things, and I didn’t bother with the memories I did have, since they weren’t anything I could have anyway... But now, I see Grace. I have memories with Grace, and it’s... beautiful to feel this glee again. Sometimes, love is so much greater than just us, and sometimes we have to sacrifice some comfort to make our loved ones happy. You understand that too, don’t you?

“I... I think I’m starting to. I’ll see you soon, Vincent.”

“Oh, Juniper? I love what you have done for him, regardless of whether or not it was intentional. He has caused changes in you as well, has he not?” As Juniper reaches for my hand, I gladly lace my fingers through hers and kiss the top of it.

“He truly has. I never even thought it was possible, but... Yes. We are very different now.”

Everything is different now. I walk Juniper back to the front desk, and before heading back, she gives me a lingering peck on the cheek. “Thank you for doing this. Nana hasn’t been this happy in a while. You... you’ve changed our lives,



Mercer. I still want you in mine, too.” The other woman working passes by and lets her know she is taking lunch now. Juniper seems so comfortable here.

“I’ll see you tonight?” I can’t confirm it enough. I was so fucking worried she would say no. But she nods, and the ringlets freed from her long braid bounce against her pale cheeks. I just want to wrap her in my arms and never let go. “I love you.” The smile that spreads across her face as I pull away, letting go of her fingers at the last moment... It reminds me of how she lit up when I walked into Quynh’s party, and how she tried to hide it. Juniper doesn’t try to hide from me anymore. I don’t ever want to make her feel like she has to.

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## Chapter Twenty-Five: Comfort

### *Juniper*

I wish I could remember where the memory is from, but I can't for the life of me pick out any placement pieces... only her face. With deep brown hair instead of shaded like Tess's. She smiled, and handed me something... and I left. That's it. I can't decipher any more than that, no matter how hard I try. I even take a break from my course work for the week to look her up on Facebook too, but it's private and the pictures I can see are recent. Mercer's doesn't show anything more than the one picture either... so I can't even really be sure it was her with all the chaos going on, and three years of heavy meds.

*Shake it off... It can't be more important than this.*

*Just be casual, it's only dinner... A monumental dinner.*

---

I get ready nearly an hour early just to sit on the edge of my bed and consider what I might say... do... how this will even go. But nothing could have prepared me.

I take an Uber to his apartment this time, and during the day there's an incredibly sweet, older gentleman who works the lobby and greets me by name. *Fancy...* I took the look of his apartment and the building in mind when selecting my wardrobe even though he told me to dress comfortably over the phone a few hours ago, so I picked a nice black pair of leggings and a gray oversized sweater. And when the door swings open moments before I can even knock, I see that he had the same thing in mind with his snug t-shirt and matching gray sweatpants. He's tossing a pan of vegetables and the divine aroma wafts into the hall, as well as gentle instrumental music, but I'm focused on something very different...

"You wear glasses?" He presses them up the bridge of his slender nose with a finger, and the smile he gives me melts my heart. I step inside, closing the door with my foot.

“Contacts, when I remember them, but usually at home.” Mercer makes his way back over to the stove where other pans are sizzling. He looks better than he did earlier, but I know he’s being careful. I don’t want him to, but it’s understandable, considering how strange it must be to bring someone into your home and life for the first time in years. “How does stir-fry sound?” His usual playful tone is a relief at least.

“Loud,” I reply sarcastically after a pop from the pan that has him shaking his arm. “It smells amazing, I’m sure I’ll love it,” I add, and I suddenly feel incredibly out of place, but I don’t want him to know that... so I set my bag on the kitchen island and slide onto one of the barstools to continue observing him.

He sets a beautiful, sizzling plate in front of me seconds after I zone out, or maybe it was minutes... I couldn’t stop watching his hands work. I start going down the mental checklist of questions and concerns I have in my head, but he slides into the seat next to mine, folds his glasses and places them on the counter, and tucks his fist under his chin, mocking me and staring back at me, which makes me smile. Everything about him makes me smile... I don’t even care about his past.

“So... I came here prepared to ask and clarify a ton of things, to set boundaries and make sure we were finally on the same page, but,” I scoop up the fork and load it full of chicken, veggies, and rice, “now I just want to enjoy being in your presence, because... it felt strange, not seeing you.” I put the fork in my mouth before I say something else embarrassing. But the moan that comes out of me and the face Mercer makes in response...

“That good, huh?” As I cover my mouth to keep from laughing, he drags the barstool closer so that I’m practically sitting between his legs. He brushes the hair from my shoulder. “I missed you too.” And for the rest of the meal with him literally breathing down my neck, I can think of nothing but our proximity... and the tension from how things were left, to the understanding we have now. But I know we have to speak

at some point, so as we're finishing up, I decide it's as good a time as any.

"How old is she—Tess?" His demeanor shifts, and he crosses his arms.

"Twelve; she'll be thirteen in a few weeks..." Oh wow. I need to learn to hide my feelings from my damn face. "I know, it's surprising, and our age difference also contributed to me keeping it from you. Because who would really want to be with someone who has a daughter that's half their age—"

"No." I stop him before he can go down that path. "It doesn't bother me, Mercer. I swear. I was expecting a little younger, but you told me how old you were. It's..." *Stop it, don't go there.* "Is Liz the same age as you?"

"She's four years younger, and Tess's bio dad is a few years older than me." It's so obvious how much it pains him just to think about it, let alone say it. I take his hand and push his plate out of the way so I can scoot closer. Instead, he scoops my legs onto his and secures his forearm around my waist. I'm barely an inch from his lips, and I haven't kissed him yet...

"I really envy you, and what you've done for Tess. There are not many men in the world who would have done the same in your position."

"I just want what's best for her, and that's being with me. If there's anything you want to know or ask, ever, I'll answer it. We have all the time now." A sweet smile and nuzzle against my face.

"Will you show me your house? It... looks like a piece of art more than it does somewhere a single dad lives." His thick fingers tangle in my hair, and he breathes me in deeply, kissing my temple before turning in the chair and setting me on my feet.

"I don't spend much time here unless I'm sleeping or have Tess for the weekend, but I will definitely show it to you." Most of the main area is black and white, plain and modern. Nothing flashy—a nice granite couch, a simple

bookshelf with inconspicuous titles, and a flat screen. The hall behind the kitchen goes to a bathroom and a study with huge windows. There's a glass desk in the center with a treadmill underneath, and three huge drafting tables covered in sketches of buildings... the only place of chaos so far. His writing is beautiful, and the drawings are... "Is this—this apartment?" I pick one from the top of a disorderly pile that shows the same spiral stairs, but a crystal chandelier instead of the pearl-styled lights that hang from the loft down into the living area.

"That's the one across the hall. I designed them. This whole building, actually; it was the first job I took after I decided to get back on my feet. The work got me through a pretty dark period full of A.A. meetings and digging through legal bullshit figuring out how to move forward." He sticks his hands in his pockets and lets me wander, picking through pieces of his work... Finally, he plucks a drawing of a large bridge I was admiring from my hands, dragging me back through the hall. "Before you think I'm just a boring old guy with bad taste, I swear it's nicer upstairs..."

"I was enjoying getting to know a bit more about you, though." But as soon as we scale the winding case and I peer over the ledge into the loft space, I see exactly what he means... It's like day and night. And the loft is more than just a loft... There are worn leather loveseats, a floor-to-ceiling wall of much more colorful books with its own step ladder, and a warm tan theme and paint that makes the whole space feel so cozy. A smaller desk in the center of the far wall coated in windows has kids' chapter books and flashcards, and a cubby of papers and writing materials.

Leaving me momentarily to take it all in, he disappears down the hall deeper into the loft, which is separated for his and Tess's rooms, and a bathroom in between them. The bathroom is clearly just for Tess. "Mine is a master, so this one is all hers." I go to move past, not wanting to intrude, but he stops me and pushes her door open. It's a kid's paradise. I would have killed to have such a giant princess bed, and to paint my room purple with stars and planets around the ceiling. "She gets anything she wants, clearly..." So many

toys and stuffed animals, a small T.V., and a stack of video games and controllers on a dresser. *Paradise indeed.*

“You’re wrapped around her finger.” He just chuckles and pulls the knob until it clicks, then continues to the end of the hall, shoving open the double doors, and—“Oh my god...” It’s exactly what I would have imagined.

Soft beige carpets, cream wallpaper with vines and orange and yellow sunflowers growing through them. Walnut furniture, including the massive bed and its frame, with burnt orange linens. He has *throw pillows*. There’s a giant, yellowish-colored squid stuffed animal on one night stand. I wander over and prop it in my hand, facing him with a quizzical look, and he smiles bashfully. “Tess won that for me at a fair last year, and it’s lived there because I don’t use that side...”

“Does it have a name?” I tease, and his cheeks lighten to a brighter shade of pink. “Oh, now you have to tell me.”

Covering his face with his hands, he throws himself face-down on the bed, so I sit beside him with the squid-topus on my knee. When he looks up at me, he sees a fuzzy fish face instead and cackles. “Sunflower.”

It’s inhumane, the laugh that bursts from my lungs, and soon he’s joining in. I return Sunflower to its designated spot. “Do you want to watch a movie or something?”

“Only if you agree to stay the night after,” he responds instantly, and I lean down to place a kiss on his cheekbone, contemplating. When he adds, “Just... sleep. We don’t have to do anything else,” does he really think that changes anything?

“I’ll spend the night, as long as everything else isn’t completely off the table...” Crawling to his hands and knees, he presses me into the mountain of pillows until he’s nearly on top of me.

“I wouldn’t dream of depriving you. All you have to do is ask.” My eyes flutter closed in anticipation, but the heat from his closeness turns into a vacuum, and he plops down beside me with a remote... I didn’t even notice a T.V. in here,

too. Fuck... Kicking off my shoes and trying not to make it obvious how much I want him, I settle into the soft bed, too far away from him.

“Soapy romance, or a rom-com like your books?” he chides, and I snatch the remote from his outstretched hand.

“Not a chance. Have you seen... *Mr. and Mrs. Smith?*” I click on it as it comes across the action section on Netflix, but Mercer cups my chin, diving into my neck. Making it incredibly difficult to focus.

“Not in a long time, but since we’ve both seen it... I can watch you instead.” We’re not ten minutes into the movie when he’s stripped me of everything except for my sweater, including my dignity... and won’t let me lay a hand on him. I don’t know how long he spends between my legs, but they are weak and I’m so tired I can’t be bothered to convince him of his own satisfaction before I’m falling asleep with him curled behind me, whispering in my ear how much he cherishes me.

---

*Wake up... It's not a dream...*

The room is blindingly bright, and I pull the covers over my head and rub my eyes. I try to fight the sun to take in my surroundings. It wasn’t a dream. My hand fans out, searching until it lands on his arm... shoulder... solid chest under the thin sheet... Letting out a breath of relief, I pull myself over to him and tuck myself against his chest, which is made easier by him throwing his arm up behind his head in his sleep. He looks so peaceful, and so handsome. I let my fingers trail down the length of his sternum, past his tattoo, down the center of his abdomen and past his unclothed hips.

“Maybe you shouldn’t have focused so much on me last night...” I whisper, so quietly I’m not sure if I said it at all. He’s completely naked, and laying flat on his back... I wonder how deep of a sleeper he is.

Carefully avoiding putting anymore pressure on him then I have to, I position myself over him, a leg on each side, and pull the blankets back so there’s nothing between us... I drag

my tongue from his collarbone to his earlobe before taking it between my teeth and hissing, “Mercy, I need you...” before stroking him once enough to rouse him and lowering myself onto him in haste, because as much as I enjoy his tongue... This is much more satisfying.

“Ah... wha—fuck.” A sleepy arm flops over my lower back, his hand settling on one cheek before squeezing and burying himself deeper. “You’re naughty, Juniper. Didn’t I tell you to wait?”

“It’s a new day, and you haven’t given me any commands for it yet, but since you seem to need your beauty sleep...” I rise enough that he slides out, slick and throbbing. But he dislikes that even more.

“Get back here.” That husky morning voice has me in a trance, and though it started playful, he suddenly makes it very, very serious.

“Yes, sir.” In a flash, he’s gripping the back of my neck and forcing me to look up at him, the tip of his cock twitching against my clit. He slowly rubs against it to torture me.

“You like to disobey, don’t you?” Sensing my impending climax without even needing to be inside of me, he pulls me higher, just out of reach of him.

“I like how you discipline me more.” That seems to be his undoing, because he takes my tongue in his mouth, flipping to lay me on my back before placing each hand on the headboard.

“Don’t let go.” Retrieving a condom from his nightstand, he tucks one of my legs into his side and sets the other on his shoulder, spreading me open so wide that I gasp as he fills me. So fucking good... and he sits there, watching me squirm on him, grinding, trying to find my high until I begin to feel frustrated. “Beg for it.” Fucking asshole.

“Mercy... please...” I reach lower, intending to help myself, when he seizes my wrist, placing it back where it was lying on the pillow. I’m so close...



“Please, what?” I want to be stubborn, but as soon as I lift the other hand to reach for him he slaps it back against the wood, threading his fingers into mine... and the pressure of him moving forward just drives me crazy.

“Please... make me scream.” Oh, no. That’s not what I meant to say. But he needs no other instruction; his other hand meets mine on the headboard, pulling out before he thrusts at a steady pace, climbing as I gasp and moan into his neck. He is unfazed by anything but my saying his nickname; each time earns me a shudder and pause before he can continue. Until he feels me tighten around him, and he releases my hands, moving his own to my hips, driving into me so fucking hard and deep that I’m sure his fingertips will leave bruises. He climaxes right as I do, clinging to him for dear life. “I love you...”

Mercer freezes and pulls back so he can see me, a stern look of longing and... something else I can’t pick out in my stupor. But he brushes my hair out of my face and beads of sweat with it. “What was that?”

I play along, raising my voice from a whisper to a mellow tone, “I love you, Mercer.” The relief is as clear as his satisfaction, but he still throbs between my legs. “Did that really turn you on again?”

“Everything about you turns me on, Juniper. Everything.”

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## Chapter Twenty-Six: Better

Things are great, for a while. But... What's the saying?

All good things must come to an end. Yeah, I think that's it.

---

Twice a week for the next month, Mercer and I have lunch with our grandparents, together... but separately. We've taken them to stores and shopping a few times too, and most nights I spend at his house... and in his bed, not sleeping. Except for the weekends, when we just text and he calls me late at night. It works, and I'll take it. For now.

*M: I just got home from a job, can I come get you?*

*J: Sure, let me shower.*

*M: You can do that here.*

*J: Fine lol*

Half an hour later I'm sitting on his couch doing my coursework while he sketches on a giant pad of paper on the dining room table. He suddenly drops his pencil and comes over, picking up my legs to sit down and placing them on his lap instead. "Do you want to have dinner with me and Tess sometime this week?" I'm completely thrown off by the question, because he told me the agreement was not to have significant others meet her until at least six months of a serious relationship... and we've been in like four of... whatever this is.

"Really? But—" I push my computer closed and set it on the coffee table, drawing myself to a seat and crossing my legs. "I just assumed I couldn't, like... for a long time."

"Things are... progressing, and she asked me about you the other day, because Darren and Liz were arguing about it, and I guess you came up quite a bit as one of the new problems with it all."

“Oh how I love being referred to as a problem,” I sigh, trying to coat the words in sarcasm. The difficulties I’ve brought to his life are hard not to consider.

“Stop it.” Plopping over, he hugs around my waist and tucks his face into my stomach, grumbling the next words so I can’t understand him.

“What are you saying?” He does it again, and I playfully smack his shoulder when I can’t pull his head away from me. “Seriously, Mercer, you finally talk to me about important shit and you’re going to be a weirdo?”

“Kiss me first,” he says, puckering his lips and finally looking up at me.

“After,” I counter. After holding the position a moment, he relents and rolls onto his back, laying in my legs.

“Liz has been pressuring her to talk about you, and I’ve told her not to because Tess doesn’t know anything about you other than I’ve been spending a lot of time with you recently. And that you make me smile when I’m talking to you and I’m with her. Those are her words.” I love hearing about Tess; I love seeing how he becomes a different person than the sullen, angry, asshole I first thought he was, and can still be at times. He has so many layers to him that I’ve taken the time to analyze. “She’s trying to drag you into it just like I thought she would, and I’m just hoping that she doesn’t get a foothold somehow.”

“I doubt there’s anything she can do—it’ll be fine,” I say, stroking his hair back. It’s gotten longer, and he hasn’t cut it because I enjoy playing with it so much... and pulling it. “How can you be okay with her being around Tess, with everything that she’s done?”

“I’m not okay with it, but I don’t have a choice. I gave up that fight almost immediately when I realized how impossible it would be to keep her entirely away unless she did something horrible.” That’s understandable, I suppose... but not when it’s personal. “I don’t care about Liz; I only care about Tess and what happens to her... but it might be better to wait until I know for sure whether or not she’s staying.”

“Just one of the many reasons I’m in love with you.”

He pops up, flipping over so quickly. “You see the big picture, and you’re more caring than you give yourself credit for.” Locking with my lips, I grab his face and deepen the kiss...

“What did you say?” Oh... *Oh...*

“I’m in *love* with you, Mercer.” And this time when his mouth claims mine, he doesn’t pull away until he’s buried inside me, our clothes sloppily discarded around the living room.

“Every moment has led to this, aligned for this, for us.” His legs wrap in mine, his knee spurring my thighs apart to make better space for him to reach around, toying with my clit in small bursts and tugging my nipple.

“I was made for you.” His grip tightening on my throat, he groans in my ear. “Don’t hold back,.” I’ve found him, exactly what he likes... everything he needs.

“You were made for me.” He hooks his arm around my top leg and opens me up, while pressing my shoulder into the sofa with his other hand. “I love you.” His pace quickens, and my moans echo through the room, and soon he’s joining me. I fondle him after playing with myself until I come again, and he collapses over my back, panting in my ear.

“I love you too.” I give his cheek a comforting pat. He catches my fingers, still soaked in me, and licks them before I giggle and pull my hand away.

---

“Shit.” My phone is vibrating somewhere, but I can’t find it. Oh crap. “Ow.” I roll straight off the couch and land on, thankfully, my good hip.

Where the fuck is it? I yank the whole blanket off; clothes are still everywhere and we didn’t clean anything up before we passed out. And now the phone is silent. I slide my hands into the cracks of the cushions until there’s a loud *thunk* and it vibrates against the floor under the couch.

“Hey, where are you?”

It sounds like he’s rushing. “Sorry... fuck, hey, Juniper—I’m sorry—I had to pick something up at a job this morning. I thought I’d be back before you got up. But Liz just called me and told me she’s bringing Tess by because their sitter canceled on them at the last minute, and she’s leaving town.” Oh shit.

“Oh shit.”

He laughs, incredibly nervously. “Yeah, oh shit.”

No, do not fuel his panic. Help to be his calm. “When is she coming?”

“Ten minutes.” I launch to my feet.

“Fuck, I’ll see you soon. It’ll be fine, okay?”

“Yeah... okay. Juniper?”

“Yeah?” I already know before he says it, because he always needs my full attention when he does.

“Give her hell for me.” What? “I love you.” What the fuck? The line closes before I can answer, and I set off on cleaning the fastest I fucking can, throwing everything in the blanket and wrapping it up, then dragging it up the stairs. I quickly change into something from my new, designated section in his giant walk-in closet and sloppily braid my hair.

The aggressive knock on the door minutes later can be heard all throughout the apartment like a dinner-bell. And I’m the main course.

“Oh, good. Something else I don’t want to deal with today.”

Tess smiles up at me and slips past, going straight up the stairs and, I assume, to her room. Liz walks in, setting her sunglasses on top of her head.

“Where is he?” Why does she have to be so fucking rude to me?

“He had to go to a job site. He’ll be back any minute, though.” Her gem-like eyes drag from my feet to my hastily-

braided hair. And of course, she looks like she belongs on a runway, or... as a boutique mannequin. “I thought you weren’t bringing her by until tomorrow.”

Those eyes roll so far back into her head that the color vanishes, and I fear they may get stuck. “Ugh, not that I need to explain anything to you, but my nanny is out with the flu, so I’m dropping Theresa off now instead of the morning so I can catch my plane to Italy. Nikolai should be grateful for the extra day with her. Now, can you be trusted not to leave her alone until he gets here?”

I return as much of the venom as I can, but with kindness, for Tess’s sake. “I’m sure he is very grateful. Of course. We’ll make brunch.”

“Splendid, couldn’t care less. Love you, sweetie!”

“Love you, Mom!” Tess’s faint and adorable voice calls from the loft, and Liz slams the door behind her.

My phone rings not a moment later.

“Hey, it’s fine, she’s gone—”

“Yeah, I know.” Right, the cameras. “I’ll be there soon.”

“Okay...”

He senses my question before I ask; maybe he knows me too well. “What is it?”

“Do you think it would be okay if I asked her to make french toast with me? I know we just talked about the agreement, but... Liz did kind of just drop her—”

“Whoa, okay. First, I think it would be a great idea. And second, we can talk about it later. This goes beyond normal circumstances. Just... hang tight. I’ll be there in a few.”

---

The door to her room is closed except for an inch-wide space, so I knock lightly on the door frame. “Come in.” She’s sitting on her bed, taking things out of her purple bag.

“Tess, right? Or do you prefer Tessie?”

“Tess is fine.”

“I’m Juniper. It’s nice to meet you.” She smiles again; she looks so much like Liz... and something about her is incredibly familiar.

“Hi, Juniper. Do you like stars?”

Raising my eyebrows, I take the invitation for conversation and step into the room. “I do like stars. I like looking at them. Do you like... french toast?” She shrugs, but I start racking my brain for something else to make. I don’t even know what there is here.

“I like pancakes more.” She stands, putting the pile of clothes she took out on her dresser. Her left arm is in a cast, with bandages around the bottom of her wrist.

“Well, it’s a good thing I know how to make pancakes then. Would you like to help me?” She holds up the cast, and her beautiful little face falls. “Don’t worry about that. You can flip them for me, yeah?” Her deep brown eyes scrunch at the corners when she smiles this time, showing two missing teeth, and she covers them. That I can understand, too.

---

### *Mercer*

“Because I don’t want this to be a fucking problem, Jeff. She dropped Tess off at my house a day early, with no notice, and left her with my girlfriend whom she’s never met. Liz didn’t even ask if she had to work or anything... I’ll be there any minute, but I do not want to hear of this being added to her list of shit to complain about, so I’m telling you now. As soon as I get to my computer, I’ll email you the video from my security cameras.”

“Alright, Mr. Bardot. I’ll let her lawyers know and make sure it isn’t brought up against you.”

“Good, it’s what you’re paid so damn much for.” I can’t fucking believe her. Couldn’t even wait for me to get

back... My bluetooth connects to Liz next, and she picks up on the first ring.

“What?”

“Don’t ‘what’ me, I told you to wait until I was home. Do you think I don’t know what you’re doing? Don’t fucking use Tess like this, and do not try to come between me and Juniper.”

“Oh, please. I’ll use my daughter however I decide, and I couldn’t help but notice quite a few of her things scattered around the place... The judge might want to know about your plaything living under the same roof as where Tess might be... hm.” Click.

As soon as I slam the brakes in front of my apartment and the valet rounds the car, I realize what I said... and what I’ve never actually confirmed with Juniper. But I’m too fucking livid to think about anything other than the constant complications my ex adds to my plate every time it’s finally been cleared.

“Nikolai, welcome back.”

“Erin.”

The way he grins at me rubs me wrong, and I’m not sure if it’s because I’m already fucking pissed or because I remember him asking Juniper to dance after I specifically told him who I was there for when I asked him to come with me. “Why don’t you wipe that smug look off your face, or I’ll make sure they put you out in the lot in the middle of winter,” I snap as he takes the keys from me, and he’s back to serious when I stalk toward the entrance.

I didn’t just plan this fucking building; this is *my* building. Liz shouldn’t have even been let through the lobby without my okay, without Juniper being notified...

“What the fuck, Lugo?” The only reason I’m not furious with him directly is because of how loyal an employee he’s always been.

“I’m so sorry, sir. I tried to call up to the apartment, but Ms. Juniper didn’t answer the call box. Ms. Lizette was



incredibly stubborn, and by the time I had called for security, she was already on your floor. They escorted her back down, though.” If only Juniper had gotten the satisfaction of seeing that part of it.

“I’m sorry for my temper. I would have done the same.”

His wrinkled eyes narrow. “I don’t think you would have, if I’m allowed to speak freely.”

I slap a palm down on his podium before heading to the employee elevator as briskly as my legs will carry me.

“You always are,” I call after him before the doors close. She should not be alone with Tess... so much could go wrong. What if they... calm down. Breathe, don’t assume.

---

“Jun...iper.” Bursting through the door, I don’t know what exactly I was expecting, but... it certainly wasn’t The Cosmos loud enough to hear Neil from the heavens themselves playing from the T.V. and Tess happily throwing pancakes all over the kitchen with Juniper laughing hysterically beside her. At least a dozen flapjacks, some half-cooked, thrown on the counters and the floor. The next lands on the burner.

“Oh shii-ns. Here, give me that.” She takes the pan, scoops the round from the burner with the spatula, and throws it back in. “That one should be fine. We’ll make your dad eat it.” Tess laughs, her high-pitched, squeaky laugh that she never shows anyone because she hates it. I only hear it when she’s playing games and doesn’t know I’m in the hall, or when we go to carnivals and ride the Ferris wheel.

“What are you making me eat?”

Juniper turns with a start, clearly not having heard me come in, and glances around at the utter mess, embarrassed.

“The burned ones,” Tess chimes in, running around the island to throw her arms over my shoulders, jumping into the bear hug greeting that’s become her regular one. “I like her, Daddy. She listens to me.” My eyes lock with Juniper’s across

the kitchen, and I... I just can't believe this. What the hell did I do to deserve her?

"I like her, too." Juniper smiles, returning to the stove. "Why don't we clean all this up so we can actually eat some of the food, okay?" Tess retrieves the broom and dustpan while I pull out the trash can, and we start wiping up the mess. Juniper makes a gigantic stack of pancakes, paired with messily-chopped fruit that Tess must have done before the disaster started. When we sit down to eat, I take Juniper's hand and kiss her cheek, which Tess makes a gross sound at.

I am in absolute awe at the way they interact... as if this wasn't the first time they met, or talked. It's so natural that I hardly say anything until Tess asks me something that I completely miss. "Dad?"

"Yeah, hun?" Juniper chuckles at my expense, and I grip her knee under the island as she bites into a strawberry, making her jump.

"Are you going to marry Juniper?"

Fuck. I buy time by taking a drink of my water and clearing my throat... I don't fucking know what to say. But Juniper speaks instead.

"We haven't talked about that yet, because that's something that happens after you've been... together for a really long time." Fuck.

"But Dad's been talking about you for a really long time..." Tess suddenly gets shy and quiet, like she's said something she shouldn't have. I've never really talked about her... not until recently.

"Well, it's only been a few months, and as much as I really like your dad too..." I can't help but stare at her when she talks about us, and to my daughter... a conversation I should be having, and one we haven't even had ourselves. "... we are just... really good friends, right now."

No, fuck... Her knee slides from my hand as she adjusts and goes back to her food. Tess glares at me, as if she knows just how badly I've fucked up too...

---

Tess has gone to her room to work on her homework for the day, since Liz pulled her from school to bring her here early, and it's just us sitting on the couch... too far away for what's become normal between us. I open my mouth to speak, and she does the same, but instead of it being funny this time, she awkwardly silences herself and waits for me to continue.

"Gin, I'm sorry for today." She doesn't respond, and I scoot so that our thighs are touching before she'll look over at me. "Coincidentally enough, I called you my girlfriend on the phone with my lawyer before getting here, while telling him about what happened, and... hadn't realized we never discussed it. I just... assumed." Those mind-boggling blues are coursing with rivers when she turns, and I can't stop the wave of panic. Everything has been so good... and I missed the signs.

"You don't need to be sorry. I shouldn't act so childish over a label, I was just really caught off guard by her asking, when we... I barely considered my role in your life before today. Before... Tess. And I don't know if you ever want to get married, or want more kids, or... anything, because we just, *be* together. We don't really talk about the future."

"I haven't talked about it... because it's too painful to consider my future without you. And I didn't want to scare you away with talk of things that I have no expectations for. I don't care about... any of that as long as I get to see you, and talk to you. But if it means something to you, then please tell me..."

She considers for a second, and opens herself to me, letting me wrap an arm over her shoulders as she settles into my chest. "I mean... eventually, sure. What's the point of any of this if we don't want to work for a life together?" That I can agree with. "But... the rest is all so traditional and expected, and... I don't know if that's for me. I think I might like hearing you call me your girlfriend, though..." The touch of insecurity laced with the playfulness that only seems to come out around me has me backing her into the pillows.

“Juniper...” I whisper along her collarbone, kissing the tip of her chin before brushing my lips ever so gently against hers. “Will you be my girlfriend?” She makes me feel like a fucking teenager again. It’s not fair.

“Absolutely.” I could get used to this. This... is bliss.

---

## Chapter Twenty-Seven: Left

### *Juniper*

“No, no, it’s family dinner night, and I will not be the exception to participating. Even Sera is here tonight.” Mercer called right after I got off the bus, heading back to the house.

“You should have just let me give you a ride—”

“Don’t even—enjoy the rest of the day with Tess, alright? I’ll call you after we eat, and maybe we can go do something tomorrow? The three of us?” I squeeze my eyes closed and prepare to be shot down, but he laughs.

“I’ll see what Tess has in mind. I love you.” I’ll never get tired of hearing him say it... now that he expects the words back too, it’s never a goodbye.

“I love you, too. Talk to you later.”

As soon as I push open the gate to the house, I see that black hair and smug face.

“How sweet. How’s my brother doing? He refuses to answer my calls ever since I met you. I wonder why that is...” Before waiting for a response, he takes the steps of the porch slowly and meets me on the walkway, holding out a manilla folder to me. “For the record, I told him to stay away from you. He didn’t listen. Then again, he’s always been a stubborn guy.”

“What is this?” His smile reminds me too much of *his...*

“Revenge.” *Run, run!*

“What are you talking about?”

“So naive... You don’t know as much as you think, girl. You might want to reconsider this relationship, or you could cost him everything he’s worked for.”

---

Keeping this from him is agony.

But until I have more, I cannot do anything... except to accept the loss, or continue to hide.

And I refuse to lose him. I will not be the reason he's separated from Tess. I will not do anything, but I have to be smart... *something you're not very good at most of the time.*

I won't do anything. But I will never do nothing.

---

I'm standing outside this fucking building that's bringing up even more horrible memories, dreading this goddamn meeting... for therapy I'm not interested in, with a cunt who also helped ruin my life... all for them. *The things we do for love...*

Maybe after this is over, I can speak to Mercer without a chest full of guilt and fear, and not ignore him for days out of dread something may slip...

My phone vibrates, and it's an unknown number. Since I have a few minutes before my appointment, I answer it, with as much politeness as my strung-out nerves can handle.

"Hello?"

Silence; a gentle crackle.

"Um... hello?" The smallest, most timid female voice... holy shit...

"...hello?" I ask again, slightly off guard.

"...Juniper?" No... oh my...

"Tess? What's wrong?" Why would she be... and how did she... *Listen!*

"Juniper, why won't you talk to my daddy?" Fuck... how do I even begin?

"Oh honey... it's... really complicated..."

"Is it because of me?" My heart...

"No, absolutely not... Things are just really hard right now, while your mom and dad are... deciding where you're going to be living..."

She sounds devastated. “Well... he’s just so sad, and he sits around doing nothing whenever I’m here and you’re not. I wanted to ask you something.” Her words are like a punch in the gut, but I keep the tears held in.

“Of course, sweetie, anything.” *That’s not your place...*

“Who is... Elliot Amada?” My heart stops... utterly stops. I can’t breathe...

“That’s... someone I was going to marry, a long time ago... How did you hear that name?” Without hesitation, she continues.

“It’s all over a bunch of papers I found in my mom’s closet. A whole huge box. And your name, and hers...” Holy shit...

“Tess... can I ask you something now?”

“I guess,” she says suspiciously, which makes me proud.

“I want you to go and tell your dad what you found, okay? And I’ll see you tomorrow.” Her tone turns happier, and that’s all I want. I would rather lie to her than have her lie to Mercer on my behalf; it’s not right to ask that of her, and I shouldn’t teach her it’s right. She’ll learn on her own how white lies work, but not from me.

“Okay Juniper. Thanks for talking to me.”

“Of course, honey, I’ll always make time for you.”

It’s a shame that I like her so much... because I may not get to be in her life anymore.

*It is what is best... For whom?*

---

### ***Mercer***

“Is she coming?” Tess asks

I’m so confused.

“I... don’t know. I haven’t talked to her in a few days...” How could she do this... to Tess? This is so much

more important to me. We set this up a week ago and... even though she seemed upset with me and ignored me, I thought she would show up for Tess.

“It’s okay, Dad. If you haven’t heard from her, then she probably had something really important happen, right?”

This is most important to me, but it doesn’t seem very important to her.

---

Tess picks some Marvel movie, and we go into the theater. I stare at my phone the entire time.

When we go home, she bugs me in the car about being mad...

“Don’t be upset with her until you know what happened. What if she got hurt? Or her family had an emergency? We just don’t know.” How the fuck can someone so young be so much smarter than I am? I’m the one that’s supposed to calm her down, be there for her... and it’s always been the other way around with us.

“You’re right, as usual.” Flipping my wrist to check the time as we pull into the neighborhood, I recall an ice cream shop not far from her house... “Wanna get some ice cream before going home?”

“Are you going to go talk to Juniper?”

“How do you do that? Little psychic.” I toss one of the shoes she kicked off into the back seat next to her. She smacks it to the floor with a ‘kiyah’.

“Because you’re my dad, and I know you too well.” It’ll never stop hurting, and it’ll hurt even more when I have to tell her. But those are thoughts for another pitiful night...

“What kind are you going to get?”

“Chocolate with rainbow sprinkles—”

“Chocolate with rainbow sprinkles—”



Tess kicks the back of my seat, laughing like a hyena as I pull off the highway and go to Juniper's. We need to fucking talk.

---

## Chapter Twenty-Eight: Unsaid

### *Juniper*

“Hey, love. Um, Sera is holding your boy-toy up at the door, trying to convince him you’re not here... Do you want to handle this?”

Fuck. *Fuck*. *Run*. No.

“Yeah, I got it.” Closing my book, I throw on pants and a hoodie and grab my tote bag full of papers and guilt. I can’t do this. But I must.

Because I will *never* do *nothing* again.

---

I can’t stand the way he’s looking at me already. I didn’t think he would come here...

Sera backs away from the door, pulling Quynh reluctantly by the arm as Mercer shuts it behind him, absolutely fuming.

“What the fuck?” He sounds more in utter disbelief than anger, and I can’t help the tears.

“I—don’t even know where to start...”

“I don’t really give a shit where, but can you please just start talking?” This hurts... I may never see him again. And I was still struggling so fucking hard to make peace with it before doing this...

“I mentioned that I thought Liz seemed familiar, like I had met her before...”

“Okay...” I’m going to break his heart...

“Can we sit down—”

“Juniper, if I sit I’m going to fucking explode. Please just keep talking...” I don’t want to be here. *Run*. *Run*. *RUN*.

“Darren came here, the day that Liz left Tess with me at your place, and he gave me a big packet of... well, me.”

“What does that mean?” He’s getting more upset...

“They... threatened me, with exposing my past with you, and when I told him that you already knew everything... he told me to read the papers. So I did, and...” I take out the folder and give it to him, but he just takes it, staring at me for more. “They threatened to expose my past with... my ex-fiance, with you, and with the courts. To keep you from...” I can’t look at him. “To keep you from getting Tess.”

“So instead of coming to me, you decide to ignore me and feel sorry for yourself?”

“Please don’t yell at me...” The way his face falls, I don’t think he realized he was. “Can we please sit down, and I’ll explain everything...” Shaking his head, he sits on the couch, and I choose the armchair beside it. I need space between us right now, because I don’t want him to see how bad I shake around anger... or when speaking of *him*...

“I scheduled an appointment with my old therapist, from before I met my ex, and I went there to see her and ask about how the files from her office, as well as the files from Becknam that only she and my ex were supposed to have access to until his death, could have possibly ended up in the hands of a Lizette Pineda. Tess called me yesterday while I was there and even told me she found a box in her closet full of papers about me...” By his scowl I know she didn’t tell him that either... I just continue on. “She froze. I swear, for someone working with such fucked-up people, you’d think she’d have had a better poker face, but... seeing her go rigid sparked another memory for me...” His elbows are resting on his knees and his hands are clasped together. “Lizette worked at that clinic, and... so did he.” His leg stops bouncing, and those usually smooth and creamy browns turn dark and solid. No... this is what I feared...

“What are you saying?” My mouth seems to be glued shut... he knows... he knows, he just wants me to confirm it. Suddenly, Mercer gets to his feet and starts pacing in front of the sofa...

“Tess’ *biological* dad...” Stopping in front of me, he towers over me and I feel so small, so sad, that all I can do is stare at his neatly-polished shoes...

“Say it.” I open my mouth but nothing comes out...  
“Juniper...”

“... is my ex-fiance...” He crumbles before me, grabbing my shoulders, then my face, and forces me to look at him, and I’m scared...

“What is his name?” The hatred in his eyes... not a question, a command... but I rip free of his grip and scoot the chair back, panting heavily, trying to calm my anxiety.

“Don’t talk to me like that. I didn’t ask for this...” It doesn’t seem to phase him in the slightest.

“You never thought to fucking tell me? I even asked, Juniper... before we did anything, and you...” I knew it... regret. Immediate and immense regret.

“Elliot Amada, and you’ve seen what he did to me... so excuse me if I didn’t exactly think this was information that wouldn’t destroy everything. Just like it did.” He says nothing, just sits, frozen and crouched before me. “Get out if you don’t want to listen to me, Mercer, but don’t take your anger about this out on me. You have no idea the hell...”

He seems to snap back, his once-warm gaze finding mine, and it is just as bitter as he acts. “I want to listen, but I am angry, Juniper. I can recognize it as irrational, and you can feel upset because of what it would have changed. But I can also accept that you and I never would have happened at all if I had known, and that this probably can’t continue because of the reminders, or questions that it might cause...” I don’t care about any of that...

“You’re not angry at me, you’re angry because you didn’t know. But I didn’t know, either...” Plopping back into the chair, he scratches the scruff on his chin roughly. “That isn’t all. After my realization about Elliot—” The mere mention of his name makes the hairs on my neck stand up and sends my body into defensive mode. He seems to notice my

sudden spike in breathing. “I made another appointment, this time for a consultation, saying it would be easier to restart there since they had all my past.

“I remembered that she leaves her clients alone in the room for about 5 minutes to settle down and relax with the room before entering, so I made sure that the door closed behind me, and I didn’t enter the frame of the camera set toward the chairs. Instead, I tossed my scarf over the one on her desk and searched the filing cabinets quietly.” At least he’s listening, but his eyebrow draws upward, in irritation or being impressed, I’m not sure.

I pull a box of tapes from the bag next and set them on the coffee table. “Liz was also a client there, under a different doctor.” I don’t have to say the name for him to get the point this time. “I stole her files, and her tapes... and I know it’s fucked up, but... I had to know if he did the same thing to her.”

“And what did you find out?” At least part of this will be easy.

“She often used the sessions to... cheat on you, but she also talked to him a lot, and... he was always nice to her. There are also tapes of her with different doctors, and she says a lot of the same, and talks about her hand in what she did to me, which according to the sessions was quite a bit, like forging my session notes and cutting out parts of videos, as well as giving him access to my life, but...”

“But?”

“She knew that if she had ever said anything, they would not have helped her. And I know that, because I did. Often. Especially once he isolated me, and that was really the only place I was allowed to go... I begged them to help me, every session, and they listened and said they would and then I would get another new doctor, and not be allowed to go for a few weeks... but Lizette went to another therapist.” I pull at the charred and falling-apart pages of a file. “And she prevented him from having that evidence destroyed.

“She wanted to threaten me, and threaten your daughter with something that she has absolutely nothing to do with. Something I can never change.” My hands are shaking uncontrollably as I reach for the thick paper and flip it open, revealing pictures of bruises and cuts, statements from her and Elliot both lying to police... spanning over the last two decades. “I was not going to let it stand.” Mercer picks up pieces, one after the other, checking dates...

“This... this is when she was sixteen... and eighteen... twenty...” Covering his mouth uncomfortably, he throws a picture face-down... “When she told me she was pregnant.” The muscles lining his jaw thread and pinch. “Why didn’t you tell me? How did you get all of this?”

“I threatened the old therapist with taking her to court for breaching my confidentiality, unless she let me steal her file, and mark it as misplaced or destroyed like it was supposed to be. And at first, I couldn’t make sense of it, and I did not want to say anything unless I was sure, but... look at this.” Sifting through the pile, I find the one thing that may actually *really* help us here. “She went on a rant during one of the police reports about wanting to murder him, saying she would if he ever laid a hand on her again—” I tap the corner where the date is...

“Three weeks before the accident.” This isn’t only huge for proving her character, these are records they were somehow able to hide entirely. And though the therapy videos and session information probably can’t be used to prove anything, falsified and hidden police reports might be.

“I think I can get her to admit to it, if she did do something to him... I think I can make her mad enough to say it. I know most of this is... not useful legally, but, do you think if I got her to confess to everything on camera in your house, or with the lawyers around, that it might get her put away? Because based on everything... how she spoke to me, Darren called this her revenge... it has to be. I was the complication in her relationship with Elliot, and I was supposed to die so they could be happy together...” A drop lands on the already-tattered clip I’m holding, so I toss it with the others and turn

away to dry my tears, but Mercer's long fingers wrap around my shoulder and he tugs me into his chest. "I didn't tell you because I was scared of losing you, and knew that if I couldn't help in some way... that she would just get away with ruining someone else's life. Even if she was his victim, she isn't one now." Squeezing even tighter, he pulls me to stand, and I wrap my arms around his waist in return... I always miss him so much. How did I ever think I would be okay with living without this?

"You... are something else, Juniper..." I rest my chin on his chest to stare up at him, and he's crying too. "I don't care about the fact that you were with him, I don't care about his blood, I can even overlook that I loved him like a brother for years, and he not only destroyed my life and marriage, he also destroyed the person who would put my life back together again..." There's so much emotion running through him, and the only one he fed for years was the rage. Mercer struggles heavily with expressing anything, but he's come so fucking far with speaking instead of reacting... Separating, we awkwardly stand within arm's reach but with only his fingers brushing the palm of my hand.

"Do you want to know why I'm really mad? What I can't overlook?" No... *Run!* But my body betrays me, and I bite my lip, nodding slowly. "Because I knew about you, back then... He... told us about finding someone who would obey him, like a slave, but he... was always super fucking weird and we thought it was a joke. But one day, after drinking with my brother and him, when he was trying to console me after Liz and before the results came back that he was the father, he mentioned meeting you, at the office, and said that you were..." Clearing his throat, he emphasizes, "In his words, 'fragile prey', and that he was going to break you..." Oh my god...

"You couldn't have known."

Now he's shaking, and the sadness is flowing even harder. "When did it start?"

"When we met, or...?" His grunt of confirmation comes before I say it. "A year, I think, after we met. Just after

he proposed...” He scoffs, adding to his own timeline, his own impression of the man who ruined us.

“Fuck...”

“And it wasn’t long after that, he...” Gently, his knuckles brush against the underside of my jaw, until they reach my ear and his fingers unfurl, only to tangle in the mess of my waves.

“You don’t have to say it, or think about it... I just can’t believe someone could live two completely different lives. At one time.”

I know he doesn’t want to hear it, but... “Yes, you do...” His movement ceases and his arm drops.

“I’m sorry, Juniper. Can you understand that my anger was coming from a place of being hurt... not just for me, but for Tess too, because I didn’t know what was happening?” What would things be like if we had always had such communication... if it didn’t take weeks and months of dying in silence instead of bringing things to one another?

*He probably would have left you as soon as he saw the scars on your body if you had told him who caused them...*

Yes, he probably would have. But he isn’t now...

“Of course I can... but Mercer, there’s one more thing you have to know... something that might actually hurt your case, which is another reason I was so okay with leaving you alone unless I could be of use...”

“You don’t need to be of use, Juniper. I just need you here, with me...” *You won’t for much longer...*

“I have... schizophrenia. It started after the accident, but I manage fine, with therapy and regular exercises.” He doesn’t seem to react, but that usually just means they don’t understand.

“I love you, Gin. I don’t care what’s been going on in your head, and I shouldn’t care about your past. It’s been like this the entire time we’ve been together, and it’ll be like this long after we decide to stay or part ways...” He cups my chin,



so lightly this time, and his eyes have melted again. Can this be true? Can this really *be*?

“If Liz is going to drag me into this, and you’re so scared of it being used against you, and Tess—because I am too—then please, let me speak. Let me tell them about myself, so it’s not twisted and misconstrued because of her.” Roughly embracing me again, he kisses the top of my head.

“I’ll ask tomorrow... I love every part of you, I promise. You’re perfect—”

“I don’t want to be perfect, as long as I am good enough for you, and her. I don’t care about anything else now.”

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## Chapter Twenty-Nine: Theresa

*Tess*

Dear Future Theresa,

I still don't like my school. I don't have any friends. They all hate my mom. I don't get invited to parties, and I don't get to go to the mall or the movies. I don't like my mom's house.

Nobody cares.

My dad tries. He tries *really*, really hard.

I love my dad.

I don't feel the same way about my mom, though. She scares me.

Is that normal?

She yells at me a lot, but that's not so bad. She yells at my dad even more, when all he does is be nice to me and try to get her to be nicer, too.

It's starting to get harder to lie to people about her, and I don't know if I'm doing the right thing by being quiet, but my mom says I am.

I don't think I trust her.

Juniper says you don't hurt people you love.

But my mom hurts me all the time.

Juniper is always nice, and quiet, and fun.

I hope my daddy gets married to Juniper so I don't have to go live in France with Uncle Darren and Leith...

I heard mommy saying she doesn't want me anymore, and she doesn't want my baby sister either. She's sick of being weighed down, but I don't know what that means, I'm not that heavy, but I'm sure the baby is.

My dad has been fighting with my mom a lot more ever since I met Juniper... but I don't know why. Because she

makes him happy, and my mom only ever makes people upset... I would pick Juniper too.

Love me, Tess.

P.S. Her pancakes are *really* bad, but my dad eats them every weekend anyway. And she puts bananas in mine, even chocolate chips if I ask nicely.

That means they're in love.

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### *Mercer*

*Two fucking weeks.* Two weeks of absolute bullshit, and not being able to see Juniper at all.

No texts, no calls, no emails. I couldn't even go by her place. It all leads up to this...

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The lawyers sat down with her and me the day after she told me everything. We shared it as well—without revealing exactly how Juniper came into possession of the tapes and files—and they came up with a plan.

There are six hidden cameras in my house, showing everything except for the bedrooms and bathrooms, as there are in every house in the building for security. I pay a shitload of money every year for every unit to have personal access to their own cameras, and a storage bank for all footage from the property to be stored in case of emergencies. Most erase after a year. Every part of my personal home is also audio bugged, courtesy of a cunt of an ex-wife who broke every shred of trust I've ever had.

Until now.

Where all of it is placed in Juniper, greeting Liz as she brings Tess over this Saturday morning, and pushing her buttons enough to get her to say anything that will fuck her life over as much as she has mine.

Two officers stand with me in my study, and the I.T. guy is here with my cameras hooked up to the monitors, audio ready to record.

Juniper is standing in the kitchen, waiting as well, picking at her nails because her nerves have been shot for days racking her brain over this. I know it, and she hasn't been able to discuss any of it with me.

Knock, knock, knock.

Showtime.

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### *Juniper*

*You can't do this; you're a horrible liar.*

I will do this if it's the last fucking thing I accomplish for this family, whether or not my position in it is secure.

"Oh, I thought you were Mercer. I'm sorry..." I motion for them to come in, and Liz eyes me suspiciously. Tess gives me a quick hug before running into the living room and switching on one of her shows.

"You're here... He's not here?" Her thickly-lined eyes narrow sharply.

"Uh, no... We got into a fight last night, and I haven't seen him yet today, but now that Tess is here I'm sure he'll be back soon, right?" Liz makes an awful face before whipping out her phone.

"Well, he confirmed me dropping her off, so yeah. Probably..." An awkward silence. Tess gets up and takes off toward the study... shit. But Mercer will keep her there.

"Can I ask you something?" There's no time to waste.

"I would really prefer if you didn't—"

"Why didn't you tell Mercer who I was when you first heard about me?" I continue anyway, catching her attention. "It's not a common name... and then you saw me. But you went out of your way to drive this wedge between us, and

bravo, I must say..." My voice cracks a little as I allow some of my usually suppressed emotions out. "Why wouldn't you just... slice clean through?"

"You really don't understand, do you?" she snaps, pulling her coat to cover her widening belly. "Nikolai is well-groomed, well-spoken, has the perfect image and career... He's ideal. He's mine." What the fuck? Even I wasn't expecting this response, with everything... all that she did to him...

"But... telling him right away would have kept anything from happening..."

"Juniper, you were already a complication once. Elliot wanted you and your mom's money. I helped him accomplish that—for a price. My heart. But Nikolai... I put years of work into shaping and molding him into the perfect partner, making him the wonderful person you love so dearly now." This doesn't make any sense... "But good men don't stay molded unless you give them freedom every once in a while. And I figured, I'd let him play with you before breaking his heart, and thus breaking yours, and letting him crawl back to me like he always has whenever we've had problems.

"Do you know how many 'you's there have been, Juniper?" It's not true... She's a liar. "Fifteen years together, and you don't think we took breaks to fuck around with other people, and come back? I just didn't expect to fall in love with Elliot after we had our fun, let alone have a baby from it. Elliot would never have been a good dad, as you well know... but Nikolai? I made the perfect decision there... And you may have fallen in love with him, and him with you. But that's never stopped us, and it won't this time either." What a sick, pathetic bitch...

"You were supposed to be destroyed, and take all the negatives away from the relationship with Elliot... and the impulses he couldn't control." No... Oh my god... "And I was supposed to get the good parts. The money, the love, the future... I was supposed to take my daughter, run away with him, and you were supposed to die—" Yes, keep fucking talking... "But you didn't. And then he locked you up in there

so you couldn't rat us out, and I kept up the payments from the company's accounts, even after he was fired for assaulting clients during sessions. He had to stay, and I had to stay because of you living. Didn't know that part, did you? But you think you're so fucking smart, have it all figured out, don't you?"

"When I was gone... who got the bad parts then?" She's suddenly not smiling. So quiet when the fangs don't draw blood. "How long did it take before he went back on the promises of it never happening again, of having to convince yourself that he loves you and that was just his way of showing it?"

"You know nothing, girl," she snaps as she stalks toward the door. No... This is the only chance I've got...

"Thank you, Lizette." Hook.

"Hah, what the fuck for?" Line.

"For doing what I never had the guts to do." Feeding frenzy. Her features sharpen, her face turning triumphant. "The world is better off without him." And without you.

"Do you think I'm stupid?"

"Of course not. I think you're incredibly brave. Can I show you something?" I pull my sweater over my head before she can't refuse, and tie up my hair, turning around so she can see the marks on my back. Her gasp sucks the air from the room, and the mood shifts.

"I... I'm sorry he did that to you."

"You have no reason to be sorry. Whatever part you may have played, you did not do this. You can only be held responsible for your own actions..." Her normally-pretty eyes lower and turn woeful.

"Well, my actions are just as bad..."

"How did you do it?"

She ponders for a moment before setting her bag on the table. I never thought to reach her through common ground, but she may actually say more this way. Because she needs

someone to talk to. A friend who knows what she's felt. But we will never be friends.

“He was never good at holding his liquor, and had a bad habit of drinking and driving. So I made sure his last drink of the night was full of painkillers, and the speedometer was off so he thought he was going slower than he really was... I was so relieved when I got the call, I cried tears of fucking joy... I really am sorry, Juniper.”

Taking her hand, I gave her a small smile. “You know, Lizette, I used to think that someone could never understand the position I was in unless they experienced the same exact things I did, but you've just proven to me that I was very wrong. Because you still don't understand me. I never would have imagined seeking revenge on Elliot, or me, just because of being in his life... and I still don't understand you, or why you needed to hurt others in order to make yourself heal. It doesn't matter how much somebody hurts us, we do not get to decide what happens to their life. Just like I will never forgive Elliot, I will never forgive you.” Ripping her hand away, she jumps to her feet with a start. “You do not deserve Tess, and you won't get her,” I say before Liz spins around, stalks the two steps between us, and her ring leaves a deep gouge across my right cheek as she backhands me. It only takes a moment, and even though I saw it coming, I did nothing to stop or deter her.

The world, and more importantly her daughter, will see the truth. I gladly take another beating to end this once and for all.

“Enough, Lizette. This is fucking over.” Mercer's voice booms from the hallway.

Tess runs out, followed by Mercer and the officers, who are holding a different stack of papers than what I had provided them with. She dives into my abdomen, and I hug her back right away. She's shaking... and my fucking face stings. Mercer joins us, but no happiness lingers on his face, only disgust. He cups my chin, examining the scratch intently before holding a cloth to my face. I know what he feels even without showing or saying it, and when his swirling pools of

earth meet mine of air and he whispers, "Are you okay?" he knows there is only one answer, but I nod in reassurance as his palm lingers on my face. Then he wraps Tess and me in his strong arms.

It's over. One more fight, one more obstacle, one more bruise... It's over.

"Ms. Bardot, you're under arrest for assaulting Miss Whitlock, and for your hand in the murder of Elliot Ameda..." Among other things. One of the officers puts her in handcuffs and the other comes over to tell me about what happened. Tess did not just find a box of papers in Liz's closet; she found copies of all my medical records, CCTV tapes, phone calls, and text messages. So many things she could never have if she hadn't taken them from Elliot... but these are usable in court. "We sent an officer over not long ago. These documents will be seized as evidence." The officers leave, with Liz howling about unfairness, and Mercer gets Tess calmed down, she decides she wants to lie down... but something doesn't seem right with her.

---

Her cast came off last week, and her birthday is this weekend, and Mercer is taking her camping. She should be ecstatic, other than the fact that she just watched her mother get arrested... and watched her mom hit her dad's girlfriend, too. But should she not be relieved, then?

"Something isn't right," I tell Mercer as we're relaxing on the couch. It's about dinner time, but Tess hasn't come down.

"What do you mean? I feel like we should be pretty relieved after today." So do I, but... I just can't shake it.

"I don't know... maybe it's nothing." But I can't convince myself it's nothing, no matter how hard I try. I don't feel like this is good enough. I don't feel like it's resolved...

When Tess does come down, she's groggy, her eyes are puffy, and I don't think she slept a wink... We order pizza and



watch Encanto, and she stays up late with us until Mercer insists we all go to bed, and he tucks her in.

---

We fall asleep relatively quickly, but I wake with a start in the middle of the night after having a horrible dream about my own past, triggered by the events of the day, and I head downstairs to grab water. On my way back up, I notice the light from Tess's computer and push the door open. She's sitting at her desk... sobbing quietly into her hands.

"Oh, honey, it's okay." I cautiously wrap my arms around her, and she hugs me back, continuing to cry into my shoulder. "I know it's hard to understand right now, but..."

"Am I in trouble?"

Absolutely baffled, I can't help the slight irritation, but I try to tame it as I answer. "Why would you be in trouble, sweetheart?" I can't fathom why she's been so scared and upset today when... Oh no....

"I thought I was helping when I gave the police those papers I stole from mom... but she said she would be back soon. I don't want her to come back... Is that true?" Her face is so full of pain and anguish, far too much for a child of twelve.

"She's going to be gone for a long time. But what do you mean, Tess? You can talk to me. I promise it's okay. You will always be safe with me. I know what it's like for people that are supposed to love and trust you to treat you with hate instead... please tell me." I feel myself starting to cry for her, for what I do not want to believe she's going to say. How could we have not seen...? How could Mercer have not seen?

"I did it because I didn't want her to come back." No... my heart constricts.

"Why not, Tess?" All she has to do is say it, and I swear to fucking god that woman will never see the light of day again... We'll make sure of it.

"When she doesn't get what she wants, she hurts people. She used to hurt my dad, and he left. She used to hurt

her friends, and they left... but now there's only me... and she hurt you, too."

"Tell me what she did, Tess. I can't help you if you don't tell me..." I don't want it to be true... Mercer would kill her if she weren't already in custody.

"I didn't slip and fall at the pool... Uncle Darren told my mom that Dad was spending time with you. She drank a whole lot and was falling all over the room. She went outside, and I ran after her because I didn't want to be alone... and she pushed me. I fell down the stairs."

I'm going to fucking kill her myself.

"Is there anything else?" I need to know more. I need to be sure before I tell Mercer. But fuck, what she has to feel to trust me with this.

Tess nods sadly, pulling her long hair out of the way to reveal bruises on the nape of her neck: long, thin bruises, resembling fingers. I pull her in for a hug and we cry... and cry and cry, because I can't form any more words of comfort, and she does not need words right now. *She's so young...* What would have happened to her if Elliot were her father figure instead of Mercer? The thoughts make the tears pour like waterfalls. She has been doing this all alone, out of fear that she'd be punished for speaking out... against one of the people who was supposed to protect her.

I don't know when we laid down in her bed, or when she threw a purple blanket over me and crawled under her own covers, but when Mercer rubs my shoulder in the morning, concern fills him with my lost and saddened expression. I know that this is the end. Finally.

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# Chapter Thirty: Nikolai

## *Mercer*

I never knew how accurate the term ‘seeing red’ was until I felt it for myself. All I could see was blood.

If it were anybody but Juniper who told me, anyone but her attempting to console and comfort me... they would probably have been beaten into the fucking ground.

---

Juniper sits in the room with Tess alone while she speaks with the officers, recalling every disgustingly painful detail of what her mother did to her, of what she witnessed over the years... while I cry and try not to be physically sick from the anger and pain I feel as I listen from the other side of the goddamn wall. It seems she kept a specific and dated journal of everything that happened, as it happened, going as far back as the year Liz and I separated, before I moved away.

Tess does not want to speak with me there, and that hurts... but the one other person she was supposed to be able to trust to keep her safe failed her, and I cannot, nor will I, fault my daughter for having limited trust in the other parent, when I was not there for her when I should have been. It guts me to know the truth of it all, but nothing could have prepared me for seeing the bruises on her back... or watching them photograph her body, while Juniper cries and holds Tess, both of them shaking. I run into the hall and hurl into the nearest trash can.

I should have seen this... She should have felt safe enough to talk to me, and I had no idea it was happening. It’s impossible not to blame myself. But I am working to right this. I’m working to fix the bridge with my daughter, like I should have been doing sooner.

But Juniper... She got through to her. I will forever be grateful for her coming into my life and, among all the chaos and pain, being the beacon of light for my family. We would be lost forever without her.

---

Juniper also sat with her in the courtroom while the last week of this bullshit was concluded.

She spoke her piece to the judge, and talked in-depth about her experiences with Elliot and what she remembered of Liz, as well as some of the things she found out about Liz through her paperwork. She was brave, and strong, and immensely thoughtful of her words, how she presented her mental illness—how she pulled sympathy. Though it's not ever what she wants, she milked it in that courtroom to our advantage.

Liz could not look at us the entire week. I don't blame her, but she did this to herself. She is pregnant with Elliot's baby, again. Darren and Leith have agreed on adopting her—it is a girl—after she's born. If they are turned down because of their residence being in another country, Juniper and I have discussed fostering her, or potentially adopting her. But we are trying not to get ahead of ourselves... There's far too much going on.

Tess was incredibly brave, and continues to be every fucking day. Juniper held her hand all the way to the stand, and Tess told everyone that her mother is a bad person. That she hurt her. That she hurt Juniper, and me, and that if she was given a choice, she would choose her dad. And I don't know at what point she figured it out, or if Liz planted the seed in her head out of spite, but she even made sure to point out that I am her real dad, and I always will be.

My heart has broken and mended more times in the last few months than I care to remember, and I would do it again without a second thought.

I've never cried so hard in front of so many fucking people then when they sentenced her to prison for abusing Tess, as well as taking part in what happened to Juniper, and for causing Elliot to overdose, which led heavily into killing him.

They granted me full custody because of the outcome, with no limitations toward Juniper being around her, or staying with me, because of her help and relationship with Tess. And that is all that matters.

I owe every fucking thing to Juniper. I'm never letting her go.

---

*Tess*

It's over.

I don't have to hide anymore.

I knew I could trust Juniper. She's the only one who understands.

My dad needs to trust her more, too. She understands him better than he thinks. She's like the sun. Everything was dark and sad. But then she met my dad, and now life is better.

---

"What are you writing there, kiddo?" she asks me from the front seat. Dad is driving us home from the courthouse. Home.

"Nothing important."

She smiles, which makes my dad smile. I like when he smiles.

---

I get to pick up all my things from storage in Denver on my birthday, and I'm excited to have all my video games again. I think Juniper will play them with me, and maybe Dad will too if she does.

My Dad picked out a ring last week. He was so disappointed when Juniper didn't come to the movies with us because he wanted to ask her to marry him then. Nothing flashy, he said when we got there, and it was just her style... but I told him he was wrong.

After everything she's done for us, she deserves the biggest, flashiest thing EVER!

So I made him pick her a better ring when he took me to show her the big, big surprise he set up—a green one, called an emerald. Her favorite color, I reminded him. And a tiny yellow stone on one side: his favorite color. And a tiny purple stone on the other side: my favorite color.

He laughed when I told him my idea, but I knew he liked it. Because we are stuck together now, just like the gems in the metal. Like stars in a constellation. And when he brought it home and showed it to me... I knew it was perfect. Just like she is for him.

---

# Chapter Thirty-One: Juniper

## *Juniper*

If I had done nothing, if I had not fought for what was right in the first place, there would be one more little girl out there who didn't trust anyone enough to speak up.

One more child that went to bed scared, alone, in pain. One more that suffered in silence—or maybe they were loud, and their loved ones failed them anyway. Didn't believe them. Dismissed them. Did not care enough to act; instead, gave the abuser the benefit of the doubt.

Why is the *victim* not given the benefit of the doubt?

If I had done nothing, Liz may have hurt Tess again, right under Mercer's nose. And Tess would have... endured.

How much had she already endured before we put a stop to it? I was too afraid to ask her... but maybe in time, with more trust... she will share. On her own. Because she is ready to face it.

---

I will never do nothing again, not only for myself, but for every 'Tess' in the world who needs someone who will listen no matter what. Someone who will make them feel safe enough to talk.

For every 'Kelly' who needs forgiveness to move on, and only wants to be better. For every 'Quynh' who thrives on acceptance and making others feel what they did not for so long. For every 'Willow' who is lost, but will somehow find their way, with the right circumstance. Eventually. For every 'Alex' who plays both sides to keep the peace that they never should have been burdened with in the first place. For every 'Sera' who has her friends' backs no matter what, no matter where. Always.

For every 'Bao' who will never get better, but has accepted himself. And has found the perfect outlet for his life, and strives to help others find theirs.

For every ‘Seth’ who does good, and hates himself for it, but continues to in hopes that he will make a difference. For every ‘Nice-guy’ in a bar who thinks he is owed a person’s time, who will be taught one way or another that he is not.

For every ‘Grace’ who never gave up, that time meant nothing for, and for whom love is the saving light at the end of the tunnel.

For every ‘Vincent’ who spends each day remembering the basics of his being, just so he can enjoy the smallest parts, only to do it again, and again.

For every ‘Darren’ who supports the wrong side, and realizes the hard way that they were indeed wrong, but cannot come to ask for forgiveness. They will receive it anyway, and sometimes get what they seek the wrong way as well.

For every ‘Elliot’ who will get what is coming for him, regardless of time, regardless of fairness, regardless of karma. You will never win.

For every ‘Lizette’ who thinks they are better, and smarter, and can get away with their actions by hiding, or claiming it’s because they were a victim... You are not. You may have been, but as soon as you started to take it out on someone else, you became the abuser.

For every ‘Mercer’ who is deceived, destroyed, removed from his life and everything he knows, removed from existence... Who still fights for what is right, who still burns so passionately, who still thrives and believes in love and life. It’s impossible, and yet... you are who ignites the flames of others who have experienced the same, but are not as strong, not as optimistic, not as good. You light their wicks for them, because you know it takes nothing from your own flame—it only brightens the world.

---

I did ask Mercer how he felt about it all... and of course he was hurt at first. It took some time to explain how some children just can’t confide in family, and it doesn’t mean she doesn’t trust him, she just... related to me. He assured me



he wasn't offended by it, and he was glad she likes me as much as she does. He also explained how he can understand her position due to Lizette being the one who was hurting her, and I'm just happy I didn't overstep with how much Tess clung to me through everything.

---

Now, a few weeks after all has settled, and about a week after Tess's birthday, we're in the car, and I realize we've been driving for over an hour. It's starting to snow. "Where are we going?" Mercer's hand tightens on my thigh; his smile sends chills through my spine.

"You'll see. It's a surprise..." Oh no.

"Not for me, it's not!" Tess shouts from the backseat. I make sure she can see my face before dramatically rolling my eyes. Mercer shushes her, and she erupts into a fit of giggles...

She's been at the apartment all week, non-stop while transferring school stuff from Denver, and she has interrupted *every single* intimate moment... but the shine will wear off soon. She's tolerable; besides, she's the only kid I've ever actually, kind of, liked. *Yeah, she's alright.*

A few minutes later, he's turning onto a gravel road that goes on forever, then stops in the middle of... nothing. "Come on."

"But—" His door is open, and he's jogging around the front of the car to pull mine open. Tess undoes her seatbelt and waits for him to open hers, too. Their relationship is the best. I love it.

Lacing his fingers in mine, he tugs me along. Into the grass of this... huge field. "What are we doing? y shoes..."

"I'll carry you back if your feet freeze, I promise." Ugh, he's ridiculous... Tess runs ahead, and we come over the top of a small hill that leads down into the most perfect space between the trees. A small pond not far away, so much nature and beauty... It's stunning.

“What is this?” Starting down the slope, I notice little flags in the ground in the center. “Wait a second...”

“No, come on,” he says, pushing me in front of him and leading me by my shoulders—but so close that his warmth radiates to me, distracting me. Tess is already near the pond. There are ducks... and beautiful green and gold and brown trees. This is paradise. I’m so busy looking around that Tess’s squeal scares the shit out of me. I whirl towards the noise, and...

“Oh my god, Mercer...” He’s kneeling in the grass, with a beautiful ring...

“Juniper, I never thought I would be with someone again at all... but proposing was definitely not a consideration until I met you. I fell in love with you hard, and fast, and we’ve had a hell of a time so far, and a million other things have happened recently, but... fuck it, why not add one more to the list?” I can’t breathe...

“Oh my god...” I whisper again.

“You were made for me, and I want you. All of you. Forever—”

“Marry my dad!!!” Tess jumps at the edge of the pond, waving her arms like a lunatic, causing Mercer to hang his head.

“Yes,” I whisper to him, and then call out to Tess, “Yes!” cupping my hands around my mouth to make it louder.

“Fuck yes.” I stumble when he wraps his arms around me, and we fall into the grass, his lips refusing to leave mine.

“Ew!” Tess screams, for a long time. Running back and forth.

“Wait, so what is this, then?” I ask finally, gesturing to the flags and random slabs of concrete.

“That’s your house,” he says, smiling, and rather smugly proud of himself for this one... because usually I see his surprises coming a mile away. Especially if Tess is involved.

“My house?”

He lies back in the grass beside me, holding onto my hand, and nods. I don't think I've ever seen him so radiant... He's incredible.

“That's right, you're going to build it. It may have also been my negotiating point if you decided to say no, because I wouldn't have given up if you had.” I laugh so hard my side hurts, and Mercer smiles at me. “There's enough land to build a small cottage by the pond,” he points to a space to the opposite of where Tess runs amok, “and I think our grandparents would be very happy there.” He's thought of everything... How could I refuse? *You can't. You know it.*

He's smiling... not grimacing, not smirking—a real smile that shows his teeth. That fucking chipped tooth that's to die for.

“Asteroid!” Tess leaps at the perfect angle to land on half of each of us, before shooting to her feet and taking off back up the slope again, mimicking a rocket.

So much that we never would have had... if we didn't trust, love, and open up to one another.

---

There is love that will never be experienced...

People that may never be saved...

Others that may never be punished...

Some that may never find closure...

And there are those who will not move on...

If you believe your heart is...

Better Left Unsaid

The End

Is Just A New Beginning

---

## Epilogue

### *One Year Later*

#### *Juniper*

One month after he proposed, I moved in with Mercer and Tess.

Three months after, I started going to school to become a CNA, and Lizette had her baby girl in prison, where she will be for a very long time.

Darren and his husband Leith adopted her. They live in Paris, and her name is Arabelle. We've met her twice now, and she looks almost exactly like Tess.

Six months after proposing, right after finishing school, I got a job at Crossridge. We finalized the layout of our house, and Mercer insisted on expediting the building—for a reason I had no idea of at the time.

But now, one year to the day after proposing, I stand on a balcony at the gorgeous venue we decided on in Venice, Italy. I insisted on us dancing to *The Funeral, by Band of Horses* as our first dance—none of the few friends and family we have with us cared about the title, and we only cared about the significance. Mercer is a horrible dancer, but neither of us cared about that either.

My wedding dress is green, deeper than the emerald of my ring, but just as bright and stunning. It pairs beautifully with the tiny violet gem necklace, long teardrop earrings, and deep eggplant satin sash Tess chose to go with it.

All I can seem to think about, regardless of the party and the music, is how determined I was to keep Mercer—Nikolai—my husband—out of my life when I first met him.

Look at us now.

“Mrs. Bardot.” He’s getting way too good at sneaking up on me. I giggle as his scruff tickles my ear, and his arm wraps around my waist. “It’s time to cut the cake.” A gentle kiss on my neck, then my cheek. I feel his devilish grin as he

speaks against my skin. “Or we can just stay out here... and I can bend you over the banister until the sun comes up?”

I can't help the audible cackle that leaves me as I rest my head back on his shoulder. Fuck the hours of pins and hairspray—we've already done the fancy shit. “You can't even wait until the honeymoon, really?”

“Of course, I can wait. But I never want to.” As I let him twirl me to face him, he braces a hand on the rail, on each side of my hip. I lace my fingers behind his neck. The amber cores of his delicious eyes glisten with the lights from the city behind us.

“I love you—” Before I can properly finish the word, he's leaning into me, giving me one of his now-incredibly-normal long-lasting kisses. Never satisfied, no matter how long it lasts. A hand moves to my waist, cinched tight in the corset-backed dress, and as soon as his tongue pushes past my teeth, I teasingly pull away. “Don't get too worked up; we do have to go ba—”

“CAKE!” Tess screeches from the doors to the reception room, then runs out to us in her long, lilac princess dress. “I want cake, and Nana says I have to wait for you to cut it. So hurry up!” She starts stomping away toward where Nana and Vincent are waiting for her in the doorway. When Mercer clears his throat, Tess stops dead. “Please?” she adds, not waiting for an answer before running back inside.

They were married at the same time as us—their own arch, same wedding. That was what Mercer insisted on for this day; anything else he couldn't care less for, and he left to Tess and me while he dealt with building our house, which is ready for us to move into as soon as we get back from our honeymoon in the Bahamas. Tess and our grandparents will be heading back after the reception. I'll be transferring to a nursing home closer to the house as well, since our grandparents are moving onto the property with their nurse.

Quynh is staying with them until we get back, and Bao has had a few pieces sold in galleries in Denver and is very happy to now have his shop and home all to himself since

Quynh focuses on her work and gets her Queenly excitement from doing theatre performances and costume-designing during the cold seasons. Sera and Alex are engaged, their wedding is in just a few months.

“I can’t believe all that’s happened since I met you,” I whisper against his shoulder as we embrace.

“I wouldn’t have it any other way.” As we release each other, he smiles, offering me his arm. I take it, and we head back into our small—but full of love and life—party to celebrate our union so far. And all that will come.

---

This family is worth fighting for. It is worth every rough day and every worrisome night. We will do everything for each other, and anything to stay together now. Family is so much bigger than blood, I am immensely fortunate that I did not allow the trauma that told me I would never find love or happiness to consume me.

I was right not to listen to the fear. To the power it once held over me.

I am better than my past. I am better than fear. I have learned to live with it.

*And so can you.*

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Shit- I have more books to write.

But fantasy, because this happily ever after shit is soft.

## About The Author

### **Jeannie Raney**

Jeannie found her love for creative writing in high school but never fully explored it until adulthood. Now, she spends a lot of her time delving into the depths of her mind to pull out creations much like this one.

Jeannie is married and has a four year old son, as well as a brood of animals that add to the daily calamity and craziness thats needed for such work to be produced.