



COERCION

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AMELIA WILDE

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1

BRISTOL

WHEN IT COMES TO NIGHTMARES, there's a range.

My siblings getting kidnapped and held hostage—*tied up next to some kind of utility pole*—is as bad as it gets.

“This is so bad.” I can't see Will. Doesn't seem to matter that he's right in front of me. “This is so, so bad.” He just promised he'd stay. That we'd find them. My mind is taking longer to catch up. I'm afraid if I stop talking, I'll disappear. “When they were little, I would—I'd have dreams about losing them at the grocery store. All the aisles would change places. I'd yell for them, and—” *Mia*. My voice would come out in a pathetic whisper. *Ben. Please. Answer me.* “I can't yell for them now.”

Because they're gone. It's an ache in my stomach like a punch. Even in a house this big, I can feel that they're not here. No footsteps upstairs. No voices. No laughter. Just my loud, shaky breath and pain in my gut.

Will's hands stay steady on my face. “I know.”

“That note.” I'm going to relive this morning every time I wake up. The empty beds. The note in Mia's handwriting. *Dad needs help. We're sorry. Be back soon!!* “That's all we have. How are we supposed to—”

“The note, and the photo.” Of course. The photo. The... ransom photo? The hostage photo? There weren't any demands. Just Mia with tears in her eyes. Ben, pale and terrified. That utility pole.

The living room at the vacation house in Bishop's Landing feels like a movie set. It's perfect, with plush, overstuffed furniture in a lovely arrangement, like it was beamed here from a high-end furniture store. There's a fireplace. Morning light streams through tall, clean windows without a single fingerprint. Not a single smudge to mar the day.

There's me.

There's Will.

Both my hands are fists in his sweatshirt. Nothing I can do about that. If I let go of him, I'll lose myself completely. I've already freaked out. Screamed into the fabric. He holds my face in his big, warm hands.

"Bristol," he says. "Sweetheart."

"Yeah. Yes."

"We have to get moving."

"You're right, obviously. Of course. We have to get to them. I have to be the one to do this."

"We're going to find them. They're going to be safe." Will said this before, but he repeats it in a calm, patient voice.

"I lost them." A flash of cold, buzzing panic crosses my chest. "I should just—I should be the one to go. It has to be me."

It's always been me. I'm the one they depend on. I'm the one *I* depend on.

"Look at me."

I'm already looking at him, but my vision's blurred by fresh tears. I blink them away again and focus on the blue-green color of Will Leblanc's eyes. This should have been a dream come true. It's what I always wanted and never thought I'd have. A beach vacation. Someone strong and solid at my side.

But not like this.

Not with the twins missing.

“You’re not doing this by yourself. I’m not leaving, and I’m sure as hell not letting you leave. I fucked up before, trying to get away from you, and I’m not going to do it again.” A shadow skates across his eyes, but Will’s resolute. “Not again. Okay? Take a breath. I’ll wait with you.”

I suck in a breath, but the air’s too thin.

Will shakes his head. “Deeper than that. Slower.” He takes a long, deep breath, and if I didn’t feel so light-headed, I’d be embarrassed. I don’t need help taking a breath. I’ve been breathing all my life. Except it’s hard to follow along. Will does it again, hands steady on my face, and I copy him. I don’t feel any better on the second breath, but by the third, my head’s starting to clear.

“Okay.” I keep breathing, deep and slow. This isn’t the time to fall apart. We’ve always made it before, me and the twins, even if it was in the nick of time. We’ll make it again. “I’m fine. I’m good.”

Will runs his thumbs over my cheekbones. “I need to make some calls. I need to make them now. Are you going to be okay while I do that?”

“Yes.” I force another deep breath. “But they haven’t told us what they’re trying to get.” No more crying. I can cry when we have the twins back. I’m going to get them back, damn it. They’ve always been mine to care for, and nothing in the world is going to keep me from them. “We don’t know enough.”

“We’ll find them.” Will pulls his phone out of his pocket, taps the screen with his thumb, and puts it to his ear.

I lean my forehead against his chest and inhale.

His free hand moves to the back of my head, and he runs his fingers through my hair.

Evan’s voice comes through the speaker of Will’s phone. “Donovan.”

“I need you at the beach house, and I need you to bring a team. The twins were taken. I got a photo about ten minutes ago.”

“Send it to me.”

Will’s hand pauses in my hair while he taps the screen again. “I don’t have time to wait here.”

“Are you in the house?”

“Yes, but—”

“But nothing, Will. Don’t step foot outside until I get there. I’m on my way. In the meantime—”

“Jesus Christ, Donovan—”

“In the meantime, I’m going to hang up with you and get some people together. Neighborhoods like that will have security footage we can check, and I’ll have someone check the photo for any embedded location data. If you leave now, you’ll only make this more complicated.”

“Drive faster.”

“I’ll call you back in one minute.”

Will shoves his phone back into his pocket and folds his arms around me. He’s still breathing in a slow, even pattern, but his heart beats fast and hard. What happens next probably involves black SUVs and men with guns and at the end, the twins are going to be okay. We’re all going to be okay.

Will’s phone buzzes. “Yeah?”

Evan starts talking, and I straighten up. What am I thinking, standing here? We need to figure out how my dad got in contact with him. Mia would have said something if he called their phone. Will arches an eyebrow at me, and I point upstairs. “I’m going to check their stuff.”

He nods, his hand splaying out one more time on my back before he lets me go. “No, I don’t care about that. If—”

They don’t need me for this conversation. I hustle up the stairs.

Both beds in the twins’ room are unmade, blankets shoved down. Mia’s copy of *The Dark Is Rising* is halfway under her pillow. Her backpack hangs on a hook near the closet, Ben’s is

in a heap next to his bed. The beat-up school laptop that comes home with him some weekends sticks out of the open zipper.

It's a place to start.

Even sitting on the mattress makes my throat tight. The twins deserve a life with nice mattresses and trips to the beach and *not* getting fucked over by our dad. That's what I'm going to give them. This is the last time he screws with it.

I balance Ben's laptop on my lap and flip it open.

It takes a beat to wake up. It's a bare-minimum kind of computer. Hardly weighs anything, and it only has a few Google apps. One tap at the touchpad, and a window opens.

It's the email app, asking for a username and password. There was a form to sign for school emails when I enrolled the twins. I type in Ben's.

And the password...

He's ten. It's probably the simplest answer.

I type in Cafall, the name of a dog in Mia's books and also the name of a baby bunny the twins found last spring, before we moved to the city. The bunny escaped one day, leaving our rented A-frame behind for good. Then I add his birthday, which is also Mia's birthday.

Instant tears, which I swipe away with my sleeve.

It's the right password. The email app opens to his inbox.

The twins are ten, so they don't have much to email anybody about. Ben's inbox has homework reminders, sent every Friday. There's one generic welcome email from when they sent out the laptop.

All the other emails are from my dad.

"You asshole," I whisper at his name.

He started emailing the week I was sick.

Dear Ben,

Sorry I haven't been home in a bit. I had a few things to take care of after that storm. I know you'll understand. You've always been so smart and responsible! Wanted to check in on you and make sure you're doing okay. Love you, can't wait to see you.

Dad

Ben waited a couple days, then wrote back.

Hi Dad, everything is fine. I hope you're fine too. Love you, Ben.

The next couple messages from my dad try a little harder. He asks Ben about his grades in math, which are always perfect. When Ben tells him that, Dad sends three paragraphs about how proud he is.

On Thursday of this week, Dad asked about Mia.

Is she reading any new books?

If he bothered to be here, he'd know that she's not reading any new books—she's reading The Dark Is Rising sequence over and over again, and has been since we moved.

Dad also asked about me.

Tell me what Bristol's up to. Is she happy with her job?

Ben wrote back on Friday. From the time stamp on the email, he was still at school. Will was at the retirement party for Finn Hughes's father. I was at my desk, thinking about Will. My plastic palm tree was there that day, too. I brought it with me so it could witness our beach weekend. It's in my purse, in the bedroom. It hasn't witnessed any of this.

Maybe that's for the best.

Will moves past the bedroom door but doesn't look in. "Send a separate team there, too. I'll let my brother know."

Hi Dad, Bristol's really good. She has a boyfriend that she met at her old job. He has a lot of money but he's really nice about it, he lets us play Minecraft on really nice laptops and he always has tons of food at his house and Mia can eat as many Eggos as she wants. And he buys those coffee things Bristol likes, but he doesn't drink that kind, so it's just for her. I hope they get married, I think Bristol would be happy if she got to stay with him forever.

Oh, Ben.

I close my eyes, shutting out the email so I can keep it together. This is the longest email Ben's written and it's painfully innocent. Painfully hopeful. My ribs feel like they can't quite keep my lungs in place. Will passes by the door again, heading downstairs.

Okay.

The email continues.

We miss you so much, but if you're busy, that's okay. We are okay where we are, and if Bristol stays with her boyfriend maybe we could stay too. That would be fine, and you could come visit us when you have some free time. I got an A on my math test today. Ok gotta go, Ben

The most recent email, the one at the very top of the inbox, came in at just after three in the morning.

Ben,

I'm so sorry to do this, buddy. I have to ask for your help. It's really serious this time. I don't want to scare you but I got in too deep and if I can't figure this out, they're going to kill me. I can't do it alone. You have no idea how sorry I am. I never should have gone this far, but I wanted to make things right for you and Mia and Bristol. It all went wrong. Can you and Mia

come and meet me? I know you two can solve anything you put your minds to. There's nobody else I can ask. Come as soon as you can, okay?

Dad

Below his signature is an address.

I'm on my feet so fast that my brain feels off-balance. I take one second to get my bearings and grab Mia's book from under her pillow. She'll want this when we find her, and now that I have this address, we can go.

Shit—my purse. I need my phone, in case they call. A quick sprint to the bedroom, where I put Mia's book in my purse, throw my phone in after it, and run.

I set a personal record for speed in descending a staircase and fly into the living room.

Will's changed out of his hoodie and into a black, long-sleeved T-shirt. He has his own laptop open on the coffee table and his phone out next to the keyboard. Men's voices come from the speaker. Evan, and somebody else. Two or three somebody else's. I drop Ben's laptop next to Will's.

"I know where they are. That's where they are."

"Leblanc, I'm pulling up to the house. Rest of the team is two minutes out." Evan Donovan sounds determined.

"I'll be right there." Will ends the call and scans the screen of Ben's laptop. He enters the address into his phone. Then he flips his own closed, stands up, and looks me directly in the eyes. "That's the address he sent, but they might not still be there."

"I know that. But—"

"I'll go with Evan and find out. You're not coming."

"—my dad's not very good at this. He'll have—what?"

"You can't come." He's not kidding. Will's expression has gone stoic and uncompromising.

“I’m *definitely* coming. You’re out of your mind if you think I’m staying here.”

“It might be an ambush. You could get hurt. You’re not going.”

BRISTOL IS all green eyes and bedhead, and if she could shoot fire out of those eyes, I'd be a little pile of ash on the beach house carpet.

Part of me absolutely thrills to her ferocity. Bristol's a sweetheart. Making her cry is better than being in the boxing ring. It's better than blocking a hit and giving one instead. It's better than anything. The fact that she can stand up to me like this, with her feet planted and her jaw set, only makes it hotter that I can kiss her and hurt her and fuck her until she's a begging wreck.

Which doesn't matter. Not with the twins gone. But *Bristol* still matters, and here she is, ready to run out the front door without looking to see who's on the other side.

"Will." I've never heard someone pack more of a warning into my name. It's impressive. And, just this once, I'd rather she just sat on the couch and let me handle things. "I am going with you. That's not up for debate."

"No, what's not up for debate is that you're staying here with a security team, where it's safe."

"What makes you think it'll be safe here?"

"The security team that's arriving in two minutes."

"Security teams can get ambushed, too. It's not better if *you're* the one getting ambushed and I'm sitting here doing embroidery or whatever useless thing you're picturing right now."

“You don’t have to do embroidery, if that makes you feel better.”

Does she even know how to embroider shit? Given what I know of Bristol’s life, she hasn’t had much time for crafts. I wouldn’t put it past her to learn something like that. I wouldn’t put it past her to do anything.

Even put herself in danger.

“The only thing that’s going to make me feel better is going to find the twins. So if you’re going to stop me from doing that, then you can just—you can fuck off.”

Bristol turns on her heel, and I can’t help it. I grab for her elbow before she can take a step. Lock my grip around it. Hold her in place.

“Let me go.”

I step around in front of her instead. My hangover is back. No—that’s a fever. Or just a strange heat in my chest, working its way up toward my face. The elevated heart rate is probably from my stomach forcefully ejecting a bottle of tequila into the sink not very long ago, and from the twins getting kidnapped. I don’t know what to do with my arms. I want to cross them over my chest, or get them in front of my face, but nobody’s going to punch me.

Bristol might, I guess.

I’ll make you wish you were dead, my dad’s voice whispers in my ear. Fuck him. This isn’t a fight, or a dark closet. It’s just an angry, frightened Bristol standing in the living room of a fancy-ass mansion, trying to get herself hurt.

“Listen.” The heat rushes up into my face, and I hate it. I’d be just as screwed with my hands behind my back. That’s what it feels like. “I don’t want to say this to you. I don’t want to admit this to you.” The urge to turn my back on her and get out of here has never been stronger, but no. I don’t ask for mercy during fights at the warehouse, and I won’t ask now. Bristol’s eyes get wider. Jesus, she’s beautiful. “But...I would not be okay if anything happened to you. That’s why you can’t come.”

Her expression softens. A light, pretty pink skates over her cheeks. I can't fucking breathe.

"That's sweet." I don't know whether to be delighted or offended that she sounds so surprised to hear it from me. Bristol clears her throat. "That's...really sweet, Will. I'm going anyway. You would go for *your* brothers, wouldn't you?"

"Jesus. My brothers are—"

"Yes, you would. And you did. You went to Emerson's house in the middle of the night."

"That was—"

"It doesn't matter." Bristol's chin comes up. I wish this wasn't the worst day, because I'd love to have a picture of her like this. A painting, even. "You don't have to tell me why you went, or what happened that night."

"Fine."

"You just have to accept that I'm going to be there for Mia and Ben, just like *you* were there for—"

"Fine, Bristol, you can come."

She takes a deep breath, like she had a much longer speech prepared. "I don't need your permission, but I'm glad you've come around to the right opinion."

There's a loud knock at the front door. Evan's here. "What the hell's happening, Leblanc? You said you'd be out there."

Bristol and I both go for the door at the same time.

If this were some romantic comedy, we'd trip over each other, and she'd laugh and blush, and I'd say some flirty bullshit about the beach, then ask for her number.

But this isn't a romantic comedy. Nothing about my life has been romantic, and if anything funny happened it was in spite of a bunch of all the horrifying things that went on.

We don't trip over each other.

Bristol slides her hand through the crook of my elbow and comes with me. She steps into her shoes. I throw the door open and put my hand to the small of her back.

“Ma’am.” Evan gives her a professional nod. “Leblanc.”

“If he can be *Leblanc*, I can be Bristol. You’re not parked outside my apartment pretending to casually hang out in your car all day. Also, we have an address.”

I text it to Evan. “Their father asked Ben and Mia to meet him.”

“Got it.” Evan sends a couple of messages. “I’m having a team canvas the neighborhood for security footage in case anybody approached the house. If they did, they might have been involved, in which case we’ll—”

“Someone did approach the house.” Bristol cuts a glance at me, and my stomach sinks. “Yesterday morning.”

“Did you speak to them?” Evan’s thumbs hover above his screen, ready to send out his next orders.

This has to end, and it has to end right now. The sick, disoriented feeling I had when I saw her face is coming back, and I can’t afford to be sick and disoriented.

“It was my mother.”

Evan’s brow furrows. “Thought she’d passed on.”

“Who told you that?” It wasn’t me. I don’t talk about her.

He shakes his head. “If there’s any chance—”

“There’s not. Don’t—” *Don’t bother her*, I’m about to say, and for what? Maybe she *was* involved. Maybe she and my father planned this. Maybe she was only here to find out if the twins were with us.

No. Emerson’s voice. *She wouldn’t.*

This version of him isn’t real, but he’s right. She wouldn’t hatch some plan with my father, no matter how I feel about the way that she abandoned us.

Bristol leans closer, her elbow brushing against mine.

“Leave her alone. She didn’t have anything to do with this. Is there any other reason we’re still here?”

“No.” One more text, and Evan bounds down the stairs and throws open the back door of the SUV. Another one is parked at the end of the drive. One of Evan’s guys is headed up the driveway of the property across the street.

The second the door’s shut, Evan guns it. His phone connects to the SUV’s navigation system and the route pops up on the screen.

Bristol takes her phone out of her purse. **Dad** flashes there, just briefly, and she dials.

Three rings. Voicemail.

She sends a text.

I know better than to hope the twins will still be at... wherever this place is. Bristol’s father is a fool, but he has enough experience at being a con man to know he has to keep moving. He only stopped heading east because he ran out of country.

Evan’s phone rings, and he answers it on speaker. I can’t keep track of the conversation. The ritzy street we were staying on in Bishop’s Landing peters out into smaller mansions, closer together, and then we’re on the highway. Wherever he told the twins to meet, it’s not going to be in a good part of the city.

Bristol slips her hand into mine and squeezes. “What are you thinking about?”

Fuck me. As if I’m the one who needs comforting. “Nothing.”

“Will.” I meet her eyes, ready to insist that the last thing we need to talk about is me. It’s not pity I find on her face. It’s full-blown worry. She’s afraid for the twins, and there’s nothing we can do until this SUV arrives at the address and lets us out. Talking about what might have happened to them won’t help. “Please.”

Please, and it’s hopeless. I can’t say no.

“I was thinking about moving.” It hurts to have her hand in mine and say the words out loud. It hurts to remember. I’d rather think about this than my mother’s face when I told her I didn’t want to see her. Somehow, *this* is a better topic of conversation than how Evan Donovan knew she was dead. Knew she was *supposed* to be dead. “That night we went to dinner with Mitchell and Greg, you said you told your dad you couldn’t keep moving, because you’d end up in the ocean.”

The corner of her mouth turns up, just a little. “I did, yeah. We made a lot of long-distance moves.”

“It was never like that with us. With my dad.” Isn’t it funny that he’ll never have to move again? He’ll always just be in prison. “The first address I can remember was in Jersey. That’s where we learned to surf, but I have no idea how we got boards. They were cheap pieces of shit, like the house. Maybe they got left there.”

“You lived near the ocean, though.” A wobble in Bristol’s voice gives away how hard she’s concentrating on the conversation instead of the miles ticking away on the GPS. “Those places are expensive.”

“Poor people have to live somewhere. It was close enough to the shore that Dad—” It wouldn’t have been him, though. I have memories of dark hair, out on the water. “Or Sin. Must’ve been Sin who figured it out and taught us.”

“Where did you go after that?”

“Anywhere that would have us. A few miles at a time until we got closer to the city. Then we circled around the outer boroughs. He’d get a job, and we’d move. He’d lose it, we’d move again.”

Bristol’s quiet for a minute, her eyes on the window. “I always dreaded packing. It never seemed like we had anything until it was time to fit it all in some truck that was on its last legs.”

“I dreaded the days we’d have to leave.”

Another pause. This one’s tentative. “Because it hurt Emerson.”

She's not asking. Bristol already knows. It's impossible to say whether it's relief or regret pushing at my ribs. Either way, it's fucking painful. "Yeah. I was always fine. He wasn't."

He was a wreck, every time. I thought it would be better when Dad got arrested because Sin had already smiled his way into enough money to afford a three-bedroom that was safer and cleaner than anywhere we'd ever lived. I was laughably wrong.

With her free hand, Bristol tries to call her dad again. Nothing. She sends another text.

"You know..." Bristol rubs her thumb over the ridge of mine. "I won't think less of you if you admit that you weren't fine."

"Except I was."

"Maybe. Or maybe you weren't. I'm not fine, and I'm not the one who got taken hostage by my dad."

"At the location now." Evan scans the sidewalk, then pulls the SUV to the curb. Bristol's had the last word, and thank God, because that conversation was going to be nothing but an open wound. One of his guys asks a question. "Pawnshop. I'm going in."

Bristol almost beats Evan out of the SUV. I'm right behind her. Evan leads the way to the door of a pawnshop and tugs it open. Every pane of glass—the windows, the door, everything—is so smudged and dirty that it could be privacy glass.

The inside is more of the same. A glass case up front has been swiped over in the most half-ass job I've ever seen. Half the fluorescent lights are burned out. Rows of shelves, too close together, hold plastic bins of random shit, some if it tagged, most of it not.

I get to the counter first. A man slouches behind it, wearing an irritated expression and a leather jacket with a layer of grime that matches his store. He readjusts his trucker hat and looks me up and down. "Help you?"

Evan steps up before I can say anything. "We're looking for two children who were here sometime this morning."

They're ten years old, brother and sister. The boy has dark hair, and the girl's a redhead."

Guy behind the counter purses his lips. It's a grimy, pawnshop impression of being deep in thought. "I don't know. Never saw anything like that. Couldn't say."

Evan leans closer to the glass case. "Are you sure? This is about two minors who have been abducted. If you're lying to me—"

"Then you're fucked." I'm done waiting on this prick. I'm done waiting, period. "And not because I'm going to call the cops. There won't be anything left of you for the cops to find if you don't start talking."

"Okay, okay, okay." The asshole puts both hands up in front of him like I've already got my fist cocked. I don't. I've just *made* a fist. That's all. "Jesus. Let's all calm down. There was a guy loitering here. That's all I saw. Hanging out in front of the store. Whatever. Shady people are my business. I got a camera. You can come on back and look."

He turns around and pushes a filthy curtain to the side. So polite of him to hold it open while we go through.

The back room is basically the same as the front. Shelves, crowded with plastic bins. The three of us stand aside for the owner to drop into a folding chair in front of a desk pushed against one wall. He flips open a laptop that looks ancient and clicks around.

A video window pops up.

He scrolls back and back and back. I want to punch him for having a computer this slow when we need what's on it right now.

"There's the guy." He leans back in the chair. Bristol's dad stands on the sidewalk, hands in his pockets, looking like a criminal on the run. He's conspicuous, and not hiding how nervous he is. Every so often he looks over his shoulder. Once or twice, I'm pretty sure he says something. There has to be someone else with him. The shop owner scrolls again. A yellow cab pulls up to the curb, and Bristol's dad steps out of

the frame. It's just light enough that the camera's not using night vision. "And there's the kids."

Mia and Ben get out of the cab. Ben goes to the passenger side window and hands money through to the driver. Then Mia grabs his arm and points.

Bristol's dad—their dad, too—steps back into the frame with a huge smile on his face. The twins go to him. He hugs them both, but he's not looking at them. He's looking over his shoulder again, this time in the opposite direction.

A white van pulls up to the curb. The side door opens, and a man gets out.

The dark shape in his hand can only be a gun.

Bristol makes a choked sound.

This isn't a romantic comedy. This is a horror film. The guy with the gun gestures into the truck, and Bristol's dad goes along with it, ushering his own goddamn children in through the door.

"That's all I got. They didn't come back."

The pawnshop asshole hits pause. It stops the video on a clear shot of the van, the gunman's hand on the handle. Mia's pale, terrified face is in the center of the screen.

She's looking right at us.

3

BRISTOL

MY SISTER'S face is so small on the screen, but her expression is clear. The man in the pawnshop doesn't have a nice laptop. Somehow, the screen gets brighter when he pauses the video. It's the last moment before a man with a gun shuts the van door and they drive off to God knows where, and then...

I put a hand to my chest and step out of the tiny back room. It's too crowded. I can't breathe in there. And if I look at Mia's face one more time, I'll cry or sob or scream.

From heartbreak, because my siblings are *ten*. None of this should have happened to them. Our mom shouldn't have died. Our dad shouldn't have been a second-rate con man.

And *me*.

I should have...

I should have done *something* differently, if we ended up here.

Two more men come into the pawnshop and call for Evan, who shouts at them from the back room. I step into one of the aisles to get out of their way and take out my phone.

I've sent two texts. I've called him twice. I know my dad's phone is on, because it rings three times before it goes to voicemail.

One ring. Two rings. Three.

"The customer at three one nine..."

"Is a coward." I end the call. "Is an asshole."

Bristol: Answer your phone. I need to know where the twins are. I know what you did.

I want to punch my dad. Scare him, at least. I've been trying to get through to him all this time, and it never works. That doesn't make it less frustrating. I pace down to the end of the aisle and go around to the next. My fantasy about pulling the bins off the shelves and making a giant, unfixable mess only lasts for half the aisle.

What good would it do? Someone would have to clean everything up, and it probably wouldn't be the guy behind the counter. It would be someone who was just trying to get through the day.

The last bin on the top shelf sticks out from the rest. Another couple of inches and it'll fall. I reach up to push it back in, make it neat. "Why are you like this?"

Nobody answers. They're doing something with the security footage in the back room.

I let go of the bin and something scrapes along the bottom. It's a soft, light sound. Metal on plastic.

I'm expecting to see a stranger's jewelry when I glance in.

It's not a stranger's jewelry.

"You're kidding."

The bin isn't kidding.

I reach in and pick up my mother's necklace. It's a locket in the shape of a heart. Gold and practically weightless.

"Hey." Will runs his palm over my arm and stands close enough to feel the heat from his body. He smells good. Will Leblanc is the only good thing in this pawnshop, aside from the necklace. "What did you find?"

Memories. I found really old memories. "This was my mom's."

"That motherfucker sold it?" For a second, he looks shocked, like he can't believe my dad would sell something

that belonged to my mother. Then he just looks pissed. “To *this* guy?”

“I know. And after Sean worked so hard to buy it for her. He had a paper route. Do people even have those anymore?”

“I don’t know.”

“He gave it to her for Christmas. He was so proud, because...” I work my thumb into the edge of the locket and pop it open. “He had it engraved.”

One one side of the heart are her initials.

On the other side of the heart are ours. Mine and Sean’s. The twins weren’t born yet. She wasn’t gone yet. *Oh, Sean, I love it so much. I’m going to wear it every single day. I’ll never take it off. Come here, come here.* Mom’s arms, wrapped around a skinny, beaming Sean in the light of a Christmas tree that had already lost half its needles. Sean, beside himself, hugging her for a long, long time, then pushing himself to his feet. *Let me put it on for you, okay?*

Where was my dad? He’s not in the memory at all. He might not have been there.

But she was. My mom was there, and she was happy.

I hold the memory and the locket in the palm of my hand and take a picture, which I send to my dad.

Will pulls me closer to him, his arm wrapped tight around my shoulders. “Is this...” I feel his hesitation in every inch of him. I also feel when he decides what he’s going to say. “Is this necklace all you have from her? Besides your postcard.”

The sound that comes out of my mouth might be a laugh. “I’m surprised you remember the postcard.”

“Why? Because you think I don’t care?”

I look up into Will’s face and find a scowl that’s so genuine it makes me want to kiss him. I brush my lips against his, and Will makes a gruff noise. “No, because you went to an illegal warehouse fight and got a concussion. In the scheme of things, a postcard—”

My phone rings in my hand.

It's my dad.

Will's arm tightens around my shoulders. "Let me take it."

"No. I want to talk to him. And he'll just hang up if he hears it's you."

I press the button to answer and put it on speaker. I don't care if Will hears this. I want him to hear everything. I never want him to leave my side again. He might think he has to, given what's happened, but he promised, so—

"How could you, Dad?"

"I know, honey. I'm—"

"Don't call me *honey* right now. What the hell is wrong with you? The twins were fine. They were happy with me, and you lured them to a shitty *pawnshop*. Why would you do that? What did they ever do to you?"

"Bristol." His voice breaks a little on my name, and a tiny piece of my heart breaks, too. I wish I wasn't like this. I wish I didn't feel anything for him at all. I feel too much for my dad. That's always been the problem. "Bristol, I know. The twins didn't do anything. They're great kids. I'm so sorry. Things got out of hand."

"What *things* could possibly involve the twins?"

"The money I owe—the guys—"

"Dad." *I hate you* is right there, waiting for me to say it, but I don't. It wouldn't be true. It wouldn't *help*. "The same people as before?"

"No, but they—they know each other. And these new guys found out about the twins. They planned this whole thing. I couldn't stop it. I had to go along with it."

"Oh my God."

"I had to, Bristol, otherwise I couldn't be here. I'm with them. To keep them safe."

I take a deep breath. The scent of Will's skin and his clean clothes blocks out the stale smell of the pawnshop. "Tell me where you are."

"I don't think it's a good idea, honey. These guys—"

"*Now.*"

There's a pause, and I *feel* it. I feel the energy change over the phone. I feel my dad shifting to a new angle. "Bristol, listen. I'm in a bad spot. Would it be so bad to let your new boyfriend pay off what I owe? If you came here to pick up the twins—" *Pick them up.* Like they're visiting for ice cream and not being held hostage by at least one gunman. "I'd still be in debt when you left. I'm not safe here, either." My dad drops his voice. "They've already made quite a few threats. That's why I had to do this."

"That's *your* problem. Not mine."

"But you always help me." His feelings might not be hurt, but the confusion sounds real. "You always do, Bristol. We're a team."

"Not this time. Now tell me where you are. The people you're with haven't even sent a ransom note."

"Yeah, I know. They said you'd panic more if you had to wait. These guys are professionals."

"Holy shit, Dad." Will stands perfectly still next to me. I'm sure it's taking every bit of his energy not to snatch the phone out of my hands and make scarier threats than the kidnappers.

"What I mean is, if you come in here with guns blazing, the twins could get hurt. I think it would be better if we could all leave without a fight."

My phone shakes in my hand. Oh, good. The trembling is everywhere. All of my nerves are completely overloaded with rage and shock, though I really have no reason to be shocked. I'm out of patience.

"Dad, you've done this so many times. You've gotten yourself into these situations *so many times*. And I have stood by you, and helped you, and bailed you out. Every time you

asked, I was there for you. I got *blackmailed by my boss* for you.” Will’s hand curls around my shoulder. It doesn’t feel like an apology.

“Bristol—”

“This time it’s too far. For all I know, you gave them the idea for this plan. You told them about the twins yourself. I don’t know. But so help me God, if you don’t do everything in your power to get the twins out of this safely, I’ll go to the FBI.”

“No, Bristol—”

“Yes, Dad. I will go to the FBI. I will turn over every detail of every con you’ve ever run. And more importantly, I will hate you forever.”

That’s what would do it. If the twins get hurt, I’ll hate him. They’ve already been hurt. Their own father helped get them kidnapped. But if he allows them to be injured, if he keeps hurting them, if he doesn’t *try*—I’ll hate him.

You’re just not like that, a voice whispers in the back of my mind. It reminds me of a sunny day at the beach and a cheap hotel that’s nice enough. It sounds like swimming all morning and napping all afternoon underneath a cabana, or at least a beach umbrella. It sounds like making the best of bad days, because *someday we’ll have everything*. It sounds like *we already have everything*.

It sounds like my mom.

Will got his mom back, and he sent her away.

I can’t think about that now.

“But more than that, Dad, most important of all, Mom would hate you.”

She never did, when she was alive. Not as far as I knew. My mom stuck with him, with all of us, until she couldn’t.

My dad sighs. It’s an exhausted, defeated sigh. The hairs on the back of my neck stand up. My dad doesn’t get defeated. He moves on to the next thing.

“Yeah. You’re right.” He clears his throat. “I did love your mom. She always kept me in line. Not that I made it easy for her. The twins have had it rough since she died, and...so have you.”

“Yes, I have.”

So has he.

I wish I couldn’t see that about my dad. I wish I couldn’t understand how losing her and being left behind with newborn twins and two grieving children could drive a person to do terrible things. To screw up again and again and again.

“I’ll text you where we are.”

“Do it now, while I’m on the phone.”

“Okay. Let me—”

There’s a pause, and a rustle, and then my phone vibrates. I check the text for a full address. Will’s phone is already out. He puts it into the map to make sure it’s a real place. The pin lands on a building. He catches my eye. *The warehouses*, he mouths.

“Dad.” I look down at Will’s phone. That pin is where my siblings are. “We’re coming to get the twins.”

“I’m not kidding about these guys, Bristol.” No hope in his voice now. No angle. “They’re violent people. They won’t hesitate to shoot.”

I CAN'T STAND this motherfucker.

Bristol looks down at her phone. "I understand. We'll be there soon."

She ends the call, and all I want is to crush her to my chest and keep her there forever. Even if she doesn't want me to. It's not safer with me. I'm just as dangerous as any of the people her father decided to work with. More dangerous. But I'd rather get shot myself than let them shoot her.

Bristol turns into my chest, her back straight and her chin up. "I can't believe him."

I run a hand up and down her back. "My dad was garbage, too, but at least he never pretended to be anything else."

"Yeah." A strained laugh. "My dad is always ready to put on a show if it gets him his way."

That...does something to me. "I'm not putting on a show with you."

Bristol lifts her head and looks at my face. Regret feels like too much light after a long time in the dark. It feels like a fist to the face I have no hope of avoiding. I don't know why I said that, except her eyes are soft, almost proud. She pats at my chest. "I know."

There's a lot I could say to her, and no time to say it. All those words feel like a rock pushing up against my ribs.

"Donovan. We have the location. Let's go."

He comes out of the back room with his guys, the pawnshop owner trailing behind. The prick looks smug, like he got away with something.

“Vehicles.” Evan’s halfway to the door.

Bristol goes to follow him, the two men from Evan’s team a step ahead of her.

There’s one thing I have to do before I leave.

At the smudged as hell joke of a glass case I pull a twenty out of my wallet and drop it on the counter. The pawnshop prick looks at it with narrowed eyes. “What’s that for?”

“My girlfriend liked a necklace she found in one of your bins. I wanted to settle up.”

He purses his lips again. The man has no fucking idea how lucky he is that I haven’t laid him out. “I guess twenty’s fine.”

“I guess if either one of those kids has so much as a fucking bruise because you saw some shady asshole outside with *two goddamn children* and didn’t do anything about it, I’ll come back here and kill you myself for free.”

“I didn’t—”

“Shut the fuck up. The best you can hope for is that you never see me again.”

Maybe he says something else. Maybe he doesn’t. I don’t care. I leave that hellhole of a pawnshop and get into Evan’s SUV next to Bristol.

“It’s not far.” He already has the address in his GPS. “Ten minutes. Fifteen if we hit red lights.”

Bristol looks up from her phone. “Run the red lights.”

“It’ll take longer if we get pulled over.” Evan passes a car on the left, cutting in front of oncoming traffic to do it. I don’t buy that he’s worried about the cops.

“Bristol.” I need to be touching her, so I put a hand on her leg, just above her knee. What I want is to hold her hand, which is fucking unbelievable.

She takes one look at me and shakes her head. “I’m not staying behind.”

“Then stay in the car.”

“Will. No. Mia and Ben need me to be there.”

“They need you to be alive.”

“What, you’re going to let me get killed? *Evan* is going to let me get killed?”

Evan rolls through a stop sign with a tap on the brakes that’s more ceremonial than anything. “I have no intention of letting you get shot, ma’am.”

Bristol gazes at the roof of the SUV, then looks me in the eye again. “See? Evan is going to keep us safe, just like you hired him to do. I’m going with you.”

Except I’ll die if she gets hurt in front of me. My heart will stop beating, and then Evan will be dealing with my dead body *and* Bristol’s prick father *and* the dangerous, violent criminals he’s decided to team up with. Plus the twins. I don’t know how to tell her that my chest is already one big ache from everything that’s happened. From the citrus scent of her in the car. From her voice, and her touch, and how much I—

“You’re going to wait in the SUV until we’ve done the first sweep. That’s my condition for bringing you.”

“But—”

“*No*. I will stop this car and leave you in—” I haven’t been paying attention to the street we’re on at all. It’s a normal block. The pawnshop isn’t far from a non-dingy café and a secondhand bookstore and a nightclub that’s closed until eight. What I need is on the end of the block. “—*that* Starbucks and pay them to keep you there until we have the twins if you don’t agree. I’m not negotiating on this.”

Bristol puts her hand over mine. “I’m being coerced. This is coercion.”

This is because I love you.

What the fuck. I’m not going to say that.

I'm not going to say that unless I have to. I'll say anything if it gets her to stay in this SUV until we can make sure nobody's going to shoot at us.

"Yes. And don't think I won't do more."

"What, you're going to tie me up in a Starbucks storage room? Give all the baristas hush money?"

She's scared, her face pale, but there's warmth in her eyes. Bristol Anderson is rubbing my hand, so gently, while she *teases me*.

Fuck this. I want my arms over my chest. I want a wall between us. I hate this soft, defensive feeling. I hate that she's looking at me like I just mentioned pickleball again, or made a cheesy joke, or admitted that I care about her.

And I don't hate it.

And I don't want a wall.

Not really.

"You want me to tie you up in a Starbucks storage room? Is that it? Does that get you off?"

Evan coughs. Bristol turns bright red.

"I don't know. I've never been tied up in a Starbucks storage room before."

"Agree to wait in the SUV, or we can find out right now."

"Fine. I'll wait."

We're only a couple of minutes out. Bristol stares out the front windshield. The hand over mine shakes.

"Would you at least let them bring me a Frappuccino?"

The jokes are going to kill me. I don't know how she can keep making them. And I know exactly how she can keep making them.

"No."

She turns wide, green eyes on me. "Are you serious?"

"Dead serious."

Evan makes the last turn, and we're at the warehouses. It's the same row of warehouses where they hold the boxing matches.

It's just a match. That's all. The stakes are higher, but I've been in high-stakes fights before.

Donovan cranes his neck, looking at the numbers stamped on metal walls, then steers the SUV off to the side and throws it into park.

I stick my hand over the seat. "Gun."

He opens the glove box.

"There are, like, six guns in there." Bristol's eyes are huge. "Why do you have so many?"

Donovan moves one pistol aside and pulls out a second one, which he hands to me. I check the safety first. Confirm it's loaded.

It is.

"I come prepared." Donovan looks at me in the rearview mirror. "Ready?"

Three warehouses down, the second SUV pulls into place. A third behind it. Evan swings himself out of the front seat and holds up a hand. *Wait.*

I go to get out, too, but my shirt pulls.

No—Bristol pulls. She yanks me toward her with a fist in my shirt and kisses me.

I get a taste of her—*clean*—and a breath of her—*citrus*—and a too-short impression of her heat, and then she pushes me away. "Do not get shot."

"Do *not* get out of the car. Not until we come out and get you."

Her lips part. It doesn't look like she's going to argue. We don't have time to argue, anyway. "Okay." She scoots over to my side, where there's nothing between her and the warehouse but the window of the SUV. "Be careful."

I shut the door and watch while she leans up and presses the button to lock all the doors. Evan jogs around to meet me.

“They’ll have eyes on her the whole time.”

“From way over there?”

He turns and waves, and a single guy comes down the road, almost at a run. The next group of four guys crosses, getting close to the warehouse.

A third SUV pulls up behind the other two, and more people get out and head toward us.

“No.” Evan checks over his gun one more time. “Not from over there.”

“We can’t go in with a fucking army. They’ll just start shooting.”

“We’re not going in together. You and me first. Rest of the guys will surround the building and wait for my signal.” He glances over his shoulder just as a fourth SUV pulls in. “Now we’re good to go.”

“This is more people than I asked for.”

He gives me a look. “There are kids in there. Are you telling me you didn’t want an army? Because I’d rather get a battalion over here than lose one of them.”

Evan says it in a clipped, professional tone, but his eyes go dark and pained for long enough that I know, I *know*, this is about something else. It’s not just about Mia and Ben. It’s personal.

For both of us. Because I want ten armies. I want to go back in time and have this many people to help *me*, for Christ’s sake. Even once. My chest does another weird, pulling thing.

“Anybody else you can call?”

He pulls out his phone and sends another text. “Three more groups en route. Just in case.”

We cross the street and approach the warehouse door. All around us, his guys get into place. There’s nowhere to go. The

building is surrounded, corner to corner.

“Stay a step behind me. And keep your gun out.” He leans close to the building, eyes on the door. “We don’t know how many people are in there.”

I’m not staying a step behind him. “Okay.”

“We can’t go for the kids first. We need to neutralize whoever’s in there. Shoot them. Knock them out. Whatever’s fastest. Do *not* do anything reckless.”

“You’re such a liar.” Evan looks me in the eye. “Go.”

That’s my cue to open the door, so I do. It’s unlocked, which means this is a setup. Evan heads in first, his gun level in front of him, and I go in behind him.

It’s dark. Can’t see a thing. Evan slaps at the wall, and a big overhead light flickers on, followed by other ceiling lights.

On the other side of the warehouse, four guys stand in a ragged line.

“Drop your weapons.” Evan’s voice echoes off all the metal walls. “We’re here for the kids.”

One of them laughs.

A fifth guy ambles out of some shadowy back room, and I can’t believe it.

I take several steps closer in spite of myself. Evan stays with me. We land in a pool of light, and so does the fifth guy.

It’s Mountain Man, from the ring.

He has a scar on his face. I’d bet anything that’s from me.

“You? Are you fucking kidding me?”

His eyes brighten with recognition. “Well, isn’t this a nice surprise. It’s *you*. I’ve been waiting to get even.”

One of the other guys moves.

I don’t see what he does. It happens fast, out of the corner of my eye, and Evan shoots.

He crumples, clutching at his knee, and I run.

Straight toward them.

In the ring, you have to be within arm's reach to do any damage, and that's the instinct I go on. Bullets fly. They're shouting. Evan picks off another guy, a bullet scraping against his calf. He turns and runs, his gait unsteady.

One of them fires at me. Shot goes wide. Then I'm too close. These might be violent assholes, but they're not top-tier violent assholes. I get him with a hard left hook and turn around to shoot Mountain Man, who has to be—

Not here.

Something's not right about that.

Evan stands over the fourth guy, zip-tying his arms behind his back. He looks up at me, face set. "Where the hell are the kids?"

He reaches for his phone next. Presses one button.

"They must be in the back."

Mountain Man reappears in the doorway.

He's not by himself.

He has one big hand on Mia's shoulder, and one on Ben's, and he pulls them out into the light. Bristol's dad stumbles out after them.

"Will." Mia's voice sounds so small. I want to put a bullet through Mountain Man's head, but she's standing too close. They're both standing too close.

"Let them go."

"Why?" Mountain Man smiles. "We could have so much fun."

His voice rises at the end of the sentence. Evan curses under his breath. More guys appear in the doorway, and from the way they move, *these* are the violent criminals Bristol's dad was talking about.

Five of them. Six. Seven. There could be more.

And now Mia and Ben are in the line of fire.

ALL I CAN DO IS WATCH the guys by the warehouse entrance.

They talk to each other, one with his phone out, poised and ready.

For Evan to call them in, probably. I lean against the door of the SUV, my heart in my throat. Every heartbeat takes a lifetime to pass. This car is new enough that it's got good sound insulation, so I can't hear a thing with the windows closed.

This is why I wanted to be in there. I don't want secondhand or thirdhand information about what's happening to the twins. Or what's happening to Will. This is my dad's fault, but I'd rather not hear about him from somebody else, either. I've had enough of that to last a lifetime.

One of the men by the door gets a text.

His head snaps up from his phone. He says...*something* to the guy across from him. I don't know what. My hand is already on the door handle.

They go back and forth. Everybody around them tenses. Hands go to guns. Men move in. Something's happening in there, and it's not good. If it *was* good, they'd be relaxing. Standing down, not gathering by the door.

The first guy puts his phone away. I don't see which one of them wrenches the doors open, but eight of them run in, two by two.

"Screw this."

I throw myself past the front seat, hit the *unlock* button, and sprint for the door.

“Ma’am! We have orders to keep you—”

I don’t stop. Not for a shout, not for anything. I run straight into the warehouse.

It’s loud, with voices bouncing off the ceiling. Men yell at each other to put their guns down. Evan’s yelling something at his people. A *huge* man is standing toward the back, his hands on Mia and Ben’s shoulders. She has her hands up over her ears, and her entire body shakes.

Will’s a few feet away from Evan, his gun drawn and pointed at the guy. He’s—he’s massive.

“This isn’t about them.” Will’s voice carries over everyone else’s. “You know that, prick. Let them go and deal with me.”

Somebody moves, and I get a clear view of my dad.

He looks terrible. His cheeks are thinned out, like he hasn’t been eating, and his clothes look too big. I’m not even sure they’re his things. I don’t recognize them. He steps toward the man who has the twins, both hands up.

“Fuck no.” The big one pushes at the twins, and they both go forward, into the middle of a huge circle of men with guns, all aimed at each other.

If any one of them shoots, Mia and Ben could get it.

I can’t move. I don’t know what to do.

More guys come in behind me, and it gets even louder. Mia closes her eyes.

Nobody will shut up and talk to each other. I think it’s well past that point.

The big man—he’s the one in charge. Everybody else who’s not part of Evan’s security team keeps glancing at him.

“Boss.” A voice like rusted steel makes its way to me through the noise. “There’s more of them.”

“I have people surrounding the building.” Evan doesn’t sound nervous at all. He sounds like he’s been in situations like this before. What the hell kind of situation could have been like this? His hands don’t shake at all. The gun he aims has to be the steadiest thing in the warehouse.

More footsteps behind me.

The ringleader, who’s a *giant*, notices I’m here.

I don’t move. Not an inch. It’s a ridiculous instinct. It won’t stop him from seeing me.

His eyes drop down from my face. They slide over my body. My throat stings. I can move temp jobs all I want, but I can never escape creepy men.

The warehouse door bangs open again, and his eyes go to the sound. He takes in the room, which is filling up with people, all of them armed.

There are...there are already people on the floor. One of them’s bleeding, both hands to his knee. The other has his hands zip-tied behind his back. A third just looks dead. Or passed out. I hope he’s passed out. I don’t want the twins to have to look at a dead body.

Ben nudges Mia toward the side, toward our dad. She doesn’t want to go. Her feet resist the movement. Ben nudges her again. One of the big man’s people snaps at her, and she backs up, but that only puts her closer to the leader. She squeezes her eyes shut again.

The enormous, too-tall asshole looks at her like he’s seeing her for the first time.

All the blood rushes out of my head.

He knows he’s outnumbered, and that makes him more likely to do something drastic.

Like shoot a child to create a diversion. That would draw everyone’s attention, and he could escape.

His head swivels toward Ben. He tenses up, his eyes going wide and round.

He barely looks at the man who's deciding whether to shoot him.

He looks at Mia.

She's obviously not okay, and less okay by the second. Her shoulders have rounded forward like she's hoping to hide in her body. If I could get to her without starting a firefight, I'd have her in my arms already.

Ben's worry for her draws the ringleader's attention.

The movement starts in the man's upper arm. God, why is he so huge? Why isn't he a normal-sized person who could be tackled, or rushed, or *anything*? Maybe I could tackle him. That happens to people. They get superhuman strength just when they need it.

But what if one of Evan's people mistakes me for an enemy? What if they all shoot?

The man's hand flexes, and then his arm goes behind his back, and oh, God, oh, no, he's going to shoot her.

I put both hands over my mouth. I don't know what I'm trying to stop. A scream, I think. If I scream for her and she hears me and opens her eyes and panics—

The gun is already out and I can *see*, even from this far away, I can see the tendons in his arm going tight because he's pulling the trigger, he's putting more pressure on it and I know from the movies it doesn't take a lot.

Everybody's shouting. Somebody else is screaming. Maybe it's me. Or Evan or Will or Ben. There's so much sound that for a second I don't understand what's happening. I don't understand the blur on Mia's other side.

I don't understand until that blur becomes my father, leaping in front of her.

He's behind her, actually. He's behind her back. He's between her and a bullet.

It hits him.

He crashes to the ground, the shoulder of his borrowed, faded sweatshirt dark with blood.

It's pandemonium.

All of Evan's men surge forward. I go with them. There might be bullets. There might not. I can't wait anymore. Mostly, people seem to be running. The ringleader disappears into a dark room in the back. Evan's guys split off after the other guys.

All I care about is Mia.

A flat-out sprint gets me to her, and I fold my arms around her shoulders and hold her tight. "It's okay. Mia, it's okay." Only...it might not be okay. I push her away a few inches and look at her face. Run my hands over her wrists. Her arms. She hasn't opened her eyes. "Mia. It's me. Are you hurt? Is anything—does anything hurt?"

She opens her eyes, just a little. "It's too loud."

Her voice shakes, but she doesn't cry.

"I know. It's really loud." I put my hands over hers. "Keep covering them until we can leave."

Someone brushes close to me. It's Will, with Ben in his arms. He sets Ben on his feet next to Mia. He throws his arms around her and she buries her face in his shoulder.

"Ben's okay." Will's eyes go past me to the floor. He puts an arm around Mia and Ben and turns them so they're not facing my direction.

Oh my God.

I whirl around and drop to my knees next to my dad. It's still chaos in the warehouse. Too many men are shouting at each other, their voices strained with adrenaline and irritation.

My dad has a hand up to his shoulder.

There's a lot of blood.

I put my hands over his, my own pulse loud in my ears. My heart is still working. I didn't get shot, and neither did Mia. My eyes burn with a fresh wave of tears. This is *not* how

I expected things to go. If anything, I thought my dad would go with the guy in charge, not throw himself into the path of a bullet.

He's really pale. "Oh, honey, don't cry."

I can't help it. My bloodstream is mostly freak-out chemicals and what feels like carbonated fear. I've never seen someone bleed this much. My dad has come home with plenty of black eyes and, one time, a long, thin cut on his side, but it was never this bad.

"Thanks for doing that." I sound as shaken up as Mia. "You didn't have to do that."

One corner of his mouth goes up in a smile, but he can't hold onto it for more than a few seconds. "Of course I did." This time, he grimaces. "That's what fathers are supposed to do, right? Protect their kids."

"Let's just get you—don't you want to sit up? This floor's too hard for you to lay on."

It's too bloody for him to lay on. I have no idea what the plan is from here. I don't want to take my hands away from his to call 9-1-1. Will would have done that, though. Or Evan. One of the million people in here had to have called an ambulance when my dad got shot.

I lever him up off the floor and into my lap. He grits his teeth so tight they scrape together like the lock on our first apartment after Mom died.

"Listen. It'll be fine. You'll be okay."

"Bristol."

"I just can't, Dad. I can't do this today. That's a really selfish thing to say. I know that, I just—I can't lose you today."

He blinks, his eyebrows going up a little, like he's surprised to see me. I didn't think it was possible for his skin to lose more color, but it keeps happening. Every second, there's less life in him.

“Hey.” The pause goes on too long. He shakes his head. Blinks again. “Don’t cry.”

“No, Dad, it’s going to be fine. I think you just need to stay awake for a little bit longer.”

He nods, the skin around his eyes crinkling. He doesn’t have enough energy for a full smile, and he’s been shot. It has to be so painful. The fact that he’s *trying* to smile makes more tears run down my face.

“What’s going to happen?” Ben, from behind me. I can’t concentrate enough to hear Will’s answer.

“What’s going to happen?” I don’t know the answer. I keep talking anyway. My dad looks into my eyes, his brow furrowed, expression falling into seriousness. “The ambulance is going to show up and take you to the hospital, and you’ll be fine. We still have to talk. You know that, right? We have to have a discussion about all this and make some decisions. Mia and Ben are your kids. Plus, there’s me and Sean. Don’t you think we should decide this together? You did a good thing tonight, protecting Mia, so we should—”

“I’m sorry.” My dad’s eyelids get heavy. This faint, small voice can’t be his. It’s practically a whisper. “I’m sorry, Bristol.”

“For what?”

“That...” His eyes close, and he forces them back open. It’s a losing battle. My heart beats even faster. It can’t beat for him, too. That’s just not how it works. “I didn’t protect you, too.”

Then he slumps against me, his body dead weight.

6

WILL

THE STERILE, flat white of the hospital hallway hurts my eyes. We were pretty much guaranteed to end up here, given the hostage situation, but if I had my way about it, we wouldn't be in *this* hallway. We'd be in the private wing of a better hospital at minimum.

There wasn't any choice. Paramedics arrived to the shitshow at the warehouse, loaded Bristol's father onto an ambulance, and left with the sirens on.

Bristol went with him, her hand in his, and I got into Evan's SUV with the twins to whatever public hospital this is. The closest one to the warehouse, I guess.

Waiting around like this is my least favorite thing. Evan hovers midway down the hall, checking out everyone who walks by with blank suspicion. He catches my eye and raises his eyebrows. *What?*

Nothing. There's nothing to do but wait. Mia and Ben sit on a bench on the wall, his arms wrapped resolutely around her. Neither one has said anything in...how long has it been? Five minutes? Ten?

"Everything okay, guys?" I regret this question the second it's out of my mouth. It's obviously not okay. Their dad is in surgery and might die. Bristol's behind a set of doors that nobody else was allowed to go through. It's the exact scenario I was trying to avoid when I called the doctor to my place—the two of us, separated by a bunch of assholes in the scrubs. The twins, looking...like this.

Ben nods. And then, as if he's not sure I bought it: "We're okay."

Mia stares off to the side. I don't think she heard me. And something about her face makes the hair on the back of my neck stand up. Her hands rest on Ben's forearm, her grip as absent as her expression.

I don't like it, but I'm not some rude motherfucker who's going to watch her and demand more answers, like the social worker who bustles by for the third time since we got here.

"Mia. Ben." She's a redheaded woman with a warm smile that I don't trust for a second. "How are you guys? Anything I can get for you?"

Ben smiles at her. "No, we're okay. Thanks, though."

I go and stand closer to the bench. Mia's body has gone tense, even with Ben's arms around her. It's a clear sign to back off.

"Mia." Another big smile from the social worker. Jesus, it's genuine. *So* genuine, with crinkles around her eyes and everything, that it looks fake. "We didn't get a chance to talk before. Did you feel like talking now?"

Mia turns her head and takes in the smile and the crinkled eyes. She does not smile back. "I don't want to talk to you. Stop asking me."

The memory of Emerson, that day after school, echoes her. *Stop asking.*

"Well, Mia..." This goddamn social worker. She reaches out her hand as if to put it on Mia's arm, and Mia glances down at it like it's a snake, or a rabid animal. The woman pulls her hand away. "I want to make sure you're okay. Today was tough."

"You weren't there." Mia's tone is flat. *End of discussion.*

"No, but—"

"I don't want to talk to you."

I'm about to step in and tell her to find another part of the hospital. I don't care anymore that she'll probably ignore me because they're not my kids.

Ben gets there first.

"We're okay." Ben's obviously worried about his dad. Obviously still shaken up. Who the hell wouldn't be in the middle of a hostage situation where you're the hostage? He's already talked to the social worker, in detail, about how glad he is to be back with Bristol, and how, yes, it was scary, but it's over now, which is good, because he has a math test next week in school that he doesn't want to miss. "We'll tell Bristol if we think of anything else we wanted to talk about."

"Sounds good." She gives the twins two thumbs up. Ben gives her a smile that's more of a cringe. Then, finally, she leaves.

I go back to the middle of the hallway and look through the thin sliver of window on the doors Bristol went through. No sign of her.

Evan comes down the hall and stands next to me, arms crossed over his chest. "You don't think it's going well?"

"He wasn't even conscious when they got him in the ambulance. You saw the blood on the floor." It was more blood than I was expecting. "I tried to keep the twins from seeing, but..." Mia was mostly hiding in Ben's shirt, so maybe I was successful. "I don't know how it's going. I haven't heard from Bristol."

"Is that why you keep pacing around like it's your own dad in there?"

I roll my eyes. "Better for everybody if it *was* my dad."

"You're a cold motherfucker."

"*He's* a cold motherfucker. That's why he's in prison." The dread turns into something like acid, hot and uncomfortable. "I can live without my dad. That's all I meant."

Evan narrows his eyes at the surgery wing doors. "Aren't those kids already living without their dad?"

He keeps his voice low. I keep mine lower. “Yeah, but if he dies, they’d be orphans. And then what?”

“Is that a serious question?”

“No. Jesus. Bristol would take care of them.”

“And you’d...what? Hire more security and send them on their way? I might know some people, if you’re thinking about bowing out again.”

A strip across my lungs burns. “You’re a prick, Donovan. No, I would not *send them on their way*. I would—” Out of the corner of my eye, I can see him smiling. He’s *satisfied*. I hate him. My face burns along with my lungs. I turn toward him, and Evan wipes the grin off his face. “I would take care of them too. Fuck off.”

“Aww.” He pats at my shoulder, and I slap his hand away. “I never thought you’d care that much, Leblanc.”

There’s nothing I can say.

It’s true. I do care about them. I wouldn’t leave Bristol and Mia and Ben for anything. It’s an awful feeling, like walking around with an open wound. *And* it’s put me in the position of caring whether their piece-of-shit father lives. Does he deserve another shot at life? No. But I don’t want them to be sad if he dies.

The asshole had better live.

There’s a flash of movement behind the windows. My heart speeds up. I want it to be Bristol.

The doors open, and it’s her. *Yes*.

I want to crush her to the wall and kiss her until she’s breathless and incoherent, but I don’t. Someone brushes against my side—Ben, with one arm still around Mia’s shoulders.

Bristol bends down and gives them a big, tight hug. “Hey, guys.” Her eyes meet mine over the twins’ heads. Her dad has to be alive. There’s no way she’d look so hopeful otherwise. Right? “Are you doing okay?”

“Yes.” Ben’s firmer than before, if possible. Mia says nothing. “How’s Dad? Is he—is he—”

One more squeeze, and Bristol releases the twins. Her hands go to her hair. I want *my* hands in her hair. Then she drops one hand to Ben’s shoulder. “Dad’s out of surgery. He’s in stable condition, but the doctors won’t be sure about anything until they see what state he’s in when he wakes up.”

“That’s really *really* good.” Ben throws himself at Bristol for another hug, pulling Mia along with him. “That’s so good. I was really worried.” He takes his arm off Mia’s shoulders and hugs Bristol tighter. Mia’s shoulders go up in an instant. Bristol pats at Ben’s back. “I’m sorry, Bristol. I never should have emailed him. Or...I should have told you. I knew it wasn’t right when we got to that pawnshop. The car just drove off so fast, and then dad was there, and he looked *bad*, you know, and then the van came and—”

“Shut. Up.” Mia’s voice is a pointed shout that carries down the entire hallway. She takes a big step back from Bristol and Ben, who’s frozen, staring at her with his mouth open. “*Shut up.*”

The second time is even louder.

Bristol looks as surprised as Ben. “Mia, honey—”

Her shoulders start to shake first, and I open my mouth to say *Bristol* followed by who knows what.

I’m too late. Mia screams.

It’s nothing like the way she screamed when I launched myself into Bristol’s apartment. That was fear. Shock, probably.

This is shock, too, but it’s more than that. There’s rage in the sound. More than anything, sheer distress.

Mia’s hands go to her chest, then her ears. Her whole body’s shaking now.

“Oh my God.” Bristol reaches for Mia. “We need somebody over here.” She looks over her shoulder. There’s a nurse at the far end of the hall, turned toward us, probably

because of the screaming. “This is—oh my God. This is an emergency, can you hurry?”

“I don’t think—” That it would be a good idea for a nurse to come over here, actually.

Ben talks over me. “Don’t be mad. Don’t be mad at her, okay? Bristol, you have to tell them not to be mad—”

Mia bolts.

She’s fast, ducking by Bristol’s arm, and then she’s sprinting down the hall.

I don’t think. I just go.

Mia runs as fast as she can. I’m faster. I have two seconds to be glad, very glad, that we’re not near any traffic, and then I cut in front of her and put my palm out to the wall.

She goes right, into the smaller family waiting room. Last door in the wing. Best-case scenario, because I have no idea what’s in the other hallways. A door with an alarm won’t make anything better.

I follow her in and stand in front of the open door.

Mia backs up to the furniture against the far wall. There’s a big window behind her with a view of the hospital’s atrium. In the hall, Bristol’s arguing with the nurse, her voice high and thin with fear.

It doesn’t matter.

That phrase, *shaking like a leaf*, is Mia right now. Her face is a deep red, and I know she wants to scream again, then scream some more after that. Her hands ball up into fists in front of her. One step to the right, then back to the left. She doesn’t glare at me, though. Her eyes are huge. Same color as Bristol’s.

Sinclair would be better at this, but Sinclair’s not here.

It feels like a standoff, which is...not what we want. It’s not just the shaking. It’s the way she’s looking at me like I’m a giant, and probably dangerous. In Mia’s mind, I’m sure it’s a

fifty-fifty split—I could be nice to her, but I could also be pissed, judging by Ben’s reaction.

I can’t get shorter, so I get down on one knee and put both hands up, palms forward.

“Listen.” That’s a great start. It does, at least, connect with something else in my brain. “I’m just here to wait with you. I’ll wait with you. Until you feel better.”

Her eyes get wider, and then she narrows them, her face turning a deeper shade of red.

“I mean it. I’m just over here so that nobody else comes in. I can move if you want to leave. Do you?”

Mia shakes her head. She’s trembling so hard that she has to exaggerate. Her teeth snap together with smaller shivers. Her fists open and close. It hurts my entire chest to watch. She looks so small, in front of those windows. I want her father to live so I can beat the hell out of him myself for putting her in this situation.

“I get it. This place is the worst. Today didn’t go how you thought it would. And now we’ve been here, and it sucks. It’s bright and smells like bleach and you don’t have any of your stuff, which is also the worst. I know it feels bad right now. Terrible. It’s way too much.”

She turns her head to look at me on an angle, and a tear slips out onto her cheek. Mia’s hands ball up into fists again.

“I’m going to be in trouble. For screaming.”

“No, you’re not. Nobody’s mad. I’m not mad. Scream some more, if it helps.” My knee hurts from what has to be a concrete floor underneath thin carpeting, but I’m not going to move. “I’m not going to leave, even if you scream. Even if it’s really loud.”

Her eyes flicker between relief and suspicion. “Why?”

There’s a pain like something breaking. A rib, maybe. Near my heart. It feels brittle as fuck, like someone’s been chipping away at it and now it’s finally given up.

“Because when Emerson feels this way, he likes for someone to wait with him.”

Mia takes a single step toward me. “But.” She swallows. “He’s not a kid.”

“No, he’s not.”

“Then I bet he never screams at anyone.” Mia’s voice drops to an embarrassed whisper. She grits her teeth, but it doesn’t stop the shaking.

The only thing I can think to say is a risk, but we’re here now. It doesn’t matter if it feels risky to me. All that matters is that Mia feels safe enough to get out of the red zone.

“Not usually. But you don’t usually scream at people, either. Emerson is a lot like you. Most times, he gets really, really quiet, and goes to a room by himself.”

Mia bites at the inside of her cheek.

“This isn’t your fault, Mia.” I get a lump in my throat at the shape of the words. “Emerson says it feels awful when things get to be too much. That his lungs don’t work, and it seems like he could explode out of his body, and it hurts.”

Mia’s eyes say this is an accurate description. There go the rest of my ribs. “I bet he—I bet he’s not a crybaby.”

A quick, murderous rage burns across my back. I’ll kill whoever told her she’s a crybaby later. There’s no child-appropriate way to tell Mia that I’m both appalled and impressed that she can hold a conversation when this is happening. It’s not a panic attack. It wasn’t always a panic attack for Emerson, either, especially when he was younger. It just looks the same.

“He totally *does* cry. That doesn’t make him a baby. Crying doesn’t make you a baby, either.”

Her chin dimples. Hard to see, with the trembling. Mia gives me a shallow nod.

“A long time ago, he told me and Sin that it hurts less if somebody squeezes him. Like a hug, but tighter.” I hold my arms out roughly in the shape of Emerson’s shoulders. “He’s

tall now, you're right about that, but it doesn't bother me. I've had a lot of practice. So, if you wanted—”

Mia sprints across the waiting room. She throws herself into my chest at full speed. I put my arms around her and lock them. Like a hug, but tighter. Her forehead drops onto my shoulder.

For a second, I can't speak.

Emerson has never felt this small. It's only in this moment that I realize he wouldn't have, even to Sinclair. I always thought of Sinclair as bigger because he was older, but of course he wasn't. Not really. We were all kids.

But there was nobody for Sin to learn from. He had to figure this out on his own. If he hadn't, if he hadn't pretended to be confident and in control, I would be fucked right now.

“It's fine.” Mia takes a sharp breath, her ribs expanding under my arms. “I've got you. It's safe here.”

I'm pretty sure she's hesitating. Still waiting for something. I can't see her face at all, just a sweep of red hair.

“You can't hurt me. No matter what happens. You don't have to keep it in. I'll wait with you, I promise.”

Mia's first sob sounds beyond tired, beyond frustrated. She puts her fists on my chest and pushes without lifting her head. A question.

I hold her tighter.

It's the right answer. Some of the tension goes out of her, and she gets heavier. Cries harder. I wait with her until it's over. Until it's time to go home.

WILL'S apartment seemed nice before. More than nice. It was luxurious compared to apartment 3C.

Now it seems like a palace. A small palace, but cozy and safe. It's pretty much heaven after the warehouse and the hospital.

Or it would be, if it weren't so quiet.

Maybe it's just that all the emotion of the day is catching up with me. My dad got shot, which seems both surreal and still terrifying.

And *Will*.

He said all the right things to Mia. He was calm and confident and warm, and I felt like I was falling apart. It's been a long time since Mia lost it like that.

Maybe that's why the quiet has me on edge. It's usually a sign that she's struggling. She picks at a plate of Eggo waffles at the dinner table. Ben pulls his chair closer and closer to hers while we eat until the chairs touch and he can't *get* closer.

"So, tomorrow's Monday." I aim for a light tone and end up sounding like one of the robots companies use to answer phone calls. Will raises his eyebrows at me. "You'll be back at the office, won't you?"

"No."

"No?" My fork crashes against my plate. Will made pasta for us instead of Eggo waffles, and mine is half-gone. I don't

remember eating so much of it. I've been focused on the twins. "But you have so much—there are things to—with your business. With Hughes."

That's the reason we were at the beach house in the first place. After the upheaval at the retirement party, Will wanted to get away, so we went.

"It can wait."

I stick my fork through two penne noodles. "But *I* have to ___"

"No."

I look him in the eyes. Maybe I mean for it to be a challenge, or a power move, but the color of Will Leblanc's eyes makes my heart heat up like it's sprawled out on the sand at the beach. He has a faint, pink color to his cheeks.

Ben leans over and whispers something to Mia, who whispers back.

I take the opportunity. "Mr. Leblanc, I can't miss work tomorrow."

"You absolutely fucking can, Ms. Anderson." His eyes flick toward the ceiling at my appalled expression. "I let Greg know you won't be in until Tuesday at the earliest."

"I'm not sick. I can't just—just *take a personal day*."

"You're going to take a personal day."

"Oh, yeah? And what about you? You're just going to take more time off? People are going to freak out."

"They'll survive."

He looks down at his pasta. The man is ridiculously attractive, and sometimes, when he's like this, frustrating to the point that I'd like to...

I don't know. Kiss him, probably. Trap him in some shadowy corner until he finally tells me what he's thinking about. He works so hard to hide it, and he doesn't have to. He's a good man. I can't even think about the way he was with Mia in that waiting room without tearing up.

I should marry him. That's what I should do. Thinking about *that* causes another wave of tight emotion in my chest. He said he'd never leave again, but that could've been the heat of the moment. He still thinks he destroyed his own family. *Staying* isn't the same as *being together*.

"You're worried I might freak out. That's what this is."

Will scowls, his eyes coming back to mine. I knew it. This is his sheepish, defensive expression. He doesn't have anything to be sheepish or defensive. "No, it's not."

"What is it, then?"

Ben is still whispering to Mia.

"Your dad is in the hospital." Will drops his voice. "The weekend was a disaster. I don't think you're going to freak out. You just don't have to deal with all this *and* answering emails for Greg. Somebody else can make his copies."

He glares down into his pasta again, but his head comes up almost immediately.

"And you know what? I don't care if you freak out. Most people would, given—" A glance in Ben and Mia's direction. "Given everything. But if you do, I'd rather not have it happen in the office. Cry all you want in here, where I can be with you."

"Will—"

"There's no good argument for going to work in the morning. What do you want me to say? That I care about you too much to let you spend all day doing temp work after this fucking weekend? Fine. I do. I care about you too much. Get over it."

He huffs down at his pasta and doesn't look at me again until I run my fingertips over his knuckles. Then I get another scowl, which would look more intimidating if his cheeks weren't all red.

"I care about you, too. I'm glad you're taking a day off."

Will makes a sound that's more of a grunt than anything.

After dinner, the twins take turns showering. Then Mia curls up on the couch, Ben next to her, Mia's book in his hands. He reads three chapters before bedtime.

They both get up without a word when I announce it's time to brush their teeth.

My stomach does an uneasy flip. They normally bicker with each other or put up a token argument about bedtime, but they're just...quiet. Docile. They brush for two minutes and climb into bed. Will leans against the doorframe, far enough to give us relative privacy but close enough that he's still part of things. I give him a look—*something's wrong*—and his brow furrows.

"Sweet dreams." I kiss Ben's forehead and move around to Mia. She looks off to the side, not into my eyes. I smooth her hair back from her face. "I'll see you in—"

Mia bursts into tears.

She bolts up into a sitting position, her arms flying round my neck. I half-sit, half-fall onto the edge of the bed next to her and give her a huge hug, my heart racing.

"Mia, what is it? Tell me what's wrong, and I can—" It feels wrong to give her a guarantee that I can fix it when I don't know whether this is about *everything* or something more specific. "We'll figure something out. Just—"

I glance over at Ben. He's trying to be stoic, but his lower lip trembles. I feel like my plastic palm tree has been wedged into my throat.

"Mia, talk to me." Mia doesn't say anything. She just squeezes my neck, her grip surprisingly strong, and keeps crying.

"She's..." Ben bites his lip. Somehow, it makes the trembling worse. "We're both worried. About dad."

"They're taking good care of him at the hospital." Ben doesn't look reassured. "I talked to the nurses. I can call, if you want to make sure he's okay." Okay as he can be, anyway.

“No.” Ben looks down at the blankets, his face. “Not about that. We’re worried that if he—” A glance at Mia. “If he doesn’t make it, then you’ll give us away, and we’ll have to go somewhere else.”

“Listen to me. I would *never* do that.” Mia readjusts her arms around my neck, but she doesn’t let go. “There’s zero chance of that happening.”

Mia takes a shuddering breath. “That’s not even true, Bristol. When you marry Will you’ll want your own kids instead of us.”

The back of my neck flushes hot. It doesn’t stop. Heat goes down my spine and into my lungs. I give Will another look. Marriage? Children? I probably just look panicked. Will doesn’t seem bothered in the least, but maybe he’s also doing his best to hide it.

I can’t look at him, otherwise I’ll actually freak out. Of all the things I was prepared to talk about today, marrying Will and having children with him wasn’t on the list.

Mia pulls back to look at me. I leave one hand on her shoulder and catch Ben’s eye. This is not the first time I’ve had to have a difficult conversation with them. It definitely won’t be the last. I can do this.

“Mia. Ben.” A deep breath. “I don’t know when I’ll get married and have children, or if I will at all. But no matter what, you’ll be with me. Understand?”

Mia and Ben exchange a look. Neither of them look very convinced.

“Yeah, but...” Mia swipes at her face with her sleeve. She has bags under her eyes. All I want for her tonight is to be able to fall asleep. “You don’t know for sure.”

“No, I’m *completely* sure. I want dad to get better, but even if he doesn’t...” I just can’t bring myself to think he’ll die. We need to do the same thing either way. If he recovers enough to leave the hospital, I have to get official custody of my siblings. “Even if he doesn’t, you’re always going to be my brother and sister. And we’ll always be together.”

Ben's eyebrows pull together. "What about when we go to college?"

It makes me want to laugh and cry simultaneously. He sounds so serious, so sure, about his college plans.

"Why would we do that?" Mia stares at him like he's said the unthinkable. "Why would we go to college?"

He shrugs. "We might get in."

"Bristol didn't go to college."

"I haven't gone to college *yet*." I rub Mia's arm. It's probably for the best if we don't get into too much detail about why I haven't gone to college. Now *she* looks concerned. "But if I did decide to get a degree, I wouldn't move anywhere for it. We'd be together."

"Some colleges are really far away." Ben taps at the comforter, fretting.

"There are lots of places to go to college in the city." Will hasn't moved from the doorway. He looks like he wants to be closer. "I got my degree at one of them."

"But where did you *live*?" There's hope in Ben's voice, but even more worry.

"Ben. Buddy." He looks at me, biting his lip again. "We have a long time to think about college. You haven't even started middle school. How come it's on your mind tonight?"

"I was thinking about it before. Like on Friday. Because this career lady came to talk to our class, and she was talking about—" He shakes his head, cheeks flushing. "She was saying stuff about money and—and *dorms*. Where you have to live by yourself. Or with people you don't know." He cuts his eyes at Mia, and it starts to make sense. "And if you're not with us—"

"Bristol's right." Will's not even technically in the room, but his authority definitely is. "The two of you have plenty of time to figure out what you want to do. I'm not sure why anyone would talk to fifth-graders about—" He cuts himself off, glances briefly at the carpet, and looks back up. "Not

every college has dorms. And not everybody lives in them even if they do. I lived with my brothers in an apartment.”

Ben’s eyes get wide. He looks like Will just announced that Santa Claus is, in fact, real, and he and his elves have gifted Ben his own personal math museum. “You *did*?”

Will clears his throat, the corner of his mouth curving. It’s his *I’ve-gone-too-far* expression. The vulnerable one. “Yes. It was best for everyone at the time. Anyway.” He puts his hands in his pockets. “Don’t worry about tonight. Good night, Ben. Mia.”

They echo his *good night*, and he disappears down the hall.

“College is a discussion for later, when you’re not tired.” I give Mia another hug, then Ben. “And in the meantime, you’re with me, and we’re not splitting up. Got it?”

“Got it.” Both the twins get under the covers.

At the door, I pause with my hand on the light switch. “You sure?”

“Yeah.” Ben doesn’t sound as sure as I’d like, but it’s been a long day.

“Good night, guys. I’ll see you in the morning.”

I hit the light and close the door behind me.

And then I hover in the hall, waiting for the sound of Mia crying, or of Ben calling me back.

Nothing happens. It’s quiet.

All things considered, it’s a success if they went peacefully to sleep without worrying anymore, but I’m not sure that’s what happened.

I’m not sure what else I could have said to get the message across. Maybe I should have said more. Maybe I should have said it again.

Maybe I should go back in.

No. They’re sleeping. We can talk about it in the morning if they want.

Tonight, I'll have to settle for *just okay*, because there's still something off. I don't think the twins will go to my dad without saying something.

It's their faces. That's what it is. I've never seen them so scared before, from the warehouse to the hospital to now. I put a hand to my chest and hold it there, breathing deep.

They doubted that they were safe. Doubted that I'd keep them with me. It hurts to think they spent any time at all imagining the day I'd send them off to live with someone else.

It's not something I can fix in a night, or even a week. This is probably going to be the biggest project of my entire life.

I can't let them down. I won't.

MY PHONE RINGS on the way through the living room to who the hell knows where. I'm giving Bristol some space to talk to Mia and Ben, and give myself some time to make the shocked as hell face I wanted to make when Mia brought up marriage and kids.

Jesus. A wedding. Babies. With Bristol. With *me*.

Apparently, they've thought about it enough to be upset.

I should be upset, too.

I am upset, probably.

Good thing it's my lawyer, which is sure to take my mind off of the wedding bells keeping Mia and Ben awake.

"Will Leblanc."

"Hey, Will. How was your weekend?" Emily Thompson, my lead lawyer, asks this question the same way she always has, and thank God. To her, it's a meaningless social nicety. Until very recently, my weekends were just additional days in the office.

"It was fine." Friday was terrible, then amazing. Saturday morning was amazing, and then it sucker-punched me. Today's been a shitshow on par with my childhood. It feels like a thousand years since I sent an email to Emily on Friday. "Yours?"

"Great. Let's talk about the situation with Hughes. All the drama with Senior is the perfect loophole." I'm going soft,

because calling it *drama* makes me flinch. What happened at the retirement party wasn't drama. I step into my office, then turn around and go out, toward my bedroom. "The more things implode for Junior—"

"Finn."

"Yes, Finn Hughes. The more things crash with Finn and Hughes Industries, the more likely we are to be able to walk. Now, the contract itself is pretty tight. Technically speaking, it's almost impossible to get out of it. The trick here is that—"

"Trick?"

"Poor choice of words. According to the terms of the contract, there are vanishingly few scenarios that would release you from the deal. However, Hughes is on the defensive. They'll want to avoid a nasty public trial with a drawn-out discovery process. With that in mind, they'll probably capitulate. I'm ready to send initial paperwork to legal at Hughes. Should I go ahead?"

Bristol pads into the kitchen. Her footsteps are soft enough that I shouldn't notice. It's not like I bought an apartment with a floor old enough to creak. I got the kind of place a non-fucked-up guy in finance would have. I didn't think anyone would stay here the way Bristol does.

I *want* to hear her in the kitchen. I'm tired of listening to emptiness.

Her footsteps cross, then cross again. It's a nervous pace, and what am I supposed to do about that? Tell her that it's fine, really, if we get married? That I'll ruin it, since that's been my track record so far, but I said I wouldn't leave?

"Mr. Leblanc?"

"No." I turn away from the door. "Just...hold off."

"Hughes will probably have a response in—wait. What?"

"Don't send anything yet."

"Okay." Emily sounds like she's doing cartoon blinks on the other end of the line. "Okay. I won't."

“Great. I’ll get back to you on next steps.”

Hughes Industries is the last thing I want to talk about right now. What I want is to be in the same room as Bristol. Just being in the same apartment isn’t enough.

I toss my phone in the vague direction of the bed. Bristol’s in the living room, folding a throw blanket. She drapes it over the back of the couch, then picks it up and re-folds it. My Van Gogh supervises from the other side of the room, the scene as peaceful as it always is.

“Hey.”

Bristol shakes out the blanket a third time. “Twins are asleep, I think.”

“You did the right thing, you know.”

She glances up at me, and my heart jumps over its next beat. “What do you mean?”

“Telling the twins they had nothing to worry about.” I probably wouldn’t have, but Bristol’s not a mean bastard like me. “Your dad doesn’t deserve to have you bail him out, but they obviously want to be with you. I hope you’re not worried about that.”

I hope that’s not why she’s made this throw blanket her life’s mission.

“I’m not worried.” An unfinished thought if I’ve ever heard one. Bristol smooths the throw blanket over the sofa. She tidies the small stack of Mia’s library books on the coffee table. Straightens a throw pillow. “I did want to ask—no.” Bristol shakes her head. “We didn’t have a chance to talk about what happened with your mother.”

“Don’t.” Bristol blinks at my asshole-ish tone. “What she did is nothing like what you’re doing. She just fucking left. It’s the exact opposite.”

She frowns, and I want to kiss it off her lips despite the raw, bristling feeling all across my torso. “I know, but...she didn’t have the resources that I have. And even this is hard.”

Bristol lifts her hands, then lets them fall back to her sides. “The men who want my dad to pay his debts—”

“I’ll take care of them. You won’t have to think about it.”

“I talked to her, you know.” Bristol’s eyes look incredibly green in the soft light. “At the coffee cart by Hughes. She was sitting on a stoop and crying, so I—”

“Felt bad for her. You shouldn’t have bothered.”

Except Bristol always bothers. She’s good. “I didn’t know who she was, and she looked like she was having a shitty morning, so I bought her some coffee. We chatted for a few minutes.”

“And what?” I don’t want to punch anyone. I don’t want to be in the ring with somebody who’s strong enough and fast enough to get one good hit in. That would feel better than this conversation. “You decided she deserves a second chance?”

“She said she was trying to...” Her brow furrows. “Make amends. She wanted to make amends, but she didn’t know if it was possible, and she was thinking of giving up. I told her not to. So it’s partially my fault that she kept trying to talk to you.”

“I’m not going to blame you for the beach house.”

“I’m not saying you should blame me. I’m saying...” Bristol looks at the Van Gogh, her face softening, then looks back at me. “I’m saying that she didn’t have somebody like you in her life. I’d bet anything she still doesn’t.”

All my old arguments are right there, but I can’t make them. They’re worn out, like the clothes that Sin and Emerson and I left behind when we moved.

“Anyway.” Bristol tucks her hair behind her ear. “I just felt like I should say something.”

She breezes past me, out of the living room. There are soft noises at the dining table—chairs being pushed in. Then back to the kitchen. The dining room. Kitchen again.

I go to the Van Gogh and scowl at the lights reflecting on the water.

Maybe I do need to re-think the situation with my mom, as much as I hate it. I hate feeling so soft and bruised and wounded.

I'm not wounded. I'm fine.

"Fuck." This is exactly what I need the boxing ring for. Instead, I stomp into the kitchen. Turns into more of a stalk, since I don't want to wake up the twins. Bristol's rinsing something in the sink. "You're right."

She faces me after my announcement, her eyebrows going up. "About?"

"It wasn't her fault that she had to leave." Punch me now. A thousand times. "It wasn't *only* her fault. My dad was a total prick. He probably hit her too. We never had any money, so she would have been worse off than you."

Bristol's all soft in leggings and a sweatshirt. She pats at a dish towel. "I didn't mean to—you know. Absolve her, or anything. But there's only so much you can do when it comes to men who want..." Her cheeks go pink. "When it comes to shitty men."

I can't go kill every man who's ever hurt Bristol, but I want to.

Maybe, if I killed every man who's ever hurt my mother, everybody would be better off.

"That's most of us."

"No." Now she's firm. "You're one of the good ones."

I make a noncommittal sound. I'm not. I could be, maybe. At the very least, I'll protect Bristol and Mia and Ben. Nobody's going to hurt them. Not again.

"Was there...anything else?"

"No. That was it."

"Okay." Bristol's eyes go distant, and she's distracted again. She opens the fridge and rearranges some Tupperware containers. Then she moves on to the dishwasher, which isn't even a quarter full.

“You want to watch a movie?”

“Sure.”

She curls up next to me on the couch, but we’re not fifteen minutes into whatever nineties fake-dating romcom this is when she gets up again.

Bristol, of all people, shouldn’t have to deal with so much nervous energy. Not now that we’re home.

I follow her to the table, where she’s moving each of the chairs an inch, then pushing them back in. When she’s between two of them, I step in and take her wrists in my hands.

She looks down and away. Swallows. “I’m—I’m sorry, Will. I don’t think—” Bristol clears her throat. “I don’t think I can have sex right now.”

I was wrong. I don’t need the ring. I’ve just been hit by somebody bigger than the Mountain Man, another asshole who needs to be tracked down. Maybe I could do it now, when I’m—what is this? Shocked.

I’m shocked.

I drop her wrist and storm into the living room, where I flip off the Van Gogh like the painting started all this. I storm to the chair where Emerson once sat for three straight hours trying to prove to me that he wasn’t having a panic attack when he clearly was. Then I *walk* back to Bristol, who’s standing by the dining table, eyes wide.

“You think.” Easy, Leblanc. “You think I wanted you for sex? When I’ve just driven you here from the hospital where your father’s life is on the line? While your twin siblings are sleeping off a kidnapping? You think I would demand *sex*?”

“Um.” Bristol looks me in the eye. She’s so pretty, so *beautiful*, that of course I want her. I always want her. “Maybe?”

I take it back. This is the hit that takes me out. I’m down for good.

It must show on my face, because Bristol takes a step closer. “I thought—I thought maybe that was all you wanted from me.”

This is the worst kind of anger. It’s mostly sadness, which makes me feel pathetic.

She *thought* that?

I guess it’s not that shocking, considering some of the things I said to her in the beginning of our...relationship. That’s what it is now. A *relationship*. And some of the things I said in the middle. And...in recent times.

“Fine. Yes. I made everything about sex at first. Obviously, I wanted to fuck you.”

Bristol presses her lips together, and I can tell she’s trying not to laugh, damn it.

“But I’m changing that, starting now. Let me take care of you.” There it is—that embarrassed collapse in my stomach. Perfect.

“You don’t have to—I’m not even the one who’s upset. Honestly, I’m perfectly—Will!”

She acts all surprised that I’ve scooped her up into my arms, but this isn’t up for discussion. “Shh. You’ll wake up the twins.”

“I’m fine,” she whispers. “I don’t need—I’m totally fine. Seriously. You have other things to deal with. There has to be a meeting about everything with Hughes, right? So just—”

In my bathroom, I lean down and start the tub with Bristol still in my arms, then stand her on her feet.

“Are you ignoring me?” Another whisper.

“Yes,” I whisper back. “I don’t care about Hughes right now.”

There is nothing more adorable on the goddamn planet than her pout. “But Finn and his dad...”

“I don’t give a fuck about Hughes Industries, the company, right now. And Finn and his dad aren’t here.”

She lets me tug her sweatshirt off over her head, then her tank top, and then the thin little bra she's wearing underneath.

"I can take my own clothes off, you know," she whispers, but doesn't stop me from taking off her leggings. Bristol's not wearing socks. I can't remember when she stopped wearing them in the apartment.

"You hate socks, don't you?"

She wrinkles her nose. "I hate socks inside."

"You and Emerson should be friends. He also hates socks inside."

"What about you? Do you hate socks inside?"

I'm crouched in front of her, one hand on the back of her naked knee, and suddenly it's torture to think about socks instead of spreading her out on my bed.

But I will. For her.

"I'm fine either way."

I turn off the tub, test the water to make sure it's not too hot, and help her in.

Bristol slides under the water with a blissful expression.

"It's a jacuzzi tub, if you want jets."

She leans her head back against the side and closes her eyes. "Honestly, those things always make me want to throw up."

"In a relaxing way, or...?"

"No, in a gross way." She laughs, and my embarrassment is immediately followed by a sense of victory.

"Scoot forward. I'll wash your hair."

"You'll wash my *hair*?"

"Don't act so surprised. It wouldn't be the first time."

"That's right." Bristol sounds pleased that I've washed her hair before. She rearranges herself in the tub while I get

shampoo and work it through her hair, then rinse it. Add conditioner.

“Turn this way.”

“Why?”

I turn her myself, then run my thumbs down the back of her neck to her shoulders.

“Aren’t you going to say I’m really tense?”

“You’re not going to be tense in a minute.”

I, however, will be on the verge of death, because all of my blood has relocated itself to my cock. Bristol in the bathtub is excruciatingly sexy. I refuse to take advantage of it.

It feels so good to touch her, though. It feels even better to rub at her shoulders and feel the tension leave her body. Bristol adjusts, little by little, slipping deeper into the water. All the knots are gone from her shoulders, but I don’t want to take my hands off her.

She turns her head, her gorgeous face close to mine. “Kiss me?”

“No.”

“Please?”

“*No.*” It’s bullshit. The whisper does me in. I kiss her like she’s breakable. That’s all I’m going to do. Soft, tame kisses. But then her lower lip is *there* and I’m just going to lick it, a little. And if I bite it, it’s not on purpose.

Bristol makes a needy noise into my mouth and reaches up for one of my wrists. She tries to tug it down her body, but I flatten my palm to her ribs.

My thumb brushes her nipple. “Please, Will. It would feel so good. Please?”

“Please what?”

A shiver goes through her. “Please touch me. I want to come.”

“Damn it, Bristol.” I lean away to wrestle my shirt over my head, and I’m back before she can move. Fine. I’ll make her come. I’m going to kiss her while I do it, though. That’s just how it goes.

I taste her while I slide my hand down her body, skimming her belly button before I go lower. Bristol spreads her legs, making this ungodly sexy sound, and I find the softest parts of her. Push my fingers in.

And then, because I can be a gentleman as well as an asshole, I put my thumb over her clit and make small, concentrated circles. I’m not even going to tease her. I’m just going to wind her up and let her go.

Her hips move against my hand, her tongue moves against mine, and I want to climb on top of her in the tub and fuck her until she can’t remember her own name.

I push my cock to the unforgiving marble surrounding the tub instead. It’s just enough pain to distract me. Jesus Christ. Maybe it’s not.

Bristol tips her head back. She’s an inch away when she whispers my name and comes, pulsing on my fingers. I keep drawing lazy circles on her clit until she comes again, a slower, softer orgasm.

“There. You can’t possibly be tense anymore.”

She mumbles something I can’t understand.

“You stay like that. I’ll finish the bath.”

I run a washcloth over her, then my hand. I could say it’s so the soap doesn’t cling to her skin, but that’s bullshit. It’s because I want to.

I lift her out of the tub and let her rest her head on my shoulder. Jesus, she’s cute. I dry her off, run a brush through her hair, and take her to bed.

I do *not* fuck her.

I get in next to her, pull the covers up, and let her sleep.

I'M HAVING such a good dream.

A warm, sunny beach. Breeze in my hair. My bathing suit fits just right. It smells sweet, like a bakery might be nearby. A little citrus, too. Similar to the shampoo I buy but more expensive. This is a luxurious beach, completely safe. Waves roll on the shore. Someone laughs. Mia, I think.

It drifts away slowly, which is considerate, and I roll over onto my back and stretch.

I feel *so* good.

It's such a specific feeling that at first I think it's from the dream. What was it, again? Luxury oranges must have played a role. Do those exist?

No...it's more than the dream-oranges. It takes me a minute to place this warmth. This security.

It's what home feels like.

What home is supposed to feel like, anyway. I think it must've felt this way to me once, a long time ago, when my mom was still alive. The familiar heartbreak of missing her rolls in like a wave, but a shallow one. She'd be happy for me, I think. Glad that I got to wake up in such a nice bed.

I take a deep inhale. A nice bed, with the scent of bacon and eggs in the air. A note of Eggo waffles, too, and Will's coffee. Luxury oranges might not exist, but his coffee definitely does. It even smells smooth and delicious.

No idea what time it is, none at all, but I can't bring myself to worry too much about it. Will said I wasn't going to work today. Good thing, because I'm still tired. In the bathroom I brush my teeth and twist my hair into a bun. I should check in with the twins, see how they're feeling about school.

A pair of Will's sweatpants is folded up on the ottoman at the foot of his bed, along with one of his T-shirts. I put them on and pad down the hall.

"No, you can call." That's Will.

Mia says something too quiet to hear.

"Tell her to email me, then. I'm not worried about it. Do you have your water bottle?"

"I might have to make up math homework." Ben says it like he's adding it to a list.

"Do you have to stay at school for that?" Will asks.

"No."

"Plenty of time to do it here."

"Can we play Minecraft first?" Mia sounds...a little sly.

"Can you play Minecraft? What kind of question is that? I thought you had an elementary school degree."

Mia laughs at Will. "They don't give us a degree. Only a diploma."

"*Just* a diploma? That's a disgrace. Show it to me."

"I don't have it yet. Not until the end of this year."

"Then you can play Minecraft for fifteen minutes. Then it's homework. You can't slack on your degree. All set to go?"

I move past the kitchen and find all three of them in the foyer. Will stands in front of the open door. A man and a woman in business casual wait in the hall.

The twins are dressed. Backpacks on. Both of them have a shiny new water bottle in their backpack's mesh pocket.

"Bristol!" Mia rushes over and hugs me, Ben arriving a second later. "We'll see you after school."

“What? I thought—”

“We have a ride.” Ben pats my arm in a reassuring gesture, then heads for the door, taking Mia with him.

“With who?”

Will ushers the twins past him. “With Heather and Drew from my security firm. Heather, Drew, this is Bristol.”

They wave to me, and I wave back, feeling unspeakably awkward. I’m wearing Will’s clothes and I look like I just rolled out of bed, because I *did*.

I rush to the door. They’re already walking away, one agent on either side of the twins. “Have a good day!”

“Okay, Bristol!” Ben doesn’t turn around. “What car do you guys drive? I like to ride in SUVs, but I’m not one of those kids that’s picky about everything.”

“I am. But not cars,” Mia adds.

Will pushes the apartment door shut and locks it.

I stare at the closed door until he turns me around, kisses my cheek, and leads me to the kitchen.

“Do you need a nap?”

“No. I’m just in shock that they went to school. And I didn’t have to nag them into it. Did they eat?”

Will rolls his eyes. His kitchen looks cooked-in. Bowls on the counter. A half a plate of bacon. An empty box of Eggo waffles. “Yes. And I gave them lunch money, too.”

“But—”

“I also packed Mia her emergency sandwich.”

“She told you about the emergency sandwich?” I cover my cheeks with my hands to tamp down the guilt. “I forgot all about it. Everything with my dad and the temp agency and Hughes—”

“It’s fine. I packed it.”

“She didn’t say a word to me.” And she definitely should have. Mia’s taken an emergency peanut butter sandwich to

school with her since the twins started kindergarten. I always filled out the forms for free lunch, but at least half the time, she wouldn't eat it.

Will's hand slides under my chin and tips my face up to his. "Mia is fine. The sandwich is also fine. What about you?"

He's inappropriately beautiful. "Am I dreaming?"

Will leans in and kisses me. He finishes with a gentle nip on my bottom lip. "Does that feel like dreaming?"

"Kind of, yeah."

He shakes his head, a little smile lighting his face. "You flatter me, Ms. Anderson."

"Oh, are you my boss again?"

"I don't know. Do you think it's hot if I'm your boss?"

I'd think it was hotter if he was my boyfriend, but...is he?
"Kind of, yeah."

He huffs in mock offense at my joke, then leans against the counter and pulls me close. Will's wearing jeans and a long-sleeved T-shirt. Normal clothes, but they're expensive. The fabric of his shirt is soft under my palms. The body underneath is hard. I wouldn't mind if he took all of his clothes off right now, but...

"So, you just took over everything and sent the kids to school. Did anything else happen while I was asleep?"

"Not really. I spoke with a nurse at the hospital. Your dad is still in stable condition."

"Good." I hadn't let myself think too much about it, but it's easier to breathe now. "That's good."

"I also stationed a security team outside the twins' school. Heather and Drew will escort them inside, then meet them at the front steps after school."

"What kind of car do they drive?"

Will laughs. "An armored SUV. Ben will be thrilled."

"An...armored? SUV?"

His expression turns serious. “I’m pretty sure that model can survive a nuclear explosion.”

“Wow.” For Mia and Ben. For *me*. This has to mean something. Or it might not mean anything. *Let me take care of you*. Was that a temporary offer? An armored SUV doesn’t seem like something you’d do for just anyone. “And the security...”

“I want them there in case the people after your dad try anything. I don’t think they will now because I put a bounty on Mountain Man’s head.”

“Mountain Man?”

“The guy at the warehouse. Seven feet tall. Too much muscle, if you ask me.”

God, he *was* huge. He could’ve hurt the twins with zero effort, and a man that strong didn’t need a gun to kill my dad. My stomach goes cold, but I push that feeling away. Nothing’s going to happen in Will’s apartment. He wouldn’t have sent the twins with those agents unless he was sure Mia and Ben would be safe. I probably would’ve been a nervous wreck dropping them off, so it’s for the best.

“You have a nickname for him already?”

The corners of Will’s mouth turn down. I love the sheepish, vulnerable look on him, even if he hates it. Maybe especially because he hates it. I don’t think anyone else gets to see him this way. “We’ve met before.”

“You have? Where?” He gives me a look, and I can’t help it. My mouth drops open. “At one of your fights?”

“At the last fight I went to.”

“Oh my God, Will. He’s at least three times your size.” He was covered in blood the night he showed up at my apartment. “You got a terrible concussion. I can’t believe you went up against him.”

“You can’t be retroactively pissed at me about it.”

“I’m not retroactively pissed.”

He glances down at my hands, which have become fists in his shirt. I loosen my grip. Maybe I am a little scared. More than that, I'm worried for Will, even though the fight is over. I don't see how this man would've gotten involved with my dad, unless...

"You don't think he'd take the twins over one fight, do you? He *hurt* you."

"He beat me up, but he didn't win." I put my palms flat to Will's chest and find his heartbeat. Then I put two fingers to the side of his neck and check his pulse there, too. His hands move gently at my waist. "What are you doing?"

"Seeing if you're alive, or if something else is wrong with you. There's no way you beat that guy."

"I did. Ask anyone."

"Are you going to drive me to the warehouse so I can find somebody who's part of your underground boxing club?"

"It's not a club. Anyone can fight. And no, I'm not taking you there." I look into Will's face, and I'm seeing a different person. A supernatural being, maybe. He narrows his eyes. "What?"

"How did you win?"

"He...got ahead. I was pretty fucked up, and I should have tapped out, but I didn't think he was going to quit. And then I thought..." He widens his eyes for a heartbeat, and I could swoon. Will probably has no idea that he looks like this when he's about to admit something he thinks is embarrassing. "I thought of somebody having to tell you that *that* guy killed me during a boxing match, and I lost it. Next thing I knew, I had him on the floor."

"*You* knocked him over?"

Will scowls. "Yes, I knocked him over. And then I beat the shit out of him." His voice gets softer. "I couldn't stop. Some guy from the crowd had to pull me off him."

"Holy shit." It seems impossible for anyone to go up against that guy, but Will did. "So that's why you're banned?"

“How did you know I was banned?”

“You told Sinclair about it when he came to pick you up.” I run my fingertips over the last shadows of the bruises on his face. “The twins were revenge, then.”

“No. He was surprised when I showed up with Evan to get them. I don’t think he knew I was with you.”

With you sounds so good out of his mouth that I want to cheer or dance or something. I don’t. I play it cool. “But...he got away, and he definitely knows now, so—”

“So there’s a bounty on his head. Nobody threatens your safety and gets away with it.”

“Because I was your temp?”

“Because you’re mine, Bristol.”

I stop breathing. Or maybe it’s my heart that stops. Or is it racing? I can’t tell. All I know is that it feels incredible. “Yours?”

“*Mine.*”

“That’s—” My voice breaks into a whisper. “That’s kind of hot.”

“Good. Because it’s kind of true.” Will turns us, pinning me up against the stainless steel front of his fridge. Blue-green eyes take in my face, heating up every place they land. “It’s really fucking true.”

Then he kisses me, and there’s nothing rough about it. He’s gentle, but possessive. Like I’m *his*.

That gentleness is only a little gift. He can give it to me because I belong to him.

And because I belong to him, he doesn’t have to hide, or hold back. Will pushes me harder against the fridge, and his softness disappears.

I HAVE TO FUCK HER.

Couldn't do it last night. Not when she needed me to take care of her. That felt so good I dreamed about it.

This will feel even better, now that I was so patient.

I come up for air and bunch the hem of Bristol's shirt in my fist. "I love this on you."

"You love your shirt on me?" She's pink and breathless, and that word—*love*—makes me want to say it back, which is beyond the pale. I strip the shirt over her head and drop it.

"On second thought, it's better on the floor."

I go for her pants next. *My* pants. I didn't necessarily put them out for her—I was wearing them, and then it was time to get the twins ready for school. Had to be dressed for that.

Bristol's not wearing panties.

As soon as I have the pants off, she's naked. Naked and soft and perfect.

"Holy fuck."

Bristol reaches for the collar of my shirt. I put my hand around her throat before she can get there and use her neck to pull her away from the fridge. She doesn't struggle when I bend her over, my elbow braced on the countertop and her back making the prettiest arch I've ever seen. I run my palm over the curve of her ass. Skim the spot where her ass meets her thighs with my fingertips.

She turns her head to look at me, but I don't let her move too far. My blood has already started a riot in every one of my veins.

I pat her ass. "I want to hurt this."

Bristol shudders, her eyes going dark. "How much?"

I take her hand and put it on the front of my jeans, over my cock. "This much."

More. I've wanted to do this to Bristol since she walked into my office on her first day at Summit. We've always been surrounded by other people. That's how it is in the city. The soundproofing between floors and units in my building is good enough that nobody's going to hear, but you know what would be really nice? A house. With a yard around it. Walls I could soundproof to the very limit of my money.

"Is that all you want?" It might be the hottest thing she's ever said, just from the way she asks. It's an open invitation.

"No." I put her hand back on the countertop. "That's just where I want to start." Soon, I'm not going to have the self-control to stop. For now, I bend and kiss her temple. "Can I turn your ass red, Bristol? I want to see tears in your eyes. They're so fucking pretty."

"Yes. As long as..." She pauses, her face going as scarlet as I want her ass to be. "As long as you say it again."

I stay close. Nip her earlobe. "I can do whatever I want with you, because you're mine."

She lets out a shaky breath, and I flex my fingers around her throat, holding her in place.

Then I bring my hand down on her ass.

It's my good hand, unfortunately for Bristol. Her first gasp turns to a yelp, then an *oh my God*. She pinches her lips closed on five and six, trying to keep the sound in.

"No. I want to hear you when we're alone."

After ten, I stop counting and concentrate on the color of her ass. Pink. Dark pink. Even darker.

“Will. I want—”

A few more, just to see the tears in her eyes. “Tell me.”

“I think I should quit. At Hughes. I think I should be here for the twins. And if my dad—”

I tighten my grip on her throat. “You’ll still be my corporate whore if you don’t go to the office. I have expectations, Ms. Anderson. I expect you to stay here and get on your knees whenever I want. Bend over whenever I say. Be good while I fuck your throat, or your pussy, or your ass, whenever I say.”

“Are you sure? Because I—”

“You can quit your job when I’m finished with you. Does it feel like I’m done yet?”

“No...”

“That’s because I’m not.”

Bristol gasps and shivers and moans in a hot, despairing way. She plants her feet on the kitchen floor and spreads her thighs. Fuck, she’s perfect. Fuck, she’s mine. Her ass is definitely red when I turn her face to mine and look at her eyes through a haze of animal lust. One tear drips down her cheek. A second one.

I pull her upright and lick them off.

She throws her arms around my neck and kisses me so hard we end up by another stretch of countertop. This one’s crowded with bowls, and I sweep them all onto the floor with one arm.

Bristol gasps again. “Oh, no.”

“Oh, yes.” I pick her up and sit her on the countertop.

She whines a little at the pressure on her ass, but that turns into another moan when I push her thighs apart and get on my knees.

Bristol’s dripping.

I kiss up the inside of her thigh until I'm hovering an inch away from her sweet, perfect pussy. Her hands come down to rest in my hair, tentative and shy, like I haven't just spanked her until she was ready to come.

"There's something you should know about me." She makes a low sound at my conversational tone, and I lick her slit with the tip of my tongue, then tease her hole. "I probably should have made it clear before we fucked, but at the time, I was...distracted."

I lick her again, thinking of how hot she was when I was railing her in my office. When she was on her knees under my desk. When I spread her out on the conference room table.

This is better.

I lick her with more concentration, moving my focus to her clit.

Bristol, here in my apartment because she wants to be, not because she owes me a damn thing, is better. Tasting her this way is hotter when I have nothing to hold over her.

I'm about to come in my jeans.

I pull my face away from her pussy, just an inch, and Bristol whines. She tries to pull me back by my hair.

"The fact is..." Honestly, she should be impressed that I sound so collected when she's about to break my neck if it means she can get my mouth back on her clit. "I'm not a man who likes to deny myself the best things life can offer."

Bristol succeeds in yanking my face back to her pussy. I reward her with my tongue on her clit. It's what I did with the pad of my thumb last night, but with more force and pressure.

I only pull back when her thighs start to lock around my head. Bristol makes panting, desperate noises, clutching at me to the point I have to hold her knees apart with both hands.

"I like big risks and big payoffs." I want the sight of her above me burned into my brain. I never want to forget her lips swollen and her eyes still bright from years and her entire

expression pleading with me to keep going. I press a kiss to her clit. “And you’re the biggest payoff.”

“And.” Her fingers clench in my hair. “And the biggest risk.”

I close my mouth over her clit and suck and lick and hum until Bristol’s ass starts to tip over the edge of the countertop. More of her weight balances on my face, and I don’t care. It lets me lick her deeper. She keeps herself from falling when her thighs tighten and she arches her back with a whimper that turns into *Will Will Will* as she comes.

I lick up as much of her sweetness as I can before the rush of blood in my body rockets up to my head and wipes out whatever civilized impulses I had left.

I’m on my feet, my heart pounding, before I realize I’ve decided to stand. I pin Bristol onto the countertop with my hips and tear my shirt over my head. The reasonable part of me I’ve just kicked to the curb asks me why the hell I’m wasting time taking off my shirt when the zipper on my jeans is all that matters.

The unreasonable parts of me doesn’t want anything between us. Not denim. Not air. Nothing.

I’m on her as soon as the jeans land on the floor, my socks pulled off in the process. My skin is supersensitive. Her hands are so soft it takes my breath away, and her fingernails—*fuck*. So sharp. Feels good. Hurts. I push inside her, burying myself in one stroke, because I can’t figure out how to survive if I do it any other way.

Bristol’s fingertips dig into my chest, and then she slides her hands up to my neck. She threads her fingers behind my head.

And then she moves, and that’s it. She wins. Because the slow roll of her hips against mine is like nothing I’ve ever felt. Maybe it’s her face. The way she’s tipped her head back, showing off her neck to me. Her lips, parted while she pants. Her eyes half-closed. I’ve never seen a person more

unselfconscious than this. I've never thought to let a woman search for contact like this. I wouldn't have allowed it.

Fuck *me*, it feels good. Like heat and pressure and something lifting away. She's a perfect fit. Not just her body, but everything.

I fuck Bristol with deeper, slower strokes so she can keep moving her hips like that. My cock is in the sweet vise of her muscles but all my thoughts seem to have disconnected themselves from my brain. I swear, I can feel individual nerves firing. They're like sparks, or like fireworks.

Things just...stop mattering.

One by one, the items on the list that runs through my mind every second of every day drop off and land somewhere else like the clothes I abandoned on my kitchen floor. Some of them are such old, habitual worries that they disconnect themselves like they know they'll be back.

Then it's just me, fucking Bristol, all nerves and heart and nothing to hide behind. No fancy clothes. No apartment. Doesn't matter that we're standing in it, because it's a million miles away. Anything that's not close enough to touch doesn't count.

I'm not some imitation of the kind of decent guy who'd live in this apartment.

I'm just me. That's it.

I want to bite her, so I thread my fingers through Bristol's hair and tilt her head to the side. My left hand keeps her on the countertop. I put my mouth on her skin. I don't plan to lick the curve where her shoulder meets her neck. I just do.

I bite her there, too. That makes Bristol clench tight around me. So does licking my own bite marks.

It's selfish, though, because she's still looking for more pleasure. I could spend my life doing this. However much she wants.

Both my hands go to her hips.

“Will,” she whispers. She’s trembling, hot, and lets me take over for her. I work my hips close to hers, giving her clit as much contact as I can.

Because.

I can’t hold out.

Not much longer. This weekend lasted a lifetime, and this is the end. This is the proof. Us. Here.

Bristol’s breath catches. She’s close, the tight muscles around my cock squeezing, squeezing again.

“Come on my cock, sweetheart. I have to—fuck. I’m not asking you. I’m telling you. There’s no choice. You have to give it to me. That’s what it means to be mine.”

That’s what does it. Bristol’s mouth opens a little wider, and my toes curl at the sound that comes out of her mouth. I’ll never be able to describe it. It’s viscerally sexy.

The pleasure of that sound shoots down to the tips of my toes and bounces back up, and that’s it. That’s how long I could wait. I’ve been on the edge since she stepped into the shower.

My soul erupts out of my body. My release locks me up, my body against hers, and pins me there. I have never, not even with Bristol, come this hard in my life.

Could pass out on the floor, really. My mind’s going with the rest. I’ll never get it back. Everything I have is Bristol’s now.

THE FIRST PLACE we go from the kitchen is straight back to bed. Will says something about a power nap, I think. By the time he pulls the covers up over me, I'm mostly asleep.

It's dark and dreamless and wonderful. The next thing I'm aware of is his body curled around mine, completely relaxed.

Then a gentle alarm.

He's out of bed first, and I roll toward his empty spot. "How long did we sleep?"

"Twenty minutes."

"What? It felt like...I don't know. Hours."

"I told you it was a power nap. Those only last twenty minutes."

I get a glimpse of his sheepish, vulnerable expression, and then he flips the blankets to the end of the bed and takes me to the shower with him.

Will runs his hands through my hair under the hot water. One corner of his mouth tilts down. I know what that's about.

"It was really nice last night. In the bath, I mean."

"Was it?"

"Yes." Will in the shower is art. The droplets cling to hard muscles and form little points of light in his hair. "I'm good now, though. You could just fuck me, if you—"

He has my back against the wall and my legs around his hips before I can think of the rest of the sentence, much less say it. Cold skims my spine from the shower tiles. It feels incredible on my skin, still overheated from the kitchen sex, but nothing feels as good as Will. His hands on me. His face in the curve of my neck. His cock pushing inside until—*yes*, there—

When I've come twice and he's come hard, driving me into the shower wall, he puts me back on my feet and reaches for the shampoo. I try to bat his hands away. "I can do it. Probably faster than you."

"Not better than me." He holds the shampoo above my head until I laugh at him and a bright flush spreads across his cheeks, which he completely fails to hide with his scowl.

I dry my hair at his bathroom counter, then find him out in the kitchen. There's zero evidence of the mess he made when he knocked all those bowls onto the floor.

"You're too fast. I would've helped you."

Will pushes the button to start the dishwasher and meets my eyes with a smile. "Didn't need help."

Whew. He's just standing in the kitchen, and I want to drag him into the bedroom.

Not yet.

"So I thought, since the twins are in school, I should probably go check on my dad."

"Right." Will's brow furrows. "My brothers are on their way over. I thought I should—I don't know. I thought the three of us should sit down." He waves a hand in the air. "And talk. I can do it another time."

"No, don't. I'll be fine at the hospital. My dad might not feel well enough to talk, and I don't want to tire him out too much. It shouldn't take too long."

Will narrows his eyes. "I should be there with you."

"Come with me for the next visit. I really think you should talk to your brothers."

Another scowl. He swipes his phone from the countertop and sends what looks like a pretty terse text, judging by how hard he taps the screen. “Fine. Donovan’s driving you. He’ll accompany you into the building. They’re here.”

He gets to the door just as someone bangs on it.

“Are you in bed?” Sinclair shouts. “Tell me you’re not still naked.”

Will throws open the door. “What the fuck, Sin? Hi, Daphne. Hey, Em.”

I step into my shoes behind him and grab my purse from the little table in the entryway. “Hi, guys. I was just on my way to the hospital, so—”

“How’s your dad?” Daphne’s dark eyes are both gorgeous and concerned. “Any news on when he’ll be released?”

“No news yet. I’m sure I’ll find out more when I get there.”

Daphne glances between me and Will. “Are you going by yourself?”

“Oh, yeah. It’s no big deal. I probably won’t.”

“No. Absolutely not. I’ll go with you for moral support.” She turns, rises on tiptoe, and kisses Emerson’s cheek. His arm slips around her waist, and he holds her close for a moment. “I’ll text you when we get there and when we leave. Do *not* text me first.”

“What if there’s an emergency? Or is this still about the art I sent you when you were at Eva’s?”

Daphne blushes. “That was *not* art.”

“Yes, it was.”

“You’re unbelievable, and we’re leaving. Have fun, Will!” She hooks her arm through mine and tugs me out of Will’s apartment to the sound of Sinclair’s belly laughter.

It doesn’t take long to get to the hospital. Evan pulls the SUV into a spot in the secure area of the hospital’s parking garage and jogs around to open the door for us. Evan stays

close by my side on the walk to the hospital entrance under clear blue skies. I wish we could stay longer in the sun. I wish we could've stayed longer at the beach, but it didn't turn out that way.

We go inside.

"I hope you don't mind that I barged in on your visit." Daphne runs her fingers through her hair, and it falls in elegant waves over her shoulders. "Will texted their group chat after—well, after everything happened. I wanted to call you, but I wasn't sure if—"

A couple with their toddler lean up to a reception desk on one side of the wide lobby. The gift-shop lady directs a man with boxes piled on a dolly past a rack of cards. A doctor in a white coat heads for the entrance. His eyes catch mine and slide away.

There's something about him.

I turn around, trying to name the feeling. Uncertainty?

"Bristol?" Daphne puts her hand on my arm. A woman coming in steps back and holds the door open for the doctor, who hurries out onto the sidewalk, his shoulders rounded. Two big paces into the street. He throws his arm up, and a yellow cab cuts out of traffic. The doctor gets in, and the cab blends in with the cars again. "Are you okay?"

I shake off the intense, weird feeling. "Yeah. Yes. I'm good."

We head out of the lobby. As we pass the hall leading to the emergency department, voices rise.

"Jameson, stop fucking around. You need stitches." A dark-haired man is holding what looks like a hoodie to another guy's forehead. "Next time you call me, I'm knocking you out myself before I bring you here."

"I'm not fucking around, and I don't—Jesus, Gabriel, don't *press* so hard. I'm injured."

"You need stitches, asshole." The first man sings it, kind of, with a little tune. "Are your legs broken? No? Then keep

walking before you get any more blood on my shirt.”

“Do you love your shirt more than me?”

“Yes.”

“Seriously.” We get to the elevators. Daphne stands beside me, and Evan pushes the button for the fifth floor, where my dad is. “If there’s any way I can help you, just say the word.”

“I—” The elevator takes us up. “I can do that. It’s just...”

“What is it?” Her expression is open. Kind. Evan looks at the elevator doors with a stoic expression, like he can’t hear us.

“It’s just that you’re a Morelli. Like...a famous Morelli. And my family is basically a train wreck.” The elevator *dings* and the doors open, letting us out onto the fifth floor. All the good chemicals from sex with Will dissolve out of my blood, replaced by a cold, jittery shame that someone like Daphne Morelli is going to meet my dad.

She faces me in the quiet space near the elevators, Evan hovering nearby. “I don’t know how I seem to you, but—”

“Perfect. The exact opposite of a train wreck.”

Even her small huff of a laugh sounds expensive. “Well, not everything is as it appears. Fancy families have their issues, too. My brother Leo basically raised me.” My eyes must get wide, because she gives me a firm nod. “Yeah. He and my sister Eva. She was always there whenever he had to—whenever he was busy. That’s why I have so much respect for what you’re doing for your siblings. I know it wasn’t easy for Leo and Eva, and it can’t be easy for you.”

I’m surprised to find myself a little choked up. “It’s not that easy, no.” I think of the doctor with his hunched shoulders, practically running out of the hospital, and Mia with her hands over her ears in that warehouse, and Ben’s face when we were waiting for my dad to get out of surgery. “But nothing worth doing is easy.”

Daphne pats my arm. “I totally agree.”

She walks with me to the nurses' station, where a cheerful blonde woman smiles when I tell her I'm here to see my dad. It's kind of her, especially when there's an officer from the NYPD posted outside my dad's door. He has a guard in part to protect him from the men he got involved with, but also because they're keeping him in custody so they can question him about the kidnapping.

"He woke up and had breakfast this morning, right on schedule." The nurse seems impressed. "He's in great condition. He must be determined to get back home."

"Oh, wow." Great condition? A day after he got shot? "I'm glad to hear that."

I take a couple steps away from the nurses' station. Evan moves ahead of me, and Daphne follows. "That's good news, isn't it?"

"I think so, yeah."

"Then why do you look upset?"

I'm not upset, exactly. I'm...uneasy. Just like I was when that doctor brushed by me downstairs.

I move down the hall as quickly as I can, Daphne and Evan hurrying to keep up. The nurse calls after me.

The cop by my dad's door looks young, almost baby-faced. He's not the one who was here yesterday. He holds up a hand as I get close. "Ma'am, I'm going to need to see some identification before I can determine if—"

Daphne draws herself up to her full height, and—woah. She looks cold and regal. Like a Morelli. "This is Mr. Anderson's daughter. Let her through."

The cop backs down. "Of course. Go ahead."

I shoulder the door open.

"Wait." Evan bumps into me. "I go first, remember?"

"Evan, just let me—" I cross the threshold just ahead of him. "Oh, God."

My dad's not in his hospital bed. Someone else is.

A white-haired doctor wearing a haphazardly fastened hospital gown, his wrists tied up with bandages.

Behind me, the cop curses under his breath. There's a shocked gasp from the nurse, who wasn't far behind us. She rushes to the bed at the same time as Evan and starts untying the doctor.

"I knew it. I *knew* it. I should have said something."

"That doctor." Evan's either pissed or guilty. Probably both.

"I just didn't place him because of the coat. And he was moving weird, because he's injured. Of course he would do this. I don't know why I thought anything would be different."

If all the blood hadn't drained out of my face, it would be on fire. It's beyond embarrassing.

My phone buzzes in my purse.

"That him?" The cop's still in the room, doing pretty much nothing.

I give him a withering glare. "Why would he call the scene he just escaped from? Of course it's not him." I've never seen the number on the screen before. "Hello?"

"It's me, Bristol."

I close my eyes. A burner phone. My dad, calling from a burner phone. I open them for just long enough to find the emptiest corner in the hospital room. "What the hell, Dad?"

"I had to get out of there. I need to stop these guys. You don't understand how relentless they are. They know you have the twins, and they won't stop."

"You got *shot*." My voice shakes, and I hate that I can't help it. "You're injured. What do I have to say to get through to you? The only place you should be right now is the hospital. Will's taking care of it?"

"How?" There's a noise in the background, but I can't tell what it is. "Whatever he pays them won't be enough. You know me. I'm always racking up debts. And these are the kind

of guys who'll realize the twins are a hot ransom ticket even without my debt. I have to stop them the old-fashioned way."

My gasp is louder than I meant it to be. "Dad—no. You were never that kind of man." He was never a killer. Never even that violent. This is a huge change, and it's not a good one.

"Yeah, I know. But there comes a time in any parent's life when he has to protect his kids. I missed that boat a long time ago, but better late than never. Don't look for me, okay? I'll be fine, and the three of you will be safe."

"Dad—" The call disconnects.

I make it to the windowsill before my knees give out and sit down with no grace whatsoever.

My dad was wrong. We're never going to be safe.

THERE ARE VERY few things in my life I've regretted more than letting Daphne whisk Bristol off to the hospital. It doesn't feel great to lock the front door with Bristol on the other side.

Sin's laugh tapers off. "You okay, buddy?"

"Shut up. I'm fine."

It's not even noon, but I go to the kitchen and get beers from the fridge. Sin follows me to the kitchen, then the living room, and Emerson appears a minute later without his jacket.

"Here." I push a beer into Emerson's hand, then Sin's, then lead the way to the furniture and sit in the chair I like best. Sin sits sideways on the couch, one of his legs stretched out, and Em sits across from me. He's doing the thing where he pretends not to notice that something's wrong. "Thanks for coming over."

Sin narrows his eyes over his beer. "Is this an intervention? Or did you just want to talk about yesterday?"

"The last thing I want to do is talk about yesterday. It was fucked up."

That's saying something, because we were lucky if we woke up and things were just *fucked up* as opposed to *horrifying* or *nightmarish* or *barely survivable*. What happened to the twins seemed like all those things combined, only worse, which doesn't make any sense. It was my fault, just like our shitshow of a home life was, but I'm not a kid

anymore. I have money. I've won in the ring against people like Mountain Man. It shouldn't have been the same.

"You woke up and the twins were gone?" Emerson's voice is extremely neutral.

"I woke up and got a photo of them on my phone, tied to a utility pole."

Sin covers his eyes. "Jesus."

"Then Bristol ran in, all upset because they'd left a note saying they had to go help their dad. It was a whole fucking thing."

"So...the warehouse guy wants a second chance to kick your ass?" Sin sounds less delighted than tired.

"He does now?"

"How's Bristol?" Emerson asks.

"Tired. Worried about her dad. Worried about the twins. But she doesn't have to worry. I have it under control." What I don't have under control is the pressure rising in my chest. "I should never have taken her to that beach house."

"Why? Both of you had a good time there." Sin shakes his beer at me. "Don't try to argue. I saw you having fun. And yes, it still counts, even if it wasn't some illegal beatdown in a warehouse."

"She keeps a plastic palm tree on her desk at work because her dream is to go on a beach vacation. I can't take her to another and *replace* what happened."

"It's not your fault that the twins believed their dad." Emerson drinks some of his beer, then looks at the label again like he's making a note to buy some for his house.

"I know that."

He meets my eyes. "No, you don't."

I scoff at him and look out the window instead. "I could have done something different. I could have—I don't know. Said something different so they didn't feel like they had to sneak out."

“Is the dad a prick to them?” Sin’s arm is completely over his eyes now. He’s made himself comfortable on my couch.

“He used them as bait to get ransom money.”

“You know what I mean. Was he like Dad when he was around?”

Bits and pieces of a hundred different memories rush to the front of my mind. The dark, too-hot interior of a closet. Light, fading on the other side of the door. Pressure building in my head, and in my jaw. A fist curling into the collar of a shirt that had been washed so many times that it was crumbling at the seams.

“No. If he was like that, Bristol would have left a long time ago.”

“Then that’s why they believed him. And you know as well as we do that even if he *was* like Dad, they’d still try to help him.” Sinclair’s reasonable and calm and I hate him for it.

“The twins were gone at the end of the weekend.” Emerson’s eyes settle on my face. “Something else happened.”

Sinclair uncovers his eyes and sits up with a glance at Emerson. “Besides two kids getting held for ransom?”

My stomach turns over. I felt good before our mother showed up at the beach house. I was imagining a life with Bristol that didn’t involve being pissed off twenty-four hours a day. I want to be sick all over again at the idea of telling them, which means I have to get it over with, or else this is my life.

“Yeah. I found out Mom is alive.”

Emerson freezes. He just goes perfectly still, his hand balanced on the arm of the chair, his eyes on mine. This stillness is what shock looks like on him.

Sinclair leans forward, balancing his forearms on his knees, and lets out a distinctly un-shocked sigh. The air goes out of my lungs, then rushes back in until they feel like they’re about to pop. I feel like I could crush the beer bottle into sand.

“Yeah.” Sin shakes his hair out of his face and looks me in the eye. “I may have lied about that. I wanted to...spare your

feelings.”

“My *feelings*? I don’t have any goddamn feelings. You said she was murdered, Sin. In the park. *Murdered*. I don’t have feelings about it.” I have so many feelings I might die. I’m furious with him. If I could be heartbroken, I’d be that, too. “I’m just saying that the truth would be nice.”

“The truth wouldn’t have helped anyone.”

“And you thought it was better to invent a fictional murder? What the fuck, Sin? You’re supposed to be a journalist.”

“I wasn’t a journalist when I was six.”

“No. Just a liar.”

He has the balls to look hurt, but Emerson un-freezes before Sin can say anything else.

“Alive?” *He* doesn’t look like he’s going to crush his beer bottle. “Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure. She showed up at the beach house on Saturday morning and tried to talk to me. Apparently Bristol met her outside the Hughes building a few weeks before, which is just—it’s great. I love that everyone has met her except me. At least Emerson remembers her.”

I don’t know whether I’m on fire or freezing. All I know is that it’s every inch of my skin, head to toe.

Emerson looks out the big picture window, then back at me. “Where is she now?”

“I have no idea. I told her to fuck off.”

It takes a lot for surprise to show on his face, but I’ve done it. Emerson’s eyes go wide. “But she’s our mom.”

“She *left*.” I want to hit someone. Punch them right across the face. Even better if I can feel the blow land, too. Instead, I’m forced to settle for deep breathing and not punching a single thing. “I know this is a lot for you to deal with, but it’s fine that you’re losing your shit.”

Emerson leans back in his chair and drums his fingers on his beer bottle. One, two, three, four, five. “I’m not losing my shit. I’m fine.”

Sinclair’s brow furrows. He cuts his eyes to Emerson, who leans back in his chair. “Yeah, Will. He seems fine.”

“He’s numb with shock, that’s why. He’s just good at hiding his breakdowns.”

Sin turns the full force of his skepticism on me. “No, he’s not. He’s been the worst at it for his entire life.”

Now *Emerson* looks skeptical, which makes me feel indignant as fuck. Skeptical and concerned. “Are you sure *you’re* okay?”

“Sure as hell doesn’t look okay,” Sin says.

I stare at both of them. “I cannot believe I’m the only one who cares about this.”

Emerson shakes his head. “You’re not the only one who cares. *I* care.”

“You’re just sitting there.”

“So are you. Except you want to kill someone.”

“I want to punch someone, Em. There’s a difference.”

“You can punch me if you want.” Sin puts his beer on the coffee table and opens his arms. “I’m the one you’re pissed at.”

“I’m pissed at *her*. She’s the one who left.”

“Just to be clear.” Emerson raises a hand. “You can’t punch Mom.”

“I don’t want to punch Mom, for fuck’s sake. I just want —” I don’t know. Would surfing help? Would screaming? Somehow, half of my beer is gone, but I don’t remember drinking it. I finish the rest. It doesn’t do anything. It’s not an answer to the questions I have. I’m not even sure what the question is. I only know it hurts.

“Do you think you could find her?”

I'm about to say *no*, but Emerson's not asking me. He's asking Sin.

"Of course he can." It comes out bitter and mean. "He can find sources in war zones. His favorite countries are the ones with infrastructure that's been torn to shit. Finding Mom would be child's play."

"Will." Sin sets his beer on the table. I'm definitely not losing my shit, but I might if he keeps using that voice, like I need to be handled carefully. I don't. I've spent my life being handled exactly the way I deserve. "You can just say it. That would be better than stroking out."

"If you knew she was alive, why didn't you look for her before?" The angle of the room changes, and it takes a few minutes to realize I'm on my feet. "You've been jumping off mountains for years. Would it have been that hard to get her phone number?"

He's on his feet, too, and Emerson. Em puts out his hand, palm open. "Do you want to go outside?"

"No, I don't want to go *outside*. Stop looking at me like that."

"Come over on Friday." It's such a bizarre turn to the conversation that it snaps me back into my body. Hands in fists. Lungs working overtime. Face hot. Fuck. *Fuck*. "We can surf. And we can talk about where you might want to go next."

"What do you mean, *go*?"

"With kids, it's nice to have a yard. A little more space. Don't you think?"

"I don't—" *Have* any kids, but I can't finish the sentence. This should not be working, not even slightly, but then I think of Mia and Ben in a treehouse. I think about Bristol in a garden. I don't even know if she likes gardens, but she can't have her own garden in my building.

I unclench my fists, but it takes several breaths before I can focus on Emerson.

"I don't have time for bullshit like house hunting."

Emerson puts his hands in his pockets and shifts into a relaxed posture that looks borrowed from someone else. “What if you didn’t have to hunt?”

I don’t know what he’s doing with his face. It’s way too casual for the tension of the moment, and—hopeful? “That’s not how real estate works.”

It’s a tooth-and-nail fight, even if you have the money, which I do. And if this is for Bristol and the twins, I don’t want that. I don’t want the high-stakes decisions and the inevitable disappointment.

“You said Bristol loves the beach.”

“Yes. She loves the fucking beach. And obviously—” I suppress the urge to throw up a bottle’s worth of tequila at the thought of getting that photo of the twins. “Security would be a nightmare.”

“It’s not a nightmare at my house.”

“We can’t move in with you, Emerson.”

“I wouldn’t dream of suggesting that.” A quirk at the corner of his mouth says he would suggest it if he thought it was for the best. “I meant you could consider moving in next door.”

“Next door to *you*?”

“Yes.”

“How the hell would I pull that off, Em? You have neighbors.”

“I *had* neighbors. Now I have a second house.”

“What? Why?”

“Because when Daphne moved in, Leo offered the closest neighbors a buyout at half a million over asking and acquired the property across the street in the deal.”

“For...?”

“Security. The teams are stationed in a gatehouse across the street, which is the same style as the cottage on the

property so it's not so conspicuous. The plan can adjust to wrap around both houses.”

I don't know what to do with an offer that's not a challenge. I wouldn't have to punch anyone. Fight anyone. I could just... give that to Bristol.

“I'll think about it.”

“Okay.”

“I said I'll *think* about it.”

Emerson gives me a slow nod. “...okay.”

Now that I've gotten a grip, though, there's still something I need to know. “Why aren't you angry about Mom?”

He blinks. Pauses. “She's alive.”

“That's it?” I sound astonished. “It's that simple? She's alive, so you're not pissed? She *left*.”

A small shake of his head. “I just tried not to think of her. It was...” His lips form a thin line. “I never wanted to think of her being dead. I'm not angry that she's alive.”

Sin pushes a hand through his hair. “When I figure out where she is, what do you want me to do? Should I schedule a dinner?”

“*No*.” I'm too loud, and another wave of frustration rings heat around my neck. “Obviously not. We're not one big, happy family.”

“Well.” Emerson shrugs. “We never will be, but that's not her fault. That's Dad's fault.”

No. It's *my* fault. I'm the reason she left in the first place. I'm the reason we lived in hell. But my brothers don't know that. They'll never understand. And if I told them—if I *made* them understand—they wouldn't want anything to do with me.

FOR THE SECOND Friday in a row, we pick up the twins from school and head out of the city for a family get-together.

It's...astonishing, actually. Will, going to meet his family. Taking *us* to meet his family. I thought it might be a one-time thing, but here we are, slowing down and turning off the road. Evan's SUV pulls in behind us. A big front gate swings open as Will drives closer.

"It doesn't open automatically for everyone." He pulls to a stop just inside the gate. "Daphne and Em, obviously, but Sin and I have sensors on our cars."

"Is that guy hiding?" Ben asks from the back seat.

"If you can see him, he means for you to see him." Will rolls down his window. "Mike. I have a second car with me."

The man detaches from the shadows and jogs over to Will's window. "How many guests?"

"One. My bodyguard, Evan Donovan."

The guard—Mike, I guess—takes out his phone and taps something on it. "Got it. Go ahead."

Behind us, the gate opens a second time. Will keeps going toward the house. It's a *beach house*, like something out of a magazine.

"There's, like, four guys out here." Ben's face is practically pressed to his window. "Wait. Five."

"Six." Mia taps at her window. "What are they doing?"

“Changing shifts.” Will glances over at me. “What?”

“Is it...” I lower my voice. “Are there so many agents because of what happened?”

He huffs a laugh. “No. It’s like this all the time. Morellis take security *very* seriously.” Will throws the SUV in park near the front porch, then reaches for my hand. He brushes his lips across my knuckles. “We’re extremely safe. Okay, guys, we’re here.”

Daphne and Emerson meet us at the door to his house, which reminds me of a giant, expensive art gallery, if that art gallery was also warm and comfortable and exciting.

“Hey, guys.” Sinclair pokes his head out of a doorway down the hall. “Don’t worry. I’m here.”

Mia waves to Sinclair, beams at Daphne, and turns immediately to Emerson, her expression turning so serious that my heart speeds up. “Did you read my book?”

Emerson takes his hand out from behind his back. He’s holding a very familiar battered paperback with colored tabs sticking out of the top. “This book?”

She taps her thumbs against her fingers. One, two, three, four, five. “That one.”

“I read it twice and took notes.”

Mia holds her breath, her eyes sparkling. I pat her gently on the back. “Do you want to read the second one after I answer your questions?”

Emerson takes a step to the left, revealing a narrow table that holds a flower arrangement and a brand-new box set of books, still shrink-wrapped.

“Yes,” Mia whispers. And then, louder: “I’ll open them for you. How many notes did you make? I didn’t notice some things about it until I read all the books twice.” She pauses from digging her fingernails into the shrink wrap and blinks like she’s just now noticing the foyer. “You *really* love paintings, don’t you?”

Daphne laughs out loud, and then the entryway is filled with people talking over one another. Will introduces Evan to Daphne. Emerson says something to Mia about the galleries, plural, he has in this house. I hear "...about a library? Do you have one of those?" Sinclair pops back out and calls to Ben about Minecraft.

"You'll have dinner with us." Daphne stands in front of Evan, feet planted, hair in a sleek, shining ponytail that looks like it cost a million dollars. Evan shakes his head. "Yes, you will."

"No need. I'm not hungry." He flashes her a polite smile.

"He's lying." I shouldn't say it, really, but he *is*. "I saw how he looked at every single hot dog I brought him outside my apartment."

Daphne spears Evan with a glare that makes her look six inches taller. "You are going to sit with us and eat and have a lovely time, *Evan*. I promise, the worst-case scenario is that you make some friends. Would that be so awful?"

Emerson reaches over Mia to touch Daphne's shoulder. I don't think she hears Evan's quiet *yes*.

But he doesn't put up a fuss when Will shepherds all of us down the hall to the enormous, fancy kitchen at the back of the house. I don't know how Emerson does it. Everything looks more expensive than I could afford in a million lifetimes, but I don't feel shabby at all.

Maybe it's Will. He doesn't hover over me, but every time he comes close, his fingertips brush over the small of my back. It sends small shivers down my spine, followed by a rush of heat, every time.

"Why are all of you *here*?" Sinclair shouts over the noise of three simultaneous conversations happening at once. "I'm touching hot things."

"Jesus, Sin." Will rolls his eyes. At Will's joking, exasperated tone, Sin's shoulders relax.

"What? I've touched hotter things before. The rest of you don't have the same experience." Sinclair swings his arms out

wide to clear the space around him, which no one is standing in, then approaches the oven with a mitt on both of his hands. He pulls two big trays out of the oven and sets them on the stovetop. “Serving dishes. Go, go, go.”

Emerson opens a slim cupboard near the stove, shushing Sinclair with the air of someone whose church service just got interrupted. He slides two oval trays onto the countertop, and Sinclair uses a spatula to push the—

What is it? It looks like perfect, golden-brown crescent rolls folded over in a circle. “What are we having? It looks amazing.”

“Taco ring.” Two voices answer at once. Will and Emerson.

Sinclair snorts. “These two have cheese. These two don’t.”

Mia, who has become Emerson’s shadow, stares. “Those are tacos?”

“Except.” Emerson hovers a hand over the ones without cheese. “The crescent rolls are sweeter than tortillas. And softer.”

“Wow.” Mia’s awed whisper makes Sinclair turn his head to the side to hide a delighted smile. He shoots a look at Will, who shrugs.

“Lucky guess.”

Ben pushes in next to Mia, and Sinclair has to wave everyone away, because it’s time to carry the food to the dining room. There are refried beans and two kinds of tortilla chips and Spanish rice and a bowl of roasted vegetables.

Will slides into the seat next to me and curls his arm around my shoulders, just for a second.

“Cheese or no cheese?” Daphne stands next to me, serving spatula in hand.

“Cheese. Please.” She drops a wedge of taco ring on my plate, and I turn to accept the bowl of roasted vegetables from Will. “When were you going to tell me the taco ring story?”

His brow furrows. “What story?”

“You’re the one who suggested it for dinner, aren’t you? Is that because it’s your favorite thing to eat?”

He leans in close, his exhale brushing the shell of my ear. “It’s not my favorite thing to eat.”

“Oh my God.” Too many roasted vegetables spill onto my plate. My face feels fresh out of the oven. “You can’t just say —”

“Your pussy. That’s my favorite thing. Feels like it wasn’t totally clear.”

I close my eyes, and the bowl of vegetables lifts out of my hands.

“Bristol, you’re *so* red. Are you okay? Is it too hot in here?”

I open my eyes to Daphne’s beautiful, concerned expression looking down at me.

“No, no, it’s perfect. Don’t worry about me.”

Daphne narrows her eyes at Will, then turns to serve herself vegetables. I attempt to elbow his ribs and fail. He’s too fast, one palm stopping my attack before I can get started. There’s a flicker of vulnerability in his eyes, and my heart squeezes.

“Sin found the recipe at the grocery store after our Dad—” He cuts his eyes around the table. Nobody’s paying attention. “After he went to prison and we moved in together. It was on one of those cards they put by the refrigerated section, I guess. Tried a ton of recipes like that, with only a few ingredients.”

“Because money was tight?” Will adds Spanish rice to my plate and uses the serving spoon to nudge it gently away from the vegetables. “Crescent rolls are kind of a splurge, though.”

“Sin was a little bit famous on Instagram, so we were okay for the first time in our fucking lives.” He hands the Spanish rice to Daphne over my head. “And crescent rolls are the same every time, as long as you cook them the same way every time. Like Mia’s Eggo waffles.”

Across the table, Mia and Emerson are carrying on a conversation that's simultaneously about art and books.

"In general, I'm not drawn to contemporary art, with a few exceptions. One of them is fairly obvious."

Mia has her fork poised on her plate between a tiny helping of roasted vegetables and her taco ring. Without asking, Emerson reaches over and retrieves her knife. She lifts her fork just as he slides the knife into its place.

"What's the obvious one?" She tests the taco ring with the tines of her fork.

"Daphne. That's one of her paintings." He gestures to a canvas that takes up quite a bit of the accent walls.

Mia's eyes get round. "In general, I think nonfiction is boring."

"In general, I agree."

"How many mountains have you jumped off of?" Ben demands, eyes locked on Sinclair. "More than ten?"

"Recreationally or for journalistic purposes?" Sin asks, tone serious.

"Um. Both? Do you always have to jump off a mountain, though? For your job?"

"It was the first nice place we ever lived in," Will continues, covered by Daphne asking Evan where he's from. "Didn't make moving any easier."

"For you, or...?"

"Em was so stressed that he'd only eat if he could eat the same things every day, except toward the end there was so little food at Dad's that he had no idea what he'd even want."

"What about you?"

"What about me?"

"Did you know what you wanted to eat?"

Will huffs. "No. I had no idea. Anyway, taco ring is good, and it was cheap enough to take a risk on. I was just happy

Sinclair was making so much food.” He meets my eyes, as serious as Sinclair was with Ben. “Never reveal that to anyone.”

“Or else what?”

Will’s eyes darken. “Or else I might like to see my favorite shade of red on your—”

“Deal. *Deal.*”

He laughs, and it’s an easy sound that goes straight to my heart.

AFTER DINNER, we all bring dishes to the kitchen and start cleaning up. Daphne claps her hands. “I have a big art studio upstairs with virtually unlimited paint and canvas, if anyone wants to—”

Mia’s hand shoots up in the air. Ben nods a little too hard.

“Great! Follow me.”

Ben’s asking her questions before they’re out the door. Moments later, there are running footsteps on the stairs.

Evan leans against one of the countertops near where Emerson and Sinclair are loading the dishwasher. “I assume it’s time for the discussion.”

Will looks up from where he’s putting leftovers in glass containers. “Did you find him yet?”

Evan shakes his head. “There were lots of people in the warehouse. My team is working on getting names. None of *you* should be conducting any solo searches.”

Sinclair gets very focused on arranging plates in the bottom rack. “You’re never really alone in the city.”

“I mean it. No *Three Musketeers* shit. These guys are dangerous.”

“We’re dangerous,” Emerson says.

Evan laughs, but...*was* it a joke? “Point is, we don’t know where they are, and I’m not satisfied with the level of protection we’re able to provide at your building, Will.”

“I came to the same conclusion.” He puts the glass containers into the fridge, closes it, then comes to stand at my side. The mood shifts. “It’s not safe for us to stay there much longer. We have to make security a higher priority.”

“Okay...” Sinclair shuts the dishwasher, and then he and Emerson are also leaning against the counter, everyone looking *too* casual. “What should we do, then? Where should we go?”

The serious, no-bullshit expression on Will’s face cracks wide open, and he can’t get it back. He sets his chin, and I’m light-headed with anticipation and nerves. He tells me more about his life before we met when we’re in a room with his brothers than he does when we’re alone. I think they’re the only people he trusts. And whatever he’s about to say, he’s going to do it while they’re here.

“Since the security is an issue at my apartment, I bought the house next door to Emerson’s.”

My mouth drops open. I didn’t get a good look at the house next door in particular, but this whole street is full of huge, ritzy beach houses. This is *waterfront property*.

“We’ll have the same security as Emerson and Daphne, like both houses are one property, so there won’t be any gaps. And Emerson works from home, so there’s almost always someone here.” Will crosses his arms over his chest. “That’s what I think we should do, if you—if you think you’d be happy there.”

I can’t see him anymore. He’s blurred out by hot, surprised tears. “A house? A whole house?”

The corner of his mouth turns up. “I bought the whole thing, yeah.”

“I’ve always wanted a house.” I never, *ever* thought I would own one. Ever. “When—is it—”

“I had some renovations done this week. Everything’s—it’s all new.” Will points out the kitchen window. Lights are on in the windows of the house next door. The house he *bought* for us. “We can stay there tonight, if you want.”

“That’s it? I just have to say *yes*?”

“There’s just one other thing.” He takes his phone out of his pocket and swipes at the screen, then hands it to me. “This is the last piece of paperwork to complete the title transfer. If you type your name right there—” He points. “It’ll be yours, too.” Will drops his voice. “You’ll never have to worry about losing it.”

I type in my name. A question floats through my mind. What if we get married? What if I change my name? I don’t ask. My throat is too tight, and the house is *now*. All the rest—*later*.

Will takes his phone, scrolls to the bottom of the screen, and presses a button. “Done. I don’t know how you want to tell Mia and—”

I’m overwhelmed by joy and relief and excitement and a *dream coming true* when I didn’t expect it, and my body just moves. I want to be close to him. He’s about to say *Ben* when I get my arms over his shoulders so I can pull him down into a big, tight hug.

Will’s whole body tenses.

I feel the shock in his shoulders first. His balance shifts away. He takes a short, sharp breath. It reminds me of surprise pain. A paper cut, but this seems worse.

The hug was a mistake. I don’t know what to do first. Let go? Apologize?

“What are you—*no*.” His hands fly to my wrists. He pushes them down and away and takes a step back. “Don’t do that.”

“Will, I—” My stomach drops at the look on his face. He’s horrified, with spots of color high on his cheeks, and I have the awful, rushing sensation that I’ve done something unbelievably rude. Something unforgivable. “I didn’t mean—”

“Don’t.”

It would be better if the roof caved in on me and pinned me to the ground. I feel like it has, but there are no shingles to hide me from the people in the room. The people who just watched me screw up after Will *bought me a house*. I’ve never been so embarrassed in my life.

At that moment, Mia and Ben burst into the kitchen. “Bristol, you have to see what we’re making.” Ben’s smiling, but his face falls as soon as he sees me. As soon as he sees Will. “Bristol?”

I’m moving before I know it, half-blind with fresh tears, a big, aching bruise at the center of my ribs. “Yes. Show me.”

Behind me, Will curses under his breath. “Bristol.”

I don’t turn around. Mia and Ben drag me toward the stairs, their hands tentative in mine, and I blink away my tears like it’s my job and try to ignore the rock wedged in my throat. They take me upstairs to a wide landing and through a set of doors.

Daphne’s art studio.

It’s bright and airy, with huge windows taking up an entire wall and doors on each side of the space. Classical music plays at an inoffensive volume. No, wait—it’s a pop song I recognize, just with violins and piano. The twins tug me toward three easels set up in the middle of the floor. Daphne stands in front of the one on the left. “Did you find her?” she asks, without turning around.

“This is mine.” Ben points to the one on the right. “And that’s Mia’s.”

Ben’s canvas looks like a very abstract flame, with red and orange and yellow. Mia’s is half-filled with circles in teal-blue shades that start out small in one corner and get larger toward the center.

“These are great, guys. Really. When you’re done, we should hang them up for sure.” I put as much enthusiasm into my voice as I can.

Daphne puts down her paintbrush, and I feel her notice me. A soft *uh-oh* confirms that I'm not looking great. "Want to paint with us, Bristol? Or if you need a break, I recommend the chair on the right."

I meet her eyes and wish I could be as collected as she is. Daphne tilts her head toward two identical overstuffed chaise lounges in one corner of the studio, near the window. They have big, round arms, and each one has a navy throw blanket folded over the back.

"I'll watch you guys."

"Watch *me*, Bristol." Mia picks up her brush from the tray at the front of her easel.

I head for the chairs, drop into the one on the right, and pull the throw blanket into my lap. It's not like I can leave. Where would I go? To the house next door, or back to Will's? Or...somewhere else? And...it wasn't a fight, was it?

"I think the circles should get smaller again." Mia peers at her canvas.

"Go for it." Daphne shoots another kind, concerned look at me, and I give her a weak, unconvincing smile. "If you don't like how it turns out, you can paint over it and start again."

The twins are having too much fun with the paintings to pay much attention to me, which is a good thing. I smile in the direction of the easels in a vague, everything-is-fine sort of way.

I'm not sure how long I've been doing it when there's movement at the studio door.

My heart does a funny leap—Will?—but it's Emerson, carrying a travel mug in one hand and a regular mug in the other. He stops by the canvases, where Daphne peers at her canvas, head tilted, hand at her ponytail. She lets go of her hair, and Emerson slides the travel mug into her hand.

"I'll need more gallery space if the three of you keep this up."

"We're going to," Daphne teases. "Brace yourself."

He bends down, kisses her cheek, and continues toward my corner of the room as if this hasn't turned into the worst, most awkward evening in the entire world.

Will's brother steps between the two chaise lounges and sits facing away from the canvases. My embarrassment comes back in a wave. I want to hide under the throw blanket.

Emerson holds out the mug. "Decaf Earl Grey with milk and sugar?"

"Sure. Thanks." The mug is nice. It has a decent weight to it, and the tea gives me something to look at. "Did Will leave?"

"No, he's downstairs at my kitchen island doing a shitty job of acting like nothing happened."

I sip the tea. It's the perfect temperature and the perfect sweetness. "Does he want *me* to leave?"

"I know for a fact he wants you to move into the house next door with him."

With the mug in my hands, I find the nerve to look him in the eyes. I can't blame Mia for thinking Emerson and Will might be twins. But there's no hint of a scowl on Emerson's face. No nervousness. He's calm. Too calm, maybe.

"He didn't seem to like me very much just now. He acted like I...I don't know. Like I stabbed him." A belated flash of anger straightens my spine. "All I did was give him a hug. I wasn't trying to embarrass him in front of the guys. I don't know how a hug from someone you—" I snap my mouth shut to keep the word from coming out. "I don't know why it's so wrong."

"Do you want to know?"

"That's...not what I expected you to say." I take a sip of my tea to buy a few seconds. "But yes. I do."

Emerson takes a breath, and for the first time in the conversation, something happens in his eyes. A moment of distance, like he's stepped behind some curtain in his mind. Gone, then back again.

“I’m assuming, since you’re the first woman he’s ever brought to meet us, that he’s told you some things about our childhood.” Emerson pauses, listening to Mia ask Daphne another question about her circles, and lowers his voice. “About closets, in particular.”

My heart sinks. “Yeah. He has. If that’s something you’d rather not talk about, it—”

“It’s just what happened. Talking about it for five minutes seems preferable to letting the evening become a bad memory. Also, Daphne’s almost done painting, so we have a limited amount of time to avert disaster.”

Daphne’s at her canvas, looking totally absorbed. “How can you tell?”

“Her ponytail.”

“What about—” Daphne reaches up to her ponytail and twirls it around her index finger. Her eyes move from the canvas to the window to the shelves. “Oh.”

“When our Dad would take Will out of the closet, he’d use Will’s shirt for leverage.” Emerson delivers this in the same, even tone. He taps the shoulder of his own shirt to demonstrate. “He’d drag Will out the same way every time, with his right hand.”

“Because...”

“Will swung with his left.”

Everything Will has ever said about fighting, about the matches at the warehouse, about college—it all comes together. “And then...they’d...”

“And then Dad would beat him. Will would try to protect himself. Sometimes Sin and I could make Dad stop, but not always.” He glances down at the floor, then back to me. “Not always. I have regrets about those times.”

“I’m sure...” I clear my throat and refuse to cry. “I know you did your best.”

Emerson waves this off. “It’s not hugs, Bristol. It’s that the beginning of a hug feels like being pulled out of the closet.

And that almost always meant getting hit by somebody who was bigger and stronger and angrier.”

“I was...I was gentle.”

“So was our Dad. He didn’t want to fuck up the shirts, because he didn’t have the money to replace them.”

Daphne puts her paintbrush down, steps back from her canvas, and sips her tea.

What I’m not going to do is cry. What I’m not going to do is let some asshole of a father ruin today.

“My painting’s done,” Mia announces.

Ben studies his canvas. “Mine too.”

“This isn’t your fault.” Emerson’s sincere, and in this moment, his voice is an exact match for Will’s that day in the hospital. *This isn’t your fault.* “Okay? You didn’t know. And Will’s not angry. He just needs some time to get over his nightmare scenario, which is—”

“Having feelings in front of other people.”

Emerson nods, solemn. “I can’t imagine anything more horrifying.”

It makes me laugh. “I’m sorry this was our first real conversation.”

“I’m not. As far as first conversations go, this one was pretty good. You didn’t even try to stab me.”

“Who tried to *stab* you?”

“My brother-in-law.”

This time, my laugh is genuinely surprised. He’s definitely kidding. People from rich families don’t go around trying to stab each other. It works, though. I’m not on the verge of tears. “Could you do something for me?”

Emerson sits up straight. “Name it.”

“Text Will and tell him I’m ready to see the house.”

THE SLAM of a door would make the most sense. A car, speeding away from Emerson's house. Cold silence.

Instead, Sinclair makes coffee and tells Evan about the prince he rescued from a crevasse. Emerson makes tea and disappears upstairs. I sit at the kitchen island and wish a meteor would fall directly on top of me.

It hasn't been that long when I get the text.

Emerson: Bristol's ready to see the house. Put your shoes on.

"Shoes. *Shoes*, Sinclair." I've interrupted him mid-sentence.

He raises his eyebrows. "Excuse me?"

"Get your shoes on. You too, Evan. Bristol wants to see the house."

The three of us are in the foyer when the twins race down the stairs at a breakneck speed, Emerson and Daphne following.

Bristol's last.

I can't take my eyes off her. She's in leggings and a soft sweater, her dark hair in a bun on the top of her head, and there's nobody in the world I've ever wanted more. There's also nobody in the world I've acted like more of a prick to.

The twins' guesses about what we're going to see while they put their shoes on fade to nothing.

I should give her space. I should just keep my fucking mouth shut. I'm going to do both those things, except I don't. I brush past Evan and go to meet her.

She pauses on the bottom step, bringing her almost eye-level with me. Her eyes are a little red, which makes the green look brighter.

I'm sorry. That's what I'm supposed to say. "I can buy you another house. Any house."

Bristol wrinkles her nose. "I want the one next door."

"I don't have to live in it."

She narrows her eyes. "Yes you do, Mr. Leblanc. I won't agree to the offer otherwise."

Weight lifts off my shoulders. "You're funny, Ms. Anderson. Negotiation happens *before* your signature goes on the paperwork."

"I guess I should read over what I signed. Did you sneak in a line that says I'm your permanent corporate whore?"

"The house *does* have an office."

"I'm in trouble, then."

I want to keep playing with her. Teasing her. Joking with her. Even if it hurts as much as it feels good.

I can't.

I put my hands on her waist. "No. Not in trouble."

"Good." Bristol leans in, puts her hands carefully on my chest, and kisses me. It's a soft, sweet kiss. "Neither are you. Can I see the house now?"

I take her to see the house.

On the front porch, I tell the twins that it's theirs, and Bristol's, and mine. Mia's eyes get so wide they take up most of her face. Ben clutches her arm. "What? What? *What?*"

Nothing—no business deal, no boxing match—could ever compare to the way Bristol’s face lights up when we go through the front door.

I had the last cleaning service turn on lamps all through the house, so the first thing she sees beyond the foyer is the huge living room it opens into, and out the glassed-in doors—

Mia and Ben go into the living room holding hands, like they’re walking into Narnia. They stop when their faces are an inch from the glass on the doors.

“Is that—” Ben whispers. “Is that a pool?”

“It is, yeah.” I feel weirdly proud of the pool. The ocean’s right there, but they have options.

He whips around to face me. “When are the people going to come and get all their stuff?”

“You mean the furniture?”

A slow nod from Ben.

“They’re not. It’s our stuff, just to start out with.”

He gasps. “These are really nice couches!”

“You’ll have to let me know if the beds are okay, too.”

Sinclair pounds on the open front door. “Can we come in yet or what?”

“Yes!” shouts Bristol, and for a good twenty minutes it’s the best kind of chaos I’ve ever seen. Daphne compliments everything she sees and somehow manages to sound totally genuine, every time. Mia drags Bristol upstairs. I arrive just in time to see her enormous grin at the sight of her new bedroom.

“Bookshelves,” she says. “It’s bookshelves.”

It looks like a bedroom sprouted up in the middle of a library. Mia walks around, touching everything with her fingertips, obviously in love.

“Don’t worry.” Her head snaps up at the sound of my voice. “We’ll work on your book collection starting tomorrow.”

She's perfectly still, frozen at the foot of her bed, for a good ten seconds.

Then, light and fast, she crosses the room and throws her arms around my waist, squeezing tight.

"Mia." Ben's voice is trembling. "You have to see my room."

His has a panel built into the wall with lights that look like a data stream from a movie. From the way Ben stares, it's his version of a dream come true. Mia leans her head on his shoulder, and they watch the lights together until he takes a deep breath and turns his head.

"How long until we can stay here?"

"Oh." I stick my hands in my pockets. "We can stay now."

"Like...tonight?"

"Yeah. There are clothes in your closets. I can have someone bring the rest of your things tomorrow.'

Bristol puts her hand on the small of my back, leaning close.

"We can just...stay?" Ben's eyes shine. "You won't miss your apartment?"

"Nope. Everything I need is here."

The twins make another loop of the house with all of us in tow, discovering the giant-ass finished basement in the process. At the end, Mia looks out the living-room windows, motionless, while Ben stands next to her. Then, without a word, the two of them head for the stairs.

Ben pokes his head over the second floor balcony railing. "Thanks," he whispers.

"You're welcome," I whisper back.

After a few minutes, Bristol goes up to check on the twins. She comes back not long after, her face flushed. "Asleep on top of the covers."

“Oh!” Daphne gets up from the chair she’d taken in the living room. “You probably want to be alone. We can—”

“No, stay.” Bristol twists her fingers together. “If you’re not busy. I like the sound of...” Her blush gets deeper. “Of everyone talking.”

“I need to check in with my teams.” Evan’s been included in the house tours. Frankly, he’s gone above and beyond the call of duty. “Security’s been on the property all week, so you should be good for the night. I’ll get back with you tomorrow.”

Bristol sees him to the front door—*her* front door—and returns looking both exhausted and excited.

“Your sitting room looked *so* cute. Should we go chat?” Daphne asks. It’s a smaller room off the main bedroom. I hoped Bristol would like it.

“Yes. We definitely should. Like, this second.”

“If I fall asleep, it’s not my fault.”

“I won’t say anything if you do.”

Daphne laughs, and then it’s just me and my brothers.

Sinclair goes to the kitchen and opens the fridge. “Good. You have beer. Let’s go to the den.”

We do. You can see Emerson’s lights from the den, and something about that seems almost ridiculously right. Not that I *need* to live next door to either of my brothers. This is just about safety.

Emerson sprawls on one of the couches, Sinclair takes an armchair, and I end up on a love seat across from them.

“Heard anything about Mom?” Emerson asks, directing the question to Sin like he doesn’t want me to overhear.

“Not yet. Haven’t given up, though.” Sin opens his beer and gives me a look. “Now that the house stuff has been decided...what are you going to do about Hughes?”

We can talk about it, if he wants, but there’s something else I want to know first.

“What did you say to her?” Whatever it was, I owe him for it. I almost fucked myself out of a good thing for no reason tonight.

Emerson sits up and looks at me. “I told her why you lost your shit about the hug.”

Maybe I *don't* owe him. “I didn't—” Well, fine. I lost it a little. “You made up a reason?”

“No, I told her the truth.”

“The truth is that I don't like hugs.”

He shakes his head, and a jittery, anxious feeling takes over most of my torso.

“This is bullshit.” I point my beer bottle at him. “You can't keep secrets about other people *from those people*. If you know something, then you have to tell me, asshole.”

Sin's watching this with an interest that strikes me as journalistic. I hate him, sort of.

Em rolls his beer bottle in his palms. “Do you remember what Dad would do when he let you out of the closet?”

“No.” The memories are short. All worn out. How *bright* it seemed. The way my heart would pound in my throat. A fist in my face.

Emerson sighs. I see it happen. He's looking at me, but for a heartbeat, there's nobody behind them. He's elsewhere. Then she shakes it off and stands up, crossing to my side of the room.

He's too tall looming over me, so I stand up, too. So does Sin. Emerson hands off his beer to Sinclair.

“Don't punch me.” He holds both hands up so I can see they're empty. Of course they are. “I'm not going to hurt you. Also, I apologize in advance.”

“What the fuck, Em?”

He reaches out with his right hand and curls his fingers into the shoulder of my shirt.

He's right. It doesn't hurt. He's not even pulling that hard.

But it *does* hurt. My abs get tense, bracing for a hit, and there's no air anymore. There's a strange pressure at my face, like thousands of old punches are resurfacing. I'm going to throw up. I'm going to kill someone. My dad, maybe. It hurts. It really hurts.

My right hand connects with something, and then my left just...stops. All the muscles in my arm are working at something. I don't know what.

From far away, over the loud-as-hell sound of my heart and a thin whistle of air in my lungs, there's a voice. It's my voice, and it sounds fine. It sounds calm. It sounds safe?

Because it's not me, it's Emerson.

“—not here. Will. He's not here. It's just us.”

My vision kicks back in, and—fuck. I did try to punch Emerson. He caught my fist in the air with both hands and is just holding it there in front of his chest.

The *way* he's holding it, and the way he's standing, pulls at something in my mind, but I can't tell what it is. Where did he learn to do that? Sure as hell wasn't me. I'm just glad he knows, because he'd be flat on the ground otherwise.

“He's not here,” he says again. I can't stop trying to punch him, for some reason. “Nobody can get in. It's safe here.”

I wrench my fist back and trip over a beer bottle. Good thing I didn't open it. I don't remember letting go. There are about a thousand things I'd like to say to Emerson. *You're an asshole*, for starters. *Why didn't you tell me before?*

None of that is important. None of it matters. There's only one thing that matters.

So what comes out, with the breath I've only half-caught, is: “What do I have to do?”

To get over this—this *joke*. This thing that came with me when we left that last, shitty house.

Emerson would know. He had to claw his whole life back before he could be with Daphne.

“You know Bristol’s not going to hurt you.”

“Of course I know that.”

“You have to go outside until you can do it by yourself,” Sin says.

Those memories are as vivid as anything. Emerson throwing up on the sidewalk one step outside our apartment building and going immediately back in. Sin with his arms around Em’s shoulders on the curb at the corner, twenty feet away. The first drive to the beach to surf, Sin’s knuckles white on the wheel, Emerson next to me in the back seat with his hands over his eyes. I could feel his heart race through my death-grip on him. The months it took for Sin to teach him how to drive, and how Emerson would sleep the rest of the day after every lesson.

And...

Me.

Shoving hands off my shoulders at the frat house and playing it off as a joke. The guy I punched because he wouldn’t let *go of me* at three in the morning, both of us wasted. The first time I walked out on a woman who was supposed to be a quick fuck because—because I didn’t know why, only now I do. How every day that Dad called my office, I drove to the warehouse, even if they wouldn’t let me fight. Bristol, hurt, because I’d pushed her away.

“I have to let her do this until it doesn’t hurt?”

“Yes.” Emerson takes his beer back from Sin.

“Fuck.” I drop back onto the couch and retrieve my beer from the floor. My brothers go back to their seats. “Let’s talk about business, for the love of Christ.”

“You tell us.” Sinclair settles back in his chair. “Did you hear from your lawyer?”

“Yes. I have about a hundred pages of documents on my phone. My lead lawyer and her team agree that the best case is

to strong-arm the Hughes into giving me what I want.”

“You’re good at strong-arming people.” Sin arches an eyebrow. “But they’ll fight you.”

“No, they won’t.” I open my beer. “They don’t want a court case.”

“Yeah, but they want to look like they’re undoing the final deals Hughes Senior signed off on even less.”

Emerson points at Sin. “He has a point.”

“Shut up. I know he does.”

Em considers me. “What’s your end goal with all this?”

“What?” Survive the conversation. That’s my first goal.

“If you win, you get Summit back. Then what?”

“I haven’t thought that far ahead.”

Emerson gives me a look.

“I can’t with you tonight. Just say it.”

“The fact is, you weren’t happy at Summit.” He’s *so* sure.

And so wrong. I’d be more offended if today hadn’t put all my emotions in a blender and turned them to slush. “Yes, I was.”

He flicks his eyes toward the ceiling. “You were interested in signing the deal with Hughes.”

“I made them give me a superyacht.”

“Of course you did. You never settle for less than what you want. I’ve known you your entire life, so I’m qualified to say that you have zero hesitation in telling people to fuck off if you don’t like their offers. If you didn’t want to sign the deal with Hughes, you wouldn’t have done it. So what did they have that Summit didn’t?”

I glare at him, mostly because I don’t have an answer.

Sinclair kicks his feet up on the ottoman by his chair. “Instead of getting Summit back, why not just ask for a big-ass severance and retire? You could travel.”

“No. I like work.” I can’t go to the warehouse, so... “I like risks. I like challenges.”

Sin narrows his eyes. He’s pulling out all the journalist stops. “And you don’t find working at Hughes challenging enough?”

“No.”

There it is. That’s the truth.

“Then what—” Sin starts.

“I just need to figure this out. And the two of you have to get out of my house.” My brothers won’t leave unless I take them to the door, so I get to my feet and leave the den first. “But come back tomorrow. I have no idea why, but Bristol loves this family shit.”

IT'S the first night in our new house.

I have a *house*.

Owning a house at all was an impossible dream. I knew I'd be a renter for life. Owning a house like this? My name on official paperwork? A hundred dreams. There are clothes here already, which means it was Will's dream to be here tonight, too.

We have a huge bedroom. It's gorgeous, with a blue color scheme that's similar to Will's bedroom at his apartment, but...lighter, I think. It also has built-in shelves on one of the walls near the bed.

He sent me to the bedroom ahead of him after Emerson and Daphne and Sinclair left to walk all the way across the yard.

"I'm staying with you tonight." There was something tentative about Sinclair's voice when he made his announcement on the way out.

"Good." Emerson was neutral. Or joking. I couldn't tell.

"*Good* as in you're fucking with me or *good* as in you're actually glad I'm going to stay?"

"*Good* as in I won't have to listen to you break down the front door in the morning. You should learn some respect for other people's property."

"Aww, Em. I knew you loved me the most."

“No. You’re fifth place at best.”

Sinclair laughed out. “Well, you’re my favorite.”

“Yes, I know.”

It makes sense that they’re gone for the night, but they’re close enough to shout for, if we needed. It also makes sense that I’m looking at the photo of Will and his brothers in front of the Met.

The bedroom door opens, a smooth, soft sound, then closes again. Photo-Will grins at me from the picture while Real-Will’s footsteps pad across the carpet, closer and closer until he wraps his arms around me from behind. I put both hands on his forearm.

“Can I keep my mom’s necklace here? All your important things are here already.”

“Of course you can.” A light squeeze. “And yes, they are.”

“I meant your picture. And the watch, and the rock.”

“Mmm.”

“You were that sure I’d agree to move here with you?”

“I hoped.” Will turns me around to face him, and my breath catches. He looks so tired, but so at home. His hands move up to my face. The pads of his thumbs skim my cheekbones. He smooths a stray lock of hair behind my ear. Everything in my body wants him. Everything in my soul, too. It feels like a sunburn. Energy, all over my skin.

“I know about the photo, but—” Hold it together. Don’t sound quite so breathless. “But not the watch, or the rock. Why is the rock important? I think those shelves are only for special stuff.”

His sheepish expression reappears.

It doesn’t go away.

I can almost see him working at it. At letting me in, even though his instinct is to shut people out.

“People wanted Emerson’s opinion on art when he was still in college. Online classes, obviously. That was before he could go fifteen blocks, and he wouldn’t take the subway or ride a bus, but he did agree to try car trips. The first place we drove was to the beach to go surfing. That’s where I got the rock.”

“And had it polished?”

Will smiles, and I almost burst into tears, because it’s his real smile. I saw it at the beach, when he was playing with the twins. “Yeah, because it went really well. We hadn’t lived by the beach in a long time by then. Emerson claimed he hated it, and only went because Sin insisted, but he was lying.”

“How did you know?”

“Please. You’ve seen him out there. Last year he told me it was just a *long-term habit*. Bullshit. He only makes long-term habits out of things he loves.”

“What about you?” I trace a pattern on the front of his shirt with my fingertip. “What do you love?”

He takes my face in his hands and kisses me.

No part of the kiss is tame. It’s like jumping into the ocean with both feet. Will seems taller in the kiss. Stronger. Overwhelming, in how good he tastes and how deeply he tastes my mouth.

Just when my lungs are about to explode, he pulls back, eyes dark. One more long look at my face, then his hands are busy again. He strips me down with raw anticipation in every movement. The last thing he takes off is the elastic in my hair.

Will runs his fingers through it and kisses me again. His hands are trembling. He’s not nervous, is he?

I am.

This is our house. This is where we’re going to live together—where we live together, present tense. These things usually happen in a different order. You get married, *then* you buy the house. We don’t have to be married, though. We don’t have to be dating.

“I need something from you.”

He says the words against my lips, and I kiss him on instinct. Maybe, if I taste him, I’ll understand. Will Leblanc doesn’t need anything from anyone. To hear him say it out loud, after the day we’ve had—

“I’ll give you anything you want.”

He lets out a breath, the heat of it skimming my kiss-swollen lips and spreading all the way down to my toes.

“You can hurt me,” I whisper. “I like it.”

Will makes a noise in the back of his throat that says he wants that, too. I know he does. The fact that he’s fully clothed doesn’t hide how hard he is. I move my body closer, keeping my hands on his chest.

“Lie down on the bed.”

He breaks away, and it’s all I can do not to grab for his shirt. Will’s across the room in a matter of strides, and then he’s through the bathroom door and out of sight.

“Bed, Bristol.”

I run to the bed and climb on, my heart beating hard. I don’t know how he wants me to *be* on the bed. He’s fucked me in quite a few positions. Maybe he’ll want my face in the pillows. Maybe he’ll want me to hold the headboard.

On my back is probably a safe bet, so I rest my head on the pillows and take deep, steady breaths.

I turn my head at the sound of his footsteps.

Will’s naked.

With...nothing in his hands. No clamps. No other toys. I can’t figure out what it means. Not with my mind overtaken by how gorgeous he is. I’m never going to get over it. He catches me watching and the corner of his mouth turns up.

Then he’s on the bed with me. Angling himself over me. Propping himself up on his elbows.

“I want you more than I’ve ever wanted anyone,” he says.

“Same to you, Mr. Leblanc.”

He doesn't tease me about being a corporate whore. He drops a kiss to my collarbone, then another, then works his way down to one nipple. I expect a bite, or a pinch, but his tongue circles it until it's peaked, then circles some more. He moves on to the other nipple and repeats.

I like when he bites. The contrast between imagining his teeth sinking into my skin and the reality of his tongue—gentle, but possessive—is doing something to my brain. This is probably what a monthlong beach vacation would feel like.

No. It wouldn't be as good.

Will kisses down and down, making a short pause at my belly button, then going lower. I'm low on oxygen and high on emotion and what must be every good chemical a human body can make. I push myself up on my elbows in that haze and just about drown under another wave of pure, hot want, because Will's head is between my thighs. He's blond and tousled and looking down at my pussy like he's seeing God.

Maybe he is.

I'm going to watch him, watch every second of this, but then he lowers his face and his tongue meets my clit and my elbows are jelly.

I can feel his impatience in every flex of his arms around my thighs, but I can feel his patience, too. I can feel how hungry he is for this, for taking and licking and owning, and how determined he is not to rush. A tiny, ineffective part of me wants to ask him what happened, what he's doing, why he's so different.

Except I'm not sure he *is* different. He could be more himself. Does that make any sense? I don't care if it does. This is the most comfortable bed I've ever stretched out on, and it pales in comparison to the man who gives my clit a little suck, then adds more pressure with his tongue until I can't see the ceiling of the beautiful beach mansion he bought for me and then had renovated in—what, a week?

Pleasure arcs all along my hips and my spine and up through my heart. Will might be trying something different—*I would be gentle for you, I would try, but I can't* floats into my head in his voice—but he's not any less possessive or thorough. He doesn't pay any less attention. He makes a hundred tiny changes until the air in my lungs lights up, too, and the pleasure peaks like a warm wave. I feel thrashed by it. He holds my thighs tighter and keeps holding until I've come all the way back to my body.

His hands are trembling again.

Will kisses the crease at my thigh one more time and crawls up over me. He's hard. Leaking. His tip bumps into my belly and leaves a cool spot of evaporation on my skin.

I reach between us, but he catches my wrist in his hand and kisses my knuckles. "Okay." He takes a deep breath. "Okay."

"Will?"

The stripped-down emotion in his eyes bowls me over. "I'm sorry I pushed you away in the kitchen. I shouldn't have done that."

My heartbreak is cushioned by the hum of *good, more, that was so good* in every nerve. "I'm sorry I took you by surprise."

"Don't be sorry." His hips press into mine and he lets out a shallow breath. I feel that sound in my bones. He wants to move and let his mind turn off. Will readjusts with a little noise of frustration, spreading my thighs in the process and nudging into my opening. He licked me so well that I'm basically just nerves. The size of him still feels new.

It *is* new. We've never had sex like this. Usually, Will *fucks*. This is different. A side of him I've never met but that I desperately want to know. I want all the sides of him. The man who bites and hurts and the man who lets his feelings show on his face even when he doesn't want to.

"Christ," he whispers. I put my heels at the small of his back and pull him all the way in. Good. Yes. The weight of him is so good. The size of him. He rests his forehead against

mine, his arms propped on either side of my head, fingertips brushing my cheekbones, my temples. One roll of his hips, and he braces himself. “Do it again.”

I’m pretty sure my heart stops. “What?”

“Do it again. I’m not going to be surprised this time.”

I press my heels into his back. I want him even closer, which isn’t possible. Will’s cock twitches inside me. It’s sexy and intimate and...and unbelievable that he wants me to do this now.

“I don’t want to hurt you. I don’t want you to have to remember all those things when we’re—”

“You’re not going to hurt me.” His brow furrows, and he rocks his hips again. “Or if it hurts, it’s not going to be from you.”

“I swear, Will, you don’t have to force yourself. I won’t make the same mistake twice.”

“I don’t want it to be a mistake at all.” The edge to his voice isn’t angry. For a couple heartbeats I can’t place it, but then it’s obvious. He’s determined. Will’s made up his mind, and when he’s decided, he goes after what he wants. He takes the risk. “You’re not going to live the rest of your life wondering if it’s going to set me off to give me a goddamn hug.”

The rest of your life rings in my ears and sinks down into my skin. It makes my heart feel huge. “Okay.”

“Do it, Bristol.”

I think he might close his eyes, but he doesn’t. He looks into mine. Will’s trembling, all through his body.

I touch his chest first. Feel his heart pound through his skin.

Then I slide my hands up, slow and steady, to his shoulders. “Okay?”

He nods, teeth gritted.

I get my arms the rest of the way and clasp my fingers lightly at the base of his neck. “Okay?”

Will shakes his head.

I move to let go.

“No. Don’t. Just—” He’s using both arms to hold himself up, but his left hand lifts off the mattress an inch. I think he’d hold my hands still, if he could, so I don’t move them. He finally gives in and closes his eyes.

“I’ll wait.” What is it he said to Mia in the hospital? “I’ll wait with you.”

His eyes snap open. There’s painful vulnerability there. Surprise. “What did you say?”

“I’ll wait with you. Until you’re okay.”

“I’m okay now.” It sounds tentative. He’s trying to convince himself more than me. “I’m okay now. Nothing’s happening.”

“Something’s happening,” I point out, heat tiptoeing up my spine. “You feel good. But you’re right, nothing—nothing bad is happening. Is that what it feels like?”

“Yeah.” His lips form a thin line. More tension gathers in his muscles. “Like every shitty memory at once. It—” Will’s face crumples. “It hurts.”

Oh, no. “Does every soft thing hurt like that?”

Because I’ve seen something like this on his face every time we’ve been together. It’s just that now, Will’s not hiding it.

“Yes,” he admits.

“We’ll figure it out.” I don’t care that it might be hard, or that he might sometimes push my hands away, or that it’ll mean remembering things he’d rather not think about. “Good things don’t have to hurt. It’s okay if they don’t. You’ll still be you.”

His eyes go wide.

“Did I say something wrong?”

“No.” Impatience flickers over his face. “You’re perfect. You couldn’t do anything wrong if you tried. Sometimes—” The skin around his eyes tightens. “It feels so terrible that I can’t see, and all those memories—” Will refocuses, his eyes dropping to my lips. “But it’s not so bad right now. It’s getting better. It’s just you.”

I take a tiny risk and unclasp my fingers, then run my fingertips over the back of his neck. Will sucks in a breath. His cock pulses inside me and all that tension turns into something else. Something good. “Just me.”

“Bristol.” God, he has beautiful eyes.

“Yeah?”

“I love you.”

The thrill of hearing it, and the joy, and the won-the-lottery-feeling of hearing him say it is so intense that the room spins. Or I spin us. I’m not sure how it happens, but I find myself on top of him, leaning down to kiss him. It changes his angle inside me and I wriggle back on it, just because it feels so, so good.

Will catches my face in his hands and pulls me down for another kiss. He’s wearing the biggest smile I’ve ever seen on his face. “Did you like that, sweetheart.”

“I loved it. I love *you*.” The playful energy burns into something hotter. Will must see it in my eyes, because his face reflects it back to me. “I love you.”

“Prove it.” His hands go to my hips and he moves them, working me over his cock.

I plant my palms on his chest and move with those big, strong hands. Everything else fades away. No more world, just Will. He’s all mine now, and with every roll of my hips, I see more of him.

I see all of him.

An old version of me probably would have been embarrassed to lean in close and watch him while I ride him

with everything I have. And never in a million years would I have reached down to circle my clit with my fingertips just to see how he'd look.

His grip tightens on my hips. "Fuck. *Yes*. Come on my cock. Make yourself do it."

"Does it." We need extra air in here. Or he just needs to kiss me again. "Feel good?"

"Feels so good, Bristol. You feel so good. So tight. Fuck. There—" I tip over the edge, and his hand comes up to my chin, holding my face where he wants it, watching until he snaps.

Then his arms are around me in a tight, tight hug while he fucks me through a long release that I feel in every inch of my body and every inch of his. "I love you," he breathes, still shaking. "Never leave."

NOW THAT I'M so close to everything I've ever wanted, the remaining cracks in my life are more obnoxious than ever. They're the last ties to whatever the hell I was doing before.

I don't want before. I want now. I want forever.

It's strange to admit it, even in my head, but it's the only thing that sounds right. I want forever with Bristol, and forever's not going to have shady criminals and uncertainty about the megacorp I'm supposed to work for hanging over it like a beach day. Ideally, we'll find out where her Dad is so he's not just wandering the country and getting into trouble.

And then there's my mom.

Another conversation with her wouldn't hurt. At least, it wouldn't hurt the way I'm used to. Em deserves a chance to talk to her, too.

I wake up early and climb the stairs to the second floor.

The twins are already awake. Quiet voices come from Mia's room. Her window looks over the backyard, which ends in a retaining wall. Sand after that, then ocean.

"He's been out there for a long time." Ben sounds envious. "Do you think he's cold?"

"No. Remember those suits? It wasn't cold in the water."

"Yeah, but it's really early. It could be colder."

A short pause.

Ben gasps. “How did he *do* that?”

“I don’t know. Do you think...” There’s a rustle, like blankets moving. “Do you think Will would teach us?”

“He probably will. Do you want me to ask?”

“I can ask.”

“We can both ask.”

I turn around and leave, keeping my footsteps as silent as possible. The last thing the twins need is for me to have a heart attack in the hallway.

It would be a good heart attack. Not that it’s ever the best-case scenario to have a major organ fail, but if it ever does, I wouldn’t mind exiting the world because too much joy took me out.

Ben sounded so confident about me. And then that offer to come to me if Mia was nervous?

Jesus, it was good.

I get back downstairs just as Bristol emerges from our bedroom with a throw blanket over her shoulders and a sleepy smile on her face. “Why are we up so early?” she whispers.

A kiss feels like the right answer. A long, thorough kiss, because it’s Saturday and we live in a house together and I fucking love her. She’s breathless when I finally bring myself to stop.

“I slept. I woke up. Went to check on the twins. They’re entertained.”

Her smile wrinkles her nose. I’m going to be in serious heart-attack danger with all this adorable shit happening. “By what? Their bedrooms?”

“I’ll show you.” I bundle her up next to me just because I can and take her through the living room to the big windows, then point out at the ocean. “That.”

“What am I—” Her eyes get wide. “Is that Emerson?”

“Yep.”

“He’s *way* out there. Will, those waves! Is it safe?” Bristol gasps, and it’s so loud that I put my hand over her mouth. She keeps trying to talk, and then something hot and wet flicks my palm. I pull my hand away. Bristol ignores me wiping my hand on my lounge pants and leans closer to the window. “He’s gone again.”

“He is not gone. It’s just a wave. If you’re going to lick me, you should be prepared to face the consequences.”

“Will, your brother could be drowning.”

“He’s not.”

“But he’s not—oh. Oh, wow. How—” Bristol tears her eyes from the window and looks at me. “Can you do that?”

“Can I hop on a surfboard in high waves and make it look easy?”

“Yeah.”

“Would you think it was hot if I did?”

Her face flushes. “Yes.”

“Then of course I can.”

We spend Saturday going from house to house. Emerson’s for lunch. Mine for dinner. In between, Daphne and Emerson disappear for several hours so that Daphne can paint, which I assume is code for fucking. After dinner, Daphne teaches the twins to play a card game called Skip-Bo, then beats everyone in an impromptu tournament without an ounce of guilt.

No news about Mom.

No news about Bristol’s Dad.

No news on Mountain Man or his band of assholes.

The only thing I make any progress on is giving Bristol exactly what she wants. A safe place to live. Time at the beach. A family that’s not going to let her down.

Me and the twins, but my brothers, too, and Daphne. It makes a difference for them to be here. A huge difference. The twins have already had to move once this year, and this move

could've been tough. The nice-as-hell house helps. I was still bracing for some serious feelings about it, especially from Mia.

She just seems happy, though. We've landed in a place where there's living evidence that everything is going to be okay. None of us has to be alone.

I brushed it off when Leo said those things about being family at Emerson's birthday. And I didn't understand why Finn Hughes would put any stock in it until now.

By Sunday, everything with Hughes is nagging at me to the point I can't ignore it.

Before I met Bristol, I was good at ignoring things. All I needed was a regular hit of adrenaline and a drip-feed of investment challenges at work. For several years, I ignored my brothers. Told myself I'd moved on from all that.

Leave it to fucking Emerson to prove me wrong.

He comes to stand next to me on Sunday afternoon. "What did the new backyard ever do to you?"

"Nothing."

"You've been scowling at it for fifteen minutes."

I guess I have been. I don't remember walking over to the living room window. At some point, I stopped paying attention to the conversation, which has moved into the kitchen. Mia giggles, and Sinclair laughs.

"I could be good at words, too," Ben insists. "Mia doesn't want to be a journalist anyway."

"There's room for more than one journalist in the world." Sinclair, sage as hell.

"Who wants to play Skip-Bo? I won't try very hard." Out of everyone in the conversation, Daphne's the least believable. She's going to wipe the floor with anyone foolish enough to play with her. "Or we could go to my house. I have an idea for a painting we could do together."

“*Together?*” No one has ever sounded more skeptical than Mia. “Like, we all paint at the same time?”

There’s a more pressing question, I think. “Tell me you haven’t been watching me for fifteen minutes.”

Emerson gives me a flat look. “You’re not interesting enough to watch for fifteen minutes. Plans are being made, by the way. Sounds like we might go to my house.”

His house, which is all of thirty seconds away from mine at an average pace. Our houses are this close because he casually suggested that I buy it from him, or technically from Leo Morelli’s real estate company, on the grounds that nowhere else would be safer. Emerson’s the person who had the conversations that nobody wanted to have so I didn’t fuck up giving Bristol the house.

“Sometimes, when we were in school, I wished you were more like Sin.”

He blinks. “I know.”

“I was wrong. I think I’d be pretty fucked if you were anybody but you.”

Em studies my face in the careful way that other people think is run-of-the-mill interest but in reality is him trying to decide if someone’s screwing with him. The pause goes on longer than usual.

“You actually mean it.” He narrows his eyes. “Did something happen? A stroke? Bad news you haven’t told us about?”

“None of those things.” I pat my pockets. Phone. Wallet. I just have to get my keys, and I’ll be ready to go. “Keep an eye on the house, will you?”

He laughs, because it’s a joke. There are a ton of agents on our combined properties, all of them keeping an eye on both houses. “When will you be back?”

“Couple hours. I’m going to talk to Hughes.”

I put a hand on his shoulder and move past him. I need to kiss my girlfriend before I leave. *Girlfriend* doesn’t seem like

enough for what she is, but that's something we can solve later.

"You mean the lawyers?" Emerson asks.

I turn back to answer him. "No. I mean *Hughes*. I mean Finn."

IT WOULD PROBABLY BE wise to call in to the Hughes building and see if he's there on a Sunday afternoon before I go, but I'm not interested in being wise right now. Besides, if I were him, I'd be at my office, trying to figure out how to un-fuck myself.

The decision to talk to him today feels inevitable. Maybe it always was, and I couldn't see that because I was used to holding everything at arm's length.

That kind of distance is impossible now.

I'm done avoiding all the risks I said I'd never take, and I'm done avoiding Finn Hughes. The only way to decide how to move forward is to talk to him directly, not through a bunch of lawyers.

The building's peaceful when I go in. I nod at the doorman and head straight for the elevators. The doors open on a quiet lobby, all the lights turned off. An afternoon glow makes it muted rather than dark. Whole place feels like it's waiting for something to happen, but it doesn't exactly feel empty.

If it is empty, and I'm wrong, then I've wasted a trip to the city and a few hours I could've spent with my family.

Because I have a family now. A real one.

And in a very bizarre way that should seem less real than it does, Finn Hughes is part of it. So we'll figure this out the way family does, by arguing with each other in person instead of formal bullshit on our lawyers' letterhead.

Outside his office is a pocket of silence so heavy that I'm beginning to think Emerson was right and something has gone

haywire with my brain.

And then someone sighs.

It's an exhausted sound and definitely not meant for an audience.

I step into the threshold and find Finn sitting at his desk, face in his hands. He's not wearing a suit. His weekend clothes, along with the Sunday-afternoon light, make him look younger. He normally wears a suit to make him look older than twenty-nine.

We knew he was young before the news broke. We knew his dad had stepped into a figurehead position and Finn was CEO for years. But nobody knew just how far it went.

"Hey."

He startles, head coming up from his hands. "Leblanc."

"Hughes."

"What are you doing here?"

"I came to talk to you." Before he can get all uptight and kick me out of his office, I stride across the space and sit down in one of the chairs across from him. Then I make a point of rearranging it so the angle is more casual. I don't care if he has a fancy executive chair and mine is in a lower class of office furniture.

Finn watches me do it. "You could've made an appointment with my secretary. And brought your lawyer."

"I could have, but I remember us having this great conversation where you said..." I glance at the ceiling. "I'm not trying to screw anyone over. Especially someone who's like family."

He grimaces. "I did say that."

"Did you mean it?"

Finn's chin comes up. "I didn't lie."

I give him the same look I use on my brothers when they're full of shit. "Don't fuck around. Did you mean it?"

“Yeah. I meant it.”

“Then we can work on similar terms. I don’t try to screw people over, either, especially people who are like family, or who are actually *in* my family. And, yes, I give my brothers shit all the time, because that’s what brothers are for. Especially when they’re telling you the things you don’t want to hear. Hard truths.”

He runs his fingers through his hair. I don’t know whether he looks more suspicious or resigned. “Hard truths. Like what?”

“First off, you look like hell.”

Finn snorts. “Thanks.”

“You’ve got bags under your eyes and you’re in here alone on a Sunday, sighing like you just figured out that your plan backfired on you.”

He narrows his eyes. “Will.”

“Which part of what I said isn’t true?”

“You don’t have any right to decide if my choices backfired. You have no idea what I was trying to do, you sanctimonious ass.”

“And you have no right to forge your dad’s signature on any number of contracts and agreements, including when you acquired a company from someone who is *like family*. You could have run the company on your own. You had the legal standing to do it, but you didn’t want people to know he wasn’t involved.”

“Get out of my office.” His hands are in fists on the desk.

“Or else you’ll punch me? If that’s how you want to have this conversation, then let’s go down to the warehouse and get in the ring. The floor’s softer. It’ll hurt less when I kick your ass.”

Finn stares at me, and I stare back. My heart beats faster. Theoretically, he could have security escort me out of the building. He could also fire me on the spot. It’s a risky move, saying that to him.

The next sound that comes out of his mouth is a short bark of a laugh. He drops his head back into his hands and laughs harder.

“Oh, fuck.” After a minute, he looks at me over his fingers. “You don’t have any proof that—”

“I saw your dad at the retirement party. Even if he did sign the documents himself, he wasn’t in any state to be agreeing to the terms on behalf of Hughes Industries. And I know for a fact that you didn’t force him to sign anything.”

“How?” Finn sits up straighter. Shakes his head. “How do you know that?”

“Because that’s not the kind of man you are.”

“What kind of man am I, then?”

“The kind that protects his dad at all costs. And I mean every fucking cost. You were never going to stress him out by forcing a pen into his hand, and you’d be damned if you took anybody else down with you. That’s where you went wrong, just so you know.”

Finn lets out a mostly silent laugh. “Tell me more about running a multibillion-dollar international corporation.”

I relax into the chair and look him in the eye. “Fair. You’re the one with the massive company, not me. But we can still trade stories. My mom walked out on my dad when I was two, and up until a week ago, I thought she was dead. Turns out she’s not.”

That’s not what he was expecting to hear, but his surprise only shows in a single raised eyebrow.

“So my brothers and I grew up with my dad, who’s a prick of monumental proportions. He’d beat the shit out of us all the time, and when he wasn’t doing that, he liked to lock us up in closets.”

“What the fuck.”

“Anyway, my oldest brother Sinclair spent the better part of his life keeping Emerson alive. I’ll be honest with you, Finn. It wasn’t pretty. Lots of near misses. But the ugliest thing

about it was how jealous I was. I wanted to be the one who got saved. Just once. I didn't understand that saving someone's ass doesn't always look like a flying tackle off the guardrail on an overpass."

Finn's fingers are splayed on the desk. No more fists. "And now?"

"I wasted a long time pretending I didn't need either of them, and it's just not true. Now I know that."

He tips his head back on his executive chair and looks at the ceiling. "How does this apply to the situation I'm in?"

"You're not going to solve any of this by being a martyr."

Finn's head comes back up. "Excuse me?"

"You're Finn fucking Hughes. You've got a billion employees riding on this company. You can't go out to shareholders and investors, alone and on the defensive. That's going to make it look like everybody bailed on you."

He scowls. "Didn't they?"

"I'm here."

"There's a lawsuit draft with your name on it."

Lawyers are all gossips. "I had to understand all my options."

"And now that you do?"

"Would I be here on a Sunday afternoon when I could be doing some weird collaborative art project with my family if I was going to bail?"

His brow furrows. "Collaborative art project?"

"I have no idea, okay? I came here instead. Because I'm not going to bail, and you're not going to fire me, even if you want to."

"Oh, yeah? What am I going to do?"

"Promote me."

Finn's eyebrows go up. "Is that so?"

“Yeah.”

“Why would I give you a promotion?”

“So I can go to bat for you.”

A few seconds of stunned silence. “With who?”

“With everyone. Shareholders. Investors. Anybody who’s thinking about jumping ship because of the secret you kept. Some of them are going to leave, but most of them are going to stay. I’m not the only person who’s thinking Hughes is a heavyweight who’s going to bounce back. You’ve built up a lot of goodwill. A lot of loyalty. People are shocked, but most of them will stay.”

“You can’t know that.”

“I do know that.” I stand up and brush off my clothes. “Because I’m good at coming up with ideas for making money, but I’m even better in a knock-down, drag-out fight, and I almost never lose.”

Finn stands up, too. “That’s what it’s going to be. A fight.”

“Yeah. Because you fucked up. If I had to guess, you did it because your dad told you that keeping this quiet was the only way.” I gesture around us at the rest of the building. “If the people here are angry, it’s not because your dad’s dealing with this thing, it’s because you lied about it.”

Finn’s jaw works. “I was born into that lie.”

“Did you like it there?”

“Sometimes.” He looks out the window. It’s all concrete and gold out there. Millions of lives are represented in those buildings, all of us living through the same Sunday afternoon. “And sometimes I think...I’m glad it’s finally out.”

“You did a pretty good job of hiding it.”

Hazel eyes flash. “I did whatever I could do to make sure my father was okay. Whatever I had to do. The shareholders never complained about their checks. You didn’t mind the payout, either.”

“Yeah, that’s the problem with rich people. They think money solves everything. I used to think that, too.”

Then I met Bristol. She couldn’t be bought.

She had to be earned.

Finn, apparently, knows this. He gives me a direct look. “I apologize. For the dishonesty. If you want to stay, I’ll be straight with you.”

“Thank you. And I’m sorry for being a sanctimonious ass.”

“No, you’re not.”

“Not really, no.” Finn laughs, and it sounds slightly less despairing than before. “Sorry for barging in here on a Sunday and telling you things you didn’t want to hear. I’m not a big fan of it myself. You’ll get over it when we’ve worked together for a while.”

A softer sigh. “Are you sure you want to do that for me?”

“It’s not for you. It’s for the money.” Finn doesn’t buy it. “I’m just kidding. I want a high-stakes challenge, not a bunch of boring corporate bullshit. And I’m not that interested in watching you get screwed over. You’re like family. Speaking of, you should be with yours, not sitting in here worrying yourself to death. I say we call it a day. And Monday morning? We hit them with everything we have. Together. Deal?”

I stick out my hand.

Finn takes it, and we shake.

MONDAY MORNING COMES, and there's no way I can stay at a big, lovely beach house by myself while Mia and Ben head off to school and Will goes into work.

I mean...I *could* stay. I quit my temp job with Hughes as soon as Daphne and I got back from the non-visit at the hospital. I spent the rest of that week at Will's, making a list of possible places my dad could be and calling into other hospitals in the city to see if he'd checked himself in. Nobody had heard anything.

Today's the first day of our new-house non-weekend life, though, and it feels right to leave with Will and the twins. I give Mia and Ben tight hugs on the front porch, and they climb into an SUV with Heather and Drew, the agents who take them to the school.

The big, black *armored* SUV starts to pull out of the driveway, and Mia leans as close as she can to the tinted windows and waves. I can see Ben's shadow waving behind her, too.

My eyes burn a little, and I wave back as hard as I can. After a second, Will joins in, his arm going around my shoulder. We both wave until they're out of sight at the end of the driveway.

Then Will squeezes my arm. "Our turn."

He drives us into the city, Evan following in a separate car.

“So.” Will’s focused on the road, and I’m focused on him. How could I not be when he’s *that hot* in his office clothes? It’s a constant battle, really, because every time he changes outfits I think he’s hotter than he was before. “Emerson said there’s a good school in town. Smaller than the one the twins go to now, with fewer metal detectors.” He grimaces, but then his face softens again. “And a competitive math team.”

“What’s competitive math?”

“I don’t know. It was on the school website.” He steals a glance at me out of the corner of his eye and flushes at the look on my face. “Are you that into the idea of competitive math?”

“I’m into the idea of you secretly looking stuff up for the twins.”

“It wasn’t a secret. I just told you about it.”

“Well, what did you think?”

Another glance. Will’s expression stays surprisingly open. “What did *I* think?”

“Of the school.”

He shrugs. “It looked nice in the photos. And the principal seemed nice, too.”

“You talked to the *principal*?”

Will huffs. “I wanted to know what the options were in case you were interested in sending the twins there.” His habitual scowl slips onto his face. “I set up a tour for next Wednesday if you wanted to see it.”

I tug his arm until he takes his hand off the wheel, then thread our fingers together and squeeze his hand. “I would love to go see it. I’m sure the twins would appreciate a shorter commute. Mia thinks the school they’re at now is too loud and busy, anyway.”

“I thought, if you liked it and they agreed, you—they—could make the switch after the winter break. Keep the transitions to a minimum.”

The man bought me a house and gave it to me three days ago, and he's already done another thing to make me fall in love with him. "We could definitely do that."

Will relaxes. By the time we pull up to the valet section of the Hughes parking garage, his eyes are bright. The warm-shower scent of him is charged in a way that I find extremely hot. He puts his hand on the small of my back and guides me toward the building with long, confident strides.

"You're different."

He looks down at me, a sharp smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. "Did you forget how I look in a suit? You could get on your knees in my office. Maybe that would jog your memory."

I purse my lips, my chest hot all the way through with how much I want him. "It might take a while. How long are you willing to keep me under your desk?"

"In that skirt? All fucking day."

We go in through the lobby, where Will turns heads. He just looks that good. For the first time, I don't have to pretend to be his employee.

Although...I kind of look like it.

He steps into the first open elevator and pushes a button. The doors slide closed before anyone else can get in.

Will crowds me against the wall, his mouth on mine, his hands on my thighs. "Maybe I'll keep you under my desk every day."

"Will! You can't. I'm—what if I wore the wrong thing?"

"Nobody's going to think you're a corporate whore, sweetheart. That's just for me."

"No, I mean—what if they think I still work here? Oh my God. I should go home."

He drags his lips down the side of my neck, adding the slightest pressure with his teeth. Every thought in my mind

dissolves into a fantasy about pushing the emergency button and staying in the elevator for the rest of the day.

“You’re assisting me during the transitional period.”

His hand is fully under my skirt, his fingertips inches from the lace covering the parts of me that are already embarrassingly slick. “That’s—that’s a temp. I’m your *temp* now?”

“No. You’re the love of my life.”

The elevator stops. Will’s touch disappears. He pulls my clothes back into place, straightens his tie, and grins at me.

“I hate you a little bit.”

“If anybody asks, you’re filling in as my temp today. It’s not a big deal.”

“I should’ve worn jeans.” The elevator doors slide open, except it’s not Will’s floor. He steps off, taking me with him. Will nods to the receptionist behind her big, elegant desk, and we keep moving. “I take it back. I’m glad I wore the skirt and the blazer. Why didn’t you tell me you had a meeting on Finn’s floor?”

“It’s more like ten meetings. Short ones, with no formal agenda. I’d describe them as conversations.”

“That sounds like it’ll take most of the day.”

“Good thing my new office is right by his.”

“Your new office?” Will’s old floor was beautiful, as far as offices go, but this one is on another level. Literally. It’s higher up, with plush carpeting and more expensive furniture. “You didn’t mention a new office.”

“New job, too.”

I nudge him with my elbow. “It’s not fair for you to keep secrets.”

“I would’ve told you last night, but by the time I had a chance to tell you about it, my tongue was otherwise occupied on your—”

“Will!” It’s Greg, my former boss. “Bristol. Good to see you.” He comes level with us and slaps Will’s shoulder. “Congrats on the promotion.”

“Thanks. I’m excited to get started.”

“That’s good to hear.” Greg’s genuine, with not a hint of jealousy about the fact that Will apparently leapfrogged him after one unscheduled meeting with Finn Hughes. “You’re the right guy for what comes next.”

Will laughs. “Did you mean to make it sound so ominous?”

The first flicker of nerves appears on Greg’s face. “It’s a departure from the status quo, that’s all. But then—that’s where you make all your money, isn’t it?”

“You could say that.”

“Everything’s on a bit bigger scale this time around.”

Will grins like he’s about to start one of his underground fights. “Good.”

We spend the morning doing office things. Will wasn’t kidding about his conversations with Finn. He makes several trips to Finn’s office to ask him about this investor or that shareholder. Everything from his old office has been delivered in a collection of neatly labeled boxes, but there’s a second, larger set of documents about the whole of Hughes Industries. All of it needs a place.

After lunch, Will gives me an approving nod. “My new secretary is going to owe you.”

“Candy didn’t move up here, too?”

“Nope. She’s back with Greg.”

He smells incredible. I want to make out with him in a way that’s extremely office inappropriate. “I could be your new secretary.”

“Hell, no. I need someone to make sure my new beach house is comfortable.”

I get on my tiptoes and kiss him for real. “That can’t be my job, you know. I have to do something with my life.”

His brow furrows. “What’s that thing where you lay on the beach and read books and look hot in a bikini?”

“I think you’re talking about a vacation.”

“Do that, then.”

“Will, it’s too cold for a bikini.”

“Wear one inside the house, then. You’ll still be able to see the beach.” He bends down and kisses my cheek. “I have a meeting. Describe the bikini to me later so I can approve it.”

He leaves before I can stop laughing long enough to tell him that I can approve my own bikinis.

Will is still talking to Finn when I find a few folders that don’t belong with the rest. The receptionist would know what to do, I think.

Someone brushes by me just outside the door to Will’s office.

“Sorry, Bristol.” Greg, obviously leaving another meeting with Finn. It must have overlapped with Will’s.

“My fault. I wasn’t paying attention.” I hold up the folders with a smile. “Pretty sure these belong with someone else’s files.”

He takes a quick look. “Pretty sure you’re right. You’re good at this, Bristol. We miss you around the office.”

“That’s so nice of you to say.”

Greg chuckles. “I think you made a good choice. Rumor has it you and Will moved out to the beach.”

My face heats up, but what’s there to be embarrassed about. “We did, in fact.”

“I knew it.”

“Um...what?”

“I knew you guys would end up together. I could tell. Mitchell didn’t think so, and between you and me, I’m going

to relish the victory.” Greg pats me lightly on the shoulder. “Congratulations, Bristol. I’m happy things are going so well for you.”

“Thanks, Greg. They really are.” I clear my throat before my eyes can fully tear up.

“I’ll let you get back to it. If I don’t see you, be sure to enjoy the beach.”

“I will.”

Greg leaves, and I take a deep breath. It’s not far to the receptionist’s desk, and I don’t want to give these folders to her wearing the goofiest grin of my life. A non-official secretary can still be professional.

Good thing, because she’s not alone. She’s explaining something in her calm, level voice.

A few more steps, and I can see who’s waiting at the big, round desk.

It’s Will’s mom. She listens to the receptionist with a worried crease in her forehead, a small package in her hands.

My heart makes an anxious twist. The new job is perfect. Will’s *happy*. And after this weekend, after he finally admitted to me that good things have hurt him for a long time, I can’t let it happen. Not today.

I square my shoulders and move around the desk. Thank God for my skirt and blazer. “Excuse me.”

Both women look at me, Will’s mom with wide, blue-green eyes. Her face falls when she recognizes me. She turns back to the receptionist. “Please. I know this is Will’s floor. I’m not asking for a meeting. I’d just like for you to give this to him.”

“I’ll take it.”

The receptionist lets out a relieved breath. She’s not supposed to accept unauthorized deliveries. This one is just personal, but it’s a gray area. “Yes. Ms. Anderson would be the person to pass on your item.”

Will's mom turns to face me, steeling herself. "You'll take it, or you'll make sure he gets it?"

He looks just like her, and my heart falls down from the high of the house and *Bristol? I love you* and Will's new job. It breaks on the newspaper-wrapped object that his mother holds so carefully.

"I'm sorry. I really am. But we need to respect Will's wishes. I can't let you leave a gift for him or a note or talk to him if he doesn't want that."

She looks at me, eyes searching, for long enough that I want to look away. "You're protecting him."

"Yes. He's been hurt before, and I don't want that to happen again."

"I'm not trying to hurt him."

"I believe you, but he doesn't want to see you right now. It's—" I don't know how to explain that everything's finally coming together without sounding like a jerk. "It's not a good time."

Her chin comes up. "Are you sure about that?"

THE LATEST CONVERSATION with Finn didn't have an agenda, but after I filled up three pages of a legal pad with notes, it was safe to admit it had become a meeting.

Halfway through page four, Finn drums his fingertips on his desk. "Before I set you loose on everyone with this, we should run it by Greg. Maybe a couple of other people."

"Let's go down to their floor, then. Greg's been on the elevator half the day."

"I could stand to stretch my legs."

This is funny, since Finn's been pacing around most of the day while we talk, but I don't point that out. A walk down a slightly longer hallway could help. He gets to the door first and opens it with about a hundred times more energy than he had on Sunday.

I want to put this plan in motion. I want the tough meetings. I think Finn wants to get on with it, too, so we're both moving at a good clip toward the reception desk.

I'm writing down my last couple notes on the legal pad, so I hear Bristol before I see her.

"It's not a good time." Her voice is warm, but she's firm. The authority in her tone is hot. Fuck. Maybe I will put her on her knees in my office.

"Are you sure about that?"

My mother's voice stops me in the middle of the hall, not far from the reception desk.

She's standing right there, facing Bristol, something small in her hands.

Finn realizes I'm missing a few steps ahead of me. "Will?"

At the sound of my name, my mom turns her head and sees me. Joy flashes onto her face. It's only there for a second, but it's so bright that it makes me think of the closet door opening. Only it's not the hellish version with Dad's fingers sinking into my shirt. It's the version where the person on the other side says *There you are*, and she's laughing, and it was all a game. Just a game.

I can't tell if it's a real memory or not, but my heart repositions itself. Has to be something wrong about that. Organs don't rearrange unless you get into a catastrophic accident.

It must be my mind that changed.

She didn't have it any easier than we did. I can't be furious about missing most of my life with her if I refuse to see her now.

And, on top of that, I always knew it wasn't really her fault that she left. It was mine. She might not have gone if it was just Sinclair and Emerson. Whatever happened to her after I was born pushed her over the edge. Who the hell am I to blame her for that? She couldn't have known that I'd ruin everything until I actually existed.

"Will, is—" Finn looks from me to my mother, then back again. His eyes go wide with recognition.

Bristol's noticed me, too, and I can tell by the way she's standing so tall that she'll make my mom leave the Hughes building just like she walked her away from the beach house. That twists my heart around again. Having someone like her protect someone like *me* was the impossible dream. It was childish bullshit. I never expected to have it.

I really do have everything.

“No, it’s okay.” Good. I sound definitive, and not like a tentative asshole. “You can let her come in.”

“Here, let me.” Finn moves to one of the doors nearby and opens it, gesturing inside with his easy, rich-boy manners. “You’re welcome to use this conference room. No one will bother you.”

My mom glances at Finn. “Oh, thank you. That’s very kind. I just don’t—I won’t need a whole room. I was just dropping something off.”

“Mom, just—” It could be that I’m having a heart attack. That’s another explanation for everything going on in my chest. “Let’s just go into the conference room and talk.”

She hesitates, like I’m going to change my mind, and I’m forced to wave her into the hallway. Finn nods to my mom as she passes him on her way into the room.

Bristol watches me with huge, green eyes, a little smile on her face that I’m pretty sure she doesn’t know is there. She was going to make my mom leave because she thought that’s what I wanted, but look at her. She wanted a reunion. A conversation at least.

I wave her over, too. There’s too much happening to feel weird about that. I’m sure there’ll be more in a minute. Mom’s probably hoping we’ll be alone, but I can’t have this conversation while Bristol waits somewhere else.

We go into the conference room, and Bristol closes the door. My mom stands up straight, looking nervous as all hell. Her purse hangs from her shoulder. It looks as secondhand and threadbare as her coat.

“Mom.” It feels unbelievably strange to say it, but it would be fucked up to call her Mrs. Leblanc or by her first name like she’s applying for a secretary job. “Hi.”

It’s a better start than we had at the beach house.

“Hi, Will.” She looks at me like I’m the best kind of surprise, her eyes shining even while the rest of her face is set and serious. “I’m sorry to have interrupted your work.”

“It’s fine. We were between meetings. This is Bristol Anderson, my girlfriend. Bristol, this is my mom.” I should say more, but that’s all I can get out before my throat closes.

“Hi,” Bristol says. “I’m sorry things didn’t work out when we met before. I’m glad we could be introduced.”

“No need to be sorry.” My mom’s eyes come back to me. “I didn’t come here to take up too much of your time, Will. I just wanted to leave this for you.”

She looks down at the package in her hands, then holds it out to me.

Two steps, and I’m close enough to take it.

It’s small enough to fit mostly in the palm of my hand. Whatever this is, she’s wrapped it in newspaper and tied it with a length of ribbon that came with something else. I can still see the creases. We’re standing here in this fancy-ass meeting room on the most important floor at the Hughes Industries headquarters, absolutely fucking surrounded by money, but this shabby little gift feels more important than anything this filthy rich corporation could buy.

“Do you want me to open it now?”

I meet her eyes. She’s already looking at me, waiting for my reaction. “Yes. If you had time. If you wanted.”

“Okay.” I undo the ribbon. It’s from a box of chocolates. The brand name is printed in silver on one end. Then I flip over the package and slide my thumbnail under the tape holding it closed. It takes all of five seconds to unwrap what’s inside.

It’s...an action figure.

An action figure of a boxer, with red gloves on his hands and defined muscles. I have no idea who it’s supposed to be. He’s beat up, though, with fine scratches on his gloves. An old, old fragment comes loose in my mind.

“I took him to remember you by.” Her voice is soft, but there’s enough regret there to fill several conference rooms.

“I remember this.” I don’t remember getting it for my birthday, or Christmas. I was too young. But I’ve thought about those red gloves over the years. The shape of them. I trace the round curve with my fingertip. “I didn’t know what happened to it.”

“You just loved those boxing matches on TV.”

The last time we were together, I was a toddler. “Wasn’t I too young to watch the fights?”

“I don’t think you’d have stayed still long enough to do that, even if I’d let you. It was the commercials. Those were your favorite.” She lets out a breath and tips her chin toward the action figure. “He didn’t want to leave.”

The truth is right there in her face. It’s written all over her. She didn’t want to leave.

“But.” *My* face hurts. I have no fucking idea what’s happening to it. “You did leave.”

“I didn’t see any other choice.”

A hundred punches land on the inside of my ribs, cracking all the hurt open and getting it everywhere. I’ve explained it to myself for years. I *knew* why she left, and whose fault it was. That answer doesn’t seem like enough.

“Did you leave because of me? Did I make things too hard?”

Bristol makes a soft sound next to me, and my mom’s hands go to her chest. I’m so fucking glad I didn’t insist on having this conversation by the receptionist’s desk.

“Will—no. That’s not why.”

“Then why did you pick Sin?” I know it didn’t work out. I know he came back. I still want to know why.

“I wanted to take all three of you, but I couldn’t—” Mom closes her eyes and swallows. She’s trying not to cry. I don’t have any memories of her to compare her expression to. I still know. “All the jobs I could find didn’t pay enough to feed three kids. I hoped I’d be able to work my way up to one of those, but—”

“We both know you didn’t.” My voice shakes. “You still made a choice. You could have taken any of us.”

“I couldn’t.”

“Why?”

“Because...” Something seems to occur to her. She flips back the top of her purse and reaches in, coming up with a cheap plastic photo album. It’s the kind you can buy for a dollar. Folds in half. Only holds two photos. My mom offers it, still closed. “That’s why.”

I open it.

My eyes land on the left side first.

It’s a photo of me and Emerson. An old one, from before she left. It would have had to be. Once she left, nobody took pictures.

She must have taken this one, and it’s—

Bristol puts her hand on my arm. That’s about when I realize I’ve stopped breathing.

Emerson must be about three and a half, with white-blond hair that’s still so fine that it curls at the ends and that little-kid combination of round, pudgy cheeks and baby-fat arms and legs that are starting to get lanky. He’s wearing blue overalls over a T-shirt with yellow stripes.

And I’m one and a half, with his same hair and his same eyes, only I’m trending hard toward *baby*. Everything about me is round and soft. I feel a pang of worry for a kid that soft.

Except in the picture, we’re sitting on a set of wooden steps in the sun, hugging each other.

His arms are wrapped around my shoulders, his baby-round hands squeezing, and I’ve got mine around his waist. He’s laughing, and I’m either laughing or shouting or both, and we’re happy. It radiates out of the picture. We might be squeezing each other to death, but we’re going to die happy.

“It would have been cruel to separate the two of you. I’ve never seen anyone so excited for a baby brother as Emerson

was. And you thought the sun rose and set with him from the time you figured out he was there. You were my earliest baby to walk, and I think it's because you wanted to be able to follow him around so badly. I just couldn't—" She takes in a quick breath. "I couldn't take that from you."

The other photo is of all three of us. It must've been taken around the same time. We're at a picnic table, all in a row. I have my arms around Emerson's neck, and Sin has his arm around Emerson's shoulders. Giant grins show off baby teeth for me and Emerson, and Sinclair's missing front tooth. We look like we're all going to be okay.

I look her in the eyes again. She's crying, the tears slipping down her face without a sound.

"It wasn't because of me."

Her hand comes up to her heart again. "I swear, Will. And I felt awful for taking that guy along."

The boxer. I find him in my hand. "That's okay. I actually—" A laugh interrupts me. "I kept something of yours, too."

"What was it?"

I can feel Bristol wondering the same thing. Heat runs down one of my cheeks. It aches in my throat.

"I kept your watch. That's probably why it took you so long to come back. You just lost track of time."

My mom covers her mouth to hide a sob, and I do the obvious thing. I don't think about it. I just put my arms around her and pat her back and let her cry.

It feels right. It feels so right that it fills up my lungs and overwhelms everything in a way that I'm shocked to discover doesn't hurt at all.

"We've been—" I'm not crying. Okay—I am, but only a little. "We've been having dinner together on Friday nights." Twice in a row, at least. "Sin and Emerson and me. And Bristol and her siblings. You could come this Friday. Make up for lost time."

“Will, I—” Her arms go around me and she squeezes me back. “I wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

MY FAVORITE THING in the world is lounging by the beach.

Will bought me the cushiest possible beach chair, which is more comfortable than most of the recliners I can remember sitting in. One of the agents brings it out whenever I want to come to the beach on my vacation.

That's my life this week. Sitting on this chair in the sun, reading a novel about a famous hero from ancient Greece. The rest of the world only knows the hero for his extreme talent as a soldier and fighter, but the man he loves knows all the soft, secret parts of him. It's sad and romantic and lovely and I find it more than a little familiar. Best of all, I get to read it at a slow, leisurely pace and listen to the ocean roll on the shore.

It's a good thing, too, because I couldn't do more work in Will's office without tearing up over the conversation he had with his mom. It was so clear that she was a woman in serious need of a hug, and once he'd seen those photos, it was all over.

Because Will is a man who wants to be able to fix things, not just fight them. He wants to be the man people need, not the man who makes things harder.

That hug fixed a lot for both of them. The dinner invitation, even more.

After Will's mom had hugged him back with a soft *you're so tall, Will, when did you get so tall?* she told him she had some errands that had to be done before five o'clock.

I let the book rest on my lap, close my eyes, and do *not* cry.

It was just such a sweet, obvious lie, and she was so happy to be able to tell it. Will's face was an open question after he let go of her. If she'd asked him to let her sit in his office the rest of the day, I think he would've done it.

"Okay," he said. "You should do that. But I need your number so we can make plans for Friday. It'll probably be best to have the dinner at Emerson's house." Will looked at her with hope and caution and fierce protectiveness in his eyes, none of it hidden behind a scowl. "We need to decide on a plan, Mom. There can't be any surprises."

She reached out, tentative, and patted his hand. Her expression was serious. "I understand. We'll make a plan, and I'll stick to it. I'll be there. I promise."

Down in the lobby of the Hughes building, he pulled her in for another quick hug and lowered his voice. "Mom. Do you have a place to stay? Do you need money?"

"I'm okay, Willie." She smiled at him, big and bright. *Lie*, a little voice in my head mentioned. Mia lies the same way. She throws herself into it with too much enthusiasm. "I've got leads on a couple jobs. Don't worry about me. I'll see you and your brothers on Friday."

I'm excited for Friday. It's going to be good. My mom's voice pops into my head over the sound of the waves. *Someday we'll have everything.*

"We had everything, Mom. I wish you could come to dinner, too."

You go, and tell me all about it.

I open my eyes, wipe away my tears, and go back to my book.

It's too chilly for a bikini. I tried earlier for just long enough to send Will a selfie.

Will: Nice goose bumps, sweetheart. I'll lick them off when I get home.

Now I'm in leggings and a cozy crewneck that Will picked out for me with two throw blankets over my lap and a bag of tropical Jolly Ranchers in one cupholder of my ultra-fancy beach chair. In the other, I have a can of sparkling water. I started out the day with a bottled Frappuccino. There are twenty-three more waiting in the fridge, because Will Leblanc doesn't do anything halfway.

I pop a fresh Jolly Rancher in my mouth. The tropical flavor bursts onto my tongue. This is the *dream*. Obviously, I love hanging out on the beach with Will and the twins. I'll never get over the sheer joy of actually *living on the beach*, steps away from the water, in the most beautiful house I've ever seen, with the man I love most in the world.

My second-favorite way to hang out by the beach is by myself, though. For most of my life, things have been stressful and unpredictable. There wasn't much time to sit and think. I had to make most of the decisions for the twins, then make them again every time we had to move. There was no such thing as Will Leblanc chatting with school principals so he'd be informed enough to make a suggestion.

A place doesn't have to be warm and tropical to be paradise.

The Jolly Rancher gets sweeter and smaller on my tongue. In a couple hours I'll go with Evan to pick up the twins from school. Heather and Drew could bring them back, then rotate off their shift, or Evan could go alone, but I like being the one to meet them at the end of the day. Especially since Mia's woken up the last two nights with nightmares. Not about our dad, though, or anything that happened in the warehouse. She says they're about losing her copies of *The Dark is Rising Sequence*, which I have to agree would be devastating for Mia.

I have time for a few more chapters at least. Maybe a bath. I didn't think baths were worth it before. It turns out that having a really nice, deep bathtub is key.

And now I have one.

Three, if you count the tubs in the other bathrooms.

It's *so* nice out. If Daphne's not painting, I could invite her to sit with me. We spent a couple hours out here the other day with the best tea I've ever had in my life. Being friends and next-door neighbors with Daphne Morelli is the most surreal part of all of this. Will doing high-powered crisis management for Hughes Industries just makes sense. Me being friends with someone as rich and talented as Daphne? That makes more sense in a dream.

"And yet." I wave a hand at the ocean. "Real."

My phone, tucked down in the cushions near my thigh, buzzes. Maybe Daphne sensed an invitation in the air.

It buzzes again while I'm reaching for it, then again in my palm. My pulse speeds out of reading-on-the-beach mode and into way-too-many-notifications mode.

"Oh, no."

They're from the twins' school. Two text messages and email.

BES PARENT/GUARDIAN ALERT. All classes have been placed on lockdown due to the presence of an armed individual on campus. No students are in danger at this time. Law enforcement is responding to the situation. Parents and guardians will be notified when the situation is resolved.

I don't know that I'm out of my chair until my book hits the sand. "Evan! *Evan!*"

He comes sprinting from the direction of the house at the same time I run toward it. Four other people come across the yard. One of them stops several feet away and turns in a full circle, hand on his gun.

Evan puts his hands out and I collide with him in the middle of the backyard.

“The twins.” I shove the phone in his face. “The twins. There’s somebody with a gun at the school.”

His phone buzzes next. He takes mine and holds them both. “Heather and Drew are there.”

“Where? Inside?”

“Drew’s inside. Heather’s outside. She tried to go in when the alert came, but they’d already locked down.”

“I’m not just leaving them there. I’m not just going to sit here and wait for somebody to text me.” Panic feels like choking on ocean water. “The twins can’t think I’m just on the *beach* while—”

Evan puts my phone back in my hands. “We’re going. Right now. Chris?”

One of the other agents perks up. “Sir?”

They’ve been hanging back in a loose circle. They’re here for me. Waiting to make sure that I’m okay. This is a dream, too. When things went wrong before, it was usually because of my dad. Who was I supposed to call for?

“I’m taking Bristol into the city. Get a couple more people on both properties.”

“It’s a school lockdown.” I sound frantic, but there’s nothing I can do about it. “That shouldn’t have anything to do with our houses.”

Evan’s dark eyes meet mine. “No. A lockdown at the school shouldn’t have any effect on the houses. It’s a precaution. And when you get back here with the twins, you can tell them there are extra people protecting them tonight.”

When I bring them home. *When*. Because I’m going to pick them up at school and bring them home, and that’s that.

Evan drives fifteen over all the way to our old neighborhood. We pass the street where my bus would’ve turned to drop me off at the complex, where I’d cross the courtyard and go home to Building C.

By car, it's only a few minutes to the school. For the millionth time, I think about texting Will. He's in meetings all day, though, and I'm not rushing off to the school by myself. I'll let him know once I pick up the twins.

"Shit." Evan brakes hard, pulling my seat belt tight over my chest, then cuts to the right. The front wheel of the SUV bumps into the curb. "We'll have to get out here. Can't get any closer. Let's go." He checks his gun, gets out, and opens my door.

"Oh. Shit."

It's complete pandemonium around the school. Six cop cars. Two more pull up on the other end of the block. There's Heather in her dark suit, three men gathered around her.

My pulse is in my fingertips. "More agents?"

Evan nods. "She called in. Not taking any chances."

"But—"

A bunch of cops converge by the steps leading up to the entrance. At least three of them are talking in loud, terse voices. More officers get out of the cars and drag barriers onto the sidewalk.

"Hey!" A man jogs by. "I want to pick up my kid. How do I get in there? Hey. Somebody answer me. Who's in charge here?"

"Who the fuck *is* in charge here?" Evan's pissed. The group of cops keeps changing, some of them running off, others running back. A car pulls up behind us, a door slams, and Evan sticks out his hand and catches a cop by the elbow as he runs by. "Is the armed individual inside the building or outside?"

"Can't speak to that."

I follow Evan closer to the building.

"Clear this area. Sir. Ma'am. We need this area clear." The woman directing us past the barricades *looks* like a cop, but she's not in uniform. "Keep moving."

“Has anyone entered the building?” Evan asks.

“No one is allowed to enter the building until the lockdown is over.”

“That’s not what I asked.” Evan jogs a few feet ahead, then circles back for me. “If nobody’s in there, I’m going in.”

“I’ll go with you.”

“No. You’ll stay here with the cops.”

“The cops aren’t *doing* anything.”

“I’m not happy about—” He digs his phone out of his pocket. “They’re not letting Drew out of the teacher’s lounge on the twins’ floor. What the *fuck*.”

We go back toward the barricade, but the loud maybe-cop woman directs us away again. Sirens on a side street get closer.

“All of you need to step back.”

Evan and I are swept up in a group of parents approaching from the other direction. Four cops join in the effort. A mom next to me shouts questions and doesn’t get any answers. A dad pushes between me and Evan.

“I have a duty to enter the building on behalf of my client,” Evan says over the raised voices. Two people are between us now. He’s leaning toward the cops, demanding their attention.

One of their walkie-talkies crackles. It sounds completely garbled to me, but the cop pushes a button on the black plastic. “Copy that.” He puts a hand out to Evan, but addresses the crowd next. “We have confirmation that it was a false report.”

“What?” A lady next to me elbows her way forward. “Which part was false? The lockdown or the gunman.”

The cop lifts both hands now. “There’s no cause for alarm. The armed individual’s presence on campus couldn’t be substantiated. Everybody calm down.”

“I’m not going to calm down,” Evan snaps. “I want eyes on my clients. And why the fuck do I have a member of my

security team being denied access to those clients? I need answers right now.”

Somebody pulls on my sleeve, and I take a step back. Evan, at least, is talking to the cops. There are other people here worried sick about their kids. Three more parents take up the empty space I’ve left behind.

The person doesn’t let go of my sleeve.

I move my wrist to shake them off, and a hand clamps down on my arm.

Then it’s not pulling, it’s dragging, with so much force that we’re out in the intersection in seconds. This cross-street isn’t barricaded. There’s *traffic*. Cars. And we’re in the middle of them.

“Hey. *Hey*. Let go of me.” Twisting my neck to look up at them only gets the sun in my eyes. “Hey!”

A car goes by too close for comfort. “Shut up.”

“*No*.” I look back toward the crush of parents and cops, take a deep breath, and scream.

Evan’s head snaps around, and then he’s running. He’s fast. He’s going to get here. The person dragging me puts an arm around my waist and lifts my feet off the ground. A driver honks at us, the horn blaring next to my ear. I kick wherever I can—knees, shins—but it doesn’t do anything.

“Put me *down*. I need to get to my siblings.”

Evan sprints into the intersection, reaching for his gun.

The car comes out of nowhere.

It runs into Evan with a screech of brakes, tires burning rubber across the asphalt, and a loud, sickening *thud*.

A hand clamps over my mouth. I never get the chance to scream.

JEFFREY MILES LOOKS TOO young to be a Jeffrey, but too old to be putting on a show like this. He sits across from me in the same meeting room where I had my first real conversation ever with my mother, frowning at the contract on the table between us. A secretarial assistant from another floor refreshes my coffee.

He's my fourth meeting of the day. Under other circumstances, I might have already skipped out on this much back-to-back time at a conference table to work out my frustration at the gym or the warehouse.

I'd rather be here. The adrenaline rush is almost the same. My skills transferred, too. I'm wry and funny and forthright in the ring because it gets the crowd on my side. No crowd necessary today. It's just me, my favorite former CFO Christa Hong as my right-hand woman, Jeffrey Miles, and his right-hand man.

"Any for you, sir?" she asks, straightening up.

"No, thank you." Jeffrey's assistant declines, too. Christa accepts with a quiet *thanks so much*.

The door closes a minute later, leaving us alone.

Jeffrey sits up straight and folds his hands on the table. He arranges his face into an expression that I think is meant to make him look tough. He doesn't have to do that. He's slated to become a major partner with Hughes by the end of the year.

My coffee's perfect, as confirmed by the first sip. "Now that you've had a chance to review the contract, let's get started."

"We're pulling out of negotiations with Hughes Industries in light of the revelations about Mr. Hughes."

"I don't think so."

Jeffrey believed with all his heart that I was going to apologize. He thought I'd open with inviting him to explain. He's already leaning forward, both hands out, ready to say, *Now, I've always admired Daniel's work, but this level of dishonesty...*

He pulls himself upright, his expression torn, like he can't decide whether to be confused or offended. "Excuse me?"

"I don't think you're going to pull out of negotiations with Hughes Industries. Certainly not the negotiations that have all but concluded."

"Circumstances have changed."

"Your circumstances haven't. You're having a pretty significant downturn in medical equipment manufacturing. Twenty-two percent in the last three quarters."

Jeffrey exchanges a raised-eyebrow glance with his assistant. "Those are internal numbers. They haven't been released to the public."

"I'm not the public. Regardless, *you* know that Hughes Industries has the highest profit margins in the industry. That's not because of price-gouging or bullshit insurance scams."

"I never implied—"

"That's because their suppliers are second to none, and you could spend the rest of your life searching for a more efficient distribution network and never find one. The way to keep your manufacturing arm in the black and ensure that your tech gets in as many hospitals and doctor's offices as possible is to partner with Hughes Industries. So, no. I don't think you're going to screw yourself over by walking away from negotiations. In fact, I think you're going to sign."

I don't have to look at Christa to know that she's wearing a serene expression with a hint of a smile, which happens to be the one that scares the most people.

Jeffrey and his assistant stare at me in shocked silence.

One. Two. Three. Four. Five.

Another three seconds for good measure.

I lean forward and tap the contract with my fingertips so there can be no mistaking what I'm talking about. "Today."

Jeffrey blusters. It's a noise out of a movie, or a sitcom. A weird cough in his throat that doesn't turn into anything normal on the way out. "Well, I don't know about that. There are discussions—the board—"

I pull the portfolio back toward me. "Unless you want me to take this deal to your top competitor."

He can't help himself. Jeffrey reaches out and catches the edge of the portfolio, digging his nails in. "We'll sign."

I keep my hand on the paper for a few beats longer, holding it there until he meets my eyes with begrudging respect. My favorite kind.

"Christa, could you pass Mr. Miles a pen?"

"My pleasure, Will." She takes a heavy, fancy-ass pen from the table in front of her and offers it to Jeffrey. I don't take my hand off the contract until he does.

Without another second of hesitation, he scrawls his signature on the line.

I take the portfolio, flip it around, and sign my name in the final spot. Flipping it closed is a nice, definitive touch. I hand it off to Christa and stand, offering Jeffrey my hand. He rushes to shake.

"Congratulations. On behalf of everyone at Hughes Industries, I'm pleased to welcome you to our new partnership. Your contacts will reach out this afternoon so you can hit the ground running."

More handshakes get exchanged, all of us thanking each other like it was a team effort to save each other's asses instead of me calling their ridiculous bluff. Let them feel that way. Word will get around.

Christa opens the door for Jeffrey and his assistant. They're almost out the door when the assistant murmurs, "If a guy like *that* is all in..."

Jeffrey cuts him off with a sharp *later*.

We wait until the receptionist's voice floats back to us from her desk, and both of us let out a long breath.

"Nice one, Leblanc." Christa raises her hand, and I give her a high five. Why the hell not? There's nobody else here to see. "Miles was serious about walking away."

"No, he wasn't. That was an act."

"Was it?"

"Of course it was. *He* might not have known that he was full of shit, but I did. And even if I hadn't, he was going to sign. Because—"

"The numbers don't lie." She laughs, her eyes lighting up.

"The numbers *don't* fucking lie, and neither do contracts."

"Would you have signed that deal?"

I give her a horrified face. "Hell, no. There were at least fifteen changes I'd have demanded and five more I'd have pushed for even if I didn't get them."

Christa shakes her head. "It's a good thing you're not the one negotiating the terms anymore. I'm sure you cost several people decades off their lives with all your nitpicky changes."

"Everybody thinks it's nitpicking until they have a fat bank account because of me. Wait. *You* have a fat bank account because of me. Are you sure you want to give me shit about it?"

"Why do you think I agreed to sit in on all these meetings? I miss spending half my day making you scowl at me."

I lean against the table, letting the rest of my adrenaline sparkle itself back to baseline. “Your new job’s good, though. Right?”

“You have no idea *how* good it is.”

I narrow my eyes at her. “Are you this happy because of the job, or did you meet somebody?”

“You’re not the only one who can meet smart, beautiful women, Leblanc.”

“Come on. Give me the name. I want to know who managed to impress you enough to go out on a date.”

Christa purses her lips, then mumbles something unintelligible.

“Pardon?”

“Six dates so far.”

“Jesus, Hong, no need to shout.”

“You asked.” She leans on the seat next to me. “What’s weird is how happy *you* are. Is it all because of the job?”

“No. Bristol moved in with me.”

“She was already living with you, wasn’t she?”

“Yeah, but I bought a house.”

Christa takes several steps away and stares at me, shifting her balance on her stilettos so she can peer at every inch of my face from every possible angle. “You bought her a *house*?”

“I bought *us* a house. Me. Bristol. Her siblings.”

Two slow blinks. “Where?”

“Next door to my brother. Out on the beach.”

“Your—” Christa steps in, her voice becoming a whisper-shriek. “Your *brother*? You moved next door to your brother? Which brother?”

“Emerson, obviously. Sin doesn’t have a permanent place in the—” Christa reaches out to touch my forehead and I bat

her hand away. “Sinclair doesn’t have a permanent place in the city, and are you seriously trying to see if I have a fever?”

“Will.” Christa draws herself up to her full height. “It took you a *year* to tell me that you even *had* brothers. You wouldn’t show me a picture of them for *two* years. I thought you were... I don’t know. Estranged.”

“We’re not.”

“So it’s that, then. That’s why you’re so happy. You got engaged.”

“I didn’t get engaged to Bristol yet.”

“Right. Yes. Well, moving into what I assume is a giant, expensive beach house is pretty different.”

“The job’s good too. It’s really good. It reminds me of being in the ring.”

A concerned grimace. “As a person who saw the results of those fights in the office the next day—”

“I meant that it’s better. Similar rush, but it doesn’t smell like sweat and Icy Hot. And nobody’s punched me in the face.”

“Is Bristol—” She hesitates, then barrels forward. “Is your family a fan of the change?”

“I haven’t taken a poll or anything, but I get the impression they’re glad I’m not in as much danger of getting a concussion on the job.”

“Always a plus. You sure you don’t miss the warehouse?”

“I—” I’m about to tell her that I do, in fact, miss climbing into the ring and knowing that, if nothing else, I’d get to land a few solid hits. I’d get the kind of contact that I wanted—the kind that hurt because it was supposed to. But since I’ve been letting Bristol reset the way everything else feels, I don’t need that quite so much. “I don’t miss it. Not very much.”

“That’s good.” Christa’s smile wavers. “That’s great, Leblanc.”

I groan out loud. “Do not cry over this.”

“I would never cry over you.” Her eyes are shining anyway. “I’m offended that you didn’t tell me about any of this, though. You owe me drinks. I’m not letting you off the hook.”

“Fine.”

“Perfect.”

Christa swipes her phone from the table. “I should head down and check on my team. See you for the three o’clock?”

“I’ll be here.”

She leaves, and I hear her say her goodbyes to the receptionist. Then I take a few paces around the conference room and stretch my arms over my head.

I don’t like being away from Bristol, but other than that, there’s no dread in the pit of my stomach. I could learn to live with *this* kind of massive-corporation work. Beneath the veneer of autoresponders and company potlucks, it can be quite vicious.

If I’m an asshole for liking that, then so be it.

Next on the agenda: collect my still-hot cup of coffee and update Finn on the meeting.

Halfway to my spot at the conference table, my phone buzzes in my pocket and keeps buzzing. A call.

Emerson Leblanc is centered on the screen.

“Not everybody works from home, Em. Some of us—”

“Are you at Hughes?” There’s noise in the background, and his voice sends a chill down my spine.

“Yeah. Why?”

“There was a lockdown at the twins’ school. They’re both fine, but—”

“*But?*”

“Bristol went with Evan to pick them up, and there was an incident outside the school.”

“Mr. Leblanc?” I have zero memory of walking out toward the elevators. The receptionist stands up behind her desk.

“What the fuck kind of incident, Em?” My skin is icy, clammy, and the next second it’s on fire. “*Emerson.*”

“One of the guys you were looking for was there outside of the school. Heather from the twins’ team described him as *seven feet tall and fast.*”

My stomach drops so hard and fast that I wouldn’t be surprised to find it on the floor. Mountain Man. That motherfucker. “I thought Evan was with Bristol.”

“In the process of chasing after them, Evan got hit by a car.”

Someone’s pulling my hair. Takes too long to realize it’s me.

“—hang up? Will?”

“Fuck.”

“Evan’s alive, Will. An ambulance is taking him to the hospital. Daphne’s going to be at the school in twenty minutes with a backup team so somebody besides security is there for the twins. They’re okay, and they can go back home with her. Sin’s with me. We’re on our way to Hughes unless you can think of a place—”

His question clears my head. I don’t have to think about it. Mountain Man wants a rematch. “I know exactly where he went.”

MY BEACH AFTERNOON was not supposed to end in a warehouse down by the city docks. It wasn't even supposed to detour here.

Obviously, Mountain Man had other plans.

The boxing ring in the warehouse is the exact opposite of the beautiful beach by my house. People hold plenty of underground boxing matches here, and they're clearly more concerned with the fighting than the cleaning. It smells like stale beer and sweat. The floor under the mat creaks every time I shift my weight on the folding chair I'm tied to in the center of the ring.

He stalks from corner to corner in front of me, looking alternately pissed and satisfied with himself.

I'm...annoyed. More than anything, I'm annoyed. I was terrified when he shoved me into the back of a rusty Ford pickup. Now we've been here in this warehouse for what feels like at least an hour, and for what? So he can stomp around making his muscles bulge? It's not even an interesting show. He's less like a supervillain than a middle manager who called a meeting that nobody came to.

What a joke. I'm at my wits' end when it comes to men like this. I know I should be sweet and quiet and subservient, but I can't. He's keeping me away from Mia and Ben and Will, and I've had enough.

"Is this where you come to work off all your frustration?"

Mountain Man whips his head around as if he's forgotten that I'm here. He has reddish hair that looks faded, like it was combined with a nondescript beige, and brown eyes that remind me of cardboard. "This isn't about frustration."

"I mean." I flex my fingers behind the chair. "Isn't it? That's what a boxing ring is for. Fighting with fists. I can't imagine you'd do that without a certain amount of frustration."

He tied my wrists with a decent knot, but the rope isn't very tight. If I can keep him talking, I can untie the knot and run. Hopefully I can do it before Will gets here. The agents with Heather weren't close enough to save me before this guy peeled out in his deathtrap of a truck, but they saw me. He'll figure out I'm here.

Mountain Man glares at me. "I'm not frustrated. I like to hit people. You should consider yourself lucky I haven't hit you."

"Wow. I appreciate it, but honestly, I have some concerns if the only thing you like to do is hit people who are, like, a quarter your size."

"That's not who I fight in the ring."

He turns his back on me, and I focus harder on the knot. I *hate* that I'm being used as bait in a trap. My blood feels like it's been replaced with pure, liquid fury that I couldn't pick up the twins from school. And that Evan got hit by a car trying to save me. I don't even know if he made it.

"So." Mountain Man keeps watching the doors on the other side of the warehouse, but he turns his head an inch to angle his ear toward me. I don't think he can hear very well out of it. That's not surprising, I guess, considering his favorite hobby is hitting people and attending what I'm sure are loud, rowdy boxing nights. "Why do you hate Will?"

His lip curls. "I don't hate that smug motherfucker. This is about money."

"Oh, really? You must've had an investment deal that didn't work out with him. What business are you in?"

“I don’t know about any investment deals. Shut the hell up.”

“I’m just trying to understand what would make this worth it for you.”

He starts pacing again, stomping louder than before. “Like I said. Money.”

“And like *I* said, why are you holding a grudge against Will about money if you’ve never worked with him?”

“Guys like that have more money than they know what to do with. Girls like you make those assholes pay up. Simple enough for you to understand?”

“So you’re mad that he’s rich.”

“I don’t give a fuck about that.”

“Kidnapping his girlfriend makes it seem like you *do* give a fuck.” A little fear tiptoes into the huge pool of my irritation. Will doesn’t do anything without a solid plan and a detailed contract review, followed by as many rounds of negotiation as it takes to get it perfect.

But for *me*, he’s made more than a few snap decisions. He invited me and the twins to stay the weekend with him when the apartment in Building C got flooded. He took us back to his place when I got sick. He’s already confronted this man once. What if he rushes in here without a real plan and gets hurt? What if he insists on doing this by himself? He might do that for me, and it would be a bad idea. He has to get security. He has to get *someone*. Mountain Man can’t injure him again.

“I want the money. Get that through your head.”

“Maybe I’m going out on a limb here, but if money’s what you want, there are plenty of people hiring in the city.”

“I want your boyfriend’s money.”

“Then it *is* personal.”

“This is not about the goddamn boxing match.” Mountain Man’s outburst echoes off the ceiling of the warehouse. “I don’t care that he beat me.”

My heart's going a hundred miles an hour, but he hasn't actually made a move toward me since he tied me up. It's lucky for me that he was either skittish about hurting my wrists or really terrible at using ropes. It's *good* news. But I'm sick of forcing myself to look on the bright side of awful situations that I wanted no part of.

“Okay. You don't care about the boxing match. Got it.”

He didn't care very much about the kidnapping, either. It annoys me all over again.

“Are you the one who called in the threat against the school?”

Mountain Man turns at the corner so he can pace back across the ring, the floor squeaking as it adjusts under every step. “It was too easy.”

“That's kind of my point.”

“That your boyfriend does everything the hard way?”

I'm on the last part of the knot. The rope's twisted, and I don't want it to drop off my hands too early. *That* would make things tough. He'd have no choice but to learn how to tie a real knot then.

“That you could put more than the bare minimum into your extortion plots. Calling in a threat on a school? Seriously? You scared all those kids and their parents when you could have just...I don't know. Called *Will*?”

His face has turned an angry red, and I get a glimpse of how he would look in the ring, charging after his opponent. Even charging after Will.

“Is that how it works for you? You just call him and he hands over his wallet? I bet he makes you spread your legs before he hands over the cash.”

“There's no correlation.”

He snarls. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

“There's no correlation between spreading my legs and getting money. I took money from him *before* we had hot

office sex, which is the opposite of the point you're trying to make."

"Do you ever shut up?"

"Do you ever talk to people instead of punching them?"

"Not if I can help it."

The door on the warehouse wall opposite the ring flies open, hitting the wall with a metalling *bang*, and Will strides in. "Leave her the fuck alone."

He's not dressed for an underground boxing match, or even a solo fistfight with Mountain Man. His jacket and tie are the only pieces of his suit missing, and despite how angry I am, despite the fear I felt, my heart thrills. Will could be in a magazine in those charcoal slacks. He's pushed the sleeves of his dress shirt up to his elbows, which puts his strong forearms on full display. And his *face*. His face is the most beautiful fury.

I shouldn't be checking him out.

Will approaches the ring, and Mountain Man laughs. "Finally, asshole. Let's finish this."

"Finish fucking what? You lost a boxing match, you unhinged piece of shit. I won, and then I got banned because I kicked your ass too hard. Are you okay? Were there not enough people after me to lumber around after?"

Will's eyes cut to me, and his face changes. There's a heartbeat of naked fear embedded in the blue-green color of his eyes. Then the emotion shutters, becoming something much darker.

I've been afraid of what Mountain Man might do to Will.

Now I'm afraid of what Will's going to do to *him*.

If Will gets into the ring, Mountain Man isn't getting out. I don't want him to get away. I do *not* want this man going after anybody else. But I don't want Will to kill him, either. Even if this man kidnapped me, even if Will would be protecting me and probably a lot of other people by taking him out, Will would take it as proof that the dangerous parts of him

outweigh everything else. *I'm a monster. You don't want me. I promise.*

Mountain Man takes a couple steps in my direction, away from the ropes at the edge of the ring. "I beat plenty of people after you, and I'll beat plenty more after we've settled this."

Will's fists open and close at his side. "Is that what you want? Me to come up there so we can settle up for what you did?"

"You're the damn fool who wanted to fight me in the first place."

There wasn't much warmth left in Will's eyes. It turns to nothing. He stalks forward, ready to leap up over the ropes. "You think this is about a fight? You think I care at all about the games people play here?"

"That's all talk. Don't be a pussy."

"Tell me one thing first." Will jumps, curling his hands around the ropes at the top. Mountain Man takes an involuntary step backward. I would, too, if Will was looking at me that way. "Did you think you could touch her and get away with it?"

"I did get away with it, motherfucker."

Will grits his teeth and swings himself over the ropes, and this is it. This is my moment. I won't get another one.

I shake the ropes off my wrist and scramble out of the seat. Two fast steps and I'm off the folding chair. I wrench it shut with both hands. Flip it over. Wrap my fists around the legs.

I propel myself toward Mountain Man and swing the chair at his head with every bit of strength in every muscle in my body.

The folded seat connects with his head a *lot* harder than I thought it would. Vibrations shoot up into my hands and arms, all the way to my shoulders. Mountain Man stumbles, swaying forward, his hands coming up to throw a punch or or grab the ropes or I don't know what. I want to drop the chair, but instead I plant my feet and swing it again.

He falls, his knees hitting first, then his giant torso. The impact shakes the springy floor of the ring. I feel so powerful that I could almost believe the vibrations will get stronger and stronger until the whole warehouse comes down.

But no, that wouldn't be good. I didn't want to destroy a building. I just wanted to protect Will.

And...*wow*. I've never hit anyone with a chair before. I've never hit anyone with anything before.

"Bristol." Will moves slowly into my field of vision, his hands out in front of him. "Sweetheart. Are you okay? Are you hurt?"

I don't understand why Will Leblanc, of all people, is being so cautious when he's the one who was about to fight Mountain Man to the death.

Then I realize I'm still brandishing the folding chair.

I wave it around a little bit and give Will a shaky smile. "Got him."

I CAN HARDLY BREATHE, let alone think. Bristol lets out a disbelieving laugh and wrinkles her nose at the chair like she's just discovered it in her hands all over again.

“What should I do with this? Should I—”

The warehouse door opens again with another loud, hollow *bang*.

“Where is he?” Sinclair shouts.

I look away from Bristol long enough to see Sinclair and Emerson running across the warehouse toward us. Em has a slight edge on Sin. He reaches the ring first and without breaking his stride he makes a flying leap up to the ropes, then hauls himself over.

It looks way too easy. Yes, he's constantly leaping onto and off of his surfboard, but that's nothing like the ring.

Or maybe I'm still under the influence of a lifetime's worth of adrenaline and I don't know what the hell I'm talking about.

“Are you okay?” He looks from me to Bristol, his eyebrows going up at the sight of the chair. “Bristol? Any injuries?”

“I hit Mountain Man with a chair.” She uses a conversational tone that could mean she's going into shock. “I'm not sure about next steps.”

Sinclair lands inside the ring and spots the length of rope on the floor. “What the fuck was this guy doing? Hey, Bristol? More than fine for you to put down the chair. Anywhere on the floor’s fine.”

Bristol nods and releases her grip on the chair, which hits the floor at her feet and bounces once before it settles. Then she scrambles over it and rushes into my arms.

I inhale the citrus scent of her skin and the clean-laundry scent that’s specific to our house, Jesus, we have a *house*, and she’s lived in it for long enough that it’s all over her. Bristol trembles, her arms tight around my waist, and I run my palms over her shoulders and her back and thread my fingers through her hair and generally try to get my shit together.

Sinclair reaches for his phone in his back pocket. “Much as I hate to involve cops, we should probably call to check—”

“The hell.” On the floor behind Emerson, Mountain Man groans. “What the *fuck*.” He pushes himself up with surprising speed, one hand clapped to his head.

Bristol gasps. I push her behind me and face the asshole who got knocked out by a fucking folding chair and still has the balls to start another fight.

Emerson’s a half-step ahead of me, Sinclair on his other side. I can’t coordinate some plan to rush Mountain Man when he’s standing right there.

“Back off.” Sinclair uses a reasonable tone. “No need to get any closer to my brother’s girlfriend. Odds aren’t in your favor.”

“I’ll fuck you up, too,” spits Mountain Man. “Doesn’t matter that there’s three of you.”

Emerson lets out a short laugh. “A left-handed prick like you doesn’t have a prayer.”

Mountain Man sneers. “Guess again.”

He charges at us with his face contorted. I push past Emerson to get in front of him, to take the first swing, but by the time I’m face to face with Mountain Man, Em’s not there.

Sin's a shadow in the corner of my eye. I feint a wild right hook and rotate in with the left, catching him just above the jaw with all the power I can put behind it.

Mountain Man grunts. He tries to reset for a swing, but I'm so close that he can't get his guard together. I throw an elbow into his abs. He sticks both hands out, reaching for me, so I step out of range.

He's fucking enormous, but Bristol hit him pretty hard with the chair. Mountain Man's eyes seem off, like they're not cooperating with him. He launches himself after me with the kind of bloodthirsty obsession that would make him a winner if we were in the ring.

This motherfucker wants to hurt me so much that he forgets about Sinclair. He forgets about Emerson.

Sin hooks a foot around Mountain Man's ankle and uses all his body weight to throw him onto the mat. Before I can get there to knock him out again, Emerson's on top of him. *Literally* on top of him, one foot in the center of his back, driving all his weight down while he wrenches Mountain Man's wrist behind his back.

There's just no way he's going to be able to incapacitate this guy. Mountain Man will roll over and tackle Emerson, or throw him off, or crush him with his bare hands.

Or maybe not. Em has an iron grip on his wrist, both hands involved in the project, and he's looking down with what I can only describe as gleeful concentration. No smile on his face, but there's a light in his eyes that I've only ever seen when he's hunting a piece of art he's fallen in love with.

One of Mountain Man's legs kicks, and he makes an angry, wounded sound. Emerson ignores all of it and puts more of his weight into the center of the man's back. He tilts his head slightly, considering, then adjusts his grip on Mountain Man's wrist and hand. Then he *yanks*, up toward the middle of the asshole's back, and Mountain Man howls.

Emerson steps off him, and the other man rolls onto his back and shuffles to his knees, holding his damaged wrist with

the other hand.

Sinclair steps in front of him and holds up the rope. “Are you going to sit here and wait for the cops without trying anymore bullshit, or should I tie you to one of the corner posts?”

“Get the fuck away from me.”

“Can’t go too far after the stunt you pulled.”

“*Him*,” Mountain Man yells in Emerson’s direction, and then his eyes land on me. “Both of you psychopaths. Don’t come any closer.”

An arm slides around my waist, and I turn and find Bristol there. Once again, I’m overloaded by adrenaline. I fold my arms around her and force air into my lungs. My brain refuses to turn over. Sinclair stands over Mountain Man, holding up the rope as a reminder. Emerson looks down at him like he’s a particularly uninteresting piece of art.

My brothers showed up for me.

They didn’t *save* me. I didn’t need to be saved. I could have taken care of Mountain Man all by myself.

I didn’t have to. Not this time.

My chest is...exploding. No. It’s being crushed. It’s oxygen, that’s all. It’s adrenaline. Someone’s lighting off fireworks in there. Bristol runs her hand over my back.

It’s only right now, standing in the ring where I’ve thrown countless punches and taken just as many hits, that I understand.

I don’t have to do this anymore. I don’t have to punch people. I don’t have to hurt people just so I can feel something.

It didn’t make me a monster to use this as an outlet. It doesn’t make me a coward to stop.

“What are you thinking about?” Bristol’s voice is soft. A little shaky.

“I was thinking that I love you.”

She turns her face into my chest. “I love you too. I was worried you might punch that guy too many times and accidentally kill him.”

“It wouldn’t have been an accident.” Bristol breathes a laugh into my shirt. “But I was also thinking that I don’t need them anymore. The fights, I mean.”

She tilts her chin and looks into my eyes. “Really? I thought you’d always want to come back here. I wouldn’t blame you if you did.”

“I came here because I was empty. My life was just a shell. It was just a way to pretend it felt so awful because I’d been punched, not because the important things were missing. Now you’re here.” Bristol hugs me tighter. “You and the twins and my brothers.”

“You’re here, too.” Bristol’s voice wobbles. “I hope you can see it now.”

“See what?”

“That you didn’t ruin anything for anybody. You didn’t break your family. It’s whole because you’re in it, no matter what else happens.”

“This family stuff is everywhere.” I say it mainly so I don’t start crying, which would be intolerable at this moment. “At home. At work. Even my mom came back. There’s no escape.”

“Do you want an escape?”

“Fuck no.”

Emerson lifts his head and ambles over to us, his hands in his pockets. “Are you sure you’re both okay?” I stare at him in the rudest possible way. I can’t even be sure what I’m looking for. He meets my eyes with a placid expression. “What?”

“You broke Mountain Man’s arm.”

A shrug. “Maybe. I’d guess it’s only a severe sprain. He won’t be punching anyone with it for a while either way.”

“You’ve *done* that before.” It’s not a question. He had absolute confidence.

Em arches an eyebrow. “Yes.”

“That’s...” Nothing like the Emerson I know. “That was pretty intense.”

He glances over my face. “What did you think I was like?”

Sure, there have been some instances in our lives where I’ve been surprised by Emerson, but laser-focused violence is a new development. “I thought you’d have a tough time in a situation like this. But you’re jumping into the ring like you’ve been here before and—Jesus. Breaking people’s arms.”

“I told you it’s probably a severe strain. I didn’t feel any bones crack.”

“What the fuck. How do you even know what that feels like? How often do you do this?”

“Not that often.”

“*How* often?”

Emerson blinks, the corner of his mouth curving in a hint of an amused smile. “Once this year. Once last year. Not that often. If it helps, I don’t think I’ll have to do it again next year unless someone fucks with Sinclair and I’m close enough to step in.”

“Jesus Christ. You’re *dangerous*. You’re a dangerous motherfucker, and you let everybody think you’re a mild-mannered art collector.”

“I can be two things.”

Sin looks over his shoulder. “Em. Cops are almost here. Go outside and tell them what they’re dealing with in here.”

“Okay.” Emerson looks at Bristol. “I wouldn’t let go of him, if I were you. He seems like he’s in shock.”

“I’m not in shock, asshole.”

“I absolutely believe you.”

Emerson hops over the ring, then jumps down to the warehouse floor. No. I *do* know what I'm talking about. He didn't come up with these skills out of nowhere.

“Em.”

“Yeah?”

He looks up at me, and for the millionth time in my life, all I can see is how similar we look. I used to think it was a cruel joke that we could be so different, but maybe I was wrong about that, too.

“You're holding out on me.”

“I am not. What are you talking about?”

“Don't play coy, Em. I tried to punch you at your house—”

“I thought you said you were done with punching people,” Bristol says. “Why would you try to punch your own brother?”

“—and you caught my fist in both hands before I could hit you. You're jumping all over this place like you live here, except I know you don't. And you just broke Mountain Man's arm—”

Emerson crosses his arms over his chest. “I sprained it.”

“—in a manner that indicated some actual technical skill with breaking people's arms. You either found a place to go or had somebody come out to your house, but you didn't learn that shit by communing with the sea while you were surfing. It wasn't me or Sin. So who taught you?”

“Oh. All that.” Em turns, heading for the warehouse doors to meet the cops and warn them that they're about to be arresting a guy who looks seven feet tall, is in a foul mood, and has a severely sprained wrist at best. “It was a guy named Eddie. He has a lot of experience with hand-to-hand combat. Maybe you've heard of him.”

OUR THIRD FRIDAY night dinner is a big one. I never thought my brothers and I would eventually be the kind of adults who got together for dinner with our families, much less live next door to one another. Those things seem run-of-the-mill compared with going to pick up my very-much-alive mom for said dinner.

The address she gives me turns out to be a motel in Brooklyn. First thing my headlights land on is two guys having a fistfight in the parking lot. It's one thing to kidnap someone's girlfriend and orchestrate a confrontation for revenge, but fighting in the parking lot of a motel? Please.

I take out my phone and dial her number. We've texted a few times since she came to my office. Calling still feels weird and slightly dangerous. I brace myself for the line to have been disconnected.

"Hi, Will. Are you outside?"

"What's your room number?"

"Seven. First floor."

"Okay. Yes, I'm outside. Throw your stuff in your bags and bring it out with you."

There's a long silence.

"Did we get disconnected?"

"No, I'm still here. Why would I need my bags at dinner?"

“Mom.” That feels weird, too, but I’ll say it as long as I have the chance. “There’s two assholes beating each other up in the parking lot. You can’t stay here.”

“It’s the only place in my budget, Will.”

“A guest room at my house is free. Emerson has guest rooms, too.”

“Well...would his house be more convenient, or yours? Is it safe to leave my bags in the car?”

It hurts to think she’s been living in places like this, with pricks in the parking lot who’ll break into cars. “Both our houses are in a good neighborhood, and they’re very safe. We actually—” I laugh at the sheer fairy-tale ridiculousness of it. “The same security firm protects us both. I thought I told you before. Our houses are next door to each other. Do you want me to help you pack your things?”

“No, no. I’ve got it. Stay right there.”

The door to room number seven opens less than five minutes later. My mom has a small duffel bag and a canvas tote over one shoulder, her purse and a plastic grocery bag over the other. That’s it. That’s all she has.

I get out and open the passenger door for her, then take her bags and put them in the back. As soon as I’m behind the wheel again, she sags in her seat.

“There are lots of fights,” she admits, watching the motel disappear in the rearview mirror. “They start when the sun goes down and stay mad all night.”

I was going to stay mad the rest of my life, but then Bristol walked in. “That won’t be a problem where we live.”

We mostly ride in silence. My mom looks out the window, watching the city fall away. It’s not awkward, just quiet. She seems relieved.

Until we’re about five minutes out, when she sits up, gripping her purse with both hands.

“Will, I can come for dinner another time. There’s no need for me to interrupt your lives.”

“It’s not an interruption. We invited you.”

“I should—” She shakes her head. “I should go back to the hotel and figure things out for myself.”

Three minutes. “Yeah, no. I’m not taking you back to that place. If you really don’t want to stay with me or Em, I’ll find you somewhere safer.”

“My budget—”

“Mom, I have so much money that it’s hard to describe it without sounding like an asshole. The budget isn’t a problem.”

“But Will.” I can’t look at her, since I’m driving, but she’s looking at me. “I don’t want you to think I came here for your money.”

I reach over and pat her hand. “I know that.”

“I really didn’t.”

There’s Emerson’s gate. “Have you ever asked anybody for money?”

We turn in, and the gate opens. The guard on the inside waves. I wave back.

“Your father.” Shame rings in her voice, no matter how soft it is.

I steal a glance at her. She’s staring at Emerson’s house. I know how it looks, because I know how it looked to me when he first bought it. A castle. A dream.

“This is where Emerson lives?”

“Yes.” I put the SUV in park and point across the yard. “That one’s mine. I have a pool. Mom.” She turns her head, and I look her in the eyes. “I was pissed at you for a long time. Really fucking pissed. Because I thought it was my fault you left, and I—” I swallow the lump in my throat. “And I missed you. But I’m not angry now. OK?”

“You don’t have to forgive me. I know I don’t deserve it.”

“I don’t have to do anything. And...I don’t know about the rest. Can’t figure that out tonight, anyway. There’s too much

left to talk about. And I can't talk to you if you're spending all your time trying to stay safe in some shitty motel."

"Will." The plastic bag rustles in her lap. "I can't ask you for this."

"Do me a favor, then, and let me do this for you. It's pointless to be rich if I can't make sure my own mother has a decent place to stay."

"But I—"

"A *favor*, Mom. A huge favor. To me."

She exhales. "Okay."

"Thanks. I owe you one."

My mom laughs, but when I help her out of the car with her purse and grocery bag, her hands shake on the handle. She looks over Emerson's house with a tremble in her chin.

She's nervous. Maybe even scared. I'm nervous, too. We've planned as much of this dinner as we can, but who the hell knows? When Dad showed up it was a huge fucking deal.

This isn't the same. Nobody's being taken by surprise.

"Mom." She looks up at me with a faint smile. "It's okay."

"Maybe it's better if I don't come in. I made mistakes before. Finding your office. Trying to see you."

"It wasn't a mistake."

"I can explain. If I had a chance to explain—"

"We'll have time for all that later. Right now, it's almost time for dinner."

I was going to put her hand on my elbow, but instead, I put my arm around her and guide her onto the porch. I think of Leo opening the door to his house for Emerson's birthday party and how effortless he made all his routine explanations. If Leo Morelli can pull that off, so can I.

We pause on the doormat. Emerson's front door senses my phone, and there's a *click* as it unlocks.

“So, Em’s house is a giant square with a big hall in the middle. We’re going to eat in the dining room, which is on the left when you first come in. I’m sure he’ll show you his galleries and stuff later. Bedrooms are upstairs.”

Mom bites her lip. The grocery bag rustles.

“Em’s not a fan of a big scene at the door, so everybody’s in the kitchen right now. That’s at the back of the house, also on the left. Daphne’s here, obviously. You’ll like her. Bristol—you’ve already met her a few times. Mia and Ben are her twin siblings. They’re ten. Mia has bright red hair that you can’t miss and Ben’s got dark hair, like Bristol. And of course, Sinclair and Emerson.”

She nods, steeling herself. “Okay.”

“Oh—I brought something for you. Thought you might want to hold on to it for the evening.” I stick my hand in my pocket and take out her watch. “I polished it up and put a new battery inside. Sorry I kept it for so long.”

She takes it from my palm with a shaky smile. “This was my favorite watch. I never had the heart to replace it.”

“Now you don’t have to.”

I give her a moment to fasten it on her wrist, and then we go in. It’s comfortably warm in Emerson’s foyer, both temperature-wise and light-wise. Not too bright. The coat closet opens for me without a sound. I take my mom’s coat and hang it up, then kick off my shoes.

“Your shoes can go in here, next to mine.”

Mom slides her shoes off, nudging them into the row. “Is this table over here okay for my purse?”

“Yep.”

Down the hall, laughter spills out of the kitchen, Sin’s the loudest, Daphne’s high and giggly. Mom’s shoulders go back up.

I take her purse out of her hand and leave it on the table next to the flower arrangement, then put my arm around her again and walk with her down the hall.

“If you need a break, you can come look at art.” I tilt my head at one of the pieces in the hall. “He’s got about a million paintings in here. Daphne paints, too, so there’s a ton of her work. She loves to paint the ocean. If you ask her about it, she’ll tell you what she’s working on. It’s funny. You’d think they’d all be the same, but they’re different every time. Okay. Here we are.”

We turn left and go into the kitchen. Mom’s entire body tenses up, and she comes to an abrupt halt two steps inside.

Sinclair’s over by the oven. He sees us first and smiles, but it fades, and he sticks his hands in his pockets, suddenly shy. Mia and Ben are at the kitchen island, perched on stools, with Bristol behind them. Emerson’s leaning against the side of the island, Daphne tucked into his side. His head is turned, and he’s already smiling, because Mia is in the middle of a spirited speech.

“—about a kid named *Will*. And now we know a *real Will*. That means—” Her eyes flick over to me, and she does a double-take. “Um. Emerson. Somebody else is here.” She drops her voice to a whisper. “I think it might be your Mom.”

Em turns his head, and I hold my breath, hold my mom a little tighter. I don’t know what I’m waiting for until I do.

Emerson’s been talking to Mia, and so he hasn’t been wearing his gallery expression—the calm, neutral-verging-on-blank mask he puts on whenever he goes out. I don’t remember when he started using it at home all the time, too. By the time we left home it was almost constant, except when things were so bad that he couldn’t control it anymore.

And then he met Daphne, and she put thousands of hairline cracks in it. I don’t think I’ve ever seen him so happy.

No. I don’t think I’ve ever seen him so *safe*.

I’m waiting for it to come back now. For the happiness in his eyes to get tucked away, held at a distance behind some invisible wall.

It breaks wide open inside. An enormous, uninhibited grin flashes onto his face, so intense that his dimples reappear. I

haven't seen those for a long, long time. The smile is a flash in the pan but his eyes light up, wide and thrilled. Daphne's watching this, same as me, and a tear runs down her cheek at the sight.

It's Emerson's real face. One of the oldest, most hidden ones. I saw his real sadness and fear and despair many more times before he shut them all away, but this one...

It's guileless. That's the only way I can think to describe it. There's absolutely no pretense. No closed doors.

"Mom." His palm moves up and down on Daphne's arm in a particular rhythm. "I hope you didn't forget the bread."

Sinclair makes a choked sound and turns his face to the window. The *bread*. She went to the store to get bread but didn't come back. That's what Emerson told me, but it's not the real story. It can't be, because—

Mom holds up the grocery bag, the handles held tight in her fist. "It was the strangest thing, Emmy. They were all out. It sent me on a wild goose chase."

Emerson laughs out loud, and in three big steps he's across the kitchen. She looks up at him, a twin open book, and I see where he got it from.

"You used to be so tall." He touches her chin. Her cheek. "What happened to your hair?"

"I messed it up." She laughs, tears streaking down her cheeks. "I don't know how to fix it."

Emerson takes her face in big hands. "Don't worry. Daphne knows all about those things." He turns, not letting go of Mom, and Daphne's there at his side. "Daphne, this is my mom. Mom, this is Daphne, my wife."

"It's so good to meet you." Daphne beams. "Emerson's right. I do know a really lovely salon."

Em leans down and whispers something into Mom's ear.

"You're kidding."

He shakes his head, and then she's crying even more, her arms pulling Emerson and Daphne in tight. She's still crying when she releases them and crosses the kitchen to Sinclair, dropping the grocery bag on the island as she goes. He won't look at her at first, but then she pulls on his elbow, saying something too soft to hear. Sin's chin wobbles, hesitating for a few more seconds before he folds. He drapes himself over her and buries his face in her shoulder, his arms folded around her.

Bristol and the twins bump into me. Their arms are at my waist, and Bristol slides hers around my neck, careful as she can be. She kisses my cheek with tears in her eyes.

Mia takes in the rest of the kitchen. "Wow." She nods to herself. "That must be some really special bread."

SOMETHING WAKES me up in the middle of the night. A sound, maybe. I tug on a hoodie over my T-shirt and pajama pants and go to investigate, half-asleep.

Upstairs, Mia is in the hallway in her nightgown, peering at all the doors. "Hey, Will?" She must be half-asleep, too. "I can't remember which bedroom's mine."

"This one," I whisper. She's under the covers in her library bedroom and back asleep in seconds.

I pad back downstairs. Dinner lasted until everyone was exhausted, and then Mom went upstairs to one of Em's guest bedrooms. He's going to show her the cottage on the property across the street in the morning.

"Quiet," he said. "You can have as much time by yourself as you want, but we'll be close, so you can see us whenever." He wouldn't hear of her living anywhere else.

I'm not sure what makes me go to the window. It's late as hell. I think my clock said two in the morning. The backyard has a moonlight glow to it. So does the ocean. Big swells roll toward the shore. A shadow on one of them catches my eye.

"Oh my fucking God."

It's not a shadow, it's Emerson.

I go out the back door, cut across my yard, and hustle across night-chilled sand. Temperatures are dropping at night, and the breeze cuts through my hoodie.

I cross to his section of the beach and stand at the shore, wave remnants freezing my toes, and wave my arms over my head.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” I shout over the waves. “You can't surf in the middle of the night. You'll get yourself killed. Emerson. *Em.*”

The figure out on the waves pauses, then starts to paddle in. He catches the next wave and speeds toward the shore. It's disgusting how good he is at surfing. He's still some distance out when he dives off the board, disappearing under the surface. The board skims along without a rider.

What if he hit his head on a rock? I'm going to kill him. Rescue him from drowning, then kill him. Just when I think I'm going to have to wade into the damn ocean at two in the morning, Emerson pops up twenty feet from the shore. He catches the leash for his board and drags it behind him like a fallen kite, legs cutting through the water with small splashes.

“The hell are you thinking?” Em doesn't answer. It's hard to see his face with the moon behind him like this. He just keeps dragging the board, walking straight at me like he's on a mission. “This is basic water safety, asshole.”

His feet crunch on the sand, and I back up a few steps until we're fully away from the water. Em detaches himself from the board and tosses it in the general direction of the yard. He starts walking again without missing a beat.

“Yes, there's security, but those motherfuckers aren't lifeguards. So—what are you—” He's still moving. “Emerson, what—are you just *running into me* like you can't even see—”

We're toe to toe when he throws his arms around me.

It's a hug. An *actual* hug. Not me squeezing him so he can breathe and calm the fuck down. A hug, like the one in that old

photo. My arms come up to hug him back. It feels surprisingly non-awkward.

“Ugh. I don’t have a wetsuit, you prick. You’re getting ocean all over me.” My sweatshirt is already soaked. He’s the same frigid temperature. Emerson doesn’t let go. “Are you okay? How long have you been out here?”

There’s a long pause. Then: “Two hours.” His voice is rough.

“Are you crying?”

“No. Why would you say that?”

He’s obviously fucking crying. “Too much happiness?”

Em nods, just once, sending more water onto my sweatshirt. Too much of anything can hurt, I guess.

“That’s better than the alternative. I can’t believe I have to say this, but no more surfing alone in the middle of the goddamn night. Wake me up instead. I’ll go with you.”

He says something I can’t make out. “What?”

“I said, good. You need the practice.”

Emerson squeezes me, and I squeeze him back, a normal amount. We walk back across the beach together.

I CAN'T WAIT for our first real summer at our house on the beach, but I have to say—fall isn't bad. Especially when we get a sunny Saturday like this one. The day started off on a high note, with news from Evan, who's getting out of the hospital this afternoon.

My beach outfit for the day is leggings and an oversized hoodie. No socks, so I can drag my toes through the sand while I watch the twins build a sandcastle. The plan started out complicated, and now it's moved up to an even more elaborate level. Mia and Ben discuss it with their heads close together. He loves the beach breeze in his hair. Mia wears the hood of her *I'd rather be reading* hoodie over her hair.

Will sits on the lounge chair next to me in jeans and a sweater that is, quite frankly, making me feel feral toward him. He looks at me over the top of the investment report he's reading. "Something I can do for you?"

A striptease. I blush at my own internal joke. "Buy more shirts in that color."

He notices the flush in my cheeks, his eyes going dark. "I'm not convinced you like this one enough for me to do that."

I squeeze my thighs together. "How can I prove it to you?"

"Take off your leggings and spread—"

"*Will.*"

“No.” Mia blocks Ben from touching one of the sandcastle tower spires with her hand. “It’ll fall over.”

“It won’t,” he insists.

“The ocean looks wet today,” says Will. “How about you, sweetheart? Has this shirt had an effect?” He waves a dismissive hand in the air. “You know what? Show me later.”

My phone buzzes in the pocket of my hoodie, so I shelve my plans to flirt with him even harder and stick my tongue out at him instead.

He points at the tip of my tongue. “I have an idea for where you could put that.”

“Hush, you.” It’s an unknown number. I swipe at my phone and the call connects. “This is Bristol Anderson.”

“Hey, Bristol. It’s me.”

“Hi, Dad.”

“Sorry it took so long for me to call. They had a policy for the first two weeks.”

“First two weeks?” My dad ended up in the hospital with an infected gunshot wound not long after the first dinner we had with Will’s mom. Now she lives in the cottage next to the security gatehouse. She seems constantly bewildered by how her life has turned out. Thrilled, too. I know the feeling.

“I wanted to tell you before. I got into a program for gamblers and—and people who have trouble like that. Came straight here after they patched me up. I sent that letter for the lawyers, but you know how the mail is. Should get there any day now.”

“Dad.” My eyes sting with happy tears. “Dad, that’s incredible news. Are you—how do you feel? Is it good?”

“It’s great, hon—Bristol. The people here get it. When I finish up, they’ll help me get a job. A real one,” he rushes to say. “Nothing under the table. That’s what I’m going to do. But I signed all the papers so you’ll have everything squared away with the twins.”

“You sound—” I clear my throat. “You sound good, Dad.”

He sounds clear-minded. Well-rested. Determined. “I’ve been talking to a guy here. About—” Dad hesitates. “About your mom. He said something the other day that’s been on my mind.”

“What was it?”

“That maybe I never faced it. The way—oh, you remember how it was. Happened so fast. I didn’t see it coming when we lost her, and afterward, I didn’t want to see it. But I’ve been trying. It’s hard, because—” He coughs, his voice going tight. “I don’t mean that as an excuse. I miss her a lot more than I realized. I’ve been missing her. That doesn’t erase what I did, though, so I wanted to tell you that I’m sorry. For putting that on you. I’m going to do better.”

“I—” I am not going to lose it on our Saturday beach day. “I accept your apology, Dad. I understand. I’m really happy for you. I hope you know that.”

“I do, honey.” I let it slide. *Honey* sounds genuine. I’ll give him that. “I’ll call again next week, same time? I’ll have a little bit longer to talk to Mia and Ben.”

“We’ll be here. Don’t worry about us.”

“I love you, Bristol. Tell the twins.”

“Love you, Dad.”

I stand up, tip my face to the sun, and breathe. It was good news with a solid plan for more good news.

My dad might actually make it.

The twins look up from the sandcastle when I get closer. “I just heard from Dad. He’s in a new program that I think is going to help a lot. He said he loves you, and he’ll call again next Saturday.”

Mia and Ben exchange a serious look. “Okay.”

Mia traces a curve in the sand with her fingertip. Ben glances behind me, then sets his mouth in a thin line.

“What’s wrong?” I crouch down next to them, the breeze blowing tendrils of my hair into my face. “You aren’t still worried about me and Will, are you?”

“No.” Mia makes the curve in the sand into a spiral.

“You can tell me, Mia.”

She glances at Ben, then meets my eyes. “We want Dad to get better. But when he’s done with his program, we want to keep living with you.”

I put a hand on Ben’s shoulder. “You know what? I talked to Dad about that, too. He signed some official paperwork so that you guys can stay with me no matter what. It’s all taken care of.”

Ben chews at his lip. “Are you happy about it?”

“I’m *thrilled*, Ben. None of us have to worry about moving, or about being split up ever again. I honestly...I couldn’t be happier.”

“But what about Will?” Mia asks. “Does he want us all to be together?”

“Will would love that.” Will’s voice comes from directly behind me, and Mia’s eyes go wide. “In fact, I’d like to make this whole thing permanent.”

Ben pushes at my hand, urging me to my feet, and I turn around to find Will down on one knee in the sand. He has my plastic palm tree cupped in his hands, and at the very top, perched in the fronds, is a ring.

A diamond ring. An engagement ring.

Will looks into my eyes. “Bristol, I love you.” Mia gasps. “I want to give you absolutely everything. *More* than everything. I want to take you to every beach you could ever want to visit, and then I want to come home with you to our beach. Because you’re everything to me. You’re more than I could ever deserve. If you’ll let me, I’ll spend the rest of our lives showing you how much I love you. There’s nothing else I’d rather do. So.” He swallows, his cheeks flushed. “You know. I thought I should ask. Will you marry me?”

“Will, to be absolutely, totally clear.” I put my hands around his, around my dreams, held safe in his palms. “Yes. I would *love* to marry you.”

Someone shrieks nearby. I look up through *more* happy tears and find Will’s family doing a terrible job of hiding behind one of the trees between our houses. Daphne. Emerson. Sinclair. Will’s mom. Daphne has a camera in her hand, and she’s laughing.

“I’m sorry!” she calls. “I just got so excited. Sorry! Keep going.”

Will rolls his eyes, gets to his feet, and kisses me. I put my hand over the top of the palm tree, stricken by the fear that the ring will fall into the sand and be lost forever. We kiss until Sinclair whistles.

“I love you,” Will whispers in my ear. Then he takes the ring and slips it on my finger. “Platinum,” he murmurs. “So it would go with your mom’s necklace.” A single, perfect diamond sparkles in the sun. “Oh—there’s something else, too.”

“What is it?” Mia’s eyes are huge.

Will puts a hand in his pocket and takes out two slim black boxes. He hands one to Mia and one to Ben.

“Look at this box,” Mia breathes. She brushes her fingertips over the delicate embossing on the top of hers. I lean closer to see it, Will’s arm wraps around my waist. She’s right. It’s a gorgeous logo. A mountain, pressed in silver. Mia looks up at Will. “Can we keep them?”

“Can you keep the boxes?” The corner of his mouth turns up.

“Yeah.” Mia’s solemn. “I really want to keep it.”

“Yes.” Will looks serious, too. “You can. And you can keep what’s inside, too.”

“Can we come see the ring?” Daphne shouts. “He wouldn’t show us earlier.”

“Get over here,” Will shouts back. “Then we have to call Bristol’s brother. Her dad, too. The whole family.”

WHEN I FIRST CAME TO WORK AT Hughes, I thought the meetings were over the top, what with the formal agendas and the birthday announcements and some guy ruling over the conference table like the president. Or, I guess, the chief of staff.

The meetings are nothing compared to the parties.

This party in particular is a showcase of the Hughes Industries event planning machine. There's a whole department of people dedicated to the cause.

Behind closed doors, yes, I roll my eyes. I would never have had an event planning department at Summit. Now that I have a higher-level view of things at Hughes, it makes a certain kind of ridiculous sense.

And, now that I'm on a stage with professional lighting about to finish my speech, I'm glad that somebody planned all this with an obsessive level of care.

“—looking forward to the future we'll build together. I'm very proud to be part of the Hughes tradition of changing lives for the better, and I couldn't be more honored to share it with you. Here's to many more years of making the world a better place to live.”

The applause from the guests is immediate and enthusiastic.

Nailed it.

The loudest applause comes from a spot on the left and continues for several beats after the rest of the clapping tapers off. It's my family, gathered around one of the standing tables. Daphne and Bristol are the loudest, but everyone came. Sinclair's using all his strength to clap at a deafening volume. My mom stands next to Emerson, clapping with fierce determination. He has his hands over her ears, and he's laughing his ass off.

It's among the top ten most heartwarming things I've ever seen, and frankly, I've seen a lot of heartwarming shit.

Finn Hughes crosses the stage, claps my shoulder, and leans into the mic. "There will be cake in approximately ten minutes. Please enjoy yourselves in the meantime."

We climb down the stairs at the side of the stage. "Happy with how it's going?"

Finn flashes a big smile at the nearby guests. "It's going extremely well if the bruises are any indication."

"Somebody deck you?"

"The shoulder slaps have gone from vigorous to competitive."

I purse my lips. "You poor thing."

He puts on a long-suffering expression. "It's the price I pay for being so beloved. I should start telling people this is *your* fault."

"Ha, ha. Yes. I'm to blame for making your company even more absurdly large."

"We're a corporation, not a company, Leblanc. And it's *your* corporation now, too." He raises an eyebrow at me.

"I'll believe it when my name is on the building."

"Be careful what you wish for." Finn shoots me an exaggerated warning look and moves off to circulate among the guests.

My feelings about event planning aside, I'm proud of this party. The official Hughes relaunch wouldn't have been

possible without all the work we put in. All the work *I* put in. I didn't want to acknowledge it at first. Those meeting-room victories felt good, but it made me wonder if I was just using them as an excuse to keep being a violent monster.

Except I never punched anyone during the meetings. More importantly, I never pushed anyone into a bad deal. Every partner and investor I've signed since that conversation in Finn's office got what they wanted and then some. Hughes Industries made it through the fallout of the news and is in an even stronger position than they were before. Even Finn's doing well.

Bristol says that using my innate skills to help people only *feels* similar to being in the ring because I was also good at knocking people out. I'll take her word for it.

I start making my way to my family's table. Finn's correct. The shoulder-slapping is on another level. The combination of guests means that some of these people are beside themselves with joy at how much money they've made, some of them are happy as hell to still have incredible jobs, and some of them are proud of us.

It means a lot. It does. But I have a lot to be proud of now. Bristol and the twins, first and foremost. I'm proud of my mom for starting over. I'm even proud of my brothers. They've put an astonishing amount of work into being obnoxious assholes who are constantly bothering each other.

Sinclair materializes out of the crowd and catches me by the elbow. "Nice speech. Are you taking up a career in inspirational bullshit?"

"Aww. You were inspired by me? Sin, you're gonna make me cry."

He laughs. "You're pretty inspiring for a stubborn prick. Do you happen to know who came up with the guest list?"

"Not me."

Sin scans the crowd around us, eyes bright. "I want to buy that lady a drink."

“I don’t think it was one person. There’s an entire department behind Hughes Industries events. Why? Is this some weird sex thing? Are you turned on by exceptional guest lists?”

“I won’t be shamed for taking pleasure in sex.”

“You fuck *lists* now? Jesus Christ, Sin.”

He spreads out the fingers of his free hand and gestures around us. “I don’t think you understand what you’ve got here. This party has everyone.”

“Yeah. It’s a huge fucking party.”

“No. I’m pretty sure *all* the Morellis are here, and most of the Constantines. I wonder what’s up with that.”

“Nothing’s up with that. They all got invited because rich people live in a small world.”

“Not all rich people hate each other.”

I give Sin an incredulous look. “At least half of them married each other. They don’t hate each other anymore.”

“Maybe not. But there’s something in the air.”

“That’s alcohol, Sin. And canapés.”

“No.” He leans in. “It’s secrets.”

“You are so fucking annoying. Nothing is even happening at this party.”

“Just a lot of furtive, lingering glances.”

“You’re drunk.”

“I’m having a good time.” He gets this *look* on his face, and I can’t hold back from rolling my eyes.

“They’re not a story, Sin, for Christ’s sake. They’re just rich assholes.”

“That’s your sister-in-law you’re talking about. And I wouldn’t write a story about the Morellis.”

I almost fall for it. “You’d only write a story about the rivalry.”

“I’m just saying. People like that always have something to hide.”

“Has it ever occurred to you that *you’re* people like that, Sinclair?”

He grins at me. “Not for a second.”

“Will!” Bristol bursts out of the crowd, gets up on tiptoe, and kisses my cheek. “You looked so good up there. I’m so proud of you.”

I take her arms and put them around my neck, then pull her close. “I’m nothing without you. Do you know that?”

“Mmm. I don’t think that scenario applies, Mr. Leblanc. You’re never going to be without me again. That means you’re everything, forever.”

“I love you, Ms. Anderson.”

“You won’t be able to call me that much longer,” she whispers.

“I’m still going to call you that when you’re bent over my ___”

Bristol shuts me up with a tight, tight hug and a soft, sweet kiss.

EPILOGUE

SINCLAIR

I LIKE OPEN SPACES. The bigger, the better. Ever jump off the side of a mountain attached to a parachute? For a second, before you pull the chute, you can't feel anything but air.

That's the stuff.

The rest of the trip down isn't bad, either. Puts things in perspective. Things can't weigh so much when they're so far below that you can hardly see them.

Same can't be said for the kind of work I do. All the best stories come from being up close and personal. Even the biggest cities in the world are collections of small places. Same goes for people's lives. They're made up of moments. Split-second decisions. All such small things, when you line them up.

For the big picture, you need to be able to step back and see it all.

That's the catch. If a guy like me stands alone in the middle of a town square, somebody's going to notice. A person who's aware of an audience always changes. I've only met a couple of people who are exceptions to the rule.

The only way to get around *that* is to make yourself less of a stranger. In my line of work, it can't be one or the other. I always start out as a neutral observer, watching my subjects before they can watch me back.

Then I move in. I become familiar, but not *close*. Never close. Bonds between people are dangerous things. I'd rather

take my chances on jumping off cliffsides.

Honestly, I miss the fall.

I miss it more now that I have reasons to stay on the ground again.

My brother Emerson and his pregnant wife. Will and his fiancée and her two ten-year-old siblings. My mother, who returned from the dead almost three decades after she looked me in the face and said *I can't go back for them, Sin, I just can't, I'll die.*

I was the one who went back. I made her death seem real enough to be believed.

And here we are. My brothers, happy. My mom, happy.

The Hughes relaunch party has transitioned out of the corporate façade and into an expensive cocktail party with an open bar. Lights are significantly lower. Much better for people-watching.

I'm tucked up on the far side of the bar, two drinks in. The evening plays out in front of me. Emerson's over in one corner with Daphne. He's talking, which probably means he's attracted some people interested in art.

Mom's there, too, looking proud as all hell.

Will's not far away, Bristol at his side. They're all wrapped up in a crowd of people from Hughes. When he thinks nobody's looking, he turns away and gives her a look that says he'd rather be elsewhere with her, somewhere private.

Toward the middle of the room, Leo Morelli has something similar on his mind. He escorts his wife Haley around a bunch of similarly rich assholes with a look in his eyes that can only be described as extremely suggestive.

He must feel me looking. It takes him all of two seconds to spot me by the bar. I wiggle my fingers in a wave. He glares back and mouths *it's rude to stare, motherfucker.*

I stare harder. He flips me off.

Then he's all sharp-toothed charm again.

Something else catches my eye.

A particular shade of white-blond. It's a canvas for the bar lights. Blue. Purple. Red. I see its true color in the spaces between.

She's in a black dress. An attempt to blend in. I can tell by the way she moves through the crowd that she has experience with becoming invisible. It's an act. A piece of jewelry she can take on and off at will.

This woman, if she wanted, could part the crowd like the Red Sea.

She's magnificent.

She approaches the bar with a smile on her face. Makes the hair at the back of my neck stand up. Not because it's threatening, but because it's genuine.

And because she's giving it to the bartender.

"How are you holding up, Joe?" she asks the bartender.

"It's a good night. Thank you for stepping in earlier." The bartender, apparently named Joe, raises his eyebrows. "Your usual?"

"It's all that sustains me."

"That bad, huh?" Ginger beer. Lime juice. A generous pour of vodka. He makes her a Moscow Mule and pushes the copper cup across the bar.

She drops a couple twenties into the tip jar. "You tell me."

The bartender scans the crowd. "A quiet night. Not counting the—"

She takes a sip, and the look in her eyes turns dark and arresting. "I had him removed. What an ass."

"You're a good egg, Ms. Constantine."

Constantine. She's a Constantine.

They're the mortal enemies of the Morellis, the family my brother married into. I've also heard about the relatively recent peace. I don't buy it. Feuds never really die.

“Speaking of asses.” She drops her voice. “Madeleine St. James over there? Don’t stop serving her, but when she asks for another Jack and Coke, leave out the Jack. She’s too drunk to notice. And too drunk to have any more. We don’t want another incident like the debutante ball.”

“Understood.”

“And—” Another name, too quiet to hear. “Keep an eye on him, okay? He’s been handsy with the servers. I warned him away, but if he keeps it up, security needs to escort him out. Quietly.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Vivian wrinkles her nose. “Really? Ma’am?”

“It’s respectful.” Joe grins.

“Call me Vivian.”

“Ms. Constantine. Final offer.”

She rolls her eyes. “That’s not better. At least once a day, I think about buying a fake identity, dyeing my hair, and disappearing in the night.”

That. That right there. Sounds like a joke. It’s not. I know that cadence, that delivery, like the back of my hand or the color of my brother Emerson’s eyes. First, because he has the same eyes as me, and second, because he says things like that all the time. Like a joke, but it’s true.

The bartender’s eyes flick over me, never landing, and then he leans in and says something to the woman. Vivian Constantine. Her sister Elaine has made the gossip rags enough that I might recognize her. Not Vivian, though. She would never make it above the fold on TMZ. If she’s anywhere she’s probably on some society page covering an art museum opening. That’s what she’s doing here, even as she sips her Moscow Mule. She’s watching over her family like a mother hen.

“It’s harder to disappear into the night than it used to be.” I take a sip of my scotch. “What with facial recognition and IP tracking.”

She changes. Just like that. Stands up straight. Her eyes go sharp. Vivian looks me up and down, and it's not just the back of my neck. It's every tiny hair on my body, pulled up tight. Then she's moving toward me, a crackle in the air around her. She steps deliberately into my space. "Who are you?"

"See something you like?"

She snorts. "Hardly."

I give her a little smile. She's lying. I normally wear adventure clothes, but I look damn good in a suit. And she noticed.

"Sinclair Leblanc."

A small pause. "Leblanc."

"You've probably met Will. He works with Phineas."

"Ah."

"And my brother is married to a Morelli. Which I suppose makes us...what? Enemies?"

"The feud is ancient history."

"Ancient, hmm?"

"Very."

"I'm always interested when people try to insist that something's dead and buried. It's the journalist in me."

Her eyes narrow. She doesn't like that. She likes me in a suit, but not the fact that I'm someone who asks questions for a living. "Why are you here?"

The fabric of her dress can't hide how gorgeous her body is. Plain. Ordinary. That's what the dress is trying to say. It lies, the same way she lies. "I'm enjoying the view. That's what I'm doing here. Admiring the show."

Two blonde eyebrows go up. "The show?"

"The one where you pretend to be a liar. Do you always tell the innocent bartender your secrets while you're babysitting an entire ballroom?"

For less than a second, her face freezes. Then it's right back to business as usual. "You've had too much to drink."

"When you have your fake identity and your new hair, where's your private plane going to touch down?"

Another freeze, followed by a laugh that vibrates through the ice in my drink on a soft, untouchable frequency. "That was a joke."

"I know jokes. And lies. That sounded like the truth."

Even in this light, her eyes are a crystal blue. "Is that how you write your articles? By making assumptions and writing them as fact?"

"I write my articles by being absolutely unreasonable in my pursuit of the truth. Because you have to be. Nothing's ever right there on the surface. It's always several layers deep. That's just the average person, but you?"

She gives me a cool, false smile. "I'm simple as pie."

That makes me laugh. "Like I said, I'm always interested when someone tries to convince me there's nothing interesting."

"Stubborn."

"Guilty."

"And perverse."

"You say that like it's a bad thing."

"You know what I think, Mr. Leblanc?"

"You're thinking I could take you behind one of those pillars and show you what none of these manscaped gentlemen ever could."

She blushes, but rallies. "I think you like to ask questions because it keeps people on the defensive. It keeps them from asking about *you*."

Fuck. It feels good to have someone turn the tables on me. Like an itch that hasn't been scratched in years. "Do you want

to ask me something, Vivian Constantine? Maybe you want me to kiss you.”

The scent of her is both sweet and cool in the bar. I don't move an inch. I don't give her any of her space.

She doesn't give me any of mine, either.

“Not likely.” She tips her chin up. Two inches between us.

I lean close and make it one. If she kisses me right now, I'll cover her mouth with my hand and drag her somewhere dark and fuck her. The charge in the air says she'd like that.

“Where does that plane land, Vivian?”

She pushes up on her stilettos. Half an inch. Vivian releases the softest sigh. A single note of a whimper. “As far away from you as possible.”

Her words land on my lips, and then it's just miles of empty air. She turns her back on me and returns to the crowd. I stare after her, the heat of her lie on my lips.

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