



TROPICAL STORM

wall street journal bestselling authors

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TROPICAL STORM

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CARTER

I'VE NEVER WANTED to tear a helicopter apart with my bare hands before.

It's a surprising thought for two reasons. One—it's completely illogical. Dismantling the helicopter while we're on it would kill all of us. And two—I'm not sure it would change anything. I can't see the next steps.

I can't see anything, really, because I have Theo's hand in a death grip and the medical team on the helicopter crowds around him, keeping him alive moment by moment.

I have no idea how long we've been in the air. Another surprise. It's part of my job to remain focused on mission objectives, and that includes keeping track of local time in the city of origin and destination. It also includes compartmentalizing emotional responses until I've achieved the objectives.

There is no possible way to meet the requirements of my job, no matter how hard I try to bury everything. Not with Theo looking so pale, halfway between life and death, and June clinging to that camera he bought her. I didn't see that coming. Theo, buying something in a city to give to June? I'd never have guessed.

I wouldn't have guessed he'd take a bullet for me, either. I would never have let him do that. If I'd known, I'd never—

A flash of June's blue eyes between navy scrubs interrupts the loop of guilt and anger and *why the fuck did you do that, Theo? Why?* before I get caught in it.

I can't talk to her. The *thumpthumpthump* of the helicopter's rotor is too loud. All the metal surrounding us vibrates. I want to crawl out of my skin or tear into the metal with my fingernails. I want to be on the ground, where I can—

I don't know what. That's the fucking problem. Another flash of June. She holds the camera close to her chest like it's going to save her. Why can't she see that nothing's going to save her, least of all me? I thought she understood what she was dealing with.

Fuck. I swore to keep myself apart from people so that nobody else got hurt, and I failed. I'm holding Theo's hand, but he doesn't squeeze mine back.

He's like this because of *me*.

The people on the medical team start talking to each other a few seconds before the helicopter begins a descent. My brain isn't working. I have no idea where we're landing. I don't know what our destination city is, or the local time, or how to get us out of it.

All three of us.

Because I can't leave without all three of us.

The helicopter lands on the roof of a building.

This is not what I thought was going to happen.

Everyone in navy scrubs around Theo's stretcher stands and moves. One of them knocks my hand away from his. I can't hear anything, but the rotor must be slowing, it must be stopping.

"Where are you taking him?" I demand of one of them, but the man doesn't answer.

Out in the evening air of wherever the hell this is, there's no plane. There wouldn't be. Not on the roof of a building. But there was supposed to be a plane, and we were supposed to get on it.

All I can do now is follow the crowd of people and the pale, still Theo on his stretcher toward big, silver elevator doors on one end of the roof.

A hospital. It's a hospital. My heartbeat is louder than the helicopter. There's not enough room in the elevator for all of us but I shove my way in.

"What's happening?" I put a hand on someone's shoulder. I need some answers, because my brain is short circuiting without the necessary information to make a decision.

"Mother of God, am I dead too? Can anyone fucking hear me?"

A woman turns, a surgical mask covering half of her face. "Surgery," she says, then turns around and rattles off a stream of incomprehensible things about Theo.

"What surgery?"

"To repair the damage from the bullet and stop the internal bleeding."

The doors open, and they're moving again. I can't understand a thing anyone is saying. The signs on the walls blur into another language. I'm good with languages. I have to be. I'm always landing in a foreign country, but I can't read anything.

Someone tugs at my elbow.

"That's not enough." Where the *fuck* are they taking him? Where is this so-called surgery going to happen? I know perfectly well that he was shot. I saw it. I felt it. I don't know what happens now. All I know is that they're taking him away, and that's intolerable. "You can't cut him open without—*hey*."

Nobody listens.

"Is this a goddamn joke? One of you needs to turn around *right now* and tell me what the plan is, because—"

"Carter." June's voice, but it's too soft to make a difference. *She* doesn't know what's happening.

"Am I not being clear? Are you not getting it? One of you turn the *fuck* around and *answer me*."

At the edges of my vision, I can see more uniforms. Security guards. They pop up like weeds. One, two, three of

them. They'll have to shoot me. The only thing worse than letting Theo get shot is letting these strangers take him away.

"I'll do whatever it takes. I don't care. Answer me. *Listen* to me."

I reach for the nearest set of navy scrubs. I'll torture them. I'll kill one of them. Anything. Anything, as long as—

Hands collide with my shirt and back me up several feet just as Theo and his team of traitors and his stretcher disappear behind a set of swinging doors.

"Let go of me." I've never felt rage quite like this before. I try not to feel it like this. I can't believe someone had the nerve to put their *hands* on my *shirt* and *push* me when I can *kill* them. My eyes follow the hands to the sleeves—black—and all the way up to the face of the person I'm about to murder for getting in my way.

It's Leo.

I swing at him without thinking. He blocks my fist, so I swing again. This arrogant motherfucker.

"Agreed," he says. "I can't let you beat up a doctor, though."

I didn't know I was saying it out loud. I didn't know I was shouting at him. Don't fully realize it until he corrals me with a series of gentle shoves on my chest into—

A waiting room. Small. Hospital furniture. Inoffensive beige on the walls.

The sound of the hospital cuts in. Voices. Monitors. Footsteps.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" I shout into his face. He looks like he just strolled out of his mansion. He's not even wearing a coat. Just black on black, like he has for almost twenty years. "I told you not to come. I told you I didn't need you."

He raises one eyebrow.

“I was fine. I was *fine*. You got in my way, and now I don’t know what they’re doing with him.”

“You were in the helicopter for hours. They need to fix the damage from the bullet and survey for internal bleeding.”

“Oh, really? And how long is that going to take? Do you know that?”

“It’ll take as long as it takes.”

“We can’t stay here.” I’m at my most feral, and Leo watches me snarl and pace and glare like I’m the least dangerous person he’s ever seen. “You can’t be here, either. You have a family.”

“We’ve had this discussion. You’re my family. And you didn’t sound good on the phone.”

I could strangle him. My hands make the shape of his neck, shaking, and he looks at them without a hint of fear. “You don’t understand. You could *die*. And then your baby would grow up without a father.”

He puts a hand in the air so I can see his empty palm. “Abby’s fine. And I’m fine. I have people with me.”

If I exploded right now, it wouldn’t be shrapnel. It would be a poisoned plant. An invasive species. It would eat Leo alive. June tiptoes into the room, but stays back toward the door.

“All your people don’t matter. I didn’t kill the woman who was after me. We need to be in the air. *Now*. Or we’re not going to make it out.”

“It’s not time to leave yet.”

“Who the fuck are you to decide that?”

“It’s not me. It’s the surgeons.”

“And you just—what? Thought it was fine if you landed here and fucked us all over?”

“Carter.” Leo’s so steady that it pisses me off. I want him to *react* to seeing what I am, right in front of him, undisguised, and he won’t. A faint flicker of emotion crosses his face. His

dark eyes get wider, just for a second, and then it's gone. "None of the people on the helicopter could tell us which one of you was shot. We thought it might have been you."

"It was *Theo*." This time, I'm so loud that I can hear the gap in the conversations outside the waiting room. "And they took him away."

Leo's expression shifts into the worst one possible for this moment.

Understanding.

"The two of you," he says.

"I don't want to talk about that," I snap.

My eyes land on June. I don't know what she sees in my face, but she peels herself away from the wall and comes to me. She wraps her arms around my waist, and I get one arm around her, and I might never let go. "I really think it's going to be okay. It's okay, Carter."

"Who's this?" Leo asks.

"June Porter."

She turns around in my arms. Looks at Leo. Looks back at me. Her eyes get wider.

When she speaks, her voice is slightly unsteady. "Hi. I'm June."

"Leo Morelli, Carter's brother. I wish we'd met under better circumstances." Leo sounds like this isn't the end of the world when in fact it is.

His eyes come back to mine.

I'm a disgrace to the profession. I'm not sure when I started shaking, or when I stopped being able to get a handle on the adrenaline rush, or if one helicopter flight clutching Theo's hand was all it took to wipe out years of training and on-the-ground experience.

"When you said you had three people with you," Leo starts.

“You have to take *all* of us back with you.” My voice is, apparently, another thing I have no control over. “All of us.”

He takes one step closer. “Of course I will.”

“We have to go *now*.”

“We’ll leave as soon as Theo is out of surgery. As soon as he can be moved.”

Leo takes in the way June’s clinging to me with a swift glance, and goddamn it, he knows. It’s been—what? Five minutes? And he already knows.

Because *I* fucked it up. I couldn’t hide the way I feel about Theo, and I can’t let go of June, and now he knows.

A very small part of me waits for him to have an opinion. To judge me about it. He’s the one who still goes to confession. He’s the one who still prays when he’s not under duress. We don’t have theological debates or discussions on the merits of church policy because I’m never fucking there.

No judgment comes.

I’m going to shout at him again.

My mouth doesn’t follow the plan.

“You can’t tell anyone.” It comes out quiet, and this might be the most serious I’ve ever sounded. “Leo. You can’t tell them.”

“I won’t,” he promises.

I glare at him.

Leo sighs, his eyes showing the first hint of strain since he pushed me in here against my will. “I won’t tell anyone.”

“Not even—”

“Not even Eva.”

He doesn’t have to say the rest, which is that my siblings will figure it out as soon as we land in New York.

That’s a problem for the future.

Leo rubs his hands over his face. When he looks up again, he's calm. "Come with me. There's a more comfortable place to wait."

JUNE

IT WAS REALLY bad when Theo got shot. I didn't think it could get worse than watching Carter carry him across the beach with all that blood making his T-shirt look dark and slick. That keeps happening. I think—it can't get worse than finding out the woman I'd befriended, Susan, was really a murderer. It can't get worse than a plane crash. It can't get worse than finding out the plane was sabotaged.

It can't be worse than thinking Theo was going to die.

I should probably stop setting the bar for that kind of thing, because watching Carter lose it scared me more than anything else. If his brother hadn't shown up and stepped in his way, I don't know what we'd be doing right now. Carter would be in jail, probably.

Maybe I'd still be here in the recovery room, holding Theo's hand.

We keep switching between worlds, the three of us. Heathrow seems like another lifetime entirely. Theo's island, too. The second island, with its roads and cities, seemed nothing like the isolated place where Theo spent most of his boyhood.

This room feels like it could be anywhere.

Carter sits on the other side of the bed, his hands clasped and his head bowed. I think he took the side with all the wires so I could stay close.

“Carter.” His brother is at the door.

Carter gets to his feet, looks at the monitors near Theo's bed with hope and worry in his eyes, and steps out into the hall.

The machines hooked to Theo are silent. One of the nurses turned off the beeping a while ago. I'm not sure how long I've been watching him sleep. Every so often, I watch the waves on the monitors curve up and down and up again. It should be calming, looking at those waves. It means he's alive. No sharp spikes. No flat lines. Just curves, like waves on the beach.

"You don't look right in here." I whisper the words, though there's nobody to hear them. Carter's outside in the hall with his brother. "You belong on the beach. Or in your house."

Except...he belongs with us, too.

I'm not sure what we look like in a city. Carter's mentioned going with his brother, but I have no idea where he lives, or what his house looks like, or whether everyone is always on edge.

I guess...I wouldn't know what that's like, anyway. Maybe there's always a kind of simmering tension between siblings. In a way, I can see how it would be better to live close. That way, you could work things out. Fight in a hospital hallway, if you wanted to.

In another way, I can see why Carter wanted to keep his distance. Obviously, siblings know too much about you. I'm not sure what Carter said to Leo on the phone. It probably doesn't matter. What matters is that Leo has known him long enough to figure out when there's a problem, and Carter doesn't like that.

In a *third* way, it's not just Carter going to Leo's. It's all three of us, and that makes things three times as complicated even without the Russians coming after us. I completely understand why Carter wanted to keep moving. I felt his fear when it sank in that we couldn't. I can't help but feel like we're...

I don't know. A plane crash waiting to happen. A bomb waiting to go off. The explanation for how Carter and Theo

and I got together seems simple in my head—we found him, and we didn't let go—but it won't sound simple to anyone else.

“I feel bad that we can't go back,” I admit. “I feel bad that you got hurt. I know Carter feels awful. And...” I steal a glance toward the hall. Carter hovers near the door, in view one second, hidden the next. “His brother is, like, *really* intense. I thought they were going to have a fight over what to do next.”

“That's not what this is about.” Carter's voice rises in the hall. “Is this a language barrier? Do you need me to explain it in layman's terms?”

“As opposed to what?” Maybe Leo had to be intense before. Carter was going to cause a huge problem with the medical team. Now he matches Carter's volume, but not his irritation. “A long-winded plant metaphor? I promise you, I can keep up no matter which one you choose.”

“You're so fucking stubborn.”

Leo sighs. “This again? I'm already here. There's no way for me to magic myself back to New York.”

“You're reckless. Foolish.”

“That's a bit harsh, considering your secret career as a—”

“Shut the fuck up, Leo, or—”

“Or all the lovely people staffing this hospital are going to know you've snapped? I think the secret's out, brother mine.” In the pause, Carter must look violent, even murderous, because Leo's voice softens. “If you want to plan, we'll plan. Start at the beginning.”

“I'm not having a crisis.”

“Of course not. Can't imagine why you'd even bring it up.”

“See?” I whisper to Theo, who doesn't answer. “He *knows* we're in a terrible situation, and it's so bad that he doesn't want to say it out loud. And, like...” Carter and Leo are talking again, low voices overlapping. “They sound similar,” I

tell Theo. “I can’t imagine having a sibling that sounded like me. But my point is, if they’re *all* that intense, how are we supposed to fit in?”

Plus, the relative intensity of Carter’s family in comparison to me and Theo isn’t the biggest thing that sets us apart. They’re rich, and we’re not.

“That’s not to say he isn’t nice. He got clothes brought here for us. For all of us. And made Carter shower and change, even though he wanted to sit here watching you every second, too. They have enough money to know where to buy clothes in Germany and just...have them sent here. They’re good clothes, too. Everything feels super expensive.”

That means Carter’s rich, too. Having tons of money didn’t stop Theo from getting hurt. Money might not keep us safe in New York, either.

I tip my head down to Theo’s hand. “I want to be back behind my camera.”

I miss my old camera. The one Theo bought me isn’t the same, but it’s a lens to put between me and the world.

It’s too late to hide like that now.

“And there’s another thing.” The nurses said it’s good to talk to Theo, even though he’s asleep. It feels less awkward than I thought it would. When we were hiding from the hurricane in that bathroom, I wished desperately that the three of us could talk. I felt Carter’s voice through his chest, but the wind and rain were so loud that I couldn’t understand the words. I’ll take any chance I can get from now on. “I wish I could call my mom.”

Really, I wish I could be sure she’d answer. Unlike Susan, with her hidden past, my mother has always been exactly who she is. It’s hard to get her on the phone.

“Maybe I’m just making excuses for calling her, but I don’t want to scare her. I didn’t tell her I was in a plane crash. I don’t want to tell her half a story, and we haven’t lived the rest yet.” It’s a small thing, deciding whether to call my mom. It might not be, though. “I don’t know. There’s something to

be said for *not* waiting. You never know when the plane is going to go down.”

It doesn't seem very funny at the moment.

“When I call her, I want to tell her about you.” My throat closes, and I swallow past it. Theo's not even answering, and I managed to talk myself through to the heart of my fear. “I want to tell her you made it through surgery, and you're okay, and we're all going to be fine. I'm not going to call her before then.”

Theo squeezes my hand.

It's so gentle that it takes me a beat to recognize that it's *him* and not me.

I lift my head up, hoping against hope, just as Theo opens his eyes.

“Oh my God.” I knew he'd wake up. I knew it. I never lost hope for a second. “Hi.”

Theo swallows, and I wrap both of my hands around his.

“June.”

I feel like I've just survived another plane crash. My heart beats so fast that those machines would think something was seriously wrong. *They'd* be wrong. This is the best thing that's happened since we left Theo's island.

“Carter!”

Carter rushes in from the hallway. His face crumples with relief when he sees Theo. He's at the side of Theo's bed in a few hurried strides. Carter maneuvers himself through the wires and monitors and takes Theo's other hand. Out of the corner of my eye, I can see Carter's brother in the doorway. He's a dark-clothed shadow, waiting, and then he's gone.

Carter doesn't seem to notice. He looks at Theo like he's witnessing his very first miracle. There's no chair on that side of the bed, and Carter ends up on the edge of the mattress. He has dark circles under his eyes. The fresh clothes and shower did nothing to erase them, and I'm beginning to think that

nothing short of wiping out everyone who could possibly hurt us will be enough.

“Theo.” Carter brings Theo’s hands to his lips and kisses his knuckles. “You’re awake. Tell me you’re awake.”

“I am.”

“Do you know us?” Carter’s voice cracks on *know*, and my stomach drops. It didn’t cross my mind that Theo wouldn’t know us. The last thing he said to us in the helicopter was *I love you*.

“I know you. I could not forget.”

Carter sags, just barely staying on his feet. “Thank God. I’m so glad you’re alive.”

“Yes,” answers Theo. “Here I am.”

“I wouldn’t have been able to live without you.” Carter tries to crack a smile, but he can’t do it. This is a serious miracle. “But now it’s going to be fine. Don’t worry about anything.”

Theo takes a deep breath. “I am not worried. You are here.”

“Now that you’re awake.” Carter’s relief is so clear and powerful that I want to hug him. “Now that you’re awake, we can start making plans to leave. We’ll go to Leo’s house, and everything will be okay.”

Theo stares at Carter with a clear ache on his face, like all he wants to do is look at him for the rest of eternity. He clears his throat. “No.”

Now Carter *does* laugh, but it’s a short, exhausted sound. “No?”

“I won’t go with you.”

Carter shakes his head. “We’ve had this discussion. You’re going. You’re mine, and you’re going wherever I go.”

Theo closes his eyes, but it’s clear from the deep breath he takes that he’s not going to sleep. He’s gathering himself. He

opens his eyes again. Green eyes meet mine, then settle on Carter's. "I cannot fight you."

New relief flashes across Carter's face, but his expression falls into seriousness. Theo doesn't mean that he's too in love to argue with Carter. He means that he got shot, and he can't physically overpower anyone.

"Theo..." Carter's sentence trails off. He can't leave him here any more than I could. But if Theo doesn't want to go, then the balance between the three of us is ruined. If he doesn't want to be part of us...

"You can take me to New York." Theo's voice is raspy from so much time asleep and in surgery. He doesn't falter or hesitate. "But I can't stay there. You know what will become of me. I'll become one of the devil's children. And sinners always pay."

CARTER

MY RELIEF at seeing Theo's green eyes—Christ, they're gorgeous—lasts about ten seconds.

Then dread slithers back through my body. It's ironic that it feels so much like an invasive species. That's supposed to be me. I'm the one who invades and hurts and kills. Turnabout shouldn't be fair play.

"That won't happen." It's a pretty feeble argument in the face of Theo's certainty, but he has to see. He has to understand. I'm not leaving him here. "You're the same person in New York as you are right now."

"I am already different." Sadness flickers across his eyes. "There is still time to take it back."

"No. There isn't. We're *all* different, Theo, you can't just —"

Two nurses come in, speaking German to each other, and one tells me in English that they need space with the patient.

June pushes her chair toward the wall, her eyes on Theo.

"June." Her blue eyes come to mine. "I'll be right back."

She holds up two fingers.

It breaks my heart, and it makes the sterile hospital room seem warmer, and I cannot *believe* that I'm going to buckle under so much emotion.

I hold up two fingers, but I can't manage a smile.

Then I go to find Leo.

He's in a small waiting room, three of his people in a clutch around him. It's absurd that he'd bring so much security when he's obviously the dangerous one. But he confers with them like he needs this.

Or like *we* need this.

One of them nods in my direction, and he turns around with eyebrows raised. "How is he?"

"Tired, probably. I didn't have a chance to ask. The nurses came back."

"But he's awake and talking."

"Yes."

Leo dismisses his men, and they go out at a good clip. He adjusts the sleeves of his shirt and studies me. "You have that look on your face."

"What look?"

"The look that says you're getting ready to run."

I'm insulted, and then I'm over it. "I don't like that we're on the same side of the ocean as Underwood and the Russians."

"Yes. You've made that clear."

It's unfathomably bizarre to be discussing this with Leo. He listened to the story with calm concentration, like all of us walk up to him every day and let him know that we're top-secret operatives for the United States government and being pursued by foreign agents. It goes against most of my instincts and all of the training I've had over the years.

"Carter?" Leo puts his hands in his pockets. It's been quiet for too long.

"I'm having second thoughts about bringing Theo and June back to New York."

"Oh?"

"Send us somewhere else. We'll disappear."

“No.”

At first, I can't identify the feeling that fills up my chest and burns away at the guilt and dread. I think it's righteous indignation. Leo and I didn't fight as kids. He was busy antagonizing our father, which was a successful strategy for keeping the rest of us safe. Safer, at least.

Doesn't matter. I feel like a surly ten-year-old. The only phrase that comes to mind is *you're not the boss of me*.

“You don't get to make that decision. I'm not your fucking child.”

He arches one eyebrow. “I didn't say you were. That doesn't mean I'm going to hand you a backpack and send you on your merry way.”

“It's safer if we're on the run.”

“No, it is not fucking safer. You have a man with a gunshot wound. This is not the time to be on the run.”

“Theo can do it.”

“No, he can't. Can you let go of your superspy bullshit and trust me for one day of your life?”

“I don't know who you think you are. Some kind of expert on gunshot wounds? You think you're qualified to say what's right for us?”

“Right now, yes. ”

“Based on fucking *what?* Your own personal gunshot wound?”

Leo narrows his eyes. I'm not afraid of my own brother, but somehow he manages to look...taller, somehow. Stronger. And the expression on his face says *of course that's what I'm talking about*.

“You got shot.” Amazing. Now I'm an incredulous prick. “And you didn't say anything? When?”

“Recently enough that I still recall how difficult it was to stay awake for the first week, much less *go on the run*. It's not a predictable recovery, asshole. You will get caught.”

God, I hate emotions. Deliver me from the evil of these feelings. “I’m already caught. I’m already a target.”

“Then we’re all targets.”

“No, you’re not. You’re only in danger if we go with you. If you just send us somewhere else—if you just let us—”

Leo crosses the room in three steps, puts his hands on my shoulder, and gets into my face. He didn’t just look stronger. He *is* stronger. Sometimes, I think of him as the teenager who took on our dad, but he’s not. All I can see is his face. It’s enough like *my* face that it feels like I’m pissed off at myself.

Which is also true.

“Listen to me.” He doesn’t sound particularly angry, but this is urgent. “If Underwood and the Russians and whoever else is after you know you’re a Morelli, then you can’t fuck off to the middle of nowhere.”

“Everybody knows I’m a Morelli. That doesn’t make a difference.” This is more of a wish than a fact, but all the lines of my life have been scrambled beyond recognition. A year ago, I would never have told any of this to Leo. I’d have vanished into the night for good, no matter how much it hurts.

“Carter, it very much *does* make a difference.” It occurs to me that he’s this close because he thinks he can’t get through to me. “You’re tired. You’ve had an ordeal. You’re not seeing it.”

“I’m seeing *everything*, motherfucker.”

“Governments don’t negotiate with terrorists. Private individuals do.”

Oh.

Leo doesn’t have as much experience with governments and secret missions as he seems to think, but he’s right about this one. There’s determined confidence in his eyes. Is this what I look like when I’m telling Theo that he has to come with us? Jesus.

“Our government in particular doesn’t have a great track record when it comes to negotiating with Russia. Right now,

we have no way of knowing who this woman is taking orders from, or why she's working with Russians.”

“We—”

“We don't have enough information. And if you're dealing with a rogue agent, and God forbid you or one of these people you've fallen in love with—”

“I never said that.”

“—gets taken hostage, then *all of us* are on the hook.” He gestures behind him with one hand, as if the whole family is standing in the room with us. “Because we wouldn't let them have you without a fight. *We* would be negotiating with the terrorists. Get it, genius?”

“Fine.” I push him away, hot-faced at the thought that my entire family would put together that kind of effort for me, and that apparently my brother has already gamed it out in his head, and none of them should be doing that. “I'll go kill Underwood myself, then. That'll solve this.”

Leo takes a deep breath and lets it out slow, and for the second time in this conversation I feel like a kid. An out-of-control teenager. “It *might*, assuming you find her and manage to stay alive, but it'll also fuck you over.”

“That woman being dead couldn't possibly fuck me over.”

“If you kill her, you'll never know who betrayed you. And then you'd be on the run forever. You and June and Theo. So the only way to solve this in a way that leaves you with any semblance of a life is to go above the asshole who sold you out to the real U.S. government.”

That does not sound as good as vanishing into thin air. In fact, I very *much* want to be gone, because Leo doesn't deserve this. None of my siblings deserve this.

“How do you suggest we do that, Leo? Just pick up the phone and call the White House?”

He shoots me a *be serious* look. “Vivian Constantine works at the State Department.”

“Vivian...*Constantine*.”

“I’m married to a Constantine. You were at my wedding, remember? You were at Lucian’s. The feud is over.”

I seriously fucking doubt anything that ingrained is over because of a handful of weddings, but it does make a certain kind of sense.

“Goddamn it, Leo.”

“Does that mean *thank you for coming to Germany at the last minute, Leo, I will stop trying to fight you on every reasonable suggestion and instead shut my mouth and get on the plane?*”

“Wait. Is the plane ready?”

“It’s been ready the whole time. What kind of person do you think I am? All we need to do is get the nurses to clear Theo for the transfer.”

New dread rises like cold water. “It’s a long flight. Is there someone on the ground waiting to—”

Leo goes for the door, putting his arm around me as he passes and taking me with him. “There’s a transitional care team for the flight. And another one at the house. Relax.”

“Fuck off.”

“Wouldn’t that be the dream?”

The next two hours are a flurry of German-to-English translation and doctors bustling in and out of Theo’s room and multiple people checking monitors and bandages. Then there’s a swarm of security and nurses and even one doctor to bring all of us down to the ground floor. A fleet of matching black SUVs takes us to a small airport a few miles from the hotel, and the entire procession reverses to get Theo onto the plane.

We fly all night.

Leo doesn’t sleep.

I try not to sleep and keep dozing off, only to startle awake and find him writing in a notebook or talking to one of the nurses or tapping at his phone.

It's night when we land at the private, high-security airport near Leo's house.

There are exactly as many people on this side of the ocean as there were at the hospital in Germany. I feel slightly ridiculous for doubting that Leo's would be safe, but that's just a lack of sleep. I know it's not safe. It won't be safe until this is finished.

I'm too tired to think much about it. June and Theo are both exhausted. He leans against her on the ride to Leo's, his eyes closed.

My brother is the only one who hasn't been affected at all by a night in an airplane. The parade of SUVs bringing us home go through his gate one by one, and he sits up in his seat. The driver hasn't completely finished braking when he jumps out of the SUV and jogs up the front steps of his house.

It's too late for anyone to be up waiting, but the front door is open, and his wife is there with their baby, Leo's head of security watching the scene. Haley, his wife, disappears into his massive hug—I can't see her behind his tall frame—and when he straightens up, their baby is in his arms, already curled against his shoulder.

He turns around to look at us, and Haley slips her arm around his waist, and...

That's it.

The two of them, standing at the door with their baby, Leo bending to kiss the top of his daughter's head while he tells Haley something...

That's what I can never have with Theo and June, because that's not how families are. That's not how they work.

I insisted that we all had to come here together, but I don't know how to *keep* us together, even if society would accept us, which they won't.

"Carter," June says. She's trapped under a sleeping Theo. "Are we home?"

The truth would be cruel when we're all so tired, so I lie.

“Yes. We’re home.”

THEO

I'VE BEEN IN A DREAM. A dream of a metal-covered hell and a white hospital room and Carter and June hovering above me like angels.

June wakes me up at a house out of a storybook. It's a castle. That's the shape of it. The size of it.

This house cannot be real.

My legs will carry me, but June and Carter walk on either side of me up the steps and in through a set of doors bigger than anything I've seen in my life.

It's not hell. It's not where I thought I was going on that helicopter.

There is nothing familiar here but Carter and June and my own feet, walking on polished rock for miles and miles and miles until we get to an elevator. An *elevator*. Inside a house. It takes us up to another floor that smells so clean that it's wrong. It's devoid of the scent of dirt and rain and growth.

The man who is Carter's brother, Leo, is nearby. I hear his voice, but the walk from the car has taken so much from me that I don't lift my head to see his face.

"This one, here. There are others down the hall. More of a walk."

The air in the hallway shifts. He must have opened a door and stood to hold it open, because June lets go of me so Carter can take me in, past him. Another scent—something *very*

clean, very alive. It makes me want to protect it. A baby, I think. He has a baby.

Carter's shoulders let down when we get into the bedroom. I don't know the way of him in this place. He's more relaxed than he was at the hospital, but he's not himself here, either.

I'm not myself here.

I don't know who I am.

I was not made for places like this.

There is no snow on the ground at this time of year. I'm cold anyway. It doesn't make sense that an enclosed space like this could seem colder than the outdoors. The island was much warmer. Must have been.

"Not much farther," Carter says into my ear.

He's warm.

And the worst part is, I can already feel myself adjusting to this place. I can already feel myself getting used to the cold, the way I'm getting used to the deep ache in my body from where the bullet cut into me and stayed until those surgeons took it out.

If that happens, if I get used to it here, I'll be a child of the devil.

Carter doesn't believe me when I say that, but I know it's true. The only thing keeping me from that fate was the island.

But then...

"Here."

We've reached the bed. The covers are already turned down, and Carter helps me onto navy sheets that are the softest thing I've ever touched. I put one palm out to touch them some more while he fixes the blankets. What are they, miracle sheets? How could one of these sinners deserve such softness?

How could I?

One last person in the room. A nurse. I close my eyes and let her lean over me. Her touch is cool and professional and

not what I want. The things she says to me don't make much sense. The prick of a needle at my arm—painkillers. Good. This deep, nagging pain follows me into my sleep. I want to be without it for a while.

The nurse must decide that I'm fine, or at least well enough to step out, because I hear her on the other side of the room, talking to Carter.

The bedroom door shuts.

Then two pairs of soft footsteps approach. I open my eyes as Carter sits on the edge of the bed. June takes a place next to him. Carter reaches for my hand at the same time she rests her palm on the blankets over my knee.

I'm going to be corrupted here, away from the island.

But then...they were on the island, weren't they? I love them, don't I?

Yes. I love Carter's dark eyes and June's blue ones. I love his strength and her softness. I love his willingness to fight with me and her willingness to kiss me.

"I'm very tired," I tell them.

Carter squeezes my hand. "Sleep, then."

Worry crosses his eyes like a shadow over the sun.

"You sleep."

He shakes his head. "Not yet."

"The bed is big enough."

"I know it is."

I am telling him the truth. Every muscle in my body feels worn out, as if I've been sick for a long time. I feel like it should be morning, but the night is dark through the gaps in the curtains. I could sleep for days.

And I know I will not be able to. Soon, it will be time for me to go. I need to leave the sinner's world behind and let Carter and June have each other.

That thought causes so much pain that I flinch, and Carter puts a hand to my face. “What is it?”

“Nothing.”

“It wasn’t nothing.”

I was not telling myself the truth before. If I stay here, I will become like those men in the alley. The men who attacked my mother.

I will become them.

“Theo,” warns Carter. He is afraid, and then he is not. “Go to sleep.”

“I cannot.”

He strokes my hair. It’s very close to how June does it. “You need to rest.”

“I need...” *Both of you. For as long as I can have you.* “I need to go.”

Carter meets my eyes. He is tired, too, though he won’t admit it to me now. “Stop saying that to me.”

I can’t be this close to him without reacting. I can’t breathe him and see him without wanting him. Now that the bedroom door is closed, I have the strange sense that no one will disturb us. It is both familiar, and not. On my island, my house was safe. Few creatures would approach it, and even fewer would try to get inside.

This isn’t my house. The floors are so soft that my feet could sink through them. These sheets...I’m not sure the sheets are real, they are so soft. And if Carter is right, then we are being hunted.

But from the way he sits on the bed without looking behind him, without double-checking, without his body on edge, listening and listening, I understand that beyond this bedroom door are people who will stand between us and whatever comes.

It’s not going to be safe forever, the way my house on the island would have eventually given in to the wind and rain.

For now, it's safe enough that...

"I need you," I tell him.

I think my body knew that some time ago. Now that I know it, there are separate aches to tend to.

Carter lets out a pained breath. "You're injured, Theo. I'm too much for you right now."

If I could get up, I would fight him. That would feel better than not touching him. I cannot get up. The painkillers are like warm rain in my bloodstream. They make my body heavy and my mind light. They stop that wounded howl in the hurt part of me.

They do not stop me from wanting Carter and June.

"Please." I did not expect to whisper.

Carter closes his eyes, eyelashes brushing his cheeks, and it takes him a few shallow breaths to control himself. He wants me, too.

While we are here, while we are safe, I'll have him. Please, let me have him. Let me have June. I'll spend the rest of my life repenting.

Carter opens his eyes, and I tip my face to his for a kiss.

He leans down with a small noise in the back of his throat and gives me what I wanted. A firm, searching kiss that says he is alive, he is well, and he wants me.

When he pulls back, his eyes are even darker. "June," he says.

She comes to his side and leans in to kiss my cheek. Then the two of them tug down the covers. Carter reaches for the waistband of the soft pants I came here in and tugs them down with brisk, efficient motions.

He reaches for my boxers next.

Pulls them down, too.

Carter takes me in his hand. I'm very hard. His grip is not shy, and not gentle, and that reassures me more than anything.

He believes I can handle this, at least. He believes I am not so fragile as I must have seemed.

He keeps his fist wrapped around my shaft while he winds his fingers through June's hair. I feel the moment he kisses her. A slight tension in his palm. She sighs into his mouth, her body curving toward his. I do not think she knows she's trying to climb into his lap.

Carter breaks the kiss by tugging at her hair. She looks at him with pink cheeks and a question in her eyes.

He answers by guiding those lips down to meet the head of my cock.

It's better than any painkillers.

Her mouth is hot and wet, and once Carter has assured himself that she is not sucking me off in a way that will hurt me, he bends to kiss me again.

He keeps his hand in her hair. The movement goes through his strong body, and my cock jumps at the feeling of it. Only Carter could do this. Guide her head with one hand and lick into my mouth like he has always owned the both of us.

Carter pushes June's head down, slow and considered, and she goes deep enough for me to bump against the back of her throat.

"Mmm." The sound from Carter is all praise, and it's praise for her, but it lands in my mouth.

I like that.

God, it's going to hurt when I leave. It will hurt more than being shot. It will be the worst pain I've ever felt. June does something with her tongue that makes my toes curl and my abs tense. It is good the nurse has already been in, because I would be causing myself pain otherwise.

I don't want to leave them.

I have to leave them.

Look at me. I haven't been in this castle for an hour, and I'm already sinning. Already asking Carter to sin with me

when he thinks we should wait. We both know he is the one who should make that decision, but I begged.

I know which sin is supposed to feel worse. I know which one I'm supposed to regret more deeply.

It's not the one that makes my heart pound. Not the one that I know Carter would do something about, if I were well.

He and June—oh, God, how does she do this so perfectly, how does she suck with the perfect amount of pressure, how, how—are not the problem.

I love them. They are perfect to me.

I'm the problem. It'll always be me, because sin is where I came from, and it's where I'll return if I stay.

A man who understands that would stop her. He would lift her head away. Refuse to accept pleasure.

I do not stop her.

I let her suck me, and I let Carter kiss me, until my hips stutter and pleasure crests and breaks. June doesn't take her mouth away until I'm spent.

Carter licks my bottom lip. "Better?"

I make a sound that means nothing and *yes*.

Their hands put my clothes back in their places and pull up the blanket. Then June rests at my side, her body warm and lovely, and Carter keeps his spot on the edge of my bed.

The last thing I feel as I fall asleep is him stroking my hair.

CARTER

THEO HAS TO SLEEP, but I can't.

It's too late for a meeting in polite society, but then—I left polite society behind a long time ago. *Before* I left the country to go to Oxford. Our family has a long history of being very fucking polite in public and vicious wolves behind closed doors, so the text that comes from Leo while I'm still running my fingers through Theo's hair is probably fitting.

Leo: Vivian Constantine will be here in half an hour.

Carter: To kill me because it's so goddamn late?

Leo: To talk to you about your little problem

Carter: I love when you're like this

Leo: I know you do. :*

The horrible part is that—in this moment—I do love that he's like this. I love that he's a busybody who either called Vivian Constantine himself or had his innocent wife do it to explain the situation or, knowing Leo, he put them on speakerphone and they both had a friendly chat.

No, I am not having a crisis that I need to be rescued from.

In fact, I'm *causing* a crisis that my family will probably have to be rescued from.

So, fine. Let Leo have what he wants. For one single night of my life, I'll go along with his delusion that he can keep all of us safe through sheer force of will.

Leo: There are clothes in the guest bedroom at the end of the hall

Carter: What clothes?

Leo: ...

Leo: Your clothes. Clothes that will fit you. The stuff you usually wear

I'm still typing when his next message interrupts.

Leo: Yes, there are clothes for Theo and June in the room you're in now. Yes, I assumed you'd want to get changed somewhere else so you don't wake them up. Yes, you're making a needlessly big deal about this. Haley and I will meet Vivian at the door if you're not down here when she arrives.

Carter: Did you really miss me that much?

Leo: No. We were on a plane for ten hours. I needed something to do

At the end of the hall is a set of suites that have Eva's fingerprints all over them. Of course, that means they're elegant and lovely, and I think she might've been having some fun with Leo because they are also very pink. He'd have let her paint them any color, I'm sure.

There are clothes in the closet of the second suite. It *is* the stuff I normally wear, down to the brands, which Leo has only seen a handful of times in the past few years. That gives me a pang. Maybe, if I hadn't put so much effort into staying away, I wouldn't be in this situation.

Maybe...

No. There's really no point in fantasizing about scenarios that will never happen. What would I do, move back to New York? Announce that I'm in love with two people? Expect to be welcomed back into the *Morelli* family after that kind of news?

Leo's voice, almost a whisper, has something to say about that. *Rude, Carter. I just welcomed you.*

"Yeah. You're one person. There are ten of us, plus spouses."

Who do you think is in charge, here?

I pull clothes off hangers and out of drawers. "I'm not having a conversation with a pretend-you."

I'm not Dad, the voice says, and then it's silent.

After this meeting, I have to get some sleep.

Although...he could be right. Half the time, Daphne tells me she's been here, to Leo's house, for dinner, and so have the other siblings. More often than they go to the mansion.

If the center of the family is *here* and not in Bishop's Landing, then...

Then nothing.

The shower in Leo's designed-by-Eva guest suite is worlds better than the hospital showers in Germany. I actually feel clean when I step out. The towels are ridiculously soft for something to dry off with. All the clothes fit.

But I don't have—

Leo: Shoes on the bottom shelf

I find shoes that haven't been torn to shit by the jungle, put them on, and go downstairs. Haley and Leo are at the door with Vivian Constantine. She's Constantine-blond, like Haley, but there's a serious, assessing look about her that reminds me of Eva. She hands off her coat to Gerard with a

soft *thank you* and turns back to Leo. He's still holding Abby. I wonder if he ever puts her down when he's at home.

As I come down the stairs, he leans toward Vivian, and she runs her hand over the fine, dark hair at the crown of Abby's head. The baby is a sleeping blob on Leo's chest, her whole body relaxed. She has no fear of falling.

Another pang.

It doesn't make sense. I don't want children. Or—I haven't thought about wanting children. My life was never going to turn out that way. I was either going to retire into a fake identity or die in the field.

Both of them look up when my feet hit the marble floor.

"Hi, Carter," Haley says. She rises on tiptoe to kiss Leo's cheek. "I'm going to lie down."

"I'll be there soon," Leo promises.

Haley meets me in the middle of the foyer on her way to the stairs and pulls me into a hug. "I'm glad you made it," she says. "Everybody was so worried about you."

"It was just a little rain."

She laughs and lets go. "Don't stay up too late."

"Wouldn't dream of it."

I go to Vivian, who shakes my hand with a firm grip. "Hello, Carter."

"Vivian."

My guard goes up. I can't help it. Vivian Constantine has been involved in more than one aspect of the feud between our families. The generational hatred might be over with, but my overall distrust of Constantines isn't.

"We'll go to my office." Leo leads the way with his baby sleeping in his arms, which has the effect of making this seem less like an armed conflict than a meeting between family members. Or it would, if Vivian weren't wearing a smart black dress and shoes with low heels that look purposefully chosen for State Department meetings.

In Leo's office, he offers us seats by the fireplace and stands nearby, patting at Abby's back. He sways slightly on his feet. "If I sit, she'll cry," he offers in a conversational tone.

"Babies are so particular." Vivian crosses her ankles and folds her hands in her lap. "Let's cut to the chase. I understand you're requesting government intervention in an international dispute."

I don't want to request anything from her.

I've never wanted to request anything from anyone.

It must show on my face, because Leo narrows his eyes from his spot just behind her. *We're doing this*, that look says. And he's right.

This isn't about *me*.

It's about Theo and June, and that's why I have to get over my pride and old professional standards and, yes, the fact that she's Vivian Constantine.

"Yes. I've been an operative for the U.S. government since shortly after I moved to Oxford. The position is classified and off-book."

Her eyebrows go up a little. "And you've been compromised."

"I wouldn't have made anyone aware of my position otherwise. It became necessary when I realized an acquaintance at Oxford is involved, and she appears to be working with Russian operatives."

"Operatives?"

"They could be mercenaries or free agents, but they have Russian ties."

Vivan glances toward the fireplace, and her expression shifts. I haven't spent much time with Vivian Constantine over the course of my life for many obvious reasons, but when I have seen her, she's worn a placid, wide-eyed expression that makes her look innocent and uninterested in whatever drama is going on around her.

She's not wearing that expression now.

Vivian looks sharp and calculating, something I'm far more used to on Morelli faces.

Her eyes return to mine. "Were there other breaches in protocol before you became aware of the Oxford connection?"

"No. I never said a word about this to my family, or to anyone else."

Vivian blinks. It's the only sign that what I've said has more than one meaning. There are things Vivian hasn't said to anyone else, either.

Leo doesn't seem to notice the pause in the conversation.

He's watching the fire.

"You were compromised after your plane crashed en route to Mauritania, correct?"

"No. Before that. The plane was tampered with during the short window of time between my final checks and takeoff. They continued to pursue us after we survived the crash."

"We?"

"Her name is June Porter." I don't want to say June's name to Vivian. To *anyone*. I wish I could go back and tell her not to get on the plane, but I can't. "She's a photographer I was escorting to a university assignment in Mauritania. My cover."

"I had the impression that another person came here with you."

Leo re-joins the conversation. "Someone they met on the island. Not a person who has government connections. He's not a threat."

Vivian purses her lips. "Are we certain?"

"Yes." Snapping at her won't help, damn it. But the idea that Theo could be a government operative of any kind is absurd. The man wants to put himself in even more danger just to protect me. If he understood what it meant to be a government operative, he'd know better. "I apologize, I—"

She waves me off. “There was no evidence of a connection, then.”

“None at all. But he’s been seen with me enough times to make him a target.”

“Well.” Vivian uncrosses her ankles. “I don’t particularly like the idea of American spies being double-crossed. The Oxford connection makes things more complicated.”

“Agreed.”

“I can help you with this. I know the person to bring it to. But it’s going to take time. If we really do have a double agent —“

“You *do*. There’s no question.”

“Yes. *If* we really do, then we’ll have to draw the person out.” She says this as simply and easily as if she were telling me what’d be on the menu at the next Constantine ball.

“How would we do that?”

An elegant shrug. “I don’t think we’ll have to put much effort into it, honestly. They’ll come looking for you.”

My blood turns to ice. “I’m not using Theo and June as bait.”

“Fine.” For a heartbeat, some of the animosity from the past shows on her face. A bolt of ferocity in blue eyes. A nonsense set to her jaw. “Then *you* be the bait. Set up a meeting with your handler. We’ll lay the trap. The double agent will be caught. Is that a plan you can tolerate?”

I force myself to remember that this is not before. That we are not our parents. That this woman doesn’t have to help me, no matter who her sister is married to, no matter who her cousin is married to.

That June and Theo need this. They won’t have a life otherwise. None of us will have a life.

“Yes. How long do you need to prepare?” I keep my voice neutral verging on apologetic. I don’t want to start a fight with

the Constantines, for God's sake. That, like the people hunting me, will hurt all of us.

"Not long." Vivian's careful, too. She rises to her feet, and I follow. When she holds out her hand to agree on this very-backroom plan, I take it. "If there's nothing else..."

"That's all for tonight, I think," Leo says.

Vivian laughs. She releases my hand, and Leo and I walk her out of the office and back to the foyer. Gerard waits there with her coat. Vivian shrugs it on, but before Gerard can open the door, she stops to look me up and down.

"You can schedule the meeting soon, but..." A moment of hesitation, and she makes a decision. "Take some of the intervening time to recover."

"I wasn't injured."

She makes a noncommittal noise. "It should be simple to uncover the traitor, Carter. It might not be easy. You need to be at your best." Vivian turns to touch Abby's hair again and nods to Leo. "Make sure he rests. You'll hear from me shortly."

JUNE

I'M DRIFTING, remembering the beach we crash-landed on, when Carter's phone buzzes.

He doesn't let it keep buzzing. Small taps say he's texting somebody. At one point he laughs, a soft *huff* that sounds like something he'd only do at home. We're not at his house, obviously, but he's been a little different since we walked through the front door. Not relaxed, exactly, but like he can breathe deeper.

I'm absolutely going to open my eyes and ask him what's going on, if he's okay, if he wants me right this minute the way Theo begged to be touched. At minimum I'm going to get up and change into pajamas.

Carter stands up.

The mattress lifts.

Now's when I'm going to do it. I'm going to stop him.

He moves quietly across the room. Okay, *now*.

Theo takes a deep breath, tipping his head closer to mine.

I'm not sure if I'm dreaming or not when Carter's head settles next to mine. Sleeping between two men is so warm that I almost kick off the blankets. I want to ask him where he went when he left.

I'm going to ask.

Next thing I know, it's morning.

Theo sleeps next to me.

Carter's side of the bed is empty.

Golden autumn light filters through curtains on the bedroom's huge windows. It looks out over a big, sloping lawn lined with trees. Red leaves. Green pine needles. Orange and yellow.

It's gorgeous with the sun slanting through the branches.

And...it makes me miss the vivid green of Theo's island.

It *almost* makes me miss the heat.

It's not cold out yet, as far as New York winters are rumored to go, but those leaves are about to fall off the trees. It'll be winter in the blink of an eye.

Theo turns on his side and wraps his arms around a pillow, but doesn't wake up.

I meant to check out the room last night, too, but I didn't. I start with checking my camera battery instead. It has less than half of its charge.

Theo gave it to me with a charger, but I don't know what happened to it. It was plugged into the wall in the hotel room. I put the camera in my pocket to carry it off the island, and then...

Everything else happened.

It'll be okay.

They don't have Theo's tropical island here, but I'm sure Carter's brother or his wife or his butler know where to get a charger that works.

Man, this bedroom is *huge*.

It has a walk-in closet and an attached bath. We'll probably have to ask for clothes, but I find big, fluffy towels in the bathroom along with equally fluffy bathrobes. Everything is *so* soft.

There's no resisting the towels. Individually-wrapped toothbrushes laid out on the countertop near the sink hint that

there might be more stuff in the drawers, which there is. A new razor. Sugar scrub. A stack of soft-yet-sturdy washcloths, or loofahs in multiple colors.

I don't have enough willpower in the world to ask about clothes first.

The enormous shower turns out to be whisper-quiet despite having excellent pressure. Two kinds of shampoo and conditioner wait on a built-in shelf. Two kinds of body wash. I don't think my skin has ever felt so soft in my life.

There's lotion, of course, and then I've never felt so moisturized in my life.

I've never stayed in a serious luxury hotel before, but I bet this is just as good. Or better. I have the same hotel feeling. Like there's a checkout time looming.

It doesn't last forever, in other words.

I ignore that feeling. That's not how you should feel when you're wrapped in the best bathrobe known to man.

There's a hair dryer, but I don't want to wake up Theo, so I brush my hair and put it into a bun still wet.

Time to look in the walk-in closet.

Carter closes the door to the bedroom as my feet meet plush carpeting. For an instant, his face lights up—he saw *me*, and he's happy about it—but then it falls, serious again. He crosses the room with confident strides, wraps an arm around me, and ushers me into the walk-in closet.

“This closet is *huge*,” I whisper as he closes the door with a barely audible *click*. “You smell good.”

He flushes. “You, too. Showers will do that for a person.” Carter gestures at a section of the closet. “These are for you. Leo sent your sizes from Germany. Anything in these drawers, also. Anything in the closet, really. The rest is for Theo, and I'm sure he wouldn't mind.”

“That's...really nice of him.”

“That’s...” Carter looks like he might roll his eyes, but he doesn’t. “Yes, it is. He didn’t have to do all of this. I would’ve handled it. This is just how he is.”

“Generous?”

“Maybe to a fault.” The corners of Carter’s mouth turn down, but it doesn’t last long enough for me to guess what he’s thinking about. “How did you sleep?”

“Great. Did you come to bed last night?”

“For a while.”

“I thought I felt you.”

“You were right.” Carter seems sheepish about it. Reserved. Maybe both.

“How did *you* sleep?”

“Fine. June, I—”

“Will you hold this for me? It seems way too nice to put on the floor, and all the hangers...” I toss him my robe, and Carter catches it with a long-suffering expression.

“June.” He closes his eyes, whispering something under his breath. “I came in here to talk to you.”

“I’ll get dressed so you’re not distracted.”

I’m probably being too lighthearted about being here, and the nice shower, and the lovely clothes on hangers and in the drawers underneath. It’s just that the secrecy makes my heart pound. The worried tension between Theo and Carter unsettles me. When we landed on that island, I’d have given anything to be in a house like this. Now, the house isn’t the most important thing.

Carter averts his eyes, looking stoically at a shelf with three purses on it while I put on leggings and a sweater that feels like it cost at least a thousand dollars.

“The sheets here are *really* soft. And the bathrobes. Even the towels. Or am I just used to...non rich-people stuff?”

“No.” Carter clears his throat, dark eyes returning to me. “All of Leo’s stuff is like that. Anything that would touch your skin.”

“Any special reason, or is he just a quality-sheet person?”

“I don’t know.” Something in Carter’s voice makes me think that’s not the whole truth. He puts the bathrobe over his arm and forges ahead. “I came here to tell you that we need to keep things under wraps. For now?”

That’s not at all playful, which is the right thing when there are people out to get us, but it makes my stomach sink anyway. “Because your family won’t approve?”

“Their approval isn’t important.” Okay, that’s *definitely* not true. It might not be important in terms of getting away from Underwood and her Russian team members, but it’s important to Carter. “If word gets out that the two of you could be used against me, we’re all fucked.”

“I thought we were safe here. I thought that’s why you wanted to come here.”

“We’re relatively safe,” he admits, his eyes moving slowly over the sweater and the leggings hiding my skin from him. “But there are things I need to do, and I can’t do them yet. We can’t let our guard down. We can’t let any information get out before it’s safe.”

“Okay. I’ll try to pretend I don’t love you. Theo’s pretty obvious about it, though.”

“I’m sure he’ll be fine.” Carter takes a breath and stands taller. “I have to meet with Leo about some security plans. Haley’s doing breakfast in the den. Want to come down with me?”

Breakfast does sound great. On the way out, Carter hangs up my bathrobe, then stops and tugs up the blankets to Theo’s shoulder. He leans down and kisses his cheek. There’s real sorrow on his face when he straightens up.

We go down the long hallway, down the stairs, and into the foyer. “Den’s this way,” he says, then puts his hand on the small of my back.

He only keeps it there partway down the hall. Laughter comes out of one of the doors, and Carter leads the way in.

Leo is in the den, on the couch with his wife, Haley. She's lovely and blonde and not at all uncomfortable with being around all this money, which is awkward. It makes me feel awkward, I mean.

"—a perfectly fine opinion," Leo says in a soft voice to his daughter, who he rests on both his arms. One of her fists waves toward him. "Don't let anyone tell you otherwise, Abigail Eva, or I will be forced to intervene." He looks up from the baby to us with a smile that almost convinces me he's not the intense, scary guy who Carter almost punched at the hospital. "Good morning."

"Morning, Haley."

Leo gives Carter a pointed look.

"Good morning, *Abby*," Carter says. "You ready?"

"No." In order to be ready, Leo has to kiss his daughter's cheeks, then hug her, then hand her off to her mother. Then he and Carter leave, Carter teasing him about being obsessed with his baby and Leo teasing him about—

"Come sit with me," Haley says, her blue eyes bright. "We'll finally get a chance to talk."

Finally, as if she's been waiting all her life to get to know some random woman who walked into her house last night and went immediately to bed.

I take a seat on the couch anyway.

"There's tea, and orange juice...some bagels. Eggs. Toast. I can have Mrs. Page bring anything else you want. And we don't have to eat on the couch, if that's not your thing. There is a dining room."

I laugh at that, because I'm sure there *is* a dining room, and I'm sure it's huge and magnificent. "I'm a couch person. And I like it in here."

"It's one of the best rooms." She looks out the big windows while I get a bagel and jam and a cup of tea. There's

a courtyard out there. It's green, with a big tree casting shade over a bench. Birds fly between the branches of the tree. And...there's a pool, too. They have a pool. "So, how are you? How was the flight?"

"I slept for most of it." The jam here is amazing, too. "And then...slept some more."

"That's good. You probably needed it. I'll probably be rude and take a nap later. *This* one—" She beams at her baby, then turns her to lean in her arms so they can both see me, I guess. "Likes to wake up at all hours of the night."

It's impossible not to smile at a baby. "She's very cute."

"Looks just like her dad." Haley laughs. "I can't say I'm surprised."

The bagel's already gone. I was hungrier than I realized. "Did you think she would look like you?"

"Mmm, I think the Morelli genes are strong. All Leo's siblings look alike. My looks didn't stand a fighting chance."

We both laugh at that. "Could I hold her? I know we just met, but she's—"

"So cute," Haley whispers. She moves closer on the couch and puts the baby in my arms. "June, meet Abby. Abby, June."

I look down at Abby, her soft weight in my arms. Haley's right. She does look just like her dad. I can see Carter in her face, too. My heart does a funny turn. What would people say if I had a baby? Who would that baby look like? There are lots of things that seemed simple on the island. We were mostly worried about staying alive and getting home. Now there's time to think of everything that's complicated.

It's a lot.

"What's wrong?" Haley asks, and I realize I've been sadly staring at her baby for longer than I should have.

"Oh, nothing." I put a smile on. "I'm just tired from all the natural disasters. And...honestly, it still feels like a storm is coming."

“It can’t get you here.” Haley’s firm, but how can she know? How can any of us?

“Tell me about her.” It’s been a long time since I got to chat with a woman who seems close to my age for something other than work. “I want to know everything about this cute, *cute* baby.”

Haley tells me about Abby, and I ask questions, and we don’t talk about any more natural disasters.

I’ve just handed Abby back to Haley when Leo and Carter come back into the den. Carter’s wearing a scowl on his face, and when Haley sees it, her eyebrows go up.

“Dinner tomorrow.” Leo’s voice is light. He reaches over the back of the couch and takes Abby in his arms. “A family dinner.”

“It’s too soon,” Carter says.

“They want to see you.” Leo says this mainly to Abby. “It’s either we have dinner here, or all of you go to Bishop’s Landing, and I think that would be a bad idea.”

“It’s a bad idea, period.” Carter crosses his arms over his chest.

Leo kisses Abby’s nose and faces Carter. “It’s going to happen eventually. If we put it off, they’ll show up here, and you know that. This way, Theo and June can meet everyone where it’s—” He’s about to say *safe*, I know it, but changes direction. “Where Theo can rest, and it’s more natural than the mansion. Relax, Carter. It’s going to be fine.”

CARTER

FAMILY DINNER IS WORSE than I ever could have imagined.

Being a Morelli, I've attended many, many family dinners, more than one of which has ended in a shouting match or physical violence.

I've never attended one where I had to pretend not to love the two people I've brought with me.

It's fucking terrible. Leo does a better job of hiding it than I do. He goes to the foyer two hours before dinner is supposed to start with Abby in his arms.

Daphne and Emerson are the first people to arrive. My sister glides in and holds her hands out for Abby. Leo puts the baby in my sister's arms and heads around her to clap Emerson on the shoulder.

"I've been *waiting* to talk to you," Daphne tells Abby. "Remember what I said last time about the paintbrushes? I thought we could talk about—"

I clear my throat.

She looks up at me, her eyes going wide with surprise and relief. "Oh my God, Carter, I thought you'd be asleep! We're so early!"

Daphne rushes into my arms with Abby in hers. She's too careful with the baby to put her arms around me, but she burrows her face into my shirt in a way she hasn't for years.

I'm not surprised that my eyes burn. I'm surprised that they burn so *much*. I thought I'd accepted the risks of my job. Every time I left to go to Oxford, I did it with the understanding that I might never see them again. It wasn't until the plane was sabotaged that I thought it was actually happening.

"I was so worried when you stopped emailing." The words are muffled by my shirt and covered by the conversation Leo's having with Emerson, which mostly sounds like a list of what's on the dinner menu and the guest list.

Guilt squeezes at my heart. "I'm sorry. I wanted to write you back. I thought about it when—"

"When the plane went down?" She takes a deep breath and looks up at me, tears in her eyes but a stoic set to her expression. "I know about the plane, by the way. I know about a lot of stuff. You don't have to pretend it didn't happen."

"I just don't think plane crashes make very good dinner conversation."

"Fine. We can do homework instead."

It feels good to laugh at her.

"I won't be doing homework. I'll be painting. You can work on whatever you want. But I want to talk to you, okay? Before you leave again."

Guilt takes over all the available space, doesn't it? I don't know why I couldn't see it before. Being a government operative isn't worth this look on Daphne's face, like she knows I won't have time for her but she can't help hoping.

"I'm here for the time being. Come over whenever you want."

She tosses her hair, blinking away her tears. "Joke's on you. I can already come over whenever I want. I'm Leo's favorite."

"You're my favorite, too."

"Excuse *me*." This, from Eva, who comes in next with Finn Hughes at her side. "I know I didn't hear you choose

Daphne over me.”

She comes in for a hug, a smile on her face, and that’s about the time the dinner starts being awful.

Not because my family isn’t happy to see me.

It’s the pretending. The hiding. The lying. Introducing them to Theo and June in Leo’s formal living room, which he only uses when our parents come to his house. Giving brief, soulless descriptions of who we are to each other. Explaining away Theo’s presence by saying he was injured on the island. Letting them believe it was during the plane crash.

My parents arrive last, after all my siblings, and that’s hell on earth. I know Leo and Eva only gave them vague outlines of what happened—something wrong with my plane, caught out on an island in the storm, an injured friend—but I don’t think our mother bought it. Not entirely. The hug she gives me is too tight for the distant, regal queen she usually is.

And my father—

Fuck.

I got my eyes from him, and my hair, and I know both too well to miss the calculating gleam when I introduce Theo and June.

We eat at a long table in the ballroom instead of Leo’s dining room because, as Leo announces when we go in, our mother likes to look at the stained-glass rose in the center of the windows.

Dinner is candlelit, almost cozy, and calm in a way I find viciously unsettling. My father eats so fast it borders on rude. He’d never have tolerated that from us. I have no idea why he’s doing it until he looks across the table at Haley, who gets up from her seat and...smiles.

She smiles at him. It’s a conspiratorial smile. Indulgent? Haley goes to my father’s place and hands over a blanket, which he puts over his shoulder.

Then she hands him the baby.

Her baby.

Abby.

Haley Morelli, née Constantine, hands her baby over to my father, and the *baby* rubs her face into the blanket, stretches her legs, and settles in.

Lucian kicks me under the table. “Did the plane crash wipe your manners from your memory? You’re staring, brother mine.”

I turn around in my seat and lower my voice. “What the fuck is going on here?”

“We’re making memories as a family.”

His wife, Elaine, leans around him. She’s pregnant, too. “Isn’t your dad kind of cute holding a baby?”

“Is this some kind of joke?” I whisper at her.

“No.” Elaine sobers. “It’s real, trust me. We all felt the same way at first.”

“At first?”

“When Abby was born,” Lucian intones, as if I should remember it.

“I wasn’t here for that.”

“Tell us about your friends, Carter.” Elaine says. “The three of you seem close.”

“We’re not.”

My sister-in-law laughs. “You’re so funny.”

I’d rather be in another plane crash than tell that lie again.

After dinner, there’s coffee in the formal living room. Lizzy updates all of us on how her first semester at college is going. Tiernan sits close to his wife, Bianca, and only scowls about half the time. My mother asks Emerson about a painting she found in one of the little-used sitting rooms in the Morelli Mansion. Eva and Leo pretend not to be telling each other every piece of information they’ve gathered since they last texted, which was probably five minutes before she and Finn

arrived for dinner. Daphne and Sophia hover nearby, trying to eavesdrop. They keep forgetting to pay attention.

My father relinquishes Abby to my mother for five minutes, then spends the rest of the time holding her.

While we're there, I get a text from Vivian Constantine. It didn't take as long as she thought to be ready. I'm free to set up a meeting with my handler.

I should be glad that we can move on to the next part of this plan, but I'm not. Any one of these phases could be the one that ends in all of us separated, or injured, or worse. I know that the safety we have here is an illusion.

I can't help wanting to hang on to it for as long as possible.

My parents stay for much longer than I thought they would, probably because of the baby. Each of my siblings finds a way to tell me that they'll be visiting whether I want them to or not, which I suspect is half because they like to come over and see Abby.

"Really?" I ask Sophia, after she tells me as much with a tilt to her head like she's walking down the runway. "Leo lets all of you come over at random times during the day?"

"Have you *met* our brother?"

"Yes. That's why I'm asking."

"He's not home all day for you, Carter. He's home because he's out until the end of the year on paternity leave. And he always made it a point to tell us to come over even before Abby came on the scene."

Describing her appearance on the planet that way is funny enough to make me laugh, even though I've spent the past several hours trying to look at Theo and June the same amount an acquaintance would look at them. I'm fucking desperate for all this to be over.

"I guess I left before he was like that."

"For a government operative, you're, like, not that observant. He's always been like that. I'll be back tomorrow,

probably.” Sophia gives me a hug, then breezes out of Leo’s house without a backward glance.

I do *not* love the way her pronouncement makes me feel. I know what my family is—a pack of wolves. Even Leo. Especially Leo.

Maybe I was wrong.

Probably not, but...maybe.

Leo crosses the foyer from the direction of the office. “Are you coming?”

“Where?”

“To the den. Obviously.”

June and Haley and Theo are in there, relaxing on couches and chairs and flipping through movies on the TV. June seems shy after the dinner we spent pretending not to know each other. She pats the couch next to her.

I can’t sit down and watch a movie with them. Not until I’ve made this call. It’s what I owe everyone in this room, and everyone who came to dinner. It’s what I owe my family, even if I can’t keep them.

“I’ll be back in a second.”

I go back across the foyer to Leo’s office and sit in front of the fireplace, then get back up. I pace in front of the courtyard windows instead. Dial my handler while I’m looking at the view.

The courtyard is as safe as it gets. Is that why Leo liked this house so much? Because he could shut out the world but still feel the sun?

He kept letting us in, though.

Maybe we didn’t count as *the world*.

My handler is as terse and removed as ever. The deviations from protocol are noted. Request for meeting accepted. We set the date and time for the meeting and hang up.

I'm halfway across the foyer when the front doors open and three agents come in. One of them jogs off toward the den. The other two lock the doors and take positions. Gerard comes down the stairs from the second floor.

"I need status updates," he calls, his voice carrying across the foyer. It must go down the hall, too, because Leo comes out of the den and meets us both at the hall entrance.

Gerard keeps his phone to his ear and his eyes on Leo's face. "Trespassers on the property line. Other side of the forest. Three men. Two of them ran. Our people caught one. From what he said, he's an unhoused man from the city."

Leo takes this in. "That doesn't make sense. We're too far from the city for that to be worthwhile."

"It makes sense if Underwood and the Russians paid them to do this. They're trying to figure out where I am." This adrenaline rush doesn't make my heart pound. It seems to make my heart slow, each beat steady. "That means we should go."

"Carter, for God's sake, if you say that one more time—"

"They're going to keep sending more people."

"Let them." Leo looks me in the eye. "I don't care. I'll put more people on each rotation. The three of you are not going out there to fuck around and get killed."

"Leo—"

"The movie is starting."

"What?"

"The movie is starting in the den." Leo's being like this on purpose. Collected, but with a simmering undertone of violence. Or maybe he's just pissed that somebody came near his forest. "Are you going to watch it with us?"

"I—" Have to leave.

"Is it that you want to hold the baby? You're probably jealous that you haven't had a turn. She's very cute."

What am I supposed to say to that? “Yes. I’m extremely jealous. My feelings are hurt.”

“I thought so.” Leo pats my shoulder, and we go into the den, where he insists that I hold the baby for at least ten minutes.

She *is* very cute.

Theo’s asleep halfway through the movie, and everyone goes to bed afterward. I kiss Theo and June and go to sleep in one of the Eva-approved guest rooms. I can tell June wants to ask why, but she doesn’t.

When the house has been quiet for an hour, I get up and get dressed. I leave Leo’s house through a door in the back, sneak past his guards, and head for the woods.

THEO

CARTER DOES NOT BELIEVE that we should stay together.

He's said the three of us shouldn't be separated, but that's not how he acts.

For three nights, he sleeps in a second bedroom. The medicine they gave me at the hospital makes me tired. I can still feel that he's gone.

I can still hear him leaving, though the room he chose is at the end of the hall.

The walls here are sturdier than the house on the island. At night, the quiet is like being wrapped in blankets. My island swelled with sound when the sun set. Animals prowled. Birds hunted. Insects sang. The ocean and the trees spoke to one another.

We are not in the city the way I remember it. We're outside of the city, surrounded by a big, green stretch of grass, so there is no constant traffic. At a certain point, the house settles.

So I hear, distantly, the baby wake and cry. I hear her parents murmuring to her.

And I hear Carter's bedroom door open. I hear his footsteps fade toward the back of the house. He is not going to meet with his brother. By the third night, I'm certain he's not in the house at all.

On the fourth night, I get out of bed and follow him. June does not stir.

It is how I thought.

There are guards on the property, but I move past them the way I would on the island when I did not want to attract the attention of the animals. Silently. Softly.

It does not take long to find Carter's path.

Days ago, people came to the woods. Carter thinks they were here to look for him, or look for us. I follow his footprints through whispering trees until I catch sight of him, so far from his brother's house that I cannot see it.

The way he moves is different from the island. He was wary, then. Cautious. He knew someone was there, but not that it was me. His plan was not to fight. It was to escape.

Now, he's...

Hunting.

He knows the threat is here, if not the shape and size of it. He's out here every night because he thinks he can find it before it finds us.

This forest has its own sounds. I move with them as well as I can. All the birds are different. Even the wind in the trees has a brittle sound. The season is coming to an end. In this place, there are fewer animals, but not none. A few of them retreat sleepily as I pass.

My bullet wound aches. Carter seems certain that this pain is from healing, not from any deeper hurt. I tend to agree with him. It's not a hot, crawling pain, the way it would be if it had become offended. I don't have a fever.

Despite that ache, it feels good to be out in the open air.

It even feels good to track Carter.

He is beautiful in the moonlight, though he is mostly a shadow. As beautiful as he was in the moonlight of my island. More beautiful, perhaps, because he loves me.

It makes my heart twist and turn like an eddy in a river. He loves me. He loves June. That's why he's doing this. That's why he brought us here, though he believes we can't stay.

He is right. We cannot.

But *he* could stay.

A breeze picks up, singing through the trees, and an owl hoots. Carter pauses, his head turned. I pause, too. My heartbeat is strong in my chest. Loud, even with the sounds of the night. I'm more aware of myself as an animal here. I didn't pay much attention on the island, except when I thought of my mother and the men who hurt her and how the devil's children have the same blood running through their veins.

It runs through mine, steady as ever.

I close my eyes for a few seconds and breathe.

When I open them again, Carter is moving.

I follow him through a forest that's both wild and not wild at all. I can almost sense its boundaries, the way I could sense the way the island met the ocean. It does not last forever. The underbrush has been tended. Paths wind this way and that through the trees. It's not left to its own devices, but it's not controlled, either.

Two trees have grown closer together, and I slip between them, glancing down to choose my footsteps. I've been walking in Carter's prints so there won't be a second set if he circles back. There will be no trace of me here when we go inside.

That's how it should be.

On the other side of the trees, I look up, expecting to see moonlight on dark hair and dark clothes.

There's nothing.

I stand perfectly still and scan the forest with only my eyes. There's no sign of Carter in the shadows under the trees.

How did I lose him? I've spent most of my life tracking predators and prey. He shouldn't be able to disappear like this.

Carter will have gone one direction or another. I'll go left first.

I make it one step into the turn, and then I'm shoved up against the tree, a hand at my chest and a gun at my head. Dark eyes in a sharp, beautiful face are inches from mine.

"Fuck." Carter sticks the gun into a holster and puts both his hands on my face. At this distance, he's not a predator. He's Carter, and his expression flashes between anger and fear. He tests my pulse with his fingertips, one hand skimming down over the wound like he's afraid I've left it uncovered. "I could have killed you."

"What are you looking for?"

"Nothing. I'm being safe. Making sure we're safe."

"No, you aren't. Something happened."

"Yes. Some assholes from the city came to the property, and—" Carter's eyes fall to my lips.

"What else?"

He drags his eyes back to mine. "I want to be the first to know if she sends someone else."

"She?"

"Underwood." His forehead creases, brows drawing together. "But it might not be related to Underwood and the Russians. Morellis have a lot of enemies."

"Because of your ties to the Mafia?"

Carter glares, the heated anger echoing in my own chest. I cannot keep the smile from tugging at the corners of my mouth.

He snorts, the lines of him softening, his touch becoming gentle, protective. "We're not mafia." Carter Morelli's face is a work of art, even when there's not enough light to appreciate all of it. His eyes show everything to a person who wants to see. "But we're not good people, either."

"Which one of you is not good?"

A barking laugh. "All of us. Beginning with my father. He's the one who—" Carter curses under his breath. "He made all of us this way."

“He was kind to the little one at dinner.”

“That’s—that’s recent. He wasn’t kind to us.”

“He was never kind?”

A sigh. “He was an asshole, Theo. His better moments didn’t make up for it. If you don’t believe me, you can ask—“

“I believe you.”

Carter presses his lips together. “My parents are...very Catholic.”

“What about you?”

“They wouldn’t have me. If they knew.”

“Who?”

A long pause. “The Church.”

I know what he means. I know the meanings humans take from the word of God. I know about power. About rejection.

Carter leans closer. “They wouldn’t understand what we do together.” His lips brush my jawline. “I don’t understand what we do together half the time. For all I know...”

“It would condemn you.”

“Yes,” he whispers.

“If I can accept it, why can’t you?”

Carter lifts his head and looks into my eyes. He smells warm and clean in the cool of the night, and I want to breathe him forever. “You haven’t accepted it. You think you’ll turn into a child of the devil, as if you ever could.”

“I have slept without you for three nights while you were out here.”

He narrows his eyes. “You knew I was coming?”

“I felt you leave the house. Heard you. I understood you were protecting us. I thought you must have decided it was better to be apart.”

“That’s *not* what I decided.”

“No?”

“I want you to be safe,” he insists. “I need—I need you to be safe. I don’t know how else to protect you. I don’t want to be separated.”

“But it troubles you, the three of us.”

“It troubles *you*.”

“It did.”

Now his grip is firm, almost desperate. “What changed?”

“I left half my heart inside. The other half is with you. It is simple.”

“So you’re just...” He makes a disbelieving sound. “You don’t think you’re a sinner for being bisexual?”

“I think every person is a sinner. But loving you, and loving June...it can’t be evil. A merciful God would never say so.”

Carter’s eyes shine, huge and hopeful, and then he cleared his throat. “Theo, I—”

“I love you,” I tell him. “I cannot stop myself from loving you. If you could corrupt me, if you could turn me into the devil’s child, I’d have become that on the island, because you were there, too. It’s the city that worries me.”

“We’re not in the city.” His voice is soft.

“We are close. It has its grip on me. I can feel it.”

“If you mean my family...”

“You were right. Your family is like a pack. But there are so many of them. This place is...it’s *built*. I am not used to it. I’m used to the wild, and to—to being alone.”

Agony flickers across his face and disappears. “We don’t have to stay here. We shouldn’t stay here.”

“Saying that hurt you.”

“My family is too much for you. I understand that. I do. But they’re—I don’t know that I should have stayed away. I don’t know that I want to leave. Except I would, Theo. I would

do that. I can buy you a place with less people and more animals, and we can—”

“We.” It hurts me to speak the word, knowing what I have to say after. “We are a temporary love. The three of us. If one of us is not meant for this place, and you are not made for my island, then—”

“No.”

“You and June could have a life here. The kind of life you want. The two of you would be all right without me. And I can live alone.”

“Stop it.” I can tell he wants to yell. “Stop, Theo, unless you want me to punish this bullshit out of you. I don’t want a life, any life, without you in it. You’re wrong, and I won’t hear it. I can’t hear that from you.”

I lean forward and kiss him.

Carter pushes into the kiss like a drowning man. His hands go to my waist, and he leans us into the trees, where there is shelter.

I do not want to fight with him. I do not want to lie to him.

So I do not speak. I let him kiss me. I kiss him back. I taste the night air on his lips. I let him taste me as deeply as he wants.

“Don’t say that to me,” he says into the kiss, raw pain in his voice. “Don’t say it again, Theo, I can’t fucking stand it. I need you here. I need you here with me.”

“I am here.” It is the truth. For now, I am here. For now, he loves me.

I lose track of the moon and the stars. I lose track of time.

I feel like a lit candle when Carter pulls back. He tips his forehead against mine, then straightens. His hands slide down my chest and release.

“It’s time to go in,” he says. “It’s time you got back to June.”

CARTER

I TOLD THEO THE TRUTH.

I can't stand to think of him apart from me, and I don't know how to convince myself that it'll be all right. What I *know* is that it won't be okay if he's not here. If I lose him to the world.

We sneak through the trees, avoiding the guards on patrol, and cross Leo's yard at the smallest gap in their rotation.

In the narrow hall inside the back door, I push Theo against the wall and kiss him again. He smells like a combination of his skin and Leo's house. Soft sheets and hard muscles. It's dangerous enough that *he* knows I can't live without him. It will be worse if anyone finds out before I can end the threat.

I could do this all night.

I don't. I pull away before I'm ready.

We're not ten steps down the hall when I sense somebody nearby.

"Go upstairs and go to sleep. I'll be there in a minute."

"Upstairs, or in bed with us?" Theo's eyes beg.

"Not all night. But...for a while. I'll come to your bed for a while."

He doesn't ask me any more questions.

I turn around and head the opposite direction.

Leo is in the hall, Abby sleeping on his shoulder. He paces the hall at a slow, steady rhythm. The two of them are dressed in soft sleep clothes, Abby's a light blue, Leo's black, as always.

"How was it tonight?" He asks the question without turning around. "I'm heading toward my office now, by the way."

I fall into step with him. Abby's passed out, her tiny mouth open. "I thought you'd be sleeping."

"Yes, well, I have an infant. She doesn't care about things like *night* and *day*. And my agents were concerned about your patrols."

"What? They didn't catch me."

"They caught you the first night you went out. I told them to leave you alone." We move through his house. I don't know whether to be irritated or grateful or heartbroken or happy or all of it, all at once. Leo turns into his office and nudges the door closed behind us. "Sit."

I sit in one of the chairs by the fire, and I mean to sit up straight to have...whatever discussion this is going to be, but end up slouching. Sinking.

I've been tired since the plane went down. And for years before that. Prowling through the woods doesn't count as rest.

Heat from the fire works its way through my clothes. It makes my eyelids heavier by the second. My body clearly wants warmth from any source, but I want it from Theo and June.

"Nobody else has come to the house." Leo's still on his feet. He's stopped pacing and sways side to side, just enough motion to keep Abby asleep. "I have people at the property line twenty-four hours a day."

"I know you do."

"But you don't trust them."

"I have to be *sure*."

He considers me, and it makes me wish, childishly, that I had a blanket to pull over my face. This is one of the hazards of being in the same room as my siblings. I'm beginning to understand that they notice as much as I do. And, unlike me, they don't have individual handlers to report their findings to.

They have each other.

Goddamn it. Is their network better than the government's? Are they better at keeping secrets? From everything I've learned about them from an ocean's remove, the answer is probably *yes*.

"You don't trust *me*," he decides, after a minute.

"Of course I trust you. I wouldn't have come here if I didn't."

"Then you must know that I have significant experience with hiring security teams, and I've made all the adjustments you wanted."

"Did you ask me in here to *scold* me about patrolling the grounds at night?"

Leo rolls his eyes. "You would know it if I was scolding you."

"Then—"

"I want to know what's keeping you up at all hours. I want to know if there's something I can change so you don't feel like you have to double-check the work of multiple overlapping security teams."

"They could have missed something."

"They didn't."

"There's always a chance."

"They didn't miss anything." He doesn't raise his voice, not even a little, but I'm struck by the size of his hand across Abby's back. She looks incredibly small, and a stony, dangerous determination shadows his face. Leo closes his eyes, and when he opens them again, it's gone. "I won't let

anyone get to this house, and I think you know that. Tell me what's wrong."

He never told me what kept him up at night. He never told me what hurt him. I sense he would consider all that beside the point. All of the secrets I'm keeping feel heavier in the warmth of his office.

"You let *me* inside. How are you so sure you're safe now that I'm here?"

"You're my brother. You're not a threat."

"Me being your brother doesn't mean anything."

"I'd argue that, at minimum, it means I know that something is bothering you so much that you're not sleeping."

At Oxford, no one cared if I slept. In my line of work, they only cared if I slept as it related to the success or failure of any given mission. I don't know how I feel about Leo noticing and caring.

Mother of God. Fine. I do my best not to let my sigh sound defeated. "It's Underwood," I admit. "It's the Russians. But... mostly, it's me."

"You?" Leo's voice is neutral. His face is neutral. As if he doesn't know.

"I'm like Dad."

He frowns. "Are you?"

My brother is being intentionally obtuse. "...yes. I'm evil and violent like him."

There's a long pause. Maybe Leo will say something insightful. Maybe he'll have the answer that makes our lives make sense. It wouldn't be the first time.

He opens his mouth, closes it, and opens it again.

"...are you?"

"Jesus, Leo. I've killed people. I didn't go to Oxford to get away from all of you. I went to keep all of you away from *me*."

“Goodness.” He glances at the fire, then back at me. “If it makes you feel better, we weren’t afraid of you. Ever.”

“I have a black ops, classified job that involves murder.”

Leo shrugs, his hand moving up and down on Abby’s tiny back. “I’ve killed people.”

I cover my face with my hands. “Leo...no, you haven’t. I know you started those rumors so nobody would fuck with you.”

“Yes, I have.” He’s so mild about this. So light. “Three people, actually.”

What the fuck? I drop my hands to stare at him. “You shot three people?”

He wrinkles his nose. “Guns are so...ungraceful. Impersonal. I stabbed them with a knife.”

“*Why?*”

“They were hurting Haley.”

I’m momentarily speechless.

“I confessed,” he says. “To both the killing and not feeling any remorse about it.”

“How are you not in *jail*?”

Leo looks at me like I’ve suffered long-term memory loss. “I didn’t confess to the police, Carter. I went to confession.”

I cover my face again. This can’t be real. This has to be a stress dream.

“Why do you think it makes you Satan to protect the people you love?” Leo asks in the dark on the other side of my hands.

“Because what if I’m not protecting them?” I don’t realize I’ve uncovered my face until he comes into view, black clothes in the firelight, his daughter safe in his arms. “They can’t be safe if I’m with them. *I’m* the danger.”

“That’s not what you are.”

My frustration and anger and fear feel bigger than the house. “You can’t be certain of that.”

“And yet I am.”

I’m on my feet without any memory of standing. I want to get *louder*, to make him understand, but Abby’s here. In the room, and on the Earth. A baby changes everything. Love changes everything.

“You.” I point at him, because I will be damned if I wake up his baby daughter in the middle of the night after she’s already woken *him* up. “You are not like me.”

Leo doesn’t look bothered by this in the slightest. “I know what you think of me. I know what you think of all of us.”

“Wolves.” I scrub my hands over my face, wishing I could break the habit, knowing that I can’t as long as I’m in Leo’s house. It’s too close to home. “And I’m the worst of all.”

He laughs.

I glower at him, and he rearranges his face into seriousness. “I thought *you* were the dangerous one. Isn’t that why you went to Oxford? To protect the...softer creatures of the family?”

“None of us are soft. We’re *all* wolves. I’m just the one who let it go the farthest. I’ve hurt people, and I’d do it again.”

“Do you want to go to confession?”

“No,” I snap. It doesn’t seem as effective in a near-whisper. Part of me *does* want to go. Part of me wants to tell a priest hidden from view everything I’ve done so he can lay out, in concrete terms, what I’ll need to do to earn forgiveness. Or whether it’s even possible. “I can’t be that person.”

“A person who goes to confession?”

“A person who’s just...let off the hook. A reformed person. I’m not reformed. I’m just as terrible as I’ve always been, and—I couldn’t tell anyone about it anyway. I’ve already told *you* enough classified information that I can’t—”

He waits, and cold clarity burns off the heat from the fire. Everything's going to change no matter how this ends.

"I can't go back. If they find out, I can't go back. I certainly can't say anything, even at confession. The church we went to isn't even—"

"Oh, I wasn't suggesting you go there. I would never. I've found the one priest in New York City who knows how to keep his mouth shut. That's where I go."

"You...attend church? On a regular basis?"

"Yes." Leo peers at me, both of us equally disbelieving. "I thought that was obvious when I got married."

"I thought that was just for the wedding. And the emergency mass when Daphne was missing."

"The priest at that church holds secret masses for me most weeks. Usually at midnight."

"Why secret?"

He rolls his eyes, looking exactly like he might burst out laughing and wake up the baby. "Because I'm the Beast of Bishop's Landing. Nobody would want me there on a Sunday morning. They'd be angry. Or afraid."

"That's bullshit."

"They're real masses."

Abby stirs, and Leo kisses the top of her head. He holds her a little closer, then crosses to where I'm standing. "Have a seat."

It's the second time he's ordered me into a chair in the last half-hour, and I don't bother fighting. "I'm not sitting here all night."

"No, of course not." He leans down, turning Abby as he does, and settles her into my arms. "It shouldn't take more than a few minutes."

"What—" I lose track of the question, because she's *so* small. So very, *very* fragile. My heart feels larger in my chest, like it wants to surround her, to protect her from everything.

She turns her face toward my shirt, her tiny body shifting. I change the angle of my arm to match, and—Christ. I would do so much for my niece. “What’s only going to take a few minutes?”

He sits down across from me and stretches his arms over his head, balancing on the back of the sofa. He’s actually leaning on it. Letting it take his weight. Then he sits up, looking tired for the first time since I came inside.

“You don’t have to pretend, you know. Not here.”

I tear my eyes from Abby’s sweet, peaceful face to look at Leo. “Pretend what?”

“That you don’t love them.”

“Leo—”

“You don’t. If you’re out trying to avoid my guards all night because you won’t let yourself sleep in the same room —”

“If anyone finds out and uses them against me, I’ll never forgive myself. If anyone gets to them, I’ll never forgive myself.” I hate how desperate I sound, but there’s no avoiding it.

“I understand.”

“Then let me—”

He holds up a hand. “Sleep in a separate room. I won’t say anything about your boyfriend and your girlfriend—”

“We’re not together like that.”

The corners of Leo’s mouth twitch like he might smile, but he doesn’t. “I won’t tell anyone about Theo and June. But let me handle the security, at least for a few days. You can’t protect anyone if you’re exhausted.”

I hate that he’s right. I’m relieved that he’s right. Abby’s soft weight in my arms rounds down the painful, jagged edges of my thoughts.

“She likes you,” Leo says.

I breathe out a laugh. “She doesn’t know me. She’s been asleep the whole time.”

“Babies can recognize their parents by scent.” Leo cocks his head to the side. “I didn’t know that until after she was born.”

“That’s true of most mammals.” Abby’s totally relaxed, heavy with sleep. “She must think you’ve left her with a stranger.”

“No, actually. Scent recognition extends beyond parents to close biological relatives. She’s too young to be afraid of strangers, but she’s most comfortable with people in the family.”

My throat closes. I’m not blinking back tears. It’s dry in here. From the fire. I look down at Abby to make sure she’s all right. My eyes feel less dry when I look back into Leo’s.

“The Beast of Bishop’s Landing is bullshit. He’s a fictional creature. You’re not really like that.”

“Oh?” Leo makes his eyes wide and sincere. “I thought I was a wolf.”

JUNE

AFTER THE FAMILY DINNER—I think of it with capitals, because it's such a big deal for Carter—his siblings start casually dropping by his brother's house as if they're there for a million other reasons.

Not to see *him*, of course.

Not to sit in the den, where Theo likes to rest and watch the courtyard birds fly in and out of the leaves in the tree closest to the window.

Not to watch me take photos of those birds with the camera Theo got for me, charged with a cord delivered by the butler less than an hour after I asked Haley if there was a drugstore nearby, or a Walmart. Along with the charger there was a Bluetooth card reader that will send the photos from the camera's memory card to any smartphone.

No, Carter's siblings don't make special plans with him, they just *happen to be in the neighborhood*.

One afternoon, when Carter is meeting with Leo in his office, Haley tells me that none of the siblings live in places that would make it a regular occurrence to be on this street, which mostly has big houses owned by rich people. We're north of New York City, and Bishop's Landing, where Carter's parents have their house and where he grew up, is east of the city.

They just don't want to bother Carter.

It's a little funny and a little sad.

Daphne is the only one who doesn't fully commit to the act.

We've been here a little less than a week when Gerard walks past the den. A minute later, Daphne's voice echoes in the foyer. "Carter! Where are you? Carter. *Carter.*"

He answers from the opposite side of the house, his voice muffled. Another meeting with Leo, down in his office. I guess that's where they go to discuss all the plans for hiring more armed agents and things like that.

"Say whatever you have to say before I get there, because I *am* coming in, and neither of you is going to stop me."

Haley comes into the den with Abby in her arms. "Hi. Everything okay? Need anything?"

She has the kind of smile you can't help but smile back at. "We're good."

"Is Theo—" Haley moves around the couch. "Oh, we don't want to bother him, do we, Abby?"

Theo's asleep, his head in my lap, under one of the unbelievably soft throw blankets that seem to magically appear whenever they're wanted in this house.

"No, no, stay. You won't bother him. He's out." The painkillers he's on from the hospital basically demand at least one nap. "Plus, I think he likes it when there's a little noise. He thinks it's weirdly quiet here."

"Here?" Haley's eyes get huge. She moves around to a love seat nearby, her footsteps silent on the carpet. "I've never thought of Leo as soft-spoken. And Abby can be...assertive."

She cringes a little, and on Leo's wife, the expression lands just between *cute* and *pretty*.

"That's a good thing, though, right?"

"Yes, as long as she's not waking up the *whole* house."

"If it helps, Theo thinks it's like a library compared to the island he lived on. Wildlife doesn't moderate its volume."

“That’s funny.” Her eyes sparkle. “Neither do Morelli men. I’m sure you’ve noticed that about Carter.”

“Noticed what? He’s—what is that saying? He’s quiet as a church mouse.”

It feels good to laugh with someone else about something we have in common. I catch myself wishing the feeling of being in this together could last forever. I let myself hold on to the wish, then delete it like a blurry photo. *If* everything turns out, I’ll be over the moon. Until then...I know better than to set myself up for disappointment.

“Good afternoon, fellow timeless beauties. What are we laughing about?” Carter’s sister Sophia glides into the room wearing a long-sleeved dress that looks both structured and soft somehow. It’s a *constructed* garment, and she wears it very well. Her dark hair is in a high, sleek ponytail.

“Sophia! We were laughing about how quiet Leo and his brothers are.” Haley can’t even get the words out with a straight face.

“They’re *so* quiet and reserved. I’d even call them shy.” Sophia only breaks into a grin on *shy*. She drops down on the love seat with Haley. “How is everyone?”

Haley laughs. “I’m okay. June?”

“I’m great.”

“And how is this cute, *cute*, gorgeous baby Abby?” Sophia looks pointedly at Abby and waits for an answer.

Abby reclines in Haley’s arms. One fist comes up to her chest. She starts to lift her head—or is she doing a crunch? Her tiny mouth opens. Her fist waves again. It looks like a *lot* of effort.

And then, very quietly, she says *oooh*.

Sophia beams. “I’m *so* glad to hear that. Honestly, Abby, that’s the best news I’ve heard all day.”

Haley sits up straighter, her eyes darting toward the door. “Want to hold her a minute? If you don’t, I’ll take her with me, I just—”

“Give her to me immediately.” Sophia says this in a high, musical voice. “Let me see my niece. We can hang out together. June’s here, too. And Theo. We’ll protect her with our lives. Go do whatever you need to do.”

“I don’t think you’ll have to go into battle, but I appreciate the offer.” Haley puts Abby in Sophia’s arms. “It’ll just be—”

“Not necessary.” Sophia makes a kiss-face at Abby. “Take your time. We’ll be just fine.”

“But still...thank you.”

“I said *not necessary*.”

Haley’s already at the door. She looks over her shoulder and gives Sophia a wave.

Sophia wiggles her fingers, which makes Haley laugh again. Then she settles back into the love seat, puts her feet on the coffee table, and shifts Abby onto her legs. My heart aches for no real reason at all. Today, all three of us are safe, and that should be enough, right? I shouldn’t be thinking about holding my own baby like that. A baby with Carter’s eyes, or the shape of Theo’s face. “You *are* extremely adorable. I wasn’t just saying that so you’d be friends with me. I genuinely meant it.”

A bird in the courtyard swoops in and lands on the outer sill. It pecks gently at the glass with its beak.

“Leo’s in his office. If you want to check on him, you’ll have to go over there. Be careful with your beak.” Sophia doesn’t turn to look at the bird. I smile at the joke—it’s sweet, talking to the birds—but then the bird actually flies away, as if it understood. Leo’s sister looks at me over her knees. “So. Now that we’re alone.”

I laugh a little. “I don’t know any state secrets, if that’s what you’re hoping to find out.”

“State secrets are boring.” Sophia glances at Theo, who’s still asleep, his body heavy. “I’m more curious about the three of you.”

This is what Carter wanted to keep...how did he say it? *Under wraps*. “There’s not much to know. We met on the

island after Carter's plane had those problems, and—"

"Immediately started hooking up?"

My breath catches in my throat, blood rushing to my face. Oh, no. It's going to be *so* obvious. "I don't know what—"

"Abby, tell this lady that it's just me and you, and she doesn't have to pretend not to be in love with my brother." Sophia looks down at Abby's face, expectant, until Abby says *goo*. Then her eyes meet mine, sparkling with amusement. "See? It's okay to admit it. I've seen the way Carter tries to avoid looking at you. At *both* of you."

"He was preoccupied at dinner, so—"

"Yeah. With being in love with you."

"If he is, he hasn't said so to me." My goal is to play it off like a joke.

Sophia shakes her head. "Oh, Carter. He's so...obvious, sometimes, but he thinks he's a closed book." She lets out a little sigh. "I think it's cool, by the way. That the three of you are together."

"You do?"

"Uh...yes." Sophia's sincere. "I love that for you. I even love it for him. He can be kind of intense sometimes, like all of us, and I think it's good for him. You guys should totally go for it."

"Go for it as in?"

"Whatever you want. Buy a house. Flaunt your timeless beauty all over New York City. Or maybe on a tropical island. Split your time between both. The one thing you shouldn't do is break up."

"I'm..." Suffocating, a little bit. "I'm not sure society is ready for that. And if I'm honest, I'm not sure *I'm* ready for everything it would mean."

Sophia's smile for Abby drops off her face, and a shiver goes down my spine. She looks almost as deadly as Carter.

“My brother is worth it. He’s really worth it. And if Theo is half as hot under his clothes as he is on the outside, he’s worth it, too. Don’t be a weakling about it.”

I survived a plane crash. I didn’t die on that island. I do *not* want to be timid about Carter and Theo. “It’s not just that. It’s...what if we’re not showing each other who we really are? What if we’re acting like good people, but there’s a dark side we’re hiding?”

“Carter wouldn’t kill anybody if it wasn’t for the U.S. government.”

“I don’t mean him. I mean me.” The truth feels like a memory card overflowing with evidence. It feels like throwing it away, again and again, only to find it on the countertop, or in my purse. “I don’t want to be a woman who’s in denial about whether she’s...you know. Capable of evil. If I stay here with two men, wouldn’t I be one of those women?”

“I think you’re spinning out a little bit,” Sophia whispers, her expression softening. She smooths a hand over Abby’s hair and continues at a regular volume. “Why would being with two guys make you evil?”

“It wouldn’t be...acceptable. To most people. To society.”

“Most people don’t matter. And *society* is a made-up idea.”

“But if it’s generally unacceptable, and I’m comfortable with that, where does it end?”

“I bet Carter would tell you that’s a slippery slope argument, which is a fallacy.” Sophia’s pointed about this. “Loving two men isn’t evil. It’s not even wrong. Denying what you wanted to *yourself* is what would hurt you, in the end. And my brother would hate that, because he loves you.”

“Look who I found.” Haley comes back into the den.

She’s not alone.

Carter’s mother is with her.

“Hi, Mom.” Sophia smiles at her mother. It’s a quick thing, directed mostly at Abby. “Come sit by me and see this baby.”

“Hello, Mrs. Morelli.”

“June.” She nods at me, taking a graceful seat next to Sophia. Haley takes in a chair. “Hello, Abby.”

Sarah touches one of Abby’s fists with a fingertip, her face softening into a smile.

“What brings you here today?” Sophia asks.

“I came to assure myself that everyone was well.”

Sophia waits a beat. “And?”

“And to speak with Leo. Your father would prefer that we had dinner at the house. I can understand making a few allowances...” Sarah’s smile gets wider, but cool dread gathers at the pit of my gut.

“A few allowances?” Sophia’s question seems absent, but I don’t think it is.

“We have traditions. They have meaning. I won’t have them abandoned.” Sarah touches Abby’s nose with a fingertip. “Not when there are so many things we need to pass on. If we change everything, we might as well be dead.”

“*Mom.*” Sophia looks at her mother wide-eyed. “Don’t you think that’s a little dramatic? We’re talking about dinner. We still *had* dinner together, it was just in another mansion.”

“We’ll keep things the same,” Sarah says, her voice soft but firm. “That way, we’ll all have something to count on. Don’t you think that’s for the best?”

THEO

I WAKE EARLY into a silence thick and soft like the dawn. The sun hasn't had a chance to break through the curve of the horizon. It's a promise of light coming soon, but not yet, not yet.

June sleeps next to me in the bed. My body knew she was here before I was awake. The gunshot wound at my side aches. My cock aches, too. It was longing for her in my dreams.

I lean closer to her. Bend until my lips just touch the shell of her ear. I want to slide my hand under the T-shirt she's wearing. It's too large for her little frame. One of Carter's. I want to work my fingers between her thighs and wake her that way.

It would not be difficult. The blankets slope low over her hips. I wouldn't even have to move them—I could leave the sheets in place and move my hand beneath them, out of sight.

I can't do it.

June doesn't wake up when I get out of the bed and go out into the hall. There are no voices. Not even the baby is awake yet. I pad down the hall in the thick silence and open the door to the last guest room.

This is where Carter sleeps, pretending not to love us.

His eyes snap open when the door brushes over the carpet. He's sprawled on the bed, one leg over the edge, his toes uncovered. I want to cover them up.

“What’s wrong?” I love this sleep-roughened voice of his. “Theo.”

I sit at the edge of his bed, near his hip, and he reaches for my chest. For my face. He’s sat this way at my bed, too. I trace the line of the blankets over his abs. “I wanted to wake June. I need your permission.”

He looks away, his hand falling to rest on my knee. “No, you don’t.”

Carter is not happy. Did he wake up hard and wanting, too? Was he restless in the night? I want to be there for those things. I want to know, but I can’t ask him now. I put my hand over his.

“Yes, I do.”

He turns his head and his eyes, dark with gold flecks like stars, burn into mine. “If you need my permission to touch her, then you need my permission to leave.”

“I *have* to leave. You don’t understand.”

His hand tightens on my knee. “Make me understand.”

I cannot. Because to make Carter understand would be to tell him that we will be like those men from the city. We will be like the men who hurt my mother. Our love is not evil. It’s not a sin. But it is not selfless. It’s selfish.

This close to the city, surrounded by people who are not worried about becoming the devil’s children, we will fall. Our passion will get the better of us. The unholy world will seep in through the cracks.

I cannot let that happen to Carter Morelli. I cannot drag him down with me. I love him too much to dirty his soul.

“You will find your own way. If I am gone, you will find a better way. I won’t drag you down into a life of sin.”

Carter narrows his eyes. “You said we weren’t a sin.”

“We are not. It’s this place. The city will corrupt us.”

“Then we’ll leave the city.”

“This is your home. This is where your family is.”

“Theo.” He slides his hand out from under mine. “It’s not true.”

I want to make the righteous argument, but my body is insistent. My cock throbs. It does not care that I haven’t shown Carter what he needs to understand. I lean into his touch. “Please.”

He makes a low noise and bumps me off the bed, onto my feet. Carter stands, too, wearing only a set of briefs. He takes me by the back of the neck and pulls me down the hall to the guest bedroom.

June rolls over, eyelids fluttering, as Carter locks the door. He keeps his hand on my neck and takes me to the bed, where he holds me in place like he’s displaying me for June.

It makes me even harder.

“Theo still thinks he has to leave us.”

June’s pink, perfect mouth turns down. “Theo, no.”

“He’s planning to run away.” Carter’s voice is even, but there’s an edge to his tone. “But he wanted your body too much to sneak out and go.”

June’s eyes go to Carter, wide and blue and beautiful. “Did he go and ask your permission?”

“Yes.” Carter gives my neck a slight shake. “And he’s going to get what he wants. Move over.”

She pushes herself toward the center of the bed without hesitation, her cheeks flushed.

“Lay down.” Carter gives me the instruction, then guides me down before I have a chance to move. He tugs the pillows out of my way and arranges me on my back. “June.”

He snaps his fingers, pointing at my chest, and she scrambles to throw her leg over me. “Is this right?”

Carter makes her hold the headboard and takes her hips in his hands. He moves her like he moved me. He’s confident and possessive, and when he’s finished, her pussy is angled above

my mouth. His hand is on the back of her neck, now, stroking the soft skin there.

“Lower down.” He kisses her pulse point near his thumb.

“Carter.” I cannot take this. She smells so sweet, and looks even sweeter, and I need him to touch me. “Please.”

“No. Down, Junie.”

She shivers at the nickname and lets him push her down and down and down until my tongue meets heaven.

I brace my hands on her thighs and eat her the way he showed me. I put everything into tasting her. It has a cost. My bullet wound hurts. I am late for painkillers.

“Do better,” snaps Carter. His cold, imperious voice turns me hot, hotter than a sunburn, hotter than boiling water. “Lick her like you *care*, Theo.”

I try harder. Seek out her clit. Circle it until my tongue is tired.

Carter makes a disapproving sound and puts his hands back on June’s hips. “Fuck his face,” he murmurs into her ear. “That’s it. Good. Don’t worry about him. He’ll be fine.”

I will not be fine. June is the sweetest thing I have ever tasted, and I am in pain. “It hurts. Carter, it hurts.”

“Oh.” June’s breathless. Neither of them understood, but my voice must have vibrated against her pussy and made her feel even better. “*Oh.*”

“Make her come,” Carter demands. “That’s what you wanted, so do it.”

I’m going to come, too. My cock strains against my briefs. My need is worse than the wound, but I know, I *know*, that Carter will not touch me until he thinks I’m worthy.

That’s—that’s okay. The idea that Carter can make me worthy turns me on. It’s painful, to want him so much.

I cannot stop.

June puts more of her weight on my mouth, and I think the only reason she does not fall is that Carter puts an arm around her hips and holds her steady. He cannot use both hands. One palm covers her mouth. She comes with a warm burst of sweetness on my tongue, on my face, and Carter does not let her up until the last shudders have left her body.

Then he lifts her off the bed and puts her on her knees, on the floor. I am next. Carter positions me facing her.

“Keep her mouth open. Like this.” He puts his hand over mine and curves my fingers around her jaw. “Squeeze. Not too hard. Make it difficult for her to close her mouth.”

June looks so beautiful like this. Beautiful and depraved. The head of my cock is inches from her mouth, and God, I want her to suck me. I need it so much.

Carter moves behind me. He pins me to the hard length of his body and wraps his other hand around my cock. He uses it as a handle to move my hips so that my cock slides over June’s mouth.

I don’t mean to stroke into her mouth. Carter stops me with a hard grip.

“Did I say you could fuck her mouth?”

His hand is punishing on my cock, and I don’t want him to let go. If he does, I’ll die. “No. Please—I didn’t mean—”

“That’s fucking right.” He starts stroking my cock instead. “Did I say you could leave?”

His fingers curl into my hips, pulling me tighter against him. I hope he leaves bruises.

“No.”

“Right again. I *didn’t* say you could go.” His hand moves over my cock, and my vision blurs. Oh, it feels so good to be handled by him this way. I should know it as a sin, but it isn’t. Not to exist in this body, against Carter’s head, with June on her knees in front of me. “Do you think you can run away from this? You’ll never get away. This will be in your mind forever. You’re not saving yourself from anything.”

“It is—” The rhythm of his hand is exactly what I want. Please, don’t stop. “It is not me I’m trying to save. I—I told you.”

“I don’t need saving.” He says it low and mean. “I need you.”

“Then why do you sleep—ah. Why do you sleep alone? Why do *you* run—Carter. Why do you run from us?”

“Because I’m not like you. I’m dangerous.”

“You are—Christ. You are telling yourself that so you can hide.”

His strokes don’t falter, but the fingers on my hip dig in. “I’m not hiding”

“You are hiding from your family. But you said—oh, fuck. You said they are your pack. You said you are part of them.”

“Are you part of my pack?”

“Even if I am, I cannot stay.”

His hand goes still. A sob comes out of my mouth. I cannot stop it.

“Try to stay.” Carter’s voice has lost its edge. It’s as raw as it was when he woke up.

“Please—”

“*Try.*”

“Will you? Come to bed. With us. Will you try?”

I am in no place to bargain with him, but his absence in the bed hurts like my wanting.

“The minute it’s safe, I’ll—I’ll stop hiding. The *second* it’s safe.”

“And if it is never safe? If I am always in danger of falling?”

“Swear to me you’ll try, or you can go without an orgasm for the rest of your life.”

“I am a sinner. I will make you a sinner.”

He kisses my jaw below my ear. “I thought you said every person was a sinner. You can be mine. I can be yours. We can both belong to June.” His voice drops to just above a whisper. “Please.”

I turn my face to his and kiss him. He can make me wait the rest of my life, if he wants. He can do anything he wants, because I have nothing left but love. I cannot resist him.

“Swear.” The word is heat on my lips and not much more. Carter is pretending to order me, but he is asking. He is begging. This is what he needs from me, and who am I to refuse him?

“I’ll try. I promise.”

“Good. You are so good. Look at June. Keep your hand where it is. Keep her mouth open.”

I can hardly see through the pleasure and the need, but I look at the angel on her knees, blonde hair tousled, skin pink and warm from riding my face. Carter’s hand flies over my cock with fast, powerful strokes until my nerves overflow and my orgasm spills out of me and onto June’s tongue.

“There,” Carter says. “Watch her take it. This is yours, as long as you keep your promise.”

JUNE

WHAT CARTER DOESN'T SEEM to realize is that I don't fit in here, either.

New York is nothing like LA. It never got cold there. I could never feel the winter seeping into the wind, bit by bit. I'm not worried about becoming a sinner like Theo is. Or... was. He *did* agree to try with the three of us, and I'm glad for that. It would have broken my heart to wake up one morning to discover that he'd walked away in the night, never to return.

I'm worried that I'll always feel like an outsider.

In the den the next morning, Mrs. Page, who I'm pretty sure is the head housekeeper, brings a tray with hot tea. We've just finished breakfast in the dining room. The *private* dining room. It's big enough to fit Carter's family, but it's close to the den, not the formal living room, which is the living room they use when Carter's parents come to visit.

I can't imagine having a house with more than one living room. My mom and I lived in more than one place that didn't have *one* living room.

I accept the hot tea, feeling like a fraud.

Which is probably silly. I'm not a fraudulent person. I'd never ask for an all-new capsule wardrobe just because I was staying at someone's house, but I have one now. I'd never ask for hot tea on a silver tray, but it appears unbidden.

Theo and Carter talk by the windows, voices low. Carter's brother and Haley went upstairs after breakfast with the baby.

None of his siblings have arrived yet.

I watch the two men I love speak to one another. They're both strong, both fierce, but in different ways. That's why they need each other. Theo runs on emotion and sensation, and Carter runs on logic and reason. When it comes down to it, they need an equal. A balance. Theo thought that if he left, Carter and I would have a chance to make something real and lasting out of all this, but it could be the other way around.

I mean, look at them. They're both tall and gorgeous and captivating. Theo doesn't need to be rich to be exactly what Carter needs.

And who am I, really? A photographer. What's that, compared to all these rich, beautiful people? I don't have much to offer. I don't even have any money.

"June." Carter's voice breaks me out of my thoughts. "Are you okay?"

I must've been frowning at my lack of money and status. "Just thinking. I'm okay."

His eyes linger on me for a few more seconds before Carter focuses back on Theo.

I reach for my phone on the side table. That's another sign that I don't belong. My phone was lost somewhere between those islands. A new one appeared a few days ago. It's a brand-new iPhone. The most recent model. I would never have chosen it for myself, but Carter didn't think twice about buying it for me.

At least...I hope it was Carter. I *assume* it was Carter, but it could have easily been one of his equally rich family members. Whoever was standing closest to the butler when the topic of needing a phone came up.

"Butler?" Carter looks at me from over by the window.

Shoot. I said it out loud. My face heats, but I smile through it. "I was just thinking about how...how cool it is that your brother has a butler."

A little smile breaks through some of Carter's seriousness, which makes this moment of embarrassment seem worth it. "Leo doesn't have a butler."

"I don't have a what?" Leo strolls into the den with Abby cradled in one arm. I've been here long enough to know that when his parents come over, he changes into more formal clothes. Everything he wears, and everything he had sent here for Carter and me and Theo, looks expensive. It *feels* expensive. But the dress shirts and slacks he puts on for his parents seem different, like a kind of armor. Right now, he wears a black sweater that looks as soft as his sheets and jeans in a dark wash. The jeans are more surprising than the almost-suit he wore for the family dinner.

"You don't have a butler." Carter gives him an amused look. "June was thinking you had a butler."

Leo laughs, and Abby's eyes brighten. One fist waves, then the other, and she says a soft *oooh*.

"Yes, my sweet precious baby, it is a little funny. But not so funny that we would embarrass our guest." Leo raises his eyebrows at her in the gentlest, most playful reproach I could imagine. "Should we tell her? We should, I think." He looks at me, and there's that dichotomy again. Leo can be the intense person who shows up in Germany and manhandles his brother out of being arrested, and he can be a person who's worried I might feel embarrassed about this butler and would like to avoid that. "If you mean Gerard, he's not a butler. He's my head of security, and..." He purses his lips, considering. "He's the person I trust most on my staff. So he's also a kind of... assistant. Body man. Most of the household requests go through him or Mrs. Page."

"Are you talking about Gerard?" Haley comes in next, wearing a dark blue fall dress, her blonde hair in a bun on the top of her head. She looks perfectly at home here, and she'd look perfectly at home on a college campus, too.

"I was telling June that he's not a butler."

"Oh my God." Haley sits on the couch next to me, laughing. "I thought he was a butler, too. Did you tell her

that?”

“I was about to.”

“Oh.” Haley puts a hand to her chest, her cheeks pinking. “The memories.”

“What a time,” Leo says to Abby. “A time that you’ll never know about, thank God.”

Carter gazes at the ceiling. “You don’t have to tell us, either.”

“Tell us what?” Theo asks, his eyes on Carter’s face like he’s never seen anything more beautiful. I totally understand the feeling. I’ve never seen anything more beautiful than the two of them.

“The dramatic and emotional tale of how Leo and Haley met and fell in love.”

Theo looks at Leo, his brow furrowing. “I hope there was not a plane crash.”

Carter snorts, and Haley makes a sympathetic noise, and it’s not until Theo cracks a smile that Leo bursts out laughing.

“That’s not the kind of drama I meant.” Carter laughs, too. Can he really be that torn up about staying here when he can laugh in the den without worrying that somebody’s going to jump out from behind the furniture and shoot at one of us. “I meant...Mother of God. I meant the feud, which is *over*. Don’t listen to me.”

“Oh, that’s extremely dramatic, Carter.” Leo raises his eyebrows. “Why *wouldn’t* you tell them about that? It would make us less scary.”

“I would argue that it wouldn’t.”

“I would argue that you’re entirely too serious about all of this.”

“He has mentioned it before.” Theo folds his arms over his chest. “He did not tell me the story.”

“Of course I didn’t. There was an emergency happening.” Carter gives Theo a significant look, and I think if the three of

us were alone in the den right now, Carter might pin Theo to the couch and have his way with him.

“Yeah,” I sigh. “The hostage situation.”

Haley shakes her head. “We’ve had enough of those for a lifetime.”

“Um...how many have you had?”

“Personally, I’m not sure I counted as an actual hostage, but it was definitely a situation.” Her smile falters for a second. Leo notices. His shoulders tense as he watches her. Happiness comes back to her blue eyes after a few beats, and Leo’s shoulders let down. “A situation that had a good ending. I hope...” She drops her voice. “I hope this is a good ending for you. For all of you.”

“It is! It’s the best, really. All of you have been so kind. It’s like being at home.”

It’s not actually like being at home. My mom and I would never have a house like this, or a life like this. We wouldn’t have the money to have a house like this, even if we both worked our entire lives for it.

Leo and Carter bicker back and forth about the story of their family feud with the Constantines, and Haley laughs at one of Theo’s jokes, and I think about my lack of money.

What I need to do is sell some of my photos to a magazine.

Quietly, when nobody’s paying attention.

Now seems like a good time.

The editor I’m looking for is in my email. Technically, I’m a freelance photographer for *National Geographic*. Or I would be, if I wasn’t on other assignments all the time. I met her through friends of friends, and we emailed back and forth a year or two ago. *If you ever have anything, send it my way, and I’ll see what we can do!*

I’ve thought about emailing her a few times since then, but it’s *National Geographic*. You can’t just send them any old snapshot of a landscape and expect to make it in.

The photos I took of the storm aren't any old snapshots.

I made some basic edits to a few of the best ones with an app on the phone, which makes me wish I'd had a phone like this on *every* assignment. I'm here now, anyway. I attach them to the email first, then listen to Carter and his brother talk to each other while I figure out what to say.

"Daphne and Emerson are coming over. She wanted me to tell you," Leo says. "Should be here in a half an hour or so."

Carter frowns. "Maybe we could go up to her studio and talk while she paints. I feel bad for making her miss me so much."

"Don't feel bad," Leo answers. "She's not coming to see you. She's coming to see me."

This makes Carter laugh, too. I love when he laughs, and the mention of Daphne's art studio in Leo's house when, from what I heard at dinner, Daphne has her own house with her husband and her own studio, makes me feel the difference between all of us with a sharp, crystal-clear focus. Leo has the time and space to keep a studio. An entire room, just for her, when she doesn't live here.

Is that the dream? To have that much money?

My dream is to have Carter and Theo. My dream is to be in a place where we can laugh together and not spend every moment fearing for our lives. It would be nice to have tons of money, but in this moment, my dream is to have any amount of money that's more than zero. I didn't have much in savings when I left London, and I want to have something in my back pocket now.

HI ERIKA!

I know it's been a while since we emailed, but I got some photos recently that I think you'd like to see. A recent assignment to Mauritania from London was interrupted when the plane had to make an emergency landing. Shortly after, I sheltered on an island during that huge tropical storm. I didn't

get any wildlife photos this time, but I made these images of the storm making landfall. They're a reminder of how small humans are compared to the world. I think about that whenever I look at them. I have a feeling National Geographic's readers would be moved, too.

I'm here at this email if you want to discuss!

June Porter

Freelance Photographer

I READ IT OVER, my heartbeat fast and nervous, and hit *send*.

CARTER

THE PLAN IS to arrive for the meeting with my handler twenty minutes early. That was Vivian Constantine's suggestion. I've timed my drive down to the minute.

Which is overkill. I've worked on tight mission schedules before, but they've always had built-in leeway. Operatives have to have room to improvise. The ability to react quickly to new information and developments in the situation is an essential skill in this line of work.

Are you even in this line of work? I can't tell which of my siblings' voices my brain uses to pose the question.

Yes.

No.

"I don't know. Mother of God."

I glance in the rearview mirror. The nondescript SUVs carrying the team of six agents are three cars back.

Leo and I had several spirited phone conversations with Vivian Constantine about what, if any, security I should bring. She thinks bringing any agents is a risk. If the traitor spots them, they'll know I'm trying to force them out of anonymity. Leo thinks sending anything less than fifty agents is unacceptable. He's not happy that I drew the line at letting him personally oversee the operation. That argument ended with both of us leaning over his desk, ready to punch each other.

"*Your wife* will literally murder me if you get hurt because you're stubborn," I snapped. "Eva would murder me, too."

Don't condemn me to a horrible death.”

“Don't condemn *me* to a lifetime of survivor's guilt, asshole.”

Vivian sighed loudly into the phone and muttered something about *Morelli dramatics*. “Leo, you're not going. You're more recognizable than Carter. Everybody in New York City knows what you look like.”

Leo glared at *me*, which struck me as unfair. “He's not going alone. We just got him back.”

There was a beat of stunned silence. I was as shocked as Vivian. Leo doesn't make a habit of sharing information that could be used against him, and he especially doesn't share it with Constantines. Haley and Elaine are the exceptions.

The raw determination on his face reminded me of how he looked when Daphne was missing. He called reporters to his house for a press conference. He and Lucian had a fistfight over it, but Leo wouldn't back down. He left everything on the table trying to find her, from searches at all hours of the night to lighting prayer candles.

I should have known he still went to church then. Sophia's voice repeats *for a government operative, you're, like, not that observant* in my head.

I should have known he'd fight tooth and nail to send agents with me, even if I refused to let him come along.

Those SUVs are *we just got him back* in the form of security teams. They're a tangible, visible reminder that I'm not a solo operative anymore.

I'm not a solo *person*, if I ever was. Theo and June are at Leo's house, safe behind his army of security agents, which is currently four times its usual size. They're not physically in this SUV with me, but the way I feel about them is a factor in this mission.

“I'm *not* in this line of work,” I say to no one. “I wouldn't have been recruited if I had liabilities.”

I can feel every single one of my siblings giving me a Morelli *look* in the back of my mind.

“You were *all* liabilities, but that’s why I moved across the ocean.”

Liabilities? Pretend-Daphne’s voice is offended, but she’s only teasing.

I let out a heavy sigh. “Loved ones. You were loved ones. Are. Obviously, I didn’t *disclose* that during the interview process. Not even to myself.

The imaginary staring intensifies. *We just got him back*

“Which was a mistake,” I add.

I spend fifteen seconds wondering if I should call them on speakerphone and tell them in case I never have another chance, but *no*. I might have disqualified myself from further black ops work by caring about people. I didn’t wipe all my experience from my brain. I can get myself back home, and I will.

Back to Leo’s, I mean.

Anyway, there isn’t time.

I park in a lot down the block from the meeting spot and wait to get out until the security agents pass me by. We won’t be talking to each other until this is over. I’m perfectly capable of taking care of myself, even in a high-stakes meeting, but I can admit it’s nice to know they’ll be nearby.

Nice, and strange. I haven’t had a safety net like that in years.

Wow. Pretend-Leo is just like the real thing. *I came to Germany*.

The exact location of meeting spot is a combination bar and coffee shop on the northern outskirts of the Bronx. That was its own debate. Leo wanted it closer to his house, probably so that it would be easier to secretly follow me here. Vivian wanted it out in Queens in the event the traitor attempted to escape toward Bishop’s Landing.

Leo pointed out that they'd have to be extremely inexperienced traitors to flee in the direction of Bishop's Landing.

"There's a *chance*," Vivian insisted. "We're dealing in slim probabilities here."

The coffee shop/bar was the winner.

I get out of the SUV and walk down the block, slipping into a casual pace that doesn't draw attention to itself. The breeze carries the smallest hints of winter in the scent, like smelling snow two months early.

Will we be here when winter comes, or will we be on the other side of the globe?

Will we still be hiding?

If we have to be. If *I* have to be. I'll hide forever if that's what will keep June and Theo safe. It won't feel good, but it'll feel better than losing either of them.

A small part of my heart wilts at the thought of pretending for that long. It's the specifics that get me. *Not* holding their hands in any space, public or private, where we could be seen by other people or photographed. Not touching them at all if there was any chance of exposure. Not hugging them. Not kissing them. Not telling them how much I...

Not telling them how much I care about them unless we were behind a locked door, the space swept for cameras and microphones.

It seems like a half-life.

It's better than *no* life.

Isn't it?

There's no time for that debate, either. I'm here.

I scan the street outside the coffee shop/bar. It's not a terrible idea, I guess. Bars are usually open at night. Coffee shops in the morning. I brace for a weird, conflicting energy while I take note of the cars parked on the street.

Then I head for the door.

It just looks like a bar. The heavy wooden door squeaks when I pull it open. Smells like a bar, too. The coffee doesn't quite cover the scent of stale alcohol.

Forget what I said before. This is indeed a terrible idea. It would always feel *off* in here with the alcohol and coffee grounds fighting each other.

It's too late for coffee and too early to be at a bar, but there's a guy on one of the barstools anyway, his hand curled around a beer. The bartender looks up at me from beneath a battered Yankees cap. "You the one meeting the lady?"

An alarm chimes in the back of my mind. As a matter of protocol, we don't involve civilians in our meetings. I don't know why my handler would have chosen to disregard that.

Having to loiter outside and pretend not to wait for her won't make this easier, though.

"Is she here already?"

The bartender stabs his thumb toward a narrow hall. "Out on the terrace."

I like walking through the dim, close hallway even less than I liked being in the bar. A metal door with a pushbar lets me out into what must be the terrace. A roof covers half the bricked patio, and a wooden fence on its last legs serves as the boundary for the liquor license.

A woman in jeans and a blazer sits alone at a wrought iron table in the corner, a glass sweating into a napkin in front of her. Water, and it looks like she hasn't taken a sip. She has gray eyes and hair the color of sandpaper.

"It's supposed to be sunny all week," she says.

It's her. I know her voice. The code she's using means she came here alone, and doesn't think she was followed.

"I heard there was a chance of rain," I answer. It means I came alone, which isn't strictly true. It also means I might have been followed but don't have confirmation.

She gives me a brisk nod. I take the seat across from her at the wrought iron table and check for cameras.

“Update me. You were out of contact for days. You didn’t make it to the rendezvous.”

“My plane was sabotaged.”

I didn’t give her these details when I set up the meeting. Her eyebrows go up. “At Heathrow?”

“I did final checks and took off ninety minutes later. Your calls came in four hours into the flight.”

She gives me the slightest shake of her head.

It wasn’t her. My handler didn’t call. I suspect, based on this moment of honesty, that she’s not the person we’re looking for.

“You have a—”

The bar’s back door bursts open before I can say *traitor on your level*.

Three guys. One of them is the man who was sitting at the bar. The other is the bartender. I’ve never seen the third.

Guns out. Pointed at us.

My handler and I dive in opposite directions. I roll up onto one knee, my pistol aimed. A bullet flies over my head. I pull the trigger, but the men scatter and the shot goes wide.

“Go,” I shout at my handler. She hauls herself over the rickety fence and disappears. The man who was at the bar jumps over the fence, too, his face chalk white, his gun bouncing around in his hand.

The bartender nods at the third man, who runs, too.

I get my feet under me and stand. A headshot would be best, but we wouldn’t get any information out of him. A shot to the torso would be easier.

I’ve just decided to take the shot when the door bangs open again and agents swarm the terrace.

The bartender takes aim and fires.

His bullet burns across my bicep, and then he’s down, shot by at least three of the agents.

“He’s hit,” calls one of them.

“I’m fine.”

He comes over and takes my elbow in his hand.

That’s when I feel the blood.

“It’s not deep.” I can’t really feel it.

“We need medical,” the agent shouts. Two people in scrubs and bulletproof vests hurry through the door.

“I’m innocent.” It’s the guy who sat at the bar, making a racket in the alley next to the terrace. “I—I’m a plant. They didn’t tell me what the job was for.”

He’s surrounded by five agents, all of whom are from the State Department.

“Vivian, you rascal.” The paramedic peeling off my jacket ignores me.

“I didn’t know,” yells the guy, like that’s going to save him. “I didn’t *know*.”

I think he actually means it, and that’s not good.

The paramedic pours water over my wound, then swipes a sterile cloth down my bicep. A palmful of antibacterial goo comes next. Then gauze.

“Just don’t shoot me.” This from one of the men who was *definitely* going to shoot me a minute ago. Was he just a desperate hire? From the shake in his voice, the answer is *yes*. “I didn’t know. I swear I didn’t know.”

There’s no sign of the third man.

My stomach turns. If they were plants, the real traitor is still out there. Underwood is still after us.

The plan failed.

We have to keep hiding.

JUNE

A CROWD GATHERS while Carter is at his meeting.

Eva, his oldest sister, and Lizzy, his youngest, get here first. They sit in the den with us, chatting about this and that. Lizzy takes a turn holding Abby.

Not long after, Leo says something vague about the kitchen, and Eva says *oh, I'll help you*. They go out together, both of them looking *very* casual. Lizzy flicks her eyes toward the ceiling in a way that seems mostly amused and affectionate. “Just *say* you’re having a secret meeting, you know?”

Haley gives her a conspiratorial look. “Now *we* can have a secret meeting.”

“Wait.” I stretch my legs out on the sofa, mainly as an excuse to touch Theo. He puts a hand on my shin. “What are they meeting secretly about?”

Lizzy switches Abby to her other arm. “Nothing important, probably. They’re just like that.”

“Best friends,” adds Haley.

“Rude.” Lizzy laughs at her own joke, and Abby says *ooh*. “Leo could at least put some effort into his excuses. He *never* does anything in the kitchen.”

When Leo and Eva come back fifteen minutes later, Daphne and Emerson are with them.

By the time Leo's butler—I mean, his head of security—tells him that Carter's team is on the way back, all of his siblings are either in the den or den-adjacent. There's no official announcement about going to the foyer. It just happens.

Daphne hovers closest to the door, Emerson at her side. He keeps leaning down to speak to her. His hand stays on the small of her back except for when she paces over to look out the front windows.

Theo stands close to me. His fingertips skim my spine, over and over again. I'm sure we're both thinking of Carter's orders to keep things under wraps, but if Sophia already knows...

Ugh. I can't think about it. All I can do is lean into Theo's touch.

"They're here." Daphne hurries back from the window to her spot by the door. Her sisters step closer to her as Gerard opens the front door. I know I should be looking for Carter, but I can't look away from Daphne. I'm hoping for a warning, I think.

She gasps, and my heart drops like Carter's plane did. Then she takes a half-step forward. "Carter, what happened?"

He comes in through the door with quick strides and blinks at his assembled siblings. Then he looks for me and Theo. His shoulders let down when he sees us.

"Let me guess." He gives them all a look that says *really?* "You all happened to be in the neighborhood."

"Don't bullshit us, Carter, we heard about your meeting."

Carter glares at Leo, who shakes his head, his face the picture of innocence.

"If you're all staying for dinner, I need to go get changed," Carter announces.

Daphne moves closer. "Are you okay?"

He holds up his left arm. Oh my God. His shirt is torn, and underneath, there are bandages. "The meeting was interrupted

by some people who felt a bit hostile.”

Daphne covers her mouth with her hand.

Carter lowers his voice and rests his other hand on her shoulder. “I’m okay.” Then he clears his throat. “I’m fine, everyone. I know you’re not here to see me, so go about your business. I will be down for dinner.”

All of Carter’s siblings lean in to touch him as he heads for the stairs. He pats their hands, reassuring them, but he doesn’t stop when he reaches us. He puts out his arms and corrals Theo and I toward the stairs, too.

In the big guest bedroom, I follow Carter into the bathroom and help him take his shirt off. He strips off his clothes and peels away the bandage. It looks like the bullet carved into him. Fresh blood runs toward his elbow, and he jumps into the shower and turns on the water.

A naked Theo brushes by me and joins Carter under the stream. Droplets of blood fall to the tile at their feet. Neither of them says a word. Theo tips Carter’s head one way, then another, his fingers working through his hair.

I reach for my hem to join them, but another bright spot of blood changes my mind. The medicine cabinet in this bathroom doesn’t have everything I need, so I go down the hall to where Carter’s been sleeping.

Wound care supplies in hand, I head back to the bathroom. Theo stands under the stream, rinsing suds from his body. His green eyes have a strange, distant look to them. He finishes rinsing, shuts off the water, and guides Carter onto the bathmat. Theo grabs for the first available towel, which he presses gently to Carter’s wound.

“I have everything.” I say it in my calmest voice.

Theo and I switch places. He picks up another towel and dries Carter with it, dripping onto the bathmat, while I put antibiotic ointment on the wound and cover it with clean gauze and finish it off with a bandage.

“Okay,” says Carter. “Okay.”

“Are you in pain?”

He looks at me, and the set of his face is all the answer I need. “What can we do?”

“Let’s just...” We go out of the bathroom, Theo following. Carter lets out an unsteady breath. “I thought I might not get back to you.”

Theo makes a low, strangled noise, and it occurs to me that he hasn’t said a word in...a long time. Carter’s head snaps around. He takes in Theo’s face. The slope of his shoulders. Theo’s eyes are closed, his head bowed, and his face is drained of color.

There’s no more fear on Carter’s face. He puts a hand at the curve of Theo’s neck. “I made it back, Theo.”

Theo doesn’t look at him. His body trembles, hands hanging loose at his sides, and his chest rises and falls too fast. A tear steals out from underneath his lashes.

Carter takes a deep breath and squeezes Theo’s shoulder. “You need proof.”

Silence. The line of Theo’s mouth wavers. It seems to take him a lot of effort to open his eyes. The emotion there breaks my heart. *Yes, his eyes say. I need proof. Show me that you’re okay. Show me that I didn’t lose you.*

Carter leans in and kisses him, and then he’s moving again. He disappears into the bathroom and comes back with a small, plastic bottle in his hand. He tosses it onto the bed, and then—

Everything changes. He’s not nervous, or hurt, or afraid. Carter takes Theo by the shoulders and kisses him hard enough that Theo whines. Carter is hard already. So is Theo. Carter wraps a fist around Theo’s cock and steers him toward the bed, pushing at his shoulders.

“June.” Carter snaps his fingers and points at the pillows.

I’ve never undressed so fast in my life. I leap onto the pillows. Carter pulls one out the way.

“Sit there. Back against the headboard. Spread your thighs.”

I'm already overheated, just from his voice. The second my legs are spread, he pushes Theo into place. He's on his back in the vee made by my thighs.

Carter leans over him. I can hear the vicious nips and tugs of his kiss and Theo's soft, needy noises. Theo's hands go around Carter's neck, and Carter lets him stay there...

For a minute.

Then he unhooks Theo's hands and pushes his arms above his head.

"Hands under her thighs. Just below her ass."

Theo doesn't move. He just stares into Carter's eyes.

Carter laughs, sharp affection on his face. "I can make you."

He makes a point of using both arms to put Theo's hands where he wants them, snug under the crease at my thigh, and then he gives Theo one more kiss.

Carter's an inch away from his face when he speaks.

"I'm going to fuck you." Theo sucks in a breath and nods. The bob of his chin says everything about how he feels. Nervous. Excited. Relieved. "You're not going to come until I let June's pussy squeeze your cock. Do you understand?"

"Yes," Theo whispers.

"I couldn't hear you." Carter's lying. *I* could hear Theo, and Carter's even closer.

Theo clears his throat. "I understand."

"Good."

Carter's in pain, but he doesn't show it. Not at all. He sits back on his heels and pushes Theo's knees to his chest with one smooth motion.

Theo keeps his thighs closed, and this time, Carter doesn't give him any orders. He pries Theo's knees apart with his hands, never breaking eye contact.

"Keep them here."

Theo nods.

“Pardon me?”

“I will keep them there.”

It’s not going to be easy. That’s obvious as soon as Carter lets go. Theo’s muscles shake, but he keeps his legs in position.

Carter bends to kiss Theo’s cock. Then he licks it. Then he takes it deep into his mouth and swallows.

Theo makes another begging noise.

Carter trails his lips all the way up to the head of Theo’s cock and lets go with a *pop*. “Don’t come.”

“I will not.”

Carter purses his lips, then rocks Theo back with a hand on his knee. He slides a pillow under Theo’s hips.

Then he goes to work.

He warms lube between his palms and strokes the insides of his thighs, moving slowly toward his hole. Carter keeps his eyes on Theo’s face, watching for each reaction.

“Play with your clit.” I’m so intent on watching him that I don’t register the words until his eyes meet mine. “Now, June. Don’t come until I tell you to.”

I put my fingers to my clit, breath shallow, and circle it while Carter pushes one finger inside Theo.

His eyes close, and he arches into Carter’s touch. Theo’s hands flex under my thighs. I can feel his tension through his grip.

“Wait,” Carter soothes. “Wait.”

Theo shudders, but he waits, lips parted.

“There.” Carter’s arm moves. He’s finger-fucking Theo, and Theo’s hips move along with it.

He adds a second finger.

A third.

I get lost in his voice. He's so sure of himself. So gentle with Theo. Carter doesn't show any of the stress he must've felt at that meeting.

When Theo can take three fingers, Carter's eyes darken with concentration. The muscles in his arm work. It's subtle, mostly hidden from me, until Theo lets out a low moan.

"Shh." Carter tells him, his face flushed, the first hint of strain in his voice. "Not too loud."

He eases his fingers out slowly.

That's the end of his patience.

Carter moves in between Theo's spread thighs, and Theo grabs my ass and holds tight. "Yes," he says. "Yes."

"Take it," Carter says, and then he thrusts into Theo. He's not cruel, but it's clear he can't hold back any longer. He missed us. He wants us. "We can do this slow another—another time," Carter promises through gritted teeth.

"Any. Time," Theo says, and then there are no more words, because Carter's fucking him in earnest. Long, steady strokes.

Carter keeps up the rhythm until he breaks, his hips grinding into Theo, and I get to watch as his orgasm tears through him. Carter lets his head fall forward, toward Theo's chest, and I feel how hard he's fucking him through the mattress. "Mother of God. *Fuck.*"

He pulls out of Theo and lunges for me, his hands going around my waist. Carter turns me around and spreads my thighs over Theo's body. Then his hands go to my hips, and he pushes me down, filling me up with Theo.

Carter bends me forward, and Theo's arms lock around me.

"Come on his cock," he orders, and that's all it takes. I missed him so much. Theo fucks into me, his face buried in my neck, and comes with a low cry that I feel in every inch of me.

Carter's there to lift me off when it's over and I'm a rag doll. He's there to lay next to Theo and trace his forehead with a fingertip. He promises us, again and again, that he's okay, and that everything will be okay.

"Soon," he says. "I swear."

THEO

CARTER SWEARS we will be safe soon.

I want to believe him, but it is only hope. The future is never promised. Not even Carter can see how this ends before it does.

That is not what wakes me in the night. I lay still, listening to him breathe. Listening to June breathe on the other side of him. Listening to the hush of the house until it was broken some distance away by Carter's niece crying.

I wanted to go to her. I always do, when she cries. I am not sure what to make of that. For many years, I thought I would die alone on the island, my body swallowed by the earth and the elements.

Now, I do not think I will die alone. The idea that one day I might rock an infant of my own, or Carter's own, exists. It is there in my mind as a possibility. For better or worse, I am connected to them. Returning to isolation will not sever those ties. They will cross the distance from my heart to theirs until mine stops beating.

It is Carter who is adrift, and I do not know how to call him home.

He returned from that meeting with a bullet wound of his own. When he saw what I needed from him, he gave it to me. I fell asleep with the echoes of him in my body and his voice in my ear.

Soon. I swear.

Soon.

I swear.

He sounded compelled. Convicted. But something was wrong, and it takes me hours to decide what it is.

When Carter says that everything will be okay soon, that we will be safe soon, he does not include himself. A bullet came close enough to make him bleed while he worked to keep us safe, and that was an acceptable price. I saw in his eyes that he would pay any cost. He would sacrifice himself to keep us alive.

Carter turns over and slings his wounded arm across my waist. It must hurt, but he does not wake. He protects me in his sleep. Puts his body over mine as he dreams.

I understand the way he feels. I feel it, too. I would give anything for this man and this woman. I will come to this cold, strange place. I will risk the temptation of sin. I will hide my love for him, and for June. I hid myself away on the island for most of my life. I am used to concealing who I am.

But...I do not want to hide. Not anymore.

I think Carter might hide forever. I think he might choose to die for us before he chooses honesty.

Pretending eats at him. It gives him hollows under his eyes and makes him carry himself as if an attack waits around every corner.

I have changed him. We have changed him. If he cannot accept that change, we will lose him. If he cannot see who he is, who he has always been, he will not find himself at home.

But I have seen him. I felt him. In this bed. With me and June. I saw who he could be.

If I fear anything, it is that the Carter Morelli I love is slipping through my fingers. That he is being stolen back by the cold and the city. That he does not reach for us because he cannot reach for himself.

I fall into a restless sleep.

He is not in the bed when I wake.

Carter stands by the windows, scowling at the world outside. It is early, and he looks like he has not slept. It reminds me of being swept out into deep water by the current, and reaching down for the bottom with my toes, only to find that it is not there.

I go to him. Put my arms around him and rest my chin in the curve of his shoulder. It hurts the still-healing wound in my chest, but I cannot touch him like this outside this room.

“I’m sorry.” His voice is rough and sad, as if he has spent a long time thinking of his apology.

“For what?”

June stretches, rustling the sheets, and then she is with us. She puts her face to Carter’s chest and hugs him too.

“I heard you.” She is sleepy and warm. Her arms rest above mine. “What are you sorry for?”

Carter holds her, and the three of us are connected the way we should be in every room. “That I didn’t shoot faster at the meeting. That I got hurt. And that we have dinner with my family tonight.”

June is quiet for a few moments. “Are those things related?”

“It would be easier if we had some resolution.”

“Easier because...” June sounds like she could go back to sleep, and that makes me want to take her to bed and cover her in the blankets. “We could stop pretending we’re not together?”

“No.” Carter’s answer comes too quickly, and I feel that too-deep water again. “Because it would be safer to go to Bishop’s Landing if I knew who sold me out. Sold us out.”

“It might be okay.” June wants to see the sunshine in everything. “Your family is powerful. I’m sure—”

“We can’t be sure of anything,” Carter snaps, and my arms tighten around his waist before I can stop them. “Fuck. I didn’t

—I didn't mean that.”

“I know,” June says. “Let's go back to bed for a little while.”

We do.

Carter spends most of the morning in a quiet mood. His siblings visit the house like eddies in a stream. They tease smiles out of him, but his mind is somewhere else.

We sit down for lunch with Carter's oldest brother, Lucian, and his wife, Elaine. She is a Constantine, like Leo's wife. The two women have the same blonde hair. Lighter than June's. Icy, I think at first. But that word suits neither of the women. They are as warm as June, whose hair looks suited to the sun on my island. I make my hand into a fist under the table to keep myself from putting my fingers in it.

Carter catches my eye, and his promise repeats in my mind.

Soon.

“June.” Elaine sits next to her husband. She reaches over to touch his knuckles with her fingertips. Brushes her elbow against his. “Daphne says you've been taking photos of Leo's courtyard. How did you get into photography?”

“Oh, I—” June's pleased at the attention, a flush rising in her cheeks. “I started back in school. It seemed like a way to —”

Carter's brother studies him. “Did you find someone to cover your classes, Professor Morelli?”

“I'd imagine someone at Oxford took care of that.” Carter does not seem to care about his classes at Oxford.

Soon.

The conversations ebb and flow around one another. Haley asks me about the weather on my island, and somehow we are drawn into a discussion about the native plants there. Carter cannot help himself. He speaks about them with a kind of longing, though he uses unfamiliar names for most of them.

Is he longing for when we were alone?

We have never been alone without being hunted.

At the end of lunch, the baby startles on Haley's chest and lets out a high, thin wail that gets louder and louder until she is screaming. I want to help her. I get halfway to my feet before I remember that I am not who she wants and sit back down.

Leo and Haley are out of their seats already. He takes the baby from his wife and heads for the door, Haley at his side.

"She's all right," he says, just before they're out of sight. The baby's cries echo until a door closes upstairs.

I can still hear her.

Carter's phone buzzes. He takes it out of his pocket and glances at the screen, his expression blank. "Excuse me."

He steps into the hall just as Elaine smiles at June. "I'd love to see your photos, if you're not too busy."

"Not busy at all." June laughs, nervous and lovely. "I have a few edited ones, and a lot more that haven't been touched."

Elaine sweeps around the table and takes June by the arm. She chats to June as they go.

I follow them. Carter's brother does the same.

He stops me with a hand on my elbow at the dining room. His grip is certain. Fearless.

I turn to him, glad I am on my feet. If he had appeared on my island, I would know him as a predator, just as I knew Carter.

"What is it?" I know as I speak that I have not made the first move, but the second. Lucian waited for this moment and did not hesitate when he saw it.

He drops his hand and moves back a step, his dark eyes on my face. They are very like Carter's. Their brotherhood shows on their faces. But Lucian's eyes are both colder and brighter, as if he has recognized me, too.

"I wanted to speak to you alone."

“About what?”

A vicious smile flashes across his face. I have an impression of sharp teeth, and then it is gone. “What are your intentions regarding my brother?”

“My intentions?”

He reminds me of a panther tracking its prey. I will not allow him to make me prey, but I cannot stop him from weighing my words.

“Yes. What do you intend to do with him? Are you here for his money? His connections? Is there something you think he owes to you?”

Lucian lists off these suggestions in an easy tone, but a muscle at the side of his mouth twitches, betraying his concern for Carter.

“He does not owe me anything. I do not want his money.”

“What *do* you want, then?”

I watch him the way he watches me. Lucian’s curiosity grows more intense. “Why do you fear for him?”

Lucian does not glance toward the door, but he seems to make a decision. He knows as well as I do that I am rarely alone in Leo’s house. We do not have long before June will come looking for me.

“Carter...” he begins, emotion creeping into his voice. “Carter is the best of all of us. If I’d known the government was taking advantage of him, I’d have put a stop to it. I won’t let that happen again.”

“I am not taking advantage of him.”

“Then tell me what you *are* doing. Are you using him as a human shield?”

Have I come here to allow Carter and his family to stand in front of me? That’s what he means. If I can make Lucian understand, maybe Carter will accept himself as part of us.

“I did not want to come here. I did not want to put him in danger.”

“But here you are.”

“It is because I love him.” My face gets hot, like a sunburn. “I told him that.”

Lucian narrows his eyes. “You love him, but you didn’t want to come here?”

“I was afraid of sin. And corruption.”

Carter’s brother laughs out loud. “Very perceptive of you.”

“He will not corrupt me. The city might.”

“You’re worried about being corrupted by the city, but not by us?”

“You are his pack. If you were going to make him evil, you would have done it before I met him.”

Lucian crosses his arms over his chest. “What about the girl?”

My heart beats faster. We are running out of time. I can almost feel June begin to wonder where I’ve gone. Carter thinks there is a danger in revealing ourselves, but there is a danger in hiding, too. Lucian has already seen past our deception. He knows there is something between us. I do not think it will help me to lie.

“I love her, too. It is the three of us.”

He nods, the movement slow, like he is deciding whether he believes me. “That’s your intention? To be with my brother, and with June?”

“Yes. I do not want to be anywhere else. With anyone else. I would only leave him to keep him safe.”

Lucian uncrosses his arms and slips his hands into his pockets. “You won’t be doing that.”

“If I have to, I will.”

“No, you won’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because he’s in love with you.” I realize he did not ask what Carter’s intentions were regarding *me*, or regarding June.

Lucian's eyes skim down my body, then back up. I can tell it is not because he is interested. He is looking for weaknesses. He is looking for the place most open to attack. "If you leave him, if you *hurt* him, then I'll hurt you. Do you understand what I mean?"

"That you will kill me to avenge your brother."

"If you break his heart, I won't just *kill* you. I want to be very clear, Theo. It'll be a slow death. I'll make you suffer for as long as I can."

Lucian's eyes gleam. He would look forward to my suffering. Delight in it, if I hurt Carter.

"That is good." Lucian's eyebrows go up. He did not expect for me to agree with him. "I would deserve it. And he would deserve for you to avenge him."

This time, his smile is not violent. It is genuine. A *grin*. Lucian steps forward, an ease about his body that I did not see before, and claps me on the shoulder.

"I'm convinced. You can stay."

"Theo?" Carter comes into the dining room and shoots a look at Lucian. "Jesus, Lucian. Could you *not* try to intimidate everyone you come into contact with, Lucian?"

Lucian puts his hands to his chest, pretending to be innocent. "*Intimidate?* Carter. We were having a friendly conversation."

"Of course you were. I can't say I'm sorry to interrupt. Come on, Theo. June sent me to find you."

CARTER

THE UPDATE that came from Vivian Constantine does not make me want to go to dinner at the Morelli Mansion.

It makes me want to put June and Theo in an unmarked vehicle, choose a random place on a map, and go.

The man who died during the ambush at my meeting had nothing on him. People from the State Department interrogated the man who tried to run away. He was telling the truth about being a plant. The third man is God knows where.

I'm no closer to finishing this, and that means I'm no closer to keeping the promise I made to Theo and June. I swore to them that I'd be fine, and being fine means being with them, and that can't be done in secret, damn it.

I don't even fully trust that it *is* a secret. It's too easy to slip up in Leo's house. It's too easy to forget that people are infallible, and we haven't shut ourselves away. *Leo* already knows the truth. He's known it since Germany. It might be the one thing he kept to himself, but it'll get out eventually, and then what?

I'm not used to a life without a clear mission. The work I've done on behalf of the U.S. government has always had an objective. An endpoint.

I don't want what I have with Theo and June to have an endpoint. I want it to last until we take our last breaths, preferably at the same time. But there is no defined success parameter. They deserve so much more than simply *staying alive in exile*.

I put on my dress shirt and shoes in the guest bedroom closet, then cover my face and let myself have a few moments in the dark.

They're *already* themselves. June is curious and resilient and lovely. She wants to take photographs so she can make sense of the world. And Theo is *of* the world. He's attuned with nature, and he's attuned to himself, and his heart is wide open.

Where the fuck does that leave me.

Angry, that's where. I resent having to hide from my family and the world more with every minute that passes, and it's beginning to feel like a waste. Every time I wanted to kiss them and didn't is stacking up. Every time I wanted to touch them.

I fucking hate it.

I'll have to treat this dinner like a mission as much as I can. Bury my emotions as deep as I can. Then afterward, we're going to choose a new course of action. If I'm going to die because we can't solve this fucking problem, then I'm not going to do it while I'm pretending I don't care about June.

Multiple SUVs line up in front of Leo's to take us to Bishop's Landing. June brushes my elbow with hers as we head toward one of them, Theo on her other side. "Are you okay? We don't have to go if you're not feeling well."

"I'd rather deal with dinner than answer questions about why we're not there."

"At least you'll have plenty of people to talk to." June's trying to put a positive spin on this, and I want to go along with it. I want having all my siblings around the table to be a good, uncomplicated thing. One extra person in the room, aside from the three of us, means we have to keep our guard up. The more people, the higher the stakes.

"You're right about that."

Theo climbs in first and offers his hand to June. A gust of wind kicks up and tries to close the door between us. Even the *wind* wants us apart.

Fuck that. I block the door, climb in, and slam it behind me.

It's a bleak, cloudy day, and it feels bleak on the drive to Bishop's Landing.

I know something's off when we step through the front door, namely because Tiernan is standing just inside.

He's not scowling. He looks...resigned, which in Tiernan's case is worse.

"This is an ominous welcoming party." Not the most polite greeting I could have given him, but I'm in no mood for the song and dance.

"Hello to you too, Carter. Theo. June." He nods at them both, then steps in closer. "Our parents have invited another guest."

It takes every bit of my black-ops training to stay in the foyer instead of turning around and leaving immediately. "Who?"

"Our favorite priest."

"You're fucking kidding."

"Unfortunately, no."

The foyer blanks out behind a black cloud. Is that the sound of blood vessels bursting, or am I imagining it? I could be stroking out. I've heard the pressure can feel intense.

"Carter?"

A hand on my arm brings me back to the present. It's Daphne. Half my brothers and sisters are in the foyer now, too, most of them looking at me with varying degrees of concern.

"Hey, Daph. Emerson. Everybody."

Lucian grabs my shoulder and shakes me as he goes past. "Get it together, brother mine. It's only dinner."

Of course. It's just *dinner*. With our Catholic parents and the priest none of us liked as kids and me, acting like a distant acquaintance of the two people I love most in the world.

Cocktail hour is a blur of small talk and a rotating cast of my siblings. The only people I want to talk to are Theo and June. The only thing I want to talk *about* is how we're going to make this work. The only thing I need to know is if they'd be fine with a life on the run. To hell with what Leo said. We can find the most isolated island in the emptiest stretch of ocean and pay someone to erase it from every existing map. We can keep ourselves away from everyone else, forever.

Except...we can't, can we? June *likes* being around so many people. She likes being included by my brothers and sisters. Theo's not as enamored of it, but he finds them interesting. And they like *him*. Even Lucian tones down the cutting comments for Theo.

We just got him back replays again, for the millionth time, and it occurs to me that my family might not *let* us disappear. Leo would probably keep looking forever.

I let out a bitter laugh. "There's no escape."

Emerson looks at me, and I have the awful impression that he knows exactly what I'm talking about. I don't know how that would be possible, but he's figured out other things before.

"There's always an exit if you're determined," he says.

Daphne turns her head from the conversation she's having with Lizzy and Sophia. "An exit from what?"

"Just a hypothetical," he answers, and then it's time for dinner.

Theo and June sit across from me at the formal dining table in the mansion. This is, at least, a small silver lining. Theo looks so good in his slacks that I can't take my eyes off him. The table hides the slacks, though it does nothing to conceal his body in a white dress shirt that first him like he was born into it.

June wears a dress that Haley gave her. The blue of the fabric sets off her eyes, and the silhouette makes me want to fuck her in it. Kiss her in it. *Touch* her in it at minimum. Put my hands all over it, and all over her, and never stop.

They're beautiful.

It's making me furious. I should be over there, with them. We should be anywhere but here. It's not safe here for every conceivable reason.

We make it through the starter course, and the chatter at the table starts to cool. It feels as tense as the weather outside. A storm waiting to break.

Or maybe *I'm* the storm. I spent years thinking I didn't have a breaking point, and I didn't plan on allowing myself to have one.

Now I do, and they're sitting across from me. The table-length might as well be miles.

"What's wrong?" Daphne whispers from my left. "Does your...injury still hurt? If it does, I bet we could find you something."

"No, Daph, it's fine." I give her a smile, and she frowns back at me. It's fairly inconvenient that she knows when I'm lying.

"Is it..." She glances around the table, which is full to bursting with hushed conversation. "The priest?"

"I don't love that he's here, no."

"I can't remember very much about him." She glances down the table. "But *Leo* doesn't like him, so..."

"He's hiding it pretty well."

"Mmm. Not really. He looks like he's about to pounce."

"Our dearest brother would never pounce on a priest."

"I don't know about that," Daphne says.

In fact, Leo stopped eating half an hour ago. He watches our father, then the priest, then our father.

I have no idea why they chose tonight to invite this priest. I don't think any of my siblings has a single fond memory of the man. Our father insisted on putting on a show for him, and the whole rest of the church.

Now I can't tell what was real, and what was the show. We couldn't act like wolves during mass, but...

Maybe we weren't. Maybe we aren't.

Maybe we're wolves, and people. I don't know. I'm not going to make a decision at this dinner. I can't be soft now, anyway. Not when people are trying to hurt us.

The priest doesn't seem to be having the time of his life, either. He sits at my mother's end of the table and scowls, despite her best efforts at being an excellent hostess.

Maybe it's the storm circling over Bishop's Landing. Maybe it's the pain from the still-healing wound on my arm. Maybe it's the general tension. Maybe he hates attending dinner with former members of his flock.

Dad doesn't seem much happier. He's been done with his main course for a long time. He and my mother keep giving each other charged looks.

"How times have changed," the priest says. His voice carries through a gap in the conversation. "There was a time when children ate with the nanny."

Leo narrows his eyes at the priest, who doesn't seem to notice. Abby isn't bothering anybody. She's curled in Haley's arms, fast asleep.

Dad's probably pissed because he wants to hold her, and the priest would clearly be an asshole about it.

"Tell me about your children," the priest says to my mother, as if we're not here and adults who can tell him about ourselves.

My chest pinches. I want *out* of this dinner. I want to go back to Leo's. Better yet, I want to go back to my own house, where I don't have to fake a goddamn thing for anyone.

"Lucian is in charge of Morelli Holdings," my mother starts. She runs down the list. Eva's work at the Morelli Fund. Leo's real estate firm. The priest keeps interrupting. I hope she never gets to me.

"Carter's been overseas. A professor at Oxford."

“A professor,” the priest echoes, like it’s dirty. “Unmarried?”

That word rattles around in my head like a stray bullet. I hate the sound of it. The handle of my fork bites into my palm. I’ll just get up and leave. I’ll get up and go, and that will be better than this hell.

“Not married yet,” my mother says. “Carter, have you met anyone at Oxford you’d consider to be—”

I toss my fork down onto my plate and shove myself to my feet, my heart in my throat, my face on fire. The volume in the dining room plummets to zero.

“No, Mother, I haven’t *met anyone at Oxford*. I won’t be *meeting* anyone at Oxford, because I’ve already met the only people I’m interested in. Let me introduce you to Theo and June. I’m fucking both of them.”

There’s a moment of hollow, ringing silence, and then I’m hit with a wall of noise.

Leo’s yelling, and he’s not the only one. June bursts into tears, dropping her face into her hands. Sophia wraps an arm protectively around her shoulder and shoots me a death glare. Theo’s gone so fast I only catch sight of him at the door.

It’s so loud that I can hardly hear Sophia when she speaks, fury in her eyes. “Wow, Carter. That was *not* the way to share the news.”

JUNE

CARTER OPENS his mouth like he's going to argue with Sophia, but then he closes it and stalks out of the dining room.

I don't know *what* to say. I can't believe he just...stood up and *shouted* that to his entire family like it was the worst thing he's ever had to say in his life. He's been pissed off and quiet all day, but I never thought it would escalate to this.

There's no way I can sit at the table by myself. Not when half of Carter's family is still shouting at each other and both of the men I love have gone off to...I don't even *know* what. Punch each other? Shout at each other, like everyone else? Kiss without me?

I swipe my cloth napkin from my lap, crumple it up into my fist, and go after Carter. The napkin feels like sandpaper compared to everything in Leo's house. I use it to wipe at my eyes as I go. There's nothing else, and I'm not going to fight with him while I'm openly weeping. *God*, this is a mess, and I'm too shocked and angry to know what to say.

The Morelli Mansion is huge. I probably wouldn't be able to find Carter at all if he hadn't gone straight for the front door. He stomps across the marble in the foyer, his footsteps loud. I run after him, my own shoes *clacking* on the floor, and I wish, I *wish*, that we could laugh about how ridiculous it sounds. Rich people's entryways are ridiculous for having a fight with one of your boyfriends. I don't feel like laughing. I feel like *raging*.

A servant in a uniform—is *that* guy a butler?—hurries to the side of the foyer and disappears behind a door that I didn't notice until he opened it.

“You're not leaving us here,” I shout at Carter's back.

He whirls around, dark anger on his face. “You want to blame me for that bullshit? It wasn't my idea to invite an asshole priest to dinner.”

“You didn't have to *listen to him*. That was a choice. He's *old*. It was easy enough to ignore him.”

“Not when he's making comments about how I'm unmarried. He doesn't have any fucking right to an opinion.” Carter's face falls for a split second, and it's almost enough to make me back down. I didn't go to church with my mom, but it was always the two of us. None of the *special friends* she brought around ever lasted. I didn't think much about getting married. Carter obviously has.

It's almost enough.

Not quite.

“What do you care if he wants to talk about you being unmarried? That's what you wanted people to think. That we weren't together.”

“Yes. To keep us *safe*. Not so judgmental priests can—”

“Carter, *you are the one who wanted us to hide*. Then you just stood up at dinner and blindsided both of us. Why are you the only one who can make that choice?”

“You agreed to the whole thing.” He steps closer, smiling, but I don't shrink back. I'm not afraid of him. “You were *fine* with hiding. You had absolutely no problem with hiding your love for me, June, so don't act like—”

“Oh my *God*, Carter. Is that really what you're pissed about?”

“I'm pissed because I don't *want* to hide anymore, goddamn it. I want to tell people about us?”

“Do you? Because you didn’t look happy to be announcing it. You looked pissed. It made me feel amazing.”

“What do you *want* from me? You’re angry that we were hiding. *Now* you’re angry that I said something.”

“I’m angry because we could have made that decision together. We could have talked about it, but you just flew off the handle. Is that who you really are? Is that who you’ve been hiding from us?”

Carter takes a step back, stricken. “I never hid who I was from you. I was clear with you from the beginning.”

“You weren’t honest then, either. All you could talk about was how dangerous you were, and it’s bullshit.” I point back toward the dining room. “*That’s* not who you are, either.”

“Who the fuck am I, then?”

“You’re the man who took care of me on the island when I was sick. You’re the man who rescued me from kidnappers. You’re the man who—who comforts Theo when he’s worried about you. You comfort *both* of us, and you care about your family—”

“If all of that’s true—”

“It’s just safer for you to keep pretending, isn’t it? Because if people knew that you had *feelings*, they wouldn’t think you’re a dangerous government spy.”

“I’m not a fucking government spy. I can’t go back to that job. I’ve been compromised. I have liabilities.”

I throw my hands in the air. “See? You’re still...you’re still holding on to something that doesn’t exist anymore. You think we’re *liabilities*.”

“You *are*. You can be used against me.”

“Are you planning to think of us that way forever? Are we always going to be baggage you have to carry around against your will? Or—what, Carter? Are you going to *put us down*?”

“I could say the same damn thing about you.” I hate the look on his face. I hate the hurt, and the pain, and the fact that

I don't know how to fix it. "I see the way you second-guess yourself. You think you don't fit in because you don't have as much money. You think you might turn out to have a violent side because a homeless woman you met once turned out to have a past that wasn't squeaky clean."

"That's not fair."

"Isn't it? Tell me you *don't* think that. Tell me you don't wonder."

"That could be true of anyone. I *could* turn out to have a violent side. I *could* turn out to be the kind of person who's willing to lie to everyone for the rest of my life."

"What would it matter if you were safe?"

"All you care about is safety. *All* you care about is keeping secrets, and it hasn't helped us at all."

"Yes, it fucking has." Carter lowers his voice, and it's worse than when he'd raised it. "You and Theo are still here. You're still alive. You're so pissed at me right now *because* you're alive. You can't even decide whether to yell at me for trying to keep us a secret or for telling the truth and doing exactly what you wanted."

"I wasn't ready. That's *not* how I wanted to do it. Your parents—"

Carter makes a frustrated sound. "Who gives a fuck about my parents?"

"*You* do," I insist, eyes stinging. "You're here at this dinner *for them*. You've been worried about how they would take the news."

"They've taken it very well." There's a sarcastic edge to Carter's voice, but there's more to it than that. It's like he dreaded this happening so much that...

"Did you do this on purpose?"

"Obviously not, June."

"I don't know if I believe that. Maybe..."

"Maybe *what*?"

“Maybe you did this because you thought it would be better if you made it happen this way.”

“You think I *wanted* everyone in my family to find out because I shouted that I was fucking you in the middle of dinner?”

“Some part of you did.” I raise my hands, helpless, and drop them. “Some part of you thought that if you went about it in the worst possible way, you could control how they reacted.”

“It would never have gone any differently.”

“You don’t know that, June. You can’t know that.”

“I know that you could have *tried*.” I wipe at my eyes with the napkin again. God, *why* are these napkins so rough? I can feel the salt from my tears burning the soft skin around my eyes. “You could have been honest with us about the way you felt. You could have—”

“Christ. Fine. I could have talked to you, but—”

“But you don’t care, and that’s why you didn’t bother. You don’t care what I think about you, or about your family. You don’t care what—”

“I care *so goddamn much* that it’s driving me out of my mind.” The words bounce off the marble floors in the foyer. “I don’t know who I’m supposed to be. I don’t know how to keep you safe. I couldn’t hide anymore. Jesus, June, I’m trying to get us out of this.”

“What happens after?” I wish I could stop crying, but I feel so overloaded with all my emotions that they’re just tears. “What happens after you *get us out of this*, and it turns out we’re all still the same people? What are you going to do then?”

“What the hell do you *mean*?”

“I mean, are we still going to be liabilities that ruined your career? Are you still going to be afraid to love us?”

“I’m not afraid to love you,” Carter shoots back.

“Because if you are, you could just go back into the dining room and tell your family it was a joke. You could smooth things over with the priest and blame it on the fact that you were in a plane crash. You’d never have to be the real *you*.”

“How do I know you even want that? You’re terrified that one day you’re going to realize you have a dark side.” Carter’s eyes go wide. “I *know* I have one. I would do anything for you, June. I would kill for you. I wouldn’t think twice about it. That’s not a hypothetical.”

“Stop trying to pretend that the dark side of you is all that matters.”

“Stop trying to pretend that a *hypothetical dark side* means anything, because it doesn’t.”

“Fine,” I shout. “I’ll stop worrying about that when you stop making plans to leave us.”

“I’m not the one making those kinds of plans.”

“Yeah, you are. You think about it all the time. The darkest, most evil thing you could ever do would be to leave me and Theo because you think it would be *safer*, but you’ve thought plenty about that.”

“I have to think about all the options.”

“Then take that one off the table, Carter, because I’d rather die together than live with the knowledge that you’re out there, somewhere, because you thought it would be better. It’s *never* going to be better.”

Carter opens his mouth.

Before he can speak to agree with me or disagree with me or continue the fight, Haley comes into the foyer, Abby fussing on her shoulder. She pats at Abby’s back.

“Hey. I’m sorry to interrupt, but—are you guys okay? Do you want me to take you somewhere more private so you can talk?”

It hits me, just now, that all the marble in the foyer is probably sending our voices through the whole house.

Carter shoves a hand through his hair. “We’re fine, Haley. We’ll be fine. We just needed a minute.”

“Okay, but...” Haley looks between me and Carter, then glances over her shoulder. “Wait. Where’s Theo? Did he go upstairs?”

Horror washes away the argument between us in one, awful second.

It doesn’t matter at all that we’ve been fighting. The first person I look to is Carter. His eyes lock on mine with the most terrifying mutual understanding of my life.

Theo wouldn’t have gone upstairs. He doesn’t know this place, and he’s desperate for the outdoors.

A peal of thunder cracks down outside, and the loud rush of heavy rain follows a few seconds later.

There are more dangerous things outside than the storm.

“No. He wouldn’t have gone up,” I tell Haley as the fear squeezes at my heart, again and again. “Oh, no.”

Carter and I both run at the same time.

It’s a heavy, whipping rain. I scream Theo’s name until my voice is raw.

I don’t know if he’ll ever hear us.

THEO

THERE IS a part of Bishop's Landing that is still wild.

It is the only thing I want when I leave the room. Anger was not meant to be held in spaces like that. It was meant to be let out where it could not harm anything.

A *wild* place.

I am not angry, but I need a wild place.

I go north on instinct under gray clouds. The storm will release itself soon. Its energy is in the air. It is like Carter has been all day today, holding himself in until he exploded.

The rain tears out of the clouds before I find the wild place I am looking for. There is relief that it's started. A looming storm always feels worse than one that will wear itself out, sooner or later.

My body has missed moving this way. It has missed traveling across open ground. I do not mean that it is empty. My island was not empty, either. Crossing through the center meant climbing over rocks and through trees and down into gullies. Bishop's Landing has houses and fences and small pockets of trees that have been left as a reminder of the land that was here before.

Neither place is empty, but they are open to the sky.

I walk, and I walk, and I walk. The people in the city would probably say I had gone a long distance, but it is not long for me. It feels good to stretch my legs. They were meant

to be used. They have wanted to be used for days. Being inside for so long, and sleeping so much, made me restless.

I find what I am looking for by following the sound of the water. No one has carved out the craggy rocks from the cliff here, so I can sit and watch the waves hurl themselves onto the rocks.

I feel like hurling myself onto the rocks.

No. That's not true. I feel like fighting Carter. I feel like wrestling him to the ground and making him explain himself.

He asked us to hide, and then it burst out of him. There was so much anger in his voice, as if he had been forced to reveal himself and *hated* it.

Maybe that's not what it was, but I won't know until I ask him, and I can't ask him until I can breathe again. Until I don't feel like I might explode out of my own skin.

It is not because I would have stopped him. It is because it seemed to hurt him, and I did not want the truth to hurt him. I wanted the truth to make things better for all of us. I need to understand what pushed him to that point.

Because...

I want to make it right. I want to show him who he is to us, but I need him to show me what he feels. It is much harder with a person like Carter, who knows so many ways to describe what he thinks and feels. What he *wants*. I wish I knew more of what he does. At the same time, I cannot dismiss my life on the island. It brought me to him, even if Carter was the one who traveled there on his plane.

Maybe he reacted like the storm, and when he has worn himself out, he will be able to show himself to us. The storm will do that, too. It will show us blue skies again. We only need to be patient.

I can do that. I lived alone for a long time, and nature does not rush. It goes at its own pace. Carter was rushed, back there in the dining room. The moment came too early.

I breathe in and out and look at the beach. It is far enough from the mansion where Carter's parents live that I know I will have some time to gather myself. The droplets from the rain and the spray are much colder than they would be on my island, but the rhythm of the waves is familiar. I could not rush the tides, either. The sea in Bishop's Landing is the same.

If I can wait for the tides, then I can wait for Carter. It will mean putting away my own fears and frustrations. Nature never responded to those, anyway. I could howl at the moon as much as I wanted. The sun wouldn't rise any faster.

It is a very human thing to wish for that. To wish that the flow of time could be controlled by man. It cannot.

I am glad for the rain, and for the crashing waves. I am glad, even, for the wet clothes, and the shoes. It is not comfortable, but it is the contrast I need to feel more at peace in Carter's brother's home. I need to remind myself of all this so I will remember that the wild places are still here. That they always will be, no matter how close I go to the city.

I have been surrounded by marble and money, and the storm has washed it off my skin. It was not bad, being there with Carter and June and Carter's family. I do not think it was evil.

How could it be? They are his pack. I said that to Lucian. It was true then, and it is true now. This is the place Carter came from. These are the people Carter came from. They made him, but they did not make him good.

That is just how he is, no matter how he sounded tonight.

I close my eyes. The rain pats at my face, runs down over my nose, drips off my shoes. It almost seems to recognize me. *Here you are, the storm says. We've been looking everywhere for you. Where did you go? Are you ever coming back?*

"I don't know," I answer it.

I thought I would have to find my way back to the island. I was determined.

But I saw how Carter needed me. I heard how much he needed me.

Does he need me?

I let myself think of it without judging it, the way I thought about the tides or the sun or the animals on the island.

If Carter was angry about his love for me, or his love for the both of us, then maybe I should go back to my cabin. I do not want him to burn with anger any more than I want him to burn with sin.

If.

Ah, but the way he touches me.

That is the proof he can never hide, no matter how hard he tries. He touches me like he loves me. Even when he despairs, he loves me. He feels the same way about June.

To love is to need. A man like Carter would not like that. I was alone on my island, and he was alone in his job. There were many differences between our lives, but that was the same.

And when a person is alone for long enough, other people become enemies. They become something to be feared.

What could it have been?

Maybe it was visiting the house where he grew up.

I've never been back to the apartment we lived in when my mother was attacked. I do not think I would like it there. I think it would make the air seem thin. I think I would feel that a threat was close, even if there was nothing to threaten me. I'm not a boy anymore.

I am a man who misses the ocean, and the rain.

But—look. There is the ocean. It is not the same color as the water that laps at the shore of my island. The spray it tosses onto the rocks is colder.

It rolls to the sand just the same.

I loved Carter and June on the island, and I love them here, just the same.

More, in fact.

What else is there to question? Nothing. I will go back to him, and I will see him as he is. When he is ready, he will see himself as part of us. He will see himself the way we see him.

Someone calls my name.

It's hard to hear over the next crack of thunder and the rain slapping down on the ocean on the rocks. I could have imagined it.

They call again.

The storm does not bother me, but Carter and June would not like that I was out here with the thunder and the lightning. They would not like that I was so close to the water.

I felt awful when I left Carter and June behind in the dining room, but I cannot stop myself from smiling now.

It did not take them long to find me.

That is because they know me. They love me. They knew where to look, and they came out into the wind and rain because I am here.

I turn around, ready to promise Carter that I won't run from him again. Ready to promise June that I will never think of it again. She won't have to worry.

Carter is not there.

Neither is June.

It's Underwood.

One of her knees is wrapped in a black, shiny brace, and at first I do not understand. How did she find me? I came here on foot. There was no car to follow.

And...how does she mean to catch me if she is injured?

Then the shadows loom out of the rain.

All of them wear dark clothes that nearly hide how wet they are. The downpour is so strong that it is like opening my eyes beneath the surface of the spring near my cabin. It makes the shapes of their guns waver.

“*Now* you see.” Underwood has an ugly grin on her face. “You shouldn’t have come alone. That was a bit of an error on your part.”

“I could say the same to you.”

She laughs, and the sound sets my teeth on edge. *That* is the sound of sin. Not Carter’s voice. Not June. “But of course I *didn’t* come alone. You’re quite surrounded, young man. I suppose that makes things simpler. You’ll come along with me, or my men will shoot you.”

I just need a few seconds to think. I need a few seconds to feel love, warm and light, in my chest. If I never get back to Carter and June, then I’ll take this with me, wherever I go.

“What do you plan to do with me?”

The warmth spreads to my fingertips. To my toes. I’m suffused with it. It is everywhere. This woman cannot take it from me, because it is part of me.

Carter and June are part of me.

“A gift.” The word comes unbidden. “A blessing. I love you.”

“Come along.” Underwood waves her hand impatiently. “Or I will give them the order to shoot. Make your choice. I’ve been too long without a cup of tea and dry clothes.”

I look for a gap between her men. Any chance of slipping past them.

There is none.

She is right. I am surrounded. They have not left me even an inch to run.

But there is always a choice, even when it seems there is none. I refuse to let myself become Carter’s downfall. To hurt him, to allow myself to be used against him, *that* would be a grave sin. I will not do that. Not when he has given me more love than my body can hold. Not when he brought me out of isolation and showed me his home and his family.

“I have made my choice.” I have to raise my voice over the rain so Underwood can hear me.

“Wonderful.” She waves me toward her again. “Now *walk*.”

“No,” I tell her, and then I turn around and dive over the cliff, flying toward jagged rock and the dark, churning ocean.

CARTER

HE'S GONE. Nowhere near the Morelli Mansion.

I circle it twice, and when I get back from the front, June sprints over and pulls me down by the shirt. Her voice is too soft. What she's saying doesn't make any sense, and—fuck, what if I never understand her again? What if the terror of losing Theo has made parts of me go missing forever?

"I can't find him," I shout back at her. "I can't *find* him. I don't know where he is."

Her fists clench on my shirt. "The water," she yells, the words finally distinct. "Where is the ocean?"

Leo runs out of the house, and I don't know what I say to him. I only know that, between the two of us, we summon an army. I don't count the number of SUVs that storm the drive in front of the Morelli Mansion. I get in the first one and tell the first driver to go north.

The beach. We need the beach.

June's right. Theo would go to the water. There's no wilderness here the way there was on the island, but there *is* an ocean. If I know him, he'll have gone to the least-developed beach in Bishop's Landing, where there's a cliffside with sharp rocks. It's a good place to be alone.

I shove sickening guilt down so deep I don't feel it and shrug on a bulletproof vest. I accept a rifle from a man whose face I don't see and don't care about. I check that it's loaded. I try not to scream.

I'm the one who made Theo want to be alone. I'm the one who lost control. June was right about that, too. I should have talked to them. I should have...

None of that will help me get to Theo. The point is, he can't be alone, because we aren't safe yet. Rain pounds on the roof of the SUV, making it impossible to plan a strategy for when we arrive. I don't think there's any point. If he's alone, I'll take him in my arms and apologize for being such a fool.

If he's not...

I'll end them. Whoever it is. I'll end anyone who would try to take him from me. That's the only kind of person who would be looking for him in this weather. I'm the only exception.

The driver pulls to the side of a narrow road that winds along the cliff. I jump out first. The other men talk to each other. I don't hear a word. All I can think is *Theo, Theo, Theo*.

One of them jogs ahead of me and gives a signal to the others. They pick up the pace, and he falls into step at my side.

"People up ahead. Can't ID them through the rain." He says every word clearly, like he knows he only has the one chance to get through to me. "Slow on the approach."

Slow, because if it's Underwood and the Russians, we can't risk startling them. They might start shooting. I won't let Theo get shot again. I won't let *this woman* order him to be shot again.

I don't feel the rain. I don't feel the chill. All I feel is every muscle in my body fighting to move faster.

It's agony. I'm sure of it now. I can't work as a government operative ever again. It's killing me to move at a measured pace. It's killing me to be separated from Theo and June by any distance.

Why couldn't I have seen this before? Why didn't I know?

The men at the cliffside appear out of the rain one by one. My heart sinks, then sinks again, and...

I see her.

Underwood.

I break and run, but I only make it two steps before an agent puts himself in front of me. He gestures for silence. I know it's the right thing to do. It's more than protocol—it's what will keep Theo alive.

I grit my teeth and keep walking.

I see him next.

He faces Underwood, his back straight, his head high. The rain makes it hard to see his face, but I know just how he looks. How proud and strong and beautiful.

She's speaking to him.

The wind buffets her voice, making the words impossible to understand. All the men I'm with listen, too. They're waiting for the moment to move.

The agent who stopped me before waves us on. We inch closer. I'm supposed to be watching Underwood and all the Russians, but I can't take my eyes off Theo.

He has his back to the cliffside. I know what's down there. A steep slope of jagged rock with sand at the bottom. More than one person has died here, which is why people mostly visit in their cars.

Theo didn't drive here. He walked.

He's too close to all those rocks. If one of Underwood's men rushes him, he could fall. It's a precarious position, which is probably why she's so happy. She came here in person with a brace on her leg. It has to be excruciating. I put a bullet through her knee. It's a bad fucking sign that she's this determined to hurt Theo.

The agent gestures again.

We move forward one step, then two, then stop.

My heart is going to shut down before we get there. I almost wish one of the Russians would do something drastic. It would be easier than being patient.

It would also be more dangerous, and that's not acceptable.

The agent makes more signals. I don't catch half of them.

I'm looking at Theo.

The agents move, steps cautious. We're making a tactical approach. We're almost there.

The wind shifts, and I hear him.

"I have made my choice." Theo doesn't sound afraid. It reminds me of the night we first spoke on the island, when he told me about the antidote.

"Wonderful." Underwood is losing patience. The men at my side tense. It's almost time. "Now *walk*."

"No," Theo says, and then he—

Turns.

Dives.

Off the cliff.

He jumps like there's nothing but water below, and there's not. There are rocks sharp enough to kill a person. He could die from landing the wrong way on the sand.

A howl tears out of my mouth, loud and raging, and the tactical approach goes to hell.

My entire chest is filled with a twisting, killing pain. I don't stop to figure out if it's a heart attack. I aim my gun and fire.

There aren't enough bullets to make them pay for what they've taken, but I keep firing.

It's all I can do. *All* I can do. There's nothing else. If I stop shooting, I'll sit down and die. I'll throw myself off the cliff after him. He's gone. He's *gone*.

Underwood brought enough people with her that one of them is free to rush me. We fight hand to hand in the rain. His fist cracks against my cheek. I knock the wind out of him with a blow to the gut. He gets his pistol up toward my head, but I kick his legs out from under him and stomp on his face.

I'm surrounded by shadows. More of them than I thought would come after me. It's more of the agents Leo hired, but they're too late. They're fighting like hell, and none of it is ever going to mean anything.

I could sit down. I could let one of them kill me.

No. I can't. I have to get Theo's body, and I have to go back to June. I have to stay alive for her. Part of us will always be missing now.

I fight without feeling it. Some of my blows are harder than I meant. Some of them glance off cheekbones slick with rain. I discover one man on the ground. I must've put him there, but I don't remember. I stomp on his face.

I want to kill Underwood.

I want to kill her with my bare hands.

She did this, and she wouldn't stop, and she's done. She doesn't get to take any more oxygen if Theo's not breathing. I want her to understand that as she dies. I want her to understand that she's dying for him, because I love him, I love him.

I find her in the rain. Aim my gun again. Fire. I want to keep my options open. If I can't strangle her, I'll shoot her.

Her men are loyal. They keep blocking my path. It won't work forever. I have more people. Leo is sending more people. He can send a country's worth of security agents, but they can't save me. Not really.

I make another move for Underwood. One of her men comes at me with a cut on his cheek. My hands feel like they belong to another person. I'm not sure how many people I'll kill today. I'll keep going until everyone who played a part in taking Theo is dead.

It can't be any other way.

Where *is* Underwood?

The man I'm fighting crumples to the ground. I raise my gun and keep firing. There she is. Fire. There she is. Fire. I'll

do this for the rest of my life. That might not be very long if my heart stops beating. It feels like it might.

“Carter,” someone says, his voice clear and steady. “Put the gun down.”

“No.” No one will give me any orders until Underwood and her men are dead. I won’t listen.

“Is everyone accounted for?” the voice asks.

Agents answer. *Yes. Yes. Yes.*

Then Leo’s next to me, his clothes soaked through, water streaming through his hair. His phone is at his ear.

“We have her,” he says. “We have her hired men. I need people to meet us. We’re not taking any fucking chances with these motherfuckers.”

Underwood cackles, the sound betraying her panic. “Oh, dear. You’ve found me out.”

Leo looks at her like she’s garbage. Like she’s litter. “Just for fun, tell us who you were working with.”

Six of his men approach her. As they get closer, she backs up. There’s not endless space before she reaches the cliff. I don’t care what happens when she gets there.

Underwood rolls her eyes. It’s a flicker in the rain, but I see it. “*His* handler was too neat and tidy. The man above her, however...he was susceptible to persuasion.”

“The man above Carter’s handler,” Leo says into the phone. “What else do you need?” He waits. Listens. “Thank you. I’ll call soon.” He raises his voice. “Take her.”

The six men he sent for Underwood spring into action. She throws herself toward the closest one, and grabs for his rifle. Her hands lock around it and she leans with all her weight while the other men close in.

One of them is inches away when she wrenches at the rifle with a frustrated shriek.

It’s wet, and her hands slip off. She was trying so hard to get it that her own momentum throws her backward.

Underwood tries to catch herself, but her injured knee won't bend in the brace. Her arms wheel, searching for anything, *anything*.

There's nothing to find.

She plummets over the side of the cliff. The men run to the edge, peering down. One of them turns and shakes his head at Leo.

"Fuck." He takes out his phone and dials. "Underwood's dead. The cliff at Bishop's Landing. I can have my men collect the body, or—"

His voice cuts out. I can't hear him. All I can hear is *collect the body*.

I have to get Theo, and I can't move. "Oh, God."

"Carter." Leo's right in front of me, his hands on my shoulders. The storm hasn't let up. It slices into us. "It's over. She's gone."

"*Theo's gone.*"

"What?"

"He wouldn't let her take him. He jumped. Before you got here. He jumped. He's gone. He's dead."

JUNE

NONE OF IT MATTERS.

Carter telling his entire family and a priest that he's fucking us? Doesn't matter. The fight in the foyer? Doesn't matter. What anyone thinks of us, anyone in the entire world? Doesn't matter.

All that matters is getting to Theo.

Carter and his brother call about a million security agents to the front of the Morelli Mansion, and Carter gets into the first one in the line without looking back. The driver accelerates away, rainwater spraying behind the tires.

I go for the closest one.

The driver turns around, his eyebrows raised. "Ma'am, we have orders to—"

"Take me to the beach. *Now.*" I stare him down like I could kill him. I don't look away. I don't care what his orders are. I have the feeling that if I break eye contact, even for a second, he'll realize that he's a trained security guard and I'm a woman in a wet dress and follow whatever orders he's been given.

He blinks first. "Right away, ma'am."

We're the fifth SUV out of the driveway, or maybe the sixth. He steers us through Bishop's Landing at top speed, keeping pace with the other SUVs.

I'm glad he has to focus on driving, because I start shaking as soon as he looks away. The dress sticks to my skin. The fabric feels even colder in the warmth of the car.

For once, I'm glad I don't have any Xanax. It would make me feel too calm. Now's not the time. Now's the time to be with the men I love, no matter what it takes. I'm not going to wait at home for Carter to come back with Theo. Whatever happens next, we're doing it together.

It doesn't take long to drive through Bishop's Landing. Soon, we're headed down a narrow road. It reminds me of some of the roads in Northern California. If there are cliffs here, I hope they're not as steep as the ones on the Pacific Coast Highway.

You know what? I'm not going to think about the Pacific Coast Highway. I'm only going to think of Carter and Theo, safe at home with me. That's it.

Red taillights on the side of the road are the first sign that we're in the right place.

I see the moment he starts to park at the back of the line, on the side of a narrow road.

"Not here. Go to the front."

"Ma'am, we—"

"Take me to the front of this line of cars, or I'll make sure you never work as an agent again."

He gives a tight nod and inches past the other SUVs until we're at the front.

"Thank you," I tell him, then get out of the car.

The driver jumps out at the same time. "Ma'am, you need to stay in the vehicle."

"I'm not staying in the vehicle." I use a calm, authoritative voice, like Carter's sister Eva. "Step out of my way."

"I have orders to keep you out of danger."

"I don't care about being in danger, and it doesn't matter very much what orders *other people* gave you. I didn't hire

you.”

“Ma’am—”

I’m done being calm and authoritative. I step up into his face, take a deep breath, and yell at the top of my lungs.

“People I *love* are out there, you asshole, and you’re not going to keep me here against my will. Do you understand me? *You cannot keep me here.* It’s illegal and I will prosecute you to the full extent of the law.”

He blinks, rain in his eyelashes, and I use his moment of confusion to knee him in the groin. The agent folds with a high, wounded grunt.

That’s *real* violence. I hurt him. I willingly hurt another person. My dark side isn’t hypothetical, but I get it now. I understand what Carter meant. *I would kill for you. I wouldn’t think twice about it.*

Kicking someone like that isn’t killing him, but it’s not nothing.

I don’t think twice about it. I sprint through the rain to the cliff by the ocean.

It’s crowded with people. Mostly agents that Leo hired, I think. They’re dragging a couple of men toward the cars by their feet. Handcuffing others. Some of the men on the ground put up another fight, but they don’t win. I have the distinct sense that I’m too late.

“No, I’m right on time,” I say to one.

There’s another, louder noise carrying over everything. It’s a person wailing like they’ve been shot. It sounds furious and desperate and it breaks my heart.

Another few steps, and I see Carter.

The rest of the world disappears.

He’s the one wailing. All the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. Carter Morelli would never make that noise unless something unthinkable had happened. Unless the *worst* had

happened. He's seen too much, and survived too much, to let anything less than the end of the world get to him like this.

But he's *wailing*. Simultaneously, he's trying to kill his brother. I've walked into the middle of a vicious fistfight.

No, that's not what it is. Leo's not mid-tackle, he's *holding* his brother. Carter tries to get free from Leo's arms. He kicks at him. Claws at him. Carter has lots of tactics, but Leo takes them in stride, because he's not just holding Carter, he's holding him back from—

"Let me go get him." Those are the first words I understand from Carter. They sound as wounded and broken as the sound he made before. "Let me go get him. I *have* to go get him. I have to be the one. He jumped off the *cliff*. I have to get him. *Please.*"

"I can't." Leo repeats it over and over. "I can't."

Oh, God. The *cliff*.

There are men gathered at the edge, looking down.

He jumped off the cliff.

Carter doesn't think Theo is alive.

I don't have any proof that he's dead, and that's all I have to cling to. I can't go to Carter. If Leo notices me, he'll send someone to stop me. If *any* of them notice me, they'll take me back to the SUV. I've already stood in one place too long.

I sprint for the edge of the cliff and skid to a stop just in time.

It's bad.

It's really, really bad.

There's no water down below. I was hoping for the ocean. Theo grew up on an island, so he could survive rough water.

If he jumped from the cliff, then he didn't land in the water. I don't think anybody could have jumped that far. There's a long, steep slope studded with sharp rocks. They're wet with the rain and ocean spray. The waves are even louder here. They're having a contest with the storm, and they're tied.

Looking down onto the rocks makes me dizzy. The thought of Theo landing on them makes me dizzy. The waves don't help.

"June," someone shouts, and I take the first step down onto the cliffside. It's not safe. My feet struggle to find a good angle, but I'm *doing this*. I have to. I take another step. No stairs have been built into the slope here. It's all rocks that have fallen onto one another.

I'll find Theo.

Another step.

I have to bend down and hold one of the rocks to keep my balance. "Theo," I shout.

My voice is starting to give out from the fight and from screaming his name at the Morelli Mansion, but I am *not* going to let that stop me from finding him.

From finding him *alive*.

There is no broken body down here. I'm prepared to be the one to find him, but my mind won't accept that he's dead. Not until I know. Not until I've seen it with my own eyes.

A few more steps. My foot slips on one of the rocks, and my balance sends me tipping down the slope. I stop myself on a rock that's sharper than the one I slipped on. It cuts into my palm a little, but I don't let go.

"Theo," I shout, louder than before. The storm doesn't give an inch. I didn't expect Mother Nature to help me, and she doesn't have to. I can do this.

There's a...sound.

I hold my breath to listen. The rain and the ocean are a constant roar.

"*Theo*." That one hurt.

"Here."

That was his voice, and it wasn't very far. "Theo?"

I can't tell if he says *here* again, or my name, or just another noise.

"Theo, I'm coming. I just—" There's no way he can hear me, but I have to talk myself through this, too. "I can't hurry, because I might fall, and then Carter would lose his mind. Okay. I have to put a foot down there, and hold on *here*. Made it."

I slip down another foot, wipe the rain out of my eyes, and crouch down to look in the direction his voice is coming from.

It doesn't seem like anybody's there at first. An overhang juts out a couple of feet from the cliffside, and the underside is in shadow.

Then he blinks, and I see him. *I see him*. There he is.

Theo clings to a ledge underneath it, his toes wedged into some gaps in the rocks. He'd probably survive the drop if he let go, but the landing would be unforgiving. He would be hurt.

Nobody on the top of the cliff would know he was there. The overhang would've hidden him, and his voice would have been muffled by the rain. Knowing Theo, he didn't say anything until he heard me. For all he knew, the Russians were still up there.

"Theo," I shout at him. "Can you hear me?"

It takes him a few beats before he answers. "I can hear you."

"Stay there, okay? Don't move. I love you." Then I take a deep breath and put every bit of power I've ever had in my life into my voice. I'll scream louder than this storm. I'll scream louder than *any* storm. "*Carter. I. Found. Him.*"

It's like magic.

Men pour over the cliffs, all around the overhang. One of them shouts something about how Theo must've climbed sideways from the spot where he fell. Carter ignores everyone who begs him to stop. He's not as careful as I was. He jumps

his way down the cliffside, landing at angles that make me gasp.

Leo is right behind him, descending the cliff with the same recklessness. He stays as close as he can to Carter. I point toward the overhang, and two of them head for Theo.

Carter and his brother stop as close to the overhang as they can get. They lean their heads close together. I have no idea what they could be discussing until Leo points at the rocks.

They're figuring out the best way for Carter to brace himself.

Carter gets his feet into position, and Leo puts an arm around Carter's waist. He digs his other hand into the cliffside, over a rock that does *not* look comfortable. Carter leans out, his hand extended, reaching for Theo.

It's the riskiest, most dangerous thing I've ever seen.

Theo bows his head. He's getting ready. Carter stays where he is, perfectly still, the rain moving frantically around him.

"Be careful," I whisper. It's a silly wish. None of them are careful men. They'll do anything for each other.

Theo lifts his head and says something I can't hear to Carter. Then he sways in the opposite direction, just once, and lets his momentum carry him to Carter.

Their hands touch.

Carter grips Theo's hand, hauls him close, wraps his arms around Theo. Carter's brother has to balance all three of them. It can't be easy.

"I have you." I can just hear him over the rain. I get a few steps closer.

"Carter." I could cry at the sound of Theo's voice.

"It's okay. I have you."

"I cannot stay awake," Theo says, and then he passes out in Carter's arms.

CARTER

MY BROTHERS HELP me carry Theo up to one of the Morelli Mansion's guest suites. He doesn't wake up when we put him into the bed. June leans in, tears running down her face, and kisses his cheek. Eva appears at her side and puts a hand on her elbow. "Come with me so you can towel off and get changed. The doctor's here, and he's waiting for us to step out."

June allows herself to be led into a clutch of my sisters and sisters-in-law.

I don't move.

Wake up, I think at Theo. Pray at him. You didn't go into the water. You didn't drown. You're okay. Wake up.

"Carter," Leo says. He doesn't seem to care that he's soaked to the skin.

Another voice enters the room. Two voices. A man and a woman. "We'd like the room cleared for the examination."

He says something about *policy*. He says something about *laws*.

"Carter, come with us." Lucian takes me by the elbow, and I shake him off.

"*Fuck* no. I'm not leaving."

"We need the space cleared." This man is a fucking stranger. Why would I leave Theo alone with him and some

nurse I've never seen? "We can begin as soon as we have patient privacy."

"Patient fucking privacy? He doesn't need patient privacy." I don't know what I say next. I only know that I keep talking, top of my voice, and my brothers converge on me. "What the *fuck*. You traitors. You motherfuckers. I'm not leaving. Mother of God, let *go* of me."

They don't let go. All three of them move me into the hall, and the nurse closes the door in my face. The lock *clicks* on the other side.

"I hate you," I shout at the door. "I fucking hate you. How *dare* you." I wheel around to face my brothers. "Where the fuck is June?"

"Eva took her to her room to dry off." Leo's so careful with me, and it doesn't fucking matter, because I need to be with Theo. I need to be with both of them.

"Her *room*?"

"Eva's old room. So she can catch her breath. That's where she is. You can go there, too. We'll go with you, if you want."

I turn back around and punch the door. It's solid hardwood, and it shows no sign of violence. I punch it again and wait, willing it to open. I'll burn the damn thing down if I have to.

I don't know how long I stand there, wishing death on the door, before Tiernan puts his hand on my shoulder.

"*What*?"

I whip around to find him watching me, worry in his green eyes. I still know those eyes like the back of my hand, despite all the bullshit that drove us apart in our childhood. I try not to think of those things. I try not to remember that Tiernan was the first person to hurt me so badly I couldn't breathe. Sometimes, I've considered the idea that he's the one who showed me what we were. What *I* am. He's the one who made me so dangerous.

I never end up at that conclusion. We were kids, and fucked-up things happened. We've put it behind us. I should

have come back from Oxford when we decided to move past those things. I should have come back for Tiernan and Daphne and all of my siblings. I didn't, and *now* look.

Tiernan sticks his hands in his pockets. "He's going to be okay. He probably passed out from the stress."

If he's pissed at me for telling him about Theo and June via an outburst at the family dinner, there's no sign of it in his face, or in his voice. He must be hiding it.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you personally." I'm a snappish, defensive asshole, Mother of God. "I understand if you're pissed at me about that."

Tiernan presses his lips together, and for a moment I have no earthly fucking idea what that expression is supposed to tell me.

I crash into the truth like a plane meeting a deserted island beach nose-first. "You *knew*, you motherfucker."

He puts both hands up, palms toward me. "You were...I'm trying to be generous here. You were so goddamn obvious at Leo's house. And then Sophia got confirmation from June."

"Jesus Christ." I put my hands over my face and breathe. "So she went running to tell the rest of you. You could have *said* something. Why the hell did all of you act surprised?"

"I didn't. The priest is the one who lost his shit."

"Half of you were shouting, asshole."

"Leo was shouting *at the priest*. Lucian was shouting at Dad, who was also shouting something at the priest."

"No, he wasn't."

Tiernan shrugs. "I was sitting next to him. Maybe you couldn't hear."

I don't know what that means. I don't know what anything means. I steal a glance at the door in case the nurse has decided to open it.

She hasn't.

“We’ll be downstairs, okay?” Tiernan pats my shoulder again. “You need any of us to come up here, send a text. Or scream. We’re not leaving you.”

I make a helpless gesture. I want all of them back up here, and I only want June, and I don’t want anyone watching me.

Tiernan steps in and hugs me, getting his clothes wet in the process. He’s gentle about it, but it squeezes all the air from my lungs anyway. Hugging him back is easy. It wasn’t simple for a long time. It wasn’t possible from across the ocean.

What have I done with my life?

He squeezes one more time and lets go. Then he takes his phone out of his pocket and wiggles it in front of him, as if I’ve forgotten what phones are. “We’re downstairs. Do you... want an ice pack?”

“No.”

“Okay.”

The second he’s out of sight, I start pacing.

I can’t do this.

I can’t, and I have no choice, because Theo’s hurt. My heart can’t take it. My nerves can’t take it. I’m a different person here. I thought I was unshakeable when I got recruited to work as an operative. All the tests I took seemed like proof that nothing would ever get to me, other than my own guilt. Nothing could drive me to panic. Nothing could choke off my air supply and send my pulse racing.

I feel completely fucking useless. Theo’s in one of the Morelli Manson’s guest suites with a doctor and a nurse, and what am I good for? Nothing but pacing in the hall, my mind on an endless loop of *Mother of God, let him be okay and please, please, I can’t lose him and pray for us now and at the hour of our death and this cannot be the hour of anyone’s fucking death, can you hear me? He’s mine. He’s mine. He’s mine.*

This is taking too long.

I don't want to get too far from the door, but my legs ache with the need to move. I end up pacing in a tight path, no more than three doors in each direction.

I'm not sure how long I've been doing it when I turn around and just manage to stop myself from running into my father.

My stomach goes cold. My blood. My muscles. Sophia told my siblings, but they didn't tell my parents because of their *code*. He didn't know, and Tiernan didn't say what he was shouting at the priest about.

"Dad." There's nowhere to go after that. I haven't a fucking clue what to say, and my brain won't work with me. Might not work at all until Theo is safe. I try to force it anyway and come up with nothing.

"Son."

There's something strange about his face. About his voice. It sounds, actually, like I'd imagine Leo would sound when he's older, and his expression is similar to the one he uses when he holds Abby.

Love, I think, over other, more complicated things. Pain and regret and uncertainty.

"Walk with me." My father puts his hand on my shoulder and turns me so we're side by side. He doesn't say anything about my clothes, or the rain-soaked spots I've left in the carpet. We move down the hall together. He looks good, for a man in his sixties. He's still strong, and his hair is still dark, and he has the Morelli look about him. The one he gave to all of us, except Tiernan, who probably came by it just through extended proximity. Dad goes all the way to the end of the hall before he turns around.

"I think it would be helpful for you to know that your situation isn't...unprecedented."

It takes several steps to work through that. "My situation with Theo and June."

"Yes, that's the one."

“I know we’re not the first people in history to do this.”

A short sigh. “It’s not unprecedented in our family.”

“That’s not—” I run through the list of my siblings. Holy Christ. Did one of them not tell me because of that goddamn code? Which one? “I don’t know who you mean.”

My father stops in the middle of the hall and looks me in the eye. “I mean me.”

I don’t know what to say to that.

“It was an arrangement that should have worked.” His jaw tenses, and I can tell how much he wants to look away from me. Walk away, even. Forget about all of this. “It didn’t, because I was a coward who followed my father’s orders. I married the person he chose for me, and I’ve regretted it forever.”

That...stings, a little bit. I’ve always known my dad wasn’t happy in his marriage most of the time.

“Carter.”

I don’t realize I’m staring blankly at his shoes until he says my name.

He rubs at his forehead, then drops his hand to his side. “I don’t regret the entirety of my marriage. I don’t regret any of you.”

I hold my breath, because it feels like we’re handing a knife back and forth. One with a razor-sharp blade. Ten years ago, I might have thrown this back in his face. Told him I regretted being alive. I can’t regret that now. I know too much about how the worst parts of a person can take root and grow out of control.

I know how love can soothe some of that poison.

“That’s good.” It’s a change from what I’ve thought all these years, but I can’t help liking the sound of it.

“What I regret is not insisting on what I wanted. What I regret is not trying harder to make it work. I gave up too soon, and I shouldn’t have.”

This is, without exception, the strangest conversation I've ever had with my father in my life.

"I'm surprised." It's the truth, and I have no guidebook for talking to my father about being in a throuple. God, that's an awful word. About being with two other people. "I wouldn't have guessed that about you."

It's beginning to dawn on me that my father and I have more in common than just his Morelli DNA. I'm with a man and a woman, and from the complete, shocking understanding on his face, he was, too.

Fuck.

My mind slots in details from his past. He hasn't told us many of them, but I've researched him enough to know that his father was even more of a tyrant than he ever became with us, and that's saying something. Society was far less welcoming to people who weren't straight. It would have been a heavy secret.

It's still a heavy secret, isn't it?

None of that excuses him, but it explains a lot.

I haven't wanted to confide in him for a long time. There's a huge, laughable irony in the fact that my father could be the only one in this house who understands.

"Even if I tried, it wouldn't work for me. Not in the long run. I keep trying to convince them that it will, but I know it won't."

"Why not?" I wish I had a recording of the genuine curiosity in his voice and a photo of how he looks right now.

"Because I'm a violent government operative. They probably won't take me back now that my cover is blown, but I'll always be a murderous spy."

My father shakes his head "That's not your identity. That's a choice. We all have different sides to us. It's why you can be so goddamn smart and still think you're only cut out to be a hired gun. It's why you can spend half your time teaching and the other half doing the government's dirty work."

“But—”

“Nobody is a single identity. We’re a set of choices, and it only takes one of them to change your life.” He reaches out, hesitating for a split second. When I don’t flinch away, he squeezes my shoulder and moves past me. He doesn’t turn back as he heads down the hall. “Don’t repeat my mistakes. Don’t live with regret. Make the right decision, Carter.”

THEO

I AM with my mother on the island.

It is dawn, the sun lifting slowly, slowly over the horizon. It's the first sunrise she won't be here to see, because she died during the night.

I have been here a long time. I arrived just after sunset. She recognized me. I knew it from the light in her eyes. We have not seen each other in many years, but she knew me.

"I am here with you." I wanted her to know she was not alone. I took her hand in mine.

"Theo." She smiled at me, and was still smiling when she closed her eyes for the last time.

I did not let go of her hand. I held it in both of mine and sat at her side, witnessing her.

The stars were bright in the sky when she let out her last breath, a calm, slow exhale, and I felt her slip away from me. I felt her soul rise out of her body. To somewhere better, where no one will ever hurt her again. She will never have to fear a dark alley or a dangerous man. She will never be sick or hungry or lost.

She is at home.

In the cabin we built together, I find sheets made from cloth softer than a cloud. Each one of them is a pure, clean white. I find a dress for her in the same fabric. It is new and perfect and will not scratch her skin.

It's what she deserves for her last outfit. She brought me here, after all. When we left the city, I did not know the island for the gift that it was.

Now I know.

This is the place where I will find Carter, and I will find June. They are not here yet, but they will be.

I will think they're bringing sin to the island, but I will be wrong. They will bring love. So much love that I will understand things like *eternity* and *always*.

It's too early to feel it yet, with my mother only gone a few hours, but I know their love already. It feels like a warm bath. A soft kiss. It feels like the antidote for loneliness.

It is holy, and it's why my mother took me and fled to this place. She wanted me to be sanctified, and now I am. The island did not do that. June and Carter will do that. Loving them more than I love my own heart will do that.

The sun wakes up the birds and the animals, and they sing for my mother while I care for her the way I should have. The way I meant to.

My hands are steady as I wash her hair. I speak to her while I brush it out and let it dry on her pillow. I tell her how much I'll miss her, and that I have forgiven her for her fear. I tell her she does not need to worry about me. I will have a life so filled with love that it will wash over everything like the storms that gather over the ocean. In the end, everything will be clean and fresh.

I wash her body with soap made from the flowers of the island. It is a ritual, like prayer, or sacrifice.

When I did this before, I was very young, and I was afraid.

I feared her death and her absence and I feared myself. It was not peaceful. I rushed so that it would be over, so that I could try to forget. I rushed because I thought I had to be finished by nightfall.

I rushed because I was alone, and there was no one to tell me that I was saying goodbye.

Now, I do not rush. I reach for a cloth to dry her and one appears in my hand.

If she were alive, her eyes would go wide at how soft it is. *Impossible*, she would say. And I would tell her that very little in this world is impossible. That somewhere, across the ocean, a man who can look as vicious and intimidating as Carter does when he is threatened fills his house with the softest things I've ever touched. No guest of his will feel the tug and burn of a coarse-woven fabric.

I clothe her in the white gown, which seems made for her. My mother looks peaceful in it. Her face is calm, with a gentle smile at her lips. I take one hand, then the other, and kiss her knuckles. I fold her hands on her belly.

The sun slants through the window of our cabin, lighting her face in a warm glow that makes her look like she is sleeping. At any moment, she could rise from the bed and walk into the morning.

That is what she is doing now. She is walking into the first morning of heaven. It closes my throat and makes my eyes sting, but it makes my heart feel light, too. She went from our home to her next home. She is free.

I look at her for a long time, memorizing her face. The sun holds its position for me. This morning will not pass until she is resting.

In the same soft light, I put my hand over hers and kiss her forehead. Her cheeks. This, too, is a gift I've hoped for, but never spoken out loud. I wanted so much to be able to do this for her one more time.

"I love you, Mama." I want her to hear it one more time. I will be thinking it every day until my soul rises out of my body, but saying it now is part of our ritual. "I'll miss you so much. I'll see you again one day, I promise."

For the first time, I understand the shape of the fear I will feel when I leave this island.

It is not about sin for sin's sake. It is about becoming the kind of person who would sin against another. *Hurt* another for

no justifiable reason.

If I became that kind of person, I would not see her again, and I needed to see her again. I needed to have that hope. My faith has never been as strong as hers, but on this, she did not waver. Even if we are separated, we will meet again in heaven.

I have not become one of those people. I have been made better, and less fearful, and more loving.

“I’ll see you again.” I know it for certain now. I can set down that fear. “You will know me then, too. And I will know you. I’ll always know you.”

A last kiss to her forehead, and then I set about wrapping her body in white sheets. She seems small when I am finished. Light, when I take her into my arms. I carry her out into the sunlight.

Her resting place has already been prepared. I did not leave her side, but the island must have known what I needed.

“Through the Lord’s mercies we are not consumed, because His compassions fail not,” I say to her, over her, as I lower her to her rest. “They are new every morning. Great is your faithfulness, Mama. Therefore I hope in you. I hope for you. I love you. I can’t wait to see you again. I will tell you everything, I promise. I promise.”

I do not bury her at the top of a mountain. I bury her near our home, where the sun will rise new over her resting place every morning. I arrange rocks over where she rests, so that even when I leave to be with the ones I love, I will always be able to find her. She will always be protected.

The sun gets brighter as I place the last rock. It is so bright I close my eyes against it. I breathe in the island and let the scent sink into me. The sound of water and wildlife. The sound of a new day. It will be with me, the way my mother is. One day, I will return.

In the dark, I rise up and up and up into warmth and softness and hushed voices.

I am...in a bed.

It's warm here.

Someone is holding my hand. Both my hands.

I open my eyes. Oh, beautiful. Blue eyes and dark eyes watch me, shining with love. From the light on their faces, I can see that the storm has cleared, and the day has been given to us again.

"Angels," I say.

June laughs, and Carter tips his head back like he's trying not to cry. Then both of them fold into me, over me, and I do not care that we are so close to the city. I do not care that life here is more complicated than being alone on an island. I am safe and warm, and I can make this place my home. I can make any place my home, as long as they are with me.

"I saw my mother." My voice is thick with tears, but I am not sad. I am home, I am *home*. The part of me that was injured and hesitant is gone. I've put it to rest. Finally, after all this time, I put it to rest.

"In your dream?" June asks.

"I buried her. I—" The tears well up and fall down my cheeks. I do not try to stop them. "I understood that you and Carter would come to the island, so I was not afraid. I said goodbye to her. I left us both in peace."

"Theo," Carter says. "I love you."

I cannot speak. There is too much love in my heart. Too much peace. It takes a bit of time to gather the words.

"When that woman found me on the cliffside." It is not as bad as the gunshot wound. My hands hurt, and my arms. There is a distant pain in my head. It could be much more. "I did not care to stay away from you. Love is more important than being...alone. I thought it was safer, to be alone, but it is not. I will stay here and love you. I love you."

Carter's breath hitches. He does not raise his head from my shoulder. "Not...*here*, though. You know we're not staying here. We'll get a house somewhere else."

“What, you don’t want to live with your parents?” June teases.

“I’m going to be busy.” Carter is not teasing. “I’m going to be so busy, loving you. I doubt they’ll find it appropriate.”

“That—” June’s voice warms and clears. It reminds me of a sunrise. “That sounds like it might be a euphemism for—”

“It means I’m going to lock us in that house and fuck the two of you for days, yes. Maybe even weeks. Months? I haven’t decided yet. Nobody’s going to be able to visit for a good long time.”

It comes to me, only now, that there’s something I want to give to him. Once we leave this room, everything will be different. We will be making our way into the future together. We will find a house and make it a home. June and I will belong to Carter.

That’s the way of things between us. It is the way we are meant to be.

But here, for a little while, we can be anything. We can be ourselves. Today, we can ask anything of each other.

We can give anything to each other.

It is like the hour just before dawn, when the day has not taken shape, and there is only possibility.

“Carter.”

He lifts his head to look into my eyes. “Yes?”

“Are we alone?”

His brow furrows. “There are people in the house, but they won’t come upstairs unless I text them.”

“Then there is something I need from you.”

CARTER

WHEN THEO EXPLAINS what he wants from me, my heart goes wild.

It races fast and hard, and Theo sees it in my face. “You do not want it.”

I want them both on their knees for me. And, just this once, I want to let him take charge. Not forever. Just once. I haven’t let anyone do this in years, and last time it was a one-night stand in a foreign country, and when I woke up the next morning, the weight of the world was still on my shoulders. It hadn’t changed at all.

“Only if you’re well enough. I won’t let you hurt yourself for this. For me.”

Theo smiles. He’s slightly pale from having to cling to the cliffside, but I see all his strength behind that grin. “I am well, Carter. Do not worry.”

The three of us go into the shower. It’s not quite big enough for all of us, but what can you expect out of the Morelli Mansion? Not every en suite is made for three people. June fusses over Theo, and fusses over me, and I can hardly breathe. I feel like I’ve just run a long, *long* race, and the finish line came as a surprise. I didn’t know I wanted it.

When we’re clean and dry, if bruised from the Underwood ordeal, Theo takes June to bed, lays her out on the mattress, and looks my way for permission. He still wants that, even with what we’re about to do.

I pull a shirt over my head. A spare pair of sweatpants, abandoned in one of the dresser drawers. “You can kiss her. Don’t make her come.”

Theo narrows his eyes. “Do not take long, Carter.”

Well. He *can* put some authority into his voice, then. The words repeat in my ears, making my whole body hot, while I open drawers and medicine cabinets in various bathrooms until I find what I need.

In the bedroom, I lock the door, and then I’m...

I don’t know what to do.

Theo finishes kissing June and detaches himself from her in a lazy, languid way. Then he pushes himself off the bed and comes to me.

He strips my shirt over my head, folds it in two, and lays it on the dresser. He tugs my pants down and off. This perfect man undresses me like the clothes are an affront to my skin. Like it’s against the laws of nature to cover myself. My cock juts out, painfully hard, and Theo rakes his eyes over me.

Then, with his strong, calloused hands, he pushes me back against the door and kisses me.

It is not lazy, or languid, the way it was with June. There’s a bite in it. A challenge. I kiss him back like that, my hands going to his chest. I don’t want to hurt him, but I *do* want that contact. I want the push and the pull. I want to feel how sturdy he is. How alive. His cock brushes against mine, and I make a sound into his mouth. He answers with a heated growl, his tongue in my mouth and his hands firm on the sides of my neck.

“I have already caught you.” He says it low enough that I don’t think June hears. One of his hands slips down to take the small bottle of lube from me. “Let yourself be caught. I will not tell.”

What happens here will stay between the three of us, he means. It calms a nervous feeling I wasn’t aware of until it’s gone.

Mother of God, it's a good thing he didn't tell me not to fight. That's the way we are. Testing each other. Finding each other's balance. Taking. Giving.

He takes me toward the bed, and I resist. Theo doubles down and *makes* me do it. "I was wrong."

Theo pauses, but doesn't let go. "About what?"

"You don't always belong on your knees."

He arches one eyebrow, and it might be the hottest expression I've ever seen him make. "Do you think I ruled my island from my knees?"

I shake my head, lost in him already.

He wrestles me to the bed. He must give June a look she understands, because when I get there, she's on her back, stretched out on the mattress, reaching for me.

A gentle, approving touch from Theo tells me what he wants.

Very fucking conveniently, it's also what I want.

I settle between June's legs, let her take some of my weight, and kiss her.

She puts her arms around my neck and spreads her thighs. On instinct, I angle my cock toward her opening, but Theo reaches around and takes me in his hand. "Not yet."

"Fuck," I say into June's mouth, but I'm not going to argue with him. It hurts not to fuck her. I probably deserve that. It means I have to hover over her, my cock only just brushing against her slick pussy, balanced on my elbows.

Oh, that bastard. Theo planned this. His hands on my hips, adjusting me the way he wants, confirm it.

"Do not stop tasting her."

I don't stop.

I kiss June's pink, pretty mouth and let her run her fingertips through my hair and down the back of my neck and

over my shoulders. I taste her, quick and hard, slow and thoughtful.

Theo rests his palm on my lower back, holding me in place. He reaches between my thighs for my cock and strokes it with a lubed-up palm. I'm fairly certain he skims the head of my cock over June's folds on purpose.

I curse into her mouth, muscles trembling, and Theo shushes me. "You are a strong man." Everything he says is even and quiet, and I'm so hot for it I can hardly see. "You will survive this."

Maybe. Maybe not.

He takes his hand away, completely ignoring my desperate groan into June's mouth.

"It's okay," she soothes, and I know she's talking about the sex, but it feels like she's talking about everything. "It's okay, Carter, we have you."

Fuck. *Fuck*. I believe her. I just...I believe her. I can't remember the last time I felt this way. I can't remember the last time I thought *yes, it's okay*, and it was the truth.

Theo nudges my thighs a little farther apart, and then two very slick fingers circle my balls. They follow a steady path all the way up to my hole. No pressure at first. Only small circles.

"Do not stop." It's a surprisingly gentle reminder from Theo. He's not scolding. He seems to understand that I didn't know I stopped.

I focus on kissing June, which is sheer pleasure, and he keeps circling my hole. I don't know how my brain can do this. I'm absorbed in the taste of her mouth, the soft give of her lips, and my nerves spark and glow with Theo's touch.

He adds more lube directly to my skin and pushes a fingertip inside.

Mother of God, I want more of *that*.

I tilt my hips to show him, to tell him, because I have no other way. If I stopped kissing June, I'd just be making incoherent *yes* noises into the open air.

Theo hums, keeping his hand steady on my lower back, and pushes his finger all the way inside me. My breath stutters, but not because it hurts. It's a light, teasing burn I thought I'd forgotten. Theo rubs his thumb over my back, patient and waiting. I do *not* want to take my mouth away from June. The head of my cock is touching her pussy, and I don't want that to move, either. I tilt my hips again, a tiny movement, and Theo lets out a breath. He fucks me with his finger, slow, gentle, then pulls out and adds a second one.

He waits for me to adjust, that thumb moving back and forth, back and forth. If he learned this from me, he's a star student. Theo fucks me with two fingers, then pushes them inside. Turns them, like he's looking for an angle.

I know what he's going to do just before he does it.

He crooks his fingers, rubbing up against a ball of nerves that turns my kiss panting and open-mouthed, and has June clinging to me like she thinks I might float away.

Theo does it again.

"One more." His voice is on some faraway island. I have no idea what he means until he adds a third finger. I'm gone, so completely reduced to raw nerves, that I don't recognize the sounds I'm making. Theo keeps answering them anyway. *Yes, he says. Good. And You like to be caught, don't you?*

I fuck myself on his fingers until he takes them away. A soft towel at my lower back takes care of some lube there. I'm shaking, propped over June, and I can't look away from her eyes. Jesus, she's perfect. Jesus, they're both so fucking perfect. They're both so *mine*.

I'm briefly aware of Theo at the edge of my vision. June moves underneath me, a new angle to her body, and then he's behind me again. Closer. His thighs to mine. Hands on my hips. Moving me, too.

The head of his cock meets my hole, and the smallest panic floats to the surface of my pleasure.

“Theo, I—I can’t kiss her anymore.” I’m afraid I’ll bite her. I’ve already lost most of my control, and when he does this, I’m going to lose the rest.

“I am not angry. Breathe slow.”

It takes three tries to get the slow breath he wants, and as I let it out, Theo pushes in.

“Mother of God. *Fuck*, oh, God.”

Now both his thumbs glide over my back in small crescents like the beaches on his island. Theo goes still, but I can feel him trembling.

“You are tight. You feel—” An unsteady breath. “Heaven. You feel like heaven. Am I hurting you?”

“No. Please. Don’t stop.”

He doesn’t stop, but he doesn’t rush, either. Theo takes me slowly, stretching me until his hips meet my ass and he’s all the way inside.

I put my face to June’s neck and try not to lose it completely. I want to come so badly. I never want this to end.

“June.”

All Theo says is her name, and June lets out a soft, relieved sound. The back of her hand brushes my abs, and then there’s movement. Her fingers on her clit.

I’m going to lose my mind.

Theo holds me by the hips and pulls out at the same speed, leaving only the tip of him inside. He strokes in a pace that drives me wild. I don’t just need to come. I want to fuck him back.

There’s no way I’ve said it out loud in words that could be understood by another person, but Theo leans into me, rocking hips. He reaches past me, and down, doing something that brings June closer to me.

“Later,” he says. “I swear. Let her take you now.”

My body obeys instantly. My mind takes longer to catch up. I sink my cock into June and lick the side of her neck. Kiss her. Theo put pillows under her hips so she'd be ready for me. I'm so in love with him it hurts.

"Love you," I manage to say, because she's tight and hot and wet. Her fingers move between us. She's already on the edge, clenching around me.

I can't fuck her, because I'm being fucked. Theo is the one fucking her, driving me deeper with every stroke.

He gasps, his fingers flexing on my hips. "June. First."

The words are barely out of his mouth before June comes. She throws both arms around my neck and drags me into her at the same time Theo snaps, fucking us both into the mattress.

"Carter. Next."

I take one hand off the mattress and reach back for his thigh, just below his ass. It's not quite where I touched him the first time he fucked June. I can't quite curve my hand around the hard muscle. All I can do is encourage him.

Theo makes a rough sound that's pure relief, and I'm swept away seconds before he is. I pour myself into June, his heat inside me.

The pulsing, consuming pleasure doesn't stop for a long time, and then Theo's heavy across my back. He presses his face between my shoulder blades, and I can tell, just from the sound of his breath, that he wants to trade back. He's done as much as he can do, and he needs me again.

We end up in a breathless tangle in the sheets, his face at my neck, June's head on my chest. I hold them tight, feeling their hearts settle back to normal in their bodies.

I'm never going to let go.

EPILOGUE

CARTER

ON ONE OF our first vacations together, we visit an island.

It's not Theo's island. He says he isn't ready to go back there, and I won't push him. I'd like to see the place where we first met again, but I'm not in any hurry to relive the plane crash. Neither is June.

We take a big, private jet to a big, private island that Leo apparently owns. Most of the land is undeveloped, conserved unto eternity, but a portion has been set aside for an exclusive luxury resort.

I'd go anywhere with Theo and June. I'd stay in a tent. On the open ground. On the beach, without any shelter from the elements.

June glows when we walk into the little beach house for the first time. It's stocked almost as well as Leo's house, which I realize isn't a coincidence. He must like to vacation here, too, on the rare occasion he'll agree to leave New York. I know, because June runs her hands over the pillowcases and drops her head back with the sheer pleasure of touching the fabric.

The first night, we don't leave the resort house. I've just collapsed on top of both Theo and June when there's a soft knock at the door. Someone's delivered a covered tray with a note inside.

Text me when you're stateside again. Yes, that's an order, Carter. Tell the other newlyweds I expect the same.

–Leo

“Oooh, stateside.” June grins at me, her cheeks flushed from the frankly athletic sex we just had on the ultra-soft sheets. “How does it feel to be a stateside professor now?”

I throw myself across the pillows and frown. “Less posh than being an Oxford professor.”

“Less posh.” Theo runs his fingers through my hair. “You would say that.”

You would say that is one of June’s phrases. I think she got it from one of my sisters. You get to hear language being passed around through the people you love when you live close enough for them to talk on a regular basis, which we do. That’s one of the best parts about my new job at Columbia. I still get to travel. All *three* of us get to travel, and it’s...

More than I could have hoped for. More than I ever could have dreamed. It’s not the *stateside* part of Leo’s note that makes my heart feel full to brimming with sunlight and laughter and love and all the things that people need to be a family.

It’s the *newlyweds* part.

“God,” I say into the pillow. “You two have made me sappy. How can you stand it?”

“It *was* kind of hot when you were a superspy.” June sighs. “Maybe you could get up early one morning and—”

“What? Stalk you in the jungle?”

She takes my chin in her hand and turns my head so she can kiss me, her hair tickling my cheek. “That was most of my idea, yeah. We could pretend we didn’t have any shelter, and maybe my ankle gets fake-hurt so the two of you have to fight over who gets to carry me...”

“This is not a simple dream.” Theo laughs, the sound its own warmth. “You’ve thought about it.”

“I can’t help it.” June’s so cute when she pretends to be innocent. “I’m with you two *all the time*. There’s just an

abundance of island scenarios constantly running through my mind.”

“I’m not getting up early,” I point out. “I want to stay in bed with you.”

This time, it’s Theo who leans in. “Just once?”

I turn my face back into the pillow. “It’s not kind of you to use that voice with me.”

“Because you cannot say no.”

He’s right.

We spend the next morning on the beach in a cabana with more soft blankets and cushions and white curtains that blow in the breeze. Theo stretches out next to me on a lounge big enough for the three of us. “Hike tomorrow? Or later today?”

“Tell me you did not bring collection kits.”

He’s my professorial assistant. Not in the classroom, but whenever we travel. He has excellent instincts when it comes to finding plants, and sometimes he’s more gentle with them than I could hope to be. He likes to hear about my research, and I like to hear about his life on the island whenever it applies to the search at hand.

Whenever it doesn’t apply, too.

And June—

June takes photos. She’s more talented with her camera every day. For Christmas, Theo and I got her a top-of-the-line Nikon. It’s not meant to replace the one she lost on the island, it’s just the next phase of her life as a photographer. Her new camera is fast and lightweight. My favorite thing about it is the sound she makes when she looks at the viewfinder and falls in love with the photo she’s taken.

I fall in love with her a little more every time.

She doesn’t take assignments from low-paying publications anymore. She doesn’t even take assignments from universities. Photography is an art form for her now, and she’s incredible at it. Her prints sell for a lot of money.

A shutter clicks off to my right, but I don't turn to look. Not right away. Theo props himself on one elbow and brushes his nose against mine, grinning like a fool.

"I brought collection kits," he says in a low, sultry voice.

He presses a smiling kiss to my cheek and another to my lips. I touch the side of his neck. His hair. The lips that follow me into my dreams and are there when I wake up. The shutter clicks and clicks.

"Come here, Junie."

She's at the side of the lounge in seconds, holding out her camera. "Look."

I shade my eyes and look at the screen. Theo leans in close to look with me.

He looks like a magazine model in the photo, if magazine models existed to demonstrate being in love with another person. His smile is heated and genuine and lovely, and—

"You," Theo says.

I look good. I look *happy*. I smile up at him, lost in his eyes, my thumb caught mid-stroke across his neck, and there is not a tense muscle in my body.

We are right together. It's obvious through the infinitesimal distance between lens and subject. It's a crucial distance, I think. It lets us see things invisible to the naked eye.

Well...they're not *that* invisible. But it's undeniable proof.

"That's forever, in a picture." June's voice is a bit tight, like she might cry over her photo. I might cry over it, too.

"Almost. Tomorrow, set up your tripod. I want some with you in it." I purse my lips in her direction. "Why are you so far away? I meant *come here, into my arms, wife.*"

June giggles and sets her camera aside. She curls up next to me, her fingertips tracing the waistband of my swim trunks. "Have I ever told you that you're my favorite subjects?"

"Do you like us better on the beach or when we look for plants?" Theo makes it sound serious, which is how I know

he's teasing.

“In the shower,” June whispers, and then she bursts out laughing. Theo laughs too. So do I. We're a connected ecosystem. Joy moves through us like roots threaded deep into lush soil.

I fold both of them into my arms, still laughing. My next breath is filled with salt air and sunscreen and the loves of my life.

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In a single moment, she becomes my obsession...

Elaine Constantine will be mine. And her destruction is only my beginning.

My will to dominate her runs as deep as the hate I have for her last name. No matter how beautifully she bends beneath my hands, I'll leave her shattered, a broken toy for her cruel family.

Winston Constantine is the head of the Constantine family. He's used to people bowing to his will. Money can buy anything. And anyone. Including Ash Elliot, his new maid.

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I wanted him, but I was already promised to another man. Ronan might be the one who murdered him. But two warring families want my blood. I don’t know where to turn.

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