



SWEET MERCY

usa today bestselling author

AMELIA WILDE

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WHAT DO YOU SAY WHEN A BEAUTIFUL, TERRIBLE MAN announces that he owns you?

You're my newest acquisition.

My mind swipes between shock and disbelief in big, unwieldy strokes. I could paint the trajectory. Harsh angles. It's real. Emerson's keeping me here. No. It can't be real. Oh, but it is.

"You're not serious." My face arranges itself into a smile, but I don't feel like I have control over my expression. I don't want to smile. Not until I can't do it anymore. "You're not, Emerson."

He tilts his head, the angle so subtle I'd miss it if I wasn't watching him with every bit of my being. This is how he's always looked at me. That's how he knows so much about me. Emerson's focus is how he tricked me into trusting him. That, and the way he touched me. And kissed me. And fucked me. It made me want to be here.

"What makes you think I'm joking, little painter?"

"Maybe you're not joking. Maybe you're—" He said something similar before, in the studio. When he was inside me. "Maybe you want to have sex again before I go home."

Emerson's gorgeous, standing there in his sleep pants, standing there with his carved abs and breathtaking eyes. "I want to fuck you. But you're not going anywhere."

My body wants to believe this is a joke. It wants to believe that I'm not in danger. But my mind won't stop working the way it always does. My mind won't stop searching for the truth in his face. *Look at the set of his mouth. Look at the steadiness of his hands. His body.* I'm used to looking deeply at a subject. I spent four years at college learning how to see so that I could make art. I can't turn it off now.

"Until the morning," I offer. "You don't want to take me home in the middle of the night."

"I don't store my acquisitions where I can't see them."

"Emerson." A panicked laugh bubbles up and I put my hands over my mouth to stop it. "*Store* me? Do you hear what you're saying? I mean—no. You can't actually believe this."

"It's not about what I believe. It's about what I own."

"Is this a game?" I search his eyes, and all I find there is sincerity. The most sincere blue-green color I've ever seen. "You're playing with me. Some—some sex thing."

"Sex is part of it, now that I've fucked you. But this isn't a game."

"It has to be."

"Do I seem..." He wrinkles his nose, almost as if he might laugh. "Do I seem playful to you right now?"

He's really asking. His expression turns serious almost immediately. Emerson's gaze has a physical weight. It's a presence against my skin. Against my pounding heart. I can't help responding to it. I feel pulled to him. I want him to keep looking at me. It's wrong. The things he's saying—I should be screaming. I should be running. The rational part of my brain points out Emerson is between me and the door. The animal part hisses warnings that he's bigger. Stronger. Faster.

"Oh my god." I fold my arms over my chest, trying to hold in my disbelief. Panic fades like paint stretched too thin over canvas. "You're serious."

"Yes."

"You think I'm a piece of art."

“You’re much more than a singular piece, little painter. Beautiful and smart and kind. Perfection. You’re far too valuable to be left out in the world.”

I pace around to the foot of the bed, then pace back. I can’t stay still. I know better than to run. Anger turns my skin hot. I didn’t get angry when I lived with my parents. It was too dangerous. I’m not in their house now. I’m in Emerson’s. It could be equally as risky here. But I can’t stop it. I’m cycling through emotions like an old black-and-white movie. Flickering up there on a screen. We painted still shots from that kind of film during my freshman year.

He waits. Watching. Every move I make is giving Emerson more information. He takes it all in. He knew how I liked my coffee. He knows about my family.

My family.

I can’t let it happen, Daphne. I can’t let this collector take anything from you against your will.

Leo’s not going to let this happen. Well—he couldn’t stop it from happening. I wanted to come here. But no matter how pissed he is at me, no matter how hurt he is that I kept a secret, he won’t let this continue. The thoughts that nearly suffocated me with guilt are comforting now.

I left a light on in my apartment. My security team is required to check on things like that. They’ll have discovered I’m missing. They’ll have called Leo. Woken him up.

He’s on his way.

I know he is. My brother always knows when danger is coming. My mind wheels through old memories. Fragmented ones. Coloring on the carpet in the sitting room near my father’s office. Leo appearing at the door, his arms out, a smile on his face. I don’t remember my father carrying me on his hip. Only Leo. Only turning back to look over his shoulder. Only my arms around his neck, my coloring book clutched in my hand. *I’m gonna drop my crayon*, I’d said. *Hold on*, he said back. *Hold on, Daph, hold on.*

Emerson's still watching when I round on him, anger burning up through that memory.

"You're unbelievable." His eyes flick between my lips and my eyes. "You're a liar. A fake. You made me think—" All those texts. His mouth between my legs. The way he touched me in the art gallery. "You did all those things so that I would trust you, and *I did*." My voice rises, but I control it before I'm actually yelling. Before my shame can overwhelm me. I need to stay pissed for this. "You're a manipulative bastard. Did you mean any of it?"

"Any of what, little painter?"

"You were careful with me. You paid attention." He saw more than I wanted him to notice. He saw everything. "You did that on purpose."

"Of course."

"To lure me here."

Emerson shakes his head. "You asked me to come get you. Your messages were clear."

"Listen to this message, then. I want to leave. I want you to take me home."

"I won't."

"Then—"

"I didn't lure you, little painter. That's all I meant. It was your choice to come."

"Because I thought you were better," I snap, and for the first time, I hear my brother in my voice. I understand what it is to speak when screaming and raging would be more appropriate. "I thought you were better than this."

Fresh shame scorches my cheeks. I never gave Emerson's name to my family. Not Eva. Not Leo. Not anyone. But I defended him. *He's not like that*. I said that to my brother's face. Leo was a day out from surviving a deadly fever. I was so certain.

“Take it as a compliment,” Emerson says. I want to say that I hate him. That I hate how good he looks. That I hate how I can’t stop noticing. I’ll call this feeling hate, but in the back of my mind, I know it’s not the right word. I can’t turn him into something ugly.

“What does that even mean?”

That glint comes back to his eyes. The dangerous one. A shiver echoes in my body.

“I’m not better than that, little painter. I’m not a good man. I never made any such promise.”

Holy shit, he’s right. It’s possible I missed all the important lessons in art school. It’s possible I never learned to pay attention at all. Emerson hasn’t just been intense. He hasn’t just been obsessive. He’s been meticulous.

“You promised...” The sentence trails off. Emerson has used that word with me before. *Promise*.

“I never promised to be nice,” he says softly. He said that to me last night when he was forcing me to paint. I was begging him, shamelessly, to help me come.

“You promised it would be worth it.” Before. In his SUV. On the way to the beach. “This isn’t worth it.”

“How would you know?”

“Because I do.” I look away from him, out the window. I don’t want him to see that part of me is still curious. Part of me asks the same question of myself. *How would you know?* Part of me wants to feel brave and free, the way I did when I was running to him on the street.

I take a deep breath. Calm myself, as much as I can. This will be over soon. Very soon, if I know my brother. And I do.

In the meantime I make a point of considering my surroundings, mainly so I have an excuse not to look at Emerson. His bedroom is spacious. A big, king-size bed. A wide walk-in closet. The archway leading through to the art studio. Huge windows looking out onto the beach. Onto the ocean. A thin layer of snow covers the sand. The room is like a

frame for the view. It doesn't distract, or detract, from the sky and the water.

A person could paint the ocean all day from this house. She would never have to feel an icy breeze in her hair or the ache of frozen fingers.

"If you're not interested in sleeping, you can paint."

I whip my head back toward Emerson. "Why the hell would you think I wanted to paint?"

A brief smile lights his eyes. "You're not aware of your body, little painter."

I scoff. Shake my head. I wish I could hate this, too. How he makes statements instead of asking questions. How he pretends to know everything about me just by watching. As if that were possible.

And then I feel my fingers.

They're searching for a paintbrush. Curved, like I'm already holding one. I grab for the collar of my T-shirt. Of Emerson's T-shirt. I try not to do this in front of people. It's a nervous habit my father always hated. Ironical, because he's the one who gave it to me in the first place.

Emerson's eyes flick down to my hand, then back up to my face.

I manage not to scowl at him while I unclench my fingers. Drop my hand back to my side. He has a chair in here, by the window. A low bookshelf built into the wall behind it. Taking the chair feels like surrender. The bed is closer.

"Fine." I pad to the bed and perch on the edge, smoothing the hem of the T-shirt over my lap. It'll be embarrassing to explain to Leo how I ended up wearing Emerson's shirt and nothing else. But—no. He won't ask. He'll just take me home. "I'll sit here."

Emerson hasn't moved from his spot in the center of the room. He handed me the mug of coffee and created space between us. I don't know that I was ever conscious of him

leaving the side of the bed, but he did. He wanted to observe me.

You're my newest acquisition.

I fold my hands in my lap. I'll make it a game, somehow. I won't give him any more information about myself. Not any more than he's already taken. I'll just wait. I know how to do that. Growing up, I attended lots of events where waiting was a requirement. The family Christmas gala. My siblings' birthday parties. Catechism classes. Those were always a waiting game. I wanted to draw the ideas, paint them, but I wasn't allowed. Leo had to explain everything to me afterward. He sponsored me for my Confirmation. We'd been in church our whole lives, but I was still afraid to make a mistake in front of the bishop. The bishop might not mind, but my father would. So Leo stood next to me at the front of the church. Even if I screwed up, he'd take responsibility.

I knew it.

"You think your brother is coming, don't you?"

"You don't know anything about my brother." My mind is still hanging on old memories. Sketching them out. Anything to pass the time.

"I don't have to know anything about him."

"Right. Because you already know everything about me. You can read my mind."

"No." I expected a joke, but his tone is even, not mocking. "I can't read your mind. But I can see you."

Another shiver. This one straight down the spine. Straight down the center of me. "See me sitting here? You're full of it."

"At the charity auction, when I asked if he'd hurt you—"

"He *didn't*."

"I know. You were furious. Real fury, and then—disgust, I think. You were disgusted. You tried to turn away from me."

"What does that have to do with me sitting here?"

“When you heard *brother is coming*, your hands relaxed. You didn’t reach for your collar.” He lifts a hand and traces a line in the air. “Your shoulders...” He lets down his own a fraction of an inch. A tiny movement, but it changes everything.

The tension’s coming back. Drawing my shoulders up tight.

“You think he’s coming.” Emerson drops his hand to his side. “No one is coming to save you, little painter. I took care of that.”

SOFT LAMPLIGHT FALLS OVER DAPHNE'S FRAME. ONE OF MY T-shirts drapes over her body, obscuring her from me. It's painfully demure, given that I fucked her not three hours ago. Shadows in the cotton give it depth. Character. But the shirt is nothing compared to the woman.

Dark eyes, bright with disbelief, with terror. Hair falling in gentle, slept-in waves. Pink cheeks paired with parted lips. Oh—that pain. If I didn't already own her, I'd pay any price. Art that hurts like this always proves its value.

The dividing line between my thoughts shimmers. I'm not so far gone that I believe she's made from canvas. I know she lives. She breathes. She cries. It's a matter of perspective, that's all. I need to keep her at a safe distance so she doesn't overwhelm my emotions. Set them loose from their frames. And I need to see her as she is. It will be the only way to keep her here without destroying her mind. That would be a shame. A waste. It would strip the beauty from the piece.

It would strip the essential parts of her away, and I'm not interested in that. I want to keep her whole, like any priceless art.

Daphne rises from the bed and plants her feet. Fear moves through her in small tremors, like tiny waves lapping at the shore, but she keeps it apart from herself. Does she lock it away, like I do? Wait for the opportunity to put it on the canvas?

I'll have plenty of time to find out. For now, I breathe in her sweet determination. Catchlights in her hair give the impression that she's lit from within. Burnished. My bed is an ideal backdrop. White sheets roll together with my dark comforter. Daphne was peaceful there. Sleeping. It's as if she emerged from a cotton sea.

"That's not possible, Emerson." The corners of her mouth flirt with a cruel smile, but she's not made for it, not practiced. "Leo can trace my phone. He can find my location."

"I deleted the location data before it could upload. All the data from the few hours leading up to your visit."

"Well, that's—" Another try at a smile. Her eyes are huge. I want to be closer, but I don't think she'd allow it. "He'll have tried to call me. He'll be able to do it that way."

"Your phone has been off since we first came into the house."

"You destroyed it?"

"No. It's safe. It's simply not available to you, little painter. Not until you're settled."

"Settled?" A tear runs down her cheek. "You think I'm going to settle down? You think I'm going to be okay with this? You're keeping me prisoner."

"I'm keeping you safe. I care for all my acquisitions."

Daphne blinks, hard, spilling more tears. She rises on the balls of her feet. Once. Twice. Three times. *Hummingbird*.

"You're crazy," she whispers. "You're dangerous. This isn't happening."

"I'll be patient, little painter. You can take the time you need."

"For what?" A few steps around the edge of the bed, then back. There's nowhere for her to go. "For what, Emerson?" Horror dawns in her expression. "Are you going to keep me somewhere? A cage?" Daphne's eyes dart around the room. "Are you going to chain me up in that closet? Is that what you're going to do?"

The suggestion is a right hook to the cheekbone. Daphne's shadow covers the muted spines of books in my shelves, the edges of her shape feathering out until it disappears. My shirt moves on her body as she breathes. It's too fast, too harsh. Her dark eyes well with fear. Unshed tears crystallize the light, fragment it. Each moment compresses. Flattens. Old memories remain in frames, behind locked doors. They remain still. I keep my back turned. I keep my focus on Daphne.

Even now, she cannot bring herself to lean away from me. No doubt there is some part of her that wants to throw itself into the corner, back herself against the wall. No one is more familiar with that instinct than I am.

And yet.

Daphne's still leaning in, the angle as subtle as the brush of cotton over her thighs.

"Come here."

"No."

"You can come here, little painter, or I can come to you. Your choice."

"None of this is a choice."

"Nonsense. I'm giving you one right now. Walk over to me, or I'll walk over to you."

Her chin quivers, and her hand hints up at her collar, but she controls the motion.

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm tired of having this conversation from a distance. Decide, Daphne."

She looks at the open floor between us. Looks back into my eyes. Her first step forward is reluctant. The second one even more so. But then her chin dips and she comes to me, stopping about a foot away. Her entire body trembles. I catch her peeking up at me from under her lashes.

I reach for her wrist.

Slowly.

Very fucking carefully.

Daphne doesn't pull away. She lets out a tearful breath when I finally touch her, running my thumb along the inside of her wrist. I count to ten. I count to twenty. And then I move up to her elbow and start the count over. Her upper arm. Her shoulder. By the time I put my hand on the side of her neck and tip her face toward mine, she's stopped shaking.

"I *hate* you," she breathes. "I hate you for using that against me. You did that in the art gallery."

"You liked it then, too." And I don't think she means what she's saying.

Her pulse is quick but not panicked under my palm. "You have no idea what I like."

"Perhaps not. But that's not why I wanted you to come closer."

A tremor moves through her. "Why, then?"

"I need you to be able to hear me."

"I could hear you before."

"There is no cage." I've never seen dark eyes as multifaceted as Daphne's. Not in any painting. Not on any person. I'm surprised she hasn't been sought after as a model by every motherfucker on the planet. Her lips part as she takes in the words. "There are no chains. And for the love of Christ, little painter, I will never lock you—" A wave of something cold, something ancient, washes up and chokes me, if only briefly. "I will never lock you in the closet."

I regret asking her to come closer. Now the art is watching me back.

Curiosity comes back into my little painter's eyes. A gleam across the depths. Light tracing the outline of a closed door. *You know what that means*, a voice whispers. *A threat*.

"So you're just going to keep me in here, then? Tied to the bed?"

"Do you want to be tied to the bed, little painter?"

“No,” she says, too quickly. Daphne’s cheeks flush. Her terror isn’t enough to hide her desires. Not from me. “I don’t want—please. I don’t want that.”

Under other circumstances, she might. I can see that in her eyes, too. The dark thoughts she’s had. The ones she tries to hide on the canvas.

“It won’t be like that.”

“What, my captivity?” Another laugh, this one raw, nervous. “There’s nothing you can say that will make this better.”

I run the pad of my thumb over her cheekbone.

Daphne leans toward it.

She realizes what she’s doing at the last moment and jerks her head back.

“Just get it over with,” she demands. “Do whatever it is you’re going to do to me.”

“All right.” I drop my hand and turn away. Stride toward the art studio. When I turn back, she’s frozen in the center of my bedroom, one hand in her collar. “This way, Daphne.”

The smallest shake of her head.

She didn’t believe me when I said there was no cage. No chains. No *closet*, for fuck’s sake. Her breath comes quicker. My little painter is spiraling again, and it’s far too late for that. It’s late in this encounter, late at night, and it will only make things harder in the morning.

There’s nothing you can say to make this better.

Fine, then. Conversation is oftentimes overrated. I cross the studio and open the doors on the opposite wall. I’m not sure she saw them before. Both sets of doors were designed to disappear into the surrounding space so they wouldn’t become a distraction.

Daphne steps forward. Light plays over her face. The angles take my breath. The halo glow of the lamp. The stark

cuts of the bulb that shines down on her canvas. She hovers in the doorway, trying to see past me.

I reach behind and turn the switch.

“Your bedroom.”

She searches my face again, no doubt for some sign that I’m joking with her. Perhaps I should, at some future date. Though—is it playfulness, if it’s exactly calibrated to Daphne? If it’s at the outer edges of what I’m capable of?

Violence, yes. Patience, yes. I’m not so certain of play.

But then she takes another step forward, and I feel that pain again. A dangerous one. Daphne is not like the other Morellis. Her art, and her shitty apartment, are testament to that. The snarling creature who tried to scare me off is a facade. Emotion doesn’t translate for her that way. It’ll have to be around the canvas, then. Use her art as a steppingstone.

I want to make her cry *and* I want to make her laugh.

I take several steps back from the bedroom’s entrance so that she can pass by without touching me. The corner of her mouth turns down when I do. I’ll never get tired of these contradictions in her.

The air stirs as she moves into the bedroom. The clean scent of my shirt hasn’t erased the bright, floral scent of her shampoo. A fleeting regret whisks by with her. I should have woken her up with my tongue on her cunt. I should have tasted her again before I delivered the news.

“This is the same as yours.”

Resurfacing from thoughts of her sweet flesh is a real hardship, but I lean against the doorframe nonetheless. Daphne stands in the center of her bedroom. It’s a mirror image of how we were before. Only the art studio stayed in position.

“The bedroom?”

“It’s the same bedroom.” She lifts her hands, almost helpless, and lets them drop to her sides. “Same bed. Same bookshelves. Less books, but...” Daphne twists her head to look behind her. “Same size closet.”

“The same en suite bathroom as well, if you wanted a complete list.”

“You’re giving me a bedroom just like yours?”

“The art is different.”

Daphne takes the risk of turning away to scan the walls. The space above my bed is taken with one of her paintings. The space above hers, however...

“That’s a Giorgia Russo.” She pads closer to the bed, letting her fingertips skim the comforter. “Is that—”

“The original.”

On the canvas above Daphne’s bed, a warrior goddess raises a knife above her head. She wears a satisfied, determined expression in the captured moment. A breath before dealing a fatal blow. It makes my pulse quicken to see the painting. It makes my chest heat to see Daphne taking it in.

Her shoulders drop. Her chin lifts. Awe. That’s what she feels.

“The opposite of Lehmann,” I say to her back. “Ms. Russo’s value has gone up significantly since this purchase.”

“Did you buy this for me?”

“I brought it to the gallery, but you were gone.”

Daphne turns to face me. Her cheeks glisten with tears.

“You are...” The sentence is interrupted by a shuddering breath, bordering on a sob. “You are the cruelest person I’ve ever met, Emerson.”

A strange urge. *Fix it. Whatever’s making her cry.* Of course, the person making her cry is me. “You don’t like it?”

“I love it.” Daphne’s voice catches. “I love her work. I love how—how unapologetic it is. This piece shows the kind of strength I wish I had.”

“It’s the strength you do have. It’s why I chose it for you.”

“It’s a joke. *Look how strong you are, Daphne. Look how brave. Look how smart you are to have ended up in this*

prison.”

“Little painter—”

“Just leave me alone.” Her hands ball up into fists. “Or am I not allowed to be alone?”

“You can be alone anywhere you want. Anywhere in the house.”

“Great. Well, thank you.” Daphne turns around and marches over to the closet. “Oh my god. There’s clothes,” she mutters as I go back across the studio. “Oh my god.”

In my bedroom, I sit at the foot of the bed and listen to her pace.

Daphne doesn’t throw any books. She doesn’t attempt to break a window. She just paces, like a hummingbird caught in a net.

Her footsteps move back and forth.

Back and forth.

It would be soothing, if my mind could dismiss the sound. It’s impossible. When there are other people in the house, I’m constantly on alert. It’s like having the outside world barge in. It takes time for my nerves to settle. My house is the only place on earth it’s possible for that to happen, so visitors are rare by necessity.

Except Daphne doesn’t seem like a visitor.

I’m listening to her for another reason entirely. I can’t help myself. I need to know more about her, and if all I can have is the sound of her footsteps, then that’s where I’ll start.

Back and forth.

Back and forth.

From this perspective, I can only see small flashes of her when she passes in front of both doorways. Faint tendrils of her shadow reach into my bedroom, though I would hardly describe it that way. A shifting of the light, perhaps. It begins to feel like a shift in the air. Tactile movement. I suppress the urge to push it away, to ignore the sensation. Many times in

my life, surviving meant a departure from the situation at hand. If I couldn't leave physically, then I left in my mind.

I'm staying here for this.

Back and forth.

Back and forth.

I wish she would come back to me. A futile wish. She won't be crossing the studio, my white shirt moving with her hips.

A vision of that moment springs to mind, vivid as any daydream, as any real day. Daphne returning to me. Understanding.

The footsteps stop.

A moment of silence.

And then—

A crash.

THE STOOL IS HEAVIER THAN I THOUGHT. IT SEEMED SOLID under my hands when Emerson made me bend over it, but I didn't expect it to have so much heft. Still—it's a better option than the chair by the bookshelves. The one that matches his. I couldn't lift that one. I had to go out to the studio for the stool. Had to make my footsteps match the length of the room so he wouldn't know. My bed is not centered over the studio doors, which means his isn't, either.

I took a risk to get here.

The wooden legs of the stool tug at my palms as I swing it toward the big glass window in the studio. I didn't think I'd have time to get back to my bedroom.

Impact.

The shock reverberates up my arms, and I gasp. It hurts. My hands. My wrists. My bones. I don't feel like I have full control over the stool but I bring it back and swing it again.

The second shock is powerful, electric. It makes my teeth click together. I'll jump out when the glass breaks. That's my plan. Jump out of the second-story window and run.

Another swing.

Nothing.

The glass doesn't crack. Doesn't give. Hot tears run over dried salt on my cheeks. Glass is supposed to crack. I saw the destroyed remnants of the paperweight on Leo's desk. A cascade of shattered petals. The window should be easier to

break. My reflection grits her teeth back at me. I aim for my face this time.

Mirror-Emerson enters the studio, his stance casual, hands in the pockets of his sleep pants. Once again, I am consumed with wishing I could hate him. Truly hate him for how calm he is. How unaffected. I hate myself a little for how it makes me feel. His placid expression makes me think that I'm wrong somehow. That this is only a temporary madness, and I'll come to see that I belong here.

I swing the stool again.

The glass holds.

"You're going to hurt yourself," he comments. No worry in his tone. No urgency. It's as if he's saying *no clouds out there tonight*.

I swallow a sob. "What do you care? You're holding me hostage."

"No, little painter. *Hostage* implies that I'm going to let you go once I receive payment. That's never going to happen."

I swing the stool in the other direction. Into the studio. Toward him. I let its momentum carry me the first few steps. The damn windows won't break. I'll break him instead. I tighten my grip on the curved legs, but something in my body hesitates. I've never attacked someone like this before. I'm within my rights to do it. He's keeping me here against my will. But he's not hurting me. He's just standing there. A beautiful criminal. I trusted him.

I *trusted* him.

I dig the ball of my foot into the floor and run. My arms lift by themselves. I'll hit his head. His ribs. I'll swing it so he can't get away. Wood on flesh. Another memory fights its way forward—my palms on wood—but I don't let it surface.

I'm going to hit him. My mind braces for the crack of his skull, for the surprised grunt. The hard fall. My breath catches in my throat. Closer. Closer. *Closer*.

At the last possible moment, Emerson moves.

Some faraway part of me is surprised at how graceful he is. How athletic. I didn't know a person could look so graceful in gray sweatpants and nothing else. Emerson knocks the stool out of my hand and grabs me around the waist. The stool clatters to the floor. I try to get my feet up so it doesn't crush my toes. Pointless. He already has me out of the way.

I have the impression of muscle and body before my back connects with the wall. I shove against his chest, both palms, *hard*, but it doesn't matter. Oh, god, it doesn't matter. Emerson is the cage. Him. He doesn't need metal bars. He doesn't need locks. My panting breath is loud in my ears. This—I should paint this. A raging sea. Waves thrashing in my head. Whitecaps.

No part of me should like this. No part of me should feel relief at the fact that Emerson's here. That I can't get away. I'm not strong enough to push him off. I try again, and some sick part of me exhales. If I can't get away, I don't have to fight. I don't have to lose. I make a few more attempts—reaching, digging in with my nails—but he bats my hands away. He's not even out of breath. He's as immovable as the wall. I know, I know—keep fighting until you can't keep fighting anymore. That's the rule. But who battles brick? Who battles concrete?

Why do I like this?

Why do I want him?

One final shove, and he catches my hand and pins it to his chest. His heart beats normally. Steadily.

“Don't fight me, little painter.” The sound of his voice soothes something in me. It makes me compliant. I wanted to be a fighter, but I find myself leaning into the wall. Subsiding, like the tide. “There. See? You're already mine. All stretched out like canvas. Trapped in a frame.”

His hand comes up, and he traces the shape of a frame beside my face. Over my head. Down the other side. It feels real. Like I could reach out and touch the edges. Like I could rise on tiptoe and press the top of my head to solid wood. I

inch one hand out to prove to myself that it's not. Of course it's not.

"Why are you doing this?"

Emerson stops tracing the pattern of the frame, which would have been ornate, I think. Gilded. He puts his hand flat on the wall next to my head. His arm reaching in feels final. Permanent. His gaze skims down over my body, and it happens again. That change in his face. It happens in a blink. If I weren't so close I could convince myself I'd imagined it. But no, I didn't. It happened. That instant of absence. It's over by the time he looks back into my eyes.

That blue-green intensity pins me to the wall just as much as his body.

"I wanted you the moment I saw you, but I resisted. I thought maybe you would escape me." His eyebrows lift. "I thought perhaps I'd let you."

"From the beginning." The surprises tonight are never going to end, are they? My mouth goes dry. "You wanted to do this to me since we met on the beach?"

"No. Before."

"What?"

"I saw you on the street." A smile plays at the corners of his lips. "You were walking in a slash of sunlight. The moment you stepped into the frame, the whole world became background."

"The frame?"

"The sidewalk," he corrects, but I know he didn't think of it like that. I know he thought of me as art, even then. Even before I knew he was watching. "I saw you, and I followed you. And then I saw your painting. I wanted that passion. That mystery. The way it felt..." He takes a sharp breath, like he's feeling it again. Astonishment flashes across his features and disappears. This is how he looked when he saw my painting. That moment of pure wonder. I'd cry if I didn't hate this so much. "I didn't know the woman on the street was the artist. I

didn't know she was you. Not until the next day. Your fate was sealed the moment I read your name."

Emerson trails a hand down the side of my face. It's unbelievably tame compared to the wild, filthy passion we had earlier.

That was before.

That was when I was here by choice.

He's taken that from me.

His fingertips hovering at my jawline feel bruising now, though he's not using any more force. I turn my face away. Emerson's hand twitches, like he's going to let go, but he grips me tighter instead. Not to the point of actual pain. It hurts my heart. I was naive, just like Leo said. I was a fool.

"You have a comfortable bed. Good food. Your studio. You won't be deprived of art here."

No, I won't. Emerson has lots of art. I passed by many pieces on the way upstairs. I can see the far corner of the Giorgia Russo's frame. It doesn't feel the same now. It's not like living in a gallery. Not like visiting a museum. All his art is examining me. I'm the one on display. The paintings have freedom, and I don't.

I'm here in a frame.

Trapped, trapped, trapped.

Oh, god, I'm already losing my mind and I've been in captivity for less than a day. A matter of hours.

Anger surges, straight out of my heart and into my veins. It burns its way down to my fingers. This feels darker than the midnight blue of deep water. It's a heartless, lightless void that scorches everything it touches. All the fear and anger and energy I've pushed down and painted out to survive grabs me by the wrist and drags me somewhere I don't want to go, I don't.

It's just that I can't stop.

The slap takes us both by surprise. Emerson doesn't flinch, but something happens to his eyes as my hand makes contact. A split-second blank. His palm meets the wall next to my head with a whisper. Not a crack. He's not retaliating.

He's boxing me in.

The sound that comes out of me is the most animal I've ever made. I hit him with both fists, landing blows against his chest.

"You asshole." A sob comes up with the insult. I feel like I could bite it in half. "You bastard. You're being—you're being such a dick."

"Don't stop," Emerson says.

I hit him harder. "I hate you too much to keep going. I hate you so much I can't put it into words."

Except—

Except.

Maybe I can't put it into words because it's not really true. Because I am lost.

And anyway, I don't have Leo's cutting barbs or Eva's cool insults. People weren't creative with the way they spoke to me in school. They didn't want to risk the wrath of my brother. Everything my siblings have said in front of me flies out of my head. It's too late for me to become like them. Jesus, it's frustrating. I can't keep that frustration off my face.

Emerson watches.

He doesn't jerk away, no matter how hard I hit him. He doesn't look wounded or nervous or tired.

He looks...

Fascinated.

My heart crumples in. For one beat, I'm slammed with pure recognition. I'm hitting him. I'm *hitting* him, and he's so far outside his body that he's watching this like a movie.

No.

It's worse than that, isn't it?

He's watching like all my rage is nothing but paint splashed on canvas.

My hand flies out to slap him again. This time, Emerson catches the hit in midair and pushes it down like he's deflecting a butterfly.

"Stop." My throat is raw from crying and swallowing screams. "Stop looking at me like that."

"Like what?" Emerson's so close I could lean in and kiss him. It wouldn't take any effort at all. Instead I punch his chest again. "Little painter."

"I'm not a painting. There is no frame." I hurl his tone from earlier back in his face. *There is no cage*. Bullshit. He's the cage, and he always has been. "If you're going to look at me, then look. Stop pretending you're not awful. Stop pretending to be good."

Emerson blinks, but otherwise my words seem to have no effect. It's not fair. Every time I look at him, I feel like running to my easel so I can paint. It feels like a tidal swell of energy. Like the thrill of stealing away into the night with him.

All my thoughts spill like wasted paint, swirling into each other until I can't tell any of them apart. I can't tell which comes first. The shame or the violence or the need.

Or maybe it's all of them together. Deep enough to drown me.

They all come out through my fists. I'll hurt him or die trying.

IT SHOULDN'T TURN ME ON SO MUCH TO HAVE HER FIGHT. I want her to an untenable degree. My cock throbs, the pulse so insistent it's difficult to focus on Daphne's eyes. They are at their most captivating, tear-filled and furious, and I can't get enough.

I've never considered myself particularly kinky. Not before Daphne. She brought this out in me. I might have been satisfied by an occasional fuck with some nameless model who has a thing for money if I hadn't met my little painter. A new part of my mind has come online. Its only responsibility is to fill my thoughts with images of Daphne.

Daphne fighting. Daphne subdued. Daphne sorry, marked by the consequences of her own actions.

And she should suffer the consequences of what she's done.

She woke me up. Tore the coverings from my feelings. Ripped them out of sturdy protective frames and set them free. It's more than the faint pain of an evocative piece. It's the bloody, beating heart that refuses to be cut out, no matter how many times I try.

I want her.

I want to hold her down. I want to feel the way her body writhes as I fuck her. Again and again and again. Until she's at her limit. Until she's past it. I want her fists and her teeth. I want her to bite me. Mark me.

I want to do the same to her.

Daphne throws herself into me, her elbows flying, fists landing on my shoulders. The blows are too wild and her body collapses into mine. My little painter struggles against the fall, trying to get herself upright and keep going. The movement presses her against my erection.

She freezes, her eyes going wide. A doe, caught in a hunter's sights.

"Emerson." Daphne's breathless. I'm at a threshold. A door cracks open and lets in a sliver of light.

"My body's getting ready to fuck you." I don't move. Daphne doesn't pull back. She doesn't attempt to escape through the wall. She stays close. I know she feels it when my cock pulses between us. "And yours is getting ready to fuck me. You're wet."

"No." It's a lie. I can see the flicker in her eyes. Daphne Morelli is a stunning piece. Fucking breathtaking. With a playful nuance that drives me out of my mind. A dutiful daughter. A devoted sister. A humble painter. And at first she's unassuming. You have to stand and watch, to see her in motion, in order to understand the use of color, the composition. You have to study her to see her depths. "I'm definitely not."

"Let's find out, little painter." I take one hand from the wall and begin by tucking her hair behind her ear. Stroking down the side of her neck. I play with the neckline of my shirt, lifting it away so she can feel my breath on her skin. I work my way down to her elbow. To her wrist. A light squeeze of her hand, and I slide my palm up her naked thigh to her hip. Daphne trembles, her breathing shallow, and her head tips back against the wall.

"It's not fair." I brush my knuckles around to her belly button, then trace a path down and down and down.

"What's not fair?" The pad of my thumb against her clit makes her shiver, but it's just an errant brush on the way to where I'm going.

“That this feels good.”

I take her face in my free hand. With the other, I run my knuckles over the delicate skin of her inner thighs. “I know, little painter.”

“Stop looking at me like that,” she says, and spreads her legs.

She’s right. I’m a bastard. I’m an asshole. Because I keep my eyes on hers while I push my fingers into her sweet, wet flesh. It tugs a sound out of me. I expected her to be aroused. I didn’t expect her to be dripping.

I change my grip on her face. One thumb under her chin so I can hold her in place. Daphne’s doing most of the work for me, keeping her head back against the wall. She can’t help but respond to this. She likes it this way.

When I take my fingers away Daphne tries to angle her hips to follow them. She’s the picture of humiliation when I hold them up in front of her face. “Where is this from, little painter?”

She wets her lips with the tip of her tongue. My heart stops, then starts again. “It’s from me.”

“It’s from your cunt.” I add the slightest pressure to her chin. “Say it.”

Daphne goes scarlet. I could get lost in that color. I could watch her paint a study of it every day until I die. She clears her throat. “It’s from my cunt.”

I make her watch me lick it off my fingers. Daphne’s eyes flash. Anger grits her teeth. “You’re sick.”

“You taste good.”

“Because I’m your captive?”

“Because you’re sweet, little painter.”

“Don’t play games with me.”

“Fine.” I stroke my fingers between her legs again, collecting more of her slickness. “I’ll paint, then.”

I swipe her desire across her cheekbone and Daphne gasps. For a moment she really does look like a painting. Shock in oil on canvas, trapped in a frame, her own juices silvery on her skin.

And then she flies into motion. Bursts out of her canvas captivity. I brace for blows but she's not punching, she's crashing. Daphne throws her arms around my neck and locks her legs around my waist.

"Don't play with me." It's almost a snarl, the most adorable, sweet snarl. "Don't play games."

I put her on her feet. Daphne resists, clinging to me until the last second. I have to peel her hands away in order to get her shirt over her head. I barely have time to discard my pants before she launches herself at me. I take her back to the wall with more force than I intended. Her head knocks against the hard surface but she bends her neck, unfazed.

Her teeth sink into the skin at the curve of my shoulder, nearly my neck. A visceral bite, down to the muscle, down to the bone. I pull her in closer, but she doesn't recognize it at first. Thinks I'm pushing her away. She fights, fingertips digging in at my shoulder blade. Her teeth. Her nails. An invisible wire pulls tight between them, roping in my aching cock, and a groan escapes.

Daphne lets go. Her head comes up, eyes wide, as if she's done something unforgivable. Fuck that. I snatch her wrist out of the air and put her hand back where it was. Push down harder. Cover her mouth with mine.

She makes a sound of angry relief and kisses me back. Her cunt is so close to my cock. I can feel her slick heat. I find it with my fingers. "Give it to me."

Daphne's thighs flex. "Take it," she challenges.

Her hips put up a token resistance when I angle her over me. She's holding on tight, but not as if I might drop her. As if she doesn't want to be put down. It's a rush of data, like seeing a thousand individual brush strokes. A glimmer of fear in her eyes. The hitch of her chest. Her soft, untouched nakedness.

Every breath is electric. I move her by inches until wet flesh meets the head of my cock.

With a hiss, she lets gravity help her. One inch. It's like we've never fucked before.

"That's it, little painter? That's all the fight you have?"

Daphne arches against the wall, taking another inch of me. "I'll never stop," she pants. "Never stop fighting."

I brace one hand on the wall and hold her up with the other. I'm in it now. In the world. Nothing between me and this onslaught of sensation. I want to thrust into her like an animal, but I won't. Lust wraps itself around my hips and tries to override me.

"Good. I like it when you battle me. I like it when you struggle."

She sinks down another few inches. "Not. Struggling."

"Oh, but you are, little painter. Give me more."

"No." Her hips circle, bucking under my hands, and she works herself down onto me. "No. I won't. I'm not going to fuck you."

"Don't you dare." She's so close that it's difficult to get my hand between us, difficult to stroke her clit. Difficult. Not impossible. At the first brush of my knuckle she clenches around me. More wet heat. "Don't you dare come."

"I won't."

Her body is making a liar out of her again. She's desperate for my touch. It's painted in her muscles every time I circle her clit. Her pussy flutters around me. Daphne takes one arm from around my neck and slaps her palm against the wall. It only brings her closer. Her hips circle. She's like a vise. Tighter than a fist. Her eyes close, but then she opens them again. A little breath. Another one. It's thrilling, the whiplash of her feelings. This is what I wanted to see. All her darkness, all her emotion, on her body instead of on the canvas.

On her body in addition to the canvas.

Daphne fought me, but she's begging silently for something else.

Authority. Permission. I'm the monster in the room, and I'm the only one who can give her what she needs.

"You're art," I murmur, and she tips her face closer. "Nothing but canvas. Nothing but a piece in my collection. Art doesn't fight, little painter. It does what it's told."

The tip of her tongue comes up to the roof of her mouth. *Tell*. That's what she's going to say, but she can't bring herself to do it.

"Be brave," I order. "Be good. Let me see what I paid for."

It starts in her body, in the quick pulses of her cunt around me. Daphne's nails hook into me. Her dark eyes stay on mine as she comes. Her heat is everywhere, hips rocking against me. The begging becomes a sound. A pleading moan. My little painter doesn't know what she's begging for.

I do.

"So beautiful like this, little painter. The sound of you. You're gripping my cock so well. You're—" A groan interrupts me. Holding in my cum feels like holding my breath. "Fucking priceless. All I want. All I've ever wanted." Daphne doesn't need my help anymore. I abandon her clit and circle her neck with my hand instead. It's only a game. A gesture. I don't have to force her to look back at me. She's doing it herself. "Your body is ready to be fucked. You've taken me so deep already."

She shivers at the words, panting harder. I've never felt a more intense pressure at my temples. One shake of her head and I'd walk away. Put her on the floor. Leave her alone. I'd be a better man than I am right now. I'd be the man she thought I was.

But Daphne uses the wall as leverage.

Not to get away.

To get closer.

Light barrels through an open door, and it's so dangerous, to let myself go like this. My heartbeat echoes the threat. Patience is agony. The first thrust releases the tension from my head. The second blows it apart. Perhaps it's too much for her. Tiny, sharp exhales every time I push in. The frames in my head rattle on the walls.

"Fuck." I could fall into her eyes, into that darkness, into that refuge. "Oh, fuck."

"No," I think she says.

And then—

Her hand. My chin. Gripping it hard. I'm so lost in fucking her that I let her do it. What is she doing? Fuck, she feels good. But what is she doing? I search her gorgeous, luminous eyes for the answer. Daphne stares back, her chest heaving. She can't catch her breath. Can barely hold on with her free hand.

"If you're going to watch me, I'm going to watch you," she pants, her words broken up by my thrusts. "*No*. Don't leave."

"Not leaving," I grunt. I haven't gone anywhere. I've been pinning her here, caging her here, all this time.

Her fingers dig into my face. "Stay."

It's half-plea, half-order, and I can't bear it. Can't bear how sweet it sounds. Can't bear how innocent it is.

I can't bear how much it hurts. Like a motherfucker. Like bone cracking under a fist. Like days in the dark. It hurts, to do what she's saying, but Daphne's turned the world inside out. Perhaps it's only in this moment that I'm capable of it. The horrifying sensation of being witnessed passes over me like a wave. It can't quite make contact. I'm too animal now. No capacity in my brain for complexity. There's only the astonishing contrast of her eyes. The slick heat of her cunt. Pleasure bearing down on my hips, on my cock.

I see her. I see her. I see her.

My release takes me with such force that it momentarily blinds me. Daphne flickers out of view. When she returns, she's shocked, too.

"Oh my god," she whispers. "Oh my god." I can't look away. I'm pumping her full of cum while she knocks against the wall and looks into my soul. "Emerson."

Another wave arrives in a heated spill. I mean to answer her but what comes out is wordless sound. Daphne's trembling, her grip shaky now. Her breath hitches and she pulses again—*yes yes yes*. I pin her hard and let her ride it out. I press my lips to her shoulder. To her neck. She doesn't try to see my face. Wind howls over the ocean, or perhaps it's only in my head.

I last a few seconds longer before my mind rebels with shrieking discomfort. Patterns layer themselves over the wall behind Daphne. Brushstrokes. They cover her face, her neck, her tits. Frame. It needs a frame. This requires containment. A painting against a white expanse. Small enough to hold in my hands, if I wanted. Small enough to control.

Daphne's head falls onto my shoulder. No more fight in her now. Finished for the day. My little painter makes no effort to help me. Her weight in my arms slows my racing heart.

I should put her in her bed. Leave her sleeping in her bedroom. What does it matter tonight? I'm a cruel bastard. I'm being a dick. She's not wrong. I might as well prove her right.

Also, I can't stand the thought of her in a separate space.

"What was that?" she murmurs against my neck on the way to my bed. "What was that, Emerson?"

I know what she's talking about. I know what she saw in my face. I thought I could hide it from her. I've been slipping lately.

"It was nothing." I lay her down in the sheets, supporting her head until her cheek is on the pillow. "It's all right." I stroke her hair back from her face. Run the pad of my thumb over her temple. Daphne's eyebrows rise like she's trying to force herself to wake. "Go to sleep," I tell her. She sighs, her

face relaxing. I run my fingers through her hair. Falling fast, I think. “You’re safe with me, little painter. Where you belong. And you’re never leaving again.”

I WAKE UP TO AN EMPTY BED.

Emerson's empty bed.

Damn him. If I hadn't been wrung out with orgasms and anger, I could have kept fighting.

Lie. The last thing I remember is a clean desperation to rest my head. Then his hand in my hair. Then nothing.

Pearl-gray clouds cover the sky outside. I feel like I've been sleeping for a hundred years, but no—I don't think so. It was only last night that I came here.

It was only last night that Emerson took me prisoner. That fight in the studio—

Getting out of bed seems like the only way to clear my mind. I move to the window and scrub my hands over my face. No sign of Emerson in the ocean. He's somewhere inside the house.

Okay.

The door leading out of his bedroom is closed, but the doors to the studio are wide open. I cross with quick strides. It's my full intention to ignore the easel. Naturally, I fail. Emerson has put the stool back in its place. He put out a fresh canvas. Washed the brushes, and the palette. They wait for me on the side-wall shelves.

It would feel good to paint. The urge is already building in my hands. In my head. But screw that. I'm not painting for

him.

The bed in the second master—in the room he made for me—is still crisply made. He slept next to me, if he slept at all.

God, what a mess. I slept with him last night. I let him fuck me in the studio. I fucked him back. The man who's taken me *captive*. The man who thinks I'm part of his collection. Nothing could be more shameful. Nothing.

It makes me wet to be treated like an object. Heat blooms on my face and I try pointlessly to rub it away.

It's just too early for this line of thinking. I'll understand it when I paint again, probably. I'll understand what was happening in his mind, too. What I saw in his eyes. One moment stands out to me—that blanked-out second when I hit him.

That night on the beach, I flinched when he reached for me. He noticed. *Someone hurt you*, he'd said. Someone hurt Emerson, too.

Unless I'm wrong. I haven't been right about much of anything lately. It's equally possible that Emerson has always been like this.

I go to the walk-in closet, which is not empty. It's also not a generic collection for any guest who happens to stay. It's all for me.

Pushing apart some of the shirts only confirms it. These are all my size, and all in brands that I've worn in front of Emerson. Anything that's not is similar enough. Dresses I like. Soft leggings. Softer sweaters. I pull open a drawer and find neat rows of panties. Some lace, some cotton. Matching bras.

“What the hell,” I murmur. He's included gowns, like he's going to be taking me out. He's included everything. Socks. Shoes. Even a small selection of jewelry.

It's more than the wardrobe I keep in my apartment. Worse yet...

I like it.

I tip my head back and stare at the ceiling. Rage is an option. Another tantrum is an option. I could try to smash the windows again. I could summon that emotion, I think.

But if I'm honest—and why be anything else, here in this obsessive walk-in closet?—my arms are sore. My muscles are tired. And I'm curious.

I know I shouldn't be. I know the essentials. Emerson is a bad person. He's holding me captive. He's never going to be good, and I can never love him.

I'm drawn to him, though. I can't help it. It's like—

“Oh, shit.” I tug down a soft sweater from its hanger. Find a pair of leggings. Underthings. “God, Daphne.”

The en-suite bathroom is enormous and sparkling. Done up in black and white. Fresh towels hang on hooks. There's also a bathtub, if I wanted. Matte black and deep. Relaxing in the tub seems like surrender, so I turn on the shower. Brush my teeth. Emerson knows my brand of toothpaste. He didn't just leave the Lehmann painting when he came into my apartment. He took things, too. Facts about me that he filed away.

I shrug off the shiver and step into the shower.

A laugh bubbles up. It sounds a little wild. A little stunned. I should be used to this, I guess. But Emerson's put two kinds of shampoo and two kinds of conditioner in here. Two kinds of body wash.

One set matches what I had in my apartment.

The other set matches what I use at Leo's house. The expensive stuff that I won't buy for myself.

I'm going to use the cheap ones out of spite, but when I reach for one of the bottles, my soul sighs. Why not? If I've lost my freedom, I can at least use nice shampoo.

In the shower, it's harder to deny how I feel.

Which is pissed, for sure. Betrayed. But the way I feel about Emerson is the same way I feel about the ocean. I can't stop painting it. I can't stop searching it for answers. I have

that same feeling about Emerson, and it goes beyond painting. I don't want him as a subject. I want to...

Swim in him. It sounds ridiculous in my head. I don't even want to swim in the ocean. In a way, it's happening when I paint. I'm under the waves. Consumed by them.

Well. If he can look at me like I'm art in his collection, I can do the same. It'll occupy my mind until I get out of here.

When the last of the soap is rinsed away, I towel off and go through the drawers. I don't know what to do with myself. Not really. So I'll start with drying my hair.

"You're kidding." Emerson didn't even pretend to match the dryer in my apartment bathroom, which cost twenty-five dollars at Duane Reade. This one costs at least four hundred. Eva doesn't have one like this. She rolled her eyes when an ad came up on her phone during one of our movie nights.

It turns out the expensive hair dryer makes my hair feel nicer. It's also faster. These are just observations, though. It doesn't mean I want to like him.

I can be drawn to him. Curious about him. I can even want him. I can do all those things while knowing he's terrible. The worst.

The flutter in my chest as I march out of the bathroom, dressed and ready for the day, doesn't feel much like hate.

It feels like a crush.

It's bullshit, honestly. A crush on a man like Emerson. I'm still horrified that he's keeping me here. I'm like a canvas with a dark stripe of paint down the middle. On one side, sunlight through the water. Looking up through waves. On the other, a roiling storm. The water beats against that line. All the emotions coming together.

Or I'm just losing it.

Emerson's not in his bedroom. I go back across to mine and try the door. It's unlocked. My fingers skim the collar of my shirt. He meant it, then. He's not actually going to cage me in here.

Just the house.

Which is not better, even though the house is large and beautiful. Is it wrong to get scraps of peace from the little things?

Probably.

I wander down the stairs with my heart in my throat. I don't want to trip or fall or embarrass myself. A pretty strange fear, given that I'm a prisoner.

On the main floor I find a wide entryway with a dining room on one side and an office on the other. The hall with the stairs leads back into a high-ceilinged living room, but there are other doors, other hallways. I poke my head through one of them. A den. I don't have the courage to open any of the closed doors. Another hall takes me toward the back of the house. To a big, light-soaked kitchen.

That's where I find Emerson.

He stands at the stove, cooking something in a frying pan. Eggs. He's whisking them with a fork. For a moment, he looks far away. His mind is definitely not on the eggs. Toast pops up. Without taking his eyes off the frying pan, he reaches over and grabs it with his fingertips. One piece, then two. Onto a plate. He only abandons the eggs to add pats of butter to the toast. Quickly, like there's a time limit.

"Do you always make toast like that?" I blurt the question in spite of myself. I shouldn't care, not at all, how Emerson makes toast and eggs. I should care more that a little of the bite mark I left on his skin last night is visible at his collar.

His expression brightens. "Hello, little painter."

"Do you?" I take a few steps into the kitchen. He's scrambling the eggs. That's how I like them. But we've never talked about it. There has never been a relevant time to discuss my egg preferences.

He finishes with the eggs. They go onto the plate, on top of the first slice of toast. He adds a sprinkle of salt, then takes the knife and smooths the melting butter over the second slice.

When he's got the scrambled-egg sandwich together, he cuts it on the diagonal and picks up the plate.

"Emerson."

"Is there a better way to have toast?"

"You took it out of the toaster when it was too hot." He arches an eyebrow. "I hate when little pieces of butter refuse to melt. That's how I make toast. Were you watching me twenty-four hours a day? Everything I did?"

A flash of surprise. "No, little painter. I didn't."

"How did you know about the eggs, then?" My plan to observe him from a cool distance is off the rails two minutes in. "Did you ask my friends? Did you get to my family?"

His confusion sharpens into his usual focus. It's like I've been standing in the dark and he's turned on a spotlight. I'm too hot in this sweater. This is too far. This is way too far.

"Did I know what about the eggs?"

"That I like them scrambled." I fold both arms over my stomach and force myself not to scream. "Just tell me. Did you have cameras in my apartment? Did I have any—any—" Emerson puts the plate down with a *click* and comes over to me with long, elegant strides. He braces both my shoulders with his palms. "Did I have any privacy at all?"

That was a guarantee in Leo's house. Jesus, I was foolish. I spent all that time being pissed off at Leo, and I had everything. He refuses to have those kinds of cameras in his house. I'm dizzy. Sick at the possibilities.

"Daphne." Emerson's steady. It would feel good to lean against him, but I don't. "They're not for you."

"My family?"

"The eggs and toast."

The dizziness pulls back. "They're not?"

"No. I was going to ask you what you wanted when you came down." His phone buzzes in his pocket. Emerson keeps

one hand on my shoulder and reaches for the phone with the other. Glances at the screen. “Wait here.”

No way. I follow him through the house to the front door. Emerson flips the lock and pulls it open.

“I distinctly remember telling you I didn’t want you here, Sin.”

“Love you too, prick.” A man sidesteps Emerson and comes into the house. It’s one of his brothers. He has Emerson’s eyes, but not Emerson’s light hair. Sin. That’s what Emerson called him. “Look. If—”

“You have to help me.” I’m *much* louder than I meant to be. Mortifying. “He’s keeping me here, and he won’t let me go. Please. Just help me get out.”

Sin turns his head, startled. His gaze isn’t razor-sharp, like Emerson’s. A faint wrinkle in his brow suggests mild concern. Not a great start. I hold my breath. Maybe he’ll punch Emerson. Or tackle him to the ground. I don’t have shoes on but I’ll still run.

I brace for a hit, my adrenaline kicking in. The door is open. I’d have a shot if Sin distracted Emerson for a few minutes.

Emerson’s brother lets out a sigh, a hand coming up to rub at his forehead. “What the fuck, Emerson?”

“Again. You were under no obligation to come here.”

“Oh, fuck off. You’re not going to call me in the middle of one of your—”

“Sinclair.” The warning in Emerson’s tone makes the hair on my neck stand up.

“I left you alone for a week, and this happens?” Sin shakes his head, then reaches over and pushes the door shut behind him. He flips the lock like it’s his house and not Emerson’s. “You have to tell me when it’s getting this bad, Em. Or—I don’t know. Any fucking human being.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Bullshit.”

“If I wanted you here, I’d have texted you. Or called.” Emerson takes out his phone, taps something on the screen, and puts it away again. “But since you’ve already—”

“We’re talking about this, jackass. Is she serious?”

“You could ask me instead of him,” I point out, my voice trembling. “And I am serious.”

Sinclair narrows his eyes at Emerson.

Emerson looks flatly back at him.

“Emerson. For the love of Christ.”

“Jesus had very little to do with it.” Emerson’s casual about this, to my horror. “You have nothing to do with it either, and since—”

“Since what? Since you’ve got a captive living in your house? You’re sloppy about it, too. She’s just down here in the foyer, asking people for help. I could have been a delivery guy. You’re going to get yourself arrested, and then what are you going to do?”

Emerson wraps his fist around the front of Sin’s coat. “Since you’ve already barged *in*.” Sin rolls his eyes. “Do you want any eggs? It would be rude not to offer, even though you’re trespassing.”

“Fine.” Sin shoves at Emerson’s hand until he lets go. “But I need to talk to you.”

They both turn in my direction. Sin shrugs off his coat. And then he catches me staring, wide-eyed, open-mouthed. He’s not going to do anything. He isn’t going to help me. He’s going to go have eggs in the kitchen.

“It would be rude not to introduce us, Emerson.” Sin’s a little testy about this, but I think he might be joking. At a time like this. When I have been *kidnapped*.

Emerson’s gaze meets mine. He’s irritated, but there’s an element of amusement to it. As if he’s glad his brother is here

but can't show it. That irritation is gone in an instant. Oh—it's him. The real Emerson.

“Sin, this is Daphne. I acquired her yesterday. Daphne, this is my older brother.”

“Sinclair Leblanc.” His brother strides forward to shake my hand. I shouldn't be interested in him. Not in the slightest. But a thousand questions crowd into my mouth. He could tell me about Emerson if I could get over this shock. I probably won't, though. Not ever. “It's a pleasure to meet you, Daphne. Sorry about the...circumstances. My brother can be a bit eccentric.”

SIN TAKES A SEAT AT MY KITCHEN ISLAND AND FOLDS HIS ARMS on the surface. He's bold color set off from winter pale in the natural light from the windows. In the summer I almost never have to turn on lamps, there's so much glass.

"Seriously, Emerson. What the fuck?"

What the fuck indeed. Sin's presence here is making me waver. My brother has seen what I've done. My little painter opened her mouth and told him herself. Her bravery made me hard because I'm a bastard, and it shifted the perspective of the house.

I see it the way Sin would. Or anyone else who didn't live here. Daphne probably sees it this way. All the new, clean spaces. Fresh paint without any scuff marks. Minimal clutter. It's the opposite of a jail cell or a closet.

Sin's presence has also made me consider the alternatives. I could let her leave with him. Set her free outside the house. Hearing her beg for help in her low, pretty voice threw my actions into stark relief. I've done a terrible thing. I'm still doing it as we speak. Daphne retreated upstairs when Sin and I came to the kitchen. Despite this relative freedom, she's still one of my belongings.

Part of me wishes I was that better man. But part of Daphne wishes I was even worse. The angry sex we had was hot. It was far too intimate. Dangerously intimate. I'd do it again regardless. I need to be buried in her cunt, even if it

means exposure. Never mind that exposure means an inevitable death of one kind or another.

“What did you come here to talk about?”

Sin huffs. “Clearly the wrong thing. I can’t believe you kidnapped her.”

“I didn’t. She asked me to bring her here.”

“Emerson.”

“Get to the point.”

“Did Dad come around here again?”

The memory of him standing at the threshold constricts my gut. “No. And I doubt he will.”

“He came to see me, too.”

More bread in the toaster. “I don’t care.”

“You should. It might be worth selling this place.” I crack an egg too hard against the side of the pan and shell drips onto the stove, the air going out of my lungs. I force it back in. Sin is being foolish. “Better for you if he doesn’t have your address.”

“I’m not selling my house.”

“He’s not going to stop. The conversation I had with him doesn’t give me high hopes.”

“The conversation I had with him almost ended in murder. I’m not moving.”

Sin’s eyes burn into my back. Light gleams from my countertop. The same wintry cool that skimmed across the waves as dawn broke. I went out this morning in the dark, when Daphne was deeply asleep. Forced myself to maintain my routine. I was dutiful about it, though I wanted to stay in bed next to her.

Sin already knows I won’t sell. Won’t move.

That I can’t.

“Then I’m moving here. I’m not going back to LA.”

This is the most haphazard, violent scrambled egg I've ever made. "Trust me when I say, Sin—no one wants that."

"I don't care. Safety in numbers."

A laugh that feels like barbed wire bursts out of me. "We fucked up, then. We should have turned out fine."

"Who said we didn't?"

The curve of the pan is like an eclipse on the dark stovetop. Rivulets of egg surge out toward the nonstick boundary. Yellow on black. An open sunflower. Bread pops up from the toaster. I'm making an identical breakfast for Sin, and he hasn't stopped me. I'm reaching for a paper towel to wrap the finished sandwich in when Sin appears at my side.

"Call me if he comes back."

I press the sandwich into his hands. "No."

"Call me, and let me come over next time."

"Fuck no."

"Yes." Real irritation sharpens my brother's voice. His eyes are mirrors of mine, but he hasn't been sleeping. Dark smudges beneath his eyes are proof of that. "I don't know what's going on with Dad. And I—"

"Stop."

"And I worry—"

"Jesus Christ."

"I worry about you," he finishes. "So stop being such a cagey asshole."

I want to tell him about Daphne. In a heartbeat, I want that more than I want to tell him to get out of my life. It's inexplicable. Frankly horrifying. I don't need Sin's help. I don't need Will to live nearby. I don't need anything, other than my home. My art.

My little painter.

It's not in my power to be different. Sin should know that better than anyone. Being the son of a monster is a permanent

state. My mind veers away from the comparisons. They're deeper than I would admit to myself when my father paid his visit. If Sin stays much longer, he'll bring up the reason he was in prison. He'll speak the charges into open air. To paint the words on canvas would render it worthless. I don't want that discussion in my house. It's enough that Sin knows. That he saw my little painter in the flesh. Enough, enough.

"Get out of my house."

"You'll call me?" Sin walks by my side to the front door. I don't know who he thinks he is, showing up at my house and demanding things of me. My brother, I suppose. Giving in would be easier. It would leave more energy for Daphne. I don't know what the hell Sin wants out of all this, but maybe it doesn't matter. Maybe it's only another shift in the outside world that will ultimately have little effect inside the walls of this house.

"Fine."

He blinks. "Do you mean that?"

I suppose he has some right to ask the question. Many of the conversations we had growing up weren't meant to be permanent promises. They were only meant to get us through until my father unlocked the door. Those discussions were rare, anyway. He preferred to keep us separate. Separate boxes, separate locks. It was better to be alone, when the crumbling in my mind had more to do with confinement and less to do with being out.

Do I fucking mean it. Christ, Sin.

"If I mean it, will you get the fuck out of my house?"

The corner of Sin's mouth quirks, but then he soberes. "Are you playing a game with her?"

"With who?" It's part automatic response, part barb. It's obviously not a game. The deadly reality of all this has settled over my skin like frigid water. I can't shake it off. I don't want to shake it off. I want to be submerged in it. Drowned, perhaps. If I experienced nothing but Daphne for the rest of my life, I'd count that as a victory.

“With Daphne.” Sin balances the scrambled egg sandwich in his hands as he steps into the porch. “Was she really serious about you keeping her here against her will?”

“No.”

He narrows his eyes. “Does she know that, Em? Or are you planning to make her see?”

“I’ll call you,” I tell him, and shut the door in his face. Sin lets out a string of curses on the other side. I don’t care. I want to know where my little painter went. If she has what she needs. Not all of it, at the moment. She needs the heat between us. The fight. When her feelings about her status here have evened out, she might see what we do for what it is. What it could be. Something more playful and less anguished. I could do that for her within those boundaries. It might be a relief.

I climb the stairs and glance into the other rooms on the way. Not here, not here, not here. I find her in her bedroom, looking out at the ocean. Sin, goddamn him, interrupted us when Daphne was losing it. All the things she did made my nerves light up. I want all those secrets from her lips.

She was that way last night.

“Come to the studio and paint.”

Daphne’s scoffs. “Definitely not. You’re a psycho. You kidnapped me. I’m not painting.”

“Yes, you are.”

Angling herself away from the window changes the light. It limns her dark hair in the hushed blue-white chill of the winter outside. In contrast, Daphne is warm. Alive. A petal pink in her cheeks and summer light in her eyes. I can’t begin to calculate the value. She’s beyond crude measurements involving money.

“I don’t care if you want me to paint. I don’t care if you want to watch.”

“I do want it, little painter. But you want it more.”

“No, I don’t.”

“I can tell you do.”

I know Daphne wants to paint the same way I know she wants to fuck. It's similar for her, I think. She wants the battle and the surrender. The skin-to-skin intimacy that hurts like a bitch. If she didn't respond so well to being owned and restrained, I might think she was a sadist. Of course, she's too sweet for pain, and pain is too easy. That's evident even in her paintings. The movement of the sea is never simple, even when it looks that way.

I know Daphne wants to paint because I can feel it in the air. I can see all the small tensions in her hands and in her body. We're not so different, Daphne and I. The world comes to us through art. It's just that hers is a tactile expression. Mine is only tactile in that way when I'm touching her.

“You want it,” I insist, keeping my voice even. “You need it.”

“Go to hell, Emerson.”

I could say more. I could say that the naked hope in her eyes can't be hidden. I could point out the way she leans toward me whenever I enter a room. Even when she tells me to go to hell. She might be a hummingbird about to take flight, but she'd fly right into my arms. Daphne can't resist the pull between us. It must feel much like the pull toward her paints.

“Someday, I'm sure.” If there is such thing as hell, the way Daphne's family believes, I'm certain I'll end up there. Eternal torment. She probably pictures fire and brimstone. I imagine the open dome of the sky. Clear ground stretching out to the horizon. No walls. No closed doors sketched out of darkness by thin cuts of light. My house, burned to the ground.

I turn away before the urge to touch her overrides all other instincts. She's hungry. Forcing her to eat with my own two hands would be hot, but probably unproductive.

I'm halfway down the stairs when she calls after me.

“Where are you going?”

“Back to the kitchen.”

A defiant sigh. "I won't eat."

I pause on the middle step and look back into her eyes. Emotions flare. She's angry at her captivity, disappointed by Sin, and hungry. We didn't eat last night. It's been hours upon hours. A little painter like Daphne still requires food to survive.

"You will."

"You'll make me?"

For someone so enamored with freedom, Daphne can't stop asking to be dominated. Another negotiation, then. Hidden behind insolent questions to cover it like a layer of paint.

"If you refuse to eat, I'll tie you to a frame on my wall and fuck your throat until you beg for food."

The little gasp she gives is exactly why I need her here. A split second of delighted, mortified shock. "I'd rather starve."

I know, I know. She's trying her very best to be serious. Summoning all her Morelli disdain. At heart, however, Daphne is that laughing girl in the press photo. Too sweet to suffer long. She would not starve. She'd take me down her throat as long as I wanted. Until she was crying and gagging. Until her thighs were streaked with desire. She can't, or won't, admit what she wants out loud. A pattern with her. Daphne was more open, more transparent, when she thought she was going to go home at the end of the evening. She's no less transparent now. She only believes she is.

It brings a smile to my face.

"I mean it." Her hand comes up and clutches the collar of her sweater.

"I mean it, too, little painter. It wouldn't be a hardship to catch you and bind you. It would be..." I fucked her twice last night, but I could fuck her three times over right now. On the stairs. On the carpet. On the front porch, for all I care. "It would be lovely."

She scowls. "I hate you."

“Don’t ever stop,” I tell her, then leave her there, all alone.
Untouched and unbound.

For now.

EMERSON BRINGS BREAKFAST. A NEW, PERFECT SCRAMBLED egg. Two pieces of toast. A clementine, divided into its pieces and spread out like a fan around the curve of the plate. He puts it on my bedside table and leaves without a word while I pretend to be bored. While I pretend I'm not on fire.

I eat all of it.

Not because I don't want him to do what he said, but because I do.

I'll tie you to a frame on my wall and fuck your throat until you beg for food.

Jesus. It's not right, wanting something like that. My body didn't get the memo. I felt a jolt like lightning when he said it. Pure heat, straight to the core. A thousand small fragments snapped into my mind. His hands circling my wrists. The rope. The frame. It would be hard, wouldn't it? It would be suffocating.

And I want it.

What Emerson said is an obvious challenge. Refusing him means giving in. Accepting this sick, wrong game we play. Giving myself to it and to him.

A shiver works down my spine. If I give in to Emerson like that, I might not resurface. I might not see my family again. I might get past this wild knot of grief and stop caring.

I pace the room and try to determine what, exactly, is wrong with me. It doesn't seem possible to be this angry and

this wanting at the same time.

Insult to injury, Emerson is not wrong. I do want to paint.

I can't say when art became more than a hobby. I don't want to call it a compulsion or an obsession. Those are just the words that come to mind when I think of it. If I go too long without painting I get a headache. I get sad. My emotions bottle up and stick in my throat. Honestly, I'm not sure if I would have grown as an artist without hundreds of hours of practice. My first pieces were nothing special. A natural-born creative probably would have made something stunning, first try.

Anyway.

I spend all day in my room, which is really more of a suite. It seems ridiculous to visit other parts of Emerson's house like this is anything but a kidnapping. My plan to gather more information fails. My chest pounds in a stubborn ache.

Emerson gives me space, like he knows this morning was a shock. An afternoon's worth of space. An evening. A night. He brings food, leaves it on the table, and goes.

I just—I can't believe his brother. I can't believe there is a person on earth *worse* than Emerson. I should have seen that coming, honestly, and that's what's so shameful. As if my brothers aren't just as dangerous. Just as bad.

But *this* bad?

I didn't believe Leo when he told the cops he kidnapped Haley. I know for a fact it was more complicated than that. I know how much she loves him.

Ugh. This is painful, all these thoughts, all these words. I flatten my palms on the comforter and try to stretch the urge out of my fingers. It helps for a second, but then it comes back.

The paint is right there. Right through the doorway. And the brushes. And the canvas. Emerson's bedroom has been dark for more than an hour. He didn't close his doors, but there's no movement through them. No sound. I'm pretty sure he's sleeping.

Thirty minutes. An hour. I could paint for an hour without waking him up.

My head throbs.

I get out of bed and tiptoe to the threshold. The moon casts a pale glow on the stool, the easel, the canvas. It's not quite enough light to judge the colors.

Ten more seconds to be sure he's asleep.

Then—

I dart across the space to the row of switches on the wall and nudge the one for the weird spotlight. A faint kiss of light. It feels less like a spotlight and more like a pool of sunlight in the middle of the dark.

There. Enough to get the feel for the colors. My mind will fill in the rest.

The shelves on the side walls are arranged with more precision than my favorite art supply store. Emerson hasn't spared any expense. Drawer upon drawer of paints. A stock of charcoal pencils, for initial sketches. Palates. More brushes than I could hold in two hands. I've had real, honest-to-god dreams before about owning this much paint.

So of course, even in this dream-reality, I go back to the same standbys. Ultramarine and black. Titanium white. A stormy gray. My fingers hover over a shade of green I would use to paint Emerson's blue-green eyes.

I'm not painting his eyes. This won't be a portrait. It also won't be a commission.

I take the green and push the drawer shut.

I have what I need.

I take everything back to the easel with me, balance the palette and the brushes on the stool, and consider the canvas. The rest of the room falls away into shadow. I'm half-shadow, too, in this circle of light.

This—this is the right place. In front of my easel. Emerson's easel, I guess. I've stood in front of many easels in

my life. The relief stays the same. I've done this hundreds of times. Thousands of times, maybe.

Low light. Just me. The canvas. The paint.

I wash the whole thing in white.

The first touch of brush to canvas feels like letting out a long-held breath. It's only preparation for the rest. Nothing fancy. Nothing artistic. But my heart responds. There's nowhere else for my thoughts to go. Nowhere else my emotions are palatable.

I could stop. Leave it white. Leave my work invisible.

But I'm pulled to the colors the way I was pulled to the studio itself. The way I was pulled to Emerson. Painting is the oldest, deepest habit of my life. My muscles take over. My mind becomes fingertips, becomes brush, becomes color and shape and form.

It's not thinking, really. Only feeling. The horrible ache in my chest becomes the rise of a wave. Anger becomes water droplets breaking free from one another, hurling themselves against the sky. I've been betrayed. By Emerson. By myself. That betrayal becomes a turn of the wrist. A swipe of the brush.

The piece takes shape. Ocean with a corresponding sky. I don't always paint the sky, but this time it's moon-soaked, shafts of light spearing the clouds. Fighting through. Bright, undeniable moonlight in the sliver of sky. It's angry, this ocean. Dark. Powerful. That's how I feel at the canvas. Dark and powerful.

I lose track of time.

Waves ripple and grow. This belongs to me, at least. This world on the canvas.

A swell surges up from the rest of the ocean like it could touch the moon. I don't let it. The moon holds itself away. It doesn't want to be obscured by dark water, but the moon doesn't always have a choice.

I don't want to think about choices.

A few of them come out onto the canvas anyway. The stark edges of waves. Moon on water. My choices were driven by an urge to be this person I'm not.

Or maybe I was trying to be the person that I am.

Either way, I'm here because I made a decision. I sent a text. No one held a gun to my head. No one forced me into Emerson's car. I felt like it was inevitable for him to come for me, but maybe it wasn't.

It was, whispers the paint on the canvas. I cover it with blue-black water. It refuses to be submerged.

Naturally.

I'm here, in the end. Alone with him. There are no more bodyguards. No more brothers and sisters. It's not what I wanted. Being separated from them like this—forcibly, against my will—is like forgetting how to paint. Like something essential has been stripped from me.

I didn't want to give you up, I paint into the sky around the moon. *I just wanted to be something more. I wanted to be brilliant and free, the way you are.*

An illusion, though. My siblings have secrets. All of them. A person doesn't simply shake those off, Leo least of all.

I don't want to be caged here. I add this to the black depths at the bottom of the canvas. *But part of me thinks maybe I do.*

This confusion is in silvery cracks in the waves. They give the impression of movement, of fierce, tidal movement. People think of the ocean deep as peaceful, but I don't necessarily agree. It's hiding more than people realize. I don't add blood this time, though my heart thunders.

If I'd chosen this, if I chose to stay here, in this studio with my muse outside the window, would it feel different to paint this scene?

I don't think it would.

That's what scares me more than anything.

That maybe it's not rage, or grief, but exhilaration.

What if I chose to stay? Would I do this forever? I can't say that this isn't my dream. A lifetime to paint. Endless supplies. I always wanted my own studio. I wanted to sell paintings for the amount of money that Emerson can pay.

Who does it make me, if I stay?

Emotions pile up until I return to the canvas. I paint out all my worry for Leo and the guilt that I didn't tell Eva about Emerson. The sea grinds itself into foam. I don't need to picture the ocean. It's there, waiting for me outside Emerson's house. The real ocean outside isn't as choppy as what I have on the canvas. Not as violent. But it could be.

My body gives itself over to the rhythm of painting. My headache dissolves. Stroke by stroke, it pulls back like a receding wave. No more pressure at my temples. No more pounding heart. I'm aware on some level of the changes in my body as I reorient to the canvas, again and again. Different corners. Different angles.

I paint all the way around the canvas.

All across the edges.

They'll be hidden by a frame, but it doesn't matter. I'll go to the ends of the earth. The far reaches of the canvas. I'll take it as far as it can go.

The moon travels across the sky, but I don't keep track. A glance now and then to see how the light changes on the ocean outside. Swells rise and rise and rise. They fall. No storm tonight. Frigid winter and cold, dark sea under a midnight sky.

And me in my little pocket of light.

It feels good to be here.

I didn't want to admit that to Emerson. I'll never tell him he was right. I'll let him think I didn't want to paint. I'll cover all my work in layers of white. He'll never know the difference. If he keeps me here for the rest of my life, I'll paint every night and cover it each morning.

The final product isn't the point.

Fine. Maybe this is a compulsion. What does it matter, anyway? I need this.

And here, in the silence, in the middle of the night...

I'll admit that his house is lovely. It's comfortable here, not icy like the beach, not cramped like my apartment. An ideal temperature. He's a criminal, a kidnapper, but Emerson sees me for who I am. Not as a Morelli, but as an artist.

He made me this studio, after all.

The air behind me presses in like a gentle hand propelling me toward the canvas. Keeping me here. Approving. It takes more work than people think to paint. If I do it long enough, my calves ache. I have to bend my knees and bounce on the balls of my feet to stay standing. I don't mind sitting now and then, but the movement comes from the ground up. I'm less hemmed in when I'm upright.

Ha, ha. I'm a prisoner finding scraps of freedom in Emerson's gallery. I wanted it to be some kind of sex game. Some harmless dirty talk. I don't think it is.

I wanted to hate it.

I don't think I do.

I want it to happen again, but I can't want that. I can't.

Waves and sky. Clouds and moon. It doesn't hurt as much to see it this way.

My heart on the canvas. All the wrong parts. The broken parts. The fearful parts. There in the deepest blue and the darkest black. The white that tempers everything else. The half-yellow glow of the moon. The pinpricks of stars.

It's not easy, but it's better than sitting in my room alone. Better than wishing Emerson would come stand at the side of my bed. Better than wondering if he was sleeping.

Another glance at the ocean outside.

My reflection is dim in the window.

It's also different.

A shadow at the door.

I whirl around, adrenaline a sharp pull in my veins, and find Emerson in the threshold. He leans against the doorframe. Tall and lean and gorgeous in his sleep pants and t-shirt, his arms crossed over his chest.

He's been watching me.

For longer than I realized.

That warm, approving feeling? That was him. It wasn't me. It was him watching. That's what it feels like to be watched by him, and it makes me furious.

He returns my gaze without flinching. Emerson isn't afraid to be caught. My eyes have adjusted enough to see the shadowed planes of his face. The dark doesn't diminish his intensity. His obsession.

"I didn't do this for you," I say.

"I know." Emerson straightens up. Every time he moves his body, I feel it reverberate in mine. Maybe that's obsession.

"I won't let you have it." I turn back to my palette and collect black on the brush. Black like the spray paint he used to destroy what I hated. I'll turn this to garbage, too. Forget painting it with white.

The tip of the brush is a breath away from the canvas when a hand catches my wrist.

It's like he's touched the beating heart of me. My foolish, resistant heart. I don't love destruction, in general. I don't actually want to destroy the painting. But emotion is a storm swell. I tried to keep it back, and I failed. Lightning and thunder. Anger and want. I'd rather ruin this than give it to Emerson. I'd rather let him hang it in his bedroom than ruin it.

"Let me see."

I'm mortified at the way I accept it. Unthinking. I stop trying to reach past his grip on my wrist.

"You've been looking for a long time."

“Not from this perspective.” Emerson plucks the brush out of my hand and lifts my fingers to the canvas. The paint’s still wet. Sticks to my fingertips. With both our fingers, he traces the curve of the darkest, angriest wave. “What does it mean?”

“It doesn’t mean anything.”

“You’re lying, little painter.” It feels like magic, his hand on my wrist. A feral magic that’s utterly off-limits to a person like me. “This wave battles the sky. This cloud fights to cover the moon. You’re trying to hide yourself.”

“Only from you. I don’t want to be here.”

“Your body says otherwise.”

“I wish you wouldn’t watch me. I wish you would let me go. I wish you’d never look at me again.”

“Is that so?”

It’s not so, damn it. I haven’t even gathered the will to wrench my wrist away from him. I haven’t tried to push him away. Haven’t tried to run.

“Yes.”

“That’s not going to happen,” Emerson murmurs. Soft and even, like he’s describing the painting on some kind of kidnapped private tour.

“I wish it would happen.”

“Another game of yours,” he muses. “You can make requests, little painter. I’m not likely to deny them.”

“I’m not playing with you. I’m destroying this.”

“You gave me your brush.”

“You took it.”

He’s fast, bringing it like a slash in the night to the canvas. I’m the one who reaches out this time. Catches him before he can put that black tear in the center of the sky.

Emerson’s other hand is steady on mine. He’s waiting for a response. Watching.

I want to hate it.

I need it instead.

I don't want to destroy this thing we have. I want it to become something else, but I don't know how to get there without breaking free.

Emerson runs his thumb along the inside of my wrist. It's a shock, a buzz, all the way up to my spine. He could knock the canvas to the ground, like he did the other night. He could take me there with it. My body prepares for it.

Instead, he drops my hand and steps away.

I'm too curious not to look, so I turn and face him.

He's there at the edge of the light, in that faint pool of sun. My breath catches. All the gorgeous lines of them, standing with his hands in his pockets.

"Go ahead." He offers me the brush.

I take it.

It feels hot. Like he's charged it with energy. With fire. *Too hot to hold*, my mind screeches. *Too hot. He's too hot. Too much.*

"No." I fling the brush at his face. Emerson catches it before it can touch him.

I'm about to follow it. To throw myself at him like I threw that brush. To let him win. To let him keep me here. I could tell myself it wasn't worth fighting. Wasn't worth the struggle.

But I can't do that. Can't give in. I won't.

I'll get out even if it kills me.

"Destroy it yourself."

I turn my back on the Collector and leave him there with his painting.

I BLEED OUT ALL THAT ANGER ONTO THE CANVAS, BUT BY THE second morning it calcifies into something heavy.

Like bone, maybe.

Or water, sloshing at the bottom of a pool. Crushing the rock below. The weight of it crushes my chest and squeezes the air out of my lungs. My hands have a magnetic pull to the covers.

My first instinct is to pull the blankets over my head and stay here. Except I don't like the idea of succumbing to soft covers and a beautiful view.

Emerson's going to want me to eat—again. He'll want me to go downstairs. I don't even want to cross the bedroom to brush my teeth, but I do. Small victories. I don't laugh at my own joke. Don't crack a smile. I just stare blankly back at myself in the mirror.

Not good. I'm not like this. Not sullen and sad and listless. I force myself to get dressed, but the thought of walking all the way downstairs...

No.

I go into the studio instead. It's a cruel joke. Offensively beautiful in the morning light. Even my irritation at this horribly lovely place is too distant to truly engage with. All my anger came to nothing. The canvas I painted is still there on the easel, but I don't replace it with another one.

I don't go near it at all.

I go to the drawers of supplies and take out a brush.

I won't escape my anger here. It will always be in the house with me. The house, like Emerson, is constantly watching. Big windows let in the world, but they don't let me out. All they do is show me the wide expanse of the ocean. I can see my freedom from the studio. I just can't touch it.

It's driving me into the earth, this feeling. Driving my feet through the floor. I don't think I can shake it off, or paint it off. Running away seems out of the question. I take fistfuls of paint from the shelves, not bothering to search for my favorites. This won't be any ocean I've painted before.

Garish reds fill my palms. Screaming yellows. A violet that makes my teeth ache.

A canvas is too small to lift what I feel off my chest and let me breathe again. It would crumple under the bleak, unwieldy despair hiding behind my ribs.

He's never going to let me out.

I will be in Emerson's house—in Emerson's frame—forever.

Screw it, then. The windows can stare at nothing. I won't let the ocean look back at me. I won't look out at my favorite subject. I can't believe he would think that this is what I wanted. To be separated from freedom by a pane of glass? A joke. It's a joke. It makes my throat close and my heart ache and my soul sink into the ground.

Drowning. It's like drowning.

I sidestep the canvas and go to the windows instead. The plan forming in my mind is wasteful. I would never do it, except it won't make any difference here. Emerson can afford to buy me paints forever. Paints to layer over every square inch of this house. Paints until my heart stops. Paints until I'm dead.

A slash of red across the window. I wait for the guilt to come, the exhilaration of splashing money on glass this way. It doesn't come. I add a cut of yellow. A disgusting green. That

sweet, electric violet. A wave takes shape against my will. Even now, I can't stop painting the ocean.

I can make it into something else. This collision of color looks how I feel on the inside, except it's not the same. It's a funhouse mirror. The way I feel is dark and cold and isolated, and this—

This is a vibrant, colorful box. I shut out the world stroke by stroke. There's no real relief in it, just the dim satisfaction that comes from knowing Emerson will hate this.

It's a waste of paint and skill, honestly. I could be creating something beautiful.

The windows in the studio are huge. I have to go back for more paint.

The windows are huge. I have to go back for more paint. I have to go back a second time, a third time. It's not working and I didn't expect it to. I didn't expect for my emotions to clear, to become something understandable. There's nothing to understand. I'm just a person trapped in a cage. A bird trapped in a cage. Is this what birds feel like? Do they hate windows for showing them the sky?

I don't come to an answer on that one. The windows are ugly. I stop using any technique at all. Stop thinking about it. Paint and more paint, covering bigger and bigger sections of glass. Dragging the stool over serves as a break. The tubes of paint I have aren't meant for a project for this size, but then—no canvas is big enough for how I feel right now. A canvas the size of the planet would be too small.

Every brush stroke is heavy. I'm layers deep now. Painting over sadness and grief and covering it again and again and again. It's a disgusting waste of material.

I hate feeling like this. I never let myself feel like this. I never let myself stay down like this.

Fear prickles in the back of my mind. When I was growing up, I kept my emotions behind closed doors, where it was safe. It wasn't for me to have tantrums where my parents could see. Not for me to have outbursts. That was for Leo. I knew better.

I'm not acting like it now, though. There could be consequences here. Emerson could be angry about the windows and the wasted paint. I stifle the urge to undo it so he doesn't see. If he never knows, he'll never have the chance to retaliate.

No point, in the end. *I'm not leaving*, my heart says. It beats it out again and again under that concrete weight. *I'm not leaving. I'm not leaving.*

The only way out is the ocean. The ridiculous, unreachable ocean. I couldn't jump into the icy water if I tried. Can't break the windows. Can't sidestep Emerson. He's too strong and the house is a fortress.

Unless...

It's not.

The lock on the door didn't seem fancy. It seemed like a pretty normal lock. Connected to his phone, somehow, but there weren't any cameras on it. No complicated hardware. His brother just flipped it shut and locked me in.

I could unlock it.

A ribbon of lime green follows the path I'd take once I stepped through that door. Straight to the gate. That's how far I'd get. Emerson would know. The lock might not be anything special but he's got alerts. Alarms. Heading toward the road would be the same as running right into his arms.

In the other direction is a cold, forbidding sea. It's not good when your only option is a winter ocean. In this fantasy, I'm a good swimmer. How long would I have to swim, really? Only far enough to find a phone.

The real issue is Emerson. In order to pull that off—nevermind the swimming, and the fact that I might freeze to death—is that I'd need him to be distracted. I've never seen Emerson distracted. I'm not sure he can be distracted.

He's obsessed.

A stalker.

A terrible, evil man.

My thoughts put up a little fight about that one. He hasn't exactly hurt me. Or tortured me. Emerson refuses to let me go hungry. That could be a form of torture. Keeping me alive to endure this.

Endure getting fucked, a voice taunts. The way you like.

"Well," I say to nothing, to no one, "how would I know? He's the only one I've ever done that with."

The only man you've ever wanted enough.

Jesus. I hate this voice, whoever she is. She's too honest and right. It's not like I haven't had invitations over the years. Boys asking me on dates. None of them rose to the level of Emerson.

The ocean's receding now. I'm concealing myself from it. Putting a wall between us. It doesn't get to watch me anymore.

"Fuck you," I tell the waves. "You're not looking now, are you? Can't see a damn thing."

Talking to the ocean is definitely a sign that I'm losing it. Water isn't sentient. It's not the swells that have been watching. It's just Emerson. The worst, lowest admission is that I like when he's watching. The warmth and the hot focus of it. I like it. I want it. I wish he was watching me now. The sickest, most twisted thing I've ever wanted.

I've never wanted to be a captive. I wanted to be free. That's why I came. I thought this was freedom, but it's a cage.

A frame in a gallery. Nailed to the wall.

"Why?" I can't make my voice go above a whisper. "Why would you think I'd want this?"

What I'm really asking is, *how did you know?* How did he know I would love this room? That I would seethe at this room? That I would, in spite of myself, long to be at a canvas here? How did he know that about me? I've never said that to anyone.

Tears prick at the corners of my eyes. Paint upon paint. Formless shapes.

I don't look for Emerson.

I don't so much as turn my head.

If he wants to see me, I will. If he wants me to see him, I will. That's what I've learned about Emerson. If he wants me to know he's here, I'll know it.

He waited for me outside my apartment. He came *inside* my apartment. I can feel him waiting here, too. In the house.

He's the frame, isn't he? He's the thing that keeps me here. That pins me, panting, to the wall. That bars me from going outside. It's not the wood or the windows. It's him.

And he is no window. What I saw in his eyes the other night—

I don't know what it was.

Today my throat is too tight to be curious about it. My heart aches too much. My soul is too heavy, dramatic as that sounds.

He leaves, though. He'll leave at some point.

Right?

The wondering is exhausting. It presses down on my shoulders and tugs the brush in my hand toward the floor.

Pain would be easier.

That soundless, annoying voice laughs at the thought. Pain isn't easier. I've seen that in my brother's face. From what he said it's just as much a cage as being a captive.

I push Leo out of my thoughts. Can't think of him right now, or any of them. This is the first time in my life that I've had zero access to my family. I've fantasized about it before. What child hasn't? You dream of packing a backpack and walking away on some grand adventure.

You go home again at the end of those adventures.

I can't go home. Or see it, or talk to the people there.

Nope.

No more thinking.

Only painting.

I run out of glass. I cover the last corner standing on tiptoe on the stool. Once upon a time I might have liked this explosion of color, but I detest it now. It's a painting I never wanted to paint. I hate this color scheme. I hate everything about it. That there's no artistry to it at all.

Just a mess, like I'm a mess.

So much for painting out of spite. So much for not giving him anything else of myself. I settle back on my feet. My balance is not great. I could fall and hit my head. It would be a hard fall, with my lungs filled with rocks.

I was kidding myself.

Emerson's kidding himself if he thinks I'll get used to this.

"Maybe you will," I say to the paint. To myself. "Maybe you will get used to it. People can survive almost anything."

The air in the room shifts, like half a breath on the back of my neck.

I'm frozen up here. A statue. My balance seems less certain with every breath I take. I don't dare move, honestly. If I shift my weight to step down I'll fall. It wouldn't kill me but it would be embarrassing. Bloody, maybe.

Soft footsteps approach.

Hands at my waist.

Emerson lifts me easily to the floor like I'm a statue on display, or a vase. Something that's on the wrong shelf. *Safer here*, I can imagine him saying. But he doesn't comment. He just moves slowly down the length of the room, looking at the windows.

He slips his hands into his pockets. Soft pants and a T-shirt, like he's not planning to go anywhere. It's monstrously unfair that he's this hot in pants and plain long sleeves. Even less fair that I can't seem to look away from him.

A person that beautiful shouldn't also be evil. It makes no sense.

I try to look at him like I would any subject in art school. Shadows and light. Depth and color. It's impossible. He's more than anything I've tried to paint. Sun pushes its way through the rainbow on the windows and the faintest echoes reach his skin.

His gaze is much brighter than the sun. So much more intense. I don't have the same urge to shield my eyes when it's not trained on me, but it still makes my breath catch.

He looks at the windows like he looked at my paintings in the gallery.

With awe in his eyes. With obsession. Seriously, as if I haven't been throwing a silent, sustained tantrum on the glass.

"How do you like it?"

It's unbearable not to ask the question. My nerves fire with fear and a tiny, desperate need for him to approve. He could say it was a waste of paint. He could order me to clean it up. Really, he could make me do anything. He's big enough. Strong enough.

Cruel enough.

But he just keeps looking. Emerson didn't give three seconds of his attention to Peter Clay's painting. He's giving moments upon moments to mine. Heartbeat after heartbeat. *His life*, that voice whispers again. I'm probably fully out of my mind now.

He turns back to me, a shock of wonder in his eyes. As if I've done something special just for him. I can't speak. If I speak, I'll cry, and I might never stop. I'll put my face in the pillows and sob until there's no more tears left in the world.

"It's better this way," he says.

"You're kidding." I choke on the words, then snap my mouth shut around them and refuse to say anything else.

"It's evocative. Look at the progression." Emerson skims his hand in the air, and I see it—what he's talking about.

"There is no progression."

“Perhaps not.” His hand drops. The lift at the corner of his mouth says he’s not really agreeing with me. It doesn’t matter anyway. I tried to make a disaster, and he still found the pattern there. He still found depth. Leave it to him to claw beauty out of the isolation and pain he’s causing.

His blue-green eyes are the most breathtaking color in this godforsaken studio. Emerson turns them on me and watches. His chest rises and falls below his shirt. Easy. Comfortable. He’s at home.

“Come downstairs, little painter.”

“And do what?”

“Eat.”

DAPHNE'S ANGER WAS INTOXICATING. IT LEFT A MARK ON MY skin that I see every time I look in a mirror. It peeks out of the collar of my shirt. She bit hard enough that it lingers. It's like one of her paintings brought to life. Its energy hums through my house. A constant undertone. The inverse of the ocean's white noise. It gave everything a dangerous, shimmering edge. I think—though I can't know, without actually seeing her family—that the specific frequency of that anger was born in her. The most cursory research on the Morellis reveals that their empire was built on the threat of retaliation. On the threat of rage. Rumors like this, in my experience, are almost always exaggerated for the benefit of whomever is whispering them.

However.

There is a kernel of truth.

Her denial was fascinating before that. Wide-eyed and disbelieving and hot. Like emerging from a dark room into blinding light. The senses can't comprehend it at first and it registers as shock. As pain. On Daphne's face, those emotions are breathtaking.

Her withdrawal makes me feel something else.

Guilt.

The fire in her dark eyes is gone. They well with crystal tears that appear and disappear in the multicolored light from outside. She's been at this all day. Winter sun fades faster and the streaks of paint lose their luster as it goes. Daphne's eyes usually burn. With curiosity. Intelligence. Desire.

They're down to bare flickers like a spent candle.

I assumed she wouldn't take it so hard, given how tightly her brother kept her guarded. An incorrect assumption. Captivity is a shock for her. When I saw her at her easel, I considered adding to the experience. Coaxing it into something else. I wanted to, but I didn't. I went back to my bed and didn't sleep.

The windows—

Christ. The windows are something else.

I have my suspicions that this is the largest piece Daphne's ever painted, and she did not enjoy it. It's a purposeful departure from her usual work. Like she's refusing to access that part of herself.

Daphne's lips part. Her eyes are enormous and sorrow-filled. No glint. No gleam. She hooks a hand into the collar of her sweater, not bothering to hide it from me. Hardly noticing, I think. "I'm not hungry."

Another glance at the windows. They're completely covered. Not a spare inch of glass. "You're not this, either."

Daphne looks, too. "You don't know what you're talking about."

Yes, I do. Because I've watched her. Because I can't stop. I wanted to see her emotions on her body, but I didn't want to see this particular set.

"You don't have to pretend."

"What's pretending about this?" Daphne twirls her paintbrush absently in her hand.

It's a feeling that doesn't translate into words. Not at first. "I don't expect you to be happy."

Her eyes snap to mine. "Is that what you think I painted? Happiness?"

"I think you painted the illusion of you. The one you think other people want to see."

Daphne's chin quivers. "You're wrong. And you said it was better this way."

"It is. At least you're not refusing to paint."

She gives a heavy, soul-deep sigh. "I don't care if you want me to—"

"Not for me. For you. Not painting must be like holding your breath." The corners of her mouth turn down. Daphne won't meet my eyes. "It's past lunch. Come down and eat."

"No."

There's no fight in it. Not even a hint of the feral playfulness of her first night here. "Come down, or I'll carry you."

Daphne looks away.

She remains utterly still as I approach, lift her in my arms, and swing her over my shoulder. Having her close is an improvement, but not ideal. My little painter doesn't so much as swing at me on the way downstairs. She doesn't try to scratch me.

I sit her at the kitchen island. Daphne drops her paintbrush onto the marble and looks blankly at the splotches of red haphazard on the veins of the rock. "Oops."

"You can paint the island when you're finished eating." I wipe the red away in the meantime.

No answer.

She's dressed herself in leggings and a sweater. I want to push it up to her waist. Up to her neck. Run my hands over her skin until she protests and pretends to hate me.

That would be better.

Perhaps it's time she needs, but then captivity isn't necessarily like that. The longer it goes on, the less predictable it becomes. There is no telling what will happen when the light around the doorframe gets stronger. Gets blinding.

Guilt scrapes along the insides of my ribs. The way to buy time is with food. Keeping her alive is my first priority. That

will give way to all the rest.

I have a pot of water on to boil and a box of noodles in my hand when I get the text from Sin.

Sin: It's a live broadcast. Watch now

This, along with a link.

Daphne stands up from her spot at the island and wanders out. I follow her to the living room, where she drops into a chair and stares out the window.

Back to the boiling water. I tip the noodles in and click on the link.

The anchor's voice bursts from the speakers. "—his home outside New York City. This is the first time the press has been invited to—I'm sorry. We'll return with more after the event."

The event is that Daphne's brother is holding a press conference. They've set up a podium outside his house, which is an honest-to-Christ castle. He wears a black winter coat and an expression that I can only describe as haunted fury. It's coming through the video feed like static. I would hate having press on my property this way.

I would only do it if there were no other options.

Camera lights, competing with the fading sun, pick up shadows under his eyes. His jaw is tense, set, and I don't have to know him to know that he is barely holding it together.

The chyron scrolls at the bottom of the video. *Morelli family pleads for safe return of daughter Daphne*. A toll-free number flashes next. News reporters from every station are covering this. They crowd in at the edge of the frame.

This is a fucking nationwide broadcast.

"My sister Daphne is missing," he says. "It's been about thirty-six hours since she was last seen entering her apartment." He goes on to describe the area without giving away her address, and I scan the background out of habit. There's a blonde woman there, watching him with a stoic, stricken expression. His wife, I think. She stands next to two of Daphne's sisters. Even her parents have come out for this.

The camera focuses tight on the podium, but I would bet they're all there.

"She was last seen wearing a gray peacoat over dark leggings and a light-colored sweater. I know—" He looks up from the notes on the podium and at all those cameras. His eyes are very like Daphne's. Perhaps that's why I get a jolt to see despair fighting with hope in them. "I know that the first forty-eight hours of a person's disappearance are crucial, and Daphne's window is closing. Please relay as widely as possible that I will personally guarantee payment for her safe return."

The chyron on the screen shifts abruptly to a general description of Leo Morelli's net worth, which is more substantial than I thought.

Leo clears his throat, glances at his notes, and looks back into the camera.

"Give her back to us." It's an order, but it comes across like a plea. "Our family would never recover from Daphne's loss. I would never recover."

A stream of camera shutters and flashes. He doesn't react to them, nor to the whispers that rise in the background. A Morelli, admitting weakness. That might be the most newsworthy aspect. That Daphne is worth enough to him—and the family—for a public display. It wouldn't be so well-attended if it wasn't novel.

"Can you tell us about her?" One reporter's voice cuts through the murmured conversation.

"Daphne has dark hair. Dark eyes. Like my siblings. Like me." A photo of Daphne appears on the screen. It's her college yearbook photo. Her smile is wide and genuine, a sparkle in her eyes as if the photographer has said something particularly amusing. "She's five feet, two inches tall." Leo pauses and an emotion I can't begin to name runs across his eyes and disappears. "And she loves to paint. She's always painting."

The blonde woman behind him takes a tiny step forward. I didn't see what made her react that way, but Leo doesn't turn.

“If you have any information, please call the number at the bottom of your screen. Any verifiable tips will be compensated.”

“Do you believe she was taken against her will?”

Rage is a split-second cloud over his face, there and gone again. “Yes.”

“Is there anything you want to say to your sister?”

A silence. Leo looks at the person who asked with cold resolve. “That I won’t stop looking until I find her.”

The broadcast cuts back to the anchor, who describes a reward that would be life-changing for most people in the country.

There it is. The amount people will be paid to hunt me.

My phone rings in my hands. It’s Will.

“What the actual *fuck*, Emerson?” This, as soon as the call connects. “Sin told me it was you.”

“That’s inconvenient for me.”

“He thought I wouldn’t say anything about it.” Will laughs. “Are you fucking kidding me? I should call the cops. No—I should call the Morellis and tell them exactly where she is.”

“Are you hard up for cash?”

“No, Em, I’m not. Dad is, though. He’s been up my ass about it for days now.”

“Is that all you called to tell me?”

“No.” He’s walking somewhere. Snow crunches in the background. “I called to tell you not to do this, but it’s already too late, isn’t it? You really think you can keep her there. She’s a Morelli. Do you know what you’re doing?”

“Surviving,” I say.

“What the fuck,” he mutters.

Texts are coming in now, too. I take the phone from my ear to check them.

Alert: Motion detected front door

Alert: Motion detected front door

Daphne's painting from the charity auction is being delivered. I look in on Daphne—still in the living room. Still staring out at the ocean. Then I go to the door. The auction included installation, so I wave the team through and point them to one of my galleries. The one that holds Daphne's pieces. It will take them no time.

The goddamn door won't shut up.

Alert: Motion detected front door

Alert: Motion detected side door

I was correct. Half a minute and they're on the way out.

Alert: Motion detected front door

Alert: Front gate approach

Alert: Front gate exit

"Are you sure about this?" Will asks. The boiling water—fuck. I go back to the kitchen and pull the pot off the stove before it spills over. Tip it into a colander in the sink. Steam hisses from the noodles left behind.

"I'm sure."

Daphne's already here. If I let her go now, she won't come back.

"You're just like him," Will says softly, and it hurts. A ridiculous amount, even though it's true. Perhaps especially because it's true.

"Fuck off," I tell him, and hang up the phone.

If I'm just like my father, then I may as well lean into it. Will's accusation divides and flattens, but it won't hide its face. Won't get out of my head. Those thin slivers of light around a closed door only lead to this. The monster outside is only myself. Daphne knows it already. So do Will, and Sin. Who cares, then?

I put the noodles in a bowl and add butter. She can have whatever else she wants. “Daphne.”

No answer.

“Come here or I’ll carry you myself.”

No footsteps.

The hair on the back of my neck stands up.

“Little painter. Answer me.”

I abandon the bowl and the noodles and my plan to play a game with her and stride across to the living room.

Not here.

Up to the studio.

Not here, either.

I take the stairs back down at a run. My phone. I need it. I don’t know why, don’t know what it is that I saw, only that I saw something there—

Fuck me.

Alert: Motion detected side door

The doors and locks in the house are connected to wifi, but they’re not special otherwise. They can be unlocked by hand in case of emergency.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

Daphne didn’t go for the front door. She didn’t try to leave with the team. There was no scene. No conversation. No confusion.

Which means.

I practically throw myself into the mudroom. The one where I keep my wetsuits. The one where I keep my boards. The one with the fucking side door.

One of the wetsuits is missing.

“No.”

The sun is taking its last gasps for today, but it's prematurely dusk because of the clouds. A storm coming in.

Faint shadows of her footprints in the snow, down beyond the retaining wall, lead to the shore.

Daphne is not a swimmer. I know that about her. She doesn't look at the water with longing except to paint it. She doesn't need to punish herself like I do.

She fled to the ocean, and she won't survive.

I strip off my shirt and my pants and jump into the nearest wetsuit like my life depends on it. But it's not my life that matters. My life can only be made shorter by this stress. This damn fool thing I'm about to do. Daphne's life is all that counts, and I'm running out of time. Every second in water this cold is another moment closer to death.

A survival kit hangs on a hook near the wetsuits. It's been there for years. I've never planned to go far enough to need it. The straps are loose and I spend three heartbeats tightening it.

Paddle board, not surfboard. The paddle board is wider and steadier. If she's already gone by the time I get out there—

My mind pours paint artlessly over the thought and presses it into an opaque frame. Suffocates the life out of it.

I take the board and run for the waves.

REMEMBER THE FIRST LINE.

Line?

Of a book.

Remember the first line of a book. If you're doing something very difficult, and you need to take your mind off it, remember the first line of a book you love, Daph.

Damn it.

I can't remember any books I've loved.

It's so much colder than I thought.

Bone-splitting cold. Ice shards in my eyes. A weighted freeze. Emerson is out here every day. I thought I could survive an hour.

Well, I will. I will make it through this hour. If I'm honest, I don't know how long it's been. This is nothing like learning to swim off the beach on one of our family vacations. Somewhere warm and tropical. Who was teaching me? Leo, probably, but I can't remember. I can only remember the water in my face.

A wave slaps my cheek. How many times has that happened? A lot, I think. I've lost track of the number of times I've lifted my arms. Kicked my feet.

It's getting harder.

The ocean pulls at my arms with every stroke. I'm not much of a swimmer but I know what happens if I stop kicking. I'll sink. Turning my head to scan for the shore takes real effort.

I can't see it.

Okay.

That's a setback.

I turn in the opposite direction. Waves upon waves. Not this way, then.

I catch a glimpse of the shore. I'll head that way. That's the way I have to go. But no—it's not the shore. It's a cloud or maybe just a dark line. I don't know what it is, but it seems more like the shore than the ocean.

Good enough.

The absolutely crucial thing is to keep swimming. Lift one arm, then the other. Kick. Kick. Kick. Have to keep my mind off the cold. I'll remember the first line of a book.

Damn it. I have to have read a book in my life. How did Leo always remember? Right—because he used this trick for something worse than swimming. For excruciating pain. Being this cold hurts quite a bit more than I expected but it's not as bad as whip wounds. Silver linings. Salt linings. I open my mouth to laugh at my own joke and get a mouthful of ocean water. It freezes my teeth.

Maybe the color wheel instead.

Pinks. Reds. Oranges. Violets.

No. Yellows.

Red. Orange. Yellow. Green. Blue. Indigo. Violet.

That's just the rainbow.

One arm, then the other. It was so bitter when I got in. I thought I might not be able to breathe, but I am. Knife-breaths. Pinching my lungs.

It's not as bad now. Not as cold, I mean. It's starting to feel...

It's starting to feel almost warm, which is a bad sign. When you start to feel warm in water like this, you're going to drown. Not me, though. Not today.

Maybe today.

No! Not today. I'm going to find the shore and when I get there I'll find a phone.

I'll remember Leo's phone number. He made me memorize it in case I ever lost my phone. It's the only one I know by heart.

Country code first.

One.

Nine.

All you have to remember is to say amen. It's nothing, Daphne. A few words.

That's not a phone number.

The water is welcoming now. I was wrong about it before. Instead of pulling me down, it's holding me up. I could lay my head down. Rest for a minute. Remember that phone number. The surface is like a pillow. But no—no. That would mean giving up. I would sink. My eyelids are heavy, though. It's a tempting thought.

I wish Emerson was here.

My legs drift down and I kick them in a frantic burst. What is it they say about bad signs? They come in threes. One, two, three. The waves are coming in more than threes. This is not good.

So much for the first line of a book. So much for the color wheel. The water grows dark underneath me. Dark in the sky, too. They reflect each other. Salt and ice try to force themselves between my teeth.

Keep kicking, Daph.

Jesus, it's hard. I want him now. Desperately. Emerson's strong and he could let me rest.

I really don't know where the shore is. The cloud turned out to be a wave. Actually, there's no difference between the clouds and the waves. A bolt of fear shoots down to my toes, which struggle for the bottom. It's not there. I'm in over my head.

Something darker than the sky and the waves flashes at the corner of my eye.

My mouth is full of water. Can't breathe it. Can't breathe. My chin tips skyward like some invisible fingers tap at the soft underside, but the water is a frigid halo. Come on, feet. Kick. I'm a puppet on strings. Arms rising to the surface. Someone else has taken control of my body. Maybe this proves the existence of God.

Then again.

I'm still sinking.

Salt stings my eyes. Through the pain, shiny fabric comes into view.

It's a black wetsuit against dark gray water. A person on a paddle board.

Emerson on a paddle board. Wearing a backpack slung over one arm. It's so strange. A laugh comes out onto my tongue but it's replaced by another lungful of water.

His hands fly in the dark and he hauls me into his arms with shocking strength. The waves are so high. How does he have his balance? The board is smaller than I thought, but he's here with me. Thank God he's here.

"Sit up," Emerson orders. "Sit up, little painter."

I can't. It's so much work. His arm locks around me and pulls me upright. He feels so warm, somehow.

His weight shifts, and Emerson curses. We both tumble back into the ocean. My head goes under but an irresistible force pushes it above the surf. I didn't see how high the waves

were before. I have no idea how to deal with waves this high, but Emerson does.

“Fuck,” he says. I can’t answer. At the edge of my vision, something white disappears into the waves.

Emerson’s board.

I can’t kick anymore, but we’re moving. It’s all Emerson. He drags me along with him with powerful strokes. The current catches at my feet and tries to pull me under. I want to ask him how he got to be stronger than the undertow. I never find the words. The swells lift and fall below us. My stomach turns.

Leo was right. I am a naive fool. I thought I could survive this, though I could do this one thing for myself, but I was wrong. I’m captured again. All I feel is relief. Emerson’s here, and I don’t have to swim.

Black rock rears up from the ocean. I gasp and choke on water. Where the hell did it come from? Were we this close to the shore all along? He’s swimming us toward a black void and I have a terror of falling in and never resurfacing. But then more rock arcs overhead.

A cave.

We’re going into a cave. Pitch-dark on the inside. Not much lighter outside. The wind howls above us, but it doesn’t seem to touch me. The crash of the surf echoes against Emerson’s steady breathing. His hands meeting the water. The cutting wind might not touch, but he does. Emerson climbs up onto a ledge and lifts me into his arms.

Numb pressure all over my body. I force my eyes open and find his, barely visible in the last of the light. He’s not looking at my face. He’s focused completely on the wetsuit.

“This one is for summer,” he says, his tone half-absent, half-scolding.

I didn’t know. I try to tell him but my mouth is too cold. I guess I never studied the wetsuit options for an ocean escape.

Water gathers near the ledge like an infinity pool surrounded by stone. That's all I see before my eyes close again.

Emerson's done with my wetsuit. He moves me closer, leans me against him, and reaches for the backpack. The zzz of the zipper bounces off the ceiling. I hear something like a match, or a lighter. Orange blooms behind my eyelids. Isn't he worried we'll burn to death?

I guess not.

He eases me away, my back against the wall, and I can't help trying to look again. Emerson's stripping off his wetsuit in the firelight. He's a tall, muscled shadow against orange flame. He's only wearing briefs and a T-shirt under the wetsuit. Both of those come off, too. His hands move over the backpack. Something long and thin unfurls into a pad on the ground. He has clothes, too. Dry ones. He puts on more briefs but nothing else. Silver sparkles in the air. Two big lengths of it. Emergency blankets. I took one for granted the very first time I met Emerson.

Not anymore.

He comes back to me and I blink up at him. Emerson doesn't bother explaining what's going to happen. He moves me like a painting. Over to that mat. My tank top comes off over my head. My panties. He tosses them away one by one and sits on the mat, then tugs me into his lap. I can barely feel his touch.

I want to make a joke about it. How I'm naked and he's mostly naked, and we're both fools for being out here at a time like this. But I'm frozen solid. Deathly cold. And his chest against my back is so warm and solid that tears gather at the corners of my eyes.

He wraps us in silver. Wraps his arms around mine. His legs, too.

"Stay," he says. Like I have any other choice. I can't move. My arms are ceramic. Can't keep my eyes open. "Stay, Daphne."

His body feels so much warmer than the air. It must be some kind of hallucination. He's frozen, just like me. Here in the dark, we're all frozen. Ice carvings. Statues. My mind is still under the water, drifting in the black tide. It's nice not to be alone. I worry that we're too close to the fire, but it doesn't catch on my skin.

I rise gradually toward the surface of my waterlogged thoughts. There's air up above. Sun. I try to pick up one arm and swim toward it, but Emerson holds me tighter.

"No need to swim," he murmurs into my ear, his breath a warm whisper. "It's all right, little painter. Don't fight it."

Don't fight what?

But then my head breaks above the surface and my body returns to itself. Realizes that something terrible has happened. Violent shivers erupt through every muscle. Fear constricts my throat. I can't stop the earthquake. I'll shake myself back into the water. My teeth chatter so hard my temples ache.

"You're fine." Emerson's confident. Calm. "Nothing is wrong. It's okay, Daphne."

The word *no* fractures under all those shivers.

"Shh." He hasn't let go of me, and I know he won't. Not until this is over. The fear subsides a little. "I've got you. It will stop soon, I promise."

"I don't feel right." The words are so difficult to get out. They barely make sense.

"It's good," Emerson says. "It's okay. You're okay." I try to tell him that it's not. That it feels like my skull is going to shake out of my head. It's too much. My teeth are chattering and it hurts. "You'll be all right. You will, little painter. You're just warming up. You were cold, and now you're getting warm. That's all it is. Nothing to be afraid of."

Don't let go.

Fear comes back in another wave. If I fall in, I won't get back out again. What escapes is a wordless, terrified sound.

“We’re nowhere near the water,” Emerson says. “I won’t let you go.”

I believe him.

It takes time to get warm. Heartbeats upon heartbeats. Awareness seeps back into my limbs. I can feel him. His chest against my back. His arms over mine. Emerson shifts so he’s cradling me, my head on his shoulder. It feels so good to lay like this. To be on solid ground. His breath is even and warm on my forehead. Strong, solid arms. Even his thighs are lean and muscled. Every part of him. Safe as houses. Where did I ever hear that? Doesn’t matter. He’s keeping me warm.

A fire starts at the base of my neck.

Hot.

I’m burning.

I have to cool down.

I shove at the blanket and try to force myself out of Emerson’s arms, but he’s too strong.

“Stay here.”

“I’m boiling,” I gasp.

“No, you’re not. Your body can’t regulate at the moment, little painter. You got too cold in the water. It’s misjudging the heat.”

“Do.” The shivering is truly awful. “You promise.”

“Yes.”

It’s hard to believe him when my skin is on fire and my blood is overheating in my veins. If that were really true, Emerson would have to let go. He doesn’t. His arms close firmly around me and stay and stay and stay.

Being awake is even harder. The heat peaks, scorching my hair and the top of my head. I stop trying to open my eyes and drift against his shoulder in a silver sea. He reaches for something in his backpack and soft cloth brushes over my face. My heartbeats get louder. Slower. They’re like white noise. Waves, maybe. Emerson lowers me down. The mat, I

think. It feels as forgiving as a mattress. I'm drifting, lulled further and further from him. Something light as air settles around my shoulders.

I hear him get up. Emerson's footsteps move quietly over the rock. The ocean is a loud rush but I still hear him. I'll always be able to hear him. I know that in a sure, hazy way. Zippers and clips. Clips and zippers. His backpack. I claw my way back to consciousness and force my eyes open.

"When are they coming?" Someone has to be on their way. Emerson is rich. He must have people he can call to come retrieve him and his hostage girlfriend from the ocean.

His eyes flicker in the firelight. "That's the only exit." Emerson points to the water lapping against the curved ceiling. "The water goes out with the tide in the morning."

My mind is still mushy. Still nothing. Still drowning in salt. Warm salt, at least.

Emerson comes back to me and crouches down to my level, a shiny rectangle in his hand, a water bottle in the other. A Power Bar. I shake my head against the cloud underneath me.

"Up," he says. And then he pulls me to sitting and makes me drink the water. Half of it in small, painstaking sips. It makes my stomach hurt. When I'm too tired to take it, I turn my head away. "That's enough for now, little painter." Emerson lowers my head back down and walks away.

At first I'm too tired to care. He's probably pissed at me for running away. I almost drowned. He has every right. But as the moments pass, my energy comes back. I feel a restless hum in my feet that spreads upward until I can breathe again.

Pissed or not, I don't want to be alone.

I took it for granted, didn't I? That cushy prison in Emerson's house, with its bed and its art studio and its warmth.

I sit back up, the blanket crinkling around me, and rub at my eyes. My vision is so blurry that it takes a minute to find Emerson in the firelight.

He sits at the edge of the rock about ten feet from the mat. He doesn't turn at the sound of the blanket or the louder rustle when I stand. Fine. So he *is* angry. I try to summon the will to blame him for this. He's the one who kept me captive. But something about his posture makes me hesitate.

I pick my way across the rock to him, watching his profile in the glow from the flames. Everything about him is gorgeous in the warmth of the light. He's dressed in simple, dry clothes, his wetsuit spread out on the rock behind him.

"Emerson."

No movement. He's the statue now, his gaze locked on the water. My heart kicks up. I can't stand it if he won't talk to me. I'd rather fight.

A few steps closer.

He's trembling.

Embarrassment burns my face. He's shaking with rage. At *me*. And I'm here in this space with him. No way out.

I take the final steps anyway and my stomach drops.

His eyes aren't fiery with anger. They're not even narrowed. His face is open, expression blank. Those captivating eyes are fixed on that curve of rock and the water touching them with something like fear. With something like obsession, only much darker. Like he might leap into it and disappear. Like he's trembling with the effort of holding himself back.

I drop to my knees at his side. I've never seen Emerson tremble like this. As if he's at the very limit of his control. As if he might snap or break or worse.

"Emerson," I say again. "Are you okay?"

He doesn't answer.

DAPHNE'S WORDS COME FROM MILES AWAY. UNIVERSES AWAY. Thousands of light-years through paintings and canvas and frames. Through drywall and galleries. Closed-off alcoves in my mind. All of this built around the endless, screaming urge to throw myself into the water and breathe it in until I can't feel this white-hot panic anymore.

I felt it coming out in the ocean. Concentrating on an essential task can sometimes stave it off for a few minutes. This time, I bought myself over an hour. Long enough to warm her up. But I knew, of course I knew, that pushing it in that way would make the fallout worse.

I am in the world now.

My usual methods for keeping it at a distance fail. It's like a headache, that stutter-start and stall. I can feel myself making the attempt, over and over, to turn the trap into something manageable.

"Emerson, please." A small hand on my arm. "Are you okay?"

It takes forever to get my brain to process a response. Knives press in through my ribs. *Better to die*, an reasonable voice murmurs. *You're dying anyway*.

I cannot get enough air. The first time someone described this to me as panic, I almost laughed. Panic is too small a word for this cutting, flashing terror. All my muscles ache with the need to run from it. I have given into those urges before. I can't flatten them now. Can't line them up or dismiss them.

All I have left is honesty.

“No,” I tell her.

Daphne’s dark eyes are filled with firelight and concern. I never wanted her to see this. I knew when I went running for the shore that there was a chance this could happen. If she’d been a worse swimmer, if she’d been less determined, maybe I could have gotten home.

But she was so far out. So far over her head. She was starting to drown. I saw her head tip back and her arms go up and I knew how close I was to losing her. It tripped the wire of the panic response and losing the paddleboard started an electrical fire in my nerves.

The board was the way home.

I don’t have a way home.

I can’t get home.

Daphne edges closer, looking into my eyes as if she’s not watching the destruction of everything I’ve built. Every careful illusion. It’s over now. I’ll be nothing to her.

“Are you cold?” A soft, warm question.

Language has locked itself down behind a shrieking warning that this is dangerous, that a threat is closing in, that death is imminent. My lungs refuse the air, even to scream. I don’t want to scream. I want to go under, and I know what that means. It means a hasty death of hypothermia. I am not wearing my wetsuit.

I want it anyway. I want it so much.

This beating panic is excruciating.

“I’m not cold,” I manage. “I’m outside.”

Daphne should laugh at the absurdity of this description. What’s happening in my mind is like a crowd of people screeching with raw throats. Like hot, blinding light. Like being choked by two large, strong hands. Like the door thrown open wide to let a vicious world inside. One of my legs twitches.

There's nowhere to run but into the water. I can't survive that. I can't let Daphne chase me into the waves.

But fuck.

I wish I could.

"What do you mean?" She's gentle, for a Morelli. This isn't their reputation. This kindness. She's not mocking in the least. "We're not really—I mean, we're in a cave. We're not exposed to the elements or anything."

"Daphne." Her name is becoming a bit of a talisman. Saying it anchors me to this rock and pulls me back from a simple, tempting death. "I don't leave my house."

A beat passes. "Yes, you do. I met you outside your house. I met you on the beach and in the gallery."

"I don't leave my house unless I'm sure."

"Of what?"

"That I can get home."

She's silent. Thoughtful. "You don't like being outside?"

I wish it were that simple. It's not just open fields or open water that tear panic loose from its frame and burn down the gallery. It's everywhere I might be prevented from returning to relative safety. My car can act as a proxy for the house for limited amounts of time, but I don't spend the night anywhere else. Not unless it's absolutely necessary.

My chest hurts like a heart attack.

Better to drown. Then you'd be sure.

The suggestion seems like a good one at moments like this. The best one. I do not tell Daphne that she's the only thing keeping me from it. The tide is at its peak. So much pressure at my ears that my head might explode. Compressed lungs. Compressed brain.

"Does this always happen when you go outside?" Her brow furrows with deeper worry.

"No."

“That time at the gallery—”

“I could get home.” It’s starting to show in my voice. Daphne doesn’t flinch, and I understand, finally, what she’s asking. “This didn’t happen when I saw you. I could get home.”

The words echo against each other until they carve themselves into the rock. Haphazard streaks of paint. I could get home. Can’t now. Can’t get home. Can’t get out. Locked in from the outside but the door will open, it will, and then I’ll be better off dead, much better off, the water would make it easy, a few painful breaths and then nothing nothing nothing—

“What does it feel like?”

The question halts, rather abruptly, the train wreck of my thoughts. “What?”

“Being away.” Daphne swallows. It’s just like her to ask this. She’s taken a step back. Become the artist. An artist has to observe. She has to know before she can engage with the subject. This is the least comfortable I’ve ever been. “What does it feel like?”

Like having my eyes gouged out. Like having all the air and beauty sucked from the world. Like being trapped in a closet and forced outside after. Narrow walls and open sky.

“Like dying.” It sounds dramatic. Fucking ridiculous. “It feels like dying.”

My chest constricts again. This might actually be a heart attack. I’d be grateful if it were over, but I don’t want to die in front of Daphne. That would hurt her.

“Like dying from cold?”

The shaking intensifies. This is the most mortifying, most unstoppable part of the whole process. I have no control over it or anything else. “Like suffocating or having my lungs explode.”

Both can be true, moment to moment. My chest won’t accept the air or it’s about to burst. What Daphne doesn’t

know is that this is the easy part. When it closes in like darkness—that's when things become more difficult.

I try to force it away by picturing myself as art. A flattened man in a cave.

Impossible. The world can't be contained in a frame this size. Only small things. Smaller canvases. Daphne's canvases don't approach the size of these attacks. Nothing ever will. There's only the act of living through it.

"What does it look like?" This quiet, murmured question guts me. I hate this about Daphne Morelli, and I love it. That she can see under my skin this way. I didn't want to show her this. Perhaps I could never stop her. "In your mind."

Because of course it does have a corresponding visual. Of fucking course it does.

"Bright." Searing, almost, in its brightness. "Tall buildings. A towering sky. Black pressing—pressing—" Can't get my breath. "Pressing in at the edges. If you've ever seen light—" I try to show her the shape with my hand. "Through a closed door. I can't make this into anything else. It's like black oil over canvas."

It traps me inside myself, just like that closet.

"You look like you need a blanket."

My bones are going to come out of my skin. They're going to rupture and force themselves through muscle. Most of all, I hate the contradictory demands of the panic. I need a smaller space and a bigger one. Smaller out here, bigger at home. I had to work so hard to tolerate my own house, to be able to walk fifteen blocks. And now I'm in this cave.

"I can't stop it, Daphne," I admit. "You shouldn't watch."

Because who would want to? I know how this seems. I know how pathetic it is.

"How many times has this happened?"

"Hundreds of times." Hundreds of deaths. Hundreds of reluctant resurrections. "I've lost count."

“Is there anything that helps?”

Yes. There is. But how am I supposed to ask her for it? How am I supposed to ask anyone but my brothers? They’re the only ones who know, and they know it in spite of me. I’m not telling her how much it hurts. How two fists are squeezing the life out of my heart. Fuck. I can’t get a deep enough breath. Blades at the bottoms of my lungs.

I know there’s nothing in here with us. Nothing in the ocean that will wander inside. All that intellectual knowledge is useless in the face of this. I might as well stand up and take a few steps off the rock ledge, into the deep water. Just for a minute. Just for a moment. I wouldn’t lose my bearings in the dark. I could get home. I could do it. And if I died trying, it would be all right. No one would mind. She wouldn’t mind. She’d be happy. She could paint the wave that kills me. That would be a masterpiece, wouldn’t it? I should give it to her. I should. I should.

My mind is splintering under the stress. I push down at my knees to keep myself from running. That’s happened before. Animal instincts take over and you can’t do anything against those. Humans *are* animals. Oh, they make art and hang it up in pretty rooms and sell it for money, but we are animals. All the systems that keep us human are just inventions of the mind. Nothing serious. Nothing worth staying here for. Nothing.

It’s so horrifying that I could scream. I won’t. I never do. But it feels like I could. Anything to release the pressure.

It’s not screaming I need, however. It’s counterpressure.

My vision is next. I don’t know what I’ll do if I lose that. Follow the sound of the water, perhaps. Follow it all the way to the bottom. I don’t know. I’m out of options. I can’t breathe. I’m going to drown here in the air. There’s no house. Not even any sky. It’s the worst of all worlds, caught in this cave like a closet. The only thing outside is an ocean-sized threat. The only thing inside is a girl I’ve kidnapped. The only person I want to keep with me. There are no other choices.

Frames come off the walls. They're not frames anymore. They're twisted metal. The canvases are alive. They have claws and teeth to tear at my skin. That's what this does, in the end. It puts me in the middle of all those emotions. And when I can't fit them into frames, they sound like howling. They feel like being punched in the face. Like breaking bone. Like fists against wood. Light from around a door, growing wider and wider until it's just open, until the world is inside and there's no getting it back out.

I reach for Daphne's wrist without thinking, practically blind.

She lets me take it and pull her around behind me. The silver blanket flutters to the rock. I don't know how to explain this so I won't. She settles against my back and I fold her arms in front of me. It's an awkward hug, but I press her hands into my chest.

"I'm afraid to hurt you," she says, her breath warm on the shell of my ear.

"You're not hurting me." I don't know why she would think that. Why it would even come to her mind.

"Are we going somewhere? Are you going to swim?"

"I'm trying to stay here. We have to stay here until the tide goes out, Daphne. I'm trying to stay. Hold on."

Hold on tighter.

Hold on with everything you have.

Finally, finally, she understands. Daphne's grip tightens but it's not tight enough. I need it to be tighter to survive this. I push at her hands and she digs them in. I know how ridiculous this is. I know that it's ironic that I would need someone to crush my ribcage in order to breathe.

"I just." Before my heart gives out. "Need some air."

Daphne doesn't argue with me. Doesn't point out all the foolish, embarrassing ways that this makes no sense. She curls up against my back and nestles her head against my shoulder. I hate, with everything I am, that she can feel every tremble in

my hands and every shake in my muscles, but I can't stop them. It's too late to stop her from seeing.

She's here.

She's too small for this. Too sweet. She shouldn't have to do this at all. No one should. But she doesn't seem afraid. It's a secondary, less urgent fear. That this will be too much for her. That I will be too much for her.

"Is it worse because of me?" This question, whispered, almost disappears into the surge of the ocean. "Because I'm here?"

"I thought you were lost to me."

"I wasn't, Emerson."

When I saw her in the water, I felt pure, unadulterated terror. There was no space between me and the emotion. No way to hold it at a safe distance. No frame. No gallery. My body jerks against her arms. It's still trying to get into the water to swim away. To escape.

Daphne holds on.

Air creeps back into my lungs bit by bit. Every breath contains slightly more oxygen than the one before. The black recedes from my vision.

"Don't leave me here," Daphne says.

I can't do that. I'd rather die.

"I won't."

She keeps one fist locked on her opposite wrist. Tight as she can. With my hands over hers, I can feel the tension in her. How hard she's trying. The fire crackles, throwing shadows onto the walls. Refusing to be put out by all the water surrounding it. They're gorgeous, rippling shadows. They catch the peaks and valleys, making new, smaller caverns.

Daphne's head gets heavier on my shoulder. Her breathing evens out.

Holy fuck.

I am suffused with warmth. With intense surprise.

“Daphne.”

She murmurs something unintelligible like a person who has already fallen deeply into a dream.

I don't know what it means that she could sleep right now, with me like this. Most of it can be chalked up to the exhaustion of her ordeal, but I am all that's between her and the ocean. An innocent like Daphne could tumble in and drown.

Her trust makes my throat close. It aches with suppressed emotion. A good sign. I put the gallery back to rights. Dust off the frames. Hang them back up.

I'm a selfish bastard.

I keep her where she is, holding her wrists over my heart, for as long as I can.

And then I put her to bed. Tuck her under every silver blanket I have. I allow myself a hand on her ankle. I allow myself to stay close while I wait for the next attack.

I HEAR VOICES IN MY DREAMS.

A voice that's like Emerson's but not Emerson's. In my dream there's a mirror, I think, but it's not very distinct. I'm not sure what I'm looking at. It gets dark, then light again. Mostly, it's just sound.

"Jesus, Emerson." Loud, echoing footsteps. "Are you—what the fuck. Say something. Come on. Words. Any fucking words, prick. Don't lose your mind now."

The silence lasts so long that it starts to worry dream-me.

Then—

A pained inhale. "Let go of me." Emerson. I'm sure it's him.

"Not until you're breathing."

"I'm breathing now."

"I'm not letting go."

"I can't stay here. I can't."

"I know."

The conversation fades out again, blending in with the lap of water on rock. They float back into my dreams like the tide. In and out. Sunrise over the ocean. Gray clouds. High waves. A paddleboard slipping out of my hands. My whole body feels heavy. Worn out.

When I finally manage to open my eyes, the cave is transformed.

There's no looming archway filled to the brim with water. It's more of a lagoon now. Winter sun cuts in through the cave's opening. Cold, white sun and blue water. I could almost convince myself it was warm. But no—I'm warm. Dressed in big clothes and wrapped in silver blankets.

Emerson stands at the mouth of the cave, holding on to the edge of a fancy, lightweight speedboat. His brother, Sinclair, is behind the wheel wearing a parka.

"Say another word about her and I'll take your head off," Emerson snaps.

"Then who will drive the boat back?"

"I will, jackass."

"You can't do this to her," Sin says. "And I don't trust you to drive right now."

"It's a boat, Sin. Any asshole can drive a boat."

They're talking about me. Arguing about me, really.

"Love you so much, Em, but you're not any asshole, you're—"

"Shut the hell up. She's not leaving."

They've been fighting for a while, I think. Maybe this time, I can convince Sin to call the cops. Maybe this time, when we're in the boat together, I can make my case to him. He's seen me twice now. Could he really say no?

But then—

There's a tight exhaustion around Sin's eyes, too. He's worried.

Emerson turns his head, and I feel him notice me like he's reached out with his fingertips and nudged at my chest. *Daphne*. His mouth makes the shape of my name, but there's no sound. He reaches into the boat and pulls something out, and then he's striding back toward me.

It's a comforter. Big enough to fit on a bed. I almost laugh at how huge it is, but it's freezing out here. My teeth are already chattering. He wraps a coat around my shoulders, too. His coat. He carries the bundle of fabric with me inside out of the speedboat.

Sin backs it into the water and kicks it into gear. I burrow into the blanket. Emerson wraps an arm around me and holds me as close as he can get. It's not very close, given all the fabric surrounding me. He's quiet as we speed across the ocean. It's not as angry now, in the daylight. Much calmer waters. I picked a bad time for my escape. A ridiculously bad time.

Emerson stares in one direction as the boat skims the waves. Must be where his house is. His face doesn't show how much he wants to be there.

Needs to be there, judging from what he said during the night.

My heart sinks. Even if I did convince his brother to call the cops, and even if he did agree to help me, it would be over for Emerson.

If my family found him, they'd kill him. But Leo wouldn't have a chance if the cops got to him first. What I saw last night —

I shouldn't feel sorry for him. And it's not pity that I feel, really. It's empathy. My heart broke for him, for the naked panic in his eyes. He tried so hard to hide it.

I understand trying to hide. I do. But it's different for Emerson. He can't put bits of himself in paintings and stow the dark parts of himself on canvas. It's bigger than that. An all-consuming thing. Jail would be a death sentence.

And I can't let him die.

The realization hits at the same time as some cold ocean spray. I shiver all the way down to my toes.

I don't want him to die.

I saw him last night before I went to sleep. I saw the way his body shook and I saw how he tried to get into the water. Where was he going to go? Emerson's a good swimmer, but people can drown at times like that. I almost did, like a fool.

And yes—he deserves to be behind bars for what he's done. People who kidnap other people shouldn't just be free in society.

Except one night away from his house was enough to unravel him. I think he's still unraveled now. It's just that he's better at hiding it. He has a way back home.

Sin guides the boat toward shore. Toward a boat house a little down the beach from Emerson's. It's so different from this perspective. The houses seem small compared to the vast sea. The wide beach becomes a thin strip of sand. It could be a Christmas village with snow-dusted rooftops. This is the opposite perspective. The ocean's view of the beach where I first saw Emerson in the water. My heart races. This is the ocean's view of the place I thought was a beautiful prison.

It's more than that.

It's a sanctuary.

One that Emerson's made for himself.

Maybe I have lost it, but I feel touched that he'd let me in. A person who feels this way about his home would be very protective of it. He wouldn't just let anyone stay as long as I have. And those hours in the cave showed me how unlike a prison it is. I have everything I need there, except my freedom.

And...

What did I do with it, anyway?

Almost drowned myself.

Sin pulls the boat into the boathouse and Emerson steps out to tie it down. He offers me his hand to get out, then folds his arm around me. The three of us hustle down the beach. I don't know if Emerson's hurrying for me or for him. I don't know if I care. His brother walks on the other side of me.

Now is probably not the time to joke about being a flight risk.

Emerson picks up the pace as we get closer to his house. We burst in through the side door, Emerson first. Sin steps around him and goes further inside. And Emerson, with a gentle palm on my shoulder, moves me out of his way.

He slams the door.

Locks it.

Leans against it.

Eyes closed, his palms flat against the wood.

“You want to go upstairs?” Sin asks.

“Fuck no.”

“I’ll stay down here.” Emerson’s eyes are all narrow suspicion now. “I’ll stay with her,” his brother promises.

The toll this single night has taken is obvious on Emerson’s face. He looks unsettled. Pale. Only his intensity is the same. His eyes dart over to me, as if to reassure himself, and I feel it like lightning out over the water.

“I’m not leaving until you come back down,” Sin says. “Maybe not even then.”

“You’re fucking leaving.”

“Fine.” Sin shrugs. “Go upstairs.”

One more lingering glance at me, and Emerson goes. His footsteps fade as he goes further into the house. They’re soft on the stairs. His house doesn’t creak as he moves through. It’s glad he’s home.

Sin watches Emerson leave, and keeps looking after him until water runs quietly through the pipes. Then he sighs. Runs his hand through his hair. Turns to face me.

“You probably want to get changed.”

“I should leave, you know. At some point. My family is worried about me.”

The corner of Sin's mouth turns down. A person has to look carefully to find the similarities between the two brothers. It's mainly in their eyes. I wonder which of their parents Sin looks like. Which one Emerson looks like. If they've ever fought about it. All my siblings have the same dark eyes. Everyone but Tiernan.

"I can't let you do that," he says finally.

"But you can let him keep me here?"

He shakes his head. "I'd rather he just asked you on a date, but that's not how it played out."

"Then undo it." Fear pulses in my throat, and at first I can't place what I'm afraid of.

And then I know. My cheeks go hot. The comforter and coat and clothes are too much for indoors. They're suffocating, just like this new, raw understanding.

"I can't do that to him." Sin crosses his arms over his chest. "Not sure you could, either."

There's a frozen moment where I consider losing it. Shouting at Emerson's brother. Raging at him. Making demands, the way my siblings do. Crying. Screaming, if that's what I have to do.

Except...

I don't want it. I'm tired and too hot and too cold all at the same time.

"Come on." Sin beckons into the house. "Get changed, and I'll make you some food."

"You think you'll be here that long?"

"Yeah."

I had imagined I'd want an hours-long bath when we got back here, but floating in the tub has lost some of its appeal. Sin waits outside the door to my bedroom while I wash the salt from my hair and scrub it off my skin. The night outdoors wasn't very kind. My skin is both pale and chapped. The shower gives my cheeks some color but it makes the bags

under my eyes stand out. A bunch of lotion improves the situation. I don't care that much about impressing Sin, but I put on some mascara and tinted moisturizer to make myself look less like a shipwreck victim.

He's on his phone when I come out. "Feel better?"

Yes, I should admit. Because I do. Once again I'm warm and dry and clean. But I also have a strange, heartbroken feeling.

It's because Emerson's not here.

Of course I'm like this. Of course I see past his shell and it makes me soft for him. Of course, of course. I *am* the soft one. The innocent one who never threatens. Who can be taken in.

"I'm hungry," I tell Sin. "And if you're not going to let me leave, you should tell me something about him."

"I'm not sure we have time for that kind of heart to heart," he says as we go down. Sin opens the cupboards in Emerson's house one by one, quickly, surveying what's there. I take a seat at the kitchen island and judge myself for the relief I feel at not having to leave. I'm going to have to paint for days to come to terms with this. Maybe years. "Why don't you tell me what happened first?"

"I tried to leave." No point in trying to hide it, honestly. He's the one who had to come rescue us on a speedboat in the middle of winter. "I thought I could swim in the ocean. Emerson does it all the time."

"Emerson is not like the rest of us." He cracks a smile and pulls a box of English Breakfast tea out of the cupboard. Sin holds it up to me and I nod. Tea would be good right now. "He views being out in the cold as a moral victory."

I shiver, despite the heat, despite the fact that we're on dry land. "I don't know how he survives it. I almost didn't. I lost track of the shore." It's scarier now, in retrospect. I don't think I had the strength to admit it to myself when I was out in the waves. "I was starting to sink, but—" I wasn't starting to sink. I was sinking. My feet were headed toward the bottom. My head was next. "He came out to get me."

Sin nods. "He would have known the risk he was taking."

"I didn't." He opens a breadbox in the corner and takes out a package of English muffins. I've never thought much about English muffins before, but right now I could eat a thousand of them. "I didn't know that until we were at the cave."

Emerson's brother puts four English muffins into the toaster and leans against the counter, studying me. "Last night wasn't good."

"For him or for me?"

"Are you going to try to escape again?"

From the island, I can see the window over the kitchen sink. A slice of the side yard. It's all white out there. Snowflakes spiral down from the sky in brittle patterns. "I don't know." As soon as the words are out of my mouth, I know they're not true. "No."

"You sure about that?"

My heart aches. My throat tightens. And there's a pull, like the undertow, like that electric gravity I felt in the gallery. It has nothing to do with escape and everything to do with Emerson. Maybe I had to be this tired and wrung out to get it.

"I don't want to hurt him. I just want to be in a place where we can understand each other. And I guess this is the only place he can be."

The English muffins pop up and Sin reaches for them without looking. He opens a cupboard and grabs for a plate with his other hand. My freakout about Emerson cooking eggs was foolish before. I see that now. Both he and his brother rush to put butter on the second the toaster's finished.

"I don't know what to tell you," he says.

"I mean, you could tell me *something*, instead of being so cryptic." Jesus, it's frustrating. "I can't live like this. Everyone is always keeping things from me. I don't know anything until it's too late."

Sin arches an eyebrow. "Everyone?"

“My family. And—and Emerson. He didn’t tell me about needing to stay in his house.”

“Emerson doesn’t tell anyone about that. He’s got a whole thing around it.”

“What do you mean?”

He opens the fridge and pushes things aside on the shelves. Takes out orange juice. A glass next. “Where did you meet him the first time?”

“On the beach outside. He invited me there to paint. I didn’t—” It’s going to make me sound unbelievably naive and sheltered to say this, but whatever. “He bought one of my paintings from the gallery where I work, and he left a note with the time and place. I thought it was a commission. I saw him surfing but I didn’t know it was him.”

“What was the next time?” Sin doesn’t seem very surprised by any of this.

“He came back to the gallery.”

“Did you see how he got there?”

“No. I’m sure his driver dropped him off.”

“His driver dropped him off fifteen blocks away.” Sin pours the orange juice into the glass, then murmurs something to himself about English muffins not being enough. “It’s obnoxious when you’re waiting for him somewhere, but he always does that.”

“Then he must be used to it. Being outside. Being away from home. How could last night have been so bad?”

Sin pulls a box of frozen cinnamon rolls from the freezer and flips them over, scanning the instructions on the back.

“Daphne, he started with half a block.” That’s nothing. That’s a couple minutes at most. “I had to walk next to him the whole time.”

“Walk next to him for what?”

He hunts down a pan and puts it on top of the stove. Covers it with tin foil. “To stop him from throwing himself

into traffic.”

Sin says this almost absently, but worry bolts through me. Emerson looked like that last night. He looked like he wanted to dive into the ocean. It was dark out. High, thrashing waves. Sin busies himself with preheating the oven and arranging the rolls in the pan like this is just random background noise to the rest of his life.

I guess it probably is.

“That’s all you’re going to tell me?”

He peers at me. “What else is there to say?”

“You could explain what the hell happened to him. Was that, like, a panic attack?” Because it was scary. It made my heart race to see it. I felt helpless, and I hated that more than being in the cave. More than almost drowning.

“Those have been happening for a long time.”

“How long?”

“Since we were kids.”

My mouth goes dry. “What happened when you were kids?”

Sin laughs a little. “We grew up.”

“With who?”

“With our father.”

Movement on the stairs. “You’re worried about him.” This is Emerson’s trick, not mine. To just say something like you already know it’s true.

“Yes,” Sinclair says softly. “I’m fucking worried.”

A shadow at the door. Emerson is in fresh clothes, the color back in his face. “Is he bothering you?”

I have the strangest urge to sprint across the room to him, to throw my arms around his waist and hold him tight. But I bet he wouldn’t like that. I bet he wouldn’t want that. Not in front of his brother. He’s been restored to the intense, vaguely

frightening person I met in the gallery. It's almost difficult to imagine him trembling. Unable to catch his breath.

“He's making cinnamon rolls,” I say. “Want one?”

IT TAKES SEVERAL HOURS TO CONVINCE MY BROTHER THAT NO one is on the verge of death or a breakdown. When I walk him to the door, he stands in the threshold, somehow managing to communicate his irritating concern using only his eyes.

“It’ll be fine,” I tell him, and push him out.

“If you don’t call me—”

“Don’t be so needy.”

I can hear him cursing on the other side of the door as I lock it.

My pulse ratchets up, just like it did when we entered that cave. Except I’m not in a fucking cave anymore. I’m in my house. Daphne is with me, but it feels charged and tenuous. I don’t know what happens now. I had no choice but to leave her with Sin while I pulled the threads of my sanity together again.

God knows what he said.

When I turn back to her, she’s standing in a shaft of light from the dining room. Sunlight settled on her hair. It glitters and shines, warming the air. My hallway has never been more beautiful and more meaningless at the same time. It’s only a backdrop for her. There is no such thing as distant pain, looking at Daphne. It’s all through my ribcage. It’s everywhere.

I can’t hold it at arm’s length. My mind overlays brush strokes over her, but it can’t quite maintain the illusion. She’s

too real for all that.

Catchlights in her eyes. Rosy cheeks. Pink lips. Daphne wears a white sweater and navy leggings. She cradles a mug of tea in her hands. I note these things the way I do all the details about her, but I am arrested by her face.

I cannot name the emotion in my little painter's eyes.

Daphne's lips part. "I want to talk to you."

"Then talk, little painter."

She shakes her head. "Where's the best place? Your favorite, I mean."

"Anywhere." Daphne pinches her lips shut. This is a learned gesture, I think. From someone else. She doesn't usually do stony silences. I spent time making the rooms in my house comfortable, since I'm always here. We could go any number of places. But right now... "The bedroom."

"Yours or mine?"

"Mine."

She follows me up the stairs.

I am wretchedly, foolishly uncomfortable.

Daphne doesn't comment when I close the bedroom door and lock it, then do the same for the studio doors. She just waits. There's no impatience in the air around her.

"Okay," she says, when I'm finished with all the doors. "Where do you want to sit?"

"Are we having an interview?"

"We're having a conversation, Emerson. Also, I'm tired."

She slept most of the night, but it can't have been restful. It was cold as fuck in that cave. A gallery in my mind fills with the things I want. With her, not from her. In this moment it's not so simple as hiding them in innuendo or games. We're both too stripped down for that. Every breath I take is edged with a strange, glancing pain. My house is where I have the

most control, and it feels worthless. That damned board slips from my hands again.

All I have is her, and I'm not even certain I have that.

I'm frozen in the face of this possibility. This uncertainty. Light spills in from the window and casts shadows across Daphne's face. The depths of her dark eyes grow deeper. More mysterious. They invite a search. And I try. I fucking try. But I can't extrapolate the future from her expression now.

It doesn't feel silent. There's something between us, or else I've fully broken with reality. A current in the air.

A canvas.

A brush.

The two of them meet.

Daphne lets out a breath, and the neutrality of her expression collapses into something sleepy and vulnerable and sweet. She turns her head, but only to find a place to put down her mug.

And then she comes to me.

She stops, inches away, and looks up into my face.

"I'm tired," she says again, and holds out her arms.

It's not like pulling her out of the water. It's nothing like that. Folding my arms around her is like coming home.

"This is the wrong direction," I mention. She wanted the ocean before. "You're supposed to be running the other way."

"Shut up, Emerson."

I stand like that, with her cheek pressed to my chest, rubbing her back, until my legs ache. When the panic becomes unmanageable it leaves all my muscles weak and worn from the effort of not running. Daphne makes no argument when I take her in my arms and carry her to my armchair by the window.

"Not the bed?" Daphne helps me pull a throw blanket over her and rests again.

“I’ll fall asleep.” When my heart stops racing, anyway. “I thought you wanted to talk to me.”

“I do.”

It takes no time at all to figure out how to sit with her. Legs stretched out on my ottoman. Daphne’s head near my shoulder. She is completely relaxed, which is at odds with the woman who flung herself into the ocean to get away from me.

The sea rolls lazily against the shore. Clouds gather in front of the sun. The day tips into afternoon.

Daphne takes in a breath, steadying herself for something. “I want you to tell me about your dad.”

My mind freezes, then struggles to restart, tripping over itself in the process. It requires effort to override the instinct to lock my arms down over her. “What did Sin say to you?”

“He didn’t say much.” A delicate irritation creeps into her voice. “He would hardly tell me anything. That’s why you’re going to.”

“It’s not for you to know.” It’s not for anyone to know.

Daphne traces the seam at the sleeve of my shirt with her fingertip. “Do you think you’re the only one with a bad father?”

A rush of realization cuts through my exhaustion. Another fact about her life slots into place. Daphne’s been purposefully vague. I’ve been purposely vague.

What the fuck is this?

Hope, I think.

“No. I think most fathers are bad fathers.”

What I don’t say is that most sons take after their fathers. I think it’s nearly impossible for an apple to hurl itself away from the tree, as it were.

“Sin says that what happened to you in the cave...” I have never heard another person speak with such considered patience. Or maybe Daphne’s just exhausted. “That it’s been happening for a long time. I want to know about it.”

“No.”

“You have to tell me,” she insists. “You’re keeping me prisoner.”

“I don’t have to tell you anything,” I counter. “I’m keeping you prisoner.”

She pushes herself upright and spears me with her gaze. “You do. I can’t spend my entire life here not knowing anything about you, Emerson. If you’re going to keep me here forever, you have to tell me.”

The suggestion that I could trade my secrets for her presence is so intoxicating that I lean forward and kiss her. I should have done it in the cave. I should have done it every minute since she’s been in this house. Every second. Daphne makes a soft sound into my mouth, but she pulls herself away from the heat. Touches her lips. Her fingertips drop down to her collar and she blows a purposeful breath out.

“That’s very distracting,” she says gently. “I want to talk.”

I anchor my hands on her waist and watch her. I want more than to talk. I want to disappear into her and never return. She tastes so fucking sweet. So lovely. It’s like being stabbed through the heart.

She’s named her price, however.

One last try. “There are other things we could do.”

Daphne puts both her hands on the sides of my face. “I know. Okay? I know. I want—” A shiver of frustration. “We are having this conversation first. Before anything else.”

The heat of her palms rushes through every one of my veins. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Well, I really don’t care.” Daphne studies my eyes, my lips, and then she leans in for another quick, vicious kiss. A biting kiss. “Don’t tell me about your dad, then. Tell me about you.”

“No.”

“You’re not the first person to do this, you know. Other people have kept secrets from me.”

“Who?”

She narrows her eyes. Ah—there it is. My little painter is discovering the rules of the game. Secrets for secrets. My past for hers, excruciating as it may be. That same sense of darkness from her paintings surges into the air. That danger. I’ve located it now. Separate tendrils. One of them is desire for something forbidden. For someone. For me. The other—

The other is hidden beneath layers of paint. Behind a hundred stacked canvases. The other has its roots in her life before I entered it.

My little painter presses her lips together. Her trust was hard to win in the first place. I took a blade to it when I brought her here.

I could win some of it back.

“I won’t repeat it,” I promise her. “And you haven’t told anyone else.”

Daphne wrinkles her nose. “You can’t possibly know that about me.”

“I can see it in—”

“My face.”

“What do you see in mine?”

“That—” She isn’t sure of herself, but she decides nonetheless. “That you won’t tell.”

“Who kept secrets from you?”

“One of my brothers.” It’s delightful, the way she hedges her bets. “What happened to you?” She points a finger at my chest. “You think you can go back on your word because you’re keeping me here, but I actually think you have to tell me. That’s what happens when you kidnap a person. You owe them. You owe me.”

She waits, impatience scrawled across her expression. It fades like a sunset. It fades into something deep and starry,

like the night sky over the ocean.

It fades into understanding.

Daphne nods, almost to herself, and puts her head back down against my chest. I run my fingers through her hair, relieved as all fuck.

“Tell me,” she says.

It’s marginally easier to imagine it now that she’s not watching. I wouldn’t have asked her for this. She didn’t need to be asked.

“I’m sure Sin already told you.”

“No, he didn’t. He was trying to protect you.”

I scoff at her. “What is it you want to know, little painter? You’ll have to be more specific.”

“It’s really that bad to leave your house?”

The worst part of this humiliation is that it’s directly alongside an intense need to fuck her. Daphne is not likely to want that if we continue with this topic of conversation. It’s too late, isn’t it? It’s been too late for hours and hours. No salvaging it now.

I’m not accustomed to feeling fear like this. Panic is different. It’s irrational and overwhelming. This fear constricts my throat, but it’s entirely grounded in reality.

She won’t look at me the same way. I’ll have revealed too much.

“If I don’t have a way home, then yes. That’s what happens.”

“Since you were younger?”

“Much younger.”

Daphne breathes. In and out. In and out. “Sin said you have a whole thing around it. He said you make yourself walk fifteen blocks everywhere you go.”

“That’s right.”

“Why?”

“To maintain a tolerance for it.”

“Like drinking?”

It makes me laugh, a short, sharp burst. “I suppose you could say that. In general, I’m painfully sober when I do it.”

“So you just...” She’s so fucking perfect. That’s the thing I can’t describe to her. I can’t even summon the words. “You have your entire life inside your house?”

“You’re not the only one who can’t leave.”

She sucks in a little breath at the realization. It’s a stark one. The frame I’ve made for her is also the boundary of my own existence. I take little trips here and there. Galleries. Openings. Auctions.

I follow my obsessions.

But on the whole, my life is here. It wears the illusion of being expansive, but even eight thousand square feet can become too constraining.

Not usually for me.

For a hummingbird like Daphne, on the other hand...

My stomach sinks. This is when she’ll reach the logical conclusion and look at me with the worst possible emotion in her eyes.

Pity.

She’ll feel sorry for me. She’ll see how small, how limited, how enclosed I am.

How worthless.

No amount of money can buy a sense of security. Believe me when I say I’ve tried. It can’t be bought or collected or kept. It will always be just out of reach. I don’t know if she’ll see it so clearly. I can’t leave her here. Technically, yes. If I had to, I could walk out. In the end, it’s not me doing the caging. It’s my past. It’s my mind. It’s the panic.

Either way, she is not alone in her captivity. Either way, I won’t leave her here. She nearly died trying to escape into the

world. Being at the mercy of her own mind could be just as dangerous. I know that as well as anyone.

My thoughts retreat. They want no part of this twisted emotion. A choking disappointment. My father was right. This place is just a reflection of a wasted son. It's a difficult thing, to be worse than my father, but I've managed it. The world files neatly onto canvases and colors die into black and white. Snowflakes tumble outside the window. Pure diamonds against the shadowed sea. The water teases the horizon, the two of them blending together until they're indistinguishable.

Daphne is saying something.

I find her upright, looking into my eyes, past my defenses.

"Where did you go?" she asks. It must be the second or third time she's said it.

"I wanted you to be free." All those methods of distance fail. One by one. They tear like cheap paper. I was lying to both of us. "I don't want you to be a prisoner here. I've always wanted you to be free. You're like a hummingbird, little painter. I want you to go where your wings take you."

"Emerson."

The words won't stop. They won't leave it be. "I'm a weak, selfish bastard. I couldn't give you what I wanted you to have."

"You're not weak." Her laugh is kind, almost touching. "You pulled me out of the ocean. You swam us to a cave and kept us alive. You didn't die and that cold was—that cold could have killed us. You're stronger than I knew."

My heart is going to burst. Any second now. "My father could never keep his hands off what wasn't his. That's why he ended up in prison. I'm exactly like him, little painter. That's all there is to know. I'm my father's son. I can't let you go."

She looks down, her hands on my chest. This is when she'll walk away. She'll go back to her bedroom, lock the door behind her, and never look at me again. My entire torso is filled with my heartbeat. It's a crushing, bloody thing. As

intense as any panic attack I've had, but I don't get the sweet mercy of blacking out. Of forgetting.

"I don't think you're weak," Daphne says, her voice the softest thing I've ever heard. "You came for me, even when it hurt you. All those other times hurt you, too." Her eyes come back to mine and I am shocked, stunned, to find them devoid of pity. "Sin said it took you a long time to walk that far. It must have been awful in the beginning, but you did it anyway."

For what?

For nothing.

"It didn't go away though, did it?" Daphne poses the question like the answer is a foregone conclusion. "It just... compounded on itself. Like layers of paint." Her mouth quirks upward, the smile disappearing again just as quickly. "It stayed painful. But you still came after me."

I don't know how she came by this wisdom.

Daphne digs her fingernails into the front of my shirt. "You don't want to be like him. You want to be better than that."

"No," I admit. "I don't want anything to do with him."

"You can't help who your father is. Just like I couldn't help..." My little painter looks away, remembering something. A flicker of helplessness crosses her face. A flicker of fear. And then it's gone. She puts those things away like she painted them out on some canvas in her mind.

It thrills me to recognize it in her. It shouldn't, but it does. It's like hearing a song I thought I'd forgotten.

"What is it, little painter?"

"I'm the weak one," she breathes. "I couldn't even swim to safety."

"You went out during a snowstorm. It might have been foolish, but it wasn't weak. You hated me, and you wanted to be free."

“I wanted you.” Her admission sharpens so much it cuts her. Tears gather in the corners of her eyes. “Out there, in the water. That’s the thing, Emerson. I wanted you to be there. I asked Sin to get me out when you came upstairs, and I was glad when he refused. That’s—that’s—”

It’s my turn to take her face in my hands. Under the blanket, the air is superheated, humming between us like nothing I’ve ever felt. “Daphne.”

“I wanted to hate you.” Her voice trembles. “I wanted to be so angry at you for what you did. You’re still doing it. But I can’t hate you. I’ve tried and tried and I can’t make it happen. What does that say about me if I can’t hate you? That’s what scares me. I don’t know who I am if I want you this much. I don’t even think you’re going to hurt me.” A high, bitter laugh. “I just don’t think you can let go. And I think maybe I don’t want you to.”

“You’ll hate me someday.” It tastes as bitter as her laugh to say it.

“Maybe I won’t. Maybe I can’t let go of you, either.”

“I think you can, little painter. The world has always been at your feet.”

“No. The world has been just out of my reach. But it wasn’t because anyone hated me. It was because they loved me too much to let me touch it.”

“Ah. I’m nothing new, then.”

“No.” A tear slips onto her cheek. “I think you’re trying to give it to me, actually. Maybe you’re doing it wrong, but I think that’s what this is. It’s just that your world looks different than the one I thought I wanted.”

“You don’t like the beach?” I’m trying to keep it light because I don’t know how to live through it otherwise. I don’t know how to keep seeing her like this. Unfiltered by anything my mind can create. Exactly as she is. In my hands. Her body against mine. Daphne isn’t hiding anything.

“I don’t give a damn about the beach.”

“What is it you want, little painter?”

If the answer isn't me, I'll survive. I will fucking survive. But I want it so much that all my muscles tense. My heart races. Hope bursts across my mind in a slash of vivid color.

“I just.” Her voice shakes with truth. “Want to be near you right now.”

There's so much more she's not saying. So much more she doesn't need to say. I allow her the space to breathe. Match myself to her. I have never wanted to be anyone's canvas more. The rest of me doesn't matter. Only this.

I push a lock of her hair behind her ear. “Clothes on or off?”

“Off,” she says in a rush of air and anguish. “I want you to take me to bed. What does that mean?” I'm already standing up. The blanket falls to the floor. It's a serious question from Daphne, and her chest hitches. “What does that make me?”

“My little painter,” I tell her, and give her what she wants.

I'VE BEEN WAY TOO HONEST WITH EMERSON. SAID MUCH MORE than I wanted to admit to him. Tears fall faster as he carries me to the bed, but he doesn't mention them, doesn't tell me not to cry. He probably sees it as more information. More honesty. And I guess that's what it is.

I'm too tired not to be honest. I was too cold for too long, and now all I want is heat and movement.

What I want is him.

He doesn't ask for any other explanation. He just yanks down the covers on his bed, stands me next to it, and strips my clothes off. No games. No seduction. I said I wanted them off, and now they are. His own follow in a matter of seconds.

"Emerson—"

No more discussion. He puts me on the pillows as dispassionately as he would rest a canvas there, but when he pushes my legs apart, I see that for the illusion it was.

Emerson's breath catches. He looks at me, his hands on my thighs, the firelight from that cave flickering in his eyes. It burns there as bright as anything I've ever seen. It shows everything.

"Hate me," he demands. *Stop me*, whispers my memory from the charity auction.

"No. I won't."

“Fuck,” he whispers, relief ringing even in that soft sound, and then he’s eating me like an animal. Like a man who’s been starving. My vision shuts down almost immediately in favor of feeling. Lips and tongue and teeth. His hair under my fingers. I must be pulling it, must be hurting him, but he doesn’t stop. It’s like having his arms and legs around me in the cave, holding me here—the same amount of force, only it’s his palms on my hips pinning me to the pillows.

I’m all nerve endings, brushed by his tongue, tortured by it. He licks me like he has to paint every secret place that exists in my folds. Like he’ll die if he leaves even one of them untasted. After the water and the frozen wind on the ride home it’s like being burned. I can’t stop making noise, but I can’t hear it, not exactly. I can only feel it in the back of my throat.

And Emerson answers.

The words themselves don’t matter. I couldn’t make sense of them anyway, even if I could turn my brain back on. I just feel the hum in that place where only he’s been, where only he has ever licked. Embarrassment breaks over me like a thin layer of ice and disappears under his tongue. Emerson digs his fingers in. Hard. Ten points of pain. I don’t understand why he’s doing it until the orgasm hits.

He must have seen it coming. I didn’t. It tears me away from the last of my self-consciousness and turns me into a wild, thrusting thing, completely out of control. More out of control than I’ve ever been in my life. More than I’ve ever allowed myself to be. It’s dark and magic and I’m powerful in it. Dangerous. Or maybe it’s the pleasure that holds such danger.

No. It’s me. It’s all me.

“Yes,” I hear myself saying. “Yes.” But I can’t actually do this. I can’t actually come again. Emerson closes his mouth over my clit and catches me as I’m coming down. He won’t let it happen. Oh—I was foolish. I was wrong. I’m not the powerful one now. I’m in the clutches of a villain who is currently drilling so much pleasure into that bundle of nerves that it hurts.

It circles around my hips and I battle it out. I can't do this. That's what I mean to say. But instead I keep saying

Yes

Yes yes yes

Until pleasure bursts over me again and I really can't see anymore. I've squeezed my eyes shut. No interest in opening them.

I'm still saying it when he kisses me there, softly, gently. Still trembling on the pillows. Another kiss, higher up. My hip. My belly. One nipple. The other. The side of my neck.

"Please, little painter," he murmurs into my ear. It takes a full heartbeat to understand what he's asking for.

I want that, too.

It's the most extraordinary effort, locking my legs around his body. Lifting them up is in direct defiance of gravity. I'm part of the bed now but I fight until we're together. He nudges at my opening, thick and pulsing, and pushes in.

It's different this way. Him, taking what he wants, his body warm and solid over mine. The stretch intensifies. I don't know if I'll ever get used to him. I don't think I want to.

Emerson makes a helpless sound and shudders. "Stop me."

I tilt my hips up toward his instead and take him deeper. There's no room in my mind for embarrassment now. I would be embarrassed of these noises if there were. Panting pleas, more helpless than he is. Emerson braces himself over me and smooths back my hair. It's so gentle. A little apology for the way his control breaks and he thrusts in until there's nowhere left for him to go and does it again.

And again.

And again.

He fucks me the same way he ate me. Desperately. He didn't think he'd get to do this again. He thought he might die out there, thought there was a good chance, and he spent that whole dark night staying alive for me.

And now—

And now—

“Your cunt is so tight, little painter. You feel so fucking good. You’re so wet when I fuck you like this. I can feel you struggling but you’re being—” He loses his breath. “So good. Don’t stop.”

Don’t stop what? The thought floats up. My body answers.

“I can’t come again,” I tell him, frantic. I don’t want to disappoint him. Can’t take it.

“You’re going to.” That easy confidence. It’s hard-won. I know that now. “I can feel you squeezing my cock. You’re going to come all over me. That’s your only purpose now, little painter. You belong in my collection, and what are you for?”

Oh god, it’s mortifying how hot that makes me. “To come for you.”

“You’re the most beautiful piece. You’re stunning like this. You feel—you feel—” He’s lost for words. Emerson’s rhythm shakes itself apart, going wild. It takes my breath away. He comes with a feral grunt, fucking through it. It’s pure heat and so much that I can feel it overflowing. Somehow I get my arms around his neck and manage to hold on. It’s like waves, like being tossed by the sea, but then he collapses down next to me and pulls me in close.

It’s warm here. Safe, wrapped in his arm, against his body. I’m too exhausted to be conflicted about it. Emerson catches his breath. It takes less time for him. He settles, body relaxing, and I could cry at how relieved he must be.

“Perfect,” he murmurs. It takes a heartbeat to realize he’s finishing his sentence, half-asleep. “So good. All I wanted.”

I drift in the sound of him breathing, slow and even, for a long time.

It’s near evening when I wake up. I’m slightly stiff from the long nap—and from last night, probably. Emerson stirs when I wiggle my toes.

“I need something from you,” I say into the calm around us.

He rests his palm on my hip. “What is it, little painter?”

My heart twists. I’ve never heard his voice like this before. Warm and sleepy and relaxed. Maybe I shouldn’t say anything. Maybe I should just drift away again and not ask the question.

Except I feel a certain clarity now that I’ve had a minute to rest. I don’t want to leave here. That’s not it. But if I’m going to stay, I need something else.

“I need to send a message. I need you to let me talk to my brother somehow. A letter or a call—something.”

His hand flexes. “Which brother?”

I think he means this as a bit of a joke. To put me at ease, maybe. But Emerson already knows which brother I’m talking about.

“Leo.”

“The protective one.”

“He’ll be—” I thought I could say this without getting caught up in my emotions, but once again, I am wrong. “He’ll be really worried about me. He’s my favorite, and he’s going to be beside himself.”

It feels like a betrayal to describe exactly how worried he’ll be. How pale and sleepless and wrung out. Leo’s worry and grief almost killed him when Haley was gone. I don’t even want to imagine him like that again, much less say it out loud, so I don’t. I’ve seen Emerson with his brother. He has to understand this, at least a little.

I’m facing away from Emerson, but his attention settles over me like a second blanket. He’s fully awake now. No doubt about that. Awake and watching. Or at least thinking.

Fear squeezes at my lungs. He’s going to say no, and that will be the end of the argument.

“I don’t need to leave,” I say against that fear. “I’m not asking you to set me free. I just want a phone call. I need to tell him that I’m okay.”

His fingertips flex over my hip. Thoughtful. Possessive. Not angry. This is the longest silence of my life.

“You can call.” My breath flees from my lungs. That’s not what I thought he was going to say. “But I’m staying with you.”

“Okay. That’s good. I mean—” It’s not great to be supervised for a phone call, but I don’t mind, as long as I get to make it. “That’s good.”

He leans in and kisses my temple, then climbs out of bed.

I climb out too. I’m not placing this phone call while I’m naked and tangled in Emerson’s sheets. I unlock the studio doors and go across to my bedroom. I feel like I’m late for a class or an interview. Something important. I pull on fresh clothes and go back across to Emerson. He’s not in the bedroom, though he’s tugged up the blankets on the bed and put them back in order.

I find him in his own walk-in closet, standing in front of an open safe in the wall. He reaches in and pulls out a phone. It’s brand-new, still in the plastic, and seems relatively cheap. Emerson digs his fingernail into the packaging and shakes it off. I wonder how many of those phones he has. It’s a burner, obviously. One you use for a single call and then throw away.

“So, you just have these handy for when a kidnapped girl wants to call home?”

Emerson smiles, glancing at me from the corner of his eye. He closes the safe and holds down a button on the phone. “The provenance of valuable art isn’t always traced through the usual channels.”

“Usual?”

“The legal ones.”

“You steal art?”

Emerson looks me directly in the eye. “How could you accuse me of being a thief?”

I don’t realize for a heartbeat that he is joking. That the wounded, ferocious darkness in his gaze is playful. When I do, it’s so startling that it makes me laugh. An unfiltered giggle. “You stole me.”

“I did not.” He still sounds affronted. “I paid.” Emerson comes out of the closet. He still smells warm and clean and really, what was I thinking? I should have just stayed in bed. “Sometimes, little painter, it’s necessary to deal with unsavory people in order to acquire an important piece. But I don’t steal. That would make it difficult to maintain my reputation.”

“To stay in charge of all the artists, you mean.”

“My opinion has its own value,” he says absently. “I don’t tell them what to paint.”

“Oh, come on. I bet if you look at a certain piece too long, everyone tries to buy it.”

“Yes. That’s why I mainly attend private showings. That’s why I don’t linger on any given piece.” He’s watching me as he says this. “Not unless I can’t help myself.”

It makes me shiver, to think of him being unable to stay away. Maybe it’s the way I feel when I look at him. Like my lungs have an electric lining.

Emerson holds out the phone. “Go ahead.”

I take it from him. This is the only thing I wanted when I realized he wasn’t going to let me leave, and now I’m nervous. I’m not sure what to say. I perch on the edge of the bed and trace the numbers on the phone with the pad of my thumb.

And then I dial it. There’s nothing to wait for, really. I’ll just do it.

Leo’s number is barely at the forefront of my brain. The numbers make a pattern on the keys. It’s the pattern I remember more than anything else. He’s never changed his phone number, not for years, because this is the one I know.

He answers on the first ring? “This is Leo.”

“It’s me.”

“Daphne.” There’s a clatter in the background, like his knees have gone out from under him. Is he at his desk? In his bedroom? I’m desperate to know, though it doesn’t matter. “Where are you?”

I was right. It’s been awful. Four words, and his heartbreak and worry are clear through the phone. They slice into my heart.

“Listen. I’m okay. I’m completely fine.”

“Tell me where you are.”

“I can’t—” Guilt comes on fast. It hurts, like swallowing a bruise. “I can’t tell you where I am. I just wanted you to know that I’m okay. I didn’t want you to worry.”

“Jesus. Who was it? Who took you?”

“No one,” I say, because it’s true and because Emerson is right there. Technically, he didn’t steal me out of my apartment. I went to him.

“Did they hurt you?”

“No, I—”

“Did they *touch* you?” His voice is rising, breaking, and my gut freezes. I might have underestimated how much this would shake him. Of all things, this is what my brother fears the most. But it didn’t happen the way he thinks it did. Emerson didn’t touch me in any way that I didn’t want.

I can’t stop looking into Emerson’s eyes. He leans against the wall by the door.

“No, Leo.” My own voice trembles, which is not how I meant to sound. “I swear. Nobody touched me.”

There’s a beat of silence. If I were going to give it a shape, it would be jagged. Anguished. “You’re not alone.”

My next breath feels like I’m taking it through a straw. This is the nightmare scenario for him. A waking nightmare.

“You don’t have to say anything that will put you in danger,” Leo says, his tone clearing. I’d be scared if I were anyone else. “I’ll understand you. Are you alone?”

“No.”

“Are you hurt right now? Did they hurt you?”

They. He’s worried about a conspiracy. The Constantines, maybe. More than one person. There’s no way to tell him that it’s just Emerson without putting Emerson’s life at risk.

“No.” Tears burn my eyes. “I swear, Leo, I’m not hurt.”

“I can come to you,” he says. “Wherever you are. I can send someone.”

“I just need you to listen to me.” The first tears spill over, and that’s it. I won’t be able to stop them now.

“I can hear you,” he insists. “I can hear every goddamn word.” *But I can’t get to you.* That’s the part he leaves out. He takes a breath, and I can tell he’s getting a grip. Steeling himself for whatever happens next.

“I’m not hurt. I wanted you to know that I’m okay. I’m safe. I really, really don’t want you to worry.”

“I’m worried,” he says. This is an understatement if I’ve ever heard one. He’s out of his mind. “And I don’t think you’re being honest.”

“I am.”

“You’re crying.”

“Yeah.” My voice goes thin and high, and this is exactly what I didn’t want to happen. “Because I don’t want you to be like this. I just want you to be okay.”

What I mean is that I don’t want him to lose it because I’m gone. But Leo curses. He’s taken it another way. “Don’t say that,” he says. “Christ. I’ll find you. These motherfuckers—”

“Leo, please.”

“Are you in the city?” he demands, panic threading through his voice. Panic and determination.

“No.”

“Are you close?”

“I think so, but—”

“Is there a window?”

“Yes,” I breathe. He thinks I’m in some basement somewhere. A true hostage. Oh, god. This is worse by the second. “There are lots of windows. It’s a good place. It’s okay, Leo. It’s good here.”

“They’re feeding you?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Was this call optional, Daph?”

He wants to know if there’s a gun. A threat.

A hostage demand.

I clear my throat. “Yes. I wanted to call you so you wouldn’t—”

“I’m going to worry until the second I find you,” Leo says. “I’m sorry, sister mine. That’s how it fucking goes.” He’s trying to be terse, but he’s so scared that I can feel him gripping the edge of some nearby window ledge or furniture. I can feel him trying not to lose his shit completely.

“I have to go. Okay?”

“No,” he says. “Don’t hang up. Daphne.”

“I’m—I’m still here.” Tears stream down my face. The sobs will be next, and I can’t let him hear that.

“How much money do they want?”

I swipe at my cheeks with the back of my hand. “It’s really not like that.”

“It is like that. There’s a price, and I’ll pay it.” Leo’s being precise with his words now, probably on the off-chance that my kidnapper is leaning in close to hear what he’s saying. “Whatever it is. Get them to name the price. There won’t be any delay.”

And I know, with all my heart, that he means it. That he would sell parts of his company to leverage the money, whatever the amount. That probably he already has so that I won't have to wait. I grit my teeth to hold in the first sob. That one gets out and it's game over.

I just—

I can't do this. It's painful. It hurts, to be loved like this. It hurts to think I took it for granted before. It hurts to think that there's no way through this that doesn't hurt even more. For Emerson. For me. For my brother. I should have thought about this before I made the call.

"I'm going to hang up now," I say.

"No, Daphne, for the love of God—"

"I really have to go. I love you. I'm okay."

"Daphne."

"Yeah?"

"Are they forcing you?"

"No." A sob escapes. *Damn* it. "I just have to go. Please don't worry."

"I'll pay it," he says. "I don't care how much it is. I love you, Daph. Don't hang up. Another minute. Please. Daphne —"

I end the call.

No more floodgates now. No gates at all. Nothing to keep the sobs inside.

My tears are hot and relentless, clenching my chest and making my jaw hurt. It all hits me at once. How overwhelming this has been. How I failed to escape. How I almost died. How Emerson saved me. How I didn't really want to go, in the end, and how fucked up is that? How wrong is that? This is hurting my family more than I ever thought possible, and I don't know how to fix it.

I cover my eyes with my hand, dropping the phone in the process, and Emerson is there the next second. He puts his

arms around me without a word and holds me while the sobs tumble out of me, crashing on the shore. He's gentle about it, shushing me, murmuring soft things to me in such a genuine way that it makes me cry harder.

I don't think it's lost on either of us that he's the one who did this.

I REGRET ALL OF IT. INSTANTLY.

The tenderness. The sharing. The honesty. I regret letting her in. Allowing that conversation in the first place. I hate it so much it forms a pit at the bottom of my heart and festers.

Because of course it didn't lead her to any real peace. Daphne's face dropped the moment she heard her brother's voice. She went pale and sad, her hand hooking into her collar and holding on tight. She wasn't aware of it at all. I know, because she didn't let go until I took her in my arms.

She has no idea how right she was. How all this difficulty compounds over the years. It does not get easier. It doesn't get easier to leave home. It doesn't get easier to recover after an attack. Her plaintive sobs are the worst sound I've ever heard.

I've become too soft, too fucking vulnerable, and my mind hisses at the prospect.

It's easier to be an evil bastard, like my father. It's always been safer, and it will be safer now.

When the sun comes up again, we're done with all this. She can't be so close. So alive. I need her where she belongs. Framed in my collection. *Not* reaching for the outside world, which only hurts her. I couldn't hear a damn thing her brother said, but I don't need to. I saw it all in her face. I have not taken Daphne from a careless family, the brother least of all.

I feel a twinge of guilt.

I nail it to the wall of my mind. Nail it down until none if it is visible.

Daphne cries for so long that she exhausts herself. She finally falls into an uneasy sleep on my shoulder, and I do the only possible thing, which is to tuck her into bed.

My bed, not hers. I tell myself it's so she won't be alone if she wakes in the night. It would be better for her if she was. I'm nothing but a regretful asshole with an art collection.

She doesn't wake up all night. Not even when I get out of bed before dawn to surf, my phone in a waterproof case in my wetsuit pocket so I know if she tries to escape again.

Part of me thinks she might.

That part is wrong. She's still dreaming, curled under the blankets, when I get back.

It's time to resume my usual routine. I leave her there while I shower and dress. Then I go down to my office and scroll through the messages in my inbox. Most of them are bullshit. A couple of them are not. I close another deal for purchase with Michael and arrange for the piece to be delivered next week. I have a small team of trusted people come in to clean the windows of her studio. They do quick, quiet work. She sleeps through that, too. It's another two hours before I feel the small shifts in the house that say she's awake. Light footsteps on the floor. Water through the pipes.

Daphne appears at my doorway a little while later. Her eyes are red, but she's stopped crying. The color makes her eyes look even larger than they normally do. Even brighter.

"Hello, little painter."

"Hi." She lets out a breath. "I'm sorry I slept so late. Did you clean the windows in the studio?"

"You can sleep as long as you want. And yes, I had them cleaned."

"Good," she breathes. "I hated that painting."

I don't mention that the entire thing has also been photographed for posterity.

“Are you hungry?” I close all the tabs on my browser. One was open to the news. Daphne’s brother put out a press release reiterating his position on paying for her safety. He’ll have to spend most of his time sorting through false leads.

“Yes,” Daphne admits. “But you don’t have to—”

I’m already out of my chair. “What do you like? Aside from scrambled eggs.”

She hesitates. “Shouldn’t you know already? You were following me for a long time.”

“You lived on the second floor. Made it difficult to see in when you were eating.”

Also, she lived on a well-traveled street. As much as I wanted to look into the windows, I couldn’t do it without attracting attention. It was enough of a risk to break in. It’s kind of her, however. To pretend that I could have been away from home for that amount of time.

Although, for her...

No. Not possible.

Daphne sits at the kitchen island and finally gives up her deepest secret, which is that she likes to eat a bagel with tea most mornings but she wants the scrambled eggs on toast that I made before.

It’s achingly normal. The kind of thing I would imagine other people do. The kinds of people who don’t have captives, anyway.

The real test is standing here, talking to her like I don’t want to bend her over the island and fuck her until she can’t stand up. It’s constant, this need to be inside her. So constant that I won’t let myself give in.

After breakfast, she goes upstairs, and I go back to my office.

Distance.

It’s futile.

I can feel her up there. I hope she's painting. At the very least, I hope she's not crying. But I don't give into that urge, either. The one I have to be with her all the time.

Perhaps it makes me more of a bastard to give her space. I don't know anymore.

In large part, I am furious with myself for telling her all those things. For not being able to get a handle on my own brain early enough to keep my weakness from her. I manage it and manage it and manage it until the frustration is too much.

I abandon the computer and the email conversation with Michael and the news and stalk into the kitchen. Peer out at the ocean. Study the ripples and patterns. The shadows from clouds moving across the surface. The jeweled diamond crests of the waves. White foam reaching for the snow on the shore. The day is fading. It'll be night soon, and it's possible to occupy myself with the gradations of shade and color for a while.

When it stops working I take out my phone and open a group text that I haven't touched in quite some time.

The one I have with my brothers.

Emerson: Come over for drinks.

Sinclair is obviously doing nothing with his life. Three dots pop up on the screen next to his name.

Sinclair: Who is this? What have you done with my brother?

Emerson: Stop being a fucking prick and come over.

Will: Is he serious?

What a bastard.

Sin: I think so??

Emerson: I'm serious. Are you assholes going to come over or not?

Will: Be honest, Em. Did you finally lose it? I don't even know what this means

Emerson: It means come over and have a drink, motherfucker

Yes. Fine. I avoid them. But now that I'm asking, he's going to put up a fuss? Jesus Christ. I toss my phone into a chair. They'll come or not. Either way, Daphne and I are going to play a game.

It buzzes, and I go back for it.

Sin: What time?

Emerson: Whenever you can get here.

I climb the stairs, glad for the end of the day. It's easier, this time of year. The world closes in early. It's not so huge, hanging above my house. I make one stop at a particular drawer in my closet before I go to find her.

Daphne is in her studio.

She's been painting.

The canvas is half-filled, but she's not standing in front of it. Her paintbrush rests in the ledge below. She is a creature of dark hair and soft lines standing at the window. No, she's not painting, but she's thinking about it. I can tell by the way she stands. One hand is partially lifted, an invisible brush about to meet the canvas.

"We're going to play a game, little painter."

She whips her head around, startles, her cheeks flushed. "What?" Her eyes drop down to what I'm carrying in my hands. "Is that rope? I told you—I told you not to play games with me."

My god, she's sweet. "You like when I play games with you. We're going to play one now."

A hint of wariness sparks in her eyes. "What kind of game?"

"The kind you'll like."

"I don't like games at all." She is lying. It's the way she lies when I'm fucking her. Flushed cheeks and parted lips and

shallow breaths. “I don’t think it’s a good idea to play with each other like that.”

But I see the curiosity in her eyes. I see how much she wants it. It gives depth to the room around her, pairing up with the dying light from outside. I’ve found it again. That dark, sweet intensity from her paintings.

It occurs to me, belatedly, that playing any kind of game with her will mean telling her more about me. There’s a cruel irony in that. I regretted it, and now I’m offering up additional access like a goddamn fool.

So be it.

Daphne watches me the way I watch her. As if nothing else exists in the world. Her eyes are bright and awake. She trusts me. My little painter can’t help it. That helplessness makes her angry. It makes tears well in her eyes. But she likes that, too. She likes complexity. Contradictions. She’s an artist, after all.

“You know perfectly well, little painter, that whatever else is between us, I’ll make you feel good.”

She bites her lip, flicks her gaze down to the rope in my hands. “Are you going to use that? In this game.”

“Yes.” I already have her answer. It’s in her body, if not her words. She’s leaning in, the little hummingbird. “Take your clothes off.”

Daphne lifts her chin. A little defiance adds dimension to the game. She is, however, unable to disguise the naked desire in her eyes. With quick movements she strips her sweater over her head to reveal a tank top with no bra underneath. That goes, too, without Daphne so much as breaking eye contact. Her leggings. Her socks. Her panties. It’s not a striptease. It’s an answer. She’s breathing harder once all her clothes are gone.

“Now what?”

I hold out the rope.

One more moment of trembling hesitation. It makes me hard as a fucking rock. Daphne’s eyes burn into my face. Into

my soul.

And then she holds out her wrists.

I always knew she would, but relief crashes in just the same. She's still, aside from her fluttering breath, as I bind her wrists together. It's not particularly rough rope, but it is rope nonetheless—no satin bullshit for her.

“Wiggle your fingers.”

She does.

“Now come with me, little painter. I'll show you where you belong.”

I take her wrists in one hand, the extra rope curled into my palm, and lead her to the stairs. And then I guide her down, taking care that she keeps her balance, taking care that she doesn't fall. “I don't want my piece damaged,” I say as we go. “Valuable art has to be transported carefully.”

“You must do that all the time.”

“Not pieces like you.” I mean to shut up, I really do. “You take more care than all the pieces I've ever moved. I think about it constantly. Every second I'm awake, and most of the time when I'm sleeping.”

Daphne blushes. “You do?”

“Yes, little painter.” Will I ever learn the virtue of silence in moments like these? Probably not. “That's why you're here.”

My house is larger than is necessary for one man. There are many rooms Daphne has never been inside. I lead her past several of them on the way to the gallery. We pause outside the door. Aside from my office and my bedroom, this is one of my favorite rooms in the house.

I haven't wanted her to see it until now.

I push open the double doors and take her inside.

Natural light floods the space from a tall window and a skylight. A circle of furniture marks the center of the space. Comfortable, with throw pillows and soft blankets. Side tables

tucked up next to them. Two alcoves hold built-in bars, one for coffee, one for alcohol.

“A gallery,” Daphne says softly. “Oh my god, Emerson.”

It’s filled with her pieces. Only hers. There are other pieces in the house, of course, but I had the art that used to be here moved to another room.

I only wanted her work in my favorite gallery. The side walls have become displays for the oceans of her soul. Salt spray and sweet darkness emanate from them, dragging their fingers down my cheek, but the bigger source of heat and wonder is at my side.

“It’s missing something,” I muse.

Daphne has already discovered what it is. Her wide, dark eyes stare at the tall wall at the opposite end of the room, where there is one large frame hung on the wall.

The frame is massive. Person-sized. And it can bear weight. I tested it early this morning before I left to surf, just to be absolutely sure.

A person could stand in it. They would be within my reach if they did.

Her breathing quickens. The color in her cheeks flames red, but she doesn’t speak. Just like a good little painter. A good little painting.

“This way.” We move, and it’s not me leading Daphne anymore. It’s me carrying a piece of art across the gallery. Her breath hitches with every step.

At the frame her eyes flick over it. The only difference between this and the ones that hold paintings are the hooks mounted into it. Daphne parts her lips, but instead of saying my name she just looks up at me. Fear and trust shine in her eyes, layered in with something else. Something dark and hopeful and filthy.

She wants this.

I want it so much that every muscle is tensed and engaged. My body is at war with itself. But this happens slowly. With

care. The animal in me is not going to take over now.

I put my fingertips on her shoulders and turn her back to the wall. Daphne shivers, her chin dipping down, and I lift her onto the frame. She bites her lip as she tries to find her balance with her feet, but I steady her.

“I take care with valuable pieces,” I tell her, my hands on her waist, her eyes on mine. She gives me a little, breathless nod.

Fuck me.

I let none of my want for her show on my face. There are other things to attend to, like lifting her wrists above her head and tying the loop of the rope around a hook. When she’s balanced there, I step back.

Survey her.

And walk away.

Daphne gasps, but she doesn’t ask me where I’m going. I’m only out a minute to gather more rope.

She watches the rope as I come back. I can feel her staring down at me when I kneel in front of the frame and circle one of her ankles with my hand. There’s a convenient hook to bind her ankle to the lower corner. I repeat the process for her other ankle, spreading her thighs in the process.

I leave her again.

“No.” She struggles against the rope a little.

The last length of rope goes around her waist. It’s not strictly necessary. A showpiece, really. But I do give it some tension with the side hooks.

She’s spread out for me now, panting, and there’s nothing she can do about it.

I have never been interested in the kink clubs in the city. What they offer has never been worth leaving my house. But looking at her now, with her big, dark eyes pinned on mine...

Perhaps I would have visited if I knew Daphne Morelli would be there.

I watch her back.

This is much better than any club.

Daphne keeps her eyes on my face like I ordered her to do it. Part of her wanted this all along.

“Evocative,” I say, the same way I would if I were visiting Michael to assess a piece or attending a private showing. “I’m particularly interested in the use of color.” I step closer and run a knuckle over the red in her cheeks. Then I skim that same knuckle on the tender flesh of her inner thigh. “And shadow.”

Daphne wriggles, testing her bonds. It’s difficult to be still. More difficult to be constrained in a frame or a closet, but she’ll manage it.

“You’re enjoying this.” I study her, slowly, leisurely. “Your face. Your eyes. It’s all there, little painter.”

“Why are you doing this? Why do you want me like this?”

I smile at her, and she blushes harder. “Because you love it. And because I love it, too. And because this is what happens when art tries to escape. This is what happens when something slips from my grasp. I have to teach it to stay put.”

“I’m not going to try again,” she protests.

“You’ll learn anyway. Better for you, I think.”

Light flashes through her eyes. It’s a game. I’m not going to hurt her in any way that would echo what happened to her before. I still don’t have those details, but I don’t need them. Her flinch at the beach was enough.

Here, the context is entirely different. I won’t punish her for her little escape attempt.

Not yet.

But I am going to teach her a lesson about what it means to be art. My little painter was so free outside of her frame, and she didn’t know it.

“I wonder what my painting would look like in response to pain.”

Daphne's eyes go wide. Fear. Closer to the surface now. "I don't know about that. I don't think I'm supposed to—I'm not supposed to—"

"Like it?" I lean in and kiss her. She kisses me back. Dark. Sweet. Fuck. Daphne tries to get closer, but she can't do that either. "What about the good kind of pain?" I ask into her mouth.

"Is there a good kind?"

My little painter tries so hard not to be innocent, but she is. Daphne Morelli is innocent to the core. Someone kept her like this for me. "There is good pain, little painter. You could try it. You could let me see it on your face. And if you didn't like it, I wouldn't do it again."

Oh, this—this is what surprise looks like. A sparkle in her eyes. Brows slightly raised. A tendril of hair falls onto her cheek, and I brush it back. "You wouldn't?"

I let her see the answer in my face. Sometimes words are worthless.

"Show me," she says, her voice barely audible. I'm so hard I want to fill her with cum. Paint her skin with it from her tits to her toes. But I have to be patient for the sake of the game.

I take one of her nipples and roll it between my fingers, then pinch. Daphne gasps, her head knocking back against the wall.

"Give it a minute," I coax, but I don't give her a minute. I lean down and follow the pinch with a bite.

Daphne makes a low, shocked sound that transforms itself halfway through into a moan. She pulls at the rope on her wrist.

She doesn't tell me to stop.

Not when I torture her other nipple in the same way.

"I don't like it," she pants.

"Then consider it a punishment. If you're telling the truth, little painter, consider it a lesson. But you aren't telling the

truth.”

“How would you know if I was lying?”

An open invitation.

I put my fingers between her thighs and find her heat.

“This is how I know. You’re soaking wet.”

Daphne groans, embarrassed, frustrated, and tries to shut me out. She can’t. She struggles harder against the rope and I watch her movement change. An infinitesimal shift in the roll of her hips. She’s not trying to fight me. She’s trying to fuck my fingers.

“Pain is beautiful on this piece.” I skim my fingers over her opening, teasing her. “But there’s something I want to see more.”

Her eyes are fiery with how much she wants this. How mortified she is. *What?* Her mouth makes the word, but she can’t put any sound behind it.

“Pleasure,” I tell her, and push two fingers into her.

Fuck them gently in and out.

It’s tame as far as these scenarios go. Not the kind of hardcore shit you’d find in any of those clubs. But the effect on Daphne is electric. She can’t stop looking at me. Can’t regain control over her breath. Her pussy pulses again and again around my fingers. I add another. She’s hotter by the second. A human flame.

“I can’t move,” she says, her voice choked.

“That’s right,” I agree. “Art stays in its place. My pieces stay where I put them. They know to stay in their frames and obey. You’re so wet, Daphne. You’re making a mess of my fingers.”

“I’m not.”

“Yes, you are. Should I put more bite marks on you? Would that teach you not to lie?”

“No,” she pleads, and her sweet cunt clenches tight.

I keep my fingers there while I add more marks to her nipples. While I add a light, grazing one to her shoulder. Not deep enough to last or bruise. I've always been more captivated by sight, but the sounds she makes—

Holy Christ. Begging moans.

I keep fucking her with my fingers and kneel down again. Her perfect cunt is inches from my face. "I haven't marked this yet, little painter."

A sob twists out of her, but it's not sad. It's not pained at all. It's just emotion rising to the surface. Spilling over. Pure, sweet need.

My teeth on her soft flesh, just above her clit, make her cry harder. Her desire runs down my fingers to my wrist. It's dripping into my shirt. It has never been more important to observe her. To hear her. The pitch of her voice rises as I bite. Before they reach the peak of real pain, I relent.

And add another finger.

Four of them. She's stretched now. My little painter is small and tight.

"That's a lot," she gasps. "A lot."

"Relax." She tries. "You have no choice but to take it, little painter." One of her tears drips off her cheek and lands on the edge of the frame. I have no doubt that the intensity is increased a hundredfold by the bondage. I get to my feet again and look into her face. Her eyes are still open. She is not bothering to hide from me. "I love this work." I kiss some of her tears away and put the pad of my thumb to her clit. Daphne tenses a little. I have, after all, just bitten her there. But her body begins to melt.

"Your fingers are big," she murmurs.

"I'm bigger. And you've taken me several times."

"Different now," she manages.

"Yes. You're exactly where I want you." In this frame. On my fingers. "No," I snap.

She startles. “What? What did I do?”

“You’re not going to come until I give you permission.”

Daphne’s face crumples. More silver tears leak from her eyes. “That’s not fair, Emerson, that’s really not fair.”

Goddamn it. She loves this. It’s explicit on her face. It’s so fucking beautiful. This might be the only time in my life I’m not pushing the world away. I’d rather be right here, close to her, listening to her breathe and squirm and moan and cry.

“I can’t.” Her voice breaks.

“Wait.”

“I just—” Daphne grits her teeth. It’s going to get away from her, and then—fuck. I might lose control of myself, too. “I need to come. Please, don’t be so mean to me.”

“It’s work to be art.” This is the same tone I’d use if I were informing a buyer about a piece. “It’s not simply hanging in a frame. You have to be at your best, little painter. Are you at your best right now? Are you going to be good?”

She clenches around me as I say it, and I almost come in my pants.

“I can be good. I’ll be pretty for you.”

“Can you? Because I think you’re about to come without permission.”

“I won’t. I promise.” Her eyelids flutter closed.

“Eyes on me, little painter.” I don’t want her looking away for a single fucking moment. Her eyes bring life to the rest of her. They set off the fine curve of her cheek and the gorgeous slope of her shoulders. Her arms, up next to her head like this, create shadow. My little painter is a complex, textured image.

No. Not an image.

I’m still finger-fucking her.

Daphne gets wetter with every stroke. Her noises become more animal, more involuntary.

“Emerson. Please.”

“You begged me before. I enjoyed that very much. I don’t want you to come now. I might not get to hear you beg.”

“Please let me come.” She’s absolutely urgent. A true emergency. “Please, please, let me come on your fingers. Please.” Tears gather at the corners of her eyes and run down in rivulets. “Please. I don’t want to disappoint you.” Oh, my little painter. Such honesty. “I’m trying to be good. Please, please, *please* let me.”

I haven’t picked up the pace. Haven’t fucked her harder.

I kiss her, stealing her words for myself. “Don’t disappoint me, then. Don’t come before I say. If you do, there will be consequences.”

“Like what? You’ll take me out of my frame?”

It makes me laugh. It feels so good to hear that. “Would that be the worst thing to happen to you, little painter? Being dismissed from your frame?”

She nods, ashamed.

My god, she’s perfect for me. It *would* be the worst thing to happen to her if I stopped the game because of this. I kiss her collarbone.

“I won’t, Daphne. I will never let you out. You’ll be framed here forever so I can watch you and play with you and fuck you. So I can deny you permission to come.”

“I can’t stop. Please.”

“Thirty more seconds.”

She starts counting, silently, the words on her lips. It’s agonizing. Her body rebels the entire way. Every ten seconds, I increase the pressure on her clit. She’s sobbing by the time we approach the end. It’s a punishment for us both, I suppose, because there’s nothing I want more than to fuck her.

“Now, little painter.”

Daphne comes without hesitation.

She’s torn apart by it. My little painter can’t keep her eyes open. Her words turn senseless and hot. Her pussy grips my

fingers tight.

And because I am a bastard, I don't let her stop. I catch her before she's all the way down and send her back up with the pad of my thumb. Relentless.

"Oh, no," she says. "Oh, no—"

I cover her mouth with my other hand.

"Be quiet and let me see you."

It's a fight to the bitter end, keeping her eyes open the way she does. Tears leaking onto my hand. Crying out into my palm.

When it's over, I make her feel it. Make her feel my fingers inside her. Make her feel the sweet, wet mess she made. I keep them deep inside her until the final shivers have subsided.

Only then do I ease them out.

Daphne mewls against my palm. I keep her mouth covered another few moments before I take it away.

Step back.

Look her up and down.

And leave her hanging there.

OH.

My god.

That was good.

It was so good.

I feel like I'm in a dream, somewhere warm and floating. It's hard to concentrate on anything right now. I'm aware of Emerson moving around the room. Doing something at one of the alcoves. He stops by one of my paintings, a glass glinting in his hand. He does the same to another painting. I'm just another one of his paintings.

This must be the end of the game.

He'll take me out of the gallery soon.

Honestly, I hope he doesn't. It's so unbearably hot that I can't get out of the frame.

I love this game.

I was being a fool when I said I didn't like them. I like the ones he plays with me. He's right. He's right for me, even if he is broken and terrible and criminal.

Even if he is dangerous.

If my family ever finds him...

Well. No use thinking about that now. I feel too good. I'm even glad for the ropes. They're the only reason I'm still upright. I would have fallen without them.

The doorbell rings, sounding far away. Emerson turns his head away from my painting and goes out of the gallery.

A delivery, probably. Maybe his cleaning service. He'll send whoever it is away and come back. I pick up my chin from my chest and try to collect myself. Most of the paintings he's bought for me are here. Including the one I did for the charity auction. *Blood in the Water*. I painted that in the feverish burst after I walked in on Leo and Haley. It took hours and hours to come to terms with learning his secret. Afterward, I didn't know what else to do with the painting. Destroying it seemed wrong, but so did keeping it in Leo's house. So I sent it to be auctioned.

I didn't know Emerson was the one who bought it.

I should have known, though.

I really should have.

Emerson left the gallery door open, but he wouldn't let anyone interrupt us right now. Not when I need a nap.

A minute goes by. Maybe two.

It also feels shamefully good to be tied up. I can admit that now. I thought it wouldn't. I thought it would be terrifying, but it's only terrifying if you don't trust the person who's binding your wrists. Plus, I let him do it. I wanted to try. And what he said to me—

If you don't like it, I won't do it again.

The gallery door opens wider, and Emerson comes back in.

He's not alone.

My heart stops.

Sinclair is with him. He doesn't have his coat on. Emerson must have hung it up at the door. Sin hesitates for a fraction of a second at the door—one blink—and then he keeps following Emerson into the room. His face doesn't change.

Mine is burning up. I'm frozen, but there's no point in freezing. It won't hide me.

And I'm still tied up.

Jesus Christ.

I am fully spread open for Emerson by his bindings, and now his brother is here.

“New piece?” Sinclair asks. I’m on fire now. I’ll probably burn the whole house down. This game is beginning to feel extremely real. Like it’s not a game at all. Can it still be a game if another person is part of it now? My mind races. No. It’s still a game. Sinclair has already seen me. It doesn’t make my heart stop racing.

“My newest one. I thought she would be nice on that wall. What do you want to drink?”

Sin ambles through the gallery, looking at my work. “Whatever you’re having.”

Whatever you’re having. Sin’s eyes light. Emerson does have a drink, but that’s not the only thing he has. Sin waits while Emerson pours something into a glass and hands it to him.

They turn toward each other like I’m not there.

“Did you redo this room recently?”

“I changed the art.”

Sin rubs a hand through his hair. “That’s easier than moving. I’m going to have to find a different hotel.”

Emerson furrows his brow. Sips his drink. “Why?”

“Dad keeps harassing the people at the front desk. He’s out of money. I’ve already had to move rooms twice.”

“Thought you were staying at a nice place.”

“I am. He’s persistent.”

“What a bastard.”

“A desperate bastard,” Sin agrees. He gestures around the gallery. “Nice space, though. Good call on the furniture. And a bar. Do you drink here often?”

“I like to be prepared. Oh—how was the drive?”

“Short and uneventful. A bit of snow on the roads. It’s a better drive now that I live here.”

Emerson sighs. “You really shouldn’t stay.”

Sin waves a hand. It sounds like a discussion they’ve had many times. “You’re not going to convince me to go back to LA. Waste your breath if you want to.”

“Fine. You’re moving your operations here, then?”

“I am the operations,” Sin says, and Emerson huffs a laugh.

My heart feels enormous. Taking up all the room in my torso. Embarrassment heats my face. They keep talking back and forth.

“Is it a busy season for acquisitions?”

“Spring is better,” Emerson tells him. “On the east coast, anyway. More estate sales when there’s not so much snow on the ground.”

I summon all of my courage and all of my breath to force one word through gritted teeth. “Emerson.”

He blinks like he’s surprised to be interrupted by a painting, but then he ambles over with his drink in his hand. “Yes?”

“Your *brother* is here.”

Let me down.

Put some clothes on me.

If you’re going to have guests, I can’t be tied up in a frame.

Emerson gives my hip a little squeeze. An intimate, casual gesture. “It’s wrong to keep art locked up where no one can see it, little painter. That’s how important pieces retain their value. A collector is always open to private showings.”

The doorbell rings again.

Oh my god.

Oh my *god*.

Emerson leaves.

Sin stands near the furniture in the center of the gallery, sipping his drink and looking at me. He could be standing in a real art gallery, except...

He's hard.

It gives me the tiniest sense of control. They can look at me, but I can see them, too. Emerson's wanted me for even longer than Sin.

Obviously, I'm newer to his brother. His eyes travel over my face. My body. He glances at the other paintings on the walls, then back at me.

Emerson steps into the doorway and ushers another man inside. His other brother. He has Emerson's blue-green eyes and light hair. He does not have Sin's composure.

His mouth drops open as Emerson pulls the door closed behind them. "Jesus goddamn Christ, Emerson." Both hands go to his hair. "Are you fucking kidding me? Is this what we've come to? Fucking women together?"

Emerson frowns. "I didn't say you could fuck her."

"None of you are going to f—fuck me."

Good. Great. Tripping over that word makes me sound super confident. My cheeks are hot coals.

"Drink?"

Emerson's brother stares at him for several moments. Then he shakes his head. "My god."

"That's not a drink order, Will."

"Vodka," he snaps. "Fuck."

Sin goes over and claps Will on the shoulder. "Has Dad been stalking you, too?"

"Yes," Will says, numbly. "He got my office phone number. I can't take any direct calls."

Emerson pours a drink for Will. His brother looks down at it, his expression stormy, but in the end he relents. He

grumbles something under his breath.

And then the three of them are coming toward me at a lazy pace. Emerson and his older brother in front. Will reluctantly a half-step behind.

Like they're visiting an art gallery. Three sets of eyes like Emerson's, only his brothers aren't as sharp. Aren't as obsessive.

"She's surprisingly innocent," Emerson comments. He uses an even, noncommittal tone. This is how he talked about the paintings when I gave him a tour at Motif. He's cool and collected and I'm art on the wall. To hear him talk about me like that—

Unfortunately, very very unfortunately, I find it hot. I'm getting wet again. Maybe I never stopped in the first place.

Sinclair cocks his head and looks at me, his eyes searching. "A woman who looks like her?"

"A virgin," Emerson confirms. "Before I found her, anyway. Her family damn near kept her cloistered."

Will snorts, the sound derisive and disbelieving. If he means to stand up to his brothers, he's not doing a very good job...because he's still looking at me. Still drinking me in. "She's tied up in your house. On your *wall*."

"Yes." Emerson takes another drink. "I thought for a while about which lighting would compliment here. I considered this wall." He points to the left. "There, we'd be able to see her with the ocean as a backdrop. But I put her where the lighting is best. Besides, anything else just detracts from her."

"You can always move her," Sinclair offers. "Try her in different places."

"Christ." Will shakes his head. But he doesn't leave. The game doesn't come apart. I don't think I want it to end. Oh, Jesus. I don't know what I want, not exactly, but I don't want Will to cause a scene. He lets out a heavy sigh. "I think you're a bastard for showing her off if you're not going to share her."

Emerson keeps his eyes on mine. “You don’t get to touch a piece of a collection unless you own it.”

The three of them come closer.

I open my mouth again. It’s dry. “All of you are bastards.”

A pause.

“She’s innocent, but there’s a spark to her,” Sinclair says.

“A spark? She’s pissed.” This, from Will.

“No.” A smile curves the corner of Emerson’s mouth. “Look at her body.”

“At your bite marks?” Will sounds more jealous than anything else.

“At the color,” Emerson corrects. “She’s flushed and pink. She wants this. She’s not even struggling.”

I struggle to make a point.

“Well,” Sinclair says, “there you go. Is she struggling because she likes it or because she doesn’t?”

“In my opinion, it’s to show me what struggle looks like on this particular piece.” Emerson’s placid art collector tone is driving me out of my mind. I wish he would kiss me again. “What do you think, Will?”

Will scowls. It doesn’t last very long. He shifts his weight from foot to foot. He’s hard, too. I can see it. I guess the only question is whether he’ll deny it. “I think she likes it,” he says, and I can’t breathe. “I think she’s mad that she likes it.”

“Unobservant,” scolds Emerson. “She loves it. Look at how aroused she is. Her nipples—”

“Are like that because you obviously fucking bit her,” Will shoots back.

“Her nipples remain peaked, despite the fact that I bit her some time ago. The real tell is in the eyes.”

They all look.

“Her pupils are huge,” Emerson says. He steps even closer and uses his hand to frame my face. “It’s more difficult to tell

because her eyes are so dark and the color is so singular and stunning. Look carefully.”

Both of his brothers move in, but they stay a few inches behind Emerson.

“I am definitely not turned on by this,” I announce.

Emerson’s eyes light up. “We’ll see.”

He hands off his drink to Sinclair, who takes it without comment. And then he’s close again. He circles one of my nipples with his fingers, then drags them down the front of my chest. Down my belly. He pushes them between my legs. A shudder rocks me at the contact. I’m sensitive from before. They all see it.

Emerson works two fingers into me again, his expression neutral. Oh, god. It’s on the insides of my thighs. I was like this before he touched me.

He takes his fingers away and I bite back the word *please*. As in *please keep touching me*.

Emerson holds his fingers up. As he does, the lights in the room change. They must be on a timer. The sun went down while I was framed here on his wall. The lamps inside the room take over, casting a soft glow over everything and making my juices glisten on his fingers.

“See?” Emerson says.

“She does like it,” Will agrees begrudgingly.

“Watch this.” Emerson puts his fingers back between my legs. I hold my breath on instinct. He’s doing this in front of them, again, and when he pushes them inside—

A sound escapes. Something like a relieved moan. But then he starts stroking them in again. Oh, Christ.

“I can’t do it again,” I tell him.

“You will, little painter. You’re going to show our guests how beautiful pleasure is.”

He’s so skillful with his fingers that I can’t get the word *no* out. I don’t want to. He’s less gentle this time. He fucks me

harder with his thick fingers. He's much more insistent. So much so that my body is rocked against the wall. The canvas creaks. It's loud.

It's bolted down, but I can still feel it shifting ever so slightly. The sound is dramatic. I try my hardest not to make anymore noise but it's the only way I can handle being finger-fucked while I'm tied up in this frame in front of people.

Emerson puts his thumb on my clit.

"It's going to be too much."

"No. It's not. It will be just gorgeous. Show them, Daphne. Don't keep it to yourself."

All the sensation overwhelms me. His fingers. The heat between my legs. The stretch.

A hint of panic. I've never done this in front of anyone but Emerson before.

And they're—they're watching so closely. Three sets of blue-green eyes, filled with lust. They're all hard, pants bulging, but I'm still nervous as hell. My breath catches.

"Here," Emerson says, and somehow I understand what he means.

To look at him.

Not them.

His eyes are different. The same color as his brothers', except for a little variation, but he's the only one who looks at me this way. Like he's seeing into my soul. Owning it. Like I'm the most valuable possession he's ever had. The most precious. It feels like a physical heat, spreading up into my belly, into my chest. The ropes are nothing compared to his gaze. That's what holds me in place more than anything else.

"For me," he says, his voice low. "I want you to show them, little painter." His thumb circles my clit. "Show them, Daphne. I want them to see how beautiful you are when you come on my fingers. When you're good and sweet in your frame." He fucks me a little harder. The trembling starts in my

toes and comes up like a wave. He's making this happen to me. With his voice. With his hands. With his eyes.

I suck in a breath. I'm not sure what I was planning to say.

I don't get a chance.

Pleasure rolls over me. Shakes my body. Tosses me in my bindings. It rattles the frame.

"Yes," Emerson says. He's pleased, and that makes me come harder. "Look at you. The pleasure on your face is priceless. What a good little painter. This is why I wanted you to be part of my collection. I never want to look at anything else."

He pushes his fingers in deep and makes me ride it out on them. I wish I could cover my mouth, but I can't. I just have to let the sounds happen.

The aftershocks last and last. Emerson's fingers feel even thicker inside me. In the hazy aftermath I manage to look at his brother's again.

They look entranced. Jealous, almost.

It takes a while to catch my breath. Emerson circles my clit in slow, soothing movements.

"When you find a piece like this," he says, "you do whatever it takes to acquire it. When the art is evocative, you make it yours. When you feel..." He pauses, and I feel another, separate aftershock. His eyes. They're sincere and open, exactly as intense as always. "When a painting makes you feel something, it's essential that ownership transfers to you. That's what a good collector does. He recognizes value. Beginners can only understand technique and provenance, but those things aren't as important as emotion."

My throat closes. My heart pounds. This is the most I've heard Emerson say about the way he feels about art. About his collection.

About me.

"I've seen hundreds of paintings. Thousands." The corner of his mouth turns down, just a little, and I see all those

paintings flicker through his eyes. “I’ve bought and sold countless pieces. The ones I choose for my personal collection are different. There’s a feeling.” He lifts his free hand and puts it at a place near his heart, and his gaze goes distant for a blink. “It’s this faraway ache. When I feel that, I know a painting will become valuable if it’s not already. I’ve felt it about older paintings before. I’ve made millions on them. The pieces in my collection will only appreciate in value. Not everyone can recognize an evocative painting the way I can, but they trust me to tell them.”

A door opens into his life. He can see things that other people don’t. It explains so much about him. The way Robert talked about him at Motif. The way people murmured his name at the charity gala. Emerson’s skill makes him valuable, just like the art he chooses.

And he chose me.

“Of all those pieces, one stands apart.” A shiver moves down my spine. “Only one took that faraway pain and sent it through my heart. My soul. I knew I couldn’t let it go. I still can’t let her go. Whenever I’m apart from it, I wake in the night thinking about it. If I ever lost it, I’d never dream about anything else. This piece—” A shadowed emotion crosses his face too quickly for me to name. “This piece draws me out. That’s what it does.” It’s completely silent in the room. His brothers are transfixed. “It draws me out of myself. I don’t have to hold the world at such a distance.” Emerson takes a breath. His tone hasn’t changed, but his words are a taut line between us, almost vibrating with emotion. “I need to be with this piece. I have to have it. In every way that it can be had. In a frame. On canvas. Whatever the form, I have to own it. To bind it. That’s what a frame is. A little binding to keep the art where it belongs. To keep it with me. Not because of its monetary value, but because it means so much that it transcends money.”

I feel like gold, even with his fingers still inside me. Maybe especially now, in this frame that he made for me. I feel priceless. It has nothing to do with my last name or my family’s reputation or anything else.

It's all because of Emerson.

He holds my gaze with affection and obsession. Every word has two meanings. Art is everything to him. But I am more than everything.

It's the thinnest layer of paint over his heart.

And he's said all of this with an audience.

His brothers are hearing this, too.

Tears well up. He invited them on purpose. He wanted them to be here for this. It's so far from what he said that night at the charity gala. *You don't worry about your brothers? No. I'm not like you.*

"That's why I've made my life out of collecting art. It's the only way I can feel. It's the only way I can have the world with me. It's the only part of the world I want. The only part I can stand. And I've been searching—" He swallows, hesitating for the first time. "I've been searching all my life for this piece." And then, in a low voice, meant only for me, he adds, "For you."

I finally find my voice. "Me?"

"Yes." He's being honest. Emerson isn't concealing anything. I know he didn't like how I saw him in the cave. He's been struggling with it. None of that struggle shows now.

"You don't care if other people see?"

"I want everyone to see."

I'm short of breath. Overwhelmed. I don't think I've ever been this treasured in all of my life. It's like nothing I ever dreamed. Nothing I ever expected.

But I have to keep breathing, because passing out right now would ruin this whole moment. I don't want it to end. *There's more. There's more, if you want it.*

I clear my throat to keep the tears at bay. "You want to show them?"

"Yes."

“Then do it.”

I STARTED THIS TO PROVE TO HER THAT I'M A BASTARD. THAT I'm evil. That I'm a terrible man, just like my father. I wanted her to know the depths of my depravity, but it's turned on me more than I thought possible.

The air in the room is supercharged with Daphne's sweet, lovely darkness and the absolute, unrestrained trust she has in me. The game slips between reality and illusion. It's so real. And it's a raw form of play. My brothers, drinking like we're actually in a gallery. A private showing. And Daphne, her pussy wet on my fingers.

Half my mind is here with her. Lost in her eyes. The other half struggles to sort and frame my feelings. I hate having people in my house. I want my brothers to be here. I have never liked games. I love this one with Daphne. I told myself that I didn't give a fuck if my brothers understood me, or if they understood too much. But I don't want to be alone. There's a limited amount of my life I can share with them because of the way I am. But this? This?

I can't help but share it.

It's the most complex thing I've ever tried to untangle.

So I focus on Daphne.

I've done that since the moment I saw her on the street. At moments like these, she is the only real thing. The rest of the world is art, or else it's emotion, closing in fast. Jealousy, for one. My brothers are looking at her. At my piece. Mine. I've

never felt jealousy about showing a part of my collection before.

But my jealousy is superseded by Daphne.

I kept my fingers inside her while I spoke. I didn't need to. I could have put my hands in my pockets. I wanted more information, and I got it. She's still wet. Still soaked. Her pussy tugs at my fingers.

She likes this. Daphne seeks me out, finding my eyes for comfort when she feels overwhelmed, but she blushes whenever she looks at Sin and Will.

My little painter is hot for exhibitionism. She might even crave it. And if she likes it, I want to give her more. If that means I have to tack jealousy to the wall with a hundred nails, then so be it.

Aside from that, observation increases value. In this case, it won't make Daphne worth more money. I will never sell her. Not at any price. But what we have between us is heightened by my brothers' presence. I don't just want her behind closed doors. If it weren't for her family currently hunting for her, I'd announce this acquisition to the world.

I push those thoughts away and turn them into abstract art for the time being. There is nothing worth considering outside this room. Daphne is in my frame. Daphne is here with me. And she's not done for the night. Her chest rises and falls in a quick rhythm. Her eyes are bright. She has more to give me.

I have more to take from her.

I pull my fingers out of her. A silent question flashes over her face. *Are you leaving me?* No fucking way. I'll stay close. When I don't move, relief crosses her eyes. Another irony. Our story is to be irony upon irony, because Daphne wants me nearby. She wants the man who kidnapped her to protect her from his brothers.

It only takes half a step to make more space in front of her frame. "Sinclair," I say. "Why don't you take her down?"

"Are you sure? She looks good in her frame."

“You can turn her around and get a better look.”

Also, Daphne shouldn't spend too much longer bound the way she is. It's putting pressure on her delicate wrists, whether she feels it or not. I won't have her damaged. Not even for the sake of the game.

Glasses click on one of the side tables, and Sin approaches. He stands next to me at Daphne's frame and holds up his hands.

“May I?” He directs this question to me, not for her, and the flush on her cheeks intensifies again. I nail down a bolt of jealousy. Her eyes are on his face now, which is understandable. He's the one who's about to touch her. Sin seems to understand that contact with Daphne is a delicate business.

“Yes.” I put my hands in my pockets. “Keep her value in mind.”

Sin takes a moment to survey Daphne's bindings. He starts with her ankle first, bending down to release one foot, then the other. She wriggles her toes on the frame. Stretches her calves. Sin brushes her skin with the backs of his knuckles as he unties her. Daphne shivers every time he does.

He reaches for the rope around her waist. Daphne bites her lip, glancing at me like she needs permission to be touched. I don't say a goddamn word. Sin already has my permission.

My brother unhooks the rope at the top last. “Emerson.”

I come forward and lift her to the floor. He keeps the end of the rope and hands it off to me when her feet are secure. I move her a few steps out from the frame to give us more space.

Sin peers down at her. “You gave her quite a few markings,” he comments.

“Yes.”

“Did she like it?”

I laugh, and Daphne lifts her chin. “Yes.” He looks at me over her head. “You can touch them, if you'd like. If you keep

—”

“Her value in mind. Of course.”

Daphne doesn't quite know what to do with this development. A new tension comes to her shoulders. I take her bound wrists in my hand, then bend down to speak into her ear. “He understands your value. You'll show him that you know your place, little painter.”

She turns her head and brushes her nose against my cheek.

The night nearly ends here, with me carrying her upstairs in my arms, never to return.

Instead, I frame this feeling and hang it where I can see it every second for the rest of my life.

And then I pull her wrists above her head and hold her in place for my brother.

Will curses under his breath and stalks over to the sitting area. He levers the arm of a chair. I hear a muffled *fuck* and he spins it around to face us, then throws himself into it like someone's holding him hostage.

Sinclair drags a fingernail over the bite marks, then over Daphne's nipple. First one, then the other. She shivers, gasps, but doesn't tell him to stop.

“She likes that,” I tell him. Daphne makes a quiet whimpering sound. “She's pulling harder at my hand because she wants more.”

“There's depth to the texture,” he comments, glancing down to the soft skin at the peak of her thighs.

He traces those marks, too. Daphne strains against the rope but doesn't move her feet.

My brother nods, and I drop Daphne's hands. He tests more of her flesh with his fingers now, circling slowly, step by step. He pays careful attention to the marks from the rope. It left its imprint on her waist, and Sin inspects it with the same care he used on the bite marks.

He takes his sweet time working his way down her ankle. Sin kneels down on the floor in front of her.

“You know what he wants,” I tell Daphne. I’m memorizing the way her hair falls over her shoulder. “Show him how you look when you’re enjoying yourself.”

Daphne takes a small step backward, closer to me. It takes her three deep breaths before she can bring herself to move her feet apart for Sin.

I know the moment he touches her because she presses back, tipping her head against me like I’m the wall behind her frame.

“She’s very pink,” Sin says. “Have you ever seen this shade, Will?”

“I’m not coming over to look.”

He wants to, though. My younger brother isn’t bothering to hide how much this turns him on, the fucker. He’s also still in the room.

Sin shrugs. I angle my body so I can see around Daphne. He’s scanning her face for something while he delves his fingers between her legs, stroking her there. “Have you made her sorry? I’d be interested to see how it changed the piece.”

Daphne goes still. I toy with her hair. Run my fingers through it and watch the light play between my knuckles. Sin stands up while he waits for my answer and touches her face. The line of her jaw. Her neck. Her shoulder.

I’m fucked, honestly. Because this game is blurring into reality. She’s my acquisition, but she has a tactile dimension. Every breath she takes is imprinted on my mind. The gentle pressure of her body against mine as she tries to stay calm fills infinite galleries. I’ve never been less able to keep my hands off an item in my collection.

“You want to see regret?” Her hair slips between my fingers.

“No. Apology.”

“For something specific?”

“For trying to escape.” Sin takes her chin in his palm and turns her head one way, then the other. “You could have lost a significant investment.”

“No. I haven’t seen that on this piece.”

“Do you want to?” Sin’s eyes darken for a split second. I know what he’s asking. My little painter is made for what he’s suggesting. I don’t know if now is the moment.

“At some point, yes. Why? Are you interested?”

“It’s cold as hell out on the water at this time of year. I almost froze to death coming to rescue you. Plus, I was worried sick.”

I make a noncommittal noise.

“Come on, Emerson. Look at her tits. They’re perfect for it.”

“For what?” asks Daphne.

“Punishment,” says Sin. “I don’t suppose you have any items we could use.”

“Bedroom closet. Third drawer on the right, second row down.”

Daphne gasps, but Sin’s already walking away.

I turn her to face me. No tears line her eyes, but emotions glint in them, chasing each other across her expression. Daphne swallows hard.

“Little painter.”

“Yeah?”

“You’ll tell us when you’re ready to apologize.” She is at once determined and relieved, as if she’d already decided to offer herself up. “But I still have a guest, and you won’t neglect him.” I pull her arms back over her head and walk her a few steps toward Will.

“I don’t like this,” he says, clutching his empty glass in his palm.

“Bullshit.”

Will rolls his eyes, but he can't help but reach down to adjust himself.

"Look at my acquisition, Will." His jaw works. "She's here for you to look at. I've bound her to keep her still so you won't be interrupted."

"It's a dick move," he says, but he's already looking at Daphne.

"Perhaps, but that's irrelevant. What's relevant is that she's mine." I catch his eye from my place just behind Daphne and try to communicate, silently, that this is a *game* we're playing. That, in fact, Daphne likes this game. "Will."

"What?"

"You thought we were going to fuck her together when you came in. Has something changed?"

"Yes." He says, snappish and short. His resolve crumbles. I'm impressed he held it together for this long. Thank Christ. I don't want Daphne to be uncomfortable for an instant because Will is trying to maintain the moral high ground. "I saw you and Sin putting your hands all over the art."

"And you wanted a turn. I apologize, Will. I was rude. Would you like a private showing?"

Daphne moans, a quiet, bitten-off sound. It's the conversation that's turning her on. I'll never get enough of her.

"Yes." It's fairly fascinating, watching him hide his desire in sullenness. I'd be far more interested if Daphne didn't exist. But she does. I take her over to Will with her hands above her head, then pull them down behind her so her back is arched and all my marks are on display again.

He folds his arms over his stomach and looks.

"You can touch her, you know."

"It's rude to get your fingerprints on the art within the first minute of the showing."

I almost laugh, but no. "I'll do it for you, then."

I get a better grip on Daphne's wrists and turn her from side to side, letting Will see her from every angle this way. I cup my hand under her chin and make her arch her neck. I arrange her hair this way and that on her skin.

"There's a certain appeal to the three-dimensional," I say to Will, and turn her away from him. I pay particular attention to Daphne's wrists, easing them from behind her head and pulling them in front of her.

Farther.

And farther.

Until she's forced to bend at the waist. I get her wrists to where I want them. "Keep them here. Just like you're in your frame."

Daphne nods. Fuck me, she's sweet.

I nudge her feet apart with my toe. My little painter is breathing hard now.

"Pretty," Will says.

"Gorgeous," I say. "Look at this curve, here." I point out the curve of her ass. The one on her inner thigh. "See how the shapes compliment each other? It's exquisite work, Will. Be appreciative."

"Let me see more, and I'll tell you if I appreciate it."

I spread her wider, exposing all her secrets to Will.

"Fuck," he says.

"I know."

"Did she cry when you bit her?"

"A little. She was already crying."

"Did you make it better afterward?"

"I haven't yet."

We both watch her in silence for a moment. Daphne's blush is spreading onto her back.

“You don’t get to touch a painting unless you own it,” I comment. “Unless you’re friends with the owner.”

“Are we?” Will asks. He has harassed me for so many years. He’s been an asshole for just as long. My brother refuses, almost entirely, to stop being a jackass. One who nonetheless frets about breaking society’s rules. He thinks my life could be fixed with the right amount of exposure therapy and I don’t know what the hell else. He thinks I could be different if I wanted to, but if I pressed him, he wouldn’t want me to be different now.

I’m not even sure it’s possible to be friends in any simple way with my brothers. My father might have ruined that for us years ago.

But...

Things are different, aren’t they? Will sits in my gallery with its pale blue walls, meant to compliment Daphne’s work. It’s meant to compliment Daphne herself. I can’t remember the last time I had such sustained eye contact with Will or a conversation that approached this level.

“We’re brothers,” I say finally.

Will is suspicious. “Don’t be a bastard, Em. Are we friends or not?”

Don’t play with him, he means. He doesn’t want this to be some fucked-up joke. He’s like Daphne in that way.

“Yes.” I pull Daphne upright. *Oh god*, she whispers as I arrange her in front of me. I press her wrists to her chest with one hand and slide the other under one of her knees. Then I coax it up and out so that her pussy is open for Will. He rubs his hand over his mouth. I know how Daphne looks. He’ll want his tongue on her. “I’m showing you my art.”

The gallery around us can’t absorb the tension. Daphne, panting in my hands. Will, staring between her legs. He gets a grip on himself and manages to look elsewhere—up her naked body, to her face. Another flicker of indecision.

“Is she still wet?”

I press her more firmly against me so she knows not to move and drag my fingers over her slit. Then I hold them up for Will's inspection. Daphne makes an embarrassed noise low in her throat. "She's making a mess of her thighs," I say. "Look how the light catches there." I paint around her nipples with wet fingers and angle her body, adjusting her slightly so Will can see the curves and shadows of her.

All of them.

I need to fuck her so badly I could scream. My chest is tight and hot with the urge, but I want to extend this for Daphne.

Even if it kills me.

Which it might.

"What does she look like to you?" Will asks.

For once, his tone doesn't register as mocking. "The same way she looks to you."

"Bullshit."

"Many times, she's the only thing I can see as she is."

"You don't turn her into—"

"No."

My brother is curious. So is Daphne. Maybe she'll forget, and I won't have to explain what Will is talking about. The panic is one thing. The way I get through the day is another.

Sin returns and closes the door tightly behind him. He takes a few things out of his pocket and puts them on a side table with a slightly sunken top so they're hidden from view. And then he blows out a breath. "She looks good like that."

"Will's having a private showing."

Will huffs. I know he wants to touch her. I know he wants to do more. It's fucking obvious. All of us want that. It's strange to have something like this in common with my brothers. We all grew up in the same house. We all looked at the same slivers of light around locked doors. But the experience was entirely different. They saw freedom in that

glow. I saw danger, and later, I didn't see much of anything at all. I was too blinded by the mounting panic, which would explode when the door opened.

"What do you think, Will?" Sin asks.

Will meets my eyes instead of his. "Don't fuck with me."

I hold Daphne open a little wider. She squirms against my grip. "This is what impatience looks like on my piece," I tell Will. I'm the background for it. I'm the canvas for Daphne's body. "She needs more."

"From you?"

"From us."

Christ, Will. Make up your goddamn mind.

He sits up straight, looking at his empty glass like it might speak to him.

And then he reaches for the side table and puts it down with a deliberate *click*.

"Bring her here," he says. "Let me see."

EMERSON PASSES ME TO WILL, THE MOVEMENT CEREMONIAL and considered. Like he brought me down the stairs at the beginning of all this. *Valuable art has to be transported carefully.* The way he spoke about art paints itself around my heart and makes it beat hard.

The way he's letting them look at me right now—letting them touch me—makes my lungs tighten. I have to work for every breath. It's a symbol of trust, as clear as if he'd written it out on paper.

Emerson trusts his brothers. Or at least he's trying to trust them. Giving himself a chance, anyway. Giving them a chance, too. From the heat of the air in the room, I know this is rare. It feels like a spring thaw on one of those days when the world remembers what it's like to be alive.

It's so important.

I could cry.

Except I'm art right now. I'm an object to be observed and used, and someone new is touching me.

Will takes me by my wrists and pulls me gently between his legs. He sits up straighter as he draws me close.

Emerson steps away. He doesn't go far, just to the edge of the furniture, next to Sin. He murmurs to him. I don't know if this is part of Will's private showing or if he's planning something.

The thought of them planning makes my nipples pull even tighter.

“Look here, Daphne.”

I look down into Will’s eyes as his brothers talk, voices low. Will’s hands curl over the rope on my wrists like I really am priceless art. Like I really am incredibly valuable, and he doesn’t want to drop me, or smash me, or mar me in any way. Everything has a double meaning right now. It’s enough to make a girl dizzy. It’s good for me that he’s being so careful, but it’s also a true show of respect for Emerson.

Will looks back into my face, and then he turns his attention to my wrists.

He unties the rope. It’s the final piece binding me, and his touch is gentle as he removes it. I can still feel the ghost pressure at my wrists when he drops the rope to the floor. I might as well still be bound. Might as well still be in the frame, really. My heart stutters with how much I want it.

Will rubs his thumbs over the lines that the rope bit into my skin, working the blood back into my fingers. He’s thorough. He inspects each of my hands, moving each finger and thumb so that he’s sure I’m not stiff. He puts each hand in his palm and looks over the inside of my wrists.

“I’m interested in contrast, too,” he mentions, tracing his fingernail across the pink imprint of the rope on the pale flesh.

It’s real conversation, I think. “You—you make a good contrast.”

He glances up at me. “How so?”

“You’re an appreciative viewer,” I manage to say. It’s all so hot. The way they talked about me like an object. *And* the way Will touches me now. Reverently. Almost respectfully, even. Will massages the rope marks. It was tighter than I thought. When I struggled against the bindings, they clamped down harder on my wrists.

“You’re a beautiful piece.” He seems to make a decision, tugging me in closer, so my face is inches from his. I can’t help but be struck by Emerson’s brothers. Will’s eyes are twins

for Emerson's, but when the light changes, they look a bit more blue. And, of course, no one looks at me the way Emerson does. Will's coming close, though, a fleeting emotion in his eyes. "Do you want this?" he murmurs.

My chest warms with a kind of relief. A kind of affection. This is the brother who would help me, if I wanted. If I said I didn't like this game, that I wanted to stop, that I wanted to leave, he would take me out of here and damn the consequences.

He would get me out.

You're safe, the voice in my mind announces, sounding incredulous and delighted. *You're safe here*.

Will waits for my answer, his expression open. My thoughts run a little wild. What happened to Will to make him so different from Emerson? They must have experienced similar things, but the end result was a contrast, like Will said. There's so much more to know, and it's like a painting that's been partially hidden from view. If Emerson's life were a painting, his brothers would take up a lot of the canvas, I think. The past would take up even more.

I want to understand that.

The wanting is a splash of paint over my racing heart. I know Will is serious. He would help me escape.

There would be consequences, if I escaped. Not the sexy kind. I saw how serious it is for Emerson to leave his house. I felt what a threat it was. I heard the worry in Sin's voice. They all know what Emerson risks when he's away from home. It's not a simple thing with Emerson. I thought agoraphobic people just didn't like to be in large, open spaces, but I was naive. A jail cell would have the same effect as an empty field. Emerson might not survive that.

And on top of that, it would damage the relationship between the brothers.

This is new for them. Or they've just recently returned to each other. It's not like it was with my brothers and sisters. We

had our moments, but we were together. The tension between me and Leo is a change. A bad one.

But this moment...

It feels like the *after*. The beginning of the reconciliation. And maybe it's strange that this naked art show is making this bridge between Emerson and his brothers, but all I care about —

I let out a laugh. All I care about is that they stay together. My heart is in it for all three of them.

"Yeah," I say to Will, who hasn't looked away, who hasn't stopped massaging my wrists. "I do."

He gives me a subtle nod and stands up. Will puts both hands on my shoulders and turns me around as Emerson and Sinclair saunter back toward the empty frame. I'm facing them as Will takes my hair in his hand and arranges it over my shoulder.

And then he leans down behind me and puts his lips to the side of my neck.

Emerson's eyes blaze. He crosses his arms over his chest, but he makes no move to stop Will. He and Sin watch as Will puts kisses down the curve of my shoulder and back up again. They have to be in pain. They've been hard all this time.

Will kisses the place at my neck where my pulse beats. Warmer this time. Linger. He's breathing me in now. Will smells good. He wears a hint of cologne, but underneath there's a scent similar to Emerson's. I mean, what the hell is that? How can they all smell so good?

Emerson's brother lifts his head, his fingers skimming over my shoulder. They find the faint marks where Emerson grazed me. Will inhales.

And then he sinks his teeth into that flesh, making those marks real. I gasp at the pain. It doesn't last for long. Even now, he's not trying to leave any permanent bruises. Emerson's jaw tenses. It's not out of anger, no. He wants the same thing. His teeth in my skin instead of his brothers. But he allows it, because this is the game we're playing. The filthy,

delicious game. This is part of the sharing. Emerson offered this to Will, and Will accepted.

I can almost see the bond between them growing stronger.

Or maybe I'm just hallucinating from all the pleasure and pain.

Will stands tall again and soothes the spot he just bit with his fingertips. "What's next, gentlemen?"

"Come here," Emerson orders.

I go, new relief washing over me. My skin is hot and prickling with the energy in the room. My heart flutters in my throat. I have no idea what's going to happen next, only that I'll agree to it. It feels dark and intense, even in my mind. I don't have any experience with this. Emerson and I have only fucked a few times.

Is that why they like this so much? Is that why *I* like this so much?

Emerson takes my face in his hand and turns my head so he can survey the bite mark Will left. "Show me how this piece looks on her knees." I sink down to the floor. "Good," he murmurs, and the praise lights me up. "You're going to practice, little painter."

He unzips his pants and takes his cock out.

Emerson is so hard that the skin around his crown is tight. He's leaking from the tip. I glance up at him to see if he's pissed about this—that I've done this to him without offering him any relief—but he's calm except for that fire in his eyes. He reaches down and tugs at my lower lip, opening my mouth for him. Then he runs his fingers through my hair and tilts my head back.

"See this, Sin?"

"Yes," Sin says. His voice is strained.

"I'm getting her ready for you." It's a small gift. Emerson, telling me what's going to happen. I'm going to have his brother's cock in my mouth, too. Heat flares between my legs. It's so bad, but it's so good. In the context of this game it's the

only right thing to do. I'm art. I'm just a piece of art. "She's never done this before," Emerson says to Sin. "The first attempt requires special handling."

He pushes the tip of his cock into my mouth, holding me open for him with his thumb.

Emerson is enormous, and he's also losing his patience. I didn't think this would be easy, necessarily, I just didn't think there would be so much of him. And he can't wait. The salt from his tip meets my tongue. This draws a noise out of Emerson. I feel it through his body.

Oh, Jesus. I want to please him. I want to do this right. But I don't know what the hell I'm doing. Fear rises. That I'll suffocate, for one. Or that he'll be disappointed.

But then his hands are in my hair. "You won't suffocate, little painter. Mmm. Yes. Use your tongue like that. Don't fight. A little pressure—there. I'm going to go deeper." I make a panicked noise around him, but he shushes me. Holds my head still. "Swallow when it scares you," Emerson says, and then he's at the back of my throat. I swallow hard, once, twice. Emerson grunts, his fingers tightening, and then he pulls out. "Breathe," he orders. I get half a breath before he's in my mouth again. I'm making a mess, struggling, and I'm mortified to find that it's because I'm trying to take him deeper. I'm trying to be the best he's ever had. "The tip—" Emerson manages, "of your tongue." I tease the underside of him with the tip of my tongue and he answers me by taking my throat with a thrust that makes me gag.

Sin curses.

"It's good," Emerson says to his brother.

"How good?" asks Sin.

"Difficult to describe." Emerson's breathless now. I add pressure, like he said. I explore the hard ridges of him with my tongue. I taste more of him. I've never been this thrilled. My heart has never beat so fast. Emerson fucks me with a few more strokes, and then he pulls away. Tears streak down my cheeks. Emerson's hand tenses in my hair, matching his gritted

teeth. But he controls himself. Reaches down. Takes my shoulders and turns me to face Sin. “Show Sinclair what it’s like when this piece takes a cock down her throat,” he says.

He keeps one hand on my shoulder, moving behind me as Sinclair undoes his zipper. Bright fear flashes across my skin. Emerson rubs his thumb across my shoulder blade. He’s making me do this. I belong to him, and this is what he wants from me.

“Open her mouth,” Sin tells him. Emerson reaches around in front of me and opens my mouth for his brother. Sinclair takes his cock in his fist, stroking it idly. “I don’t think I’ll be able to stop.”

“You can use her tits.”

Another low curse, and Sin guides his cock into my mouth. They’re both touching me now. Emerson moves his hands to my hair, and so does Sin. Desire runs down the inside of my thigh. He tastes different. Still good, but different. And he’s just as thick. Sin doesn’t take my throat, though. He holds still.

“Show him,” Emerson coaxes, and the fact that he’s telling me, the fact that I want him so much—

It grounds me.

I forget to be embarrassed and concentrate on getting Sin wet. On the contrasts, really. His ridges are different. The angles are different. The shape of his crown. I take a minute to wrap my mind—and my tongue—around him. Feeling him there. Sin groans.

“I know,” Emerson answers. “I’ll hold her in place.”

“Both of us,” grunts Sin, and then there’s a new pressure on my head. A heartbeat of waiting, and then Sin pushes his cock down my throat.

Emerson was being gentle.

Sin is wild. Impatient. Emerson has given him permission. My hands come up to his thighs and I hold on tight, but I don’t have to. There’s nowhere to go. They hold me while I choke and cry and gasp.

“That’s right,” Emerson says. “You’re taking him so deep. It aches in your throat, I know. But he’s so pleased. He can’t stop fucking you. You’re being such a perfect piece in my collection. The best one I’ve ever owned.”

This is the hottest I’ve ever been. It might be wrong, but it’s also right. I’m a piece of art. It’s okay to lose myself in this. That’s what art does. It stays in its frame, where it belongs, and pleases Emerson. When you’re art, you don’t have to make decisions. You just have to be good.

Oh, I like it. Oh, I want it. That thoughtless obedience. That’s what it means to be owned by him. He’s giving this to me. It hurts Emerson to do it. I know he wants me all to himself. But he’s making this gesture anyway. Making me choke on his brother’s cock. And somehow, it *means* something. They’re both the frame for me now.

I’m so wet and aching. I wish they’d touch me, but it’s not time yet. I’m here for Sin. I have to survive him. It scares me, but it subsides.

Whenever the fear rises again, I swallow. “Fuck fuck fuck,” Sin says. I do it again and his thighs tense.

“He’s ready, little painter,” he says to me. And then, to Sin: “Go ahead.”

Sin thrusts in deep, his hands locking around my head, and he—oh my god. He *expands* in my mouth. And then he pulls out and pulses cum all over my chest. Emerson’s fists tighten in my hair in a silent message. He demanded this from me. I’m doing this because he wants me to. Because I belong to *him*. Everything that happens tonight is because he’s allowing it. Because I trusted him. His hand in my hair says *I’ll do this to you so many times, little painter. Don’t worry your pretty head.*

Sin comes for a long time, like it’s been pent up inside of him for months. He finishes with a shudder and steps back to survey his work.

“Christ,” he says.

Emerson braces me against him while I catch my breath. Sinclair zips himself up and wipes my tears away with his

knuckles. He rearranges my hair, then steps out. Sin returns a second later with a damp towel.

“It was fucking beautiful,” he says to Emerson.

“The work is like nothing else.” Emerson pulls me to my feet, holding me close against his body. He takes the towel from Sin and skims it over my chest, cleaning off the evidence from his brother.

And then he turns me again.

Toward Will.

“What do you think of her tears?” he asks. “I find the pattern particularly intoxicating.”

“I want to taste her.” Will’s eyes are hot, the color bright and burning. Into me. Into both of us. He stands where I left him, near his chair. Like the three of us were a painting for him. That’s not enough now.

“Ah,” Emerson says, understanding in his voice. “I see what you want. Do you, little painter?”

I shake my head. No one sees what Emerson can see.

Emerson puts his hand on the back of my neck and walks me over to Will. Then he moves behind me again, loops his hand under my knee, and pulls me open. Wider this time. Higher. I’m up on the ball of my foot.

“He wanted you like this,” Emerson murmurs into my ear. “He wanted to taste the piece this way.”

Will looks at him for a long moment.

And then he steps forward and gets down on his knees. Will braces one hand at the curve of my ass and the other where my leg meets my body. The same leg that Emerson is holding. Will’s eyes meet mine from between my legs.

I’m already on the verge of combusting, but I know what he wants.

Confirmation.

I nod at him.

“Put your arms around his neck,” Will tells me. I reach up and hook my hands behind Emerson’s neck. My body is stretched to its limit like this, but I let him take as much of my weight as I can. Will’s breath is warm on my folds. He leans in and kisses Emerson’s bite marks. “Poor thing,” he murmurs, and then he begins in earnest.

Oh, Jesus. Oh, fuck. He’s enthusiastic, licking and lapping and biting at me like he’s been deprived all his life. The position makes me lightheaded with how filthy it is. Emerson’s the frame, I’m the art, and Will is worshipping it. He circles my hole with his tongue and coaxes more juices out of me. He presses his face in harder, exacting with the tip of his tongue. There’s no part of me he doesn’t want.

Oh.

I’m.

Going.

Words come apart in my brain. I find myself trying to rock my hips into Will’s face. Emerson has to hold me so I don’t shake myself out of his hands and fall on the ground. His grip near my knee tightens.

It’s not like Emerson. It’s different. It makes me want Emerson’s mouth, Emerson’s tongue, Emerson’s teeth, but this is pleasure, too. Pleasure that Emerson’s making me take. He’s writing it on my cells and painting it on my face. Turning it into art over and over again.

Will takes my clit between his teeth and I moan. He does it a little harder. The sound crests into something like a cry.

“Can I make her come?”

If I didn’t have my hands around Emerson’s neck, I’d grab for Will’s hair. “Please,” I babble. “Please, please, please.”

“You want it and so does she. See how it looks on the piece.”

Will buries his face in my pussy, giving it another series of long, searching licks before he focuses his attention on my clit.

A bomb. This is what it feels like to be a bomb about to go off. Electrical wires and explosives. His tongue builds it up, sweeping at the sensitive bundle in quick circles. Will nibbles at it. Strokes his tongue over it. He's good at this. He must have had a lot of practice. I haven't.

"I can't," I gasp. "I can't, I can't."

"You're such a lovely piece of art, little painter. And you're already doing it. His mouth feels good. You're trying to fuck his face. Your cheeks are the perfect shade of pink. Now come on his tongue. Let him taste it. It's all right. I've got you."

Emerson's words echo what he said to me in the cave, and that's what does it. That promise. *I've got you*. Will's hands dig into my flesh and pull me closer into his mouth as I come. He runs his tongue over my slit, drinking up my orgasm while I shudder against Emerson. My muscles tremble with holding this position, even as Emerson supports me, but he doesn't let me down. Not at first. He keeps me open for Will.

And Will takes his time. After I come down he kisses my clit, a soft brush, then stands up, wiping his mouth with his sleeve. "Can we fuck her?"

"No," Emerson says, and I swear there's a hint of regret in his voice. He wishes he could bring himself to go that far. "Her pussy is mine. You can taste it, but you can't take it."

"She needs to be fucked," Will counters.

"She wants you to watch."

Emerson's right. I don't fight him when he takes us over to the couch in the center of the room, Will and Sin following. I'm desperate for him. Humming with this sensation. Emerson sits on the sofa and I stand in front of him, shivers trickling down my spine. Juices trickling down my thighs. He takes his cock out again and reaches for me, pulling me onto his lap with a heavy, relieved sigh.

I spread my thighs over his waist, and he angles me above him. "It's going to feel thick, little painter. You're oversensitive from our game." The head of him pushes against

my opening, and oh—it does. He feels bigger than ever. “Show them how you take me,” he says. “Show them how good you are, even when your pussy is stretched.”

I let gravity carry me down a few inches, his hands at my hips, a soft moan escaping me. It *is* a stretch. I have to work for it. Have to concentrate on relaxing. Will made me wet, though. He made me so wet that there’s not much friction. I sink down slowly, slowly, until we meet, until we’re together. Emerson brushes my hair away from my face. His eyes have never been so clear. The heat is almost unbearable. The tether between us feels steely and unbreakable. Like his heart is making mine beat. Like mine can only beat if his does.

And I tried to run away.

He moves my hips in gentle motions, rocking me over his cock. Not thrusting yet.

I tried to run away.

The pressure builds until the words burst out.

“What if—what if I’m sorry now? I want to apologize.”

Emerson’s eyes flare. “For what, little painter?”

“For trying to leave. It was—it was reckless and dangerous and I almost died. It hurt you, too. And Sin had to come get us. It was cold. It was so cold, and so wrong. I never should have done it. I want to stay with you. I want—I want—” My breath isn’t cooperating. “I want to show them what it looks like to be sorry. I want to show you.”

There’s a moment of silence. Worry trickles in. What if this isn’t the game we were playing? What if I ruined it? What if it shatters on the floor into shards of glass?

Emerson pulls me in and kisses me. I clench on his cock as he does it. “I got you back,” he says, reassuring. Forgiving. “And you didn’t do any permanent damage. But I would love to see you sorry, little painter. What did you bring, Sin?”

His brother is ready. “A couple of things.” He crosses behind the sofa and picks something up from the side table.

Two objects. Small and black. They fit in his palm. He offers them to Will, who takes them without hesitation.

They both move behind me. Two hands reach around and take my wrists, pulling my hands away from Emerson's chest. "I'll balance her," Sin says. He pulls my hands over my head and stretches me upright. I'm balanced on Emerson's cock. Emerson rubs at the curve of my waist, his hips rocking slightly, as if he can't help himself. "Will's good with clamps."

My eyes go wide.

"Hush, little painter," Emerson says.

And so I hush as Will's hands come around me with the nipple clamps.

They bite in hard, harder than Emerson's teeth, and I burst into tears. Sin keeps my arms above my head while Will adjusts them, making them tighter, somehow.

"How is it?" Sin asks Emerson.

"She's dripping," Emerson says, voice tight. "She's clenching around me. The piece likes to be sorry."

"I am," I gasp. "I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have done it."

"That's right." Sin shakes my arms a little. "You lured our brother out into the ocean. Do you know better now?"

"I don't know. I don't know. Yes. I don't know." I don't know anything right now, actually. Except that those points of pain at my nipples have a direct line to my clit.

He makes a *tsk* sound. "You're my brother's piece. And you were very disobedient. Nipple clamps might not drive the point home."

It's a question. If Emerson refuses him, he won't continue. But it's an offer.

Emerson doesn't refuse.

Sin separates my wrists and leans me forward again. "Down," he coaxes. "Oh, I know it's going to hurt. Your nipples will survive." He makes me lean forward until they're

brushing at the front of Emerson's shirt. Every time they touch is a new shock of pain. "She'll need to be open for this."

Emerson runs his hands down my sides and lower, to my ass.

And with a gentle pressure he spreads me open.

I lose my breath entirely. Lock my eyes on his. Sweat mists on my spine. A bottle clicks nearby, and then something cool and wet lands on my hole. A knuckle follows it, rubbing it in, and then the tip of a finger.

"Sin wants to see more of an apology, little painter."

"What you've done isn't enough," Sin comments, clipped and confident. "My brother deserves more."

He pushes a finger into my hole and my entire body tenses.

"Relax," Emerson says. "Art doesn't fight. It's beautiful and obedient in its frame."

The finger goes deeper. "He's—he's stretching—"

"He's stretching that tight hole, little painter. And you're taking it." Sin adds another finger and I grit my teeth. Emerson has a bruising grip on my ass. He leans forward, just slightly, so that it pushes me back onto Sin's fingers. Two of them. Tears gather and fall. "Beautiful." Emerson's voice goes low, intimate. "Clench on his fingers," he says next, and I do. It hurts. Sin's fingers are thick and deep, and when my muscles work, Sin groans.

"He's not done," Emerson says.

Sin pulls his fingers out, but they're immediately replaced with something thicker. And harder. "Oh," I say. I'm hazy with pleasure and pain. With the clamps hurting my nipples and Emerson's cock filling me. "Oh, oh. I can't."

"He's going to fuck it in and out of you until you can," Emerson says. "It'll hurt your hole, I'm sure. But it won't be too much. I promise, little painter. You'll be exactly as sorry as you want to be."

I hold onto his shirt for comfort, bury my face in his collar, and sob.

It feels so wrong. It feels so good. It hurts. Whatever Sin is using stretches me, getting wider and wider until I'm sure I can't take it, I can't, I can't, but then it pops in and stays in place. My hole throbs around the invasion.

Emerson lifts my face from my shirt.

His brothers have come around behind him so they can all see how sorry I am.

"Jesus," Will hisses. "That's gorgeous."

"I'm so sorry," I whisper.

Will leans over Emerson's shoulder and puts his hand over Emerson's. He tilts my face up another inch and licks one of the tears from my skin. Will squeezes my chin tight, like he wants to do more, and lets go. "Her tears taste as good as they look on the piece."

Sin cracks a wicked smile. "I'm sure she'll feel better soon."

Emerson tips my face down. He searches my face. Drinks me in. And then he kisses me again.

In the sharp kiss, I feel the last of his control break. "I'm going to fuck you like this, little painter. I have to fuck you like this."

"Please," I breathe.

And then he has control of my body, control of my hips, and he's fucking me. I ride him the best I can. Struggle with it. But we find our rhythm. It's impossible not to, with him. Even when I fight him I still find it. It's like the rhythm of painting. It's embedded in my soul. I can't pretend it's not there.

I don't see his brothers move, but the next thing I know, there are hands. Hands toying with the clamps as Emerson fucks me. One of them pulls the toy out of my ass and pushes it back in in a steady, teasing rhythm as my muscles flutter around Emerson. He's the center of the world, but his brothers are still part of it. I'm being watched. I'm being treasured.

They toy with me, lifting my chin so Emerson can see my neck. They tug at my hair. Twist at the clamps. I don't know who the frame is anymore. All I know is that I'm the art.

Emerson grunts, and then he yanks me in for a kiss. A huge wave of pleasure appears in the distance. I can feel it in the tips of my toes. Little tremors, working their way up. The hands on my body prepare, too. They touch and brush and squeeze, and then—

Then—

One of them takes the clamps off.

Blood rushes back into my nipples, ripping my orgasm free. I sob it out all over Emerson. He holds me tight, holds me down hard, as he comes too in hot, hard bursts. I'm so full. Of him. Of the toy. I'm so sorry. I'm so happy.

"Little painter," he says. "Daphne."

I reach the other side of the wave and keep tumbling. I'm still falling when someone—Sin, maybe—eases the toy out of me. It's not a frightening dark. It's a good one. It's soft. I land on Emerson's chest and nuzzle into him, shaking as hard as I did in the cave. My vision is blacking out. But it's okay to let go and fall asleep. I can't stop it.

"I've got you, little painter. It's all right. I'm not letting go."

Emerson's voice is the last thing I hear.

IN THE END, DAPHNE WON'T—OR CAN'T—WAKE UP. WILL tucks a blanket over her while she's cradled in my arms and I carry her with me when I see them to the door.

"It was good," Sin says, his hand on the knob. "Coming for drinks."

"Don't get used to private showings."

He laughs. "I won't. But I mean it."

"It was good," I agree. And I'm surprised to find that I mean it, too.

"You guys are fucked up," Will says.

"I'll text you," I call after him as he goes into the night.

He waves his hand above his head. *Whatever*. He's a stubborn asshole. He enjoyed the hell out of himself tonight.

I'm bone-tired and sated, but I take Daphne into the shower nonetheless. She's half asleep and murmurs soft nothings through the whole process. When she is, at last, dressed and dry, I lay her in the bed. She reaches for me with one hand and won't settle until I let her curl up on my chest.

Nothing.

Nothing is better than this.

I wake up early like always, the gray light of early morning filtering through the windows. Daphne breathes deeply at my side. She's taken half my pillow. Her body is

relaxed. Truly at rest. She sleeps easily here, which is another pleasant surprise. My little painter isn't bracing for anything to happen to her.

I run my fingers through her hair.

She doesn't stir.

I feel so fucking good.

I don't want to waste a minute of this on sleep.

Last night was a sea change for the three of us. It had to be Daphne, I think. I've never had anything so important to show them. I've never wanted that before. Perhaps there's some part of me that wanted their approval. That still does.

And how could I not want them to see? She's gorgeous. Her dark hair on the white pillowcase. The gentle curves of her body. The pink lips to match her flushed cheeks. She senses her own safety, even when she's sleeping. Daphne feels as good as I do, and she's still dreaming.

She must feel me watching, because her breathing changes. Daphne stretches a little, then wriggles closer, into my heat. She pushes her back into me and pulls the blanket tight. "It's early."

Her voice is as warm as her body. Sleepy and satisfied. It's the best sound I've ever heard.

"I'm going to surf." I tuck her hair over her ear and brush a kiss to her cheek. The idea occurs as I register the softness of her skin. "Come with me."

"No." Daphne laughs. "It's winter. I'm not going in the water."

"Come outside with me. Even prisoners get yard time."

She laughs harder at the joke, but it's true. Even real convicts get time in the sun. That's important for most people, but especially for Daphne. An artist needs contact with the outer world. The view from the studio is one thing. For now, she should feel the wind in her face. There's something about standing on the shore.

Daphne understands that. After all, she came to the beach at my request. She could have used a reference photo, but she came in person.

She lets me run my hand over her shoulder and her arm for a minute before she rolls over onto her back. “Really?”

“Yes. Bring your sketchbook.”

Her brow wrinkles. “I don’t have a sketchbook.”

“Little painter. You think I built you an art studio with no sketchbooks?”

Daphne blushes, her eyes lighting. She pushes herself upright, drops a kiss on my cheek, and hops out of bed. It’s cute enough to induce a heart attack. My little painter is light on her feet as she flits to the chair by the window and wraps a throw blanket around her shoulders. Drawers open and close in the studio while she hunts for one of the sketchbooks. A little gasp echoes into the bedroom. “This is one of the *nice* ones,” she says to herself.

I climb out of bed with a smile on my face. I can’t stop smiling, in fact. Even while I make the bed and pull the covers up tight. Put the pillows back in their places. This is how it could be between us.

If we weren’t running on borrowed time, anyway. If reality would leave us be forever. If her family would let her have this life.

Whatever. Borrowed time is better than none. And I feel too good to discard the feeling so early in the day.

Daphne appears, dressed in winter leggings, tall wool socks, and a base-layer shirt, at my side in the bathroom while I’m brushing my teeth. I have an extra toothbrush in here for her. She wrinkles her nose and laughs every time she sees it. Thinks it’s a little ridiculous that her bathroom is fully stocked, too. But why be inconvenienced if she doesn’t have to be? I care for my most valuable pieces.

I care for her most of all.

Daphne hands her sketchbook and pencil case to me at the top of the stairs. She pulls a soft, warm hoodie over her head, then twists her wrist to look at the stamp near the hem. “Is this your favorite outdoor brand, Emerson?”

“Yes, but I don’t have much experience with their women’s collection. Do you like it?” I ask her as we descend.

“I love it. There’s no tag on the inside.”

“I like that about their things, too. I have my tailor take them out. Better not to have them in the first place.”

“Is this what you’re wearing?”

“Yes.” I show her the stamp on my own wrist. When I’m not running after an escapee, I wear compression shorts and a base layer under my wetsuit for winter surfing.

In the mudroom, I open one of the built-in closets and survey the outerwear. I offer Daphne a pair of slim-fitted snow pants first. She raises her eyebrows at me. “Snow pants?”

“For standing on the beach.”

“These are warm leggings.”

“These go *with* the leggings.”

She laughs under her breath, but takes them and steps in. A matching coat next. I chose a few coats for her. This one will be good for sketching. It has a looser profile, so it won’t constrict her arms, but it’s still relatively fitted at the waist and rated for temperature sixty degrees below the temperatures on the beach. Daphne slides it over her shoulders with a happy sigh. “I feel like I’m going on some important mission with all this gear.”

“The most important mission. Your art. Come here.”

My little painter steps close and lets me tug a fitted beanie over her head and snug it down over her ears. I add a scarf and arrange it over the zipper so it won’t distract her. I help her into her boots. When I look up from adjusting the closures, she’s grinning at me.

“I can put on my own boots, you know.”

“I do whatever the fuck I like with the pieces in my collection. Including this.”

She blushes, her eyes sparkling, and holds out her hands for me to put on a pair of mittens with finger flaps. Daphne will have full access to her charcoal pencils.

“Now turn around,” I tell her.

“Seriously?”

“Yes.”

She does it, biting her lip, and when she’s facing away from me I pull her hood up. When Daphne completes her circle and I’ve assured myself that she’s warm and covered, I tuck her hair into her hood. She leans her cheek into my hand.

Christ, it’s good.

I get into my wetsuit, grab my board, and we go out.

Snow crunches under our feet on the way across the yard. More snow on the steps in the retaining wall. A bit less on the sand, where there’s more wind and water. I look up and down the beach. There’s no one in sight except for a person walking their dog in the far distance.

No, this is no prison yard. Even in winter it’s a gorgeous stretch of beach. White skims the top of waves, a deep blue-gray in the pearly morning light. It’s my favorite time of day. When everything is new and fresh and quiet. The windswept shore is peaceful. Waves curl up on the sand, leaving their shadows behind. Clouds ripple in the water. Momentary reflections in small pockets, swept away by new swells. The horizon is misty. The sky and the water are close today. Blurring into one another. They won’t stand for boundaries today. They’re too close.

I become aware of warmth. Of heat. Of attention.

Daphne’s been watching me, her eyes curious and affectionate. “Do you like it out here?”

The beauty is what I like. Being outside my house, less so. Surfing, like walking fifteen blocks, has always been a way to

build up tolerance. To punish myself with the staring sky. To force myself to live with it.

“I like that you’re here, little painter.”

She rises on tiptoe and kisses me.

I kiss her back.

Out here in the cold, she’s warm. Precious. Priceless. I meant every goddamn word I said in front of my brothers. It’s perhaps more astonishing that I could say it at all. It was magnificent.

Daphne pulls away with a little sigh. “You should get going.”

“I’ll be back soon.”

“I’ll be here.”

No goodbyes.

I like that.

I push out into the water.

Fuck, it’s cold. Far more frigid than the day I went after her. I didn’t think about it then. It hardly registered in comparison to the raw terror that she had already gone under. That will probably come back to me every time I swim out for as long as I live. There’s no separating the memory from the waves.

I stop paddling to look back at her.

Daphne has her sketchbook open, a pencil in her hand, and her head bowed over her work.

She’s safe.

At the moment I found her in the water, she wasn’t. Her face was tipped toward the sky and her arms were outstretched, her hands splayed on the surface of the water. That pose, more than anything, is what haunts my dreams.

Daphne is not, in fact, the first person I’ve pulled from the waves in front of my house. Two others, since I’ve lived here. A ten-year-old boy who’d wandered away from his family’s

beach day and a teenage girl who had been drinking with her friends. I came across the boy at mid-afternoon on the last wave of the day. The girl I found at dawn, deep into August, still drunk. Both of them were in that same Jesus-on-the-cross pose in the water, glassy eyes skyward. That's what it actually looks like when a person is drowning. They can't scream, or speak, or wave their hands. It's a quiet death.

My little painter might not know how close she was. A person at that stage has less than a minute.

I use the time out in the water to hang these memories in an appropriate place. Smooth them out so they're not so jagged. When they are still, I can focus on last night. On how good it feels to be with her in the fresh day.

I turn back toward the shore and let a couple of lesser waves pass me by. Daphne is watching me now. It's hard to see her expression from this distance, but I know it well enough. She's not angry. Not hateful. She's looking at the scene before her. I'm part of it now. I'm part of her reference.

Part of her life.

Heat in my chest overpowers the cold.

I make myself go under. The cold bites into my fingertips. My toes. The wetsuit is top-of-the-line. It's designed to keep people warm in subzero temperatures, but it doesn't completely insulate me from the worst of the cold. That's good. It's more like a punishment this way. One I still deserve for doing this to her. For loving it so much. For feeling peace in this moment.

Joy, even. There is no distant pain in my heart. It's a wide, expansive crush of emotion. There is an element of pain, of course, but it's just because she's beautiful.

When I resurface, Daphne has taken a seat on the shore. She'll be glad for the snow pants now.

I didn't know I was looking for her, all those years.

Now that she's here, I can't imagine anyone else.

I climb back onto the board and surf the way I always surf. Pushing myself. I wouldn't say I have a particular obsession with surfing. It's just something I do. We grew up near the water, so Sin and Will know how to surf, too.

Mainly, it's practice. I force myself into the vastness of the ocean so that I can continue to do it. Not much can come at you from the depths or across the surface. Sharks, I suppose. An errant boat. There hasn't been a shark sighting in this area for years, and there aren't many boaters in winter. It comes with some risk. I could hit my head on the board and drown. I could stay out too long and freeze to death. In one way, it's less risky than going into the city. I take my chances nonetheless. I deserve to be cold. I deserve to be in a place I don't love. My one concession is that I'm in sight of my home.

I take one wave in and swim back out.

I want to be inside with Daphne, which makes this more necessary than ever. She won't be able to stay inside my house indefinitely. She needs the outdoors. She needs inspiration. I'll keep doing this as long as I have to.

There's an element of purpose when I think of it that way. It's less punishing and more preparatory. Sometimes, she'll need to leave. I'll go with her.

Another wave. Another. I lose myself in the crests and falls. Test my balance in various ways. The sky grows lighter. Winter pale, dark water below. It doesn't get shallow until close to the shore. Wave in. Swim out. Ah—the real punishment is swimming away from her when all I want is to have her in my arms. All I want is to lay her on the ground. To open that soft coat and kiss her neck. To bite her. To take her.

Too far, a voice comments. *Too far, too far.*

I can feel her there. It sounds like bullshit, but I can. A tug at my heart. It keeps me anchored while I do this thing. While I play out this routine. Art or not. Daphne or not. My brothers or not. Sometimes surfing is the only reason I leave the house. If I stop doing it, I'll lose the habit. It could take years to regain them. Years of work and suffering and panic. It would

be appropriate. It would be deserved. But I don't want it. I want to feel good.

Like this.

For her.

Last night wasn't suffering. Last night was everything. My brothers appreciated her. They saw her value.

My obsession is justified.

It's real.

I take a breath of crisp, cold air. Habit takes over. The world outside becomes art tacked to the wall. My feelings join those pieces in neat rows.

They do not, to my surprise, resemble their usual bleak imagery. They are tinged with joy.

Joy has a warm cast. It has cool depths in the shadows, but it's saturated with sunlight. I see hints of it in the waves. Brush strokes layer in like the water is reflecting a summer sky. Winter is always the more dangerous season for me. The world presents excuses to tuck myself away in my house. Everyone else tries their best to do the same. Who wants to be out in the snow and ice? On the East Coast, it's possible, even preferable, to hibernate for the winter. But I can't do that without risking all the other days.

Except with Daphne standing on the shore, my heart is lifted. Teal and yellow skim the water, disappearing with every blink.

We both have our contradictions. Our contrasts. Mine seem more bearable today. They make more sense. They don't struggle in their frames.

I surf for an hour or so. Daphne doesn't waver on the shore. I check on her perhaps too often. She fills pages of her sketchbook, her expression content. It's not hurting her to be out in the snow.

Being with me might not hurt at all today, if she feels anything like I do.

What if I could give that to her permanently?

What if I could be a man who wasn't like my father?

Those frames come one by one into my thoughts and I hold them in my hands. I observe them closely before I hang them up.

What if?

What if?

What if?

Possibilities fill galleries in my mind. Many of them center on my house. My home. My life. I'm not arrogant enough to think I'll ever be able to leave. My responses to the world are too deeply embedded.

But I would work at it for Daphne. I could extend my time outside the house. Not indefinitely. Just for as long as she needed. If I was with her—

If I had her with me—

It might not be such a disaster. It might not hurt so much.

There has to be a way.

Her family is a real difficulty. Daphne hasn't spoken about the phone call with her brother since it happened, but I know it hurt her. I dismiss the idea of cutting her family off entirely. Any future will need to include them, somehow. Daphne suffers otherwise.

It seems fixable this morning.

And anyway, how am I supposed to give her up?

I can't.

Even if that makes me feel like my father, even if it makes me a criminal, a devil, a bastard, I can't let her go. And more than that, I can't let this feeling go.

I've never felt it before, and I know it won't subside. It's far too real. The way I feel for Daphne has nothing to do with money and everything to do with need.

With obsession.

The good kind. The kind that doesn't cause me any pain, except the pain of seeing something excruciatingly beautiful. The pain of imagining my life without her. Daphne burrowed into my soul with astonishing speed.

I catch a wave and stand up on my board, laughing at the thought. I haven't thought of my soul in years. Didn't believe I had one.

It's the last wave in, the cold soaked into my bones. So cold that I'm shivering by the time I lift my board out of the water. Daphne closes her sketchbook and gets to her feet as I tuck the board under my arm.

"Emerson, look at you."

"I'm fine."

"You're shaking." She rubs her hand on my arm as if she can warm me through the wetsuit. "You're going to freeze to death. You need to get inside." Daphne hooks her arm through mine and pulls me toward the house.

"Don't worry about me, little painter."

"Too late." She's determined, hustling us across the yard. When we get inside, she flips the lock in the mudroom and hurries out of her winter clothes while I hang up my board. "Come on, come on, come on. We need to get into the shower."

"Daphne."

She ignores this and grabs my hand. Daphne takes the stairs two at a time and heads directly into my bedroom. Into my bathroom. She leans into the shower and turns the water on hot. Then she puts her warm, small hands on the hem of my base layer and pushes it off.

"You're too cold." Real concern in her voice.

"Oh, please. There's no need to fuss."

"Yes there is, Emerson." Daphne puts a hand on her hip. "Get out of those clothes. I want you warm."

"You're still wearing *your* clothes."

My little painter is shockingly fast at shedding the rest of her clothing. She steps into the shower and reaches for my hand again, pulling me under the water with her. Daphne gets goose bumps from the heat, shivering with pleasure. But her eyes open quickly and she positions me under the stream. “There,” she says. “Stay there.”

She runs her hands all over me. Rubbing hot water into my skin. And then she takes one of my hands between hers and massages it, her face serious, droplets clinging to her lashes.

My skin is still cold, but everything I feel is warm. Secure. Like arms wrapped firmly around my chest. Around my heart.

“What are you doing, little painter?”

Daphne glances up at me, a serious smile teasing at her lips. “Taking care of you. I got worried.”

This is what it’s like, then. Warmth everywhere. The scent of her in the air. Her sweet, genuine concern. Her hands. I take care of all my pieces. But this is what it’s like for someone to take care of me.

I DID WORRY ABOUT EMERSON WHEN HE WAS OUT THERE ON the waves. It shouldn't have concerned me. He captured me, for one thing. He's used to doing dangerous things. He's in danger right now. My family is looking for him. But I was nervous anyway.

I didn't like it when the waves got larger. I didn't like it when he did tricks over the crests. It was impressive, because he's impressive, but when he went under the surface and out of sight—

My breath caught.

I hated when he rolled off his board and disappeared. If something were to happen, if he was really in trouble, I wouldn't be able to drag him back. I couldn't pick him up out of the water the way he did for me.

I'm still not sure if I'll be able to save him. Not from the ocean. From all the rest. There's a broken part of Emerson, deep down, that makes him surf when it's cold enough to make ice chunks form on the surface. That traps him inside his house. That traps me with him.

I wasn't strong enough to save my brother, so, you know. There's evidence.

But it was good to be out with him. Good to be invited by his warm, just-woken voice in my ear. It was refreshing on the shore, and now I'm wakeful and warm. Eventually, the cold leaves Emerson's hands. When it does, he picks me up, presses my back to the wall of the shower, and pushes himself into me

while he tells me all about the water today. All about the way I looked on the shore. The colors he saw in the water. How it felt as light as summer. The moment feels almost stolen, somehow. He makes me come first, biting into his shoulder, and follows me after, his mouth over mine.

We finish the shower and dry off. Emerson watches me dry my hair. He chooses clothes from my closet—comfortable leggings and a long-sleeved top that's light as air—and we go down to the kitchen.

He cooks breakfast for me.

Emerson's comfortable here. He reaches for things in the cupboards without looking. Everything is exactly where he left it. His shoulders relax. His expression is peaceful. It takes my breath away to see him like this. I didn't realize that he could relax. I just assumed his personality involved constant tension. That it was part of his intensity. But when he is at home—when he feels safe—his body doesn't try so hard to protect him from the world.

We might have had this if he'd asked me on a date when we first met.

That wasn't possible for him, though.

I understand Emerson now. More than I did by far. That kind of interaction wasn't available to him. He interacts with the world through purchases and acquisitions. Through obsessions. That's how he maintains stability and focus. That's how he stays in control. And Emerson, more than most people, needs that.

He can't go out into uncertainty. He can only buy pieces of safety for himself. A date in the city would have been an incredible risk.

I prop my chin on my hand and watch him put bacon onto a tray. Jesus Christ, he's beautiful. It should make me sad to think he couldn't risk a date for me, but it doesn't.

Emerson came to me the only way he could.

He came to me like he comes to his great love, which is art. This is how he approaches paintings that speak to him.

That make him feel something.

This is how he loves.

Really, it's consistent. This is how he is in every area of his life. If he loves a painting, he shows that love through acquisition and collection. He speaks that language to his brothers. It makes my heart ache now to think of how they spoke it back to him. They might not be collectors, but they're his family. He's even like this with nature. He owns his private beach. He insists on mastering the waves, even though it's not comfortable.

Emerson only understands ownership. He owns himself as much as anything else. It's how he's caved out an island of peace in a sea of panic.

He's quiet while he cooks. My thoughts come and go in soft waves. I take him in. The light on his face. The sun comes out from behind a cloud and warms the kitchen. He makes eggs. Toasts an English muffin, hissing when he pulls it from the toaster.

The timer rings on the stove. "Bacon?"

"Yes. Please."

He puts the eggs and the English muffin and the bacon on a plate in a balanced arrangement. Emerson makes up a matching plate for him. Does he know he's approaching this in a very artist-like way? When he's done, he pops open the fridge and takes out two ramekins. These go in the negative space he's left in the center. So, yes. He does know. He's thoughtful about this, and efficient. He gathers silverware and mugs of tea and brings it to me. I think I'm hungriest for how happy he looks.

He sits with me at the kitchen table. The ramekins turn out to be filled with sliced strawberries. Along with salt and pepper shakers, Emerson has a sugar dish. He dusts this over his strawberries, then does the same for mine.

"Good?"

"One thing." I take his chin in my hand, pull him close, and kiss him. He tastes minty and clean, and he makes a little

satisfied noise into my mouth.

I let him go.

“What was that for, little painter?”

“It’s not always a transaction,” I tell him, and he laughs.

We eat in a comfortable silence I wouldn’t have thought was possible when we met. He eats his eggs between the two slices of English muffin. That’s just how he likes to eat eggs, it turns out. I freaked out at him that first morning for nothing.

I take our dishes and put them in his dishwasher, then dry my hands on the dish towel hanging from the handle of his stove.

It’s still early. Plenty of day left.

“So...” A shy heat comes to my cheeks. “What do you want to do now? Work? That’s probably what you do on a normal day.”

“On a normal day. I answer emails and plan for deliveries. Sometimes I attend showings, or gallery openings, or charity auctions.” He smiles. “Don’t worry, little painter.”

“I’m not worried.”

“You thought I might leave you here.”

Fine. He’s right. For a second, I thought he might lock me in and go to a showing. “I can neither confirm nor deny.”

He laughs. It still feels like victory to hear him laugh. “What do you want to do, little painter?”

Go to bed with him. Maybe forever. But right this minute...

“Paint,” I admit. “I want to paint. It’s—” Oof. I don’t usually talk about my painting habits in this much detail. It makes people worry. But Emerson won’t. He already sees everything. “It’s hard for me to go too long without painting. I get headaches if I don’t.”

His gaze intensifies. It’s a heated touch, as real as his hands on my skin. “Headaches?”

“Yeah. Here.” I tap on my temples. “Like pressure.”

“How long do they take to start?”

I wrinkle my nose. “Not that long, honestly. A day or two. Maybe a little longer if I’m on vacation somewhere amazing. Sketching can get me through most times.”

“Crying doesn’t give you any release.”

“I wish. I cry all the time. But...” Now that I think about it. “Maybe it’s having my hands involved that makes the difference. Anyway, I want to paint.”

“Can I watch?” Hope lightens the color of his eyes, and I know, as surely as I’ve ever known anything, that he’ll stay downstairs if I ask him to.

“Yes. On one condition.”

He raises his eyebrows. “What’s that, little painter?”

“That we talk while I paint.”

“I would have thought you’d prefer silence.”

“Sometimes I do, but not today.”

“You don’t want silence?”

“I want to hear your voice.”

Emerson’s cheeks actually flush. He stands up, brushes at his shirt, and offers me his hand. Up in the studio, I marvel at the windows. “Your people did a really good job.”

“They’re specialists.”

He goes through the doors and returns with the heavy chair from his bedroom. It seems effortless for him to move it. He puts it some distance back from the easel. Emerson has given me space to paint, but he’s also given himself space to observe.

“Specialists for artist tantrums?” I choose several paints from the drawers. Emerson replaced all the ones I wasted. Maybe I should be frustrated that I couldn’t actually ruin the space, but I’m glad. These paints are a second chance.

He takes his seat, leaning back in the chair. “Under normal circumstances, it would be possible to scrape the paint off with a razor. But the glass in this house is meant to withstand hurricane-force winds. It has to be cleaned with a solution instead.”

I choose a brush. “Maybe I shouldn’t have done it.”

“You should have done whatever the hell you wanted to do. And that was what you wanted.”

A fresh canvas waits at my easel. That’s where I go with my palette and my paints and my brush.

We square off with each other. The canvas, waiting. Me, adjusting my body until I’m in the right position. There’s a kind of energy I’m looking for, I guess. Weird as that sounds. It never takes long to find it. Even with Emerson in the room. He’s not disruptive to the process.

It’s as comfortable as being alone, actually.

And it feels good to give this to him. He wants it, and it’s within my power. He wants to see what it’s really like when I paint.

This is it. It’s as real as the hours I spent in my little apartment, or in the studio as Leo’s house. I washed this canvas in white yesterday, so I don’t have to wait.

I start with Prussian blue. The color on the canvas is also the color of authenticity. It sounds a little out there, even in my head. Well, it’s true. Emerson would be here even if he wasn’t in the room. I’m thinking of him on the waves with his surfboard.

Starting the piece feels good. My thoughts float to the place where the brush kisses canvas, separated from it only by the paint. I fall into it right away.

What does it mean if painting in front of him doesn’t change anything?

It does change *some* things, obviously. I can feel the heat of him in the room. His gaze on my skin. The fundamental act isn’t altered. The same movements come to my wrists, my

fingertips. The sensation of being connected to the work by a bright line is unchanged.

It feels...

Safe.

A few minutes pass. Maybe ten. I'm not sure. I never pay much attention to time when I'm painting.

"The panic attacks started because of my father," Emerson says.

Something in me answers to the sound of his voice. I can't explain it. I'm not startled. It's like he's been speaking to me all this time. Communicating, even in silence. "Is that what Sin meant?"

I keep my focus on the painting because I know that's what he wants. I can taste in the air how important it is to handle this gracefully. Whatever he's about to tell me. Guilt pinches my stomach. I wasn't graceful about it with Leo. I can't go back and do it again, but I can get this right.

"That's what he meant."

He's quiet for another stretch of time. A wave blooms on the canvas. The edge of a surfboard. Emerson's in the painting now. The suggestion of him, anyway. I haven't started the detail work.

"You could tell me about him, you know. I—" The board balances on the waves. When it has its rider, he'll be tall and strong, steady above the swells. "I want to know everything about you. Everything you want to tell me." The surfer in the painting isn't afraid. His mind is occupied by the movement of his body. He's a reflection of Emerson as he is now, in the room with me. He's not afraid, either. Nervous, I think. A little wary. But not afraid. Not panicked, either. The difference between fear and panic is the difference between a teaspoon and the ocean.

"He was violent. Consumed with control. We were too wild for him."

I try to imagine Emerson like one of my brothers. When I was very young, they were wild. Running through the house. Avoiding my father. I can't quite picture Emerson acting that way. "But you weren't, though. Were you?"

"No." He makes a sound that's close to a laugh, but there's no humor in it. "That didn't matter. His perception was all that counted. His mood."

We're getting closer to the dark heart at the center of this. To the truth Emerson's hidden. To the core of his panic. I keep painting. Keep my breath steady. I will my heart not to race.

"He would beat the shit out of us," Emerson says. "And when he was done with that, he would lock us in the closet."

My brush skips on the canvas. Guilt stings my throat, my eyes. I said that to him the first night I was here. I asked him if he was going to do that to me. I threw it in his face.

For the love of Christ, little painter, I will never lock you—

Pain in his eyes. I was too scared, too wrapped up in myself to see it.

I will never lock you in the closet.

It hurt him to hear that.

"That's horrible," I say, not turning away from the canvas. He might only be able to talk about this if he's not looking at me. I know how hard that was for Leo.

"Yes. It was."

"He was always like that?"

"Maybe not so much when I was very young. I don't remember most of those years."

I add depth to the curve of a wave, connections blooming between my memories of Emerson. All the things he's told me. How he was in the cave. I saw his panic. He admitted that his father was a bastard. The closet—it's the closet he hid for the longest time.

"How long—" My heart aches. I blend some white into the deepest blue on my palette. "How long did he keep you in

there?”

“I think the shortest period was eight hours. But sometimes it would be days.”

“Days?” I clear my throat of my shocked whisper. What the fuck? There wouldn’t have been any light. No air to breathe. It would have been inhuman. It would have been torture. “For what?”

“His motivations varied. The more difficult thing was that he made it dangerous to be outside. When he opened the door, it came with a cost.”

My heart drops to the floor and breaks apart like that paperweight. It’s all I can do to keep painting. Even my father had his better moments. His small kindnesses. He was mainly a bastard, but he never put us in closets. We never went hungry. Jesus.

“And that’s when—”

“When it became harder to tolerate open spaces. And it never got easier.”

“In the cave you talked about a door.” He mentioned a specific image, actually. Traced it with his hand in the air. “The light around the doorframe.”

“It never meant anything good. It made me anxious to see it. On the one hand, it would mean there was hope of escape. On the other, it meant there was a threat on the other side. It was impossible to judge how angry he’d be when the door opened.”

“Were you always alone?”

“There were times it was the three of us. It was better in some ways. Worse in others. In general, I was alone.”

Of course he needs to control his life. Of course his mind responds to the outside world with abject panic.

“The closet,” Emerson says, “was the only safe place.”

I bite my lip until I can’t take the pressure anymore. There. No tears.

“I started having the attacks early on. Elementary school, maybe. It would start ramping up when I saw the light go on outside. He usually let us out at night, so there was always that shape. And when he opened the door, there was no stopping it. I thought I could get used to a beating, but I never did. Which was unfortunate, because he never stopped.”

“Your brothers—”

“They had the opposite reaction. They always thought it was safer to be free. Sin thought so. Will thought so. The beating was just the cost of doing business, I guess. I could never convince my mind not to overreact.”

“I don’t think that’s an overreaction.”

It’s officially too difficult to paint, so I put down the brush and turn to him.

Emerson looks back, and his nerves are on the surface. Palpable. But he’s not worried for himself. He’s worried that this might be too much for *me* to take. That it might break me somehow. Erase the happiness from yesterday.

“You don’t have to worry about that,” I tell him, and his expression turns questioning. “You’re not going to upset me. I mean, obviously I’m upset. I hate—” I whisk unshed tears from my eyes with my knuckle. “I don’t want for this to have happened to you.”

“What happened to you, little painter?”

He’s not the only one who’s been keeping secrets. It’s time, I think. I don’t want to have to say this to him, but we’re in this together now. It’s both of us. He can’t be the only one with his past on the line. Honestly, I’m glad that he watches me so much. I’m glad he sees everything. Because he already knows that something did happen.

He’s known since the night we met.

I take a deep breath. “Nothing like—nothing close to what happened to you. My dad didn’t lock us in closets, but he did hit us. My brothers more than me. I was—” I’m about to say *lucky*, but it wasn’t luck at all. It was because of Leo. Emerson’s eyes narrow. He doesn’t like this, though he’s

prepared for it. The first time we talked at the beach, we discussed this in an oblique way. We're the same like that. We talk about art instead of life. "I was younger, so it didn't happen very many times. Only twice. My brother was—is—very protective."

"Leo."

"Yes. He—" Hesitation comes on strong. Telling anyone about what happened at home is against the rules of being a Morelli. We don't let outsiders know about our private business. Which makes total sense, looking back. It's how our parents kept their reputation intact at church. We kept their secrets for them. Still, this isn't only about *them*. It's about Leo. And I want Leo to be able to trust me, too.

"I won't repeat anything you say."

Jesus. It's like he can read my mind. If I say that to him, he'll insist it's my expressions that tell him everything he wants to know.

Either way.

"Leo would fight with our dad. He would distract him. Draw attention to himself so that he didn't hit the rest of us as often. But he couldn't always be there. There was a time when I was small."

Now the words ball up and ache in my throat. I don't really want to talk about this. I wish I could forget it had ever happened. I've painted it out a hundred times, a thousand, and I'm tired of painting it.

Emerson waits.

"I colored on my dad's shoes. I don't know what I was thinking. I knew better. And I knew there would be consequences, but I thought that I could avoid them. Leo always knew when Dad was angry. I was just—" A laugh that's pure sadness slips out of me. "You know, for a long time, I thought it was a game. He would take me upstairs to my room and tell me to listen to a whole CD while I drew or colored. He didn't want me to know what was happening. But that day, he wasn't there."

“Daphne...”

“I don’t even want to describe it, Emerson. It was in my father’s office. And it didn’t last very long. Thirty seconds, maybe. A minute. But I was so afraid and so—so *shocked*, somehow. The memory won’t drown no matter how many oceans I paint.”

“He hit you?” Emerson’s voice is steady. Soft. He’s taking care with me now. I can see it. Hear it. Feel it.

“He had this leather strap.”

A few tears escape my resolve and run down my cheeks. I wipe them away with the back of my hand.

“It’s really nothing.” I’ve insisted this to myself so many times. And even as I say it to Emerson, I know it’s not true. Leo knew it wouldn’t be nothing. That’s why he worked so hard to stop it from happening in the first place. Yet it wasn’t torture. It didn’t keep me from the world. “I’m not trying—oh, Jesus.”

I’m not trying to show him up.

“I would never think you were comparing, little painter. What was the second time?”

“It was later. It didn’t matter as much.” A tumble. A rush. I want this part to be over. “In high school. He was drunk, and he slapped me. I turned my back on him and ran.”

Emerson holds out his arms to me, and I go. I mean to stand between his knees and keep my composure, but instead I fall into him like he’s the only place I can stand to be.

It’s true.

He is.

His hands move up and down on my back. Emerson breathes. He’s doing the same thing that I tried to do for him. He’s trying to show me that it wasn’t too much. “You know that won’t happen to you here. That won’t happen to you ever again. Don’t you, little painter?”

“I know you take care of all your acquisitions.”

Emerson tips my face up toward his. “Not me. Not here. Not ever. You’re right. I take care of all my pieces. But I care for you the most. I need you to know that.”

“I do.” My heart flutters. “I’ve always known that, I think.”

“I’m not better,” Emerson says, strain edging into his voice. “I’m not a better man than my father, or yours. But you have my word.”

I think I have much more than that.

“How do you do it, then?”

“Do what?”

“Go out.”

Emerson’s jaw tenses, and my heart speeds up. The pull I have toward him gets stronger. Like it’s been grasped with two fists. Like gravity has gotten stronger, but in his direction.

“The same way I passed the time in the closet. I made it into art.”

“In your head?”

“It was dark most of the time, so it was all imagined.” He’s wary about this, too. Emerson must think it’s too strange or unacceptable to mention out loud. “It’s almost constant now. Automatic.”

“You mean...in your head, you imagine—”

“I don’t have to imagine. Most of the time, I can see how the world would look if it were a painting. Pieces that hang on the wall.” He winces, the expression so quick and suppressed it’s barely there. “They’re contained. They can be viewed at a distance.”

“You see the whole world like that?”

“If I’m at home it happens less. Outside, almost always.”

There’s something he’s not saying. “But what?”

Emerson clears his throat. “At first, I saw you that way, little painter. But now I see you as you are.”

“What do I look like?”

He takes a moment, looking into my face with a flash of awe. “Stunning.”

I put my arms around his neck and lean into him. Kiss his cheek. Breathe him in. He thinks this is embarrassing. Something to be hidden. There’s a reason people pay so much for art they love. They wish they could see things like that all the time.

“It’s not true.” I lift my head again. There’s something about his eyes.

“I never lied.”

“You were wrong. You’re so much better.” He doesn’t argue, but he doesn’t agree, either. “Are you sad?”

He blinks. “About what?”

“Sad that you have to be home most of the time? Sad that it’s hard to go out?”

Do you wish everything was different? Because if it had all been different, I might not have met you.

“No, little painter.” Emerson cracks a smile like a sunrise. “I’m not sad. You’re here, too.”

WE SPEND A WEEK TOGETHER.

My little painter studies my life the way she studies the ocean for her sketches. She finds the negative spaces in it and puts herself there. It's consistently surprising, because for all my experience with art, I never noticed those areas in my own house.

I didn't know that a person belongs on the beach every morning when I'm out on the water. This is one of the first things to become part of the shared routine—not the one she had alone at her house, and not the one I had at mine, but the one that includes both of us. Daphne lets me help her into her coat and clothes before we go out into the cold. She likes to reach up and make sure my wetsuit is zipped, though it's on the front and basically impossible to screw up.

It's not just any person, naturally. It's Daphne. She's the only one who's ever fit in that space, with her hood pulled up and her sketchbook balanced in her hands.

There was a Daphne-sized emptiness at my kitchen island I neglected to see. She hooks her feet on the rungs of the stools and drinks tea while I make her breakfast. We don't eat lunch in the kitchen. Most of these days, we eat it upstairs in her studio. She makes me carry the matching chair from her bedroom and put it next to mine. I place an order for more chairs so we can sit in the bedrooms, if necessary. It's not usually necessary.

There was a Daphne-sized negative space in my bed.

She never goes back to her own room after the gallery. Not to sleep, anyway. By the third day, I come into the closet to find her hanging up some of her things next to mine. My little painter blushes pink when she sees the surprise on my face. “It’s just faster in the morning when you want to surf.

In the afternoons, she comes with me to my office. This is the place she feels least comfortable in the house. That discomfort likely has to do with what she told me about her prick of a father. Daphne doesn’t mention it to me in explicit terms, but I notice her tells. Her hand spends more time in the collar of her sweaters. She taps her feet. Has more trouble focusing on her sketchbook, even when she has everything else she likes—tea and a blanket over her lap and a soft pillow to lean against on the small sofa by my desk.

And in the evenings...

Well.

She’s art.

Sometimes in her frame. Sometimes in my bed. Sometimes she pops up afterward and wants to watch a movie, curled up next to me in the living room. Sometimes she’s dead asleep for the rest of the night and I get to carry her upstairs.

It’s bliss.

Aside from the texting. The texting borders on irritating. My brothers want to come for more drinks. They commiserate about my father’s increasing calls and visits. I’m not opposed to giving Daphne more of what she wants, but I find myself unable to give up a single day with her.

I’ve never had a week like this. Not that I can remember.

A peaceful one.

“The weather’s the same every day,” Daphne says, late on the last afternoon. We’re down in my office, and she’s fidgeting. The tip of her charcoal pencil drags across the page but she can’t concentrate. Keeps watching the light through the window. “So cloudy. It’s like time stopped.”

“It is like that, little painter.” A repeat of the same day for a week. I’ve been taking it as a gift. If time doesn’t continue, then nothing will disturb us.

“Do you think it will change soon?”

“I hope not.”

My phone buzzes on my desk.

Alert: Front gate approach

Alert: Front gate entrance

“Daphne—”

The interval between the last alert and the next one is too short.

Alert: Front door motion detected

A pounding knock reverberates through the house.

Daphne freezes. The quiet in my office crystallizes. The temperature drops.

“Is it your brothers?”

“No.” They would tell me if they were coming. They know how important it is now. The hair on the back of my neck pulls up. It’s either a delivery I’m not anticipating, which never happens, or it’s my father. “Go upstairs, little painter. I’ll tell you when to come down.”

Daphne stands up, puts her blanket over her arm, and goes. I don’t want to scare her, but her face is pale. She recognized the rhythms of my house early on. My little painter knows this is not right.

I’ll make it right.

The knock comes again. More insistent this time. Like he’s trying to punch through the door with his bare hand.

Dread fills my gut and begins its work on my lungs, but I go to the door anyway. For a brief moment the sunlight from outside outlines the frame. *You know*, that dark voice says. *You know. You know.*

I pull the door open.

“Hello, Emerson.” My father stands on the porch wearing a different sweater underneath his tan coat. Same pants. My heart has become the surface of my skin. Listening for her is my highest priority. For any movement upstairs. If he sees her, we’re both fucked. “Are you going to invite me in?”

I should have expected this. Sin and Will have been making comments about him. He’s been escalating his efforts with both of them. He’s out of money, and he has three sons. It was only a matter of time.

If I don’t allow him in, he’ll assume I’m hiding something. He’ll dig in to that pressure point.

“Do you need more money? Sin said you’re scraping for pennies.”

“I don’t need more money.” He blinks at me, incredulous, and then he puts his hand on my shoulder and pushes past me. Ambles into the foyer. “Collected any new art lately, son?”

He knows.

He doesn’t, but my organs feel twisted. All knotted up. I close the door. “That’s how I make my living. I would think you’d be focused on making one for yourself.”

The huffed laugh is a sound out of my nightmares. “It’s touching that you’re worried for me.”

His movements are too slow. Too calculated. He’s leaning into doorways. Into my office. Thank God I told Daphne to go upstairs. My father sees something inside that interests him and goes through like it’s his goddamn house. I follow after him, letting my expression reflect impatience. Not the stark sense of impending doom. Never that.

“It smells good in here,” he comments.

“I keep a clean house.” His eyes glint. This is the worst kind of game now. Because the scent of Daphne’s shampoo hangs subtly in the air. “I can’t teach you computer literacy at the moment, unfortunately. You’ll have to come back another time.”

“I know how to use a fucking computer.” His face darkens, but he controls it quickly. “Is it pretty?”

“Is what pretty?”

“What you’ve been collecting.”

“I only acquire valuable pieces. The beauty is in the eye of the beholder, as always.”

“Valuable,” he repeats, tasting the word. “How valuable? Is it worth what you paid?”

“Every piece I acquire is worthwhile for one reason or another.” I’m pretending with everything I have that I don’t give a fuck that he’s asking these questions. That I’m bored answering them. But I do give a fuck. Every sense is on high alert. Adrenaline sweeps through my veins, and I have conflicting needs. I have to listen for Daphne. I have to keep her safe. And I have to let my mind do its work to keep the intrusion of my father at a safe distance. I’m aware that his arrival here is a trigger for an attack. I won’t be able to hold it off indefinitely.

It can’t happen now. The purpose of protecting Daphne keeps panic in the background for the moment.

He moves past me, out of my office, and goes deeper into the house. He wanders past closed doors and picks his way through until he finds the living room.

One of Daphne’s mugs rests on the side table by the house. His eyes lock onto it. I feel him considering it in the context of the room. My father doesn’t see things like I do. No one does. But he is my father. I’m horrified to realize that the way he’s looking now is familiar. It’s the way I would take in a room in a painting. A still life is almost never a simple representation of the objects. Each one has some subtext. Some meaning.

There is only one mug on the table. I don’t leave glasses out. It could easily be mine.

My father turns around and looks me in the eye. He becomes the subject. The world around him darkens. Retreats. Out of frame, I can feel Daphne’s presence upstairs. So sweet. So precious. So mine.

“Where is she?”

Fuck. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“The girl.” An amused grin. “The art. Is that what you call her? You acquired her. You’ve got her in here. I know you do. Where did you hide her, Emerson?”

I raise my eyebrows. Turn down the corners of my mouth into an imitation of concern. “I’m afraid you’ve lost it, Dad. Have you been drinking?”

“I’m stone-cold sober,” he says, and his grin turns vicious. He might be sober, but he’s evil to the core, and I don’t want him to know that Daphne exists. That’s the part that makes me sick. “Oh, you boys thought you were so much better than your father, but look at you.” He steps forward and claps my shoulder. “Following in my footsteps.”

I brush at my sleeve where he touched me. “You’re delusional.”

Fuck that. I’m not following in his footsteps. And insofar as Daphne is in technical terms my captive, he didn’t just capture women. He hurt them. He sold them. He did not care for his acquisitions. He didn’t care for anything, including his sons.

My father strolls back out, headed toward the back of the house. Into the kitchen, with its windows looking out onto the ocean. There is no sign of breakfast here, or lunch. He doesn’t care about the kitchen island. He goes to the window and shoves his hands into his pockets.

The mechanism for survival is failing. My mind struggles with the vile subject. Difficult to turn my father into a flattened piece when I hate the sight of him in my house so much. Anger wells, threatening to overrun its frame. It bleeds to the edges like red paint bubbling out of the canvas. Guilt follows after, yellow and sharp. On some level, he’s right. I’m keeping Daphne here. I did hurt her. It hurts her now to be separated from her family. But I’d never damage her the way he damaged the women he trafficked.

The distinctions collapse. They don't really matter, do they? It's all evil in the end. Anyone who acquires another person is better off dead. My father is evil and so am I. I have succumbed to the force of gravity. An apple can't fall far from the tree.

"What do you need?" I ask, managing at the last moment to wrestle my tone into something unaffected.

"I don't need anything." He shrugs, dark eyes coming back to mine. "I wanted to talk to you. I wanted to see how you were doing."

"You've done that, and it didn't end well. It ended with me throwing you out. Did you forget?"

"I forgave." He taps a hand over his heart, mirroring my own false concern back at me. "I assumed you were not well. That you were having trouble with your mind, like always. It must have been a shock to see me. Sin didn't prepare you well enough, I suppose. And people have strong reactions when they're unprepared."

"I didn't have a strong reaction," I comment. "I just hate you. A strong reaction would have been to kill you."

"Oh, but you're not a killer." He chuckles. The light from my window attempts to soften his face and fails. "You're too weak for that. A man who paints."

"I don't paint."

"Collects art. Whatever." He waves his hand in the air as if there's no difference. "A man like you isn't a murderer."

I let out a sigh. "How much?"

If he has a price, I'll pay it. From what little I could hear of Daphne's phone call, her brother wanted much the same thing. There is no price I would accept to give Daphne up. I would pay any price to get my father to fuck off forever.

He cocks his head to the side, faux-confused. "How much for what?"

"How much for you to leave here and never come back? I have plenty of money. Name your price."

“You have money,” he echoes. He looks around my kitchen in earnest now. Everything here is new. Fresh. It’s clean. “You certainly have plenty, Emerson. I can’t argue with that.”

Why would he? No doubt he’s done his research. He’ll know that I have money. That we are all wealthy. Wealthier, in fact, than he ever was.

“The number,” I press. “Tell me what it is and I’ll pay it.”

“No amount of money can keep me from my sons.”

My spine turns to ice. Out of anyone else’s mouth, it would be a promise. From him, it’s a threat. My father will never leave me alone. Not now that he knows where I live.

It was always a rigged game, wasn’t it? He made me this way. Shaped me into this person with his own two hands. And now he’s going to exploit the vulnerabilities I couldn’t hide from him.

It’s not possible for him to know everything. The work I’ve done over the years. The time I’ve spent trying to achieve some level of normalcy.

It’s possible for him to know enough to destroy it.

All my nerves are strung out now. My mind flashes a gallery of options at me. I could beat the shit out of him. I could kill him.

“Name it,” I demand. “Will and Sin want nothing to do with you, either. I’m not above paying you off.”

“You were above it before.”

“I’ve reassessed the situation. You are not valuable. You’re nothing I want to look at, and nothing I can sell. So I’d rather take the loss now and never have to look at you again.”

My father laughs again, rubbing his hand over his mouth like I’ve made an excellent joke. Nothing has ever been this serious. I swore once that I’d never give him a penny. I built my wealth in spite of how hard he worked to keep me from the world.

I study him like a cheap, shitty piece of art. I'm not bothering to determine its value. All I want to know is whether he's planning to bolt for the stairs.

He's not, I don't think. His body is too relaxed. He usually telegraphs those kinds of movements. No—he's not going to run. And if he's *not* struggling to catch a glimpse of the woman he referenced, he knows she's here. He's certain of it. The undercurrent of angry, desperate tension that coils under his skin is also absent.

He looks too satisfied.

Over what?

I can't ask him. Pressing him for details will only serve as confirmation that a woman is here, that she is Daphne, and that I love her.

A frame comes down over that thought with shocking speed. I can't turn it facedown. Can't even push it to a gallery wall. What the fuck? No. I can't love her. That's not what this is. I *value* her. She's extremely, intensely valuable, and I take care of all my acquisitions.

"I have things to do today." I take my phone from my pocket and check the time on the screen. "Let's finish this, and I'll pay you whatever it's worth."

"I meant it, Emerson. You don't have to worry about your father another moment." He smiles, teeth sharp, and I hate it.

I wait, letting the silence grow between us. My father likes the sound of his own voice, and he'll keep talking if I give him the chance. The cheap colors of his clothes mark him as part of the outside world. Something that doesn't belong. He remains, for the moment, an ugly gash at the heart of my home.

Incorrect. The heart of my home is upstairs.

Staying very, very quiet.

It's taking more of my energy to flatten him into art. More than I want to spend on him. My energy is for Daphne, and he's been here too long.

“You could fuck off for free,” I point out. “Do you need me to walk you to the door?”

“No, no.” He meanders to the hallway. Back to the front door. If he’s here much longer, the whole house will be stained with him. My lungs are already beginning to tighten. I don’t have time for this bullshit. “Lovely visit, Emerson.”

“Let’s not repeat it.”

He glances down at the front of his coat, fiddling with one of the buttons. “It’s a shame, really, that it’s not a good place to be.”

“For you.”

“For *you*, Emerson.” His eyebrows raise in an imitation of concern. “It won’t be good for you at all in about—oh, fifteen minutes, maybe. I stopped by to give you fair warning. Family loyalty and all that.”

My ribs leap inward, crushing my lungs. This motherfucker. “You’ve never been particularly loyal, Dad.”

“Not me.” Another infuriating chuckle. “I called the Morellis. I’m collecting all that reward money. That family understands loyalty.”

My heart turns to stone.

This wasn’t fair warning. This was a diversion. He ate up all the time we had to get away, and now he’s spitting it at my feet. All those minutes wasted like spilled paint and burned canvas. He came here to gloat because I threw him out. Because he doesn’t really need money. Sin was wrong. My brothers were both wrong. He found another way.

“We won’t be seeing each other for a while, Emerson.” He puts his hand out with a frown and squeezes my shoulder. I want to tear his hand from his wrist. Instead, I’m working to contain this horrified, falling feeling. An arrest. Jail. A slow descent into madness.

No. It won’t be slow. It’ll be quick. I could be dead in fifteen minutes.

I have to make a plan. I have to protect my little painter from the inevitable scene. I shove all my emotions away. Nail them to the wall. No time for them now.

I take the shoulder of his jacket in my fist and push him out the door.

No, I have to leave her here. I have to make a plan. I have to make a plan. I shove all the feelings away. Nail them hard to the wall. Flatten them out. No time for feeling now. “If you come back again, I’ll kill you.”

“Good luck.” He grins, and for a single moment I consider killing him now for what he did.

Instead, I slam the door in his face and run for Daphne.

She’s waiting at the top of the stairs, her face pale. “What happened?”

I crush her to me for a heartbeat. *For the last time*, that voice says.

And then her wrist is in my hand. I take her to the bedroom first. Collect a burner phone. Back toward the stairs. We need to go down and out. To the water.

They’ll be coming from the road.

“Emerson, please. What did he say?”

That the world was ending. That he’d invited in the cataclysm. I take her through the house, to the mudroom. I don’t know how to dress her for this. A wetsuit? It’ll only be a short time in the sea. “My father called your family. He told them where you were. They’re coming for you.”

I hear the words as I’m looking into her eyes. Into Daphne’s sweet, dark eyes, which have captivated me from the very first glance. Into the face of the only woman I’ve ever loved.

I love her.

I *love* her.

“We—” She raises her arm so she can kiss the back of my hand. “We have to go. We have to go *right now*. He’ll never let

me see you again.”

This is the painting I’ll see in my head every waking moment for the rest of my life. In my dreams until I’m dead. Daphne looking up at me, those moonlight eyes fiery with determination. She’s going to slip the bonds of her family and run.

My little painter can’t do that.

She can’t chain herself to me. Can’t go down with the ship. I’m wreckage, and I have been for a long time. I’m a stalker. A menace. I’m my father’s son. And she needs her family. She’d suffocate without them if I kept her away from them for good.

I take her face in my hands.

“What are you doing? We have to leave.”

“Not you.”

A sharp breath. “What? Emerson, no.”

“You have to go back to them.” We don’t have time for the conversation this moment demands. “Go back to your family. Find a man who’s not a nightmare. One who’s never held you captive. One you can bring home to your brother.”

“You’re not saying this to me.” She’s stunned. “You are *not* breaking up with me.”

“We were never together, little painter. You were just a piece in my collection. I’m returning you to your original owners. I’ll stay with you until they take you home.”

Panic flashes across her face. “You can’t. My brother is going to—you *can’t*. Leave. Leave *now*.”

“If you think I’m leaving you alone—”

“You have to. I’ll fix it, Emerson. I’ll make him understand, and then you can come back.” I am not afraid of Daphne’s brother. The worst he can do is kill me. I’ve wished for that before. But her fear is rising, cresting. “Please. You might get arrested. You might get *hurt*. I don’t want you to get hurt.”

I'm sending her away, and she's still concerned for my safety.

Nothing has ever been so painful.

I won't make her witness to the inevitable scene.

It's the only chance I'll have to say it. "I love you."

Shock is a catchlight in her eyes. "What?"

"Do you understand, little painter? I love you. That's why I have to let you go. You can't be with a man like me." I acquired her for selfish reasons. For sex reasons. Maybe even love reasons, but it's real now. I care about her more than myself, more than my need for control. I love her enough to give her back her freedom—even if it means never seeing her again.

Tears cling to her lashes. "That doesn't make any sense. If you love me, then we should be together."

Our time runs out. Sooner than I expected. Sooner than I wanted, but the impending disaster would have arrived at some point. This was only ever temporary, as much as I wanted to believe otherwise. I always loved her enough to let her go.

I press a kiss to her forehead. Another one to her lips.

We both reach for my wetsuit at the same time.

It's a scramble to get it on. Her hands are deft on the zipper. Tears run down her face, but she's steady. Focused. "I'll make sure no one touches your paintings."

"It's not the paintings I'm worried about. It's you. They're going to assume I'm still inside with you. They're going to be ready to shoot. You won't have much time to explain." I press the burner phone into her hand. "You call first. If you don't, they'll storm the house. Upstairs. Quickly."

Daphne hesitates. "Please come back."

"You won't be here," I say. "You're going to stay far away from me, where it's safe. I'm no good for you, little painter. No good for anyone, but especially you. I wish you could see

yourself.” Her cheeks are tearstained, her lips trembling. She’s a mess. A beautiful mess. “You’re a work of art. My favorite piece. I’ll remember it forever.”

MY HEART WON'T STOP POUNDING.

I hate this so much.

All I have is the burner phone and a place to sit in the studio.

All I want is Emerson.

I could throw up. Scream. Cry some more. I don't do any of those things. I sit on the stool in my art studio and take calm breaths. I dried my tears on the way up. Tried to put myself back together.

Emerson has been gone for five minutes.

The house feels empty without him. Unstable. Like he's sucked all the supports out of the walls and blown the windows out. I stood at the studio window and watched him push his board out into the waves. He looked back at me before he went. Emerson didn't wave. He put his hand to his heart, his face already going distant and blank.

He was lying about being okay. He couldn't have been telling the truth. I swallow hard and try to hold the memory of his touch in my mind. How it felt to have his palms on the sides of my face. To have his mouth against mine. At the tips of my fingers, I can feel the phantom movements it would take to paint that moment.

This is not what I wanted.

A half-finished painting behind me in the studio. Emerson gone. His *father* in his house. I heard his voice from where I hid, out of sight, at the top of the stairs. He has a voice like my father's. Sometimes it sounds polite and genteel, like at parties and at church, and other times he spoke to us the way Emerson's father spoke to him.

Like a monster.

I exhale, controlling my breath instead of screaming all the anger out. I didn't have time to finish my painting. It bothers me now. Enrages me. It gives me a headache. We had just enough time to see how good things could be, and now it's ruined.

I love you. That's why I have to let you go. You can't be with a man like me.

Men are always doing this to me, aren't they? They make plans and don't ask permission. Emerson's father didn't do this because I asked him to. He just wanted money. And Emerson—

I love you and it's over in the same sentence.

It's not over. It can't be.

Another deep breath. I run my fingers through my hair and relax my face. I refuse to look shaken. I refuse to look hurt. I refuse to look as if Emerson has done me any harm, because he hasn't. No harm, only heartache.

The burner phone waits in my hand. In one more minute, I'm supposed to call.

Tick.

Tock.

This is just about staying alive until things settle down.

They never will, sings that voice in my head.

The minute ends.

I dial Leo's number. There are voices in the background. "Daphne?"

"It's me. Are you—are you outside?"

“Yes.”

“Please don’t—just be careful when you come in. There’s nothing dangerous in here. I’m okay. But there’s—” I’m about to say *expensive art*. “There are valuable things in here.”

“Where are you?”

“I’m on the second floor.” Tension fills the space between his words. They won’t know for sure that I’m telling the truth until they’re inside. “In the art studio. I’m alone. It’s safe to come in.”

“Stay where you are,” he orders. “Don’t move. I’m coming to get you.”

He hangs up and the front door bangs downstairs. It was unlocked. They didn’t have to force it, but they still opened it like they’re an invading army. Men shout back and forth to each other. My heart races. This is like when the cops came to Leo’s house, only worse. Heavy footsteps rattle the floor. They’re searching for him.

For us.

Quick footsteps on the stairs. So many people. It scares me, and I’m in the middle of swallowing that fear when Leo strides in through the studio door.

He takes one look at me and his mouth drops open, his eyes going wide with relief. One hand comes up over his eyes—a second, then he drops it—and I scramble down off the stool to meet him.

Leo hugs me so hard my feet leave the floor. He smells like the snow and his house, clean and cold and familiar, and I can’t help hugging him back. I can’t help pressing my chin into his shoulder. I can feel his heart pounding through his shirt. He’s not wearing a coat. I was right. He’s prepared for violence.

I’m so heartbroken. I’m so relieved. I want Emerson so much, but I don’t want a life where this isn’t possible.

Men come into the room behind him, telling each other that it’s clear, it’s clear. They go into my bedroom. They go

into Emerson's room. *Stop*, I want to tell them. *There's nothing for you in there*. But I can't argue with this many uniforms. The FBI. A SWAT team. I don't think they usually let people come along on rescue missions like this, but despite all their guns and their code words, I can't imagine them winning an argument against Leo.

He lets out a breath and puts me back on the floor. His hands come up to my face and he peers into my eyes. "Are you okay? Tell me if you're not. Tell me now, Daphne."

"I'm okay." He brushes my hair back, checking my eyes again. "I'm not drugged or anything. I'm really okay."

Leo nods, but he has to make sure for himself. He reaches down and checks both of my ankles with his hands, a soft touch, then stands up and takes one hand in his. He pushes my sleeve up so he can see one wrist, then the other.

Checking for bruises, I think. Marks. He's checking to make sure I wasn't chained. My heart breaks a little more. He tips my chin up. There are no marks on my neck, but Leo seems relieved all over again to discover it for himself.

There's no damage.

"Who did this? Whose house is this?"

I shake my head, buying time.

He sighs, like he knew this would be the answer. Like he suspected that someone had terrified me. I hate letting him think Emerson did that to me. That Emerson threatened me with consequences if I gave his name. He didn't. He's never asked me to keep him a secret from anyone.

Emerson knew this would be a possibility the whole time.

I'm not giving him up, even if he thinks we can't be together.

You're a work of art. My favorite piece.

"Okay." Leo puts his arm around my shoulders and ushers me to the door. When I was younger, he would have carried me in his arms. If I'd given him any hint that I wasn't okay,

he'd do it now. Instead he tucks me into his side and takes me out.

A man on the stairs tries to stop us. "There's a space we've set aside for the interview. We need to do that before—"

"Not now." Leo doesn't give him a second look.

"The investigation—"

"You can conduct your interview when I'm sure she's up to it."

I don't say anything. I don't want to be taken to a separate room with strangers to be questioned about what happened to me. I'm still not over watching Emerson disappear into the ocean. I still need time to think about what I'm going to say.

It's such a horrible crush of emotions. I'm relieved that Leo can see me so that he won't be worried. I'm terrified that he'll never understand. I hope he will. And I need Emerson. I miss him with a physical pain. My muscles ache with the fact that he's gone. With the way he tried to end things.

At least Leo is going to be okay now. I bet he hasn't been sleeping. He has dark circles under his eyes. I'm tired, too. Tired of all this. Tired of fighting. Tired of not knowing where Emerson is, even though it's only been a few minutes. If he's safe. If he got away. My heart keeps speeding up with the uncertainty. It's like being denied paint. Or denied air.

Where? That voice asks again and again and again. *Where is he? How is he?*

How long does he have before he starts to panic?

It was a little while when he rescued me. He should still have some time.

"All finished?" The FBI agent standing near Emerson's gate is brusque.

"Yes," Leo says. "Go about your business."

The agent shakes his head, mumbling something under his breath about *protocol*. They should have known Leo would

insist on going. He wasn't going to wait another second to see if I was all right.

We go outside the gates. Leo's SUV is waiting off to the side. He came in last, after all the cops, and made them wait so he could go in first.

That's my brother.

He opens the passenger door for me, helps me in, and reaches for the buckle.

"I can do it," I protest, but I let him click the buckle into place anyway. "I'm fine."

"We'll let the doctors be the judge of that." Leo closes the door and goes around to the driver's side. Climbs in. When his hands are on the wheel, his shoulders let down. He's exhausted.

"The doctors?"

"We're going to the hospital."

We go there without stopping anywhere else. One of the police cars escorts us. Leo pulls up to a set of doors in the back. Before I can undo my buckle, his car is surrounded by bodyguards, led by Gerard, Leo's head of security. Gerard's face lights up when Leo tells him the news.

Leo walks me inside, safe in the bubble of his people. We move through secure hallways and a waiting room cleared of everyone else. A doctor meets me in a private room in a private wing. This is what it means to go to the hospital as Leo's sister.

No one is here to photograph me. No one is here to see me but the doctors he's chosen.

All my worry descends. The stress of being in Emerson's house when the cops came. The rush to get him out. The way he said he loved me. The way he left. The blood drains out of my face.

"I can stay with you, if you want me to." Leo probably thinks it's the doctor who's made me nervous. She's a soft-

spoken woman with dark hair. Two nurses are with her. “They’re going to ask you questions first.”

“Okay. Yeah.”

Leo sits in a chair by the bed and takes my hand in his. It’s a good thing, probably. I need something to focus on in the hailstorm of questions. All I want are answers. I want to know where Emerson is. But for the next while, I’m the one giving them. They ask me in many different ways if I’ve been assaulted. If I’ve been harmed. If I’ve been raped. No and no and no. I pull my sweater over my head and let them put a stethoscope over my tank top. There’s no evidence of the bite mark from Emerson’s brother, and there are of course no bruises.

Is he still in the ocean?

Is he on land?

Where?

Where?

Where?

Emerson’s not in his house. The FBI agents are there. All those agents are going through his things to make sure they can—

I don’t know. Claim that he kidnapped me? My headache gets worse. The nurses finally force Leo to leave and ask me one more barrage of questions. When they’re finished, he comes back in and sits on the edge of the bed.

I’m less furious now. I’m tired, and I’m afraid for Emerson, and I want him back.

Leo pats my leg under the hospital blanket. “The detectives need to talk to you, Daph. Can you do it now? If you can’t, I’ll tell them to wait.”

My heart tiptoes up to my throat. This part isn’t going to be good, and I just want it to be over. “I can do it now.”

He goes back to the door and beckons them in. Then Leo comes and stands near the bed. He’s not leaving.

A man and a woman in sharp uniforms enter the room. Their faces are set. Neutral. Leo's is less neutral. This is probably the part that's been causing him the most pain—wondering what happened to me. His relief that I'm okay isn't going to erase the fact that he'll want retribution for this. He'll want Emerson to pay for what he did. All those sleepless nights. The sick terror of having someone he loves go missing.

I don't have a way to lie about this. I've never been good at lying. It won't work now.

"Ms. Morelli," the woman says. "Can you describe what happened to you after you left your apartment? We understand you were being held at..." She rattles off Emerson's address. "For the last two weeks. How did you get there?"

My face goes hot. It must be red. Leo's watching me, brow furrowed, dark eyes alive with a worried anticipation. I look from him to the cops and take a deep breath.

"I'm sorry." Leo narrows his eyes. "I'm so sorry. All this fuss—you didn't need to do this. I was irresponsible. I was—I was upset that my brother was being protective. I felt a little trapped, and I wanted to get away for a while. So I ran away."

"By yourself or with Mr. Leblanc?"

Leo's eyes snap to the cops. He might have won the argument about his presence on the rescue team, but he didn't have this information.

"I ran away with Emerson, yes. I'm so sorry that all of you had to waste your time trying to find me. It was my choice. I did it."

The detectives exchange a look. The woman opens her mouth to speak.

Leo gets there first. "What the fuck, Daphne?"

His eyes bore into mine. He was soft before, gentle, but now tension sings in the room.

The male detective holds up a hand. "Mr. Morelli, we don't want to ask questions that would disturb the victim. She's just been released from captivity."

“Get out,” Leo snaps. “Both of you.”

Both detectives puff up, getting ready to argue. “Sir, if you’re not able to—”

“If you’re not able to get the fuck out of this room, then you have five minutes left in your current positions and you’ll never work in the state of New York again.”

I want to hide under the blankets. That’s what I want. That’ll show them how independent I am.

“You want to keep your jobs? Your reputations? Would you like your families to be safe?” Leo’s attention is on them now, and they hate it. He’s being an asshole. Cruel and demanding.

“Sir—”

“If you want any of those things, then you’ll get out of my sight and let me speak to my sister.”

The two detectives share a long, weary glance.

“We’ll finish our questioning at a later time,” the man says finally. “Please let us know when you’re ready.”

They leave without a backward glance. I don’t blame them. It’s not safe to argue with a Morelli. It’s the least safe to argue with Leo.

The door closes.

“Daphne Valeria Morelli, what the hell do you think you’re doing?”

His anger is less stinging now, and if I really look, I can see that it’s a thin layer over a deep well of fear. This has cost him. I can’t stand the pain in his eyes. I close mine. Just for a minute.

“It’s the truth,” I say into the darkness. I’m not going to break down. Not in here. I open my eyes again and meet Leo’s. “I’m sorry, Leo. That’s the only thing I’m going to tell the cops.”

He stares back at me, disbelieving, like he doesn’t know me. And maybe that’s true, as painful as it is. Maybe he

doesn't. Maybe it's impossible to ever know another person.

But it's not, is it? I know Emerson.

And I know what was true. I'm not making it up. I wasn't brainwashed. I wasn't hurt. I was a captive. That's all. That was partially my choice, too. Will gave me the option to leave, and I didn't take it. I wanted to stay. It's not illegal for a person to change her mind. Leo changed his. He married Haley, despite how he felt about the Constantines. Once he met her he couldn't let her go.

"I've been looking for you." His voice is rough. Strained. "For *days*."

"I know that. I knew you would. I felt awful about it." Tears burn my eyes. "I never wanted you to worry. I thought about you the whole time."

"It was your choice, but you didn't call?"

"He—" *The truth, Daphne, even if it hurts.* "I didn't have my phone."

"Because he took it from you."

"I—"

"Don't bother lying about it. I know it wasn't at your apartment."

"I wanted to go with him," I burst out, a tear rolling down my cheek. "And he wanted me to stay. He didn't want me to go back to *you*. You'd never let me out again."

"No. Because this is the asshole who bought your paintings. I saw three of them in his house. Emerson Leblanc is your fucking stalker."

"He wasn't—"

"*Daphne.*"

I feel trapped in this standoff. More trapped than I was in the frame. The only way out is honesty.

"Fine. He was."

Leo curses under his breath, his hands coming up to cover his face. “He got to you, then. He tricked you. He made you think you had to protect him.”

“No one tricked me. No one’s making me say this. I’m choosing this. I promise.”

“Daphne...” Leo’s tone softens, and he is my *brother*, the one who carried me up the stairs to hide me from our father’s violence, the one who came to all my art shows in college, the one who would do anything for me. He’s my favorite. It kills me to fight with him. “Do I have to explain to you how Stockholm syndrome works?”

I fold my arms over my chest. “Seriously, Leo? Have you met your own wife? You told the cops she was your prisoner. I didn’t believe you, but now I think you were telling the truth.”

He’s silent, and I know it’s because he was honest. I thought he was self-destructing from grief, but it *is* what happened between them, even if he exaggerated some of the details. I also know that Haley loves him to the ends of the earth. I heard the head-over-heels, til-death-and-past-it tremble in her voice when she made her wedding vows.

Leo looks away, his teeth gritted. When he returns, his eyes are dark with skepticism. “So you’re saying this is about love.”

“I...” He said he loved me. He also said I shouldn’t be with him. But that doesn’t cancel out love. It just doesn’t. My mouth is dry with the stress of the hospital and the argument and the guilt. “Yes. It is.”

My brother makes a sound that’s somewhere between a scoff and a laugh. “If this is about love, Daphne, then where the fuck is he?” He shakes his head. “You know what? It doesn’t matter. I’m never letting him get to you again. If he comes for you, he’s a dead man.”

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Amelia Wilde is a USA TODAY bestselling author of steamy contemporary romance and loves it a little too much. She lives in Michigan with her husband and daughters. She spends most of her time typing furiously on an iPad and appreciating the natural splendor of her home state from where she likes it best: inside.

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