

THE  
SECRETS  
THAT YOU  
KEEP

CHLOE I. MILLER

the  
*Secrets*  
that you  
*Keep*

Chloe I. Miller

KEY LIME BOOKS



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For Goose, Kitten, and Oscar the Grouch

love you forever

This novel contains themes that might be disturbing to some readers. For content warnings, please visit:  
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Music plays a large role in this story, and to receive the most immersive experience possible, we invite you to explore the novel's soundtrack.

Remember to listen closely!  
Clues to solving the mystery can be found hidden in the lyrics.

[www.chloeimiller.com/playlists](http://www.chloeimiller.com/playlists)

the  
*Secrets*  
that you  
*Keep*

SOUNDTRACK







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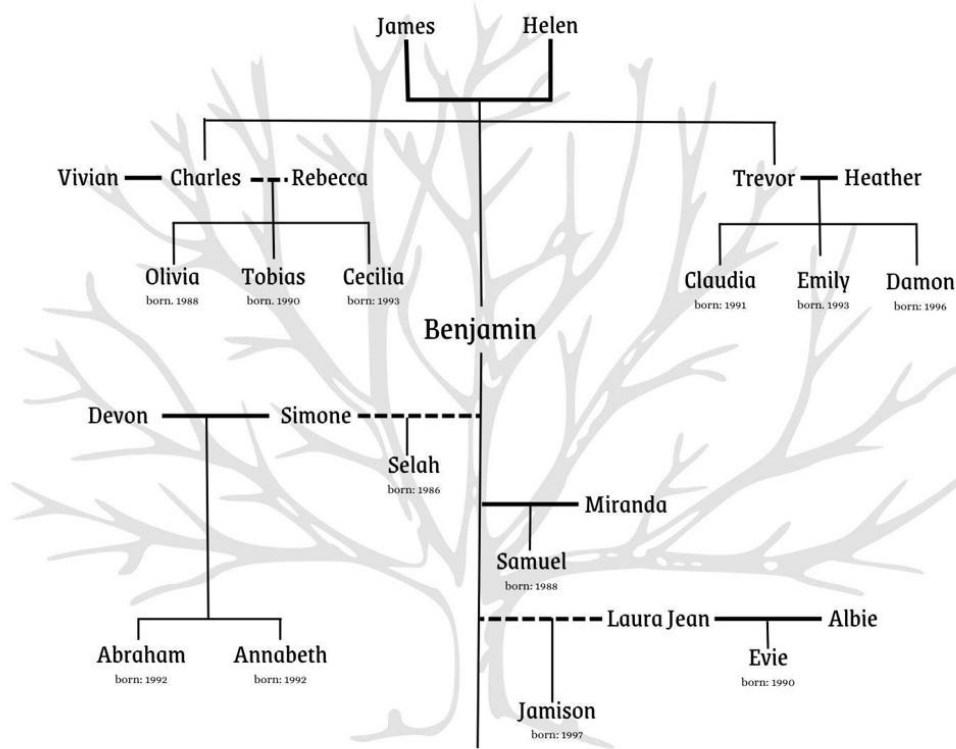
Acknowledgments

Sneak Peek

Our Lips Are Sealed

# Fairweather

## Family Tree



- Marriage —————
- Relationship - - - - -
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## PROLOGUE

A fingernail moon scratched at the night sky, partially illuminating the playing field. Surrounded by marshland covered with thick underbrush, she crouched in the tall grass, holding her breath to keep quiet.

The game had begun.

Nothing but towering sand pines, whose narrow trunks offered little protection, lay ahead. Edging from her hiding spot, she crawled slowly through the sandy mud with stiff limbs. The movement caused the world to spin, and she gritted her teeth. He must have injected her with something more potent than his usual concoction.

She couldn't blame him for being overly cautious when dealing with her. His regular opponents played blindly, unaware of why they were chosen.

But waking alone in this foreign landscape, she'd known immediately why she was there. Her usefulness to him had ended, and it was her turn to lose.

Shaking away the pinpricks of light in her vision, she continued crawling on her hands and knees towards the forest in the distance, until a familiar shadow appeared, forcing her to stop.

“Run, run, run as fast as you can.”

Pressing out of sight into the nearest bush, she grunted as thorns tore into her flesh. A startled, slimy creature jumped from a branch and became entangled in her hair, croaking for help to the chorus of other swamp vermin singing in the night.

Stifling a scream, she wrestled what she hoped was only a frog off her head and drew a calming breath. The air was thick and muggy, nothing at all like the day before, when he surprised her with a visit.

And to think she had been happy to see him. It was Christmas, and he was all she had.

The screeching of insects quieted, and in the gaping silence, she heard a branch snap.

“Run, run, run as fast as you can,” his singsong voice chanted.

Their match was moving at a faster pace than his others. Playing tag wasn't his favorite part of the game, but it was close. He liked to savor it, torturing his players for hours. Allowing them to believe they had a real chance at winning, but that was never the case.

He always won.

“Run, run, run as fast as you can.”

The wind carried away the childlike taunt, and when it blew past, the scent of salt water tickled her nose. Eyes wide, she cautiously emerged from her position to see choppy waves bouncing in the dull moonlight.

But beyond the water, a faint glow waited. It wasn't the moon or a star, but something distinctly man made, and she bolted towards it.

The wind traveled with her as she ran, cutting a path through the brush to aid in her escape. Weak legs slogged through the bog, carrying her closer to the smell of saltwater, but in her haste, she tripped on a piece of driftwood, tumbling through the last barrier onto the swampy beach.

And there, just across the water, his final insult stood like a bright beacon on the opposite shore.

Haven House.

He had brought her home.



## CHAPTER 1

*Rebecca*

1987

“**S**ometimes, I think you’re evil.”

With her gaze locked onto the bright red Mercedes pulling into the parking lot, Rebecca Miller’s lips curved at the compliment.

“I’m not evil. I’m interesting.”

Her co-worker, Paul, joined her at the window, and together they watched a damn near perfect male specimen emerge from the car.

“His name is Charlie Fairweather,” Paul said.

“Money?”

“Bunches.” Paul cut her a sideways glance. “Is he going on the list?”

Four leggy coeds trotted over to greet the new arrival, and Rebecca’s smile widened. She did love a good challenge.

“Does he have a girlfriend?”

“Several, apparently,” Paul said, swiping up trays to take to the kitchen. “Good luck.”

Rebecca returned to her already busy section of the Blue 42 Bar and Grill to watch Mr. Fairweather from a safe distance. He entered the restaurant with his bouquet of females, and the group headed directly to a booth by the bar, forcing a handful of freshmen out of their way. College students from the nearby University of Alabama were packing in early for an afternoon of football and drinking, and while everyone waited for the game to start, he held court as more patrons, mostly women, joined his entourage.

The air of authority Charlie Fairweather held—coupled with his understated, albeit expensive clothing—smelled like old money to Rebecca. And old money always made the list, going straight to the top.

Born dirt poor to a single mother, she’d spent her younger years hopping from place to place while Mama dated her way through the Cottdale, Alabama single men’s circuit.

Male roommates permitted Mama to pay their portion of the rent with something other than cash, but when Rebecca was fifteen, her mother decided it was time to find a job and started working at the local pub as a bartender. The pay she earned was enough for them to afford a place of their own, and the day they moved in, Mama had been bursting with excitement.

“And this here is all yours.” Mama swung open a door to reveal a room with a single bed covered in neon pink sheets. “We’re living the good life now!”

Shocked into silence, Rebecca couldn't recall the last time she'd slept on a real mattress. Her beds were usually the inflatable kind.

"You could say thank you," her mother grumbled when she remained quiet.

Mama was right. Renting the furnished single-wide was probably the nicest thing she'd ever done for them. "Thank you."

But later, settled between the itchy, new sheets, Rebecca had stared up at the popcorn ceiling, thinking of her future. For people like her and Mama, this trailer was as good as it would get, but it wasn't enough. Deep down, destiny whispered of something brighter. The only question was how to make it happen.

Soon enough, the answer came along in the form of a rich redneck named Earl.

Mama met Earl while working the late shift at the pub. They went out on a few dates, and when she brought him around to meet her daughter, Earl took one long, hard look at Rebecca's ample curves and asked them to move in with him.

Mother and daughter gladly left their trailer behind to live in Earl's Tuscaloosa home, where the air conditioning worked, and the floors didn't rattle when you walked. He loved to spoil them, too. And in return, he only asked that they attend church services with him on Sundays, not interfere with his bowling league nights, and for Rebecca to smile when his hand found its way up her skirt.

Give a little, get a little, quickly became the family motto.

Seeing her mother happily settled, Rebecca longed for an Earl of her own. She dropped out of high school junior year to get a job. If Mama met her man at work, Rebecca thought she could do the same.

The Blue 42 fit perfectly into her scheme. Popular with wealthy college boys, the place was an ideal setting to compile a list of potential Earls.

The list noted important things such as the forms of payment each boy used, whether they picked up another's tab, and if there was a female companion on their arm when they left. She learned new money paid with credit cards and came with a different girl each visit. But old money kept long-term girlfriends and rarely used anything other than cash.

Both old and new tipped well when Alabama won.

Roll Tide.

And on that September day, it didn't take her long to catch Charlie Fairweather's notice. Besides granting her a sharp mind, the good Lord saw fit to bless Rebecca with a face and body crafted to make men melt in her hands. Unlike the usual big haired blondes that frequented the bar, she stood out amongst the sea of sorority sisters with her long chestnut hair and deep-set bedroom eyes.

At kickoff, the place became standing room only, and she rushed over to help the bartender. Having lied on her job application, no one knew her actual age, so none of them

batted an eye when she began filling as many drinks as she could manage.

“I don’t believe I’ve ever seen you here before.”

Rebecca glanced up from pouring a beer and did a slight double-take, immediately striking Charlie Fairweather from her list. He was too pretty, and the pretty ones were difficult to manage.

She smiled politely. “I’ve only been here for a month.”

“What’s your name?”

“Rebecca.”

“I’m Charlie.”

His voice was empty of an accent, an oddity for this student body. Everyone here talked with a little moonlight magnolia in their voice, except her. As hard as she tried, Rebecca couldn’t kick the twang of the trailer park out of her mouth.

“Where are you from?” she asked.

“Florida.”

“Are you a student?”

His green eyes sparkled with humor. “No.”

“Do you live here?”

“I’m visiting my younger brother, Trevor.”

She nodded at the table of females anxiously awaiting his return. “Your drinking buddies sure don’t look like any Trevor I’ve ever met.”

“No, those are friends of mine.”

“Better get back to them,” she said, leaning forward to give him an eyeful of cleavage. He might not be going on the list, but it didn’t hurt to keep him in the wings for some fun if she ever felt so inclined. “What can I get you?”

Charlie licked his lips, not bothering to meet her eyes.  
“Beer.”

Rebecca placed his drink on the bar, and when he reached for it, the wedding band on his finger flashed under the fluorescent lights.

Oh yeah, definitely off the list.

“Life is a complicated thing, and not everything means what you think it means,” he said when he caught her staring.

“I think a wedding ring means you shouldn’t be standing in a bar flirting with another woman.”

“A beautiful woman, but yes.”

Rebecca shook her head and moved on to the other customers as Charlie faded into the crowd. Once the game ended, she said goodnight to everyone and headed across the unlit parking lot to her car.

Out of the darkness, Charlie appeared, trotting casually beside her with his hands in his pockets. “Good evening.”

She didn’t stop, walking faster. “Can I help you?”

“Just escorting a lovely lady to her car.”

“Sweet Jesus,” she muttered, rummaging around in her purse for car keys. “Go away.”

“Would it be okay if I called you?” They reached the car Earl let her use for work, and Charlie leaned on his Mercedes, now parked next to her. “We could have dinner sometime.”

“No.”

“Because I’m married?”

“Yes.”

“What if I only want to be friends?”

Ready to end this nonsense, Rebecca gave up her search for keys and yanked him by the shirt, slamming their bodies together. The teasing expression on his face disappeared when she leaned in close enough to taste the sharp intake of his breath. “What were you saying?”

His hands landed on her hips, holding her to him, and Rebecca allowed it for a second before shoving him away.

Friends, her ass. Men were all the same.

She found her keys and got in. “Have a good evening, Mr. Fairweather.”

Charlie caught the car door before it could close. “I don’t love my wife.”

Of course, he didn’t. Married men never did.

“What does that have to do with me?”

“It’s a long story.” He ran a hand through his floppy, golden hair. “How much time do you have?”

She would never know why she did it. Listening to his story would gain her nothing, but Rebecca got out to stand opposite him, and the second her feet touched the pavement, something shifted. It was as if that whispered promise of destiny loomed, waiting and watching the two of them in the parking lot of the Blue 42.

“Start talking. I don’t have all night.”

Charlie told her how his family made their money through various businesses, primarily in land development and construction. His wife, Vivian, came from a family who was involved in some of the same ventures, and their parents struck a deal over a land project, making their marriage part of the merger.

Rebecca laughed. “Are you telling me you’re in one of those arranged marriages?”

“I guess you could call it that,” he said. “My brother, Ben, works alongside our father in the company, and he pushed me into it.”

Charlie was too attractive for his own good. His sad eyes were getting to her.

“Vivian and I are trying to make the best of it,” he went on. “But it’s so damn hard.”

“If you’re trying to make the best of it, why are you out here talking to me?”

A baby.



His wife wanted a baby, and he'd been unable to give her one.

“She’s seen a few doctors, and they’ve all said it’s not possible. I offered to let her adopt, but she wasn’t interested, and now she won’t let me touch her. I’ve been patient, but my patience can only last so long.”

It was a sad story for sure, but as she listened to him talk, a new idea had taken form in Rebecca’s head. “And which of the blondes with you tonight will be the lucky lady?”

“All of them,” he answered, unashamed. “I’m tired of being good. It’s exhausting.”

Rebecca glanced at her watch. It was two in the morning, and the parking lot had emptied out a while ago. “Well then, you better get going,” she said, taking a step towards him. “Beautiful women don’t like to wait.”

He curled a finger through her belt loop, bringing her closer. “But here I am, wasting my time with you.”

That night she rode him as hard as she could on the backseat of his convertible. Poor, sex-starved Charlie Fairweather didn’t know what hit him.

“I knew you would be worth it,” he moaned, surging upward as she bounced.

The red Mercedes rocked in time with her hips. “I’m worth it all.”

Over the next two months, he visited as much as possible, and the more Rebecca learned about him, and his money, the

more she was sure Charlie was her Earl.

They met at a local motel when he was in town, and two months into their affair, the next step in her plan fell into place while he was mindlessly hammering away at her from behind.

“I love you,” he grunted against the shell of her ear.

She remained quiet, collapsing on the bed when he finished. Charlie plopped down next to her, taking a minute to catch his breath.

“Did you hear what I said?”

Rebecca yawned. “When?”

He rolled on top of her. “Say it.”

Charlie was a quick rebounder, which had made this so much easier than expected. She spread her legs, playing coy. “Say what?”

Dropping kisses on her lips, he slid in with a groan. “That you love me.”

Allowing him to build speed, she waited for the right moment. That point of no return, where he was so lost in his own pleasure that it would soften the blow she was about to deliver. “I’m pregnant.”

Charlie stilled above her. “What?”

“We’re going to have a baby.”

Panic engulfed him as the words sunk in, and he retreated to the end of the bed, sliding off its edge. “What?” he asked again, his choked voice coming from the floor.

Rebecca fixed a smile on her face. She would need to play the innocent through this next part. "I'm pregnant."

"How?" He scrambled to stand. "Aren't you taking birth control?"

"I am," she lied. "I guess it didn't work."

He paced, naked at the foot of the bed. "You can get an abortion. I'll call Ben. He'll set it up."

Charlie rushed to the motel phone and dialed, sitting on the bed next to her. "It's going to be okay."

Careful not to let her panic show, Rebecca laid a hand on his arm. She hadn't counted on the brother getting involved. "It's the middle of the night."

"Ben will understand the urgency."

"I can't just waltz in and have an abortion."

Charlie waved away her concern. "We have a friend who's a doctor. He can deal with this type of thing."

"They're going to want to see identification or something."

"I said it's fine," he snapped. "Albie won't ask questions."

"Trust me, they're going to ask questions," she said, ready to play her last card. "I'm only seventeen, Charlie."

His head whipped towards her. "What did you say?"

When she didn't reply, he hung up the phone and stood, his hands clenched at his sides. "I asked you a question, Rebecca."

She enunciated each word slowly, driving it into him like nails in a coffin. "I'm only seventeen."

The color drained from his face, and he raced to the bathroom. The sounds of his vomiting went on for a solid ten minutes, and Rebecca used the time wisely, squeezing out a tear or two.

When he was finished, Charlie emerged pale and defeated, glaring at her with unrestrained contempt.

"Don't you look at me like that," she yelled as he dragged on his clothes. "Two seconds ago, you were hollering how much you loved me, but now you're puking your brains up at the thought of me having your baby."

He collapsed into the motel room chair and continued to stare at her. Rebecca squirmed where she lay, but refused to give up.

"My mama once said I would learn that when a man's cock is full, his words are empty." She threw off the covers and stomped over to him. "I guess I should thank you for proving her right."

The slap caught him off guard, and when she went to strike again, Charlie grabbed her arm, hauling her roughly into his lap.

"When will you be eighteen?"

She didn't struggle much, just enough to put on a good show. "August."

"How far along are you?"

“Maybe a little over a month.”

He quickly did the math. “Meaning you’re due around July.”

“A summer baby,” she whispered, attempting to look somewhat maternal. In a surprising twist, Rebecca had learned during one of their many pillow talks that Charlie wanted kids too, and had been upset when he and his wife couldn’t conceive. “Just think of it.”

Letting go of her arm, Charlie’s hand came to rest on Rebecca’s stomach. He left it there for a long time. “Go to sleep,” he said finally. “I need to think.”

Obediently, she went to bed, making sure to leave herself uncovered. It was time to use every weapon in her arsenal, and Charlie was a weak man, unable to resist beautiful things.

After a while, she dozed off, waking before dawn to find him moving between her legs. “Everything is going to be alright,” he grunted. “I have a plan.”

By the end of the month, he was whisking her away to a new life in Florida, explaining that she and the baby were going to live in one of his family’s estates. A place so big, it came with a name.

Haven House.

Charlie was unusually quiet on the drive, but when they passed the exit to Hollingsdale, the city where he lived with his wife, she tried to coax him into a conversation.

“Tell me again about the house.”

He gestured to the wall of pine encasing the highway. “This is all Fairweather land. There’s nothing between Hollingsdale and Port Michaelson, except thirty miles of beach, pine, and Haven House.”

“Where’s the beach?”

“To your left, past the forest,” he said. “And the Intracoastal is to the right. There’s a narrow branch of it running behind Haven, through Shepherd’s Bayou.”

He’d already told her the story of how his family built Haven House in the late eighteenth century when they came to the area to invest in lumber. And how, a couple of generations later, once the mill on the property closed, the Fairweathers abandoned Haven to live in their Hollingsdale manor, Parkland Grounds.

“Where is the family beach house you talked about?”

“Close to Haven, but Ben stays there mostly when he’s in the area,” he replied. “The beach is beautiful, so visit anytime, but stay away from the house. My brother likes his privacy.”

“If the beach is so beautiful, why doesn’t your family build out here?”

“My father thinks there’s more money to be made in Texas and the Carolinas, so he’s left the area untouched,” he explained. “That’ll change once Ben is in control of Fairweather Holdings. He sees the beach as a goldmine.”

Rebecca frowned. As the oldest of the three brothers, Charlie should be the one left in charge. “Why won’t control

pass to you?”

He shot her a grin. “Because working isn’t my thing.”

Turning onto a gravel road, they drove for a mile through the thick wood, coming to a group of cars parked off the drive.

“Ben is having a parking area put in soon, and he already upgraded the inside a year ago,” Charlie told her as they got out. “It’s all modernized and fully decorated.”

Rebecca nodded at the cars parked off the road. “Who do those belong to?”

“The little red one is Simone’s, and the other is Ty’s truck. He’s her brother and takes care of the grounds.”

Charlie had mentioned Simone the housekeeper, could come off as difficult, but Rebecca wasn’t concerned. Haven House was to be hers, and she would learn to deal with all those who came with it.

Far down the lane, a handful of houses sat next to the bayou.

Charlie followed her gaze. “Those are the cottages. Our grandfather thought to use Haven as a corporate retreat and built them for guests. Ty lives in the one over there to the right, but the rest are empty.”

The last car they passed was a black Range Rover, and Rebecca’s stomach dropped. She knew her luxury cars, and this one didn’t belong to an employee. “Whose car is this?”

“Ben wants to meet you.”

Stopping dead in her tracks, she glanced down at her cutoff jean shorts and Guns N' Roses t-shirt. She hadn't prepared herself to meet the brother.

Charlie mistook her expression. "Don't worry. We'll get you a car next week. Then you'll be able to go into Port Michaelson to shop and get the things you need. The baby's doctor is there, too. Albie's a good friend. You'll like him."

He took her hand, pulling Rebecca the rest of the way down the drive. As they neared the edge of the forest, she stopped again when Haven House came into view.

"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph," she whispered.

"What?"

"It looks like Scarlett O'Hara's house."

"Tara?" Charlie considered it for a minute. "Nah, I think it looks more like Twelve Oaks, except for the second floor balcony. Haven's wraps around the entire house."

"What's Twelve Oaks?"

He laughed openly at her ignorance. "Have you ever actually seen *Gone with the Wind*?"

She shook her head, and they continued down the cobblestone path leading to Haven's front porch. A vast, well-manicured landscape spread from the house to the water, and Rebecca sighed at the oaks and weeping willows swaying in the fall breeze.

"This place is beautiful."



“Wait until you see it in the spring. Ty is a genius. He can make almost anything bloom out here.”

Large white columns stood guard, observing their approach. The front door opened between the two center pillars, and a stunning black woman stepped out. She wore a belted coat dress and kit heels, looking nothing at all like what Rebecca expected.

They climbed the steps, and the woman nodded at Charlie before turning to greet Rebecca with a tight smile plastered to her face. “Welcome to Haven House,” she said, her voice smooth as her flawless caramel skin. “My name is Simone.”

A stylish bob framed Simone’s heart-shaped face, and Rebecca tried not to stare when she shook her dainty hand. “It’s very nice to meet you.”

A meowing growl came from a gray cat weaving between them.

“Don’t mind her,” Simone said, ushering them in with a sweep of her hand. “Mrs. Dashwood doesn’t care for strangers, but she’ll get used to you in no time. You’ll find a dozen or so of her friends around here; however, I only allow a few in the house.” Her smile widened, but it didn’t reach her eyes. “Keeps the pests away.”

Inside the foyer, Rebecca gaped at the crystal chandelier hanging overhead. A door to her right revealed a room with overflowing bookcases, and further down the large hallway, a wooden staircase led to the second floor.

“This way,” Simone said, guiding her to the left, after Charlie.

Rebecca stepped into a parlor that held an expansive sitting area with an enormous fireplace and large windows overlooking the lawn. An ornate desk sat in the rear corner of the room where a man waited, leaning on it with his arms crossed.

His face carried the same high cheekbones and well-sculpted mouth as Charlie, but it was there that the similarities ended. Eyes as dark as midnight tracked her entrance. He was tall, taller than Charlie, who stood at least six feet, and had hair shaded the same color as his eyes.

She stopped in front of him, letting his piercing gaze rake over her in assessment. He didn’t care for what he saw, and his lips curled in distaste.

Charlie came to stand next to them. “Rebecca, this is my brother, Ben.”

“It’s nice to meet y’all.” Nervous, the words came out with a thick drawl, and from the corner of her eye, she saw Simone flinch.

Continuing his appraisal, Ben addressed his brother. “You’ve informed her of Albie?”

His deep voice startled Rebecca, and she jumped slightly.

Charlie nodded. “I need to get her a car.”

“And she understands she is to stay out of Hollingsdale?”

“Yes.”

No, Rebecca did not understand. However, she kept her mouth shut. Manipulating Charlie was one thing, but Ben was going to be a different story.

“We need to pick out her room,” Charlie said.

“Or she can stay in a cottage,” Ben replied, shifting his penetrating gaze to his brother. “They’re now fully equipped, and she can decorate it to her liking.”

Rebecca hadn’t come this far to end up in one of those houses by the water. She wanted Haven House, as promised. “I’d prefer a room here,” she blurted out. “In case you’ve forgotten, I am pregnant with your niece or nephew and deserve to be in the main house.”

A lengthy silence fell over the room, and Ben clenched his jaw so tight, she thought it might crack. Like a coward, Charlie excused himself to retrieve the suitcases from the car.

Realizing Ben could derail her plans with a single word, Rebecca held her breath, waiting for him to speak. He opened his mouth, probably to do just that, but the sound of tiny rapid footsteps approaching halted the words on his lips.

A boy barreled in, probably not quite two, and ran straight to Ben, who lifted the child into his arms.

Simone hurried over, and the boy’s face lit up. “Mommy!”

Leaping into his mother’s waiting arms, infectious laughter filled the quiet house. “Tum on, Daddy,” the boy urged Ben. “Go play.”

“I’ll be there in a minute, Selah.”

Rebecca waved to the boy as he left with Simone, wondering if Ben had a wife at home, too. “Your son has his mother’s eyes.”

Ben straightened, rising to his full height. “While living here, you’ll respect this home and the people in it,” he ordered. “Make an appointment with Albie, and Simone will help you pick out a car.”

“Thank you very much, but Charlie will help me.”

Moving around her to leave, Ben shook his head. “You’re in for a rude awakening.”

Charlie returned with her bags, and they went upstairs to decide on a bedroom. She learned Simone and Selah lived in a suite of rooms downstairs off the kitchen, leaving her the entire second floor to choose from.

The days ticked by, and Rebecca settled in, learning about her new home and its residents. She became acquainted with the cluster of cats, too. The sleek gray one named Willoughby quickly became her favorite.

Exploring the house, she discovered a place Simone called a conservatory that had an entire wall made of glass. There was also a massive dining hall, and a ballroom Selah used as a play area.

Selah was a sweet boy. He was smart, and loved everyone he met. His mother, on the other hand, Rebecca found to be a more reserved individual. But trapped in the house, the women

got to know each other a little better, and she learned the details regarding Simone's relationship with Ben. It started as a fling, occurring while Simone worked on staff at Parkland Grounds. They were no longer together, but Ben provided for her and his son, keeping them safe from his family at Haven House.

"We're serious when we tell you to stay away from Hollingsdale," Simone told her. "If their father gets even a whiff of what is happening out here, then you, me, and our babies will be in trouble. James Fairweather is a monster."

Rebecca listened and stuck close to the house. She got to know Simone's brother Ty. He was a kind man, who always brought fresh flowers in from the gardens for her to arrange throughout Haven's many rooms. He even offered to drive her to her first doctor's appointment so she wouldn't have to go alone.

Although she was nervous, Rebecca declined Ty's offer. She went alone, but it turned out alright. Dr. Albie Eddins and his wife, Laura Jean, were pleasant surprises. They treated her with respect, putting her at ease about the pregnancy.

"They're good people," Simone said when she returned from the appointment. "Ben is lucky to have friends like Albie and Laura Jean in his life."

Rebecca agreed, honestly surprised that Ben had friends at all.

Charlie visited regularly in the beginning, but as the days stretched into weeks, he came less and less, staying away for

prolonged periods. Concerned by his behavior, she approached Simone about it.

“Vivian is pregnant.”

The news made her sick, and Rebecca fled to the room upstairs she’d picked out for the nursery. “This was something that was bound to happen,” Simone said when she found her. “Ben tells me the doctors don’t think the pregnancy will stick.”

Rebecca covered her face with her hands, crying. If Charlie’s wife gave him a baby, then all would be right in the world, and he would forget about her.

“Why are you so upset?” Simone came to stand next to her. Willoughby followed, rubbing his head on Rebecca’s leg. “It’s not like you love him.”

“Of course, I love him.”

“Bullshit.”

Willoughby hissed in shock, and Rebecca lowered her hands. Simone never cursed.

“But I do.”

Simone placed her hands on her hips. “Lie to the others all you want, but I see through the act.”

Unfortunately for Rebecca, it was no longer an act. She’d fallen for Charlie soon after arriving at Haven, and the thought of losing him left her feeling hollow.

“Ben loves his son. He comes as much as he can to see him,” Rebecca said, trying to find the right words. “And obviously, he cares about you.”

“What does my relationship with Benjamin have to do with you and Charlie?”

“How did you settle for not being his—”

Simone cut her off with a laugh. “His wife? The lady of the house?” She waved an impatient hand around the room. “What do you think I am here?”

The housekeeper, Rebecca thought, but wisely kept her mouth shut.

“Ben, nor I, ever entertained the thought of marriage, and even if we did, his father would never have accepted it,” Simone said. “This place might be in Florida, but the further north you go, the more southern you get, and the notion of a black woman becoming a Fairweather wife is ridiculous.”

Rebecca sneered at the comparison. “I’m not black.”

Simone smiled down at her cruelly. “No, but Charlie will never leave a woman like Vivian for something spat out of the back of an Alabama trailer park.”

“You don’t know that.”

“But I do,” Simone countered. “Appearances matter more than love. You’re a clever girl, and should have no problem understanding this.”

“Why should I listen to anything you say?” Rebecca yelled, struggling to rise, but her growing belly slowed her down. “You’re nothing but the help that fucked the Master.”

Unfazed, Simone sighed. “It’s alright to be upset,” she said once Rebecca got to her feet. “But lashing out at the only person who understands your situation is not a good idea. I’ll forgive you this time, but remember, if you want a future here, it would be wise not to make an enemy out of me.”

Ashamed, Rebecca mumbled an apology, scrunching her face up to fight the tears that were coming. She couldn’t go back to Alabama. Not after she’d had a taste of Haven and all that could one day be hers.

“I’m scared.”

Simone took her hand and gave it a squeeze. “You should be.”



## CHAPTER 2

# *Evie*

2019

**E**vangeline Eddins allowed her younger sister, Jamison, to take the lead as they ran the forest trails of Haven House. It was a crisp February morning, and Evie wanted to take advantage of the cooler air, forcing her sister to tackle not only their regular daily jogging route past the mill ruins but also the batch of cleared pathways that dove deeper into the woods, ending at the Fairweather family cemetery.

Approaching the end of the second trail, Evie kept her eyes forward when they passed the black iron fencing encircling the graves.

“Good morning, Mama,” she said, without slowing her pace.

Jamison echoed the greeting to their mother, stopping for a moment to see the polished marker bearing Laura Jean’s name.

“We need to talk to Ty about having the landscaping company clean out here,” Jamison said when she caught up to Evie. “It’s a mess.”

The sisters turned around when they reached the end of the course, retracing their steps to the house. Evie glanced over at the graveyard as they went. The place did look horrible.

“The boys are planning on going fishing this weekend while Selah is in town,” Evie said when they neared the canopy’s exit. “Ty is bringing the boat over from the marina to Haven’s dock today. Talk to him about it when he comes to the house, or just wait until the party tonight.”

They emerged from the forest, making their way across the lawn. Jamison readjusted her platinum blonde ponytail as a gust of wind blew in off the bayou. “Any idea what time Selah and Lenora will arrive?”

“Maybe an hour before the party starts,” Evie replied. “Selah got caught up at the shelter.”

Jamison snorted. “My brother is overly dedicated. It’s his birthday, and he deserves time off.”

“The shelter is important to him, and this is Selah we’re talking about. He’s not going to leave any problems hanging while he’s away.”

Selah Fairweather’s big heart had led him down a career path no one expected. During his college years, he’d volunteered with an outreach program, working at inner-city shelters. The time spent in the program pushed him to pursue a career with non-profits, and he now ran one of the largest shelters in the Atlanta metro area.

“I know, but Simone and I wanted to take Lenora dress shopping while they were down,” Jamison whined. “And Annabeth put together some new reception recipes for her to try. We’re losing a whole day of doing wedding stuff.”

Poor Lenora.

Selah’s soon-to-be wife didn’t know what she was in for this weekend. His mother and two half-sisters were consuming themselves with wedding planning. The ceremony was to take place under the giant oak in the middle of Haven’s lawn, where Simone and her late husband, Devon, were married.

Entering Simone’s life in the most unexpected of ways, Devon Howard had been a grounding force at Haven House. The pair welcomed their twins, Annabeth and Abe, soon after they were married under the old oak, giving Selah not only a caring and dedicated stepfather but also two new siblings to dote over.

And while Selah and Lenora choosing to have their wedding in that particular location tugged at the sentimental heartstrings of them all, the decision also allowed for Annabeth to attend.

No one knows when the disorder took over completely, but a severe form of agoraphobia made Haven House Annabeth’s home, as well as her prison. Her days were long and empty, but when Selah announced his plans to marry Lenora at the house, she’d pulled Evie aside to tell her she wanted to start exposure therapy.

“It’s time, don’t you think?” Annabeth had asked, her delicate face set with determination. “I’m twenty-six and rotting away in this place.”

Wanting her best friend to succeed, but still concerned she might push herself too far, Evie encouraged Annabeth to plan with her therapist before jumping into anything.

But being hard-headed, Annabeth didn’t wait, and the next day when everyone was out, she attempted to walk down the front steps. Simone returned to find her daughter crumpled on the porch in tears.

“I’m a complete failure,” Annabeth cried, later that night with her head in Evie’s lap.

“No,” Evie reassured her. “You might be a complete jerk for scaring everyone, but you’re not a failure.”

“I should’ve waited for you.”

“Are you sure it’s me you want to help with this?”

Annabeth sat up, her brown eyes pleading. “Please say you’ll do it. I can’t watch my brother’s wedding from the side porch.”

Not knowing what else to do, Evie agreed. The next morning, the two of them rose before the rest of the household to give it a try.

With the sun barely in the sky, they stood on the top step of the porch, The spot had served as an invisible barrier to Annabeth for years.

Evie moved into position. “I’ll go down one step and hold your hands. You can start when you’re ready.”

A few of Haven’s feline residents watched from the shadows. Only Colonel Brandon dared approach.

“Not now, Colonel,” Annabeth whispered with a sheen of sweat on her upper lip. “I’m trying not to pass out.”

“Focus,” Evie warned. “I can’t promise I’ll catch you before the ground does.”

“That’s reassuring.” Annabeth glared at the birds chirping in the trees. “Is it always this loud out here?”

“That’s the panic trying to take over,” Evie explained. At least she could offer a small amount of knowledge. “The world around you feels amplified. Noises. Light. It’ll press in, but you have to breathe through it.”

More minutes ticked by, and she feared Annabeth’s nerve was waning. “Hey, remember the pie you made last Sunday?”

Annabeth stared at the ground, unmoving. “What?”

“The pie you made on Sunday,” Evie said, tugging at her hands. “It was delicious.”

“Um, thanks.”

Evie shooed the Colonel away, giving Annabeth room to move. “You could sell it at the cafe in our bookshop.”

With her eyes locked on the step, Annabeth huffed. The imaginary bookshop was a childhood dream of theirs.

“After this first step, you’ll take another, and then another, until we go as far as we can. Maybe we’ll end up in Key West, and we can open a bookstore there.” Evie swung their hands back and forth. “One more step to Key West.”

Annabeth’s small frame trembled. “Stop being weird.”

“I’m not weird. One more step to Key West is inspirational,” Evie shot back, trying to make her laugh. “I’m inspirational, damn it.”

“No, you’re not,” Annabeth argued, lifting her right foot with a smile. “You’re weird.”

Holding a collective breath, they watched the right foot lower to the step below, and Evie moved to make room for a second, steadier foot to follow.

Annabeth’s chest pumped in excitement. “I did it.”

“You did it.” Evie squealed along with her. “But I think we should go back in before you freak out.”

“I want to keep going,” Annabeth said, already moving, and an hour later, they were standing on solid earth together. “One more step to Key West.”

“See, it’s catchy,” Evie said, turning her around. “We should put it on a t-shirt to sell at the shop.”

“You’re being weird again.”

Under the guidance of Annabeth’s therapist, Evie committed three days a week to working with her outside.

After a time, their sessions began to yield results, but it was a painstakingly slow process.

Four months after they started, Annabeth made it far enough to stand under the tree where Selah was to be married. “I think I’d like to sit here for a while.”

And so, they sat.

It had been a good day.

Since then, Annabeth moved around the exterior of the house with ease, but only if she had a companion with her.

“Did you pick up Selah’s cake?” Jamison asked, walking under one of the giant oaks. The moss covered branches always reminded Evie of gray haired old ladies keeping watch over the estate.

“I ordered the fruit torte he likes.”

They stepped off the thick carpet of grass, winding their way to the house on one of the many cement passages stretching across the grounds.

Jamison ran a hand over the batches of pink and purple azalea bushes dotting the side of the walkway. “Are you nervous about tonight?”

“No,” Evie lied.

Since Selah’s visit coincided with his birthday, Annabeth wanted to have a small party, and Evie, in a moment of insanity, invited a date.

“I like Lucas.” Jamison danced on the path, shaking her butt at Evie. “You know I’m a sucker for a good looking man with a nice ass.”

Evie swatted at her sister, who laughed like a loon just out of reach.

“Hey,” a voice called out, and they turned to see Abe coming up the path. Annabeth’s twin brother lived in one of Haven’s cottages, giving the women free rein over the main house.

He rolled his wheelchair to a stop next to them. “What are you two doing?”

“Jamison is teasing me about bringing a date tonight.”

Abe’s bright smile appeared. “I heard about him. I’m bringing someone too.”

The sisters laughed. “Which member of your harem is coming tonight?” Jamison asked.

Never lacking in female companionship, Abe’s active social life was a form of entertainment to the women of Haven House. Every weekend morning, they gathered in the front parlor with their coffee to watch his conquests from the previous evening try and traverse the front lawn to the parking area.

The best part was when the sprinklers came on.

“I don’t have a harem,” Abe said. “However, I do have lots of friends who find me attractive.”



Women found his handsome face and well-toned body irresistible, but really, it was his teasing personality that drew them in. He was a carbon copy of his father Devon, while Annabeth was the more serious twin, like their mother.

“But I’ll have you know, she’s the same one I’ve seen for the last two weekends,” he told them, rolling past and purposely aiming for Jamison’s toes. “Her name is Mallory, and I met her at work.”

Abe worked as a landscape designer at Firewater Beach, the latest development under Fairweather Holdings. It sat on the other side of the highway from Haven, hidden from the world by the seemingly endless forest.

Firewater was a passion project of Jamison’s father, and Ben had all but given up on his plans to develop the area until recently. Over the last year, the first phase in the project reached completion, and according to what Evie had learned from her sister, the potential profits were staggering.

There were plans for a small concert venue, an outdoor shopping area, and Abe recently finished working on the town square, which was set to have its grand opening next week.

The trio reached the house, entering through the screen door and into the kitchen where Annabeth was hurrying about, covered in flour and some mysterious sauce. Her shoulders slumped when she saw them.

“We have a problem.”

## CHAPTER 3

# *Evie*

“**M**ore people are coming to the party than originally planned,” Annabeth said, wrinkling her nose at the contents of a bowl on the counter. “We’re going to need more food, so I sent my mom out to buy a few things.”

Evie grabbed a rag to wipe at the mess. “What do you need us to do?”

None of them had to worry about the party planning. A by-product of Annabeth’s condition was the obsessive need to stay organized. She would handle all the details and dole out each person’s duties when the time came.

“I do need more of those pastries Lenora likes.” Annabeth turned to Jamison. “Can you drive into Hollingsdale and stop in at that bakery near Evie’s office? Call ahead and drop your name. See what they can do to make a Fairweather happy.”

The citizens of Hollingsdale and Port Michaelson respected the Fairweather name. After his father’s death, Ben took over the company and set out to build a central base of operations in the northern part of the county, providing an abundance of jobs to the local families.

With most of the area residents earning their paychecks one way or another from Fairweather Holdings, people never hesitated to accommodate Ben's only daughter.

"Got it." Jamison grabbed her keys and headed out. "Text if you need anything else."

With the food shortage under control, Annabeth ordered Abe to handle the drink arrangements. "I planned on using a sideboard in the dining room for the alcohol," she told him. "But I think we're going to need more refueling stations."

Entertaining outsiders at Haven was rare, and Evie didn't care for the strain on Annabeth's face. "Who else will be here tonight?"

"A college friend of Selah's who works for Fairweather," Annabeth replied, joining her in cleaning. "And Ben texted a few minutes ago. Trevor is in town for the Firewater event on Wednesday, and he accidentally let it slip that Selah would be at Haven this weekend. He extended an invitation out of courtesy, thinking Trevor wouldn't accept, but he did."

Ben's younger brother Trevor, along with his wife and children, were horrible people. Claudia, his oldest daughter, was the worst. She worked alongside her father, running the North Carolina branch of Fairweather Holdings.

"Is Claudia with him?"

Annabeth bit her bottom lip. "I'm afraid so."

Already apprehensive about having Lucas at the house, Evie's nerves kicked into overdrive at the thought of dealing

with Claudia, too. “Maybe she’s changed since the last time we saw her.”

“Nope,” Abe said, crushing her hopes. “I went by the main office yesterday and ran into her.” He rolled his wheelchair into the corner pantry. Years ago, Ben remodeled Haven to give Abe full access to the lower level. “She’s still the same old Claudia.”

“Great,” Evie muttered.

Abe reappeared with a lap full of various types of liquors. “I’ll have the main booze stations in the parlor and the library. Then I’ll hide emergency stashes throughout different rooms.”

Impressed, Evie nodded. “Not all superheroes wear capes, Abe.”

He saluted them as he left, and Evie worked with Annabeth to clean the messy kitchen.

“I laid out one of Jamison’s dresses on your bed for tonight,” Annabeth said, scrubbing at a spot on the counter. “It’s black.”

“But I planned to wear my beige dress suit.”

Stopping what she was doing, Annabeth gaped at her. “Like hell you are.”

“Why not?”

“Because you look like an accountant in it.”

“I am an accountant.”

Annabeth flicked Evie with the rag she'd been using. "You have a man coming to the house tonight, and wearing clothing that resembles a brown paper bag is a no," she scolded. "This is the first time in forever that you've dated someone for over a month, and we need to keep him hooked."

The relationship hadn't quite hit the thirty-day mark, but Evie didn't correct her. She'd met Lucas three weeks ago when Hollingsdale General hired her accounting firm to reconcile overdue accounts.

Dr. Lucas Fields had spotted her in the cafeteria on her first day and came over to introduce himself. While shaking his hand, it had taken Evie a good ten seconds to form a proper greeting because the man was quite literally perfect. Lucas had a perfect smile, which she would learn came with a perfect laugh that he would magically release at the perfect moment. Not to mention his perfect green eyes, that shined brightly against his perfectly tanned skin, on his perfectly toned body.

"Brown paper bags do not lead to sexy times," Annabeth warned.

Things with Lucas were progressing too slowly for Annabeth's romantical brain. But truthfully, it was Evie's choice not to rush. Her limited dating experience involved one high school boyfriend and a college romance that ended when he took a job offer in Canada.

Even better, Lucas didn't seem to mind her hesitation on the physical aspects of the relationship. Their dates consisted of dinners in restaurants, late-night chats in coffee shops, and

other similar venues that offered little privacy for anything more than the occasional kiss.

And like a gentleman, he never pressured Evie to come home with him at the end of the night.

“Annabeth, you sure have an extensive amount of dating knowledge,” Evie said. “I mean, especially for a person who’s never been on one.”

“I’m working on it. The men of the world won’t know what hit them when I shake this house loose.” Annabeth wagged a finger at her. “Now, say you’ll wear Jamison’s dress.”

“Fine, I’ll wear the dress.”

“And wear your hair down,” Annabeth added. “No librarian buns tonight.”

Evie rolled her eyes and went off to start her list of party preparations, noting where Abe hid the emergency stashes of booze. She had a feeling the information would prove vital at some point.

Simone and Jamison returned in the afternoon with more food and supplies. Evie wanted to talk to her sister about Claudia but didn’t have a chance until she ran upstairs to take a shower.

“I hear Annabeth is playing dress up with you tonight,” Jamison said, emerging from her bedroom wearing a scarlet jumpsuit. Standing at almost six feet, the outfit looked stunning on her. “If you like the dress, keep it.”

Her sister's wardrobe matched her bold personality, and Evie doubted she would. As much as she loved Jamison, they were nothing alike. "Did you hear who else is coming?"

"Oh, yeah." Jamison's crimson lips stretched into a smile. "I bought an extra pie so we can throw it in Claudia's face if she says anything nasty."

"That's my girl."

Evie left her to grab a quick shower. She styled her long, dark blonde hair down, per Annabeth's request, and slid into the dress waiting for her on the bed. It was a sheath cut, hugging her curves loosely enough to make her feel comfortable. The matte black fabric brought out the gray in her eyes, and she decided at the last minute to brush mineral powder on her nose to cover the splatter of freckles there.

"What do you think, Fitzwilliam?" Evie asked the black ball of fur watching from the bed. "Do I look okay?"

The cat meowed at the question, earning him a scratch behind the ear. "Wish me luck."

Coming down the stairs, she spotted Abe waiting by the front door. "Are Selah and Lenora here yet?"

"Yes," he answered, and winced when a crash came from the back of the house, accompanied by an extreme amount of swearing. "Annabeth is going to kill someone before the night is over."

"I'll go help."

She headed towards the kitchen, arriving in time to see Annabeth removing a pan of charred appetizers out of the oven.

“I told you to take the cheese puffs out after two minutes!”

Jamison frantically fanned at the smoke filling the kitchen. “I’m sorry!”

The pan dropped to the counter, landing with a loud clatter. “It’s ok,” Annabeth grumbled, poking at the crispy remains. “It’s a new recipe, and I didn’t think they were going to be all that great, anyway.”

Simone came in from the side hall. “Get those outside to the trash or the entire house will smell like smoke.”

“I’ll take them,” Evie offered, and Jamison bagged the puffs, bringing them to her.

“The dress makes your boobs look good,” Jamison said, handing her the bag. “Lucas is going to have his hands full tonight.”

“Very funny.”

Evie stepped out onto the darkened patio and felt around for the switch. Confused as to why the hanging lights were off in the first place, she flicked it on, revealing two figures seated at the outdoor dining table.

“Baby girl!”

Hearing Selah’s voice, Evie dropped the bag and ran towards him. Big arms captured her in a bear hug, and she



held on tight. Nothing calmed her more than having Selah home.

“Happy birthday,” she whispered in his ear.

Growing up, Selah acted as an older brother, treating Evie no differently than he did his actual siblings. When her mother died, and she felt lost in the world, it was Selah who reminded her that the bonds of their found family were as strong as others tethered in blood.

“It’s good to be home.” Selah released her and nodded at the bag on the ground. “What do you have there?”

“Burnt cheese puffs.” She opened it to show him. “Poor Annabeth wanted to try new recipes for tonight but hasn’t had any luck.”

“Maybe next time you’ll consider hiring a catering service,” the other figure sitting at the table remarked.

Evie fixed a smile on her face. “Thank you for the suggestion, Samuel. I’ll let Annabeth know you don’t care for her cooking.”

Selah chuckled, lowering himself onto a patio chair. He retrieved an already lit cigar from the ashtray on the table and stuck it between his teeth, ready for the show.

Next to him, reclining back with his own cigar in one hand and a glass of whiskey in the other, sat Samuel Fairweather, the son of Ben and his ex-wife Miranda.

The permanent scowl on Samuel’s face deepened. “That’s not what I said.”

No, he probably hadn't meant to insult Annabeth, but Evie never failed to seize every opportunity to annoy him.

"Annabeth enjoys doing things like this. It gives her purpose."

Exasperation seeped into the sharp planes of Samuel's face, and Evie pressed her lips together to stop from laughing. This never got old. Since his return last year, provoking him had become her absolute favorite pastime whenever he dared step foot inside Haven House.

Selah grinned, his head volleying back and forth. "I hear the boyfriend is coming tonight."

"His name is Lucas," Evie said, not particularly wanting to discuss this in front of Samuel. "I met him at Hollingsdale General. Their books were a mess, and they contacted my firm for some help."

"So, you seduced him with your mathematical prowess?" Selah asked, wiggling his eyebrows.

"Something like that," she replied. "I really like him. And I know she means well, but I hope Annabeth doesn't embarrass me tonight. She's already stuffed me into this ridiculous dress."

"You look nice. Black is a good shade on you." Selah puffed at his cigar. "And the only way Annabeth could embarrass you—and the rest of us—is if she's planning on making everyone play a party game."

Samuel smirked, sipping at his whiskey. "Or is the good doctor already aware of how you like to cheat?"

“I don’t cheat,” she snapped in his direction.

But she did cheat.

Evangeline Eddins cheated every single time there was a possibility Samuel Fairweather might lose.

Since they were children, he’d spent his summers at Haven House, making it his sole purpose in life to irritate her. As an adult, she liked to return the favor.

Evie hated him.

And Samuel barely tolerated her.

But then again, why should he when it was her mother who had broken apart his parent’s marriage.

Lenora materialized out of the darkness, coming from the direction of the cottages.

“I found them skulking around in the dark with cigars,” Evie said, embracing her.

Dressed in sparkling gold that glowed against her flawless, ebony skin, Lenora raised an eyebrow at Selah and Samuel. “Everything good?”

“We’re fine,” Selah said, rising to kiss his fiancée on the cheek. “No more arguing, I promise.”

Evie frowned. The brothers never argued, even though Samuel’s lofty arrogance was a complete contrast to Selah’s giving nature.

Sensing the three of them wanted a moment alone, Evie excused herself to dispose of the garbage in the bins on the

side of the house. When she returned, Selah and Lenora had gone inside, but Samuel remained, gathering their glasses from the table.

She hurried past him into the house and nearly ran into Annabeth, juggling a tray of food. “Take out the next platter and prep it to serve,” she ordered Evie. “I’ll be back in a minute to grab it. Trevor and Claudia are already here, and Jamison is occupying them until Ben arrives.”

As Annabeth left the kitchen, Samuel came in from the patio, and Evie stuck her head in the fridge to find the platter, hoping he would leave.

“Your uncle is here. Jamison is talking with them,” she said when she heard him rinsing something in the sink, taking his sweet time. “But she might need reinforcements.”

Evie extracted a platter from the tightly packed fridge and set it on the counter. “This is Selah’s night, and I don’t want Claudia ruining it.”

Samuel finished at the sink and turned to lean back on the counter, arms crossed. “Noted.”

He watched as she arranged the food, and after a few seconds of uncomfortable silence, Evie tried to make small talk to break up the tension filling up the room. “Why were you two smoking cigars? Isn’t that normally saved for the end of the night?”

“Selah is right, the black brings out your eyes,” he said, ignoring the question. “You look nice.”

Evie froze, rolling her gaze upward to where he stood in his suit that cost more than she made in a month.

Samuel never complimented her.

Ever.

He was up to something.

“Although, you do look a little pale just now.” Full lips twitched under her scrutiny. “Are you okay?”

“Are you?”

“Perfectly fine,” he replied, his amber eyes filling with amusement. “Is there a reason you’re staring at me?”

She almost convinced herself to let it go, but then the telltale sign he was lying appeared, and Evie knew she wasn’t overreacting.

“Yes,” she answered, staring at the collar of his crisp white dress shirt. Whenever they played games as children and Samuel needed to deceive someone, or if he figured out the winning move before anyone else, a faint flush would appear on his neck. Early on, Evie learned how to exploit it, and that knowledge is what first gained her the reputation of being a cheater.

The summer Simone forced Samuel to teach Evie how to play chess had been an interesting one.

Thinking back to the conversation on the patio, her brain latched onto an idea, and she stepped around the counter.

“Why did you two have your cigars so early?”

Samuel stiffened as she approached. “We’re leaving at sunrise to go out on the boat and had our cigars before it got late.”

“But Abe and Ben weren’t there, and you guys always smoke them together.” She stopped directly in front of him. Samuel stood at least six and a half feet in height, and she had half a mind to rise up on her tiptoes to glare at him. “Why didn’t you wait for them?”

His jaw tightened, and the blush on his neck deepened. “Why are you interested in what I do with my brother?”

“Because it’s odd,” she smirked. “Both the early cigars and the compliment.”

“I can’t compliment you?”

The smile on her face vanished. “No.”

Samuel squeezed his eyes shut, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Maybe I just wanted to have a celebratory cigar with my brother before the party started.”

Bingo.

“Celebratory?” Evie purred. “What an interesting word.”

His eyes popped open, and she bit down on her bottom lip to suppress a smile of victory. He should know better than to play with her.

“Tell me, Sammy,” she demanded, using the nickname he hated to get under his skin. “What’s going on?”

Unfortunately, Samuel knew how to get under her skin too. Taking a step forward, he crowded her, pressing Evie back against the kitchen island.

Bracing a hand on either side of her waist, palms flattened on the granite, Samuel lowered his head to whisper in her ear. “Let it go, Evangeline.”

She shoved at his chest, which did nothing. “Did you know black is my favorite color?” he asked, clearly pleased with the way his nearness was bothering her. “And I stand by my earlier statement. You look nice tonight.”

Annabeth entered, immune to their constant bickering like the rest of the family. “Samuel, I know she’s your cousin, but Claudia is the worst person in the world.”

Samuel lifted his head to give Annabeth a sympathetic look. “I’m sure she’s not the worst human in the world, but she’s at least in the top ten.”

“I would suggest you get out there and help your sister. Jamison is close to killing her,” Annabeth told him, swiping another platter off the counter. “And Evie, there’s an extremely gorgeous man on his way to the front door. I believe he belongs to you.”

Evie pushed at Samuel again, and this time he moved. “Black isn’t a color,” she hissed under her breath, determined to get the last word. “It’s what’s created when there’s no light, kind of like your soul.”

He did smile then, not bothering to suppress it. “It’s still a color.”

Head held high, Evie stomped to the door, but paused in her exit, unable to walk away without one last strike. “Make sure you tell Annabeth how you think we should hire caterers next time.”

Annabeth’s face fell, her shoulders sagging. “You don’t like my cooking, Samuel?”

“That’s not what I said.”



## CHAPTER 4

# *Evie*

“Completed in 1791, the Fairweathers built Haven to showcase the pristine grace of the family.”

Lucas flashed Evie his perfect smile as she led him into the conservatory. “When I asked you to show me around, I didn’t realize I would get a full tour.”

Embarrassed, she shrugged. “When we were kids, Annabeth and I made a tour script for the house. She’s the best guide, by far.”

Coming fully onto the upper landing, Lucas let out a low whistle, and Evie smiled. This room was one of her favorites. “The conservatory is an addition to the original building,” she said, running her fingers over the exposed brick wall. “It was created for one of the original Fairweather daughters who couldn’t spend much time outside due to a weak disposition.”

They gazed out over the rear glass paned wall, which stretched high above into a domed ceiling. The architecture of the conservatory was unique, but the tokens of their lives scattered about between the plants and mismatched furniture gave the room its charm.

“That’s beautiful,” Lucas said, nodding at the painting sitting on top of Simone’s upright piano at the entrance.

“My mother’s work. The large painting of Haven in the main hall is her piece, too.”

Evie guided him down the three steps to the sunken sitting area.

“Is that a record player?”

Along the wall, where the glass met the brick, was her mother’s record player. Laura Jean would read or paint in the conservatory, listening to old albums. Evie nodded. “You never know what you’ll find in this room.”

Lucas strained to see past the wall of glass. “Is that Shepherd’s Bayou?”

“It is,” she answered. “The bayou is straight back, and the cottages are on the waterline to your left. Abe lives in the house near the dock, and Selah’s is the one next door. The other two are for guests.”

“That’s four. I thought I counted six.”

“The cottage on the other side of the parking area is the groundskeeper’s cottage, where Ty, Simone’s brother, used to live. When he married last year, Ben gifted him a townhouse in the new development, so now we use his old place for storage.”

“What about that one by the forest?” Lucas asked, drawing her to him by wrapping an arm around her waist. “What’s in it?”

Whenever he touched her, she had a habit of going stiff, and Evie had to tell herself to relax—twice—before answering.

“It’s used for storage, too.”

“Interesting,” he murmured. “What else is out there?”

“There are remains of the old mill, but they’re deep in the woods. Ben keeps saying he’s going to hire someone to remove what’s left because it’s dangerous to have, but he hasn’t gotten around to it yet.”

“Why is it dangerous?”

“It has hidden pits and manchineel trees.”

“Manchineel trees?”

“They’re a type of tree that’s so toxic, you can get blisters just by standing too close,” she said, forcing herself not to tense when his mouth inched closer. “If someone eats its fruit, their throat will swell shut within minutes. It’s what killed Ponce de Leon.”

He slid her hair back, exposing her neck. “Are you a horticulture specialist like Abe and Ty?”

“No, but I make it a point to be aware of the plants in my backyard that can kill me.”

“And why do you have killer trees planted in the backyard?”

She let out a nervous laugh. “I d-don’t know?”

“One more question.” His breath fanned along her jaw. “Have I told you how beautiful you look?”

Seconds before their lips touched, a crash in the dining room across the hall startled her, and she lurched out of the embrace. "I'm sorry. This is the first time in a long time that I've brought someone home to meet everyone, and I'm a little jumpy."

That wasn't the total truth. She was mainly nervous because Evie didn't understand how someone like Lucas could be interested in someone like her, and she wanted to impress him tonight.

"It's ok," he said, running a hand through his golden hair with an encouraging smile that somehow made her feel worse. "I'm excited to be here."

They stood there awkwardly until Evie worked up the nerve to ask him if he wanted to get a drink.

Lucas took her hand. "I'd love to."

With Jamison continuing to keep Claudia entertained in the parlor, Evie figured the library would be the safest place to find liquor. The room was empty save for Selah and Simone. Evie introduced them to Lucas, and while chatting, they discovered that both men had ties to a charity at an Atlanta hospital.

As the men spoke of their mutual acquaintances, Simone motioned for Evie to join her at the makeshift bar in the back of the room.

"Your man looks like a Ken doll," Simone whispered, handing her a glass of wine.

“I don’t have a problem with that.”

They reclined on the bar to scope out Lucas together. “I’m sure you don’t,” Simone replied. “But you better watch yourself.”

Ben stalked into the room, deftly avoiding Selah and Lucas. He made his way over to them and snatched up a bottle of whiskey from behind the bar.

“I’m going to need this,” he muttered, filling the glass to the top. “What are we talking about in here?”

“Simone called my date a Ken doll.”

Continuing her assessment, Simone wrinkled her nose. “He’s a little too attractive for my taste.”

Ben downed his drink in one gulp. “He’s familiar, but I can’t think of where I know him from.”

“Maybe you met him at a charity event,” Evie said. “Lucas is on the board of several. That’s what he and Selah are over there discussing.”

“I don’t go to charity events, kid. I just hand over my money when they ask.” Ben poured himself a second glass and turned to watch Lucas with them. “And I’m sure he’s fine. Simone worries too much.”

“No, I don’t.” Simone gave him a pointed look. “I’m always right about those boys Jamison brings home.”

“Well, at least he’s not like the last one Evie introduced us to.” Ben thought for a minute. “Chet?”

“Brett,” Simone corrected. “The communist.”

“He wasn’t a communist,” Evie whispered through clenched teeth. “He was a political science major.”

Ben nudged her with his elbow. “It’s the same thing, kid.”

Evie nudged him back, and they grinned at one another. Ben was the only father figure she’d ever known. Her actual father, Albie Eddins, died in a car crash when she was a baby.

“All I’m saying is he’s pretty enough to cause trouble,” Simone said. “The type of man that can make it hurt.”

Ben cut her a sideways glance. “What the hell does that even mean?”

He and Simone were the most straightforward people on the planet, and it left him dismayed when she became philosophical.

“I don’t know,” Simone replied, watching closely when Lenora came into the room to join Lucas and Selah’s conversation. “It’s something Laura Jean used to say.”

Evie smiled, listening to them. Simone had been her mother’s dearest friend. The accident, which robbed them of Albie, had also severely injured Laura Jean, leaving her unable to care for a baby Evie. With no relatives to assist, Ben had stepped forward to help his best friend’s widow, and brought mother and daughter to Haven House for Simone to look after. The women were already good friends, but grew closer during Laura Jean’s lengthy recovery.

And when it was time for Laura Jean and Evie to move on, the women decided it was in everyone's best interest for them to stay. Together, they made Haven House into a loving home, supporting one another and their children.

Simone nodded at Lenora. "Our future daughter-in-law will be able to tell if there's something off about this Lucas."

"Selah hit the jackpot with her," Ben agreed. "She can smell bullshit a mile away."

On cue, Lenora laughed at something Lucas said, and Evie smirked into her wine glass. "See, he's charming."

Simone snorted. "Ken dolls are not charming."

"Ignore her," Ben said, softly enough for only Evie to hear. "And you know, the day I met your mother, she called me charming."

Evie laid her head on his shoulder. Her mother's death had destroyed them both at their very cores, shaping them into different versions of themselves.

For Ben, his soul shattered when Laura Jean took her final breath. People could search their whole lives and never come close to finding a fraction of the love the two of them shared. Most wanted to believe their relationship began soon after Laura Jean moved into Haven House, but that simply wasn't true. Evie was at least five when she discovered them dancing together on the conservatory's lower level late one night.

Catching her mother dancing hadn't been all that uncommon. The halls of Haven House were often filled with

music, and Laura Jean would grab anyone nearby to twirl to the beat. However, as Evie watched the two of them move in the moonlight, she'd known what she was seeing was different. The word affair meant nothing to her back then. All she understood was that Ben loved her mother.

And in witnessing that love, day in and day out, happily ever after became a very real thing to Evie.

Until it was over.

Not only did Laura Jean's death destroy Ben, but her loss also extinguished the light inside Evie. Gone was the wild girl who ran barefoot through the forest, smelling like the honeysuckle tangled in her hair. The girl who dreamed big and was afraid of nothing.

In the wake of their family's fractured fairytale, the world was left with a mere shell of the spirited creature she'd once been.

"Tell me something," Ben said, angling his head to look at her. "Do you like him?"

"He makes me nervous, but yes, I do."

"Then that's all that matters. A little happiness goes a long way, kid."

"Heads up," Simone warned under her breath as the goddess, better known as Samuel's girlfriend Gretchen, headed their way.

The three of them aimed their most polite smiles at the new arrival, each devising an exit strategy. Not that they didn't like



Gretchen, but everyone knew not to get attached to one of Samuel's women. All his relationships had a ninety-day shelf life, and Gretchen was approaching her expiration date.

"You look lovely," Gretchen gushed, taking Evie's hands in hers. Simone and Ben excused themselves, abandoning her to deal with the former Texas beauty queen.

"Er, thanks."

It wasn't hard to feel inferior around Gretchen. Simone might think of Lucas as a Ken doll, but Gretchen was a living Barbie. She was also brilliant, working as a lawyer for Fairweather Holdings.

Gretchen glanced over her shoulder at Lucas. "That new beau of yours is quite attractive."

"Lucas is a doctor," Evie blurted out. On reflex, her subconscious wanted to treat anything related to Samuel as a competition. He had a lawyer, but she had a doctor. Point for Evie.

Gretchen tossed her glossy hair to the side, giving a full view of the skintight dress she wore. It was a design Evie would kill to walk around in, but she just wasn't brave enough.

"Have you met Mallory yet?" Gretchen asked. "It turns out she's a Pi Phi like me."

Evie didn't know what a Pi Phi was and discreetly signaled Lucas for help. "No, not yet, but I think I'll do that now."

Taking one look at Gretchen, Lucas understood her distress call and extracted himself from the conversation with Selah to

come to her rescue. “I do believe we haven’t finished our tour,” he said, taking Evie’s hand. “I think the parlor was next.”

They hurried from the library. “That was close,” Evie said when they were in the hall. “She’s nice, but a bit much to deal with.”

Abe rolled out of the dining room, cutting them off. “I forgot where I hid the backup bourbon, and the dining room station is already out.”

“I swear we only hide alcohol around the house on special occasions,” Evie mumbled to Lucas, mortified.

Ty and his wife, Dee, came through the front door just then, and Evie promised Abe she would deal with the bourbon, sending him off to warn the new arrivals that Trevor and Claudia were in the house.

“Wait right here,” she told Lucas as Abe left. “The bourbon is probably hidden in the media room.”

Once a ballroom, the media room held a viewing area with a small office hidden in the back, a likely place for the bourbon to be found. Flipping on the office light, Evie stopped short when she saw a man sitting with his feet propped on the desk, stroking a tabby cat in his lap.

Apparently, it was her night to find handsome men hiding in the dark. “Um, hello, and who are you?”

“Gabriel.” The man looked her over, grinning in a way that reminded Evie of the Cheshire Cat. “And who might you be?”

Realizing he was Selah's friend from college, she crouched down to dig through a cabinet. "Evie."

Gabriel lowered his long legs to the floor. "Ah, the infamous Evie. We meet at last."

"Why am I infamous?" she asked, but then decided maybe she didn't want to know. If this guy was a friend of Selah's from school, chances were high he knew Samuel. "No, don't tell me. I'm sure the answer depends on which Fairweather you've talked to."

"Very true."

The undercurrent of an accent tinted his words, and Evie peered at him over her shoulder. "Are you Australian?"

"South African," he replied. "I came to the states for college and never left."

Searching for the bourbon, she wondered if Annabeth had met him yet. Mr. South Africa was just her type, handsome and *inside* Haven House. "You wouldn't happen to know where a bottle of bourbon might be hiding?"

Gabriel stretched an arm under the desk and produced the bottle, setting it in front of him. "I've helped myself to a drink or two while waiting for the opportune moment to sneak out."

"Why are you trying to sneak out?"

"I didn't know Claudia was going to be at the party. She and I dated forever ago, but the woman still frightens me."

The man was impressive if he survived Claudia. “Well then, there’s no shame in trying to escape. But make sure you use the kitchen exit. Look for Annabeth. She’ll help you.”

“Is Annabeth the cute one in the Donna Reed-like dress?”

Evie grinned at the description, taking the bottle from him. “That’s her.”

Lucas called her name, and she stuck her head out of the office. “Selah is gathering everyone to give a speech,” he said, his eyes wide as he took in the space. “We’re supposed to go to the parlor.”

She told Lucas she would be right there and turned back to Gabriel. “Now’s your time to get away. Selah is long-winded when he talks.”

Gabriel rose from the desk chair, and Evie couldn’t help but be struck by the way his cerulean suit matched his eyes. Yeah, Annabeth most definitely needed to meet this guy.

“Thank you, infamous Evie,” Gabriel said. “I hope we meet again.”

Evie told him goodnight and rejoined Lucas, who was staring open mouthed at the screen on the wall. “Can I come over and watch football here sometime?”

Laughing at the question, she hurried into the hall to deliver the bourbon, but ended up colliding with a solid mass of male walking past. Evie let out a gasp as the bottle slipped loose from her grip, plummeting to the floor.

Samuel caught it seconds before it crashed, passing it back to her while warily watching Lucas approach.

“I guess you’re the other stepbrother.” Lucas extended his hand. “Dr. Lucas Fields.”

Evie winced. Ben and her mother never married, and while Selah didn’t mind being referred to as her stepbrother, Samuel did, and was often quite vocal about it.

Dark eyes flicked to the outstretched hand in front of him, then to Evie, and then back to Lucas. “No, I’m not her stepbrother.”

Moving around them, Samuel continued down the hall to the parlor.

“He’s pleasant,” Lucas whispered watching him go. “And most definitely not your stepbrother.”

“I’m sorry. Samuel is...”

“A man of few words?”

“I was going to say an asshole,” Evie sighed. “But yeah, I guess you could say he has a limited vocabulary, too.”

## CHAPTER 5

# *Evie*

“**T**hank you for the great party,” Selah said, standing in front of the parlor room windows with Lenora at his side. “It’s been a long time since I’ve celebrated a birthday at Haven House, and it’s nice to be home.” He rested a hand protectively on Lenora’s stomach. “And I guess there is no better moment to tell everyone that we’re postponing the wedding.”

Annabeth and Jamison booed, while Evie’s gaze shot to Samuel standing near the door with Gretchen. He spared her a glance, but nothing more.

Lenora gave Selah a playful shove. “I’m pregnant,” she announced, and the room erupted into cheers.

“Wait, there’s one more thing.” Selah held up his hands for quiet. “They found two heartbeats.”

The cheers grew louder, with Ben and Simone rushing forward to congratulate their son. Claudia even clapped halfheartedly.

Bursting with excitement, Evie smiled over at Lucas, but found him frowning at his phone.

“Everything okay?”

“It’s the hospital,” Lucas said, sliding the phone back into his pocket. “I need to go.”

Ashamed of the relief she felt, Evie took his arm. “Come on. I’ll walk you out.”

They maneuvered their way through the crowd to retrieve his coat from the closet in the foyer.

“Please congratulate them for me.”

“I will.” She opened the front door, and they walked out onto the porch. The chilly night air had her rubbing her arms for warmth. “It’s cold out here.”

“I wish I could stay to keep you warm.” Lucas brushed his lips over hers, catching Evie off guard. No matter how many times he kissed her, she never got used to it.

“Um, yeah.”

“Well, goodnight.” Lucas bounded down the steps two at a time, waving when he reached the path. “And it was nice meeting you, Samuel.”

Evie’s head whipped to her right, and there, alone in one of the rocking chairs, was Samuel.

“This is the second time I’ve come across you sitting in the dark tonight,” she said, once Lucas drove away. “You could’ve announced yourself.”

“Trust me, I didn’t want to witness your little moment with the doctor, but you two started making out before I could speak.”

Evie snorted. “I feel sorry for Gretchen if that’s your idea of making out,” she said, taking a few steps towards him. “Celebratory cigar, huh?”

He remained quiet, and Evie tilted her head, studying him. “Lighten up, Samuel. You’re going to be an uncle. You should’ve told me in the kitchen, instead of hiding behind fake compliments.”

“There’s more to the story, and I didn’t want to upset you.”

Samuel rose and went to the porch railing, watching the treetops toss around in the breeze. A stream of wind blew past, ruffling his black hair. He was wearing it longer these days, and it gave him an air of recklessness, which was absurd. Samuel had never been reckless a day in his life.

“Go back inside and celebrate.”

“Oh, no you don’t.” She moved closer, poking a finger in his back. “You can’t just drop a line like that and expect me to ignore it. Stop being dramatic and tell me what’s happening.”

He faced her and let out a heavy sigh, pinching the bridge of his nose as he’d done earlier in the kitchen. “I’m starting to get these headaches every time we talk,” he said. “I think I’ll start calling them Evie-aches.”

“Don’t be funny. It’s not your style.”



His hand dropped. “You’re right. Abe is Selah’s funny brother, while I’m the serious one.”

“Damn it, Samuel. Tell me what’s going on.”

“There are complications.” Even in the dimmed light, she could see the sadness softening his face. “The doctors think the pregnancy is viable, but the percentage is low. They wanted them to consider a selective reduction.”

Evie’s heart ached for Selah and Lenora. “Where they remove one baby?”

Samuel nodded, running a hand through his hair. “Selah wouldn’t listen.”

“What did you expect him to do?”

“I expect him to think about Lenora,” he said. “These complications put her in danger.”

“If that were true, Selah wouldn’t hesitate.”

“Not intentionally,” Samuel said, his frustration spilling over. “But you and I both know how he blazes forward with that fucking optimism of his. Never stopping to think about the consequences.”

Everyone loved Selah’s positivity, but sometimes he could take it too far.

Samuel leaned on a column, stuffing his hands in his pockets. “He called and asked me to come to his cottage before the party. When I got there, he told me everything, and

how the doctor wanted Lenora placed on bed rest. She shouldn't even be here.”

“And what did you say?”

“I told him they should delay the announcement.”

Evie raised an eyebrow. Like any Fairweather male, Selah didn't care to be told what to do. “I'm guessing he didn't like your suggestion?”

“He got angry, which I expected. Lenora sent us outside when we started shouting. I tried to reason with him on the walk up from the cottages, but he shut down. He said it was unfortunate I couldn't be happy for them.”

“I'm sorry, Samuel.”

And she truly was. Samuel might be a complete ass to her, but he loved his brother, and under different circumstances, would have been excited.

“Then he pulled out two cigars and told me to stop talking. We sat in silence until you came along,” he said. “I figured he wouldn't delay the pregnancy announcement, but I wasn't sure if he'd mention the twins.”

They stood together for a long moment, listening to the sounds of the celebration inside.

“I never thought I would say this,” Evie said finally, “but I agree with you.”

Bitter amusement flickered over his handsome face. “Dear God, is the world ending?”

“I know. I’m shocked too.” She held up her hand, thinking of the best way to phrase what else she wanted to say. This was the most civil conversation they’d had in years and didn’t want it ruined. “But hang with me a minute. There’s more to that statement. You need to trust Selah to decide for his family. These babies and Lenora are his responsibility.”

Samuel shook his head stubbornly. “And Selah is mine,” he said. “Who’s going to pick up the pieces of him when something horrible happens to Lenora? I’ll tell you who. It’ll be me. And I’m sorry, but I can’t do it again.”

Selah’s situation was reminding him of the nightmare they’d lived through with Ben when her mother died. “We’ll all be there for Selah if something happens,” she argued. “And sitting out here, struggling to fix an unfixable problem, will achieve nothing.”

Evie closed the distance between them, and he straightened. “Selah is going to be a dad, and you’re not supporting him when he needs it,” she said. “How many moments in life have you missed by working to keep everything, and everybody, under control? Including yourself.”

He blinked at her, and then let his head fall back, squeezing the bridge of his nose again. “Jesus,” he mumbled up at the haint blue ceiling. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

Evie’s anger bristled. He thought she was being ridiculous as usual. “I didn’t realize you were a praying man.”

His head lowered, and he opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came out.

“What?” she snapped, suddenly self-conscious.

Clearing his throat, he tried again, but still nothing.

“Samuel?”

He shook his head and leveled a steady stare at her. “I was going to say, please don’t start being optimistic, too. Our mutual cynicism is one of the few things we have in common.”

Her brows shot up. “Two compliments in a single night. The world really must be ending.”

“That wasn’t a compliment.”

Evie snickered at him. “Coming from a narcissist like yourself, a comparison of our commonalities is, in fact, a compliment.”

He gave her a small, wry smile. “That’s quite a mouthful, Evangeline.”

The front door opened, spilling light onto the darkened porch. Annabeth stuck her head outside. “Did Lucas leave?”

“Yeah, the hospital needed him,” Evie told her.

“Damn it.” Annabeth’s shoulders slumped. “I didn’t have a chance to talk to him.”

The Colonel skirted through her legs, making it to the cobblestone path before Annabeth caught him. “Oh no, you don’t,” she scolded the cat. “I’ll not have you impregnating Tess again. We have enough kittens around here.”

Samuel shot Annabeth one of his rare full smiles. “Abe told me you were moving around outside freely now, but it’s pretty awesome to see it.”

She beamed at him, proud to show her progress.

Evie was proud of her, too. The day had been stressful, but Annabeth was staying strong.

“I need an escort,” Annabeth confessed, climbing the steps. “But close to the house, I’m able to do it alone without holding on to someone.”

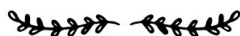
“Maybe I’ll come over and take you for a stroll next week,” he said, sounding truly amazed at what he was seeing. “Or we could go for a drive if you’re up to it.”

Sometimes, it was easy to forget Samuel could be endearing. Evie wouldn’t go as far as calling him charming, like Lucas, but he had his moments. Too bad those moments happened when he was speaking to anyone but her.

“A walk sounds nice.” Annabeth hugged the Colonel to her chest and looked around, confused. “What are you two doing out here?”

“I was lecturing Samuel about being bull-headed,” Evie said, turning to go inside. “And I think he was praying for me to shut up.”

“Well, praying is good, I guess.” Annabeth followed behind her, patting Samuel’s shoulder as they left. “It’s about time he realizes there’s a higher power than himself.”



Annabeth glared at everyone gathered in the kitchen after the party. “Can someone explain to me how a sexy single man was in our house, and I didn’t find out until he was gone?”

Evie sealed the last container of leftovers and stuck it in the refrigerator. “Don’t be angry with me. I told him to find you.”

Claiming emotional damage from dealing with Claudia for most of the evening, Jamison sat perched on the counter, refusing to help clean up. “Selah said he’s in town for a few days. You should drop a hint to Lenora that you wouldn’t mind having him over for dinner.”

“Good idea,” Annabeth said. “Lenora will help me out. She’s already gone to bed, or I would have her text him now.”

“I’m going to bed, too,” Evie said, stopping on her way out to kiss Simone on the cheek. “Goodnight, Grandma.”

“Goodnight, Auntie,” Simone replied with a gentle smile.

Auntie.

Evie’s heart was light with the thought as she readied for bed. The what-ifs could wait until morning, and even then, Samuel would worry enough for them all.

After washing her face in the jack-and-jill bathroom she shared with Annabeth, Evie changed clothes and turned off the lights. Moonlight shone through the uncovered window on her balcony door, creating shadows of the forest on the opposite wall.

Debating whether to keep it open and enjoy the last bit of winter hanging on, Evie stepped outside to check the temperature. Her room sat at the front of the house, overlooking part of the gardens and driveway. All the suites on the second floor included access to the balcony, giving them a shared outdoor space. Annabeth's section faced the water, and Jamison's viewed the forest where they jogged every day.

Standing at the railing, she inhaled the crisp air and heard someone talking below on the porch. Ben was pacing in the gardens, unsurprisingly on his phone, and too far off to be heard. That meant the rumble of male voices under her must belong to the boys.

When the wind calmed, Abe's booming laugh drifted upward, and she was also able to recognize Selah talking and Gretchen's distinct giggling. Evie assumed the other female speaking occasionally was Mallory.

"What did everyone think of Evie's doctor?"

The question came from Gretchen, and Evie strained to listen.

Of course, Selah was kind. "He seemed nice."

"He was certainly nice looking," Mallory added, proving that Abe's taste in women wasn't so bad after all.

"I agree wholeheartedly with that assessment," Gretchen replied. "Abe?"

"She looked happy with him," Abe said, although he didn't sound very sure.

“Samuel, what was your take on Dr. Fields?” Gretchen asked, and Evie’s heart seized in her chest. Whatever he had to say would be rude, and mean, and make her hate him even more.

Whispering a silent prayer, she begged whoever was in charge of the universe to let the matter drop without him answering.

“Nothing.”

Evie nodded to the sky above in thanks.

But Gretchen wouldn’t let it go. “What does that mean?”

“It means I don’t have an opinion of him.”

That was a lie, Samuel had an opinion on everything. Worse, his brusque dismissal piqued Gretchen’s interest, and as a career-Barbie, lawyer edition, she knew when someone was lying. “I’m sure you do. So, give it to us.”

The silence stretched, and Evie leaned forward, nearly toppling over the railing when Samuel’s deep voice broke through the quiet. “I didn’t pay much attention to him. But it doesn’t matter. He won’t be around for long.”

“What makes you say that?” Gretchen asked.

“A man like that is more concerned with impressing his colleagues and golf buddies than building a relationship with someone.”

Evie’s mouth hung open. How much more hypocritical could Samuel be? His dating history consisted of brief affairs



with women who all looked like they could be twins.

“That’s not fair,” Gretchen argued. “You just admitted that you barely acknowledged the man while he was here, but yet you can automatically dismiss him as the type to not want a serious relationship?”

Samuel let out a blasting sigh, and Evie automatically recoiled. The sound signaled the end of his patience. She was well acquainted with it.

“Someone who puts that much effort into his appearance only has two motives when dating,” Samuel started to say, but Abe interrupted him.

“Do you think he dyes his hair?” Abe asked. “It’s an unnatural shade of blond, and the cut is amazing. It hypnotized me when he did that little head swish thing to knock it out of his eyes.”

Selah laughed. “Shut up, Abe.”

But Abe wasn’t done. “And his teeth were so white.”

Gretchen shushed him. “Go on, Samuel.”

“I was saying that he either wants someone he can show off without getting serious, or the good doctor is in the market for a nice, biddable wife,” Samuel said. “He won’t find that in Evie. She’ll overwhelm him.”

“Lucas seemed perfectly capable of handling her,” Selah commented.

“You tell him, Selah,” Evie whispered.

“Well then, she’ll get bored with him,” Samuel snapped back at his brother. “Evie will never be content living out some vanilla existence with that guy. She may think that’s what she wants, but it’s not what she needs. In the long run, she’ll be miserable.”

Bastard.

Samuel Fairweather was an absolute bastard.

Listening to him make judgments about Lucas, and what she wanted in life, sent Evie’s anger soaring. She couldn’t believe she’d felt a single ounce of sympathy for him earlier, and had half a mind to march downstairs and tell him to go to hell.

“That’s a high level of hostility to have towards a man you don’t have an opinion on.” This statement came from Gretchen.

Samuel didn’t respond to her, but addressed his brother instead. “Do not stand there and scowl at me like I’m the asshole for saying it out loud, Selah. Your opinion was the same as mine when you first saw him.”

“I changed my mind after talking with him. I’m allowed to do that,” Selah replied with heat in his voice. “Evie seems to like him, and Lucas is the first guy she’s brought home in a long time.”

“Yeah, and her last boyfriend was a communist,” Abe said. “Lucas is an upgrade.”

Unable to step away from an argument, Samuel kept pushing. “You know I’m right. He’ll give her a boring life with a couple of kids and one of those weird hybrid dogs with a stupid fucking name. She won’t realize she’s wasted her life on him until it’s too late.”

“Maybe that’s what she wants,” Selah said, his voice raised to a near shout. He was the only person who ever dared to stand up to Samuel when he was being an ass. “And until you’re ready to turn that hypercritical mirror on yourself, you’re not in any position to pass judgment on us, especially Evie. Let her be happy.”

The wind grew louder, and she couldn’t hear anything else except the slam of the front door. On the lawn below, Gretchen strode down the path towards the parking area with Samuel not far behind.

The party was obviously over.

Watching from the shadows she saw Samuel stopping Gretchen to talk by her car. Evie had to admit, they made a striking couple. Jamison told her the other day how she thought Gretchen could be the one to finally drag him to the altar.

Evie wished her luck.

When Gretchen left, and Samuel headed back, Evie had an idea. The moon was high in the sky tonight, illuminating her as she returned to the railing.

Catching sight of her staring down at him, Samuel halted abruptly on the walk. They stood suspended for a moment, watching one another until she felt her point had been made. And once it had, Evie turned on her heel in dismissal, striding back inside.

She locked the balcony door and leaned against it, smiling at her cat.

“That felt good, Fitz.”

But her victory was short-lived. A hard knock on her door had Evie rushing over to make sure it was locked.

“Let me talk to you,” Samuel’s muffled voice demanded through the door.

“Go away.”

The knob rattled. “I want to talk.”

“No.”

“Open the door, Evangeline.”

Did the man ever say please?

“I said go away.”

When the knocking didn’t cease, she went to bed, snuggling under the covers with Fitz. Samuel would eventually give up and accept he’d lost this round between them.

## CHAPTER 6

# Evie

**F**lashes of memory.  
Echoes of time.

In the twilight of sleep, pieces of the past stretched outward, catapulting Evie into the oubliette of her mind where escape wasn't possible. At least, not without first reliving the shards of a life that no longer existed. And while the dream always ended the same, the build to its climax evolved, beginning at a different point in the story each time.

Tonight, it opened with her mother.

*Laura Jean twirled about in the conservatory, barefoot in a broom skirt, spinning between her easel and her painting supplies. Splotches of color dotted her arms, with some even soaking the tips of her long untamed hair.*

*"Why the sad face, kitten?"*

*Evie remembered this day. It was her birthday, and she'd chosen to spend it learning a new feathering technique. Once upon a time, Evie loved to paint.*

*"It doesn't look right, Mama."*

*“Keep trying, and you’ll get it.” Laura Jean turned on the record player, and the rich tones of Stevie Nicks filled the room. “Practice makes perfect.”*

*Evie frowned at the mess on the canvas. “But Ben says, practice makes permanent, and imperfect practice makes—”*

*“Art.” Ben rushed in and kissed her mother soundly. “And there is no greater artist than your mother. Trust her, kid.”*

*He bent down and planted a kiss on Laura Jean’s pregnant belly peeking out from under her shirt. Jamison would arrive that winter, and Evie had been excited to become a big sister.*

*“Oh no, I got some paint on you.” Laura Jean wiped at the streak of color on the lapel of Ben’s suit jacket. “I’m so sorry.”*

*Ben kissed her once more with a loud smack. “Worth it.”*

*Forever late for something, he ran out again, and Evie giggled, watching him go. Ben loved her mother with his whole heart, and it made her love him, too.*

*Clouds covered the sun, muting the light streaming in through the conservatory windows. Laura Jean stepped over to the glass, frowning at something on the lawn.*

*“Etched in the bone. It was always going to be him,” she murmured to Evie. “Swallow the fear, and don’t hesitate, else everyone will lose.”*

*The music continued to play even when the memory dimmed in a blur of motion.*

*Evie closed her eyes until the world steadied, opening them again to find herself sitting on the couch in the parlor with a two-year-old Jamison in her lap.*

*“What are you girls doing?” Simone asked from the hall. “It’s almost bedtime.”*

*Five sets of eyes remained glued to the screen.*

*“It’s a new show,” Annabeth said, from next to Evie. “It’s about three girls who have superpowers. And they live with their dad and an evil monkey kidnaps him.”*

*Simone approached the group. “An evil monkey, huh?”*

*Annabeth nodded solemnly. “He’s really evil, Mama.”*

*Kneeling directly in front of Evie, Simone gripped her chin. “Evil is where you least expect it, Evangeline,” she said, speaking in a voice not her own. “Pay attention.”*

*Evie remained quiet, knowing she shouldn’t ask questions. It was best not to, since the answers weren’t always what you wanted to hear.*

*With a shake of her head, Simone returned, straightening to stand with a smile. “Don’t worry, your mama will be back soon. Ben insisted on painting the bedrooms in the new house, and she’s supervising.”*

*The home Ben built for them was to be their castle in the fairytale, but Evie never slept a single night in it.*

*The parlor scene spun away, ushering in a heavy bass that thumped beneath Evie’s feet. She spun, holding her mother’s*

*hands while they danced in Haven's ballroom.*

*The song playing was one of their favorites, and to hear it meant the end was near.*

*Laura Jean let go, and Evie stumbled to the corner of the room. Prepared for the next part, she covered her ears when the screams started. Never in her life would she be able to forget the guttural sounds of anguish Ben made as her mother lay dying.*

*His suffering in that moment held power and haunted Haven House still.*

*Willing herself to look, Evie saw her mother on the floor with Ben hunched over her, pleading with Laura Jean to stay. Stay, stay, stay.*

*Stay.*

*He would do anything.*

*Anything.*

*He promised. He swore. He begged.*

*How like Ben to negotiate with Death.*

*Bile rose in Evie's throat. She needed to tell her mother goodbye, but couldn't move, locked in place by a hand on her arm.*

*Samuel.*

*Evie yanked against his grip, but he held tight. In his other arm, Jamison squirmed, fighting to get down, and with the two*



*of them struggling to get free, Samuel realized he couldn't hold them both.*

*And Samuel let Evie go.*

*Free, she ran towards her mother, but tripped on the way, landing on something soft. It was a girl, lying broken on the floor with drops of scarlet freckling her beautiful face.*

*Knowing how she would hate being found messy, Evie wiped at the red, scrubbing the girl's skin clean.*

*Ben's cries disintegrated as she worked, blowing away like sand in the wind. Through the ballroom windows, darkness rolled in, pulsing like a heartbeat of nothingness that ate away at everything but Evie and the girl.*

*Finishing her task, she waited. Knowing the rules. Only when they were alone in the void would the girl rise and speak, revealing secrets to be forgotten by the morning.*

*Slowly, the scent of jasmine crept in, heralding life into the space, and the girl rose from her slumber. "Good evening, Queen Evie."*

*"Good evening."*

*Evie permitted the girl to choose the topic whenever they met. It was only fair since she had no one else. Tonight, they whispered of Selah and babies. Of things yet to come, and of things no one wanted to remember.*

*And when their talk came to a close, the girl stared out into the oblivion. "Don't let him win."*

*Evie frowned. This wasn't how the dream usually ended.  
"Who are you talking about?"*

*In a blink, the girl's facade vanished, and her true form of  
maggots and decaying flesh sank to the floor. It crawled  
towards Evie, digging its sharp nails across the hardwood.*

*"Wake up," The girl cried, her unseeing eyes returning.  
With each drag of her body forward, her lips spread wider,  
gaping unnaturally to spew forth the screams of a thousand  
souls. "Wake up!"*

*Evie stumbled, landing hard on the ground. The misstep  
gave the thing a chance to latch onto her leg and claw its way  
up her body. "Wake up, Evie!"*

Secure in bed, Evie opened her eyes while the dream  
slipped through the cracks of her mind, erasing itself from  
memory.

Facing the wall, she watched the shadowed tug of war  
between the wind and forest continue to rage outside. It was  
quiet except for the creaking pops of Haven's old bones.  
Hoping to salvage a few more hours of sleep, she closed her  
eyes again, readjusting her position. The movement disrupted  
Fitz, who patted at her ankle with his paw.

"Stop it, Fitz."

But he didn't stop, and the paw became fingers, tiptoeing up  
her leg.

"Fitz?"

The fingers transformed into a hand, locking onto her leg,  
and Evie sat up screaming.

## CHAPTER 7

# Miranda

1988

**H**ow long were wedding receptions supposed to last? Miranda looked out from the head table across the expansive gardens of Parkland Grounds. Dinner had been served well over three hours ago, and yet the crowd hadn't thinned in the slightest.

Guests mingled around her, giving the occasional nod or smile whenever they roamed by. She thought she must not be playing the part of a blushing bride very well, since none of them stopped to strike up a conversation or extend their congratulations.

Then again, many of those in attendance were business associates of her groom, with Miranda knowing less than a dozen. The idea of getting married in front of a group of strangers might bother some, but she had been preparing for this type of matrimonial *bliss* for most of her life.

"The richer the husband, the lonelier the wife," her mother, Pamela, would preach to Miranda and her sisters. "But

remember, my darlings, it's better to be lonely in cashmere, than in cotton."

With a gaggle of girls to marry off, Pamela Abrams learned to wield the art of matchmaking as a weapon to ensure advantageous unions for her children. And with the three oldest girls settled, Pamela tackled the hunt for her youngest daughter's husband with gusto.

Miranda should have known her mother was up to something when she was assigned to be the liaison between their family's company and Fairweather Holdings. As a formidable player in the land development industry, Fairweather had expressed an interest in buying her father's patent for a residential waste disposal system.

Well-equipped to handle the introductory meeting, Miranda arrived early, ready to start negotiations on what was sure to be a lucrative venture for both her family's company and Fairweather. However, all that self-confidence went out the window when she found Benjamin Fairweather waiting in the conference suite.

Recognizing him at once, she'd mumbled an apology, thinking she'd made a wrong turn. Her contact within Fairweather was Jack Hoffman, and not the acting director of their North Carolina interests.

"You're in the right place," Ben had told her when she tried to gracefully back out of the room. "Jack's mother took a fall this morning, and he's out of the office caring for her. I'm afraid you're stuck with me. Please have a seat, Ms. Abrams."

Stella Hoffman was a friend of her mother's, and Miranda had known damn well the woman was fine. So fine, in fact, that Stella was meeting Pamela for lunch in an hour.

"I'm sorry," she mumbled, pulling files from her briefcase to begin. "Please tell Jack I hope his mother gets better soon."

As the meeting progressed, Ben gave no indication of being interested in her, keeping the discussion professional and focused on Fairweather's attraction to her father's company. So, when the invitation to dinner came at the end, it surprised Miranda, and she told him no, claiming a previous engagement for the evening.

Her mother was waiting when she returned to the office. "Are you crazy?" Pamela screeched. "Why did you say no?"

Miranda fell into her desk chair. "How was your lunch with Stella?"

"Don't change the subject."

"Why are you here, mother?"

"Because apparently, my daughter has lost all common sense," Pamela replied, sitting in the chair across from her.

"He wasn't my type."

"Ben Fairweather is every woman's type."

"He's not Jewish," Miranda said, bringing up a fact her mother rarely ignored.

"No one's perfect."

Miranda searched her brain. "He's very intense."

“Intense means he’s good in bed.”

“I wasn’t aware this was about expanding my sexual horizons,” Miranda said, more than a little uncomfortable with where the conversation was headed. “Thanks for looking out for me.”

“Somebody has to.” Pamela smirked, happily keeping up with their rapid-fire exchange. “Because you don’t.”

“Mother!”

“Miranda!”

Letting out a grunt of frustration, Miranda shook her head. “I know this might not make sense, but he’s too straightforward, too focused on the task at hand. Nothing distracts him. And the way he brought up dinner was odd. He went from talking about marginal loss expectations to asking me out all in the same breath.”

“Hundreds of women would jump at the chance to have the undivided attention of Benjamin Fairweather.” Pamela’s lips curved into a smile. “Tall, dark, and handsome doesn’t quite do him justice, does it?”

“Eww, stop talking.”

“And you, stop with the excuses,” Pamela said, her native New York accent coming out. “There’s not much here to offer a girl of your caliber, and since I couldn’t get you to stay behind in Manhattan to fish around for a catch, Ben Fairweather is going to be the lucky guy.”

Miranda ran a hand through her pixie cut. No one believed she'd willingly hack off her long hair, but she loved the new style. It made her feel more like herself. "I just don't know."

Pamela leaned forward, sharp eyes searching. "Did you not find him attractive?"

Swallowing the lump in her throat, and not wanting her mother to push, Miranda gave in and called the Fairweather offices to explain to Ben that her plans for the evening had fallen through.

To her surprise, she enjoyed the date, which led to many more until they were soon spending most of their nights together.

And her mother had been correct. Ben's intensity served her well in the bedroom.

Three months into the relationship, he invited her to meet his family in Florida. Miranda was hoping for a fun weekend at his beach house, but discovered they were to stay at Parkland Grounds, the home of Ben's parents. The mid-city manor sat far from the gulf and was specifically constructed to remind the world of the Fairweather wealth.

When they arrived, a staff member answered the door while Helen Fairweather stood stiffly back, waiting in the expansive foyer. She wore a pink wool suit with gold accents and a tightly coiled chignon with not a single silvery blond hair out of place.

Mother and son did not greet one another.



“You’re late,” Helen said by way of introduction. “Lunch is being served.”

Miranda handed the staff member her bag. “Thank you, but we already ate.”

Helen sneered at her response. “This way.”

Miranda would learn that everything at Parkland Grounds was conducted with formality, including lunch, because Ben’s father demanded it.

“You’re Sam Abrams’ youngest?” James Fairweather asked from the head of the table while his gnarled hands worked at cutting the meat on the plate. “Abrams Disposal Services?”

“Yes, sir.”

Chewing on the morsel in his mouth, Ben’s father narrowed his beady eyes in her direction. “Leave it to a Jew to make that kind of money shoveling shit.”

The ugliness in his words pinged off the crystal chandelier like a starting bell, alerting Miranda to ready for battle. James Fairweather’s jibe was nothing new. Passive insults were an everyday thing since moving south of the Mason-Dixon line.

She stared down the lengthy table at the old man, awaiting the next strike. But before Ben’s father could speak, newcomers rushed in. A man and a woman so well put together, Miranda’s mouth hung open for a split second.

Ben introduced them as his brother Charlie and sister-in-law Vivian. The exact opposite of the other Fairweathers, Ben’s

brother was all smiles and jokes. Miranda found him delightful.

Mercifully, the lunch soon ended, but just when Miranda thought she was free, Helen stopped her on the way out. “Join me for a walk.”

Ben intervened with a shake of his head. “Miranda needs to rest. We’ve been traveling since early this morning.”

Helen didn’t so much as spare him a glance. “Follow me, Ms. Abrams.”

Miranda had no choice but to go, and was led past the imperial staircase, deep into the house’s east wing.

Stopping at a set of doors, Helen threw them open to reveal an enormous garden. Everywhere Miranda looked, there were dozens upon dozens of flowering plants, covering at least two acres of land. Cobblestone pathways twisted through the neat rows of flora, and at the heart of it, a towering circular fountain gently spouted water into the sky.

Helen took her arm, guiding Miranda down a path. “Are you at all interested in botany?”

“I’m afraid not.”

“These are my babies.” Helen gestured to the flowers surrounding them on both sides. Beautiful blooms basking in the sun without a drop of color on their petals. “All free of imperfections.”

“I grew up in Texas,” Helen went on, navigating them through the sea of white. “Did you know we have over two

thousand varieties of wildflowers in my home state?”

“Um, no.”

Helen stopped to examine the soil of a flower bed. “The impure devils dig their roots into the earth around the cultivated species of flora, disguising themselves among their betters.” Her fingers pinched a small pink bud emerging from the dirt. “They’re rebellious and difficult to remove if cross-pollination occurs.”

Ben’s mother dropped the bud to the ground, squishing it under the toe of her shoe. “My children are like these flowers, pure and well cultivated. Their father and I must be diligent and not allow any weeds to take root near them.”

They continued walking, with Helen’s heels clicking a slow beat on the stone. “It’s harder with boys. They crave wildness from time to time, revolting against their purpose. Most would assume by his lively personality that Charlie would be my defiant seed, or perhaps Trevor as the youngest. But it’s neither. Both are loyal.”

Miranda attempted to extract her arm, but the older woman held on. “His father cannot see it or refuses to. Either way, you’ll do well to remember nothing gets past a mother,” Helen said. “Ben is my rebel seed who welcomes the wildflowers into his life. It was only a matter of time before one took root.”

Miranda stopped struggling and allowed herself to be led to the fountain. “But there’s something you should know before this little arrangement between you two goes further.” Helen gazed up at the water trickling into the pool of the fountain.

“Benjamin is like his father. He’ll try to suppress it around you, but that cruelty is there. Fairweathers find joy in destroying things that get in the way. Even when it’s their own family.”

“Ben isn’t cruel.”

Helen laughed. “Consider this a warning from one woman to another. My son cannot love anyone. Even if he entertained the notion, mark my words, he would still betray them to obtain what he wants.”

Before they arrived, Miranda’s father had warned her of the rumors regarding James Fairweather, and she’d come here prepared. However, Helen’s behavior was something she hadn’t expected, and Miranda told herself she should just leave and catch the first flight home.

But then these people would win, and that wasn’t going to happen.

“Let’s be honest, Helen. The truth is, you think Ben will never care for me because I’m not some white rose plucked from your garden of suitable women.”

Helen’s lips curved with evil malice. “That’s not the case at all. We’ve raised our boys to accept that affection is a commodity not afforded to those who wish to remain in power. Ben has proved he understands this, time and time again.”

“How so?”

The grin on Helen’s face widened, cracking deep lines in the unnaturally smooth skin. “I really shouldn’t say.”

Miranda jerked her arm free, and Helen let her go, waving a hand in dismissal.

“Dinner is in a few hours,” she said, sneering at the slacks Miranda wore. “And for God’s sake, wear something more feminine.”

Refusing to run, Miranda went inside to the guest room she’d been instructed to stay in and collapsed on the bed.

Ben snuck in while she was lost in thought. “What did she say?”

“Not much,” she replied, careful not to look at him. “Your mom is... different.”

He came over to the bed. “Everyone thinks my father is the evil one, but Helen puts him to shame,” he said. “Then there’s Charlie, a piece of shit that neglects his wife.”

“You could’ve warned me about Helen,” Miranda grumbled, shifting to her side to face him. “And I think Charlie’s wife is just a quiet person. You can’t say he’s neglecting her because she’s shy and he’s not.”

“Vivian is on so many antidepressants she can’t string enough words together to form a complete sentence.”

“So, you automatically blame Charlie for his wife’s depression?”

Ben lay next to her, stretching out on his back. “Vivian wants a baby, but they can’t conceive,” he said, pulling her to him. “She’s also growing suspicious that Charlie is having an affair.”

“Is he?” Miranda rested her chin on his chest. “She’s beautiful. Why would he need to stray?”

“Charlie cheats because he thinks he can do whatever he wants. The worst part is the girlfriend is pregnant, and he expects me to clean it up.”

“How would you clean it up?”

Ben hesitated, and then lifted his head to look at her. “I need to tell you something.”

Alarm bells went off in her head, but Miranda kept her face blank. “Go on.”

“My father is ill,” he whispered, as if the walls had ears. “It’s his heart. Honestly, we were all shocked to find out he even had one.”

Ben was a serious man, and his attempt at humor was another sign she needed to stay alert. “And?”

“Charlie’s a playboy, but he’s also an idiot. My father knows he’s not fit to run his own life, let alone a company like ours. When the doctors told us of his condition, my dad revised his trust, leaving control of Fairweather and all its subsidiaries to me.”

Bypassing Charlie was a surprise, but not unheard of in business. Elder children either took to the jobs laid out for them by their parents, or they sat back and continued to reap the benefits while others did the work.

“What about your younger brother?” she asked.

“My father made me agree to look after Charlie, and I also have to allow Trevor a spot on Fairweather’s board, but his actual authority would be at my discretion,” Ben said. “Neither of my brothers knows any of this. Charlie won’t care so long as his bills are paid, but Trevor will be a problem.”

“What will your mother get?”

“Nothing.”

The muscle in Ben’s jaw ticked, and Miranda wanted desperately to know what Helen had done to her son that made him hate her so.

“I’m letting her leave with the assets she came with, a house in Houston and a vacation home in the Virgin Islands,” he said. “I’ll provide her with a reasonable income, but that’s it.”

Ben rolled into a sitting position, bringing her with him. “There’s something else.” They sat facing each other while he visibly struggled to get the words out. “I have a son.”

Miranda recoiled, unable to hide her shock. “Excuse me?”

He attempted to take her hand, but she yanked it back. “Please,” he breathed. “I’m only asking you to listen.”

Miranda was many things, but she wasn’t stupid. When a man like Ben Fairweather asked you to listen, you listened.

“His name is Selah,” Ben went on when she nodded for him to continue. “He’s a little over a year old, and lives with his mother.”

Ben spoke the boy's name with such tenderness, it obliterated his mother's earlier statement. Helen was wrong. Her son was very much capable of loving someone.

"In Hollingsdale?" she asked.

Ben shook his head. "He's safe, living at my family's original estate. It's a house that sits between here and Port Michaelson. My family doesn't know he exists, and the only way I could provide for him without raising suspicion was to lie. I convinced my father to let me have the estate renovated, under the guise of bringing it back to use as a corporate retreat. My grandfather had the idea during his time at Fairweather but never followed through with it."

"But why is Selah being kept a secret?"

"His mother is black."

Miranda's mind went to the garden of white. She didn't even know the child, but was already afraid for him. "Are you sure no one in your family knows?"

"Charlie does, and he's using Selah as a bargaining chip to force me into helping with the pregnant girlfriend."

A tremor ran through Ben's hands. He was risking something in telling her this. "It's a long story, but it boils down to the fact that I might be the secondary director of the company, but my father keeps my finances on a tight leash. If I were to care for my son outright, the expenses would send up a huge red flag."

"You hid them in plain sight."



“Exactly,” he said, seemingly relieved that she understood. “Selah’s mother draws a salary as the housekeeper, and her brother oversees the landscaping. My parents have never even stepped foot on the property, and only know that I sent two members of the Parkland Ground staff out to manage Haven House.”

“So you’re able to justify their expenses, while keeping them hidden.” Miranda swung her legs off the side of the bed. “That’s clever, Ben.”

He moved to sit beside her, hesitantly taking her hand. She didn’t pull away this time, lacing their fingers together.

“What’s your relationship with Selah’s mother like?”

“Simone and I have known each other for a long time. We’re good friends, and I think the two of you would get along well.”

Miranda felt she already knew the answer to her next question but wanted to hear him say it. “Why are you telling me this?”

“Because I trust and respect you,” he said, holding her gaze. “Every marriage in my family lacks those two basic things, and I want ours to be different.”

He offered no declarations of love or false promises of devotion. That alone helped her take what he was saying seriously.

As if reading her mind, Ben chuckled at her expression. “It’s okay. I know you don’t love me,” he said. “However, I

think we can agree that our goals in life are aligned. A union between us would benefit our families, but we might also find ourselves happy with the arrangement. I like you, Miranda, and I think you feel the same way about me.”

“Do you think you could ever love me?” She wasn’t trying to force the subject, but Miranda was genuinely curious. If he were hoping for something like love to grow between them, considering his proposal would be out of the question.

“I don’t think I’m made like that,” he replied, almost shamefully. “Nor do I think it’s something I could ever learn.”

Miranda understood. It was impossible to force a heart to bend in a way that it was unwilling, or unable, to go. But he was right. They respected one another, and maybe, in the long haul of life, they would discover a little happiness during the journey.

Her mother would certainly be happy, at least.

“If not love, what do you hope to get out of this marriage?”

Ben pulled her into his lap. “I want more children. Selah is the best thing that’s ever happened to me,” he said. “You’re also not the type of person who would expect me to exclude my son from our lives.”

Staring off at the horrendous pink and green striped wallpaper, a thought struck her. “Where would we live?”

“We’ll stay in North Carolina until my father passes, and then we’ll come here. Parkland Grounds will be ours.”

The idea of ripping out any trace of Helen from this house nearly made Miranda shout out a resounding yes. But she knew she needed to be sensible. “Give me time, Ben.”

“Of course.”

“In the meantime, I want to meet your son. Can we go tomorrow?”

Excited at the thought, Ben nodded. “I didn’t think I could make it out to Haven this trip. You’ll get to meet Simone too, and I’ll invite Albie and his wife over for lunch.”

“Albie is the friend who’s a doctor, right?” Miranda asked. “He knows about Selah?”

“He delivered Selah. Albie is a gynecologist, which we all find hilarious.”

“Here I am with another question,” Miranda sighed. “Why is being a gynecologist hilarious?”

“You’ll see.”

The next morning, Ben told his family he and Miranda were going shopping in Port Michaelson, giving them an excuse to stay out most of the day.

When the car pulled off the highway, Miranda craned her neck to see the two-story antebellum through the trees as they approached. “Whoa.”

Ben parked, and they got out. “The place is a bit ostentatious for my taste, but Simone loves it, and Ty is doing amazing work.”

They headed towards the house, and a little boy met them halfway, breaking into a run when he saw Ben. “Daddy!”

Ben picked him up, hugging him close before tossing the child in the air high enough to make Miranda’s heart stop.

“Selah,” Ben said, bringing the boy over. “This is Miranda. I want you two to become friends.”

“Tay, Daddy.”

“That means okay,” Ben translated, and Miranda smiled at the pair of them.

A beautiful black woman stood on the porch, watching the interaction. A queen in her castle, her gaze raked over Miranda in assessment.

“I’m Simone,” the woman said, nervously. “It’s very nice to meet you.”

Miranda could only imagine the fear this woman lived in. “It’s very nice to meet you, too.” She took Simone’s hands and felt the damp sweat on them. “Your son is adorable.”

Simone gave her a shaky smile. “Thank you.”

Ben kissed Simone on the cheek as he passed. “Relax, SiSi. Miranda doesn’t bite.”

Gaining courage, Simone straightened her shoulders and took a deep breath. “Welcome to Haven House.”

Miranda stepped inside and let out a gasp. The place was amazing, and she wandered into the hall, marveling at each room she passed.

“Are Albie and Laura Jean here yet?” Ben asked.

“No,” Simone replied. “But please take Selah to wash up before lunch. He was helping his uncle in the yard this morning.”

Ben and Selah left for the hall bathroom, and Simone turned to Miranda. “Care to help me set the table?” she asked. “It’s a lovely day, and I thought we would have lunch on the patio.”

Miranda followed her into the spacious kitchen at the rear of the house. “Haven is immense.”

“It’s a pain to keep up with, but since there’s only the three of us, I guess I shouldn’t complain,” Simone said, stacking plates to take outside. “Maybe I’ll get a little help when they bring that girl here.”

Miranda held out her hands to take the table settings from her. “What girl?”

“Charlie’s plaything,” Simone snickered with a shake of her head. “They expect her to come to Haven House to have the baby. I’m not particularly thrilled about having a teenager here.”

“Teenager?”

“She’s seventeen,” Simone whispered, her mouth drawing tight. “Charlie claims he didn’t know, but I don’t believe it.”

“Oh my God.”

Simone stepped out onto the patio through the kitchen door and Miranda went with her. The setting was beautiful,

overlooking the forest and the back half of the manicured grounds.

“Ben tried to tell me I would be a good influence on the girl.” Simone clucked her tongue. “Now I ask you, do I look like I’d be a good influence for a seventeen-year-old?”

Grinning, Miranda nodded. In her sleek dress and pearls, the woman standing before her looked like she’d just fell off the pages of a *Southern Living* magazine. “You do, actually.”

“I’m not,” Simone scoffed. “I’m a woman who got pregnant by the son of her employer, and is now in hiding until said employer is dead because he’s a racist pig from hell.” She shifted the plates in front of the chairs hard, rattling the glass table. “Hopefully, that’ll be soon. Satan’s surely missing his servant.”

“I thought I knew what to expect before we arrived, but nothing could’ve prepared me for his parents.”

“They’re worse than you can imagine.” Simone jerked her chin for Miranda to follow. “My mother died when I was little, and my father couldn’t care for two young children, so he sent us to live with our Aunt Maudie. She worked as the Fairweather’s daytime nanny, and when I was about eight, I started coming to the house with her to help. Charlie and I are the same age, and Ty is Ben’s age, so she figured we might become companions.”

They gathered the food, and together, carried it to the table. “The amount of psychological abuse heaped on those boys

would make you sick,” Simone said. “Aunt Maudie tried to protect them as much as she could.”

“Helen took me to see her garden.” Miranda hadn’t told Ben the full details of what happened between her and his mother, but she felt like Simone would understand.

“The purity gardens?” Simone whooped, impressed. “Oh, my. Helen sees you as a threat. Ben tells me you’re Jewish?”

“Yes.”

“I would’ve loved to have seen that witch’s face when you walked through the door.”

Miranda chewed at her lip. She’d already decided she liked Simone on the spot, and if she accepted Ben’s proposal, the two of them would need to be open with one another. “I imagine co-parenting with someone requires an enormous amount of honesty from both sides.”

“It does, but it helps that we were friends first.”

“Did Ben tell you he was going to propose?”

A faint smile touched Simone’s lips. “There are no secrets between us.”

Miranda gazed out over the waves of color spreading far across Haven’s lawn. “Then he’s told you about his plans to root his brothers out from positions of power within the company.”

Simone came to stand next to her and nodded towards the flowers fluttering in the afternoon breeze. “The first thing Ty

did when we came to Haven was plant us a garden of rainbows. He wanted to create a place for Selah that was a direct contrast to the hell of Parkland Grounds.” She turned to Miranda and laid a hand on her shoulder. “While Ben might be immune to the poison of the Fairweather legacy, Charlie and Trevor are prime examples of it. They use people in awful ways, and then toss them aside as if they’re nothing. Monsters made in their parent’s image.”

“Like Frankenstein,” Miranda said, absently. “I always thought Shelly was using her story as a metaphor for parenting.”

“I think you’re probably right,” Simone agreed, laughing. “The mantra of every toddler to ever exist is surely *‘beware; for I am fearless and therefore powerful’* or something along those lines.”

From around front, Selah came running through the gardens with his father chasing after him, both unaware they had an audience.

“Ben is like Frankenstein’s monster, too. The difference is, he is powerful in his fear,” Simone told her. “He plays the part of a ruthless monster in front of his father well, and it’s a damn scary thing to see, but he can’t fool Helen. She knows her son is going to turn on them when James dies.”

Miranda’s head hurt. She still had so many questions, but all of this was too much to process, so she changed the subject. “Selah is a lovely name. It means to pause and reflect in Hebrew. What made you choose it?”



“I didn’t. Albie’s wife did. Laura Jean stayed by my side through the delivery.”

“A beautiful name for a beautiful boy.”

“Thank you,” Simone said and then leaned over to whisper. “I have a bottle of white wine in the fridge. Are you interested?”

“Oh Simone, we’re going to get along just fine.”

During lunch, she met Simone’s brother and Albie. Laura Jean couldn’t make it because of a meeting at the Junior Women’s League.

Ben sat at the table with Selah in his lap. “Why do you make her do those things?”

“It’s not my idea,” Albie said. “Laura Jean insists on being involved with the community to drum up business for the practice. Not that I could take on more patients.”

Albie smiled apologetically in Miranda’s direction. “She sends her regrets and hopes to meet you next time.”

Miranda blushed, understanding why Ben found Albie’s choice of professions funny. The man was gorgeous, and she could only imagine what went through his patients’ heads whenever they came in for their exams.

Ben piled food on the plate in front of him and Selah, while Simone raised an eyebrow. “He has his own chair, Benjamin.”

“Selah, do you want to sit in your chair?”

“Tay, Daddy.”

“That means no,” Ben translated to Simone with great authority.

The table broke out in laughter, and what she was witnessing struck Miranda. Ben wasn’t asking her to join him in the life she’d witnessed yesterday, but in this one. The one that meant something to him. These people were his family, and not the vile ones she’d met at Parkland Grounds.

The talk turned to the cottage updates, and Ty told them the largest one would be ready for the new resident arriving next week.

“This all depends on if she’s willing to stay out there,” Simone said, sipping her wine. “She’s only a child, and might want to live in the main house.”

Ben’s eyes hardened. “She’ll do as she’s told and won’t cause trouble.”

“I can only hope,” Simone mumbled. “If not, I’m sending her to live with Albie.”

Albie held up his hands. “Keep me out of this. I only agreed to help with her medical needs.”

When lunch was over, Ben and Selah took Miranda on a tour. As the three of them walked a worn path along the water, Selah ran off to catch a squirrel.

Ben chased after him, swooping Selah up to settle the boy on his broad shoulders. Father and son searched for the animal, who wisely scurried up the nearest oak.

Maybe it was the two glasses of wine she'd had at lunch, or perhaps it was seeing Ben playing with his son, but Miranda suddenly knew her answer.

Catching up with them, she took Ben's face in her hands and kissed him. "Yes."

Ben peeked up at his son. "Should I get down on one knee, Selah?"

"Tay, Daddy."

"That means yes."

He kneeled on the ground, bringing Selah and Miranda face to face. They giggled at each other as Ben held his son's legs at the ankles with one hand and pulled a ring out of his pocket with the other. "I brought it just in case."

"Miranda Abrams, I promise to give you everything you could ever want in life," Ben swore, sliding the diamond onto her finger. "Will you marry me?"

"Yes."

Selah cheered like he understood what was happening, pulling at his father's hair when they kissed.

Now, a year later, Miranda sat alone in a heavy wedding gown, tired, hungry, and dying from an urgent need to use the restroom.

Albie pulled up a chair next to her. "You're not supposed to look so unhappy on your wedding day."

"How much longer?"

“Fairweather events are ninety-nine percent business and one percent celebration,” he told her. “Charlie and Vivian’s wedding lasted till damn near dawn.”

“I can’t make it that long.”

He leaned forward to where only she could hear. “Are you feeling alright?”

Albie was one of the few who knew of her current condition. Ben had insisted he examine her when the pregnancy test came back positive.

“This dress is too tight, and I haven’t been able to eat much today,” she confessed. “And I really, really need to go to the bathroom.”

Albie rose, searching the crowd for help. “Let me get Laura Jean.”

She stopped him. “No offense to your wife, Albie, but I’ve spoken to her twice in my life. Bathroom help is a little outside the bounds of our friendship.”

“What about your maid of honor?”

Her best friend, Josie, had been enjoying the reception about as much as Miranda. There was only so much feigned joy one could manage in a night. “I sent Josie home an hour ago.”

“Your mother?”

“Nothing could pull her away from a party like this.”

“Your mother-in-law?”

“Be serious, Albie.”

Laughing at his own joke, he signaled to someone. “Well, then that leaves us no choice.”

Miranda sighed, resigning herself to sit there for another hour. “I already told you, I’m not comfortable getting naked in front of your wife.”

“I’m not summoning my spouse. I’m summoning yours.”

Ben arrived at the table, with what Miranda liked to think of as his game face on. The mask he wore in front of his family. “What?”

“The exhausted Mrs. Fairweather is hungry, and needs to use a restroom, pronto,” Albie said. “And as her doctor, I’m advising you to stop carrying on with this reception bullshit and take care of your wife.”

The mask fell away, and Ben crouched next to her. “I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay, but I’m ready to leave.”

Once they helped her stand, Albie clapped Ben on the shoulder. “Splendid party, Fairweather. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to dance with my wife one last time.”

Saying goodnight, Ben maneuvered them through the crowd, and Miranda tugged at his arm to gain his attention. “I’m going to say something to you that most grooms hear on their wedding night, but I mean it in an entirely different way.”

“And what is that?”

“I need you to get this dress off me. It’s nothing but a torture device of satin and puffy sleeves.”

He kissed the top of her head. “Anything else?”

“After I’m naked, you need to feed me.”

Ben wheezed out a laugh, and Miranda beamed at him, leaving the reception crowd with a view of a bride and groom very much in love, and sure to have a long, happy future together.

## CHAPTER 8

# *Evie*

**E**vie stared at the pill bottle on the kitchen counter, wanting nothing more than to close her eyes and block the sight of it.

But if she did, all she would see is the dark figure at the foot of her bed.

Her screams had startled him, and the shadow man ran off, escaping through the balcony door. The commotion awakened Jamison and Annabeth, and they ran out onto the landing in time to see the intruder dart past the large window at the back of the house. In abject terror, the three of them went shrieking downstairs to find Simone.

Once locked in Simone's room, Jamison called Selah out in the cottages, but Lenora answered, telling them Selah had heard their screams and went outside to see what was happening. The next thing she knew, he was chasing after someone with Samuel, who had been sleeping in the guest cottage.

Simone instructed Jamison to call Ben next, and he arrived within minutes. "The police will be here shortly," he said,

bolting the front door behind him. "I'm going after the boys."

"Like hell you are!" Simone shouted, as terrified as the rest of them.

Evie remained quiet while they argued. She felt sick, like she might vomit all over the kitchen floor, and rocked in Simone's arms.

"Go get Abe and Lenora and bring them in here," Simone said to Ben, rubbing Evie's back. "And text Samuel while you do. That boy is never without his phone."

Ben returned with Abe and Lenora moments later, already having heard from Samuel. "They're on their way back."

"Take Lenora into the parlor with Annabeth," Simone ordered Jamison. "And Abraham, I want you to stay in the foyer to let the police in."

When they were gone, Simone released Evie. "I'll be right back."

Evie stood trembling, a hand on the counter for balance. Ben came closer, but wisely kept a foot of space between them. He knew only a few people could approach her in this state. "Can you tell me what happened, kid?"

That was when Simone placed the bottle of anxiety meds on the counter. They didn't believe her, and the smack of resentment over it warmed the chill left behind by the shadow man.

"I woke up and felt something brush against my ankle and assumed it was Fitz." She inhaled and exhaled slowly,



controlling her breathing. “But when I opened my eyes, there was a man dressed in black on my bed. I screamed, and he ran out the balcony door.”

“Were you having one of your dreams?” Simone asked.

It was pointless to deny it. “Yes.”

Ben and Simone’s eyes met for the briefest of seconds.

“Jamison and Annabeth saw him pass by the window,” Evie argued, frustrated. “I’m not crazy.”

“We know you’re not crazy,” Ben said. “But sometimes those dreams of yours can seem so real it messes with your mind. The doctor said it’s all part of the anxiety and panic attacks.”

Their lack of faith hurt, and the pity she heard in Ben’s voice had tears welling in Evie’s eyes. She didn’t want their sympathy, she wanted to be believed.

And she certainly didn’t want the pills. She rarely took them, not liking the way they made her feel.

Getting ready to tell them just that, Evie let out a startled scream when a loud banging came from the kitchen door.

“It’s us.” Selah knocked again. “Open the door.”

Keeping her back to the room, Evie heard the rush of footsteps approach behind her. She continued to lean on the island, arms crossed and eyes on the bottle. She briefly wondered what everyone would do if she popped the lid to

swallow a few of the tiny ovals, gulping them down to see if they really would help.

Samuel appeared in front of her, blocking her view. It was only then that Evie let her eyes close, preferring the memory of the shadow man to his arrogant face.

“How much longer before the police arrive?” Samuel asked.

“Any minute now,” Ben replied. “Unless you think I need to call them and say it was a false alarm.”

Evie’s nails dug into the flesh on her arms. “I am not crazy.”

“No, baby girl,” Selah said, putting an arm around her shoulders. “There’s someone in the woods.”

Evie’s eyes flew open, and Samuel’s somber features filled her vision. “It’s true,” he confirmed. “What the hell happened?”

“I woke up, and a man was in my room. He ran out onto the balcony,” she said, adrenaline kicking in. “Did you see him, too?”

Selah nodded. “We got close, but not enough to see his face.”

“He was leading us in circles,” Samuel added. “The guy knew the woods as well as we did.”

That wasn’t possible. During the summer months when Samuel stayed at Haven, the boys practically lived in the forest as kids. They would disappear in the morning, only

occasionally reappearing for food. No one knew it better than them.

Jamison ran in, excited. “The police are here.”

Ben and Selah followed her out of the kitchen, with Simone right behind them, leaving Evie alone with Samuel. He reached behind him and retrieved the pill bottle, studying its label.

“When did this start?”

The answer was last year, but he didn’t need to know that. The sounds of the police entering the house carried down the hall, and Evie waited patiently for Samuel’s need for control to drag him away and quash his interest in her medicine.

But he didn’t move.

“How many did you take?”

“My life is none of your business.”

Samuel continued to loom over her, casting his not so silent judgment. The adrenaline that was coursing through her body a minute ago wavered, edging her closer to the tipping point.

“I need you to back off.” She swallowed thickly, her throat rough. “Please.”

Her plea worked, and Samuel stalked to the other side of the kitchen with the bottle. “You don’t want these.” He opened the cabinet where they kept medicine and placed it inside. “The police will talk to you first, and you’ll need a clear head.”

What she needed was for him to stop stomping at the fingertip grip she had on her sanity. “I bet you could provide a better description than I could.”

“We could hardly see anything out there.”

Samuel ran a hand through his mop of black hair. It was a mess, and Evie frowned, looking him over. *He* was a mess.

Things out of place, or not as they should be, pricked at her nerves when she was stressed, and Samuel’s un-Samuel-like appearance had her gut twisting. Stains covered the long sleeve white cotton t-shirt he wore, and there were leaves caught on the leg of his black athletic pants. Even his feet were bare.

“Where are your shoes?”

“I was kind of in a hurry,” he replied, sarcastically. “Are you sure you can’t recall anything?”

She tried to focus. “The only thing I remember is that his hands were incredibly soft. I thought it was Fitz’s fur touching me.”

Samuel’s jaw ticked. “Touching you?”

“His hand was running up my leg.” Remembering it caused her to shiver. “And, I think, he was trying to pull me out of bed.”



Detective Frank Mathis, with his weathered face and thinning hair, reminded Evie of one of the tv show detectives Jamison

was obsessed with.

“Try not to let anyone venture off the trails near the mill ruins,” Mathis barked out the order to his officers. “We don’t need anyone falling into a hidden pit.”

Men and women in uniform departed the house, scurrying over the grounds like ants running from a destroyed hill. Evie sat on one of the parlor couches with Annabeth, who watched the male officers come and go with interest.

At some point, Annabeth had removed her sleeping bonnet and styled her shoulder-length curly hair. “You can’t blame me for seizing an opportunity,” she’d murmured to Evie, nodding towards a batch of men in the hall. “And since when do the police wear such form fitting uniforms?”

The joke broke through Evie’s anxiety, and she covered a smile with her hand.

As a true crime junkie, Jamison’s head was buried behind the curtains, watching the action unfold on the lawn through the window. “They’re bringing in the search dogs.”

Evie thought her sister might be enjoying this a little too much, and apparently, so did Samuel.

“Sit down,” he ordered with his arms braced on the back of the couch where she sat with Annabeth. Evie didn’t need to turn around to know there was likely a scowl on his face. “This isn’t one of your podcasts.”

Detective Mathis pulled the door partially shut to block the noise from the hall. “Which room belongs to Evie?”

“The first door on the right at the top of the stairs,” Ben replied. “And Frank, tell your officers to tread lightly up there. This is hard enough on her. We don’t need a fleet of people traipsing through her things.”

Mathis repeated the order into his phone and hung up. It was clear to Evie that the detective and Ben were acquainted. She could guess as to why, since the detective knew Haven’s layout as well as its inhabitants, understanding their ties to one another without much explanation.

Simone leaned forward in the corner wingback chair. “Are you alright?” she asked Lenora.

“I’m fine.” Lenora smiled at her reassuringly, reclining on the room’s other couch with Selah. Abe was next to them, his left leg bouncing with nervous energy.

“He exited the house through Evie’s balcony door?” Mathis directed the question at Ben. “But he was also seen through the rear hall window?”

“Yes,” Evie spoke up, annoyed at not being asked directly.

The detective examined her over the top of his bifocals. “Do you normally sleep with the balcony door open?”

“Sometimes,” she answered. “But I know I locked it before I went to bed.”

“When he ran out, did he open the door?”

Evie thought for a second, remembering the whisper of cold air when she woke. “It was already open.”

Mathis looked around the room. “Did anyone else see him inside the house?”

“We did,” Annabeth said, wagging a thumb between her and Jamison, who had disappeared completely behind the curtain. “We’re the ones who saw him run past the window at the rear of the landing.”

“And then you two chased him.” Mathis eyed Samuel and Selah. “Is that correct?”

“We heard a noise, and both came outside at that same time,” Selah said. “Then we heard it again, and realized it was the girls screaming. That’s when we saw someone coming from the back of the house, and we ran after him.”

The detective’s bushy eyebrows knitted together at Samuel. “You were sleeping here? I thought you had a place over in the new development.”

“We were planning on going fishing before dawn,” Samuel replied. “I stayed over since the boat was already docked here.”

Mathis shuffled his feet, turning towards Ben. “How did the intruder get from the second floor to the ground floor so quickly without taking the central staircase?” he asked. “Do you think he jumped?”

Ben shook his head. “It’s too high.”

“There’s lattice and vines climbing up the chimney on the western side of the house, about where Annabeth said they saw him,” Samuel said, and Selah nodded in agreement. “It

couldn't wholly support a full grown man, but it would soften the landing. We used it as kids to sneak out at night and play in the woods.”

Simone gave the boys a pointed look, and the three of them mumbled their apologies.

Mathis waved his hand impatiently. “Go over what you saw in the woods.”

“It was a man, and he was about this tall.” Selah stood and held his hand out to show the man's height to be a little over six feet. “He wore dark clothes and a ski mask. We thought we had him cornered, but he vanished and reappeared about six yards away.”

“The guy knew what areas to avoid,” Samuel said. “And how to move around us in the darkness.”

“Other than the family, is there anyone else that would have that kind of knowledge about the area?”

Jamison popped out from behind the drapery. “A groundskeeping team maintains the trail system that goes all the way to the mill. They're out here at least twice a month because Evie and I jog the paths all the time.”

Mathis's phone went off again, and he answered it, leaving the room for privacy.

Evie blew out a breath, her mind and heart racing. The only thing holding her together was the fact that Samuel was staring a hole in the back of her head, and she wasn't about to give him the satisfaction of seeing her fall apart.



Simone rose and began pacing. “I want a full security system installed. Cameras, alarms, the works. We should have done it years ago.”

Mathis returned and switched his line of questioning, moving on to the party. “Was it only family present?”

“No, we had a few extras,” Ben answered. “Abe brought a date, and Selah’s friend stopped by for a bit. Then there was Evie’s boyfriend, Lucas Fields, and my brother Trevor came with his daughter Claudia.”

Trevor technically fell under the family category, but the entire room knew not to contradict Ben on the matter.

“And what about Charlie and his family?” Mathis asked. “Were they in attendance tonight?”

Ben stiffened at the mention of his older brother. Sibling relationships were always a complicated thing, but the Fairweather brothers were the kings of dysfunction. “No, the last I heard, they were living in the Caribbean.”

The detective’s phone buzzed, and he squinted at the screen. “Ben, can I talk to you outside?”

When the door closed behind them, Jamison scrambled back behind the curtain. “Something’s going on.”

The urgency in her tone had Samuel and Selah joining her.

“Look at dad,” Evie heard Jamison whisper to her brothers. “Is he okay?”

Rising from the couch, Evie elbowed Samuel out of the way to look. He grunted but let her slide in front of him, and through the parlor window, she saw Ben on the front walk, speaking with Mathis and another policeman, his face drawn tight and pale.

“I bet they found the guy dead in one of the pits,” Jamison said.

Selah tugged at the ends of her hair. “Don’t be morbid, you doof.”

“Or maybe he tried to swim across the inlet and didn’t make it,” Annabeth suggested, pushing Selah to the side so she could look. “If that’s the case, it’s a good thing they found him now, and not after the swamp animals got him. Can you imagine? Body parts would float ashore for months.”

“Jesus, Annabeth,” Samuel whispered, his breath tickling Evie’s ear. They were all squished together against the window, and she elbowed him again.

“Well, it’s true,” Evie said. “Then the cats would get a hold of what’s left, and you know how they like to bring in gifts from the forest.”

Jamison shifted from her position to let Abe into the huddle, flicking his ear as he scooted forward. “We might wake up tomorrow and find an ear waiting for us by the back door.”

Abe batted her hand away. “What’s that guy showing Ben on his phone?”

The group leaned in together and tried to catch a peek, but couldn't see anything past Ben. He nodded at Mathis and turned away from whatever he was being shown, closing his eyes momentarily.

A chill spread up Evie's spine.

"Go," she whispered to Samuel, who was out the door with his brother in a flash.

On the front walk, the boys approached their father, and seeing whatever was on the officer's screen, Selah's hand came to rest on Ben's shoulder like he was steadying him.

Simone paused in her pacing. "What's going on?"

Dark eyes flicked to Evie in the window, and she held Samuel's stare while the cold dread building inside her turned to ice.

"Something bad."

## CHAPTER 9

# *Evie*

**B**en remained outside listening to Mathis for what felt like an eternity. While they waited, Lenora confessed she might need to lie down, so Simone and Annabeth took her upstairs to one of the empty bedrooms.

Without Simone listening, Evie and Jamison convinced Abe to go out on the porch to see if he could hear what was being said.

Abe agreed to do it but paused on his way out. “Do you think Lenora is okay?”

“Pregnancy is tough,” Evie said, unsure of what he knew, but once it was only her and Jamison in the room, she told her sister of Lenora’s complications. “The doctors placed her on bed rest for the duration of the pregnancy.”

Jamison sagged against the window frame. “Who could make that kind of choice?”

Evie leaned on the opposite side, trapping Simone’s heavily embroidered curtains behind her. “Like I told Samuel, we have to let them make their own decisions.”

More police arrived, and the strobing blue lights of their cruisers flashed into the parlor. “But remember, you can’t say anything,” Evie said, her palms growing clammy at the sight of more cops. “Selah only told Samuel. I don’t even think Abe knows.”

“Why did Samuel tell you, if it’s a secret?”

Evie glanced over at Samuel, flanking his father with Selah. “I guess I was in the right place at the wrong time, and he needed to confide in someone.”

When the last of the newcomers gathered, Mathis raised his hands to gain their attention. “I want every room in that house searched,” he shouted, loud enough for them to hear through the glass. “The rest of you divide out into teams to assist the ground operation already in progress.”

“Text Abe and find out what’s going on,” Evie said.

Jamison did as she asked, and when her phone pinged with a response from Abe saying he couldn’t hear anything from his position on the porch, the ever-present vice in Evie’s chest groaned to life. “He’s lying.”

A plainclothes officer stepped forward to divide those on the lawn into groups, and Ben strode back into the house with Mathis and the boys right behind him.

The parlor door opened, and Mathis was the first to come in. He sat on the couch left vacant by Lenora. “Girls, we need to talk.”

Ben arrived next, his face devoid of color. He stood to the side by the door, while Jamison reluctantly went to the antique settee across from the detective.

“Ms. Eddins?” Mathis gestured to the spot next to her sister. “Can you join us, please?”

Samuel slipped into the room then, still shoeless, and locked the door behind him.

Rooted in place, her lungs tight, Evie stared at Samuel’s feet before shaking her head at Mathis. “I’m better off over here.”

Mathis gave her a curt nod. “Which trails do you two use the most?”

“It depends on the time of day,” Jamison answered. “If we’re up early, then we use the one by the mill, but it gets more sun midday, so if we have a late start, we take the one past the graveyard. And then sometimes we do both.”

“Which path did you take this morning?”

“Both.”

“Did you notice anything unusual?”

Jamison said she didn’t, and Mathis looked at Evie for confirmation. “No, nothing out of the ordinary.”

“Where is your mother’s emerald necklace kept?” Mathis asked.

Ben had given Laura Jean an exquisite emerald solitaire necklace when Jamison was born. The four-carat teardrop

stone matched their mother's eyes, and she'd worn it every day, twirling the stone in her fingers out of habit.

"In my jewelry cabinet," Jamison replied. "I only wear it on special occasions."

Mathis stood and went to Ben. "If the intruder was in Evie's room, as well as your daughter's, then he could have been in any part of the house tonight. It will take some time, but I think it's best that we search for other missing items now."

To Evie, it sounded like Mathis thought the shadow man had been in Jamison's room too. "What's going on?"

"That's fine," Ben responded to Mathis, ignoring her. "Jamison's bedroom is the master on the second floor."

"I'm assigning an officer to each resident." Mathis tapped away at his phone. "They'll help expedite the room search, while you and I will go out to the graveyard."

With her mind running through all types of horrible scenarios, Evie's eyes met Samuel's across the room.

"Tell them."

Samuel's clipped order halted the exchange between his father and Mathis, and Ben came over to sit next to Jamison. "The police found your mom's necklace in the woods."

"So, he was in my room first, and stole the necklace," Jamison said. "But dropped it in the woods when he escaped?"

"He didn't drop it," Samuel told her, keeping his eyes on Evie. "They found it hanging from the graveyard's archway."

“What do you mean, hanging from the archway?” Evie asked, her voice cracking.

“Let the police deal with this,” Ben replied, glaring at Samuel. “They know what they’re doing.”

That answer wasn’t going to work for Evie, and it certainly didn’t stand a chance against the power of Jamison’s inquisitive mind.

“It’s okay, daddy,” Jamison said. “You can tell us.”

It wasn’t until her mid-teens that Jamison realized she could make her father puddy in her hands by showing him the slightest bit of affection. She’d grown up at Haven House, distanced from Ben, who snatched up any drop of affection she was willing to give.

Ben let out a heavy sigh, easily giving in as expected. “Go ahead, Frank.”

“The necklace was left at the center of the high arch. One of my officers first on the scene spotted it with their flashlight, but in the daylight, anyone would have noticed it,” Mathis explained. “The officer texted a picture to me, and I verified that the necklace once belonged to your mother.”

A blast of static noise exploded in Evie’s head, muffling the rest of whatever Mathis was saying. Questions ripped through her. The main one being, why? Why would someone do this?

“Well, it wasn’t there this morning.” Jamison’s brow creased in thought. “And if he stole it tonight, how did he get it up on the arch so quickly? There were less than ten minutes



between when my brothers lost sight of him and when your officers arrived. He wouldn't have had enough time to climb up there."

Mathis shrugged. "Perhaps he tossed it in the air as he escaped, and it snagged on the arch."

"Don't lie to her, detective," Samuel warned, his usual condescending sneer appearing. "You know damn well, by the way the necklace was arranged, that it wasn't tossed up there."

"That's enough," Ben snapped. "They don't need to hear all this."

"Hiding the truth won't protect them. Jamison is a big girl and can deal with this. But look at Evie," Samuel said, with a nod in her direction. "She's scared, and you're making it worse by keeping things from them."

If there was one thing Samuel excelled at, it was upsetting Evie enough to knock her out of her own head. His accusation lit a match, igniting a fiery rage that burned through the fear. "I'm not scared," she yelled. "Stop making assumptions."

"I'm not making assumptions," Samuel shot back. "I can see it with my own eyes."

Evie thought about hurling the crystal vase next to her at his hard head, but Ben stood, getting in the line of fire.

"That's enough," Ben ordered. "No one wants to watch the Samuel and Evie show tonight, so cut it out."

A knock at the door cracked the tension, and a female police officer stuck her head in the room. "I'm ready when you are,

detective.”

“This is Officer Rosemont,” Mathis said, relieved at the interruption. “Jamison, would you mind accompanying her to your room for a search?”

Jamison stood to leave. “Can you come with me, dad?”

The anger on Ben’s face faded, and a bittersweet smile edged around the corners of his mouth. “Of course.”

The moment they were gone, Evie turned to Mathis, ready to ask her own questions. “You said you identified the necklace as my mother’s, but how did you know it belonged to her in the first place?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Samuel said.

She held up her hand at him. “Yes, it does.”

The detective kept his eyes downcast. “I was one of the responding personnel the night your mother died, and it’s standard procedure to have officers complete a preliminary examination of the body when there’s a death in the home. Your mother was wearing the necklace when she passed.”

The detective’s eyes rose to meet hers. “I’m sorry.”

Someone knocked at the door, requesting to speak with Mathis, and he left, telling her that an Officer Callahan would be along shortly to take her upstairs.

Turning back to the window, Evie wished this Officer Callahan would hurry. Being alone with Samuel wasn’t the

best idea right about now, as he would surely say something that would drive her to commit physical violence.

“Was asking Mathis that really necessary?”

Predictable.

A flush of red stained her cheeks, but she kept her anger in check. “Why don’t you go find something to do?”

“You need to do a better job of holding it together.”

That did it.

Evie stormed across the room, and when she reached him, his impossible height enraged her further, so she grabbed a hold of his shirt, yanking him to her level.

“It is somewhere between midnight and dawn. The police are everywhere hunting for a man who was in my room. A man who had his hands on me.” Her voice faltered, but she took a deep breath. Samuel would not be the one who made her break tonight. “I’m sorry you think this is an appropriate time to find fault in my behavior, but maybe, just this once, you can show a little sympathy and realize it’s okay for me to be upset. And if you can’t, then do me a favor and shut the hell up.”

Samuel kept his expression blank. “I was simply pointing out that the others are watching. Annabeth and Jamison look to your lead. Think about them.”

“Think of the others, Evie. It’s not always about you, Evie,” she snickered. “God, even after all these years, you still have to push, don’t you?”

“Someone has to.”

“Did you know the day you walked away from Haven House was one of the best days of my life?” Her lips screwed into a hard smile. “I didn’t realize it at the time, but suddenly there were no expectations to meet, no one pressing me to be alright. I could have bad days, and no one judged me for it.”

“I never judged you,” he replied, angry at the accusation. “I’m sorry you felt that way, but I’d like to point out that in my absence, you’ve started to have full-blown panic attacks that knock you down for days.”

“How do you even know that?”

“You think I don’t know what goes on here?” he asked, placing his face in hers. “Or with you?”

“But you didn’t know about the medication.”

“The pills were a surprise,” he admitted. “Your dependence on them proves that it’s time to speak to an actual doctor who specializes in emotional stress, and not that quack you’ve been seeing. Then maybe you can stop hiding in this house.”

“I’m not hiding,” she said, sticking her chin in the air. “I have a full life. A job, friends, and a boyfriend. Oh, and let’s not forget that home in the burbs with the weird dog waiting for me in the future.”

His mouth hardened. “I tried to apologize, but you wouldn’t open the door.”

“You can shove your apology up your ass, Samuel,” she said, her anger deflating. She was so tired, and arguing with

him was only making it worse. “And I don’t need to see a doctor that specializes in emotional stress. For the millionth time tonight, I am not crazy.”

“Would you call Annabeth crazy?” he countered. “Or my father? It’s not something we openly discuss, but even he needs help. You’re no different from them, except that your brain processes the lack of closure from your mom’s death differently. It manifests itself as panic.”

Evie huffed out a laugh. “Sounds like you’ve been meeting with a shrink, too.”

“Yes, I see one. After my mother passed, I needed someone to talk to, and it helped.”

Robbed of speech for an entire minute, Evie blinked up at him open mouthed. Samuel thrived on disassociating himself from people, and knowing he sought help from another human boggled her mind.

“That surprises you,” his deep voice rumbled, jerking her attention back to the argument. “I was skeptical as well, but over the years it’s taught me we can’t alter our history, no matter how much we want to. The past has to remain dead and buried in the backyard, along with our mistakes and missed opportunities. It’s the only way to move on and take what you want most in life.”

Evie’s stomach plummeted, and her heart might have fallen along with it. She was done with this conversation that was veering dangerously towards a topic she had no intention of discussing. It was time to gain the upper hand, which meant

she would have to push the elephant in the room between them.

“Okay, Samuel, you win.” Rising on her toes, Evie brushed her lips along the curve of his ear. “I’ll keep my emotions in check and be a good girl for you. I haven’t forgotten how much you hate it when I rock the boat.”

When she pulled back, she expected to see anger on his face, but instead, there was only sadness. “I’m so sorry, Evangeline.”

The apology knocked the fight right out of her, and she let go of his shirt.

“We need to talk,” he continued, his voice rough. “There are things I need to say.”

Her bitter heart jumped back into her chest, twisting into place. “There’s nothing left to say.”

Suddenly, a young officer with an overabundance of freckles stuck his head into the room. “I’m Officer Callahan, and I’ll be assisting you tonight.”

“Let me get Selah to go with you,” Samuel said, stopping her before she could leave. “You shouldn’t do this alone.”

“Selah is busy with Lenora.”

“I could go.”

The offer was sincere, and Evie hated him a little more for it. “I can handle this myself. Contrary to what you believe, I’m not some pathetic weakling.”

A low laugh rumbled deep in his chest. “Evangeline, I have a long list of adjectives I use to describe you, but weak and pathetic are not on it.”

## CHAPTER 10

# *Evie*

“**C**heck to see if anything is out of place or missing altogether,” Officer Callahan told Evie when they entered her bedroom.

Her entire life was jammed into this space, and she tried to determine where to start. From the old dark blue corner cabinet covered in twinkling painted stars, to the duvet Simone had made her on her fourteenth birthday, the room was a time capsule of all things Evie.

It held nothing of substantial value, except for more of her mother’s jewelry, which she kept stashed in a box on the vanity. Lifting the lid, she touched the vacant spot where Laura Jean’s engagement ring to Ben always sat.

“My mother’s ring is gone, but the rest of my jewelry is here.”

“Can you describe the ring?”

Never one to listen, Samuel appeared in the doorway and leaned against the opening while Evie described the diamond to the officer.



“Can you check the dresser and nightstand next?” Callahan asked, and when neither yielded anything missing, he instructed her to check the closet.

“There’s nothing in here. Just some old photos and one of my mother’s paintings.”

Swiping the garments to the side, Evie frowned when they slid on the closet rack smoother than usual. She knelt on the floor, crawling further in. “They’re gone.”

Backing out on all fours, she crashed into Samuel, who had come to stand behind her while she searched. He extended a hand to help her rise, and she took it, uneasy at the sight of him in her room. Even as children, Simone had forbidden him from entering.

Especially during the teen years.

Samuel’s gaze swept over the eclectic furniture and total disorder of the space, paying particular attention to the unmade bed.

“My box of photos and my painting are gone,” Evie said, attempting to tug her hand free from his grip.

Samuel held on, caressing the top of her hand lightly with his thumb. This was her punishment for what she’d said in the parlor, and sadly, his revenge was working. The longer he continued to touch her, the more flustered she became.

Gritting her teeth, she knocked her foot against his, delivering a light kick. “That’s enough.”

Ending his examination of the bed, Samuel swung his gaze to her. “It’ll never be enough, Evangeline.”

“Is the painting worth anything?” Callahan asked, without looking up from his phone.

“Not really,” Evie answered, continuing to try and pry her hand loose. “But it was important to me.”

The painting was the last piece she and her mother created together before Laura Jean’s death. They’d sat at their easels on the side porch for hours, working to capture the summer blooms of Haven. Halfway through their progress, the boys broke up Evie’s concentration when they came hurtling through the scene playing football.

“Don’t get so upset,” her mother had told her, adding wisps of dark contouring to the canvas where the boys played. “If you look at every piece I’ve painted here, there’s always a smear of shadow somewhere in it because one of you whizzed through while I was working.”

Samuel had run by then, sticking his tongue out at Evie. Not able to let the insult go, she’d hopped off the porch to give chase, but when she failed to catch him, Evie tackled Abe instead, who was standing innocently off to the side holding the football.

And with the ball in her possession, Evie had launched it with all her might, nailing Samuel in the face. His nose had bled for a half hour, and Laura Jean grounded Evie for a week.

“What does the painting look like?” Callahan asked.

“It’s of the gardens here,” she said, and then lowered her voice for only Samuel to hear. “The one she painted when I threw the football at you.”

One side of his mouth lifted in the corner and raising their joined hands, he rubbed Evie’s finger along the slope of his nose where the ball had struck. “I remember.”

Hearing the intimate timbre in his voice, she stepped back, and he released her hand, his point made. “Maybe someone put it in the attic by mistake,” Samuel suggested, heading for the door. “I’ll go check with Simone.”

He thankfully left, and Evie finished her search in peace, finding nothing else taken. Callahan sent her to the parlor to wait for Mathis, and she met up with Annabeth on the landing. Evie told her about the ring and the other missing things as they started their way downstairs. “I’m sure the ring was stolen, but the other stuff probably ended up in the attic. Samuel is going to check.”

“I know,” Annabeth replied, zigzagging through the string of police heading to the second floor. “My mom is with him. Nothing was taken from my room, but Jamison is missing some stuff, like her music box.”

Evie’s heart sank. The music box was one of the few keepsakes her sister had of their mother. Laura Jean would soothe a restless baby Jamison to sleep by playing it every night.

Entering the parlor, Annabeth closed the door and leaned against it, her eyes skimming over Evie. “Are you okay?”

Since they were the only ones there, Evie let her guard down and dropped onto one of the smaller couches by the fireplace. “I wasn’t doing well for a hot minute, but Samuel pissed me off enough to keep me from diving over the edge.”

“A man of many talents,” Annabeth said, sitting next to her. They folded into each other, relaxing their heads on the cushions. “He knows what he’s doing when he pushes your buttons.”

Evie snorted. “He forgets I know how to push his buttons, too.”

“Did you remind him?”

“I did.”

“And how did he react?”

“Not the way I anticipated,” she answered. “He paid me back for it upstairs just now.”

Annabeth yawned. “Let the games begin, I guess.”

“Don’t say that,” Evie said, exhaustion making her eyes heavy. “The absolute last thing I want to think about right now is Samuel.”

“All I’m saying is that he’s clever, and has you too busy thinking about him, whether it be good or bad, to let what’s going on around us sink its claws in.”

“Stop complimenting him,” she grumbled.

“Hey, I’m still team Evie.” Annabeth patted her leg. “I always will be, but I’m also going to give credit where credit

is due.”

They sat quietly, listening to the clock on the mantle count the minutes. Annabeth was soon snoring, and after a while, Evie dozed off too, until a freezing cold hand shook her awake.

“This is all so messed up,” Jamison said, wedging herself onto the small couch between them.

Evie shifted to make space for her sister as Ben came in with Samuel and Mathis.

“Can you give us a minute, Annabeth?” Ben asked.

Annabeth hurried out, and Samuel locked the door behind her. As soon as the latch clicked into place, Ben fell into the corner wingback. “He took her things.”

“My painting wasn’t in the attic?” Evie asked.

Samuel shook his head, keeping his focus on Ben. “Several of Laura Jean’s paintings were taken.”

“Along with the wedding dress she never wore,” Jamison said. “Who the hell steals a wedding dress?”

Shocked, Evie sank back onto the couch. “The engagement ring you gave mom was taken from my jewelry box,” she said to Ben. “But the one from my dad was still there.”

The anguish on Ben’s face morphed into fury. Launching from the armchair, he faced Mathis. “What the fuck is going on, Frank?”

Mathis shuffled his feet, keeping his eyes lowered. “We’re working under the assumption that tonight was not the first time the thief gained entry to the residence,” he explained. “This seems to be a habitual occurrence, with a fixated interest on the late Ms. Eddins.”

Ben’s fists clenched and unclenched at his sides. “And what do we do now?”

“We’ll need to conduct interviews as soon as possible,” Mathis told him. “I’ll need to speak to everyone who’s been in and out of Haven recently. If you have photos of the items taken, we’ll report the information to a database that monitors for resold stolen goods. The person who did this is probably a random thief who thinks he’s found some famous artist’s home and plans on profiting off her work.”

Calming slightly, Ben rubbed the back of his neck. “I insured the necklace and wedding ring, so there’ll be photos of them, but I don’t think we have any photos of her paintings.”

“There’s a photo of at least one of them. The painting of Evie,” Jamison said, whipping out her phone. “I’m messaging Simone to grab it from the library and bring it in.”

“He took the giant one of me?” Evie’s eyes widened. “How did he get it out of the house?”

The piece was enormous, and featured a three-year-old version of herself grinning happily in a frilly pink dress that was made with layer upon layer of itchy crinoline.

“As I stated, we don’t think this is the first time he’s been inside Haven,” Mathis said. “He could have taken it when no one was home.”

“Someone is always home. Annabeth can’t leave, and Simone rarely does,” Evie said, her voice rising. “So, what you’re saying is that you think this guy has been sneaking around Haven while we’re here.”

A knock at the door stopped Mathis from answering, and Samuel opened it to let Simone in with the photo. Crossing the room, she handed it to the detective. “You may now explain to me exactly what is going on in my house, Frank.”

Mathis went over the details again and when he finished, Simone turned to Ben and Samuel. “What are you going to do about it?”

“We’ll do whatever it takes, SiSi,” Ben said, readily taking the blame. “This will never happen again.”

Satisfied, Simone turned back to Mathis. “Ask your questions now.”

Having Simone in the room helped Evie concentrate when Mathis began in on Ben first. “Are there any business associates, or perhaps a competitor, who would launch a mental attack like this?”

A mental attack. Evie liked that. The phrase perfectly captured what this was doing to them.

“I’m careful to separate my private life from my public one,” Ben replied. “Few knew of my relationship with Laura

Jean, and we planned on quietly announcing our marriage once it was done.”

It took a great deal of strength on Evie’s part to not glance Samuel’s way. Most people didn’t know about his father’s relationship with Laura Jean because Ben had been married to Samuel’s mother, Miranda, for most of it.

“Are you seeing anyone now?”

The question threw Ben, and the rest of them. Half of a whole never to be complete again, they all knew he would spend the rest of his days alone.

“No.”

“What if it wasn’t my dad this guy wanted to hurt?” Samuel asked, taking the detective’s attention from his father. “The necklace was positioned for the girls to find.”

“Well, how about it?” Mathis took a step towards the couch where Evie sat with Jamison. “Can you two think of anyone who might have done this? Got any ex-boyfriends out there who might want to upset you?”

“I’m on good terms with my last boyfriend,” Jamison said. “And I’m not seeing anyone currently.”

“Aren’t you seeing someone, Evie?” Mathis asked, pulling out his phone. His thumb ran over the screen. “Lucas Fields?”

A ball of dread bounced in Evie’s stomach. She didn’t want Lucas involved in this. “We haven’t been seeing each other for very long.”



Mathis went over to Ben. “I’ll need to talk with everyone at the party. Including your brother and his daughter.”

“I’ll get you his number,” Ben replied. “Trevor is in town until Thursday.”

“And I’d also like Charlie’s contact information. Given his connection to the place,” Mathis mumbled.

“I’ll get it to you,” Samuel said.

Mathis nodded his thanks, before putting on a brave face to question Simone. “Are you seeing anyone, Ms. Howard? Or have any acquaintances you think might be connected to this?”

With her hands clasped in front of her, Simone stared down her nose at the detective. “I have not been in a relationship since my husband died. Nor am I associated with anyone who may have done this.”

“Any outside interests away from the house?”

“No.”

Her answers didn’t seem to surprise him. “That doesn’t leave me much to go on. What about Laura Jean’s family? Do you have much contact with them?”

Evie shook her head no. She’d always been told her mother’s parents were dead, and started to explain to the detective just that, but Ben interrupted her.

“Yes.”

Living a life marred by anxiety and panic, Evie prided herself on being prepared for every outcome to every situation,

the world could throw at her. But this bombshell from Ben knocked the air from her lungs, and she stood abruptly. “What are you talking about?”

Ben didn't respond, the guilt in his eyes speaking for him.

Jamison popped up beside Evie. “Someone better start talking.”

“Laura Jean's brother was released from prison not too long ago,” Ben told them. “Her mother has also served time, and spent long stints in rehab.”

Gagging betrayal choked Evie. She'd always believed what they'd told her about Laura Jean's family, never questioning it. The two people she trusted the most had allowed her to think that when Laura Jean died, she was alone, with no family, except for Jamison.

“You lied to us?” Jamison seethed.

“What were the charges?” Mathis asked, trying to gain as much knowledge as he could before the room exploded into pandemonium.

“Armed robbery,” Ben answered him.

Jamison was in her father's face before Evie could stop her, the notorious Fairweather temper making its grand entrance. “Where the hell do you get off keeping this kind of information from us?”

Ben gauged his chances against his daughter's internal fire, a twin to his own. He asked Mathis to wait in the library, obviously concluding that things were about to get ugly.

With the detective gone, Evie wasted no time turning on Simone. “How could you?” she demanded, not bothering to ask if she’d known. Ben and Simone told each other everything. “You knew how I felt and said nothing. Then you allowed me to pass along the same lie to Jamison.”

“It was necessary,” Simone replied, not the least bit remorseful. “When Laura Jean died, we discovered that her mother was living in a homeless shelter with a bunch of other drug addicts.”

“This is not okay,” Jamison said, looking to Samuel for help. “Tell them what they did is not okay.”

Samuel, who had been watching the action unfold silently in the corner, surprised everyone and agreed with his sister. “It’s not okay.”

“Look, we’re all tired,” Ben said. “We can talk about this in the morning.”

“That’s daylight creeping in through the window, *dad*,” Jamison said, her tone laced with stinging sarcasm. “The morning is here. Tell us why you lied.”

Ben’s face darkened. “You need to calm down.”

“No,” Jamison screamed, her chin quivering. “You of all people do not get to tell me what to do.”

Evie positioned herself between father and daughter. “Calm down,” she murmured to Jamison, giving Ben her back. “He’s right, we’re tired and not thinking clearly. Grab Annabeth, and head upstairs to the guest bedroom. I’ll be up in a minute.”

With one last scathing look at her father, Jamison threw the parlor door open, startling the officers in the hall. The door slammed behind her, jostling the paintings on the wall.

“I knew you’d be the one to understand,” Ben said.

Turning slowly to face him, Evie held her breath for a second to steady herself. “I do not understand.”

“It’s a small secret we used to keep you safe,” he tried to explain. “Your mother would have wanted it this way.”

Evie couldn’t comprehend how Ben, her partner in pain all these years, hadn’t yet learned that secrets could destroy even the strongest bonds.

That was a lesson she thought they’d learned a long time ago.

“Trying to justify what you’ve done by using my mother doesn’t make this better. It makes it worse,” Evie said. “And since she’s not here to speak on the matter, let’s leave her out of it.”

The pained expression on Ben’s face broke her resolve, and a tear slipped loose. While he hadn’t learned his lesson on keeping secrets, it seemed she hadn’t learned hers either.

Never trust a Fairweather.

“My mother’s family is my family,” she continued. “It doesn’t matter if they’re good or bad, rich or poor, they’re mine.”

“You belong here,” Ben replied, lifting his hand to wipe the tear from her cheek. “We’re your family.”

“I’m not yours.”

Ben’s hand hovered in the air for a split second before it dropped to his side. “I’ve been caring for Laura Jean’s mother quietly since her release from jail five years ago. She’s been to rehab. Twice. But my lawyer in Louisiana assures me that this last time the treatment stuck, and she’s doing better.”

“Does she know about me?” Evie asked, before an appalling thought struck her. “Does she even know her daughter is dead?”

“Yes,” Simone spoke up. “When I found the mother, I wrote and informed her of Laura Jean’s death. I also told her that her grandchildren would remain under our care.”

“Didn’t give her a choice, did you?” Ben’s deception hurt, but knowing Simone was in on it, tore at Evie’s heart. “Or me.”

“Sending you to those people was never an option,” Simone said.

“Those people?” Evie wasn’t one for shouting to make her point like Jamison, but she couldn’t stop. “Those people are a part of me, just like my mother was a part of me, and you two have robbed me of a connection to them.”

“They wouldn’t have been able to give you the life you deserve,” Ben said, at a loss. “The life your father wanted to provide for you.”

Ben's use of her father showed how desperate he was to prove his case, and Evie's lips curved into a sneer similar to the ones that Samuel gave out. Keeping her at Haven House was never about Albie Eddins, and they both knew it.

"What do you see when you look at me?"

The question struck its intended target, and Ben shook his head, his gaze dropping to the floor, unwilling to answer.

"I know I don't resemble Mama, but you still see her when you look at me." Evie pressed. "Keeping me around all these years, providing for me, caring for me, you didn't do it for Albie. You did it because I'm a piece of her. You keep me close because you can't let her go."

"You're right, I can't let her go." A shuttered breath escaped Ben. "But neither can you, kid."

A low blow, but one she probably deserved. "I know you loved my mother. Seeing you two together was like looking at the sun. It was bright, and beautiful, and supposed to last forever," she said. "But please don't bring Albie into this. It's already hard enough for me to imagine mom ever being with him. It was as if he was nothing more than a bump in the road to get to you."

"Don't say that." Ben gripped her forearms. "Your parents loved each other. It might not have been the same as what Laura Jean and I had, but never doubt that they loved each other."

Evie couldn't help but wonder if Ben's loyalty to a dead man stemmed from the guilt he felt over loving his best friend's wife more than his own. "I'll have to take your word for it. I only know him through your memories," she said. "And now I have to ask myself how much of it was the truth, and how much of it was manipulation."

"That's enough," Samuel said, and Evie blinked over at him. She'd almost forgotten he was in the room. "We don't have time for this. Mathis is waiting."

Samuel opened the parlor door to reveal the growing crowd of law enforcement in the foyer.

Ben left without another word to find the detective, and Evie fled to the room's back corner, facing the wall while she composed herself. Simone tried to approach, but she held up her hand to stop her.

"I can't," Evie said. "Not yet."

Her own limits reached, Simone left, closing the parlor door.

Evie didn't need to look to know that Samuel remained. His presence burned like a hot arrow in her back.

"Did you know?" she asked him. It shouldn't matter, but it did. "Did you know they were hiding this?"

Samuel came to stand next to her. "No."

She looked up at him, searching his neckline for the hint of a lie. Finding nothing, she wiped the tears that betrayed her.

"Okay."

Tentatively, like he was trying to touch a wild animal, Samuel pulled her to him, wrapping his arms around her. She tensed, not quite sure what he was doing,

“Pretend I’m Selah and just hold on until you’re steady.”

Evie almost laughed at the irony. Seconds ago, she’d been berating Ben for not being honest, but here she was, just as guilty. She didn’t want to pretend Samuel was someone else. He was the one she needed more than any of them at this moment, although she would never admit it.

Inhaling the scent of the forest still clinging to him, and the faint remnants of the sandalwood cologne he’d worn to the party, Evie burrowed into his chest. “Do you think I overreacted?”

His chin came to rest on the top of her head. “No, but you have to remember, he’s never rational with things involving Laura Jean. It’s the one subject where he lets his heart take over.”

“Can you blame him?”

When he didn’t answer, Evie tapped his chest, and Samuel’s strong arms tightened around her.

“No.”



## CHAPTER 11

# *Laura Jean*

1991

**L**aura Jean Eddins had long held the belief that destiny was a thread twined in the bones. A thin, changeable thing, designed to pull a person where they were meant to go in life.

For some, their threads ran straight, while the universe knotted others, making life's path difficult to traverse.

And whenever that was the case, there were only two choices a soul could make.

Cut the line, or work out the tangle.

Listening to the music flow from the record player's speakers, Laura Jean paced the lower level of Haven's conservatory, trying to convince herself that this tangle in her thread was worth the effort.

Ben was late.

He was never late.

That was more her style.

In fact, the first time they met, she had been running late to her own wedding.

When Albie's residency at Tulane ended, he'd wanted to hurry back to Florida to open his own practice, and managed to convince her that a quick courthouse ceremony was all they needed. Laura Jean agreed, but being superstitious to a fault, she insisted they keep certain traditions.

"It's bad luck to see the bride before the ceremony," she'd told him. "I'll meet you there."

Which was a mistake.

Her grasp of directions was as hopeless as her punctuality. On the day of the wedding, she made her way to the courthouse, where they were to be married in a judge's chambers. But as soon as she stepped off the elevator, she immediately became lost amongst the rows and rows of locked doors that all looked the same.

Roaming the halls like a mad woman dressed in an extravagant wedding gown, she'd just about given up hope when a door opened, and a man in a black robe appeared.

"Hello?" She attempted to wave him down. "Can you help me?"

The heavy figure turned, and the man's face broke out into a grin when he set eyes on her. "You must be searching for Judge Hale's chambers."

Laura Jean swished her skirts. "Did the outfit give it away?"

“You look stunning, my dear. The most beautiful bride I have ever seen, if truth be told.”

His compliment was nothing out of the ordinary. Laura Jean knew what she looked like. Her blond hair, combined with the dark features of her Cajun ancestors, gave off an exotic appeal that most men found irresistible.

And she hated it.

Her attractiveness was mere camouflage, hiding the awkward mess of a human she really was. In addition to being forever late and lost, she was also clumsy as an oaf with a dreadful habit of speaking her mind at the wrong time. People, especially men, didn't quite know how to handle her. They expected some demure creature trapped in a pretty package, and were left baffled when the real Laura Jean appeared.

Adjusting her veil, she asked if he could steer her in the right direction.

“Destiny awaits down the hall and to the right,” the man said, with a twinkle in his eyes. “Hale's chambers are the last door on the left.”

She thanked him and trudged down the hall as quickly as the dress allowed, refusing to feel an ounce of regret in her decision to wear it. If she was going to marry a man like Albie, she was going to do it looking like a damn princess.

Before long, she was in a circular antechamber consisting of five doors. Because of the room's shape, there was no way to determine which door would be considered the last on the left,

and she decided to knock on every one of them until she found Albie.

“You must be Laura Jean,” a deep voice spoke behind her.

Startled, she turned too fast and almost toppled over from the considerable weight of the gown. “Um, yes?”

At the antechamber’s entrance, a dark-haired man sat in one of the waiting chairs, regarding her with a mix of curiosity and indifference.

“Benjamin Fairweather,” he said, unfolding his tall frame to stand. “It’s a pleasure to finally meet you.”

Albie’s childhood friend was to be their witness, and Laura Jean breathed out a sigh of relief at being found.

He made his way to her, thrusting a smooth hand forward. Laura Jean shook it while the artist in her buzzed. With an unexpected jerk, she yanked him closer.

“I’m late,” she said, pushing up on her tiptoes to calculate how she would sketch him. Almond eyes complemented strong cheekbones and generous lips in a way she hadn’t seen since studying Greek sculpting techniques. The creases around his mouth suggested he didn’t smile often, but she was willing to bet when he did, a dimple would show.

“Do you always greet people this way?”

Ignoring his question, she continued her examination. Benjamin Fairweather was the same age as Albie, but unlike her future husband, this guy carried an air of age to him. Like

he'd already ridden the merry-go-round of life one too many times.

"You are splendid," she declared with quiet awe. "Can I sketch you sometime?"

Ben pulled his hand away and glanced around anxiously. "This is not how I imagined our initial meeting would go."

Her eyes finally met his, which seemed to make him even more uncomfortable. "Life's full of surprises, and if it wasn't, everything would get pretty boring. Don't you think?"

His brows snapped together. "Albie said you were different."

"Is that a bad thing?"

"Er, no?"

"Wonderful," she said, offering him her most radiant smile. "And by the way, I think this is a lovely first meeting. You and I have established how life is full of surprises and that I'm different, but not in a bad way," she said. "Now, can you help me locate my future husband so we can get married?"

He warily offered her an arm. "You took a wrong turn at the end of the hall. Albie figured you would, so he sent me to wait here while he stayed in the judge's chambers. This way, whichever path you took, one of us would find you."

Laura Jean's forehead wrinkled in bewilderment. "I have no sense of direction."

“Obviously.” Ben waited patiently while she gathered her skirts to walk. “But I’m confident that is the only fault you possess.”

The comment made her laugh. “Albie mentioned you were wealthy, but he didn’t say you were also charming.”

The dimple she’d been sure existed appeared. “I think you’re the first person to ever call me charming.”

“I’m sure that’s not true.”

They started back the way she came, with her leaning on him for support. Walking in a wedding gown was harder than it looked. “I also heard you wanted to pay for us to have a real wedding,” she said. “That was extremely kind of you, and I want to say thanks, even though we didn’t accept.”

“Albie loves you very much,” he replied, wrinkling his nose at the stark brown hallways. “He’s like a brother to me and deserves something nicer than a courthouse wedding.”

“You know how he is about wasting money.” Neither she, nor Albie had grown up with much. Her in a backwater swamp shack, and him in the foster care system. “But he did agree to buy me an actual wedding dress. Do you like it?”

“It’s stunning, as are you.”

“There you go, being charming again.”

The dimple popped out once more. “I promise to stop soon.”

They arrived at a second antechamber that, in her defense, looked identical to the first.

“Do you need a minute?” he asked when she hesitated at the judge’s chamber door.

Laura Jean tilted her head back to see his face. Ben was so very tall, while she barely hit the five foot mark. “I want you to know I’m going to be a good wife and promise to take care of him. I won’t get lost along the way.”

He listened, considering her words. “You know, I couldn’t help but be hesitant when Albie said he wanted to marry some woman he picked up in a bar.”

She held a finger in the air to stop him. “It was a jazz club, thank you very much. Don’t make it sound seedy.”

“My apologies.” A smile stretched across his face, and this time, two dimples showed. “But you’re not what I expected. I know we’ve spent less than ten minutes together, but I think you’re lovely, and I don’t say that to many people.”

“Albie says you don’t like anyone, except him and perhaps one other person.”

“That’s about right.”

“Maybe one day you’ll add me to the short list of people you like.”

“Maybe.”

They stood grinning at each other for a moment. “Before we go in, how about we make a deal?” Ben asked.

Intrigued, Laura Jean nodded. “Let’s hear it.”

“If you swear to take care of him, then I swear to do everything in my power to help you establish a good life together. Including, finding you when you’re lost.”

She looped her arm back through his. “Deal.”

They went in, and Laura Jean married the man of her dreams. Albie moved them to Florida later that month, and Ben was good on his word, lending them the remaining money needed to open the practice. He even stopped by to help them remodel the newly rented office space when he came to town.

The grand opening was a success, with women flocking to meet the area’s sexy new doctor. It made Laura Jean giggle every time she picked up the phone to hear yet another breathless female excited to secure a coveted appointment.

However, one of Albie’s first patients almost shocked the hair right off her head.

“He got the maid pregnant?”

Laura Jean couldn’t believe it of Ben, and had nearly dropped the tray of supplies they were setting up for the next patient.

Albie shushed her. “It was a one-time thing. They were alone in the house, wine was involved, and boom.”

“Boom indeed,” Laura Jean murmured, envious. She and Albie had been struggling to get pregnant since their wedding night. “When is she coming in?”



“I can’t see her in the office,” he said, explaining Ben’s plan to hide this Simone woman at a property his family owned called Haven House. “I’ll do her examinations there. Alone.”

Laura Jean didn’t care for that idea. She and her husband did everything together.

“Simone is scared to death,” Albie explained when they argued about it. “Secrecy is non-negotiable. You’ve met Ben’s family, and damn well know they would never accept this child.”

When Laura Jean moved to Florida, she hadn’t expected to find the people here clutching to the ways of the old south like it was their grandma’s good pearls. But as it turned out, they didn’t call this place the Redneck Riviera for nothing.

“What does Ben think?”

“He would never admit it, but he’s happy, excited even,” Albie said. “He’s also scared.”

On the day she finally met the mysterious Simone, things didn’t go as expected.

But the best things in life rarely did.

Early one Sunday, Albie received a phone call from Ben. Simone wasn’t feeling well, and Ben wanted him to make sure everything was alright. Taking advantage of her husband’s half-asleep state, Laura Jean convinced him to let her tag along.

When they arrived at Haven House, Laura Jean openly gawked at the place. Following behind Albie, she’d peeked

into each room, but it was the conservatory that made her stop in her tracks.

Albie went off to speak with Ben in the kitchen, leaving her staring, entranced with the space. So much so, that she didn't hear someone coming up beside her until they spoke.

“Beautiful, isn't it?”

Laura Jean shouted in surprise, and the very pregnant woman next to her laughed. “I'm Simone. You must be Albie's wife.”

“That's me.” Laura Jean lifted the medical bag. “I'm here to assist. Ben called and said you were unwell.”

Simone rubbed her stomach, which was snugly concealed under her sweater. “I'm not due for a few more weeks, but things haven't been right since yesterday.”

“What does it feel like?”

“Almost like a tightness,” Simone explained with a grimace. “It comes and goes, but no pain, only a squeezing around the lower part of my belly button.”

Laura Jean had aided her husband enough to know the signs of early labor when she saw it and hurried Simone to Albie. They laid her down in a room adjacent to the kitchen.

“You know, I've kept my mouth shut this whole time, but since we're all here, I want something to be known,” Simone said, staring up at the ceiling. “I've been most uncomfortable with having Albie as my doctor.”

“Albie knows what he’s doing, SiSi,” Ben said, hanging back in the doorway. “Remember, you’re only one of the many skirts he’s been under.”

Albie didn’t pause in his work. “My wife is present, Fairweather. Could you maybe shut up?”

“Hmm, sounds like Ben and I need to have a talk later,” Laura Jean teased with a wink at Simone.

The room fell silent after that, which seemed to agitate the patient. “Albie, why in the hell did you pick gynecology to study?” Simone demanded, taking deep breaths. “Your pretty face must make all those women uneasy.”

Laura Jean sat on the bed and held her hand while a contraction hit. “Every appointment slot is full for the next several weeks, and the new patient waiting list stretches out six months.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Are you two done making fun of me?” Albie asked, lowering Simone’s skirt to help her sit up. “You’re dilated about a centimeter, and that tightness you feel is a contraction. Make sure your bags are packed and ready. We’re going to have a baby by the end of the week.”

Simone blew out a giant puff of air and looked over her shoulder at Ben. “It’s going to be okay,” he assured her, his face empty of color. “I promise.”

Scooting forward, Simone attempted to stand but couldn’t quite make it, and Laura Jean took her hands.

“Every appointment slot?”

“I swear, I’m the only wife in the world who doesn’t mind her husband spending his days between the legs of other women,” Laura Jean said, helping her rise.

Simone let out a laugh that shifted into a grunt of pain, followed by a strange splashing noise. The group slowly lowered their gazes to the floor, where a puddle was forming on the carpet.

Albie was the first to recover. “Well hell, SiSi.”

The rush to the hospital had been nothing short of comedic, but they wouldn’t laugh about it until later. When they arrived, Ben was forced to wait in the car. If someone were to recognize him, the gossip could spread to his father.

“Stay with her,” Ben pleaded to Laura Jean as Albie rushed Simone off in a wheelchair. “She’s scared.”

“I won’t leave her side.”

Once they settled into the delivery room, Laura Jean asked Simone if there was anyone she needed to call.

Simone shook her head, gritting her teeth through the pain. “Ben knows to call my brother. Ty is over in Mobile today, buying some sort of seed or fertilizer.”

“It’s just the two of you there?”

“Our parents died while we were young, and we lived with an aunt who worked for the Fairweathers,” Simone said,

squeezing Laura Jean's hand tighter. "You're from New Orleans?"

"Not exactly. I come from Jefferson parish, which is right outside the city."

"You got any siblings?"

"A brother, but he's a son of a bitch." Laura Jean shrugged. "Daddy died in Vietnam and Mama never recovered from it. She's taken to drinking her pain away and leaving my brother to get himself into all kinds of trouble."

Simone breathed through another contraction, sweat beading her brow. "Sometimes the family God gives you isn't the one you're meant to keep."

Laura Jean grinned, loving the way this woman thought. "Amen to that."

After ten hours of grueling labor, Simone gave birth to a healthy baby, and Albie went outside to tell Ben he was now the father of an eight-pound boy.

"What are you going to name him?" Laura Jean whispered in the quiet. They had darkened the room to help the baby adjust.

"Ben and I have tossed around so many names but haven't settled on any. I know I want it to start with the letter S. I'm Simone, of course. Then you have my mother, who was named Sabrina, and then my brother's real name is Silas."

Laura Jean thought for a minute. "I saw the name Selah in one of the baby books we keep at the office. It stuck with me

and can be for a boy or a girl.”

Simone rolled the name around on her tongue. “I like that,” she said, tenderly stroking her baby’s cheek. “Welcome to the world Selah.”

Mother and son went home to Haven, and Laura Jean visited almost daily, taking on the role of auntie to give Simone a break. Ty tried helping with baby Selah, but confessed to Laura Jean he had no idea what he was doing.

A year rolled by, and one day, while she and Albie were prepping an examination room, he told her Ben was going to propose to the woman he’d been seeing in North Carolina. “He hasn’t asked yet, but he’s bringing her home to meet his family next week.”

“Does she know about Selah?”

“No,” Albie replied. “Ben plans on letting her meet his family, then telling her about Selah, and *then* proposing.”

“Good God,” Laura Jean muttered. “The woman’s going to run all the way back to North Carolina.”

“Yeah, probably. But none of that compares to what Charlie has done.”

Albie then told her of the pregnant woman coming to live at Haven. No, not a woman. A child. Laura Jean felt nauseous just listening to her husband explain the whole sordid story.

“Ben’s telling Simone today,” Albie said. “And you might need to go over there later to help her bury his body when she’s finished killing him.”

“Why is Ben allowing this girl to come to Haven?”

“Charlie threatened to tell their father about Selah if Ben blocked her from coming.”

“You’re kidding!”

Albie paused what he was doing for a minute. “They’re moving her down in a few weeks, and I can’t help but feel sorry for her. She’ll be a patient.”

“Goodie,” Laura Jean said sarcastically. “I can’t wait to meet her.”

The girl, named Rebecca, came to her first doctor’s visit alone. She was a pretty thing, who sat stiffly in her chair as Laura Jean went over their new patient questionnaire.

“Any allergies?”

“No.”

“Does anyone in your family have a history of heart disease or high blood pressure?”

“No.”

The answer to every question was a clipped no, and Laura Jean couldn’t determine if the girl was lying, or the healthiest human on the planet. But she reined in her annoyance when she noticed Rebecca’s hand trembling as she signed the form.

“It’s going to be okay,” Laura Jean promised her. “We’re going to take good care of you and your baby.”

Rebecca ended up giving birth just shy of her eighteenth birthday to a baby girl she named Olivia.

Laura Jean prepared a basket packed with goodies not just for baby, but for mama too, and presented it to Rebecca at her first post-delivery doctor's appointment.

With dark circles under her eyes, Rebecca whispered her thanks.

“Tired?”

“Livy hasn't gotten into a nighttime routine yet, and Simone can't help because Selah's been sick with a nasty stomach bug,” Rebecca replied, her exhaustion evident by the hitch in her voice. “She says Livy will learn in her own time, but I just don't know.”

Since the girl's arrival, Laura Jean had given Haven House a wide berth, not wanting to get in the way while the women settled in with each other.

“Simone is usually right about most things,” she said, already making plans to swing by the house that afternoon to help. It sounded like both women had their hands full and could use an extra set. “You'll do well to listen to her.”

Rebecca smiled. “Well, she also says it's time for you and doc to start a family of your own.”

“We're working on it.”

In fact, she and Albie worked on it so much they'd exhausted themselves in the process. But eventually, all that work paid off. Evangeline Renee Eddins graced the world with her presence, making a fool of her father, who fell head over heels in love with his daughter on sight.



“I do this for a living,” Albie said, cradling Evie to his bare chest on their first night home as a family. “And I can tell you, without a doubt, there has been no greater beauty ever born.”

Laura Jean trudged her way through the first week of newborn care, learning quickly that being stuck with a crying baby all day could drive a sane person mad. When Evie reached two weeks of age, Albie agreed it was time to get out of the house, and promised to take them to the new baby outlet in Pensacola.

Excited, Laura Jean had made them leave right after breakfast the following morning.

It was funny now, listening to the jazz album in the conservatory, and thinking of Albie. The very last memory she had of her husband was of him singing, in the driver’s seat as they drove down the highway. He loved music as much as she did.

Simone’s heels clicked on the hardwood floors, heading in the direction of the front door. “Ben’s here,” she called down to Laura Jean as she passed the conservatory. “Get ready.”

Laura Jean hoped Miranda was with him. The women agreed to go four against one if needed. But honestly, she didn’t expect him to fight her on this. Ben had struck a deal with her when she awakened terrified and disoriented in the hospital room after the accident, and she planned on holding him to it.

Laying there with pain searing through her body, it was Ben’s unshakable calm that helped her mind stay clear as he

explained what had happened. But as he went on talking, his own sorrow had him choking on the words, and Laura Jean knew that the universe had struck without mercy, and her Albie was gone.

The pain in her body was nothing compared to the agony in her heart. She and Ben mourned together in that sterile hospital room, crying until there was nothing left in either of them.

When all the tears were shed, and the hollowed emptiness of their loss settled in, Ben explained how the semi-truck that had struck them on the way to Pensacola not only killed her husband, but also crushed numerous bones in Laura Jean's body. Her hospital stay would be lengthy, and she would need help at home once released. Not to mention someone to assist with Evie, who had been left unscathed in the accident.

"I want Laura Jean at Haven," Simone argued with Ben the next day when she'd brought Evie in for a visit. "She needs to be with us."

Ben refused, already making plans to hire an around-the-clock nanny and nurse. "Absolutely not."

The idea of going home without Albie, to be surrounded by strangers, was more than Laura Jean could take. "Please," she begged him. "Don't leave me in the care of people I don't know."

He gave in, and when it was time, Laura Jean went to Haven House with Evie. Recuperation was tedious, taking nearly a year. But with the help of Rebecca, and Miranda when

she was in town, Simone nursed Laura Jean back to her old self.

Physically.

Mentally, she plunged into a deep depression, rejecting doing anything outside her usual routine care of Evie.

But when the spring flowers opened in Ty's gardens, Simone forced her to sit outside for an hour every day. "Sunshine cures the blues."

On one of Miranda's visits, the women gathered around the patio table, drinking spiked lemonade while they listened to the children play in the yard. Laura Jean had placed Evie in the portable crib next to Tobias, who was only a couple of months older than her daughter. Rebecca and Charlie's second child had a sweet disposition just like his big sister. "These two get along so well together," she said, taking a seat. "And are getting so big."

"Sammy is getting big, too." Rebecca held her hands out to Miranda, taking the boy from his mother. "He's twice the size Livy was at this age."

"It's those male Fairweather genes," Simone said. "All of them come with a heaping dose of height and arrogance."

"Toby isn't like that." Rebecca smiled down at her son in the crib. "He's the best baby, and hardly makes a peep."

"Ugh, lucky you," Miranda snorted. "Samuel is demanding all the time."

Simone knocked one of the cats from the table. “He’s his father’s son. God help us when this new generation of Fairweather men get set loose on society.”

Laura Jean’s lips cracked into a smile, listening to the conversation. It felt good, and she closed her eyes, tilting her face towards the warm sun.

“It’s nice to be outside,” Simone commented.

“Yes, it is,” Laura Jean admitted, already knowing where this was going.

“Do you want to practice your squats while we’re out here?”

“Hell no.”

“Your range of motion is so much better since my last visit,” Miranda said. “Oh, and I came across a new crafting shop in downtown Hollingsdale and picked up some paints for you, along with a canvas.”

Laura Jean was so very thankful that she’d found a friend in Miranda. Ben’s wife was everything he deserved. “Thank you.”

The back door screen slammed shut, and Charlie strolled out onto the patio as if he owned the place. “My goodness, how lucky am I to find four beautiful women all at once,” he crooned, leaning down to kiss Rebecca while the other women looked away.

They all adored Rebecca, but none of them could stomach her relationship with Charlie.

“Go away,” Simone said, fanning herself with the book she’d brought outside to enjoy. The novel was a romance, and Laura Jean tried to catch the name of the title. Since moving to Haven, she’d become addicted to them.

“Better yet, go out there and play with your daughter,” Miranda mumbled.

Olivia was already running in their direction, and Charlie caught her mid-stride. He might be a rotten bastard, but the man loved his children.

“How’s my best girl?”

“Good.”

“Are you making Selah mind?”

“Yup.”

“Keeping your mama and our Toby straight?”

Nodding, Livy’s golden curls bounced.

“That’s my girl.” Charlie spun her in the air before setting her on the ground. “How about we take Selah for a walk by the water?”

When Charlie and the older children were out of earshot, Miranda leaned forward to gain Laura Jean’s attention. “Ben mentioned he thought you were well enough to go home. But what do you want to do?”

“Stay,” Simone said, as if it were already decided. “Laura Jean wants to stay. We just have to convince Ben that’s what’s best.”

“I told him the other day that I didn’t think I could live in that house without Albie,” Laura Jean said. “And he offered to sell it and find us something new.”

Her lack of income was something to consider, too. She and Albie had sunk every dime they had into the practice. Thanks to a successful couple of years, she had enough savings to last a little while longer, but without a job, her funds would dry up fast.

“That’s a good start. Tell him to put it on the market and say you want to find a place closer to Haven,” Miranda said. “When we go back to North Carolina, I’ll begin laying the groundwork to change his mind.”

Having survived amongst the Fairweathers for the last couple of years, Miranda had picked up quite a few tricks from her husband.

But less than a month later, Ben told Laura Jean her house had sold, and he was already compiling a list of possible homes for her and Evie.

“I’ll find something close,” Ben told her over the phone. “There’s a nice new subdivision going up on the edge of Port Michaelson. You’ll be within a half hour of Simone.”

“But I don’t know what I can and can’t afford, Ben.”

“Let me worry about that. I’ll be in town next week,” he said. “We’ll go see some of the houses and narrow down our choices.”

He was trying so hard to make her happy, that she hadn't the heart to tell him then that she wanted to stay.

And now she was stuck doing it face to face.

Taking the needle off the record, she slid the album back in its sleeve, and heard someone enter the upper landing. It was Miranda, holding Samuel's hand. "When he tells you no, remind him you're all alone in the world," she whispered. "That's what bugs him the most."

Laura Jean gave a thumbs up, and then quickly hid it when Ben came in.

"I'm taking Samuel up to play with Selah," Miranda said, giving them privacy.

Ben nodded, distracted by the stack of papers he was looking over as he came down the steps. "We're seeing five options today."

He read over the details of each house, and when he got to the third listing, she couldn't hear anymore. "I want to stay."

Ben went on as if she hadn't spoken. "Now the four bedroom has a pool, but I don't think that's wise with Evie being so young."

"I said, I want to stay," she repeated, a little louder.

"I heard you," he said, seemingly unsurprised by the request. "But the answer is no."

"Has Simone said something to you about this?"

“Simone says a lot of things to me.” Ben sat on the chaise lounge. “I’m guessing you two have forgotten that I agreed to this because it was a temporary thing. You deserve a place away from all this insanity, where you can watch Evie grow up in peace.”

“I think this is the first time I’ve ever heard you acknowledge the insanity of the situation here.”

A thunder of small feet hurried down the hall, followed by a crash, a shout, and finally a chorus of apologies.

Ben’s right eye twitched. “Look, I have no idea what I’m doing here, but whatever it is, you don’t need to be a part of it.”

“I can tell you what you’re doing,” she said, moving to sit next to him. “You’re giving Simone a safe place to raise your son, and a home for Rebecca and her children. The risk you’re taking is enormous.”

“Don’t make me out to be the hero. Rebecca is only at Haven to save my own ass,” Ben sighed. “If Vivian or my parents find out what’s going on out here, then it’s game over for all of us.”

“Does Vivian’s family really hold that much power on the Fairweather board?”

“Enough to make my house of cards fall,” he replied, tossing the papers on the side table. “But I’m working on it.”

“How?”



He wouldn't answer. Laura Jean remembered all the things Albie told her Ben had done to stay in favor with his father, and she'd never once believed any of it. But seeing how hard he worked to keep Haven, and all those who called her home safe, she was beginning to believe them.

"Haven represents what happens when you let secrets snowball," he said, staring through the glass wall. "And if things fall apart, I'd never forgive myself if either you or Evie were caught in the crossfire."

Laura Jean realized she was losing this battle, and it was time to go in for the kill. "With Albie gone, I'm alone," she said. "But here at Haven House, I've found a home and a family with the girls. Don't make me give them up." She placed her hand on his arm. "We had a deal, Fairweather. You promised to take care of me, and staying at Haven is the best way to do that."

Ben looked down incredulously at the hand on his bicep. "Are you trying to work me over?"

"Maybe," she admitted. "Is it working?"

"No."

"Damn it." Laura Jean smacked his arm and rose from the couch. "What's it going to take?"

Another crash, but this time from the ballroom next door. Ben laid his head back on the couch while they listened to the chaos play out. "Are you positive this is what you want?"

"I'm sure."

“Fine,” he conceded. “But I have one condition. Allow me to purchase one of the houses on my list, and we’ll set it up as a rental. This way, you’ll have a home when you’re ready and generate a little income for yourself in the meantime.”

She squealed and did a victory dance, hopping around the conservatory’s lower level. Ben grinned, his dimples appearing for the first time since Albie left them. “Do we have a deal?”

“Deal.”

## CHAPTER 12

# *Evie*

**S**he and Samuel didn't hold on to each other for very long. The rare moment of peace was interrupted when Abe opened the door, and seeing them together, tried to back out but ended up hooking a wheel on the frame. He struggled to free himself, and when he couldn't do so on his own, sheepishly asked for help.

"We're coming," Samuel grumbled, and Evie tried not to notice his reluctance in letting her go.

While Samuel helped Abe, she went upstairs to check on Jamison and found her and Annabeth in one of the spare guest rooms. Her sister was crying, and the three of them talked until one by one, they fell asleep while the police finished their search.

The next morning, Evie woke before the others, and quietly slipped out onto the landing where Ben was examining the large rear window the shadow man had run past.

He offered her a tentative smile. "Are we okay, kid?"

Rushing to him, she almost knocked him over with her embrace. They would work through this, as they always did. “Yeah, we’re okay.”

But reconciling with Simone was a different story.

“I’m not sorry for what I did,” Simone told her when she went downstairs to get coffee. Not wanting to fight, Evie tried to flee, but unyielding arms wrapped around her, making escape impossible. “But I am sorry it hurt you.”

Simone turned her around. “Your mother used to say that people keep two types of secrets. Ones to tell and ones to keep.”

Long slender fingers gripped Evie’s chin. “The secrets you’re allowed to tell aren’t capable of hurting anyone, or if they do, the person deserved it,” Simone explained. “But on the other side of that coin are the ones that can hurt, or even destroy, someone we love. Those are the secrets that you keep, burying them deep inside until they lose their ability to harm.”

Evie hugged her, ready to move on. “That does sound like something Mom would say.”

“Laura Jean sacrificed more than others would for the people she loved,” Simone said. “She was a good friend. The best if you ask me.”

The police stayed throughout the day, and when the security team arrived, Haven House was packed to the brim with strangers.

The old girl hadn’t seen that much action in years.

Once the police were finished, they packed up to leave, with Mathis promising Ben he would provide regular updates. As the last police cruiser pulled away, Selah announced he wanted to take Lenora home right then, instead of waiting until the following day as initially planned. Everyone helped him pack the car and waved the couple off while a security team from Fairweather Holdings worked around them.

Under Samuel's orders, Haven was equipped with cameras, motion sensor lights, passcode alarms, and every other gadget under the sun. He assembled everyone in the media room to go over the details.

"All windows and doors are equipped with alarms, and entry passcodes will reset at midnight each day," Samuel said, standing in front of the giant movie screen. "Cameras are set out all around the exterior and are motion activated, along with the security lights."

"This is all well and good," Simone said. "But I still don't feel secure with Abe out in the cottages."

Abe tensed, already knowing where this was headed. "I'm fine, Mama."

"Humor me and move back in for the time being."

All eyes turned to Abe. Having independence was important to him. "I think I'll be okay in my own place."

"She's right," Ben conceded apologetically. "It'll be reassuring to have a man in the house."

“For who?” Jamison rolled her eyes. “Abe is the biggest scaredy cat of us all. He can’t even be in the same room as a spider.”

“That’s absolutely true, and I carry no shame with that.” Abe agreed, looking at Samuel for help. “So, you see, it’s pointless for me to stay in the main house.”

Samuel shook his head. “Sorry man, but I agree with Simone.”

“Well then, maybe you should stay too,” Abe mumbled. “It can be one big slumber party.”

“Sounds good to me,” Samuel said, with a shrug. “It wouldn’t hurt to have an extra set of eyes.”

This talk was getting out of hand, and Evie nudged Annabeth’s leg. Samuel could not stay at Haven House.

“There’s no need for you to stay, Samuel. Abe’s just mad because we’ll tease him about the girls he brings home,” Annabeth said, whacking her brother in the chest as she walked by. “I’ll go prepare one of the downstairs bedrooms for him.”

Ben reclined in one of the plush leather theater chairs. “I’ll need a room too, and preferably not the one next to Abe if he’s planning on bringing women home.”

Simone’s head swung in his direction so fast, Evie thought she might have gotten whiplash. “Excuse me?”

“Samuel’s right, an extra set of eyes won’t hurt, but there’s no need for him to stay. I’ll do it.”

“There’s no need for either of you to stay,” Simone argued. “Both of you live less than two minutes from Haven.”

Samuel crossed his arms. “It’s either him or me.”

“I said I would do it,” Ben replied. “It won’t be an issue.”

“What about the sale in Texas scheduled for next weekend?” Samuel asked.

“Mathis will have this all sorted before then.”

With a cluck of her tongue, Simone went over to Ben and poked his shoulder. “You better not make noise when you get up at the crack of dawn to go to the office.”

“Don’t worry, SiSi.” Ben closed his eyes as if he were considering a nap. “I remember the rules.”

It was decided, and for the first time in years, Haven had members of the male species sleeping under her roof.

Not that Evie got much sleep. She was too scared to spend the night in her own room, and tried sleeping with her sister, but ended up tossing and turning as she listened to Jamison snore until dawn. The next morning, she drove to work half dead from exhaustion.

Parking in her regular spot by the strip of brick buildings lining downtown Hollingsdale’s main thoroughfare, she turned off her car and sat for a minute to get her head on straight. It was time to go from being plain ole’ Evie to Ms. Eddins, a junior associate at Applebaum’s Tax Consulting.

Hired by the Applebaums, brother Phil and sister Constance, not long after graduating from the local branch of the state university where Jamison now attended, Evie enjoyed working at the small firm.

Inside the lobby, she waved good morning to the receptionist, while the sights and sounds of a typical Monday morning eased the tension hanging on from the weekend.

“I went to Java,” her assistant, Micah, said as she swung by his desk on the way to her office. He followed behind, balancing two large cups of coffee and a thick file in his hands. “I picked up our favorites.”

Micah was her closest friend outside of Annabeth. When Evie started her climb up the company ladder, he promptly sought a transfer to her department, having previously worked under Constance, who didn't exactly appreciate his way of thinking or lifestyle.

“An extra-large, I see.”

“Well, I didn't know how much you would need after having Lucas over to the house.” Micah placed the cups on her desk and closed the door. “And did we have naughty times?”

“We did not.”

“Damn.”

Dropping into a chair, he studied her suspiciously. “If you didn't play doctor all weekend, then why do you look so tired?”



Evie sat at her desk, gulping down half her coffee before answering. “Someone broke into our house and stole some jewelry. The police came and stayed until the next day. I’m tired from all the excitement.”

Half-truths.

Evie existed peacefully in the world by speaking only half-truths and keeping her connection to the Fairweathers hidden. Lucas was the first person she’d trusted with the knowledge in a long time, while the staff at work knew nothing.

Micah held a few tidbits of information. Like the fact that she lived with her Aunt Simone in a big house between Hollingsdale and Port Michaelson. He knew about the twins, and had met Jamison several times, but had no idea she was a Fairweather.

In turn, Evie knew pieces of him that the others didn’t. Like how his grandparents had taken Micah in when his parents kicked him out at the age of fifteen, loving their grandson unconditionally.

“Did they catch the guy?”

“Not yet.” Evie opened her laptop, ready to fill her brain with something other than the shadow man. “But we’re now the proud owners of a fancy new security system.”

“Well, did Lucas at least get to meet everyone?”

“Yes, and we were supposed to have dinner last night, but I said I was too exhausted to go out.”

“You should never be too exhausted for a good ravaging, Evie.”

“It was only dinner. I guarantee no sex was canceled.”

“And that’s more on you than him.”

“Don’t you have work to do?”

Even though she was considered his superior, Micah was equal to Evie in skill. His problem was that he lacked the education required to move up in his career. Every penny he made went to taking care of his grandparents, leaving no funds available for school. The Applebaums offered a scholarship program to employees they considered to have a future within the company. Micah applied every year, but had yet to win a spot.

Positive his lack of acceptance into the program had less to do with his potential and more to do with Constance Applebaum’s personal hang-ups, Evie had been considering approaching Ben for a loan on Micah’s behalf.

“I do, but you need to know Constance is in one of her moods,” he said. “She wants to close out the Hollingsdale General file and scheduled you in for a morning meeting.”

Technically, Evie reported directly to Constance, and the woman was a micromanaging nightmare who would waste time questioning every decision made on a file. “Wonderful.”

“If you hadn’t ditched Dr. Feelgood last night, a meeting with Constance wouldn’t trouble you so much today.” Micah

pursed his lips and tucked a lock of sandy blond hair behind his ears. "I'm just saying."

"I think you're more upset about it than I am."

"Probably." He rose and gathered the files on the corner of her desk. Claspng them to his chest, he let out a dreamy sigh. "I bet he has those v lines on his lower abs."

"Go."

"Yes, boss."

Blazing through the correspondence that came in over the weekend, Evie focused on completing the remaining notes to close the hospital account. An hour later, her phone rang, and she fumbled to answer it.

"Good morning," Lucas chirped. His irregular work hours made him a morning person, and it had taken Evie time to get used to. "How are we doing today?"

"Better than yesterday."

"Good to hear," he said. "Listen, I'm working nights all this week, but I was hoping we could reschedule our dinner for Friday. I can pick you up after work, and we'll try that new Italian place by your office."

Besides being a morning person, Lucas was the type of upbeat individual who always sounded like he was on the verge of breaking into laughter whenever they talked on the phone. It was just another thing for her to get used to, but right then, beyond tired, she kind of found it annoying. "That sounds great."

“Awesome. It’s going to be hard waiting until Friday.”

“Me too,” Evie said, and then winced. “I mean, it’s going to be hard for me, too. The waiting.”

She mouthed a silent scream of embarrassment while Lucas laughed softly in her ear. “I get what you’re trying to say.”

Mortified, Evie told him she had a meeting to get to and hung up. With every inch of her on fire from embarrassment, she rested her forehead on the desk, relishing in the coolness there.

Micah breezed in, stopping short. “What’s happening here?”

“I was on the phone with Lucas.” She stood to collect her things. “We’re having dinner on Friday.”

“Why do you sound upset?”

“I’m not,” she mumbled, slamming the files onto the desk. “We’re fine. I’m fine.”

“Uh-huh.” Micah laid a hand on her shoulder. “You need to breathe.”

“I’m not losing it,” she assured him. “But seriously, what is wrong with me? Why do I get so jumpy around him?”

“There’s nothing wrong with you, babe,” he answered. “But it’s past time for you to let loose and open that vault of yours.”

“I hate to break it to you, but my vault has been sealed since college.”

“And I hate to break it to *you*, but that’s obvious.”

## CHAPTER 13

# *Evie*

**W**hen the workday ended, Evie grabbed dinner with Micah and then drove home with the music up and the windows down. It was movie night, and she was looking forward to zoning out for a few hours.

But her excitement was short-lived. Annabeth texted that Samuel was at the house, setting up a computer, or something, for Ben in the media room's office. They'd hardly spoken since the hug, and Evie wasn't ready to confront the fallout yet.

Arriving home, she snickered at Samuel's black Audi sitting in the middle of the drive. "You even park like an asshole."

It took Evie two tries to enter the house. The new passcode box blinked ominously, while she fiddled with the security app on her phone. When she finally got it right, and the door opened, blaring music greeted her.

Sneaking past the media room, she made it to the kitchen where Abe sat at the table, watching Annabeth and Jamison dance around, tidying up the remains of dinner.

“They’re freaking nuts,” he yelled at Evie over the music.

Jamison spun towards them, landing in Abe’s lap to race her fingers over the top of his closely shaved head. “We’re letting Abe pick the movie since he’s still mad over having to sleep in the house.”

“And you’re going to hate it,” he promised.

Simone came out of the pantry with a bottle of red wine. “If it’s one of those horror movies you like, then we might need more of this,” she said, placing the bottle on the counter. “Oh, and Annabeth, don’t forget to get your shopping list together for next week. I’m going out first thing in the morning.”

Switching the music to a lower volume, Annabeth ripped off a piece of paper from a pad on the counter. “I’m making jambalaya, and I think I want to decorate this year.”

Abe tickled Jamison to get her off him. “Why are you so obsessed with Mardi Gras? We’re neither Catholic nor Cajun.” He inclined his head towards his mother pouring a heaping glass of red. “And only one of us here has a drinking problem.”

Creating attachments to holidays and events segmented the years for Annabeth and helped her mind cope with the isolation. Abe knew this, but he loved teasing his sister just like any brother.

“Watch your mouth,” Simone said, pointing a finger at him. “Or I’ll override your movie choice, and we’ll be watching a romantic comedy.”

When they started arguing over movies, Evie left them to take a shower. Once clean, she slipped on a pair of baggy, cotton flare pants and an old t-shirt, piling her hair into a messy bun.

Jogging back down to the lower level, she slowed her descent when she saw Samuel waiting at the base of the stairs. She'd hoped he would have been gone by now, but unfortunately, Evie was coming to realize he would be around more while his father stayed at Haven.

“Any word from Mathis?”

Samuel placed a hand on the banister, and if Evie didn't know any better, she would think he was trying to block her way. “He asked us to compile a list of contractors and other companies we've used out here through the years. Basically, anyone who had knowledge of Haven's layout. There weren't many, so we gave him what we had, along with the names of the men Ty hired to handle the groundskeeping.”

“What does Ty say about all this?”

Simone had made it clear she preferred her brother to know as little as possible about the break-in, so as not to agitate him. Three years ago, Ty had suffered a stroke that left him weakened. He was still able to do the things he loved, like fishing or taking care of the small gardens around his Firewater townhouse.

“We've tried to leave some details vague, but he's upset.”

“Hopefully, Mathis will find this guy soon,” she said, proud at how polite they were being to one another. Maybe their hug had been a good thing after all. “Abe is already tired of being here.”

“I hear you’re forcing him to watch a movie tonight.”

“Are you joining us?” she asked, pretty sure his answer would be no. Samuel’s big brain refused to settle long enough for him to watch anything for very long.

“I’m finished.” He held up a cable in his hand. “So, no. I’m not staying.”

The rolled up sleeves of his dress shirt revealed a muscled forearm, and her eyes followed the cut line. He’d been an awkward, skinny, boy too tall for his age in his early teen years. But by the time he graduated from college, Samuel had filled out in all the right places, becoming the gorgeous man Evie loved to hate.

“Unless you think I might like the movie.”

She blinked up at him, surprised by the flirtatious tone in his voice. “You wouldn’t want what we have to offer.”

The corner of his mouth twitched. “Are you sure about that?”

The smart thing to do would be to end this, but Evie let bravery get the better of her because it was him. “I suppose I should say, you couldn’t handle the selection I have to offer.”

The teasing humor on his face dimmed, and Samuel took a step, coming to stand on the same stair as her. Going into



automatic retreat, Evie flattened against the wall. It wasn't lost on her that their location concealed them from the others in the kitchen, and gave the advantage of hearing anyone who approached.

“Don't be so sure about that.”

A large hand propped on the wall by her temple, and Evie scolded herself for allowing this to happen. Years ago, she'd charted a mental map on how to navigate around him. It was stitched together by three simple rules; attack first, never give in, and always keep your guard up. Breaking one meant getting knocked off course and into the shadowed edge of the unknown where the signs all read; *Here There Be Monsters*.

To make matters worse, that long quiet connection to him unfurled from its slumber, humming to life inside her as it recognized the call of its match.

It demanded she answer, igniting a fire that was both binding and absolute. “Trust me, it's too much for you.”

Dark eyes dipped, resting on her mouth. “Give me a chance to find out, Evangeline.”

And just like that, the heat building in her turned to ice.

He'd had his chance.

“You smell nice,” he whispered, close enough now that their breaths mingled. “What perfume are you wearing?”

“Jerk.”

Samuel's gaze took its time returning to her face. "Opportunist." he corrected with a flash of teeth. "And I asked what perfume you were wearing. Not your opinion of me."

She knocked his arm aside. "Soap, asshole."

He straightened, creating space between them, and she took the opening, marching past. Samuel's deep laugh chased her. He was enjoying watching her flee.

"See you later, Evangeline."

Head high, she didn't react and turned sharply into the media room, letting out a sound that was a cross between a growl and a snarl.

"Who does he think he is?"

Abe was already in the recliner specifically designed for him, searching up the movie. He didn't have to ask who she was referring to. No one else riled her up like this. "Samuel Fairweather."

Evie shook her head. "He is a pig from hell."

"Only with you."

"Yippy, for me," she snorted, dropping into the leather chair next to him. "Where is everyone?"

"Getting wine and snacks ready," Abe answered, turning to look at her. "Hey Evie, can I ask you a humongous favor?"

"What?"

"Will you go on a date with me?"

Her mind was already spinning from what just happened with Samuel, and it took her a minute to process his question. “I’m sorry?”

“The grand opening for the Town Square is Wednesday, and I need a date.”

“What about Mallory?”

“I broke it off,” Abe said. “It wasn’t fair to her because there’s this woman at the office, and I’ve wanted to ask her out ever since we met, but she’s had a boyfriend until recently.”

“Then ask her to go.”

“Are you crazy? The boyfriend dumped her a couple of days ago. I can’t ask her out yet.”

“Why not?”

Abe sobered. “I don’t want to be the rebound guy with Nari. She’s smart and beautiful and laughs at all my jokes. Samuel brought her with him when he moved back here to work on Firewater. She’s one of his assistants.”

“This woman puts up with Samuel all day? Yeah, you better not screw with her.”

He relaxed in the recliner. “Nari will be at the party, and if you come with me, I’ll have the perfect wingman.”

Abe might seem overly confident to the outside world, but he honestly wasn’t, and often needed one of them around to function as a touchstone.

“I’m sorry, but the last party I attended didn’t exactly end well, and I’m not looking for a repeat performance,” Evie said. “Why don’t you take Jamison?”

After graduating from college in May, her sister’s life would involve these types of events regularly when she started working for the company.

“She has class that night.” Abe stuck his bottom lip out. “Don’t you want to see everything I’ve accomplished? The garden green is my masterpiece, and it’s a big deal for me. Please, don’t make me go alone.”

“You know I don’t like doing anything Fairweather related,” Evie groaned. “People treat you differently, and it’s weird.”

“I’ll tell Ben not to talk to you at the party. I’ll make him swear.”

“My answer is still no.”

“But think about how out of sorts it’ll make Samuel to see you there.”

Intrigued, she went quiet, thinking on the matter. “Is Simone going?”

“You know she can’t stand anything to do with the name Fairweather either,” Abe said. “I’ve already taken her on a tour, and she cried because I’m so amazing.”

“Fine, I’ll go, but make sure you tell Ben that I want to be incognito.”

Abe lifted his hands in the air like he'd scored a touchdown.  
“And what do you want me to tell Samuel?”

“Tell him that if he comes near me, he'll regret it.”

## CHAPTER 14

# *Evie*

“**H**oly cow.”

Abe’s mouth hung open when Evie came downstairs on the night of the Firewater party in another one of Jamison’s dresses. This time, instead of wearing an inconspicuous black sheath, she’d borrowed a sleek baby blue number that clung to every curve as if its life depended on it. Tiny red roses sprinkled the pencil skirt, while the upper half consisted of two swaths of fabric cut into a V-shape, diving low enough that an entire roll of tape had been required to seal everything in place.

Evie checked her hair in the foyer mirror. “You owe me.”

“I’ll do your laundry for a week.”

Fitz hopped onto the table in front of her. The commotion from the break-in had sent Haven’s felines scattering into the woods, but they were gradually returning as things calmed down.

She ran a hand down her cat’s spine. “Two weeks.”

Abe insisted on driving, which was fine by her. Walking was difficult enough in Jamison's heels, and she couldn't imagine how she would operate a car in them.

Her sister had monster size feet.

On the ride over, the pine trees gave way to reveal the glittering waves ahead as they drove towards Firewater. It was close to sunset, and the Gulf of Mexico was putting on a show for Abe's big night. A fading sun scorched the sky with pink, orange, and violet tones, reflecting off the foam tipped emerald swells crashing ashore. The combination of white sand earth, green gulf waters, and the fire burnt sky made for a dramatic sight.

Firewater rose in the distance as the roadway veered east, hugging the coast. When she was younger, the area held no name, and was known simply as Fairweather land.

The set of townhomes where Ty lived was the first batch of buildings in the development they passed. "Will Ty be there?"

Abe shrugged. "He was having a good day today, and went out on the boat, so it's possible."

Beyond the townhomes, Mediterranean-style mansions littered the powder white shore. The gulf front homes were enormous, each unique in their design, yet held small commonalities to keep them in balance.

"Did you work on the landscaping for the mansions too?"

"Bungalows," he corrected her with a grin. "These people actually refer to them as beach bungalows."

Evie rolled her eyes. “Because, of course, they do.”

“But no, they stuck me with the public spaces,” Abe said, moving the van’s hand controls which looked like an old video game controller. “The town square is my baby, and later, I’m starting on the shopping complex.”

“A shopping complex doesn’t seem like it would fit in out here.”

“The intention is to build individual shops right past the square on the waterside of the road. Like an open-air market,” he said. “It’s going up at the same time as the eatery section. Firewater has a deli and coffee shop, but Ben wants more options.”

Evie nodded at the homes on the opposite side of the road. “Why do those houses look different from the ones on the beach?”

“They subdivided the development into districts, each with its own theme. Those over there have a Caribbean influence, and if we continue driving past the square, you’d feel like you were in the Adirondacks. The latest one being built gives off a West Coast vibe.”

“I can’t get over how all the homes are so distinct, but yet, you can see an obvious link between them.”

“That’s Samuel’s doing.”

“He’s only been back for a year. There’s no way he could have possibly accomplished all this so fast.”



“Firewater has been in the planning stages for a long while. Samuel constantly juggles several projects at a time, with some being more costly and bigger than this.” Abe pointed to a two-story on the water. The home was the same muted color scheme as the others, but its construction was unmistakably more contemporary than its neighbors. “That’s Samuel’s place. The rear of it is all glass, giving him unobstructed views of the beach. He modeled it after one of his Lauderdale homes.”

“One of his homes?”

“Samuel’s got houses all over, but personally, I think the Firewater house is his best,” Abe said. “I heard Gretchen tell him she thought a pool would be a nice addition, but I don’t know if he’ll go for it.”

“Maybe she’ll persuade him once they get married.”

When Abe didn’t respond, she turned in her seat towards him. “Or will they not live there? I realize Samuel has to work wherever Ben sends him, just like Jamison will when she starts.”

Abe kept his eyes on the road, and Evie poked his shoulder. “Come on, you can tell me. I already know Samuel hated Fort Lauderdale while he was there. I also know that he wants to take over the North Carolina facility, but Trevor and his girls are in the way.”

“You sure know a lot about Samuel.”

“Selah gossips like an old lady,” Evie said, acknowledging a universal family truth. “He keeps me well informed.”

“But where did you pick up the idea that Samuel and Gretchen were getting married?” Abe asked, cutting her a sideways glance. “Not from Selah, that’s for certain.”

One of the mansion’s doors sat propped open, and Evie strained to see inside. “Jamison said Gretchen could handle him, and that they would probably get married.”

The row of waterside homes ended, replaced by a tall hedge that blocked her view, and Abe made a left turn into a gravel parking lot. “Samuel isn’t serious about Gretchen,” he said.

“Samuel’s never serious about any woman, but maybe things are different this time.”

Abe parked, and Evie exited the van as gracefully as possible, giving herself a mental high-five when she managed not to flash a group of people walking by.

Coming around to the driver’s side, she pointed towards the opening in the hedge line across the street. “Is that it?”

Abe swung his legs out, letting them dangle. “That’s it.”

“Wow.”

On each side of the entrance, two sentinel towers soared high above the trees and homes. Bowls of fire sat atop their heads, holding flames that whipped about in the amethyst sky. Water brimmed over the edges of the bowls, cascading down into splintered cracks running the length of the stone, disappearing into a pool at the tower’s base.

“Firewater.”

Abe hit the button to open the automatic rear passenger door. “I knew you’d like it.”

There were symbols carved between the jagged crevices, triangles and lines that looked familiar, but Evie couldn’t quite recall where she’d seen them before.

Abe grunted, working to extract his wheelchair. She tried to help, but a stitch in her dress popped, and she shot ramrod straight.

“One wrong move, and I’m going to bust out of this thing.”

When ready, they crossed the road and passed between the two towers, navigating a stone walkway that led to an immense courtyard.

Evie gazed up at the Moorish-style white buildings with dark wood accents encircling the area. Twinkling string lights hung over a blanket of dense grass, with green tones so rich, it made her question if it was real.

“No, it’s not real,” Abe replied when she asked. “But you’re the first to notice.”

The lawn ended at a series of low-lying shrubs, growing on the edge of the sand. And there, stretching outward in all its brilliance, lay Firewater Beach.

“This is unbelievable,” Evie said, fighting a sense of unfairness. Her mother should be here, seeing Ben’s vision come to life. “I’m totally blown away.”

With the reception in full swing, a band played in the corner, while waitstaff moved through the crowd, carrying

champagne and appetizer trays.

Evie looked around but saw no other trace of plant life.  
“Fake grass is your masterpiece?”

“This way.” Abe guided his wheelchair down a passage between the buildings and into another courtyard, only this one held a garden with every color on earth spread out as far as the eye could see.

Evie stood dumbfounded. “I didn’t know you had it in you, Abraham.”

“Me either.”

Firewater was his first job, and Abe had grown remarkably from it. Before this, he lived his life much like his mother and sister. Shut away from everyone at Haven House.

Strolling the lanes with other guests, Evie took her time examining everything while Abe rolled beside her. “I wasn’t sure how to really express the vision I had in my head for this space. Samuel told me to do whatever I wanted, but to make sure it had lots of color. This is the result.”

“He did an outstanding job,” Ben said, coming up behind them. “And I know I’m not supposed to talk with you openly, but I wanted to say that I’m glad you’re here.”

Evie hugged him, not caring anymore. “Mom would have loved this.”

Ben’s smile was faint, but there. “That means a lot to me, kid.”

An older couple nearby were arguing over a type of plant, and Abe excused himself, rushing over to talk.

“He’s really in his element,” Evie said, delighted. “I’m so happy you offered him this position.”

“Samuel has been pressuring Abe for God knows how long to do something like this, and Firewater presented the perfect opportunity.”

While Abe talked to the couple, Ben brought her further into the garden. “How are you holding up? I’m there at night but rarely see you.”

“That’s because you work too much.”

Ben nodded in greeting to a group of people strolling down the path ahead. “I do what needs to be done,” he said. “But seriously, how are you doing?”

“I haven’t slept in my room yet. I tried sleeping with Jamison, but that didn’t last, so I’m in Annabeth’s room now, and we’re doing okay.”

Placing his hand on her back, he led her behind a flowering bush. Or maybe it was a tree, Evie wasn’t sure. “Mathis called with an update,” he told her. “It’s not much, but he’s looking into two brothers. They work for a construction company I’ve used to do restoration jobs at Haven. Both men have prior burglary hits on their records.”

“But how would they know my mom?”

“The first time I contracted them was after that storm came through in ‘95, and they would’ve had contact with your

mother then, or in the future when they were hired again,” he said. “In fact, Simone had their company out last year when she wanted to update the lighting.”

“Did Mathis question them yet?”

Ben sighed at the phone buzzing in his pocket. “It seems they’ve disappeared. Their foreman says they haven’t shown up for work in the last few days, but apparently, that’s not uncommon for this pair.”

“Great.”

“Mathis will get them,” he assured her.

“I hope you’re right. Things need to get back to normal.”

His phone went off again. “I have to go,” he said, already walking away. “Oh, and you might want to find a jacket. It’s cold out on the lawn.”

Abe returned to her side. “Those people are amateur botanists and were asking about the firebushes.”

Evie had no idea what a firebush was but didn’t ask. If Abe started talking about plants, they would be in the garden all night. “Let’s find this Nari,” she said. “I’m only supposed to stand there, right? I don’t have to be involved in the conversation?”

“No, you have to talk to her.”

As they reentered the party, Evie frowned at him. “Why?”

“Nari is Samuel’s main assistant.”

“So?”

“She’ll want to meet you.”

Searching the crowd, Abe’s face lit up when he caught sight of her. “She’s by the bar. Get us a table, and I’ll bring her over.”

He was gone before Evie could argue, and she found a standing table near the beach lookout. The buildings shadowed the spot, making it an ideal place to people watch.

All sorts of guests were milling about, from obvious employees of Fairweather to older couples who she guessed were residents of the development. Then there were the upper level suits. Trevor and Claudia being two of them. She’d dodged a bullet at Selah’s party and hoped to have the same luck tonight.

A waiter walked by with champagne, and she plucked one off the tray. Taking a sip, Evie admired the small symbols carved into the wood frames around the windows. Somewhere along the way, she’d forgotten how creative Samuel could be in his genius.

As if manifesting him from her thoughts, her eyes landed on him, standing a few tables away with Gretchen and another couple. He looked handsome, devastatingly so, in his perfectly cut black suit. As he nodded at something the couple said, a lock of hair slipped, and he slicked it back out of habit, only for the wind to ruffle it loose again.

Engrossed in her observation, Evie didn’t hear the waiter’s return. “Another?”

It was becoming cooler by the minute, and she thought a little more champagne might warm her up nicely. “Thanks,” she said, taking a second glass.

Returning to watch Samuel, she noticed he was beginning to look bored, and smiled. He absolutely loathed social events, never even having so much as a birthday party when they were kids. Humans in general annoyed him, with small talk being one of his biggest pet peeves.

Right on cue, his interest in the conversation ended, and Samuel’s gaze wandered through the crowd. He didn’t notice her at first, but when recognition struck, his eyes snapped back, the flute in his hand paused midway to his lips.

Evie sipped from her glass, letting him take his fill. It was wrong, and a little dangerous, to be so utterly unbothered by the fact that they were in public with hundreds of strangers. And yet, that didn’t stop her from shifting in her stance to provide him with an unobstructed view of the dress.

For a second, she would’ve sworn he’d stopped breathing, but it was honestly impossible to tell from this distance. However, one thing was certain. Samuel liked what he saw.

He lingered in spots of interest, scouring her body like he was committing every inch to memory. The feel of his eyes on her warmed her skin in a way the champagne couldn’t, and Evie flushed under his weighty gaze.

“Infamous Evie,” a heavily accented voice said directly in her ear.



Startled, she jumped, spilling champagne all over the table. Quickly, Gabriel helped her clean up the mess, while they laughed together.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to frighten you,” he said, tossing the rest of the wet napkins aside. “I heard what happened after Selah’s party. Total shit thing, for sure. Are you girls doing alright over there?”

“We’re fine, Getaway Gabe, but thanks for asking.”

“Getaway Gabe?” Gabriel chuckled. “Oh, I like that.”

Samuel materialized out of the crowd, planting his glass on the table. “Go away Gabe sounds better. It has a nice ring to it and sends a message that any idiot can understand.”

The grin on Gabriel’s face widened. “Does it?”

Samuel glared at him. “We’re not supposed to speak to her.”

Gabriel set his glass on the table like a gauntlet next to Samuel’s. “Nah, see, you’ve got it all wrong. It’s you who can’t talk to her. I, on the other hand, can do whatever I want with dear Evie.”

Antagonizing a Fairweather was not for the faint of heart, and Evie hoped Mr. South Africa knew what he was doing. “Abe left me to go hit on your assistant,” she said quickly. “He said her name is Nari.”

Together, the men scanned the crowd. “Abe’s a brave man,” Gabriel said. “Nari is not one to mess with.”

“This might be good for him,” Samuel replied, with total faith in his friend. “He normally goes after easy targets. I’m shocked he’s willing to take a chance like this, but Nari and Abe would be good together.”

“You’re right.” Gabriel’s blond head swung back around. “Some women are worth the risk.”

Samuel’s jawline ticked. “Don’t you have somewhere to be?”

“No.”

Evie pressed her lips together, thinking she really, really liked this guy.

“I’m sorry if I’m not making myself clear,” Samuel said through clenched teeth. “Fuck off, Gabe.”

Gabriel laughed, retrieving his glass from the table. “You look gorgeous, Evie. Be sure not to waste your entire evening talking with this grump.”

Walking backwards into the crowd, Gabe blew Samuel a kiss as he left, and Evie mistakenly chose that moment to take a sip of champagne. Choking, she fanned her face to stop the liquid from flying out her nose.

“That was rude,” she managed to say.

Samuel watched her struggle for air with mild concern. “You’re right, I should sue him for sexual harassment.”

A blast of wind whistled through the party, and she shivered. “I meant you.”

“Do you need my jacket?”

“Why would I want your jacket?”

Samuel nodded at the goosebumps coating her arms.

“Because it’s chilly, and you’re shivering.”

“I’m fine,” she insisted. Another blast of cold hit and Evie scrambled closer, mindful not to touch him. “Totally fine.”

“Are you sure?” His gaze dropped for a nanosecond. “That dress doesn’t cover much.”

“Don’t like it?”

“On the contrary, it’s a well-earned punishment for my behavior the other night.”

The corners of her mouth curved, pleased he understood that she certainly wasn’t wearing this thing because it was comfortable.

“Gabriel is right,” she said. “You’re not supposed to talk to me. Those are the rules.”

“I’m no longer interested in the rules.”

“And why is that?” They were in public, and Evie figured it was a safe place to ask. “Why are you acting this way all of a sudden?”

“What way?”

If he was going to play coy, she decided to score another point in their game. “Like you’re a college boy out to charm me, and not an old man who just turned thirty.”

The remark hit home, and the arrogant smirk on his lips faltered. “Perspective?”

The splotch of red peeking out from his collar had Evie shaking her head. “Bullshit.”

Samuel tsked. “Such language, Evangeline.”

“Lie to me then. It’s not the worst thing you’ve done.”

This time he winced, and Evie chalked another point to her tally. But dragging up the past would bring nothing but pain, and he deserved to celebrate tonight.

“All that aside, I want to tell you that Firewater is incredible,” she said. “What you’ve accomplished here is far beyond my expectations, and I’m proud of you.”

Samuel stood utterly still as if she’d truly shocked him.

“Are you okay?”

He cleared his throat, snatching his glass off the table to down its contents. “Let’s just say that a compliment from you can disarm me as swiftly as that dress.”

“I was being serious.”

“So am I.” He signaled for a waiter to bring him another drink. “What did you think of the towers?”

“I loved them.”

“Good.”

If she didn’t know any better, Evie thought he almost sounded relieved.

“My dad wanted parts of the development to reflect life with Laura Jean, like a personal memorial, and when Abe was hired, I thought it would be nice to include a small homage to Devon around where his son would be working.”

The waiter arrived, and Samuel took a glass, offering one to her also, but she declined. “No more for me right now.”

Resting a hand on the table behind her, he made a cocoon of sorts to block the wind. “When I started brainstorming what we could do, the first memory that came to mind was the summer Devon had us do experiments with the natural elements,” Samuel continued. “Your mom was supposed to act as his assistant, but kept interrupting the lesson with tidbits of information on Native American beliefs and stuff from Greek mythology.”

Smiling, Evie remembered the day well. “You only had him for the summers, but I’ll tell you, it was hard to start public school after having Devon as a teacher. He was a great man.”

“Laura Jean had a way of making you believe in magic, but Devon would show us the truth behind the fantasy.”

“They worked well together,” she agreed. “The hippie and the scientist.”

Samuel’s eyes searched her face. “The towers are for them. I thought your mom would have liked the mystical aesthetic of their design, while Devon would have appreciated the fountain’s mechanics. Magic and truth working simultaneously to form something extraordinary.”

Touched, she couldn't stop from smiling. "Are you saying you believe in magic now?"

"Not exactly," he replied, his usual smirk returning. "But, as you so graciously pointed out, I'm getting older, and with that comes the ability to see things in a new light. Like I said, finding perspective."

Evie narrowed her eyes at him. "All this talk about magic and perspective coming out of your mouth is scaring me." She leaned in close to whisper. "Are you possessed or something? Did an alien take over your body? Blink once for yes, twice for no."

A bark of laughter escaped him, causing more than a few heads to turn. Gretchen heard it too and began cutting her way through the crowd towards them.

Recognizing their moment was over, Evie gathered her things. "I need to go."

Samuel watched with confusion. "Why?"

Two tanned arms snaked around his midsection, and his confusion flickered into annoyance.

"Oh my God, that dress is unbelievable," Gretchen said, tucking herself into Samuel's side, looking nice and cozy there. "Where did you get it?"

Evie searched for Abe in the crowd. She needed to get out of there as quickly as possible. "It belongs to my sister. I don't own anything this nice."

Patting Samuel's chest, Gretchen pouted up at him. "I guess he forgot that we're not supposed to talk to you tonight."

"It's fine," Evie said, spotting Abe chatting with a woman by the bar. "But if you'll excuse me, I need to go and play my part for the evening,"

Making her way across the lawn, she breathed a sigh of relief, almost reaching Abe when Gabriel rushed over with two stunning brunettes hanging on each arm. "Give him a minute," he whispered. "That's Nari, and he's working up the nerve to ask her out."

"Got it." She scanned the surrounding buildings. "Any chance you can point me towards the bathrooms?"

"It's in the first set of buildings near the entrance," one of Gabriel's lovely companions said.

Evie hurried off in the direction the woman pointed, finding the door without issue. Inside the building was an empty corridor with a bank of windows stretching the length of the space. At its end, a small sitting area with two chairs and a table waited.

The floral pattern on the chairs caught her attention, and Evie didn't notice the second set of heeled footsteps joining hers until she turned the corner and came face to face with Claudia Fairweather.

"Hello, Evie."

"Claudia."

Arms crossed, Fairweather sneer in place, Claudia circled her. “I’m surprised to see you here.”

“I wanted to support Abe.”

Claudia’s face contorted with unconcealed distaste. “Yes, well, we wanted a more qualified individual, but for someone with no formal training, he’s done an adequate job.”

Evie tapped down her response and waited. The nasty remarks about Abe were merely the opening act. Claudia could, and would, sink much lower.

“My father says Ben’s rationale in hiring him is rooted in the guilt he feels over Abe’s... situation.”

And there it was.

“Abe is talented, as evident by what you can see out there,” Evie replied coolly. “And from what I hear, Samuel has been after him to apply for a position on one of Fairweather’s development teams for a long time.”

The corners of Claudia’s mouth tilted upward, and she smoothed a hand down the front of her white designer gown. “Speaking of Samuel, have you by chance seen the dedication plaque in the entryway?”

“No, I haven’t.”

Claudia’s eyes gleamed with malice. “You really should check it out,” she suggested with fake enthusiasm. “Although you might not like it as much as everyone else.”

“Why is that?”



“Because the formal name of the town square is Miranda’s Garden Green.”

Evie didn’t understand what she was getting at. “I would think Miranda would have loved having something this beautiful named after her.”

“You’re so right,” Claudia replied, moving further down the hall, and out of striking distance. “If you think about it, Samuel’s dedication to his mother should be a lesson for all women.”

“And what lesson is that?”

“The one that says wives get the beautiful gardens dedicated to them after they die, while the mistresses are always forgotten.”

Careful to control her temper, Evie kept her face blank. “If you’re referring to my mother, most of Firewater is a tribute to her,” she shot back. “Samuel and I were just discussing that very fact.”

Claudia stopped her retreat. “And he sneaks a memorial to his own mother right into the heart of it?” Malicious laughter ricocheted off the vacant space. “Samuel is more clever than I thought.”

Not willing to listen any further, Evie continued down the hall. “Have a safe trip home.”

“Oh, and Evie, I meant to tell you how much I like your dress,” Claudia called after her. “Samuel seemed to like it, too.”

The champagne she'd consumed bubbled up from her stomach, and into Evie's throat. Gulping it down, she hastened through the bathroom door before Claudia said anything else.

With no one around to see her humiliation, Evie secured the lock and let shame engulf her. By the time she rejoined the party, Claudia would see to it that all the right ears knew exactly who she was, and then the whispers would start.

*Like mother, like daughter.*

Going to the sink, she turned on the faucet with the idea to splash cool water on her face, but the reflection in the mirror stole her breath. She looked ridiculous. The dress was wholly inappropriate, and she should never have worn it, no matter how much she wanted to make Samuel suffer.

Her actions on the lawn were just as unacceptable as the dress, adding fuel to an already growing fire. Evie's chest squeezed with self-hatred over how eagerly she'd grabbed at the crumbs of attention Samuel had dropped over the past few days. This couldn't go on, and her first thought was to ignore him from here on out. To be smart and hope he would leave it alone.

No, that plan would never work. Death by disinterest wasn't a feasible option when it came to Samuel. Ignoring him would make him try harder.

There was only one way to stop this.

But first, she needed a drink.

## CHAPTER 15

# *Simone*

1992

**S**imone woke to the sound of her future husband's heartbeat.

Brushing her lips on the steady drum, she prodded Devon awake. "You need to rest," he rumbled, rolling her over. "Today is a big day."

Diving her icy hands under the blankets, she giggled when he yelped. "Are you sure you want to marry me?"

"Why would I not?" he hissed, capturing her wrists with one hand.

"All of it," she sighed while he ran kisses up her neck. "All of them. All the mess that comes with me. Are you sure you want to deal with it for the rest of your life?"

Devon's body covered hers, and with her hands trapped above her head, he showed her just how much he did. "I want you," he whispered in her ear as they moved together. "The rest is just noise."

He always had a way of making it sound so easy.

They rolled out of bed with the sun an hour later. “It’s bad luck for a groom to see his bride before the wedding,” Simone said. “You better get back to your place before Laura Jean discovers you. She’s too superstitious for her own good.”

Devon grinned as he dressed. “I should go wake her up, and tell her that not only did I see my bride before the wedding, but I made her—”

Simone clucked her tongue. “There is no need to be vulgar.”

“A few minutes ago, you didn’t seem to mind the vulgar things coming out of my mouth.” Devon came up behind her to splay his large hands over her abdomen. “How are A and B this morning? Are they excited that dad is going to make an honest woman out of mom?”

Twins.

Simone was still in a state of shock. “They’re fine and behaving. Neither has pressed on a vital organ since yesterday.”

He nuzzled her neck, lifting her pregnant belly to release the constant pressure. She moaned at the relief. “A second round was not on my schedule for today, Mr. Howard, but for this, I’m willing to be flexible, if we can make it fast.”

Devon took his reward, leaving her sprawled naked on top of the covers, sweaty and out of breath. “Meet me under the big oak tree at two o’clock, sharp,” he said, kissing her goodbye. “I’ll be the one down front in the bow tie.”

She slipped into the shower when he was gone, blissfully thinking nothing could spoil this day.

“Selah’s throwing up.”

Except that.

Simone shut off the water and found Laura Jean lounging on her bedroom settee. “He’s fine now and will be ready for the ceremony, but he’s in trouble for sneaking sour gummies into his room last night. I put him back to bed with some water and crackers.”

Simone tossed off her shower cap with motherly exasperation. “What would possess him to do that? He knows he has a sensitive stomach.”

“Because he’s a kid, and kids do crazy things.”

“I’ll go up in a minute to check on him.”

Laura Jean waved the thought away. “I’ll take care of him. Pay attention to getting ready,” she said and wiggled an accusatory finger. “And don’t think I didn’t see Devon sneaking out.”

Simone smirked, disappearing into the walk-in closet to grab a robe. “Relax, I made him keep his eyes closed.”

“You’re such a liar.”

Laura Jean followed her to retrieve the veil. “I’m taking this into my room to steam. I’ve finished with Selah’s suit. He’s going to look adorable walking you down the aisle.”

Pausing in her exit, Laura Jean stared down at the veil in horror. “Dear God, I hope he doesn’t puke on the dress.”

Simone sat on the stool at her vanity. “Between the sour gummies and his nerves, I don’t have much hope.”

“I’m not worried about his nerves. If Devon sees things going south, he’ll do something silly to calm Selah.”

Simone had no idea that when she attended the Port Michaelson Elementary School kindergarten open house, it would be the night she met the man she would want to spend the rest of her life with.

And she certainly hadn’t expected him to be a fifth grade science teacher who had a penchant for wearing bow ties.

From across the cafeteria, Devon spotted her lost in the piles of orientation paperwork and made his way over to help. The first thing Simone noticed was his smile. It was honest and freely given.

Within a few dates, Devon proved to be a rare type of man, loving and goofy at times. The loving part snared Simone, but the goofy side of him won over her son.

Devon was understanding of her situation, too. When things got serious between them, he rang up Ben directly, requesting that they meet.

And to everyone’s surprise, Ben liked him. Well, as much as Ben liked anyone.

“He’s a good guy, and I appreciate that he’s showing discretion regarding our arrangement,” Ben told Simone and

Laura Jean after having drinks with Devon. “But can we all agree the bowtie thing is weird?”

“I think it’s kind of sexy,” Laura Jean argued. “A good looking man like Devon coming off totally secure with being a little silly is attractive.”

Ben absently traced a finger along the collar of his dress shirt. “Really?”

“Really,” Laura Jean replied, making Simone giggle at the skepticism on Ben’s face. “You might learn something from Mr. Howard.”

Devon proposed shortly after, and the wedding plans were quickly underway.

Another point for Devon, in the most perfect man alive category, was that he cared for Simone’s friends, and understood how important they were to her. In the middle of all the wedding planning, Laura Jean started making noise about leaving Haven.

“You’re a better cook than Simone,” Devon said, trying to convince her to stay. “If you go, I might starve to death.”

Gnawing at her lip, Laura Jean peeked up at Simone through her eyelashes. “Don’t you think you two need time to be a family without me underfoot?”

“You’re my family too, and we’ve created something special here,” Simone countered, unable to think of life at Haven without her friend. “I’m not going to let you run out on us now.”

“I love this place, and I love the family we’ve made, but the last thing I want to do is become a burden. You already have Rebecca.”

Devon held up a hand to interrupt. “Uh, isn’t Haven around twenty thousand square feet? I think it’s safe to assume you won’t be in the way. And think of all the help we’re going to need when the twins get here.”

Laura Jean’s face lit up. She was as excited as Simone for the twins’ impending arrival. “I’ll probably make an excellent aunt and would hate to rob those babies of my greatness.”

With no further talk of leaving, the women concentrated on the wedding until the big day arrived. Simone didn’t know if life could get any better.

“Will you call down to the cottage and tell Becca I’m ready for her?”

“Can do,” Laura Jean answered, with a two-finger salute. “Oh, I forgot to tell you. Ben called last night to say he would be here early. He wants to talk to you.”

“Did he say what about?”

“No, he was his usual cryptic self.” Laura Jean said, leaving her to tackle the veil.

Simone went about her morning, readying herself for Rebecca’s arrival. The girl constantly overslept, kept up late by Charlie’s antics.

It was nauseating.



Painting her nails, Simone waited, and when the second coat was dry, Rebecca crashed through the door with kits of makeup and hair products. “My alarm didn’t go off.”

Simone spun on the vanity stool, the excitement in her building. “Well, you’re here now, so let’s get going. I’ve got a two o’clock appointment I can’t miss.”

Rebecca switched on the radio and got to work. Time after time, Simone and Laura Jean encouraged the girl to apply to the local cosmetology school in Port Michaelson. She was talented with all hair types and could use what she learned to open a salon once this stupid charade of staying hidden was over.

“I’m so sorry I’m late.” Rebecca expertly sectioned Simone’s hair to prep it for curlers. “I was talking to Charlie all night about his plans for Toby’s birthday party.”

Simone knew what that meant. Nothing. Charlie always made big plans, but never fulfilled them. “Well, I hope it’s everything Toby wants,” she said diplomatically, sensing that it would be her and Laura Jean arranging a small party to counter Rebecca’s disappointment once again. “But let’s focus on today.”

“Is Laura Jean getting the veil ready? I want to secure it now and not at the last minute.”

“She should be down with it soon,” Simone assured her. “Now remember, I want a natural look for today.”

“But with your usual red lipstick?”

“Is there any other color?”

Rebecca shook her head. “Not for you.”

Simone watched her friend in the mirror, disgusted by the injustice of the situation. Rebecca had a good heart, and would one day mature into a lovely woman. All she needed was to get far enough away from Charlie Fairweather to grow into that potential.

“Did I hear you say Charlie couldn’t make it to the wedding?”

Simone hadn’t wanted the bastard to attend in the first place, but Rebecca invited him without asking.

“When we talked last night, he said something came up with Vivian,” Rebecca replied, fully accustomed to playing second fiddle. “Her family is in town, and I guess it was an unexpected visit.”

Relieved, Simone let her work, and when they finished, she smiled at her reflection. “You’re incredible.”

Rebecca beamed at the praise. “Laura Jean paints pictures, but I paint people.” Dusting off her hands, she nodded towards the closet door. “Get the dress on, and I’ll go see where Laura Jean ran off to with the veil.”

With Rebecca out hunting Laura Jean, Simone retrieved the gown from the closet, hanging it on the door hook.

Cream satin and lace flowed in waves to the ground, leaving Simone breathless. Complete with puffy sleeves and beadwork to die for, she was thrilled that she let Laura Jean convince her

to buy it. "If you're going to marry the perfect man, you need the perfect dress to do it in."

Someone knocked on the door, and she yelled at them to come in, lost in her love of the dress.

It was Ben, his face drawn tight as he closed the door. "Something's happened."

Simone prepared herself, feeling as sick as Selah probably did. Something was wrong, and she gave Ben her full attention.

"Tell me."

"He collapsed last night."

No need to ask who *he* was. James Fairweather was the devil they all knew.

"Is he dead?"

Ben sat on the bed. "No, but he's in and out of consciousness. The doctors are saying that if he pulls through, he'll be in rough shape and won't last much longer."

Simone sat next to him, taking his hand.

"We're so close," Ben whispered. "I was the one who found him. He was on the floor, his back to me, convulsing."

"What did you do?"

"Nothing," he exhaled with a shadow of a smile. "I did nothing, except wait for him to die."

"And you're confident no one saw you?"

“You know me better than that, SiSi.”

She did.

Simone knew every damn thing from working in that house, often wondering if Miranda comprehended the lengths her husband took to protect his position in the family.

Of course, she would understand the basics. Business was business, and Miranda’s own family came from that world. It would be second nature for her to glance the other way while her husband meticulously destroyed other companies that conflicted with the interests of Fairweather Holdings, or ignore the occasional slip of funds that fell from Ben’s hands into the pockets of those in power, standing ready to bend the rules.

But could she ignore the people?

The ones who would not yield, and paid dearly for it?

Like the man who put a shotgun in his mouth after losing everything because James Fairweather deemed him to be a threat.

And did Miranda know, like Simone did, that in her husband’s wallet, folded into near nothingness, was a scrap of paper containing the man’s obituary? Or that Ben read it often to remind himself he wasn’t the monster he pretended to be?

“What do we do now?”

“We wait,” he said, standing. “That’s all we can do. The doctors are giving him a year, maybe two if he’s lucky.”

A year or two? An honest to God ending in sight? James would be dead, and Selah would be safe?

Simone placed a hand on her stomach, letting a twin kick at her palm. It was almost too good to be true.

Ben helped her rise, taking in the hair and makeup. “You clean up nice.”

“Shut up,” she said, blushing. “By the way, your son has been throwing up all morning. He snuck gummy worms into his room last night and ate the entire bag.”

Ben scrubbed a hand down his face. “I’ll go check on him. And just a heads up, with everything happening at Parkland Grounds, we’ll need to leave directly after the ceremony.”

“I understand.”

He stood quietly, for a moment, as if he were searching for the right words to say. “There’s one more thing,” he said, taking her hands in his. “When this is over, and he’s dead, I want you to understand that I plan on changing Selah’s last name to mine.”

Jerking her hands free, she gaped at him. “The last thing my boy needs is the burden of the Fairweather name on his shoulders.”

Ben stared down at her, maintaining that eerie calm of his. “This is not up for debate. My son will have my name and the respect that comes with it.”

“Respect?” she spat the word. “The people who respect it are the people who don’t know any better.”

“I’ll give you Haven House.”

A jolt of shock paralyzed her, and she sat on the bed, almost sliding off.

“All maintenance, tax payments, everything, will come from a trust set aside to care for our family’s historic properties,” Ben continued, naturally assuming he was winning her over. “But in return, I ask that you give me this one thing. Let Selah have my name.”

“Tell me why this is important to you.”

“I don’t have to give you an explanation,” he snapped, his impatience breaking through. “The offer is on the table. Take it or leave it.”

Simone remained quiet for a long time, and when she finally spoke, her voice shook with betrayal. “Who the hell do you think you’re talking to?” she asked. “Where is this coming from?”

“Have you and Devon discussed adopting Selah and changing his last name to Howard?”

So, that’s what this was about. Ben was scared he might lose his son, and his automatic response had been to make a bargain out of fear.

“Devon and I talked about it with Selah once, and then shelved the topic until we could speak to you.”

His mouth compressed into a hard line. “That’s not going to happen.”

“Obviously,” she said, her outrage remaining close to the surface. “How dare you come in here, on my wedding day, with the promise of giving me Haven, and then turn it into an ultimatum.”

Something in Ben fractured, and his broad shoulders sagged, her anger humbling him. “Selah is mine, and when we’re free, I want everyone to know it,” he tried to explain. “But I understand if you disagree.”

“What about Haven House?”

“It was always going to be yours,” he said, softly. “You gave me my son, SiSi. The very least I can do is give you a house.”

Simone massaged her temples. “What am I going to do with you?” she murmured. “Why has this gotten you so worked up?”

Self-loathing blanketed his face. “Devon will be an excellent father to Selah, much better than I’ve been. I only wanted a piece of me to stay with him.”

“Don’t say that.” Lord help her, but Ben’s stubbornness could frustrate her like nothing else. “You’ve sacrificed so much for us.”

“I’m never here, not when it matters.”

“But you will be when this is all over. You’ll get to be the father to him that you are to Samuel.”

“I want the boys to be close,” he said, firmly. “Real brothers that spend time together.”

“Then that’s what we’ll do.”

She hugged him, and he hugged her back, careful not to mess up her hair. “What a fucking pair we are,” he said. “Thanks for putting up with me.”

Simone leaned back to look at him. “What’s going to happen to Rebecca when he’s dead?”

“Charlie isn’t going to divorce Vivian.”

“Then she needs to know that.”

“No.”

“You can’t expect this nonsense of her hiding here with the kids to go on. It’s not fair,” Simone said, furious for the girl. “She loves him, quite hopelessly.”

“What does my brother do to these women?” Ben asked, sounding truly confused. “I don’t understand.”

Simone rolled her eyes. “I’m not surprised, you don’t. You’ve never been charming a day in your life, while Charlie oozes it.”

“There are some people who would argue that fact.”

“Don’t get me wrong, in the sex department, you’re excellent,” she said. “But that’s not enough to hold them for the long haul the way Charlie does.”

Offended, Ben scowled at her. “It’s good to know that we’ve reached a point in our friendship where you’re comfortable enough to insult me directly to my face.”



Simone leaned down to touch up her lipstick in the vanity mirror. One could never have enough red. “I’m not trying to insult you. But you’ve never understood that without an emotional connection, real or fake, it’s just sex.”

With a pop of her lips, she straightened. “I know Charlie doesn’t love Vivian or Rebecca, but he makes them believe he does,” she said. “God didn’t bless your brother with brains, but he did gift him with the ability to hook females using the promise of possibilities. However, giving a woman false hope is a dangerous game.”

“Tell me about it,” Ben grumbled. “Vivian will not give him up. She’s shooting for another round of IVF.”

Multiple rounds of failed IVF and two miscarriages later, Vivian Fairweather had yet to carry a baby to term. Simone’s hand unconsciously returned to her own growing belly. “That poor woman.”

“Don’t throw her a pity party.” Ben went on to explain how much damage Vivian could do to their plans. Two percent didn’t seem like much in regular life, but that wasn’t the case in the corporate world.

“So, let me get this straight,” Simone said. “Randall McIntyre will hold a significant number of Fairweather shares once James dies. Not as much as you, but enough to cause a problem?”

Randall McIntyre, or The McIntyre, as he was called when she worked at Parkland Grounds, had been a thorn in the Fairweather family’s side for ages. James thought to fix the

problem by throwing Charlie at his daughter, but that only sunk the company deeper into The McIntyre's clutches.

"He's being allotted a small amount in the trust, but the part that has me concerned is Charlie's prenup," Ben replied.

"Should they divorce, Vivian's payout will allow Randall to accumulate Charlie's shares. If you combine the shares he'll earn when my father dies, along with the stockpile he's hoarded since partnering with Fairweather on a few ventures, The McIntyre stands to gain a substantial amount of control on the board, holding only two percent less than me."

"But you'll still have more than him, and everything will be fine."

"Not if I ever need to sell shares to pay off loans or deal with other issues," Ben explained. "Recessions come and go. That's the way it works."

"So, your goal is to keep Vivian happy, and Charlie makes her happy," Simone said. "I can talk to Rebecca, but the girl deserves a life, Ben."

"I'll make it up to her when this is over."

The bedroom door flew open, and Laura Jean ran in, stopping short when she caught sight of them. "I'm sorry!"

"It's fine," Ben told her. "We're done here."

"Becca is finishing with her kids and will be down in a second. Miranda and Samuel are helping Selah put on his suit, and I wrestled Evie into her pantyhose and dress." Laura Jean

brought the veil over to hang on its hook. “Which was about as much fun as bathing a cat.”

Simone looked at the time. “Oh God, I’m off schedule!”

Turning to Ben, Laura Jean placed her hands on her hips. “I need you to set up chairs with Ty on the lawn. I’ll be out there in a minute to help.”

Ben’s lips twitched at her bossy tone. “But don’t you need to get dressed, too?”

Laura Jean swept a hand over her plaid top and jean shorts. “Are you saying you don’t like my outfit?” She kicked a leg up to show off her Doc Martens. “That’s rude of you.”

Ben shifted uncomfortably. “Erm, no. I thought that maybe—well, I was going to say—um, you look nice.”

Laura Jean laughed, and a smile crept across Ben’s face, wide enough that a dimple showed.

Watching them, an unease settled over Simone. It hadn’t escaped her notice that, as of late, something had been brewing between these two that shouldn’t be. “Devon’s mother is the only person attending on his side,” she said, breaking up the moment. “Please make sure she has a seat in the front row.”

Ben promised he would take care of it, leaving them to finish dressing.

“Oh, I love wedding dresses.” Laura Jean slid the gown’s protective covering off. “This is so gorgeous.”

Simone studied her friend. “Do you think you’ll ever try again?”

Laura Jean fluffed the train, making the satin dance outward. “I think Albie would want me to, but I just don’t know.”

Deciding to leave it alone, Simone helped her spread the train outward, and the two of them gasped at the beauty of it.

“Well, if you don’t find anyone, remember you’ll always have me,” Simone said, nudging Laura Jean’s shoulder. “We’ll grow old together in this place, covered in grandbabies and happy in our long life.”

Laura Jean nudged her back. “Now, that’s a fairytale ending I can get behind.”

## CHAPTER 16

# Evie

“**W**hat the hell are you doing in here?”

Evie eyed Samuel striding towards her from the set of chairs she'd admired outside the bathroom. “The bar service employees you've hired are outstanding. Please give them a big tip. I asked for an extra-large glass of red wine, and they just gave me the entire bottle.”

Scowling, he glared down at her slouched figure. “Are you drunk?”

“Yep.” Evie made the P *pop* with her lips. “I didn't think it was polite to walk around in such a state, so I came in here.” She rubbed a hand on the arm of the chair. “By the way, I like these. Can I have them?”

“Care to tell me why?”

“Why do I want the chairs?” she asked, squinting at the two Samuels in front of her. “Don't you think they would go nicely in the conservatory?”

“Why are you drunk in the bathroom hallway?”

Evie brandished the wine glass around with a cluck of her tongue. “Speaking of bathroom hallways, this really is wasted space, Samuel. I expected better from you.”

“Get up,” he snarled. “You’re going home.”

Setting her glass on the table, Evie rose on wobbly feet, slapping her clutch purse under her arm. “Let me tell Abe I’m ready to go.”

“Don’t bother him. I’ll drive you home and be back before anyone notices I’m gone.”

Hell.

No.

“I’d rather leave with Abe, thank you very much.”

Samuel’s eyes narrowed. “Abe is out there talking with the developer of a new resort coming to the outskirts of Hollingsdale. The guy is interested in hiring him for the project.”

“According to Claudia, Abe can have whatever job he wants around here.” Evie’s tongue felt thick, and she smacked it on the roof of her mouth a few times. “So, he can meet with him at your office tomorrow.”

“This resort isn’t a Fairweather development,” he said, holding her steady by the arm when she started to tilt. “The project would be a tremendous opportunity for Abe to continue doing what he loves while staying in the area. And you’re not about to go out there and ruin it.”

“Why does Abe want another job?”

“There’s a year of work left for him at Firewater. After that, we won’t need him at this location, and I can’t convince him to leave Simone and Annabeth.”

Through the wine haze, Evie’s brain managed to process what he was saying, albeit slowly. “Fine.”

Without another word, Samuel dragged her through an exit door at the end of the hall that led to a concealed parking lot filled with expensive cars.

“Slow down,” she slurred, breathing hard from keeping up with his lengthy strides. “Your legs are too damn long.”

He stopped next to a black Mercedes SUV, and Evie smashed into him with a thud. “Oof.”

Swinging open the passenger door, Samuel attempted to force her inside. “Give me a minute,” she hissed, struggling against his grip. “They didn’t design this dress to sit in cars.”

“No, that dress was made for something else entirely,” he drawled, shamelessly watching her shimmy up the tight skirt.

Evie slid—crawled—into the passenger seat, and he slammed the door hard enough to make her teeth rattle. When they pulled out of the lot, the car lurched forward with surprising speed. “Take it easy!”

“Try not to vomit.”

“Try not to drive like a maniac.” She held on as he made a sharp right turn, driving in the opposite direction of Haven.

“You went the wrong way.”

“I know where I’m going.”

“Are you sure about that?”

He didn’t say anything, and she shifted in her seat, ignoring him to watch the new section of homes go by. Maybe it was the wine bending her brain, but the houses on the eastern side of the town square seemed much larger and even more extravagant.

“I can’t believe you did all this.”

Samuel relaxed a little, his anger waning. “Tell me what happened back there.”

They were passing Ben’s beach house, and her reply lodged in her throat. It was odd seeing it crammed between other homes. Once upon a time, this place held nothing except the sand, the sea, and the home Ben Fairweather built for his Laura Jean.

“Miranda’s Garden Green,” she said, finally. “When I ran into Claudia, we were discussing memorials, and she found it funny that you named the town square after Miranda, when Ben wanted Firewater to represent my mother. She thought you were being clever.”

Samuel’s hand tightened on the wheel. “Claudia is a bitch, and you shouldn’t let her get to you.”

Holding her nose, Evie mimicked Claudia’s nasally voice. “Wives get the beautiful gardens dedicated to them after they die, while the mistresses are always forgotten.”



Samuel turned off the seaside highway and onto an access road where the thick tunnel of pine surrounding the road plunged the car's interior into darkness.

"That's pretty poetic for Claudia," he deadpanned, the dashboard lights illuminating his profile. "She must be reading those self-help books Gabe bought her when they broke up."

"She said it should be a lesson to me."

"What the hell does that mean?"

Drawing on the liquid courage she'd consumed during her pity party outside the bathroom, Evie readied herself to begin. "It means you don't get to look at me like that anymore."

Samuel's eyes remained on the road, his face blank. "Because of what Claudia said, or because that's what you want?"

The composure in his tone had her insides turning to jelly, which did not bode well with the combination of wine and champagne sloshing around in there. Her plan didn't account for him wanting to have a reasonable discussion.

In every imagined scenario of this conversation, she'd worked out that the only way to do this was to be brutal. But she couldn't become Brutal Evie if he was going to do something ridiculous, like act rationally.

When they made it to Haven's drive, he parked under the canopy of oaks, far enough back to remain unseen by anyone inside the house. "Talk to me."

“The way you looked at me on the lawn, and in the hall, and every other time we’ve been near each other these last few days,” she rambled, determined to stay strong. “You don’t get to look at me like that.”

Samuel leaned on the center console. “From what I can tell, you didn’t mind,” he pointed out with a cocky glimmer in his eye. “And I wasn’t the only one doing the looking.”

Huffing at his arrogance, Evie jerked at the door handle and found it locked.

“Let me out.”

“I’ll drive you the rest of the way.” Samuel’s finger trailed down her bare shoulder, leaving a trail of goosebumps on her skin. “But first, I want you to answer my question. Does this stem from what Claudia said, or is it what you want?”

The desire to lean into his touch was overwhelming, and she yanked at the door handle again and again. “I said, let me out.”

Samuel hit the unlock button, and Evie flopped out, nearly landing face first onto the gravel. The world spun, and she knocked the door closed, shuffling forward with limited grace.

The car’s headlights blinded her for a split second too long, giving Samuel time to reach her. His large hands caught Evie by the upper arms. “Tell me why.”

“Because, I said so,” she shouted in his face, trying to shove free. “You don’t get to look at me like that with the woman you’re going to marry standing five feet away.”

“What in the hell are you talking about?” He hooked an arm behind her back, holding her flush to his front. “I’m not going to marry Gretchen. I’m not even sleeping with her.”

Evie shrieked with laughter. “You can’t seriously expect me to believe that. Look at you! You’re like sex walking. What woman wouldn’t want Samuel Fairweather in her bed?”

She would regret that statement when the booze wore off, but for now, she didn’t have time to dwell on it. “And Gretchen is beautiful. You two belong together in your beautiful beach house, with your beautiful pool, living your beautiful lives together.”

“I don’t even have a pool,” he yelled back when she continued to squirm. “What about Lucas, huh? Or does he not even enter your mind when I’m around?”

“Leave Lucas out of this.” Evie jabbed at his chest, which was like poking a brick wall. “And you didn’t answer my question. Why aren’t you sleeping with Gretchen?”

The hand on her back curved lower, and a second hand joined it, squeezing her into the hard lines of his body. “Because she’s not what I want,” he growled, massaging the flesh in his hands. “*This* is what I want.”

Evie granted herself a second to enjoy the feel of him. Her body loosened, the fight in her gone as he moved her against him. “What do you expect me to do?” she asked, furious at the hitch in her voice. “Say thank you for deeming me worthy of your attention after all these years?”

Samuel's head lowered, his mouth hovering over hers. "No, but I do expect you to make me beg," he replied, nuzzling her nose, keeping his lips just out of reach. "I'll gladly take whatever punishment you dish out because how we arrive at where we need to be doesn't matter. The end result is what's important."

"And what's the end result?"

"You and me. Samuel and Evie," he breathed. "I want you, and you want me. The rest of the world can go to hell for all I care, I'm tired of running."

Her heart skipped and then stopped so abruptly, Evie thought she was dead.

But it beat from behind her ribs again, screaming at her to act. She rocked her hips into his, their bodies creating a delicious friction that had Samuel groaning low in his throat. The sound sent desire flicking, and licking through her limbs, all the way to her fingertips curling into his shirt.

"If you'll remember, I never cared what anyone else thought," she said, surprised by how strong she sounded. "You're the one who left."

"If I had stayed—"

Evie's eyes closed, her spirit splicing in two as she regained focus. Using the last of her willpower, she delivered the first blow. "Don't romanticize it. One good fuck is all it would have taken to get me out of your system."

Samuel reared back as if she'd slapped him. Pain mixed with the need in his whiskey brown eyes, and she quaked in his embrace, reminding herself that this was always going to punish her as much as him.

He surrendered his hold, the cool night air swarming her skin. "Go inside."

Evie didn't know if he was more disgusted with himself, or her, or both. But it didn't matter, because it was time for the grand finale.

"If you'd stayed, I would have become just another Fairweather whore." Her hand swept wide, encompassing the house and grounds. "Like the rest of them."

Samuel tensed, the energy around him shifting violently. What she'd just said was unforgivable and cruel. Not only to him, but to her, too.

"Go inside, Evangeline."

The quiet fury in his voice sent her immediately into motion, and she started walking down the drive. Tears blurred the tunnel of oaks, shaking and shimmying in the night air. Their moss swung low in the breeze, ushering her towards Haven, like they were hurrying her along before she could say something even worse.

Samuel trailed behind her, the crunch of gravel under his feet letting her know he was there to see her safely to the house.

They walked in silence, the ramifications of what she'd said nearly suffocating Evie. She couldn't leave things like this, and her brain scrambled to find the right words to say.

Lost in her thoughts, she tripped, stubbing a toe on a rock. Cursing the stone, she ripped off Jamison's shoes, rocketing them angrily into the brush. When they landed with a thud, a sob broke loose, and Evie covered her face with her hands.

The footsteps behind her rushed forward, and before she could resist, Samuel's muscular arms swooped her up, lifting her to cradle against his chest. He carried her silently to the pavement, gently lowering her to stand when they reached the front walk.

Evie swayed where she stood, staring up at Haven House glowing brightly in the night. "I'm sorry," she said, unable to look at him. "I'm so very sorry, Samuel."

A knuckle grazed her forearm, stroking with a feather's touch. "I know you're trying to push me away, but it won't work," he said. "Now go inside. We'll talk tomorrow."

## CHAPTER 17

# *Evie*

**E**vie thought she was going to die.

Walking into her office the following morning, she scowled at the fluorescent bulbs, buzzing loudly overhead.

“Can we shut those off?”

Micah frowned. “The lights?”

Evie crumpled into her desk chair, which rudely spun under her weight. “They’re hurting my eyes.”

The room went dark. “What’s wrong with you?”

She worked to remove her sunglasses but fumbled the process. “I went to a party,” she answered, the glasses clattering to the desk. “It didn’t end well.”

“I’ll say.” Micah shoved a coffee in front of her. “Drink and explain.”

Steam curled out of the cup under her nose, and Evie’s stomach revolted. “There’s not much to tell,” she said, gagging slightly. “Champagne plus red wine makes for a hungover Evie.”

“Why on earth would you drink that much on a Wednesday?” Micah asked, holding in a laugh. “Don’t you know to save that for the weekend?”

“Extenuating circumstances prevailed.”

After leaving Samuel on the walk, she’d gone straight to her room, crashing onto the bed. She’d dozed for a good hour, awakened by Fitz’s loud purring. Cuddling him close, she thought about going into Annabeth’s room, but decided against it. The time had come for her to move back into her own bed.

But she was too afraid to sleep, knowing her words to Samuel would haunt her dreams. She’d nearly destroyed everything in mere seconds. Their past, their present, and their future.

No, she couldn’t think like that. There was no future with Samuel, and there never could be. She would never survive him, because the simple truth of the matter was that Evangeline Eddins had been in love with Samuel Fairweather since she was seven years old.

The feeling had struck like lightning on a stormy summer day while they played a game of hide and seek in the house. The two of them had ended up in the same spot, squatting under the library desk. As they waited out Selah searching the room, Evie’s eyes had landed on Samuel, and that was it.

An explosion of emotions boomed in her little chest, and she tumbled headfirst in love, never looking back.



“Stop doing that,” he’d whispered, waiting for a chance to run to home base.

Evie batted her eyes at him in the way she’d seen Ariel do to Prince Eric. She figured if the tactic worked for a mermaid, it would work for her too. “Doing what?”

“Making your eyes do that thing.” He pushed his thick glasses into place. “I don’t like it.”

She gave him a crooked smile. “I’m not doing anything.”

“Yes, you are.” He whacked her shoulder, knocking Evie off balance and onto the ground. “Stop it.”

Her love for him mixed with annoyance, and Evie could no longer tell if she wanted to marry Samuel or murder him.

To this day, those two urges still walked hand in hand.

He ran off to save himself, leaving her under the desk, dumbstruck, and plotting ways to make him love her too.

As it turned out, she wasn’t very good at dropping hints. Apparently, punching a boy or challenging him constantly, did not, in fact, let them know you were in love with them.

Time passed, tragedies struck, but through it all, Evie’s treacherous heart never let him go. When they reached the teenage years, Samuel started to take notice of her in a way he never had before, and while she knew she should let her infatuation with him end, her heart wanted no one else.

Until it was crushed the summer she turned eighteen.

As a newly minted adult, right out of high school, she'd thought it was time to be bold and act. The sparks between them, at that point, were undeniable whenever Samuel visited. That particular summer, he and Selah were coming to stay at Haven for a week before moving over to Parkland Grounds, where they would start cleaning out the rest of his mother's things from the estate.

With such a narrow window of opportunity, Evie had no choice but to move quickly. She tried to corner Samuel the first day, but the boys took off early in the bowrider they once kept stored at Haven's dock and didn't return until sunset, drunk and sunburned, to pass out in Selah's cottage.

Simone had been livid, and Evie exploited it to her advantage. "There's a graduation party for my class out on Dune Island tomorrow. I want to go but don't have a way to get there. Can you make the boys take me? They would hate it."

Thinking the punishment fit, Simone had agreed, and as luck would have it, Selah was too ill the next day, leaving Samuel to be the one to take her alone to the barrier island.

Evie donned what she deemed her sexiest bathing suit and stepped aboard the boat to a suspicious Samuel. "Why do you want to go to this party?" he mumbled from the pilot's chair. "Other than track, you're not involved with people from your school."

Evie spread out onto the seat next to him. "It's the last time I'll see most of them. Not everyone is a moody grouch like

you. Some of us have friends.”

Sliding on his sunglasses, a complaining Samuel steered their boat down the vein of the Intracoastal stretching from Haven House and into the bay.

At the pass leading to the Gulf, Evie transferred to a bow seat, settling on her knees with her hands in the air. “Faster,” she yelled over the roar of wind. “Go faster!”

The demand coaxed a smile from him, and Samuel hit the throttle, cutting through the waves as requested. The ride took less than twenty minutes, and when they anchored, he gave her a strict two-hour time limit.

“Josie is in town to help me next week, and Simone invited her to dinner tonight, so I don’t want to get back late.”

Samuel and his mother’s lifelong best friend were immensely close. The pair of them cared for Miranda through her multiple cancer battles, and when the doctors in Florida said there was nothing else to be done, Josie moved the trio to her North Carolina coastal home to see if the cancer centers up north could possibly help.

They couldn’t and Miranda died on a September day, with Samuel and Josie at her side. The morning the phone at Haven rang with the news, Simone’s wails of sorrow roused the household, and they’d all held her as she grieved the loss of yet another friend.

Years of mourning took over, with Miranda’s death weighing heavily on her son. Simone had said this cleanout at

Parkland Grounds was important because it was the first step in him finding closure. Next week was going to be hard, and she thought he might want to have a little fun first.

“Why don’t you come with me?”

He reclined in a chair, pulling his ball cap low over his eyes. “I’m taking a nap.”

Evie spent her time at the party counting down the minutes to get back to the boat, and when she’d felt enough time had passed, she returned to find him sleeping soundly.

“You should really wear sunscreen.” she’d told him, running a finger down his now deep red nose.

Samuel woke slowly, growling at her to be seated so they could go.

Evie moved to the chair directly in front of him, spreading out in her hot pink string bikini. The spot would grant him a prime view of her body as they bounced over the choppy water. “I think I’ll get a little more sun on the ride home.”

Samuel fought a hard battle not to look but gave up when they entered the pass into the bay. Discarding his sunglasses, he openly watched as she arched her back for him, letting the bathing suit stretch tight across her breasts.

And when Evie knew she had his full attention, she grazed her fingertips over her nipples, swirling them into hard buds that begged to be touched. A groan tore from somewhere deep inside him, promptly followed by the word *fuck*, chanted in a steady repetition.

Smiling, she tilted her head back, and when their eyes met, the hunger staring down at her told Evie it was time to make her move.

“Is everything alright?” she asked, rising from her seat.

“Yes.” The word came out choked, and Samuel cleared his throat. “Sit back down.”

Evie’s eyes lowered to his swim trunks, licking her lips at the sight of his body’s reaction to her show. “How about I sit in your lap?”

The engines sputtered the same time Samuel did.

Snapping out of his stupor, he stomped back to the motor. “It’s stalling out,” he told her, yanking at some wiring. “Everything is fine.”

“Can we make it back?”

He returned to the wheel, and crouched low, flipping his hat backwards to rummage through a panel box. “We’re almost there, but we’ll have to go slow.”

“Do you need a flashlight?”

“No,” he snarled, rising. “And I’m not going to tell you again to sit down. I have no control of the bo—”

Always a capricious thing, Mother Nature decided to take matters into her own hands then, sending a rogue wave at the boat. Evie went flying, slamming into his chest, and Samuel caught her, holding on tight as they stood transfixed.

It was now or never, and sliding up his chest, she tried to kiss him.

Realizing what she was attempting to do, Samuel released her, and scrambled back to the pilot's chair. A long minute of silence passed, while the boat crawled through the dark river of water leading to Haven.

“Do you understand what would have happened if you'd followed through on that move?”

Evie's face burned with embarrassment. “Yes.”

Samuel kept one hand on the wheel, and the other fisted in his lap. “No, I don't think you do.”

“Then why don't you explain it to me?”

He'd taken his time, like he had at the Firewater party, letting his gaze take in all she was offering. “I wouldn't have stopped until you were naked and underneath me on the floor of this boat.”

Breathless, and more than a little shocked at his honesty, Evie told him that was exactly what she wanted. “There's no one else for me, Samuel.”

The corners of his mouth had gradually lifted. “You mean there's no one else that can handle you, but me.”

Evie wished she could go back in time to stop herself from embarrassing them both. At that moment, she'd scoured her brain for a seductive response, and all she could come up with was, “But how exactly would you handle me? I think I'd like it hard and fast the best.”

Samuel's mouth had hung open, his throat bobbing as he swallowed her words.

"I'm not saying no, but we have to think about Jamison," he struggled to get out. "This would be hard for her to understand."

Of course, he'd been right. How exactly were they supposed to explain to an eleven-year-old Jamison that her brother and sister were dating?

Not only that, but Ben would've also never accepted them being together. In his mind, she and Samuel were basically stepsiblings.

However, none of that mattered to Evie back then. She grabbed his hand, placing it on her hip. "I've kissed a few boys, and let them touch me, but it was never enough because it wasn't you."

Samuel's eyes slowly closed, his thumb teasing its way under the string of her bathing suit. "I'm so going to hell."

"I'm going with you."

"Wonderful."

They arrived at Haven's dock, and Samuel brought the boat alongside. With the lines secured, he hopped out, offering Evie his hand. "If you're sure about this, then after Josie leaves and Jamison goes to bed, come to me out in the guest cottage."

"What about Selah? He'll see me and wonder what's going on."

“Selah knows what I want from you.”

The butterflies in her stomach had scattered about in every direction then, and remembering it now, Evie wondered if she would ever feel that way again.

“And what is it that you want from me?” she had asked, but Samuel never answered, and she would waste months speculating on what his reply might have been. In the distance, a car door had shut, drawing their attention. It was Josie, arriving for dinner.

Evie recalled how strange it had been to see her again. Josie hadn't been to Haven House since she'd left with Miranda years before. She looked the same, as if no time had passed. Blond hair, cropped short in a no-nonsense cut that matched her no-nonsense attire of jeans and a button-up blouse.

Samuel waved at her. “We're eating dinner early, so Josie can get to Parkland Grounds before dark. She's going to get a jump start on my mom's things before I come over next week.”

They'd walked back to the house with Simone and Josie watching them closely from the porch. “Nothing gets past those two,” Samuel muttered. “Go through the back door.”

Evie flittered off inside, fantasizing about what was to come in the night. She showered and changed into a white shift dress. The outfit had made her look like a naïve virgin heading off to meet her fate, which wasn't far from the truth.



But then the front door slammed with enough force to shake the walls, and she peeked through the balcony window to see Samuel storming down the walk, speaking furiously to Josie.

Evie ran out onto the balcony just as they drove away.

“We need to talk,” Simone said, from the doorway behind her.

“Where is he going?”

“Parkland Grounds.”

“Why?”

Simone didn’t answer, and Evie stomped over to her. “This is none of your business!”

“Watch your mouth, miss,” Simone warned. “You two need to cool down and think of the consequences.”

“Nothing will change what I feel for him,” Evie had told her with such earnest that it hurt to remember how much of a fool she’d been. “And Samuel wants me the same way.”

Simone rolled her eyes, and went back inside, with Evie on her heels. “I’m not blind, and have kept my mouth shut, watching this inevitable thing between you two tick down like a bomb, but I was hoping it would stay dormant until you were older.”

She opened Evie’s underwear drawer, rummaging around. “Do you still have the condoms I gave you? You’ve been taking your birth control regularly?”

“Simone!”

“The last thing we need is a baby on the way.” Simone slammed the drawer shut. “Or are you confused about what he’s expecting? If so, I’ve done a poor job in your upbringing.”

Evie had held her head high, trying to look mature. “I’m not confused. I know what to do.”

“Lord Jesus, save me from these children.” Simone placed a hand on her forehead as if she had a fever. “They’ve all gone crazy.”

“I’m not a child anymore.”

“And don’t I know it.”

Evie had gone to bed that night, solid in the belief that come the morning, Samuel and she would be together.

Forever.

But the one night turned into two, and the next she knew, Selah was packing his things to go to Parkland Grounds. When Evie approached him before he left, she asked what he knew about why Samuel was staying away, but Selah wouldn’t say much. “Things will work out the way they’re meant to, baby girl. I promise.”

Evie couldn’t recall if her heart broke then, or if it had held on with misguided hope for a few more days.

Samuel never returned to Haven House that summer, or any summer after. Through the years, they’d seen each other a handful of times at family events like Jamison’s graduation. At first, it was easy to ignore each other, but then the

antagonizing started, mostly on her part, and things escalated from there.

“Maybe you should go home,” Micah said, drawing her back to the present. “There are no meetings today, and you can review the new accounts after you get some sleep.”

Evie wiped the drool from the corner of her mouth. “This is so unprofessional.”

“Yes, it is,” Micah agreed. “But it’s also freaking hilarious.”

## CHAPTER 18

# Evie

The security cameras aimed at Haven's front lawn whirled to life when Evie got home, following her as she stumbled down the path. The blue observation light clicked on, signaling someone watching, and her phone buzzed with a message from a restricted number.

*Hungover?*

Her mind foggy, Evie frowned at the phone when it buzzed again.

*Serves you right.*

Realizing it was Samuel gazing at her through the lens, she straightened her shoulders and shot a middle finger towards the camera.

Unfortunately, her heel caught on a paver at the same time, and she stumbled.

*Careful. I'm not there to carry you.*

“Bastard.”

In her room, she crawled into bed, hoping for sleep. Annabeth came in soon thereafter with water and Tylenol. “Take this and give me the details about last night.”

Swallowing the pills, Evie told her everything.

“That had to be hard,” Annabeth said when she finished. “To hear him say all the right things and then walk away.”

She laid on her back, pressing her palms into her eye sockets. “And I said such horrible things.”

“Yeah, but I understand what you were trying to do, and he obviously did, too.”

“Is it wrong to admit that I enjoyed shocking him?” Evie asked, lowering her hands. “Mostly, when we’re around each other, I feel like a joke.”

“You’re not a joke.”

She stared up at the ceiling. “I’m probably some story he tells his friends about the time his almost stepsister offered him sex.”

Annabeth nudged her arm. “That’s not true.”

“You’re right,” Evie said, rolling to her side. “Samuel doesn’t have any friends.”

They giggled, and Annabeth stood, ordering her to rest. “I’m making homemade soup, and you can have some later.”

Sleep overtook her and Evie managed to rest most of the day until her phone rang, waking her from an almost comatose

state. The shrill sound sent her heart racing, and she answered it with a garbled hello.

“Are you ok?” Lucas asked.

Evie willed her brain to wake up. “Um, yeah. I’m just not feeling well.”

“Do you need a doctor?”

Evie tried to force a noise out of her mouth that resembled a laugh. “No, but thanks for the offer.”

“I’m more than happy to make house calls.”

“I’ll be okay.”

“Any news from the police?”

Evie told him what she’d learned from Ben, and Lucas was nothing but sympathetic. “Women have it tough. You’ve got to watch out, or you can become easy prey for sick men.”

“From my understanding, Mathis is working with the idea that these guys thought my mom was some famous artist, and they targeted her things with the intention to resell.”

Lucas disagreed. “No, this is much more than a thief robbing the place for monetary gain. It’s been almost twenty years since she died. What’s happening here is more like an obsession.”

Evie didn’t care for his way of thinking. “I hope Mathis finds them soon,” she mumbled. “I need a break from the crazy.”

“Say no more, because I was actually calling to cancel our dinner date tomorrow and invite you to come with me to a conference in Atlanta this weekend,” he said. “I completely forgot I had to make up some accreditation hours, and there’s a session that starts at Emory on Friday.”

“Um,” Evie stammered, searching for an excuse. The thought of spending time alone with him in a hotel room brought her nausea back with a vengeance. “I don’t think so. I’m pretty sick.”

“I’ll take care of you,” he promised. “You can relax at the hotel while I work during the day, and maybe we can meet up with Selah for dinner one night.”

“It’s not that I don’t want to go, because I really do.”

“Yeah?” His voice went soft. “Well, I really want you to come. I think you and I are ready for a little weekend away.”

Evie paled, grappling with how to respond. “I think so too, but I don’t want to vomit in the moment.”

Realizing he wasn’t getting anywhere, Lucas gave up. “I’ll let you off the hook for now, but next time, you better watch out. I won’t take no for an answer.”

They chatted for a little longer, then hung up when he got a call from the hospital. Evie was putting her phone to charge just as Jamison barged in without knocking.

“Awake?”

Jamison fell onto the bed, making Evie wince. “Can you maybe not do that?”

“Why did you polish off a bottle of wine in under an hour last night?”

“Samuel’s got a big mouth.”

“My brother throws his opinions around like an old lady, but he doesn’t gossip like one. That’s Selah’s job.” Jamison shook the bed more just to be a brat. “And Abe’s. Samuel told him, and he told me.”

“I ran into Claudia.” Evie went into the details of the night, omitting the part involving Samuel. While Annabeth knew everything, her sister remained unaware of what went on all those years ago.

Jamison’s face hardened in a way that reminded Evie of Ben. “Claudia can’t get away with saying that shit. I’ll talk to Samuel. He’ll take care of the cow.”

Evie stood and, surprisingly, her stomach stayed in place. Relieved, she inhaled the scent of food floating up from downstairs. “Is the soup ready?”

“Yes, and as a heads up, my dad and Simone are in the kitchen.”

Knowing Simone probably already had a lecture prepared, Evie groaned. “Wish me luck.”

Sure enough, ending her conversation with Ben at the table, Simone pegged her with a look when she shuffled in. “Well, hello there.”

The back door was open, drawing the cool night air through the screen and into the warm kitchen. Annabeth stood at the



stove, stirring the contents of an enormous pot. “She’s alive!”

“How are you feeling, kid?” Ben asked while trying not to laugh at her hungover state. “Rough night?”

“I’m sorry,” she apologized, tightening her fluffy robe around her. “What I did was wrong and immature.”

He reclined in his chair, propping his arm on the back. “Don’t worry about it.”

Simone sighed, unable to keep her mouth shut any longer. “What would possess you to do such a thing?”

“Because Claudia was in true form last night,” Samuel’s voice came through the screen door seconds before it swung open, ushering him inside. “And Evie was her target.”

The humor on Ben’s face faded. “Excuse me?”

Jamison sailed into the kitchen with a finger directed at Samuel. “You need to say something to her, or I will.”

Samuel leaned back against the kitchen counter, wearing a plain black sweater and jeans. Evie couldn’t recall the last time she’d seen him look so casual by choice.

“I’ve taken care of it,” Samuel said to Jamison. “We won’t have any more problems out of her.”

Ben surged from his chair. “Someone better explain what happened.”

“Claudia cornered Evie last night and said a few nasty things because she has nothing better to do,” Samuel told him, keeping his tone even. “She’s no longer welcome at Firewater,

nor will she ever work on any project you or I are involved directly in. When Jamison takes her position within the company, the same stipulation will apply to her. I've discussed the issue with Trevor, and he's acceptable to those terms as long as the details of what went on last night remained hidden from you."

Standing before his son, Ben gave him a warning look. "What did she say?"

Samuel remained silent, and Ben turned to Evie. "Tell me."

She opened her mouth, but before she could speak, Samuel cut her off. "I said no," he snapped, his calm demeanor dropping. "Leave her alone."

Ben twisted back around to face his son. "Who the hell do you think you are?"

Simone rose from the table to intervene, but Samuel held up his hand, stopping her. "I am the man you raised me to be," he replied, his gaze locked on Ben. "And as that man, I am doing as I was taught. Taking care of the people who belong to me. Which means you need to back off Evie, and not worry about what some bitch said."

The men continued their stare down. "It's not worth it," Samuel assured his father gently. "Claudia is nothing. Her words mean nothing. Hearing them will only cause pain, and we've had enough of that to last lifetimes."

Seconds ticked by, and then, gradually, the coiled tension in Ben's shoulders eased. He nodded, slapping a hand on

Samuel's shoulder. "We'll talk later."

Like the rest of them, Evie knew he wasn't going to let it go. And when Ben gained the truth, even God himself wouldn't be able to save Claudia from his wrath.

Which she was totally fine with.

Dialing back his anger, Ben smiled at Samuel apologetically. "The meeting this weekend can't be rescheduled, and until Mathis locates those men, I want someone here at night."

"I told you, it's not a problem," Samuel said. "I'll sleep here."

The abrupt change in the conversation had Evie's brow wrinkling with confusion. "What?"

"We're in the middle of a bidding war for some land outside of Houston, and I have a meeting in Texas on Saturday to finalize the purchase," Ben said, and turned to Jamison. "Hey, why don't you come with me? It'll be a good way to get your feet wet. We'll take the plane over on Friday and be back by midday on Sunday."

Jamison nodded. "As long as you give me time to shop while we're there."

"I can do that," Ben said, her easy agreement wiping the lingering strain off his face. "Come to the media room, and I'll show you the details, so you'll be up to speed."

Evie watched them go with her mouth hanging open. This could not be happening.

“I’ll be out during the day,” Samuel told Simone.

“Will you be here for dinner on either night?”

“Probably,” Samuel answered, his eyes flicking to Evie. “I’ve left my evening schedule pretty open to accommodate everyone’s needs.”

“Should we be expecting Gretchen, too?” Annabeth asked, with feigned innocence. “I want to make sure I make enough food.”

“No,” he answered, well aware of what Annabeth was getting at. “But what about Lucas? Will he be joining us? I never really got a chance to talk to him at the party.”

Evie’s face heated. “Simone, I forgot to tell you that I might go out of town this weekend,” she said, not breaking eye contact with Samuel. “Lucas invited me to go with him to Atlanta.”

Samuel tensed, and Evie marked a point in her favor on their imaginary scoreboard.

Annabeth frowned from her spot by the stove. “You forgot to tell me, too.”

“It just happened,” she explained, quickly. “I haven’t decided if I’m going yet.”

“Let me know when you do,” Simone said, wisely moving towards the exit. “I’m going to find Abraham. Annabeth, can you come help me?”

“He’s parked in front of the TV, mother.” Annabeth kept on stirring, with obviously no intention of leaving. “It’s not like he’s hard to find.”

Simone sighed, beyond irritated with them all, and left. The room went quiet in her absence and Evie continued to stare at Samuel. He did the same, with Annabeth remaining at the stove, pretending not to listen.

Finally deciding enough was enough, Evie apologized. “I’m sorry for what I said last night.”

Samuel’s eyes cut toward Annabeth.

“She knows what happened,” Evie said.

“I know all,” Annabeth crooned ominously with her back to them. “Evie tells me all the important stuff.”

“Yet you didn’t know about Lucas inviting her to Atlanta,” Samuel pointed out smugly. “Interesting.”

“Because I had the conversation with him less than ten minutes ago,” Evie huffed. “Look Samuel, I know you want to talk, so let’s do it now.”

He straightened and strode towards the back door. “You’re not getting off the hook that easy, Evangeline,” he said, pushing open the screen. “You and I both know you’re not running off to Atlanta, which means we’ve got two long nights ahead of us to talk.”

The door slapped closed behind him, and Evie let out a frustrated growl.

“These next couple of days are going to be interesting,”  
Annabeth sang, stirring away. “I hope we have enough  
popcorn for the show.”

## CHAPTER 19

# *Evie*

**S**amuel wasn't at the house when Evie walked in the door from work on Friday. Thanking the universe for the reprieve, she scarfed down her dinner to rush upstairs before he arrived.

Annabeth knocked on her door a little while later with a gift. "The next book in the Elven Realm series came out yesterday, and Mom bought it for us."

Evie took the book from her and cradled it to her chest. "I would much rather spend the weekend fantasizing about hot Fae males than you know who."

"He's here, by the way. I told him you had a headache."

Evie's heart gave a nervous jolt. "Did he ask where I was, or did you volunteer the information?"

"He asked."

"I better lock my door tonight."

"Why?" Annabeth's eyes danced with humor. "You'll just unlock it for him if he asks."

“I would not!”

“And here we have, ladies and gentlemen, the saddest of the female emotional states,” Annabeth said, pulling the door closed. “A woman in denial.”

Sequestering herself to her bedroom, she read until she fell asleep early in the evening, and in the morning, Evie remained hidden away until she heard Samuel’s car leave.

“He has a dinner thing tonight with Abe, but he’ll be here after that,” Annabeth informed her over breakfast, which was precisely what Evie wanted to hear.

She went about her Saturday as usual, ending it with a late afternoon exposure therapy session with Annabeth in the yard.

“You can’t hide tonight,” Annabeth said, sweating profusely. It was warm outside, and they were pushing her limits today. “Let him say what he needs to say and get it over with.”

Evie aimed her towards the dock, their new goal. “I’m still reading the book, and it’s getting good.”

“Fine, but don’t hide.”

Annabeth took a step towards the water, but hesitated, wrestling with the invisible line in front of her. Sometimes she was able to proceed without considerable fuss, but sometimes it was the opposite. “You should read out in the open, so he can’t corner you alone.”

“That’s a pretty good idea.”



“I’m full of them.” Annabeth gulped down her fear and took a long step. “You just don’t listen to me most of the time.”

“That’s because you’re full of shit, too.”

Annabeth elbowed her. “At least I’m not intimidated by Samuel.”

“I’m not intimidated by him.”

“Good, because here he comes.”

Spinning around, Evie inwardly groaned as Samuel crossed through the gardens towards them. Unbelievably sexy in his dark gray suit, he was probably the only man in the world that could exude that much confidence strolling through blossoming flowers.

He afforded her a glance when he reached them. Looking damn edible with his rumpled hair and boyish grin. “I promised to take you for a walk.”

Evie rolled her eyes. “She’s not a dog, Samuel.”

Ignoring her, Samuel extended an arm to Annabeth. “What’s the goal today?”

“We’re standing at it,” Annabeth said, holding on to him. “This is the farthest I’ve gone, but the end goal is the dock, or someplace near the water.”

“Did you want to go swimming?” he teased, and Evie snorted.

Annabeth shrugged. “Maybe. I haven’t been swimming in a long time.”

Samuel surveyed the grounds and nodded to a large section of lawn off the patio. “Perhaps it’s time for Haven to have a pool installed.”

Annabeth’s face lit up. “If I can master walking outside, I know I can learn to swim again!”

Samuel grinned at her excitement and inclined his head towards Evie. “I heard this one gets excited about beautiful pools, too.”

Evie’s eyes narrowed. He wanted to play, did he? “Luckily, I have just the hot pink bikini to wear.”

Shades of red popped out around Samuel’s collar, and he cleared his throat. “How about we take a few steps together,” he said, careful to keep his focus on Annabeth. “Just tell me what to do.”

When Annabeth looked unsure, he tugged her arm. “Come on. I’m probably a much nicer walking companion than your usual one.”

Annabeth threw her head back and laughed. The oak’s branches above echoed the sound, quivering in the afternoon sun as if the tree understood the joke too.

“You know I’m right,” Samuel said.

“Okay, but we have to go slow,” Annabeth replied, readying her nerve.

Remaining close, Evie walked a couple of paces behind them.

“So, where are we headed after the dock?” Samuel asked, smartly waiting for Annabeth’s signal to continue. “The forest trails?”

“Key West.”

“Key West, huh?”

Annabeth nodded, dragging him with her as she took an elongated step. “Evie and I are running away to Key West and opening a bookshop. It’ll be called Key Lime Books, and she’ll manage the store, but I’ll pick out what books to sell.”

“I don’t see why I can’t have a say on the inventory, too,” Evie argued, playing into the dream.

“Because you like *Wuthering Heights*, and I’ve never forgiven you for it,” Annabeth said over her shoulder and then whispered to Samuel. “Heathcliff is a pig.”

“Interesting.”

“That I don’t trust Evie’s taste, or that Heathcliff is a pig?”

“Both.”

Annabeth took another elongated step and stopped. “We’re even going to have a coffee shop and a baked goods section.”

“Sounds like you two have it all figured out.”

“Yo!” Abe hollered from the side porch with his hands cupped around his mouth. “It’s time to go.”

Samuel sighed and extracted his arm. “I promised Abe I would sit in on his dinner meeting with the new resort developer.”

Evie rushed forward. They were too far out of Annabeth's comfort zone to be without skin-to-skin contact for even a second.

"Thank you for the afternoon walk," Samuel said. "It was educational."

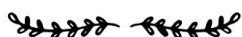
Annabeth faced the water. She always liked to have one last glimpse before going inside. "Anytime."

"And I'll see you after dinner, Evangeline."

Evie held her friend's shoulders, letting Annabeth know she was there. "Is that a warning?"

"Sammuuueelllll," Abe yelled louder. "Come on! I don't want to be late."

Samuel took off without answering, and Annabeth reached up to pat Evie's hand. "Yep, you're screwed."



When dinner was over, Evie snuggled up on the conservatory's couch with the book and Fitz nestled in her lap. Sinking deep into the cushions, she pulled a blanket over them and turned on the reading lamp. The lower level was a quiet spot, but also visible enough that if Samuel tried to talk to her, someone would overhear.

Next to her, the glass wall reflected the watery image of Annabeth standing at the railing above.

"Is the book as good as we expected?"

"Better."

Colonel Brandon snaked through the posts on the railing, meowing at his brother. Fitz ignored him, already sound asleep.

“We’re getting ready to watch a movie,” Annabeth told her. “And I’m supposed to find out if you want to join us.”

“Who made you ask?”

“The very tall man currently lounging in your usual recliner.”

“Hmm, pass.” Evie returned to the book. “But keep an eye on him. You know he won’t sit through the entire thing, and I don’t want him wandering in here while everyone else is occupied.”

Annabeth and the Colonel left, and the house finally quieted to where Evie could let herself get lost in the pages. The mantle clock resting on the table ticked away the minutes, then hours, until she found a good stopping point.

Marking the page with a bookmark, she stretched, knocking Fitz off her lap. He scampered up the stairs and onto the upper level, ready for bed.

“I’m coming, Fitzzy,” she whispered, straining to hear any noises from the media room next door.

Hearing nothing, she lowered her legs to the floor. With the house asleep, she could sneak off to her room undetected.

She switched off the reading lamp, and the half-moon hanging in the sky over the conservatory’s dome, cast a ghostly glow about the room.

“Spooky,” she told Fitz, who meowed in return.

Through the glass wall, the effects of the warmer weather rolled inland from the bayou. Fog billowed over the lawn, covering most of the grounds. The muggy air would hang around for the next few nights, creating a blanket of blinding white from sunset to sunrise.

Evie folded the blanket and headed towards the stairs, but movement on the eastern side of the lawn caught her attention, and she stopped, coming closer to the glass.

It was likely an animal. Haven’s grounds hosted a variety of species that all eventually found their way into the gardens.

By its height, Evie guessed it to be a deer. There were probably two or three of them out there, munching on the new spring blooms. But through the thick fog, it was impossible to tell for sure.

When the movement outside ceased, she headed for the stairs, making it halfway up before Fitz released a deep hiss like she’d never heard before. Returning to the glass, Evie placed a hand on the pane. Whatever was out there, had begun to cut a clear path through the fog, purposely zigzagging from east to west like a pendulum coming closer and closer to the house.

The more it moved, the more she realized it was too tall to be a deer or any kind of animal, and she debated about calling out to the others for help, but suddenly, Evie lost sight of it.

Fitz's growls quieted, and the only sound was the ticking of the clock again.

"I guess we're going crazy, Fitzzy," she said, now convinced her mind had been playing tricks on her yet again. "Let's go to bed."

Evie took one last look outside, only to rear back in terror when a woman emerged from the fog.

And not just any woman.

It was her.

Or it looked like her. What could only be described as a vision of herself floated across the grass in a white nightgown. The doppelgänger's face hung lifeless, its mouth drooping grotesquely open. There were empty sockets where eyes should have been, and its bare feet hovered over the ground, the toes skimming through the grass.

A pulsing pressure beat upon Evie the closer it came, and she raised a hand as if she could stop it from advancing.

When it was merely a few feet from the house, the thing convulsed with jerky movements, its neck bending unnaturally like a broken doll. As the thing spasmed, caught in the throes of a frenzied transition, the fog rolled forward, enveloping the final change like a wave.

Panting for air, Evie leaned forward to look, and when the rolling white receded, a stranger stood where the thing had been. A woman, who was taller than Evie, with high cheekbones and long chestnut hair. And unlike the

doppelgänger there seconds ago, this woman had two feet soundly planted on the ground.

The woman's big doe eyes gazed up at Haven House in astonishment, her head shaking in desperate denial. Deep sobs wracked her body, and she screamed in anger, asking why.

*Why, why, why.*

Through the tears, she spotted Evie and lurched towards her, stopping just shy of the glass. They stared at one another, while the ticking of the mantle clock ceased, time standing still.

“Evie?”

Stepping closer, Evie felt a tickle of recognition. “Who are you?”

The woman scratched at the windows, her nails chattering on the glass. “I want to come home,” she cried. “Let me in. Don't be scared.”

The woman's mouth never moved, and yet the words rang loud and clear in Evie's head. “Go away,” she ordered firmly, like her mother taught her. She should've known this was a dream from the start. “This isn't your home.”

The woman's beautiful face twisted into a snarl. “Yes, it is.” She smacked the windowpane with her palm. “Haven is mine, as much as yours.”

“Go away.”



The woman shook her head, the tears gone. “He always wins, but I know how to beat him,” she whispered, her eyes darting over her shoulder to peer off at something behind her in the dark. “I can help.”

Tendrils of mist seeped in through the window frames, carrying the vague scent of vanilla with a hint of patchouli, reminding Evie of her mother.

Reminding her to listen.

“As long as you don’t hurt me, we can be friends.”

“No, we’re as good as family,” the voice pealed in Evie’s mind. “Family protects one another. You can’t win without me. I can protect you.”

“From who?”

The woman smiled, revealing razor sharp teeth that hadn’t been there a minute ago. “He loves you. He loathes you. He craves you. He hates you.”

“Who?”

“The one you let in,” a chorus of voices screeched in her head. “You have to be smarter.”

Evie covered her ears, and the woman screamed in anguish, blood soaking the white nightgown. It pooled at her abdomen, flowing upward to smear her face and pour into her mouth, nose, and eyes.

“The game has begun,” the woman gagged, her body swaying. “Run, run, run as fast as you can.”

She collapsed onto the slanted window, the deadweight from the impact too much for the glass. The wall began to crack, and Evie scrambled back in horror.

One eye opened on the blood soaked face pressed to the glass, and the woman screwed her lips into a smile etched in pain.

“Tag, you’re it, Evie.”

## CHAPTER 20

Rebecca

1993

**J**ames Fairweather was dead.

From what Rebecca heard, the mourning period was brief, with Ben coordinating his father's funeral and his mother's removal from Parkland Grounds all within a few days.

Ever the master at manipulating the narrative, his transition to power had been seamless. Even his takeover as head of Fairweather Holdings had gone without opposition from the board, or his siblings.

Ben had won.

Long live the king.

Sitting around the central fountain in the gardens of Parkland Grounds, Rebecca tried not to roll her eyes when Miranda clinked her champagne glass against Simone's. With Helen gone, Miranda was now queen of it all, living the high life as *the* main Fairweather wife.

“To us,” Miranda said. “And to playing the long game.”

Having arrived with Samuel shortly after her mother-in-law’s departure, Miranda began gutting Parkland Grounds on her first night in the manor. The following morning, she’d called out to Haven House.

“Get over here. We have work to do.”

Leaving the children with Devon and Ty, hoping they wouldn’t return to a pile of ashes, Simone drove Rebecca and Laura Jean into Hollingsdale. When they reached Parkland Grounds, she stopped the car in the middle of the street, staring aghast at the gates hanging wide open, without a guard in sight.

Miranda greeted the three of them at the front door with her friend Josie, who had journeyed with her and Samuel from North Carolina to their new home.

Holding up a pair of gardening shears in her hand, Miranda had snapped them playfully at Simone. “Are we ready to have some fun?”

Rebecca didn’t understand why Miranda wanted every flower in the gardens hacked from its bed, or why she and Simone had done the job with such fervent glee. They worked all afternoon, only stopping when the sun slipped from the sky and the full moon rose over the destruction left behind.

At some point, Laura Jean produced a bottle of champagne she’d found in the kitchen, and the women huddled around the

enormous central fountain, dipping their feet into the shallow pool.

“Y’all behave,” Rebecca chided when Simone kicked water in Miranda’s direction. The two women howled in laughter, nearly toppling over the edge. “The neighbors might hear.”

“We own the neighbors, darling.” Miranda lifted her glass to the left. “Over there is Charlie’s house, and the other is an empty property James and Helen purchased so they wouldn’t have neighbors.”

Rebecca stared off towards Charlie and Vivian’s home. She couldn’t see anything, but realizing she was this close to them sparked something in her.

Charlie hadn’t been out to see her since his father’s health took a turn for the worse weeks ago, and the last time they were together, they’d fought when he tried to explain how things would work once his father passed.

“I’m not going to continue being your dirty little secret,” she’d hollered at him. “You promised me, Charlie!”

He’d paced the living room floor of the cottage where Rebecca spent most of her time, with or without him. She preferred it to the chaotic main house. Out here, she had her own space, away from the children. “Things have changed.”

The excuse wasn’t good enough for Rebecca. “Then make them change again.”

“I can’t.”

Charlie was getting the best years of her life. Before long, she would be too old to snag someone worth her time. “Well, then I’ll take the kids and leave.”

The threat had gotten his attention. “If you try to leave and take my children, you’ll regret it,” he spat out, raising his hand as if he were going to strike. “That’s an easy promise to keep.”

She wasn’t afraid of him. Her mama’s old boyfriends had taught her how to take a hit long ago. “Get out.”

Wrenching her arm behind her, Charlie turned her towards the hall. “I think you need a reminder of who you’re talking to.”

She cried out in shock more than pain, and with little choice, Rebecca allowed him to lead her to the bedroom where he tossed her on the bed. Squirming beneath him, she grappled with his hands as they hiked up her skirt. Once he had her where he wanted her, Charlie sheathed himself with a single thrust. “You’re not going anywhere.”

Biting his neck, she continued to fight, but it only made him groan. Charlie liked it rough.

But then again, so did Rebecca.

She arched her hips, marking his skin with her nails and teeth while she let him take whatever he wanted.

“I thought so,” he snarled, getting off on the violence and the way she screamed as he beat into the spot he knew would spiral her into a quick release. “No one else could ever give it to you like this.”

The same pattern continued through the night, with them fighting and fucking until dawn. Rebecca was amazed that the walls were still standing when he left. Sex had taken a turn with them recently, becoming a little more dangerous.

But that night brought them to a new level.

One she liked very much.

Since then, she hadn't seen or heard from him. She understood this distance wasn't permanent, but that didn't make it any less difficult. He was going to be a father again, and waiting to tell him was killing her. Maybe if the girls got good and drunk tonight, she could sneak next door. Charlie would be happy to see her.

That was, of course, if his wife wasn't home.

Laura Jean danced on the ledge of the fountain to music playing from a tape deck on the patio. She sipped at her champagne, staring intently at a room on the second floor. "Is Ben using his father's office?"

Miranda turned and followed her gaze. "Begrudgingly," she replied. "Did you need him for something?"

"I was thinking of buying more rental property, but I won't bother him tonight."

Rebecca wanted to speak with him, too, and what she had to say couldn't wait.

"I've ordered pizza," Josie announced, coming outside. She sat next to Miranda, rolling up her pants to put her feet in the

water. “The guy I spoke to said they’d never delivered here before.”

“Lord, no,” Simone cackled, already a little tipsy. She was taking advantage of being childless for the night. “The staff always handled the cooking. I don’t think any of the boys tasted fast food until high school.”

“Speaking of which, I’ll need your help in the rehiring process,” Miranda said. “I want to know who to keep and who to toss. Plus, I don’t want staff here at all hours of the night. That’s barbaric, and I’ll need your input to set manageable times.”

Simone nodded. “I know which ones will be loyal and which ones are probably still in Helen’s pocket. She’ll be watching every move you make over the next couple of months.”

Rebecca leaned back on her elbows, gazing up at the manor. It was as large as Haven, perhaps larger, but much more refined compared to the lived-in look Simone kept. Parkland Grounds didn’t have toys strewn about, or ballrooms filled with classroom supplies. The sofas weren’t juice stained and threadbare from little feet jumping on them. Actual art hung on the walls, and not scribbles created with sticky hands or sub-par pieces painted by the wannabe artist Laura Jean.

While Miranda and Simone had annihilated the garden, Rebecca had taken the time to roam through the lower level, admiring the lovely pink and gold accented décor.



“Miranda says if you see something you like, to mark it,” Josie said, strolling casually through the house as if she lived there too. “She’s redecorating the whole place.”

Rebecca cut a sideways glance at the woman. She didn’t care for Josie, who dressed and acted just like Miranda. It was weird.

“I bet she is.”

She ran her fingers over the textured wallpaper. It was a shame. Miranda would surely do something gaudy with the place. Her tastes were as masculine as her haircut, and like Simone had ruined Haven House, Miranda would erase the dignified elegance of Parkland Grounds.

“Miranda, do you mind if I wander through the house more?” Rebecca asked, unable to take another minute more of their celebration. Jealousy had been snapping its jaws at her since they arrived, and she wanted to speak to Ben in private.

Miranda waved her on, and Rebecca trotted inside, finding Ben’s office easily enough.

Samuel sat on the floor with a drawing pad in his lap. He scratched a pencil on the paper, shading in his sketch. The boy never created anything in color, preferring to keep things in black and white. The Fairweather heir was boring and broody, with not much in the way of personality. Even her Tobias, who was as interesting as wallpaper, had more spunk than Samuel.

“Does it feel weird to work at a dead man’s desk?”

Ben's dark head remained lowered as he continued to read through the papers in his hands. "Samuel, can you please excuse us?"

Obediently, the boy hurried from the room, and Rebecca was glad to see there was at least one well-behaved child in the world. It would make things simpler when he came to stay at Haven for a few weeks this summer.

"Loitering in doorways is rude." Ben leaned back in his chair and looked her over from head to toe, as he always did. "At least that's what my mother says."

"Is that your problem?" Rebecca tipped her head to the side. "Mommy issues?"

"Perhaps." He motioned for her to close the door. "What do you want?"

She almost laughed. What didn't she want?

Choosing a seat across from the mahogany desk, Rebecca settled on the fine leather. She didn't have to pretend with Ben. They understood one another.

"An explanation," she replied. "A better one than what I was given."

"Charlie told you everything you needed to know," Ben said. "Or did you want me to use smaller words to help you better understand the situation?"

She stared down her nose at him as best she could. Rebecca might hold an ounce of power in this conversation, but she was still dealing with Benjamin Fairweather. Charlie had told

her of the things his brother had done to stay on top, and she couldn't help but respect Ben's tenacity.

One did not conquer an empire being the good guy.

"A whisper from me in the right ear could burn all your hard work to the ground. I would suggest you show me a little respect."

"Respect?" He shook his head, amused. "Currently, your existence is the source of several problems."

"You mean my children's existence," she said. "Outing a mistress means nothing. It's easy to deny a sexual relationship. But you can't deny them. Poor, childless Vivian would only have to take one look at my sweet Livy's face to know Charlie had strayed."

Ben considered her words. "Does my brother know how clever you are?"

"No."

"The girls aren't aware, either."

"They are, and they aren't," she admitted, a little sad over it. "They're good, and I love them, but I only let them see the shiny parts of me."

"Meanwhile, I get to see it all." Ben heaved out a sigh, scrubbing a hand down his face. "You know we don't have to do this. Hush money pays very well. I've funded your account with plenty for a *quiet*, fresh start somewhere else."

"An account that Charlie manages."

“That’s the way it has to be.”

Rebecca laughed. “He really caught you by surprise, didn’t he? Your old man had one last ‘screw you’ in him at the end.” Bracing her hands on the chair’s arms, she leaned forward to make her point. “The amount is not enough. I want more, and I want control of it.”

“More I can do, but Charlie will remain in control.”

“You’re not in a position to argue.”

“And you’re not in a position to negotiate,” he shot back. “Tearing me down might feel good, but doing so will only destroy your future. What exactly do you want?”

“Isn’t it obvious? I want it all,” Rebecca said, exhaling the truth to the only person she could. “Charlie, the money, the life. It’s not fair. I’m the mother of his children. I’m the one he loves, and Vivian is nothing but some mouse he’s saddled with because of your father. I’m left alone while she gets my life.”

Rebecca glanced up at the office’s high ceilings. The crown molding was exquisite. Helen Fairweather might have been part demon, but she had excellent taste. “Do you know what Simone and Laura Jean wanted me to do? Go to beauty school,” she scoffed. “Why should I have to work when Simone doesn’t?”

“You are not Simone.” He nodded at her appearance. “Even if you try to pretend to be.”

Yes, she wore Simone’s clothes, and styled her hair into a half-braid like Laura Jean. Rebecca thought that if she were

more like them, Charlie would find her worthy of his time.

“Simone and Laura Jean want you to have a bright future,” Ben said. “They see how far you’ve come since arriving at Haven House.”

“I want that too,” she said, steeling her nerves. “Haven House.”

Ben flat out laughed in her face. “That will never happen.”

“If Vivian finds someone else and moves on due to no fault of Charlie’s, you retain control, correct? Her father’s plan fails?”

“The clause was put in the prenup to keep Charlie in check, not Vivian,” Ben said. “If the marriage breaks up because of her, nothing will happen.”

“And when that time comes, Charlie will be free to marry me.” She rose from her chair to examine the antique pieces of furniture throughout the room. “Haven House will make a nice wedding gift.”

“I’m not giving you Haven.”

“Charlie says otherwise.”

“My brother is an idiot.” Ben clasped his hands together on the desk. “He’ll say anything to get laid, including promising you things that are not his to give. I don’t know why you stay with him.”

“I threatened to leave a couple of months ago, but it didn’t end well.”

He arched an eyebrow. “Care to elaborate?”

“Let’s just say Charlie fucked the idea right out of me.” She laid a hand on her stomach. “By my calculations, the latest Fairweather should arrive by Christmas.”

Ben’s eyes rolled closed, his lips moving as if he were counting to ten. “Another one?”

“Charlie does love his babies.”

“But you don’t even raise the ones you have.”

“The girls are much better at the whole *motherhood* thing than I am, and Devon is amazing at dealing with their education,” she replied. “By the way, that was very slick of you to suggest he homeschool them. We wouldn’t want my Livy telling everyone her daddy is Charlie Fairweather.”

Rebecca strolled over to a painting on the wall. It was of the original Fairweather mill, bustling with activity on the bayou’s sound. “I’m willing to be patient until Vivian gives him up, but I want control of my money.”

“I wonder what the girls would think if they ever met the real you.”

“Simone would be proud that I’m fighting for myself. She knows how hard it is to remain silent. I think she’s got that thing we saw on a news report the other night.” Rebecca tapped her chin thoughtfully. “Post-traumatic stress disorder? Yeah, that’s it. All these years of keeping her shoved under the rug have taken their toll.”

“Watch your mouth.”

Rebecca smiled at him condescendingly over her shoulder. “And Miranda wouldn’t bat an eye. If our roles were reversed, she would do the same thing. Your wife is a brilliant woman, and if I’ve learned anything from her, it’s knowing your worth.”

She sauntered over to him, resting a hip on the corner of his desk. “But I bet you two haven’t had sex since Samuel was conceived.”

When he said nothing, Rebecca slid onto the desk, sitting fully in front of him. “How does a man like you manage that?” she asked, spreading her legs, placing one foot on either side of his chair. “I might not have fucked the right Fairweather to begin with, but I’m willing to fix that if you need some relief. A good hard ride might loosen you up, Ben.”

A cynical smile twisted his lips. “I’ll have to pass. Women aren’t exactly hard for me to obtain.”

His boast wasn’t a lie. Ben was sexy as hell, and his powerful presence only added to the appeal. Even if she weren’t trying to convince him to see things her way, Rebecca would’ve let him have her whenever he wanted.

And she wasn’t the only one.

“But none of those women are the one you want.” Her negotiations with him were stalling, and it was time to exploit Ben Fairweather’s single weakness. “Tell me, did you wait until Dr. Eddins was cold in the ground before you started lusting after his wife, or has that craving for Laura Jean always been there?”

Ben slowly rose, knocking her legs to the side. “She wants you too,” Rebecca continued, grinning. “It’s so pathetic to watch her wrestle with the guilt of loving you.”

Rage seeped into the lines on his face, and before she knew what was happening, Ben’s hand snaked out to wrap around her neck. “My father must surely be rolling in his grave,” he snarled. “Here I am, entertaining some whore’s demands in my office, as if she has some say in what I will or won’t do.”

His thumb stroked the centerline of her throat, and she held still, paralyzed with fear.

“Would you like to know what he did with his own brother’s women?” he asked, his tone sickeningly casual. “There were plenty. Charlie isn’t the first Fairweather to have a mistress crying on the family doorstep, begging for money. My uncle fathered dozens of bastards in his lifetime.”

The thumb stroking her neck pressed in on her windpipe, thinning Rebecca’s air supply. “The next time I’m out at Haven House, we’ll take a little walk, just you and me,” he whispered, pulling her closer. “We can go meet them.”

Her hands wrapped around his wrist, and digging her nails in, she tried to free herself, but Ben was too strong. The more she struggled, the tighter he squeezed. “You see, Fairweather bastards live in the forest,” he said. “All you have to do to find them is follow the forked path to the south section of the wood.”

Understanding the threat, a muted cry wheezed from her lips. The only thing in the southern part of Haven’s woods was



a graveyard.

Ben placed his face directly in hers. “Keep your stupid fucking assumptions to yourself.”

He released her with a shove, and she tumbled to the floor, gasping for air. “I just want what I’m owed,” she coughed. “And I don’t care what you say. I’m no different than Simone.”

Ben turned away from her, his rage morphing into disgust. “And sometimes, I’m no different than my father.”

## CHAPTER 21

# *Evie*

**A**nticipating the impact of glass, Evie crossed her arms over her head. The blast became deafening, but as quickly as it began, the chaos ended with a thunderous bang.

Gasping for air, she lowered her shaking limbs. The room sat still, with the only sound being the ticktock of the clock steadily counting the time.

Fitz sat perched on the railing overhead, observing her with curious eyes.

On the couch, Evie tossed aside the blanket and bolted to the intact glass wall. The dense fog continued to sweep over the grounds on the other side, but this time there was no movement, save for the oak's branches creaking in the wind.

She laid a hand on the spot where the woman in her dream collapsed, struggling to recall what she looked like.

“Answer me.”

Samuel's voice broke through the ringing in her ears, and she spun around in time to see a blur of motion coming at her from the upper level.

Large hands enveloped her face. “You feel like ice.”

Evie opened her mouth to tell him she was alright but struggled to get the words out. The room was freezing like it had been in the dream.

“I had a nightmare,” she said, her teeth chattering.

Samuel hauled her to him, cradling her in his heat.

Why was he always so warm?

Evie melted into him, her eyelids drooping as she draped her arms around his waist.

And why did he smell this good in the middle of the night?

“You’re so hot,” she murmured.

“Thanks for finally noticing.”

With her eyes closed, and her face plastered against his chest, Evie smiled. “Please, don’t ruin this by being yourself.”

Samuel chuckled, the sound vibrating in her ear. “What was the nightmare about? When I came in, you looked like you’d seen a ghost.”

“Maybe I did.”

His hand lightly caressed her back, and the longer they stood holding on to each other, the more her mind regained focus.

And Evie realized she was resting on Samuel’s bare chest, alone in the dark, with no one else around.

Letting go, she stepped out of his hold and frowned. He wore a pair of gray sweatpants, and nothing else. The flawlessly cut lines of muscle on his stomach and chest teased her with their perfection, and Evie tried to maintain eye contact with him, failed, and then tried again.

Samuel pressed his lips together, fighting a smile. “Are you sure you’re alright?”

No, she was not alright.

A tornado of lust was currently whipping around, tearing through the barriers she’d built to resist him. In the end, she was too weak to fight it and her gaze slid to his torso. “Where the hell did you get those?”

He looked down at his stomach, confused. “What?”

“Those.” She pointed at his well-defined abs. “They’re... um... like... wow.”

Samuel’s eyes lifted, and he offered her a wicked grin. “Did you want to touch them?”

Did she want to touch them?

Of course, she did.

She might want to lick them, too.

The lust tornado gathered speed, going from an F1 to an F5, and she turned away flustered. “Has everyone gone to bed?” she asked, keeping her tone conversational as she retrieved the book from the floor to deposit on the table.

“Yes,” he said, coming up behind her. “Did something in the book trigger the nightmare?”

“Um,” she stammered, shifting to face him and block his view of the title. “No.”

“Abe told me what you’re reading.” Samuel continued to advance, and she retreated a step. The backs of her legs struck the table, jarring the reading lamp. “I knew you liked romance, but I didn’t realize you were into *that* kind of romance.”

She was going to kill Abe.

Not that she was ashamed of what she was reading. The fantasy series was one of her favorites, but it had copious amounts of sex in it. The main character wasn’t shy about her body, or what she wanted from her partner, and Evie respected that, wishing she could be as open. Sex wasn’t something she’d had a lot of, and when she did, the encounters were nothing like the ones in these stories.

Perhaps that’s where her nervousness with Lucas came from. She was worried that their chemistry wouldn’t live up to the fantasies she’d created in her head.

“Abe calls it fairy porn.”

“Because Abe doesn’t know any better,” she said, holding her head high. “There’s nothing wrong with reading erotica. This series is one of my favorites, and the storyline is actually quite good.”

“Can I borrow it?”

“I’m sure it’s not to your taste.”

His sinful grin deepened. “How do you know what I want to taste?”

This was the difference in her attractions between Lucas and Samuel. With Lucas, she was skeptical of her ability to please him in bed. If he were to make an innuendo as Samuel had just done about sex, she would likely break out in hives from the pressure to make it good for him.

But with Samuel, wanting him was as natural as breathing. She could never compare to the legions of women who had rolled in and out of his bed through the years, and she didn’t want to. Sex with him would be about fulfilling her own needs. She’d given up trying to impress him years ago.

“Your taste in books, jackass,” she snorted. “I remember how you and the boys used to read those boring baseball magazines when we were kids.”

He drifted closer. “I guess I should have gone to you for book recommendations,” he said. “So, what’s involved with an erotica?”

Evie swallowed thickly and found an interesting spot on the floor to examine. “Sex,” she mumbled. “An erotica involves lots of sex.”

From the corner of her eye, she saw an unmistakable twitch, and Evie said a silent prayer of thanks to whoever introduced gray sweatpants into Samuel’s wardrobe. The garment showed off the long length of him, pulling tight as his body stirred.

“What kind of sex?” Samuel asked, the laughter in his voice gone.

The answer coiled low in Evie’s stomach. The book involved the type of sex she wanted to have. Hard, powerful, with mouths and multiple positions.

“Can we talk about something else?”

“Would you like to finish our conversation from the other night?”

“Pass.”

“And we can’t talk about erotica novels?”

“Preferably not.”

“Well, then, that means only one thing.” Samuel reached behind her, and the lamp clicked off. Night poured into the room, with only a sliver of moonlight shining in. “It’s time for us to go to bed.”

Evie remained completely motionless as a vision of them tangled together, coated in sweat, and screaming in pleasure, overtook her. The coiling in her stomach clutched lower, and she released a shaky breath.

“Please don’t say no,” he whispered against her ear, begging like he promised he would. “Let me have you.”

Teeth nipped at her earlobe, and the surrounding air crackled with electricity.

Saying no was off the table.

The only debate left in her mind was if they could control themselves long enough to make it to her bedroom, or if they should just use the one he was staying in downstairs.

“I’m tired of all this in-between when it comes to us,” he said, straightening to stare down at her. “All or nothing, Evangeline. What’s your answer?”

Her heart swooned, plummeting at his feet. They would never make it to any bedroom, and she eyed the conservatory’s couch next to them, hoping it was sturdy enough.

But before telling him yes, she took him up on his offer to touch, and softly trailed her fingers over his stomach, ending at the dusting of hair just below the navel.

There was, of course, a small voice in her head warning of how much this was going to hurt in the morning. However, when his mouth began to descend, the murmur of doubts went quiet, and Evie arched upward on her toes to reach him faster.

As their lips were set to collide, Samuel stopped short, frowning at a buzzing in his pocket.

He pulled out a phone, answering the call. “What’s wrong?”

Selah’s frantic voice shouted in Samuel’s ear. Evie couldn’t understand what was being said, but he was upset.

Sitting on the couch, Samuel listened for another minute, his face drawn tight. “You need to stay calm. If you don’t, you won’t be able to understand what the doctors are saying.”

The shouts coming through lessened, and Evie could make out a few words.



Lenora. Car. Blood.

“Call me in thirty minutes,” Samuel ordered. “If I don’t hear from you, we’re getting in the car and driving up there. Dad and Jamison are in Texas, but I can have them in Atlanta within two hours once I recall the pilots.”

He hung up and tossed the phone on the couch. “There was an accident,” he said, wrapping himself around her waist. “A car ran a red light and side-swiped them. Lenora’s side took the brunt of the impact, and she seemed fine when she got out, but blood started trickling down her leg. An ambulance took her to the hospital, and the doctors won’t let Selah see her yet, nor are they telling him much.”

Samuel rested his cheek on her stomach, and the intimacy of their position left Evie unsure on what to do. Her hands hovered for a few seconds before eventually landing on his shoulders.

“Does he need us?”

“He wants us to wait until he knows more.”

And so, they waited, with Samuel holding on tightly to her in the dark, while she absently toyed with his hair. Neither of them spoke, frightened into silence over Lenora.

When Selah called back the second time, he was hysterical.

Samuel released her and fell back on the couch, blowing out a ragged breath. “I’m so damn sorry, Selah.”

“Hello?” Abe called out from the doorway. He saw them together and grinned. “Nevermind, I’m leaving.”

Evie told him to wait and hurried up the short steps to explain about the accident.

Abe's grin faded. "Is she going to be okay?"

Samuel joined them on the upper level, his phone back in the pocket of his sweatpants. "The injuries Lenora sustained in the wreck caused her to miscarry one of the twins."

This wasn't fair. Evie shook her head in denial. Things like this shouldn't happen to people like Selah and Lenora. They took care of others unselfishly and simply wanted a little happiness for themselves.

"I'm calling my dad and getting him there as quickly as possible." Samuel paused to collect himself. He was upset, but keeping his emotions in check. Like always. "Selah doesn't want us to tell Simone, because he knows she'll try to drive up there in the middle of the night. He asked that we wait until morning to let her know what's going on."

"I agree," Abe said, lowering his voice. His mother had ears like a hawk. "We'll know more by then."

Simone was going to be furious when she found out they hid this from her, and Evie debated overruling them. "I don't know if that's a good idea."

"I'll take the blame when she loses her shit," Samuel assured her. "But we should relocate while we wait to hear back from Selah."

They crept down the hall and closed themselves up in the library. Samuel made phone calls to his father and the pilots

while she and Abe listened. Ben had purchased the first private jet for the company when he and Laura Jean began their affair. It killed them to be apart, and he would fly home as much as possible to see her.

Fairweather Holdings now had something like three or four. Evie wasn't sure, as she'd never used any of them.

Sitting on the overstuffed chair in the corner, she didn't miss the disappointment that flashed in Samuel's eyes while he helped Abe settle onto the larger couch in the room.

Her spot only held space for one. Even though they weren't alone, what had almost happened was still sitting too close to the surface. Their game had changed, and Evie didn't trust herself to know how to play just yet.

## CHAPTER 22

# *Evie*

**W**aking alone in the library, Evie blinked at the sun's dull morning light flickering through the slanted blinds. The faint sounds of Simone's anger filtered through the closed door, and Abe snuck in, looking very afraid.

“So, it turns out you were right, and we should've woken my mom up.”

“Any more news?”

The last she'd heard, the doctors had stabilized Lenora and the second baby was holding on strong. She'd fallen asleep not long after Ben and Jamison safely landed in Atlanta.

“They're going to be released in a couple of hours,” Abe said.

Evie stretched with a yawn. “How's Selah doing?”

“Jamison said he's being really quiet, and Ben took him to the cafeteria to get some coffee while Lenora rested.”

Simone's yelling grew louder, and Abe flinched. “She's going to kill us.”

“You, not me.” Evie went to the door and stuck her head into the hall. It sounded like Simone had Samuel cornered in the kitchen, giving her a clear path to the stairs. “I’m going up to get some real sleep.”

Abe latched onto her shirt. “Don’t leave me!” he pleaded. “We need to accept our fate together. When she comes after us, we can use each other as shields.”

“Uh, no. You told Samuel I was reading porn,” Evie said, prying him off. “I’m not helping you.”

“I said fairy porn, not porn-porn,” he frantically whispered. “And you know it’s weird. Like, what do they do with their wings while they’re going at it?”

Evie fled, making a mad dash for the stairs. She ran on her tiptoes, safely arriving at her room unseen.

Closing the door, she considered calling Jamison. Her sister wasn’t one to sugarcoat a situation. A quiet Selah was a red flag as he tended to suffer silently, letting his pain churn until it reached a boiling point.

Simone would likely leave as soon as possible to be with him. Samuel might go too. Selah would need his level-headed brother now, more than ever.

Clarity had arrived with the dawn, burning the idea of jumping into bed with Samuel from her brain. Admittedly, the sex would have been phenomenal, and physically satisfying. But mentally, she would have been a train wreck right now if she’d followed through with it.

The door to her bedroom flew open, knocking against the dresser. “What in the hell were you thinking?” Simone marched in, furious. “How could you let them keep that from me?”

“For the record, I told them it was a bad idea.”

Simone placed her hands on her hips. “But you still allowed them to do it. You were raised to know your own mind, and I expected better.”

“You’re right,” Evie sat on the side of the bed with her shoulders hunched. “I’m sorry.”

“What the hell am I going to do with y’all?” she grumbled, joining her. “I spoke to the doctor myself. Lenora and the baby are truly okay.”

Evie wasn’t surprised Simone had called the doctor directly. She never took what she was told at face value. Trusting people wasn’t in her nature.

At least, not anymore.

“Do you want to tell me what you were doing with Samuel at midnight in the conservatory?”

Simone had left what happened that summer alone. When Samuel never returned, she avoided the topic, probably thinking it would hurt Evie to discuss it. But then again, they weren’t the type of family that liked to talk of the past.

Ever.

The unmistakable sound of an Audi engine revved out front, and Evie stiffened.

“He’s leaving, baby,” Simone said, gently. “He promised Gretchen he would drive her to the airport this morning.”

Reminding herself that this could be much worse, and she could be naked and well used in his bed while he slipped off to meet with his girlfriend, Evie rested her head on Simone’s shoulder. “I was going to let myself have him,” she confessed, needing to say the words. “Even though I knew he would walk away again.”

The noise of the Audi faded, slicing like a knife through Evie’s heart as it went. “I’m never going to be enough for him.”

Simone patted her cheek. “Oh, I don’t know about that.”



Jamison and Ben returned to Haven after seeing Selah and Lenora home. When they landed, Ben dropped Jamison off, and drove straight into the office for a meeting.

“That land deal was a whole clusterfuck of a situation,” Jamison said, sitting between Evie and Annabeth on the parlor couch with one of the new kittens snoozing in her lap. “There were missing funds for the purchase. Dad was furious, and Uncle Trevor was totally freaking out. They’re having a big meeting at the office, right now.”

Evie grabbed a blanket to drape over her legs. “Tell us about Lenora.”

“The doctors placed her on total bed rest, and I heard my dad on the phone with Simone,” Jamison told them. “It sounds like she’s going to wait until Tuesday to go up there because she doesn’t want to come off as the overbearing future mother-in-law.”

Evie snorted, and Annabeth straight out laughed. Simone was the very definition of the word overbearing.

“What do you think Lenora needs?” Annabeth asked. “Can we send her anything?”

“Selah’s gone into alpha overprotective mode and was already driving her crazy by the time we left,” Jamison said, sliding her cold feet under the blanket and onto Evie’s leg. “So, my best guess would be a listening ear.”

Evie yelped when her sister’s icy toes dug into her thigh. “Get off me, brat.”

“Why can’t you share?” Jamison yanked at the blanket, causing a tug-of-war to break out.

Annabeth wisely vacated the couch. “I’m going to bed,” she said. “Evie, you better finish the book tonight. I’m tired of waiting.”

“Yeah,” Jamison growled as the battle for the blanket continued. “I won’t get it until after Annabeth finishes.”

Evie let go of her side of the blanket, sending Jamison flailing backwards. “Then leave me alone and let me get to it.”



Annabeth waved goodnight, but Jamison remained, staring at Evie while she tried to read. “What’s wrong with you?”

“Nothing.”

Jamison kicked her. “Bullshit.”

“Go away.”

“I’m serious. What is wrong with you?”

Evie kept her eyes on the page. “The whole thing with Lenora and Selah is upsetting.”

“That’s not it.”

“Okay, super sleuth.”

“Well, I have something to tell you.” Springing up from the couch, Jamison padded across the room and closed the door. “I got dad to talk to me about mom’s family. We can go meet them.”

Evie marked her page to give Jamison her attention. “He’s never going to let us meet them.”

“Let?” Jamison shook her head in disappointment. “We’re not children, we can do whatever we want.”

“Don’t you think someone will notice we’re missing?”

“No, because this is how things are about to play out,” Jamison said, holding up her fingers to tick off each point. “Mathis will arrest those guys next week, and then Simone will go to Atlanta while my dad takes off to Texas for at least a month to handle this land deal. By next week, all the drama will die down, and we can start making plans.”

“What if mom’s family actually did have something to do with the break-in?” Evie asked, not wanting her sister to get her hopes up. “This whole theory that two men were obsessed with her for all these years seems far-fetched.”

“No, it’s not,” Jamison countered, returning to her spot on the couch. “In Minnesota, a high school kid stalked his algebra teacher for fifteen years. And then there was this other guy who stalked a female co-worker for eight years. He ended up killing her and enjoyed it so much, he became a serial killer.”

A little stunned, and more than a little disturbed, Evie frowned. “You know you’re weird, right?”

“Every minute, approximately twenty-four women become the victims of a stalker, making the theory Mathis came up with possible,” Jamison argued. “I think those sickos have been in and out of here, feeding their infatuation with mom for years.”

“And I think those true crime podcasts are eating your brain.”

Jamison shrugged. “Everyone needs a hobby, and learning about this stuff has taught me two very valuable life lessons.”

“Which are?”

Jamison sat a little straighter, ready to impress. “The first is how to hide a dead body.”

“That’s nothing to brag about, Jamison.”

Evie’s phone vibrated next to her, and she checked the screen. It was Samuel. He’d called at least a dozen times that

afternoon, but she refused to answer or read any of his texts. Swiping the call to voicemail, she placed the phone face down. “What’s the second?”

The phone went off again, and this time she shut it off. The only man she wanted to speak to tonight was Lucas, and they’d already talked earlier, making plans to have dinner tomorrow.

“How to tell when someone is lying,” Jamison replied, eyeing Evie with suspicion. “Who was that?”

Loving Samuel might be hard, but denying it was easy. Evie had done it for so long that not even Jamison, with all the tricks she’d learned from listening to countless crime podcasts and cold case documentaries, would be capable of distinguishing between the truth and a lie.

“Wrong number.”

## CHAPTER 23

# LIAM

“**A**nd you’re certain they have no connections to the area?”

Federal Agent William Cohen sighed into the phone. “They own large amounts of real estate in Florida, Texas, and the Carolinas, but nothing in or around Missouri,” he explained again to his father. “There are no personal ties either.”

The squeak of an office chair accompanied the grumbling noise his father often made when he was thinking. Liam retrieved his suitcase from the airport baggage conveyor belt while he waited for a response.

“This is a waste of time.”

Recently retired, his father had spent the last twenty-four hours toiling over his son’s current case. “Sending you to Florida is pointless. The person you’re after won’t go too far past their anchor point. I agree there might be a connection, but not a big enough one to send an agent, especially you, down there. This matter could’ve been cleared up with a phone call, meaning they sent you there because of me.”

Smiling at the irritation in his father's voice, Liam walked towards the rental car lot. His father wasn't wrong. Dr. William Cohen's notoriety within the justice system was the elephant that followed Liam into every room at the Bureau, and the reason he was standing in the Florida sunshine.

"Hawkins wouldn't have sent me down here if the lead wasn't solid."

Locating his rental, Liam popped the trunk and tossed his bag inside. "There's too much of a coincidence to be ignored."

When he opened the car door to get in, the hot air trapped inside the vehicle slapped him in the face, and he had to take a step back. "Even you can admit that."

"You have too much faith in Agent Hawkins." His father trusted only a small group of law enforcement, and Liam's superior, Agent Donovan Hawkins, wasn't one of them. "That man has botched this investigation since day one."

"Hawkins is doing his best. Serial homicides aren't exactly an everyday part of his caseload. This is his first time dealing with something like this."

"That argument means nothing to me. His mistakes have been plentiful, and now he's sending his most valuable asset to Florida."

"I'm not you, dad." This was an old argument. One Liam didn't want to have right now. "This is my first serial homicide investigation, too."

His father scoffed. “The knowledge you gained growing up in our household goes far beyond Agent Hawkins’ training. I never hid what I did for a living. And just because you didn’t follow in my footsteps, however disappointing, shouldn’t negate the advantage you bring to the team.”

Liam got behind the wheel and started the car, the blast of heat from the vents making him gag. “I’m sorry you think my trip to Florida is an insult.”

The repetitive squeak of the office chair halted. “The Bureau has always had glory hounds. They’re usually good people, doing the job for the wrong reasons,” his father stated. “Hawkins wants to advance his position, but that won’t happen if your name is tied to the final report.”

“Because it’s your name,” Liam replied. “Look, I know why I’m here. Hawkins wants me far away from the action, but at the same time, I might as well make the best of it. We both agree that there’s something to this.”

His father let out a sigh. “What time are you meeting the locals?”

“I have an appointment with a Detective Mathis in an hour.”

“Did you do your homework on the flight?”

“Yep,” Liam answered, relieved when the car’s A/C shifted out of swamp hell mode and into a more reasonable temperature. “Mathis is a year from retirement, has a wife, three adult kids, a dog, and a boat.”

His father never missed a chance to dig. “Flags?”

“The house he lives in falls way outside of a detective’s salary range, and the kids all went to good out of state colleges.”

“What does the wife do for a living?”

“Nothing.”

“Find anything else?”

“No?”

The squeaking desk chair started anew, this time at a faster tempo. “The response to the robbery,” his father announced, smug. “Average citizens don’t get that many units called out for a home invasion. Detective Mathis pulled out all the bells and whistles for these people.”

“Maybe it was a slow night.”

“The family who owned those paintings has enough money to keep a dozen detectives in their pockets. I bet Mathis will have a nice, neat file with filtered information about them waiting for you.”

“Always the cynic.”

“Damn right,” his father said. “Remember, you’re in a part of the country that is nothing more than the fatty overhang of a tightening bible belt. These people only play by the rules they make up as they go.”

Liam pulled out of the parking spot but slammed on his brakes when another car sped through the lot, nearly hitting

him. Growing up in New York, he laid on the horn, unimpressed. “They can’t drive either.”

“I’m serious, the whole Florida Panhandle is a magnet for the bizarre,” his father mused as he listened to Liam curse at the other driver. “You know they captured Bundy an hour from where you’re staying.”

Changing the subject, Liam asked about his mother. His parent’s recent move from their beloved New York to rural Virginia had made his mother immensely happy but sunk his father into an abyss of boredom, which could be a dangerous thing.

“She’s taken up knitting.”

“It’s macramé,” his mother called out in the background. “Wear sunscreen, Liam.”

“She’s driving me crazy,” his father muttered, making Liam grin. “All this knitting and gardening isn’t right. It’s a deflection ploy to hide her mourning of the life we had in the city. She was talking about buying a dog the other day, and not a good sturdy mutt, but one of those yappy things that barks at its own farts.”

“Let her enjoy retirement.”

“Hmmm, I’m trying,” his father grumbled, and then let out a curse. “I’ve got to go. I’m late for my prep session on the podcast, but I expect a phone call when you’re finished with the detective.”

“You’ll get one.”



Liam hung up and followed the GPS directions to the highway. His phone buzzed a minute later, and he glanced down to see a text flash across the screen.

*Poker face on.*

Yes, a bored Dr. Cohen was a very dangerous thing.

The irony of his father's prior comment on Agent Hawkins' need for glory wasn't lost on Liam. Not that his father ever purposely sought notoriety. As a likable, intelligent criminal psychologist, fame just kind of dropped into his lap without invitation.

It also helped that the great Dr. William Cohen hunted serial killers for a living.

Or at least did until they began hunting him in return.

His father's illustrious career started during a dinner party he and Liam's mother attended. One of the guests was a member of the local police force, and when talk at the table turned to a string of rapes plaguing the neighborhood, Dr. Cohen offered his professional opinion on the person likely responsible.

Intrigued by the then unknown behavioral psychologist's analysis, the officer took the information to his superiors, who used it to hone in on a man already under suspicion.

From there, police departments in the surrounding boroughs called on Dr. Cohen to consult when an investigation fell into the criteria of what they called the Cohen Cases. Serial crimes that contained violence without purpose or pattern.

Liam's father held an understanding of the drive behind the acts and could interpret the significance of the insignificant.

Two years into working with the police, was when the Feds came calling, and things were never the same.

*You're too smiley. Overly happy people should never be trusted.*

Liam groaned at the text. His dad literally wrote the book on dissecting the human psyche, but without a class to teach or a team of agents to advise, his son was the lucky recipient of his attention.

Stopping at a traffic light, Liam replied: *Don't you have a book to write?*

With a new book deal, the true crime podcast he co-hosted, and working as an advisor on the upcoming tv mini-series chronicling his career, one would think Dr. Cohen would have little time on his hands. But when an investigation like Liam's landed on his father's radar, no one could stop him from trying to get involved.

And Liam hated to admit that his father was right about him having an edge over the other agents.

As far back as he could remember, he'd been taught to approach everything with analytical eyes. In his early teens, he'd expressed an interest in his father's work, and been permitted access to old case files where Liam spent countless hours reviewing photos, witness statements, and autopsy reports.

Once a case was fully submerged in Liam's head, his father would then instruct his son on how to break down the evidence and gain answers.

"Remember Liam, the devil doesn't just live in the details," his father would say. "He hides there, too."

Dr. Cohen specialized in the class of criminal his fellow behavioral scientist liked to call hedonistic. The files Liam reviewed were of men and women who thrived on the ritual of their violent acts, feeding their demons not with their victim's demise, but with the ceremony of the violence they inflicted. Most of the cases he studied during those early years were well-documented by a world fascinated with the macabre.

"The societal response to these atrocities is as interesting as the crimes themselves," his father often remarked. "The shame of it is, people will learn every little thing about the murderer, down to his shoe size, but not take the time to remember the victims, except for how their bodies were desecrated in the final moments."

While his father was intrigued by the public's reactions, Liam was disgusted by it. In college, he abandoned his plans to join his father's field and pursued a career within the Bureau as a field agent. This way, instead of wasting time figuring out why the monsters did what they did, he could focus on stopping them.

But even so, Liam continued to view every assignment with the deductive lens instilled in him, and when the details of his

current investigation emerged, that lens zoned in with acute clarity.

A month ago, an appeal for aid from a minor rural county on the Missouri-Arkansas border reached the Bureau's field office in St. Louis. A double homicide that had left local law enforcement baffled.

Two women in their mid-twenties were found raped, mutilated, and murdered at a shared residence. Rachel Henderson, the first victim, was described as a painfully shy individual by family and friends. The five foot brunette kept to herself, forgoing the wild bar scene her roommate, Morgan Albright, regularly enjoyed.

Henderson's body was discovered in the master bedroom, bound to a chair with heavy-duty cable ties, and placed at the foot of the bed. Trauma to the body consisted of lacerations on the soles of her feet and mild bruising around the ankles. The medical examiner concluded Ms. Henderson died from asphyxiation by the roped noose left around her neck and had also been sexually assaulted multiple times prior to death.

The second victim was not as lucky.

Morgan Albright's remains were in the same room as Rachel Henderson, albeit not as intact. According to interviews conducted by the police, the blond ex-cheerleader was popular amongst her friend group and loved by many. She came from a solid home, and like Ms. Henderson, attended nursing school at the nearby state college. Ms. Albright's body was found nude and unbound on the floor. Her eyes, which her

mother described as blue as the sky, had been removed. Gouging marks and defense wounds suggested the eyes were extracted with a blunt object while she fought her attacker.

The victim's lower extremities were also removed prior to death, severed mid-thigh. The cuts were precise, leading the medical examiner to believe that Morgan's murderer used some sort of oscillating saw. She died of hemorrhagic shock from the dismembering, leaving a trail of blood on the carpet as she dragged herself from the bed.

The sexual assault on Ms. Albright occurred both pre and postmortem.

Initial conclusions formed by the locals were that Morgan returned to the home with a male companion, and things turned ugly. But as the case went cold, a detective working the file happened upon an identical crime in a nearby county from the previous year.

Due to the style of the deaths, and the expanding body count, the sheriffs of both counties sent in requests for federal assistance. A small unit was formed, with Hawkins named as lead. He didn't want Liam but was forced to take him on by his superiors.

"Please don't assume merit secured your position on this team," Hawkins had told him that first day. "The other, more qualified, agents assigned to work this file were chosen because they demonstrate the skills necessary to put this to bed in a timely manner while you're purely here because of your name."

It was true. The name William A. Cohen Jr. was a hard one to ignore with something like this, and in the beginning, Liam agreed and planned to stay out of the way. With less than two years under his belt, he didn't need a negative report from a senior agent to follow him for the rest of his career.

But when Liam got his hands on the file, he immediately saw the structure in the murders. A balance where there shouldn't be. The slaughter of the four women was committed in an exacting manner, mirror images of the other, with no deviation to the components which, if you looked hard enough, screamed of purpose through the carnage.

"You're reading too much into it," Hawkins said when Liam brought his observations to him. "The killer is probably some recluse who only comes out to prey on young women, like these poor girls."

"I disagree," Liam had responded automatically. "This is a ritual to him, and ritualistic killers don't consistently fit the mold of a white male between the ages of twenty to thirty-five with anti-social tendencies. Many look and act the same as everyone else, and it's their ability to blend in with society that makes them challenging to identify. We have to understand the why first, because it will inevitably lead us to the who."

Liam immediately regretted his words.

"I think you're a little biased on the importance of why this guy committed these murders," Hawkins said, his face darkening. "But since you assume there's something here beyond the obvious, why don't you review the crime scene

itself. There's an office down the hall. It's perfect for staring at photos all day."

The order was a means of keeping Liam occupied and out of his superior's hair. Unfortunately for Hawkins, rummaging through the hundreds of photos taken at the murder sites turned out to be useful.

Initially, Liam paid no attention to the oil painting at the Henderson and Albright home, but when he analyzed the photos of the older crime scene, he found a portrait hanging over the victim's bed that stuck out like a sore thumb.

The ornately gold-framed painting was of a young girl, posing proudly in a Pepto Bismol pink ruffle dress. It hung directly over the bed and sat in stark contrast to the rest of the home's contemporary decor.

Thinking he was on to something, Liam returned to the images of the Henderson and Albright residence and found another oil painting positioned directly over the bed. This one was of a garden surrounded by a forest, with a body of water in the distance.

When he viewed them in person, the photo-realistic similarities between the two paintings were undeniable. But more importantly, the illegible signature scrawled in the corner of each piece matched.

Liam knew nothing of art and put in a call to a local art museum, who couldn't help him either.

The victim's families assured him they didn't recognize the pictures; however, Rachel Henderson's mother supplied him with the name of a pawn shop her daughter frequented. The mother stated her daughter would buy the odd knick-knack from the store, and purchasing a painting she liked wouldn't have been out of character.

On a Saturday afternoon, Liam paid the pawnshop a visit, and the owner permitted him to go through the meticulous records he kept.

"I don't think they've come through my place," the man told Liam. "But let's run it through Leads and see if we get a hit."

After about fifteen minutes of searching the stolen goods database, they had their answer. "Yep, here it is," the shop owner said, turning the monitor towards Liam. "It was taken from a house in Florida last week."

The little girl in pink stared back at him from the screen. "That's not possible. The piece was found at a crime scene over a year ago."

The man provided him the name and phone number listed to contact, and Liam was soon speaking with a Detective Mathis based in Port Michaelson, Florida.

Sitting outside the pawn shop in his car, he explained to the detective how he was tasked with researching a case the Bureau was working on, purposely leaving out the full extent of the crimes. "I got your information from the owner of Bartow Pawn in St. Louis. A couple of paintings you have



listed as stolen from a home a week ago in Florida were found in Missouri last year, and I'm hoping you can tell me how that's possible."

"Honestly, we're not positive when the paintings were taken. An individual broke into a home here last weekend, and one of the residents woke to find him in her room," Mathis explained. "He was scared off and when we had the homeowners review their belongings, it was discovered that numerous things were missing, such as those paintings. The guy has probably been working the home for some time."

"How can you be sure that it was this intruder who took the paintings?"

"All of the items stolen were of a deeply personal nature and belonged to the artist."

Liam glanced down at the open file in his passenger seat. A printout of the girl's painting lay on top, and she stared up at him with a mischievous smile. "Who's the artist?" he asked. "Are they famous?"

"Her name was Laura Jean Eddins. She died quite some time ago," Mathis told him. "And no, Ms. Eddins wasn't famous, but her work is sentimental to the family."

"What else was taken?"

Mathis rattled off the list; more artwork by Ms. Eddins, a diamond engagement ring, an antique music box.

"A wedding dress?"

The hair on Liam's arms stood at attention. A ring, a music box, or even paintings by an unknown artist could be pawned without too many questions asked. Those things held value and would generate a small profit for an average thief. But stealing a wedding dress?

That was personal.

“And all these objects belonged to my artist?”

“Yes, but we think we've found the man, or men, responsible,” Mathis said. “A couple of hurricane rats that settled here in the mid-nineties.”

“Hurricane rats?”

“People who follow storms and find employment in the aftermath. These fellas washed in with Hurricane Eugenia, and from the records we've gathered, it seems both men worked around the home Ms. Eddins lived in. It could be that they found her attractive and became fixated, or they thought the home was an easy target and continued to steal from it when the mood struck.”

“How long has she been deceased?”

“Almost two decades.”

Liam frowned, not buying either theory. “And how did she die?”

The beat of silence on the line was a fraction of a second too long, telling him that whatever was about to come out of the detective's mouth next was more than likely a lie.

“Her death was attributed to previous injuries sustained from the car wreck that killed her husband.”

This guy was starting to piss Liam off. None of what he was saying was making sense. “Forgive me Detective Mathis, but I’m trying to wrap my head around this. How did paintings stolen from a home in Florida end up at the scene of two separate double homicides?”

“I beg your pardon? Did you say a double homicide?”

“Two double homicides,” Liam clarified. “The first one occurred around a year ago, and then the second batch of murders took place sometime close to Christmas. Four women are dead, and we have no leads. The only thing that connects them are these paintings, and the way their bodies were butchered.”

“Laura Jean’s paintings were there?”

“Hanging right over the bed where the women were killed.”

Mathis went quiet, and then, “Who were the victims?”

“Morgan Albright, Rachel Henderson, Christina Porter, and a Lindsey Miles.” After digging through the women’s lives over the previous week, Liam was becoming quite possessive over them. “Are any of them familiar?”

The detective blew out a breath. “No.”

His answer disappointed Liam. “Can you send me the info on your suspects, so I can look into them on our end?”

“Of course, we’ll be more than happy to assist,” Mathis replied.

Liam provided him with his email. “Thanks for your help.”

“And when you’re finished with the paintings, I know the family would appreciate having them returned.”

“That won’t be a problem,” Liam said, glancing down at the girl in pink. “By the way, who’s the little girl in the painting?”

“Evangeline Eddins,” Mathis answered. “Or Evie, as the family calls her. She’s Laura Jean’s daughter.”

Liam told him he would be in touch and hung up.

“You don’t look like an Evangeline,” he mumbled to the photo. “But an Evie? Yeah, I can see that.”

On the drive back to his apartment, he called his father, hoping he could walk him through this mess.

“You can bet your sweet ass it’s connected.” Dr. Cohen let out a whoop of excitement when Liam finished talking. “Let me get my pen to take notes.”

That afternoon they dug up as much information as they could, learning that the painting had been taken from a property owned by a real estate and land development corporation named Fairweather Holdings. The company was successful, to an unbelievable degree, and information was easily found on the organization.

But its owner, a Benjamin Fairweather, was careful about keeping his private life, private. They only found a few

property records and a divorce decree, but not much else.

The next morning, his father called first thing. “That Benjamin Fairweather is something else,” he yelled in Liam’s ear when he answered his phone. “He’s got three kids, with three different women.”

“So?” Liam yawned. “Why is that relevant?”

“The first woman he had a kid with lives in the home that was robbed. They were never married, and the son works for a non-profit in Atlanta. I read a few articles written about the place he manages, and he seems like a nice boy.”

“Wonderful?”

“The second kid, the one he had with the woman Fairweather actually married, works with dear old dad at the family company. The wife, Miranda Fairweather, is dead, by the way. I found her obituary. Cancer got her several years ago.”

“And does this one seem like a nice boy, too?” Liam asked, sarcastically.

His father sipped at his coffee. “Meh, he followed in his father’s footsteps. I guess only some of us are lucky like that.”

“Can’t let it go, can you?”

“Nope.”

It was entirely too early for this. “What about the third kid?”

His father got damn near giddy at the question. “She’s the one that set my bells and whistles off.”

“How so?”

“Fairweather’s daughter also lives at the residence with the first woman, the mother of the oldest.”

Liam got out of bed and headed into the kitchen. “That’s weird,” he said. “And another weird thing is the home that was broken into, is a historical property with its own name.”

“Haven House, I know, but let me finish telling you about the third kid. Her mother once lived at this Haven place, too.” His father paused for a dramatic effect, and Liam rolled his eyes, turning on his coffeemaker. “That is, until her death.”

“Laura Jean Eddins?”

“Bingo!” His father shouted, and something crashed in the background. “Oh, shit, there goes my coffee.”

It was past time to find his dad a retirement hobby that didn’t involve murder. “So, why would Fairweather stuff a couple of baby mamas in some old house his company owns?”

“I have no idea, but there’s something freaky going on there. It might not be related to your girls, but my interest is piqued. I’ll dig more and call you back. Oh, and tell your Hawkins.”

After making himself a cup of coffee, Liam sat at the kitchen table and composed an email to Hawkins explaining the developments.

Around lunchtime, his phone rang. “Sorry to bother you on a Sunday, Cohen,” Hawkins said. “But I’ve booked you on the

first flight out in the morning to Florida. If you really think there's a connection, I want it flushed out."

Liam cursed himself for his own stupidity. He'd just handed Hawkins a valid reason to send him far away from the investigation.

"Sir, the person who committed these murders will stay where he's comfortable, and that's Missouri, not Florida." Liam tried to argue. "If there's a connection between the murder and the paintings, I can establish it from here."

"I'm sure you could."

With that, the line went dead, and Liam was on a flight the next morning. He called Mathis before boarding the plane and scheduled an appointment. "I'd also like to meet with the owners of the painting."

"I'll see what I can do," Mathis said. "How about you send me the case file, and I'll review it before you arrive."

Liam had no intention of sending the detective anything. "Sure, you'll have it in a minute."

Once the plane landed, he'd received several texts from Mathis. Liam left them unread and took the well-known scenic highway to the police station. He was hoping to get a glimpse of the shore, but the high-rise condominiums and gulf front restaurants of Port Michaelson blocked his view.

Giving up on sightseeing, he headed to the station, his phone ringing with a call from Hawkins as he pulled into the parking lot.

“Did you even bother to examine those paintings?”  
Hawkins asked, sounding smug. “There’s a message written on the back.”

Of course, he’d looked at the back. “What are you talking about?”

“I spoke to an art dealer and had them review the pieces. The paintings are worthless, but they suggested we look on the back to find the title or any other information the artist might have left.”

“There’s nothing on the back.”

“Under the paper there is, and both paintings said the same thing.”

Hawkins was gloating, and it made Liam’s head hurt. “What?”

“Tag, you’re it.”

“Nothing else?”

“Just the name Evie.”

That message could mean any number of things, but something told Liam this trip to Florida might not be a dead end after all.

“The second you’re finished with that detective, I want to hear from you, Cohen,” Hawkins said, drawing the same conclusion.

“Of course.”



Liam met Mathis in his office, the tension visibly leaving the detective's face as he shook his hand. At twenty-seven, with a slender build rising an inch above six feet, and what his mother called a baby face, Liam knew he wasn't at all what Mathis had envisioned.

"I never received that email," Mathis said, gesturing for Liam to sit.

Handing him a manila envelope, Liam apologized. "Sorry, I have a hard copy of it for you."

Mathis opened the file, and the mannered smile on his face faltered.

"We have no record of any type of murders like this in your area," Liam said, after giving the detective a minute. "Have you ever seen anything similar that we might have missed?"

"No," came the detective's whispered reply as he flipped through the photos. "Nothing."

"I would like to speak to the owners of the painting today, along with Evangeline Eddins."

Mathis resealed the envelope when he was finished, excusing himself to step out into the hall. Liam watched him through the open door, speaking with someone on his phone.

"We can go now," Mathis said when he returned and nodded towards a folder at the end of his desk. "When you said you were coming, I took the liberty of putting together a file for you about the home and its residents. Most people need a road map when dealing with the Fairweathers."

Taking the file, he followed Mathis to his car. “It’s about a thirty-minute drive,” the detective said. “The house sits between Hollingsdale and here.”

As they drove east, Liam shuffled through the paperwork provided by Mathis. “How many people live there?”

“Five,” Mathis replied. “The place is enormous.”

Liam scanned an aerial property map. “I can see that.”

“The main house was built by the first Fairweather who came to the area from Georgia. He was a lumberman and built a mill on the property. You can see it on the western side of the map, where the land juts out into a small peninsula. Around World War I, the family business switched from lumber to land, and they moved from Haven House to an estate they built in Hollingsdale called Parkland Grounds.”

“Do all rich people name their houses?”

Mathis shrugged with a smile. “I guess so.”

“Tell me about Benjamin Fairweather.”

“He’s a good guy, but all business,” Mathis said. “Ben oversees their family company with his brother Trevor, and they have a new development in the works. Big luxury beachfront homes, but without the congestion you get when visiting, say, Odessa Beach or The Dunes.”

“I’m assuming those are other developments in the area?”

Mathis nodded, and Liam went back to the file. In his search, he’d found three Fairweather brothers, but only two

were listed in the detective's notes.

“What about the other brother?” he asked. “Charles?”

“Charlie is wandering through the Caribbean on a sailboat,” Mathis grunted. “Which is no surprise to anyone. He was a known wild child.”

“It says here on the night of the break-in, the family was gathered for Selah Fairweather's birthday party. He's the oldest of Benjamin Fairweather's sons and works at an outreach center in Atlanta, correct?”

“You really have done your homework, Agent Cohen.”

“But the second son works for their father at Fairweather Holdings?”

“Samuel,” Mathis replied. “He'll be at the house when we arrive.”

Out the car window, Port Michaelson had disappeared, with the highway cutting through row after row of pine. “What can you tell me about Mr. Fairweather's youngest child?” he asked. “She's the daughter of my artist, right?”

“Jamison is beautiful like her mother, but with her father's personality. She's a handful, that one.”

“And she lives at this Haven House, also?”

“Yes.”

“With Simone Howard, the mother of Benjamin Fairweather's first child.”

“You got it,” Mathis answered, chuckling. “Mrs. Howard will also be at the house today. Her daughter will be there as well, but I ask that you don’t talk about your case in front of Annabeth.”

“Can I ask why?”

Mathis searched for an answer. “She’s delicate. I don’t want to say there are mental issues, but that’s what it is.”

“How so?”

“She’s one of those people who is scared to go outside.”

“An agoraphobe?”

“I guess that’s what you would call it,” Mathis said. “Her twin brother also lives at Haven. Abraham works for Fairweather Holdings, as well.”

Haven House’s residential dynamic kept getting weirder and weirder. None of the dots connected. “Are the twins also the children of Ben Fairweather?”

Mathis outright laughed. “Their father was Devon Howard. He taught science at Port Michaelson Elementary. My oldest had him in the fifth grade. He was a great guy.”

“Was?”

“Devon died around the same time as Ms. Eddins.” Mathis shook his head. “It was a rough time for the family.”

Liam closed his file and tried to sort through all he’d learned. Mathis kept using the word family, but that’s not what these people were, at least not in the traditional sense.

“Let me see if I have this straight,” he said, as the car turned off the highway and onto a gravel road canopied by massive oaks. “Simone Howard had twins with her deceased husband, and they all lived at Haven House?”

Mathis nodded, and Liam continued. “Mrs. Howard also has a son, Selah, with Benjamin Fairweather, and that son lived at Haven House until he moved to Atlanta,” he said, shifting through the papers. “Next, we have Benjamin Fairweather’s son with his deceased wife, Miranda Fairweather. This son works with him, but never lived at Haven House.”

The foliage surrounding the car thinned, and Liam leaned forward in his seat when Haven House came into view.

“Then we have Jamison Fairweather, the third child of Benjamin Fairweather and yet another woman, Laura Jean Eddins,” Liam went on, trying not to let his mouth hang open. He’d never seen anything like this place. “But Ms. Eddins also has another kid, who is my girl in the painting, and this one is the daughter she had with the husband that died in the car wreck?”

“That’s right.” Mathis parked in front of the house. “Like I said, you need a road map when dealing with these people.”

## CHAPTER 24

# *Evie*

**I**t was the first Monday in March, which meant the mandatory Applebaum quarterly meeting would start soon.

Hustling down the front walk to her car, Evie huffed in the steamy morning air. Winter was officially over, trampled by spring as it was ushered in with its usual parade of heat, humidity, and horniness.

The beasts of Haven House were twittering about in a fevered state already. Bayou birds squawked their mating calls, while squirrels zipped around the lawn in a mad dash to find a mate. Even the cats were in on the action, with Fitz leading a charge of female felines into the woods.

“Hey, no more orgies!” she shouted at him.

Fitz ignored her, snapping a black tail at his harem to follow.

The security camera positioned off the walk rotated on its axis, aiming a lens in her direction. Evie didn’t need to look up

to know that the blue light was on or guess who might be watching.

The phone in her bag buzzed, and she dug it out, fully expecting a panicked text from Micah. They were to present first, and she was running late.

*Leave Fitz alone. A good morning fuck never hurt anyone.*

Nope, not Micah.

Keeping her head lowered, she hurried along so Samuel couldn't see her smile, and the phone vibrated with a second message.

*You should try it sometime. Sex is an excellent stress reliever.*

She dropped her keys while reading the text and quickly snatched them up, only to drop them again. Growling in frustration, she bent down to retrieve them again.

*And you look very stressed right now, Evangeline.*

Evie's head slowly turned to glare at the camera. Stressed? Yes, she was most certainly stressed.

And tired.

And annoyed.

And it was all Samuel's fault.

Last night, right as she was drifting off to sleep, her phone rang, and she stupidly answered it without checking to see who was calling. "Hello?"

"Did I wake you?"

Her eyes had snapped open at the sound of Samuel's voice.  
"Yes, and goodnight."

"You can't ignore me forever."

Evie sat up in bed. "Did Gretchen have a nice flight?"

"I have no idea," he replied, and she would've sworn he was smiling. "I dropped her off and went straight to the office. Things didn't go as expected in Texas."

"I'm very sorry to hear that."

"But if you're really interested, I can ask Gretchen tomorrow during our virtual meeting. She'll be happy to know you were concerned."

"You're such an ass, Samuel."

"Hmmm," he murmured. "I think you meant to say, you have a nice ass, Samuel."

Evie couldn't stop the snorting giggle from erupting, and she slapped a hand over her mouth to suppress it.

"Did I just make you laugh?" he asked with genuine shock.  
"Wow, it kind of feels like I've wrestled a bear and won."

"Are you calling me a bear?"

"You're definitely surly like one."

"Only with you," she shot back, not at all offended by the comparison.

"Because I'm special."

Evie smirked with an eye roll. "In your own mind."



“And in yours.”

“Could you be any more arrogant?”

“Oh yeah,” he replied sarcastically. “Did you want me to go into full Fairweather heir mode? I hear the ladies at work like it, but something tells me you wouldn’t appreciate it as much as they do.”

Evie would wager there were dozens of women around his office that left trails of drool in his wake. “You would be right,” she said, and yawned. “I’m going to bed.”

“Want some company?”

The question was meant as a joke, but even so, she abruptly disconnected the call and muted her phone alerts.

Her brain refused to shut off after that, and when she did fall asleep, a naked Samuel filled her dreams, doing things to her that made Evie wake panting with a sheen of sweat covering her skin.

No, the word stress didn’t quite cover what she was this morning. Standing at her locked car, Evie’s nostrils flared when her phone rang.

It was him.

Without breaking her death stare at the camera, she held the phone up in the air and swiped the call to voicemail.

It buzzed with a text, and Evie swore her eye started to twitch.

*You also look very beautiful.*

Ignoring him, she drove to work like a maniac, and when she arrived, Evie charged down the hall to the conference room.

Micah intercepted her. “Constance canceled the meeting.”

Evie almost slumped against the wall in relief. “Thank God. The last thing I need today is to have Constance upset with me.”

She dumped her things on the desk, the contents of her purse spilling everywhere. “It’s been a helluva morning already.”

Micah looked her over. “Those bags under your eyes are screaming for caffeine. Want me to grab you some?”

Her cell phone buzzed, vibrating on the desk.

*Have dinner with me.*

The butterflies inside her fluttered their wings, and Evie told them to calm the hell down. Dinner with Samuel was out of the question. Her sanity and self-control were hanging by a thread.

Snatching up the phone, she typed a reply. *Not interested. Having dinner with Lucas at a new downtown Italian restaurant tonight. I hear it’s very good. You should take Gretchen when she gets back.*

“Yes or no, Evie?” Micah asked, inching closer to the door. “If it’s a yes, I need to grab some now before Brenda does her refill. I swear that woman consumes a gallon of coffee a day.”

Evie didn't look up from her phone. "Yes, please."

The phone rang, and she silenced it. A text came through seconds later. *Fine. I'm coming over later so we can talk.*

Oh no, he wasn't.

*I'm not sure when I'll be home. If at all.*

Sending the message, Evie let out a villain worthy cackle. She wasn't going home with Lucas tonight, but why should Samuel need to know that.

When a minute ticked by and he didn't respond, Evie set the phone down on the desk like it was a bomb about to go off. After the second minute passed, a message came through, and she peeked down at the screen with one eye open.

*You're a horrible liar.*

Damn it.

Evie grabbed the phone, typing furiously, but he sent over another message before she could finish.

*Stop running. I won.*

"I am not one of your Barbie dolls, begging to be played with." She pointed a finger at the screen. "Yes, I wanted to strip you naked and screw your brains out, but that doesn't mean you've won anything!"

Micah returned with their coffee. "Who are you talking to?"

Evie straightened with a guilty look on her face. "No one."

The phone rang, and she let out a startled shout, floundering to silence it. "My phone has been acting up. I'm just going to

leave it off for the rest of the day.”

“Uh-huh.” Micah placed her coffee on the desk. “What if Lucas calls?”

“I’m seeing him tonight.”

“Ugh, really?” Micah waved a hand at her. “I’m sorry, sweetheart, but you look like you’re walking around in a brown paper bag.”

Sighing, Evie glanced down at her beige dress. “You know, Annabeth said the same thing,” she said. “I’m not meeting Lucas until six, so maybe I’ll stop by that little shop Jamison likes next to the restaurant. My wardrobe could use a boost.”

“Boost?” Micah mumbled under his breath on his way out. “Honey, it needs a rocket launcher.”

The morning whizzed by with no further interruptions from Samuel, and in the late afternoon, Constance called Evie into her office to go over account transferals for the spring quarter. With a tendency to drone on, Constance kept her until after five, and by the time she returned to gather her things, everyone else had left for the day.

With thirty minutes to burn before meeting Lucas, Evie headed to the restaurant on foot. The warm snap in the weather had drawn the after-work crowds to the sidewalks of downtown Hollingsdale, leaving them bustling with activity. New cafés and shops were everywhere, and not a single one of them was connected to Fairweather Holdings.

Such a thing was once considered a sin in this town.

The shop she wanted to visit was still open when Evie arrived. The place was trendy, and the clothes were not her normal style, but she ended up finding three outfits to buy.

“Does the restaurant next door have a bar area?” Evie asked the clerk as she checked out. “I’m a little early for my date.”

“They do, but you better hurry. That place gets crazy busy as the night wears on.”

The lady wasn’t kidding. The restaurant was filling up when Evie entered, but luckily, she secured a spot at the bar to wait. A bartender came over and she ordered a glass of red, but instead of getting her drink, he squinted down at her in the low lighting.

“Is your name Evangeline?” he asked.

“Um, yes.”

“I have a message for you, and I quote; turn on your damn phone.”

Taken aback, Evie reached into her purse and switched on her phone to see seventeen missed calls, and twice as many texts. Logging into her voicemail, she listened to the first two messages, which were from Samuel.

“Call me.”

Did the man just go around all day barking orders to every human he encountered? The second message was the same thing.

“You will be at the house tonight.”

In the third voicemail, his tone shifted. “This is not about our conversation from earlier. I need you to come home right now. This is an emergency. Call or text when you’re on the way.”

The next voicemail was from Ben. “Hey kid, call.”

Ben left two more messages, and then the next thing she knew, Simone was shouting in her ear. “I don’t know what in the hell you’re thinking by not answering my call. That Micah boy at your office won’t put us through to you. He says you’re in a meeting. Like, I give a damn about some meeting. Get home, now!”

Abe tried to contact her as well. “Hey, they thought you might answer my call, but I guess not,” he said, and then switched to a whisper. “But seriously, get your ass home, or let someone know you’re okay.”

Evie frowned. Why wouldn’t she be okay?

The final round of voicemails were from her sister and Annabeth. “Please come home. We don’t know what is going on.”

Hearing the strain in Annabeth’s tone knocked Evie out of her daze, and she gathered her things, heading towards the exit.

Jamison’s excited voice was next. “There’s an FBI agent here about the robbery. No one will tell Annabeth or me anything, and they’re making us wait upstairs. Dad and Simone are freaking out, and Samuel was getting ready to

drive into Hollingsdale to find you, but then Agent Cohen pulled Abe in for questioning, so he stayed. Call us back!”

Jamison’s message was less than fifteen minutes old, but Evie called Annabeth first.

“Are you okay?”

Evie pushed her way through the crush of people in the restaurant’s waiting area. “Yes, but what’s going on?”

“They’re not telling us. Ben has been in the library with Agent Cohen and Mathis all afternoon. Then they took Abe in there an hour ago to talk and are still in there.”

“Who the hell is Agent Cohen?” Evie made it to the restaurant door and stepped out onto the sidewalk.

“He came to the house this afternoon with Mathis,” Annabeth told her. “Jamison listened through the door for a bit, and from what she heard, it sounds like the FBI has a case that might involve our break-in.”

“What kind of case?”

“I don’t know, but you better get home pronto. Everyone is going crazy and trying to keep cool in front of this FBI guy, but then I’ve got Jamison up here flipping out over him. He’s really attractive, and apparently, his dad is a big deal.”

Evie sighted Lucas striding down the sidewalk, still in his scrubs. She raised a hand in the air to gain his attention. “I’m meeting Lucas for dinner.”

“No,” Annabeth said firmly. “You need to come home. Lucas can wait.”

“Ugh, fine. I’ll be home soon.”

“Oh, and you’re going to tell me later why Samuel knew where to find you,” Annabeth whispered, before hanging up.

Lucas snaked an arm around her when he reached her. “I’ve missed you.”

“And I’ve got some bad news.”

She explained the situation, and Lucas seemed more impressed than disappointed. “A real FBI agent is at your house? That’s awesome.”

“Yeah, but that means I’m going to have to cancel our dinner plans.”

“Boo.”

Lucas gave her an exaggerated pout with his full lips, looking delectable in his scrubs. The whole rotten day came crashing down on Evie. All she wanted to do was relax and have a nice dinner with a man who wasn’t Samuel.

Grabbing hold of his shirt, Evie pressed her lips to his pouting ones. She’d never initiated physical contact between them before, and the move took Lucas by surprise, but he swiftly got over it, slipping a hand to the nape of her neck, locking them together.

The kiss deepened, with Lucas taking over, tasting her leisurely there on the sidewalk in front of dozens of people.



When they broke apart, he was slightly breathless. “Do you want me to come with you?”

“I’ll be fine,” Evie said, trying to disguise her disappointment. She should’ve felt something after a kiss like that, but there were no butterflies or tornado warnings. No connection at all. “I promise to make it up to you.”

The heat from their kiss lingered in his eyes, and Lucas smiled. “Oh, I know you will.”

## CHAPTER 25

# *Miranda*

1994

**N**ot many people carried the distinct honor of shocking Benjamin Fairweather, but sitting across from her husband, Miranda felt an odd sense of pride at being one of the few who'd managed to do it.

With Samuel at school, and the staff dismissed for the day, the walls of Parkland Grounds were the only witnesses to the outright obliteration of their marriage.

He'd been home for two months straight, with plans to stay on longer as he oversaw the construction of Fairweather's new triple tower headquarters. It was rare to have him here for such a prolonged period, and she could've dropped her bomb sooner, but Miranda hadn't worked up the courage until today.

"Your mouth is hanging open."

Ben's mouth snapped shut. Dressed for the office in a dark suit, he looked damned intimidating this morning. "Is it something I did?"

The corners of her mouth lifted at his question. Leave it to Ben to take her announcement as a challenge. "No."

Tilting his head to the side, he studied her as if she were an alien. “Is it something I didn’t do?”

“No.”

“Why now?”

“You know why.”

Ben rose from the living room sofa, stalking to the sidebar on the far wall to pour himself a glass of whiskey. “You want one?”

“It’s ten in the morning,” Miranda sighed, watching him toss back the amber liquid. “And you have meetings this afternoon.”

“I’ll cancel my meetings.”

“Either way, I don’t think it’s wise to let Samuel see you drunk. He’s excited about this weekend.”

They had plans to spend the next couple of days as a family, pretending that everything was normal because when the weekend was over, their lives would be anything but.

Cancer was a bit of a bitch like that, crashing into people’s lives like an uninvited party guest. A random lump of *nothing* that one day decided she was special enough to become a *something*, demanding all the attention.

Hearing her diagnosis had been utterly frightening, but Miranda refused to dwell on the fear, and instead embraced the anger she felt at her body’s betrayal. Some shadow on an x-ray wasn’t about to take her from her child. Samuel was

everything. He needed her, and she needed him. Cancer could fuck right the hell off. Miranda had things to do.

Unfortunately for Ben, the diagnosis also put things into perspective. Doubts pertaining to her life choices were always there, and with the grim reaper circling the block, Miranda thought it was time she told her husband the truth.

“This can’t be a complete shock,” she said, crossing the room to join him, her heels sinking into the newly installed plush carpet. Parkland was finally coming together, looking nothing like it did when Helen Fairweather was in control. “I mean, you must have noticed.”

Ben poured a sizable helping of whiskey into a second glass and set it in front of her. “Get drunk with me. I have questions.”

“I’ll tell you anything you want to know.”

“How long?” He turned to face her. “When you went to North Carolina last summer for a vacation with Josie, I thought it was because you needed a break from the move down here. I sure as hell didn’t think it was to...”

Ben waved his hand erratically in the air, completely at a loss for words, and somehow, his discomfort calmed her.

“Have sex with a woman?”

“Yeah, that.” Ben took another long swig of his drink. “How long has that been going on?”

“Since we were college roommates,” she replied, ready to be totally open. “One night can change your life, Ben.”

The bottle of whiskey tipped over his glass, filling it to the top. “Or ruin it.”

She grinned and leaned a hip on the bar. “Now, I have a question for you. Have you ever once loved me?”

Ben threw her an *I told you so* smirk. “So, it is something I did.”

“Have you?”

“I love that you’re the mother of my son.”

“Simone is also the mother of one of your sons. Are you saying you love me like you love her?” Miranda raised an eyebrow. “As a friend?”

His nostrils flared. “Is there something wrong with that?” he gritted out. “I made myself clear from the beginning. You knew what to expect.”

“I knew you didn’t love me, and I knew I didn’t love you, either,” Miranda said. “But our marriage worked. We function as a unit, holding the same goals and the same values to create a good life. The lack of love between us never got in the way and provided freedom most couples don’t have.”

“I’ve never cheated,” he fumed, with more emotion than he’d shown in the entirety of their marriage. “Not even when we came to Parkland Grounds, and you moved into a separate bedroom.”

“That’s not the type of freedom I’m referring to,” she replied, surprising herself with how calm she was remaining. “I’m talking about the fact that we hold no expectations of

each other. And before cancer showed up with her fuck all attitude, that was enough for me. I could hide who I was, and what I wanted, because of the stability you granted me.”

“Do you love her?”

“Yes.”

Closing his eyes, he sighed. “What do you want from me? A divorce?”

A divorce was the very last thing she wanted. “Absolutely not.”

“Why?”

“Samuel.”

Their son was intelligent, comprehending concepts most kids his age couldn't. The next few months were going to be hard on him, and Miranda didn't want to add his parents getting a divorce into the mix.

Ben opened his eyes and nodded. “In front of him, we'll remain a family.”

“We are a family, Ben.”

To secure a prosperous future for themselves and those they cared about, she and Ben had played the long game together. The experience, and Samuel, had created a bond between them that would last forever.

“Yeah, I know,” he mumbled.

Miranda picked up her whiskey and swallowed a mouthful, relishing the burn as it made its way down. “Another reason

we can't get a divorce is my parents," she said. "I know my dad doesn't have much voting power, but every little bit helps right now."

"Pamela would lose her mind if you and I split up. Contrary to what you think, I'm quite the catch." Ben laughed at his words, the liquor doing its job.

"I love them, and I know they love me. But they would never understand."

"Society won't understand either." He wasn't being cruel, only fair. "Fairweather Holdings does business with individuals and companies that take their Sunday church service seriously. If you were outed, we'd lose contracts."

"I'm aware of how it works."

"Good, then you should also know that they're stupid fuckers," he said, clinking his glass with hers. "So, I guess we're back to doing what we do best. Lying and keeping secrets to survive."

They sipped at their whiskey in peace, leaning on one another. "If I could change me, I would. Loving you, even if you never loved me back, would be easier than this," Miranda whispered, setting her empty glass on the bar. "I'm sorry."

Ben topped her off. "Don't be sorry, be you. Not everyone gets to be happy in life. Some of us have to stand on the sidelines and watch."

A tremor of a smile touched her lips. "I'm glad you think like that, because there's one more thing I want to talk about,

but I'm not sure how to say it without upsetting you.”

Ben's gaze slid sideways to look at her in mild horror.  
“What else could you possibly have to say?”

Miranda took her time finding the right words. “I told you my secret because I'm tired of denying myself. We don't know what will happen after the surgery and treatments. The doctor says that if it doesn't work, I could be gone by the summer.”

“Stop,” he ordered, slamming his glass down. “You're not allowed to leave Samuel motherless. That's not how this story goes.”

“You can't control everything, Ben.”

He leaned down, planting his face directly in hers. “I. Fucking. Forbid. It.”

Miranda hugged him, and he wrapped an arm around her. “I don't want you watching from the sidelines,” she said, getting teary. “I want you to be happy, too.”

He laughed and kissed the top of her head. “What do you want me to do, Miranda? Go out and fall in love with someone?”

Her next words were almost as hard to say as her confession about Josie. “You already have.”

Ben tensed, his arm dropping. “We're done here.”

She tried to hold on. “Don't you think it's obvious?”

“No.” He retreated to the opposite side of the room, getting as far from her as he could. “There is nothing obvious about



anything.”

Miranda followed, not about to let him run. “Ben, you must realize that she feels the same way.”

“This conversation is over,” he bellowed. “I let you have your say, but now we’re done.”

“Albie is dead,” she screamed, chasing him to Parkland’s rear staircase.

Ben froze on the second step, his shoulders slumped in defeat. Miranda had to tell herself she was doing him a kindness by saying what needed to be said.

“He’s dead, and it sucks, but he’s not here.”

“I can’t hear this.” Lowering himself to sit on the bottom step, Ben cradled his head in his hands. “Stop talking, please.”

“Laura Jean wants you.” She knelt in front of him. “Not your money, or your power, just you.”

He wouldn’t look at her, and she tried again. “You wanted to know how long I’ve loved Josie, well let me ask you the same question. How long have you loved Laura Jean?”

Ben’s fingers dug into his skull. “I don’t know.”

“Liar.” She angled her head to see his face. “I bet you know when it happened down to the second.”

Staring at the floor in anguish, he ignored her, every muscle in his body constricting tight. “You’re no different from me,” Miranda insisted. “I understand the living hell you’re going through.”

After a lengthy silence, he lifted his head, and eyes wracked with guilt searched hers. “You know those puzzles that have thousands of pieces to them? The ones that when you open the box, it’s this overwhelming mess with no meaning? But then, when all the pieces come together it forms this beautiful picture?”

A thin smile edged his lips, so full of pain and longing. “That’s what it was like. She was lost, and I found her,” he said. “When I first laid eyes on Laura Jean, it was like this very satisfying click of completeness hit me. The piece missing in my puzzle finding its home.”

The look in his eyes shifted, pleading with her for understanding. “But I swear, I wanted nothing more than for them to live a long, healthy life together. If I could bring him back, I would.”

“Everyone knows that.” Miranda cradled his face in her hands. “But Albie would want you both to be happy. He wouldn’t hold loving Laura Jean against you. If anything, he would understand.”

“No, it’s not right.” He pulled away from her. “I can’t.”

Miranda poked him in the chest. “Listen, people like me, we know one thing that the rest of you don’t, and that’s how the grim reaper is a total asshole who heckles you at the curtain call. The last thing I would wish on anyone is to reach the end of their life with a pile of regret hanging over their head. Learn from my mistakes, and take what you want. Don’t miss this, Ben.”

Hearing her own words, the pent-up terror she'd hidden from exploded, and Miranda burst into tears.

Ben hauled her to him, holding her as she cried. "Do you want Josie? She can go with us to the hospital next week when it's time, and then stay for as long as you want. Hell, she can stay forever, if it makes you happy."

Miranda's sobbing slowly subsided, and she looked up at his handsome face. She wasn't lying earlier. Life would be so much easier if she could love him like a wife should, but that wasn't her, and she was done pretending.

"Promise me you'll think about what I said."

"Isn't it a little late for you to start playing the role of a nagging wife?"

"I'm serious, Benjamin."

He got to his feet. "I can't make any promises," he said, extending a hand to help her stand. "I wouldn't even know where to begin."

"You begin at the beginning," she replied, using him to lift herself up off the floor. "All great love stories have to start somewhere."

## CHAPTER 26

# *Evie*

**E**very light in the house was on when Evie arrived home. Coming through the front door, she saw Jamison and Annabeth at the top of the stairs. Her sister pointed to the library door, where muffled voices carried into the hall.

“Don’t let them know you’re home yet,” she whispered, motioning for Evie to come up.

Evie slipped off her heels and hurried to them, all three hastening into Jamison’s bedroom. Formerly Laura Jean’s, the suite held one of the few working fireplaces at Haven and its own chandelier. A room truly fit for a princess.

“They’re waiting for you,” Annabeth said, shutting them inside. “Ben and Samuel got here this afternoon to meet with Mathis and Agent Cohen.”

“Who is hot,” Jamison added, laying across her pink satin king bed. She wiggled her eyebrows at Evie. “Like unreal hot.”

Annabeth scoffed, obviously having heard this already from Jamison. “Anyway, they went into the parlor with my mom,

and we don't know what's happening.”

“So, I listened at the door,” Jamison said.

“And what did you hear?”

“First off, I know this agent.” Her sister rolled onto her stomach, propping her chin on her hands. “Well, I know his dad. I mean, I don't like know-know his dad, I know who his dad is.”

Evie crossed her arms. “Get it out, Jamison.”

“His dad is Dr. William Cohen. He's like the top serial killer analyst in the country,” Jamison squealed, literally bouncing on the bed with excitement. “He recently retired after that whole incident with the Red River Ripper.”

Evie tossed a look of bewilderment at Annabeth, who only shrugged. “What the hell is a Red River Ripper?”

“He's a serial killer who operated in Texas,” Jamison explained. “Strangled a bunch of college girls and left their bodies along a riverbank. Dr. Cohen was acting as the profiler on the case with the FBI when the Ripper attacked him and his wife.”

Evie's mind was spinning from all the information being thrown at her. “How do you know the guy downstairs is related to your Dr. Cohen?”

“Because she barged into the library while Ben was talking to him like a damn fool,” Annabeth muttered.

“I didn’t barge in,” Jamison argued. “I went in and introduced myself.”

Annabeth grinned. “Mom said she fangirled all over the man.”

“Dear God, Jamison,” Evie groaned.

“Oh, shut up,” Jamison said. “And FYI, they know you’re on the way home. Someone will come looking for you soon.”

Evie felt her throat constrict. She wasn’t ready to meet anyone just yet and needed a minute alone to clear her head. “I want to change my clothes. While I do, you two can go tell them I’m home.”

Jamison leaped up and grabbed Annabeth’s arm. “When they open the door, don’t say a word. Just go sit down. We’re not going to let them kick us out again.”

With a groan, Annabeth allowed Jamison to drag her downstairs, and Evie snuck across the landing to her room. She closed the door and concentrated on her breathing as she changed. The calming exercise was something she’d done countless times with Annabeth. Two breaths in, one long exhale out.

She felt silly, but it helped.

A soft knock on the door sounded, and Evie opened it to find Samuel standing with his arms braced on the door frame. His gaze scoured her from top to bottom, and with every passing swipe, the fear in his eyes lessened.

“No more disappearing acts.”

The tie he wore dangled in front of her, and Evie gave it a tug. “Tell me what’s happening.”

He debated what to say for a handful of seconds, giving the building bubble of nerves in her time to intensify. “It can’t be any worse than what’s going through my head,” she said. “Jamison told me that the guy’s dad is a serial killer hunter.”

“Jamison needs to learn how to keep her mouth shut.” Samuel ran a hand through his hair. “His name is Agent Cohen, and he’s working a case that has ties to the break-in.”

“Another burglary?”

Samuel winced. “No,” he said, taking her hand, both a little surprised when she didn’t automatically pull away. “There were four women murdered in Missouri, and he’s here because they found your mother’s paintings at the crime scenes.”

His thumb swirled tiny circles on the top of her hand. “The murders were in different sections of the state, months apart, and involved two victims at each scene. There’s nothing to connect them except Laura Jean’s paintings and the way they were killed.”

The grip on her hand tightened as if he were trying to hold her steady. “The victims were mutilated, raped, and murdered. Two out of the four women’s legs were hacked off, their eyes removed.”

Evie’s legs shivered beneath her. Whatever she’d been expecting, it hadn’t been this. “Okay,” she breathed, pushing

through the panic threatening to wreak havoc at any moment.  
“Keep going.”

“Mathis thinks the paintings are a coincidence.”

“Do you?”

“No, and I don’t think Cohen does either, but I also don’t trust him.”

“You don’t trust anyone.”

Footsteps on the stairs had Evie extracting her hand from his. “Let’s go,” Simone whispered, appearing on the landing. “I want these men gone.”

“Cohen wants to talk to you, but if you need to stop at any point, just say the word,” Samuel said, with his back to Simone. “I’ll be right there.”

“Stay close,” she whispered, and followed them downstairs and into the parlor. Agent Cohen waited just inside the door with Mathis. Jamison wasn’t kidding. The guy was attractive.

And also, young.

From his clothing to his messy hair, everything about him made Evie not want to take him seriously. He looked like one of the local surfers her sister liked to date, rather than a federal agent ready to discuss murder.

But it was his eyes that changed her mind. They were an unsettling shade of brown that seamlessly melded into the black of his pupils. Oddly enough, it reminded her of a pet lizard Abe had when he was younger. The thing lived to



terrorize them and would hide in the nooks and crannies of Haven, studying them with its beady eyes.

Agent Cohen analyzed her the same way, immediately searching for strengths and weaknesses, so he could pounce at the right moment.

Samuel was right not to trust him.

“I’m sorry to keep you waiting,” she apologized, taking a seat on the couch between Annabeth and Jamison.

“It’s fine,” Ben assured her. He stood off to the side with Mathis. “Agent Cohen has a few questions for you girls.”

Simone sat in the corner wingback, and Samuel moved to sit next to Abe on the small sofa, both staying in her line of sight in case she needed to signal for help.

“I’ve caught everyone up on the case,” Cohen said, coming towards the couch. “I’m assuming someone has given you an explanation as to why I’m here?”

Evie nodded, and he took out a photo from the file in his hand, setting it on the coffee table in front of her. “What can you tell me about this painting?”

“Um, that’s me,” she stammered. “My mom painted it.”

“That’s a pretty formal dress for a small child. Was it a special occasion?”

She gave him a weak smile. “Mom and I went shopping one day, and I saw that ridiculous dress in a store window. I wanted it so badly, but she wouldn’t buy it, because she knew I

would only wear it once. I was kind of a brat back then and ran around the store until she agreed to get it. But the deal was that I had to pose for a portrait in it.”

“And did you?” Cohen asked. “Wear the dress again?”

“Ah, no,” she said, unsure if he was trying to get at something or attempting to put her at ease. “The crinoline scratched at my legs. I think that was probably the last dress I wore for a long time.”

Cohen withdrew a second photo from the file. This time, it was of the painting missing from her closet.

Evie took the picture from him. “My mom and I worked on this one together. Over here is the bayou,” she said, pointing to the background. “But those bright colors at the bottom are the gardens. Mom painted the bayou part, and I worked on the gardens. That’s why it’s just a bunch of blobs of color.”

She ran a finger over the four black smudges in the corner. “And that’s the boys. They were playing a game and kept running through the scene while we worked, so my mom added them to the picture.”

“What were they playing?”

“Football?”

Evie glanced over at Abe and Samuel for confirmation. Abe shrugged, and Samuel was too busy scowling at Agent Cohen to answer.

“Did you guys ever play tag?” Cohen asked, and kneeled, placing himself at her eye level across the table. He pulled a

phone from his pocket. “Or hide and seek?”

Samuel’s eyes narrowed. “Why are you asking?”

Cohen didn’t reply and continued to scroll through his phone. In the silence, Mathis heaved out a sigh. “I’m telling you, these paintings probably ended up in the pawn and flea market circuits, moving from one dealer to the next until they ended up in your neck of the woods, Agent Cohen.”

“A simple explanation to a complicated situation,” Cohen murmured with his sandy blond head lowered as he searched. “But I’m afraid there’s more to it than that.”

Finding what he was looking for, Cohen turned the phone toward Evie. “Does this mean anything to you?”

She leaned forward to get a better look, and Cohen tapped the image, zooming in. On the screen was the back of a canvas with four words scratched out in tidy black lettering.

**Tag! You’re it, Evie.**

“Do you recognize the handwriting?”

Ben and Samuel were across the room in seconds, peering over the agent’s shoulder. Cohen swiped at the image, and another photo appeared. The same words but scrawled on a different piece.

“What the hell is this?” Ben demanded.

Cohen kept his lizard eyes on her, waiting for a reaction. “Is this your mother’s handwriting?”

A memory that cut like glass and tasted of blood pressed in on the fringes of her mind. It begged for home and warned of games best not played.

*Run, run, run as fast as you can.*

“Ms. Eddins, do you recognize the handwriting?” Cohen asked again, setting the phone on the table.

Evie’s nails dug into her palms, absorbing the pain that would steady her mind. “No.”

“Does the phrase mean anything to you?”

“No, it doesn’t,” she said, digging her nails deeper. “I mean, no more than how you would traditionally use it.”

“Did you play tag as a kid?” Cohen asked, his eyes sliding to his left where a furious Samuel stood.

“Everyone played tag as a kid,” Samuel snapped, his anger radiating through the room. “Why the hell didn’t you show us this earlier?”

“Let the man ask his questions,” Jamison said, and Evie didn’t miss how Cohen’s attention wavered when her sister spoke. He’d glanced at her several times as he asked his questions, like he couldn’t quite figure her out.

“Who were they?” Jamison asked. “The women. What were their names?”

Agent Cohen opened his file, presenting them with four photos of happy women enjoying happy times. “Rachel Henderson, Morgan Albright, Lindsey Miles, and Christina

Porter.” He divided the pictures into pairs. “Ms. Henderson and Ms. Albright were roommates, as were Ms. Miles and Ms. Porter.”

They listened while Cohen told them of the victims. They were all college students in their early twenties. Lindsey Miles was an avid outdoors enthusiast, while her roommate, Christina, was an art student. Rachel Henderson had a sick grandmother she cared for on the weekends, and her best friend, Morgan Albright, was a shining star who never met a stranger.

“None of these women deserved what happened to them, and we want to find the person responsible before he does it again.”

Evie stared down at the women, understanding more than most, how much their families were suffering. The least she could do was hold it together long enough to help. “No, I don’t recognize the handwriting.”

Cohen brought forth a photo clipped to some paperwork. The image showed a feminine bedroom, with polished cream-tinted furniture. A large, jewel-embellished bed sat along the back wall, framed by two tall windows covered in gauzy curtains. Between the windows was her mother’s bayou painting, hanging haphazardly over the bed. Its shadowed color scheme clashed with the rest of the room, drawing Evie’s attention to it at once.

Below the painting, streaks of red branched downward with scattered splotches and splatters of crimson littering the wall.

In the center, the distinct outline of a handprint could be seen.

From there, the color flowed to the duvet, where it pooled into parallel lines of scarlet, stretching from the bed to the door and past a sheet-covered chair.

Annabeth gasped and turned away, but Jamison sat so far forward, she was practically on the floor.

Evie stared at the photo, transfixed, forcing her mind to accept what it was seeing. At the edge of the frame, a colorless and mangled foot peeked out from under the sheet, and if she didn't know any better, she would swear its toes wiggled.

*Run, run, run as fast as you can.*

## CHAPTER 27

# LIAM

“Was she dragged to the bed or from it?” Jamison Fairweather asked, picking up one of the photos laid on the table.

Tapping down the impulse to glance in her direction yet again, Liam answered with his focus on Evie Eddins. He wasn't going to get much more time with her. The two men towering above him would see to that. “From the bed.”

“That much blood loss would've killed her. And those pause points in the blood pattern make it look like she stopped as she moved across the carpet,” Jamison remarked. “The guy who did this wouldn't have been weak. He took out two girls by himself. So, that means she dragged herself across the floor while he watched, and then he raped her as she bled out.”

His self-restraint broke and Liam's gaze flicked to Jamison for a nanosecond. “That's a line of thought we're following.”

Since arriving at Haven House, Liam had tumbled down a rabbit hole he couldn't claw his way out of. There were more questions than answers in this place. After he and Mathis got

out of the car, Liam had taken a moment to stare up at the behemoth antebellum style home. “Are you sure we’re still in Florida?”

The detective laughed. “The Fairweathers brought that good ole Georgian eccentricity with them when they built here.”

Liam nodded towards the body of water in the distance, recognizing it from one of his paintings. “Is that a lake?”

“Shepherd’s Bayou,” Mathis told him. “It connects to the Intracoastal. The original Fairweathers used it to ship lumber from the mill into Port Michaelson for processing.”

The inky brown reeds of the marsh across the inlet waved from the shore, and behind them, a thick line of pine guarded what lay beyond. “What’s over there?”

“Nothing, except critters that will eat you.”

Liam hoped he was joking and walked with the detective to the porch where a woman waited. Mathis introduced her as Simone Howard.

“Welcome to Haven House, Agent Cohen,” Simone said, her voice as smooth as her skin. She was in her late fifties, but without a wrinkle in sight. “Please come in.”

Inside the home, the foyer was much smaller than Liam expected, flowing into a wide hallway that led to what looked like a kitchen at the far end of the house.

Overhead, a chandelier glinted in the sunlight. “That’s beautiful.”



Simone Howard's polite smile affixed to her lips softened. "You should try cleaning it."

A car door shut out front, and she guided them into a room on their right. "If you don't mind, I'm going to have you wait in the library. Ben will join you shortly."

The door closed in her exit, and while they waited, Liam examined the various titles sitting on the wall-to-wall bookshelves. Mathis found a seat in a chair across from the room's desk, like he knew exactly where they expected him to wait.

A man entered minutes later, and had to be none other than Benjamin Fairweather. His presence rippled with authority, instantly dominating the room. A younger version of Fairweather, who exuded the same commanding force, accompanied him.

Mathis made introductions as Ben Fairweather sat behind the desk. Simone returned and stood next to him while Fairweather's son leaned against the fireplace mantel. This presentation of a unified front sent Liam's mind into motion, generating so many questions that he didn't know where to begin.

Thanking them for meeting with him on such short notice, he reviewed the details of the case, omitting the newly discovered writing on the back of the paintings. It was a message meant for Evangeline Eddins, and Liam wanted to be the one who delivered it.

The Fairweathers and Ms. Howard listened to him with disassociated ears, showing no emotion while he spoke. The lack of response annoyed Liam, and he decided that perhaps a visual aid might help.

“This is Morgan Albright.” Liam sat in the chair next to Mathis and placed an autopsy photo on the desk in front of Ben Fairweather. The picture showed the upper remains of a young woman on an examination table, empty eye sockets gaping wide. “He removed her eyes and legs, then raped her repeatedly. Before and after death.”

Simone Howard covered her mouth and retreated to the opposite end of the room. The Fairweathers, both father and son, viewed each photo Liam presented with the proper amount of shocked horror and disgust.

“We have two crime scenes with two victims at each scene,” Liam continued. “From what we’ve pieced together, it seems he makes one girl watch the other’s demise. The first girl is tied to a chair and placed at the foot of the bed, where the killer does his work. When he’s finished, she’s then strangled to death. He rapes her before he kills her but doesn’t disfigure the first victim like he does the second.”

Ben Fairweather shuffled through each photo, flipping one at a time, in slow order. “The scenes are identical in their execution,” Liam said. “The victims also match in their likeness. But the third connection is in the paintings.”

Liam passed him the photo of the Porter and Miles bedroom. “No one knows where they came from, and if you

look here, you can see how out of place the piece appears in the room. It's what caught my attention."

Samuel Fairweather had moved to stand next to his father's side, taking Simone Howard's place. "What do you need from us?"

"I'd like to interview anyone connected to the break-in or Laura Jean Eddins."

Benjamin Fairweather laid the pictures face down on the desk. "And ask them what, exactly?"

The man was clearly sickened by what he'd seen and heard, but his tone suggested he might not be willing to help.

"I'm more than happy to speak with you, Agent Cohen," Simone spoke up, fanning her face. "Laura Jean was my best friend. I'll help in any way I can." She directed a pointed look at the Fairweathers. "We all will."

One might need a road map, as Mathis suggested, to follow their ties, but you needed a degree in psychology to interpret the hierarchy of the household. The familial dynamic playing out in the room was completely fascinating to Liam.

Ben relented, losing the silent battle Simone Howard had won with a single look. "How do you want to start?"

"I'd like to start with Evangeline Eddins."

"No," Samuel said, with enough force that Liam raised an eyebrow. "You'll start with us."

Simone returned to her spot behind the desk, shuffling Samuel towards the door. “What he means, is that Evie won’t be back until tonight. She works in Hollingsdale and gets off at five.”

Speaking to the younger Fairweather in a low voice, she sent him from the room. “Samuel’s going to see what he can do about getting her home earlier to speak with you.”

Impressed, Liam made a note to never underestimate this woman. Simone garnered enough respect here that men like the Fairweathers listened when she spoke.

And Liam had no idea why.

Ben leaned back in his chair. “I’ll allow you to talk to the family, but I have conditions,” he said. “First, you’ll show no one any of the photos of the bodies. None of them need to have that in their heads. And second, if any of them become upset, you’ll not push them to continue. Annabeth Howard has issues that are being addressed. She’s doing well, and we don’t want to hinder the progress made.”

“I can do that,” Liam replied, with no intention of following Fairweather’s rules. The man’s arrogance was astounding. “I’m not here to upset anyone.”

“And our Evie is prone to panic attacks ever since her mother passed,” Simone added. “The break-in rattled her, and she’s not been herself.”

“I understand, and since Ms. Eddins is unavailable currently, I’d like to go over some information about Laura

Jean Eddins. Can you provide me with a photo of her?"

"Why?" Ben asked, but Simone was already rummaging through the shelves.

"I had copies made of some old pictures recently," she said, coming over with a photo album. She slid a picture loose from the binding. "You can have this one."

The image featured Ben Fairweather, twenty years younger, with his arm wrapped around the shoulders of a stunning blond woman who rested back on his chest. The couple posed under one of the giant oaks on Haven's lawn, and in the woman's arms was a toddler girl whose wide smile overwhelmed her face, lifting her chubby cheeks high enough to cover her eyes. Tufts of pale hair shot out of the little girl's head with a tiny bow hanging on for dear life in the center.

Three more children surrounded the couple. Another girl, about seven or eight, stood shoeless in the grass by the woman. The girl's tongue was sticking out at the serious looking boy next to Ben, and the camera had caught the boy mid-eye roll with the beginnings of a smile on his lips. Between them was the third child. He was older, with darker skin and a full head of curly hair. The older boy was doubled over, holding his stomach while he laughed at the other children's antics.

"That's Laura Jean, Jamison, and Evie." Simone pointed to the beautiful woman, baby, and the wild, shoeless girl. "Then the boy on the left is Samuel, and the one in the middle is my Selah."

Ben leaned forward to look. “Is that the summer Selah grew his hair out?”

“Mmm-hmm.” Simone nudged Liam’s shoulder. “He’s almost as bald as the day is long now. The child could never figure out how to handle his curls, so he shaved them off when he was in high school.”

“I don’t think we ever took a decent photo together,” Ben said, his face softening. “Either Selah wouldn’t stop laughing, or Jamison was crying.” He nodded at Evie and Samuel. “And don’t get me started on those two.”

“You have a beautiful family, Mr. Fairweather.”

“Why did you want to see her?”

“I needed to know if her appearance matched any of the victims,” Liam told him honestly. “We can’t ignore any trace of a commonality.”

“And is there any?”

“Two of them had light blond hair, like Ms. Eddins, but that seems to be it,” Liam replied, slipping the photo into his file. “Would you mind telling me how she died?”

“I explained about the car accident, and the complications from it,” Mathis interrupted, speaking for the first time since their arrival. “It’s amazing what doctors can overlook, even when all the signs are there.”

Liam opened his mouth to ask further questions, but the library door swung open with a crash, and what was possibly the most beautiful woman on earth appeared in the doorway.

She was tall, almost as tall as he was, with pale blond hair and emerald eyes.

Looking down her pert nose at him, she examined Liam from his head to his toes and back up again. “Who are you?”

Ben sighed heavily. “Agent Cohen, may I present my daughter Jamison.”

Liam stood to shake her hand but tripped on the leg of his chair. “Uh, hi,” he said, after regaining his footing. “Nice to meet you.”

“And why are you here, Agent Cohen?”

“Uh-um...,” he stuttered, slightly mesmerized. “I’m here about a case I’m working that might have a connection to Heaven.”

Her red lips twitched. “Heaven?”

“Haven,” Liam corrected himself, quickly. “A connection to Haven House.”

He sat back down, humiliated, and hoping she would leave.

She didn’t.

“What kind of case?”

“We’ll discuss it when Evie gets home,” Ben said. “Go wait with Annabeth in the kitchen.”

Ignoring her father, she sat on the desk directly across from Liam. “Agent Cohen.” Jamison rolled his name around in her perfect mouth. “What’s your first name?”

Staring up at her, Liam drew a blank. “William,” he managed after a minute. “But I go by Liam.”

Her face lit up with excitement. “It is you! Your father is Dr. William Cohen!”

Liam’s heart sank.

“I’ve read everything your dad has ever published. I’ve even tackled his research papers. And, of course, I’m a huge fan of his podcast. Just the other day he was saying how proud he was of the work you’re doing at the Bureau. He talks about you all the time,” she gushed. “Is it true that you’ve been helping him build profiles since you were fifteen?”

Was he in hell? Because where else would he discover that the most beautiful woman on earth was also one of his father’s groupies.

“Thirteen, actually.”

“Forgive my daughter,” Ben interrupted, giving Jamison a light shove off the desk. “She has morbid interests.”

Jamison’s chin lifted. “Agent Cohen’s father is the top serial killer hunter in the United States. He saves lives.”

“He’s really just a psychologist,” Liam replied. “My father doesn’t hunt anyone. That’s law enforcement’s job. All my dad does is give the authorities a guide to the type of person who might commit certain crimes.”

Mathis studied him with renewed interest. “What does he say about the case you’re working on?”



“My father’s retired,” Liam said, praying the well informed Jamison Fairweather would leave it at that. “He and my mom bought several acres in Virginia last year and are enjoying a quiet life.”

“So, what’s your case about?” Jamison asked. “And what does it have to do with us?”

“Dammit Jamison, I said to go outside,” Ben snapped.

Not moving, Jamison waited for him to answer, and Liam was unsure of what to say. He didn’t want to piss Ben Fairweather off and deter him from helping.

“Go outside, baby,” Simone said, gently. “We’re almost done.”

With a roll of her eyes, Jamison hopped off the desk, and Liam marked yet another impressive hit for the lady of the house. “I came in here because Samuel said to tell you that Abe is on his way, but he can’t locate Evie,” she said, heading for the door. “I tried calling her assistant, but he won’t put us through because she’s in a meeting.”

Ben and Simone excused themselves and in their hasty departure, they left the library door open. From his position, Liam saw an enormous, framed mural hanging in the hallway. “Is that another painting by Ms. Eddins?”

Mathis craned his neck to see. “Yes, that’s Laura Jean’s work.”

Liam got up to get a better look. The painting was of Haven House, created in a similar style to the work found at the crime

scenes. Laura Jean Eddins had captured the majestic elegance of the estate but managed to include tiny reminders that Haven was a home more than anything. There were cats on the porch, and a kite dead in the yard. A tire swing hung from a tree branch, and out on the bayou, a small skiff floated on the water. The cottages were painted in bright colors, and the one on the end, nearest the forest, even had a little garden of its own out front.

And like in the bayou painting, there were wisps of gray and black dotting the scene. Liam counted nine total.

Standing in front of the painting, he could overhear the conversation taking place in the kitchen. They were discussing Evangeline Eddins, and from the corner of his eye, Liam saw Jamison standing next to a woman who he assumed was Simone's daughter.

Annabeth Howard's face pinched with concern over whatever was being said. The woman was tiny, and almost fragile looking. "She has a date with Lucas tonight," she was saying, tucking a strand of short, wavy hair behind her ear. "But I'm not sure at which restaurant."

"I know where she is," Samuel said, blatantly annoyed. "I'll go and bring her stubborn ass home."

"God, Samuel, you're such a killjoy," Jamison scoffed. "Evie is fine. There's nothing wrong with wanting a little privacy. Besides, they might not be eating dinner at all." She shared a smile with Annabeth. "Or maybe he's eating, and she's the main course."

Simone knocked Jamison's arm, telling her to hush. The argument went on, and while it did, the front door opened at the opposite end of the hall.

A man in a wheelchair entered. "You must be the FBI agent that's got everyone all in a tizzy," he said, rolling forward. He grinned, nodding towards the raised voices coming from the kitchen. "Welcome to the crazy house. I'm Abe Howard."

Liam's brain hardly registered what the man was saying, because it was somersaulting through a myriad of theories. He had victims with their lower legs removed, and no one thought to mention that a member of the household was in a wheelchair?

Samuel's heavy footsteps approached. "I can't get in touch with Evie, but we know where she is, so I'm going to get her." He halted when he saw Liam gaping at Abe. "Is there a problem?"

"I think I scared him," Abe whispered loudly to Samuel.

Liam snapped out of his daze. "How long have you been in a wheelchair?"

"Most of my life."

Liam's head whipped to Samuel. "You didn't think to mention that you have a wheelchair bound individual living here when I have two victims with trauma to the lower extremities?"

Realization dawned on Samuel, and he let out a curse under his breath. "Abe, I think Agent Cohen would like to have a

word with you.”

“By the way he’s looking at me, I think he wants to buy me dinner, too.” Abe leaned forward in his chair and winked at Liam. “I’ll have you know, sir, that I am not a cheap date.”

“Come on,” Samuel said, leading them back into the library. “Let’s get this over with.”

When they entered, Mathis was still in his same chair, waiting.

“We’re having trouble locating Evie. Go help my father,” Samuel ordered, and the detective obediently did as he was told. “And shut the door on your way out.”

Abe parked his chair next to one of the room’s couches. “Did you want to sit on the couch?” Samuel asked, grabbing Liam’s file from the desk.

“Nah, I’m good,” Abe replied. “But can someone please tell me what’s going on?”

Without asking for permission, Samuel read through the file, relaying it all openly to Abe. Now and then, Abe would ask something, and Samuel would answer before Abe completed the question.

“Are you two related?” They were obviously close, but Liam had left Mathis’ file in the car and wasn’t sure who belonged to who anymore.

“No,” Abe answered. “We share a brother, but we’re not related.”

“But you lived together growing up?”

Samuel shook his head. “I spent a few weeks here during the summers, and sometimes the occasional holiday, until my sophomore year of college.” Closing the file, he relaxed back on the chair that was almost too small for him. “Now tell me, Agent Cohen, what in the hell is going on?”

Samuel Fairweather didn’t seem like the type of guy who would take an evasive answer, so Liam was open with him. “At first, I thought the paintings were a weird coincidence.”

“And now you don’t.”

“Not necessarily,” Liam said. “There’s still a high probability that it is only a coincidence.”

“And if it’s not?”

“Then coming here was the right decision.”

Samuel nodded, satisfied with the answer. “Ask Abe your questions.”

Liam covered the basic points in Abe’s life. From his daily routine to his dating history, which was vast. Halfway through the interview, Simone came in and stood quietly in the corner.

“I know it sounds cliché, but do you have any enemies?”

Abe grinned. “I’m a pretty likable guy.”

There was a knock at the door, and Jamison stuck her head inside. “I talked to her.”

Samuel, along with Simone, hurried from the room, leaving Liam alone with Abe. “You stated earlier that you had been in

a wheelchair most of your life. How did it happen?”

Abe moved his leg, showing he wasn't completely immobile. “The day my dad died, I got hurt,” he mumbled. “The damage was permanent.”

“I'm very sorry,” Liam said with sincerity. These people had rotten luck. “You guys seem to know a great deal about loss.”

Big brown eyes no longer filled with laughter met Liam's. “You have no idea.”

Samuel came back with his father and Mathis in tow. Abe's interview continued, and the group allowed him to speak without interrupting. They were in the middle of discussing an upcoming project Abe was taking on, when Annabeth knocked at the door to tell them Evie was home.

“Why don't we move into the parlor,” Simone had suggested. “We'll need more space once the girls join us.”

As everyone transferred to the room across the hall, Liam noticed Samuel hung back, slipping up the stairs when he thought no one was watching. When he returned, Evie Eddins was with him, and the younger Fairweather kept an aggressively watchful eye on her.

Beyond intrigued by the behavior, Liam had presented Evie with the gory crime scene photo, not only to see her reaction, but to see Samuel's response, should she become distressed.

And the man did not disappoint.

“That's enough,” Samuel said, snatching the photo from Jamison. “We're done here.”

“I’m okay,” Evie said, though she clearly was not. Liam had been in the room with her for less than twenty minutes and even he could tell that she was on the verge of breaking down. “We can keep going.”

“No.”

The finality in Samuel’s voice had the color returning to Evie’s cheeks, almost as if a switch had been flipped. “Whether or not I continue isn’t up to you,” she yelled at him.

“The hell it’s not,” Samuel shouted back.

Eyes wide, Liam stood. What in the hell was up with these two?

“Enough,” Ben ordered, and turned to Liam with an apologetic smile. “I think we’re done for tonight. Can we begin again in the morning?”

“Sure,” Liam answered, continuing to watch Samuel and Evie. The latter was on her feet, moving around the table to stand toe-to-toe with Samuel.

Annabeth stepped in front of him, blocking his view. “I would say it’s been lovely meeting you, Agent Cohen, but it wasn’t,” she laughed, attempting to distract him. “Would it be alright if I go first tomorrow? I want to get my interview over with.”

“Not a problem.” Liam strained to see over her head, which wasn’t hard considering how short she was. “Will nine tomorrow morning work?”

Abe picked up the file from the table and slapped it on Liam's stomach. "Would you like a tour of the grounds tomorrow?" he asked. "I'm sure Jamison would love to show you around."

At the mention of Jamison, Liam turned away from the boiling brawl about to take place and found said woman standing next to him. This close to her, his brain went fuzzy. "Yeah," he finally got out. "I'd like to see where they found the necklace."

"We can arrange that." Ben clapped a hand on his shoulder, guiding Liam into the foyer where Mathis waited. "Right, Jamison?"

"Absolutely," she replied, tagging along with her father.

The twins and Simone joined them. "Goodnight, Agent Cohen," Simone said, closing the parlor door, leaving Samuel and Evie alone. "We'll see you in the morning."

He told her goodnight over his shoulder as he was hustled out onto the porch.

"Where are you staying while you're in town?" Ben asked.

"I have a hotel over in Port Michaelson."

Fairweather shook his head. "That's over forty minutes away."

Jamison snuggled against her father's arm. "We can do better than that," she said, batting her eyes at Ben. "Can't we?"



“Yes, I think we can.” Ben smiled at her with genuine affection. This guy was a sucker for his daughter. “There are a set of townhomes in our development nearby that we use for colleagues visiting the area. It’s right on the beach, across the highway from here, and you’re more than welcome to stay there.”

Jamison bit down on her bottom lip. “Or you can stay here. Then you could have total unrestricted access to us.”

Any other time, unrestricted access to Jamison Fairweather would be a dream come true, but Liam couldn’t afford the distraction. “A townhouse on the beach sounds amazing.”

## CHAPTER 28

# *Evie*

**T**he door clicked closed behind Simone, and Evie pointed a finger in Samuel's face. "Who in the hell do you think you are? I was fine."

Samuel latched onto her wrist, flipping her palm upwards to expose the crescent marks left behind by her nails. "Is that so?"

"You don't get to decide what's too much for me." She ripped her hand free of his hold. "That's my call, not yours."

"What could you see in the photo?" he asked with that detached calm of his, making her even more furious. "Cohen was told not to let you three see any pictures of the bodies."

"A room with blood everywhere, and my mom's painting in the center of it." Evie wasn't about to mention hallucinating for a second and seeing the toes wiggling. "There was something covered by a sheet in the corner, too."

"Cohen is a sneaky bastard. Don't let his appearance fool you."

Needing distance from him, Evie went to the window to peek through the side of the curtain at Cohen on the porch talking with Ben. “I don’t like his eyes,” she admitted. “But I get why Jamison thinks he’s hot.”

Samuel sank into the corner wingback. “She’ll have to contact her professors in the morning,” he said, talking more to himself than her. “I’m not going to let her go back and forth to Hollingsdale alone.”

Of course, Samuel’s first thought in all of this was how he could control the situation.

“That’s not fair. She only has a few weeks left, and they might not let her complete the courses off campus.”

“If there’s a problem, I’ll take care of it.”

“Oh, I’m sure you will,” she snickered, turning back to him.

“And I expect you to call your office in the morning and put in for time off.”

Evie’s stomach dropped. She needed to work. Not for the money, but for the routine it provided. Maintaining a schedule helped.

“No.”

His face darkened. “This is not up for debate.”

“You’re not taking my job away from me.”

“It’s for the best.”

“The best for who? You?” she yelled, her hands fisting at her sides. “So, you can get off thinking you have control over

me, too?”

Samuel bolted out of the chair, charging toward her with a pulsating anger that shook his entire being. “Those women were raped and tortured, and then the sick fuck took out their eyes and cut off their legs.”

An enraged Samuel was a beast to behold. Most people would cower where they stood, but Evie held her ground. “I said no.”

“That wasn’t your mother’s handwriting.” He continued to crowd her, snarling at her defiance. “Did you recognize it? Because I certainly didn’t.”

“That doesn’t mean it wasn’t hers.”

His fury crackled like lightning in the room. “We don’t know what’s going on, and until we do, I’ll do what’s necessary to keep you safe.”

The concern in his voice was there for only one reason, and it sickened her as much as Cohen’s photos. “Ugh, could you please stop.”

Samuel’s brows furrowed in confusion. “Excuse me?”

“You’ve made your point, but it’s time to end this.”

“What exactly are we ending?”

“This.” Evie waved a hand between them. “I can’t maneuver this thing with you and focus on what’s happening. I get that you want us to sleep together, but there’s no need to

put forth so much effort. You can stop pretending that you care about what happens to me.”

The pain in his eyes that had been there the other night when she'd said those horrible things returned. But there was something else with it this time.

Fear.

“The only one here pretending is you,” he said thickly. “You want me as much as I want you.”

Evie let out a self-deprecating laugh. “Oh my God, it doesn't take a genius to figure that out.”

An arrogant smile of triumph spread across his face, the pain that had been there a minute ago vanishing. “I knew it.”

“Is that what you needed to hear to make you stop?” she sighed, suddenly exhausted. “Samuel, I have loved you my whole life, but I'm not goi—”

There was no time to react. One second, Evie was standing on her own two feet, but in the next, her back was against the wall with Samuel's body pressing into hers.

“Say it again.”

“What is wrong with you?” she sputtered, gaping up at him. “What did I say?”

Samuel's hand cradled her cheek. “Tell me you love me again,” he rasped, the rawness in his voice breaking through to her. “Please.”

The please was her undoing. One little word was all it took for her to sail right off the map of Samuel and Evie, and into the land of monsters. It was like a free fall. An exhilarating drop into a place where the unknown beckoned, and the promise of the forbidden waited.

Samuel leaned in, their breaths mingling as his lips hovered over hers. This close, she could taste him on her tongue, and something deep in the depths of her soul sighed.

*At last.*

*At last, she'd lost.*

*At last, the game was over.*

*At last, she was going to take what she wanted.*

The wall around her heart splintered, drowning the doubt. “Of course, I love you,” she whispered, allowing herself this one moment of truth. “How have you not figured that out yet?”

The shred of restraint Samuel was holding onto snapped, and his lips crashed into hers. For a split second, Evie stood frozen, but when the surprise wore off, every fiber of her being came alive, and she buried her fingers in his hair.

He groaned at the ease of her acceptance, and she parted her lips, allowing her tongue to meet each thrust of his with one of her own. There was no hesitation between them, no distrust or wariness. Only instinct and an overwhelming sense of rightness.

“You drive me in-fucking-sane,” he grated out.

Evie nipped at his bottom lip. “You wouldn’t want it any other way.”

“Hell no.” His dark head lowered to the delicate hollow of her neck, his teeth scraping over her skin as he lay kisses. “But you’re out of your damn mind if you think I’m not going to do everything in my power to protect you.”

Evie shivered, the coiling heat threatening to shatter her. They were fully clothed, and technically only kissing, but this was more intoxicating than all her other sexual experiences combined.

With a swift tug on his hair, she forced him to look at her. “And you’re out of your damn mind if you think I’m going to agree to anything.”

Uninterested in arguing, Samuel captured her lips again, and looped an arm around her waist, dragging her lower half over the impossible thickness of him. His arousal made her see stars, muting the rest of the world.

“I want that,” she whimpered, opening her legs for him.

Samuel grunted and thrust forward, slamming her into the wall. “And you’re so going to fucking get it.”

A sharp knock at the door had them scrambling apart. “Jesus Christ, get a hold of yourselves. You sound like a couple of cats in heat,” Simone hissed through the door. “They’re on their way back inside.”

Evie’s eyes went wide. “Oh my God,” she panted, trying to get herself under control. “They could hear us.”

“That would be you she heard,” Samuel whispered back, his chest rising and falling as heavily as hers. “You’re noisy when you’re turned on.”

“I wasn’t the only one making noise.”

Samuel rested his forehead on hers, still trying to control his breathing. “Unlike you, I don’t care if they catch us. It’s not like we can hide this. I won, and the world needs to know.”

“You didn’t win.”

“I beg to disagree.”

Evie gave him a lopsided grin. “By the time I’m done with you, Samuel Fairweather, you will be begging.”

“I already told you I would.” His smile twisted into something wicked. “Shall I get on my knees now?” he asked, running his tongue over the seam of her lips. “There’s a sturdy lock on the parlor door, and if you promise to be quiet this time, we can test the theory that says the tongue is the strongest muscle in the body.”

Evie blinked at him, her brain misfiring. She wanted to say yes. Actually, she wanted to scream yes. No man had ever offered her that before, and here Samuel was, ready to stop, drop, and lick less than two seconds after their first kiss.

But reality was already settling in. If she wasn’t careful, she might end up with a ninety-day expiration date like the rest of his women. “We need to cool it down. I don’t want to rush this.”



Black brows shot upward, disappearing under the strands of loose hair hanging over his forehead. “*This* has been brewing for years. That’s about as slow as you can get.”

Evie winced. That was something else she would need to be careful of. “Can we not discuss the past?”

The teasing glint in his eyes faded, and Samuel straightened, shaking his head. The absence of his heat felt wrong in every way, and she struggled not to chase after it.

“I want us to be totally open with one another, and there are things you need to know,” he said. “We’re not finally doing this with secrets hanging over our heads.”

The sound of the front door closing gave Evie’s heart a nervous jolt. Ben and Jamison’s muffled voices carried in from the foyer. “And what about them?” she asked. “How are they going to take this?”

Samuel shrugged as if he didn’t care. “What exactly do you think they’ll do? Disown us?”

“I don’t know.”

His eyes searched hers. “I know it’s hard, but think about how this would have played out if your father were alive. My dad would’ve encouraged me to go after the daughter of his closest friend.”

It was nearly impossible for Evie to imagine a world where her mother and Ben were never together. But Samuel had a point. “Maybe you’re right.”

“I’m always right.”

The corner of Evie's mouth curved upward at his ego that knew no bounds. "What about Jamison?"

"She's an adult, and if she can't accept us, that's her problem."

"You can't think like that. She's our sister." Hearing her own words, Evie grimaced. "Oh my God, we are so screwed up."

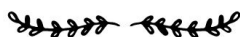
Samuel nodded solemnly. "We'll probably end up on one of those daytime talk shows."

"Be serious."

"I am serious," he said, feigning innocence. "When we're cut off and disowned, you and I can work the talk show circuit for money."

"Stop," she ordered, grinning at him. "This could cause a rift between them and us, damaging our whole family."

"It could," he acknowledged, and went in for another kiss, but this time, it was soft and gentle. "But I swear, it'll be worth it."



"I agree with Samuel," Ben said when they all gathered in the kitchen after Mathis and Cohen's departure. "Everyone needs to stay close to home."

Evie motioned to the three men in the room. "Are any of you taking a leave of absence?"

“Abe will take a day or two off, and I’m planning on sticking around here tomorrow while Cohen is around,” Ben replied.

“Well, maybe I can take a day off, but nothing more,” Evie said.

“No.” Samuel stood in the corner with his arms crossed. “You’re going to take time off until they catch this guy.”

“And you’ll be doing the same?”

“That’s not possible.”

Evie gritted her teeth. Before sneaking out of the parlor, she pressured him into agreeing that they should wait to talk to Ben and Jamison. To say he hadn’t been happy with the idea was an understatement, and the compromise had made him exceedingly difficult to deal with. Even more so than usual.

“It’s not possible for me either. Your work is no more important than mine.”

“But it wasn’t my name written on the back of those paintings.”

Glaring at him, Evie lifted her chin while he scowled at her for arguing. The second part of their compromise was getting him to accept that she wanted to take the physical side of their relationship slow, using Lucas and Gretchen as an excuse. She had no interest in playing the part of the other woman.

And while Samuel’s persuasion tactics were top tier, she’d held strong, and he agreed in the end, making him even more grumpy.

The others continued with the conversation, and when Samuel was sure no one was looking, he tossed her a wink, making Evie blush. Averting her eyes, and already regretting her idea of staying out of his bed, she tried to focus on what was being said.

“I’m more than happy to stay home,” Jamison was saying. “Liam needs a tour guide.”

“I invited him to stay at the townhouses,” Ben told Simone.

She nodded. “Ty will keep an eye on him.”

Jamison’s head whirled between the two, her brow creased in bewilderment. “Did you only invite him so you could monitor him?”

The room went quiet. All of them knew the lengths Ben would go to stay ahead of something that might be a threat. As the youngest, Jamison hadn’t learned that lesson yet.

“The guy never told us about the writing on the back of the painting until he had Evie in front of him,” Abe tried to explain. “Cohen wanted to make her squirm.”

Jamison shrugged. “That’s a normal tactic they use.”

“He didn’t have to show us those photos of the room either,” Annabeth said with a shiver. “Did you not see the body in the corner?”

Jamison opened her mouth to argue, but Ben cut her off. “And he did it after I specifically told him not to.”

“Not everyone is obligated to obey the commands of a Fairweather.” Jamison rose from her seat at the kitchen table, turning to Evie. “You weren’t upset. Tell him what Cohen did wasn’t that big of a deal, and they shouldn’t automatically go on the defensive.”

Evie chewed on her lower lip. “We don’t know what this guy is thinking, Jamison.”

“Cohen took one look at Abe and freaked,” Samuel pointed out. “It’s obvious he thinks there’s a connection between Abe being in a wheelchair and the whole leg removal thing. For now, we need to be careful when dealing with him. I don’t want any false accusations floating around.”

Jamison spun to face him. “He’s trying to help find the person who killed those girls. You just don’t understand his methods.”

“And neither do you,” Samuel said, his voice rising. “You’re not some crime expert just because you’ve watched a couple of documentaries. Cohen was in this house all afternoon, and he never once mentioned a message on the back of those paintings. He wanted to see Evie upset.”

Jamison let out a frustrated growl at her brother and stalked from the kitchen, her pounding footsteps retreating down the hall.

“You handled that beautifully,” Simone snickered. “Why don’t we do something productive and call Mathis. Let him give us an opinion on this, Agent Cohen. He might not be much help, but Frank is better than nothing.”

“I’d like to know what Mathis thinks, too.” Abe had been shaken by the agent’s interest in him. “As Samuel said, I don’t want to be blamed for something I didn’t do, just because I’m in this damn chair.”

Ben squeezed Abe’s shoulder. “Frank is driving Cohen back into Port Michaelson to pick up his car, they should be there by now.”

“Then we’ll call Selah and fill him in,” Samuel said, knowing that alone would make Abe feel better.

The men headed down the hall to the media room. “Jamison will be the key in dealing with Cohen,” Annabeth whispered. “If he comes after Ab—”

Simone held up a hand for her to stay silent until the men were out of earshot. “We have to shove her into his orbit,” she said when they were gone. “Without her realizing we’re pushing.”

Evie sat next to them at the table. “Did you see how he looked at her?” she asked. “It won’t be a problem getting him to take the bait.”

“Annabeth, go upstairs and get her talking about him,” Simone said. “Make her more excited than she already is, and tomorrow we’ll have her stick to him like glue.”

A pang of guilt struck Evie. “She won’t like it.”

“It doesn’t matter, the seed is planted,” Simone replied. “The attraction is there, and he’ll allow her to get close, which

means she can pull him back on track if he gets the wrong idea about us.”

Like Ben, Simone would take the necessary steps to keep the family safe.

“Relieve me in a few minutes,” Annabeth said to Evie as she got up from the table. “I’ve already heard enough while we waited for you to get home.”

When Annabeth left, Simone leaned across the table to whisper at Evie. “Spill it.”

Evie scrunched up her face, fighting a fit of giggles. “He kissed me,” she mouthed.

“Sounded like more than that going on in there.” Simone fanned herself in the cool kitchen. “What are you going to do about it?”

“I told him I wanted to keep it quiet until the FBI agent was gone.”

“That’s reasonable.”

“And I said I wanted to take things slow,” Evie told her, blushing. “Physically, I mean.”

Hysterical laughter shook Simone for a solid minute. “Good luck with that,” she said, wiping the tears from her eyes.

“Patience is not a virtue of Fairweather men. They take what they want, when they want, and you’ll find that they can be very persuasive.”

## CHAPTER 29

# LIAM

Getting out of his rental car, the thunderous roar of the gulf greeted Liam. Salty, humid air clung to his skin, making him sticky all over.

A man waited on the sidewalk in front of the row of townhouses. “It’ll calm in a bit. There’s a storm offshore, but it’ll slide on by and miss us,” he said, holding out his hand as Liam approached. “I’m Ty, Simone’s brother. I live two doors down.”

Liam shook his hand. “Agent William Cohen.

Ty squinted, taking him in. “Are you sure you’re old enough to be in the FBI?” he asked, leaning heavily on a cane. “You can’t be over eighteen.”

“Would you like to see my badge?” Liam replied, smiling politely. “I have it right here.”

Ty waved him off. “Nah, I’m sure you’re what you say you are.” He shifted his weight awkwardly with the cane to pull a key from his pocket. “Ben would’ve dealt with you by now if you weren’t.”



Not knowing how to take that statement, Liam let it go.  
“Where can I get something to eat around here?”

“Firewater ain’t got much yet by way of food. The closest restaurant or grocery store is over in Port Michaelson,” Ty said, handing him the key. “But don’t you worry, my wife put some things in the fridge. There’s enough to get you through tonight and tomorrow.”

“I appreciate it.”

The older man nodded, shuffling to turn around. His lanky body moved stiffly, and he paused briefly to gain his bearings. “Dee’s got a good heart. My girl enjoys taking care of other people.”

“Do you need some help getting back to your place?”

Ty made his way slowly down the sidewalk. “No, sir,” he said over his shoulder. “But holler if you need anything.”

Unlocking the front door, Liam dumped his bag in the entryway. The townhome was much larger than what it appeared from the street, with a full kitchen and big living space. It had a home office on the ground floor, and two suites upstairs. He claimed the one with the balcony overlooking the beach as his.

From the sliding glass door, Liam took a moment to watch the white capped waves lash against the shore. On his drive over, he’d taken a quick tour of the development, noting the homes of Fairweather and his son. Samuel Fairweather’s house was a contemporary design, all straight lines and sharp

edges in impeccable order. Very much a reflection of its owner.

The father's beachside mansion was the exact opposite. Benjamin Fairweather had created an oasis for the rich here, and his home showcased the opulence of Firewater in the grandest way possible.

The house sat on what was probably the equivalent of three lots, with stone walls taking up every square inch. It was nothing short of a castle by the sea, complete with two turrets, and an exterior spiral staircase that led to an open-air landing on the westerly side of the home. High arch glass windows overlooked the land in every direction, and Liam wondered if the whimsical nature of the design had anything to do with his late artist's influence.

After unpacking, he spread the contents of his files on the kitchen table. It would take hours to sort through the data provided by Mathis and catalog it properly with his own.

While he worked, Liam called Hawkins and gave him an update.

"Check in after the interviews are complete," Hawkins said, seemingly unimpressed with what Liam had learned. "I have my own interviews to conduct tomorrow. A person of interest has been located. A truck driver that is registered as being in the area during both murders."

"Does he have any connection in Florida?"

Hawkins hung up before answering, and Liam shook his head at his superior's lack of professionalism. He called his father next, receiving an entirely different response.

“You’ve got a guy in a wheelchair?” his father shouted, the squeak of his desk chair hitting a fevered pitch. “Tell me everything.”

Liam relayed all he’d learned, and when he came to the writing on the back of the canvas, his dad let out another whoop of excitement.

Liam placed his father on speaker to snap photos of the contents in Mathis’ file. “I spoke with Ben Fairweather right before leaving, and he admitted the writing could belong to Laura Jean. He claimed she was always doing things like that for the kids. Leaving little notes hidden around the house,” he said, sending the images via text. “Check your phone. Those are aerial shots of the property, a couple of driver’s license copies, and photos of the interior from the night of the break-in.”

His father took a minute to review the messages. “So, I was right about Detective Mathis.”

“The break-in wasn’t his first dance with the Fairweathers,” Liam agreed. “He’s too familiar with them, and the house.”

“They’ll assign him to monitor you.”

Liam laughed. “Get this, they offered me a beachfront townhome to stay in while I’m here. It’s right smack in the middle of that luxury development by the house. Fairweather

extended the invitation under the guise that it would be more convenient for me to stay close while I conduct my interviews.”

“How nice of him,” his father replied sarcastically. “I’m assuming I don’t need to tell you to watch your step?”

Liam slid the driver’s license photo of Evangeline Eddins back into the file. “Their apprehension makes all of this even more interesting. There were no substantial red flags with them in regard to the case. They have issues, for sure. One is an agoraphobe, Evangeline Eddins has an anxiety disorder, and then we have Fairweather and son. Those two are a couple of high-functioning sociopaths.”

“Most people in power, whether it be in business or politics, are sociopaths,” his father replied. “But that’s a conversation for later. Give me the details on the girl.”

An image of Jamison Fairweather flickered in Liam’s mind, and, for whatever reason, the center line of his chest burned. “Which girl?”

“Evangeline Eddins.”

Liam charged through the woman’s stats, relieved his father had started with Evie. “Late twenties, accountant, and has a boyfriend, from what I overheard.”

“You said she had anxiety issues?”

“Simone Howard warned me prior to meeting Evie that she suffered from panic attacks when upset. Apparently, they’ve plagued her since her mother’s death.”

“Did you witness any indicators?”

“I noticed a few when she first entered the room. She’s attractive but downplays it. No makeup, oversized clothing. Like any person with extreme anxiety, she comes off unassuming and doesn’t want to draw attention to herself.” He yawned as he spoke, the long day finally catching up with him. “But when I showed her the back of the canvas, things really got interesting. A nice escalation started to play out, but Ben Fairweather intervened, and escorted me from the room before I could see how far it would go.”

“How’s her relationship with Fairweather?”

“Good, as far as I could tell. He’s overprotective, like any father, even though he never married her mother.”

“Our artist.” The squeaking chair quieted. “If Evangeline’s mental issues began when Laura Jean Eddins died, that means the events surrounding the death, or the death itself, triggered it.”

“The impression they gave me was that Eddins’ death was quite sudden.”

“Cause of death?”

Liam dug through Mathis’ file for a death certificate. “Something about residual health issues from the car wreck that killed her husband.”

He found a summary report on the accident, but no death certificate for either Albert or Laura Jean Eddins. “An abrupt

death of a parent would create enough mental trauma to trigger a young Evangeline into a panic disorder.”

“How old was the girl when her father died?”

Liam compared the date on the report to Evie’s birth date listed on her driver’s license. “Less than a month.”

“And how old was Eddins when her mother died?”

Frowning, Liam checked again for the death certificate, but found nothing. “I’m not sure, but there’s at least a seven year age gap between Evangeline and her sister, Jamison.”

“What the hell kind of condition from a car wreck could hang on for that long and kill without warning?”

“Maybe damage to an organ that deteriorated over time?” Liam suggested. “Either way, I’m planning on pulling her death certificate, and Devon Howard’s, in the morning. Simone Howard’s husband died around the same time as Laura Jean. The accident that killed him is also the one that put Abraham Howard in a wheelchair.”

“What kind of accident?”

“I didn’t push the subject,” Liam answered. “Abe Howard appeared to be on the level. He’s probably the most normal one in the entire house.”

“It’s the normal ones that’ll get you, William.”

“You’re such a drama queen.”

His father laughed. “How’s Abe’s relationship with Evangeline Eddins?”

“Good, but I noticed some tension with the son, Samuel Fairweather.”

“Between him and Abe?”

“No, with Evangeline.”

“What kind of tension?”

Liam thought for a minute. “The kind that shouldn’t be between stepsiblings, if you catch my meaning. The strange thing was, no one else in the room picked up on it, or found it odd.”

“It’s probably been going on for some time, and the others either can’t see it, or don’t want to. Families with that kind of money have an innate habit of disassociating themselves from things they deem upsetting. It’s simpler for them to ignore the issue until someone else makes it go away.”

It was easy for his father to pass clinical judgments when he wasn’t in the room to witness what had transpired. There was more to Samuel and Evie than a small attraction. Whatever was happening between those two was like a nuclear warhead ready to take them both out.

“Now, I want to hear all about Jamison Fairweather.”

Liam puffed his cheeks. One wrong word and his father would see straight through him. “She seems to have a good relationship with everyone in the house.”

“I have eyes, William.”

He should've never texted him those photos. Liam let out the breath he'd been holding. "She's insanely beautiful. I went over to shake her hand and tripped on my chair."

His father laughed longer than Liam thought necessary. "I can't wait to tell your mother."

"It gets better. She's a huge fan of yours."

"Ah, the perfect woman does exist and has finally come into my son's life."

Liam wandered into the living room to sit on the couch. "She's smart too and doesn't tiptoe around her father like the others."

"When this is over, invite her to dinner," his father said. "But in the meantime, you need to stay focused. Jamison Fairweather is nothing more than a distraction."

"My attraction to her won't be an issue."

"Famous last words, son."



## CHAPTER 30

# *Evie*

“**A**re you naked?”

Smiling, Evie rolled over in bed, cradling the phone to her ear. It was late, near midnight, and the house was quiet. “Are you at home?”

“Yes,” Samuel replied, with the sound of waves crashing in the background. “I’m having a well-deserved drink and enjoying the night air. Did you want to join me? You can be as loud as you want at my house.”

She grinned at his flirty tone. It was like hearing him speak a foreign language. “What did Mathis say?”

“He wasn’t much help, and is as impressed with Cohen’s father as Jamison is.”

“Simone had an idea,” she said, and explained the plan to use Jamison. “But I don’t know if it’ll work.”

“He’ll take the bait. The guy took one look at her and fell all over himself.”

“Jamison won’t like manipulating him.”

He let out a long sigh. “She’s going to have to learn how to maneuver around people as a Fairweather. Cohen is a lesson. Unfortunately, one of many.”

Evie understood, but that didn’t mean she had to like it. She was already nervous about Jamison joining their world.

“I can hear you thinking through the phone,” he said. “What’s on your mind?”

“Other than the FBI, dead bodies, and you?” She shifted to her back, startling Fitz, who batted her head with a paw. “I’ll probably be tossing and turning for hours.”

“My bed is big enough for you to toss and turn over here.”

Temptation thrummed in her veins, but so did the hesitation she assumed would be gone by now. “Are you sure we can do this?”

“Take everyone else out of the equation and tell me what’s making you second guess us.”

“There are numerous reasons.”

“Start with number one.”

“We would fight all the time.”

“Do you know what Lenora calls our fighting?” Samuel asked. “Foreplay.”

“Hilarious,” she replied, mortified that Lenora had seen through her act. “Does anyone else know?”

“Selah and Abe, of course.”

“They already know what happened in the parlor?”

“No, but they know everything else.”

She wasn't sure she wanted to know what the phrase 'everything else' entailed. “I see.”

“Selah and I weren't just fighting about his decision regarding Lenora at the party. He called me out for not telling you how I felt, and it pissed me off.”

Evie made a mental note to corner Selah the next time he was home and get the full details. “Number two; we don't know each other. Not anymore.”

“I know you're overly competitive and think your sole purpose in life is to beat me at everything.”

“It is,” she agreed. “What else?”

“I know you love being on the water but hate the beach. And I know you listen to crappy music too loud, and one day you're going to lose your hearing.”

“Stevie Nicks is a goddess and should always be played at top volume.”

“If you say so.”

He went quiet, and she waited, growing nervous over his silence.

“Samuel?”

“I know your eyes turn more green than gray when you're excited, and that when you smile at everyone except me, it hurts more than it should.”

Warmth seeped through her, shooting all the way to her toes. “I had that same thought the other day while you talked to Annabeth. You were being so kind to her, and she had your full attention.”

“I’m a kind person.”

“No, you’re not,” she snorted at the absurdity of the statement. “But my point is, I was jealous. I wanted your attention. I wanted to be the one walking arm and arm with you on the lawn.”

“Yeah, well, imagine how it was for me when I saw you in the conservatory with the doctor at Selah’s party. Abe kept telling me not to look, but, like an idiot, I did, and accidentally knocked over the liquor table.”

She shoved her face into the pillow so he wouldn’t know she was laughing.

“I can hear you, Evangeline.”

“Is that why Abe was in a rush to replace the bourbon?” she squeaked, trying to control herself. Disgusted by her behavior, Fitz moved to the end of the bed.

“I haven’t felt that level of jealousy since you brought the communist to Jamison’s high school graduation.”

“Brett was not a communist.”

“Whatever he was, the guy nearly died that day in the gym,” Samuel grumbled. “I sat through the entire ceremony imagining ways I could remove his head and shoot it through one of the basketball hoops.”

“But you brought a date, too!”

“I don’t even remember her name.”

“Francesca,” she reminded him, sourly. “She was Columbian.”

“Keeping track of me, Evangeline?”

“Maybe.”

He groaned. “Are you sure you don’t want to come over?”

“I’m sure,” she whispered, not so sure.

“I think you’re lying.”

“Oh, I definitely am,” she admitted. “But I’m staying here. You, however, may continue telling me all the things you think you know about me.”

The sound of the waves faded as he went inside. “I know you once enjoyed painting, and have real talent, but don’t do it anymore because it reminds you of Laura Jean.”

She did enjoy painting, and found herself wanting to tell him a secret she hadn’t told anyone else. “Last year, when Annabeth started her exposure therapy, I bought a canvas and some oils,” she said. “The supplies sat in a bag on my bedroom floor for weeks before I worked up the nerve to use them. But when I did, my head was as blank as the board in front of me.”

“You know, I’d make an excellent nude model,” he offered. “Maybe you just need some inspiration.”

“If you were my nude model, I wouldn’t be interested in painting.” She sighed at the thought of him naked, but then had an idea. “Or maybe I would. I read a book last month where the couple covered themselves in paint and had sex on a giant mural. We could try that.”

“That’s something else I know,” he said in a low voice. “You read those naughty books when you should be in bed doing naughty things with me instead.”

“Have you really not had sex with Gretchen?”

“I’ve not had sex with anyone since I made the decision to takeover Firewater.”

“Why?”

“Because I want you,” he whispered in a way that made Evie’s heart do somersaults. “Why waste my time with someone else?”

“Are you going to call her tomorrow and tell her it’s over between you two?”

“I’ll text her now, if you agree to come over.”

“Samuel, you will not break up with that woman via text!”

“It was a joke,” he said, finding her outrage funny. “She’ll be home on Friday, and I’ll talk to her then. Gretchen is dealing with issues at the Houston office, and I want her focused on that, and not me. But then again, our relationship is more ornamental than anything. If I needed a date for an event, she was there and vice versa.”

Things between her and Lucas were more solid than casual dating, and she owed him a proper goodbye. He was a great guy, and deserved to be with someone perfect, just like him.

“I plan on making my call in the morning. I don’t want to hurt him.”

“That means we’ll be clear by the weekend and can spend two days straight in bed.”

Evie suddenly felt lightheaded. “I said I wanted to take things slowly.”

“Well, you’ll have to lower your expectations for the first several rounds,” he replied. “Maybe by Monday morning, I’ll be able to fuck you slowly, but I wouldn’t expect it before then.”

Evie lost the ability to speak. The images racing through her head made her skin tingle and her insides quake as if he were kissing her for the first time again.

A change of subject was needed, or she would be on his doorstep before she could stop herself. “I’m going to work tomorrow.”

“Way to kill the mood, Evangeline.”

“I’m not kidding.”

“How hard is it to inform them you need to take a leave of absence? If there’s a problem, we’ll find you another job. It’ll be fine.”

“No, it will not be fine,” she said, frustrated with his flippant attitude towards her work. She was still considering going over there, not to sleep with him, but to punch him in the nose. “I might be a junior partner, but my firm doesn’t grant leave without advance notice unless it’s an emergency, and I don’t want to divulge the details of my private life. No one there knows I’m connected to the Fairweathers, and I want to keep it that way.”

“When did you become a junior partner?”

“Last year.”

“Why didn’t you tell anyone?”

“It’s not that big of a deal.”

“Yes, it is,” he said, genuinely enough it diffused her anger slightly. “And I’m only asking you to take a few days. If they have an issue with it, you can come work for me.”

Ben had tried on several occasions to persuade her to accept a position at Fairweather, and every time Evie always turned him down.

She also had to think of Micah. If Constance threw one of her notorious fits, and let Evie go for taking unapproved time off, she might fire Micah as well.

That wasn’t a gamble she was willing to take. Micah needed a steady income to support himself and his grandparents. Their failing health had taken a toll on his already small paycheck.

“No, I won’t do it.”



“Damn it, why do you have to be so stubborn?”

“Because that’s who I am,” she told him flatly and hung up.

## CHAPTER 31

# Laura Jean

1995

**T**hunder boomed in the distance, and a frightened Evie tried to climb up her mother's leg. "I'm scared."

Laura Jean's own fear mixed with the exhaustion weighing her down, and she hugged her daughter tight. "This storm will be here and gone before you know it," she promised, knowing damn well that the monster currently churning in the gulf would make her a liar by lunchtime. "You'll see."

Another boom, and Evie's eyes, so like Albie's, went as round as saucers. "I don't want to go into the ballroom," she whispered. "Selah says we're going to have to sit in the dark."

It wasn't a question of *if* the power would go out, but *when*. Ben had called last night to tell them that the local electric company's plans were to trip their already vulnerable system early, hoping to avoid serious damage to the grid.

And with Hurricane Eugenia's landfall predicted to strike within the hour, Laura Jean didn't think they would wait much longer to shut it down.

"There's no need to worry, kitten. I'll be with you."

“But I hate the dark.”

On any other day, her daughter was a brave soul. Too brave, if Laura Jean was honest. Ferociously independent, Evie never met a stranger or left a spot unexplored.

But as soon as the storm’s path took a sharp turn, heading their way, she’d become uncharacteristically fretful, listening quietly as the adults spent most of the night and into the early morning preparing Haven for the onslaught.

“Evie,” Rebecca called out, coming down the hallway, “you need to get your coloring book and crayons. I already have your flashlight on your pallet.”

While Devon and Ty boarded up the first floor windows and secured Haven’s exterior, Laura Jean and Simone had been assembling supplies for the makeshift shelter Rebecca was preparing in the ballroom.

Evie wiped her tears. “But I need Hopper.”

Hopper, the raggedy one-eyed stuffed kangaroo, which once belonged to Albie as a child, was her daughter’s constant companion. “Go and get him,” Laura Jean said. “But be quick, kitten.”

When Evie disappeared upstairs, she slumped against the wall. “How much longer until the ballroom is finished?”

Rebecca joined her, just as exhausted. “It’s ready, but I’m going to wait to put out the snacks. I can’t trust Toby not to eat them before the storm hits,” she said. “Did you find the weather radio?”

The wind whistled outside, and Laura Jean shivered. She hated hurricanes. Growing up in Louisiana, she'd gone through her fair share, and it never got easier. "Ty found it and was bringing it to you."

"I haven't seen him."

Laura Jean unclipped the walkie-talkie from the waistband of her shorts. Selah's toy had proved invaluable over the last several hours. "Ty, can you hear me?"

"Yes," Ty's voice crackled. "Go ahead."

"Where's the weather radio?"

"Conservatory."

Rebecca headed off to locate it, and Laura Jean spotted Selah coming down the stairs. "Don't scare the little ones, please."

With his hands in his pocket, Selah offered up his megawatt smile. "I didn't mean to."

"You know, when the power goes out, we're going to be in a room with all the windows boarded up," she said, trying to scare some sense into him. "That means we have to sit in absolute darkness, listening to all the awful things happening outside."

The boy's grin dissolved into an arrogant sneer. A move he'd undoubtedly learned from his father. "It's just a storm."

"A storm that can rip Haven apart," she pointed out. "As the oldest, we need you to be a leader."

Selah's chest puffed with purpose. Livy was ordinarily the one they entrusted to be in charge, as she minded the other children, often without being asked.

"Now, go check the flashlights in the ballroom," Laura Jean said. "We'll be calling everyone down in a minute."

"Yes, ma'am." Selah saluted her and ran off, passing Rebecca returning with the radio.

"Any idea how it works?" Rebecca asked, fiddling with the knobs. "It's so old."

Heavy footsteps thumped down the stairs. "Mama, I'm hungry."

Rebecca didn't bother to look up. "I don't want to hear it. You just ate breakfast."

"But I'm hungry," Toby whined, making his way slowly to them, his thick chest heaving for air in the effort. "Please, Mama."

Laura Jean opened her mouth to speak but swiftly closed it, waiting to see how his mother would handle him. Rebecca had a short fuse when dealing with her children, but none more so than Toby.

"I said no, damn it."

Tears welled in his eyes. "Please!"

Devon had recently recommended they pursue a doctor specializing in developmental delays for the boy. He struggled

to keep up with the other children socially, but when they suggested it to Rebecca, she wouldn't hear of it.

"You're always hungry," Rebecca replied, flatly. "Go into the ballroom and help Selah."

Not at all interested in the task, he turned to Laura Jean. "Is Evie in there?"

"She's getting Hopper and will be in soon."

"Can I sit with her during the storm?"

Toby chased after Evie constantly. Her daughter was patient with him where the other children were not, and unfortunately, he was beginning to rely on her a little too much. "We'll see."

"You'll sit where you're told." Rebecca gave him a shove in the ballroom's direction. "Daddy will be here soon, and you're to be on your best behavior."

"Yes, ma'am."

Charlie planned on riding out the storm at Haven after securing the beach house. He'd been less than enthused with the assignment, but Ben was tied up preparing the Fairweather offices for the storm, and wasn't about to send an employee work crew over to prep his personal property when they needed to tend to their own homes.

"I hope Charlie's alright." Rebecca checked her watch. "He should be here by now."

"I'm sure he's fine."

Selah stuck his head out into the hall. “Toby got into the snacks!”

“Damn it, Tobias!”

Rebecca bolted into the ballroom, and Laura Jean went to follow, but a rush of wind blasted down the hall, ushering Devon and Ty into the house through the back door.

“Has it started?” she asked, running into the kitchen.

“It’s about to let loose.” Ty shook off his rain slicker. The kitchen’s high windows rattled from the wind, and his eyes rolled upward as if he expected the roof to come flying off. “The conservatory isn’t gonna make it.”

Devon dried the beads of rain from his head with a kitchen towel. “There just wasn’t enough time to prep all that glass,” he said, his usual cheerful face looking far too serious for Laura Jean’s liking. “The storm surge on this thing is amazing, especially when you stop and realize that she was in her primordial stage less than two days ago.”

“That’s his fancy scientific way of saying that the bayou will drown us before we even lose a window,” Ty said, slinging an arm around Laura Jean’s shoulders. “We’re in for a wild ride.”

She leaned into the embrace. “I’m scared.”

Ty gave her a squeeze. “Haven has survived countless storms, and will continue to do so long after you and I are gone,” he said, changing his tune to make her feel better. “Our girl will keep us safe.”

Simone emerged from her bedroom with Rebecca's youngest daughter CeCe on her hip, Annabeth at her side, and Lestat the cat locked in a death grip under her arm.

"We're ready." Simone's voice trembled as she spoke. "The news station says it's time to get into your shelter positions."

Devon came over to wrestle a howling Lestat from his wife. Like his namesake, the brat prince had a flair for the dramatic and hissed when removed from his mistress.

"Most of your feline friends are safe in Ty's cottage, and those left inside Haven will be in the ballroom with us," Devon said, scowling at the ball of fur clawing at him as he led Simone and her entourage from the kitchen. "And you're more than welcome to hold this little bastard in your lap during the storm."

Watching them go, a punch of nerves hit Laura Jean. "How long do you think it'll last?"

"Eugenia's fast, which I normally like in a woman, but she'll slow down once she hits land," Ty replied. "The worst part will last a good two hours, with most of it gone by mid-afternoon."

The back door banged open again and Ben rushed in, soaking wet and in a murderous rage.

"Where's Charlie?"

"Not here," Ty answered, unfazed, while Laura Jean's mouth hung open. "But let me guess, he didn't show at the beach house?"



Ben ripped off his shirt and dropped the garment to the floor. It landed with a sloppy plop on the white tile, and Laura Jean hoped her tongue didn't do the same. She'd never understood how a man that sat behind a desk all day could get a body that looked like the gods sculpted it.

And when he removed his pants next, she forgot how to breathe. They came off with a swoosh, landing next to his shirt.

"I'm going to kill that bastard."

Ty didn't so much as blink, well accustomed to the Fairweather brothers and their love for one another. "We ain't got time to bury no bodies today," he said. "But I'll go get you something dry to put on."

"I'd appreciate it."

Ty left them alone together, and standing in nothing but his underwear, Ben made a halfhearted attempt to cover himself. "Can I get a towel?"

"Uh-huh," she croaked and scurried down the hall where they kept the downstairs linen closet.

It was growing harder every day to hide her feelings. When this desire for Ben took root in her a few years ago, Laura Jean quickly concluded that whoever coined the expression *falling in love* was an idiot.

Love wasn't a fall. It was a tumble.

Right off a damn cliff.

As she searched for a large enough towel, Ben came up behind her, entering the small space of the darkened linen closet. She had to physically fight not to shiver at having him close. “How are things at Parkland Grounds?” she asked, trying to distract herself. “Is everything okay with Miranda and Samuel?”

“I’m not worried. Josie is there, and Parkland is basically a fortress,” he said, his breath skating over the nape of her neck. “But I won’t make it back before the storm blows in, so I guess that means I’m staying here with you.”

Spinning around, Laura Jean shoved a towel at his bare chest, ignoring the zip of electricity that shot through her when her skin connected with his.

She slipped past him, hurrying back into the kitchen where Rebecca was waiting with her hands on her hips. “What’s this about Charlie?”

“He’s not coming.” Ben appeared around the corner, drying his hair. “My guess is that he’s at home with his wife.”

The view of Ben clad in nothing but his boxers had Rebecca’s lips curving upward. “Well then,” she purred. “I guess I’ll have to find someone else to ride out the storm with.”

Laura Jean loved her friend, but right now she really, really wanted to kick her in the face. “Can you gather the children, please?”

Rebecca winked at Ben and left.

“That woman is a fucking menace.” Ben wrapped the towel around his waist. “And I’m sick of it.”

“She does things like that because she knows it gets to you,” Laura Jean argued on Rebecca’s behalf, even though she still wanted to rip her hair out. “You don’t have to be such an asshole to her.”

Ben smirked. “But I’m an asshole to everyone.”

“Very true.”

Another bellow of thunder hit, and Laura Jean jumped, letting out a startled shout. “Damn, I hate these stupid storms.”

Ben ran a hand through his hair, and it flopped about every which way. “If it makes you feel any better, I think this storm might benefit me,” he said. “Since I’ve been home, I’ve finally decided to develop the land around the beach house.”

“Is that why you’ve been staying out there since Miranda’s remission?” Not that Laura Jean minded. Having him this close meant his visits to Haven had become more regular. “To plan the project?”

“Um, yes.” The towel started to slide, and he caught it, much to her dismay. “But Fairweather’s board isn’t willing to take on the cost of navigating around the building restrictions in place to protect the dunes.”

Laura Jean frowned. She loved the powder white shore directly next to his beach house and took Evie there at least once a week. The dunes he was referring to were almost two

stories tall, and last summer, Devon had made the kids sleds so they could slide down them, all the way to the water.

“Are you telling me you want this storm to damage the dunes so you can build on all that beauty?”

“Fairweather Beach Resort has a nice ring to it, doesn’t it?”

Appalled, she shook her head. “No, it doesn’t!”

Ben bit down on his bottom lip to stop a smile from spreading. “Mother nature is about to give me more than the local county officials will, even when I make it beneficial for them to look the other way.”

“Please don’t tell me things like that.”

A dimple appeared, and then another. “Why, Laura Jean,” he teased. “I had no idea you were such a good girl.”

She stood stock still, blinking at him stupidly as her soul left her body. A playful Ben would surely be her downfall. Snapping out of her stupor, she all but ran for the door. “I’ll call Miranda and let her know you’re here.”

On the hall phone, Laura Jean dialed the number to Parkland Grounds with shaking hands, and Miranda answered on the first ring. “Is Ben there?”

Shame coiled in Laura Jean’s chest. Her friend had suffered so much this past year, fighting cancer and winning. She deserved to live a peaceful life with her husband, without another woman lusting after him.

“He’s here, and Charlie never showed up at the beach house.”

“I guess we shouldn’t be surprised,” Miranda replied with a short laugh. “Are you guys ready? Samuel is taking Josie through the house to do the final checks.”

The lights flickered overhead. “We’re ready, and I think the show’s about to start. Stay safe, Miranda.”

“See you on the other side, LJ.”

The children filed past, with Simone intoning ominously in the ballroom’s doorway that everyone should have their shoes on just in case Haven House failed them and they had to run outside in the storm.

Evie was nowhere in sight, and Laura Jean stopped Livy as she passed.

“She’s in the library,” Livy said, holding on tightly to a fidgety Abe. “Hopper is missing, and she’s upset.”

Laura Jean found her daughter in the library conducting a frantic search. “I need him, Mama.”

“Close your eyes and think of the last place you saw him.”

Evie did as she asked, and after a few seconds, her eyes popped open. “He’s at Aunt Becca’s house!” she exclaimed, referring to Rebecca’s cottage. “Toby and I went over yesterday to get some water while we were playing outside, and I left Hopper on accident. Can I go get him?”

“I’m sorry, kitten, but it’s too late.”

“Can you go?”

Through the slats of wood covering the library’s windows, she saw a break in the rain, and according to the weather channel, currently blaring from the parlor across the hall, they still had a half hour before landfall.

“There you two are,” Rebecca said, coming in. “It’s time.”

“I left Hopper at your house,” Evie told her. “Did you bring him with you?”

“Ah, no.” Rebecca followed Laura Jean’s gaze out the window. “You could probably make it, if you run.”

None of the cottages were prepped for the storm, and going outside was a tremendous risk. But wanting her daughter happy, Laura Jean squared her shoulders. “Will you be alright with Aunt Becca?”

“I’ll be brave,” Evie promised, hugging Laura Jean’s legs. “I love you, my Mama.”

“I love you too, kitten.” Laura Jean kissed the top of her head. “But remember, this is a secret mission. You can’t tell the others where I’ve gone.”

Simone would worry. Devon would lecture, Ty would offer to go in her place, and Ben... he would flat out kill her for even thinking about it.

Laura Jean slipped through the front door, and the quiet that greeted her was enough to give her goosebumps. There was no movement from the woods, beast or otherwise, with the inlet

ahead lying flat as glass, reflecting the circulating clouds overhead.

It was as if Eugenia were taking a collective breath before she tore them apart.

More thunder came from the south and she broke into a run, barreling towards Rebecca's cottage. It was the one farthest from the main house, directly next to the forest.

The wind picked up as she ran, knocking bits of yard debris against her legs. When she reached the door, Laura Jean threw it open, diving inside as the heavens opened, releasing a deluge of rain.

In the small foyer, she took a minute to catch her breath, glaring at Hopper, who lay on the couch in the living room.

"Shut up," she mumbled at the stuffed animal watching her with one eye. "This is all totally your fault."

Lightning flashed close enough to sizzle the air, and something struck the side of the house. She screamed, cursing herself for being so stupid.

Pulling off the walkie-talkie she still wore, Laura Jean prayed that the signal would reach.

"I'm okay," she said to whoever was listening. "Tell Evie I'm okay, and I'll be back as soon as this outer band moves on."

"Girl, you are in so much trouble," Ty's distorted drawl crackled from the speaker. He said something else, but she couldn't hear it over the heavy vibrations shaking the walls.

Dropping the walkie-talkie, she fell to the ground, covering her head.

Her grand-mère used to say that if tornadoes were considered the finger of God, then hurricanes must surely be His fist. Monster storms created by the Almighty to remind man of how small he was on the scale of things.

When this was over, the landscape of Haven might never be the same. But cowering on the floor just then, that didn't matter to Laura Jean. She only wanted to get back to her little girl, and for them to make it out of this alive.

The quaking stopped, and she straightened to peek through the kitchen window, realizing what she was seeing wasn't an outer band, but Eugenia herself. And if Devon was correct about the storm surge, sheltering in a cottage on the edge of a bayou was the worst place she could be.

Minutes went by, and Laura Jean bounced on the soles of her feet, working up the courage to make a run for it. It was a dangerous option, but her only one.

Blowing out a breath, she went for the door, but fell back when it opened on its own.

“Have you lost your damn mind?” Ben roared, busting in, looking like a deranged madman. He forced the door closed, panting hard as if he battled his entire way to get to her. “If this storm doesn't kill you, then I will.”

“Is Evie alright?”



“She’s fine, damn it,” he growled, jerking her to the ground. He covered her with his body when the earth trembled again. “But we’re not.”

The tremors went on for what felt like forever, and once it ended, she remained crumpled on the floor. “I thought I could make it.”

Ben stayed low for a second, and when he thought it was safe, moved to sit across from her on the opposite wall, drawing his long legs up in front of him. “We’re going into the worst of it. It’ll be hell for the next hour.”

What sounded like bones popping came from the side of the house, and he craned his neck to look out the living room window. “We’re losing some oaks.”

“Talk to me,” she pleaded, now thoroughly terrified. “Take my mind off the fact that we might die out here.”

Ben winced at something he saw outside. “We might get hurt, but death is unlikely.”

“You don’t sound very sure of that,” she yelled. “Talk to me!”

His gaze returned to her. “Um, the new office is coming along nicely. It should employ around three hundred people to start. We’ll keep central accounting there for all projects, and our advertising teams, unless I think the area being developed needs a local eye. For example, we’re starting two extensive projects in Lauderdale and San Antonio. Those areas will need their own main offices.”

Another crash, and she yelped. “Find another topic. I would rather listen to the storm trying to kill me, than the comings and goings of Fairweather Holdings.”

“I was thinking of buying a boat,” he said, surprising her. “Something small and easy to maintain, but big enough we can take the kids out on it.”

“You hate the water.”

“I hate the beach, not the water.”

“What’s the difference?”

“Sand.”

She relaxed slightly. “Evie hates sand, too, but I make her go to your beach all the time, because I love it.”

“I know,” he said softly. “I’ve seen you two playing in the water.”

So, he had been watching. His car was sometimes in the driveway, and she’d often wondered if he’d snuck a look.

“Join us, next time.”

He smiled. “Maybe I will.”

The destruction outside continued, and then, after a few seconds of companionable silence, Ben dropped a bomb on her.

“Miranda is in love with someone else.”

Thinking she misheard him, Laura Jean shook her head.

“What?”

“Before she began treatments last year, Miranda told me she was in love with someone else.”

“What?” she repeated, a little louder to compete with the ringing in her ears.

“Josie,” he said, his voice empty of emotion. “Miranda is in love with Josie.”

“*What?!?*”

“Yeah, that was kind of my reaction, too.”

The words played on a loop in her head. Miranda is in love with Josie. *Miranda was in love with Josie!*

“She wants to stay married, for Samuel’s sake,” he continued casually, as if he hadn’t just turned her brain inside out. “Also, her parents wouldn’t approve of the situation, and I need Sam Abrams’ support when dealing with the board.”

Questions.

She had so many questions. “Did you agree?”

“I did.”

“I’m sorry, Ben,” she said, not really knowing what else to say.

“Don’t be,” he shrugged, non-pulsed. “Miranda is happy.”

“But what about you?”

He shifted uncomfortably. “I’ve been on a few dates.”

Red trickled into Laura Jean’s vision. “Oh?”

“Discreetly, of course.”

“Of course,” she parroted, struggling not to scream. “And, uh, how did that go?”

“Awful,” he replied, not making eye contact with her. “But the whole dating thing was necessary.”

“Why was it necessary?”

“Seeing other women helped me sort out some stuff in my head.”

“Such as?”

He took a second to answer. “It was like a test.”

“And did you pass?”

“Hell no,” he snorted. “I failed horribly.”

Good.

Benjamin Fairweather never failed at anything unless he wanted to.

“I hate dating, too,” she revealed, slyly. “The ones I’ve been on lately weren’t really my type.”

“When did you go on a date?” His dark gaze swept over her. “And when the hell did you get a type?”

“Everyone has a type,” she said, smiling when the muscle in his jaw ticked. “Don’t you know the type of woman you want?”

“Yes,” he said, but then promptly changed his mind. “I mean, no.”

“It’s a yes or no answer, Ben.”

“It isn’t that simple.”

“Yes, it is,” she shot back, unwilling to miss her chance. Miranda wanted someone else, and Laura Jean had known for a long time that her attraction to him wasn’t one-sided. “Just say it.”

“No.”

“Why?”

“Because.”

“Because why?”

“Because I can’t have what I want!” he shouted, loud enough to drown out the thunder.

Lightning pulsed through the windows, creating a strobing effect, but neither noticed. The storm was nothing but white noise to them now.

“You can have anything you want,” she said, trusting that he understood her meaning. “All you have to do is take it.”

The internal war inside him played out over his features, and Laura Jean waited patiently to see which side would win.

“He would never forgive me,” Ben rasped, the sadness in his voice swallowing her whole. “I would never forgive myself.”

Albie.

Laura Jean had long wrestled with that guilt too and had only recently found peace.

Without hesitating, she broke from her spot on the wall, and crawled across the foyer to him. He tracked her approach, lowering his legs as she neared. “I belong to you.” She moved up his body to straddle him. “Can’t you feel it?”

Ben rested his head back on the wall. “I’m so fucking in love with you,” he whispered, brokenly. “I have never wanted anything more in my life.”

He swallowed thickly and laid a hand on her hip. “But I can’t have the ghost of Albie between us,” he said. “We can’t live like that.”

“If you don’t think Albie isn’t up in heaven, laughing his ass off at your hesitation, you’re not as smart as I thought you were, Ben.”

Laura Jean bared down, rolling her hips. He sucked in a sharp breath, his fingers digging in as he encouraged her to move faster.

“You want me to take, but what are you willing to give?”

“Everything.” She held his heated gaze, letting its fire lick over her skin. “You can have all of me, Ben.”

A hand fisted in her hair, dragging her closer, and all the thoughts in Laura Jean’s head evaporated.

“So be it.”

In a lifetime, women experience many types of kisses. Some begin slow, with a hint of shyness to the act. Others have more kick and were the best in Laura Jean’s opinion.

But this kiss with Ben was nothing like what she'd ever experienced. His lips met hers with absolute ownership, violently possessing her with a power that rivaled the hurricane raging just beyond the walls.

Laura Jean's back met the hardwood floor of the foyer, and the shorts she wore vanished. With their mouths fused together, they fumbled with the button of his jeans, pulling them partly down his legs before impatience had his hips pressing forward.

She cried out from the sheer size of him. "Open for me," he breathed, withdrawing slightly to push forward again. "You can take it."

Hooking her legs around his waist, she angled herself in a way that allowed him to plunge deeper, and the playfulness in his eyes shifted into something feral.

He struck fast, burying himself to the hilt with a groan. "Fuck, yes."

Lifting her hips, she squeezed around him, urging him to move. The hot glide of friction shredded the last bit of his control, and Ben ripped her shirt upward to watch her breasts bounce under him as he pounded into her mercilessly.

The slap of their bodies filled the foyer, mixing with the steady stream of promises falling from his lips. He told her of the things he was going to do to her, and of all the ways he was going to have her. Of how nothing had ever felt this good, and how he wanted to do nothing else in life but fuck her forever.

Hearing his familiar voice saying such deliciously wicked things had her moaning. “This is only the beginning.”

And suddenly, everything stopped.

“We can’t do this.”

Ben rolled off her, and Laura Jean’s heart lodged in her throat. She lay motionless, thinking he’d changed his mind.

“Wh-why?”

“Which way to the bedroom?” Removing the rest of his clothing, he stood naked above her. “I can do better than a hardwood floor for our first time.”

Dazed, she pointed over her head towards Rebecca’s room. “There?”

Ben scooped her up, tossing her over his shoulder. Laura Jean burst out laughing, which earned her a smack on the ass. “Now, you’re really going to get it,” he promised. “No woman has *ever* laughed at me naked.”

An hour later, they lay covered in sweat, with her spread atop him as if she were some sacrifice, and he the altar. Through the window, the rain remained a downpour, but a less apocalyptic one.

“We should try to go before it picks back up again.”

Ben continued to stroke her spine with his fingers. “I want you and Evie to move into the beach house with me,” he said, staring up at the ceiling. “And I want to marry you.”



Happiness filled her in a way it never had before, but with a mental shake, she shoved the euphoria aside. There were others to consider. People they loved and cared about. “We need to respect Miranda’s wishes.”

He sighed in irritation. “But down the road, I wa—”

Laura Jean placed a finger to his lips. “Down the road, you will ask me to marry you properly, and not demand it,” she said. “And you’ll do it with a big ole’ rock that will make everyone else jealous.”

Ben flipped her over. “Anything else?”

“I’ll expect you to ravish me every chance you get,” she added, wrapping her arms around his neck. “And to make sure that we spend the rest of our lives together, complete and whole.”

He nibbled along her jawline. “That sounds suspiciously like a happily ever after scenario, and I don’t believe in happily ever afters.”

“You can believe in us, and that’s enough.”

Ben planted his face in her hair, laying all his body weight on her. “Jesus Christ, I’ve fallen in love with an optimist,” he mumbled. “And, damn it, I’m letting myself buy into it. Positivity is not in my DNA, and neither is patience.”

“Trust me, I know,” she said. “I live with one of your sons. The older Selah gets, the more like you he becomes.”

“That’s nothing. Samuel is way worse.”

“Do you think you’ll ever want more children?”

Ben’s head lifted, and when his gaze met hers, that familiar tug of destiny hummed in her bones. “With you, I want more of everything,” he whispered, laying delicate kisses down her nose until he landed on her lips. “Absolutely everything.”

Utterly at peace, she inhaled his scent, branding the moment to memory. “I love you,” she sighed, letting the very thread of her soul tie itself to his. “Until the end of it all.”

They stayed in bed until he deemed it safe enough to leave. “Are you going to tell Miranda?” she asked, sliding on her shoes as they dressed in the foyer.

Opening the front door, Ben leaned on its frame and stared off at Haven through the drizzling rain. “I’ve kept secrets my whole life, and when my father died, I swore to myself I would never do it again. But then he backed me into a corner with Charlie, and now this thing with us is just icing on the cake,” he said, drawing her to his side. “But yes, Miranda will be happy for us.”

“I hate this as much as you do, but it’s only a temporary state. It doesn’t matter in the long run.”

“It does to me.”

Laura Jean laid a hard kiss on his lips. “Then you’ll have to get over it,” she said, darting out from under the cottage’s awning and into the rain with Ben chasing after her. They arrived on the porch drenched and laughing.

Inside the house, she found Evie asleep on her pallet, with Toby next to her. “Thank you for watching over her, SiSi.”

Simone eyed her glowing face suspiciously. “Everything go alright out in the cottage?”

“It did.”

When the storm died off completely, Devon and Ty accompanied Ben outside to assess Haven’s exterior damage. Overall, the grounds lost two of its grand oaks on the eastern side, along with numerous pines.

Haven’s lower level received minimal damage, with even the conservatory holding up under Eugenia’s attack.

But the second floor took a hit. “There’s roof damage and we’re missing windows,” Ben told Laura Jean and Simone as they cleaned up the ballroom. “And the power is going to be out for a few days.”

Unable to live without air conditioning, Simone gasped. “But I’m already melting!”

Laura Jean smiled. She didn’t mind living a day or two without electricity. Sleeping under the stars with Ben sounded kind of wonderful. “We can handle two days without power.”

Ben shook his head. “The power and water will be out for at least a week.”

Screw the stars, even Laura Jean had her limits.

“I cannot do that, Benjamin,” Simone shrieked in a panic. “I will die a nasty sweaty death without electricity or water.”

“Calm down,” Ben said. “Why don’t you guys take the kids down to Orlando for the week and stay at one of those big resorts that serve round-the-clock margaritas by the pool. While you’re gone, I’ll get a crew in here to make Haven livable again.”

“Is there a way to let Miranda know we’re going, so she can come with us?” Laura Jean wanted some alone time with her to talk. “I’m sure the power is out at Parkland Grounds.”

Ben knew immediately why she was asking. “I’m going now to check on Samuel, and can see if she’s interested in tagging along.”

Simone headed towards the ballroom door. “I’ll go tell the children. They’ll want to visit the theme parks, I’m sure.”

When they were alone, Laura Jean placed a hand on his chest, needing to touch him. “I love a man with a margarita plan.”

“I figured the promise of booze would appease you both,” he said, leaning down to sneak a kiss. “That was nice of you to invite Miranda. Something tells me this is going to be an interesting girl’s trip.”

“Miranda and I will compare notes,” she said, grinning against his lips. “And, now that I think about it, Simone can bring hers, too.”

“Of all the twists and turns in my life, I never thought I would be in this situation.”

“I would certainly hope not.”

Ben smiled down at her. “When I get back from Parkland, I thought we could take the kids to the beach house and see how it fared since we’re maybe—most definitely— moving you and Evie in.”

“I would love that.”

Laura Jean busied herself sorting through the children’s clothing for the trip while he was gone, but after a while, she had to take a break from the muggy heat. She went outside to sit in one of the rocking chairs on the front porch, listening to the whine of chainsaws coming from the area where Devon and Ty worked.

Dozing off for a minute, Laura Jean woke with a start, the dream she’d been having chasing her tail into the waking world. With a shake, she knocked it away, and watched as a black topless Jeep swerved into a parking spot off the drive.

Ben was behind the wheel with Samuel in the passenger seat.

Samuel hopped out, running towards the children collecting fallen limbs in the yard. “It’s pretty bad out there,” Ben said, coming up the path. “Parkland is fine, but has no power or water either. Miranda and Josie are packing. They’ll be here tomorrow morning.”

Laura Jean stood, frowning at the gray skies. “It’ll be dark soon. Do you still want to go to the beach house?”

“Of course.” Cupping his hands around his mouth, Ben yelled at their children. “Selah, Samuel, Evie, let’s go!”

Laura Jean took the porch steps two at a time to get to him.  
“That was kind of sexy.”

“So, margaritas and me doing the dad thing does it for you?”

“Everything you do does it for me, Fairweather.”

They loaded the kids in the backseat, with Evie in the middle, and drove towards the beach house.

“I like your car, Ben,” Evie said, holding her hands in the air. “I can feel the wind.”

Laura Jean smiled. Whenever her daughter said Ben’s name, she always elongated the e, and it was adorable.

Ben’s eyes flicked to her in the rearview mirror. “I didn’t want to drive my Rover because of all the stuff on the roads. So, I brought this out.” He patted the Jeep’s dashboard. “She was my first car, and your dad and I used to drive her around, looking for pretty girls to talk to.”

Samuel and Selah made gagging noises, but Evie giggled. She loved hearing stories about her father. “How many pretty girls did my daddy talk to?”

Ben gave Evie a wink. “Too many.”

Laura Jean’s heart swelled. Albie was never going to be the ghost between them. Her husband would live on in the memories she and Ben kept alive for Evie’s sake, but for them, it was time to move on. Together.

Albie would have wanted it that way.

As the Jeep made its way down the clay road, the kids chatted about the storm, with Samuel and Selah somehow making it sound like they'd all lived through a world war.

But when the jeep turned the corner, and the beach house came into view, all talk ended.

Laura Jean leaned forward in her seat, unsure if what she was seeing was real. "Oh my God."

Ben slammed on the brakes. "Holy fuck."

"Swear jar, dad," Samuel whispered, his big brown eyes wide behind his glasses.

"Let it slide this time, Sammy," Selah whispered.

Evie wiggled her way to stand on the seat. "Something came up and took a bite out of your house, Ben."

The description was spot on. Along the rear of the house, the dunes were washed away, leaving the structure half hanging in the air with no back end. The front door banged in the gulf breeze, flashing glimpses of the water below.

"I bet it was a sea monster," Evie declared as they all got out. She made her way over to Ben, struggling to walk in the too-big tank dress she'd inherited from Livy. "Do sea monsters eat houses?"

Ben's eyes remained on the house. "I don't know, kid."

"Sea monsters eat plankton," Samuel told her with an eye roll. "They don't eat houses."

“How do you know? Are you a sea monster?” Evie asked, with her hands on her hips. “Is that why you’re so mean?”

Samuel elbowed her, and she jabbed him in the stomach with a fist. Selah busted up the fight before it continued, offering Evie a piggyback ride.

“Can we go down to the water, dad?” Selah asked, adjusting Evie’s arms so she wouldn’t strangle him. “I bet the storm washed up all kinds of cool shells.”

At the mention of going to the water, Evie slapped Selah’s back in excitement. “I want some pretty shells.”

Before either adult said no, the children ran off, taking advantage of their distracted state.

“Watch for debris in the sand,” Laura Jean called after them, wandering around the side of the house. The entire rear wall was missing, leaving the three-story home looking like a doll house, open and ready for play. “Is this what you were hoping for?”

A couch hovering off the second floor fell with a fantastic crash, landing in the pile of ruins on the sand. The children cheered in the distance.

“Not exactly.” He scrubbed a hand down his face. “But it’s okay. The beach house was never going to be a permanent situation for us. It’s too small. We’ll find somewhere else to live.”

Laura Jean looked over the flattened shore. “The dunes are gone,” she sighed, heartbroken. “So, why can’t we build a



home here? This place is beautiful, and I would love being close to Haven and Simone.”

“The beach will need to be re-nourished multiple times before we can build. I wouldn’t be able to lay a foundation for at least a year, maybe more.”

She stuck out her bottom lip, and he grinned. “However, if it makes you happy, then that’s what we’ll do.”

Ben went over to the Jeep and rummaged around for the camera he’d brought. “But where are we going to live in the meantime?” he asked, scowling at an end table dropping to its death. “I know it’s my family home, but it somehow feels wrong to ask Miranda to leave Parkland.”

“Because it is,” she agreed. “Parkland Grounds is not for us. Let her raise Samuel there, with Josie, in peace.”

“I guess we could buy something in Port Michaelson.”

Laura Jean shook her head firmly. “We’ll live at Haven House.”

Pausing in his picture taking, Ben looked at her as if she’d grown two heads. “I love you, but you’re insane if you think I’m going to live there.”

Raising an eyebrow, she moved to stand in front of him. “What about those new projects you’re starting in San Antonio and Fort Lauderdale? Do you think I don’t know what that means?” she asked, crossing her arms. “It means you’ll start traveling again, and I’ll be alone. If we live at Haven while we

build here, Devon can continue to homeschool Evie, and I won't be lonely while you're away."

Ben's camera clicked, capturing her image. "I'll think about it," he said, glancing over at the kids. Finding them distracted, he laid a kiss on her mouth. "But are you sure you want to live here on the beach? There are so many other options and places open to us."

Beams of light streaked through the overcast sky, with red, orange, and pink hues peeling away the gray to reveal the setting sun slipping into the beyond for the night.

"The water here always looks like it's on fire at sunset," she murmured. "Instead of calling this place Fairweather Beach, you should name it Firewater Beach, instead."

The sounds of their children playing in the surf carried over to them, and she sighed, feeling that bittersweet pull in the bones again. "Build here," she told him. "This place is our home."

## CHAPTER 32

# *Evie*

**H**oping to escape unseen, Evie tiptoed downstairs a little after sunrise. The others wouldn't wake for another hour, leaving her plenty of time to get out of the house without being detected.

The front door security pad blinked a sinister red when she entered the code, remaining armed. Trying again, she whispered a curse when it still didn't work, and snuck down the hall to try her luck at the back door.

In the kitchen, sunlight streamed through the high windows, shining down on Ben sitting alone at the table. She stopped short, letting the nostalgia sweep over her. Seeing him like this, barefoot and in the clothes he'd slept in, Evie half expected her mother to pop out of the pantry with breakfast.

"Morning, kid."

He'd been staring out the window when she came in, but returned to sipping his coffee when he realized someone was watching.

"What were you thinking about?"

The corners of Ben's eyes crinkled as he smiled to himself. "Hurricanes."

Evie frowned. It was March, and hurricane season didn't start for another couple of months. "A little early in the year for a storm, isn't it?"

"It is." He hooked an arm on the back of his chair, his gaze skimming over her attire. "You look nice, but don't you think that outfit is overkill for a day at home?"

"I'm going to work."

"Are you?"

Evie recognized that tone. He wasn't pleased, but was willing to listen, and perhaps negotiate. "My job is important to me. If I tell them I need a leave of absence for an unknown amount of time, they'll replace me."

"Then you're not as important to them, as they are to you."

Hating his reasoning, but understanding he was likely correct, she thought it was time to tell him about Micah. "But there are people at my work who rely on me."

Evie paused, thinking of the best way to phrase what she wanted to say. Fairweather Holdings employed thousands. Troubling yourself over the fate of a single worker might seem trivial to Ben.

But then again, he cared about her and would take her concerns seriously.

“I have an assistant. His name is Micah. Before me, he worked for Constance, but she’s a bit judgy and didn’t accept his lifestyle, so she transferred him to me. The move was seen as a demotion, but he and I were thrilled.”

“What kind of lifestyle are we talking about here?”

“Micah is into men, and Constance is... Constance. I don’t know how to describe her.”

“The Applebaums have been in this area roughly as long as the Fairweathers,” Ben said, stretching his arms over his head as if he’d been sitting in the same spot for too long. “I went to high school with Connie, and she was a complete waste of space back then. I can’t imagine much has changed.”

“It hasn’t.”

Ben grimaced. “She had this weird obsession with me when we were sophomores. One time, she waited outside Parkland’s gates all night hoping to talk to me.”

“Eww.”

“Tell me about it,” he said. “But back to the subject of this Micah person. If the guy loses his job, I’m sure he can find another. You don’t need to worry yourself with it.”

Evie explained Micah’s situation with his grandparents. “They rely on his income to stay afloat. He refuses to leave them after they took him in.”

“Listen, kid, I’m going to say something, but I want you to know that I’m not trying to upset you.”

Her spine stiffened. She didn't handle criticism well, and hearing it come from Ben would make it even worse. "Go ahead."

"It's time for you to stop thinking about others and figure out what makes you happy. For too long, I've watched you try to please everyone else, but ignore what's best for you."

In an empty kitchen, with the quiet peace of the morning surrounding them, the perfect moment to tell Ben about her and Samuel had just presented itself. "What if what makes me happy isn't what you'd expect?"

Ben's brow furrowed. "What do you mean?"

Her sudden balloon of courage deflated, and Evie scrambled to save face. "What if I wanted to live somewhere else? Jamison will leave for Texas soon. Annabeth is making progress, not in leaps and bounds, but substantial enough for me to see a light at the end of the tunnel. Soon, she'll be fine without me."

"Is that why you've stayed?" Ben scanned her face like he needed her to deny it. "To take care of everyone else?"

It was, and it wasn't, but she preferred not to get into the messy details of how her brain functioned. "No, I can't say that's the sole reason, but it's been a big part of it."

"Had I known, I would have remedied this sooner, and gotten you the hell out of here."

She almost laughed. Ben could lecture her all he wanted about putting herself first, when he slaved his days away to

build a business that supported them all. “I know Haven was special to you and mom, but I think my time here is done.”

“Nothing would make me happier than to know that you are out, living your life far from here.” The lines in Ben’s face sharpened. “And Haven isn’t special to me. I hate this place.”

Their shared grief slithered between them like a snake ready to strike, and Evie took his hand. “Haven will always be my home base, but for now, I think she’s through with me.”

“Just say when, and I’ll make it happen.”

“You say that now, but later, when I do something crazy, like run off with a man you don’t approve of, you’ll be begging me to stay.”

“As long as he’s the one you want, then I say the further you run, the better,” Ben gave her hand a squeeze. “The world is wide, kid, and it’s time for you to start living in it.”



Evie psyched herself up to call Lucas on the drive to work, but didn’t place the call until she was parked in her office lot.

“Good morning, beautiful,” Lucas answered, seemingly more energized than normal. “How was last night?”

This was the end of them, and the less he knew, the better. “It all turned out to be nothing,” she lied. “I have an interview tonight with the FBI agent, and then he’ll go home.”

“Are we having dinner before, or after the interview?”

“I think we need to take a break,” she said, completely forgetting the speech she’d composed. “I mean, like in our relationship.”

Silence was his only response, and Evie checked the screen to make sure he hadn’t hung up. “Lucas?”

“I’m here.”

“Oh, um, well, I don’t think I can give this relationship what it deserves. You’re an amazing man, and you should be with someone who is just as amazing.”

She wasn’t lying. Lucas was the full package; handsome, understanding, and caring. The type of man that would one day make some woman very happy.

But that woman wasn’t going to be her.

He remained quiet, and the pulse in her brain thickened its beat. God, she hated confrontations.

Across the street, the door to an Irish pub sat propped open while the manager decorated sidewalk tables for St. Patrick’s Day. Evie stared at the green and gold party supplies, letting their sway in the morning breeze help her keep focus through the pain piercing her skull.

A girl wearing a long, flowing white dress stood in the shadows of the pub’s doorway, watching Evie in her car. She seemed vaguely familiar, and assuming she was one of the waitstaff who regularly served her and Micah, Evie waved.

At the attention, the girl’s face stretched into an impossibly wide grin, revealing straight white teeth that glowed brightly



in the darkened restaurant. Lifting her hand, she returned the greeting with a wiggle of her fingers.

“An-anyways, like I said, you’re amazing,” she stammered, looking away from the girl. Her wave reminded Evie of the toes in Agent Cohen’s photo. “And I’m sorry, but my head’s not in the right place.”

“Well, I think you’re pretty amazing, too,” Lucas replied. “Your head might not be in the right spot, but what about your heart?”

“It’s not there either.”

He huffed in her ear, annoyed, as if he’d never been dumped before. “Wow, this is certainly unexpected.”

“It’s for the best.”

“It might seem that way now, but you never know what the future will hold.”

Evie tactfully told him she had to go, and hung up, taking a minute to manage her breathing. The pub girl was gone, but the disquiet her wiggle of fingers brought on lingered.

The phone in her lap buzzed with a text.

*Did you make the doctor cry?*

Samuel had called twice this morning, and once more while she was speaking with Lucas. His question pierced through the accelerating dread, making her smile. She typed back a response.

*You know you really should play hard to get. This desperate bid to get my attention is a bit of a turn off.*

Her phone rang promptly after she hit send. “Yes?”

“Say that to my face, Evangeline, and we’ll see how fast I have you turned on again.”

“What do you want?”

“Other than you? Not much. I’m a simple man, with simple needs.”

“There is nothing simple about you.” Evie tucked the phone between her ear and shoulder to gather her things. “And what makes you think I’ve spoken to Lucas already this morning?”

“I bet you called him when you woke up because of the guilt you feel after throwing yourself at me last night.”

Locking the car, she headed down the sidewalk, mindful not to glance in the pub’s direction. “I waited until I got to work to call him. Thank you very much,” she replied. “And you threw yourself at me.”

“Agree to disagree,” Samuel teased and lowered his voice. “But did he cry? It’s okay, you can tell me. He looks like a crier.”

Evie swung into her office lobby with a stupid grin on her face. “I noticed you’re not lecturing me about going to work this morning.”

“That’s because I was totally out of line last night. You’ve handled everything thrown at you remarkably well, and

separating you from an established schedule, with friends and coworkers, might do more harm than good.”

“Yeah, well, don’t give me too much credit,” she said, flipping on the light switch in her office. “I almost freaked out when someone waved at me a minute ago.”

“That’s not a big deal. I freak out when people wave at me all the time. It usually means they want to talk, and you know how much I love conversational chit-chat.”

“About as much as I do.”

Someone said something to him in the background, and Samuel told her he had to go. “I have a meeting about to start. I’ll see you tonight.”

The line went dead, and Evie put her phone away. Samuel supporting her decision to come into the office placed her in a better frame of mind, and she sat at her desk, ready for the day.

With the early start, she finished overflow coming out of another department, and when Micah arrived, they continued the reviews from the previous day. Things were going well until around lunchtime, when Constance blessed them with a visit.

“Knock, knock,” Constance crooned, entering. “I have news.”

Micah stood to leave, but Constance flapped a hand at him to stay. “Sit. This involves you, too.”

Constance didn’t believe in fraternizing with the employees, and seldom made her way over to this side of the building.

Smoothing out the pattern neon top she wore, Constance sat across from Evie's desk, positively vibrating with excitement. "I wanted to be the first to tell you about the recent account our firm has landed. Apparently, what you did at Hollingsdale General gained us some big attention."

"From who?"

Constance pointed a teal tipped fingernail at Micah. "Drumroll, please."

Micah strummed his fingers on the desktop, looking uncomfortable while Constance shimmied her hands as if they were on a game show. "Fairweather Holdings!"

"Excuse me?" Evie croaked.

"Fairweather Holdings!"

"Oh my God," Micah exclaimed. "That's freaking awesome!"

"It is," Evie managed, thinking of all the ways she was going to murder Samuel. "This is really incredible."

"Fairweather has requested a team from our office to come onsite and assist with some internal accounts. They're launching the second phase of the new development here and are short on accounting staff," Constance explained. "I spoke with the acting director himself a few moments ago, and he specifically asked for you, Evie. He said a Dr. Lucas Fields recommended you."

Dead.

Samuel was so very dead.

“We’ll assemble a lineup of our best and brightest to show those stiff suits what we’re made of at Applebaum,” Constance went on. “I don’t think I need to explain to you how big of a deal this is for us. Fairweather Holdings never outsources.”

“I totally understand.”

Constance fluffed her trademark bob and stood. “Have a list to me of who you’d recommend for the team. I might not use it, but I suppose I should consider your input.”

Evie assured her she would have a list ready within the hour. “Will you be joining us, Constance?”

“You better believe it. Not only do I want to ensure we make a good impression, but I also want to get a look at Benjamin Fairweather. I haven’t seen him in decades,” Constance gushed, fanning herself. “That man is so gorgeous, he could wet the Sahara. We went to school together and had quite the love affair.”

“How scandalous,” Micah cooed. “Did you break his heart, Constance?”

Twisting an imaginary key to her lips, Constance winked. “My lips are sealed.”

When she was gone, Micah grabbed Evie’s shoulders and leveled his gaze at her. “You’re going to have to thank Dr. Feelgood for this. Properly. On your knees. Like a good girl.”

“Don’t get too excited. We’re going to be working directly with Constance for who knows how long.”

Micah groaned. “Do not ruin my vibe.”

“Well, go take your vibe into Fiona’s office, and see if she’s interested in joining us,” Evie suggested. “She’s ex-corporate and would be ideal for this.”

“Mia would be a good choice, too,” Micah added. “I’ll go talk with her.”

Evie closed her office door after he left and called Samuel. She could hear a steady stream of voices in the background when he answered. He must still be in his meeting, but she didn’t care.

“You son of a bitch.”

“And here I thought you would find me clever.”

“This isn’t funny,” she seethed. “I told you no one here knows I’m connected to the Fairweathers.”

“That was obvious when I spoke to Constance Applebaum,” he replied. “Who’s an interesting person, by the way.”

“She has the hots for your dad.”

“I could’ve done without that information.”

“If I have to know, you have to know.”

“I don’t recall that law being in the rulebook of Samuel and Evie.”

“How could you do this?” She closed her eyes and rested her forehead on her hand. “We’ll be lucky not to kill each

other during business hours.”

“Or do something else entirely.”

Haven’s bookshelves were loaded with office romance novels, and she was well aware of what could and would take place if they spent too much alone time together.

However, his comment and the murmur of voices in her ear gave Evie an idea. “How tall is your desk?”

“Why?”

“Are you still in your meeting?”

“We’re on a break,” he told her. “I’m presenting when it’s over, and then I can get out of here.”

Evie’s lips curved. “I wanted to know how tall your desk was, because I’m trying to figure out if you’ll be able to bend me over it, or if I should just plan on being flat on my back, while you fuck me on our lunch breaks.”

Samuel sucked in a sharp breath. “Stop.”

“My assistant, Micah, said I should properly thank Lucas on my knees, like a good girl, for landing us the Fairweather account,” she whispered into the phone. “Little does he know that it’s you I’ll be thanking.”

“Do you have any idea what you’re doing?”

“I do,” she said, flushed with power. “And I bet when you stand up, everyone in that meeting will, too. I’m sure it won’t be *hard* to keep the audience’s attention.”

“I really hate you right now.”

“No, you don’t.”



## CHAPTER 33

# LIAM

A pair of yellow eyes observed Liam from the corner of the library desk.

“I asked you a question, Agent Cohen.” Jamison Fairweather leaned forward in her chair. “Do you find it difficult to be taken seriously as a federal agent when you’re as handsome as you are?”

“Erm, no.”

The beast on the corner of the desk waved its tail, sensing Liam’s discomfort. Last night, he’d spotted one or two felines loitering around Haven, but this morning, they were everywhere.

Meowing, the cat hopped into her mistress’ lap. Jamison’s interview was over, and while they waited for Annabeth, she’d started asking her own questions.

“I think Claire likes you,” she said, nuzzling the long-haired tabby’s nose. “You should feel special. She’s normally wary of men.”

“All smart women are.”

The remark earned him a smile, and Liam's heart thumped a little harder. The plan to not become distracted by her had flown out the window the second she trotted downstairs. Even at nine in the morning, the word beautiful didn't quite suffice for this woman.

But it wasn't purely her appearance that drew him in. Jamison radiated an energy similar to the sun, leaving those nearby locked in her orbit. She was clever, with a sharp tongue that took no prisoners.

"Simone and I would prefer to stay for Annabeth's interview if that's alright," she said, dropping Claire to the floor. "Simone, because she's overprotective, and me, because I'm nosey."

"That's fine."

"I didn't have a problem, by the way," she said. "It was tough to concentrate, but I found I could answer your questions clearly without being distracted by your looks."

"Uh, good?"

One side of her mouth quirked upward. "Oh, it was very good."

Annabeth arrived with her mother and Ben. Jamison scooted out from behind the desk to allow her father to sit. "We're staying," she told him, and seated herself with Simone on the sofa.

The interview with Annabeth was short. Her limited contact with the outside world didn't exactly give him much to work

with, and when it was over, Jamison tapped her friend's shoulder. "Now, let me ask you, was it difficult to take him seriously because he's so handsome?"

"Jesus Christ," Ben muttered under his breath.

"No, Agent Cohen's attractiveness only enhanced my interview experience." Annabeth gave Jamison a conspiratorial wink. "Ten out of ten."

"Go," Ben ordered, and the two women rose from their seats, laughing as they left.

"I apologize for my girl's behavior," Simone said, moving to the chair left vacant by her daughter. "They both know better, I assure you."

"It's nice that you think of them as your girls," he replied, putting away his notepad. "Evie and Jamison, I mean."

"Well, that's what they are."

Wanting to record the session, Liam set out his phone, and over the course of two hours, they dealt with Simone's day-to-day life, her ties to the Fairweathers, and then onto her relationship with Ben and Haven House.

"Can we talk about Devon Howard?"

Simone's face fell. "My husband was a wonderful man. He taught science at an elementary school in Port Michaelson but gave it up to homeschool our children."

"He died here?"

Her eyes landed on Ben for a split second and then drifted back to Liam. “He was out on the dock with our twins. Abe got hurt first, and...” Her voice broke, and she took a minute to compose herself. “Devon did his best that day, and our Abe is alive.”

Liam wanted more details, but reminded himself that Devon Howard’s death had nothing to do with why he was there. “Let’s move on to Laura Jean. You two were good friends and, according to my records, lived together here at Haven for several years.”

“We were kindred spirits,” she said, her warm smile returning. “Isn’t that what Anne Shirley said about her and Diana? Or perhaps it’s bosom friends, I can’t remember, but either way, we were close.”

“So, you two were exactly alike?”

The question had Ben snorting out a laugh. “Hell no.”

Shushing him, Simone shook her head. “No, we were nothing alike,” she said. “I require order in the chaos, while Laura Jean was the chaos.”

“A beautiful chaos,” Ben said, sobering. “That’s exactly what she was.”

“How did Laura Jean become interested in painting?” Liam asked.

“I’m not sure,” Simone replied. “She was studying to become an art teacher when she met Albie.”

“Would anyone outside the home be familiar with her work?”

“Only us, and perhaps her family.”

Liam picked up his phone and opened the email Hawkins had sent over at the crack of dawn. “Laura Jean’s mother and her brother were in prison until recently.”

Ben rested back in his chair. “Laura Jean had no contact with them once she and Albie came to Florida.”

“But you did.”

“And here I thought lawyer-client confidentiality was still a thing.”

Liam felt sorry for the Louisiana lawyer who would most likely be losing a very lucrative client soon. “Their profession makes them finicky creatures, and some like to talk more than others, especially to the feds.”

He asked if Jamison or Evie had any contact with Laura Jean’s family. “They were unaware of their existence until recently,” Simone said. “Jamison has some wild notion of meeting them.”

“I saw where Mathis has them listed as potential persons of interest for the break-in. We’re sending one of our local field agents out to pay them a visit this afternoon. I’ll let you know if we clear them or not.”

Liam turned to Ben. “I’d like to know a little more about you and Laura Jean,” he said, bracing himself. “How long after the death of Dr. Eddins did your affair with her begin?”

Fairweather was a smart man and understood why the question had to be asked, but that didn't mean he had to like it. "Five years."

"You were married when the affair began?"

"I was."

"How did Samuel handle the situation?" Liam pushed. "How were things between the two of you during those years?"

"He never had an issue with it. Miranda, Laura Jean, and I maintained a healthy relationship for his sake, and for the sake of the other children."

Jamison stuck her head into the room, halting the interview. "Dad, your phone is going off like crazy. It's a Texas number calling."

Ben excused himself, and Liam paused his recording. "I think I have what I need from you," he told Simone. "However, I would like to speak more with Mr. Fairweather."

"That Texas phone call will lead to another, and then another, until the day gets away from him," Simone predicted. "Why don't you let Jamison take you on a tour while you wait."

Torn between wanting to spend time with her, and wanting to avoid her at all costs, Liam debated on what to do.

Jamison found his hesitation amusing. "Let's go, pretty boy. We'll start at the top and work our way down."

He allowed her to lead him out, and up the stairs. The leggings she wore left nothing to the imagination, and as he followed behind her, Liam's gaze traced the curve of her thigh to the spot where he was sure he'd find the softest skin.

"You'll love the view."

Liam stumbled on a stair. "I'm sorry, what?"

"The second floor balcony has a spectacular view of the grounds," she said, smiling at him over her shoulder, knowing exactly what she was doing. "You'll love it."

"Can't wait."

He took his time in Evie's room, checking the balcony door and closet. Another cat, this one black, leered at him from the bed.

"That's Fitz," Jamison said, shooing the ball of fur off. "He belongs to Evie. She's got a thing for Mr. Darcy, and every male cat she's ever owned has carried a form of his name."

"Your sister likes the dark, broody types, huh?"

"Yeah, but ironically, that's not what she dates."

From there, they proceeded on to the other rooms, ending in Jamison's suite. "Why do you need a fireplace in Florida?" he asked, wisely staying in the doorway. "It's hot all the time."

Jamison sat at the end of her bed, leaning back on her arms. The ivory camisole she wore stretched tight across her chest, and every ounce of blood in his head rushed south.

"Maybe I enjoy being hot and sweaty."

Suddenly unable to breathe, Liam wisely returned to the landing. “I’d like to see where they found the necklace.”

On their way outside, she showed him the media room, the conservatory, and then finally, the dining room. “Yeesh, do you guys actually eat in here?”

“Simone keeps this room immaculate, and only lets us in here on special occasions.” She tapped her foot on a stained rug. “Samuel knocked over a tray of booze at Selah’s birthday party, and I thought she was going to kill him.”

Outside on the brick patio, Liam stopped to gauge the drop from the balcony to the ground. “So, they considered Selah’s birthday a special occasion?”

“They think he jumped from there,” she said, pointing to the latticework and vines climbing the brick fireplace. “And yes, Selah is the best, and we all love him.”

Liam took a few photos, and then walked with her down a paved pathway leading to the water and cottages. The concrete beneath his feet ran smooth, and he assumed they’d laid the walkway for Abe’s use.

“What about Samuel?” he asked, hoping to get some insight on the man, and maybe what was happening between him and Evie. “Would you say he’s the best?”

Jamison plucked an azalea from one of the many multicolored bushes lining the path. “Samuel is okay in small doses.”



“Things got a little heated last night between your brother and sister. What’s up with that?”

She shrugged. “They hate each other.”

“Are you sure?”

“I guess hate is too strong of a word, but they get under each other’s skin. He’s overbearing, and while Evie is timid with everyone else, that’s not the case with Samuel. She gives as good as she gets when it comes to him.”

“Samuel seems like he could be a pretty intimidating guy.”

“Oh, he is,” she agreed. “But he has to be. Selah wants nothing to do with running Fairweather Holdings, nor do I. The position I’ve chosen is one that doesn’t require me to make the company my life like Samuel will have to do.”

“Don’t you think that’s a heavy burden for one man to bear?” Liam asked. “From what I’ve read, Fairweather is growing larger by the day.”

“He can do it. Samuel’s a freaking genius.”

They came to a stop on the path, with one way leading to the water and the other running in front of the cottages.

“Which cottage belongs to Abe?”

“The first is Selah’s place,” she told him as they strolled down the line of homes. “Then Abe is next. The third is our guest house, and we use the remaining two for storage.”

Beyond the homes, the forest loomed, encompassing the estate like a wall.

“Give me a second,” Jamison said when they reached the end of the path at the last cottage. “I saw a piece of driftwood by the dock that I wanted to grab for Ty. He carves stuff out of the pieces I collect for him, and if the tide comes in while we’re in the woods, I’ll never find it again.”

“Sure.”

Liam made notes on his phone while he waited, calculating the distance between Haven and the forest. Even at a full run, the Fairweather brothers wouldn’t have caught up with the intruder before he disappeared into the woods. They must have been confident in their knowledge of the area to forge ahead with pursuing him.

A rustling to his left caught Liam’s attention, and he looked over at the last cottage. It was the largest one, but not as well-kept as the others. The accumulation of leaves and other vegetative waste hanging around the front door indicated that the family didn’t use it often.

Curtains blocked his view of the inside, and treading closer, the metallic creaking he heard seemed to be coming from around the entrance. The noise grew frenzied the nearer he came, until it ceased completely when he reached the small porch.

Glancing in Jamison’s direction, he saw her dragging a log up from the reedy shore onto the grass. With his attention turned away from the house, the noise returned, but this time louder.

His gaze snapped back to the cottage's front door, and he saw the knob twisting frantically, as if someone were trying to get out but couldn't.

The hairs on the back of his neck pricked with awareness. Out of instinct, Liam rested a hand on his sidearm. "Hello?"

The knob's movement halted, and a strange hush pressed in, causing his head to throb in time with his heartbeat. There were eyes on him. He could feel it. Something was watching, gauging his intentions.

"Is someone in there?"

A rush of wind blew through, and he almost missed the sound of the door opening a fraction of an inch with a gentle click.

"Hello?"

"What are you doing?" Jamison rushed around him and snatched the door closed. "You don't want to go in there. There's no telling what kind of animals are living in it. Even the cats stay away."

"The door opened on its own."

Jamison dragged him away by his arm. "If I freaked out every time a door opened on its own at Haven, I'd be a basket case. It's what you get when living in old houses."

Liam allowed her to guide him off the porch, his gaze lingering on the cottage door as they walked away.

They reached the trailhead, its opening yawning wide like a monster ready to devour them whole.

“You and your sister jog here every day?”

She nodded. “Well, we did. Since the break-in, neither one of us has really felt like it.”

Entering the woodlands of Haven House was like walking into a different world. Thanks to the dense canopy above, the temperature drop hit Liam immediately. The humidity remained, but the coverage made the heat more bearable.

His eyes needed time to adjust in the dull light, and when they did, he saw small animals and birds flittering about in the trees and through the streaks of sunlight.

“Ty hired a crew to come out three times a year to clear the trails,” she said when they arrived at a fork in the main path. “Do you want to start at the graveyard or the mill?”

“Graveyard.”

Jamison veered to the left, leading them away from the water. “Did you have any more questions for me?”

“What was your mother like?”

“I don’t remember my mother.” The words were hollow, and almost apologetic, as if it was her fault she hadn’t committed every detail of the woman to memory when she’d had the chance. “That’s a privilege only my sister has.”

“You can’t remember anything?”

Jamison scanned the never-ending rows of pine. “I can remember the music. They say my mom loved music, as much as she loved painting, and I can kind of remember the feel of her holding me while we danced.”

The wind rustled the trees above, whirling lower to flow around them and blow the wisps of hair back from Jamison’s face. She closed her eyes, breathing it in. “And I can remember the way she smelled. Isn’t that weird?”

“Olfactory and auditory memories are actually quite common.”

“And quite pathetic when that’s all you have.”

Movement in the brush had Liam stopping. The dread he’d felt around the cottage returned, and the once bustling wood went quiet.

He swept Jamison behind him. “What was that?”

“Just ignore it and keep moving,” Jamison whispered, giving him a small shove. “It’s normal to get spooked in this section. It’ll get better the further in you go.”

“Nothing about this place is normal.”

Liam’s gaze combed over the area, half expecting to see something staring back at them.

Jamison took his hand. “Come on, the graveyard is right over here.”

She led him around a sharp curve on the trail, with him fighting the urge to look over his shoulder every five seconds.

They arrived at the graveyard, and, oddly, he felt better.

“The necklace was hanging from up there?” Liam moved to stand under the spiked center of the arched entrance. “That’s at least twelve feet high.”

“And it wasn’t there earlier in the day when we went for our run.”

He stared up at the gothic wrought-iron design. “There’s no way he just tossed it up there and hoped for the best.”

“Mathis didn’t think so either.”

Crossing the threshold, Liam wound his way through the cracked headstones covered in glazes of green and black. He paused when he came upon two plaques that bore a small semblance of shine. “Your mother?”

Jamison remained on the path. “Her ashes.”

She inclined her head to another marker next to his foot. “And that’s Devon’s slab, but we buried his ashes under the large oak in the center of the yard where he and Simone were married.”

“Is Miranda Fairweather also buried here?”

“No, from my understanding, Miranda is in North Carolina.”

Liam came back to her, and they returned to the fork in the path with him remaining alert this time. “I read in the report that Evie’s boyfriend was at Selah’s party,” he said. “What’s he like?”

“Hot.”

They arrived at the junction and made a right towards the mill. The dense woods thinned as they walked, bringing in more sunshine. “Is he a Darcy?”

Jamison snorted. “No, he’s a doctor.”

He grinned at her answer. Liam didn’t know you couldn’t be both a Darcy and a doctor. “Does he have a practice around here?”

“No, he works at Hollingsdale General.”

“Is she serious about him?”

“Well, she’s not fucking him, if that’s what you mean.”

The toe of Liam’s shoe snagged on an exposed root. He stumbled and let out a curse. Why in the hell was he always tripping around this woman?

“I, um, wasn’t asking, but thanks for the info,” he replied. “What about Abe’s date?”

“Meh, he’s already after someone new,” she said, pointing to a crane sunbathing on a decaying tree. They were mere feet from the water; however, this section of the inlet was wider than the one by the dock and led out into a larger body of water. “No woman can hold Abe’s interest for long.”

When they came upon the mill ruins, Liam stopped at the edge of the path. The area consisted of six buildings, with one holding the remains of a giant water wheel half hanging off the structure.

“Don’t get too close,” Jamison warned, pointing to uneven sections of the ground. “There are hidden pits here, and near the shore are the manchineel trees.”

“The what?”

“Manchineel trees,” she repeated. “They’re super toxic and can burn your skin if you stand too close. Ty used to scare us with stories, saying the fruit was the apple that killed Snow White.”

“Why in the hell would you have those?”

“The first Fairweather planted them to deter his workers from cooling off in the water on hot days.”

“Jesus, your ancestors sound lovely.”

“They weren’t.”

Liam explored the mill where he could, mindful not to fall into a pit. “Your brothers really tracked the guy through all this?”

“Selah and Samuel have played here since they were little and know how to navigate the dangerous parts.”

When it was time to head to the house, Liam asked how far Hollingsdale General was from Haven House.

“Oh!” Jamison hopped around him on the trail. “I get it! Lucas is the boyfriend, and thus the most likely suspect since our shadow man was in her room.”

“I’m not here to investigate the break-in,” he insisted. “But I want to speak with him before my time in Florida is done.”



“Can I come?” she pleaded.

Liam shook his head, and the beautiful woman next to him did the worst thing she could possibly do. She stuck her bottom lip out and begged. “Pretty, pretty please. I’ll let you drive my car.”

He didn’t have to ask which car parked out front belonged to her. It fit her personality like a glove. “Red, huh?”

“The color is Carmine Red, and it has two turbos.”

“Twin turbos.”

“Whatever, but it goes very fast, and I would love for you to take Betty for a spin... to the hospital... with me.”

Liam laughed. “Betty?”

“Don’t make fun of me. I like to name cars.” She shoved his shoulder. “Samuel bought her for me as an early graduation gift.”

“Well, while I am a sucker for pretty girls named Betty, I’m afraid I’m going to have to say no.”

Jamison batted her eyes at him as they made their way over the lawn. “Come on, Liam, Betty’s never been driven hard by a man before.”

It was totally unprofessional to even entertain the idea, but they were talking about a brand spanking new Porsche 911.

And he would get to spend more time with her.

“Maybe tomorrow.”

Jamison opened Haven’s back door. “It’s a date.”

“What’s a date?” Simone asked, busy preparing food with Annabeth when they walked in.

“I’m taking Liam to the hospital tomorrow to talk with Lucas.”

Brown eyes leveled on Jamison. “Do not embarrass your sister.”

“I won’t.”

Simone dusted off her hands and turned her maternal gaze at Liam. “With all that’s going on, you need to keep your mind sharp and your belly full. There’s not much to eat around Firewater, so you’re more than welcome to join us for dinner,” she said. “Ben isn’t off the phone, but Evie should be home within the hour. By the time you’re finished talking with her, the food should be ready.”

Liam didn’t think she would take no for an answer. “Ah, sure.”

Abe rolled in from the hall. “Come on, Cohen. March Madness starts next week, and ESPN is doing a recap before the Miami game. You can watch with me while waiting for Evie, instead of sitting in here with these old biddies.”

“Who you calling a biddy?” Annabeth flung a piece of whatever she was chopping at her brother’s head. “You rickety roller skate.”

The food ricocheted off Abe’s head and Jamison batted it back in his direction. Waving a spatula, Simone scolded the three of them, all while apologizing to Liam at the same time.

“It’s fine,” Liam said, taking in the interaction that revealed so much in just a few seconds. “And I can’t say no to basketball, Abe.”

## CHAPTER 34

# *Evie*

**O**n her way home from work, a sleek black sports car zoomed into Evie's rearview mirror. The obnoxious Batmobile-looking thing revved its engine, picking up speed to pull along beside her.

“Grow up,” she grumbled, keeping her eyes on the road. “You think you look cool, but I bet the gas mileage in that thing sucks.”

The Batmobile gunned its engine to peel off, disappearing down the highway. She didn't see it again until turning onto Haven's private drive.

“Move!” she yelled through her lowered window.

Arms crossed, Samuel reclined back on the side of his Lamborghini. “Make me.”

This far from the house, no one could see or hear them, and Evie got out. “How was your meeting?”

“Hard.” He crooked his finger at her. “Come here and finish what you started.”

She took two steps and Samuel closed the distance, charging forward to lift her up with one arm. He hoisted her high in the air, allowing Evie to look down on him.

“I gave a presentation with a raging hard-on.” Samuel’s free hand clutched the back of her neck and head, holding her to him as he kissed her with equal parts punishment and pleasure. “I was talking about a quarterly budget while envisioning you spread naked on my desk.”

“So, you prefer me on my back?” she groaned against his lips. “How boring, Samuel.”

“Boring?” He loosened his hold, dragging her down the length of his hard body. “Oh Evangeline, you have no idea how many ways I’m going to fuck you.”

Her feet touched the ground, but she held on, rubbing her hips into his. “Promise?”

With a growl, Samuel’s mouth returned to hers, parting her lips with his tongue. The kiss nearly made her knees buckle, and she clung to him.

But then, quite unexpectedly, he was gone.

Evie’s eyes cracked open, her arms empty and dangling in the air. “Where the hell are you going?”

Samuel smirked, sliding behind the wheel of the Batmobile. “See you at the house.”

The car sped away, kicking up dust in its wake.

“Son of a bitch,” she hissed, marching to her own car.

She got in and slammed the door, driving the rest of the way while cursing his very existence. He'd gotten her all hot and bothered on purpose.

Samuel was waiting on the front walk, but she didn't stop, stomping past him. "Leave me alone."

He caught up with her easily. "Sexual frustration makes beasts out of us all, doesn't it?"

"What you just did was mean." She climbed the porch steps. "My little comments weren't that bad."

Racing ahead, he blocked her at the top of the stairs. "I ran through every set of mental gymnastics in my arsenal. It worked long enough for me to make it to the damn podium, but when I started speaking, my mind strayed right back to you, and the committee got an eyeful."

She burst out laughing. "Oh my God."

"And not to brag or anything, but I think I impressed them."

She laughed harder, her shoulders shaking. "Just so you know, I would have never pulled a stunt like that with anyone else."

"Lucky me."

"You should feel lucky," she insisted, getting control of herself. "I trust you with sex stuff, and that's a first for me."

"You never trusted your partners?"

"Partner." She raised a single finger in the air. "As in one. And even with nothing to compare it to, he wasn't that stellar

in the bedroom.”

“So, why did you stay with him?”

“Emotionally, I felt safe with Brett, but physically he didn’t know what to do with me, because I was too afraid to speak up. I didn’t trust him with that part of myself.”

“But you trust me,” Samuel said, arrogantly pleased.

“Because you know I can give you what you need.”

This discussion was bound to happen sooner rather than later, but Evie wasn’t fully prepared with what she wanted to say. “Yes, and I want to do things with you I’ve never done before.”

“Hmm.” Samuel propped a shoulder on one of the columns. “I think I’m going to need you to elaborate.”

“Like when you offered to, um, do the thing with your mouth.”

Unable to maintain eye contact with him, she focused on a camellia bush planted off the porch. “No one has ever done that to me,” she confessed. “I’m not sure if I’ll enjoy it, but that’s okay. I trust you to listen when I tell you what I like and what I don’t. You won’t expect me to just lie there and take it.”

“Unless it’s on top of my desk, of course.”

“Or bent over it,” she shot back, relaxing a little. “And I want to learn how to make you feel good, too.”

Samuel whistled out a puff of air and straightened. “We’re due inside, and I don’t want a repeat of what happened at my

meeting this afternoon. I get what you're saying. There's no need to continue."

Evie frowned at him. She wasn't done.

And he did deserve a little payback.

"I know the basics of how it works, but tongue placement is confusing. Am I licking while sucking, or what?" she asked.

"And how does it work when you do it to me? Is sucking involved there, too? I've read the books and watched a few movies, but I'm not getting it."

Samuel pinched the bridge of his nose, closing his eyes.

"Fuck, I'm lightheaded."

Evie moved closer, running a finger down his crisp white dress shirt. "And what exactly are you *eating*?"

His eyes snapped open the same time his hand latched onto her wrist to yank her to him. "You."

Cupping her cheek, he caressed her bottom lip with his thumb. "Think you can handle that?"

"You act like being seduced by you is some life-altering event." The tip of her tongue darted out to stroke his thumb. "But I think I'm handling it well."

"For clarification, I haven't seduced you yet," he exhaled, watching what she was doing with pained interest. "But yeah, when I do, it will be life-altering."

Arching up on her toes, she went in for a kiss. "I hope your dick is as big as your ego, Samuel."



“And then some, Evangeline.”

The front door swung open, and Evie staggered back, almost toppling off the porch. Samuel caught her as Ben stepped out.

“Don’t be too hard on him, kid. I called Samuel when you left this morning.”

Evie’s mouth opened and closed like a fish out of water. Had he seen anything? Heard anything? “It’s fi-fine,” she wheezed when she realized he hadn’t. “I’m not upset.”

Relieved, Ben placed a hand on Samuel’s shoulder. “Good, because tomorrow is an opening day, which is when this guy gathers the teams to highlight what we expect in the next phase of a project. It’s a great time to start.”

“Wonderful,” Evie said, trying to sound sarcastic. “A day of hearing Samuel drone on and on.”

Ben chuckled. “Actually, he’s really impressive when he speaks, so much so that all the ladies crowd in early for front row seats.”

Knowing damn well she would be on the front row with the rest of them if she could, Evie continued her act of indifference for Ben’s sake. “Well, then you’ll find me in the back.”

“That’s probably a good idea,” Samuel said dryly. “I wouldn’t want you to faint.”

Ready to find her footing in this new game, she turned to Ben. “I meant to ask, can I have an office with a large desk? I

really like to *spread* myself out when I work.”

A strangled, laughing sound came from Samuel and he tried to cover it with a cough. “Listen to her. She hasn’t even started and is already making demands.”

Ben smiled at his son. “Let her have what she wants, Samuel.”

“Yeah, Samuel,” Evie pouted, not missing the stain of red on his neck. “Give me what I want.”

“Oh, I plan on it.”



Sitting on the library sofa, Evie waited while Agent Cohen set up his phone to record the session. “If you become uncomfortable at all, please let me know, and we can take a break.”

“I’m fine,” she assured him. “I want to get this over with.”

Cohen said her name, along with the date into the phone. “My questions might seem personal.”

“I said, I’m fine,” Evie replied, a little firmer. She didn’t want him to assume she was a pushover after the episode last night.

“Ok, then let’s start with the paintings. Can you tell me what you remember about your mother’s artwork? Do you know if she ever sold any to the public?”

“No, mom painted for herself. Her favorite subject was Haven House.” Evie waved a hand around the room. “Inside

and out.”

Cohen stood to examine the gold leaves blanketing the emerald-green walls. “I thought this was wallpaper.” He traced a leaf with his finger. “It’s so well done.”

It was nice to hear someone from the outside appreciate her mother’s talent. “What you see is the product of a bored Laura Jean stuck inside on a rainy day.”

The door opened and Samuel came in. “Sorry, I got tied up. My dad won’t be joining us. He’s on another conference call.”

Cohen returned to his seat. “Sounds like you guys have a bunch of problems at the office today.”

Samuel sat next to her on the couch, taking up all the available space. “It’s Texas, and there’s always a problem in Texas.”

“Jamison tells me she’ll transfer there when she takes her place with the company. Do you prefer working at that division, or this one?”

Evie pressed her lips together. Annabeth had texted her updates throughout the day, saying Cohen had taken the bait with Jamison, and apparently, her sister was just as smitten.

“I prefer our North Carolina office, but my uncle runs it.”

“Is that where you were before here?”

“No, I was maintaining our Lauderdale facilities for about three years.”

Cohen separated a bundle of papers from his file. “Evie, you’ve had a lengthy career with your current employer. Have you ever had any problems with coworkers?”

“No, not at all.”

“And what about you, Samuel?”

His big shoulders shrugged. “I deal with hundreds of people every day. I’m sure some of them have a problem with the way I do things.”

Evie poked Samuel’s leg so he would give her some room. “Only some?”

Cohen’s lizard eyes slid to her direction, studying her like he had the wallpaper. “On the night of Selah’s party, I understand that your boyfriend, Dr. Lucas Fields, was in attendance. Everything good there?”

“We’re fine.”

Cohen jotted something down. “I plan on speaking with him tomorrow.”

“Who? Lucas?” she asked, trying to see what he was writing. “Why?”

“To take his statement.”

Evie’s stomach dropped. “I would appreciate it if you left him out of this. He’s a great guy, but it’s not working out,” she said, quickly. “I don’t want to make things any more awkward than they already are.”

Cohen's head raised, his gaze drifting between her and Samuel. "Did you break up?"

"Yes."

"I see." Cohen shuffled his notes. "Samuel—"

"Had nothing to do with me breaking things off with Lucas."

The words were out of her mouth before she could stop them. "I mean, of course, he didn't," she rambled. "He has a girlfriend. And he's Samuel... which is... I'm sorry, what was your question?"

Cohen's eyes narrowed. "I didn't have a question," he said, turning to Samuel. "Would your girlfriend be Ms. Gretchen Parker? On the night of the break-in, she's listed in attendance as your guest."

"Gretchen is in Texas and will be back by the end of the week," Samuel replied, eyeballing Evie as if she were crazy. "I'm sure she'll be more than happy to speak with you."

"But she is your girlfriend?"

"When I need her to be, yes."

"What does that mean?"

"It means I keep my relationships casual, Agent Cohen."

Sinking into the couch cushions, Evie told herself this was Samuel's way of distancing himself from Gretchen. But to hear him speak of the woman who had essentially been his

girlfriend these past few months in such a way made her head hurt.

And she couldn't help but wonder if she would also one day get tossed into his "use as needed" pile of women.

"I'd like to talk more about Laura Jean," Cohen stated. "I understand her death was very abrupt and stemmed from injuries she sustained in a car wreck."

Samuel stiffened the same time she did, and if Cohen's statement hadn't shocked her so completely, Evie would have found the synchronicity of their movements comedic. "I'm sorry?"

"Detective Mathis said she died from residual health issues linked to the wreck that killed your father."

A near lifetime of controlling her exterior while inside she collapsed, helped Evie recover first. She nodded, refusing to repeat the lie planted by Mathis.

Next to her, Samuel remained utterly still, and she laid a hand on his knee, the contact bringing him back around to the conversation.

"And you've had panic attacks ever since her death?" Cohen asked.

Samuel raised an eyebrow. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"Curiosity," Cohen told him, but thankfully, moved on. "Evie, can you tell me what kind of relationship your mom had with Ben?"

“Happy,” she answered, grateful for the change in questioning. “If you can use such a small word to describe what they had together.”

“Where did you live?” Cohen asked. “My records show Miranda Fairweather living at Ben’s primary residence in Hollingsdale until well after your mother’s passing.”

“My mother loved Haven and Ben loved her,” she replied. “We lived here while they built their house in what is now the Firewater development. And when we weren’t here, we were traveling with Ben when he had to be in Texas for more than a few weeks.”

“What about you?” Cohen asked Samuel. “Did you travel with your father and his family during that time?”

“I did not.”

“Was there a reason for that?”

“Not that involves your investigation.”

The Fairweather in Samuel was coming out, and if she didn’t intervene, he would likely end up in a jail cell by the end of the interview.

“Samuel attended a private academy in Hollingsdale,” Evie answered for him. “It was one of those stuffy places that didn’t let you miss too much school. Simone’s husband homeschooled Selah and I during that time, so it was easy for us to pick up and go whenever.”

Accepting her explanation, Cohen nodded. “Jamison was born in ninety-seven, but, Samuel, your parents divorced in

ninety-eight?”

“My parents separated long before they divorced,” Samuel replied, obviously unimpressed with where Cohen was trying to take this. “And again, you’re becoming sidetracked. My father’s private life has nothing to do with those murders.”

“Humor me,” Cohen said. “How did you feel when you found out your father was having an affair?”

Irritation boiled in Evie so hot that the tips of her ears burned. “Why does that matter?” she snapped, ready to go to jail right along with Samuel. “What are you trying to get at?”

Cohen ignored her, keeping his focus on Samuel. “Can you recall how you felt when you discovered your father was leaving your mother for another woman?”

“My father didn’t leave my mother for another woman,” Samuel stated, his voice like ice. “My mom left my dad for someone else first.”

Evie spun towards Samuel so fast it made her dizzy. “What?”

Across from them, Cohen nodded as if he’d already known. “Did she ever remarry?”

“Yes, shortly before her death. But you won’t find any record of it. At the time of the wedding, it wasn’t legal.”

Digging through his notes, Cohen pulled out a piece of paper and read it. “Would Josie Campbell be the individual she married? I found her name listed as a resident of the Hollingsdale house.”



“It is.”

Weightless, as if she were floating into space without a tether to bring her home, Evie felt herself lift off the couch. She stood, with no intent of going anywhere, the shock simply propelling her to rise. Staring at Samuel with her mouth open, and heart beating in her ears, she whispered down to him, “I don’t understand.”

“Breathe.” Samuel took her hand in his, the concern on his face breaking her a little more. “Breathe for me, Evangeline.”

She tried, but with every inhale of oxygen, the small number of memories that remained in her head of Miranda flashed before her eyes.

And Josie was in every one of them.

The holidays, the theme park vacations, the family dinners, Josie was always there with Miranda. Never once had she considered the women to be more than friends.

“You’ll have to forgive Evie,” Samuel said to Cohen, drawing her down to sit next to him. “I believe she’s catching up.”

“By her reaction, I’m guessing very few people were aware of your mother’s relationship with Ms. Campbell?”

Evie kept her gaze lowered to the floor, choking on her tears while Samuel spoke. “Mom told my dad about Josie when doctors diagnosed her with cancer the first time, but since scandals are bad for business, they agreed to stay married, and keep mom’s affair a secret.”

“They stayed married for the company’s sake?”

“My mother’s father sat on Fairweather’s board and possessed enough voting shares to make a difference. Dad needed to keep him happy for as long as he could, and that side of my family would never have accepted a divorce, let alone what mom had with Josie,” Samuel replied. “When my grandfather died, the shares dropped into my trust, and dad had the divorce papers drawn up the next day. He asked Laura Jean to marry him a couple of weeks later.”

“I’m surprised Laura Jean was patient enough to wait for your dad to get a divorce,” Cohen said.

Evie closed her eyes, letting the pinpricks of numbness poke her from the inside out. How could she have been so blind?

“Laura Jean was an incredible person.” Samuel’s grip on her hand tightened to make sure she was listening. “She was a loyal friend to my mother and sacrificed a lot to protect her.”

“What did she sacrifice?” Cohen asked.

“People would see her and my dad out together, and no matter how careful they were, rumors spread like wildfire.”

“Whore.” Evie said, bitterly. “They called my mom a whore, because everyone thought she was his mistress. I had no idea when I was younger, but when I went into the public school system, and people learned of my connection to the Fairweathers, I started to hear the rumors.”

Letting go of Samuel, she rubbed her temples. “You know, when you’re a kid, all you understand is your own mother’s

happiness. Nothing else matters. But as I got older, I realized the oddity of the situation and figured Miranda was being the bigger person by remaining friends with everyone,” she said. “I’ve lived nearly all of my life thinking mom was the other woman who broke up a marriage and a family.”

As the enormity of the truth set in, Evie covered her face with her hands. Laura Jean hadn’t been the homewrecker the world, and her own daughter, assumed her to be. Her mother had allowed everyone to believe a lie in order to protect a friend.

Papers shuffled, and Cohen said something about staying for dinner and told Samuel he would follow up with him another time.

“That’s fine, but please keep what we’ve discussed here private until I can speak with my father.”

“Not a problem.”

The library door closed, and Samuel hauled Evie into his lap. “I swear, I thought you knew,” he whispered, pulling her hands down. “It wasn’t until that incident with Claudia that I got the first inkling that something was off.”

She buried her face in his neck, clinging to his scent to remain centered. “Am I the last to know?”

“If you didn’t know, then I’m sure Jamison and Annabeth don’t either.”

Evie looked up at him. “Simone?”

How easy it was to read him now that the walls were down between them. She could see in his face how he wanted to lie to save her from the pain. “Yes.”

The stinging betrayal hit deep, and laying her head on his chest, Evie closed her eyes, wanting to know everything.

“Was it nice?”

“What?”

“Miranda and Josie’s wedding.”

Samuel rubbed his chin on the top of her head. “It was one of the last good days we had before she died. They were married on a mountaintop in North Carolina. Mom had seen a spread of something similar in a bridal magazine and loved it, so Josie and my dad made it happen.”

A laugh rumbled from deep inside him. “I walked her down the aisle, or grass, or whatever the hell you want to call it. I was so nervous I stepped on her gown and almost knocked us both over.”

“I bet she looked beautiful, though.”

“She did.” Samuel’s fingers clutched her chin, bringing her head up. “I bought the land where they were married a couple of years ago and built a cabin on it. You’ll like it there.”

The tears returned, and a sense of urgency overtook her.

What in the hell was she waiting for?

Ben and her mother had waited.

Miranda and Josie had waited.

And for what?

Nothing.

In the end, it all fell apart anyway.

If she could learn anything from them, it was that happiness was never promised in the ever afters, and she wasn't going to miss a single second of hers.

"I don't want to go slow," she breathed, taking his face in her hands. "I want you to do the right thing and tell Gretchen that it's over."

Evie brushed her lips over his. "But after that, I'm all in. No more hiding. No more denying what we are to each other," she said. "No more in-betweens. I'm yours, Samuel."

## CHAPTER 35

# LIAM

Liam stood on Haven's porch with Jamison, listening to the night come alive around the house. "Thank you again for your help today."

"Are you sure you can't stay?"

The phone in his pocket vibrated. "I can't."

"But I'll see you tomorrow, right?" she asked, offering him a smile that made it hard to say no. "You, me, and Betty have a date."

"We'll see." Liam nodded at the Aventador parked next to Betty. "Samuel's?"

"I call her Phyllis just to piss him off."

He waved goodnight and drove to the townhouse, thinking through the things he'd learned today. Which was basically nothing.

No one at Haven House showed any indicators of suppressed disinhibition or deviant traits. They maintained emotional connections to each other, invalidating any theories

of possible hidden personality disorders that would normally be seen in perpetrators who inflicted the level of violence his girls had seen.

But there was something.

It lay just under the surface with these people, and as hard as he tried, Liam couldn't scratch through to see exactly what it was.

Then again, maybe he was thinking this way because of the revelation during his interview with Evie and Samuel. Miranda Fairweather's sexuality hadn't been a surprise to him, not when Josie Campbell's name had been so intricately woven in the recorded life of Samuel's mother.

Property records, bank accounts, it was all there.

But for Evie, realizing the truth whisked her into a place mentally where she couldn't cover her shock. He felt sorry for the woman, but watching her distress trigger Samuel Fairweather's almost visceral response had Liam fascinated.

The more time he spent with those two, the more laughable it became that they thought they could disguise their affair. He figured Jamison was the key cause of their forced hiding. She would likely be upset, and that fiery personality of hers probably burned hot enough to cause permanent damage to those caught in the backdraft.

Their family would never be the same, and Liam didn't blame her half-siblings for remaining quiet.

He parked in front of the townhouse and his phone vibrated again. "I've been calling you for an hour," Hawkins snapped when he answered.

"I was finishing some of the last interviews of the day."

"And?"

Liam told him what he knew, unlocking the townhouse door. He set the files on the bar and opened the fridge, hoping Ty's wife had been gracious enough to leave a beer or two behind. "There are some things that don't add up, but overall, I think this place is a dead end."

"I did a little research of my own on the family and see they have a development near Lauderdale?"

Searching the refrigerator, Liam found a beer from a local Port Michaelson brewery tucked in the back. "So?"

"So, we have two more girls," Hawkins informed him. "Miami."

Liam's head struck the roof of the fridge, jostling its contents. "What?"

"We got a ViCAP hit this morning, and Peterson is doing the legwork as we speak. It's a couple of working girls that frequented the Bayside area. Locals mentioned they might have two more and are pulling the info together to send over."

"When were the murders?"

"Four years ago, ten months apart," Hawkins answered, giving him the details that he knew thus far. "It's not an exact



match to our boy's MO, but it's close."

"Because he was practicing."

"What?"

"Practicing," Liam repeated, writing everything down to go over with his father. "These guys practice until they create what is, in their mind, perfection. The pattern will evolve as time goes on, but the core of it will invariably come through because of the commitment to their psychosexual needs."

"Cohen, have you spoken to your father about this case?"

Liam winced and put down his pen. "No."

"I know he's retired, after what happened and all, but maybe it's time that you did."

"He'll be more than happy to help." And to find out that Hawkins was in over his head and knew it. "I'll call him tonight."

"One more thing, it turns out the truck driver I spoke to today runs a route from Florida to Oklahoma," Hawkins said. "I don't think it's our guy, but I'm due there tomorrow to finish up, which means I need you to stay put."

"That works for me, but in the meantime, can Peterson shoot over the Miami scene photos so I can compare?"

"You'll have them within the hour," Hawkins promised. "Do you want me to put a call into the field offices there? Get you a little backup?"

"Not yet, but place Jacksonville on standby."

Hawkins agreed. “Do you know if any of the people in that family have spent significant time at their Lauderdale developments?”

“Yeah,” Liam said, taking a sip of his beer. “Samuel Fairweather.”

## CHAPTER 36

# *Simone*

1997

**C**radling a baby Jamison to her chest, Simone drifted silently through the kitchen with Evie right on her tail. “Your sister kept Mama and Ben up all night. So, you and I are going to take care of her while they sleep in.”

Jamison’s arrival had turned the entire household upside down. Her screaming demands rang out at all hours of the night, making sleep difficult for those who resided on the upper level.

By the end of the first week, most of the children moved downstairs temporarily for some peace and quiet, with Evie and Livy choosing to remain upstairs to help Laura Jean when Ben was out of town. Texas kept him busy, pulling him away most days.

“It’s time to feed her, or she’s gonna start yelling again,” Evie whispered.

Jamison’s formula had to be just the right temperature, or there would be hell to pay.

Simone plugged in the bottle warmer. “Let’s get breakfast going while we wait for it to get ready.”

Lightly bouncing the bundle in her arms, she told Evie what to gather from the refrigerator. The rest of the brood would be up soon, as none of them ever gave the courtesy of sleeping in.

“You guys are feeding her without me?” Livy yawned, joining them. “Not fair.”

The girl crumpled into a chair at the kitchen table, laying her head down to form a pile of springy blonde curls on the tabletop. “Let me know when the bottle is ready, and I’ll do it. She likes me best anyway.”

It was true. Livy had a gift. The children flocked to her like a mother hen.

“I’ll let you feed her,” Simone said, eyeballing her oldest arriving from the spare downstairs bedroom he and the boys were using. “Unless her big brother wants to do it.”

“Uh, no.” Selah sat on his barstool. “I think she’s possessed by a demon.”

Abe and Toby straggled in, taking their place next to Selah at the bar. “Or maybe she’s an alien from outer space,” Toby said.

The idea of Jamison being an alien excited Abe. “If she’s an alien, is she going to turn green?”

Toby’s eyes went round. “Guys, what if she’s an alien demon?!”

A debate took off over the advantages of being an alien versus being a demon, and Simone smiled, listening to her babies jabber on.

Annabeth and CeCe were the last to arrive. The girls put on their aprons, ready to help with breakfast. “CeCe, get the pancake mix,” Simone instructed. “Annabeth, you can sort out the bacon. Evie is working on the fruit.”

“Yes, ma’am,” her girls replied in unison.

“CeCe, your hair looks nice today,” Simone observed. “Did Annabeth do that?”

CeCe patted her chestnut braid. “Yep, I wanted to look like you ‘cause I’m a CeCe too.”

The girl was the spitting image of her own mother, who had next to nothing to do with her. Simone flicked the tail of CeCe’s braid and sent her off, letting her little shadows work while she waited for the bottle to warm.

“It’s going to be a lovely day,” she told them once the food was served. “Devon won’t be back until this afternoon, so you can take the morning to play outside.”

As an only child, it was up to Devon to handle the last bit of his mother’s things after her death, and he’d stayed in Birmingham for the night to finish. Simone didn’t know how Laura Jean did it, having Ben gone for days at a time. A single night without her husband was about all she could take.

The bottle warmer clicked off, and Simone stuck the nipple into Jamison’s eager mouth, so Livy could eat. “When you’re

finished, everyone needs to brush their teeth and change clothes before going outside.”

In under thirty minutes, Simone was alone with a fed baby in her arms, and a messy kitchen. “One day you’ll be running off with them, but for now, you’re going to help me clean.”

Jamison cooed, and Simone kissed her forehead, completely missing the sound of footsteps coming down the hall until Charlie Fairweather sauntered into the kitchen.

“Well, hey there, SiSi.” Charlie hoisted himself onto a barstool. “What’s for breakfast?”

It had been practically a year since she’d last laid eyes on him. After the hurricane, things between him and Rebecca withered into next to nothing with Charlie only coming around every now and then.

But here he was, looking sick and hollow, like a skeleton wearing Charlie Fairweather’s clothes.

Rebecca padded in behind him, popping gum in her mouth and carrying her shoes. “What?” she snarled at Simone’s scowl of disapproval, dropping her chunky heels on the floor. “We just came to get some food.”

“Is there nothing in the cottage?”

“What the hell does that matter? Fix us something to eat,” Charlie said. “Or did you forget that when the staff lives full time in the main house, they work full time, too.”

Rebecca covered her mouth to hide a smile. “We’ve been out all night, and we’re hungry.”

Anger flushed Simone's cheeks. "Feed your damn selves."

Jamison fussed in her arms, and Charlie's dull, sunken eyes landed on the baby. He slid off his stool and came around the island. "Is this my new niece?"

Charlie leaned in for a look, and Simone wrinkled her nose. He stunk of sweat and stale beer, and God knows what else. "You're right, Becca," he said. "She's not as pretty as our Livy, but I guess we shouldn't expect much coming from Ben."

He ran a finger along Jamison's cheek, and Simone tightened her hold. "Who would have thought my brother had the balls to fuck Laura Jean?" he snickered. "Not me, that's for damn sure. Not after the way he's treated me and mine."

Charlie bopped Jamison's nose. "But this little thing proves the bastard is no better than me."

Simone pressed Jamison closer, and the baby's chubby digits curled into her shirt. "You don't know anything."

"I bet he did it just because she was Albie's."

"Ben is upstairs. You could go and ask him."

That warning would have once given Charlie pause, but with Jamison between them, those days were over.

"I'll deal with breakfast," Rebecca broke in, finally realizing that bringing him inside the main house hadn't been the best idea. "What do you want?"

“No, that’s SiSi’s job.” Charlie’s gaze stayed locked onto Simone. “She can handle it.”

Laura Jean appeared in the doorway wearing her nightgown and robe. “You look like shit, Charlie.”

Charlie smacked his lips, openly leering at her. “And you’re looking good, Laura Jean. I see you’ve already got your figure back. Poor Becca never seemed to be able to bounce back after Cecilia.”

Rebecca’s face heated, the color on her cheeks almost matching the bright polyester dress she wore. “I’m working on it.”

Charlie had been a son of a bitch since the day he was born, but this new version of him boggled Simone’s mind. If Ben caught him down here talking like this... well, it wouldn’t be good.

“You need to leave,” Laura Jean told him. “Now.”

Rebecca held up two boxes of cereal she’d pulled from the pantry. “We thought we would eat with the kids.”

“The children have eaten and are playing in the forest,” Simone said, laughing at the idea of Rebecca wanting to spend time with her offspring. “They won’t return until lunch.”

“You shouldn’t let them run wild out there,” Charlie said. “There’s all kinds of shit in those woods that can hurt them.”

Laura Jean crossed her arms. “Thank you for your parenting input. We’ll take it into consideration while raising your children.”



Charlie's mouth thinned. "Listen to you," he said, stepping closer. "Got yourself a Fairweather bastard and you think you can say whatever you want, like that one." He jerked his chin at Simone. "But tell me the truth, what made you do it? I can't imagine you would fuck him willingly."

"I think I'll go get the kids." Rebecca headed to the back door. "Charlie, why don't you come with me? They haven't seen their daddy in months."

Charlie ignored her. "Money is the only reason I can think of that would make you agree to becoming his whore," he whispered to Laura Jean. "Rebecca says Miranda still comes around, and y'all act like this is all normal, but it's not. She was your friend, and you broke up her marriage."

"Don't pretend to be some saint," Simone said, trying to keep her voice steady. She had a habit of crying whenever angry, and didn't want Charlie to think he'd gotten to her. "You've destroyed your own wife, so don't you stand there and act like you're any better."

Charlie fiddled with the sash of Laura Jean's robe. "You better make that stupid bitch of yours shut the fuck up before I do it for you," he said with quiet menace. "She's not the boss around here, no matter what she thinks."

Laura Jean lifted her chin. "Get out."

The order made him chuckle. "You're still as feisty as when Albie first brought you home." Tracing the sash of the robe to the knotted belt at her waist, Charlie gave it a tug, bringing her closer. "But you better be careful, Ben won't entertain a

woman with an attitude like that for very long. If you don't watch your mouth, you're going to find another man's dick in it, and the next one might not have as big of a bank account as my brother does."

Simone gasped, but Laura Jean continued to stare down her nose at him. "You are so pathetic, Charlie."

"I'll show you how pathetic I—"

From behind Laura Jean, a hand flew over her shoulder, wrapping around Charlie's throat to silence him.

"What did you say?" Ben snarled, coming in.

He led Charlie backwards, and when they reached the island, Ben smashed his brother's face into the granite, holding him there by pinning an arm behind his back. "Tell me what you said, you piece of shit."

Charlie thrashed under the hold, knocking the dishes to the floor. "Get the hell off me."

Ben flipped him over, and slammed his forearm onto Charlie's neck, slowly applying pressure.

With his oxygen supply cut, Charlie's eyes bulged, his face turning red and then purple. In his current state, he was no match for Ben.

The commotion scared Jamison, and she howled in irritation. "Stop this!" Simone shouted, even though a part of her wanted Ben to inflict as much pain as he could. "The children might come in and see!"

Ben leaned in close, whispering in Charlie's ear. No one else in the room could hear what was being said, but whatever it was, spurred Charlie into motion, and he fought harder to free himself.

Rebecca opened the screen door. "Kids!" she hollered. "Come quick, daddy's home!"

Laura Jean came around to Simone and took Jamison. Careful to remain back while holding her daughter, she called out to Ben, and the sound of her voice gained an immediate response. His head snapped up, and eyes full of rage peeked through the strands of black that had fallen forward in the scuffle.

"He's not worth your anger," she told him. "Let your brother up."

Giving his brother one last shove against the countertop, Ben released him. Charlie collapsed onto the floor just as Livy and CeCe barged through the back door.

Giggling, the girls tackled their father where he lay. "What are you doing down here?" CeCe asked.

Rebecca snapped her fingers at them. "Come on, girls. Let's cook daddy some breakfast in the cottage."

They cheered, surprised at the invitation, and helped Charlie to his feet, pulling him out the back door where Toby stood gaping at the destruction in the kitchen.

Rebecca shoved her son's shoulder on her way out. "Get moving, Tobias."

Toby looked at Simone to tell him what to do. While he'd begun to come out of his shell as he grew, the child still remained unsure of how to act most of the time.

"Toby, you make your own choices," Ben said, smoothing his hair from his face. "Unless I say otherwise, you don't have to do anything you don't want."

Toby nodded, understanding. "Me and Abe were pretending to be pirates."

Ben gave him a curt nod. "Carry on then."

The screen door banged shut, and Jamison's cries grew louder. Laura Jean handed Ben their daughter. "Sit down."

Taking Jamison, his eyes searched her face. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry." Laura Jean cupped his cheek. "But this is what we get for sleeping in late."

She gave him a kiss and went off into the pantry to gather things for their breakfast. Ben sat at the table and Simone joined him, both of them needing a minute.

"You'll tell me later what he said to her?" he whispered.

Simone nodded. "He mentioned Miranda."

"I can hear you two talking," Laura Jean said, coming back out to switch on the CD player by the stove. "And it's alright. Charlie might think he's got some power, but he's not stupid enough to bite the hand that feeds him, and neither is Rebecca."

“Is he on drugs or something?” Simone asked. “I smelled booze on his breath, but judging by the way he looks, there’s more to it than that.”

“I’d almost prefer her bringing home random men, rather than having Charlie back in her life,” Laura Jean said, already swaying to the music. “When is she going to learn?”

“Never,” Ben replied. With his consistent presence at Haven, Rebecca had wisely remained out in the cottage most of the time. “But we won’t have to worry about it much longer.”

Systematically gaining shares to outweigh the volume held by Vivian’s family was taking longer than expected. The marginal lead Ben held was growing, but until he had a solid ten percent over Randall McIntyre, including the portion that could be lost in the divorce, the status quo had to be maintained.

And no one was more pissed off with that than Ben. “I’m close, and hopefully soon, we’ll be free of her.”

Laura Jean dug out some mixing bowls to make pancakes. “But it’s not only the company we have to worry about. If you make her leave, she’ll take the children with her.”

Nuzzling his daughter’s nose, Ben whispered to Jamison. “What do we do when they don’t give us what we want?”

A domesticated Ben was an odd thing for Simone to witness. It was as if Laura Jean had tamed some wild beast and brought it home as a pet. Which was a strange way for her to

think, considering she shared a child with the man and had known him most of her life.

However, being with Laura Jean had changed him. Ben was living life for once, instead of plowing his way through it. It was nothing to find him wandering the halls, shirtless in a pair of joggers like he was now, enjoying the mundane parts of a day like reading to the girls at bedtime or watching tv with the boys. He'd signed Selah up for little league, and constantly tried to coax Samuel into joining. A tire swing now hung in the yard because CeCe complained about wanting one, and the conservatory had a new upright piano because he thought the children should learn to play. He was the only one who'd had enough patience to teach Abe how to ride a bike and had even taken time with Toby, learning from Devon how to handle the boy's tantrums.

Jamison gurgled at her father, and Ben grinned down at her. "That's right. We take it," he said. "If I can work out a way for us to gain custody once this is finished, I'm doing it, and my brother can go to hell, right along with that bitch."

Simone and Laura Jean shared a look. To them, Rebecca wasn't the horrible person Ben tried to make her out to be.

"We'll talk about it later," Laura Jean said, returning to making breakfast.

Ben raised an eyebrow, surprised at her tone. "Oh, will we?"

Without looking up, Laura Jean smiled. "We certainly will."

Dimples appeared on Ben's face, and Simone snorted.  
"Gross."

"Shut up, you look at Devon the same way," he mumbled, watching his woman dance around the kitchen with a goofy expression on his face. "By the way, when is he coming back? We're supposed to go pick out a new bat for Selah today."

That was something else that had changed. Ben and Devon were becoming friends. The two of them had been circling the other in politeness through the years, but now they genuinely liked one another. Throw Ty in the mix, and the three of them would sit out on the front porch with beers, discussing ways to solve the world's problems like a bunch of old men.

"This afternoon," she answered. "And I can look at Devon anyway I want to. I'm not you. Happiness doesn't go with those cheekbones of yours. You have a face made to brood."

"And your face was made to frown."

She smacked his shoulder and rose to clean up the mess on the floor, but Ben tried to stop her. "I'll take care of it."

"Sit with your daughter." Simone retrieved the broom from the closet. "You don't have much time with her before you go back to San Antonio tomorrow."

"I don't want to leave with Charlie here."

"He's all bark and no bite," Laura Jean reassured him.

Simone picked up the broken breakfast plates. "And if things get crazy, we'll call Josie. She'll come out here and beat his ass."

Josie was one of the most capable humans Simone had ever met. She didn't suffer fools and was an open book if one was willing to stop and read a page or two.

Learning of her and Miranda had been quite a shock, considering the news came on the same day she'd learned about Ben and Laura Jean.

Hurricane Eugenia had struck, and the women escaped to Orlando with the children, staying at some mega resort Ben put them up in. On their second day there, the three of them told her everything while the children splashed around in the pool and Rebecca was off wandering through the gift shop.

The news had sent Simone directly to the poolside bar, where she sat alone drinking copious amounts of alcohol, fretting over their futures.

Josie was the only one brave enough to approach. "A hurricane, and now a fancy family resort serving watered down drinks," she said, sitting without invitation. "Will the fun ever stop?"

Simone had stayed silent until she finished her drink. "I'm over the moon happy for you and Miranda. If I'd have paid attention, I would have seen it sooner."

Lighting a cigarette, Josie offered her a drag. "What about Ben and Laura Jean?"

Simone took the offering, and inhaled, coughing when the nicotine hit her throat. "Oh, I noticed that nonsense brewing



ages ago, and I was pissed. There was no way I could choose a side.”

From there, they moved on to shots, and since Ben was paying, kept them coming until the sun set.

“Well now that you know everything, why are you over here drowning your sorrows in shitty tequila?” Josie asked, her voice slurred. “What’s got you so concerned?”

Simone threw her arms in the air. “Everything!”

Ash from her third cigarette fell, burning her leg. She yelped and brushed it off. “There are too many lies to keep up with, and too many uncertainties for my brain to handle. We’ve got to watch out for Vivian’s father, and now we have to watch out for Miranda’s.”

“They won’t live forever, Simone.”

Simone banged her palms on the bar. “Damn it, I am tired of sitting around waiting for old men to die before I know peace,” she yelled, earning herself a few stares from the other parents trying to enjoy an evening drink. “I survived James fucking Fairweather and thought I was done with this bullshit!”

Her outburst had made Josie laugh so hard she’d fallen off her stool. “Ask yourself, would you give up Devon?” she said, crawling back up. “Or live in fear and wait, knowing that when you’re free you’ll be with the one you love and nothing else will matter?”

Drunker than she'd ever been, Simone cried at the thought of losing Devon. "I know the fear of living like that, and I wouldn't wish it on anyone," she sniffed. "But no, I'd walk through fire to get to Devon. He's my happy ever after."

Josie clicked their shot glasses together. "And Miranda is mine."

They'd stumbled back to their suite of rooms and the next day, nursed the mother of all hangovers while the children ran amuck at one of the theme parks. Laura Jean and Miranda banished them to a shady spot, where they were responsible for watching over the shopping bags.

"We should totally make this a tradition," Josie mumbled, pushing her sunglasses up her nose. "But, you know, without hangovers."

Simone, miserably sick to her stomach, had nodded. "Totally."

Their annual trip became a thing, although these days Rebecca no longer joined them. The next one was coming up soon, and Simone was looking forward to it.

"Renourishment to the shoreline ends in a few weeks, right?" Simone asked Ben. "Are you going to start laying the foundation while we're gone on vacation at the end of the month?"

"Well, yes," Laura Jean said. "That is, if I've settled on a floor plan by then."

“Your mother is smoking hot and so worth the trouble,” Ben whispered loudly to Jamison. “But Jesus Christ, she’s indecisive.”

The screen door clanged close, and Evie came over to Ben wearing half the forest in her hair and on her clothes.

Laura Jean took one look at her oldest and sighed. “I don’t want you running around in the woods barefoot, kitten.”

Evie shrugged, her attention on Ben and Jamison. “Hold her head up higher,” she instructed. “She’ll start crying if it hangs too low.”

“Yes ma’am,” he said, adjusting his hold. “Evie, may I ask you a question?”

Clasping her hands behind her back, the girl nodded, ready to offer advice on the proper care of her sister.

“Your mother cannot decide on the type of house I should build for us. What would you prefer?”

Gray eyes studied him. “A big one. With a pink room for Jamison.”

“Anything else?”

“Selah needs a baseball room when he sleeps there,” she answered, and then rolled her eyes. “I guess Samuel can have a room too.”

“Is that all?”

Evie held her head high. “I would like a pool.”

“But we’re going to live on the beach.”

Her nose wrinkled. "I don't like the beach."

"Me neither, kid, but who does?"

"Mama."

"And who do we live to make happy because we love her more than anything?"

Evie giggled when Laura Jean grabbed her hand, twirling her to the music. "Mama," she squealed. "Always Mama."

## CHAPTER 37

# *Evie*

**E**motionally exhausted, Evie had gone straight to bed after leaving Samuel in the library. “Don’t leave your door unlocked,” he’d warned before they went their separate ways. “My self-restraint is virtually non-existent now that you’ve dropped this bullshit of wanting to take things slow.”

She hadn’t listened, but in the quiet of the night, it wasn’t Samuel that came to see her.

“Samuel had his say.” Simone came over to sit next to Evie on the bed. “I didn’t deserve his anger, but I took it, like I’m here to take yours.”

Laying on her side, Evie remained silent. Mainly because she didn’t know how to respond. The resentment she’d felt earlier had fallen off into the void where all the disappointments in her life went.

“Withholding things is second nature to me after all we’ve been through.” Simone’s brow wrinkled as she sorted out her thoughts. Apologies weren’t exactly high on her list of skills. “But, then again, I really wasn’t trying to hide Miranda and Josie. The past is hard, and I can’t...”

“Can’t what?”

“Remember,” she sighed. “There’s so much bad. It’s hard to remember the good.”

“We never talk about them.” Evie braced her head on a hand. “Mom, Devon, all of them were so much more than the ending.”

Annabeth came in through the shared bathroom door. “I can’t remember things about daddy like I used to,” she said, crawling into bed behind Evie. “The only real thing I can recall is how he laughed.”

Evie grinned. “Devon did have one of those great booming laughs that kind of just exploded out of him.”

Simone squeezed her eyes shut. “I’ll try to do better. But it hurts, my babies. Talking about them tears at my wounded heart.”

“Don’t think of it as tearing at a wound,” Annabeth suggested. “It’s more like sticking a needle in the skin to sew it closed. The pain is there, you can’t avoid it, but with each pull, the wound gets smaller until it heals.”

Snuggling into her pillow, Evie snickered. “When did you get so wise?”

“Y’all wanted me in therapy, and this is what you get.”

Simone opened her eyes and gave Evie a sly smile. “Did you tell her?”

“Tell me what?” Annabeth asked.

“She kissed Samuel,” Simone replied, before Evie could.

Bony fingers jabbed into Evie’s back. “No, she didn’t!”

The three of them stayed up discussing Samuel, and all that had occurred. “Sounds like you’re in for it,” Simone said, standing to leave when Evie finished giving them the details. “So, you best prepare yourself.”

“Like how?”

Annabeth rolled to her back, lifting her legs high in the air. “Stretching.”

The next morning, Annabeth seemed to be on the same train of thought when she came in to help pick out Evie’s outfit for her first day at Fairweather. “I hope you did some yoga when you got up, so Samuel can bend you like a pretzel.”

“I will tonight.”

“Honey, you’re going to be busy tonight.”

“He knows I want him to talk to Gretchen first.”

“What makes you think he hasn’t already?” Annabeth all but disappeared into her closet, digging for the right shirt to go with a new skirt Evie had bought the other day. “You gave that man the green light, and green means go.”

Annabeth forced her to put on a light layer of makeup, and then made a fuss over her hair until Evie was rushing out the door, late. She sped to the address on file for Fairweather Holdings, never having been there. It was in the northern part

of the county, nestled in the farthest section of woodlands controlled by the company.

When the triple towers came into view, Evie slowed her car. “Holy crap.”

At the guard booth, she provided her name and was handed a pass to wear around her neck. “This will get you through any door, Ms. Eddins.”

Evie thanked him and managed to locate Micah waiting for her in the massive parking lot.

“You look good enough to eat.”

“Thanks,” she replied, noticing he was wearing a new outfit. A classic button down paired with some chinos and loafers. “You look incredible, too.”

Micah flicked his blond curls from his face. “This is a big deal, and I went out last night to buy a few things.

She frowned at the pass hanging around his neck. “Why is yours red and mine is blue?”

“Because yours is an all access pass,” he said after examining her badge. “Who did you sleep with to get that?”

“It’s probably a mistake.”

“Well, don’t say anything. You never know when we’ll need it.”

“Very true.”

They walked towards the gleaming towers. “Can you believe this place?”



“It’s amazing.” He pulled at her arm to move her along faster. “But come on, we don’t want to be late.”

They were meeting Constance and the others at nine sharp in the main tower lobby. Arm in arm, they headed inside, and located their group waiting at a security desk.

The buzz of activity in the tower reminded Evie of a beehive with busy workers traveling to and fro, through the space. The open design provided a floor-by-floor view all the way to the top.

“How big is this place?” Micah asked, tilting his head up at the never-ending ceiling.

“It’s thirty stories,” Mia read from her phone, joining them. “Tower One, or the central tower, is thirty stories tall while Tower Two and Tower Three are twenty stories. The building’s exteriors are made from a reflective glass produced by a company Fairweather acquired and is often used in their luxury properties.”

With directions in hand, Constance instructed them to follow, and the group merged into the swarm of Fairweather employees.

“Fairweather’s North Florida offices employ sixty percent of the surrounding area’s residents, with a workforce totaling well into the thousands,” Mia continued reading as they walked. “However, the largest branches are their Texas offices.”

Evie's head swiveled from left to right, trying to take it all in. The flow of bodies led them into an auditorium decked out in all white, and right away, she knew they'd entered Samuel's domain.

“When we're finished here, we have a meeting in the Tower Two conference room on the fifth floor,” Constance said when they found seats. “From there, we'll be assigned a group of offices to utilize while we're here.”

By the time the lights dimmed, the auditorium was standing room only, and on the stark stage, a woman stood at a podium, opening the meeting by congratulating all involved with the local success of Firewater Beach. She then went on to talk about a project in Texas, and another's progress in North Carolina.

As she spoke, four men arrived, coming in from backstage. Gabriel was one of them, walking with two others Evie didn't know. Samuel was the last to enter, and when he took the stage, she would've sworn she heard the first set of rows let out a collective sigh.

He looked annoyed and impatient, nothing out of the ordinary. The dark suit he wore hugged the hard lines of his body, and on his face sat a pair of stylish glasses that didn't look at all like the ones he'd worn growing up. A shadow of a beard marked his jawline, sculpting generous lips that twitched when he spotted her.

“Jeez, does every morning at this place start with a parade of hot men?” Micah mumbled next to her when Samuel started

speaking. “Check out Fuck Me Fairweather Junior, and the Adonis behind him.”

Mia leaned in from Evie’s other side. “His name is Gabriel St. Johns, and he’s the head of Fairweather’s hotel division in Fort Lauderdale.”

Evie frowned. Since when did Ben have a hotel?

“He’s delicious,” Micah agreed. “And just my type.”

“The one with long hair next to him is more my type,” Mia sighed, referring to the man sitting with Gabriel. The other men on stage wore suits, but this guy was dressed in jeans and a black t-shirt that showed off the tattoos covering his muscled arms. “His name is Randall Rowan McIntyre III, and his family owns horse ranches in Texas that have something to do with Fairweather’s developments there.”

Hotels and now horses? This fountain of information coming from Mia were things she should’ve known, and Evie straightened in her seat. “Where did you learn all this?”

“You know how to use the internet, right?” Mia laughed at her. “I did research to narrow my choices. This place is a cornucopia of handsome, rich men, and I want to take home one as a souvenir.”

Recently divorced, Mia and her assistant, Lauren, were known serial daters who hunted the opposite sex for sport.

“God, tell me he’s single,” Micah whispered urgently to Mia with his eyes locked on Samuel. “He’s perfect for Evie since she dropped everyone’s favorite doctor yesterday.”

Mia perked up immediately, and Lauren sat forward to listen in.

“Lucas is single?” Mia asked.

Evie nodded. “And there’s nothing wrong with him. I just wasn’t in the right headspace to deal with a relationship, and he deserves more.”

“You weren’t in the right headspace?” Micah grunted. “If you’d given him more head, the only space you would be worried about is the one between your legs.”

“Will you all get control of yourselves?” Constance whispered, incensed. “There’s a time and a place for this type of talk.”

They all sunk down into their seats and pretended to listen. “She’s just mad because Daddy Fairweather hasn’t shown,” Micah whispered to Evie. “And if he looks anything like Junior, I’d be pissy, too.”

Evie couldn’t help herself. “Junior is gorgeous.”

Micah turned to look at her. “Oh my God, are you, Evangeline Eddins, interested in the Fuckable Fairweather poster boy down there?”

She loved Micah, and if things progressed with Samuel, it wasn’t something she wanted to hide from him. “I am.”

He placed a hand on his chest. “My heart is aflutter. As God is my witness, I’ll do everything in my power to get you in that man’s pants before the end of our contract here.”

The assembly ended, and Constance led their group through the crush of people exiting.

“I feel like they should have provided us with a map,” Micah said, holding her hand to avoid getting separated. “Cut to your right. Constance is just following the herd, and I see some elevators over there no one is using.”

They broke through the crowd to make their way down a side hall. Micah swiped his pass on the security pad to access the elevator, but nothing happened.

“Well, I guess that’s why everyone is using the other elevators,” Evie said. “These are out of order.”

“I don’t think that’s it.” Micah grabbed the pass from around her neck and swiped it. The elevator buttons lit up, and he pressed the down arrow. “All access, baby.”

An empty elevator car appeared, and they entered, but when the doors started to close, a hand shot out, stopping them.

Samuel got on, and Micah emitted some sort of gurgling sound, like he was drowning. “I forgot my bag,” he said, hurrying out, holding the bag in question. “I’ll meet you in the lobby.”

The doors closed, and they stood side by side, less than a foot apart. “He’s holding his bag,” Evie whispered, conscientious of the security camera in the corner. “That’s my friend Micah, by the way.”

“The cameras don’t pick up sound.”

That information made her relax for some reason. “We got lost and tried this elevator to get to the lobby since everyone was crowding the others.”

Samuel remained looking forward, all business for the cameras. “This one is only for those who are in upper management.”

“Well then, thanks for the pass,” she said. “Micah wanted to know who I’d slept with to get it.”

Samuel raised his hand. “Oh, I know that answer.”

“Yeah, it’s no one.”

“Not yet.”

“Will you try to be normal?”

He spared her a sideways glance. “When in the hell have we ever been normal?”

“Well, then try to be good.”

Sighing loudly, Samuel shook his head. “That really is the last thing I want to do while we’re alone in an elevator. I haven’t been able to finish a complete thought since I arrived at work, knowing you would be here today.”

“No wait, that’s not true,” he said, his voice dipping lower. “I’ve finished several complete thoughts, and all of them involve you either on my desk, on your desk, on my drafting board, on my couch, or in the break room.”

He scanned the empty space surrounding them. “I guess I should add this elevator to the list.”

Flushed at the ideas he was putting in her head, Evie reached out and gripped the rail, giving it a shake. “Seems sturdy enough to give it a try.”

“Speaking of sturdy, I have a sturdy lock on my office door, and you can join me for lunch,” he told her. “That skirt you’re wearing is perfect, and we can circle back to those technical questions involving *eating* you had yesterday without much fuss.”

Evie’s insides turned to liquid. “What’s with the glasses?”

“I stayed up late going over figures, and my eyes refused to accept my contacts this morning.”

“They make you look like a sexy professor.” She leaned towards him slightly. “Would you like to see me after class, Professor Fairweather?”

Her joke made him laugh. “Looking to gain some extra credit, Ms. Eddins?”

The elevator stopped on the third floor, and they moved apart when the doors opened, both hiding their smiles.

Gretchen, looking as beautiful as ever, blinked at them in surprise. “Evie, what are you doing here?”

## CHAPTER 38

# LIAM

**I**t was official. Liam was in love with a girl named Betty.

“Where’s the hospital?” he asked, slowing to a more legal speed when they approached the outskirts of Hollingsdale.

“Beats the hell out of me,” Jamison said, nestled in the passenger seat. She’d shown up at the townhouse this morning with Betty, both girls looking breathtaking in the morning light. “I have no sense of direction. Selah makes me keep a GPS in here, but that bitch is annoying, and I put her in the trunk.”

At a stoplight, Liam plugged the name of the hospital into his phone for directions. “So, which department will you be in charge of at Fairweather when you move to Texas?”

“I’ll be on the public relations side of things. You know, working on the company’s image and all that.”

“Is that what you wanted to do, or was the position chosen for you?”



“Well, what I wanted to do was go into broadcasting,” she revealed, slightly embarrassed. “But I lose my nerve anytime a camera is on me, and giggle like an idiot.”

“I highly doubt it’s that bad.”

“If you ever watch my demo tape, then you’ll see how serious of a problem it was,” she replied. “But even though I didn’t pursue it, broadcasting is how I became interested in true crime.”

Driving through Hollingsdale, Liam noted how the town was smaller than Port Michaelson with the older buildings holding less of a tourist feel. “I told my dad about you.”

Jamison groaned. “You didn’t tell him that I’m some crazy fangirl, did you?”

“No, but he said I should bring you to dinner sometime.”

Jamison blushed, and Liam drank it up, feeling like he’d accomplished something few had.

“How’s your mom doing?” she asked.

His mother was fine. It was his father who had turned himself inside out with guilt. “She’s enjoying retirement,” he said. “You can ask me about his cases if you want.”

Jamison grabbed at the opportunity and plowed him with a barrage of questions. Liam answered most, even some of the ones he normally wouldn’t.

Turning onto the hospital’s drive, he parked Betty in the visitor’s lot, right outside a building with the name

Fairweather on it. "I see your father is big on charity."

"And tax breaks."

Liam cut Betty's engine. "Remember you're only here to observe. So please, watch what you say."

"Where's the fun in that?"

They got out, and he stared at her over the car's roof.

"Jamison."

"Fine, I'll behave."

"Thank you."

She licked her lips. "But one day you might not want me to."

Liam shut the car door, and nodded, not bothering to deny it. A woman like Jamison probably dealt with men all the time who were too intimidated by the way she looked to speak the truth.

"You're beautiful, but you don't need me telling you that." He came around to stand in front of her. "Combined with your... personality, it's hard for me to stay focused when you're around, and I can't let that happen. I need to show this case the respect it deserves."

She bit down on her bottom lip, and Liam fought a groan, unable to look away. "We need to keep things professional, for now."

"For now," she said, sticking out her hand.

They shook on it, but when Liam tried to pull away, Jamison yanked him closer. “You have soft hands for a federal agent. Care to pat me down later?”

Laughing, he knocked her hand away and started walking towards the hospital entrance. “I should make you wait in the car.”

“I believe there are laws against that in the state of Florida.”

The hospital lobby was small, with a lone desk on the back wall. A middle-aged woman wearing pink scrubs and a frown sat behind it. “Can I help you?”

Liam flashed her a smile and his badge. “I’m hoping to speak with Dr. Lucas Fields.”

“And?”

“And I would appreciate you telling me where to find him.” His gaze dropped to her name tag. “Lisa.”

“That’s not my job.”

Noting the shadowed line on Lisa’s finger where a wedding band should be, Liam tried to gain her help using a different tactic. “I’m only in town for a few days,” he said, giving his back to Jamison. “And I would *love* to speak with him.”

The woman’s lips parted, and there was a hitch in her breathing. “Please,” he said softly, receiving a nice eye dilation. “It would mean so much.”

“Let me see what I can do.”

Lisa escaped through a door behind the desk, and Jamison poked him in the back. “Did you just flirt with that woman to get information?”

“I’ve done worse.”

“Such as?”

“Let’s just say librarians are freaks and can be incredibly kinky under the right circumstances.”

Jamison snorted and pulled out her phone. “I’m telling Annabeth that our FBI agent uses his hotness to get what he wants.”

Liam strolled over to a wall of headshots promoting the doctors on staff. He found Lucas Fields and frowned. The man was not what he expected. “How long has your sister been dating Dr. Fields?”

Head down, typing away, Jamison shrugged. “About a month, I think.”

Lisa reappeared with freshly painted pink lips. “I spoke with Dr. Miller, and he said that Dr. Fields is off today,” she told them. “Is he in trouble or something?”

“Not at all,” Liam assured her with a wink. “Thank you for your help.”

On the way out, Jamison snickered behind him. “You have no shame.”

“I most certainly do not.”

Outside, his phone rang, and he took the call, maintaining his distance from Jamison while he spoke. Liam hadn't told her about Miami, planning to work it into the conversation on the ride back to Firewater.

The files and photos didn't show up in his inbox until close to midnight, and he'd scoured them until near dawn for a connection to Laura Jean or the others. But there was nothing, except the same patterned kills his girls had suffered through.

"Everything ok?" she asked when he hung up.

"That was a call from one of our field offices in Louisiana," he said as they got into Betty.

Her pretty face paled. "And what did they want?"

"You know we had to dig into them, right?" he asked. "Your uncle's rap sheet is extensive, with plenty of violent inclinations for us to take seriously."

Jamison nodded, staring down at her lap. "And?"

She was so desperate for a connection to her mother that these people already meant something to her, and Liam was happy to tell her what he'd learned. "Your uncle's work keeps detailed records, placing him there on the nights in question," he said. "Your grandmother's health isn't the best, and she would never have been able to commit either crime."

The news about her grandmother got her attention. "What do you mean her health isn't the best?"

Ben must have withheld the fact that most of the money he sent went to the woman's cancer treatments and home care,

which left Liam to deliver the news. “Cancer.”

Slumping in her seat, Jamison remained quiet as he started the car. “I think this means it’s safe for you to contact them,” he said, pulling out of the parking lot. “I have your grandmother’s number and can give it to you.”

She sniffed and nodded, turning to look out the window.

They made their way through downtown Hollingsdale, all red brick and Americana sitting off bay waters.

“Evie works over there.” Jamison pointed at a building in the center of Main Street. “But my dad contracted her company to work for Fairweather, so she’s at their main offices today.”

“Yeah, I overheard that at dinner,” Liam said, reading a street sign that showed a turn off to the college campus nearby. “You’re not skipping class, are you?”

“No, I’m off for the day, except I have to take a test online later.”

“Since you’re free, would you mind coming back to the townhouse with me?” he asked. “There’s something I’d like to get your input on.”

“I thought you wanted to behave?” Jamison’s head tilted to the side. “Or have you already given up?”

“We got a hit on a few more murders that matched my guy’s MO.”

The teasing smile on her face faded. “Where?”

“Miami.”

He hit the highway and let Betty loose. “I combed through the crime scene photos, but found nothing connected to your mother’s artwork, or really anything that stuck out about your family at all.”

“You want me to look at them, don’t you?”

“Agent Cohen of the St. Louis field office says no, that’s ridiculous, and could get me in serious trouble,” he replied. “But Liam, the guy you had dinner with last night, says yes.”

She clapped her hands, excited.

“They’re unfiltered,” he warned. “Are you sure you can handle that?”

“Of course.”

“And you understand, these murders took place around the time your brother worked at the Fairweather offices in the area.”

Jamison burst out laughing. “Samuel’s an asshole, but he’s not a monster. The man is a softy on the inside once you peel past the first couple of layers.”

“I still have to pursue it.”

“But you don’t think it’s him, or you wouldn’t be asking me to look at crime scene photos.”

Liam said nothing and focused on enjoying his last few minutes with Betty. But yeah, Samuel Fairweather didn’t fit the criteria he and his father had laid out. The connection to

Evie, his overprotective nature towards the family; those two behavioral patterns alone placed him at the bottom of their list.

Ty was waiting outside the townhouse when they arrived. “I thought I saw Betty this morning.” He embraced Jamison. “Don’t you need to be studying for a test?”

“I will,” she promised. “Did you get my text about the driftwood we found yesterday? I’ve got it drying on the lawn.”

Ty squeezed her. “Thank you for thinking of me.”

“I wasn’t thinking of you, I was thinking of me. You promised me those bookends.”

He chuckled and turned to Liam. “My sister said you might come around asking for an interview.”

“I will, but not at the moment.”

“Uh-huh.” Ty’s gaze floated from him to Jamison. “Behave, young lady.”

Inside the townhouse, Jamison huffed. “Why does everyone always tell me to behave, like I’m some wild heathen whose life goal is to embarrass everyone?”

“Because you’re open and honest,” Liam explained, turning on his computer. “People will claim they want truthfulness, but when faced with it, they can’t cope.”

“You sound like your dad.”

He grinned, thinking his father would find as much humor in her comment as he did. Pulling out a chair from the



kitchenette table, he gestured for her to sit. “I’ve printed the reports, but the photos are on my laptop.”

Starting off, he showed her abstract shots of the first scene. Jamison examined every section of the pictures, taking her task seriously, but didn’t recognize anything. The further in they went, the more the tension in his stomach eased.

Perhaps Laura Jean’s paintings had been a coincidence after all.

Liam expanded out on the scenes, allowing her to see the women. She didn’t make a sound, and continued to search each frame.

“My brother could never do something like this.”

“Tell me about your relationship with him.”

Jamison leaned back in her chair, eyes on the women. “He hung around the house in the summer, and some holidays, when I was growing up. But when I was like eleven, college life took over, I guess, and he didn’t come to Haven anymore. Later, when I was in high school, dad started making us vacation together.”

“Ben wants you guys to be close.”

“Yeah, I think that’s it too,” she said. “Abe comes with us sometimes, but Evie never does. She feels bad for leaving Annabeth.”

“Where do you go?”

“Everywhere.”

She smiled and closed the laptop, not wanting death in her face while she spoke. “We rented a villa in Mexico where the boys taught me how to surf. There was another in France where we got to run a vineyard for a week. We’ve gone skiing out west, and in the alps,” she said. “Selah can’t ski for shit, and we end up spending half our time making sure he doesn’t die.”

“That sounds amazing.”

“It is.” Her eyes met his. “Well, not watching Selah try to die by way of a tree, but for the most part, it’s fun. I’ve gotten to know my brothers better, and we’ve connected.”

“But Evie never goes?”

Jamison shook her head. “She uses Annabeth as an excuse, but there’s more to it. If she came, there would be World War III between her and Samuel. They fight all the time, which I’m sure you picked up on when he sat in on her interview.”

He had indeed seen something, but it wasn’t fighting.

“Plus, she’s afraid,” Jamison added. “Her panic attacks only come on once in a while, but when they do, they knock her on her ass.”

“What triggers them?”

“Anything really, but for sure if she doesn’t sleep well at night, or if she gets away from her usual schedule. Whenever she goes somewhere, she has to research the who, what, and where like a dozen times before she’ll even get in the car.”

An upset in the routine was a frequent trigger for those with anxiety. One false move could ruin the sufferer's entire day.

Liam passed her the catalog of items recovered from the first scene. "Local PD isn't sure if this batch of murders belongs to the same killer."

"It's him," she said, reading the list. "They might have their legs, but it's the same guy."

When none of the items cataloged stuck out to her, they returned to shifting through the laptop files, moving on to the second crime scene. "He got better," she murmured. "Are these more like your girls? I didn't see much before my dad snatched the photo away."

"They are," he confirmed. "But don't look at them. Look at everything else."

Emerald eyes scoured the scene, totally consumed. While she was busy, Liam thought he'd pry a little more into her family's history. "Tell me about your Uncle Trevor."

"He's a dick, and his daughter is a bitch. End of story."

"But they were at Selah's party?"

"Yeah, we're still pissed at my dad about that. Trevor was in town for something at Firewater, and dad invited him out of politeness. We never thought the jerk and his evil spawn would show."

"So, your dad and your uncle Trevor don't get along," he said. "What about the oldest brother, Charlie? Does he come around much?"

“Dad gets along with Trevor because he has to for the business.” She clicked through another set of photos. “And we don’t talk to Charlie.”

“Why?”

Jamison’s gaze flicked from the screen to the table. “Charlie did something after my mom died, and my dad punched him. He went away after that.”

“What did he do?”

“I don’t remember, but they got into a fight, and my dad beat Charlie up pretty good.”

Liam’s jaw tightened. She was lying. There was more to the story. “Where is Charlie these days?”

“I think I overheard that he’s living on a sailboat in St. Thomas.”

“And you have no idea what your uncle did to make your dad so mad?”

Jamison stood and went to the refrigerator. “Sometimes I feel like I’m stuck reading the CliffsNotes of some great novel everyone else has read.”

She pulled out two bottles of water and came back to her chair. “All I get are the highlights, and not the small spots in the middle that build the story into what made it so great in the first place,” she said. “I don’t know my mother. I don’t know the man my father was before she died. I don’t understand the story as everyone else does because they lived through it, but I didn’t.”

“That’s why you want to meet your grandmother.”

“Exactly,” she said. “The stuff I’ve learned about my mom comes in spurts, but I need more. I want to know things about her that the others can’t tell me.”

“That’s understandable,” Liam said, sincerely. “Meeting them might give you what you’re looking for, but also, it might not. You need to be prepared for that.”

“I am, and I don’t need you to give me my grandmother’s phone number, because I’ve already contacted her.”

He sighed, not particularly surprised. “What did she say?”

“She sounded totally normal and wants to meet me. I’m planning to visit, but I didn’t know she was sick, so, I guess my trip needs to happen sooner than I thought.”

Very soon, from what Liam had learned. “Does Evie know?”

“You’re the only one I’ve told.”

Liam’s phone rang with a call from his father. “It took you long enough,” he said when he answered. “Are you losing your touch, old man?”

Squeak, squeak, squeak went his father’s chair. “The brother didn’t do it.”

“Agreed,” Liam replied. “The hesitation marks suggest whoever did the Miami jobs lacked self-confidence from the start, and I can tell you Samuel Fairweather is the type of man born drowning in his own ego.”

“Amen,” Jamison said.

The squeaking halted, and silence traveled down the line. “I thought we agreed you should stay away from her.”

Liam stood and moved to the back sliding glass door.  
“Harder than expected.”

“I see,” his father mumbled. “Have you pulled the death certificate for Laura Jean Eddins?”

Liam watched the waves lap at the shore and thought about asking Jamison to take a walk with him on the beach before she left. “That’s on my list of things to do.”

“It takes two minutes to pull a death certificate.”

“Hopper!” Jamison shouted, and jumped up from the table, knocking over her chair. “It’s Hopper!”

“What’s she going on about?” his father asked.

Liam came over to look at the image Jamison was frantically pointing to. “That’s my sister’s stuffed kangaroo, Hopper!”

On a recliner, in the second bedroom of the Miami homicides sat an old one-eyed stuffed kangaroo.

“What did she see?” his father shouted impatiently.

“A stuffed animal that belongs to her sister.”

“Miami or Missouri?”

“Miami.”

“Shit,” his father said. “Get her the hell out of there before you compromise this investigation.”

Liam hung up the phone and grabbed her by the shoulders. “Jamison, listen to me. You cannot tell anyone about this.”

Her face hardened, and she shrugged his hands away. “My mother’s paintings are at two murder scenes in Missouri, and then my sister’s fucking stuffed animal is at another in Miami, but you expect me not to say anything to my family about this?”

“I need some time,” he stated. “Let me have some time to sort through this.”

“Are you kidding me?”

Liam closed the laptop with a snap, making her flinch. “No, I’m not.”

Storming away, she snatched her bag from the counter.

“I’m not asking you to keep this information to yourself.” He chased her into the small foyer. “I’m ordering you to.”

“Kiss my ass, Agent Cohen.”

She ripped open the front door, and Liam yelled at her to stop. “Whoever is committing these murders, it’s your sister who’s influencing their actions. That stuffed animal is proof enough that the connection to her isn’t random.”

He held up a hand when she opened her mouth to speak, and surprisingly, she remained silent. “The person responsible knows her intimately, and I can’t risk tipping them off.”

“Are you wanting to use Evie as bait?”

“No, not at all.” He hedged closer, but halted when her eyes flared, warning him not to come any nearer. “But this information could upset her, and any deviation in her behavior would send out an alert to this guy, possibly setting off a catalyst for another murder.”

“I can’t hide this from her.” Tears welled in her angry eyes. “You can’t ask me to hide this from her. Evie and I don’t keep secrets from each other.”

The truth was there, sitting on the tip of his tongue. Proof that her sister did, in fact, keep secrets. But blurting out that information was a sure way to lose any assistance he was hoping to get from Samuel. “Just give me time.”

“Are you going to bring in more agents?”

“I’m not the one to make that call, but I will let my superiors know what’s happening.”

It was the best answer he could give. “I’m also going to call Mathis. I’m sure he’ll send units to the house to watch over everyone.”

“Promise that you’ll protect my sister, Liam.”

“I promise.”



## CHAPTER 39

# *Evie*

**A**n acute stress reaction, better known as the fight or flight response, was first studied in the early twentieth century by physiologist Walter Cannon who summarized that if the body's stress level became too high, an internal reaction occurred to help produce enough adrenaline to deal with the imminent threat presented.

Physical manifestations of this response can be seen as rapid breathing, an increased heart rate, pale or flushed skin, and finally, uncontrollable trembling.

Evie was pretty sure her body went through every fight or flight reaction point the moment Gretchen folded her arms around Samuel's waist.

"Did they finally convince you to join the family business?" Gretchen asked, laying a kiss on Samuel's cheek. "Or are you just visiting?"

By the grace of all that was holy, Evie managed not to throw up. "Uh-um, kinda."

“We expected you tomorrow,” Samuel said, untangling himself from Gretchen. “I left you a few messages last night, but you never called back.”

The elevator doors started to close, and Evie darted through them before they shut completely. “See you guys later.”

Samuel called her name, but she kept walking, waving a hand over her shoulder so he would think she was fine. Only when she was sure the elevator was gone, did she sag against the wall of the empty hallway, taking a minute to recover.

*Are you ok?*

Evie wrinkled her nose at Samuel’s text, her eyes stinging. No, she wasn’t okay but would be. Eventually.

*I’m taking her to lunch so I can end things.*

She gaped at the phone. If things were so casual between them, why did he feel the need to feed her before breaking things off?

*Please answer me, baby.*

The use of the endearment punched her right in the gut, knocking her head back on straight. Collecting herself, Evie straightened from the wall. Taking Gretchen to lunch was a perfectly adult way of breaking things off. She had nothing to worry about.

Right?

*I’m fine.*

Sending the message, she continued walking, arriving at a security station. She was in the middle of explaining to the guard she was lost, when Ben walked through an unmarked side door.

“Hey, kid.”

Ben introduced Evie to the security guard as his stepdaughter, and it dawned on her then just how excited he was to have her there. “What are you doing in this hall?”

“I got lost.”

“Yeah, that happens a lot around here. But since you’re not doing anything, did you want to come up and hang out with me?”

She grinned. “I’m here to work, Ben.”

“Yeah, yeah,” he grumbled. “So, what did you think about Samuel’s speech this morning?”

She wasn’t about to tell him she’d been too busy ogling his son to pay attention to what was being said. “I was impressed and told him as much when I ran into him afterwards.”

The guard’s desk phone rang, and while he answered, Evie pulled Ben off to the side. “Can we talk about something that came up during my interview with Cohen last night?”

“I can’t begin to tell you how sorry I am that you found out about Miranda like that.”

“The news of Miranda and Josie was definitely a surprise,” Evie said, not yet ready to dive into that part with him. “But

I'm referring to what Mathis told Cohen about mom. About the way she died."

"Mathis has our best interest in mind. You can trust him."

"Yeah, but we can't just lie to a federal agent like that. He'll find out."

"No, kid, he won't."

Knowing not to question him because she wouldn't like the answer, Evie let it drop, and said she had to meet Micah in the lobby.

"If you need anything, call me or Abe," Ben said. "And Samuel, if you're desperate."

"Samuel left with Gretchen. They went to get lunch."

Ben chuckled, arching a knowing brow that made Evie feel even sicker. "A little early for lunch, don't you think?"



Evie closed her laptop, tired and well beyond frustrated. "I hate corporate."

She and Micah had spent the entire morning developing a starter strategy, but right off the bat, the first account they tackled presented a miscalculation so great, it had led them into a nest of other problems. The reports provided were in such poor shape that Evie was actually starting to think they were botched on purpose.

Micah rolled his shoulders. They'd been huddled over their laptops, silently working for the last four hours straight.

“There’s this one hole I keep falling down, and I swear I’m going to find its end before tomorrow.”

“If I look at one more crisscrossed revenue statement, I’m going to go insane.” She hung her head back, looking up at the ceiling. “Let’s go home.”

“But it’s only three.”

Evie shrugged. “Constance left after lunch, and there are too many people here for anyone with actual authority to notice we’re missing.”

“A reckless Evie?” Micah picked up his things. “I think I like it, but I’m taking some of these files with me. We can’t walk into this first thing tomorrow, or we’ll both lose our shit.”

As they trudged their way to the parking lot, Evie texted Annabeth. *On my way. Have wine ready.*

*Bad first day?*

*Samuel left with Gretchen and never came back or texted.*

*Bastard. But I’ll bet he’ll be at the house tonight. He’s a free man. Green means go!*

Driving home, she called Selah, and they talked about Lenora along with Simone’s upcoming visit.

“Lenora’s got me cleaning like crazy.”

“I know Simone wants to go up there to help, but I figured she was waiting until our FBI agent left.”

“Dad doesn’t think the guy will be there much longer.”

“Unless Agent Cohen sticks around for Jamison’s sake. You should’ve seen them together when he came for dinner. It’s enough to make your eyes roll.”

Selah chuckled. “Poor Agent Cohen.”

When Evie arrived home, she took a shower and thought through how she needed to get ready in case Samuel did come over. She tossed on a robe and marched across the hall into her sister’s room. Jamison lay sprawled across her bed with her nose in a book.

“Studying?” Evie asked, going straight to the closet. “What time is your test?”

“I have to log into class at five,” Jamison replied, continuing to read. “Can I help you?”

“I’m looking for that white dress you bought last summer. The one with the off-the-shoulder scrunch top.”

“It’s on the right,” Jamison said. “Why do you need it?”

“Annabeth says I dress like a grandma, and I’m trying to change that.” Evie found the dress and pulled it from the closet. “Good luck on the test.”

Returning to her room, she slipped the dress on over her head and turned towards the mirror.

“Whoa.”

Women wore things like this every day, but it was a new experience for Evie. Wiggling the top off her shoulders, she’d forgone her bra, and the outline of her breasts could be seen.

She left her hair down, scrunched into light waves. If she draped it over her shoulders, it partially covered her chest, but not enough, and on her way out, she cowardly grabbed one of her many cardigans to wear.

Downstairs in the kitchen, she found Annabeth alone, blasting music while she cooked dinner. “We’ll start with white wine,” she told Evie, her head buried in the fridge. “Then move on to the red.”

Straightening, Annabeth turned towards her and snorted. “What a lovely cardigan, grandma. Heading out to play bingo later?”

Evie shot her an exasperated look and took it off. “Better?”

“Holy boobs, Batman!”

Annabeth’s head bobbed up and down in approval. She picked up one of the glasses of wine Colonel Brandon was currently weaving his way through on the kitchen counter and passed it to Evie. “Poor Samuel won’t be able to control himself, but may I make a suggestion?”

“Sure.”

“Lose the underwear,” Annabeth said, with authority. “Ease of access is crucial.”

Evie had already done that, but was too embarrassed to say anything. “You read too much smut.”

Annabeth danced around to the music. “I know.”

They'd consumed an entire bottle of wine by the time Simone joined them. "What in the hell are you wearing?"

"Her *fuck me* outfit," Annabeth explained, uncorking another bottle. "Don't be a prude, mother."

"I'm not a prude," Simone stammered. "I just didn't expect to walk into my kitchen and see Evie's boobs."

Self-conscious, Evie covered herself. "If it's that bad, I'll change."

"No!" Annabeth shouted, wagging a finger at her. "It's the light you're standing in, that's all. Put your cardigan on if it makes you feel more comfortable, but do not change." She held up a full garbage bag. "By the way, this needs to go out, and I want to do it."

Evie went to where they kept their shoes at the back door and slid hers on. "Okay, let's go."

"By myself."

Evie's eyes widened. "Are you sure that's not the wine talking?"

With the garbage bag in hand, and a look of determination on her face, Annabeth nodded. "Maybe it is, but it doesn't hurt to try. The sun hasn't gone down yet, and it feels right."

"Ok, but don't go overboard."

"Says the woman in the see-through dress." Annabeth counted down from ten. "If I'm not back in two minutes, come pick me up off the ground."



Evie held the door open for her. Dusk was settling in, painting the sky in vibrant colors that rivaled Haven's gardens. "Shout if you need me."

"You can't hear anything over this music," Simone said, turning off the sound system. She gave Annabeth a nod of encouragement. "Go on then. Let's see what you can do."

And with that, Annabeth Howard stepped out into the world alone for the first time in years.

Simone joined Evie at the door, and they waited in silence. When a minute went by, both began to worry, but seconds later, a shaking Annabeth returned.

"I did it," she rasped, falling through the door. She might be shaking, but the huge smile of victory on her face told them she was fine. "I did it!"

Folding her arms around them both, Simone kissed her daughter's head. "I must be the only mother in all of history who would love for her children to run away from home."

"Don't worry, we'll be running off to Key West soon," Annabeth said, her trembling easing off. "And I found something that belongs to Evie while I was out."

Through the screen door, Samuel stood on the patio with his hands stuffed in his pockets. His hair was wet, as if he'd just had a shower, and he wore a pair of jeans with a deep blue t-shirt.

"Come take a walk with me, Evangeline."

Evie stepped outside, and his eyes darkened, sweeping her entire body.

“Are you staying for dinner?” Simone asked.

“No, ma’am,” Samuel replied, his gaze locked on Evie. “I’ll be eating at home tonight.”

## CHAPTER 40

# *Evie*

“Do you like my dress?”

Samuel’s gaze continued to rake her body in the dying light. “Let’s go.”

Heading across the lawn, she trailed after him, her short legs working twice as hard to keep up with his long strides. “Where are we going?”

“I know you miss jogging, and I thought we could check the path to see where I can have cameras installed.”

Losing the stress release her daily run provided had been awful. “Thank you.”

Crossing the threshold of the wood, they remained quiet, wandering down the path along the water to the mill. It was brighter in this section, with views of the setting sun across the bay. Samuel slowed his pace, lingering a step or two behind, likely appreciating the view her dress offered in the natural light.

Being under the canopy again, the need to run made Evie’s legs itch, and she increased her speed. With her wine buzz

gone, and Samuel's silence wearing her down, she wanted some distance, or else she might start bombarding him with questions about Gretchen.

When they hit the midway point, she gave in on the impulse and took two accelerated steps forward, but she didn't get far.

Samuel grabbed her arm, jerking her back against his chest.

"Yes, I like the dress," he whispered, running his tongue along her neck, ending with a nip at her ear. A hand dove down her front and under the hem of the skirt. Finding his mark, Samuel brushed the tip of his finger through the wet heat between her legs. "And I really like the lack of underwear."

The temporary shock of what he was doing was short-lived, and Evie opened for him, rolling her hips to generate friction right where she needed it.

"Hold on to me," he demanded, drawing her arm around his neck. The finger encircling her entrance slipped inside, striking home, and she cried out, her body shuddering at the welcomed invasion.

He set a slow rhythm while his other hand tugged at the bodice of her dress, ripping it down to reveal her breasts.

"You're so beautiful," he breathed, cupping her. His thumb brushed back and forth over a nipple, teasing it to attention. "Do you want more?"

She might have nodded or made some noise of consent, but whatever she did set him off, and a second finger sank in.

Gasping at the fullness, her eyes closed as the pump of his hand intensified. Evie pressed her lips together, her moans turning into grunts.

“No one will hear you out here,” Samuel whispered in her ear, his voice shaking from the force of his movements. The tempo increased, jarring her body into a maddening state. “You can scream all you want.”

Her hips bucked of their own accord, and she rode his fingers into oblivion. The muted cries she’d tried to suppress broke free, and covering the hand on her breast with her own, she urged him to squeeze harder.

“Come for me,” he groaned when her inner muscles clenched around him. “I need to feel it.”

Her body obeyed the command, sending tingling pulses of pure pleasure through her. She screamed loud enough that the forest screamed back, echoing her release for all to hear.

The slide of his fingers remained constant, dragging out the final drops until she lay slumped on him, panting hard. “I’d like another one of those, please.”

Withdrawing, he turned her around, kissing her thoroughly. “Keep wearing dresses with no underwear and you might get more than you can handle next time.”

“I can handle you.”

He grinned with pure male satisfaction. “Do you always make that much noise when you come?”

Evie's face flushed with every shade of red in the known universe. "Shut up."

"I thought all that racket you made in the parlor was a fluke." He held onto her when she tried to wiggle free. "But I guess not."

"I'm not loud."

He laughed. "You were so loud just now that the animals on the other side of the inlet are applauding me."

The color on her face deepened. "I didn't mean to make so much noise. That's never happened to me before."

The laughter on his face died, and he blinked a few times as his brain filled in the blanks. "Jesus, was that your first orgasm?"

Reminding herself she had no reason to be embarrassed, she nodded. "Yes."

Samuel ran his tongue over his teeth as if he were the big bad wolf who'd found a snack in the woods. "Oh, Evangeline, this is going to be so much fun."

She tried to get free again. "Stop teasing me."

"I'm nowhere near ready to stop teasing you." He released his hold, only to stalk down the path after her. "In fact, I propose that we play a new game."

Walking backwards away from him, she stumbled. "I talked to Selah today," she said, changing the subject. "Simone is going up there for a visit soon."

“The rules of the game are simple. One point for your basic orgasm, which is what you just experienced.”

“Lenora is making him clean.”

“Two points if you scream my name and not God’s.”

“Can you imagine Selah cleaning?”

With little effort, he snatched her to him. “And a whopping three points if you’re unable to stand when I’m done with you.” His head dipped to nibble on her neck. “I hope you’re ready to play.”

“Is that why you brought me out here?” The remains of his arousal pressed in, and Evie swayed her hips lightly over it.

“To play with me?”

“No, I brought you out here to talk, but then you greeted me in this dress, and I lost my damn mind.” He bunched the hem of the skirt in his hands and peeked over her shoulder. “God, that’s a perfect ass.”

“Stop getting sidetracked and tell me what happened with Gretchen.”

He let the dress drop with a huff. “I told her it was over, and I wanted to be with you.”

“And?”

“And she said that was fine, and we ate our tacos.”

Evie glared at him. She’d spent the entire afternoon imagining every sort of wild scenario, and he’d been eating tacos. “That’s it?”

“Why do you sound upset?” He planted two firm hands on her bottom, giving it a solid squeeze. “Are you mad I didn’t bring you tacos?”

“Firstly, yes, I’ll always be mad if you have tacos, and I don’t.”

“Noted.”

“Second, I spent the afternoon wondering where you were. When you didn’t come back to the office, I thought you’d changed your mind about us, and were off playing the orgasm game with Gretchen, while I was stuck working on those crappy accounts you assigned us.”

Samuel frowned. “What’s wrong with my accounts?”

Evie waved her hand in exasperation. “They’re a mess. Did you purposely have someone destroy them to screw with us?”

“They’re reconciled accounts out of our North Carolina offices. Everything should have been in order, and easy to manage.”

“You gave me busy work?” she asked, incredulously. “Are you kidding me, Samuel?”

He flashed her a smile. “I was hoping you’d get bored and visit me.”

“Bastard.”

Samuel dropped a light kiss on her mouth. “I’m the legitimate one, remember?” he joked. “And I didn’t text



because I thought you needed some breathing room after what happened on the elevator.”

“I told you I was fine.”

Placing his forehead on hers, Samuel gave a look that said he knew otherwise. “You don’t have to pretend. It’s just us here.”

Her throat tightened, and Evie reminded herself that it was okay to be vulnerable with him. They weren’t going to get anywhere with this if she wasn’t truthful. “Seeing you two together, I don’t know, it was like you fit. Like she was the type of woman someone like you should be with.”

“And what type of woman is that?” he asked, getting a firm grip on her ass again. “Because the one in front of me is pretty fucking amazing.”

“No, I’m not. I’m just me,” she said. “The one that’s not interesting enough to keep anyone’s attention for very long.”

“One night.”

“What?”

“That summer, it was only supposed to be for one night,” he whispered, his eyes half closed in regret. “I was coming back.”

She shoved at his chest, and he let her go without a fight.

“We need to talk about this,” he said, walking behind her as she moved further down the trail. “If you really want to know what I was doing this afternoon, I was on the phone with Selah, trying to work out what to say.”

“Leave it alone,” Evie pleaded, shaking her head as she kept moving. “Why can’t you just leave it alone?”

“Because I need your forgiveness.”

She halted in her retreat, staring blankly at the foliage ahead. The trees were different in this section of the wood, and not made up of the invasive pine brought in by the Fairweathers. These were older, with roots dug deep in the land that was theirs. They belonged to this place.

Unlike her.

“Can’t you understand, that’s why I don’t want to talk about it,” she said, her voice small. If he demanded this, she would lose him again. “I don’t think I can give it.”

Samuel moved to stand in front of her. “We have to be open and honest with each other, or this will never work.”

Resentment flooded Evie, and she welcomed it like an old friend. The feeling had been her constant companion all these years, and she harbored its power now to say the things she’d wanted to say for far too long.

“You’re a smart guy, Samuel.” She narrowed her eyes at him. “Have you figured out yet why I have such limited experience with things related to sex?”

If he wanted to be open and honest, they would start on her terms.

“It’s because of you,” she hissed. “No man has ever lived up to you in my mind, and because of that, I learned to hate you as much as I loved you.”

“Evie—”

“You ruined me,” she yelled, cutting him off. “And I sure as hell don’t need to hear your excuses. I don’t want to know how I misinterpreted your intentions.”

Samuel’s brows snapped together. “You couldn’t be more wrong.”

“I am not wrong!”

“What about the summer before?” He circled her on the path, his own temper rising. “Or do you not remember how I spent weeks pretending to teach you chess? I knew you could play, but went along with the act, because I wasn’t about to give up spending time alone with you.”

Evie winced. It was true. She’d joined the chess club in high school because Samuel enjoyed playing, and pretended she didn’t understand the game, begging Simone to make him teach her when he came to visit.

“Did you know it was me who made Selah go to every track event you competed in when I was in town?” He paused next to her. “I refused to miss a single race.”

No, that wasn’t right. Simone had guilted Selah into attending, and he’d dragged Samuel along. At least, that’s what she’d always assumed.

“You say I ruined you, but you ruined me first. The day on the boat was merely the tipping point. My defenses were down, and I was tired of fighting it.”

“Why did you fight it in the first place?”

“Because it was wrong!” he shouted, sending a flock of birds scattering from the brush. “You were supposed to be my stepsister, for Christ’s sake.”

“If you had felt a fraction of what I did, that wouldn’t have mattered.”

Samuel lifted his gaze to the treetops rocking in the evening wind. “You know, I laughed in Simone’s face for thinking one night would cure me of wanting you.”

“But it did.”

“No, Evangeline.” Absently rubbing the center of his chest, his eyes returned to hers, and the certainty in them stole the last piece of her soul that wasn’t already his. “No force on earth could ever snap that cord.”

“Then what happened, huh?” she asked, fighting like hell not to collapse into a pile of tears. “Why did you leave me like I was nothing?”

“Because you were everything. And a man who has everything, has everything to lose.” Samuel stood staring at her for a handful of heartbeats, the wind ruffling his dark hair. “Something happened when I left that night, and now I’m asking you to listen, even though hearing what I have to say is going to hurt.”

The wind died, leaving a vacuum of silence around them. In the emptiness, Evie thought she heard a whisper, a warning in the air, to prepare herself for what she was about to hear.

She pressed a hand to her stomach. “What?”

“When Josie and I left here we went straight to Parkland, and when we got there, we saw my dad’s car in the driveway, which was odd. He wasn’t supposed to be there until the next day, because of Josie’s plans to have dinner at Haven House.”

His face tightened, lost in the memory. “The staff had already gone, and the house was quiet. But this kind of quiet was different. Something felt... off. I’m not sure what made me do it, but I ran as fast as I could up the stairs to my dad’s old office, and he was there. Unconscious, on the floor, with no pulse.”

Ben’s screams from the night her mother died haunted Evie just as they haunted Samuel. If she listened hard enough, she could even hear them now. The brutal sound of Ben’s soul snapping in two would live with both of them forever.

“He was taking meds to help him cope,” Evie said, making excuses she already knew were lies. “It could have been an accident.”

“There was a picture of your mother in his hand, and notes addressed to each of us on the desk,” Samuel told her flatly. “Does that sound like an accident?”

Tears welled up in her eyes, and Evie blinked them back. Ben had slipped, and as painful as it was to admit, she wasn’t surprised. Sometimes it was easier to fall blindly into the dark, than face a future without the light you’d once held.

“While I sat in the hospital, waiting for him to regain consciousness, I wanted to keep hating him,” Samuel went on. “I had for so long.”

“Why did you hate him?”

“My father was a man who wielded his power so easily. No one distracted him, not even his wife and children. Then along came your mother, and he softened. Benjamin Fairweather was gone, and in his place was Ben, a guy who played pirates in the yard, and made his kids go to little league.”

Anger pricked in Evie’s chest. “They were happy. What is wrong with that?”

“Nothing,” he exhaled. “Those were some of the best years of my childhood, but when Laura Jean died, my dad died right along with her.”

“You hated him because he mourned her?”

“I hated him because Laura Jean’s death took my father to a level of devastation I didn’t know existed. This great man that I’d looked up to my entire life wallowed in his pain, with no intentions of ever becoming whole again. He gave up on us, because we weren’t enough.”

“You had no right to think that way,” she yelled, furious on Ben’s behalf. “All he did was love her.”

“I know!” Samuel rushed forward, but stopped short of touching her, his loosely tethered control revealing itself. “Sitting next to him in the hospital, so close to making you mine, I no longer hated him. I understood him in a way I never had, because if I lost you the way he lost Laura Jean, it would be me in that bed without question.”

The weight of what she was hearing became too much, and Evie held her hand up, feeling sick. “Losing me wouldn’t have broken you.”

“Yes, it would,” he said, giving in and pulling her to him. “It did.”

She buried her face in his shirt, letting him hold her in the twilight. They stayed that way until the darkness came, enveloping them in the night.

“By the time he was released from the hospital, and getting better, you already hated me,” he whispered into her hair. “I thought it would be easier to keep things that way.”

“Well, you’re an idiot, Samuel Fairweather.” Arching up on her toes, she kissed him. It wasn’t sweet or loving, but hard, a punishment for his stupidity. “You could have come to me and explained.”

“No one was ever supposed to know. Mathis got a bonus to erase the first responder records, and the hospital received a new patient wing to remain quiet.”

He tucked her head under his chin. “Josie forced my dad into therapy, like she did with me after mom died,” he said, and huffed out what sounded like a laugh. “You know, she’s always supported the idea of us being together, and was heartbroken when things didn’t work out.”

Evie smiled. “Simone and I had a long talk last night, and she said Josie is one of the smartest people she knows.”

“Yeah, she’s one of my favorites,” he said, softly. “And one of the few people my dad respects.”

“Finish telling me about Ben.”

She’d been so absorbed in her own life following Samuel’s departure that she never noticed Ben’s sudden absence. He was living in Lauderdale during that time, commuting home now and then to check in with all of them. Looking back, she realized he avoided coming around Haven for nearly a year.

“Through therapy and a lot of kumbaya from Selah, he got through it.”

“What did Simone say when she found out?”

“This is the only secret he’s ever kept from her.”

Her eyes went wide, and she stared up at him with her mouth open. “Oh my God.”

“I know.”

He kissed her then, and she went soft under him, letting him attempt to make amends. “Forgive me yet?”

“No,” she answered, as his hands drifted lower. “But my forgiveness will come.”

Samuel gave her a sly smile, the wolfish gleam in his eyes returning. “Can I try to earn it by making *you* come?”

Breathless and achy, she kissed him again, bending in a way that let him have more to work with. “You’re pretty confident in that penis of yours.”



“And you’re about to find out why.” He let her go to lead them back to the house. “Because tonight you’ll be in my bed where you fucking belong.”

## CHAPTER 41

# Evie

It was ten o'clock at night and well past Evie's bedtime. Rolling down the hall ahead of her, Abe hummed the theme to *Mission Impossible*. "This is like one of those movies, but with sex instead of spies."

Annabeth shushed him. "Do you want Abe to let Samuel know you're on the way?"

The twins were her lifeline to making it out unseen. Samuel had made it clear when he left that he expected her soon. But she'd had to wait until Ben and Jamison went to bed. "I'll be fine."

"Ah, come on," Abe whined. "Let me booty call him."

"I agree. If you're going to do this, be safe about it," Annabeth said. "And don't forget about our sex talk."

Annabeth's sex talk mainly consisted of her dumping handfuls of condoms into Evie's purse. Where she'd gotten the condoms from was anyone's guess.

"That's like the blind leading the blind," Abe mumbled, earning him a punch in the arm from both women.

Annabeth tapped at the security pad. “Are you ready?”

Evie nodded. “But I might be right back.”

Abe didn’t look up from his phone. “If you are, I’ll be disappointed,” he said, pausing the security camera sensors in the app Evie had yet to download. “You have ninety seconds from go.”

Tucking her cardigan tight around her, Evie ran at Abe’s signal. A light sprinkling of rain fell as she jogged to the parking area, and once she made it inside the car, she glanced down to see that the thin white material of the dress was now transparent in spots.

With a shrug, she shimmied off the cardigan, and headed down the drive. Her outfit didn’t matter. She was on her way to have sex with Samuel, and clothing wasn’t exactly a top priority for the evening’s activities.

Sex.

With.

Samuel.

The reality of what she was doing hit hard, and almost had her turning the car around. Not because she didn’t want to have sex with him. She really, really wanted to do that. All night, with no breaks, except maybe for the occasional sip of water.

It was important to stay hydrated.

No, the fear eating at her came from a place much deeper. What would happen tonight signaled the beginning of *them*. Of Samuel and Evie finally becoming Samuel and Evie.

If someone had told her a month ago this would be happening, she would've laughed in their face and promptly reported an insane person on the loose to the police.

Speaking of police, Evie slowed as she passed a police cruiser parked off the side of Haven's drive. No one had mentioned Mathis sending them over, but knowing Ben, he'd probably had guards on duty since the night of the break-in, and she'd never noticed.

The ride to Samuel's was short, giving her no time to calm down before she arrived. Driving through the open gates, Evie parked next to the SUV he'd driven her home in from the Firewater party, presuming the Batmobile and Audi were tucked safely in the detached garage.

Abe had obviously alerted Samuel she was on the way because he stood waiting in the doorway, with a shoulder propped on the frame. He was shirtless and wearing her favorite pair of gray sweatpants. Turning off the car, Evie took a minute to admire him in the rearview mirror.

She watched him lift his phone to his ear, and a second later, her own phone rang.

“What are you waiting for?”

“Enjoying the view.” She fiddled with the dress, ready to let the rain do its job. “Those abs of yours should be considered

the world's eighth wonder.”

“Come inside and you can finally touch them.”

A nervous giggle bubbled up, and she clamped her mouth shut. “Give me a minute.”

“What’s wrong?”

“I’m nervous.”

He crossed his ankles and grinned. “All that big talk from you over the last couple of days, and suddenly you’re nervous?”

“I’m allowed to be nervous, Samuel.”

“You’re allowed to be a unicorn for all I care, as long as you come inside,” he replied. “I promise to be gentle.”

“And if I don’t want you to be gentle?”

In the rearview mirror, he straightened. “Get out of the car before I drag you out.”

“I have to be back before sunrise.”

“We’ll see.”

“Um, I brought condoms,” she floundered. “In case we need them.”

Realizing what she said, Evie sank down in the seat, mortified.

“We’re going to need them,” he assured her. “Now, come inside.”

Tossing the phone in the passenger seat, she opened the car door, and like always, the rain off the gulf fell heavier closer to the shore. She tried to tread carefully over the wet cobblestone and not slip, but nearly lost her footing more than once.

The glow from the open front door created a circle of light around where Samuel stood, and she stopped at its edge. “What are you doing?” he asked, squinting to see her through the rain and the dark. “Get in here.”

Evie stepped into the light, solidifying that a thin, white dress on a rainy night could be a mighty thing when you were out to seduce a man.

Samuel’s mouth hung open, his wide eyes roaming everywhere except her face. He didn’t appear to be breathing as far as Evie could tell.

“Come here.”

Head high, she stayed put. “Come and get me.”

Lightning sliced the sky further down the beach, cracking across the clouds. He was there by the time the thunder hit, lifting her into his arms.

Evie wrapped her legs around his waist, their mouths crashing together.

“The neighbors will see,” she said, relishing the warmth of his body on her wet skin. “Take me inside.”

Swinging them around, Samuel carried her through the door and kicked it closed.

“You come to me like this, and you’re worried about the neighbors?”

Pinning her in place on the wall, Samuel’s hips thrust forward, and with only the thin barrier of his sweatpants separating them, the hard ridges of his erection ground into her.

She moaned, desperate for more, and grappled with the waistband of his pants. “Not yet,” he said, stopping her. “We’re nowhere near ready for that.”

Evie snarled in disagreement, but changed her mind when he ripped the top of the dress down to lavish her breasts with tongue and teeth. Tiny jolts of electricity surged through her with every pull of his mouth, and she buried her face in his hair.

“More,” she demanded, unable to form complete sentences.

While his mouth teased, his hands explored, landing between her legs. A brush of his knuckles sent a wild shiver down her spine, and she whimpered.

Satisfied with her reaction, Samuel relinquished her nipple with a final tug and rose to stand. “Use your words, Evangeline.”

“I need more.”

With a smirk, Samuel slowly dropped to his knees. “More, more, more,” he chanted. “How am I ever going to satisfy you?”

His hand ran along her leg, lifting it to drape over his shoulder. “But I have an idea,” he whispered, shoving her skirt up around her hips. “One that I think you’re going to like.”

Burying his head between her thighs, he ran his tongue directly over her center, and a whoosh of air blasted out of her lungs. “Again,” she cried out. “Do it again.”

Samuel sucked at the tender flesh, wreaking havoc through her body. “More?” he asked, lapping at her leisurely. “Are you sure?”

Gasping, she nodded, and with a chuckle he splayed her legs further apart to delve in deeper. She cried out, rolling her hips in time with the exquisite motion of his tongue. Her enthusiasm had Samuel groaning, and he gripped her chin, guiding her gaze to the floor-length mirror hanging at the end of the hall.

Transfixed by the reflection staring back at her, Evie didn’t recognize the half-naked woman with her back arched, riding the dark head working below.

A finger took the place of the tongue, and Samuel lifted his head. In total control of himself, his eyes met hers in the mirror.

“Look at you.” He laid a kiss on her inner thigh before biting with just the slightest pressure. “Have you ever seen anything so beautiful?”

Release sparked low in her belly, and she chased it, tugging at his hair to let him know she was close. A second finger slid



in, pumping hard. “Who do you belong to, Evangeline?”

She couldn't answer, unable to look away from the image they were creating in the mirror. Her body bounced with each powerful stroke of his fingers.

“Please.” She needed his mouth on her again. “Please, Samuel.”

Knowing what she wanted, Samuel gave her a few flicks of his tongue as encouragement. “Answer me,” he demanded. “Who do you belong to?”

Blinding pleasure consumed her, and Evie sobbed his name. “Samuel.”

“Good girl.”

With two hands under her thighs, he hauled her fully against his mouth, feasting wildly as her inner muscles spasmed around his tongue. She held on to his shoulders, clawing at his skin while he drank in her shudders with a moan.

Once the last of her screams subsided, he stood, raising an eyebrow at her slumped state. “Ready for more?”

Evie nodded, her head bobbing like a limp doll.

“Can you walk?”

She wasn't sure, but she needed him to feel what she was feeling and slipped her hand into his sweatpants, fisting the smooth thickness there.

Samuel braced a hand on the wall with his eyes closed, thrusting his hips once and then twice.

“Upstairs,” he whispered, removing her hand. “Or we’ll never make it.”

He brought her further into the house, taking them up a floating staircase at the end of the hall. The house was dark, but even in the low light, the red marks on his back could be seen. “I’m sorry I hurt you. I didn’t realize I was digging my nails in so hard.”

At the top of the stairs, Samuel stopped at the first bedroom, turning to face her. “I like the feel of your marks on my skin.”

Lifting the remains of her dress over her head, Evie gave him a nervous smile. “Maybe I’m marking my territory.”

Raw lust swirled in Samuel’s eyes, as he took his time studying her naked before him. “Maybe I’m about to do the same.”

## CHAPTER 42

# *Evie*

“Don’t worry, no one can see us.” Samuel drew her to stand at the end of an enormous bed. “It’s a special one way glass we manufacture.”

The full moon shone through the rear glass wall of his bedroom, its light illuminating the white sand on the beach below. Out over the gulf, the remnants of the spring storm raged, building into something bigger for tomorrow.

As Evie’s eyes adjusted, she saw a drafting board in the corner and a few pieces of furniture, but nothing else. There were no personal touches, no photos or décor of any kind.

But knowing him as she did, Evie understood an empty room was the only way he could rest. Haven House had been a tough adjustment for Samuel every summer, and he often spent his first week cleaning Selah’s room where he stayed.

“Your room needs some personality.”

Fingertips trailed over her skin, gently bringing her closer. “Maybe you can decorate it for me.”

“If I recall, you don’t particularly care for my taste.”

“Haphazard eclectic isn’t really my style,” he agreed. “But I would make an exception just to have pieces of you in here.”

“Maybe you just need to keep *me* in here.”

“That sounds like a better plan,” he replied, coming in for a kiss.

Evie stopped him with a shake of her head, pointing to his pants. “Off.”

“Why don’t you take them off for me?”

Happy to oblige, she dipped her hands in, running them over his backside. The pants slid down, and she kneeled as they dropped, stopping when the long length of him broke free.

Evie struggled not to stare but couldn’t help it, her brain too busy calculating how sex with him would work.

“I’m glad to see you’re impressed.” He gave himself a stroke, making her mouth water. “We’ll start slow.”

“I don’t want slow.”

Flattening her tongue, she licked upward with no real idea of what she was doing. Oral sex wasn’t something she’d ever attempted, but was more than willing to give it a try to have a taste of him.

Samuel jerked her to stand, his breath coming out in harsh gusts. “We’re not doing that tonight.”

“But I want to.” She gave her lips an exaggerated lick, and his jaw ticked. “You got to use your tongue on me. Why can’t

I do the same?”

“Soon.”

“You’re no fun, Samuel.”

She was on her back with him crawling over her in a blink. “Where the hell did you get this thing?” She scooted higher on the mattress. “It takes up half the room.”

“It’s an Alaskan king.” He kissed her stomach, working his way upward, stopping to pay extra attention to her breasts. “And I’m going to fuck you on every part of it.”

“Mmm, okay,” she purred, spreading out beneath him. “We’re not going to sleep tonight, are we?”

“Sleep is for the weak.”

Evie remembered the condoms and tried to sit up. “I left the condoms in the car!”

“I bought some on my way home.” He swirled her nipple with his tongue, drawing it into a hardened bud. “Hoping you wouldn’t chicken out.”

“Have you ever had sex without one?”

Samuel’s heated eyes rolled to her face. “Never.”

She bent her knees, nestling him between her thighs. “I’m on birth control and have yearly physicals.”

“What are you saying?”

Evie arched an eyebrow, silently asking the unaskable question.

“You’re such a horrible influence,” he groaned, sitting back on his knees. Grasping himself, he rubbed his tip through her wet heat, biting his bottom lip as he drank in the sight. “Are you sure?”

She raised her hips, placing him into position. “Give me what I want.”

“I’ll give you anything you want, Evangeline,” he exhaled, crowning with a shiver. “Because all I want is you.”

He moved to lay on top of her, placing them face to face as he pushed forward fully. She hissed, the stretch bordering on painful. “Maybe we do need to take this slow.”

Samuel kissed her tenderly, remaining motionless until she was ready, and once the stinging sensation passed, Evie urged him to continue.

Without breaking from her mouth, he took her in steady, measured movements, and on the final slide, buried himself fully.

“Do you have any idea how good you feel?” Samuel circled his hips, slow and torturous. “Or how much I need you?”

“Show me,” she whispered, raking her nails down his side. “Show me how much you need me.”

Pushing up on his arms, he retreated to her entrance, only to drive in smooth and deep. When she took it with a moan, he let go, pumping into her with abandon.

“You are mine,” he snarled, each word accentuated with a hard slam of his body. “You will always be mine.”

Assaulted by sensations and emotions she'd never known existed, Evie held on, the connection between them humming in every corner of her soul. She whimpered for more, begging incoherently for him to never stop.

Shifting a hand under her knee, he spread her wide, leaving her utterly at his mercy as he bottomed out again and again. The orgasm to end all orgasms detonated inside her, and she could do nothing to stop it. She thrashed beneath him, her hips bucking in time with his as she sought the white-hot bliss of euphoria trickling through her veins.

Samuel watched her come with a wild look in his eyes, never slowing, giving her exactly what she needed. But his control could only last so long, and when it was gone, he powered into her, plunging tip to base with heavy, ramming strokes strong enough to lift her off the mattress.

“Ah, fuck.” Muscles tense, head thrown back, Samuel poured himself into her with a shout. Under her hands, goosebumps covered his skin. “Look at what you do to me, Evangeline.”

Evie *was* looking.

And she saw a man as lost in her, as she was in him. It was a cruelly beautiful thing and made her regret ever fighting this in the first place.

The beat of his body lessened, and Evie yanked his head down, capturing him in an open mouth kiss. Samuel's tongue moved in sync with his slowing thrusts, dancing with hers as she lay trembling in his arms.

She could lie to herself later and say it was absurd to think in such a way, but just then, Evie half expected to hear a confession of love. Simple words that would reflect everything between them.

But instead, all she got was, “Are you alright?”

Not exactly words of love, for sure, but the complete and total happiness staring down at her was enough for now. Evie hid her smile. “Are you?”

Samuel rolled to his back, taking her with him. She rested her chin on his chest, watching as he panted up at the ceiling. “I’m not really sure,” he answered when he finally caught his breath. “I think I had a heart attack somewhere in the middle of that.”

She snorted out a giggle and he lifted his head to scowl at her. “It’s not funny, Evangeline. You could’ve killed me.”

“But what a way to go.” She traced his lips with her finger, avoiding his teeth when he snapped playfully at it. “Not to be one of those women, but what are you thinking right now?”

A smug grin spread across his face. “I scored twenty-three points.”

She pinched him, and he grabbed her wrists to thwart another attack. “You should know that I plan on making it an even one hundred by dawn,” he informed her. “Unless you think we can double down on that.”

Rolling away, she sprawled out on her back next to him, stretching her arms overhead. “And you should know I have



this new boss. He's very demanding. If I show up to work exhausted, he's sure to call me into his office and reprimand me."

Samuel covered her with his body. "He sounds like a real ass."

"Oh, he is," she agreed, winding her legs around him. "Today, he made inappropriate comments about my clothing."

"Speaking of which, never wear the white dress to work." He pinned her hands down. "I actually will have a heart attack if you do."

"Well, there goes my outfit for casual Friday."

## CHAPTER 43

# *Evie*

**G**loriously naked, Samuel rested back on his elbows, watching her dress. “Stay with me.”

“Will you please put some clothes on?” She tossed his sweatpants at him. “Your nudity is distracting.”

“Come here, and I’ll show you how distracting I can be.” He stretched, providing her a view that made it hard to say no. “I promise I’ll be quick.”

“You said that an hour ago.”

“I was lying an hour ago.”

A faint flush colored his neck. “And you’re lying now.”

“Fine.” He stood, pulling on his pants, and retrieved a t-shirt from the dresser. “Let’s go.”

“Where are you going?”

“I’m following you to the house.”

She went with him downstairs, sneaking a peek at the lower level as they went. It was much like his bedroom, high end furniture but all very contemporary and uniform.

“You don’t have to.”

“And you don’t have to argue.”

Samuel found her shoes in the foyer and kneeled to slip them on her feet. “Are you sure you don’t want to stay?”

His hand skated up her leg, and Evie knocked it away before he convinced her otherwise. “Yes.”

She hurried outside to her car. The sunrise was gaining speed, and Ben usually woke with it.

“Stop a few feet outside of camera range,” Samuel said, getting behind the wheel of his SUV. “From there, I’ll give you the signal on when to go.”

The officers were where she’d left them, right off the highway entrance to Haven. Evie waved, slightly embarrassed, and stopped her car on the edge of the tree line.

Samuel parked behind her and got out. “When did they get here?”

“I’m not sure, but you don’t have to glare at them like that.”

Samuel stuck his head through her open window. “I’m not glaring at them. That’s just how I look at people,” he said, giving her a kiss. “Abe is waiting to let you in. I can pause the camera for two minutes. That should be enough time for you to park and get inside without setting off an alert on my dad’s phone.”

“Got it,” she said. “See you at the office, Mr. Fairweather.”

“Oh, you’re not getting off that easy. I’ll be back in a little while to drive us to work. Together.”

With a roll of her eyes, she drove off, parking in under thirty seconds. She made it to the porch by the ninety second mark, and Abe quietly opened the door to let her in.

“Did you have a nice night?”

Evie nodded, heading for the stairs. “Thanks for being my wingman.”

Abe laid a hand over his heart. “It was my honor.”

Hoping for a quick nap before her alarm went off, she ran upstairs to snuggle under the covers. If she didn’t get some rest, Fairweather Holdings would have a walking zombie on their hands.

Fitz settled next to her, purring loudly. His warmth soothed the dull ache in her muscles, but it made her miss Samuel, and she grabbed her phone to send him a text.

*I should have stayed.*

*Want me to come get you?*

*No, I’m sore. I guess you marked your territory after all.*

*Check your thigh.*

Frowning, Evie flung off the covers, much to Fitz’s annoyance, and there, on her inner right thigh, was a bite mark. She snatched her phone, typing furiously.

*Did you give me a hickey?*

*Did I?*

The mark should have made her angry, but it didn't.

*I'm taking a nap.*

*Sweet dreams.*

Closing her eyes, her tired mind drifted as hope ballooned in her chest, and for the first time in forever, she didn't immediately rein it in. The fantasies she'd kept locked away took over, and Evie floated off to sleep, never expecting to dream of her mother.

*But there was Laura Jean, waiting on the side porch. Her mother danced in that way of hers, swiping a paintbrush over a canvas, while Ella Fitzgerald's voice floated out of a CD player on the ground next to her. She wore her signature broom skirt and tank top, her blond wavy hair flowing around her shoulders.*

*Even in death, Laura Jean Eddins was breathtaking.*

*The sun's blinding light shone down on the scene, accompanied by the heat of what could only be summer. All around, the cicadas shrieked at deafening levels, and Evie briefly wondered what could have provoked them to produce such a racket this time of day.*

*"Oh, my!" Laura Jean squealed in surprise when she spotted her. "You've grown into such a beauty."*

*"Hi, Mama."*

*Her mother rushed over for a hug, and Evie held on, inhaling the familiar scent of vanilla and patchouli.*

*So real.*

*These dreams always felt so real. Not that Evie was complaining. This was a considerable improvement over the way she normally saw her mother, dead on the floor, with the light gone from her eyes.*

*Laura Jean pulled back to study her. "It's going to be alright."*

*"I'm just happy to see you," Evie said, wiping a tear. She nodded at the easel. "What are you working on?"*

*"Same as always." Laura Jean motioned towards the painting, the engagement ring from Ben sparkling in the sun on her finger. "Haven is my muse."*

*Would her mother have loved the home Ben built for them as much as Haven? It was an odd thought Evie's brain often asked.*

*As if she could hear her thoughts, Laura Jean grinned. "Ben ordered me a new set of colors to capture Firewater," she said. "Are you excited about sleeping in your big purple room?"*

*"I can't wait," Evie replied, her heart breaking at the excitement on her mother's face. "And Jamison's will be pink."*

*"A room fit for our princess."*

*Louis Armstrong's baritone voice joined Ella's on the radio, jarring Laura Jean. The smile on her face faltered, her eyes flickering with confusion. "Where am I?"*

*It dawned on Evie then how tiny her mother seemed, standing a good two inches under her. "You're home, Mama."*

*Laura Jean continued to stare off at nothing. "Albie loved this song. You know, we met at a jazz club down in the French Quarter of New Orleans, and the band was playing this when he introduced himself."*

*Evie smiled, having heard the story a million times. "And you choked on your soda."*

*"I didn't just choke on my soda," Laura Jean said, coming back around. "It shot right out of my nose like a cannon, spraying your father and the poor bartender at the Maison Bourbon."*

*Evie's head tilted. "I thought the name of the club was Fritzel's?"*

*Her mother shook her head. "Ben always gets it wrong when he tells the story because he wasn't there. It was the Maison, right off Bourbon Street. It's the real deal, with brick walls and this cool spiral staircase that leads up to a balcony. My girlfriends and I would sneak into the city on Friday nights to listen to music there."*

*Thunder rolled in off the bayou, carrying with it dark, churning clouds through the trees. The mist dipped low over the cottages too, scraping the rooftops with zaps of silent lightning.*

*"Who's that?" Laura Jean asked, staring at the figure on the lawn.*

*The girl from the conservatory waited just outside the ring of light encircling Haven, unmoving, wearing her white nightgown. Blood red lips moved silently, and when she noticed their attention on her, the girl lifted a hand, waving with a wiggle of fingers.*

*“She’s mine, and won’t hurt us.”*

*“What’s she saying?”*

*“Don’t worry about her,” Evie said, taking her mother’s hands. “Pay attention to me.”*

*Laura Jean turned back to her. “Are you happy, kitten?”*

*It was a dream, why deny it. “I am.”*

*“Does he love you, too?” her mother asked. “Is he a good man?”*

*A mother’s intuition always had a way of coming through, and Evie smiled.*

*“I’m in love with Samuel.”*

*“I knew it!” Laura Jean clucked her tongue. “You two are so much alike, even though none of the others see it. I’ve always said this day would come, but everyone else thinks I’m the weird one for thinking that.”*

*“You’re not weird!”*

*Her mother laughed, tucking a strand of hair behind Evie’s ear. “Don’t worry, being called weird isn’t an insult. Normalcy sucks the color out of life. Ask Ben if you don’t believe me. He lived in a black and white world before I got a hold of him.”*



*“How did you know Ben loved you?” Evie asked, knowing full well this wasn’t real, and she was essentially talking to herself. “Like really know?”*

*“Kitten, I loved your father, too. I want you to always remember that.”*

*“I know, Mama.”*

*“Albie was my heart. We were young, and ready to take on the world together. He was my best friend, and my husband.”*

*Laura Jean fidgeted with the emerald solitaire necklace around her neck. “But Ben is my soul,” she sighed, her love for him shining through. “I love him with a fierceness that echoes in the bone. When he’s near, something in me sings in harmony with something in him.”*

*At that moment, Evie would have given nearly anything to have Ben here, seeing her mother like this one last time. Happy and hopelessly in love with him.*

*Laura Jean wrinkled her nose, embarrassed. “That sounds silly, doesn’t it?”*

*“It’s not silly at all,” she assured her. “But how did you know he loved you?”*

*“Remember the hurricane when you were five?”*

*Evie nodded. “We went to Orlando afterwards, and you guys had to separate Samuel and me on the ride down.”*

*“You punched him, Evangeline!”*

*“He accused me of cheating during the alphabet game!”*

*“But you did cheat!”*

*“Do you want a winner for a daughter, or a loser?” Evie teased, making her mother shake her head. “Ben taught me that winning is everything.”*

*“Well, Benjamin is going to get an earful when he wakes up.”*

*Evie frowned. “What?”*

*Laura Jean didn't answer and bent down, changing the CD. The heavy thump of Mick Fleetwood's foot on a bass pedal replaced Ella, and a wave of dizziness shimmered over the vision of her mother.*

*Evie knew this song. It often played in the house when Laura Jean was alive.*

*It was also playing when she drew her last breath.*

*“I knew Ben loved me during that hurricane,” Laura Jean said, taking Evie's hands again. “He busted through the door of the cottage, soaking wet and pissed off that I'd put myself at risk, and I knew he loved me.”*

*Her mother tried to twirl her, but Evie couldn't move. It was like someone had packed her feet in cement.*

*“Since then, when good things happen, it's Ben I share them with,” Laura Jean continued. “And when the bad comes, he's the one I run to.”*

*The thunder came closer, and Laura Jean's brow creased with concern, her gaze returning to the girl on the lawn. “I*

*don't like this."*

*Evie hit pause on the CD player, unable to listen any longer.  
"It's just a spring storm."*

*"No, something's wrong," Laura Jean whispered, her voice small. "I want Ben."*

*"He misses you," Evie said, the tears falling now. "So much, Mama."*

*"Why would Ben miss me? He's sleeping right next to me."  
Her mother sighed and laid her hands on Evie's shoulders.  
"And why are you upset? Is this about last night? Listen, we'll all sleep in the new house tonight."*

*Icy fingers dug in around Evie's spine, ready to rip her into waking. She relaxed, knowing not to fight. It would hurt more if she did. "I love you, Mama, but I have to go."*

*Laura Jean kissed her cheek, hugging her tight. "I'll see you soon, kitten," she said. "And don't forget, we're going into town early to eat ice cream before the fireworks start."*

*"I won't forget."*

## CHAPTER 44

# *Evie*

**A**nnabeth shook her awake. “The alarm has been going off for twenty minutes.”

“Shit.” Evie stumbled out of bed and into the bathroom.

“Oh, hell no.” Annabeth chased after her. “You’re not getting off that easy. I need details.”

Evie turned on the shower. “The term mind-blowing doesn’t quite cover last night.”

“Oh my God, tell me everything.”

Evie shooed her out and took the fastest shower in the history of Haven House. When she was done, she returned to her room where Annabeth waited, impatiently sorting through Evie’s clothes.

“Talk while you dress.”

Leaving nothing out, Evie gave her all the salacious details. “Ugh, that’s hot.” Annabeth fanned herself. “I mean, it’s gross to me, because it’s Samuel, but still very hot.”

“Jamison didn’t suspect anything?”

Annabeth shook her head. “She left a few minutes ago for a run on the beach.”

“Right behind the townhouses, I bet.”

“No doubt,” Annabeth said, sitting on the bed. “Listen, I need to tell you something. You know how Abe can’t hold his liquor? Well, after you left, he and I had a glass of wine together and he started talking. Like, spilling all the secrets about Samuel.”

“What secrets?”

“He said Selah pushed him to make his move.”

Relieved it wasn’t something more sinister, Evie hunted for shoes in her closet. “Yeah, at the party.”

“Oh no, way before that. Abe said Selah called him out about his feelings for you a long time ago, and they ended up beating the shit out of each other.”

The idea of the brothers physically fighting was insane, and Evie popped up to stand. “What are you talking about?”

“Remember when Abe’s depression got really bad, and Selah came down to talk some sense into him?”

“Yeah, and then they went to Samuel’s place to go fishing or something.”

“According to Abe, they were sitting around drinking whiskey one night, and Selah looks Samuel dead in the face and asks when he’s going to stop fucking the Evie clones and go for the real deal.”

“What is he talking about? Samuel only dates Barbies.”

Annabeth’s eyebrows shot to the sky. “Uh, what the hell do you think you look like?”

“No, I don’t,” Evie said, a little offended.

“You’re right, you’ve got an ass on you, where his Barbies usually don’t.” Annabeth rolled her eyes. “Anyway, Samuel denied it at first, but then they tossed back a few more glasses and he let it all out.”

“Such as?”

“Abe wouldn’t tell me.”

“Where did the fight come in?”

“Selah called him weak, and Samuel punched him. Then all hell broke loose. They were rolling on the floor, beating on each other, and Abe said Selah just kept on saying shit that made Samuel even more furious.”

Selah was going to get an extra big hug when she saw him. “I can’t believe any of this.”

“At the end of it, Samuel pinned Selah and Abe thought it was over, but then Selah went for the jugular.”

“What did he say?”

“I hope you’re prepared to watch her marry another man,” Annabeth said, mimicking Selah’s baritone voice. “And if you think that’s going to hurt, imagine what it’s going to feel like seeing her pregnant with his child.”

Evie's mouth hung open. A dirty move for sure, but she loved Selah for it.

“And then Samuel punched him in the face so hard, it knocked Selah out.”

“No!”

Annabeth nodded, her overnight braids bouncing. “The next morning, Abe overheard Samuel call Ben and tell him he wanted in on Firewater, but needed to work on site.”

“Son of a bitch.” It surprised Evie how quickly her anger flared. “He's been here a year and did nothing until Selah pushed him again at the party.”

“And because I'm stellar at reconnaissance, I asked about that, too.” Annabeth polished her nails on her shirt. “After his first visit to the house, Samuel didn't think he could fix the damage done. If you recall, you weren't very nice.”

No, she hadn't been nice. Simone invited him to dinner soon after he moved back, and Evie had made snide comments throughout the meal. “I could have probably handled that better.”

Her phone on the nightstand vibrated with a message from Samuel. *I'm here.*

Evie texted back she would be down in a minute. “I'm guessing Ben left?”

“About an hour ago,” Annabeth said, on her way out. “I'll pack you breakfast since it's getting late. I'm sure you need some food after last night.”

Thanking her, Evie dried her hair and went downstairs. Samuel was in the kitchen, looking well-rested and handsome in his blue suit. He and Abe were talking over the blaring music Annabeth danced to while she packed Evie a muffin to go.

Going straight to Samuel, Evie kissed him, eliciting gagging noises from the twins.

“Good morning,” he said against her lips with a smile. “Did you get any sleep?”

Simone came out of her room and clapped her hands. “Oh no, we’re not doing that in my kitchen. It’s eight in the morning.”

Samuel released her with a kiss on the nose. “The jet is ready when you are, Simone.”

Simone eyeballed them each individually, leveling a finger as she turned around the room. “I’m leaving for Atlanta this morning and will be back in one week. Don’t do anything stupid while I’m gone.”

There was a chorus of *yes, ma’ams*, and Evie took the brown bag from Annabeth. “See you tonight.”

“Or not,” Samuel said, as they left.

In the foyer, she gathered her laptop and purse. “Did you really get into a fistfight with Selah?”

Samuel glared in the direction of the kitchen while opening the front door. “Who gave Abe alcohol?”



“Is it true?”

He didn't reply and took her hand as they walked to the car. The cameras clicked on when they passed.

“I'll delete the footage when I get to the office,” he said, leading her around to the passenger side of his SUV. “And does it matter?”

“But why would you hit him?”

“I was drunk, and I couldn't handle what he was saying. I already knew I was weak, but to hear it from him, I guess I snapped.”

Evie fisted the material of his suit jacket, pulling herself up to his eye level. “You are not weak.”

Samuel's mouth covered hers, kissing her fiercely. “When it comes to you, Evangeline, I'm afraid I very much am.”

“See, you say things like that, and I can't be mad anymore.”

“Why were you mad?” he asked, opening her car door.

“You hit Selah!”

“He deserved it.”

“For speaking the truth?”

She sat, and he closed her in. “And I'm mad that you didn't pick me up in the Batmobile,” she added, when he joined her. “I want to drive it one day.”

“We can swing by the house and switch out cars, if you'd like.”

“If we went to your house, we would never make it to the office.”

“That’s a valid point, but I feel as though further research is needed.” He drove towards the highway. “It wouldn’t hurt to test our resolve.”

Evie waved to the officers as they passed. “It looks like Mathis assigned his people to stay around the clock. They’ve never been here when I’ve left for work before.”

“I need to ask my dad about them,” Samuel said, pulling onto the highway. “But I can’t exactly explain why I’m at the house this morning.”

“He won’t see us arrive at the office together, will he?”

“No, he’s already there. But if he does, I’ll tell him you had car trouble.”

“If I had car trouble, wouldn’t I ride with Abe?”

His hand rested on her thigh, giving it a squeeze. “Stop overthinking.”

Evie’s phone rang, and she wrinkled her nose at the name on the screen, but answered it anyway. “Hi, Lucas.”

“Am I catching you at a bad time?” Lucas asked.

Samuel’s hand on her thigh moved upward, disappearing under her skirt. “I’m on my way to work,” she said. “What do you need?”

“I went by your office yesterday to see if you wanted to have lunch and talk,” Lucas replied. “But they said you were

working out of the office over the next few weeks.”

She tried to listen, but when they arrived at a red light, Samuel’s disapproving rumble in her ear distracted Evie.

“Back to wearing underwear, Evangeline?”

He traced the lacy thong with a finger, tugging at it slightly with a *tsk-tsk*.

“I-I’m sorry I missed you,” she said to Lucas. “I’m working at Fairweather.” She spread her legs and met Samuel’s heated gaze. “It’s very rewarding.”

The one finger became two, sliding inside her underwear to rub circles on the sensitive bundle of nerves there. The light turned green, and Samuel hit the gas, driving with one hand.

“Maybe I can come out and take you to lunch,” Lucas said. “We can talk about us.”

“Uh—” Evie struggled to speak, lifting her hips to give better access, “I don’t know if us having lunch together is a good idea.”

“Why not?”

The fingers driving her crazy stopped what they were doing and slid down to press into the bite mark on her thigh, sending a clear message. “Because I’m seeing someone else.”

“Excuse me?” Lucas shouted loud enough for Samuel to hear. “Who?”

The car swerved off the highway and onto a deserted dirt access road with a Fairweather Holdings sign at its entrance.

“I’m sorry,” she apologized to Lucas. “I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

“I guess you’re not the person I thought you were, but I would still like to get together as friends soon.”

Samuel slammed the car into park and had her underwear off in a flash.

“I have to go.” Evie propped a leg on the door. “My boss needs me.”

The phone clattered to the floor, her back arching when two fingers plunged deep. “You’re a jealous bully, Samuel Fairweather.”

“Yes, I am,” he snarled, his teeth grazing her neck while she came apart in his hands. “And now we’re really going to be late.”

## CHAPTER 45

# LIAM

Liam's idea to sit on the deck of the townhouse and enjoy his coffee while reviewing the case files of the four crime scenes was ruined by three things.

The weather.

The water.

And the woman.

Stormy skies lingered from the night's downpour, dishing out gusts of wind that agitated the gulf. Its waves crashed ashore violently, creating a spray of saltwater. The paper in his hands melted at the first touch of humid air, and Liam gave up on them, pulling out his phone to work with the information stored there.

He spotted Jamison jogging along the waterline with the other morning runners halfway through his review. She was hard to miss, looking like some ethereal creature emerging from the sea dressed in nothing but the tiniest shorts known to man and a sports bra.

The other males on the beach noticed her too, and Liam half wished for a rogue wave to take them all out.

As hard as it was to look away, he did, but he couldn't focus, knowing she was near.

Exhaustion was eating him alive, causing the words on the screen to blur. He'd called Mathis as soon as Jamison left yesterday, telling the detective about the developments coming out of south Florida, but leaving out the discovery of Hopper, not wanting Ben Fairweather's lap dog to alert the family.

"Sending over a detail wouldn't be a bad idea," Liam had told Mathis.

"I'll send one, if Ben agrees."

"Make him agree."

"No offense, Agent Cohen," Mathis said. "But those women died years ago."

"These murders hit a little closer to home, and I would think erring on the side of caution would be the best way to proceed."

"I'll get back to you."

Angry, Liam had hung up, forgetting to request the death certificates his father was so hell bent on obtaining.

He spoke to Hawkins next, telling him of Jamison's find. "What makes you think Samuel Fairweather isn't involved?"

"My father agrees that he doesn't fit the profile," Liam had replied, hoping Hawkins would accept that. "He's reviewed

the case and is working on providing us with a clearer picture of the person responsible.”

“The truck driver has turned out to be more interesting than we originally thought with a couple of sexual battery hits,” Hawkins said. “Once I get a feel on the situation, I’ll decide who I’m sending down there to you.”

“Sounds good.”

“Would your father join us if we asked?”

Undoubtedly, he would, but none of that mattered if his mother didn’t think she could make the trip. “He won’t leave her behind.”

“I understand, Cohen.”

Over the next hour, they hashed out a plan of questioning for Hawkins to follow, using input provided by his father. After he got off the phone, Liam continued reviewing the Miami files until late, and when he finally did attempt to rest, he tossed and turned all night.

“Good morning.”

Jamison climbed up the deck steps. Her sports bra and tiny shorts even more mouthwatering up close.

“Good morning,” he replied.

“I wanted to let you know I haven’t checked Evie’s room for Hopper.”

He doubted she would find it. “How was your test?”

“I don’t know. I was pretty distracted.” She came over to stand at the table next to him. “Have you learned anything new?”

“No.”

“Oh, ok.” She fidgeted where she stood, looking adorably nervous. “I stopped by to ask if you would like to come to dinner tonight at the house. Simone is leaving to help Selah’s fiancée.”

“Why does Selah’s fiancée need help?”

“Lenora is pregnant, and her doctor placed her on bed rest after they got into an accident.”

“That doesn’t sound like fun.”

“I’m sure it’s worse with Selah hovering over her,” she said. “So, will you come to dinner tonight?”

“No, I have too much to do, and I’m not sure when I’ll finish.”

“Are you going to call my dad this morning and tell him about Hopper?”

Liam wanted his one-on-one with Fairweather, and son, before his team arrived. “It’s on my list of things to do.”

“Last night was horrible,” she said, softly enough that Liam hardly heard her over the wind. “Evie and I don’t keep secrets from one another. I don’t know why you think my dad or Samuel should be the ones to tell her.”

“You just have to trust me.”



“I do trust you.”

Her eyes met his, and a surge of lust smacked him head on. This was getting out of hand. He almost wished his restlessness in the night had been caused by the case, but no, it was visions of Jamison, naked and beneath him, that had robbed Liam of sleep.

As if she could sense what he was thinking, she licked her lips, coming closer. “Invite me in for a cup of coffee.”

Coffee would be the last thing she would get if they went inside.

Tapping down the desire to know if her skin tasted like salt after running through the gulf spray, he shook his head. “I have a conference call in a few minutes and need to prepare my notes.”

“Maybe I’ll stop by later tonight and bring you some dinner.”

“That won’t be necessary.”

“But it would be rude of you not to let me play hostess,” she said, already jogging down the steps. “I’ll see you around six.”

Watching that blond ponytail sway as she made her way down the beach, Liam gritted his teeth. “Fuck.”

His phone rang with an unfamiliar number. “Hello?”

“Is this Agent Cohen?”

“It is.”

“My name is Selah Fairweather, and my mother gave me your number.”

Liam asked Selah to give him a minute to step inside. Shutting the sliding glass door, he grabbed a pad and a pen. “I’m glad you called. I was planning on contacting you today.”

“If you don’t mind, can you run through everything with me?” Selah asked. “All the information I have is second hand.”

Liam went over the details, covering what the others knew. “So, the focus could be Laura Jean or Evie, and you’re unsure of which,” Selah concluded.

“Or the paintings could be a coincidence.”

“But Hopper’s discovery tells us otherwise.”

He fell back on the couch, huffing in frustration. “Jamison told you.”

“I’m basically the family therapist,” Selah said, with a chuckle. “They all come to me for advice, or to talk when something is bothering them. You don’t know her that well, but keeping this from Evie is hard for Jamison. They’re incredibly close.”

“I’ve noticed Jamison seems to regard Evie as almost a maternal figure.”

“No, I would say she looks at my mother that way, but with Evie, it’s more like she’s a living representation of Laura Jean, but not as a mother figure. If that makes any sense?”

Liam wrote the phrase *living representation of Laura Jean* on his pad. It was an interesting take. The connection might not be with Evie, but in what she represented. The last living piece of Laura Jean Eddins.

Then again, the same could be said about Jamison, but thus far, nothing connected her to the scenes.

Unless there were more victims they hadn't found.

"That makes sense," Liam told him, understanding why they all went to Selah for advice. "And would explain Hopper's presence."

"Listen, I haven't told anyone else about Hopper, but if you don't let Samuel know what's happening by the end of today, I will."

"Why Samuel?" Liam asked, taking the opening. "I would think the first person I should notify of these developments would be your father."

Selah remained quiet, and Liam snickered. "It's a little obvious, but I can't understand why the rest of them don't see it."

"Oh, we see it," Selah said, quickly. "The way they feel about each other isn't a secret except to my dad and Jamison."

"Even your mother knows?"

The question made Selah laugh. "Nothing gets past that woman. She'll play you for a fool if you let her."

Liam decided to try his luck and asked Selah about his stepfather.

“Devon was a great guy and made everything fun. A real kid at heart.”

“How did your mother take the loss?”

“God, that was an awful summer,” Selah said. “Mom pushed through, focusing on Abe’s recovery, but my dad, he was... no person should ever go through that kind of suffering. He lost himself when he lost Laura Jean.”

If he had known Selah was going to be this open, Liam would’ve called him sooner. “How did Samuel handle watching your father grieve like that?”

“I know you think it’s a line you have to follow, but I swear to you, Sammy isn’t capable of hurting anyone.”

“When my team arrives, and they will soon, I can’t promise that they’ll draw the same conclusions as me, but I don’t have Samuel high on my list.”

“He’s a good man, Agent Cohen,” Selah said with conviction, and talked non-stop about his brother, painting a surprising picture.

“So, even though he’s three years younger, Samuel graduated from college the same year as you?” Liam asked, impressed.

“He’s brilliant, but don’t tell him I said that. The bastard is cocky enough without hearing it from me,” Selah replied. “After college, he went straight to work at Fairweather, even

though I told him to try something else first. Property management is boring and leaves a person unfulfilled. Sammy wanted to quit the first year in, but our dad talked him out of it.”

Liam’s phone signaled another call coming in. It was his father, and he wanted to take it. “Selah, can I call you back?”

“Sure.”

Disconnecting, Liam switched to his father. “I was talking with Selah Fairweather.”

“July 4, 1999!”

“What?”

“July 4, 1999!” his father repeated, the chair in the background squeaking at a breakneck pace. “I called in a favor and got the death certificates.”

“Which one?”

“Both of them, William. Laura Jean Eddins and Devon Howard died on the same damn day!” his father shouted. “July 4, 1999.”

Liam rose slowly from the couch, his body going numb. “How did they die?”

“Cause of death is listed as unknown.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?”

He shouldn’t be this angry. This shouldn’t feel like a personal betrayal. But it did.

“Don’t beat yourself up,” his father said. “You smelled the lie, too, but the girl got in the way.”

“I doubt Mathis will hand them over, but I need those autopsy reports.”

“And here’s where I impress you.”

Liam’s phone buzzed in his ear. “I’ve texted you the private number to Jack Zimmerman, the newly elected state attorney for the area,” his father said. “Zimmerman’s dad is a judge in central Florida, and we worked together on a case about ten years ago.”

Protocol dictated that all autopsy records for a county were stored within the state attorney’s office as a backup.

“You’re a genius.”

“Nah, I’m a New Yorker,” his father said, with pride. “We always know a guy, who knows a guy.”

“But what if the state attorney is in Fairweather’s pocket like Mathis?”

“The Zimmermans are trustworthy.”

“You’re speaking from the experience you’ve had with the father. The son could be different.”

“Make the call anyway. If Jack is anything like his dad, then he’s not stupid enough to lie to a federal agent, regardless of who’s lining his pockets.”

“These reports would be almost twenty years old and could take time to dig up.”

“Very true, so in the meantime, rattle the Fairweather’s cages and see what falls out.”

## CHAPTER 46

# Miranda

1998

“Merry Christmas!”

Swinging open the front door of Haven House, the sights and sounds of the season greeted Miranda. “We’re here!” she shouted, unsure if anyone could hear her over *Jingle Bell Rock* piping through the house speakers. “Hello?”

Laura Jean emerged from the ballroom, dashing over to help with their bundle of presents. “Merry Christmas.”

“And a Merry Christmas to you,” Josie said, passing her some of the gifts. “Everything looks amazing.”

Samuel dumped his load on the foyer table and raced up the stairs in search of the other children. “Forgive him,” Miranda mumbled. “I swear we raised him better.”

“He’s as wild as the rest of them,” Laura Jean replied, kissing her on the cheek. “Are all these presents for the kids?”

Miranda smiled apologetically. “There’s more in the car.”

Josie slid a hand around her waist. “It’s the girls that get to her. Samuel is all boy, and when Miranda can shop for



something girly, she goes crazy with it.”

Ben came down the hall wearing a blue holiday sweater, complete with snowflakes. Miranda stared at her ex-husband, barely able to hold a straight face. “I like your sweater, Ben.”

“Shut up.”

Laura Jean gave a twirl, showing off her snowflake covered skirt. “He’s wearing it for me. It matches my dress.”

Josie didn’t bother to hold back her laughter. “You’re adorable, Fairweather. If you ever give up corporate life, you can always get a job at Santa’s workshop.”

With her free hand, Laura Jean patted Ben’s chest while he glared in their direction. “Don’t let them get you down, honey.”

“I’m not.”

Laura Jean kissed him soundly on the mouth, then trotted off to the ballroom with the presents. Once she was out of sight, Josie rushed over to Ben, clapping her hands in excitement.

“Do you have it?”

Pulling them into the library, Ben produced a small black box hidden in a desk drawer. He opened the lid, the diamond catching the light just right. “Good?”

Miranda sighed, laying her head on Josie’s shoulder. “Very good, Benjamin.”

“You’ve outdone yourself,” Josie agreed. “Although you could have gone bigger.”

Ben paled. “What?”

“Oh no, Laura Jean’s hand is tiny,” Miranda argued. “Anything over five carats would have been too much.”

The library door opened, and Ben snapped the box shut.

Samuel came in, stopping short when he saw the three of them. “What are you guys doing in here?”

“Close the door,” Ben said, waving him over.

Eyeing them suspiciously, Samuel did as he was told. “Am I in trouble?”

“Not yet, but the day is young.” Josie ruffled his hair. “Come see the ring.”

“It’s here?” he shouted.

The adults shushed him, and Ben opened the box again for Samuel to see. “Wow.”

Ben smiled at his son’s reaction. “Do you like it?”

“You could have gone bigger, Dad.”

The box snapped shut again. “Damn it.”

“Five carats is fine,” Miranda assured him when he started to pace. “This is Laura Jean. She’ll love whatever you give her, because it’s from you.”

“I don’t know, Mom,” Samuel mumbled. “Josie says the bigger the better with jewelry.”

Josie rested her hands on his shoulders, leading him from the room. “Now would be a good time for you to zip it.”

“Can I have a soda?”

“Come help me get the rest of the presents from the car, and then you can.”

Miranda watched them go, her heart bursting at the sight of her little family.

Last year, when she and Josie sat Samuel down to break the news of the divorce, he’d taken it well. “I figured it was coming. I see dad with Laura Jean. They think they’re not being obvious, but they are,” he’d said. “Now she’s pregnant, and I know dad is the one who did it. Selah told me.”

“You’re going to be a big brother,” Josie said. “How do you feel about that?”

“That’s cool, I guess,” he replied. “When dad looks at Laura Jean, he gets all gooey and weird, so I guess he’s happy.”

He stepped forward, his serious, brown eyes locking on Miranda. “But are you okay, Mom?”

Miranda took Josie’s hand. “I’m happy, too,” she revealed. “Like your father, I feel gooey and weird when I look at the person I love.”

She and Josie could almost see her son’s big brain kicking into overdrive. “Oh,” he said, and then again when he sorted it all out. “Oh!”

His gaze darted back and forth between them. “But how does that work?”

Josie erupted into laughter, pulling him in for a hug. “Let’s not worry about that.”

Samuel hugged them, wedging his head between theirs. “I like you the best anyway, Josie,” he whispered. “You’re one of my favorites.”

“Oh baby, you’re one of my favorites, too.”

Miranda had dissolved into a blubbing mess after that, overwhelmed with relief. The world may never know of how much she loved Josie, but the ones that counted did and accepted them as they were.

She’d cried for the remainder of the day, with Josie and Samuel throwing her a pizza party to make her smile.

Miranda moved to block Ben’s path. “How did you pick out the ring?”

“What do you mean? You know I designed it for her.”

“Exactly,” she said. “You designed a magnificent ring for the woman you love, and she will cherish it as much as she cherishes you.”

He laughed at himself, scrubbing a hand down his face. “Did you ever think we would be like this?”

She knew what he meant. “It almost feels wrong to be this happy.”

“It’s like we’ve become the people we were always meant to be. You with Josie, and me—”

“Wearing snowflake sweaters?”

Ben chuckled, scratching at the trimmed beard on his chin. “Along with this thing.”

“I never knew Laura Jean was into the outdoorsy type.”

His face fell. “Is that what I look like?”

It was, but she thought it best not to say anything further. “Let’s go before Laura Jean gets suspicious.”

They parted ways in the foyer, with him going to help Josie with the presents, and Miranda making her way to the ballroom. “Whoa!” she exclaimed upon entering. “This is fantastic, LJ.”

Silver and ice blue swaths of fabric ran from the tall windows and across the ceiling to drape in waves. Icicles dangled overhead, streaming to the floor where patches of cotton created a snowy landscape. In the corner, a plump twelve-foot tree adorned with every color ornament imaginable stood proudly over the heaps of presents scattered under its branches.

“Did you do all this yourself?”

Devon came in carrying a platter of food. “No, she needed my manly help to do the ceiling.”

“And watch what he did!” Laura Jean clapped her hands and white twinkling lights shimmered under the fabric. “Isn’t

it great?”

Simone arrived with a second tray, kissing Miranda on the cheek as she passed. “Samuel ran in, downed a can of coke, and then ran out again like a madman.”

“Ugh, he’ll never sleep tonight.”

“It’s good for him,” Josie said, hauling in more presents. “At home, he’s too serious, but the second we pull up to Haven House, he starts acting like a kid.”

“Wait until he sees the room we’re designing for him and Selah,” Laura Jean said. “It’s going to be amazing.”

Ben followed behind Josie. “For the last time, we’re not giving the boys a trampoline pit in their room.”

“How is the house planning going?” Miranda asked. “Surely, you’re almost done?”

Laura Jean squealed, and Ben rolled his eyes. “I’m so excited,” she said. “He’s building me an art studio in one of the turrets.”

Josie paused next to Miranda. “Did she say turret?”

“Yes, it has turrets,” Ben said, with much less enthusiasm than Laura Jean. “Like, as in what you would find in a damn castle.”

“We’re driving by this place on the way home,” Josie whispered in Miranda’s ear.

“For sure.”

Ben pulled Laura Jean over to him. “I have never had a build take this long. She’s driving my foreman insane.”

Stroking Ben’s beard, Laura Jean hopped up on her toes to kiss him. “I want everything to be perfect.”

“I know that, but the foreman doesn’t love you like I do, and you’re giving the poor man a drinking problem.”

Evie stuck her head in the room and turned a deep red when she spotted Miranda.

“Is Sammy here?”

Miranda shared a smile with Laura Jean. “Upstairs.”

“They’re going to give us some beautiful grandkids one day,” Laura Jean sighed when her daughter was gone. “Mark my words.”

Ben made a face. “You’re crazy, woman.”

“Speaking of crazy,” Josie said, fixing herself a plate of food. “Where are we with the kids?”

A crash above their heads had the silver and blue fabric on the ceiling shaking. The noise was accompanied by yelling, and the men excused themselves to check on the children.

“We’ve decided it’s time for public school, and will start them next fall,” Simone replied, making her own plate. “Selah and Livy need social interaction outside of the house.”

“Evie will do fine in a school setting,” Laura Jean added. “And Devon said there are some new programs coming to the Port Michaelson school district that could help Toby.”

“Has he made any progress since seeing the therapist?”  
Miranda asked.

“The bed wetting is getting better, but he’s taken to speaking only when absolutely necessary, or making Evie do it for him. It’s a constant battle to get him not to rely on her so much,” Laura Jean replied, stealing a carrot off Simone’s plate. “We met with the therapist last week, and while she’s seeing positive behavioral improvements in his sessions, she’s concluded that many of his issues are more self-inflicted.”

“Do you agree?”

“Simone and I discussed it at length, and yes, some of the more... problematic things Toby does are of his own choosing,” she said. “We’ve increased his therapy to four times a week, and Devon is working with him every day.”

“What about CeCe and the twins?” Josie looked up as the racket over their head continued. “Are they ready for school?”

Simone smiled. “Abe is excited, and my girls tell me they’re more than ready for big kid school. They’ve planned out their wardrobe at least a hundred times.”

“Tell us about Becca,” Miranda said, hoping to hear something positive on that front. “How is she?”

Laura Jean went to the door, peeking out into the hall to make sure no one was listening. “Not good,” she answered, once she saw the coast was clear. “Viv kicked Charlie out, and he’s been living in the cottage these past two months. He’s gambling again, losing something like two hundred thousand a



night. Ben had to divert his allowance straight to Vivian, allocating only a small amount to Charlie.”

God, poor Vivian. That woman had been through hell with Charlie. Miranda had always thought she was a good person, and never deserved to be saddled with such a piece of shit husband.

“Ben doesn’t have much longer before his buyout is complete, now that my dad’s shares are safe in Samuel’s trust,” Miranda said. “When it’s truly over, Charlie’s allowance can go to Rebecca and the kids where it belongs.”

Simone shook her head. “Ben won’t give Rebecca a dime. She’s too far gone.”

“Is she really that bad?”

“Every time we see her, she looks dirty, with weird sores all over her skin,” Laura Jean said. “I don’t know if she’s sick, or if all the stuff she’s putting in her body is doing that to her, but it’s bad.”

“A silver lining is that she and Charlie are gone most of the time,” Simone said. “They’re friends with some people who live in a huge house on the other side of Port Michaelson, and go to nightly poker tournaments for big players with deep pockets.”

“Do either of them have anything to do with the kids?” Josie asked.

“Sometimes she tries,” Laura Jean said, sadly. “Livy is still her favorite, but she doesn’t have the patience for Toby or

CeCe.”

Josie bit into one of Simone’s famous mini quiches, chewing it as she thought. “Has anyone considered what will happen to the children once the buyout is complete?”

Miranda’s heart sank. “I wouldn’t be surprised if they took off with them, hoping to get cash out of Ben when he’s no longer obligated to support them.”

“I’ve discussed that possibility with him, and, for my sake, he’s willing to try,” Laura Jean said. “When it’s time, we’re going to propose rehab to Rebecca, and if she gets clean, we’ll set her and the kids up in a place without Charlie.”

“That’s a good plan,” Josie said. “But what will happen in the meantime? You’re moving out of Haven in a few months.”

“I’m planning on taking Toby with us,” Laura Jean said

Simone nodded. “And I’ll keep the girls at Haven with me.”

Josie nudged Miranda. They’d already figured things would go this way and wanted to help. “Let us take Livy. She and Samuel get along great, and having her around would be good for him.”

“We could enroll her at Samuel’s school under the guise that she’s my daughter,” Josie said. “The people there think I’m his aunt, so it won’t come off weird if the kids let it slip that they’re cousins.”

Laura Jean smiled, her eyes sparkling as bright as the decorations. “Livy would handle a private school education

well,” she agreed. “Let me talk to Ben, but I think you’re onto something.”

“That leaves the children split three ways,” Simone said. “It’ll be hard on them, but it’ll certainly cut the parenting burden down until Rebecca is better.”

Miranda clapped her hands, excited. She’d always wanted more children, and Livy was a sweet girl who would be a wonderful addition to their family.

Above them, what sounded like a pack of elephants stormed about on the second floor, the noise then carrying down the stairs. The women ran into the hall to see Ben lugging Samuel by the arm towards the parlor.

“Do not move,” Ben ordered, dropping the boy in a chair just inside the parlor door.

Miranda hurried to her son, examining the bruise growing under his left eye as Ben rushed back upstairs.

“Samuel Alexander Fairweather,” Simone addressed him in a tone no child dare ignore. “Start talking.”

He straightened his glasses, which were hanging askew on his face. “I thought I heard Jamison crying and went to check on her, but she wasn’t the one making the noise. It was Toby in the corner of the nursery with Evie’s cat. He was hurting him, and Darcy was making these awful sounds.”

“What was he doing?” Laura Jean asked as if she already knew.

“Toby had his hands around Darcy’s throat, and was squeezing,” Samuel replied, mirroring the action. “Jamison was awake, and scared by the noise the cat was making, so I shouted for Selah and ran in to grab her.”

Heavy footsteps heralded the chaos that came down the stairs next. Evie led the charge, heading straight for Miranda. “Sammy didn’t do anything bad. Toby just doesn’t understand how to play with the cats.”

The other children exploded into the room, all shouting what they’d seen or heard. Ben and Devon took up the rear, with Devon dragging a thrashing Toby with him.

“Quiet!” Devon yelled over the pandemonium. He placed Toby in a chair, the boy’s enormous frame heaving with tears. “If you are not old enough to vote, leave the room.”

CeCe hurried over to Simone. “Am I old enough to vote?”

“No, ma’am, you are not.”

“Are you?”

“Unfortunately.”

CeCe stomped her foot. “Well, I’m a CeCe too, so I get to stay.”

“Not this time.” Simone turned her towards the door. “Go with the rest of them.”

The children filed out, and Devon crouched down next to Toby. “Why does Samuel have a mark on his face?”

Toby didn't answer, his tears falling faster, and Samuel snorted. "Stop crying, you psycho."

"Watch your mouth," Ben snapped.

"He doesn't know how to hold her," Toby wailed. "He was going to hurt her."

"I was going to hurt her?" Samuel leaped to his feet. "You were the one trying to kill the dang cat in front of her."

"Language," Ben warned.

"I said dang, not damn," Samuel huffed at his father and for a split second, Miranda wondered if Ben ever felt as if he were looking into a mirror when dealing with their son. "Dang isn't a cuss word."

The muscle in Ben's jaw ticked. "Sit. Down."

Samuel flopped into the chair. "When I tried to get Jamison out of there, Toby went crazy. He jumped on my back, and I almost dropped her."

"You're mean," Toby screamed, struggling to stand. "She doesn't like you."

"She's my sister, not yours," Samuel yelled back. "And I am not mean."

Devon calmly restrained Toby with a hand on his shoulder. "Did you hit him?"

"No!"

Samuel rolled his eyes. "Liar."

"Did you hit him back, Samuel?" Ben asked.

Toby was big for his age, but Samuel was much stronger. If her son had struck, Miranda was sure the boy would show much more damage than a few tears.

“I don’t go after things weaker than me.”

“I’m not weak,” Toby said, his voice shaking. “And I’m not a freak.”

Laura Jean went to Toby and whispered something to him. Taking his hand, she helped him stand. “Toby and I are going to have some quiet time in the library,” she said, leading him from the room. “We want to have a nice day, so we need to all decompress.”

Hanging his head, Toby went with her, but when they neared Samuel, his chubby face twisted in rage.

“I hate you!”

Toby lunged, and the boys fell to the floor, rolling towards Miranda as they wrestled.

Hardly registering the hits Toby landed, Samuel deftly flipped the younger boy over, pressing his face into the carpet.

“What are you going to do?” Samuel taunted, securing Toby’s hands behind his back. “You can’t win against me, you big freaking psycho.”

Ben and Devon scrambled to pull Samuel off, but just then Evie opened the parlor door. “Leave him alone!” she screamed, charging into the fray to punch Samuel square in the stomach.

With the wind knocked out of him, Samuel wheezed, falling back onto the floor. “He was trying to kill your cat!”

“Enough!” Ben hauled the boys up by their arms, his parenting limits reached. “It’s fucking Christmas!”

The commotion brought the other children in, and the battle lines were drawn. Abe stood with Samuel, hollering at Evie that Toby deserved what he got. Livy joined them, with Jamison on her hip, while CeCe and Annabeth sided with Evie. Selah remained neutral, planting himself between Samuel and Toby.

Ty came in from outside, eyes wide at the scene. “What in the ever-loving hell is happening?”

“Quiet!” Ben roared, and to Miranda’s surprise, the children ignored him.

Simone darted forward, yanking Abe out of the mix. She went back in for Annabeth and CeCe, but Devon got there first, moving the girls out of the way while Laura Jean took Jamison from Livy.

Evie jabbed Samuel in the chest with a finger. “You’re a meanie, Samuel Fairweather.”

“And you’re a butthead, Evangeline.”

Toby went into a rage at Samuel’s insult, tackling him into the wall. Samuel didn’t hold back this time, and it took Ben, Devon, and Ty to pull the boys apart.

When it was over, Josie collapsed onto the couch. “Merry Christmas,” she whooped. “When are we opening the

presents?”



## CHAPTER 47

# *Evie*

**S**amuel straightened his tie and started the car. “We need to set some ground rules.”

Evie ignored him, arms crossed, eyes forward.

“Please don’t pout. It does things to me.” He pulled out onto the highway and laid a hand on her leg. “And I have a meeting getting ready to start.”

She lifted his hand by a finger, tossing it from her lap. “You’re the one that went all neanderthal when Lucas called.”

“And you enjoyed it.”

“Immensely,” she acknowledged, with her nose in the air. “But the next time I want to reciprocate, I suggest you allow it, or else I might not offer again.”

“We have tonight.”

“I’m sleeping tonight,” she said. “Alone. In my bed.”

“Not happening.” His hand returned to her leg. “Tell me about what went on yesterday.”

Evie's eyes cut to him. "You're going to have to narrow that down, Samuel," she said dryly. "Yesterday was kind of a big day for me."

He grinned, pleased with himself, and she knocked his hand away again. "You mentioned something about the files you were working on being a mess."

"I love how totally unapologetic you are over giving us reconciled accounts."

"Sorry?"

She scoffed at the awkward way the word came out of his mouth. "That was hard, wasn't it?"

"It was," he admitted. "Now, tell me about the accounts."

"There was an allocation of funds from the Firewater account, earmarked to flow into a Texas account, but the figures were off, with only a partial amount distributing correctly."

"Off by how much?"

"Over the two-week time period, we covered around five hundred thousand."

"Did you find out where the funds were sent, or are they holding in the Firewater account?"

"Micah and I searched for a good while, and the funds weren't anywhere in the Firewater asset accounts we have access to," she said. "He took some of the work home to keep looking and sent me an email explaining what he'd found."

“What did the email say?”

“I have no idea.” Evie dug around on the floor for her phone. “Work wasn’t exactly my top priority last night.”

Finding the phone, she continued to search the floorboards. “Where the hell is my underwear?”

Samuel grinned, his eyes on the road. “Don’t worry about it.”

Giving up, Evie read through all the messages Micah sent overnight. “He said he found more dates, all of them with the half a million dollar transfers from Firewater’s account going elsewhere, leaving the Texas accounts short.”

“Those funds were to be used in the land purchase my dad went to Texas to deal with. The deal requires an exorbitant amount of accessible cash flow.”

Evie frowned at her screen. “Micah said the money filters into four different sub-accounts and sits for exactly eight days. From there, the funds are moved over into another account for someone named Darien.”

Samuel burst into laughter, startling her. “That damn bitch.”

“Who’s Darien?”

“Darien isn’t a person, it’s a place,” he replied. “It’s the name of a town off the coast of Georgia. Fairweather purchased the surrounding area to develop into a luxury resort community, but my dad left the project purposely underfunded until I decided whether I wanted to take it on.”

He hit a button on his steering wheel and called Nari, telling her to cancel his meeting.

“When the last phase of Firewater is complete, I need to figure out where I’m headed next,” he said to Evie when he hung up. “Normally, I don’t have to be onsite, but the Georgia project appeals to me, and if I went in during the initial planning phase, it would solely be mine.”

Distracted by the thought of him leaving, she didn’t realize his hand had returned to her lap. “I think you’ll find the area to be a nice place to settle down,” he said, fingertips tracing over his mark. “Maybe we’ll take a drive soon, and you can see it.”

Evie turned in her seat to face him, hoping she wouldn’t spontaneously combust over what he was implying. “I’d like that.”

“Redistributing from the Firewater account would require upper level access held by less than a dozen people,” he continued. “I’m not the only one who wants Darien. If it’s funded enough to commence with phase one while I’m stuck at Firewater, then control will go to someone else.”

“Who else wants it?”

“The amounts transferred are barely a quarter of Firewater’s monthly earnings. The totals are small enough to fly under the radar, especially if this person oversaw the account management.”

“So, someone from the North Carolina office.”

“Claudia.”

A vision of Claudia's smug face outside the bathroom at Firewater filled Evie's head. "That conniving witch!" she shouted. "She wouldn't dare."

Samuel drove through Fairweather's security checkpoint, waving to the guard as they passed. "Oh, she would, but if I have unequivocal proof that she's behind this, she'll never have a shot at Darien."

Evie pounded a fist into her palm. "We're taking that bitch down."

"Hell yeah, we are."

## CHAPTER 48

# *Evie*

**E**vie hustled into the Fairweather office she shared with Micah, out of breath from running nearly the whole way. “We need to talk.”

From his chair, Micah looked her over with concern. “Are you okay?”

“I need to see everything you found regarding the Darien account,” she said, shutting the door.

“So, you did read my emails.” He went back to working on his laptop. “I wasn’t sure since you never replied.”

“Sorry, I was too busy having copious amounts of sex last night to pay attention to emails.”

Micah swiveled back around in his chair, nearly tipping over. “Excuse me?”

“I even made it to the finish line.” She snatched his coffee from him. “Eight times if we include the one in the woods.”

“What woods?” he asked at a near shout.

She held up a finger, guzzling the caffeine. “And the car this morning.”

“What in the hell is happening?!”

Evie hauled him up and out of the way to see the spreadsheet he had open on the screen. “I mean, I’m glad you and Lucas are back together,” he said. “But can’t he fuck you in a bed like a normal person?”

“Oh, we did that too, but it wasn’t Lucas.”

With a gasp, Micah kneeled next to her. “I beg your pardon?”

“It was Samuel Fairweather.”

A noise resembling a dying chicken came out of him. “You had sex with Samuel Fairweather?” Micah’s butt hit the ground with a thud. “Holy Mary, Mother of God. Sweet baby Jesus, beloved in the heavens.”

“That’s a lot of religious imagery.”

Micah clutched his chest as if he were having a heart attack. “Well, maybe we need to pray, Evie,” he squawked. “Or have a seance, or whatever, because we should thank whoever blessed you.”

“It was definitely spiritual.” She spun in the chair to face him. “But there’s more to this story, and before I tell you, I want you to know that I love you. You’re one of my best friends, and I didn’t keep this from you on purpose. It’s just how I am.”

Micah regained control of himself by swiping a hand over his face. “Whatever it is, you can tell me.”

And she did. She told him everything.

Well, almost everything.

Some parts of the story were still too hard to say out loud. Wanting to talk about the past with Simone was one thing, but to speak freely of it with a person who wasn't there, nor would understand, wasn't something she could do just yet.

“And my relationship with Samuel is a secret because of Jamison and Ben. They would freak if they found out.”

“Let me get this straight in my head.” Micah stood, dusting off his pants. “You had sex last night with Samuel Fairweather, who gave you eight orgasms. But you're also the daughter of his father's ex-fiancée, and you two share a sibling, the fabulous Jamison, whom I adore.”

“That's right.”

“And you live in a house with your aunt, who is not really your aunt, but your deceased mother's fiancé's ex-girlfriend, who has a child with him as well.”

“It's so bad, isn't it?”

“It's definitely Lifetime Original Movie worthy.” Micah pulled over a chair to sit. “Is the agoraphobia thing with Annabeth real, or just a lie to keep me from meeting her?”

“That's very real,” she replied. “And you might see Abe hanging around the office. He deals with the landscaping for



Firewater.”

“You mean the hot guy in the wheelchair Mia went after this morning is your not-cousin?”

She nodded, making a mental note to tell Abe not to sleep with her coworkers. “But to top it all off, this FBI agent shows up on Monday and says he’s looking into some murders that might involve us.”

Micah’s face scrunched in disbelief. “What?”

“And I think Jamison has the hots for him.”

“This is most definitely a Lifetime Original Movie,” he mumbled, taking his coffee back from her. “The Hallmark Channel would never touch it.”

“And now we have Darien to deal with.”

“Yeah, who is this guy stealing all the money?” Micah scooted next to her to share the screen. “As of this morning, I’m up to five months of transfers from Firewater, but when I dipped directly into the Darien account, I found other lines within the company feeding it. I can’t tell from where, our access doesn’t cover it, but they’ve been depositing into Darien for a longer period.”

“How much is in the Darien account?”

“Three hundred million.”

Evie stopped reading. “Fairweather Holdings has three hundred million in profit allocated incorrectly and no one noticed?”

“The money is there, under the blanket of the company, but not where it needs to be, and red flags wouldn’t go up immediately.”

She’d always understood Ben’s wealth was substantial, but the full scope of it hadn’t struck her until this moment. “That’s insane.”

Micah snorted. “Three hundred million is a drop in the bucket here, and if I’d known you were one of them, I would’ve made you pay for lunch more often.”

Her phone buzzed with a message. “Samuel wants us in his office for a meeting in an hour. We need to email him what you’ve found so far,” she said, reading the text. “If he’s right about who’s behind these transfers, it means we’re going to take down the biggest, baddest, most evil bitch on the planet.”

Micah shoved her aside. “Well, then get out of my way, and let me do my thing.”

They worked silently, side by side, and a few minutes before they were to leave, a gorgeous redhead knocked on the door. “My name is Taylor, and I’m one of Mr. Samuel Fairweather’s assistants,” she said, holding up a badge like the one Evie wore. “This is an updated pass for Micah Oliver.”

Micah ignored her, typing at a furious pace, and Evie stepped forward to take the badge. The woman’s freckled face lit up with a dazzling smile. “It’s so lovely to finally meet you, Ms. Eddins.”

“Erm, thanks.”

“I’ll see you upstairs.”

Evie thanked her again and closed the door.

“I’ve copied you on everything I sent to lover boy,” Micah said with a final stab at his keyboard. “Review it, so you’re prepared.”

Sitting at her desk, Evie marveled at the thorough report. “You’re so amazing.”

Micah stood, offering her his arm. “Yeah, I am.”

But as they rode the elevator to the executive floor, his confidence faltered. “What if I’m wrong?”

“You’re not wrong. We’re walking into a meeting where you’re going to be a superstar.”

The elevator doors opened on a waiting room with a large desk. A woman with a headset took their names, and seconds later, Taylor appeared from around a corner. She led them to an empty office with a desk and a handful of chairs.

“Mr. Fairweather will be in shortly.”

They sat facing the door, keeping the glass wall to their backs. “I’m so fucking nervous,” Micah whispered. “What if I throw up?”

“You won’t throw up,” Evie assured him, checking out the office. It was nearly barren except for the basics. “Samuel’s not as scary as he thinks he is.”

Micah frowned. “You mean, he’s not as scary as I think he is?”

“No, I meant what I said.”

After a few minutes, the door opened, and Samuel came in with Gabriel. “Have you found anything else?”

“Yes.” Micah fumbled briefly with his papers before passing a sheet to them. “That’s the full list for the last ten months. You can see the transfers start small, but grow steadily.”

Samuel propped a hip on the desk, with Gabriel looking over his shoulder.

“That harpy has got some balls,” Gabriel said, impressed. “Well done, Infamous Evie.”

Evie held up her hands. “I did nothing. This is all Micah’s work.”

Handing the sheet to Gabe, Samuel came over to shake Micah’s hand and make introductions. “Our teams wouldn’t have touched those reconciled files for months.”

“Reconciled?” Micah frowned, confused. “Someone overlooked this by accident?”

“Not by accident.” Gabriel came over and took a seat next to them. “It seems we have a very naughty girl on our hands.”

“I still can’t believe you dated Claudia,” Evie said.

“Ah, the thing of it is, I have a weak spot for naughty girls.” Gabriel’s gaze slid briefly to Micah. “And boys.”

Micah audibly gulped, and Evie thought she might have too. Annabeth really needed to meet this guy.

Another man entered, looking so very out of place just as he did yesterday. “Rowan, this is Micah Oliver. The man who discovered Claudia’s scheme,” Samuel said. “And you know Evie.”

Rowan was as tall as Samuel, with a partially shaved head on one side, and long inky black hair on the other. The tattoos on his muscled arms flexed under her observation, and he grinned when he caught her staring.

Evie shook his hand. “We’ve never met.”

Blue eyes, full of mischief, cut to Samuel. “I work IT for Fairweather, and handle things of a personal nature for the family,” he explained. “Like erasing security footage that should remain private.”

Her face heated with embarrassment. “I see.”

Rowan sat next to Gabriel. “I certainly did.”

“What did you see?” Gabriel asked in an exaggerated whisper.

“Well, a moment ago, I saw a beautiful woman watering plants on the porch in her robe,” Rowan answered, tapping on the tablet in his hand. “She does it twice a day with a bunch of cats following her around.”

“She’s only wearing a robe?” Gabriel tried to take his tablet. “Give it to me.”

Evie texted Annabeth discreetly, while Rowan wrestled Gabriel off him.

*Wear sexy clothes when watering plants. Trust me.*

Ben swept in, sitting behind the desk, his anger radiating through the room. “Let me hear it.”

Samuel brought the file to his father. “You’re up, Micah.”

Micah stood and gave Ben the blow-by-blow of what had transpired right under their noses. Evie listened, beaming proudly as he hit every point, painting an undeniable picture of Claudia’s deceit.

“Handle it,” Ben told Samuel, rising to leave. “If I get involved, it’ll end badly.”

“Are you calling Trevor?”

“On my way to do just that.” Ben paused in the doorway, nodding in her direction. “And make sure Claudia knows Evie was involved in the discovery.”

Rowan chuckled softly when Ben was gone. “Your father’s sense of humor never fails to surprise me.”

Samuel sat behind the desk. “At least he has a sense of humor, unlike yours.”

“How true,” Rowan replied, engrossed in the screen before him. “If you’d like to get this over with, Claudia is back in Charlotte and currently working at her computer.”

“Call her,” Gabriel urged, excited. “I don’t want to miss this.”

Samuel pressed a button on the desk phone. “Nari, get me Claudia.”

Evie held her breath as they waited. Both she and Micah on edge.

“I’ve been told she’s unavailable, sir.”

“Call her back and send it directly to me.”

“Yes, sir.”

Micah shifted, leaning forward, his arms resting on his knees. “She knows,” he said, gaining the room’s attention. “When I logged in late last night, another user was accessing the account. She would have seen me snooping around.”

The phone on the desk rang, and Samuel answered it with the touch of a button. “I’m sorry, Nari, but I already told you, Ms. Fairweather is unavailable at the moment,” a woman’s annoyed voice came through the speaker. “He’ll have to try her again later.”

“Make her available.”

The woman on the line sucked in a sharp breath. “Yes, sir.”

They didn’t have to wait long. “What do you want?”

Samuel reclined in the chair, steepling his fingers. “You must enjoy painting yourself into a corner. First, there was the Houston thing, and then more recently, you got yourself banned from anything related to Firewater, and now this new bullshit with the Georgia venture. Soon, the only division that’ll welcome you will be the Lauderdale offices.”

“Or was that your plan all along?” Gabriel asked, as if having an epiphany. “Fuck up enough, so they’ll send you to

me?”

“What are you talking about?” Claudia snarled.

Samuel inclined his dark head at Rowan. “I brought in a local third party to audit some of the Firewater accounts that were reconciled under your supervision, and they discovered something interesting. Look at your screen and you’ll see a report revealing how you’ve drained earnings from multiple projects, including the current Texas purchase, to build up Darien.”

Claudia laughed viciously. “You know the local workforce there is shit. If they’re any good, we already own them. These people obviously made a mistake.”

“There’s no mistake, and I trust them completely,” Samuel replied, grinning at how flustered his cousin sounded. “But who we used doesn’t change what you’ve done.”

“Oh, fuck off, you pretentious asshole. Hiring third party contracts requires approval from both Ben and my father, but nothing from the Florida office has come through recently. Who are these people?”

It was a horribly petty thing, but Evie agreed with Ben, wanting Claudia to know she was playing witness to her downfall. She would let Micah take the credit in the long run, but this moment... it was hers.

Claudia was the type of individual who thrived off the pain of others, using it as entertainment. And it was past time someone put her in her place.



Rising from her chair, Evie went to stand by Samuel, placing a hand on his shoulder. His lips curved in approval, and out of sight from the others, he lightly stroked the back of her leg as she leaned forward to speak directly into the phone's speaker.

“Hello, Claudia.”

## CHAPTER 49

# *Evie*

**M**icah raised his oversized margarita, aptly named the Fishbowl, in the air for a toast. “To us.”

“To you.” Evie clinked her glass with his. “Micah, the superstar.”

The outdoor boardwalk restaurant in Port Michaelson was the ideal location for their celebratory lunch. The breeze was cool, the gulf waves were low, and the sun was high in the sky. Tilting her head back, Evie closed her eyes, soaking in their triumph.

“That woman was crazy,” Micah said, slurping down the remains of his drink. “Like certifiable.”

Samuel had granted Claudia one last shot at redemption, but when she failed, he revoked her access to all Fairweather accounts until further notice. He was also set on launching a memo to every employee, informing them of his decision, and basically letting the entire company know that her own family didn’t trust her.

Claudia hung up then, presumably running off to daddy. Samuel thanked Rowan, sending him out with Gabe, so he could speak with her and Micah privately.

“That was a hell of a find,” Samuel started off, addressing Micah. “I understand that you’ve had no training, nor hold any certifications, and yet you found something like this.”

“It’s not that I haven’t tried to gain an education in my field, but money is tight. There’s a scholarship program through Applebaum, but I’ve never made the cut.”

“We don’t have anything like that here at Fairweather, however maybe we should.” Samuel gave him a tight smile. “After what you’ve done for us, I think the least we can do is offer you a job, and an education to go with it.”

Stunned, Micah stared down at the floor. “Are you only offering me this because of Evie?”

“While keeping Evangeline happy is a goal of mine, the answer is no,” Samuel replied, amused at his bold assumption. “Your talent shouldn’t go to waste working at Applebaum.”

Micah shifted uncomfortably, scared to take the risk. “They’ve been good to me.”

“They could have been better,” Samuel stated plainly. “I’m assuming the pay you receive isn’t adequate enough to care for those that depend on you.”

Micah nodded, getting emotional. “I also work weekends to help us get by.”

“We’ll double the amount of your current salary, and pay for the classes needed to further your career. Once those are complete, I’ll bring you on full time with a renegotiated salary.”

Evie came around to face her friend. “You’ve earned this.”

Composing himself, Micah straightened his spine and nodded at Samuel. “When do I start?”

Enjoying the win, Samuel shook his hand. “Take a long weekend, and we’ll see you on Monday,” he said just as Ben returned.

Samuel and his father discussed of all that had transpired with Claudia, while Micah and Evie sat quietly listening.

“And I’m guessing Micah took the offer,” Ben said when Samuel finished speaking.

“He starts on Monday.”

“Good.” Ben’s gaze landed on Evie. “What about you, kid?”

She grinned, knowing damn well what he was getting at. “What about me?”

“Any interest in coming to work for Fairweather?”

“I’m fine where I am.”

Micah poked her leg. “Uh, we’re a team, and I’m not accepting the position if you don’t come with it.”

“But I don’t like corporate.”

“Fine, we’ll stay at Applebaum,” Micah huffed. “I’ll spend the rest of my life taking coffee orders because you don’t like

corporate. I hope my crushed dreams will go with that fancy creamer you drink.”

Ben laughed and headed for the door. “Make sure Micah gets a sign-on bonus, and if he lands us Evie, double it.”

Micah gasped, and when Ben was out the door, grabbed Evie by the shoulders. “Say yes.”

Nari’s voice came through the desk phone then, alerting Samuel he was late for something. “Micah, can you give Evie and I a minute?”

Stepping into the hall, to give them privacy, Micah closed the door on the way out. “I’m sure I can create a benefits package to your liking,” Samuel said, once they were alone. “We can include mandatory carpooling in it.”

Evie would never say no to that. “Do I get a sign-on bonus too?”

“You can have whatever you want, Evangeline.”

“Well, who can say no to that?” She took a step towards him, and he stiffened. “Are you alright?”

“It’s incredibly hard not to touch you.”

Taking pity on him, she remained where she was. “Micah and I are taking the rest of the day off to celebrate.”

“Where are you going?”

“I was thinking lunch over at Port Michaelson’s boardwalk sounded good.”

“Stay with Micah at all times, be aware of your surroundings, and, for the love of God, keep your phone on,” he said. “My dad has a dinner meeting and will leave the office by four, so have Micah bring you to me after that.”

“Oh, that gives me time to do some shopping down on the boardwalk, and I hear there’s a new lingerie store that’s opened,” she said, placing her hands on her hips. “And since I seem to keep misplacing my underwear, I guess I’ll need to pick up a few pairs.”

His eyes darkened. “If you insist on wearing them, make sure they’re black.”

“Yes, sir.”

Samuel looked up at the ceiling with a groan. “I’m never going to survive this.”

Evie grinned. “Don’t forget that me, and my new black underwear, will be sleeping in my bed tonight.”

“I know.”

“Alone.”

“Alone with me,” he stated. “Now go, enjoy your afternoon.”

And enjoying the afternoon was precisely what she and Micah were doing. “After this, I want to go shopping on the boardwalk. A new job means a new wardrobe.”

“Sounds good,” he said, running a finger through the salt on the rim of his glass. “But only if you let me pick out what you

buy. The outfits you got at that little downtown boutique the other day is a good start to amping up your wardrobe, but you still need help.”

“Did you see those women Samuel is around all day?” Evie punched at the gummy fish floating in the margarita with her straw. “I’ve got to keep his attention.”

“Honey, that man spent half the meeting fucking you in his head,” Micah snorted. “You don’t need to worry about other women.”

“I don’t know,” she mumbled. “Taylor looks like a supermodel who jets off to spend weekends in Paris, while I look like the wallpaper that’s been hanging in your Nana’s bathroom for the last four decades.”

Micah scrunched his face. “That brown dress suit you always wear does need to die.”

“Annabeth threatened to have a bonfire and burn it in the yard once.”

“I’ll bring the matches,” he said, signaling the server for the bill. “Drink up, so we can spend money we haven’t earned yet.”

They shopped for a few hours, with Samuel texting and calling throughout the day. “Yeah, you should totally be worried about keeping his attention,” Micah teased her. “The man is obsessed.”

Micah drove them to the Fairweather offices when it approached four o’clock, escorting her to the top floor. “Text

me tomorrow,” he said, kissing her cheek goodbye when they reached the receptionist’s desk on Samuel’s floor. “I want to hear about his reaction to the stuff you bought. That outfit is amazing.”

“I wouldn’t call it an outfit,” she said, peeking into the enormous shopping bag from the lingerie store. “It’s more like a few pieces of sheer material stitched together.”

“Make sure he knows I helped pick it out.” Micah stepped onto the elevator, wiggling his eyebrows. “Maybe he’ll triple my sign-on bonus as a thank you.”

Wandering through the quiet, empty halls, Evie breathed out a sigh of relief when she found Taylor. “Did you have a pleasant afternoon, Ms. Eddins?”

“Please call me Evie, and yes, I did,” she answered, holding up the shopping bags as proof. “I’m trying to find Samuel’s office. Is it the one we were in earlier?”

“No, his is next door. Take the hallway to your left, and it’s the last door on the right.”

“It’s so quiet,” Evie said, noticing the darkened offices. “Has everyone left?”

“Yes, work ends early around here when it can,” Taylor explained. “There are some days where we don’t leave until well after midnight.”

“Good to know.”

Evie said goodnight and made her way to Samuel’s door. The overabundance of bags in her hands didn’t allow her to



knock, but she could wiggle the handle enough to push it open.

Like the others on the floor, the office was dark, except for a single light illuminating the drafting board where Samuel worked. With his jacket removed, and his sleeves rolled up, he talked on the phone while the pencil in his hand scratched at the paper in front of him.

Placing her purchases on a chair by the door, Evie stealthily traversed the room filled with insurmountable amounts of clutter. Stacks of files and blueprints made for an interesting gauntlet through the disorganization that was so unlike him.

“I’ll see you tomorrow at eight,” he said, speaking to the person on the phone. “Be prepared to listen.”

He hung up and dragged a hand through his hair, causing it to stick up with the other loose strands.

“Everything okay?”

The tension in his shoulders eased, and he spun on the stool towards her. “Come here.”

Hurrying to him through the chaos as best she could, Evie’s lips found his the second she reached him, and they kissed as if they’d been apart for days and not mere hours. “Mmm, you taste like sunshine,” he whispered, his tongue dipping in for more. “And.... tequila?”

“I had a margarita.” Facing the drafting board, she looked over the designs he’d been working on. “Are these for Firewater?”

Samuel swiped her hair to one side, running his lips along her neck. "It's the fourth set of plans."

"They're all different," she said, lifting a hand to toy with his hair while she flipped through the drawings. "I thought you were ready to break ground?"

"Something's still missing."

"I like the second one the best." She plucked a handful of barely used colored pencils from a cup at the top of the board. "But you need some color."

He laid his chin on her shoulder, watching as she shaded in the sketch. "Do you remember how you would color in my drawings when we were kids? It used to drive me insane."

"Life is better in color." She finished and held up the paper. "Perfect."

"That's pretty good."

Setting the sketch down, she turned to him. "We make a good team."

"Yeah, we do." He gripped her hips, hauling her closer. "How was shopping?"

"I bought some black items, per your request."

The hands at her waist slipped lower, bringing her flush against him. "Are you wearing some now?"

"No, Mr. Fairweather." Evie arched up to hover her lips over his. "I'm as bare as you left me this morning."

In one swift move, Samuel hoisted her in his arms, kissing her senseless as she wrapped her legs around him. “Lady’s choice, couch or desk?”

“Couch,” she panted, loosening his tie. “Then desk.”

Samuel dropped them onto a small sofa in the corner, straddling her across his lap.

The pencil skirt she wore was too tight to hike up, and she stood. “I’ll unzip it,” she said, but an idea came to her, and she paused. “Or would you rather I get on my knees?”

Samuel’s chest rose and fell with heavy breaths. “Seriously, *are* you trying to kill me?”

She lowered to the ground, coming to rest between his thighs. “I bought so many things to wear for you,” she whispered, undoing his belt buckle. “And not just in black. I have purple, blue, and my favorite, hot pink.”

Samuel’s head fell back, his eyes closing. “You are most definitely trying to kill me.”

Light suddenly flooded the room, and Evie scrambled to stand, but in the process, she tripped, bumping into a stack of files that fell like dominos. Samuel snapped to his feet, steadying her before she did any more damage.

Standing in the doorway, with his hand hovering over the light switch, Ben gaped at them in horror. “What in the hell am I looking at?”

Straightening her clothing, Evie remained quiet. Telling Ben was never going to be easy, but him finding them like this was

so much worse.

“I thought you had a meeting,” Samuel said.

“I canceled it.”

Samuel fastened his belt. “We were going to talk to you this weekend.”

“This weekend?” The shock was slowly wearing off, and Ben stared at the two of them in disbelief. “How long has this been going on?”

“A few days,” Evie answered, finding her voice, but Samuel spoke at the same time.

“A few years.”

The vein in Ben’s forehead pulsed ominously. “Which is it?”

“Emotionally, or physically?” Samuel asked. Evie pinched his arm, and he gave her a lopsided grin. “What? It’s a legitimate question.”

“Will you please be serious?” she hissed. “This is not funny.”

“It is kind of funny.” Samuel took her hand. “And it’s going to be okay.”

Ben’s hands fisted at his sides, listening to them. “Fucking hell, are you two sleeping together?”

Completely unperturbed by his father’s anger, Samuel shrugged. “And if we are?”

Evie was going to kill him if Ben didn't do it first. In his mind, Samuel probably thought the hard part was over, while in hers, it had only just begun.

“What he means to say is this thing between us started a long time ago, but we never acted on it,” she tried to explain. “However, we're adults now, and felt the time was right.”

“Do you know how this looks?” Ben fumed at his son. “What in the hell were you thinking?”

Recoiling, Evie struggled not to let the bitter disapproval in Ben's voice crack at the pedestal he'd lived on in her mind since she was a girl.

Samuel didn't care for his father's tone either. “I was thinking it was about time I took what I wanted.”

“But did it have to be her?”

Samuel gathered her close, tucking Evie at his side. “It was always going to be her.”

The words tugged at the very marrow of Evie's bones, and she relaxed in her place, secure in the fact she was where she was meant to be. “And it was always going to be him for me.”

Ben shook his head furiously. “This will never work. You're both too strong willed and more alike than you think. Laura Jean and I—”

“We're not you and Laura Jean,” Samuel cut him off gently. “But that doesn't make what we have any less extraordinary.”

Extraordinary.

Samuel thought they were extraordinary.

Tears blurred her vision, and Evie had to look away. They would get through this thing with Ben together, but there was no guarantee that she wouldn't become a mess before the end of it.

“What about Jamison?” Ben asked, still attempting to reason with them. “How do you think she's going to take this?”

“We've no interest in hiding and are planning on speaking with her soon,” Samuel replied. “Most everyone knows anyway.”

Ben didn't take that bit of news well. “Are you saying I'm the last to know?”

“It's more like you were the last to pay attention. No one told you because we thought you would be upset.”

“Why would everyone think it would upset me?” Ben shouted, rounding on his son. “Keeping secrets from me, that upsets me. You two feeling like you needed to hide, upsets me. This is us, not the outside world. We don't fucking hide from the hard stuff anymore, remember?”

“Look at how you're reacting,” Samuel pointed out. “Do you think this behavior shows us you could ever accept what we are?”

“I'm acting this way because I love you both, but you two could seriously damage one another,” Ben said. “I know you

think what's happening here is special, but it won't last, and when it's over, there'll be nothing but suffering."

His composure gone, Samuel yanked Evie behind him. "I am tired of measuring life by the moments of pain we've endured," he seethed. "We walked into this knowing you might not accept it, but we did it anyway because it meant everything."

Evie laid a hand on the center of Samuel's back, hoping the insignificant gesture was enough to let him know she felt the same. That what they had was worth this walk through fire with Ben and later Jamison.

Reaching around, he took her hand in his, bringing it to rest on the erratic thump of his heart. "I'm not giving her up," he went on, his voice raw with emotion. "Not for you, or anyone else."

That did it.

Evie went from quietly crying to a loud hysterical mess in seconds, and wrapped her free arm around Samuel's waist, clasping him tightly while soaking the back of his shirt.

A minute went by, and then another, with the only sound being her wet sniffles packing the silence.

"Does anyone want a drink?" Ben asked, exhaustion engraved on every word. "I think there's whiskey in the conference room."

The strain in Samuel's body lessened. "Bring the bottle."

"I'll be back."

The door closed, and Samuel twisted around, his mouth swooping down to capture hers. She yielded at the first touch, opening for him, giving him all.

“I meant it,” he breathed into her. “No in-between.”

The kiss turned desperate, neither of them able to get enough, but the door opened again, interrupting the moment.

Ben averted his eyes. “Christ, this is going to take some getting used to.”

They jerked apart, Evie in embarrassment and Samuel in irritation.

Ben motioned for them to sit on the couch. “You know, the last person to shock me this much was your mother.” He set three glasses on the desk and poured a generous helping in each. “Not many people can catch me off guard, but she did.”

Evie settled next to Samuel on the couch, taking a glass of whiskey from Ben. “Not to add to the strangeness of our situation, but can you narrow down which mother you’re referring to?”

Ben threw his head back and laughed as he sat on the edge of the desk. “Holy hell, this family is so very fucked up.” He took a second to take a hefty sip of his drink. “I was referring to Miranda, and when she told me about Josie. She also called me out on a few things regarding Laura Jean at the same time.”

Pulling her legs under her, she curled into Samuel, who rested a hand on her knee. “Was Miranda upset that you had



feelings for another woman?”

Ben regarded them over the rim of his glass, raising an eyebrow at Samuel touching her openly in front of him. “Yeah, this is definitely going to take some getting used to,” he mumbled, downing the rest of his whiskey in one gulp. “And no, Miranda wasn’t upset.”

“Mom basically told him to quit being a wimp and make his move,” Samuel said, smirking at his father being so very flustered by them. “But it took him another year to work up the nerve.”

“Laura Jean knew I was too nervous to make the first move, and she ended up having to be the one to do it, kissing me in the middle of a hurricane.” A faint smile touched Ben’s lips. “My girl never did things halfway.”

Something tickled Evie’s memory. “You were angry that she ran out in the storm to get my stuffed animal from the cottages.”

Ben nodded, his eyes meeting Samuel’s. “Hopper.”

Evie laid her head on Samuel’s shoulder, letting Ben understand she wasn’t scared to be open around him either. It would take time for him to ease into this. And probably more time for Jamison, once she learned the truth.

But that was the thing about time.

It passed quickly, killing off the memories of how things were in order to make room for the future and how things were going to be. In her heart, Evie had to believe that Ben and

Jamison's acceptance would come, and then she and Samuel could begin to live out their happily ever after.

With no more secrets to keep.

Breathing in the sense that everything was going to be alright, Evie smiled softly at Ben. "And you went after her," she said. "Right into the storm."

The everlasting pain Ben lived with flashed in his eyes. "Ah kid, I would've followed that woman anywhere."

## CHAPTER 50

# LIAM

**B**etty's taillights disappeared into the night and Liam slammed the townhouse door shut, ignoring the papers flapping about at his feet.

He dropped to the floor, sitting in the wreckage Jamison left in her departure. The great Dr. Cohen had said to rattle the cages of the Fairweathers, but in doing so, Liam had rattled his own.

After learning of Laura Jean and Devon's matching dates of death, he'd hung up with his father, only to have his phone ring seconds later with a call from Ben Fairweather himself.

"When it comes to my family, keeping me in the dark is the last thing you want to do," Ben said by way of greeting. "Frank Mathis is a good man, but you will speak to me directly from now on."

"How much do you know?"

"Four murders in Miami that could be connected."

"Did Mathis mention that the women were killed during the time frame Samuel worked in your Fort Lauderdale offices?"

Liam could almost feel Ben's outrage through the phone.  
"Are you saying that you think Samuel is involved?"

"I can't ignore the fact that he makes a compelling suspect," Liam replied. "And there's something else. Jamison came by yesterday and helped review some of the scenes out of Miami."

"I would appreciate it if you would refrain from indulging my daughter's fascination with this type of thing."

"Well, her fascination paid off. She found something. A stuffed kangaroo named Hopper, which she said belonged to Evie, is in one of the photos."

There was a long stretch of silence before Ben spoke again. "It was her father's," he said. "Albie was abandoned as a baby, left with nothing but a blanket and Hop. He kept it, giving the thing to Evie when she was born."

"It was found at the first set of murders in Miami."

Ben mumbled something under his breath. "There's no denying it then. It's connected to us."

"This is why Samuel's unhindered cooperation is important. Allow me to interview him, alone."

"He's in a meeting, but when it's finished, I'll have him call to set up a time."

"I'd appreciate that." Liam paused, thinking of the best way to approach his son's relationship with Evie. "Please express to him that I need total honesty during this interview. Nothing can be off-limits. I plan on getting personal."

“All of this is personal, Agent Cohen.”

Liam tried again. “What I’m saying is these crimes are of a sexual nature, and I’ll need to address his conduct with women.”

“Samuel doesn’t have a problem in that department.”

“And I’m going to cover his full relationship with Evie.”

“There’s not much to it,” Ben said, remaining oblivious. “They fight as siblings do.”

“But they’re *not* siblings.”

“Samuel would never hurt Evie.”

Liam gave up. “And in this interview, we need to prove it,” he said. “I’d also like the information regarding Hopper, and the developments coming out of Dade County withheld from Evie. If the information pushes her into a constant state of panic, it might tip off whoever is responsible, and things could escalate.”

“Escalate?”

“I think whoever is doing this has an endpoint in mind, and it may or may not involve her,” Liam told him. “On the night of the break-in, I don’t think she woke up randomly to find someone in her room. I think he wanted Evie to see him.”

Ben released an unsteady breath. “She’s left to have lunch with a friend.”

“As long as she’s with someone, and in public, I think everything will be fine. You can’t hide her away forever.”

“Like hell I can’t.”

That was a loaded remark, but Liam didn’t have the time or the patience to unwrap it. “Let me get through the interview with Samuel, and then the three of us will sit her down to talk.”

Once off the phone with Ben, he’d put a call into Jack Zimmerman’s office. “My father told me to expect your call,” Jack said. “What is it that I can help you with?”

Liam gave him the rundown, divulging just enough details to keep the man interested. “And as of yesterday, we’ve unearthed two other cases out of Dade that might be related.”

“We’ve had nothing like that here.”

“No, but there’s evidence that connects these murders to a prominent family in the area.”

“Which one?”

“The Fairweathers.”

Jack groaned. “Those aren’t people you want to go poking a stick at, Agent Cohen,” he said. “What do you need from me?”

“Two autopsy reports.”

“Can’t the county locals provide that?”

“The locals have been slow to provide access to the things I need to make this move quickly.”

Even if Jack Zimmerman wasn’t on the Fairweather payroll, he would still want him gone as soon as possible. Federal involvement wasn’t ideal for any local official. “Between you

and me, once those reports are in my hand, I'll probably close out the link here, and get back to Missouri."

"Give me the names and the DODs," Zimmerman said. "I'll see what I can do."

Liam provided him with the information, and when he hung up, spent the next few hours finishing his comparison analysis of the crime scenes. He kept returning to the positioning of the Fairweather possessions. They were placed in areas over or next to the bed, keeping watch as the massacres unfolded.

Rolling around the idea in his head, Liam shot off a text to Hawkins, who would be walking into the interview with their Missouri suspect right about then. But as he was typing, the phone rang with a call from another Fairweather.

"Is she in danger, Cohen?"

The fear in Samuel's voice was nearly choking him. How had he and Evie disguised what they were from their family for this long?

"I take it your father has told you about the latest developments."

"She's on her way back from Port Michaelson. I understand why you want to keep this quiet, but she's strong and won't fall apart. Evie needs to know."

"My team is interviewing a suspect currently being held in Missouri. Let's see what they turn up, and from there we'll work in a formal interview with you."

“I’m not waiting around on your bullshit. If you want to interview me, we can do it tonight.”

Liam wanted to see what Hawkins pulled out of the truck driver. If there was a line leading to Samuel, he didn’t want to walk into this without it.

“Tomorrow, eight o’clock, at your office.”

“The office has too many ears. I have nothing to hide from you, but there are things I’d like to keep private,” Samuel replied. “We can meet at my house.”

Not ideal, but it would work, and perhaps seeing inside his home would give Liam better insight into the man that was Samuel Fairweather. “No question can be off-limits.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow at eight. Be prepared to listen.”

After he got off the phone with Samuel, Liam had decided to walk to Ty’s place, and take him up on his offer to talk. But as he’d gathered his things to leave, there was a knock at the door.

“Dinner as promised,” Jamison said, holding a casserole dish. She pushed past him inside. “It’s early, I know, but I have an online class starting in an hour.”

He closed the door and leaned a shoulder on the wall, watching her move around the kitchen wearing a floral dress that hugged her curves and showed off those long legs that were becoming a danger to his sanity. “Thanks, but I was heading out to talk with Ty.”



“It’s Thursday,” she said, taking the lid off the casserole dish. “He and Dee go to the seafood buffet at their favorite restaurant in Port Michaelson, and won’t be back until late.”

Stretching up on her toes, she reached for some plates on a high shelf. The hem on the dress rode up, and Liam’s eyes devoured the sight.

He needed to get her out of there.

“Annabeth made enough for the two of us. That is if you want me to stay.”

What he wanted didn’t matter. “I’m sorry, but no. I have too much to do, and it seems I’ve wasted an entire day on the phone.”

She searched the drawers for utensils, ignoring him. “Speaking of talking on the phone, I spoke with my grandmother again. We discussed the possibility of Evie and I coming over for a visit.”

Some of the sauce from the casserole got on her fingers as she served the food, and a perfect pink tongue darted past her lips to lick it clean.

Liam felt dizzy. “You need to go.”

“Why?”

“I have an interview with Samuel in the morning, and need to prepare.”

“Maybe I can help,” she offered

“No.”

At the gruffness in his voice, she stopped what she was doing to stand at the end of the counter where his files sat organized. “Come on, let me help.”

Liam didn't know where the anger came from, but it was there, making him flip open the file next to her where a printout of Laura Jean Eddins' death certificate lay on top. “If you want to help, tell me how your mother died.”

The fire in her dimmed, her cheeks going pale. “My mother's death has nothing to do with your case.”

“Tell me anyway.”

“You're right, I should go.”

Liam blocked her way, allowing himself the luxury of touching her arm. “What are you hiding?”

“Nothing,” she said, biting on her bottom lip in a way that made him see red. “You just need to accept that some families have things they don't like to talk about.”

Looking back, he should've kept his mouth shut and let her go, but the eight dead women in his care wouldn't allow for it. “Like the fact that Samuel and Evie are sleeping together?”

Jamison took a step back, shocked laughter coming out in spurts. “Not only is that disgusting, but it's also insane.”

“It's not insane. I picked up on their relationship the moment the two of them were in the same room together.” He stalked towards her until she was cornered. The humor on her face dying with each step. “You know, I found it funny that

you were worried about keeping a secret from her, when she's been hiding something like this from you.”

Sobering, the fire in her eyes returned. “Evie would never lie to me.”

“Technically, she didn't lie,” he shot back, ready to make it hurt to see if he could drive something—anything—out of her. “Your sister just fucked your brother and didn't tell you.”

The crack of her hand across his cheek made Liam's ears ring. “How dare you make up lies about my family.”

His head slowly rolled back to its proper place. “Ignoring the truth won't make it go away.”

Holding her head high, she wound around him, pausing at the end of the counter to stare at the open file bearing her mother's name.

With a single swipe of her hand, the folders sliced through the air, slamming into the wall. “Thanks for the advice,” she said, his paperwork raining down in her wake. “I'll see myself out.”

Liam had her pinned against the wall before he knew what he was doing, pressing in close enough to taste her gasp of surprise on his tongue.

“You want some advice? Stay away from me,” he snarled in her face. “I saw what you were a mile away. A pretty diversion to help me swallow the bullshit I've been fed from the beginning.”

Her lips contorted into something cruel, and she flattened against him. “Even if I were some lying whore sent to distract you from whatever ridiculous scenario you’ve come up with, we both know you’ve enjoyed every minute.”

The feel of her body cradled in his was like an electrical shock to the system, knocking his brain offline. Liam tilted his head, inhaling that scent of hers that drove him mad. “I absolutely fucking did,” he whispered, on the verge of doing something that would drown him in regret later. “And I still do, so get out.”

He’d shoved away then, leaving her skin flushed from his lingering heat. A few seconds later, she was gone, abandoning him in the aftermath of his actions.

Now, as he sat on the cold tile with his eyes closed, Liam wondered if he could screw up this investigation any worse.

The phone in his pocket rang in response. “Hello?”

Jack Zimmerman’s voice cut through the roar in his head. “Did you read the reports?”

“You found them already?”

“We switched to an electronic system ten years ago, but these reports weren’t stored in our database,” Zimmerman replied. “I had to call Bob Sanderson, who was the state attorney at the time of Ms. Eddins and Mr. Howard’s deaths. He knew right where to find them, and asked that I pass along a message.”

“What’s the message?”

“The case is closed. Tread lightly.”

Without bothering to say goodbye, Liam scrambled to his computer, opening the email sent from Zimmerman. He held his breath as he read through the autopsy reports, letting out a string of curses when finished.

Liars.

They were all liars.

On July 4, 1999, Laura Jean died at her listed residence, sustaining two gunshot wounds, one to the upper chest, and a second in the left abdomen with the bullet lodging into the spine. Immediately upon impact, her airway hemorrhaged, cutting off air supply. Death would have occurred in under two minutes and been painful to watch.

The report also noted the death of a male fetus in its nineteenth week of gestation.

Devon Howard’s report was much of the same, but with his injuries confined to the abdomen and chest with one bullet slicing clean through. Liam thought of Abe in his chair, and the probable small sliver of truth the family had given him.

Father and son had been together that day, with Abe sustaining damage in the attack.

Then again, the others had been damaged, too.

Agoraphobia, panic attacks, and that damn haunted look in Ben Fairweather’s eyes.

The signs were all there.

These people reeked of wounds brought on by trauma. Wounds that most likely would never heal because whatever occurred in that house on July 4, 1999, ruined them beyond repair.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chloe I. Miller lives in Florida with her husband, two children, and a dog that doesn't realize she's an animal. She can be found on TikTok (@authorchloe.i.miller) and Instagram (@author.chloe.i.miller). For more information on her books, check out [www.chloeimiller.com](http://www.chloeimiller.com)

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Caitlin is also the reason Samuel wears gray sweatpants. So... you know... everyone needs to say thank you to her for that.

To my husband, thank you for indulging me in this endeavor. You never thought I was crazy to try and get this story out there, even though I drove you crazy while writing it. Thank you to my two children, who are (I'm not kidding when I say this) the best kids a mother could have. I am so proud of everything you do. Thanks to my Mom for nagging me since the seventh grade to write. When I told you I was doing this, you were the only one who said, "finally!"



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Merissa, thank you for being my friend through the years. And if you see facets of your personality reflected in some of these characters...no, you didn't *\*waves penguin flipper\** you didn't see anything.

The settings featured in this novel were inspired by various locations around North Florida. And while the area is known for its abundance of beautiful powder white shores, one in particular served as the inspiration for Firewater Beach. A special place loved by my in-laws, Paula and Gary, who spent months at a time basking on their favorite stretch of sand until my father-in-law's passed on from this world. Gone much too soon, his loss is felt daily by the other half of his whole left behind. Their romance was the stuff of legends, and drawing

on the life of love they shared, I was able to craft the story of Ben and his Laura Jean.

And finally, dear reader, I thank you for taking a chance on my story. If anything, let it serve as a reminder that *happily* is never promised in the ever afters. Seize the moments that matter whenever you can.

Dance the dance.

Share the laugh.

Take the walk on the beach.

Continue reading for a sneak peek of....

Our  
*Lips*  
are  
*Sealed*

KEY LIME BOOKS



## OUR LIPS ARE SEALED

There was a giant naked man in her bed.

That was Evangeline Eddins' first thought when she woke in the night after colliding with a very warm, very nude, male body.

Surprised, she retreated to the other side of the mattress, nearly falling off. "What are you doing in here?"

Samuel pretended to sleep, laying on his back with a decorative floral pillow shoved behind his head. The matching floral sheet lay spread across his waist, giving her a prime view of his muscled upper half.

"I know you're listening."

"Sleep is what you wanted," he whispered. "So, go back to sleep."

"That's kind of hard to do with you in here."

Samuel's eyes opened, and he looked over at her, his usual sharp features softened by the rest he'd had. "Don't say I didn't warn you."

Rolling to his side, his hand locking onto her waist, he dragged Evie to him. She halfheartedly attempted to squirm away, but stopped fighting when he wrapped her in his heat.

“What in the hell,” she said, realizing her nightgown was missing. “I don’t have any clothes on.”

“Is that a problem?”

“When I said I wanted to sleep, I meant alone.”

“And I said that’s not happening.” He rubbed his growing arousal into her back. “Now be quiet before I change your mind about only wanting rest.”

Too late for that.

She wiggled her bottom. “My inner sixteen-year-old self is squealing right now.”

The hand at her hip trailed upward to massage a breast. “Go to sleep, Evangeline,” he whispered, licking along the shell of her ear while his thumb brushed back and forth over a nipple. “It’s almost dawn, and I promised my dad I would leave early to avoid Jamison, should she decide to go for another early morning beach run.”

So much had happened over the last twenty-four hours that it made Evie’s head spin. She and Samuel were together, happy, and ready to move forward. Ben was aware of their relationship, and while not totally onboard with the idea, he was willing to try to be understanding.

Jamison, although, remained unaware.

But as of tomorrow, that would change. Impatient as ever, Samuel had wanted to tell her last night, but Ben talked him out of it as the three of them shared a drink after work. “Wait until the weekend,” his father had said. “What’s one more night?”

Evie wiggled her bottom again, earning herself a bite on the neck. “I don’t think she will. She and Cohen got into an argument.”

“Good,” Samuel said. “I don’t want her around him.”

Samuel hadn’t trusted the FBI agent since his arrival earlier in the week. Agent William Cohen was here to investigate a series of murders out of Missouri, where paintings by Evie and Jamison’s mother were found at the scenes. The connection was slim, but Cohen’s superiors sent him to Florida anyway.

Rolling over to face him, Evie snuggled against his chest. “Jamison seemed pretty upset about Cohen.”

Samuel’s eyes remained closed. “I don’t care,” he said, hooking a leg over hers. “And if you don’t stop talking, I’m going to make those teenage dreams of yours come true. Then everyone in the house will know I’m here.”

“They won’t hear us.”

A low laugh rumbled in his chest. “Trust me, they will,” he whispered. “I know this is the first time you’ve had a man in your bed here, but I can assure you these old walls are thin, and they’ll hear everything.”

She buried her face in his neck, laying kisses on his heated skin. “It’s not.”

“It’s not what?”

“It’s not the first time I’ve had a man in my bed here.”

Samuel’s eyes flew open. “Excuse me?”

“I was with Brett for years, and I was an adult,” she said, referring to her college boyfriend. “Simone never objected to him staying the night.”

He flipped her over, securing her hands at the wrists above her head. “Why am I just now hearing about this?”

With a slow smile, she spread her legs, stretching out beneath him. “You don’t know everything, Samuel Fairweather.”

He continued to glare down at her, nostrils flaring. “About you, I do.”

“Apparently not.” She lifted her hips, rubbing the tip of him along her center. “Let me show you how quiet I can be.”

Samuel released her hands to draw her legs further apart. “Ah, but you forget, I’m not him,” he murmured, giving her but just an inch. “You can’t keep quiet with me.”

His hips retreated and returned, torturing her with quick, shallow thrusts. She buried her fingers in his black hair, remembering how she’d thought it too long and reckless for a man like him.

How wrong she had been.



“I need all of you,” she whispered. “Or are you trying to make me beg?”

“Never.” He retreated again, but this time drove back in deep. “I could never deny you anything, Evangeline.”

Samuel took her slowly and as promised, she remained quiet, leaving the heavy, steady thump of his body into hers as the only sound in the room.

But soon enough, his control slipped, and placing one hand on her mouth and another on the wall to stabilize the bed, he rode hard, the way she liked it best.

“This is the last night you’ll ever spend in this house,” he grated out against her ear. “Your home is with me.”

Utterly consumed, she pulled his hand away from her mouth, arching up to kiss him with all the love in her heart. This was indeed her last night under Haven’s roof. Her future was with Samuel, and starting tomorrow, they would begin building their life together.