

ALWAYS WITH YOU DUET PART 2

NEVER  
LOSING  
HOPE

Y.V. LARSON

—MUSIC—

# NEVER LOSING HOPE

ALWAYS WITH YOU DUET BOOK 2

Y.V. LARSON

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# AUTHOR'S NOTE

Thank you for picking up my book, it means the world to me. While I would love for you to read my work, your mental health is more important.

**This book is intended for a mature audience of 18+. There may be some violence, drug use, kidnapping, torture, nightmares, PTSD or other triggers. Please be aware if you have any of those triggers.**

**If you need a more detailed list, don't hesitate to reach out via email or social media!**

Email: [YVLarson92@gmail.com](mailto:YVLarson92@gmail.com)

If you are still with me, there's one more thing I would like to add. Eve's story is just that, her story. Keep in mind that trauma is different for everyone. Evelyn is not meant to be depicted as a framework for all trauma responses and coping mechanisms.

This is simply her story of finding safety, comfort, and love from a group of guys who learn how to help her. While this book is emotional and dark, it will also focus on growth and finding joy in life.

If that sounds good to you, then I hope you enjoy the final installment of my debut series!

Happy reading!

*DEDICATED TO*

My Momma.

You are my soul mate.

My best friend.

The one who promised:

*I will always be with you,  
Watching over your shoulder.*

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# Prologue

## **Evelyn - 18 years ago**

“Momma, look!” The wind whips my pigtails around my cheeks when I look back. Flying through the air, I catch sight of Mommy running behind me. Her mouth is spread so wide in a smile. I giggle at her chasing me.

Mommy’s face changes from being happy to... why is she frowning? “Eve! Watch out!” Why is Mommy yelling at me? My eyebrows furrow, and my chin quivers.

Not wanting her to see my tears, I look forward again, my feet peddling so fast now. The ground feels like it drops below me, and a squeal peels out of my lips.

It happens so fast...I’m not even sure what it was. But there’s a ringing in my ears, and my knees hurt.

“Evie, honey!” Through my watery eyes, I watch Momma kneel before me. Her dark hair and comforting presence make my tears fall harder. “Where are you hurt, baby?”

“M-my knees!” A burning sensation starts on my hands now, too. “H-Hands, Mommy.” My tummy swirls, making me not feel so good.



“Eve!” The voice of my friend, Noly, makes me drop my head. He saw me fall. I feel his small hands brushing away my hair while Momma checks on my knees. “Are you okay?” He sounds scared. Looking up at him from my place on the ground, I watch his curls twirl in the wind.

A giggle pops out, and I smile at him. “I-I’m okay.”

“Of course you are.” Mommy gives me a wide smile and says, “You’re my little warrior, aren’t you?” I nod and snuffle back some boogies.

“Can I give her a new name too?” Noly looks at Momma, so excited to be giving me another one.

“Of course, Bug. Evie can have all the nicknames.” She pinches his cheek gently and gives him a wink.

His nose scrunches beneath his glasses. “Momma Mi told me about a bird that is so strong and can live forever...” Noly looks at me now. How would I know?

“A Pheonix?” Momma asks.

His eyes grow wide, and he gives me his biggest smile. “Yes! Evie is my little Phoenix! She is so strong and will live with me forever and ever.”

# Chapter 1

## Ryan

The slam of the judge's hammer makes me jump right out of my skin. There was rage behind that sentencing; good for us because *fuck* Evelyn's dad. A door bangs closed in the back of the courtroom, making my nerves prickle with anxiety. I don't think much of it until I hear Korren rumbling out curse words.

Looking around Nolan's pale face, I find the grumpy bastard looking flustered and clutching Eve's purse in a vice grip. He catches my eye. "Eve and Josie ran out... she wasn't looking so good."

"Shit, let's go!" Amiri stands up on my other side and ushers us out of the pew. Ignoring the obscenities I want to throw at Noah on the way out of the courtroom, I follow behind Nolan, just trying not to fucking run into the crowd.

"Where is she?" Kor's panicked voice breaks through my rage-filled thoughts. Looking ahead of us, I see the front doors of the building overflowing with press and angry community members. It would be sweet how much they are supporting our girl with their signs of her name, but right now, they are clogging up the building.

Our girl is on the other side of this wide hallway... and these supporters need to get out of the damn way. Unfortunately, our initial pause looking around cost us our easy passage to the restroom. Bodies now crowd the entire lobby and adjoining halls; women flood in to use the lady's room.

“Son of a bitch!” Korren roars, his spiral evident at not having Eve in eyesight. If I'm being honest, though, sweat has begun to bead my brow, and my heart is thundering in my chest. I'd like to say that this is fine, and our girl is with her friend. Just peeing and powdering her nose or whatever women do in the bathroom. This should be fine because her dad and kidnapper are locked away now.

So why does something feel wrong? My gut is churning, and the alarm bells in my head are going fucking ballistic.

Looking over at Nol, I catch him rubbing at his chest, his eyes darting around the room. Amiri isn't any better; eyes sparkling with tears of frustration and fear. His dark skin glistens in his own perspiration of stress.

*Fuck.*

“Fuck,” Nolan repeats my thoughts with a wobbly whisper.

“Does anyone have eyes on her?” I have to yell over the crowd cheering Eve's name. Even if we were to yell out for her, she wouldn't be able to pick out our voices among everyone else.

“No, let's just make our way to the girl's bathroom.” Amiri pushes to the front of our group and takes the lead in guiding us through the shit show that has become the courthouse.

*Where the fuck is the security?*

After behind shoved, groped, questioned, and ignored, we finally make it to the wall that was way too fucking far away. “Ugh!” I shake off my coat. “Does anyone else feel like their fucking skin is crawling now?” Seriously, I think about a million sweaty people just touched my entire body.

The bathroom door bursts open. “Fucking moveuhh!” Josie’s irritated voice has my shoulders relaxing and the four of us taking a collective sigh of relief.

That is, until she comes out... *ALONE!*

“Oh, thank God, there you are!” She looks around at us, completely naive to the fact that we are all about to explode in some way, shape, or form. “Where’s Eve?”

“Excuse me?” Korren’s menacing rumble has the hairs on the back of my neck standing up. I grip Nolan’s forearm in mine, whether it’s for my own comfort or his, I have no idea. I just know for a fact that something isn’t right.

She frowns at the tattooed man towering above her. “What? I thought she was with you?”

I run my hand through my blonde hair, not caring if it’s messy anymore. A pained grunt escapes me with a gasp when another elbow jabs into my side. Perfectly fed up with this bullshit, I take over by saying, “She is not with us. You brought her to the bathroom, so where the fuck is my girlfriend, Josie?”

She blanches. And fuck if my heart doesn’t shrivel up and die right then and there.

“Babe, calm down.” Nolan chastises me for speaking to our friend like an ass.

“She- she wasn’t in the bathroom anymore when I got done peeing,” her voice wobbles, nerves fraying at being put on the spot with all the angry testosterone surrounding her.

“There you guys are!” My heart takes a hopeful beat at the sound of the parents surrounding us. The thumping organ falls flat when Mia asks, “Where’s our little fighter?” My hand clenches on Nolan’s arm again, and a ball of fear gets lodged in my throat at the same time it sours my stomach.

I lock frantic eyes with Korren and tilt my head towards the back door. We need to get the hell out of here. I can barely hear anything, and more people are pouring into the building. Plus, Eve knows where we parked, so if she got overwhelmed by the crowd, then she would know to meet us by the car if she needed some fresh air.

Right?

Shuffling along with our group of confused and worried family members, I can’t help but feel useless. I can’t make her appear out of thin air with a joke or stupid innuendo. I’m of no help... I can only trail behind like the lost, scared puppy they all joke about. I can only hope like hell that Eve is actually outside waiting for us.

She’s not.

Eve is nowhere to be seen once we all burst through the back doors. Heads swivel, wondering just where the fuck our girl is. Dan and Chris walk around the few cars in the lot, only to come back to our SUV with a shake of their heads.

Mia and Shelley are freaking me the fuck out, too; both look like they are on the verge of a panic attack, and their husbands look like they are about to kill someone. The fear in the air is making my throat itch and my hands shake.

“Evie!” Nolan’s wobbly voice rings out, and my heart cracks a bit more at his desperation. “Eve, you out here, baby?”

I pull my phone out of my pocket. “I’ll just call her.” My idea is quickly thwarted when Korren pulls her blue phone out of the purse she left behind.

“Son of a bitch!” The screen of my cell is about to crack under my punishing grip. “I knew I should have gotten her a watch to go with it!” My yell comes out scratchy and dark. The emotion and rage bubbling to the surface.

Amiri turns to Josie behind us. “When was the last time you saw her?” His jaw ticks when she looks at him with wide, red-rimmed eyes.

She twists her hands in front of her. “Um, so we ran to the bathroom because she was about to puke. She did, then I helped her swish some water and wipe her face. She was standing by the sink when I told her I was going to pee. But when I came out of my stall, the entire fucking female population was pushing through the doors. I checked the bathroom and yelled for her, but she wasn’t there.” A tear slips free from her lashes. “I-I thought she was with you guys.”

“Fuck.” Amiri swipes his hand down his face.

Jo’s eyes ping-pong between us. “But- but she should be fine, right? I mean, Brent and Noah are locked up now.”

My stomach drops into a splatter of anxiety on the pavement. My vision goes hazy, and around me, I not only see the realization dawn on everyone but the air shifts.

Could Eve have been right this whole time? Were there two kidnappers?

“Oh my God,” Nol whispers next to me, swaying on his feet, face completely drained of all color. I latch onto his waist, holding him to me, trying to keep him in one piece, even if I am completely ruined at this moment.

Amiri’s knees hit the ground. “No...” Devastation is clear across his features.

“Right, guys?” Josie’s shrill screech is drowned out by our worst-fucking-case scenario.

“Split up. Right the fuck now!” Korren’s roar has me jumping out of my horrified stupor. He takes off to the other side of the parking lot, telling the parents on his way to search for her.

“Come on, love.” I pull Nolan along with me, attempting to silence the thundering of my heartbeat out of my ears. “Let’s go look around the building; maybe she just got turned around.” Even as I say it, I know I’m wrong.

He follows behind me in a numb trance, probably reliving that night seven and a half years when Eve was gone.

“Nolan. Focus,” I snap when we round one of the alleyway corners. I need him to help me look for something... anything. “Baby! Look at me.” I drag his face close to mine, bending down a bit to look into his eyes. “Help me look for our girl... please.” My voice cracks under the weight of uncertainty.

“Yeah, okay,” he whispers, a tear falling from his eye. I watch as he blinks away some of the fog and reward him with a kiss.

Gripping his frozen hand in my sweaty one, I pull him slowly behind me into the alleyway crammed with dumpsters. Looking around, I notice an exit sign halfway down the pathway. “She could have gone out that door,” I murmur. Silence meets my hopeful pondering.

Glowing, I pause my slow steps and turn around. “What’s wrong?” I pause, terrified about what made my love look so completely and utterly fucking terrified.

His face is whiter than a sheet, with a sickly sheen. My breath catches. Nolan’s mouth is wide open, his bottom lip trembling, and his eyes are completely fucking bloodshot, overflowing with tears.

“Wha-what?” My broken whisper comes out hesitant. He isn’t looking at me; his eyes are trained on the ground behind me. Unmoving. Not blinking. My chest feels like it’s about to rip open and leave me as nothing but a puddle of desperation and heartbreak.

I don’t want to know what he’s looking at. My eyes release their own tears, my heart and soul weeping at what I might find behind me.

“Hey! Did you guys find anything?” Amiri and Korren round the corner and come to a stop beside us. I watch their hope fade, only to be replaced with all-consuming fear.

“Nolan... what’s wrong?” Amiri’s gentle tone registers with his frozen mind enough for him to point past my hip.



I squeeze my eyes shut, wishing like hell that this is just a nightmare. That I won't find whatever is behind me. Whatever is making the love of my life completely shatter in front of me, is just a dream, and I am still at home, wrapped in a blanket with my family on the couch, napping without a care in the world.

"No." Korren's broken whisper zaps the strength out of my knees. I have never heard him sound so defeated. "No!" His roar has my eyes flying open when he shoves past me.

Nolan is still frozen in front of me, and Amiri doesn't look much better. I take a shuddering breath that does nothing to calm the terror coursing through my veins.

Slowly... I turn.

At first, all I see is Korren on his knees a few feet away, but then... my heart stops. The blood freezes in my body. My muscles and bones give out, sending me crashing to the ground, scrambling to get to Kor.

"No, no, no, no, no. NO!" Trailing tears behind me, I crawl toward our protector. The man who I know will stop at nothing to keep us all safe. Korren, the same man who is hunched over, sobbing like he has lost everything that matters in this cruel world.

The very same man who has Eve's heels clutched to his chest. Our tattooed brute whose knees are soaking up the small spatters of blood surrounding a fucking syringe.

"She- she's gone," his splintered whisper is punctuated by Nolan's piercing wail behind me. A sound that takes my soul

and rips it to shreds. It's a sound that resonates in each one of us. Because... Eve's gone.

*Again.*

## Chapter 2

### **Evelyn**

A stabbing pain in my hip has my consciousness rearing its ugly head. It is fucking ugly because whatever the hell is going on... I want no part of it. My head feels like it's getting repeatedly hit with a sledgehammer, my stomach won't stop rolling, my eyelids feel glued closed, and something is seriously jabbing me in the side.

Groaning past the cotton feeling in my mouth, I attempt to move my arms. The best I get, though, is a twitch of my fingers. My entire body feels like it's finally given up.

*What the hell happened?*

Thinking back, I don't remember drinking a ton last night or throwing another pool party... no we have been too focused on the court cases. The court cases! My eyes shoot open to find myself in the trunk of a moving fucking car.

It all comes rushing back in rapid fire, making me gag. I whimper and swallow the bile back down. Brent and my dad's sentencing... walking out without Jo... retching in the bathroom... the crowd... fresh air... then... A sob bursts past my lips.

*I failed. I fucking LET him take me!*

Tears run freely as I think about all the ways I could have tried to save myself. But I didn't. I stood there and let him take me. When it counted the most, I couldn't be who everyone thought I was. Strong. I finally found a life worth fighting for, and I just fucking stood there.

Hell came calling, and I rolled over like a good Pet with my tail tucked between my legs.

The dog joke has my chest heaving harder, reminding me of Ryan. My golden retriever who likes to bite a little...my dominant happy man. I miss him so damn much... I miss all of them. I would give anything to be back in their arms right now.

My sorrow and horror swiftly boil over into rage and determination. I hiccup; my tears tucking themselves away for now. My harsh breathing and stuttering breath even out, settling at my decision that I will do everything in my power to make my way back to my family. I will endure anything I have to if only to see them one more time.

I was worth fighting for the first time, a small ember in the ashes. And now? Now there's a whole damn family of flames roaring to be reunited surrounding me. I will fan them any way I fucking can to join them into the blazing inferno they are meant to be.



I jolt awake to the sound of a slamming door and strain to hold back the vomit wanting to join me in the tight space when the car sways.

*Fuck, fuck, fuck!*

I try to keep my breathing steady as my ears stress to figure out what's going on outside. The scuffs of footsteps slowly fade away. My hand twitches, causing shock to shoot through me. I hadn't been able to move the last time I was awake.

Testing out my limbs again, I find I can wiggle around a bit since I'm not tied up. Pins and needles stab my bare feet and calves from being shoved into a tiny fucking trunk for God knows how long.

*Small space...* before I can well and truly descend into panic, the sound of jingling keys has me tensing up. Instincts of flight or fight are in overdrive, both responses reacting on rapid fire. I will do whatever I have to in order to get back to my family.

Scrambling as far back into the trunk as I can, I bite down on the whimper that wants to rip from my throat when my hair gets caught under my elbow—the taste of copper floods my mouth from biting back the sounds trying to escape.

*I just want my guys... Nolan, Amiri, Korren, Ryan. I just want my family.*

A sob bursts free without my permission just as the trunk gets thrown open. A scream peals from my abused lips as my legs flail, trying to fight off my attacker who's dragging me from the trunk.

It's weird. There are moments in life when you hate the spot you are in... but when something else presents itself, you will fight like hell to keep the previous option.

This trunk was fucking vomit worthy... and now I would rather suffer in its small space than be anywhere near Kyle.

"Fuck. Sit fucking still, cunt." His nasal voice makes me sick as his grubby hands latch onto my calves. The fires of hell have nothing on the horrific burn that this pedophile's hands do.

"Don't touch me!" I'm shocked at how strong my voice comes out as I flail. I scream, my back ripping across the bumper; pain sears my senses, keeping me in the moment.

"Shut up."

My ass collides with the sandy pavement; the air rushing out of my strangled lungs. At this moment, I'm glad I didn't cut my hair more than I did. It serves as a shield that protects me from the horrors the world has to offer.

Peeking through the black strands... there's nothing. Absolutely nothing except a black fucking Camry in the dead of the night. The stars overhead mock me with their cheery twinkle while the frigid night air steals the breath from my lungs.

December has fallen, and in the desert, nights get really fucking cold. My teeth chatter, unable to gather my bearings. We are in the middle of fucking nowhere, my feet are bare, and I'm still in my open-back dress from the trials. At least my hair fell from its pony, leaving me at least some semblance of a blanket.

The scuffle of his pristine shoe has me jerking away. “Now listen here, Pet.” I gag at the name he gave me all those years ago. “We are getting as far away as fucking possible. You are going to be a good little girl until I can get us to our new home.”

“Home will never be with you,” I growl out the words, my eyes locked onto the orbs of grey I would love nothing more than to stick a fork into. A swift kick to the ribs has me curling in on myself again, making spittle fly as I cry out in pain.

“Ah, ah,” he mocks in a cheery tone. Crouching, he grips my chin in a painful grasp. “Have all these months apart made you forget everything you learned?” He tisks at me, his greasy face set in mock disappointment.

“Fuck you,” I grit out through my clenched jaw. I am not the same little girl he remembers. I may have frozen and panicked, but that doesn’t mean that’s all I’m capable of. No. These past five months have made me so much more than a girl who is overrun by her trauma. This woman has a life she has to get back to... and honestly... this can’t be much worse than the first time he had me.

The fact that he’s trying to get me as far away from the guys as possible, makes my anxiety twitch with unease, but this girl just pulled up her big bitch panties. Traveling with Kyle means there will be more opportunities for me to try to escape. Fucking sucks that it will have to be in the middle of butt fuck nowhere, but it’s all I got. So, I’ll make do.

An evil smile stretched his face. “Mmm, I’m going to enjoy breaking you in again. It was much more fun when you put up

a fight, don't you think?" Before I can tell him to eat a dick, he leans in and licks my fucking face.

"Ugh!" I attempt to scramble away from him, but whatever drugs he pumped me up with are still in effect. Everything feels like Jello. Like one of those damn nightmares where your legs won't let you run away from the monster that's chasing you.

A swift slap across my cheek has me seeing stars... and not the ones above me. "Shush now." He leans back a tad, baring his teeth at me in some fucked up form of a smile. "We are going to get a room at a hotel down the road."

My heart pitter-patters with hope, only to be swiftly shut down when he tilts his head. "Now if anyone asks, you've just had a little too much to drink, *daughter*." His vile statement is punctuated by shoving a dirty cloth in my face.

I scream and buck my hips, trying to get him off me, but it's useless. I already inhaled whatever the fuck was in the fabric. As my mind starts to dim and my muscles loosen, I hear the demon say, "Sleep now; Daddy will take care of you." The last thought I have before darkness claims me is, *fuck that kink*.



## Chapter 3

### **Nolan**

“I’m going to need you all to calm down,” Detective Smith stares Korren down. Hard. I risk a glance at Amiri, hoping like hell he can smooth this over. We need something. *Anything*.

“Kor,” Mir’s stern snap is all it takes for his brother’s shoulders to drop. He takes a reluctant step back from the detective, and I release a quiet sigh of relief. We need Smith on our side, not kicking us out of his office and banning us.

It’s been two days since Eve... disappeared. Fuck. I never thought I’d have to think those words ever again. And yet, we failed. We fucked up. We didn’t listen to our girl when she expressed the possibility of there being more than one kidnapper. We were so focused on the fact that her damn father was in on it.

After the horror of finding her heels in that fucking alleyway, my parents came searching. I was so stuck in my own terror of the horrific development that it took Mom several minutes to get through to me.

Then, and now, I can’t help but want to switch it all off. I understand now why Eve preferred to be oblivious to her

surroundings. I would rather have the numbness of disassociating than live in this nightmare again.

I already did this once. Why...fucking why would the world make me do it again?

It's that selfish thought keeping me here... because while this may be hell for me and the guys, what does this mean for Eve?

The police report, and initial phase of getting the cops to the scene, was a fog for me. After Sherry, Chris, and my parents got our dazed asses back home, all hell broke loose. Korren broke everything he could get his hands on, while Amiri did nothing to stop the carnage.

My heart gives a painful yank at remembering how Ryan disappeared off to Eve's room. Me? I walked around the house in tears. Each of her items I found left strewn about tore at my soul even more. Books, headphones, sweatshirts, her notebook, swimsuit drying out on the patio... everything seemed so normal.

*“SHE’S GONE!” Korren’s gut-wrenching roar has the parents jumping out of their skin. The shock of his scream has goosebumps pebbling over my flesh.*

She's gone... again.

*“EVELYN. IS. GONE.” Each word is punctuated with the sounds of glass shattering and chairs being split in two by the force of his blows.*

*I don't move. My feet feel like they are stuck in tar while my eyes are glued to Korren ripping our home to shreds. My heart sinks at how Amiri stares off into the distance, shaking and*

*completely shut down. Turning, my soul cracks as I watch Ryan's face crumple before treading up the stairs. The sound of Eve's door slamming, and my boyfriend's sobbing has my feet moving further away from everyone.*

*I just can't. I did this already. Seven and a half years ago, I fucking did this. The experience I have in this fucked up situation is of no help to my family. The only thing that will make this better is our Evie coming home.*

*The wail of my mom's cries drives me further into the house. A home that feels so damn empty now, even with all the people crowding our space.*

*Eve's laughter doesn't echo through the halls. Her joy and sass don't light up the walls. Her tears and sadness are leached from the floorboards.*

*She's not here, and I don't know if she will ever be again.*

*My knees give out as I approach the game room and find her stuff littered around the cozy space. Her book is lying open on the couch, and her favorite blanket is rumpled beside it. Her trademark ChapStick next to her water glass and... fuck, my sweatshirt lays across the back of the couch. The sweatshirt she wore around the house yesterday in her tiny shorts and knee-high socks. She was a fucking vision.*

*Wiping away my tears, I stand and make my way to the couch. I wrap my fingers in the thick fabric and slowly bring it up to my nose. This may be mine, but it smells like my girl. Soap and vanilla.*

*A ball of emotion gets lodged in my throat, and a sob crawls its way out of my mouth. She's gone.*

*Hugging the cold sweatshirt to my chest, I settle onto the cushions and wrap her blanket around me, taking comfort in her scent. If I think hard enough, I can almost feel her tiny body wrapped in mine. Almost.*

The heat of Ryan's palm on my arm breaks me out of my thoughts. Looking over at him, I admire his tussled blonde hair and imploring blue eyes. I offer him a small smile, which he returns with a gentle one as well. His chiseled jaw has my mouth watering a bit, and I lean into him.

We haven't really spoken much except for the family meeting when we decided we needed to do everything we could to find her, which is why we are in Detective Smith's office getting yelled at.

Ry leans down to give me a gentle kiss on the lips and whispers, "I love you," in my ear. My tummy swoops in pleasure while my heart jitters with appreciation for my man.

My eyes water as I respond, "Love you too, Ry," my voice is hushed under the wave of emotions. We have been about as loving as usual, except a bit more reserved; both of us drowning.

"Take a seat, please," Smith grits out between his clenched jaws, clearly still annoyed with how we basically busted down his office door.

Korren reluctantly plops his ass into the leather chair, muscles flexing in agitation. Settling down in the armchair next to my love, Amiri takes up my other side, each of us opposite from Smith with his large mahogany desk in between.

The tension in the room ratchets up the longer he glares at us. I'm going to vomit; my anxiety tumbling through my stomach.

"Would you like to explain why you barged into my office, gentlemen?"

"Ex-fucking-cuse me?" I would say I'm shocked that it's Ryan who responds that way, but I'm not. He's become an ass to people standing between him and our girl. "You know exactly why we are here!"

I nudge him with my knee, trying to bring him back down a notch. We really don't want to get kicked out of here before we get answers. His angry eyes dart over to me, face softening when our gazes collide.

Smith sighs and runs a hand down his face. "I know this is about Evelyn, but what exactly do you need? I'm a bit busy trying to get her back home."

*Oh, I could just-*

"Answers. We know you have information. We can help." Amiri sits straighter, readying to fight, mirroring my exact feelings.

He looks us over with furrowed brows. "How do you expect to help the FBI on a missing persons case?"

"Any fucking way we can," Korren growls with clenched fists. "Please." My heart aches at the crack in his voice when he pleads.

"Guys, we are doing everything we can to get her back-"

Korren stands, chair thrown to the ground with a crash. The tattooed man hovers over the desk. “PLEASE!” He yells, tears streaming down his face.

My chin wobbles, the emotions tearing me up inside. On the one hand, I am so fucking devastated that my family has to experience this... but on the other, I’m so damn thankful that they are here with me this time. I have more people fighting for my girl, and I couldn’t be more fucking grateful.

I grip Ryan’s hand, my knee bouncing as we wait for Smith to respond. The silence is deafening while he searches Korren’s heartbroken eyes. My heart releases its own exhale when Smith’s expression softens. We have him.

“I don’t know, guys...” his voice trails off as he scrutinizes us again.

I can’t hold back any longer. It’s time he understands just how serious we are whether or not we have his permission. Eve is out there somewhere, enduring fuck knows what, and this asshole is just staring at us.

“We’ve thought about this, I swear. We know it might be hard, but we have each other. We will help whether you know about it or not. So, what’s it gonna be, Detective?” My voice comes out sternly even as my knee continues to bounce.

He sighs again like we are a pain in his ass. “Fuck. Fine, but this stays between us. And if you guys fuck something up, then that’s it. You are done. I know you love that girl, and honestly, she deserves all the help that she can get.” Smith’s eyes narrow on all of us again when Korren sits back down after righting his chair. “You will not get in our way, and you will stay down low. I don’t want to have to worry about you

guys too. There's a woman out there who needs all my damn focus. I will give you information and leads, but you better not fuck this up."

At our agreement, he sighs again, cursing under his breath. "Shit, okay. You aren't going to like this, but if you destroy my office after I show you, then the deal is off. Understood?"

*What the fuck is he going to show us?*

Kor coughs on the other side of Ryan and shuffles in his seat, clearly understanding that he is the one who is most likely to start breaking shit. And we don't have our dads here right now to clean up the mess he would make.

"Yes, sir," we all mumble, nodding our heads. I rake my hands through my curls while he studies us some more, probably trying to figure out if we are actually up for this or if we are full of shit.

Only one way to find out.

"I have the security footage from the alleyway and parking lots at the courthouse."

I choke on my fucking spit.

*Oh my God. He has the footage of Eve getting freaking kidnapped! I'm going to be sick.*

"Shit," Ry curses beside me, his face draining of all color. I hear rather than see Amiri's breath catch in his throat at the same time Korren yanks at his hair.

"I'll show you the footage if you actually think you can handle it. Then I'll tell you what we know."

The guys and I share a loaded look. The support and strength we offer one another is a tangible sensation linking us together.

“Let’s see it,” Amiri nods, his voice stern.

After giving us one more thoughtful look, Smith turns to his computer and sets it up for us to watch. I swear I can hear all of our hearts going apeshit right now. This wasn’t something I thought would happen when we got here...I’m fucking terrified of what we might see.

*What if it’s worse than what I conjured up in my head?*

My eyes narrow on the computer screen now facing us. The paused footage shows an empty alleyway.

The skin around his eyes tightens as he reminds us, “You break anything; you are out.”

We nod our understanding.

He hits play, and my chest seizes when our girl comes into view. She looks around in confusion, clearly deciding to just walk around to the cars. She picks the right direction, and I can’t help but wonder how close we were to finding her.

After a few steps, she wobbles a bit and immediately takes her heels off. When she bangs her shoes against the dumpster, cussing up a storm, I can’t help but smile at her antics. Ryan, still holding my hand, lets out a little snort at the same time I hear Kor rumble quietly about how cute she is.

But then she stops her slow limping. Foreboding and horror ripple through me. Eve’s little fit with her shoes was a nice reprieve from this fucked up situation.



Smith turns up the volume just as the camera catches none other than Brent's fucking brother, Kyle. The groaning of Korren's chair beneath his white-knuckled grip has me clenching my jaw.

*Fuck.*

*"You sure do make a lot of noise, Pet."*

I'm going to be fucking sick. My stomach completely bottoms out, and tears have found their way down my cheeks.

"No..." Ryan and Amiri whisper on each side of me.

Eve stands there, completely frozen.

*"Too bad my brother won't be able to join in on the fun anymore. You know, if you wanted just me, you didn't have to go through all this trouble."*

Korren lets loose a quiet, choking sob, making my heart constrict and my throat close up. I can't do this. I go to stand and leave, but when I look over at Ry, I see devastation and tears pouring from his eyes. I can't leave him. I have to be strong for my family.

*For Eve.*

Forcing my gaze back to the screen, I just barely make out the trembling of her body and the tears dripping from her face. It's like her terror has her completely unable to move...yet she doesn't look like she's disassociating. She lived that moment, mind and body, and she was so fucking scared.

We were too late.

While I was studying Eve and silently begging her to run, I didn't notice Kyle inching his slimy ass closer. My skin crawls

at the way he's leering at my girl.

*"Time to go, troublemaker."*

All four of us launch out of our seats when he lunges towards Eve with the fucking syringe in his hands.

"No!" Amiri shouts at the same time she finally takes a step back...onto her twisted ankle.

Her strangled scream sends me to my knees, unable to hold myself up any longer. Ry follows, holding me in his arms while we watch our girlfriend's eyes cloud over. Just before they close all the way, Smith blasts the volume.

*"I'm so sorry."*

Her body goes completely limp on her final word; sagging into that fucking monster as he carries her away.

"No, no, no." Korren's pacing draws my attention to his horrified face. God, I can't fucking do this again.

Smith's tapping on the keyboard niggles at my panicked mind just as he changes the screen. We all watch in devastated silence as Evelyn gets thrown into the back of a fucking trunk.

"Fuck!" Mir's roar startles me out of my silent shock. "Tell me you are tracking that motherfucker!"

"Sit down, please." Smith's voice is laced with sadness and pity.

We do as directed, all of us clutching each other's hands in a show of unity and support.

He looks us over again like we are ticking time bombs. He just doesn't realize that the longer he leaves us hanging, the

longer these explosives have been fucking inching our way towards explosion.

“Kyle was sloppy. We have his plates and his car tracked on multiple traffic cams. The APB is out, and we are on his trail.”

“But?” There’s more he isn’t saying, and I really need the whole fucking story. My sadness is quickly boiling into rage. My best friend is out there at the hands of one of her demons *again*, and nothing is going to stop me from getting her back in my arms.

“We lost him yesterday. No cell phone to trace either. He hightailed it out of populated areas really fucking fast, clearly realizing he had to get off-grid to go unnoticed.”

“And?” I’m going to punch something.

He sighs and rubs the back of his neck. “We got a call this morning; his car was spotted leaving a shitty motel about eight hours north of here.” Bile rushes up my throat at the mention of a motel. “I’ve had people combing the area and following the direction he was last seen moving. I’m leaving in the morning and joining the hunt.”

“Us too,” Amiri states. It’s not an offer or a question. Just a fucking fact. Nothing will keep us from finding Eve.

“I figured. I’ll send you the details and what I know. I swear, though, stay out of fucking trouble and check in with me every day. I can’t keep you from that girl, I realize that, but I also need you boys to stay safe. Please. Eve will need you all in one piece when we catch up to them.” His tone allows for no argument, and honestly, he won’t find one from us. This

was exactly what we needed when we decided to storm into his office.

*Hold on, Fire. We are coming for you.*

## Chapter 4

### **Evelyn**

“How was your beauty sleep?”

“Fuck you,” I murmur, trying to stay a little quiet for my poor head.

After Kyle knocked me out with that dirty fucking rag last night, I was dead to the world. I shiver, remembering how I woke in a wooden chair tied down with zip ties this morning. The fact that I’m still fully clothed and haven’t been brutalized yet has me feeling stronger than I did during those seven years.

Something about this time is different. Kyle hasn’t touched me, except for the occasional caress that makes me want to vomit all over his tiny dick. The rough handling, I can handle, except for the kick to the ribs yesterday, which has definitely bruised me. Other than that, I’m relatively okay. And really fucking pissed.

“Ah, ah, troublemaker. Don’t mistake your luxury hotels and front seat for kindness. As soon as we get to your new home, everything will go back to how it used to be.”

Luxury hotels, my ass. When I woke and blinked some of the grime away from my eyes, I realized he stashed us in a damn pigsty. I swear I saw beetles crawling across the stained carpet.

The front seat isn't all it's cracked up to be, either. His rambling is aggravating me to no end and making my head pound where it's leaned up against the window. Sure, it's better than the trunk in the fact that I can see and breathe, but I still can't move.

Instead of chains and shackles, Kyle has chosen zip ties and drugs to keep me in line this time. Too bad the drugs don't stop bodily functions from making themselves known.

I have to pee so freaking bad, and he hasn't fed me or given me water. I had gotten used to the spoils of having a normal life these past five months. Now? The hunger pains and dry mouth just have me angry.

I think one of the major differences this time around is, I have found my own strength along with a life I really want to live. I have a family waiting for me, and my damn therapist took away my unhealthy coping mechanisms, so here I am... traumatized and absolutely livid.

The slap on my bare thigh has me hissing at him like a cat waiting to attack. "Did you hear me, Pet?"

"Like nails on a chalkboard, asshole." The fog and wooziness from the drugs wear off a little more with every mile we pass.

"You know," he muses while slipping his free hand that's not steering the car under the hem of my dress, "I enjoy your

feistiness. Means I get to break you all over again. Maybe this time you will be more engaging.”

“I have to pee,” my voice comes out strong and unbothered. On the inside, though, my tummy swirls with nausea.

He snatches his hand back in disgust. “You’re fine.”

“Unless you want me to ruin your seat, I suggest you let me out, so I can do my business. In case you weren’t keeping track, I haven’t had a bathroom break since yesterday morning.”

He narrows his eyes on the empty road in front of us; all the while, my bladder is screaming for release, and my pounding headache begs me to stop talking.

Kyle shifts in his seat and takes a look in the rearview mirror, his anxiety bleeding through the tiny space. His once crisp white dress shirt is now soiled with pit stains and dirt. His dress pants carry their own filth and rips too. He’s a mess all around, which bodes well for me; I can get the fuck away from him easier if he’s distracted.

“No, seriously. I have to pee,” I wiggle in my seat and give him an imploring look.

“Fuck, fine.” His beady eyes shoot daggers at me like I’m such a burden. Everyone does say that pets are a lot of work. I don’t think he realized potty breaks would be a thing if he wanted to keep his space tidy.

*Damn, the guys would have loved that joke, even if it was pretty morbid.*

Still in the middle of nowhere, the sun shines on the rough sand and patchy brush surrounding us. The heat during the day

is still comfortable and warm, but nobody wants to get caught in this terrain at night when it drops close to freezing.

The car veers into the ditch near a patch of prickly bushes. Dust kicks up around us at his less-than-smooth park job. I scrutinize him, annoyed all over again when I take in his features. He'd be handsome for a mid-forty-year-old if it weren't for the monster he hides so well. His sharp jaw and salt-and-pepper scruff just make me want to claw his eyes out.

Kyle is a smooth man; he's a damn lawyer, so I suppose he has to be. But right now? He's unhinged and strung like a live wire, ready to short-circuit. I don't think he planned this at all. I haven't seen him eat or drink anything, either.

Clearing my scratchy throat, "I can't do anything unless you take these off." I motion my bound hands around and toward my secured feet.

His eyes narrow as though he believes I'm trying to pull something sketchy by asking to be released. Looking from me to the bush outside the window, he curses, realizing I'm right.

Shoving his door open, he rounds the car and yanks mine open as well. Gripping my thigh hard enough to bruise, he angles my legs and feet out of the car. I try to kick my legs up at him, but my drug-riddled body feels like it's moving through quicksand.

"Just your hands, bitch."

*Wait what?*

Before I can ask what he means, my hands are being snapped free, and I'm thrown over his shoulder. My aching



stomach and bruised rib protest the hard shoulder shoved against them.

“What the fuck!” I screech and slap my hands uselessly against his broad back, careening us closer to the bushes.

This position has my breath catching, remembering how Ryan loves to throw me over his shoulder. He would say that someone so tiny should always be carried around. I would giggle and swat his ass while I enjoyed the attention, he showered me with.

I’m not laughing now.

Before I can truly spiral into sadness, I’m thrown right side up again. Wobbling on my bound feet, I swallow down the bile that burns my throat.

“Go.”

I look up at him in confusion. “What?”

“Pull your fucking panties down, squat, and pee.” His eyes heat, and I know I’m not going to like what he says next. “Or I can do it,” he sneers, “if you’d rather.”

Understanding sets in; he cut the ties from my hands so I could do my business myself. Yet he’s not moving, still hovering over my woozy form next to the bush.

“I’d like some privacy, please.”

“Nope. Last chance, or those panties become mine.”

*Shit!* I scramble to push my underwear down with my heavy fingers. I’d rather he hover over this mortifying moment than lay his rapist fucking fingers on my body again.

I quickly drop into a squat, just wanting to get this over with. I lose my balance, unable to hold myself up with my feet restricted, and my hand flies out to catch my balance.

A garbled scream rips from my chapped lips at the searing pain spiking up my arm. My frantic gaze lands on my bleeding hand, where it clutches the prickly bush.

“You can hold onto me, Pet.” Kyle’s suggestive voice breaks through the pain. I look up at him with tears in my eyes and take in my position in front of his crotch.

Gulping, I keep my grip on this bush from hell and ignore the burning pain radiating through my shredded skin. I’d rather rip my skin off than touch him willingly. I take a shuddering breath and focus on getting my business done.

The relief of my empty bladder is short-lived; I don’t have anything to clean myself with. With my free hand, I take a clean part of my dress and wipe; I refuse to get a UTI infection on this road trip to the fiery pits. God knows he would let me suffer without antibiotics.

Gritting my teeth, I shimmy my underwear back up my legs and try to stand. Another tear splashes against my cheek when I shift my grip on the bush, heaving myself up. Before I manage to right myself, Kyle has me thrown over his fucking shoulder again.

“You son of a bitch!” I hiss between the rageful thumping in my head.

“She was a bitch, actually. Good job, Pet.” His words are punctuated by my ass hitting the car seat.

I clench my jaw when a new set of zip ties yanks at the scarred flesh of my wrists. Kyle's efficiency with the restraints left me no time to process what was happening.

"Aw, the rapist has mommy issues...how original." I smirk in triumph when he frowns at me. Clearly, I hit a sore spot.

My internal dance of victory is short-lived.

His eyes darken, the snarling monster rising to the surface. "Looks like it's time for a nap."

Then he's on me, shoving a nasty fucking rag into my face. I scream and buck against him to no avail, fear driving my body to do anything to stay awake. My eyes burn, and my limbs go slack, forcing the fight out of me. Kyle's face tilts in my vision just as black spots start to flit across my eyesight.

I reluctantly fall into the darkness, leaving my body behind in the hands of my kidnapper.

*Wow...I'm a far cry away from the scared little girl I used to be. This time I'll fucking fight this asshole.*



## **Korren**

"Let's fucking go!"

Look, I understand that we are up really damn early, but what I don't understand is why they aren't itching to rush out the door like I am. We need to get our asses on the road, like yesterday.

Smith said to leave today around the same time that he did, so we would be near him if anything came up. Fucking stupid. We could have already found her by now if we had left when I wanted to, right after we left his damn office.

Kyle had the whole day yesterday to put another eight hours between us and our girl. Just as I'm starting to get worked up again, my phone vibrates in my back pocket, where it's leaning against our SUV.

**DSmith:** Got a call. He was spotted at a gas station yesterday afternoon. Head there. I'll send the address.

Clicking on the address, I pull up the directions. Thirteen fucking hours away. Knowing that there are other agents and a whole group of people out there following these leads makes me a little less murderous. But being at the back of the caravan is not where I want to fucking be.

We should be at the head of the search party, hunting this asshole to his grave. We should be the ones leading the way to our girl.

An orb of raw emotion steals my next breath. Tipping my eyes skyward, I despise the burn of tears that threaten to fall. Eve needs me to be strong. I don't have time to cry right now. Balling my fists, my jaw ticks as I flex my muscles, trying to activate something other than this gut-wrenching guilt and fear.

"Coming!" Ryan's holler draws my focus to the front door. Out walks the guys, all carrying their forms of luggage and dressed in simple cozy outfits.

I swallow back my annoyance and attempt to flatten out my pursed lips. We have a long road ahead of us...too many miles between us and our woman. Starting this journey off with anger is not the best idea...I know that. Four of us stuck in a car together for days on end is bound to get a little tense; no sense in starting now.

“Get in,” I rumble, uncrossing my tattooed arms.

They toss their bags in the hatch and hustle to get their asses in the car, undoubtedly picking up on my need to leave before something else breaks. Hopping in the driver’s seat, I look over at my brother next to me with a questioning look. He gives me a solemn nod, his silent way of telling me that it’s go-time.

My eyes trail to the rearview mirror; what I see has my chest constricting. Ryan’s head is resting on Nolan’s shoulder; his bloodshot eyes are lined with purple signs of exhaustion. Nol’s fingers trail through his boyfriend’s blonde locks, attempting to offer some comfort.

Ry has slowly been dimming since Eve was taken three days ago, and it’s been wreaking havoc on our family. We all fell into our roles seamlessly because who we are just fits with one another. Without our little fighter...some of those roles have been shaken.

Nol has stepped up as a strong presence for Ry whenever he can, but we have all watched him crumble under our new reality. My brother gets lost zoning off into space, and I can barely hold my temper in check anymore.

So much is wrong.

“Get some sleep,” I murmur to the broken men around me.  
“I got this for now.”

Their eyes shoot to mine, finding I speak the truth. I’ll be the strong one and watch over them for now; all they need to do is relax.

“Thank you,” they all whisper and close their eyes.

*We’re coming, Eve. Just hold on a little longer.*

## Chapter 5

### **Evelyn**

Groaning at the aching muscles in my neck, I slowly lift my head to take in my surroundings—another dingy-ass motel.

I swear the green carpet is moving along with the popcorn ceiling. I wouldn't be surprised if it collapsed, honestly. Preferably on Kyle's sleeping body, sprawled out on the bed in front of me.

Zip-tied to my second chair of our fucked-up adventure, I try to shimmy out the tingles in my fingers trapped against the arms of said chair. I bite back the hiss of pain that escapes from my burning throat. The pounding in my head has become a constant these past few days, but the swollen eyebrow and crusted blood down my face only make shit worse.

Looking back at the bastard on the bed, I cringe at the sweat staining his new clothes and the junk food wrappers littered around him.

I swear he didn't pack shit for himself. This clearly wasn't planned, so sooner or later, he's going to mess up, and I'll be ready. If I'm not unconscious, that is.

After the demeaning potty break in the desert yesterday, I woke to find us in the parking lot of a gas station in a small town. Unfortunately, I was still so out of it I could barely tilt my head let alone escape.

Watching people milling about outside of my window while I couldn't make any part of my body move was a new kind of torture.

Kyle drugging me in the car made more sense after that. It was more than how much I annoyed him. He must have known we weren't far from civilization.

I played the part of his 'drunk daughter' very well when I'm passed out in the front seat, wrapped in a blanket.

He came back carrying bags containing a few changes of clothes for him, snacks, and drinks. I absolutely salivated.

We peeled out of that town so fast I barely registered the fleeting signs of life. Once we were a few miles out, he shoved a piece of bread in my mouth so viciously that my lip ripped open. After I managed to swallow the sustenance down, he pulled the car over and gripped my jaw so hard I could hear my bones creak.

Unable to keep my mouth closed, I opened wide, only to choke on the water he drowned my mouth and nose in.

"Better swallow, bitch. This is all you are going to get for a few days."

I can't catch my breath; my throat feels like it's convulsing on fucking fire. The small amounts I'm able to swallow scorch my esophagus. The rest of the precious fluid flies from my mouth as my lungs reject the intrusion.



Tears stream from my eyes while my body convulses, confused by the sensations of drowning and desperately trying to swallow.

A yearning so strong makes me whine. I just want a hug. I want my guys to wrap their arms around me, kiss my head, and tell me how much they love me.

While I struggle and my jaw begins to bruise, my mind screams out for them. I need their warm comfort and solid strength.

Blood floods back into my abused face when he releases me, and my head automatically tips down, spluttering on the leftover H<sub>2</sub>O, trying to kill me.

“Well, that was stupid. Why did you waste it?” His tone drips fucking evil.

“I’m going to fucking k-kill you,” despite the stutter, my words are strong. This asshole will suffer for all he has done to me. I am not a broken simpering girl anymore.

“The fuck did you just say?”

I tilt my chin up, my long hair dripping around my face. “I said,” my voice a growl that Koko would be proud of, “I’m going to kill you someday.”

I don’t know what I expected to happen, yet I’m not surprised when he punches me square across the face. My smirk stays even as my vision whitens.

The guys’ faces flash through my mind right before I pass out with the faint feeling of blood dripping from my eyebrow.

Kyle's loud snore causes me to flinch in my chair, sparking my annoyance at the show of weakness. He's out cold. I need to do something.

Still groggy and a bit disoriented, I take in the rest of the room, seeing if he left something I could use. His shit is next to him on the bed, four feet away from me. Nothing is on the table behind me or on the floor by my bound feet.

A sinking sensation in my tummy tells me that this isn't it. I can't do anything with this.

I can only hope he will let his guard down soon. The last few days, with only a slice of bread and the impromptu drowning, have my strength withering.

Letting my anxiety get the best of me, I yank my arms, trying to get the ties to fucking loosen. Energy drains from my tired body at the attempt. No luck.

“Naughty, Pet.”

Kyle's gruff voice startles the air out of my lungs. My eyes flick up to him as he rolls out of bed. Standing at his full height, shivers rack through my body at how menacing he looks this morning.

Coming to stand in front of me, he leans down, making his putrid scent burn the hairs in my nostrils. Gagging silently, I lock my body up, waiting for him to strike.

“What do naughty girls get? Do you remember?” His nose drags up my neck, following the nauseous goosebumps up to my ear.

His breath sends the hairs on the back of my neck into a panic. Alarm bells blare in my mind, and my fight, flight or

freeze instincts are arguing in every crevice of my brain.

The sweat of his palm gliding up my thigh leaves the air to cool the leftover moisture making me shiver in disgust.

“What do naughty girls get?” He hums at me while his other hand twirls in my dirty hair.

“Fuck you,” I spit out because there is no fucking way I am answering that vile question.

“Mm, can’t wait till we get you to your new cage. But for now, we have to get a move on.” The sharp prick in my arm is a shock.

The last time he used that method was back in that godforsaken alleyway. I can’t fight the drooping of my eyelids, but annoyance and disappointment flood my system.

I have to be stronger. I have to fight if I ever want to get home.

*Home...Just want to go home.*



## **Amiri**

You know that feeling when even asleep in a car, you know you are almost there? Maybe it’s the car slowing down that triggered consciousness or the energy in the car shifting. Either way, you awake ready for whatever is on the outside of the car doors.

Except, this time, I was not ready for what was on the outside of the SUV.

“What’s going on, Nol?”

After a long, fourteen-hour day of driving and swapping out who is in the passenger seat, Nolan has us parked in front of a disgusting motel. The heart-stopping part? There are flashing lights and caution tape surrounding the area.

My stomach twists, not knowing what the hell is going on. Is Eve in there? If she is, does that mean...

“Ask Korren.” Nolan’s catchy words tug me out of my downward spiral. I turn in my seat, ready to do just that.

“Smith is here. He sent me the address. This is where their leads have led them.” He gulps, eyes wide as he stares out the window. “I didn’t think there would be a fucking crime scene, though.”

*Fuck.*

I nudge Ryan’s shoulder, needing to know where he is right now. Because clearly, the two in the front seats are not okay. Their pale complexions and worried expressions are enough to tell me that I need to take the lead.

Ry looks over at me and nods, confirming he can help me out. He’s a little pale, and his floofy hair is a bit flat from our long day on the road. Other than that, his gaze is clear, and his shoulders are back; he’s composed.

“Let’s go,” I state firmly, knowing they need my guidance.

The sounds of seatbelts being unbuckled reach my ears as I grab the door handle and thrust it open. The cool evening air breezes along my dark skin, a reminder not to get left out here at night.

“Amiri.” The familiar voice has my head swinging toward a tired-looking detective.

“Smith.” I nod and shake his hand before he greets the rest of the guys.

He studies us for a beat. “This is their last known location. As of this morning.”

“So, she’s not...she’s not in there?” Nolan’s voice comes out wary—my heart pounds in my chest, waiting for his answer.

“What? No! I’m sorry, boys. I should have assumed you would have thought the worst.” He looks around him with a critical eye, finally realizing how awful this looks. Dressed in jeans and a tight black long-sleeved shirt, Smith gives us an apologetic look. “Shit, I didn’t think about it. No, she’s not here; come take a look.”

We all release a collective sigh of relief, the unknown weighing hard on us. Trading wary glances with my brothers, I give a nod and proceed to follow him toward one of the motel rooms.

I never thought I would be one of those people who bends to pass under crime scene tape...yet here I am. Because, like I told Eve, I would follow her to the ends of the earth. My chest twinges, remembering that wonderful day.

My girl was in her tiny light blue swimsuit and tipsy off her margaritas. Eve’s teeny toes were dangling in the pool, with a smile lighting up her cheeks. Her head tipped to the sky as she enjoyed the sun...she radiated happiness and sunshine.

I couldn't keep my thoughts to myself, unintentionally broadcasting my feelings. And, damn, the beaming smile and watery eyes she sent my way made my soul fucking soar. She became mine that day. I basked in her strength and perseverance, so achingly thankful that my woman crawled herself out of hell and into my arms.

Now here I am, walking through a crime scene at a motel that should have been condemned years ago, praying to anything listening that I won't completely shatter when I walk into the taped-off room.

With Smith in front of me, he blocks the view of the entire room as we shuffle around, trying to fit all five of our bodies into the cramped space. The smell of odor and mold makes my nose twitch as I take in the nasty fucking carpet and cracked ceiling. I'm glad this place didn't collapse while Eve was in here.

I shudder, my unease and nausea making themselves known.

"No breaking shit, please." Ryan snorts at the look the detective shoots Korren. Ko rolls his eyes but gives him a nod of understanding.

Smith moves away from the rotting desk his large form was covering. I choke. Korren snarls. Nol lets loose a sob while Ryan sucks in a sharp breath.

Cut-up zip-ties are scattered around the wooden chair, which I hadn't noticed before. We were too busy checking the bed and making sure there was no evidence over there. A needle sits amongst the offending restraints.

The silence is deafening.

Smith clears his throat, gaining our murderous attention. “We can conclude that Evelyn was zip tied to the chair. There are no signs of struggle, which could mean that she was unconscious the entire time she was bound.”

“What now?” Korren’s rumble sets me on edge, knowing his rage is close to the surface. Fuck, we all want our pound of flesh from this bastard, and there is nothing I can do to keep us calm.

Our woman is out there somewhere, being fucking drugged, restrained, and who knows what else. We are pissed for good reason, and it’s that anger that’s fueling our tired bodies at this point.

“Now, we drive. There is only one road, and he didn’t backtrack. So now we follow and wait for our next tip. The officers will finish here, but we need to get a move on. We caught up to them fairly fast, so we can’t stop. If you guys need to stop for the night, go ahead, but my partner and I need to hit the road.”

“No. We aren’t stopping. We will follow,” Nolan’s voice comes out gravelly. When I look over at him, his fists are clenched, and his jaw ticks.

Yep. We are fucking pissed.

“Let’s go.”

## Chapter 6

### **Ryan**

I crank the music and fucking jam. I wonder if Evie likes Taylor Swift. We could have some wild karaoke nights when she gets home with wine and snuggles.

“What the fuck!”

Korren’s roar can barely be heard over the Swift concert I’m putting on. Belting the words to “You Belong with Me,” I continue to lose myself in the lyrics. It’s two A.M., how else am I supposed to stay awake?

“Ryan!” I drown him out again, shocked he hasn’t hit me yet. Although, I am the one driving which gives me certain privileges.

Nolan’s giggle next to me has my smile stretching wide until he reaches over and turns my tunes down.

“Hey!” I pout through the darkness, barely making out his smirk.

“Bro, what the hell?” Miri’s groggy voice tumbles through the now-silent cabin of the SUV.



“What?” I wink at my boyfriend, knowing he will back me up on the brattiness I’m spewing.

“That was rude, don’t you think, asshole?”

“How do you expect me to stay awake at this hour, Koko?” I use Eve’s nickname for him to hopefully tone down his crankiness.

I knew that the brothers were asleep in the back, but I’ve been fucking dying up here. It’s pitch black, and we are in the middle of butt fuck nowhere. Not to mention how quiet I’ve kept the car for hours, leaving my mind to run rampant.

Thoughts and scenarios of what my girl is going through right now were slowly killing me. I needed to drown out my thoughts like I used to after my dad died...especially when I could barely hold back my sobs. So, Taylor Swift, it was. That didn’t last long, and now I have an annoyed group of guys stuck in a moving vehicle together.

Unfortunately, the nickname didn’t lift the mood the way I thought it might. Nope. Not one fucking bit.

“Hey, man, I’m sorry,” I tell him when I see his head dipped low into his hands in the rearview mirror. He doesn’t answer for a few moments while his quiet sniffles reach my ears. “Sorry guys, I just couldn’t sit here in silence anymore. My thoughts they-” My explanation cuts off when I choke on the wave of emotion trying to suffocate me.

A hand clamps down on my shoulder. “It’s okay; we get it. We all miss her.” Amiri’s understanding makes my eyes burn with tears making the road in front of me blurry.

Looking in the mirror again, I find Kor nodding and wiping his cheeks before he gives my shoulder a squeeze as well. All is forgiven.

“I need someone to swap with me, please, I can barely keep my eyes open, and I swear sometimes it feels like we aren’t even moving.”

Amiri agrees to take over this time, so after a quick pitstop on the side of the road for a nature bathroom break, we get resituated in the car.

With my head nestled on Nolan’s lap in the backseat, I drift off to the sounds of the three of them quietly talking about the plans for tomorrow. Or today, I guess. The days bleed together on the road.

Assuming that Kyle checked them into another shithole, that means we are gaining on them. I hope that asshole sleeps all fucking morning, so we can catch up.

Closing my eyes, I hope for a dream in which I have Evie in my arms again. Safe and comfortable, right where she belongs.



“Gentlemen,” Smith drawls across the table from us, “this is my partner, Detective Brown.”

The woman sitting next to him is absolutely not impressed. She is definitely younger than Smith, probably late thirties or early forties. She’s scary as fuck too. Her sharp jawline is accentuated by her harsh blonde ponytail.

From her form, I'd say she works out a ton, but not enough to make her huge. She's taller than Eve, probably a few inches away from six feet. I smirk at her, enjoying the way her frown deepens.

That's okay; I will get her to love me by the end of breakfast. She's attractive, but I'm not interested in any way. I just have this need to make people like me...it sets off my puppy vibes.

Smith rubs his eyes before swinging his arms across each of us as he lists out our names. She doesn't shake our outstretched hands. Instead, her eyes trail over us with her lips turned down.

"They shouldn't be here." Her stern voice is aimed at Smith.

He sighs, taking a sip of his black coffee. "I told you they were trailing along."

"Ya, but why? This is dangerous. I don't need these kids distracting us from saving that young woman."

*Ah, shit.*

"Excuse me?" Korren rumbles next to me, his agitation rising. "That woman is ours. So, we will be helping with or without your fucking permission."

"That's why." Smith points his fork at Kor.

I snort. His annoyance with the caveman shit is hilarious. That's what you get when some fucked up douchebag takes your girlfriend. Again.

My humor sours at the thought and my breakfast is now forgotten.

We stopped in a small town after driving through the night and morning. Smith called and said to meet up for food where the one road from the motel last night split into different directions. At a crossroads, it was time to make a plan. So, here we are, at eight A.M., in a tiny diner, still in the middle of nowhere.

“What the hell, Dom?” Her exasperation is clear in her tone and the way she throws her hands in the air.

Wait. “Dom?” I can’t help but chuckle at the twist my immature brain put on the name. But really?

“Ugh. Yeah, Dominic Smith. But you can’t call me that.” He shoots me a glare when Nolan laughs into his water next to me.

*Fuck, I love him.*

A smack upside my head has me huffing and shooting a glare at Amiri. Who, by the way, is also trying to swallow his smirk. I bark out a laugh again, unable to contain myself and my dirty thoughts.

“Can we talk about Eve now?”

All laughter and joking get sucked out of the room at Smith’s question. Back down to business and what matters most, we all sober and give him our undivided attention.

“I didn’t think you guys would be riding my ass the whole time, so I let Brown know what was going on. Let’s do a recap.” He leans back and throws his dirty napkin on the table

between us. “Eve’s been missing for four days, counting today. Has been seen at two hotels and one gas station. We have-”

He’s cut off by the sound of his phone ringing. I don’t think much of it until Detective Brown straightens in her seat, eyes focused on the phone in his hand.

Suddenly, he’s flying out of his chair, not caring as it smashes to the ground. I vaguely notice his partner dropping cash onto the table as we all rush out the door. Hot on his heels, we come up short when he hangs up the phone and turns to us.

“Kyle’s car was just spotted in a town about twelve miles from here. We have the direction in which he left. We have to go. Now.” With that, he and Brown slam their car doors shut behind them and peel out of the parking lot.

Turning to my family with my eyes probably bugging out of my head, I notice that we all have varying expressions of shock and determination.

“Get in the fucking car. Now!” Korren’s yell has us all jumping into action, ready to get Eve.

The screech of the tires on the asphalt has my adrenaline spiking. Gripping the ‘oh shit’ handle, I hold on tight in the back seat with Amiri as we get flung back and forth. Too hopped up with anxiety, seatbelts are the least of our worries.

“Go, go, go!” Nolan demands from his spot next to the racecar driver that Korren has become. His tattoos and fierce expression, as he catches up to Smith’s car, would be fucking epic if this weren’t such a dire situation.

I'll tell Eve all about it when we get her back, though...she will definitely find it sexy. My heart flutters, thinking about the possibility of having her back with us soon. Like today. My greasy blonde hair flops in my eyes when I twist my head to look at Noly.

His glasses are haphazardly on his face, and his curls are in complete disarray. Yet, the fire lit in his eyes, and his locked jaw have my worry for him dimming. We may be a mess, but we are fucking unwavering in our hunt for Eve.

Korren's ringtone blares through the speakers of the SUV, making me jump in surprise. Smith's name pops up on the dash and is quickly answered.

"Yes?" Kor grits out through clenched teeth. His white-knuckled grip on the steering wheel definitely makes indents as he rides the detective's ass.

"We are a few miles out. I'm going to need you to back off a bit." Smith's voice tumbles through the vehicle.

"No," we all respond at the same time.

"Listen here, little shits," Brown's raised voice has us all cringing, "you will stand down. We don't need you riding our asses as we speed into a new town. You endanger all of us and Evelyn if you don't listen." Her voice softens, "Trust us."

"Fuck, fine. What are you going to do?" Amiri demands.

"We are going to follow the road they were last seen on. They have a head start on us. Just stay back a ways, I promise I will call when we spot them. Be aware of others on their trail. And don't be stupid."

With that, Smith disconnects the call. The roar Nolan lets out rocks me to my core—the sound filled with pain, frustration, and rage.

“We should fucking be there!” His hands yank on his brown curls like he’s unable to contain the emotions demanding his attention. “We can’t - we should have - we have to find her!”

His final statement ends with a gut-wrenching sob. It’s the sound of a man separated from his best friend, the love of his life, for the second time in their short lives. It’s the sound of a man feeling completely powerless to help the woman he loves from further torment and pain. Nolan’s devastation hits us like a ton of fucking bricks, making my eyes burn, and Amiri shuffles in his seat.

“Baby,” I go to soothe him while Korren weaves his way through the next dingy town.

“NO!” He shakes his head vehemently, not allowing my words to pierce his panicked fog. “No, no, no...” He trails off, his breaths coming rapidly enough to freak me the fuck out.

I’m about to make him do Eve’s breathing exercise, but Korren beats me to it. Except it’s not what I would have done.

His tattooed hand shoves Nolan’s head between his shaking knees. “Breathe, Nolan. We are so close; I need you to put your big bitch boxers on. Right the fuck now.” Korren’s voice is firm, but his tone is tinged with understanding and love.

Miraculously, I watch Nolan’s heaving back begin to slow, slowly gaining control. Kor removes his hand to focus on keeping us safe while we leave behind the small town.

The tension in the car lingers after that while we follow Smith. Korren keeps us far enough away that his car is a speck on the horizon; none of us want to get yelled at again and kicked off of this team we've made with the detectives.

Time keeps moving...the miles pass by. Until the sun began to set, we drove and found nothing all day. We know Smith and Brown didn't find them either because their car is still a speck on the horizon before us.

Hope begins to dwindle, and dread makes my stomach churn...the realization that, at some point, we fucked up. Big. Somehow, somewhere we lost them. We lost Eve.

Coming up on Smith's pulled-over car, we park behind them and hop out, needing some fucking answers.

"Where the fuck are they?" Korren rounds our car, creating a cloud of dust in his wake. Unable to reach him in time, I tense as I watch his shoulders square back before he shoves Dominic into the side of his vehicle.

"Hey!" Brown yells at the same time Amiri lunges for his brother, "Kor, stop!"

"Where the hell is she?" His hands push at Smith's shoulders again, his rage and anger wreaking havoc on his mind.

"We don't know!" The broken yell from Brown has my heart sinking. It's one thing to assume what's going on...but hearing that we lost our girl again is like a fucking punch in the soul.

"You son of a bitch! You told us to follow you! Now she's gone again. Lost!"



Just as Kor cocks his fist back, Amiri latches on to his arm and drags him away. At the same time, Brown pulls a gun out of her holster.

*Holy shit.*

Gripping Nolan's hand, I tug him behind me. I won't allow another member of my family to be hurt. I can't handle it. Peeling my eyes away from the pissed-off blondie, I take in Korren's hulking form. Only Miri is larger than his brother.

"Korren!" Amiri unleashes a bark I've never fucking heard come out of him. My back goes ramrod straight while Nol tenses in my hold against my back.

I've said it before, and I'll say it again... When our dark god is pissed, we all about piss ourselves. It's fucking terrifying.

"I'm sorry," Smith's voice breaks through the chaos, making all eyes zero in on his stoic form. All signs of pity and failure are gone from his face to be replaced by his indifferent mask.

"For what?" Nolan whispers behind me, barely loud enough for everyone to hear in the desert.

"We lost them. At some point, Kyle must have driven off one of the side roads. It was more logical for him to just keep heading north." Rubbing at the back of his neck, he continues, "I have a few members of the team following some of the smaller roads that branched off. We should have been able to catch up to him unless-"

"Unless he knew we were closing in," I finish for him. At their nods, my head dips. I feel Nolan's hand on my waist as I soak in that bit of fuckery.

He knows we are coming and that we are close. What does that mean for Eve?

## Chapter 7

### **Evelyn**

You know what would be great? To not wake up completely disoriented and coming off of drugs. In addition, I'd love not to have to wake up in the same damn dress that I've been wearing for who knows how long.

Oh! And I'd love to be able to move. My wrists and ankles are absolutely raw, the dried blood yanking on my little hairs. If I could make any request, though, it would be to wake up lying down. My neck and back are permanently screwed at this point.

Speaking of my neck, I slowly pick my chin up off my chest while I attempt to clear the fog from my mind. Glancing around, my brows dip in confusion. I ignore the dull ache of the wound above my eye. We are still clearly in the middle of nowhere, but now it looks like we are hidden off the side of a small road covered in some dry brush.

I would call it a forest if there were more than just a few flashes of greenery, but there isn't much in the form of life. In the early morning light, I see it's just more deserted and even less populated than the last time my eyes were open.

Shifting in my seat with a wince, I find Kyle sprawled out in the seat next to me. Disgust makes my chapped lips curl back in a sneer. He has one hand down his pants, and the other is splayed across my thigh.

Bile rises with absolutely nothing to purge out, seeing as I haven't been fed. Small demeaning sips of water here and there are all that I've gotten since that one slice of bread.

Wait...why are we here? I've come to expect that each morning I would be waking up in a shitty hotel chair. Instead, we are tucked away on some side road while the groping dipshit sleeps beside me.

I'd rather have a chair with him far, far away from me.

Flashes of yesterday bang through my pounding head. Kyle looked absolutely manic as we sped out of the gas station he chose for the day. Hazy memories of people pointing and yelling, then nothing but road flying by beneath the window my head rested against. The swerve of the car off the highway, then...nothing. Just darkness. Now here I am.

Grabbing his moist palm off my horrified thigh, I placed it back in his lap gently, not wanting to wake the beast. He's becoming increasingly crueler the longer we have been stuck in this car together. Although, that's only when I wake up for a few minutes after being drugged senseless again.

I think he's been using it more and more as his anxiety increases. I don't know if the nausea and tremors are from the drugs or just the entire situation in general. My body is becoming increasingly more uncomfortable the longer this goes on; my skin fucking itches and I feel sick.

*Ugh, I have to get out of here before I'm useless.*

I was rarely drugged for those seven years he first had me since I was always pliant...you know, drifting off into my memories. Now, though, he wants the old me back—the one who doesn't talk or move. Luckily, there have been no signs of him touching me down there.

The drugs, though...something isn't sitting right with them. Maybe it's the lack of food and water on top of it...but I am unwell. I know it's only going to get worse too.

Taking a scratchy, deep breath, I assess my surroundings. This seems utterly careless for him. Surely, he had to know I would wake up at some point.

I flick my gaze over to him again, my adrenaline rising, understanding that this might be the chance I've been waiting for. His eyes are still closed; his breathing is still slow and deep.

*Shit, shit, shit!* The tirade of curse words tumbles through my head as I frantically search around the car for something sharp to cut the zip ties with.

Nothing.

Absolutely nothing jumps out at me as a viable option. Fucking ridiculous. First, I was held in a basement with nothing but sharp tools, and now there isn't even a plastic fork in sight.

The sharp tug of the restraints on my ankles has me looking down and realizing that he hasn't changed those for days. The frayed edges of the single tie are tinged pink by my blood.

Worn. The tie on my ankles is worn down; I wonder if I put enough force on it if it would snap.

A choked snore beside me has my heart pounding around in my chest, a clear representation of trying to get the fuck out. A bead of sweat, like a gentle caress on my neck, makes my breath stall in my throat.

The first night at home with my guys...Korren elicited the same soothing touch on my neck after he made my panic spike. I was so damn scared about the guys being mad about me paying them back. Yet, Koko kneeled before me and brought me back from the edge.

My fierce protector sat me at his family table and kept me close to his side.

*Korrens arm wraps around the back of my chair, keeping me from going anywhere. I gulp, trying to shove the feelings of being trapped away. I'm not sure what face I make, but Korren notices and removes his arm, giving my neck a gentle caress as he moves. My shiver of delight is unexpected.*

A sob gets lodged in my throat from being distracted by the memory of kindness and care. That was one of the first moments I felt my body react that way to someone again. He elicited a chill of pleasure and yearning unlike anything I had ever felt.

Later that night, I fell asleep curled up beside him on the couch after he found me raiding his kitchen like the chocolate thief I am.

A tear falls. *I miss him.*

I miss all four of them so much that my chest feels like it's being sawed in half, almost like I'm one of the victims of a chainsaw massacre. Nope. I'm living my own nightmare once again. I'm not an actress in a movie, nor am I a fictional character for people to cringe about.

I'm *real*. This is *real*, and it fucking *hurts*. Everything hurts. I'm in absolute agony, and I'm alone. Four pieces of my heart were ripped away from me, leaving my chest a gaping wound that nobody can heal.

I matter. *I FUCKING MATTER!*

And just like any other time, it mattered for me to fight...to focus...I wasn't strong enough. I, too easily, succumbed to my trauma once again, and now it's too late. All because I let the never-ending heartache drown me with phantom touches of my soul mates.

“Good morning, Pet.”



Still held deep in the pit of failure, I attempt to drown out Kyle's incessant babbling. To no avail, his words still strike my tender soul like he intends to.

“Nobody is looking for you; you know that, right? I mean, why would they?” His scoff sends nauseous goosebumps down my spine. “We both know you are only good enough for the hole between your legs.”

I flinch. And I fucking hate it.

He hasn't drugged me yet today; it seems he wants my company for the next stretch of the road trip. It's been a few hours since he woke up, and somehow, we are still on some long stretch of sandy roads.

My forehead burns up against the window, and my stomach rolls constantly. I really don't feel good. I wish I could float away...but that little party trick was healed right out of me. Still mad about it.

"The boys sitting with you last week...I'm sure you annoyed the shit out of them. What does a poor little mouse like you have to offer? I bet you can't even get them to feel one ounce of happiness with that decrepit mind of yours."

I keep chanting the words "don't listen" over and over again to myself in my head. But what if he's right? I know I've been through some shit, and I know I have really bad days. Maybe those outweigh the good memories, though. Maybe when they noticed I was missing, they felt relief. No poorer traumatized girl to deal with...just like Kyle said.

My vision twists and twirls, another dizzy spell making me want to keel over.

Annoyance and anger flare once the loopiness fades a bit. "And what about you, dipshit? No family loved you either, huh?" If I'm going to feel like shit, then he can too.

"Listen, bitch, that's none of your business. Just because your whore legs couldn't buy you loyalty doesn't mean you know anything about me." He sneers at me before his eyes dart back to the road.



He isn't fast enough to shift his focus back before we hit a pothole that turns the shooting pain in my head into white-hot agony. It's enough for my vision to white out and a groan to tumble from my mouth.

A sharp slap on my thigh has me gasping at the sting left behind.

“Shut up.”

“Fuck you,” I grit out through my clenched jaw. Insecurity and anger rage in my veins. A vicious combo if he wants to fucking push my buttons.

The road continues to get worse from here, and I'm honestly shocked at how his car is lasting through this. Deep potholes, shattered bark, thick masses of dead trees, random bushes in the center...are we even on a road, or is this some form of a four-wheeler trail?

Just as the thought tumbles through my brain, the awful sound of a tire popping rings through the car.

It's a sound that used to terrify me as a young driver before Kyle happened. Now though? My chest feels like it's bubbling, and my lips begin to stretch into a slightly deranged smile.

I laugh. And I continue to laugh. I mean, what the actual hell? Everything is so messed up. The hysterical wheeze has my boney sides aching while Kyle's slew of profanities adds to my delirious frenzy.

My kidnapper looks almost as bad as me. His eyes are a bit sunken into his sickly pale face. Every glance I've stolen at

him showed that he looked about ready to pass out on the steering wheel.

There is zero food or water in the car right now. I don't know what the hell he was thinking when he took this road because I've also been watching the gas gauge. If our tire hadn't popped, then we would have run out of gas soon.

I don't even think we are on an actual road at this point. I just...what the fuck?

Now we are stranded in some gnarly looking woods, probably in New Mexico somewhere.

Between my fits of giggles, I say, "Super unfortunate, considering there is no spare tire in the trunk." More peels of giggles spew before I catch my breath. "You know, because I was stashed back there for the better part of a day. There is a big hole where it and the cover should be, though."

He roars, shoving his car door open, then slams it closed behind him. The rattle and thumping of him moving around in the trunk have me huffing out a few more fits of laughter.

In the side mirror, I watch as he walks around my side of the car. Scatters of anxiety ripple through my bound limbs when he roughly opens my door.

"Told ya!" I give him a wide grin, sass attempting to conceal my fear.

My alarm bells were right to activate at that moment. I yelp when searing pain explodes across my scalp.

"Stop!" I plead only for my cries to fall on deaf ears.

My knees slam to the ground, finally tugging me all the way out of the car by my hair. He doesn't stop there. He continues to drag me across the rocky terrain, ignoring me and probably turned on by the tears streaming down my face while I cry out in pain.

“Please, stop, Kyle!”

Another raspy screech of pain flies out of my mouth when my Achilles tendons flare with pain as well. My tied wrists claw at his hand, a feeble attempt to get him to let go of me. And yet, he just yanks harder even though my legs are caught on a root.

“I-I'm stuck!” Creating a coherent sentence is harder than I thought it would be.

My neck, which was already sore and stiff, is now tweaked from being forcefully yanked around. Welts and bleeding cuts mar my bare legs. A familiar feeling, my blood trickling out of wounds.

Looking up at him, bile rushes up my throat at the same time, saliva pools in my jaw. The forest we are in is fairly shaded, leaving Kyle's face to be masked in the late afternoon shadows of the trees.

Pure malice and hatred darken his eyes. They flash with upcoming horrors right before he drops my weeping body onto the hard ground.

“Ah!” My elbows now match the rest of my bleeding, bruised body. Breaking my fall, they keep my abused head from receiving any more damage on the unforgiving ground.

A sudden rush of air flies from my lungs a second before the pain in my stomach invades all recesses of my nerves.

Drawing his pointed dress shoe back from me, he spits on the sand next to me. “Stay, bitch.” With those parting words, he walks back to the car a few yards away.

A whimper slips free while a line of saliva drips from my parted lips. Everything hurts—the muscles in my abdomen contract and cramp where he kicked me. The hit was so hard; I’m sure he would have cracked a rib if he aimed higher.

Shifting after a few minutes of trying to control the horrendous pain rippling through my stomach, I notice a difference in my attire.

I peed myself.

The bump of the rocks barely registers as I tip my head to look up at the canopy of trees above me. I used to dream of the sky. Then I got the chance to see the sun and the stars again. Now all I want is a goddamn blanket. I just want to curl up in a ball and hide away from the world.

The presence of a teardrop trailing down my temple and into my ear has my eyes fluttering shut.

If I think about it hard enough, I can imagine Ryan trailing his fingers across my face and leaving me with gentle kisses. The day I found out I had to give my statement...Ryan was perfect, especially when panic gripped me at the thought of what was to come.

*As if sensing my thoughts, Ryan comes up next to us and runs a finger along my jaw, causing shivers to race down my spine.*

*“Eve, we don’t have to be there with you if you don’t want us to. I know that would be super overwhelming, honey.” He shoots a look behind him to the others standing a few feet back. “I do think it would be good for one of us to be with you for support, though. It’s up to you, but we do need to get an update on the case.” Ry swoops down before I can register what’s happening and leaves a feather-light kiss on my cheek before stepping back behind Kor.*

A quiet, anguished sob splits my lips wide. A silent scream adds itself to the sorrow raging from me, the clenched heaving aggravating my tummy.

Nolan and Ryan laid their hearts out for me right after that. They told me how much they wanted me, how they loved me...and I crumbled at their feet.

I want that now. To be able to lay my broken self in front of them and bask in their love and warmth again.

Tears dampen my hair, and urine soaks my dress. Tears trickle down my face while blood flows freely from my wounds.

Broken again. Tired. My eyes refuse to open any longer, and I don’t fight it. I’ll fight tomorrow...just a little rest.

## Chapter 8

### **Nolan**

It's been five days. Five days since Kyle took her away from me. From us. Looking at us, though, you would think that Eve has been missing for a year.

I'm just so tired.

I physically don't know how much more I can handle. I constantly feel sick to my stomach, and I'm not getting enough sleep. Every time I doze, images of Eve in that hospital bed plague my dreams.

Her eyes hollow and terrified...her body broken.

I know I can't give up...I won't stop till I find her. But the longer she's gone, the further I feel myself slipping into dark territory. Ryan is worried about me, even though his only focus should be on Eve.

I'm fine. Fine enough to keep going. I have to be because nothing will ever be okay without Eve.

None of us are doing good. We have been running on minimal sleep, snacks, and energy drinks. It's only getting

worse too. After we found out that we lost them again yesterday afternoon, the energy shifted.

Depression and guilt hang heavy in the air, which only works to weigh me down even more. Thoughts of what we could have done differently taunt me toward insanity. We just keep failing.

We are hanging on by a thread... so what does that mean for Eve?

I don't remember feeling this way the first time. I was depressed and scared, sure. This is different now. Eve and I have a connection that only someone you have spent every waking moment with would have. She's my life mate, and we keep getting separated in the most horrific ways.

I don't know if I believe in supernatural shit, but I know for a fact that Eve and I are connected in some way. My turmoil is an endless pit trying to suck the light out of me. I feel so physically unwell that it makes no sense when I haven't done anything.

Sure, it makes sense for me to feel weak and tired. This feels so fucking wrong, though.

When Eve was in that basement before she escaped, there was a time when I could feel her slipping away from me. It was like a part of my soul was being shredded apart.

The piece of my soul where Eve resides feels like it's deteriorating, leaving me nauseous, clammy, and shaky.

Maybe I'm just crazy. I don't know anymore. I just know Eve needs safety and her family.

“Nolan,” Ryan’s voice sounds like it’s far away from where my head leans against the car window.

Still driving.

“Nol,” this time, his voice is accompanied by a gentle touch on my thigh, effectively drawing my attention to the heat of his palm over my sweatpants.

Dragging my bleary eyes from the forestry in the distance, I twist my head to Ry. He doesn’t look the greatest either; we all need a shower.

*I could go for a shower.*

“Hey, there you are.” his fingers glide across my cheek, a comfort that brings tears to my eyes. My soul weeps.

“Baby, what’s wrong?”

My eyes unfocus again and return to the darkening sky. “I’m fine.”

*How original;* the thought makes me laugh on the inside—a delirious little feeling.

“You’re scaring me,” his voice is a broken whisper that yanks at my heart.

I work to clear some of the fog from my brain as I truly give him my attention. I don’t want these horrible feelings to affect him this way...I don’t want to hurt him. He’s hurting enough as is.

“I’m sorry,” my voice is scratchy from lack of use. I adjust the glasses on my nose and brush my fingers through my curls, trying to situate myself back in the land of the living. “I’m okay,” I repeat, hoping to convince us both.



“You don’t look okay, Nolan.” I hadn’t noticed Amiri leaning around his seat up front next to Korren. “Let’s stop for the night.”

“No!” My voice cracks like a sharp whip. We can’t stop moving; we need to find her.

“I’m serious, Nol. You look sick. We need to get a hotel for the night.” Amiri gives a nod to Korren, who pulls up directions to the nearest hotel.

“Kor, we can’t stop.” I thought if one of them would agree with me, it would be Korren. Except he shakes his head at me while navigating the streets of one of the bigger towns we have stopped in the past few days.

“We don’t even know what direction to go in right now. We could be moving further and further away from her. Plus, Smith and Brown have stopped for the night too. It would be smart to get some real rest.”

All three of them are fucking frowning at me, concern clear in the way they are preparing for me to explode. We have all had our moments of freaking out, but this won’t be one of mine.

I’m just so damn tired. Tears fall freely from my lashes... the emotions reaching overwhelming heights.

“Okay,” I whisper, because what else can I do.



*“Nolan! Please help me!” Eve’s shrill scream pierces my ears.*

*Grunting and crying, I can't fucking move. My legs are like lead as she's dragged away by a dark shadow. I feel my muscles tense and bulge in their attempt to break free of whatever is keeping me trapped.*

*"Eve!" I try to shout for her, but it comes out garbled and far quieter than it should. I can't get to her!*

*"Nolan, HELP!" My eyes zero in on her face.*

*My knees slam into the glass beneath me, causing an echo to rumble through this hell. Blood streams from her eyes and mouth. When she twists her head around to look at the shadow, I notice blood pooling out of her ears too.*

*"Fuck, Eve!" This time my voice comes out strong.*

*Whatever had me rooted to the spot releases me at the same time Eve thumps to the floor. Shadow gone.*

*Scrambling to get to her before it comes back, I grip her cold hand in mine as I roll her over to assess the damage.*

*Yet, there is none, only blood smeared across her face and neck.*

*"Eve," it's a wobbly sound, but at least I can still talk. Flipping her over onto my lap, I grip her cheeks in my palms. "Eve, I'm here now."*

*She's slack in my arms with her golden eyes wide open. Unblinking. A rattling breath escapes my lungs at the horrifying sight below me.*

*Tapping her cheeks, I say her name again and beg for a response. "Hey, baby. I'm here now. Wake up."*

*A pang in my chest has my stomach dropping...dread settles in my soul.*

*“Eve, come on!” Frantic, I shout and plead for her to hear me. Blood coats my hands and arms...a smudge of red taints the vision of my glasses too.*

*At my shaking, her mouth pops open. “Come on!” I dip my head into her chest. My heart stops at the silence I find.*

*“No. Damnit, Eve! NO!”*

*My tears hit her cheeks, creating a morbid trail through her blood. I continue to shake her and plead for her to wake up, panic making my heart thunder out of control. My chest feels like it’s about to implode with how tight it is. I can feel my bones rattling with each quake of fear.*

*She can’t be dead.*

*“You were too late,” the voice behind me is one I know well, if not a little different. I about explode in relief at hearing her again.*

*Whipping my head around, I’m shocked to find a young Eve. This is how I remember seven-year-old her...less than four feet tall, tiny, with way too much hair than she knows what to do with.*

*She’s crying.*

*“E-Evie?” My eyes shoot down to the one in my arms...her face has lost all color. She’s dead.*

*“Why didn’t you save me, Noly?” Young Eve asks in a timid voice. Her large golden eyes pierce right through my heart.*

*“I-” I can’t control the sob that bursts free. “I tried.” The excuse falls flat with the dead body of my best friend wrapped in my arms.*

*I’m coated in my girlfriend’s blood, and all I can say is, I tried.*

*A high pitch cry slips from the small girl behind me, making me flinch and cringe away. She catches the move and begins to wail harder.*

*“You were too late!” Her screech rattles the glass beneath us, a small crack appearing beneath her feet.*

*Suddenly, her screams stop. Her eyes turn cold, her face expressionless, while tears drip from her chin.*

*The only sound in the room is my labored breathing and pounding heart.*

*“And you will be too late again.” It’s then I realize the cracks beneath her have webbed out to surround her small feet.*

*She was right; I am too late. Again. It happens in slow motion, her frail body dropping with her arms flying up over her head. Her hair creates a shadow above her as she falls with the shattering of glass.*

*“EVIE!”*

I lunge forward and reach toward my falling friend, only to be greeted with a dark room. I find myself seated in bed, covered in sweat, and panting hard.

“Shh, Nolan. I’m here, you’re okay.” Ryan’s voice beside me filters through my brain, easing some of the nightmare

remnants.

He flips on the lamp next to him, highlighting the frown above his concerned eyes. I lick my salty lips, realizing that the sheets have dropped away from his bare chest, giving me an eyeful of his rippling abs and toned chest.

“Nol?” His hesitant voice is laced with huskiness from sleep.

Catching sight of the clock beside the hotel bed, I see that it’s a little past four in the morning. The brothers got their own hotel room while Ry and I are sharing a single. We got in around eight last night, and we all immediately ate and promptly fell asleep in our respective rooms.

A gentle caress on my bare shoulder has me reorienting myself back to my boyfriend. “Nightmare,” I mumble, swiping at my eyes. Snatching the bottle of water next to me, I down half of it in one go.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

I take a deep breath, “I was too late to save her. Twice.” The final word comes out as a whisper. Ashamed to utter the words out loud.

His cool hand on my jaw startles me before it soothes my heated skin. “We won’t be too late, I promise.”

“You can’t promise that.”

Ry hums to himself before nudging me onto my back. My mouth dips in confusion until his hand trails from my jaw down the plains of my chest and comes to a stop at the top of my boxers.

“What are you doing?” I’m shocked at how easily he made my voice so airy. I almost groan at the sight of his eyes dilating. He’s a bit blurry without my glasses on, but with him so close, I can make out the lust highlighting his features. I do groan when his other hand tugs at my curls, though.

“Helping you relax, my love.” His plump lips press against the column of my throat; all the while, his shaggy blonde hair tickles my chest and chin. The scent of hotel shampoo teases my nose.

“Mmm,” I murmur, not sure if I was trying to actually say something, yet he still volleys with a similar sound between a moan and a groan. “Ry,” his name comes out like a needy plea.

He nips at my bottom lip, settling himself against my side. My hips buck off the bed when his hand dips into my waistband. The heat of his fingertips has my hard cock twitching and aching for his attention.

Activating my core, I lean up and capture his lips with mine. Licking the seam of his lips, a smile graces mine when he bites me again.

“Who’s in charge here?” Ryan pulls away from me and takes his tantalizing touch off my hardness.

All I do is nod, lost to my own need. A sharp tug on my hair makes heat tingle the base of my spine. I’m so wound up from days with no release...this is exactly what I need. I need to feel the love of my boyfriend. The need to give up all control to him at this moment is high. I’ve felt so powerless; I just want a moment to give it all away.

“Who is in charge, Nolan?” His voice deepens a notch at my silence. A teasing pain has my eyes shooting down to my chest, where he twists my nipple.

Pain isn't necessarily a kink for us; he just knows how to force my attention in the sexiest ways.

“You are,” I pant out.

“I am what?” His teeth graze the area below my ear while his hand begins its path toward my throbbing dick.

My breath catches, “You are in charge, Ryan.”

“Mmm, good boy.” then his hand grips my base and starts his slow pumps. The hand in my hair tilts my mouth toward him, jutting my chin out right where he wants me.

A relieved sigh releases tension from my mind and body, my focus riveted to each swipe of his tantalizing tongue and teasing caress of his expert fingers.

Just as I'm about to sass him off about his teasing, he gets to his knees beside me and tugs my boxers down. Straddling my shins, he gives me one of his wicked grins right as his tongue darts out to lick his lip piercing.

“Fuck,” I breathe when he catches the bead of precum with the barbell in his mouth. *I will never get enough of his piercings; they are so fucking sexy, and fucking hell, they feel good.*

His chuckle tells me I said those thoughts out loud. No matter, because the cool air he just blew over my dripping cock has all thought sizzling away in a ball of flame.

The tip of his tongue dances around the angry crown; then he's swallowing me whole.

"Fuck!" I roar, my hips flying further into his face.

Unfortunately, that move cost me the pleasure he was just giving. "Ah, ah. Who's in charge?"

"You're in charge. But fuck, Ryan," my voice comes out strong.

"Butt fuck, indeed." He descends. Suckling and hollowing his cheeks, my stomach swoops with pleasure.

Using the extra saliva he left dripping down my balls, he coats a finger and slowly enters my ass.

I writhe at the intrusion; pain and pleasure become one as he preps me to take him. A second finger, and I'm about to combust.

"Ry!" Fuck, I'm going to cum if he doesn't stop.

"Mmm, you want more?" He teases, popping off my dick.

"Y-yes, please." In the next second, his boxers are off, his pierced cock pointing at me. I don't know when, but he managed to acquire a bottle of lube in my sexed-up haze.

"Lift."

I eagerly do as he says and lift my ass off the bed so he can place a pillow under me, putting me at the perfect angle for him to fuck me.

"Good."

I fucking preen at the praise.



Lubing up his shaft, he spreads my legs wide, admiring the view as he slowly pushes in.

I clench my jaw at the intrusion that doesn't get much easier to take as time goes on. The piercings of his Jacob's ladder have my breath stalling, the pleasure ratcheting to new heights.

"Breathe." perspiration beads along his brow, his own jaw ticks at the grip my ass has on him.

My back bows off the bed when his lubed-up hand grips my own length and gives an irresistible tug just as he completely seats himself inside me.

"Oh fuck, Nolan. You are so tight." His pace kicks up, hitting all the right spots as he continues to jack me off. Bending down, he takes my mouth in a passionate kiss that has my breath catching at the love and tenderness he gives me.

The sounds of our thighs slapping together mix with our moans, the perfect soundtrack. He sits back, adjusting his angle in me so he can pound into me harder.

"More, more!" My throaty voice eggs him on, letting loose the unhinged Ryan that makes my toes fucking curl. "Yes!"

My hardening cock twitches in his hand, the tingle at the base of my spine signaling my release. "Fuck Ry, I'm gonna-" The warning ends with a ridiculously loud moan. Stars flash behind my eyelids, and one of the best orgasms I've had in my life sends my fingers and toes into numbness.

"Eyes open," he growls above me, effectively causing my eyes to snap open at the order, simultaneously drawing out my orgasm.

His blonde hair drips. The muscles in his neck and chest flex with each thrust. He's a fucking vision. The tirade of curse words that fly out of his mouth makes me blush as his grip becomes punishing on my thighs. His release sends a roar through the small hotel room as he spills deep in my ass.

"Nolan," his pumps slow while he drawls out my name with a guttural moan making my cock twitch in response.

Gently, he slips out, careful not to hurt me.

I still cringe at the sensitivity; he's not small, and his fancy peen does all kinds of naughty things on the way out.

Ocean-blue eyes meet mine before he leans down and gives me a gentle, exploratory kiss. Sweeping my moist curls off my forehead, he whispers, "Good boy."

And fuck if I'm not ready to go again.

"I love you," I whisper back. The burn of tears is unexpected as I bask in the afterglow of our love.

I'm even more surprised when his eyelashes also drip their own tears. "I love you too, Nolan." He searches my eyes from his spot across my chest while I run my hands up and down his firm back. "We will find her." His promise brings a fresh wave of emotion tumbling from my eyes and quivering lips.

"Okay," I whisper.

After searching my face for another beat, he continues, "How are you feeling?"

Knowing he's concerned about how ill I looked earlier, I respond, "I don't know." It's the truth. That dream rattled me,

but then I was thoroughly distracted by my sexy man to put much thought into how my body was coping.

Giving me a gentle peck on the cheek, he tugs me off the bed. “Let’s go shower and maybe catch another hour of sleep.”

So just like that, I follow his lead and enjoy the way he takes care of me. Gently running his soapy hands across my body, he whispers sweet words to me in the safety of the shower stall.

I bask in this moment, accepting that I needed this in order to keep moving forward. I am ready now. *And I’m coming for you, Eve.*

## Chapter 9

### **Korren**

We need to do something. Anything other than driving aimlessly down the same damn road we were on yesterday. When I mentioned that we might be getting further away from Eve if we kept driving North, I realized that it was a total possibility.

“My team picked up tire tracks heading off the highway on a basically desolate side road.”

“What? Where? Where are you? Tell us where to meet you!” I can’t help but bombard him with all the questions I have.

I hear the telltale sound of Detective Brown sighing in the background over the car speakers before she chimes in, “I’m texting it to you know. Meet there ASAP so we can make a plan.”

Popping the coordinates into the GPS, I give Amiri a nod next to me to follow the directions. I feel restless in the passenger seat, unable to do anything but rely on my brother to get us there as fast as possible.

*I'd be going faster.*

Thankfully, we are only a few hours out, back the way we came initially. I'm glad we decided to just keep circling the area; otherwise, Eve's life would be on the line for longer while we retraced our steps.

"We will be there in a few hours; see you soon." Smith cuts off the call, leaving us in silence as we stew over this next lead.

"Is anyone else afraid of getting their hopes up?"

I frown at the vulnerability in Nolan's tone. He's been high-spirited all day...probably thanks to his boyfriend beside him. As the hours went on, his lunch forgotten, he seems to be declining again.

He freaked us all the fuck out yesterday when Ry tried to get his attention. When I got my own look at him, I almost brought us straight to a damn hospital. He was ashen and seemed on the verge of passing out.

This morning he had more of a pep in his step, but now the weariness and the stress are taking a toll on him once again. Not as pale as yesterday, but his complexion is still concerning; I make a mental note to keep an eye on him.

Shuffling in my seat, I turn and share a loaded look with Ryan, communicating similar concerns. I run my hands through my dark hair, the tattoo on my bicep catching my eye for a moment.

She who falls catches herself.

I got it for Eve the day before the courthouse. I wanted to surprise her with it when we could promise her a safe future.

Nolan has always loved to refer to her as his Little Pheonix... The quote and the fiery image of the phoenix felt right. It serves as the reminder I need right now; our woman is so fucking strong.

*She's my fighter.*

Emotion clogs my airway, and my eyes burn with unshed tears. The emptiness of my arms makes me ache to wrap Evie in a tight embrace. I swear my heart is constantly skipping beats. I'm the angry one...but I'm also the one that they say feels the most.

I'm so...there are no words to describe the horrific effects of having the love of your life ripped away from you. From watching her overcome so much trauma, just to have the asshole who abused her in the first place steal her all over again.

“Don't lose hope.” My voice is gruff. Deciding to take a page from each of us, I continue, “Remember your nicknames for her.”

I gesture to Amiri first. “Angel.” To myself. “Fighter.” Ryan is next, his eyes glassy when they lock on mine. “Goddess.” Finally, I meet Nolan's equally misty gaze. “Pheonix. Fire.”

I swallow, needing to collect myself. “We have given her endearments of otherworldly strength...why?”

“Because it's true.” Nol's voice is soft.

“Yes. Evelyn has shown us time and time again how much she can endure. Mir, you feel like she's sent from the heavens. Ryan, you believe her to resemble an entity of immense

power.” I lock eyes with Nolan again. “And you know my fighter can rise from the ashes. She’s proven that already.”

My heart pounds in my chest, my hands are fucking sweaty. I’m not the talker of the group; I prefer my grunts and nods over speeches. This was important, though.

“We have to remember the strength Eve radiates. She is going to make it, and we will be there.”

My chest puffs out a tad at seeing their shoulders push back in determination once again. My words worked to remind them of who Evelyn Miller is. She is not a simpering, weak little girl.

No.

She is an Angel who clawed her way out of hell. She is a goddess who has faced each battle head-on while maintaining her grace and beauty. Eve is a fucking Pheonix who will rise, no matter how many times her flames have been snuffed out.

Evie is my fighter...I just need her to keep fighting as long as she can.

Because as much as my speech empowered my family... I’m still fucking terrified.



## **Evelyn**

A chill down to my bones rouses me from unconsciousness. My teeth chatter so hard my jaw cramps at the abuse it’s

taking. Groaning as I shift on the cold ground, a gasp flies out when the pain in my abdomen shoots in all directions.

Peeling my eyes open, I'm shocked to see stars twinkling between the trees above me. Jesus, I've been out long enough for the sun to set. Longer, judging by the moon high in the sky and how absolutely freezing the desert air has become.

*What the fuck?*

Maybe Kyle fixed his tire and left me here. Pets are a lot of work, after all. The wooziness in my brain encourages a giggle to bubble up at this horrible predicament.

It's the little things.

Hmm, would it be so bad if he just left me here to die? At least if he did run off, then I would be free of his torment. I haven't enjoyed the psychological torment he's been throwing at me recently. I don't appreciate him using my weakened state to taint the memories I have of my men.

They love me, and they are coming for me. The only thing I should be questioning is how long I can hold on. Because the dried blood streaked from my scarred lips and down my cheek is not a good sign of whatever damage he inflicted when he kicked me.

*Shit. Kay, now what?*

Adjusting myself again, I manage to twist enough to look around the dark clearing a bit. I cringe at the state of my soiled panties and gross dress. Kyle is absolutely nowhere in sight. Except the car is still here, and it's fucking running. That asshole is wasting gas just to run the goddamn heater, I bet.

He's lucky his pet hasn't died out here yet or runoff.



*Wait.*

Twisting again, I find the zip ties on my ankles to be holding on by a thread. That damn root that caused me so much extra pain wins my forgiveness. This is my chance.

I'm running. This is happening.

I don't know where, but I swear anywhere is better than being with my fucking rapist. It's only a matter of time before he kills me or uses me. I don't know what has him so unhinged this time around, but I'm not sticking around to find out how this ends.

I'd rather find my own ending.

Gritting my teeth to keep my whimper of pain quiet, I yank my ankles apart.

*Ohmygod.* My mouth makes an 'O'. Completely shaken by how effective that was, I stare at my now free legs and let my feet dance in joy.

Deja Vu hits me, remembering how my feet did this same little jig after I got the shackles off the first time. A small smile forms, realizing how far I've come, and yet, I have always saved myself.

You know, give or take a few years.

My smile stays all the while my teeth chatter away as I prepare myself to move. It's been a while since I walked. What...five or six days?

The deep breath I take sends sharp pains through my chest and stomach as they rise. I don't have any idea how to

evaluate what might be wrong with me, but I know for a fact that I need to get moving.

Like, now.

It takes a tremendous amount of effort to swallow the pain-filled sounds that want to escape. I yank on my wrists, but they won't budge; having been replaced multiple times. Huffing out a frustrated breath, I crawl to my knees while doing my best to ignore the rippling pain ringing through my whole body.

*It's fine. This is fine. Just get somewhere far away, then you can rest.*

My pep talk works wonders, the self-encouragement guiding my feet to the ground. I avoid the fact that they can barely hold my shaking body up. Nothing wrong with some avoidance in the grand scheme of things, am I right?

My ratted black hair falls around my shoulders and face, the perfect camouflage for the dark night. Another morbid idea for a Halloween costume added to the list.

I cringe as my knees and hip pop, a sign of their misuse. A hiss slides through my gritted teeth as I shuffle my bare feet along the jagged ground.

*What are a few more cuts?*

A red flag waves in my mind telling me that my inner monologue isn't normal. Giving it a mental thumbs up, I admit that I'm definitely not in the right state of mind. I huff a quiet laugh...even that was coo-coo.

For coco puffs.

My stomach rumbles like a stampede of horses descending. Hopefully, it didn't rattle the car, and the dipshit asleep inside of it.

Rationally, I know that it's unrealistic for my stomach to cause an earthquake...but irrationally...I swear I made the ground move.

The sharp jap of a pointy rock in my foot has me snapping back to reality.

*Damn.*

Even if my stomach was crazy enough to rattle the car, I'd made it so far into the woods I can't even see the damn thing.

How long have I been walking? I must have completely zoned out in my mind and let my body take over our escape. Somewhere along the way, my blood turned ice cold, enough to numb the aches and pains for a while. There's nothing around except for wild bushes, trees, and, most likely, some disgusting snakes.

Fucking shudder.

I've been saying that we have been in the middle of nowhere, but now I've lost all sense of time and direction completely. What's worse is I don't know how much longer I can keep going.

This is the closest I've gotten to disassociating in months... I'm not proud to say that I'm so fucking glad I managed to escape without really thinking about it or experiencing the pain of walking.

Now that I'm present, my brain finally computes the misery of the hike. Bile and tears are a constant companion with the

agony shooting through me. I'm almost positive my feet are shredded to ribbons, my arms and face littered with slices from the unforgiving brush, and not to mention, again, my insides feel like they are trying to tie themselves up into a knot, only to yank on the ends tighter.

*Drama queen, you say? I wish.*

“Shit, fuck!” A sharp stabbing pain in my toe loosens my lips enough to let loose a yell. The stumble has me careening to the right, losing my balance.

A strangled whimper shatters the quietness of the night around me when my shoulder collides with a tree. A fresh wave of hell shoots up my neck and down my arm while my body crumples to the ground.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck!” I do my best to keep my voice down, even as my vision spots over with darkness.

Sometimes a nightmare is just too much to bear. The pain too taxing. The exhaustion too heavy.

“There's no fucking way I just managed to dislocate my shoulder,” I murmur, biting my lip hard enough to bleed. Lifting my shaking hand, I push gently on the throbbing joint.

Before I can pull my hand away, burning bile rushes up my throat. I barely manage to whip my head to the side in an attempt to puke anywhere else but on my own person. The movement brings more stabbing pains, only causing more dry heaving and additional torment in my stomach.

A vicious fucking cycle.

*Yep. I dislocated my fucking shoulder.*

The disbelieving thought grumbles in my brain at the same time my chin hits my dirty chest, out for the count.

*I hope I got far enough away.*



“EVELYN!” The roar of Kyle’s voice has me jerking awake with panicked breaths. Unfortunately, that only makes my chest ache; a reminder that I will never fully heal from the first time he held me against my will.

The adrenaline that spikes my system dulls the throbbing in my shoulder and the rest of my body.

“PET!”

“Shit, shit!” I can’t help but chatter out the shaky words as I heave myself to my feet and bolt away from my hiding spot.

Hopefully, me hearing the echo of his voice means he’s far enough away for me to run without him seeing. Because, let’s face it, I am running like a newborn deer. Except my lack of coordination is due to a lot of fuckery.

“YOU CAN’T HIDE FROM ME!”

The rage in his voice sends my thundering heart into overdrive; telling me I need to move faster. Holding my injured arm around my injured stomach, I hustle-hobble my way through the scratchy forest. Sweat drips down my back and into the fabric of my disgusting dress.

“Shit,” I hiss when a branch gets hold of the black garment and rips the bottom half away.

The sound of it makes the adrenaline pump into my veins faster for fear that he might have heard. I leave behind the scrap and allow my feet to take me as fast as they allow.

“EVELYN!” The sound feels closer, and I swear I can almost feel his putrid breath fanning across my neck.

Whipping my head around, I barely notice the damp strands of my hair whipping across my chest and cheeks.

Then everything bottoms out.

A horrific sense of weightlessness makes my tummy swoop and my brain lift.

Another fucking nightmare I get to live.

I wait for myself to jerk awake as the earth disappears beneath me. Instead, air wooshes up to expose my panties and bruised body. A silent scream contracts my throat as I plummet through the early morning light.

# Chapter 10

## **Amiri**

“This looks like the gates of an awful fucking horror movie.”

I roll my eyes at Ryan’s description of the forest in front of us. I can see the car tracks very clearly, but how far did Kyle manage to get in the mangled mess of dead trees and brush?

“Oh my God, the creatures in there.” He turns wide-eyed to Kor standing beside him. He, too, rolls his eyes and uncrosses his arms before whacking Ryan upside the head.

Grumbling to himself, Ry rubs his hand through his mess of blonde hair on his way to Nolan. “He hit me.” I can’t help the snort that slips free when Nol also rolls his eyes from his crouched position.

Ryan’s huff makes us all grin a little, the humor breaking some of the tension. Until he speaks again.

“I’m just saying...it looks like the branches are about to come alive and eat us.”

“Smith.” The sharp demand from Detective Brown has our smiles slipping away. Standing straight, he silently has us all

convene around him, waiting for direction.

Police cars and other search parties are also gearing up around us, creating their own plan. This time, we get to take the lead.

“Right. I’m not sure how far we are going to make it in there with our vehicles. But that is how we are starting. I have some people stocking up the cars with hiking shit and extra food.” Smith sighs before continuing, “That being said, I have no idea what we are going to find in there.”

He eyes us, and my own narrow in return. Standing firm in front of him, I don’t waver at their assessing gaze. I’m sick of them waiting for us to cower. Eve is in those damn woods, and we are going in.

“Do you know how to shoot?”

I’m shocked by Brown’s question, but we all give her nods. It was something we learned how to do together a couple of years back. Nolan went through a paranoid phase about losing us, so we took the classes.

“Great. Take these.” she hands us each our own Glock and holsters. “We will drive in first; you will follow. The rest of the teams will fan out behind us while also covering more ground. Many will be on foot as well, so stay sharp. You probably won’t notice them since they will be coming in after us.”

With the holsters strapped to our hips, and our Glocks secured, we soak in the information. We can’t fuck this up.

The next thing handed out is a handful of walkie-talkies, one for each of us. “I’m not sure what cell signal will be like



in there, especially the further we get, so don't lose these." Brown's voice is stern. I can't help but be thankful she's on our side.

Looking around the dusty ditch, my tummy flips at everyone who came out to help. Volunteers are organizing hiking packs, and officers are planning out routes; so many people have come to help Eve.

Smith told us that there is no marked exit from this trail, so the only option we have is to go in with everything we got and hope to fuck our girl is in there and unharmed.

I'm not stupid enough to think she isn't hurt; I just can't think about how bad right now.

"Oh, and this is super important, so pay attention." Spinning my head back around, I cringe a little when Smith gives me the stink eye, clearly picking up on the fact that I zoned out.

"One of the big reasons we don't know where this shitty road ends is because of the cliffs a few miles south. So please, be careful where you drive and where you step."

"I'm sorry...did you say fucking cliffs?" Ryan's voice is incredulous. I would assume that he was just being silly again, yet when I get a look at his face, all the blood has drained away.

"Yes, we are fairly close to New Mexico at this point, too, just so you know," Smith adds the tidbit of information like it matters right now.

"You said these cliffs are a few miles south?" Nolan asks gently while eyeing his boyfriend, who has begun to pace.

“Yes,” Brown draws the word out like she’s talking to a toddler.

“Eve is in there!” Ryan snaps, losing his cool and tossing his hands in the air.

“Yes,” Smith confirms.

“What if she got too close to the fucking cliff, Dominic?” I can sense Korren’s agitation rising as well. The tension in the atmosphere is not doing well to satiate his protective instincts.

“Then we will cross that bridge if we come to it!” Brown huffs and swats at the air like she can shoo away our anxieties.

Fuck...Ry is right, though. What if she did get too close to the cliff? And fell. What if Kyle wasn’t paying attention and ran them off the fucking cliff? There are so many damn possibilities running rampant in my head that I can barely fucking focus.

My job is to take care of my family, and we have all lost our shit so many times in the past six days that I’ve lost count. Scrubbing my hand through my buzz cut, I tip my head back and enjoy the evening breeze as it cools my dark skin.

“Let’s get a move on before the sun sets, yeah?” I ask, hoping to get everyone back on track.

In his dark jeans and a dark T-shirt, Smith nods before marching over to one of the officers. While we wait to head out, I check in with my guys after ushering them to the SUV.

“Are you guys okay?” I murmur, not wanting anyone to overhear.

“Fine,” Kor grumbles.

*Damn, I wish Eve was here. She'd get a big kick out of his grunting.*

“Really, Ko?” I raise a brow.

“I’m fine. We just need to get moving. I don’t like the look of that forest and knowing that Eve is in there is making me jittery as fuck.”

I nod because what can I say? I turn to Ryan, knowing that he definitely isn’t okay.

He rolls his eyes and shoves his hands into the pockets of his jeans. “I’m fine.” *Jesus*. “This is so fucked, though. I can’t believe he would take her in there, not knowing if there was a way out. And there are fucking *cliffs*, for fuck’s sake!”

Nolan runs his fingers across his forearm, causing Ry’s muscles to loosen and his voice to soften away from the raised voice he was just spouting. “I’m okay; I just want her home,” Ryan says so softly that I swear I can hear my heart break a little more.

Turning to Nol, I wait for his answer. “What he said.” I nod because... well, me too. This sucks. And it’s going to keep sucking until we find her. And it might suck after that.

Fuck.



“I stand by what I said. This place is fucking horrifying.”

I’m inclined to agree with Ryan’s disgust in the back seat. We have been on this damn road for about an hour now. To

call it a road, though, would be a lie.

“Fuck.” Korren grumbles next to me as we hit another damn crater. The ground is littered with gaping holes, probably leading to the pits of hell. Some thick enough that we would have damaged the car had we not missed them. Not to mention, bushes are growing in the damn center.

I hiss when Smith’s car ahead of us basically flies off a hidden bump in the road. I’ve apologized to our SUV so many times since I started driving us through this shit show. I’m thankful our family car is big and tough enough for this off-road-fuckery. Smith’s blacked-out undercover squad-looking car is taking a beating, though.

Nolan sighs from the seat behind me. Before he can contribute to our complaining, Smith’s car comes to a stop ahead of us. My heart thunders in my chest as I throw the SUV into park. I tumble out the door, my body moving faster than my feet.

“What is it?” The sounds of the guys scrambling out behind me is background noise to the blood rushing through my ears.

Smith turns to me, tilting his head to indicate to come closer. We huddle around him, like puppies, just waiting for scraps of information. I look over at Ry, the dog joke bringing back memories of the day Eve came home to us.

*“What the fuck!” I could kill him, and Korren is the violent brother. My kitchen is absolute carnage, and the man standing in it looks like a dog who rolled around in baking flour all day.*

*Ryan gives me a big smile, fucking golden retriever that rolled around in his own mess. “I’m making brownies for Evie*

*so she can have a treat tonight!” He begins hopping around, and I can’t help the little smirk that betrays my annoyance.*

My chest constricts at the reminder of how hopeful and excited we were for her to move in with us. Ryan may have annoyed me that day, but reminiscing on how he radiated happiness, has my throat closing up with emotion.

Our smiles have been muted for almost a week, and our happiness snuffed out. Eve was a bright light in our life, and without her here, it’s dark and dreary. Sure, we all enjoy the jokes and amusement here and there, but it’s forced. The undertones are laced with desperation.

A need for companionship, comfort, recognition, and reassurance. The guys and I...we are splintered right now. We love each other and work together, but the suffocating layer of depression and failure hovers heavily.

“The tire tracks continue from here, but they veered off to the side.” Brown gestures to the other side of our vehicles. “I assume he stopped to rest for a bit.”

Smith and Brown move to do a bit more investigating to see what they can find. I hear Smith’s hushed tone, speaking into the walkie-talkie about getting a team out here to comb through the evidence left behind.

“Alright, let’s go. There’s nothing here except for one track of footsteps to a tree and back. I have a team coming through here to do a more thorough sweep.”

Nolan lurches forward. “What if she was left here?”

That’s a good fucking question; my anxiety skyrockets. Looking at Nol, I notice his pale face and sweaty brow. He

picked up a bug somewhere but refuses to talk about it. The anxiety might just be manifesting more physically for him. I feel sick to my stomach half the time too.

“We would have seen more footprints and possibly a scuffle. That possibility is why I have another group coming to check it over.” Smith’s voice is firm and unwavering, allowing my shoulders to relax a bit.

We haven’t always been on the best terms with him, with emotions running high and him calling all the shots, but I trust him. If he says that following the car tracks further down the path is the best course of action, then I will follow.

“Okay, let’s go.” I turn, knowing my brothers will follow, even if a bit reluctantly. Hopping into the driver’s seat, I glance around at them again.

Korren is a stone wall beside me. Tight, black, long-sleeve and jeans, his body faces the window, all expression shuttered. Vigilant and level-headed, he keeps watching for anything out of the ordinary. He seems put-together, but his sleek black hair is the messiest I’ve ever seen it, and the tattoos on his hands and neck make him look scary as fuck. He’s ready to tear down the world with his bare hands to get Eve back.

Ryan, murmuring in the backseat, looks fairly put-together too. His dark jeans and sweatshirt give him a ruffled, lazy look. Blue eyes pierce mine in the rearview mirror. He will tear each prickly bush from hell out of this forest until he uncovers our girl.

Next to him, Nolan probably looks the worst. His face is devoid of color again, listening to Ry with a sickly sheen of sweat coating his bare arms underneath his T-shirt. We are all

wearing jeans in case we have to go on foot at some point. I worry that he's heating up in them. As if he can sense my gaze, he locks his gaze on mine behind a few stray curls. What I see has my breath catching; there's a fire raging in his eyes. I won't ask if he's okay anymore, he's not, but nothing will stop him from saving his best friend.

And me? I'm dressed similarly, with a layer of grime coating my ebony skin. I don't have to worry about my hair like the others, but my forehead is greasy from each stressful swipe of my hand. Catching my own eye in the mirror, I see a similar determination in my own that the rest of them have.

We may be a mess and completely terrified, but we will stop at nothing to get our Evie back.

With the car in drive, we continue through the night in hopes we can catch up to them. If his pattern holds up, Kyle will need his beauty sleep. I just fucking hope we make it before something happens.

# Chapter 11

## **Ryan**

A yawn splits my lips; none of us have gotten even a wink of sleep, each keeping our eyes on the passing forest around us. I don't think we would actually be able to sleep, though. Between the horrendous road and the anxiety of possibly finding Eve out here, relaxation isn't feasible.

As the night drones on, all my thoughts keep returning to my girl and everything she might be going through. Has she been eating and drinking water? Is she still in that dress from a week ago, or has he allowed her to change? Then that brings up a whole round of fear...does she have any clothes on? What has he done to her...? My stomach bottoms out and sours at the possibilities.

We know what happened to her the first time; what if that's happening again? Will she be able to come back from whatever treatment she's receiving?

*Fuck.*

Gulping, I grip Nolan's hand harder. I take comfort in having the guys close; I don't think I could do this alone. I can't believe young Nol went through this by himself. I know



he had his parents, but now he has us, who completely understand the turmoil of losing the love of your life.

I press my forehead against the window and watch the world wake up with the early morning sunrise. Golden rays shine through the canopy of crazy ass trees; a mockery of the beauty the world has to offer. Yet here we are in a forest from hell, hoping like fuck that we will find her.

A crackle of the walkie-talkie has each of us sitting up straighter. My heart pounds, the unknown of what Smith must report weighing on my wariness.

“We are stopping. Stay silent.”

Well, shit.

Amiri barely has the car stopped before Nol, Korren, and I leap out of the vehicle. Making eye contact with Korren on our side of the car, a silent energy passes between us, a hum of adrenaline. We give each other twin pats on the back and make our way to Smith and Brown.

Their hushed whispers can finally be heard the closer we get.

“They will follow either way,” Dom’s tone is firm. When he notices the four of us hovering with our arms crossed, he grinds his jaw.

“What are you talking about?” Kor rumbles next to me.

Smith’s trademark sigh spikes my annoyance. We need fucking answers, and we better get them. Eve is out there waiting for us; meanwhile, we are still being treated like damn children.

“We are going on foot from here.” His voice is hushed while staring ahead.

“Why?”

Turning to us, he explains, “We think we saw the sun glinting off of something up ahead.”

“What?” I hiss, “Why the fuck are we still standing here then?”

“Let’s go,” Nolan’s tone is incredulous, clearly on the same page as I am. This is the closest we have gotten to the possibility of finding her.

“Told you,” Smith murmurs to Brown, who just rolls her eyes in response. “We called for backup, but the six of us are going. Now. I don’t know why they might have stopped, but if whatever is reflecting the sun is Kyle’s car, then we have to move. I need you armed and loaded. Get your packs just in case and be ready to roll out in three minutes.”

My chest feels like it can barely control the furious pounding of my heart as we hustle back to the car. An array of curse words color the air rushing to get packed in under two minutes.

*Fuck.* I have no idea what’s about to happen, I can barely express how fucked my body feels right now. I’m jittery, shaky, sick to my stomach, and wanting to pass out while simultaneously ready to run a marathon.

Backpacks strapped on, guns checked and loaded, the four of us look up at each other at the same time. Standing in a circle, we take turns locking eyes, emotions radiating in our huddle.

“I love you guys,” I choke out, needing them to know.

“Family.” Amiri nods his head at me.

“Forever,” Nolan whispers, tears tracking down his pale cheeks—my own fall in response.

“Love you,” Korren’s words shock all of us; I can count on one hand the number of times he has said that to us. A sob gets lodged behind my teeth at the softness and vulnerability in his eyes.

Not a second later, he shuts it down, his face awash with fury and determination. “Let’s go get our girl.” He stomps his way through our group, each of us following his lead.

I swallow back the feelings that want to burst out of my soul. Now is not the time. We have to be strong now. I can cry once we get our woman to safety.

Stepping close to the detectives, I notice we all have our own form of masks on. Knowing that whatever we may find today will need our full attention without feelings clouding our judgment.

“You will follow close behind us, and you will do everything we say. Keep your guns holstered until I tell you otherwise. Do you hear me?” Brown’s tone allows for no argument. We all give her serious nods.

“I’m serious, guys. You have to follow our lead on this.”

“We understand,” Kor states, his voice deep and firm.

She nods and turns around with Smith at her side, gun drawn. Keeping our footing as light as possible proves to be difficult with the number of dead twigs snapping beneath my

shoes. My anxiety spikes when I catch sight of glinting metal further ahead. If he had seen us, he would have driven away.

*Begs the question...what the fuck are we about to walk into?*



## **Korren**

I may have told them that we understood what we had to do, but the closer we get to turning the corner, the more I realize that I was full of shit. My muscles are locked, and the urge to run ahead of them is making my calves itch.

*We are going too slow.*

The thought waves through my brain like a red flag as I traipse a few feet behind Smith and Brown. Slightly behind me is Nol, Ryan a bit behind him, with Amiri taking up the rear. We make a staggered line hidden behind the wall of detectives.

I know this is definitely against protocol for them, but they are smart to realize that we would just follow without their permission. And we wouldn't be doing it this fucking slow. No, we would be running ahead, guns fucking blazing.

My jaw cracks under the pressure of aggressive grinding. Hoisting my backpack up a bit further, I keep my knees fluid and shake out my clenched hands.

The reflection that we spotted through the woods is now about to be directly in front of us. I zero in on the right-hand curve in the path while battling my instincts screaming at me to *fucking run*. Too slow, too slow.

Just when I'm about to snap, they stop. My rage begins to boil. Instead of looking back at us, they each take a look around the corner to see what they might find. Which I guess is smart.

They give each other a nod and raise their guns before continuing on, still not paying attention to us. I look over my shoulder at Nolan, who may be pale and sweating buckets, but he looks like he's about to run head first, too. We all do.

Locking eyes with each of them, we have our own silent conversation like the detectives just did. But instead, we convey our love and support for one another. This is saying, "I'm here with you," without words.

I turn, noticing Smith and his partner have already made it around the curve. I curse myself for holding us back, even if it was just a few seconds. There's something nipping at my heels, shouting at me to hurry.

Hustling forward and finally turning that goddamn corner, my eyes immediately zero in on the black Camry we have learned to associate with Kyle. Any blood left in my face from this trek, completely drains, leaving me lightheaded and stock still.

*This is it. We finally caught up. But where's Eve?*

My inner monologue has me snapping out of my stupor; my hearing no longer drowned out by a high pitch ringing. Snapping my head around furiously, I try to spot where she might be.

Except...she is nowhere to be found in this small clearing. What I do find has me moving, and before I know it, I'm

standing over a crouched Brown.

I barely notice Smith walking the perimeter, nor do I pay attention to the feel of my family standing at my back. Each staring down at the drag marks from the car, the scattered blood in the sand, and the broken zip ties.

“She was dragged from the car to this root.” She points to the wood sticking out of the ground. “It seems she might have laid here for a bit; there’s a larger accumulation of blood here than the drag marks.”

With that, Nolan swears and bolts away from this morbid scene. The sound of his retching has my own nausea climbing up my throat. Murmurs of Ryan behind us soothing our brother allows me to focus back on whatever the fuck this is.

“What else?” I croak out.

Brown stands and indicates to the opposite direction of the car. “I think she snapped her ties and managed to take off that way. Eve’s tracks are alone and staggered, whereas there’s a larger set off that way.” She gestures to Smith a few meters away doing his own investigating.

“So, she escaped?” Nolan whispers, having joined us once again.

“I’m saying it’s possible, considering what’s right in front of us. The most important thing, though, is there are no tracks leading back.” Her pointed look has my head whipping up, my eyes already scanning the forest Eve ran off into. “They are both out there somewhere...for how long, I’m uncertain.”

“So let’s go,” Ryan huffs, his body vibrating.

Before we can make a move, Smith comes bustling over, his walkie-talkie plastered to his face. He reaches us, a flush staining his neck and cheeks.

“Backup is on the way. Those in vehicles will be here soon, but we need to move. I don’t like the possibility of Evelyn being out there for as long as I’m thinking she has. She’s injured and has most likely suffered through at least one freezing night out in these woods.”

His words are rushed and frantic, making my own anxiety and fears fucking skyrocket. Everything he’s saying is the conclusion I was already coming to but hearing it out loud has my chest heaving and my throat closing up.

*Too slow, too slow, too slow.*

The red flag surges in my mind once again. My toes feel cramped in my shoes, my thighs are starting to sweat in my jeans, and my muscles are spasming with the need to do something—anything.

“We are coming,” Amiri states for all of us, clearly the most put together right now.

“I know.” Brown nods in agreement with Dominic. “There will be others searching the woods with us in under ten minutes. You will not draw your weapon, and you will stay close to us. Understood?”

“Yes.”

The lie is easy. If I find Kyle or my girl before they do, I’m fucking gone. I will not be bound by this agreement when the promises we made to Eve have settled into our souls. A one-

word answer does not compete with the life of love and protection we vowed to give her.

The look in the detectives' eyes says that they know...they know our words only mean so much when our hearts are crying out for the piece that's missing. And they understand enough not to push us anymore or demand our compliance. It's futile.

What cracks my heart even more is when Smith comes to me and gives me a slap on the shoulder, his eyes are vast pools of protectiveness and pride. He gives each of us our own forms of affection before he takes the first steps away from the newest crime scene. Away from us and into the woods that Eve is lost in.

Hope springs in my chest while simultaneously recoiling in fear...*too slow*.



# Chapter 12

## **Nolan**

Pure, unadulterated dread mixed with hope. The havoc these mixed emotions are wreaking on my system makes me want to keel over and sleep away the nightmare that has become my fucking life.

I am ashamed to admit that my foot hesitates to take the first step past the barrier of the clearing. I'm so scared of what I might find that it's debilitating enough to have me second-guessing finding the love of my life—Eve, who is the one suffering and scared.

*Pathetic. I'm a fucking disgrace.*

I hate the way my chin wobbles when I look back at the horrific scene by the car. Her blood was spattered everywhere. I just...what the fuck? The ache in my chest has been constant this past week...I don't know how much longer I can live with this guilt and sorrow dragging down my weak body.

A nudge on my waist draws my attention to Ryan on my other side. The concern is evident in the way his eyes moisten whenever he looks at me. Instead of lingering on how much pain I'm causing him, I shove my glasses up my nose and finally walk into the woods.

Ry takes up the rear, with Amiri in front of me and Kor leading us behind the detectives. I barely notice the sweat dripping down the back of my neck or how twigs yank on my curls. My focus is solely on the surrounding forestry, hoping to catch a glimpse of my raven-haired beauty.

*Nothing.*

Nothing for so long that I can't help but cringe at the way my shirt sticks to my chest and the sun trying to burn me alive. I'm trying to calculate how long we've been hiking, judging by the sun's placement directly above us, when a hushed yell at the front of the line has my heartbeat doubling.

Gulping back another bottle of water, I lean onto my tiptoes, trying to catch a glimpse of what they might have found. We've been walking in a single file line, hoping to keep noise to a minimum and follow the thin trail that has been pre-stomped. Now all I want to do is bolt around everyone and see for myself.

*Fuck it.*

Stepping my right foot off the path, I collide with a hard body. Ryan must have had the same idea; unfortunately for him, though, I managed to check him right to the ground.

"Ow, fuck!"

Thankfully his yell is whispered, but the giggle that slips out of me isn't. He pops his head up over a particularly gnarly bush and gives me the evil eye until he sees the humor dancing in mine.

"The hell, guys?" Brown hisses under her breath.

“Sorry,” I mouth back to her before smirking down at my boyfriend and offering him a hand up.

His lips turn down in a mock pout while a scrape on his cheek wells up with blood. “Where’s my apology?”

“Sorry, babe.” I give him a gentle kiss on the lips and wipe off some of the twigs stuck to him. I may linger on his ass for a moment longer than I should, but remembering his scratch, I pull a tissue from his backpack and dab it dry.

“S’okay.” He gives me a soft smile that makes my heart flutter with happiness.

“Ry, Nolan, come take a look at this.” Korren’s voice snaps us out of our moment.

The group is now huddled a few feet away from us. Bustling over, I look down at what they found. To the right of their semi-circle is a bunch of broken brush and tree limbs that trail from where we are to a tree a few meters away. The path is no longer straight and calm; now it’s jagged and looks like an animal ran through that way.

My brows furrow, the idea that we have just been following animal tracks makes my stomach roil at the wasted time. That is until I see droplets of blood streaked across another root.

“Son of a bitch,” Korren grits out through pursed lips. The idea of Eve spilling more blood is an awful fucking reality.

“Is this her?” Amiri asks no one in particular.

“I think so. It’s the only lead we have.” With that, Smith makes his way over to the tree before crouching down next to it. The look he gives us isn’t one that gives me happy vibes... no he dreads whatever news he’s about to break. “I think she

stayed here for a bit; there's another pool of blood that suggests she might have taken a rest."

*More blood. More fucking blood.*

My self-loathing and depression kick into rage the closer I get to the damn tree. I notice the blood and ripped bark at my stomach height and the bloody sand beneath it.

Whatever happened, she hurt herself even more...but she still got up. She kept fighting. Just how long ago, though?

"This way," Brown's gentle tone raises my hackles, but Amiri's touch on my arm has me containing my anger.

I drown out the sounds of Dominic on his walkie-talkie and take in the damaged forest branching off the left side of the tree. Honestly, it's been a bit too easy to follow her trail for my liking; I can only hope Kyle chased after her in the dark. Thankfully, had we not picked up on her trail initially, this one wouldn't even look like a path to us.

Except...this is the path of an injured woman running for her fucking life.

"Keep moving," Smith rushes past us, his tone clipped and urgent.

Bile rushes up...maybe I should have been listening in on his conversation with the other teams.

This time instead of being quiet and slow, we are basically fucking running single file. My arms and legs are buzzing with adrenaline and terror; my head feels woozy, like it's moving in slow motion.

Slamming into the back of Korren's hulking body was not how I expected to be snapped out of my panic. My glasses stabbing the bridge of my sweaty nose serves me right for zoning out.

"Dude." Ko turns around to steady me. "You good?"

Blinking a few times, I nod. "I'm fine. What's going on?"

"I don't know. First, we are running like snakes are nipping at our heels, then I'm being jostled about by you." He shoves me a little and turns back to the front of our group.

Dismissing the small path, we converge at the stopping point marked by two pale as fuck detectives.

"What?" I snap. I'm about fed up with running around with no real fucking answers.

Just as they step aside to show off the dirty scrap of black fabric, the most chilling voice rings out through the forest.

There's no chance for me to vomit all over the evidence of Eve's dress that we just found because the detectives immediately launch their asses up and take off toward the sound of Kyle's voice.

Still in shock, I stay still and look down again. Fingering the nasty fabric, my eyes catch on the continued trail veering off from the bush that ripped her dress. They ran off in the opposite fucking direction.

Ignoring the hushed argument around me from the guys, I throw myself down the path, stumbling over my feet, knowing that I am so fucking close to Evelyn. I have to find her. Kyle is out there looking for her, and the detectives dipped out to capture him instead of getting Eve to safety.

Fuck them. I am all she needs. I will help her. I will save her; I have to. She has to be okay because I can't fathom a world where we were too slow to get to her in time. I tune out the yells of my brothers and Ryan, my focus solely on reaching the end of the track Eve carved out.

I'm so focused on reaching her that the arms looping around my legs don't register until my breath wooshes out of me and my elbows scrape on the unruly ground.

"What the fuck!" My anger is palpable; so thick in the air at the betrayal of someone stopping me.

So close, I know it. I can feel it in my racing heart, my tingling fingers, and my singing soul. My best friend is so close, yet Korren decided to tackle me to the ground instead of helping me fucking get to her.

Trying to shove myself up, I'm stopped by his body weight settling on me. "Get off!"

"No. Look. You almost ran off a fucking cliff, Nolan." His voice is harder than steel. He's pissed and...scared.

It takes a beat for his words to register in my fear-addled brain, but when they do, my head whips up, nearly taking out his nose behind me. Just like he said, I almost threw myself off a damn cliff because I wasn't paying attention.

Holy fucking shit. The sounds of pebbles tumbling over the edge is an eerie background noise to my near death.

A few feet in front of me is the rocky edge with the tops of more desert trees as a backdrop. The forest is far more vast than I thought, and the cliff is taller than I ever could have imagined.

How will we ever find her?



## **Ryan**

Mother fucking, son of a...“Nolan!”

Oh my hell, he almost launched his ass right off a damn cliff. Skidding to a stop next to his stunned form sprawled out on the sand, I nudge Korren off his back. My nod of appreciation for saving my boyfriend’s life isn’t enough right now, but I can barely form words at how terrifying it was watching as he sprinted for the edge with no sign of hearing us calling out to him.

I was too slow to reach him...this is why family is stronger together. Fuck. I almost lost him. Dropping to my knees next to his shaking form, I bring my shaking hands up to his face and force his gaze on mine.

“Nol,” I say his name on an exhale of relief. I almost lost him too. His wide eyes meet mine before I pick him up and throw his legs over mine so he straddles me. “Damnit, you scared me, Nolan.” I can’t help the quiver in my voice; anxiety and horror still coursing through my body. His arms shudder in time with my shoulders when he wraps them around me.

“I’m sorry.” The tickle of his breath skittering across my neck and the press of his warm body against mine settles some of my frayed nerves.

“Don’t do that ever again, do you hear me?” He nods, but it’s not enough. “Do you hear me?” I say a bit louder, not

allowing this to slide.

“I won’t do that again. I’m sorry, I just-”

His voice cuts off with a soft whimper, “I know, baby. I know.”

The pitter-pattering of my heart slows the longer I have him safely in my arms. Gunfire off in the distance has us jerking slightly and pulling away. Well, shit, I hope they caught him, or killed him. I’d rather have the honors myself, though. That dipshit deserves a slow and painful fucking death.

*Eve.*

I see the same moment Nolan comes to the same realization; we are wasting time sitting here. Helping a dusty Nol to his feet, I give him a firm kiss on the lips that serves to remind me he is still here and safe.

Amiri coughs behind us from where he’s standing with his brother, keeping watch. Breaking our embrace, I turn to them, ready to continue our own search since the detectives ran off at the first opportunity to catch Kyle.

A helicopter flying over the forest draws my attention as it glides around in the distance. Damn, I didn’t realize Smith had called that in. I suppose when we found the car, it was all hands-on deck. Things have been moving really fucking fast since then...too fast in Nolan’s case.

Shaking out my jittery hands, I take a deep breath hoping to center myself so we can continue our search. “What now?”

Amiri sighs and hangs his head, the stress a heavy weight on his broad shoulders. Glancing at Nolan beside me, I notice him frowning off into the woods he bolted out of. And



Korren...his narrowed gaze is locked onto the cliff's edge like it's a puzzle to solve.

Glancing behind me, I don't know what has his attention like that. Maybe he's just thinking. Still, nobody responds.

"Guys?"

Mir snaps out of whatever thought he was lost in. "I don't know. Maybe find where her trail goes from here. Smith and his partner are busy with Kyle, so it's up to us." A touch of bitterness lines his words. I can't blame him, though, they really did fucking ditch us and her trail.

"Yeah, okay," Nolan murmurs while pushing his damp curls out of his face and cleaning up his lenses.

Nobody moves. Frowning at all of them, I make my way back to where we popped out and onto the cliffside. Seeing the path clear as day after we all trampled over her footsteps, I have no idea where she would have gone from here. Making my way across the tree line, I don't see the start of a new trail anywhere.

On my short walk back, my eyes catch on Korren walking toward the edge. His steps are hesitant and slow; almost like he's in a trance. My heart speeds up at the image of this grown, scary man, trembling while he reluctantly moves to the drop-off.

"What are you doing?" Amiri picks up on the same eerie scene in front of him, his own voice wavering slightly. Only the scuff of Kor's shoes can be heard between the four of us. "Korren!" Mir barks, unable to hold on to his impatience and concern any longer.

He stops a few paces away from the edge but doesn't turn around when he responds, his voice like gravel, "If she ran through there like Nolan, without someone to stop her, she would have-"

*No.*

"No. She would have seen it. Ryan, tell him." Nolan looks at me with wide pleading eyes, intent on ripping my soul out, stomping on it, and shredding it to ribbons.

I can't tell him. I can't because...a sob strangles the air from my throat...because he's right. Korren's right. Had she been running for her life, out of her mind with fear, she wouldn't have noticed the cliff a few yards off the tree line until it was too late.

"Ryan, tell him he's wrong!" Nol has tears running down his cheeks as he fucking begs me to set his worries at peace.

I say nothing, too lost in the swirling inferno of guilt and horror. Because...Korren is right. Eve might be at the bottom of this cliff.

*Dead.*

## Chapter 13

### **Evelyn**

*“Evie!”*

*Smirking at the ball of energy flying down the banister, I pop another grape in my mouth. Ryan bounds up to me in a way that begs for a puppy joke, but I’ll be nice and wait to see what has him so worked up first.*

*Sucking in deep breaths, his chest flexes beneath his shirt... just a little more, maybe it will rip. The fluid leaking from my mouth is definitely grape juice, not drool. I raise an eyebrow at him when he doubles over, panting for air.*

*“Dude, spit it out. Like a good boy.” Amiri tacks the dog joke on at the end, causing me to choke on the grape. Taking a sip of water, I whack him in the arm and attempt a stern glare. He smirks at me, effectively making me lose my battle at faking disappointment.*

*“Hush, you.” I turn back to Ryan, who has his fist over his heart like Mir physically hurt him with the words. “What’s going on, Ry?” I smile at him, hoping to divert his attention from their inevitable play fight.*

*It works. He shoots me a blinding smile and sweeps in to give me a gentle kiss with his hands wrapped around my waist. I melt into his touch, enjoying the way his energy encompasses me.*

*“Hi,” he whispers in my ear before leaning back. “I was thinking after the trials in a few days, we could go shopping for Christmas decorations!”*

*Just like that, my tummy swoops and jitters with excitement and warmth. I hadn’t thought much about the upcoming holiday, especially with the shit show that was Thanksgiving. Yet, I’m finding myself absolutely ecstatic and emotional at the prospect of celebrating with my family.*

*So many years I spent imagining what it would be like to spend Christmas with my loved ones. Waking up early with restless excitement, eating a warm breakfast, drinking coffee by the fire, wrapped in a blanket surrounded by love and happiness.*

*“I would love that, Ry,” I can’t help how quiet my voice sounds, nor can I control the tears building behind my eyes.*

*His face falls. “Why are you crying, baby?” A watery giggle escapes when his eyes flare with panic. Amiri steps closer, his own anxiety flooding the kitchen.*

*I wave my hand in front of my face before it lands on his scruffy cheek. “Because I am so happy and-” I hiccup, unable to control the emotion rolling through me. “I dreamed of the day I would finally be able to spend Christmas with my family again. Now I have all of you, and I f-forgot how much I hoped this day would come.”*

*“Oh, Angel,” Mir murmurs before they surround me with their arms and gratefulness. My watery eyes tip skyward, and I send Momma a silent “I love you” knowing she is watching over me right now. I can practically feel her support and joy settling over us in our group hug.*

*I fought for so long...now I finally get to have the Christmas I always hoped for. A small smile graces my lips while I snuggle my face into Ryan’s neck, soaking up their love for a little bit longer.*

# Chapter 14

## **Amiri**

How I wish I could tell my brother that he's wrong. I wish I could step over to Nolan, wrap my arms around him, and tell him that it's not true. That Eve did not fall off the cliff that, just minutes ago, he almost threw himself over as well.

I wish so fucking badly I could take away the devastation on Ryan's face, the terror on Nol's, and the blank paleness of Korren's. I wish I could conjure up even a touch of doubt...but the facts and likelihood are battering around in my brain, telling me that my brother is right.

I want to take all my suffering and fear, tell it to go to hell, and have Eve come up behind me and tell us she's okay. That she did, in fact, spot the cliff before it was too late. None of that happens. Instead, we all just stand here, fighting to come up with any amount of disbelief.

"Do you think she's-" Ryan can't finish the question we are all wondering. Is she dead? Is she down there? Will we be able to see her if we look over the edge?

Korren takes a step, making my aching heart skip a beat in response. Another step, just a couple more until, he can look

down. At his second to last step, I lurch forward in an attempt to stop him from seeing what we are all afraid of.

“Kor, stop!” Ryan and Nolan rush forward on my heels, the urgency in my voice urging them into action.

*Too late. Too slow.*

The strangled roar that releases from his scratchy throat is one that will haunt my dreams. The sound his knees make as they crash into the ground will stick with me for the rest of my life.

The next thing I know, he’s up and shoving me around, trying to get inside my backpack. He snarls unintelligent words, and my pleas for an explanation go unheard. Ryan and Nol are in my eyesight, their gazes flicking from me to Kor and back to the cliff. Their faces are pale, their feet hesitating to move and see for themselves. Their bodies’ self-preservation is on high alert to keep them from further trauma.

Korren’s voice has me jumping, his words sounding garbled from the blood pounding in my ears. The words “helicopter,” “Eve,” and “now” are the only ones I can make out in my current state.

The clatter of the walkie-talkie being thrown at my feet finally brings me back to the present. It’s Korren rushing to sit at the edge and throwing his legs down that truly snaps me out of my frozen state.

“What the fuck!” Rushing forward, I reach for his shoulder to stop him, but my plan fizzles out and bursts into flames of pure agony.

Below us, about eight feet down, is Eve. Her crumpled form lays still on a rock ledge protruding from the cliff face. The pain of my knees slamming to the ground doesn't register as I take in the way her dark hair is fanned out around her, some strands hanging over the edge. Her skin is purple and blue along her legs and arms. The dress she wore last week is ripped and dirty, part of her butt burning in the harsh sun.

Her bound hands are cradled under her head, whether they broke the hit to her skull or she curled up that way after she landed...I don't know. Dried blood coats her abused body, one leg clearly broken.

I tune out the sounds of Nolan's screams and Ryan's sobs as my brain tries to compute that Eve is the woman lying broken and unmoving below us. My Eve. Our Evie.

My Angel.

*She's not moving. She's not fucking moving!*

The horrific realization that we might be too late has me shifting my legs over the side, determination and adrenaline riding me hard as I place my feet and hands in the same spots Korren did before me.

Looking between my knees, relief sparks through the raging dread, seeing that he made it down safely and is tending to Eve. Focusing back on my task, trying not to injure myself, I descend the jagged wall. The second my feet touch the platform, I immediately swing around and kneel next to my battered girl.

I swear my whole body goes numb while I watch Kor try to find a pulse in her neck. I gently tug her dress down to give



her some sense of privacy, trying to do something useful without hurting her.

Loud whirling from the helicopter gets louder the closer it gets to us, but my focus is solely on my brother, who's struggling to find any sign of life.

"Stop!" Smith's roar reaches my ears, drawing my attention skyward. Seeing him holding back the other two sets my mind at ease. They have someone there with them to keep them from following us down. The rock is too small to fit more of us, and someone needs to come down from the helicopter to load her up.

"Mir, I-I can't find a pulse!"

Swinging my head to him, I try to avoid focusing on the sheer desolation and alarm plastered to his features. My stomach drops while my heart shatters...he can't find a pulse.

*Think, think, THINK!*

My burning eyes latch onto her bound hands, peeking out from beneath her head. Leaning over, I, as gently as possible, take her dainty wrist between my fingers and push down, praying to anything fucking listening, that her heart is still fucking beating.

*Beat, damn you! Come on, Eve. Fight! We are here now! Stay with me...come back to me...FIGHT!*

"Is-is she..." My brother's voice wavers, causing my focus to deviate for a moment.

"I-"

*Was that a thump I just felt against my thumb?*

“Come on, Eve, do it again. Please,” my plea breaks as I stare at her bruised face. Korren must have swooped her hair away, giving us a better view in case she opened her golden eyes.

*Thump.*

“Again!” I urge her above the roaring wind of the helicopter that now hovers above us.

Thump.

“She’s alive. It’s weak and inconsistent, but she’s alive!” I holler to Korren, his shoulder slumping at the news. Sobs begin to rack his body as his hands flutter around her, not knowing if he should touch her.

I don’t notice the two men landing behind us with a gurney until they yell at us to move. We stand reluctantly and press ourselves against the rock wall. One turns around and forces us into vests, hooks a wire onto multiple straps, and ushers us to the ladder they dropped down.

He must notice our hesitation to leave Eve because he gives us a gentle nudge. “We’ve got her. We have to strap her in and need space. She will be up in a minute, I promise.” With that parting yell, he turns, dismissing us.

Locking eyes with my brother, the tremble of his chin and the vulnerability in his eyes is like a punch in the gut. My strong brother needs me to take care of him now. The time for my own emotions will have to come later; I have a family that needs me to take the lead and get them to safety.

Which won’t happen, until we leave Eve on this ledge with two unknown rescue officers currently working on rearranging

her limbs in the most gentle way they possibly can.

In order for my family to be whole again, we need to walk away from her while she's in her most vulnerable and broken state, barely hanging on to survival.

So I do...I decide to usher Korren up the ladder and take one final glance down at the woman who stole my heart a long time ago. I send her a silent promise that I will see her up there in a few minutes.

*Please, keep beating.*



## **Ryan**

“Let me go!”

Nolan's wail pierces my ears, causing my emotions to go haywire and my body to double over at the complete and utter heartbreak radiating on top of this goddamn cliff.

“Stop!” Smith's bark has me cringing while I recoil from Brown's gentle touch on my back.

“You can't go down; there's no room.” He tries to reason with Nol, but he's completely lost to the trauma of seeing our beautiful girl so broken and immobile.

The cries, threats, and pleas keep coming, but Dom never budes.

“Look! Just fucking look!” His grip on Nolan's jaw is firm as he forces his gaze to the scene below us. Our brothers are climbing a ladder to the large rescue chopper, and Eve's form

is being gently tucked into the gurney. “We can’t go down there, and I’m not letting you up the next fucking ladder that’s about to drop down if you can’t control yourself!”

Nolan stops moving completely, slowly turning and squaring up to the lead detective. My pulse thunders at the rage flicking through his eyes.

“Where is he?” His voice is deathly calm, sending chills down my shaking spine.

“We lost him-”

“WHAT?” Nolan roars and lunges at him. Meanwhile, I just stand there, completely fucking useless.

I can’t help Nol right now...I can’t get the image of Eve out of my head...her body twisted at odd angles. Her skin color screamed fucking agony...and I couldn’t even go down there to tell her I’m here now.

“We got Korren’s call; we left others to track him.”

Just as Nolan is about to completely attack Smith, I take a dazed step forward and murmur his name, “Noly...” My voice cracks, and my chin wobbles when his eyes swing to mine.

I just...I can’t be strong anymore. I’ve put up a good front this past week and did my duty as the family jokester and Nolan’s rock...but I just can’t. It hurts; everything hurts so much I feel like my chest is caving open, and every time I blink, all I see is my girl, lying there bruised and still. So still.

“Ryan?” Nolan’s tone is caked in concern for me, the shock of seeing me break apart causing him confusion and panic.

I have my own issues and rocky past, but this...I can't be the happy one who focuses on other people's emotions because my own is trying to suffocate me. I feel like I could implode at any moment.

I'm not sure when the tears started, but the blurry form of Nolan rushing over to me has me collapsing into his arms. Anger forgotten; he's here for me now. Now I can be weak in the arms of my love. There's no room for embarrassment or shame; turmoil and guilt rage through me like a storm I don't know if I can weather.

"Let's go!"

I feel, rather than see, Nolan lifts his head away from me while still keeping me tucked into his chest. I don't have the energy to comprehend or attempt to lift my head.

"I got you, Ry. Kor and Amiri are with her now, headed to the nearest hospital. There's a helicopter here to take us there too." His scratchy voice in my ear is comforting.

*Wait, she's gone?* I snap my head up to see that the rescue team that came for Eve is off in the distance now, leaving an additional one hovering above the cliff for us. The noise of ours must have canceled out the sound of the other one leaving.

*Is she okay? Is she alive...will she make it?*

"Ryan?" The touch of his thumb wiping away the tears still escaping from my burning eyes causes me to let loose a choked sob, unable to contain the torment clogging my throat.

I give him a nod of confirmation that I heard him and am ready to go. Ready for anything else? Fuck no.

My goddess just flew away from me, taking my happiness and hope right along with her. I will brave whatever is thrown at me, simply for a chance to hold her...even if it's for one last time.

# Chapter 15

## **Korren**

*“Koko?”*

*My eyes widen as the melodic voice behind me sends shivers through my body. It can't be. I keep my eyes trained on the sunset about to drop below the tree line of our property.*

*“K-Korren?”*

*I focus on the dancing flames of the firepit instead of turning to the voice I never expected to hear again. She's not real. Evelyn has been dead for years. The reminder of losing her makes my fists clench.*

*“Korren, why won't you look at me?” Her words are hushed and wobbly.*

*Not fucking real.*

*I saw the light fade from her eyes the day we found her on that ledge. She's gone, and never coming back because we were too late. Too slow.*

*A sniffle behind me makes me flinch, the sound shredding my insides to pieces. The sounds I'm sure she made the entire time we were looking for her...crying and alone. Unclasping*

*my fist, I pinch the bridge of my nose, hoping it will make the migraine-induced hallucinations go away.*

*“I-I thought you loved me.”*

*Her broken plea has me flying out of my chair and turning faster than I can comprehend. And there she is. Just how I remembered her all those years ago...long black hair that shines in the sun, tiny thin frame, pointy nose, scarred lips... but her eyes, they are soaked in tears.*

*“Eve?” I croak. This isn’t real; she is gone. Dead. I’m just sleeping or super drunk.*

*“Why didn’t you come for me?” Her dainty arms are wrapped around her waist, making me ache to replace them with my own.*

*Her words finally register. “What?” I’m basically fucking speechless, but that’s the least of my worries because...I’m going crazy. This. Isn’t. Real.*

*“I-Why didn’t you save me? I thought you would protect me.”*

*And just like that, everything inside me shatters because she’s right. I should have saved her...I told her I would protect her. I didn’t.*

*“Eve...” There’s nothing I can say. I failed, and the love of my life paid the price. She is dead because of me.*

*“He said you weren’t coming for me, b-but I never gave up hope.” Her chin dips to her chest, but what has me stepping forward is the way her cheeks started her pale and how the skin around her eyes began to purple before I lost sight of them.*



*“Are you really here?” Each word out of my mouth feels like sandpaper. This makes no sense. She’s here and talking to me...but what she’s talking about makes this all a contradiction.*

*“I-I fell. I couldn’t catch myself that time, and n-nobody was there to help me.” Still not looking at me, she takes a step back, making my anxiety fucking grow. I don’t care if this isn’t real; hearing her...seeing her is all I have ever wanted.*

*She can’t leave me again!*

*“I thought you loved me.” Just like the footage we watched of her in that alleyway from when Kyle kidnapped her, she steps back on the leg she broke when she fell from the cliff.*

*Lurching forward, I go to catch her before she can hit the ground, but I’m too slow to break the fall. Leg snapping, her body crumples without a sound of pain from her parted lips. Making it to her side, I can’t help the horrified gasp that escapes me at her glassy eyes and bruised body beneath me... just like the day she died.*

*“Eve? Eve! Come back to me! COME BACK TO ME RIGHT FUCKING NOW!” Gagging on a sob, I push past the tremors and trauma beating me from the inside. “EVE! Baby, please, I need you. PLEASE!”*

*“Korren!” The shock in Nolan’s voice when I throw myself out of the chair and onto the ground is background noise to the thundering of my heartbeat.*

*“Eve,” my cry is a broken whisper as I double over on my knees. A touch to my back makes me flinch, but the sound of*

my brother's voice makes me lift my head.

“Hey, it's just me. You were having a nightmare.”

A nightmare? Shaking my head, I try to clear out some of the fog confusing my mind. Taking a look around me, I find a row of crappy hospital chairs and white walls surrounding us. Below me is white tile, and the smell that can only be found in hospitals tingles my nose.

Realizing where I am, I ignore the stares of the random people around us and look at my brother. Dirty and tired, Miri crouches in front of me, his dark skin wrinkled from frowning.

“Fuck,” I mumble, pushing myself to my feet. “How long was I asleep for?” I avoid eye contact with him, still shaken by the dream.

“About forty-five minutes,” Ryan states methodically, all traces of emotion leached from his ashen face. Shooting a look at Nolan, I see he is already looking at Ry, with concern etched into his features.

I swallow hard. “Any updates?”

“No,” the one-word answer comes from the one who usually cheers us up and comforts our anxieties.

We landed hours ago on the emergency rooftop of the hospital, and there are still no fucking updates.

Before my brother and I could hop out of the helicopter, Eve was already being rushed away into surgery. The fear and anguish at losing sight of her had me attempting to follow, but Amiri held me tight and wouldn't let me go until I calmed down.

The roar that came out of me when the doors closed behind her gurney almost brought the sky crashing down. It was like everything inside me protested, my heart tried ripping itself from my chest, my mind absolutely crumbled, while my body fought its damndest to protect her.

I don't know how Amiri has been able to stay so strong, but I couldn't be more grateful for him watching over us. He has forced food and water on us, sought out blankets, wet towels to wipe our nasty faces, and anything else we might have needed. I mean, shit, he managed to find us a couple of pillows to use out here.

“She's still in surgery.”

“What?” My raised voice doesn't faze Ryan; he just stares blankly ahead. “How the fuck is she still in surgery? It's been hours!” My chest pounds at the implications of her still in there.

“I don't know.”

Now his lack of emotion is starting to piss me off. “What the fuck, Ryan?” I ignore Amiri stepping forward and Nolan's murmur to calm down. “No, I will not calm down. He's just fucking sitting there all stoic and monotone while our woman is dying!”

That finally gets a fucking reaction out of him; he cringes at the idea of Eve dying, but it's quickly shut down, and he's back to absolutely nothing. How can he sit there acting like this isn't the epitome of hell?

“Kor-” I cut Nol off. “How do you sit there acting like nothing is wrong?” My volume rises with each word,

completely flabbergasted at his lack of emotion.

Still, he doesn't look at me. The rational side of my brain is screaming at me that I'm wrong and he's feeling just as much as we are. While the emotional side of me that feels completely helpless and broken wants to pull the horrendous emotions out of him just so I can feel less alone.

Amiri is so damn solid and hasn't shed a fucking tear since he ushered me up the ladder. Nolan's focus has been plastered on his boyfriend since they found us in the waiting room. And Ryan is completely blank.

My gut twinges, guilt already surfacing at attacking him, but this void of loneliness and despair has me grasping at anything that might give me a connection back to my family.

Nolan flies out of his chair at me and gets in my face; he can be a scary motherfucker when he gets angry. Nol in protective mode is even more terrifying. I'm aware I could kick his ass, but damn, does he pack a punch when he's defending himself or others. Past experiences have me taking a step back, knowing that I crossed a big enough line to have sweet Nolan squaring up to my tall, broad, tattooed form.

Shit. He follows me when I step back, not allowing me to get away with the crap I just pulled. His face is absolutely thunderous as he stares me down.

"You will not speak to any of us that way ever again," I admit that the way his voice turns to fucking gravel sends an ashamed shudder through me. He's fucking pissed. "How you have managed to forget that trauma is different for everyone is absolutely ridiculous. He saw her. He fucking broke. And this is what his broken looks like. Say one more fucking word to

him, and I will throw your ass out of this hospital faster than you can protest. Understood?”

The way he steps further into my space tells me that my nod was not good enough for him. “Say it or get the fuck out.”

“I understand; I’m sorry.” The words waver on my tongue, and my eyes burn at the shame firing its way through my body.

“Bullshit, you can apologize later.”

He steps away and sits by the frozen man in question. One tear tracks its way down Ryan’s cheek, causing immense pain to squeeze my chest. I turn and make my way out of the room, knowing I’m no longer welcome.



## **Evelyn**

*“You okay?”*

*“Ask me that one more time, Korren; I dare you.” I roll my eyes, annoyed with his overprotectiveness right now. I asked to go out to eat for dinner with all of them, but they keep shooting me looks like I’m about to fall apart. And maybe I will, but right now, I am just fine.*

*I mean, hell, I always go out with Mia and Josie; this just happens to be the first time I’m going out with the guys. I think they are far more comfortable keeping me wrapped up in the comfort of our home, even with my sperm donor and Brent not allowed parole.*

*“You are not allowed to tell me how good the food is,” Miri grumbles from the driver’s seat. His playful pout has some of the moodiness in the backseat dissipating; a giggle slips free.*

*“Eve, promise me that you will tell us if you want to leave, okay?”*

*I twist towards Korren, a scowl twisting my features, ready to tell him to back off before I get overwhelmed. I thought we all learned not to push me like this; we all learned about this trigger a few days ago at Thanksgiving.*

*The twisting of his hands in his lap makes me pause; my tough man is struggling. “I promise. I’m good right now, but please don’t push me; it’s making me super anxious.” His eyes flare in understanding, an apology on the tip of his tongue.*

*“I love this song!” With that, Ryan blasts the song You Need To Calm Down by Taylor Swift. I smirk as Nolan snorts next to me, his eyes glittering with happiness.*

*I don’t sing along with the man in the passenger seat, my lungs feeling a bit short of breath today; instead, I rest my head on my best friend’s shoulder and enjoy the sounds of their playfulness.*

*I think we were all relieved when I caused no issues or stress at dinner once we were seated at a corner booth. With my men surrounding me, I felt safe and content to enjoy the time out.*

*Holding onto Amiri’s hand as we walk to the SUV, I lose myself in his wide smile and rumbly laughter, completely at peace in his presence.*

*“Evelyn?”*

*Everything pauses. Amiri's head is tipped back in a laugh, unmoving. My eyes shoot to Ry, whose arms are wrapped around Nolan, frozen and speaking quietly in his ear. Korren, beside me, is staring at the ground with a small smirk on his face, foot midair. The world around me has literally come to a standstill at the sound of my mother's voice.*

*That voice...no, this doesn't make sense.*

*This isn't right. This isn't how this night ended.*

*That thought brings horrific clarity, I'm not actually here. This memory is just that...a memory.*

*"Eve, honey."*

*I refuse to look forward, the pain from realizing that this isn't real...that something so horrific is happening outside my mind, causing me to retreat. I have never been lucid in a dissociation memory...why is this different?*

*"Sweetheart, please look at me..." Momma's soft voice tugs at the loss I feel in my soul at losing her too soon.*

*I look up. I'm not sure what I was expecting, but it sure as fuck wasn't her looking the exact same as I remember. Nor did I think I'd find her crying with a look of pure sadness as she searches out my gaze. My tongue is stuck to the roof of my mouth, unable to get any words to form.*

*"I need you to listen to me, Evie." She takes a step forward just as a chill run through my body. I take a step back, uncertainty rattling through my bones. "Eve, no!" She yells just as I slip my hand from Amiri's loose grasp.*

*The effect is immediate; my body loses all palpability at the same time, ice shoots through my veins, and my eyes roll back*

*into my head.*

*My last thought before the memory shuts down is how nice it was to hear her voice, even if it wasn't real.*



# Chapter 16

## **Nolan**

Why haven't we heard anything? It's been fucking hours, and my family is crumbling under the uncertainty of what the hell is going on behind those damn doors. Ryan sits horrifyingly still and quiet next to me, Amiri sits with his head hanging on my other side.

I huff out an annoyed breath thinking about how Korren sulked his way out of the waiting room after I called him out on his bullshit. God, I can't fucking believe how he was talking to Ryan. We all know better than to assume trauma affects everyone the same. I'm not saying that it's not horrifying and devastating to see our golden boy shut down and lock himself away from us, but we can't fucking turn on each other.

God, it was literally the worst timing. Moments before Korren woke and started yelling, Ryan had just gotten off the phone with his mom.

*Peeking out of the corner of my eye, I watch Ryan retreat into himself. I nibble on the inside of my mouth until I rip too*

*deep, and blood coats my tastebuds. Cringing at the metallic taste, I almost miss Ry pulling his cell phone out of his pocket with a dead stare.*

*“Hello, Charlotte.” With no inflection in his tone, he greets his deadbeat mom. I observe him carefully, knowing how awful his mom was to him after his dad passed.*

*They were a happy family until James died of cancer when Ry was fourteen. Everything changed from what I know...his mom turned into an emotionally abusive alcoholic who never wanted anything to do with her son.*

*Photos of James show how identical he and his son were... the pain of losing her husband and being surrounded by his doppelganger every day made her snap—in turn, making a young Ryan fracture as well.*

*Boys, girls, tattoos, alcohol, piercings...thankfully, never drugs, though. Before he became my man, the boy broke at the loss of both his parents before the age of fifteen. I will forever be grateful to the brothers and their parents for that.*

*“Don’t use that tone with me, you little shit. I saw you on the news.” Even from my place next to him, I can make out the slur in her words as she shouts down the line. “I see you are friends with that drama queen everyone is so worried about.”*

*Blood fills my mouth again at the forceful bite I give my tongue. Ryan doesn’t take the bait like I would have. “Why are you calling, Charlotte?”*

*She only calls maybe once a year, and he picks up each time to tell her to go to hell when she asks for money.*

*“You owe me money; I need it.”*

*“I owe you nothing, Charlotte.” The continued use of her name serves to keep his guard up as a reminder that this woman is no longer family.*

*“RYA-”*

*The shrill screech of the woman who gave birth to my Ryan is cut off by his thumb hitting the end button.*

*Phone safely tucked back into his pocket, he goes back to staring blankly at the wall with no emotion in sight.*

Lost in my thoughts, I completely miss the person walking in from the set of doors we have been staring at forever.

“Is there a Mr. Kellar?” The man who calls out Amiri’s last name is tall and built, probably upper fifties if his greying hair is anything to go by.

I scramble out of my seat behind Mir, praying like hell that there will be good news. Out of the corner of my eye, I register Ryan standing stiffly and following our rushed movements to the doctor on the other side of the room.

“I’m Amiri Kellar,” his voice is firm, like he’s preparing himself. The man looks Ry and me over with a critical gaze, unsure if he should divulge information in front of people not vetted for. “They are my family, E-Eve’s family. Please tell us what’s going on.” The headache behind my eyes grows at the crack in Miri’s voice when he says her name...there’s just so much that keeps hurting.

“Alright, gentlemen. My name is Dr. Ellis, and I’m the lead surgeon for Ms. Miller.” He hasn’t even gotten to the hard part yet, but I still feel like I could throw up.

The sound of a door bursting open behind us draws my attention, only to find Korren rushing toward us with a hopeful look. “What’s going on?” He asks as soon as he takes his place beside me with wide eyes.

“This is my brother, Korren Kellar,” Amiri rushes to say before we can waste any more time with the doctor’s questions.

He nods. “Right, okay. Anyone else we should be waiting for?” We shake our heads. “Okay. We had some complications...” His concerned pause makes me want to lash the fuck out.

“What kind of complications?” Korren’s voice resembles a growl as he steps toward the surgeon.

“She flatlined for two minutes and forty-two seconds.”

“No,” I breathe like I can deny what the doctor is telling me.

“After considerable action, we have Ms. Miller stable, but she is in critical condition. She has a broken leg and an array of bruising and minor lacerations on most of her body.” I gulp, knowing that’s not all he has to say because there is no way Eve basically fucking died on his table from those injuries.

“Ms. Miller had internal bleeding and bruising from what we call blunt abdominal trauma, which is a direct blow to the abdomen without an open wound. Unfortunately, the bleeding took us a while to find as it seemed to be an older wound than the brain injury.”

“WHAT?” Ryan roars next to me, making me and the brothers jump in surprise. “The internal bleeding wasn’t from

the fall?”

“No. From what we can tell, Ms. Miller suffered neglect and assault. She is malnourished and extremely dehydrated. We can discern that the injury to her stomach was before the cliff. Most likely from either being shoved into something or a direct hit from a fist or foot.”

I’m going to be sick.

“We found the bleed coming from her spleen, which we had to remove; it was already damaged beyond what we could repair. Her kidneys, ribs, and liver are showing signs of extreme bruising as well, which we will need to monitor.”

Jesus, fucking Christ.

“The swelling on her brain is most likely from when she fell off the cliff. There is no bleeding, but as I said, both of these injuries are very serious to vital organs...Ms. Miller is in a coma.”

“What?” Amiri whispers, unable to control the emotions rolling off of him.

“I know this is hard to hear, but we are doing everything we can to keep her stable, but yes, Ms. Miller is in critical condition.”

“What does that mean? Is she not going to make it?” I about fucking shatter into fragments at Ryan’s defeated tone.

“It’s hard to say right now. I’m sorry I can’t tell you more. We aren’t sure when she may wake from the coma, but we are doing everything we can. She is being moved to the ICU. I’ll be back with more information shortly. Excuse me.”

With that, Dr. Ellis walks back the way he came, leaving us broken and devastated in his wake.



“Hi, Mom,” I can’t contain how my voice quivers.

“Oh, baby! Are you okay? How is Eve? How are the boys? We will be there soon!” I don’t have the energy to fight with her on this.

We are a few hours outside Bisbee, where Eve’s original doctor, Dr. Levine, is on call in case we need her experience with our girl. As much as I want to go home, Eve can’t be transferred while in this condition.

She’s still in the ICU and under a fuck ton of watchful eyes, but we haven’t been allowed to see her yet. My stomach spasms at her being in there all alone.

“Not good, Ma,” I murmur into my phone, ducking my head and leaning it against the cool wall outside the waiting room we have been in for what seems like years.

“We will get you guys a few hotel rooms before we get there, okay?”

“Okay.” She will do it no matter what I say...and I have nothing to say. Everything in me is crying out for the girl lying somewhere in this hospital, fighting for her life. Or at least I hope she’s fighting.

*Fuck. Eve, don’t give up on us now. I swear if you wake up and keep fighting this, we will move far away where the*

*memories and the people our city spawned can cause you no harm. Fight, my Little Phoenix...please.*

My inner praying to the woman we all worship is cut short by my mom's worried tone, "Nolan?"

"I'm here. It's-It's not good." I know I have to tell Mom and Dad, but it's so hard to be the one to break someone's heart and damage their hope. "Evie's...It's bad."

"It's okay, Son. Tell us, please," Dad's voice makes me stand just a bit taller while simultaneously cracking me open even more. The last they knew was when we found Eve and were rushing to the hospital. I've been avoiding their messages and calls all night.

"They had to remove her spleen. Something about abdominal assault and internal bleeding. She is bruised and cut up. She has swelling on the brain, and-" I hiccup, "other major organs are also bruised."

"So, what does this mean?" Dad's voice is still strong, but my mom's crying in the background makes me choke up even more.

I just want a hug. Ryan went back to his comatose state after the surgeon walked away. I want my mom and dad. I want someone to make this better.

"She's in a coma...they don't know if she's going to m-make it."

I break. Saying the words out loud makes it more of a reality than I ever wanted it to be. I drop the phone to the ground at the same time my ass hits the floor. I can hear my mom and dad yelling out for me, but I can't bring myself to

say anything else. I whip my glasses off and bury my face between my knees, sobs racking my body to the point of pain.

It's nowhere near as much as Eve has been through, yet I can barely handle it. Questions and fears start roaring in my head, each battling for the spotlight.

*Does she know she's safe? What if she doesn't make it? Did she hear Korren and Amiri while on the ledge with her? What if she never wakes up? I didn't try hard enough to find her. Did she give up hope? Did she see the cliff? Will I ever be able to hear her voice or see her eyes light up at the prospect of a new experience?*

I'm positively drowning in my own mind; the thought of reaching for the surface doesn't sound appealing, either.

"Nolan."

Korren's voice has me tilting my head back to stare into his glistening eyes. He crouches down in front of me and lays a hand on my knee.

I didn't notice him joining me outside of the waiting room, but I'm glad he found me before I completely lost myself in my mind.

*Is this how Eve feels when she zones out?*

Realizing I'm still not with him fully, he grabs my phone off the ground beside me and lifts it to his ear. I drown out whatever he says and just soak up his comforting and commanding presence.

"Nol." He's off the phone when I open my eyes to the sound of his voice. I nod to let him know I'm listening. "Dr.



Ellis said she can take visitors now, but just two at a time. We thought you should be the one to go, man.”

A tear drops off his chin after he extends the selfless offer, his own heart breaking in front of me at the assumption he won't get to see her.

“Will you come with me, please?”

He rears back, shocked at my question, probably thinking I would want Ryan to come with me. I don't think him seeing Eve first would be good for his psyche. I want to know what he might see before we can't take it back. Plus, I think Amiri will be good for Ry right now, not Korren's dominating presence.

Also...I need Kor; he's one of the greatest men I know and someone I trust implicitly. I need him...I need my brother because he was here to pick up the pieces when I needed him the most.

“Please.” He nods, shaking loose another tear. Maybe I can be what he needs to organize his broken parts, too, but the only thing that will make us whole is having Eve smiling at us with her eyes shining and contentment radiating from her aura.

He holds his hand out to help me, and I gratefully take it, knowing I am feeling a little shaky. I look down to see my phone shut down in his hands and trust that he calmed my parents enough for me not to worry about it.

Once I'm steady, I throw myself into his arms and take a little pride in the way I catch him off guard if his grunt is anything to go by. I wrap my arms around him before pulling away and placing my glasses back on my nose.

“I am so sorry for how I acted earlier,” he rumbles, making my eyes burn with more tears at the vulnerability he’s showing.

“I know. It’s not me you need to apologize to, though.”

He scrubs a hand through the greasy, dark strands of his hair. “I will apologize to Ry, too, I promise. I just-I felt so lonely and scared. You all seemed off in your own world and so controlled while I was falling apart.” Kor swallows hard enough for me to see.

“You are not alone, brother. I swear. We all have our own way of coping and showing our emotions, but I fucking promise we all feel like we are being ripped apart.” I can see in his eyes that he needs more from me, so I give it to him because he is family.

“I hurt so damn much, Korren. I haven’t been able to sleep without nightmares or eat without feeling nauseous, and I can’t stop my mind from running away from me. I have felt physically fucking ill for a week, and it’s not because I’m sick. I am completely and utterly fucking devastated. You aren’t ever alone, and I’m so sorry you have been feeling that way.”

He doesn’t utter a word; instead, he engulfs me in his arms with his scruff, scratching my forehead as he holds me tight. I think I hear a mumbled “thank you” before he releases me with a determination that lights a fire under my own ass.

Our girl needs us, and it’s time we see her.

Making our way to Eve’s room is a blur of white walls, white lab coats, and a whole fuck ton of Deja Vu. Stopped on the outside of her door, I look at Korren and take in his shaky

features. I wish I had words to comfort him, but I don't think anything can prepare us for what we are about to see.

I take the lead, seeing as my brother hesitates to go in. Gently opening the door, a gasp chokes the air out of me while my own saliva drowns me in horror.

My sweet girl is much worse than the last time I saw her in a hospital bed. Tubes are hooked up to her everywhere; her leg is in a thick cast above the blankets, as well as her scratched and bruised arms. The rest of her body is under the white blanket...but her face. It's calm, so calm it makes my stomach fucking sink. Because I would rather her be yelling and crying over whatever this is. Tubes stick out of her nose and mouth, golden eyes shut with her dark hair tickling her cheeks.

A garbled sound behind me startles me out of my pursuit. Chancing a glance at Kor, my vision blurs at the sight of tears tracking down his face and his hand covering his mouth. I don't expect him to move, so when he throws himself forward, I scramble away in shock.

His knees must be badly bruised after how many times I've seen him crash to the ground, but he pays the damage no mind as he clutches Eve's hand. On his knees before her, he shoves his face into the bed and wails.

My own tears track down my face as I take up the other side of the bed. Dragging a chair close to the bed, I grab one of her cold hands and use my other to run my fingers through her hair.

"Baby girl," I whisper, my voice broken, "we are here now. Please stay with me." I dip my own forehead to rest on her dainty hand.

The sound of my strong friend breaking apart over the woman we love has my own sobs demanding their way out of my chest. I hold onto her as hard as I dare while I beg. I don't beg a higher power...no. I beg this powerful force lying in front of me to keep her own damn heart beating.

This woman is everything we believe her to be. A goddess, an angel, a fighter, and a phoenix. If anyone can rise from the ashes one more time, it's Evelyn Faye Miller. So no, I don't pray to something to keep her alive. I ask my best friend, who has shown time and time again just how strong she really is. My hope lies with the woman lying in this hospital bed and nothing else.

*Come back to me.*

# Chapter 17

## **Amiri**

Walking out of Eve's hospital room, a shuddering breath leaves my lungs. I never saw her in the hospital the first time, so I had no idea just how fucking horrible it would be to see her lying there like that.

Glancing to my right, I notice everything that is wrong with Ryan. He won't eat; I don't know the last time he drank water. He barely blinks, his skin is white as a sheet, and his body has a slight tremble to it.

It reminds me of when Nolan's emotions strangle the life out of him, too. It's like the two of them swapped places... the give and take of their relationship is something to admire in this twisted situation.

It's like Ryan has completely shut down. I thought maybe when he saw Eve, he would snap back into any kind of emotion. Besides a small stumble when he walked in, he was still completely blank. The worst part was how dead his eyes looked while tears ran down his cheeks. His gaze never left her for the little bit we were allowed to visit.

My stomach twists, the image of Eve lying on the ledge and now her body hooked up to all those machines...it's too much. Just as a sob works its way up my throat, we enter the waiting room to find Mia and Dan there. I am losing control of my emotions because of who stands next to them; my mom and dad are here, too.

The gates of my tears and heart-wrenching pain that I've had on lockdown burst open. Now, as I throw myself into Mom's arms with a cry so loud it echoes around the room, I am stripped bare.

The ache in my chest intensifies; I'm fucking suffocating. Each tear that stains my mom's shirt is an apology and a promise to Eve.

*I will never let anything hurt you ever again. I'm sorry we took so long. Wake up, and I will do anything to make you happy. Just wake up!*

Subconsciously, I know she's only been here since this afternoon, and visiting hours just ended, but it feels like her eyes have been closed for years.

"Oh, honey," Mom murmurs into my chest. "It's okay; let it out; I got you." And I do. I don't know how long I stand there, crushing my mom to my chest, but I let everything out—my fears, my guilt, the pain...all the damn pain.

Once I can take in a full breath, I pull away, noticing the tears on her own face, too. I wipe them away, my thumbs large on her chocolate cheeks.

"How is she?" Mom scans my face, gripping my forearms.

“Not good, Mom. They-” My voice catches, “they don’t know i-if she will wake up.”

Her gasp brings fresh tears to my eyes; the reality of saying it out loud makes me want to keel over and never come back up again.

“Hey, son.” My dad’s rich voice breaks through the emotional torment momentarily.

“Dad,” I breathe and latch onto his taller form. The feeling of being smaller than him is welcome...I need someone to take care of me now.

“Don’t give up on her, do you hear me?” His murmur in my ear and firm arms around me have me relaxing and trusting in his guidance and support.

“Never.” It’s a vow I send to Eve as well, and I will never give up on you, Eve.



*“Where am I?”*

*Smiling, I turn to Evie, who just walked down the stairs. “Good morning, Angel.” Just as I step forward to give her a kiss, she takes a stumbling one away. “You okay?” I furrow my brows. Maybe she had a nightmare, although this development would be new.*

*“Wh-who are you? Where am I?” She’s way too fucking pale, and what the hell is she talking about?*

*“You’re funny, baby. Do that joke with Ryan when he walks in. Come eat.” I move to grab her hand, but she quickly snatches it away and backs toward the entryway. “Eve?”*

*Her frantic eyes dart around me and then behind her. “Who’s Eve?” The sinking feeling in my gut gets worse when I see the unshed tears glistening in her eyes. My anxiety makes me move closer to her again, thinking that this weird feeling will go away if I can just get my hands on her.*

*“Good morning, sleepyhead!”*

*Ryan’s voice behind her makes her jump so hard I swear I heard her teeth rattle. The scream that echoes in the hall makes Ry stop dead in his tracks.*

*“Please, let me go. I’ll never tell anyone about this. I swear!” Tears are running rampant down her sweaty cheeks and neck.*

*Where the fuck is Nolan?*

*Maybe seeing her best friend will snap her out of whatever this is. On second thought, Korren might even be better. As if I conjured them, they both come traipsing from the stairs. They stop once they spot us, eyes narrowing on Evie’s shaking form between Ry and me.*

*“What’s going on?” Korren growls, assessing the threat that we might be to our girl. It’s absolutely ludicrous, and I would never intentionally harm Eve. The tattooed knight prowls closer to me. With my body still turned towards the crying woman, I lift my hands, showing I mean peace and that whatever is going on, I am just as confused and scared.*

*“No, please!”*



*We all startle when she throws her hands above her face and throws herself to the ground, trying to protect as much of her body as possible. My breath catches at the sight of my beautiful girl curling in on herself in fear of us. My ears start to ring while my hands tremble and go numb at my side. She's afraid of us—the men who love her more than anything in the world.*

*Before I can snap out of my shock, Nolan is rushing forward and crouching beside her. My hearing comes back, but I can only hear Nol's voice. There is no crying, no screaming, or even a soft whimper.*

*“Eve!”*

*At his shout, I finally register what is happening in front of me. I take a step to the side and find that he has flipped her onto her back. She's not moving, nor is there a shine to her hair. Her skin is ashen, and her eyes...all the life has been sucked out of them just as the will to live is being sucked out of me. Her eyes are dead.*

*As my knees buckle, her golden eyes flare. “You didn't save me.” My body doubles over as her irises mimic the brightness of the sun. My throat turns scratchy; my retinas burn, making them feel like I'm melting from the inside out.*

*She's right; I couldn't -*

*“Amiri!”*

*Shooting upright in bed, I take gulping breaths, my throat feeling like I've been raging for hours. Before I can form the*

words, a bottle of water is thrust into my hands, the lid already cracked, allowing me to gulp it down greedily.

“You good?” The familiar grunted words of my brother help to soothe my frayed edges right now.

“Fine.”

“Nightmare?”

I squint when I look up at him, the sun framing his body beside my bed. The shades are wide open, allowing me to understand a bit more why that fucking dream ended like that.

Ignoring his question, I ask one of my own, “Was I screaming?” Because it sure fucking feels like it. It feels like I have about eight shredded chips lodged in my throat that won’t go away no matter how much I drink or swallow.

Korren’s face is unreadable. “No, but for the last hour, you have been snoring like you have fucking allergies.” I snort. “Time to get up, visiting hours start in about an hour, and I’m assuming you will make us all eat.”

After the hospital staff kicked us out last night, we followed our parents and Nolan’s parents to a nice hotel a few blocks away. Thankfully, they had double for my brother and me, and the two lovebirds got their own king.

This hospital is far more strict, keeping to their two-person visit policy and visiting hours...it makes me wish we were home. Dr. Levine wouldn’t kick us out because she understands just how much Eve needs love and support to heal.

My first wave of guilt for the day hits full force; Eve isn’t well enough to travel, and here I am, wishing we were back

home. I want to be around twenty-four-seven to ensure we have the latest updates, but most importantly, my angel is getting the care she needs. I scoff at myself, annoyed that I'm mad about sleeping in an amazing bed throughout the night while she is on her own, fighting just to open her goddamn eyes.

Breakfast consists of very few words in the hotel dining area. The eight of us all lost in our thoughts of Eve...Ryan has yet to eat even a bite of food. I shovel down as much as I can without puking; the need to be at my best for Eve is like fire under my skin.

I have to do better. Be better.

Hushed encouraging words from the parent's filter across the wooden table. I can't tell if they actually believe she will be okay or are just trying to put on a good front for us. Either way, it doesn't do much to quell this wretched anxiety twisting my insides.

The drive to the hospital is the same, quiet and subdued; none of us ready for what the day might bring. I want to reach out to my brothers, but I'm trapped in my own torment that bombarded my system when I saw my mom yesterday. My walls are firmly demolished, leaving me vulnerable and aching.

Dressed in clean clothes that Mia and Dan brought for all of us, we shuffle our way into the bustling hospital. Our shoulders are hunched inward in varying degrees of t-shirts and pants, a natural form of self-preservation.

I find myself in the ICU waiting room, not even remembering the walk here, too lost in my mindless musings

—anything to keep me from thinking about that God-awful dream last night.

Dan somehow manages to get an update without me noticing and comes back to tell us that the two of us can head in for a visit. Eve has made no progress; the night was rough on her and the staff. Complications and alarms had them rushing in each hour to stabilize her again. I'm too fucked in the head to really grasp what happened or what they did to help her.

“Amiri.”

I startle when Nolan touches my arm. Jesus, I'm really out of it. Scrubbing my hand down my face, I attempt to collect myself enough to process the day.

“You okay?” He keeps his voice low and soothing, clearly picking up on my out-of-character distress.

I huff, “No, I'm not okay.” How the hell could I be okay? Frustration settles into my bones, making me shift back and forth restlessly.

“Would you like to see her first?” I see no judgment or plea in his eyes to say no, but I still do. She doesn't need my chaotic energy right now. If I can't be one hundred percent there with her right now, then I don't deserve to take the first visit.

My throat works down a sob while I watch Nolan and Korren walk through the door to the ICU rooms after they each give me a hug. Casting my eyes around the room, I take note of my parents sitting by Ryan, shooting him worried looks. Training my gaze on him, I cringe a little at his run-

down appearance and dead eyes. I take the seat next to him and take hold of his cold hand in mine. His pale skin looks sickly wrapped in my dark palm; the difference in complexion is a frightening contrast.

I sigh, my eyes settling on Dan and Mia standing at the check-in desk, finally getting the information from someone other than a couple of emotional, broken bastards who can't even take care of themselves.

My head thunks back on the wall; the slight pain is deserved. A subtle squeeze of my hand has me zoning in on Ry's face, hoping like hell he's coming back to us. Nope. His face is still stony and passive, making me wonder if I just imagined the feel of comfort he offered.

Disappointment weighs heavy on my shoulders and eyelids when I lean my head back against the wall. The hushed crying and bustle of the hospital lull me into a restless sleep.



“Have I told you how much we miss you?”

I've been sitting at Eve's side for the past fifteen minutes, mindlessly talking to her. They say that she might be able to hear our voices, which could help her wake up faster if she feels our love and support.

Ryan has yet to say a word, though. His head is face first in the bed beside her hip while he holds her hand between his. He looks like he's praying...I just wish he would talk to her too.

She needs all of us. His sniffles join the sound of the heart monitor.

“We miss your smiles and the sass you enjoy throwing at Nolan. Ry can’t keep him in check on his own, you know?”

I hope the mention of his name will coax him into saying something, but I’m met with silence. Maybe it will be enough for Eve to just hear his name and feel him beside her. She looks the same as yesterday, so many tubes and machines keeping her in the land of the living.

I can’t help but wonder if her mind is blank right now or if she’s reliving our memories in there. Or if she’s remembering all of the trauma she has suffered through. Fuck. She may be strong and alive, but my girl has absolutely suffered. Her body doesn’t look like hers; the sponge bath yesterday did not clean off all the muck and grime from the past week.

I so badly want to run her a bath, wrap her in my arms, and brush out her hair while she enjoys the bubbles and heat of the tub. My hand clenches on her wrists, my sorrow building again.

“Evie-”

Before I can continue my rambling, an extra beep on the machine next to me has my own heart straining in my chest. Ry doesn’t move, even when the next beep comes quicker. What’s going on? Is she waking up?

“Eve? Are you there?”

Ryan’s head shoots up at that right before all hell breaks loose. Those extra beeps of her heartbeat become frantic while her body stays still.

This isn't right.

I shoot out of my chair at the same time, Ry dips down and grips her face.

“Evelyn!” His roar teeters on a soul-wrenching beg.

My stomach bottoms out, hands hovering above her, not sure how to help or where to touch her. With her heart rate increasing and her body lying broken in front of me, I have no idea where to touch without making this worse.

Before I can make a decision and clear my mind of the sheer panic invading my senses, the doors are thrown open, and shouts permeate the air. I hover above my girl, wide-eyed, as a team of nurses and doctors burst through the room.

Ryan's sobs and pleas are the loudest, making my chest crack open in agony and horror. A set of arms yank me from the room, and I do nothing to fight them, my entire body and mind on lockdown.

On the other hand, Ry is being wrestled away as he fights and screams for Eve to wake up. Between the bodies crowding the room and my brothers flailing, I catch one last look at my Angel's face.

That's when the rapid beeping of her machine ceases.

That's when my own heart stops right along with hers. Everything dies in that moment with Eve. Nothing else matters.

Evelyn has flatlined.

# Chapter 18

## Ryan

*Wake up, please. I can't do this without you. Your hands are so cold, baby. I feel too warm next to you...take all the heat you want. Fuck, you can have anything; just please come back to me.*

*They are worried about me, you know? I don't know how to do this. Seeing you, like...that...broke me. I don't think I will ever be the same.*

This is the only way I can talk to Eve right now. I feel like everything inside of me has shut down; nothing is online except for the pits of hell, burning my heart, mind, and soul. Amiri's murmuring is background noise to my own communication with Eve in my mind. I have to hope she can hear me because this is all I have. It feels like my own body is in a coma right along with her, unable to reach the surface.

*If you go, take me with you. Nolan will be better off without me at this rate...I don't think I can survive this life without you in it.*

“Eve? Are you there?”



My head shoots up at the sudden change in Miri's tone; he now sounds hopeful and weary. It's instant. The distant sounds of the beeping now plow into me like a fucking gut punch.

*Too fast.*

Her heartbeat continues to pick up speed, and before I know it, my hands are gripping her cheeks, and my horrified yell for her rips apart my scratchy throat. The thundering in my ears drowns out my own voice; all I can focus on is getting Evie to stay with me.

Arms wrap around my middle and drag me away from her prone body, causing my anxiety to skyrocket at the separation. I call out to her, I plead with her, I fucking yell at her to wake up. I don't know what I say, but the desperation clawing at my insides makes itself known.

Until...until the rapid beats descend into a treacherously long ring.

Gone.

My Evie...our little warrior...defeated.



**Nolan**

“I WILL NOT CALM DOWN!”

I shrink back at Ryan's roar of fury as he wrestles through the waiting room doors. The malice wafting off of him in waves has Korren and I shooting to our feet alongside the parents.

Behind my boyfriend being shoved through the doors is Amiri, who looks...well, he looks dead. We have traded one comatose brother for another, and the previous one is currently fighting the security staff, trying to get back through the way they came.

A sudden lightheadedness has me stumbling into Kor on our walk over to the scene. Bile rushes up, and I'm helpless to stop it; I puke all over the white tiles of the ICU waiting room.

"Shit," Korren curses, holding my weight as my own body revolts at whatever news we are about to receive. He hauls me up to his chest and moves me away from the mess I made. "Nol, come on, man. Look at me."

Dragging my burning eyes up to his face, I gulp at the love and care shining in his eyes...will that be broken soon, too?

"Somethings wrong, Kor..." I trail off, having no energy to explain the dread settling into my weakening body. Whatever connection I have to my best friend is rotting in my stomach... something is seriously fucking wrong.

**"GET OFF OF ME! I NEED TO SEE HER; SHE WILL BE OKAY IF SHE HAS US!"**

The pounding in my head spikes at Ryan's screaming protest. Korren gives me one last look before he runs over to the man in question and wraps his around him from the front.

"No, stop! I have to get back there!"

My eyes are on fire as I watch them struggle against each other. The security guard backs off at Korren's nod. His words are too hard to hear from my position a few feet away, and I

can't make my feet move to get closer to them or Amiri, who is now slouched against the wall, head in his hands.

“Please,” Ryan whimpers, sagging against our brother. “She can't be gone...”

And just like that, the world ends.

I stumble forward and land in a heap in front of Amiri, unconsciously seeking his reassurance that Ry is wrong.

His head slowly lifts, and his vacant eyes lock on my desperate ones. “Flatline,” is all he can croak out before a burst of agony splits his lips. His spittle sprinkles against my forehead, but it goes unnoticed...he confirms what Ryan is currently repeating over and over again into Korren's shoulder on the floor behind me.

The presence of my parents and the brothers' parents are only highlighted by the women's sobs and their husband's hushed words of comfort.

There is no comfort to be given to us now. We are gone... right along with our girl. The love of our lives. The one who has fought through the worst of humanity, only to live not once but twice.

Is she buried beneath the ashes with no energy to rise?

My hope was built on her strength when we weren't fast enough to save her from unrepairable damage.

The signs were there; she fought with everything she had. We weren't there when she ran out of strength.

And now, my best friend is dead.



## **Korren**

*What the hell?*

My shock is punctuated by Nolan falling into me and promptly throwing up everywhere. My surprise is short-lived as he slumps against me, his body giving out underneath him.

“Shit,” I rumble trying to control his body weight while simultaneously moving us away from the mess. “Nol, come on, man. Look at me.”

His droopy eyes finally register me. “Somethings wrong, Kor...” My breath gets lodged in my throat at the vague and terrifying statement, but I don’t have time to dwell on it when more shouting persists across the waiting room.

The security guards are about to arrest Ryan, and I can’t have him taken away from us. I don’t know what’s going on, but I can protect him. Shooting Nolan one last look and seeing that he’s steadied himself, I run to our golden boy and wrap him in the biggest hug I can manage.

Nodding at the guards manhandling him, they reluctantly release his writhing body while giving me pointed looks that say if I can’t control him, they will have no choice but to do it themselves.

“No, stop! I have to get back there!” He tries to pry his face out of my shoulder, but I just hold him tighter.

“Ry, talk to me. I’m here; your family is here. You’re with us; tell me what happened.” Digging my right hand into his

blonde locks, I twist his head enough to talk into his ear.

His body begins to give up its fight, but his next words completely steal the air from my lungs...and I don't know if I can ever breathe again. I don't know if I ever want to.

“Please, she can't be gone...” Unable to hold up his weight, we fall to the ground in a heap of limbs that refuse to walk the earth without Evelyn at our sides.

With my arms still around my brother, I shatter just like he does. We cling to each other in the horrified unification of our loss.

My mind is a whirlwind struggling to comprehend this new reality that we now have to live in. What if I don't want to live through this, though?

The guys and I were a unit before we met Eve, but we became a family when she came into our lives. A family filled with love, understanding, and support. A family with dreams, plans, and goals. A family who may have been traumatized and filled with struggles...but we were a team who sought out the happiness and brightness that the world could offer.

What are we now?

A group of men reduced to shadows of grief on the floor of a hospital. A woman who gave everything she could to live... only for it to not be enough.

A family in tatters with our only hope of salvation floating into the abyss.

## Chapter 19

## **Evelyn**

*“Eve honey, come on, it’s time to get up.”*

*Momma’s voice hums through my ears, but she sounds far away. Peeking my eyes open, I sit up and take in her serene face. Dark hair fans around her shoulders, her face glowing with a light spattering of freckles across her nose. Sweater and jeans...she looks just as I remember her.*

*“Mom?” I squint my eyes, trying to get a better understanding of what’s going on.*

*Wherever we are is bright as fuck. And white. Are we in a hospital again? Looking down at myself, I find myself in my dress from the courthouse. Except it’s clean, and my hair is back up in its ponytail.*

*This isn’t right. My thought is confirmed when I don’t notice any pain or weariness throughout my body. Wait. I know this isn’t right, but I’m having trouble piecing together answers.*

*“Eve. Wake up,” Mom says more urgently, getting in my face.*

*“What? Momma...” The confusion fades away when I realize I’m seeing my mom for the first time in over seven years. “Mom!” I fling myself at her, needing to feel her comfort.*

*“Hi, baby,” her words are mumbled into my shoulder as she grips me back just as tightly.*

*I can't help the sobs that burst from my chest, nor can I contain the tears of joy at finally being in her arms again. Words cannot describe the ache in my soul, nor can they express the sheer bliss lighting up my body.*

*“Momma, I mi-missed you so much. I got back, and y-you were gone!” My last word is spoken as a wail of anguish from my heart. I grip her tighter, swearing I will never, ever let go, ever again.*

*“I missed you too, so so much.” She leans back from me, her own cheeks streaked with tears. “Evelyn, I need you to listen to me.”*

*I shake my head and throw myself at her again, unable to get enough. I don't know if I'm fucking crazy or if I actually died, but...I'm never leaving her.*

*“Eve.” Her tone is sharp as she nudges me away, yet her eyes are glassy and filled with understanding. “You need to wake up.”*

*“What? No.” I shake my head even though I'm not quite sure what she means.*

*“Yes. I need you to think. Where are you right now?” She brushes away some of the flyaway hairs from my wet cheeks.*

*“I'm with y-you, where I want to be.” I hiccup and frown when she shakes her head at me.*

*“No, Eve. Where are you?”*

*“I-” It all comes rushing back. The kidnapping, the hotels, and the forest. All the awful aches and pains, the drugs. Fuck, the kick to my stomach. Freezing cold nights. Running. Bleeding. Kyle’s voice. More running. Then...nothing. I fell.*

*“I’m with you now,” my voice is firm, with no wobble to take away my conviction. I don’t know what this is, but it beats being, well...beaten.*

*“No, sweetheart. You have to go back.” Another tear drips from her eyelashes.*

*“No, I don’t want to. I want to stay here.” My anxiety reaches new heights when she shakes her head at me.*

*“What about Nolan?”*

*That gives me pause. I don’t know...if I’m being honest. He has Ryan, and clearly, if I’m speaking with my mom right now, something is seriously wrong with me. Steeling myself, I straighten my shoulders.*

*“He will be okay; he has Ryan.” My next statement is quiet, “Plus, he’s too late.”*

*“And what about Amiri and Korren, Evelyn?” Shit, now she’s frustrated.*

*“I-I don’t know. They will be fine; they didn’t know me for long.” I just want my mom; I’m so sick of hurting...of fighting. I know I said I would do everything I could to get back home to my guys, but didn’t I already do that? If this is heaven or whatever, that means I LITERALLY did everything I could.*

*Mom’s face softens as she lays her palm over my cheek. “Sweetheart, they love you. None of them will be okay. And neither will you.”*



*“But-I want to be with you!” Hunching over, I try to ease the soul-wrenching pain that grips me at the possibility of leaving her.*

*She shushes me, “You have to wake up, okay? I love you so much, and I swear I will be right here.” Her hand hovers over my right shoulder.*

*Snapping my head up, memories flicker in my mind. In the hospital when I was breaking down in the shower...I felt a warm weight right there. The same thing happened a few more times after I moved in with the guys.*

*“That was you? I know you’ve always said that, but...” My chin wobbles.*

*“I’m always with you, little warrior. I promise.” she leans in and kisses my forehead, her tears dripping onto my face.*

*“Momma, no, please. I want to stay with you!” I cry out, gripping her arms like she will be taken from me at any moment.*

*“And they need you to stay with them. It’s not your time yet, Evie. You have so much life to live that’s not filled with darkness.” A sob bursts from her lips as she presses our foreheads together. “I’m so so so sorry for not finding you. But I am so fucking proud of you, Evelyn Faye Miller. You saved yourself, and you will not lose hope this time either. Those men out there, they haven’t given up on you, so please, baby. Please, don’t give up on yourself.”*

*I cry out when sudden pain in my stomach and shoulder pierces through me. “What’s happening?” Doubling over and*

*gripping her forearms, I pant for breath at the excruciating pain radiating through my entire body.*

*“You’re waking up.” Momma’s eyes are filled with their own anguish and sorrow, but she gives me a small smile filled with hope. “Evelyn, I love you so much. You can do this.”*

*“AHH!” My tears start anew at the hell raging through my tiring limbs.*

*Gripping my cheeks, Mom forces our gazes to lock. “I love you. It’s time to wake up now, little one. Live.”*

*My vision starts to cross. I whimper for my mom again, begging her not to leave me. I whisper how much I love her as I grip her warm hand in mine and keel over onto my side. The last words I hear from my Momma shatter my heart while they fuse the shards back together at the same time.*

*“I will always be with you...”*

## Chapter 20

### **Josie**

*Come on, come on, come on!*

If this were a movie, I would zap the shit out of this red light that's keeping me from my best friend. The hospital is *right there!*

“Ugh, finally,” I grumble as I take the left turn into the parking lot. Since the guys left, Mia has been wonderful in keeping me updated...well, with what little information she had. She rarely heard anything until Detective Smith called her yesterday and told her Eve was in a hospital.

They dropped everything and left to get here. Thankfully, she sent me the address after making me agree to come today instead of last night.

Shoving my Jeep door wide, I tumble out of my car in haste to get inside. “Shit!” I go back for the flip-flop that fell off my foot. With it securely in place, I run through the sliding doors. “ICU waiting room?” My yell makes the lady behind the desk jump and narrow her eyes before she points down another hall.

After an eternity of cursing my shoes, I finally find the doors to the waiting room I've been looking for.

The scene I walk into makes my blood turn to ice, and my bones lock in place. Amiri and Nolan huddle by the wall, each with their heads bowed and shoulders shaking with emotion. In the center of the room are Ry and Korren, wrapped in each other's arms, their sobs piercing my soul.

Dan has a crying Mia wrapped in his arms with his head hidden in her shoulder. Chris and Sherry are much in the same position next to them. My long hair whips around at whatever the fuck this is. I refuse to draw any conclusions. Shucking off my sweater, I toss it onto a nearby chair and begin my walk through the room. Before I can approach any of the inconsolable people I have grown to love, the door on the opposite side of the room opens to reveal a haggard-looking man in a white coat.

His eyes go wide at the scene I am currently standing in the middle of, clearly uncertain how to even begin.

Gulping, I make my way over to him. "Hi, I'm Josie. I just got here. I'm their friend. Are you Eve's doctor?"

Snapping out of his stupor, he gives me a once-over before nodding. "Yes, I am Doctor Ellis." His eyes once again move to the horrifying scene behind me. Still, none of them have looked up to see that he's here.

"Um, what's going on? Is everything okay?" I side-eye the family behind me, my own heart pitter-pattering.

He coughs before straightening and collecting himself. "Ms. Miller flatlined about ten minutes ago. She is alive and

stable for now, though.” I can feel my eyes widen and my eyebrows raise in shock. “Two of the men were in there when it happened; I came to let them know that she is okay.”

“Okay, thanks Doc. I can let them know,” my voice is nothing but a whisper. He nods his thanks and makes his way back to tend to Eve. I turn around and take a deep breath, trying to settle my nerves at hearing that she almost died.

*Son of a shit.*

“Kay, what now?” Literally, nobody has moved from their spots since I walked in. “Guys?” I call out and receive zero response. I attempt to get everyone’s attention just one more time to no avail. “Fuck.”

I slowly move over to Korren and Ryan and reach to touch their shoulders. The squeak that slips out of me is awful when they both launch their asses to their feet. Taking a step back from their heaving chests and Korren’s snarl, I toss my hands up in surrender.

“She’s alive!” I rush out, not sure if they are even registering that it’s me in front of them. “Eve’s okay! They have her stable.”

Kor steps forward, and I step back. “What?” He rumbles; his hulking tattooed form is downright intimidating, with all his energy focused on me. I don’t know how Eve doesn’t shrink under the heavy vibes he gives off.

Before I can respond, Ryan shoves him aside and grips my shoulder. “What did you say, Jo?” Desperation leaks from him, almost making me choke on my words.

“She’s okay, Ry,” I breathe, watching the tears fall from his eyes. I will never be able to understand what these guys have gone through in the past week, but it has taken a lot from this strong family.

“She’s okay,” he repeats my words in relief. In the next moment, he’s rushing over to the huddled pair whose wide eyes are on me, having heard the news.

I can’t help but look on as Ryan tackles Nolan in a viscous hug full of love, devastation, and reassurance. They both outwardly weep and grip each other like they are trying to burrow into the other’s skin. They can’t get close enough.

I’m so entranced by their show of affection that I don’t realize Amiri is now walking towards me. Without stopping, he wraps me in his arms. No words are spoken between us; our friendship is built around our connection with the woman currently in this damn hospital somewhere.

Releasing me, he moves to his brother and roughly pulls him into his chest. When they begin whispering, I avert my gaze and make my way over to Mia.

“Hi, sweetie,” she snuffles and wipes her nose on her tissue before giving me a gentle hug. Sherry comes over and does the same, each giving the other the support necessary to get through this unfair experience.

This past week, I’ve felt completely out of sorts, not having my best friend to talk to or hang out with. We have become so close these past few months; I don’t want to return to a life without my partner in crime.

Guilt festers under my skin like a disease. I can't help but feel like this is my fault. That if I hadn't left her alone in that damn bathroom, she could have been home this whole time. Christmas came and went without my bestie...I've been staring at the gifts I got her all week. My heart cracked every time I thought about what must have happened to her, all because I left her alone.

She was so excited to spend Christmas with her guys and the family she has built...that was all taken from her and us. Their decorated home went untouched, the house holding its breath, waiting for Eve's joy and brightness to spark life back into its walls.

Encompassed by understanding and the love of her family, I feel confident that no matter what she endured, yet again, she has a team out here waiting for her, ready to tear down the fucking world.

I don't know what's going on with the detectives chasing Kyle down right now, but I know for a fact that he will suffer.

If the law can't figure it out, then I have faith the guys in front of me will have no problem taking their pound of flesh.

He will rot in fucking hell.



**Evelyn**

*"Mom?"*

*The silence is like a fucking knife to my chest. She's gone again...my mom is gone. I continue yelling for her in the*

*darkness. It's a far cry from the bright white where Momma was.*

*Beep.*

*The noise niggles at the back of my mind, a memory of another time I heard that incessant sound. The panic digging its claws into my brain halts my progress of understanding just what the hell is going on.*

*My body feels heavy, weighed down by an unmovable force. I try to twist my body around to search for anything other than the pitch-black surrounding me. No success. I'm rooted to the spot, my eyes frantically darting left and right, up and down.*

*"Momma!"*

*Is this hell?*

*Did Mom ask me to leave her because I wasn't worthy of heaven? What did I do to deserve this? After everything I had to fucking live through in the real world...*

*"Her eyes are moving!"*

*The voice ping-pongs around in my jittery mind, driving my confusion to new heights.*

*Beep.*

*Beep.*

*Beep.*

*My heart thunders with the tune that makes me want to scream. All I want to do is lift my arms and cover my damn ears.*

*"Shut up, shut up!"*



“Shit, Eve, it’s okay. We’re here; you’re safe.”

*I whimper, the voice trailing off quietly towards the end.*

“Open your eyes, baby.”

*I try to reach out and hold onto the voice, but whatever consciousness this is, is slowly slipping through my heavy fingertips. I can’t hold on to the comfort the voice offers me. Before my eyes droop into nothingness, a wet bead of moisture tickles my cheek. A caress that soothes me into the abyss.*



*Beep.*

Ugh.

“Eve? Guys!” I groan at the onslaught of pounding the shout brings to my battered brain. “Guys, she’s awake!”

*It’s too bright, and loud...* those are the only thoughts I’m capable of at the moment besides the throbbing of my entire body.

“Come on, open your eyes, love.” I know that voice, even if it’s caked in emotion. His usual broodiness is replaced with barely concealed anxiety. Koko. A shiver rolls down my spine at his rumbly vocals. I don’t listen to him, though. If anything, I squeeze my eyes shut even tighter. “Dim the lights.”

The burning in my eyes suddenly lessens; the world around me is reasonably lit now. I release a sigh at having one pain taken care of, only for a harsh twinge in my stomach to peel another soft cry from my dry lips.

“Get the nurse!”

Mmm, I know that voice. It wraps around me like a cotton blanket on a rainy day, begging me to soften and drift off into a trance of coziness. Amiri. My scratchy throat constricts at the concept of safety.

*I hope this is real.*

Soft murmuring filters through my pain-addled brain that’s trying to make sense of what life has in store for me now. The beeping and heavy limbs are reminiscent of the first time I escaped. Is this just another memory? No. The guys weren’t here the last time I found myself in a hospital bed.

Is this real?

I feel like I’ve been trapped in my own head for so long, getting ripped from one memory to another nightmare and into a confusing alternate universe. I don’t know what’s up or down...right or left.

Warmth seeps into my aching bones, bruised organs, and aching muscles; all the pain fades into a dull ache, allowing me to relax into the softness underneath me.

“Fire?”

Just as I begin to drift off into a sea of blissful nothingness, the sound of Noly calling out to me gives me one last burst of strength to open my eyes. Whether it’s to reassure myself that this might be real or to soothe my best friend, I don’t know.

Peeling my eyes open, I’m met with a rush of shuffling feet and subtle gasps of praise. Brown curls, sparkling eyes framed by dirty glasses, and a bright smile stun my tired eyes. I notice

the subtle shake of his shoulders before I flick my eyes to the head of shaggy blonde hair hanging onto him.

Ryan's eyes are rimmed with purple and red, his cheeks a bit too gaunt to be healthy. His parted lips, stained with tears, have me settling further into the bed...he's with me, too.

My vision wavers and blurs enough that I'm sure my words would be slurred if I tried to speak. A gentle caress on the inside of my right wrist draws my attention to the imposing figures on my other side.

Framed by a curtained window, Amiri places a kiss on the back of my hand while dropping into a crouch beside me. Koko hovers above him, protecting his family even as his lip quivers, drinking me in from afar.

"Hi, little fighter..." Kor whispers, his astonished tone making my insides sing with solace at the wonderful scene before me.

I fight the droop my eyelids plead for and muster up one final look at all of my guys. "I love you," my words are barely a croaked whisper, ones that I'm not even sure I could hear as I drift away into the darkness of slumber.

Echoes of I love you's, and hushed cries tumble down with me into the confines of my mind...I just hope I will see them again.

I hope that if I wake up, they will all be there. I hope I won't wake up in a fresh new kind of hell. I hope I will have the strength to open my eyes again and live the life I've always wanted.

I hope for one more chance at life.

# Chapter 21

## **Evelyn**

The murmur of voices rouses me from the recesses of unconsciousness. Ryan's words finally register in my sleepy state before I can even crack open my eyes.

“When we get home, I want to have Christmas. I know we missed it, and Eve might not be up for it, but she deserves a goddamn cheesy holiday with all the gifts and food we can get.”

*I missed Christmas.*

“I agree. Good thing we didn't get a real tree this year. Everything is as we left it, so we can celebrate whenever she wants.”

Amiri causes warmth to swirl around in my tummy, a calm that settles in the core of my being. They are here still...I'm not alone.

“You weren't there to sign for her car, though. Are you going to get the drop-off rescheduled?”

Nolan's question has my dreary eyes shooting open in shock. The choked sound from my throat has all four of their

heads whipping toward me, followed by the rush of their bodies crowding around my bed.

“Hi, Angel. How are you feeling?”

Parting my lips to respond to the dark god leaning over me, I struggle to get a sound out. Thankfully, he notices and offers me a cup of water with a straw. I guzzle. And I fucking guzzle. It feels like a damn eternity since I’ve had any liquid.

I gasp at the stabbing pain in my abdomen from how much fluid I just worked into my body. “Easy, Eve,” Korren’s tone is firm, probably seeing the pain most likely plastered all over my face.

I lick my lips; the stinging pain of moisture settling into the cracks and blisters on them is the least of my worries. I sweep my eyes over the men who have stolen my heart. I can’t help the tear that escapes at my body’s protest of being alive.

“H-hurts.”

I hate the way Ryan’s smile falters before he rushes out the door. A wobbly, painful breath inflates my lungs at the loss of his presence.

“He’s getting the nurse so they can give you something for the pain. Ry’s coming back, understand?” Nolan gives me a determined look, like he’s prepared to promise me the world no matter the cost.

I give him a gentle nod and do my best to ignore the twinge in my neck. My sight blurs with the onslaught of emotion, and my bottom lip tugs at its scar as it wobbles.

“I know, sweetheart. We are here now.” His vow does nothing to stop the sob that bursts free of my chest, nor does it

diminish the yelp of pain that wreaks havoc on my center. His gaze turns frantic just as a nurse rush in and adjusts something beside me after shuffling the other two of my guys away.

Korren growls at the male nurse, making my attention divert to the threat my protector sees. I catalog his white, blonde hair and the harsh line of his jaw. Just as I go to dismiss him, a warm wave runs through my veins, muddling the pain in my body and making my brain soar to the clouds.

“Pretty...”

*Who said that?*

The nurse lets loose a snort and offers me a wink. Oh my God, I said that! I ignore the additional grumbling bouncing off the walls of the room, too lost in my own embarrassment. The man laughs again. “Hi, Ms. Miller. Yes, you did say that.”

I don’t know what he just pumped me full of, but the heat of it rushes to my cheeks, making my embarrassment visible. It feels like my eyes are as wide as saucers, unable to make them move away from the guy laughing at me and jotting down notes.

“I’m so sorry,” I breathe...oh, the fucking horror.

He gives me a big smile, tucking the clipboard beneath his arm. “Quite alright; it’s not the first time. Go ahead and call me Miles. I-”

*Who just giggled?*

“What the hell did you give her?” The pouty growl and hushed wheezing make their way past my horrified embarrassment.

I can't help the laugh that rocks my body at the sight of Ryan doubled over, silently chortling behind a stone-cold, pissed-off Koko. Thanks to whatever the pretty nurse gave me, I barely register the cramp in my tummy.

"I gave her something to help with the pain. Everyone reacts a bit differently in different stages. You might find her to immediately fall asleep, become confused and disoriented, or even a bit silly." He shoots me another conspiratorial wink making me grin right back.

"Get out." the haste in which my head snaps back to my growly man has my head swimming.

"Koko..."

The nickname rolls off my tongue easily, but the way his body stiffens before every tense muscle in his body relaxes is not what I was expecting. It feels like my thoughts, behaviors, and feelings are not aligned whatsoever. Like they are trudging along and trading off who moves the slowest.

The next thing I know, the blonde man is gone and replaced by my dark-haired, tattooed teddy bear leaning over me and grasping my heated cheeks.

All thoughts of whoever administered the drugs flee from my mind...Korren is here. He's holding me. My strong, unyielding protector is shedding tears of relief and exasperation on my behalf.

"Eve. Fuck, I'm so so so sorry. I should have been there to protect you. I should have found you sooner. None of this should have happened. I'm so sorry. I swear I won't let anything hurt you ever again, even if you kick me aside."

The change from giggly energy to this...makes my eyes well up, and my mind wash away the fog the warmth coated me in. I'm still too muddled to respond fast enough before my fierce man can continue.

"I-I'm sorry, Evelyn. Thank you for fighting and surviving on your own. Thank you for living."

It's hard work to lift my weighted hands into the longer strands on top of his head when he drops down onto the sheets beside me. I fight the sleepiness like my life fucking depends on it. There's a battle between the woman my men need and the woman who needs to heal. They may need to work together, but my family needs me more than I need sleep right now.

"There's n-nothing to," I swallow, "forgive." My words may be soft and raspy, but they still hit their mark.

Korren's head shoots up, his eyes wide. "You don't understand, I-"

Before he can continue to apologize my ear off, I yank on the hairs I can manage to get a grip of and shush him. "No apol-apologizing." staying coherent is getting harder, along with the stabbing distress in my throat.

I attempt to drag him up and am grateful he understands my request. With his face hovering above me and his hitched breathing skittering across my lips, my arms begin to weaken the longer I hold him to me.

Just as my arms begin to give out under the force of gravity, I whisper the words he needs to hear, "You saved me."



The gentle caress of our lips tingles my nerve endings as I succumb to the heavy blanket of sleep.



*“They aren’t coming for you. I’m sure they were glad when they found out you were gone.” A full-body shudder rolls through me at Kyle’s treacherous words.*

*“You’re lying! They will find me...they will!”*

*“Then why haven’t they found you already, huh?”*

*Trapped in a dark space with nothing to see around me, the sound of his wretched taunts echo throughout the room. He’s all around me, trapping me from every angle, suffocating the hope out of me.*

*“They will! They promised!” My guys promised they will always protect me... they promised me the world. I know they weren’t lying...Nolan, Ryan...Amiri and Korren, love me.*

*“None of them love you.”*

*A gasp catches in my throat when the hair around my face moves with his rancid breath in my ear. Twisting around, I throw a fist, hoping to break his fucking face. Except he’s not there. Gone again and one with the shadows.*

*“Why would anyone love a used-up slut like you, Pet?”*

*It’s the nickname that makes me see red. “Shut up!”*

*“Baby, wake up!”*

*“They love me! My guys are coming for me!”*

“Eve!”

The tremble of my arms and the pounding in my head yank me from the nightmarish memory. Gasping for breath, I cringe at the light burning my closed eye sockets and the hammer bashing against my brain.

“Lights!”

The firm demand does nothing to curb the pain, but they are mildly forgiven when the lights shut off.

“Let’s just keep them off all the time, yeah?”

“I’m not the one turning them on; one of you guys is.”

“I haven’t.”

“Me neither.”

“Oh. Maybe the nurses are when they do their checkups.”

I grumble, already annoyed with the amount of noise these dipshits are surrounding me with today. Mortification makes me never want to open my eyes when flashes of the last time I was awake come to mind.

I called the damn nurse pretty.

“Well, let’s just try to turn them off after them from now on.”

“Yeah.”

“Oh, and the blinds.”

“Shut up,” I grumble, but it comes out sounding more like, “shuuuup”. Ugh, I’m feeling prickly as shit, and there’s too much going on around me, along with the fact that remnants of Kyle’s voice is still whispering through my mind.

“What did she say?” Recognition finally turns on at Ryan’s humored question.

“She told you, idiots, to shut up.”

This time, my eyes fly open and immediately land on my bestie curled up on the couch beside me. I can’t help the watery inhale that fills my lungs, “J-Jo?”

“Eve!” She rushes to her feet when our eyes lock. “Shit, I missed you so much, and these dumbasses have been driving me crazy. I’m sure Mia is about to kick one of them in the balls with me too. You need to get better...you are the only one that can keep these bimbos in line!”

A straw poke my lips, a silent offer of water from Nolan on my other side. I shoot him a small wobbly smile of appreciation once I get my fill without aggravating my wounds.

“My bimbos,” I rasp out as best I can, to which she replies, “Yeah, all yours, babe. You have the patience of a saint.”

“Hey!”

I smirk at Ryan’s dismayed outburst, all the while hoping to cover up just how much it hurts to listen to them. Having my family surround me is all I have wanted; I refuse to succumb to the agony ripping through my body. I just want to hear their banter, even if I can barely participate.

“Guys, do you mind if I have a minute?” Their friendly bickering comes to a halt at Noly’s quiet inquiry. I gently twist my head to get a better look at him, careful of the cramping in my neck.

“Of course, I’ll have the nurse come in soon, okay?” Ry gives him a small peck on the lips before soothing his hand down my arm and ushering the group out of the room. Their lingering glances and mouthed words of love make my throat squeeze.

Once the door is shut behind them, I take in my quiet man, who currently looks like he’s shattering under the collapse of the world. Dressed in a pair of jeans and a simple blue t-shirt, I wish I could bury my face into his chest and never let go.

“Please don’t cry, Evie!” He lunges forward so quickly it catches me off guard enough that I flinch. It’s instantaneous; the guilt takes over his entire body. His shoulders slump forward, his hands go up in surrender, and his eyebrows and plump lips draw down in concern. At the same time, his eyes flare wide in panic.

“Oh fuck. I’m so sorry. Baby, you have to know I would never hurt you; you remember that, right?” He looks so uncertain that it makes my soul yearn to comfort him. Unfortunately, I don’t have much to give at the moment. A hot wave of frustration and annoyance run through me at how much Kyle is still taking from me.

“I-I know. Just star-startled me.” A cough slips free. “Trust you,” I force the words out, needing to convey that I’m not afraid of him. “Love you.” I hate the way heaviness drags my eyelids down again without permission. He asked for alone time, and here I am, falling asleep.

A choked cry reaches my tunneling hearing, “I love you, little phoenix. I’m so sorry. Sleep now; I’ll be here when you wake.”

In the presence of my best friend, the one I was meant to spend my entire life with, I drift off into a gentle sleep with excitement zinging through my veins at his promise.

*Noly will be here when I wake.*

## Chapter 22

### **Nolan**

There's just nothing to say at this point. It's been two days since she started waking up in small increments. The beeping of Eve's machines, her hitched breathing, and the bustle of the hospital outside the door fill the silence between us.

Ever since our entire family lost ourselves to grief in the lobby of the ICU four days ago, the doctors and nurses have been less restrictive over how many of us visit and when. They became very accommodating after Chris put his foot down and demanded that the rules be lifted for us, they became very accommodating. Whether that was because of the sheer devastation threatening our lives or how terrifying Chris can be...I don't know.

Either way, I'm thankful for the moments I can sit here watching over my girl like I am now. I ignore the dull ache in my head; I don't think I've stopped frowning since the damn court day almost two weeks ago.

Jesus, has it really been less than two weeks? Eve was missing for almost an entire seven days, and we have been here for about five.

I'm going out of my mind; I just want her home and comfortable. I'm not naive enough to think everything will go back to the way it was...fuck knows, we all have some serious issues we are struggling with individually. Hell, Eve flinched away from me.

I try to rub away the stabbing pain in my chest...when she jerked back from me, it reminded me exactly of the first time I saw her again after those seven years. It took months for her to truly trust us, and now I can't help but wonder if we have to build again.

"What happened to you?" I intend for the thought to stay silent, but it sounds like a fucking bomb being dropped into the silent room.

Amiri and Korren lounge on the couch on the other side of the room while I lean against the wall on the ground beside Ry.

"I'm scared," his voice beside me is a wobbly whisper but loud enough for the brothers to hear as well. "What if..."

He honestly doesn't have to continue the thought...we all fear what happened to her in the week she was missing. *What if the same things happened again?*

A broken leg, bruised organs, removed spleen, bruises and scrapes, a dislocated shoulder, swelling on the brain...and a fucking coma.

Isn't that enough?

The nurses and doctors won't divulge any more information to us even when we asked specifically if she was raped. Nausea burns my throat, remembering how sick we all felt when we made the decision to ask. Unfortunately, it was

for nothing because the staff decided we hit our quota for knowledge.

We aren't her family, her blood, or married to her. That's something we plan to rectify as soon as she fucking allows us to.

"I'm scared too," I grip Ryan's hand in my own and allow my head to rest on his shoulder, my eyes fixated on the rise and fall of her chest.

And that's it. There is nothing else to say. We all lived this together, want the same thing, feel soul-crushing emotions... now is just not the time. Support and love are in the air, so that's enough for now. Right now, we wait, and we hope.

*Beep, beep.*

My frown deepens, and I hear her heart rate increase. I barely register everyone else leaning forward, having caught onto the extra noise, too.

*Beep, beep. Beep, beep.*

I can feel Ry's pulse pick up underneath my fingers, right along with hers. Releasing him, I stand and close the few feet of space between me and the bed.

"Is she okay?"

I glance up at Amiri's concerned features, preparing to respond, when a whimper has my gaze shooting back down to the woman in question. I think the answer might be no. Before I can get a word out, her frail body jerks hard, drawing a gasp from her lips at the sharp movement.



“Shit, wake her up!” Kor’s voice does nothing to calm my own anxiety.

A high-pitched, keen pierces my ears, “They are coming for me!” Her words make me want to double over and vomit, but I’m stopped when her body begins to thrash viciously.

“She’s going to hurt herself! Wake her up!”

I can’t explain what happens next...the frantic shouts and cautious prodding and shaking drown out anything else. Evie sobs past her tear-riddled cheeks. Hands yank me away by my biceps without warning, each of us being dragged further away from the rumpled bed sheets.

Nurse Miles rushes to her side and administers a fresh round of drugs, instantly calming her. The team of nurses who helped hold her down slowly back away from her still body. All the while, the guys and I are still being held like we are about to lash out. The concern is fair, considering how much of a fight Ry put up the last time something horrific happened in this goddamn room.

Miles turns after doing whatever it is that he does. “She is sedated and will be out for a long while still. It was the safest choice in order to keep her from hurting herself further. I will get Dr. Ellis.”

I don’t care about his trek out of the room; my eyes are glued to my best friend, who just had to be drugged in order to calm down.

“Hi, gentlemen.” Amiri is the only one who offers pleasantries as we all shrug off the arms of those holding us back. After a few moments, he continues, “Ms. Miller is fine

and healing as well as to be expected. I do need to advise we all be on watch for nightmares such as what just occurred. Ms. Miller could do more damage to her abdomen and brain if she responds any worse than she did this time.”

A resounding set of gulps is the only response he gets. It looked like she was having some sort of muscle fit or seizure...but it was just a fucking nightmare.

*What happened to you?*

“She’s okay?”

Dr. Ellis looks over at me and states, “Yes, she is okay. Let her sleep for now. We will just have to watch out for these episodes during recovery.” With that, he walks out.

We resume our positions around her, each lost in our own thoughts until Korren breaks the silence, “Did you hear what she said?”

“They are coming for me,” I nod, repeating her words before chaos ensued.

“Who was she talking about?”

A beat goes by before I realize what she meant. I look them each in the eye, making sure I have their attention. “She meant us...Eve never gave up hope that we were coming for her.”

*Eve never lost hope.*



I can’t help but snicker at Josie’s grumbling over the stench of testosterone as she leaves the hospital room. We watch her

go, trying and failing to hold back the humor of how outnumbered she is.

“Stop, guys! Your Mom and Jo are going to castrate me if you keep this up!” Ry pleads with his big blue eyes.

“Just wait till Eve finds out.” I nudge him with my shoulder when his face turns to stone.

“She will love it.” He’s so adamant that Evie will love the car he got her for Christmas...while, on the other hand, my parents and Josie have been telling him not to do it. It might overwhelm her in their eyes, but in Ryan’s mind...Eve deserves it and so much more.

“What will I love?”

Spit gets lodged in the back of my throat at her small voice behind where I sit on the edge of her bed. Hacking up the saliva trying to drown me, I finally settle when a tiny, warm hand touches my back. I choke on my next breath for a whole other reason...*Evie’s here, and she’s touching me.*

“Hi, baby.” Ryan leans across me, balancing himself with a hand high on my thigh. I barely hold back the groan at being between these two. After placing a gentle kiss on her cheek, he moves back to stand in front of us. “How are you feeling?”

The shuffle of her arms is the only warning we get before she tries to move to a seated position. We all take a collective breath and lean forward, ready and anxious to help her. Gritting her teeth, she holds back the whimper I know wants to escape.

“Eve, be careful.” Korren scolds her and pushes a few buttons to readjust the bed to hold her how she chooses.

“I’m fine,” she whispers, eyes lowered to where her hands grasp in front of her tummy. She’s not fine; she’s actively trying to hide her sniffles and glistening eyes.

Twisting myself and hiking a knee beside her hip, I grip her chin between my thumb and pointer finger, needing her eyes on me. “Eyes on us, sweetheart.” A fissure opens in my heart when her chin and lip wobble in my grasp. “We have you now; you’re safe.”

Her attempt to lean into me is thwarted by her injuries; a loud cry escapes her heaving chest. A spark of panic pushes me to comfort her; as gently as I can, I wrap one arm around her shoulder, my hand cradling her head, while my other arm snakes around her thin waist.

Nuzzling into my neck, she grips my shirt like she never wants to let go. Her watery cries are muffled, but I can feel every emotion that threatens her foundation of strength and happiness. They batter against her bones, making her shake in my arms. They trample over each other, trying to escape faster than she can expel a breath.

“Follow me, Eve. Deep breath in,” I suck in a shaky breath of my own, “and out.” Long black strands of hair float away from her shoulder on my exhale. It takes her a few minutes to mimic the exercise, but soon, she settles in my embrace.

“I-I’m sorry.”

“No apologizing, little fighter.” Eve jolts against me, having forgotten about the audience we had. I gently extract myself, catching her eye as I pull away. “You’re safe.” She sniffles and gives me a teeny nod, enough to have my shoulders relax slightly at being able to comfort my girl.

Amiri procured a cup of water and a straw at some point, now giving it to her since her breathing is under control and some of the panic has ebbed. It has to be a good sign that she isn't afraid of the four of us crowding around her, right? All we do is stare at her, but she doesn't seem to mind as her eyes continue to scan us over the rim of her cup.

Until her eyes drop again.

Korren rumbles, "Look at me." I feel Ryan shift beside me, readying to step in if she is uncomfortable.

Immediately, her wide eyes shoot up to his, breath stuttering a tad. Nudging Amiri out of the way, Kor also sits beside her on the bed. Thinking this might be too much, I stand and watch the exchange with a critical eye.

Gripping her jaw, they lock eyes, something I have seen them do many times. "Evelyn. Focus." De Ja Vu hits, reminding me of Eve's first meltdown after I brought her home.

Korren did the same thing on the floor of the dining room. He gripped Evie's jaw and demanded her attention. Just like all those months ago, goosebumps pebble the fair skin of her arms. The brute fucking smirks when a visible shudder runs through her.

"Mmm, so perfect, little fighter...you listen so well."

*Well, fuck.*

Ryan chokes next to me, clearly as shocked as I am at the praise. Glancing at Miri, he has an eyebrow raised, watching his brother with a small smile. Turning to Ry, I hold back my huff of laughter at our matching surprised expressions.

I guess he isn't the only one in our family who enjoys the praise kink...and judging by the way the sheets are rustling in her lap, I'd say our little Evie is trying to rub away some of her own desire with her thighs.

"Damn," Ry hums out beside me. "Shh," I hiss, not wanting to take away Eve's distraction. Too late.

My heart stutters, and my jaw is once again on the ground when she gives us a wink. He sucks in a gasp at seeing her playful side come out after all this time. When Eve flatlined in front of him, it completely jolted him out of his own comatose state, and ever since he found out that she was okay, he has been much more like himself.

I know he still has some serious trauma to work through after everything...we all do...but I am so fucking grateful to see my boyfriend and girlfriend sharing cheeky smirks. God, I want to bring her home and see her blossom again. I will never get enough of her smiles, no matter how small they are. The one she's sporting now reaches her eyes; the twinkly mischievousness eases more of my turmoil.

Clearing her throat, she removes Korren's hand from her jaw and holds it in her lap while giving him a lingering kiss on the cheek. My eyes drop to his other hand that's white-knuckled on his thigh, clearly trying to hold himself back.

"How are you feeling?" Amiri asks her again, not happy with her previous lie that she was fine.

"Um, when can I go home?" Korren squeezes her hand when she starts to drop her eyes again.

“Why don’t I go get the doctor?” Without waiting for anyone to respond, Miri stalks out of the room, ready to get us some answers.

“So, what will I love?” Her golden eyes peer at us between her thick lashes. The question has Ryan ready to burst with excitement. I roll my eyes and catch Korren doing the same.

“Your Christmas present!” A switch flips. Her chin hits her chest, no longer caring about Korren’s demands.

“I-I’m so sorry.”

“What are you sorry for, Fire?” I’m confused about what just happened; I need to make it better. I want her to look at me and smile. I want her voice to go back to something more than a whisper.

“I missed Christmas. I ruined another h-holiday.” Her hiccup makes me want to find a fucking blowtorch and burn the world down. I don’t even want to know what Korren is thinking right now. The tick in his jaw says it’s nothing good.

“You didn’t miss Christmas Eve. We paused it, and everything is right where we left it, okay? We will celebrate with the entire family whenever you want to.”

Thankfully, she takes Ryan’s words in stride, lifting her face and giving him another teeny smile and nod. A breath wooshes out of me at her acceptance just as the door opens behind me.

“Ah, there she is!” Doctor Ellis’ sudden presence in the room has Eve jumping and curling in on herself, even if it hurts her.

Bright face and wet cheeks, she gasps in pain. “I’m sorry, Ms. Miller,” Ellis drops his voice to a more soothing tone. Hopefully, that’s enough for Korren to stop staring daggers at him.

“She’s in pain,” Kor basically growls like a fucking caveman. Doctor Ellis nods and moves to the machines; meanwhile, Eve hasn’t taken her eyes off him. She leans slightly away from his spot next to her.

“Ms. Miller, if the pain ever gets to be too much, you can push this button right here to administer a dose to lessen the pain, okay?”

She nods but doesn’t move to press it. I frown, confused again at her reaction. I feel useless, the person I have known my entire life is sitting in another hospital bed, and I can’t fucking understand what she’s thinking. It sounds ridiculous, but I *know* her. I know her better than I know myself, and I hate that I don’t understand what she’s thinking or going through. I can guess...but it’s not the same as truly knowing someone inside and out. I should be able to complete her sentences, damnit.

Ellis frowns but continues, “Since you are awake and coherent for the most part, I think it’s time you got an update. Would you like them to leave?” He doesn’t look at us, his eyes trained on Eve, waiting for her response. She is his top priority, not the guys who have been hounding his ass for the entirety of our week spent in this cube of white walls.

Her eyes flare, and I wish like hell I was close enough to truly see her flames spark to life. My skin heats; the embers of



my little phoenix being stoked back to life sets me aflame with  
pride and need.

*She will rise.*

## CHAPTER 23

### **Evelyn**

*Do you want them to leave?*

That's gotta be a joke. There is no way my guys are ever leaving me ever again. The thought makes something flare to life inside of me. The same flame that made me stand my ground against Kyle...the one that urged me to fight back and escape.

*No way in hell are they leaving me here alone.*

“No, I want them to stay,” I give myself a mental pat on the back for how strong my words come out. The older man gives me a nod, taking me at my word, thankfully, because I don't have the energy to fight with him over whether I'm sound enough to make that decision.

“My name is Doctor Ellis; feel free to call me Ellis, though. I hear the word doctor way too much around here.” His easy smile and joke have me relaxing a little, in turn making Korren settle.

“When can I go home?” Out of the corner of my eye, I see the other three taking their seats in a few chairs.

“First, I'd like to run a few additional tests before I answer that question with certainty. If everything goes well, you

should be home by Monday.”

I look at Kor, who understands my unanswered question. “It’s Saturday. You have been here for six days,” I listen with rapt attention as his voice cracks, “you were missing for a week before that.”

Gulping, I give him a nod of understanding. Two weeks. That’s how much Kyle has taken from me.

“Evelyn, would you like to know what happened?” I nod and shrug my shoulders, a hiss of pain slides through my teeth at the movement on my right side.

*Why the hell not? It’s not like it could be any fucking worse than the last time.* Plus, I need to figure out what’s wrong with me. Literally, every time I move, I fucking hurt myself.

“Alright, this may be hard to hear, so just let me know if you want me to stop.” I’ve heard that before. “You came in with severe blunt abdominal bruising; your right leg is broken beneath the knee, a dislocated right shoulder, and swelling on the brain.” At the mention of my leg, my attention immediately shifts to the limb I hadn’t even noticed I couldn’t move. Oh my god. I move the sheets, and there it is...my leg from the knee down is in a cast. Tears blur my vision...*he just keeps talking.*

“Would you like me to continue?” I nod, covering myself back up, still holding onto Koko’s firm hand. “You were a severe case of malnourishment and dehydration. The abdominal internal bleeding was due to a damaged spleen, which we had to remove. Ms. Miller...you flatlined during surgery.”

“I DIED?!” My outburst causes Korren to jump; guilt swamps me.

“Your heart did not beat for two minutes and forty-two seconds.”

“Maybe we should stop.” Amiri steps forward, a frown marring his chiseled features. His concern only makes me realize that this is not all there is. There’s more.

“Tell me.” It’s a demand.

“You were in a coma for two days.” My lips part on a gape. “You flatlined the first day.” Ellis stops there for a moment, waiting to see how I handle the news that I died. Twice.

“I died...twice?” I look to each of my men, needing their clarification. At their nods, I shake my head in denial.

Miri runs a finger down my cheek, brushing away the fallen tears. “It’s true, Angel. Ryan and I were right here when it happened.”

My eyes shut on their own accord...it’s too much.

“I’m so sorry.” there is no other way to respond to my family telling me that they physically watched me die in front of them. “I’m so sorry you had to see that. I’m so so so-”

My frantic words are cut off by a hot mouth slipping over mine. Before I register who has me by the neck, Ryan lays his forehead against mine, his own sorrow dripping from his eyes and onto my face.

“Don’t. Don’t apologize for that. We will talk more about that later if you want to but do not apologize to me, baby girl.

It's me that should be sorry for not protecting you or saving you," I go to rebuke his claim when he seals me in another bruising kiss filled with devastation and love. "Later."

Instead of putting space between us, he sits down on my free side, blocking me between him and Korren. I peek at Amiri, silently wishing he would come to sit with me, too. Stepping forward, he leans across Ry and gently kisses me on the corner of my mouth. It's tame but filled with so much feeling. Standing to his full height again, he places himself behind our golden boy and begins to twirl the long strands of my hair around his fingers.

"Shall I continue?" Settled and surrounded by my family, some of my earlier fire comes back. Shooting Ellis a look, I respond, "There's more?"

He chuckles, a sound that's grateful for the emotional reprieve. "You are a very strong woman, Ms. Miller. You also have a very devoted family." He lifts his greying brows. I smirk, knowing the guys definitely pissed him off more than once. "When you are discharged, you will need to be in a wheelchair until your doctor from your hometown can clear you. I would normally send you off with crutches, but the strain it would do on your abdomen would be extensive that way. Wheelchair, bedrest for a week, then restricted movements for about a month or two after, depending on your leg. Your stomach is healing from surgery, and the injuries from the blunt force will take about one to two months as well. Dr. Levine will go over everything with you, as she is listed as an official primary doctor on your file. You will need to make an appointment as soon as possible when you get home; I'll have all records sent to Dr. Levine."

*Well, fuck. Somebody should have been taking notes.*

Nolan chuckles...I guess I said that out loud. “We know what to do, sweet girl, I promise. Plus, he will give us the paperwork. Rest your mind; we will take care of you.”

With two sentences, my best friend set me at ease, allowing me to zone out and begin processing that whole fuck load of medical stuff that was just dumped on me.

“Ms. Miller?” There’s more? “I need to know if you would like a sexual assault exam?”

The male bodies around me stiffen so hard I think they are about to snap. I rush out, “No, thank you.”

“Are you sure?”

I sigh, “I’m well aware of the signs, and there was zero concern of that for the entire week he had me.” My words are straight to the point...this is something my guys really don’t need to worry about. “I promise.” I make sure to look each of them in the eye, attempting to set them at ease.

“Is that all?” I ask the doctor, my eyes beginning to droop once again.

He nods. “Get some rest, Ms. Miller. We will discuss additional side effects and information later. I will schedule some final tests and get you home as soon as I can.”

With that, Doctor Ellis leaves, closing the door behind him. Enclosed in a huddle of muscle, soft touches, and gentle words...I allow my eyes to close, feeling safe in the presence of my family.



“Put me down!”

“Why so you can crawl up the stairs like a damn slug?”

“A slug? I’m pretty sure a slug wouldn’t be able to reach a centimeter off the ground.” I frown at the stairs.

“They could slug their way up the stairs, though.” Ryan nods, acting like that makes sense.

“A slug, slugging up the stairs? What the hell are you talking about?” I scowl up at him, completely distracted from the fact that I did not want to be dragged around like an invalid.

“You know, like with their sticky stomachs or grabby hands or whatever. Like suction cupping their way up the back of the stair! Wait, what are slugs?” His golden brows furrow as we reach the landing.

My head tilts, trying to shake a thought loose, “I don’t know. Aren’t they like mini worms?”

“Oh, my gawd! Ya’ll are making my IQ drop with each damn word you say!”

Ryan’s bright blue eyes lock with mine at the same time our jaws drop at the insult Nolan just threw at us. Turning with me draped across his firm arms, we both land our glares on the asshole framing my bedroom door.

“Excuse you?” Ry’s teasing voice vibrates through my aching back, helping to release some of the tension built up

from being stuck in the car all day. The nap was nice since I was able to enjoy seeing our home again. Propped in my wheelchair, I was ready to start fucking crying until Ryan swooped me up bridal style to get me settled and cleaned up.

Now, here we are, all protests of being carried, washed away because of the distracting turn of conversation. I don't think either of us realized Nolan was trailing behind until he opened his mouth.

Removing his glasses with a roll of his eyes, he lectures, "Slugs are like worms yes, they are about a quarter of an inch and can climb up to six feet." His eyes flick to Ryan. "So yes, you were right. The derailment of your debate was painful, though."

A laugh bursts out of me, completely taking me by surprise. So much so that I wasn't able to prepare my head or gut for the act. Yelping, I grip Ryan's black t-shirt, hoping like hell this side effect will go away soon.

"Shit! Okay giggles, time for some rest and painkillers."

Lying against the pillows of my bed with covers being dragged over me, I swallow back nausea at the thought of taking something that will make me loopy. I'm really tempted to take them just to ease some of the pain in my entire body, but I don't know if they will make me feel the same as whatever Kyle gave me.

"Eve?" My eyes flit up to the pair kneeling before me, silently scolding myself for being so transparent. "What's wrong, baby?"



My throat closes at the same time my chest feels like it's being gripped in a vicious hold. I don't want to talk about this now. We were just having fun with each other, and now Kyle is here, taking away more of my happy moments. I don't feel like I've been set back much in my recovery...but I have yet to actually talk about it. Now faced with questions...I'm finding I might not be as unaffected as I thought. My body is fucked six ways to Sunday, but I had hoped my mind held strong.

A tickle on my cheek brings me out of my swirling thoughts. "What's wrong, Fire?" Staring into the depths of Noly's eyes, some tension in my chest and throat ease...the familiar comfort of knowing that no matter what I say, he won't leave me.

He hasn't ever left me. *They* haven't.

Dragging myself out of Nolan's loving gaze, I settle my sights on Ryan only to be swept up into his affectionate galaxy of blue and silver specks. These men are sitting here, letting me see into the depths of their souls, completely trusting me with whatever I might find. Ryan and Nolan have opened themselves up for me, a show of trust and understanding.

In their eyes, I see the pain and trauma they have endured that their bodies don't show. My men trust me with their deepest heartaches.

*I can too.*

"I-" I'd rather have them read it from my stare. "I don't want any painkillers." I hate the way my eyes drop in fear of them seeing too much right after they bared themselves to me.

Warmth of a finger trailing along the left side of my neck shoots tingles down my spine, making me sit up straighter and my gaze peeking up at them. “Why not?”

“Um-” This is harder than I thought it would be. “He-I was-” *Fuck*. “Sometimes he would use a needle or just a dirty towel...b-but it would make me loopy and sleepy.”

I slam my eyes closed when their fists clench my bedspread; harsh curses fill the air with rage and agitated energy.

It starts in my hands. My wrists clench and flex, followed by a quake in my forearm. My shoulders bunch up to my ears; the ache muted, all senses tunneling into a pit of panic. Losing all control of my body, my arms come up to protect my head as my body falls to the side, protecting my stomach and giving my back to the harshness behind me.

My last thought before reality fades is *I thought I was okay*.

# Chapter 24

## **Amiri**

Tossing the keys onto the counter, I snort at the argument happening on the stairs. Eve's been feisty about us carting her around, but there is literally no other way she can move about right now. Her grumbling was put on pause while she snoozed in the backseat of the SUV.

“Think she will eat something?” Without waiting for Korren to respond, I open the fridge and heave a sigh of relief and appreciation. Mia and Dan returned a day before us and stocked up the fridge so we wouldn't have to worry about anything besides keeping Eve comfortable and happy.

Snagging a prepped bowl of fruit and some cheese, I make a plate to bring upstairs. Unfortunately, she's regressed in her nutritional habits again. I work to unclench my fists; the fact that she was barely fucking fed or given water for an entire week goes against everything inside of me.

Realizing I never got a response from my brother, I turn to find him staring at her wheelchair on the other side of the island. “Kor?”

He jerks and looks over, eyes a little glassy. “Yeah? What? Sorry.” His dark eyebrows pull together while he rubs at the back of his neck. The newest tattoo on his bicep shines when his sleeve rises.

“You okay, man?” Turning to face him fully, I note the purple lining his eyes, the rumpled clothes, and messy hair. Not waiting for his response because I know the answer, I suggest, “Go take a shower. I’m going to bring this up to Evie and see if she will eat anything.”

Grabbing a bottle of water and the plate, I bumped my shoulder against his to get him to move up the stairs. He offers a nod and follows along, allowing me to relax just a bit as he listens.

Just as I reach the landing of the hallway, I hear a panicked Ryan, “Eve? Eve! Baby, it’s okay; we won’t ever hurt you.”

Running the rest of the way to her room, I shoulder through the cracked door, having no idea what to expect. It sure as fuck wasn’t my Angel curled up in a ball on her bed, sobbing and whimpering.

“Fuck!” I hiss as Kor’s body slams into my back, making my hold on the water falter. Ignoring the bottle rolling away, I move my ass to set down the plate of food. “What happened?” My tone is urgent.

My stomach bottoms out when Eve clenches in on herself even tighter, pulling a pained gasp out in between her cries. Korren shoots me a glare filled with rage at my poor behavior. I can’t help the anxiety and sorrow burning through my common sense...I just can’t stand seeing her like this. Afraid of us.

The two kneeling by the bed aren't much better, their hands running all over her, trying to get her to come back to us with their rushed murmuring. I take a cautious step forward, not wanting to be the reason she does more damage to her body.

“Move,” reverting back to one-word demands, Korren nudges Nol and Ryan away from the bed. Standing and moving away from her looks like it's causing them physical pain.

The amount of stress and fear in the room coil around my heart, making me ache to take away all the pain my family is suffering.

Their stricken expressions have me reaching out to them. A grunt slips from me when they both unexpectedly launch themselves into my chest. Being the tallest and the widest of us, I easily hold them in my arms. I can almost hear the shattering of my soul when they both let out twin sobs of anguish.

I can't stop the tear that drips off my chin and into Nolan's curls. I hold on tight to my brothers on the far side of the room while we watch Korren move around to the side of the bed Eve is facing.

We don't dare make a sound as he gently places one knee on the bed; the dipping of the mattress jostles a choke out of Eve. Ryan jolts in my arms, wanting to go to her, but I hold tight, knowing that my brother has this. He has always been her safe place...the one who can pull her out of the darkness of her trauma.

Now flat on his back, Korren lies still, his head tilted in her direction to watch her. I don't know how long I hold my damn breath waiting for something to happen besides her cries and pain-filled squeaks. It feels like a fucking eternity until her sounds die down, and her head lifts, eyes immediately landing on Korren.

I feel the guys release a relieved breath, their shoulders drooping and more of their body weight leaning into me. I gently push them up and nod to the door when their attention fixates on me behind them.

Shooting a final look at Eve, now curled against Korren, we quietly close her bedroom door behind us, hoping she will settle. The walk back down to the kitchen is tense and silent, waiting until we are far enough away to not disturb her.

“What happened?” My whisper is unintentionally small, the emotion blocking my voice box from working properly.

A throat clearing has me looking up from where I was staring at the counter. Ryan and Nolan exchange a loaded glance. “We asked if she wanted any painkillers,” Nolan's voice is hushed as well. “Um, then she kind of shut down. We asked what was wrong. She was silent for a while; then she told us-” he cuts off, his tears getting the best of him.

“She told us he drugged her to keep her sleepy and compliant.”

My head whips over to Ryan; his eyes latched onto his struggling boyfriend. “What? How did we not know this?”

“We did know this; we literally saw the needles, Amiri. The details are probably in the file of paperwork he gave Eve.

It might have been something the doctor left for her to talk to us about.” Nolan’s head drops at Ryan’s guess.

*Son of a bitch!*

“If he didn’t discuss everything with us, does that mean there’s more?” The words are bordering on a yell, but I’m fucking livid. How am I supposed to take care of her if I don’t know everything that happened?

Snapping his narrowed gaze to mine, I pause at the fury I find in his blue eyes. “Be quiet!” Ryan’s hiss makes me gulp. “I get it’s terrifying not knowing everything that she went through, but Eve is entitled to any privacy she desires. Hell, if I went through something as fucking awful as she has, I wouldn’t want everyone knowing all the shit that happened before I even have a chance to come to terms with it myself. That woman up there deserves the opportunity to make her own decisions. We will not take that away from her. She has had enough of her choices stripped away to last a thousand lifetimes. If she chooses to share, then we will support her. And if she doesn’t want to share, then we will...” He trails off, waiting for me to fill in the blank like the asshole I am.

“Support her.”

He gives me a firm nod, his hard expression fading away into lines of exhaustion. “We all need to shower; let’s go.” He ushers Nolan toward the stairs and into his bedroom while I drag my feet to mine.

Ryan scolding me like that was a shock. His taking control was even more eye-opening, as that is usually my role in our family. Our silly golden retriever stepped up to keep me grounded when I couldn’t.

Stripping out of my grubby clothes, I step into the steaming shower. One deep breath in, another stuttering breath out. Water flies from my lips, my head hanging forward under the spray.

*Deep breath...and out.*

“Never again,” I vow into the hot water. Never again will Eve be taken from us. Never again will she know the pain of hunger or the dreariness of thirst.

My Angel is home now, and she’s fucking staying.



## **Korren**

It takes so much goddamn willpower to keep my body lax and calm underneath Eve’s shaking form. As soon as she realized it was me lying next to her, she latched onto my shirt and burrowed her way into my neck.

I have spent many nights with her in my arms, hugging me like a lifeboat. Pride niggles in my mind at how safe she feels with me. This moment reminds me too much of her panic attack at Thanksgiving, though. Eve has come so far since last August, but her being at the hands of that monster may have set her back.

We will have to relearn her trauma and PTSD responses in order to keep her healing process moving forward. My gut twists, the sounds of her whimpers still echoing in my mind as her body contorted in pain. This won’t be easy, but I believe in my little fighter. How could I not? She has survived the worst



the world has to offer, yet here she is, curled tight around me, her breaths puffing against my collarbone.

With her breathing evened out, I forgo asking any questions, hoping like hell she will fall asleep and get some much-needed rest. When she wakes up, she better eat, though. The bone of her dainty elbow digs into my ribs, and I swear I can feel the outline of her breastbone against my side, too.

*Too thin. Too slow. Too late.*

No.

*Almost too late.*

We made it just in time. *Just in time for her to die twice*, the nasty thought strikes like a viper. Poison slips into my veins, freezing my life's essence in place.

*You let her die.*

My throat closes up, ice stealing my breath away at the realization that it's true. Had I been faster, maybe none of that would have happened to her. Maybe if *I* did something better...if *I* was better. I didn't do enough to keep her safe...*I wasn't enough*. The thoughts rip through my brain like shards of ice, cutting themselves into the recesses of my mind.

A huffed grunt next to me has me panicking when I realize I just gripped her tighter. Fuck. Self-hating thoughts tack onto the hard truth that I could have done more. I should have done more. *Why didn't I do more?*

"I'm here."

My breath catches at Evie's soft voice by my ear. This beautiful woman just fucking comforted me after having a

painful panic attack. And here I sit, dumbfounded at the wonderful human in my arms.

“You saved me.”

Her hand releases my shirt and skates down my abs, a soothing gesture meant to calm my racing thoughts. She doesn't realize that my thoughts are now swarmed with admiration and awe for her.

“Not soon enough,” I can't help but deny her words...I don't deserve for her to think of me as a fucking hero.

“You are enough.”

Everything in my body hums at her words. My deepest insecurity. In the comedown of her own emotional storm, she heard my own inner turmoil. She felt my pain and hurtful thoughts.

“I love you.”

My eyes burn at each declaration she makes; her affirming words of love allow my tears their freedom from the confines of the negative hold they were trapped in. A fire of love and understanding thaws the harmful ice in my veins.

“I love you, little fighter,” my voice cracks, but it's not the ripping of my heart that causes the sound. It's the pieces sliding back together to form its first real *thump* of life because there is no life without Eve.

My heart begins its steady rhythm beneath the cheek of the woman it beats for.

## Chapter 25

**Evelyn**

*Pop.*

“Mmm,” vibrations rumble through my stretched throat. Another crack in my neck has me releasing a sigh at the release. Pairing my early morning stretch with the first rays of sunshine kissing my skin, I feel at peace.

I curled out of bed not long ago. Somehow, I managed not to wake the snoring hulk next to me. Guilt twists my aching stomach; he must have stayed with me all night. Warm cheese and wilted fruit on my makeup vanity told me enough; he didn't even leave my bed to eat something. Someone brought my wheelchair upstairs, and while trying to shimmy my way into it, I woke up a sleepy Amiri sleeping by the door. He was silent when he scooped me up with a whispered, “What do you need?”

Scanning the backyard, I enjoy the gentle breeze that plays with my hair. I take in the soft cushion beneath my casted leg while the left one swings back and forth off the edge of the chair. I enjoy the freedom of this simple moment. I want to stay like this forever. Twinkling chirps of swooping birds, the steady thumping of my heart beating, the separation of my

ankles...I want to stay in my quiet space of freedom forever. Even if one of my legs is trapped in a cast.

I am beyond happy at being home and with my family again, but I just need myself now. I died. Twice. Me. I know they suffered through it as well, and I would never minimize what they went through. I need to figure out how to process it, though. And that means getting out of bed when I can't sleep and watching the sunrise on a new day. Alone.

"I miss you, Momma." The breeze carries my whisper away. I hold on to hope that she can hear me. "How am I supposed to do this? I don't know where to begin." I close my eyes for a blink but decide that watching the world come to life around me was the whole reason I came out here.

I need to feel beauty.

"Was it really you, Mom?" I haven't been able to stop thinking about my dreams during, well, everything.

I flatlined twice...was I really with my mom during those minutes of death?

Never have I been so lucid when I disassociate...were those memories and moments with my mom what everyone talks about? During death, memories of the life you lived flash through your mind.

Niggling in the back of my brain jump-starts my thought process a bit faster. A shitty side effect from the coma, drugs, and bleeding is bound to make me a bit sluggish.

The replay of my date with the guys runs on replay in my mind, but not the real parts. No, everything took a turn when

Mom arrived in the parking lot. She was frantic, pleading with me to listen to her.

*“I need you to listen to me, Evie!” She takes a step forward just as a chill runs through my body. I take a step back, uncertainty rattling through my bones. “Eve, no!” She yells just as I slip my hand from Amiri’s loose grasp.*

*The effect is immediate; my body loses all palpability at the same time, ice shoots through my veins, and my eyes roll back into my head.*

*My last thought before the memory shuts down is how nice it was to hear her voice, even if it wasn’t real.*

Was she warning me not to let go of Amiri? Was he my final lifeline I was holding on to?

I shiver, remembering the fantom chills of the pit of darkness. When I let go of Mir, did I die? Pressure behind my eyes has me furiously blinking away the moisture building. No more crying right now. I have to keep thinking...I need to make sense of this.

The last time I saw her, the guys weren’t there; it wasn’t a memory. It was something else altogether. I wanted to stay with her so bad I could still feel the stabbing pain in my heart and the pull on my soul that still reaches out to her.

*“Momma, no, please. I want to stay with you!” I held on to her for dear life.*

*“And they need you to stay with them. It’s not your time yet, Evie. You have so much life to live that’s not filled with darkness. I’m so so so sorry for not finding you. But I am so fucking proud of you, Evelyn Faye Miller. You saved yourself,*

*and you will not lose hope this time either. Those men out there, they haven't given up on you, so please, baby. Please, don't give up on yourself." She cried and held me back just as firmly.*

*"What's happening?" My tummy flutters, and my muscles spasm, remembering the pain and brutality that felt like it was ripping my body apart.*

*"You're waking up." Momma smiled through her own sorrow and heartbreak. "Evelyn, I love you so much. You can do this."*

*My throat burns, the screams and cries I let loose are still fresh in my body.*

*Her dainty hands gripped my cheeks while she looked deep into my eyes. "I love you. It's time to wake up now, little one. Live."*

*I begged her not to leave me. I whimpered from the pain of my body being ripped apart and put back together. I told her how much I loved her, right as everything began to fade.*

*"I will always be with you..."*

I refuse to believe the warm weight on my shoulder is just my imagination. Even if my mind was just making shit up as I died on that table and in the hospital bed...Camila Miller would have said all those things. She would have begged me to live; she would have done everything in her power to see me in my final moments and resurrect my tired body.

"Always with me." I lift my left hand and place it over my right shoulder. My hushed words are carried to the heavens, a

message and a promise for my soul mate who watches over me.

“Eve?”

I gasp and spin in my seat. My nails dig into my shoulder at the sharp bite of pain the twist of my body made in my panic.

“Oh, hi.” My cheeks heat in embarrassment at how I reacted to my Miri. “I’m sorry.” I absolutely despise the fact that I’m the reason his brows dip. “I-” he cuts me off from apologizing again.

“Why are you apologizing?” Taking the seat next to me, he gently places a palm on the knee, swinging my foot back and forth. The touch sends heat shooting from my thigh and up to my core.

“Uh,” what did he ask me?

“Why did you apologize, Angel?”

I drop my gaze from the chocolate of his irises. “I felt bad for startling so easily, again, I guess.” That sounded far less stupid in my head. Cringing at myself, I pick at a scab on my shoulder.

“What would not have startled you if I was coming to join you?”

His question makes me frown, truly thinking over what would have made me less afraid. “I didn’t know you were there, so making more noise before you got so close might have helped.”

He nods like I'm not crazy. "I can do that. You hungry?" Slowly leaning forward, he grips the wrist of the hand that's scratching at my shoulder. My breath catches when he lays a soft kiss on my palm.

"I-" This man has me under some kind of fucking spell. Everything has felt different since I came out of the coma, so I'm not sure where we all stand. Looking back on all of our interactions, though, they are acting the same, if not a bit gentler. I'm not mad about the extra care because the uncertainty dimming my actions is a battle I can't fight alone.

I am mad about the manhandling, though. Just as I go to decline breakfast, I'm scooped up into his strong arms and wide chest. A pulse in my core diverts my attention from my irritation. His abs ripple against my ass, and his dark skin shimmers in the early morning light. I'm so distracted by how his body feels against mine that a whimper of loss escapes my lips when he sets me down on the counter.

The smirk he gives me should be illegal on a man as sweet as he is. "What's wrong, sweet girl?"

Um, fucking swoon? I swear I hear all the women around the world hooting and hollering for this panty-melting display.

His infectious smile has my own lips kicking up. "I just missed you, Amiri." My heartfelt honesty draws him back into my embrace. With his head tucked against my neck, he peppers my pulse with tantalizing kisses like he's thanking the thumping of my blood pumping through my veins.

I ignore the aches in my body when I arch into his towering form. "I missed you too, Angel. So, fucking much." The words he doesn't say are thrown into the kiss he captures



my mouth in. Without words, he pours his love into me. His adoration and devotion sing through his subtle moans, which I return in earnest.

Drawing away slowly, he huffs a laugh when I follow his plump lips. He gives me a final peck, promising more kisses once I eat something. I don't tell him I'm not hungry because...well, I want kisses!

I'm so damn sick of hurting. I want to feel the bond we have all built together...I'm not made of glass. I have some really messed up shit I must work through; we all do, but I fought with everything I had. I am not weak. I may be little, but I am a fighter. My mom's little fighter. Their little fighter.

Speaking of the nickname "EVELYN!" The shout is far enough away not to send me into a complete panic attack, but no matter how many times I try to call back, my voice is stuck behind a ball of anxiety lodged in my throat.

Rushing to my side, Amiri grabs my bony hip and warns me with a look. At my nod, he yells, "Down here!"

Mentally, I give myself a pat on the back for not flinching at his raised voice. He gave me enough warning, but if I don't count my wins, even the small ones, I won't have anything to be proud of.

"Eve?" The loud question bounces down the stairs before the man does. Korren is still dressed in his clothes from yesterday and looks just like how I left him. Except now, his calm, serene features are replaced with fear and alarm. "Eve!"

Before I can even think about cowering away from the man running towards me, Amiri steps into his path with a hand

to his heaving chest. “Calm. Down.” I can’t see much besides the back of Miri’s buzzed head, but the tension in the air might as well be why the sausages crackling on the stove.

“Move.”

“No.” My dark boyfriend stands firm.

The standoff continues, making my anxiety increase the longer their agitation grows. “It’s okay, Amiri.” I hope my acceptance and soft voice will snap him out of their brotherly battle.

“You don’t need to deal with his aggressive energy, Eve.” He doesn’t look back at me, yet I can see his jaw grinding from my spot on the counter. I would jump down and place myself between them if I could.

“I would never hurt her!” Korren’s eyes widen at the same time his shoulders droop in defeat. Hurt lines his face at misunderstanding his brother.

“That’s not what I meant. Of course, you would never hurt her, but your energy might be startling or too much right now. Understand?” Dropping his hand, Mir steps to the side, allowing Kor to pass.

His strides are calm now, even a bit hesitant, as he closes the space between us. Placing himself between my legs, he brings his hands up to grip the sides of my neck with his thumbs holding my chin high. “You know I would never hurt you, right?”

“I know,” I whisper and close the distance between our parted lips. He needs me to make the first step, just like Amiri knew I needed him to show his affection first. Korren was my

last first kiss all those months ago because he didn't want to rush me or make me feel uncomfortable.

As our tongues slowly dance around each other slowly, I know I made the right call. My big, strong protector would never do something he wasn't sure I really wanted. Hands still caging my neck, I encourage him to give in a little more with a tiny nibble on his bottom lip. I smirk at the rumbly growl he lets out before angling my head to deepen the kiss.

He devours me and presses his body snugly against mine. My core flutters with anticipation and excitement. I'm so fucking glad this part of me wasn't damaged again...it's been the hardest to move forward with. In the arms of my men, though, I'm safe, cherished, and loved. A few of them might have dominant streaks, but they make it well known that I have all the control.

Thumping on the stairs and a fork clanking on the counter slowly draw my attention back to my surroundings. Just in time, too. "Oo, me next!"

Breaking away from Korren, I let loose an airy giggle at the way he growls at Ryan, trying to push him away. "Share," Ry whines and play bites at the air between them.

"I'm not a toy."

"And I'm not a golden retriever, yet we all play the parts pretty well, huh?" A bark of laughter behind Ryan sets my own guffaw loose.

Grumbling to himself, Korren moves out of the way for Ryan to swoop in and slide his hands around my waist. A little

squeak slips free when his cold hand brushes the skin underneath my t-shirt.

“She even squeaks!” Nolan pops up next to the man between my legs. I mock glare at him. “Good morning, Evie.”

All the dog jokes fade away when his lips kiss my jaw, and his glasses bump my cheekbones. Locking eyes with me, he waits for permission before he kisses me. I give him a nod after realizing I am not overwhelmed yet. This is needed.

He swoops in, one hand wrapped around Ryan and the other cradling the back of my neck. Just as our tongues touch, he draws away, but before I can pout, he pulls my neck towards our boyfriend instead.

I gasp at the nip Ryan leaves on my lip before he parts my mouth, seeking entrance. Just as fast as it started, it ends. Nuzzling my nose with his, his blue eyes shine with emotion. “I love you, Eve. I missed y-you,” his voice cracking is even more heartbreaking when a tear drops from his long lashes.

“I love you too, Ryan,” my voice is a murmur, wanting to keep this moment between the two of us. “I missed you.”

I just hope it’s all over now.

# Chapter 26

## **Evelyn**

“Have you heard from Smith or Brown?”

Korren’s hushed question behind the wall that is Noly and Ryan makes my spine snap straight. Did the brothers really think I would be too distracted to hear their damn conversation?

“Yeah, they are coming by later with an update and to see Eve.” Amiri’s voice is just as quiet, making my hackles rise. I wish I had a working leg right about now so I could march over there.

Instead, I push the other two out of my space so I can hit the two whisperers with a glower. “And when were you going to tell me about this?” Now, my back isn’t the only one to jerk into alertness.

“Eve-”

“No,” I cut Nolan off, “I want to hear from them why they are whispering about something that involves *me* when I’m right here.” A small tremor begins in my hand at the confrontation. Fuck.

“We didn’t want to upset you, Angel.”

I scoff, “You aren’t doing a good job of that.” I despise the way my voice shakes. My muscles clench where I’m propped up on the counter, making my stomach squeeze in pain.

“I’m sorry, we just weren’t sure when to talk to you about all of...that.” Korren waves his hand in my general direction.

I honestly don’t know how I’m supposed to feel about that statement. I’m kind of fucking offended by the way he said it...like it’s something dirty. Like I’m dirty.

“Right, well, *that* is my business no matter how you feel about it.” All four of them go to speak, but before they can utter a syllable, I continue, “What time will Smith and whoever else be here?”

Nolan and Ry decide to stay quiet, smart boys, and Korren looks to his brother. He sighs, “Eve-”

“What time?” I clench my jaw, trying to hold back the anger raging through me. The anger isn’t normal. It’s all just been too much. I’m fucking tired.

“Around four...” he trails off, his lips turning down in a frown.

“Kay, I’d like to rest. Nolan, can you bring me upstairs, please?” My throat closes immediately after I choke the words out, my emotions strangling me from the inside. I curse myself when a tear tickles my cheek before Noly whisks me away from the kitchen. He doesn’t say anything, thankfully. Instead, he gently tucks me into bed and finds a water bottle to place on my nightstand.

His lingering kiss on my cheek makes the tears fall faster. With my lamp on and the overhead light off, he gently closes

my bedroom door.

I fight to hold my breath, but it's a losing battle. A loud sob explodes out of me, filling the room with my emotional torment.

Blanketed in my sorrow, I slip into a heavy sleep, one I hope will wash away the shitty events of my life.

I'm just so tired.



## **Ryan**

“Fuck!” Korren’s yell has me pursing my lips in agitation. Seriously, what the hell is up with these two? Normally, they are far more collected and less eager to let anger get the best of them. It’s not good for our girl right now.

His darker counterpart is no better as he stabs the eggs half to death, muttering curse words under his breath.

“Guys, calm down.” Footsteps on the staircase draw my attention to Nolan making his way down, except he stops mid-stride halfway down. A horrified look crosses his face before his body turns to look back. “What’s wrong, babe?”

His head snaps back to look at me so fast I internally cringe. “She’s crying. Can you not hear that?” My chest twinges when his wide eyes fill with a shimmer of tears and guilt. A question lingers in them, one he doesn’t know how to express right now.

“Go lay down with her, Nolan; it’s okay.” I avoid looking behind me at the two who caused this mess. Why couldn’t they have fucking waited for Eve to leave the room or, I don’t know, texted each other?

My man still hasn’t moved from his hesitant spot on the staircase. I frown up at him once I make my way out of the kitchen. “Will you come with me?” I swear everything inside of me melts at his whimpered question. I don’t know where his anxiety is coming from specifically, but if both of my loves need me, then you bet your ass I will be there.

“Come on. I need a snuggle.” The other two can figure their shit out. Eve hasn’t been home for even twenty-four hours, and we keep messing up left and right. At this rate, she should just be eating and sleeping, not dealing with any of the bullshit the world around her has to offer.

*Smith and Brown better have some good fucking news, though.*

“Careful where you point that thing.” I give Nolan a gentle slap on his tight ass wagging in my face.

“Hey!” The smirk he sends me over his shoulder lights up my entire fucking world with fireworks. Thank fuck I can still make him smile.

Snagging his belt loop before he can take the left down the hallway to Eve’s room, I tug him, so his back is plastered to my chest. I bend and nuzzle behind his ear, having to hold back my groan at how his breath snags in his throat. My hands trail their way around his sides and latch around his waist.

“Everything is going to be okay, my love.”



“You don’t know that,” his words tumble out on an exhale as his body deflates into mine. The firmness of his pert ass sinks into my hips, encouraging my feet to widen to accommodate his perfect body.

“I do know. Want to know why?” I don’t hold back the urge to nip at his earlobe. I also don’t wait for him to respond; he needs to listen. “I know everything will be okay because our Evie is home and in her warm bed. I know because, while she may be crying, she also has a family wanting to hold her and help her through this. We may not know or understand everything she is going through, but none of us will allow her to go through it alone. Do you hear me?”

He sucks in a shuddering breath and makes my own chest rumble with emotion. “Remember what I told you when she first came home? Evelyn is not broken; she is stronger than we give her credit for.” I drop a kiss on his jaw and continue, “Don’t forget that our woman has survived unspeakable things and still has the capacity for love, kindness, and laughter.”

I can tell by the way his shoulder blades relax against my chest that what I said has settled some of his worries. A soft moan slips out when he turns in my hold, making his ass graze my cock. *God damnit.* Nol’s huff of laughter and his own tented shorts are all I need to know he is just as affected by me as I am by him.

“I love you.” I bite my lip when I catch sight of his dilated eyes and barely manage to hold in my snarl of need when he presses his front against me, our dicks creating the friction they so desperately need.

“I love you too,” my words come out scratchy and filled with desire. Just as I slant my lips over his, a hushed whimper from across the hall has me pulling back before anything can truly begin. “You okay now?”

He nods, fresh tears peeking through his lashes. “Thank you,” he whispers. “Let’s go cuddle our girl.”

I couldn’t agree more.

Taking the lead, I gently knock on her door and press my ear to it, trying to hear if she tells us to go away. I hear nothing, so I open the door and just about burst into tears at the sight before me.

*Is this how Amiri and Korren felt last night when they walked in to see her panicking?*

“Sweetheart?”

No answer.

Looking up at Nolan, we share a silent conversation...I take the left. He takes the right. “I need cuddles,” he murmurs as he slides under the covers beside her.

“Me too, baby girl. It’s cuddle time.” She doesn’t protest when I slide my arms under her and draw her onto my chest. A small sigh ripples my shirt, putting me at ease that she’s comfortable with us being here right now. Just as her body begins to melt into me, Nolan’s hand snakes underneath her waist, drawing a huffed gasp out of me at the warm touch his knuckles make on my exposed side.

I narrow my eyes at him over her head when he giggles and jostles all three of us with his shaking shoulders. I’m

about to shush him because we came in here to cuddle and comfort our girl, not fuck around, but Eve beats me to it.

“Stop shaking the bed,” her voice is muffled by my chest, causing my own shoulders to shake at how pouty she sounds. Damn it, we were supposed to be quiet and relaxing for her. “Stoop,” she draws out the ‘o’ so much that we can’t contain ourselves any longer. Lifting her head off my shoulder, her sleepy eyes glare up at me, except they lack the fire of her anger from earlier.

“Sorry, baby. You’re just so cute when you whine.” I smirk when Nolan loudly snorts and buries his face between her shoulder blades.

Her pursed lips huff at me, “Were you laughing at me, to begin with?” My humor shutters when her golden eyes drop, and her voice fades away. On the other side of her, Nolan’s head snaps back with a frown.

“No,” I rush to say, “Nolan laughed at me, Eve, I promise.” That sparks something in her, and damn if it doesn’t make me hard.

Turning a glare on the man at her back, she defends me, “That’s not nice. Why were you laughing at him?”

“Uh-” He looks to me for help, but I only offer a satisfied smirk. I love how she’s standing up for me even if it’s not necessary; he was just being a goof.

Her scowl deepens. “Oh, it’s okay, Eve. He was just being a little tease, is all.” The downturn of her lips turns into a twist of curiosity. Then her eyes flare. “What’s that look for?” I can’t look away from her flushed cheeks.

Nol shimmies a tad beside her, and I know he's trying desperately to hold himself back from devouring her. She just looks so damn innocent and sweet, with her hair fanned out behind her and the redness of embarrassment creeping up to her hairline. When her tiny teeth poke out and fiddle with the scar on her bottom lip, I about lose it right then and there like a fucking teenage boy.

“Words.” Fuck, I love how Nol lets his dominant side out with her.

“I-how did he tease you?” Her blown pupils prod at me, begging for an answer.

“Mm, you really want to know?”

Fuck, this isn't a good idea. Eve has a broken fucking leg, is healing from abdominal surgery, and was in a fucking coma on top of everything else. And yet, the way her eyes are sparkling at me shows that she is feeling alive in this moment. She's here. With me. With us and not trapped in some swirling dark pit of emotion and memories.

“Yes, please.”

*Ah, fuck.* Her begging is so pretty.

Slowly lifting the hem of her shirt to expose her bony hip, I watch for any hesitation on her face. When I find none, I drop my head into the crook of her neck. “He wrapped his arms around you and brushed his fingertips, oh so gently, right,” my fingers dance along the soft patch of skin as my voice deepens, “here.”

“Does it feel nice, little Phoenix? The way his fingers tickle along the edge of your waistline?” At Nolan's question,

she responds with an airy hum of pleasure. “Eye’s open.” I nip at her neck just as he scolds her.

Lifting my head, I watch her lip’s part on another gasp. Goosebumps follow my fingers across the line of her shorts, begging for my attention. On the way back, I slightly dip beneath the waistband and absolutely relish the way her hips tilt into my hand, demanding more. Until a pained whimper stabs me in the fucking heart.

Yanking my hands away from her, I pant from panic instead of arousal. “Shit, Eve! I’m so sorry,” my frantic apology is overlapped by Nolan’s worry, “are you okay?”

*Fuck, fuck, fuck!*

Her stuttered breath makes me feel like a complete asshole for riling her up to the point of pain. I can’t even give her the release she needs right now because of how much it would hurt her.

“I’m not okay.” My heart fucking shatters at her admittance. “I’m so damn horny now, you assholes.” Nolan’s giggle kickstarts my blood pumping, but confusion settles on my conscience.

“Why are you laughing? We hurt her!” If it wouldn’t jostle Eve, I’d shove him.

“I’m fine, Ryan.” Her tiny hand cups my cheek, drawing my attention back down to her gentle smile and tired eyes. “I liked it, and I can’t wait until I can actually handle that.” She blushes a fierce shade of pink at how open she’s being.

I nod at her, but I’m still annoyed with my laughing boyfriend. “Why are you laughing, Nolan?” The use of his real

name on my lips has him calming down enough to actually give me a damn answer. I about had a heart attack over here because of how careless we were with our injured girlfriend. Thinking with our dicks is not okay right now.

“I’m sorry, I just don’t think I’ve ever heard you say the word ‘horny’ before, Eve. You took me by surprise.” He drops a kiss on her forehead. “And I can’t wait either, my love. Rest now.”

My frown smooths out at his reasoning and gentle words. Before I know it, Eve clutches the bunched blanket back up to her chest, a soft snore sounding in the space between the three of us.

“Love you,” he mouths to me before settling back into the pillows and petting her head gently.

Unable to fall asleep, I lean against the headboard to watch over the most important people in my life.

“Love you,” I whisper not just to one but to both of the wonderful people who own my heart and soul.

# Chapter 27

## **Korren**

I could puke. Like, I'm physically fucking nauseous. De-ja-vu is a goddamn bitch, and that's just me. I can't imagine what's going through Eve's mind right now. Somehow, I managed to hide the fork I just bent in half from everyone when she flinched at the sound of a knock on the door. The garbage was right below me, so I guess it wasn't all that impressive.

Fuck. She's been so damn quiet all day since she woke up from her nap with the guys. Her face is utterly blank whenever I've apologized or tried to get her to look at me. I feel like a jackass for feeling better at the observation of seeing her treating Ryan and Nolan the same as my brother and I.

She deserves better...smiles, laughter...sunshine. Glaring at the wheelchair that she's been hauling herself around in since she came down, I make my way to greet our guests. She's been so adamant that she doesn't want to be held, nor does she want the detectives to be in her bedroom while they speak with her.

I swear, if she weren't the love of my life, I'd tie her to the damn bed so she would actually listen to the doctor's fucking

orders.

If I had another fork, I would stab the wall with it. My frustrations and helplessness are making me feel like I'm losing control. My girlfriend won't speak to me, she's injured so bad she should be lying in bed, yet she's too damn stubborn to stay in her room, and I have two fucking detectives waiting at our door to deliver news on the case that we haven't heard anything about in almost a week.

My deep breath is forced as I pull open the door to reveal a casual Dominic in jeans and a polo with his salt-and-pepper hair slicked away from his face. Beside him, Detective Brown's blonde hair falls freely around her cheeks and her blouse-covered shoulders. The bright yellow of her shirt and light jeans paint her in a completely different light than when she's in mission mode.

*Who are these people?*

"I'll still kick your ass in flip-flops, boy."

"Sweet Jesus! Brown is wearing flip-flops. Get the guns; we have an imposter!"

And just like that, the tension drains from my shoulders. A huff of laughter from my chest surprises me.

"I may be wearing denim, but did you know a gun still fits in them?" Smith cocks a brow at Ryan hovering in the doorway with me.

"Does it go up your butt...because your name-" My hand slaps over his mouth, cutting off whatever crap he was about to spew.



“Please, come in.” Still censoring Ry with my palm, I walk him backward into the house and deposit him next to a wheezing Nolan. I doubt he will keep his boyfriend from lipping off, but Amiri is close enough to them that it’s safe to assume he won’t offend anyone.

“Would you like a water?” Amiri asks, not fucking realizing he was on puppy duty and walking across the space and into the kitchen.

Silence.

*Fuck.*

While I was so distracted with Ryan, I didn’t think to check on Eve sitting at the dining room table. Her bloodshot eyes are darting back and forth between the two people who helped save her life. We haven’t told her everything that happened on our end, and she hasn’t asked. I think she fears the answers we might give. Nobody has mentioned Kyle around her, either.

“Good to see you again, Ms. Miller.” Smith doesn’t move to her, respectful of boundaries he may not know of.

“Hi,” she whispers, a tear dripping from her eyelashes.

My heart thunders in my chest; the unknown powerlessness of this interaction is freaking me out beyond belief. We haven’t heard anything about Kyle yet; our focus has been on Eve. What if he’s still out there?

“Ms. Miller, I’m Detective Brown; you can call me Lisa, though. Dominic’s partner.”

I think we all double-blink at finding out her first name, but that piece of information flies away when Eve scoots back

and wheels her way around the table toward Brown. Lip still trembling, she stops a few feet away from the detective duo and stretches out a palm.

“Please don’t call me that; Eve is good.” That’s the first I’ve heard her dislike being called by her last name. I file that away for another time to analyze.

Crouching in front of her, Lisa meets her outreached palm and gives Eve a small, watery smile of her own. “We got him, Eve. Kyle will never hurt you ever again.”

My little fighter shatters before my eyes. Her grip on Brown is firm as she draws it to her heaving chest, lurching the blonde woman into her. Careful of her injuries, she wraps Eve in her arms like a mother would. Hushed words are traded back and forth between the women, shedding tears on each other’s shoulders.

My own eyes burn at the display of relief and support... this is what we all need to move forward. Sniffles can be heard across the room from each of us. Smith catches my eye and moves toward me, completely taking me by surprise when he gives me a clap on the shoulder and a wide smile.

“You did good, Korren.”

“Thank you,” my gratitude comes out choked; the validation from the lead detective on Evelyn’s case is far more than I ever could have asked for.

Dazed and teary, I hardly notice Dom making his rounds to the rest of my brothers, offering them hugs and hushed words. My eyes are locked on my woman in the wheelchair, silently

sobbing into Lisa's shoulder. I make out the words "thank you" murmured repeatedly into the yellow fabric.

Eve doesn't realize how much we all need to thank her for never losing hope. She fought for her life, and even when her heart gave out, she continued to fight.

She deserves all the thank you's in the entire world because we would cease to exist without her.

Our phoenix would have been joined by four piles of ashes right alongside her.



## **Evelyn**

"Please tell me what happened?"

I don't know what it is about Lisa being here tonight, but she has set me completely at ease, and I feel that no matter what, she will always have my back. Something about her energy speaks to me on a molecular level, making me instantly trust her.

Her hand settles on my right shoulder, a warmth radiating from her palm that makes a fresh wave of tears threaten to choke me out of breath.

*She reminds me of Momma.*

Almost sisterly. Lisa would never be a replica of my mom, nor would she ever replace her, but her aura and how she has interacted with me, reminds me of Camila Miller. No, sorry, fuck that.

Camila *Yvonne*.

No longer will my father take up any space in my life or my mom's. The surname Miller means absolutely nothing to me anymore.

“Why don't we get comfortable, and we can chat just us girls? How does that sound?” Lisa can't be more than fifteen years older than me, but her caring demeanor is exactly what I need. I give her a nod with a small smile, and the next thing I know, Korren has me swooped up in his arms and depositing me on the couch.

With a blanket firmly wrapped around me and a bottle of water, I'm left alone with Lisa faster than I can tell him, ‘Thank you.’

“Big sap, that one,” her joke makes me giggle hard enough that I have to bite back my wince of pain.

“He's a softy,” I agree with a wistful sigh. “Can you tell me what happened now? Nobody has said anything about it.”

“Sure, Eve, but are you sure you want to know? It wasn't pretty. I almost kicked the alphahole vibes right out of all of your guys.” Her huff of indignation lightens the weight on my chest a bit.

“Yes, I need to know.” I do. I really do. Because while I was fighting so damn hard to get home, I need to know the other side of the story as well.

And so she does.

I don't interrupt, too stunned by everything she tells me. From the guys demanding to be involved in the hunt, to their determination to find me the entire time. The forest from hell

to the moment they took off to catch Kyle and left my guys behind. At that point, I almost lose my shit, but the guilty look on her face and the way her voice drops a few octaves has me biting my tongue.

“When we got the call that Korren found you-”

At that, I can't hold back my horrified gasp, “He-he found me?”

Her nod is solemn. “Yeah, Eve. You fell off a cliff and dropped about eight feet. A ledge off the face of the cliff broke your fall. Korren found you lying there and climbed down with Amiri after they called in reinforcements. By the time we got there, they had all seen you.”

I swallow back the bile threatening to burn my throat raw. “Oh my God.” My eyes search out the guys, desperate to see their faces after learning all this happened to them. Yes, *to them*. Because while I had my own traumatizing experience, my men had their own.

A boisterous laugh leaves Ryan just as a loud snort leaves Amiri, seemingly at the expense of Detective Smith. My other two guys are holding back their own huffs of laughter. My heart immediately warms at the sight of all of them getting their dopamine in. Fuck knows I haven't been a good source for them.

“They really love you, Eve.”

Flicking my gaze back to Lisa, I give her a wobbly smile. “I know, I love them too. Thank you for looking after them and keeping them in line.”

She groans and rolls her eyes, “Listen, I totally understand the overprotective bullshit, but I get enough of that from my own men.”

“What?!” My screech is barely fucking contained because...OH MY HELL. “You have a harem?!” I whisper yell, gripping the blanket to my tummy, telling the wounds that I hear their pain, and I’ll try to control myself.

She laughs and waves her hand at me like it’s the most normal thing to discuss this, “Oh yes. You got lucky with four though because let me tell you, five is a lot to deal with...it’s a damn good thing they all love each other too if you know what I mean?” She shoots me a wink, and I can only gape at her.

“Don’t look so shocked, Eve. You literally have those four ready to marry you, and suddenly you’re shocked that I have one more husband than you will?”

“But-but they are all together?” I cannot even fathom how she thinks I could contain my shock right now. We have fantastic support from our loved ones, but now I have finally met someone in the same type of relationship as me.

“Oh yes. My body can’t hang with all that.” Another wink. “If you ever want to talk about any of this, I am an open book and will always be here for you, I promise.”

And just like that, a tear soaks my cheek in happiness and gratitude to have this wonderful woman extending an offer of friendship. All thoughts of sex dissipate at the prospect of having someone to talk to about our unconventional relationship.

“What happened to Kyle?”

She leans back and gives me a once-over, checking to see if I can handle what she has to say. “We had multiple teams scouring those woods. There was no way he would get out unnoticed. We believe he spent a few days hiding because by the time we cornered him on the edge of a cliff, he was acting like a feral beast. He jumped instead of facing life in prison. Unlike you, he didn’t have a ledge to break his fall. He died on impact.”

*Words escape me.*

“You are safe now, Eve. I swear to you.”

“And what do you need from me?”

Hell, I know they need something because the first damn time I met Detective Smith was because he demanded a statement from me and all the information he could get.

“You can make a written statement and let us know when it’s done.” Her eyes soften on me. “Take your time. You deserve to heal and spend this time with your family.”

“What about Smith? Last time he was very adamant about hearing from me.” I give her a skeptical look because there’s no way I won’t be rushed to complete this.

“Remember what I said about having experience with alphaholes? I got you, I swear. If he grumbles, just ignore him.” Her hand rests on mine for a moment, allowing me to soak in her reassurance.

“Thank you, Lisa. For ev-everything,” I’m not ashamed of the way my voice catches. This woman kept my family safe, helped track that bastard down, and didn’t kick my guys off

their case...she was part of the large team that deserves all the gratitude in the damn world. "How can I ever repay you?"

"Live, Eve. That's how you can repay us. Live and be happy, darling. That's all I ever want for you."

I nod.

*It's time to live.*



# Chapter 28

## **Evelyn**

“Hmm, hmhmhm, mmm-”

Nolan’s responding hum is cut off by Korren, “What the hell is that supposed to be?” Looking from my muffin, I glare at him for first interrupting our singing and, second, for being rude to Ryan.

“Nonya.” His golden curls hide his drawings from me. When I hobbled into the kitchen in my newest cast, he asked so nicely if he could sign it. Of course, I said yes, and now here we are, fifteen minutes later, a donut and a muffin deep, creating a tune with my best friend and watching Amiri bustle around the kitchen. I don’t think he’s just signing it at this point if his huge stack of Sharpies is anything to go by.

“Bro, she has to wear that for a week; you better not be putting a penis on it.”

My bark of nervous laughter hardly makes my tummy uncomfortable after weeks of resting and a ridiculous amount of not moving. My leg is on its last stretch of recovery, which I know the guys are a bit bummed about because they have really enjoyed my wobbly walk around the house. Someone made a joke about me having a pregnant wobble someday;

thankfully, Amiri caught onto my immediate panic and changed the subject.

“You better not be drawing a penis, Ryan.” I scowl at his big head, hoping he can feel the weight of my gaze behind his glorious set of soft hair that I just want to yank on.

Damnit. It’s been a long month of pent-up sexual frustration and doing literally nothing. All the why-choose romances I’ve read, which might be considered a problem, have only made me hornier. The guys put me on a strict ‘no sexy business’ while I’m healing...I’m just hoping that once this last cast is off, I will stop being treated like glass.

“Try this, Angel.” Before I can protest, Miri shoves a cookie into my mouth. “More chocolate?” He’s been trying very hard and has been quite successful in helping me get my weight to a healthy range. With sweets. Cue the evil laugh.

“Ohmigawd,” my words are basically just a groan of pleasure. All worries of Ryan’s penis drawing fly from my mind when I swear to hell, I just had an orgasm in my mouth. Humming, I lean forward with my mouth open wide, chasing the rest of the cookie in his mouth-watering hands.

Like the wonderful man he is, the cookie drops onto my tongue, drawing out another groan from my rumbly throat.

“Eve...”

A thumb runs across my bottom lip, making my eyes pop open, and all thoughts of dick rushing back into my mind. I can’t help but let my tongue flick out against Amiri’s finger. A low rumble sounds from him before his lips meet mine in a frenzied kiss that steals my breath away.

“Done!” Ryan’s shout of victory makes me jump and break away from the toe-curling kiss.

“Need this fucking cast off,” I mumble to myself.

“Mmmm, soon, little fighter.” Korren drops a kiss to my neck behind me, resulting in a brother sandwich that makes me want to do dirty things. A hint of anxiety swirls through my body at the thought of being intimate with them, but I want this. I want them.

“You like?” The burn in my thighs when Ryan lifts my leg off the counter draws my attention to what he is doing.

Blinking away the haze of lust, I gasp, completely enamored with his art. “Ryan,” I breathe, “it’s beautiful.”

“Oh wow, babe, I haven’t seen you draw in a while,” Nolan’s praise, along with mine, has him absolutely beaming.

Twisting my leg as much as possible, I take in the intricate lines of each individual flame that encompasses my entire cast. Grey specks of ash are scattered toward the top while the raging fire begins at my foot. Looking closely, I can pick out all the different colors he used to create the most eccentric blaze I have ever seen.

Ryan moves around the edge of the counter with the biggest smile I have ever seen. “I’m glad you like it, baby girl.”

“I love it! Can you make me more drawings? It’s freaking glorious, and now I don’t ever want to part with it.” I’m practically bouncing on the counter.

“Even though it will stink?” I hush Amiri and ignore his crinkled nose.

“To be fair, I only saw squiggles,” Kor grumbles from his place on the other side of the island.

I tune out their commentary and drag my Ry into a deep kiss. The saltiness of my tears mingles with his minty fresh taste, making this a core moment to remember. My golden man is a fucking artist.

Pulling away, I pepper kisses all over his face and bask in the joy of his husky giggles. “I will draw you anything you want if I get this kind of reaction every time.” I smirk and risk a nibble on his shoulder, unable to help myself from wanting to eat him. “Hey! You have been eating treats all morning; how can you still be hungry?” His tease is punctuated with a peck to my nose.

A high-pitched squeal of laughter rushes from my lips when he takes his own bite of my neck. I never imagined that after all this time, I would be capable of dissolving into a fit of giggles.

“I’m hungry too,” the pout is evident in his voice as he continues taking love bites at my exposed skin.

“Okay, okay, you two! Where’s my snack?”

Ryan’s baby blues lock on mine, a smoldering hint of mischievousness glinting back at me before he pounces on our whiny man behind him. He completely devours Nolan before attacking him with tickles and nibbles.

“Eve, you hungry?”

“Is that a joke?” My gaze trails back to my own personal chef of muscle, who now has sandwich stuff lined up on the counter. His confused look has me taking pity on him, “No,

Mir, I'm not hungry. You fed me enough sweets to give me a tummy ache for days."

*Ah, shit.*

His frown deepens, and his lips turn down in concern. Instead of waiting for him to panic, I interrupt his thoughts, "I'm joking, I promise. I'm full. Can I help?" When my feet land on the floor after hopping down from the counter, I swear the air gets sucked out of the room at all four of their collective gasps.

*Double shit.*

Here it comes... "Eve," Korren snaps, "you can't do that. Are you okay? Did you hurt yourself?"

My eyes burn, but not because of tears; no, this is from holding back my eye roll. It's sweet, it really is, but I'm fine. I just want to get back to normal...well, my normal.

His wide hands frame my cheeks as he looks me over. "I'm wonderful, Koko." Running my hands over his broad shoulders, I release a quiet sigh of relief when they relax, and he gives me a gentle kiss.

My protector deserves not to worry so much. I've been working hard to keep on track with Levine's healing instructions and listen to the concerns of my guys. I really have, and I'm feeling great. Happy even. Some days are harder than others, making bed rest not that much of a struggle since I can barely manage to take care of myself when my mind feels so heavy.

"Okay," he murmurs, releasing me to Amiri to make lunch for everyone.

“WHERE’S THE PARTY AT?”

I smirk; the party just arrived in the form of a dirty blonde tornado.

Let the weekend begin.



### **Nolan**

“Do you think we can go in there?”

This is another moment where I remember that these guys have no experience with girls. Sure, their occasional hookups and high school girlfriends are one thing, but it’s clear as day they don’t have sisters.

I hold back my snicker at their plotting. Korren is currently strangling the life out of a can of beer, Amiri can’t stand still, and Ryan’s head swivels between the brothers and the girls in the living room.

“That fucking asshole!”

“He didn’t!”

All three of them take a step back from the shrill screeches echoing down the hall of the game room. It’s been a slumber party weekend for Eve and Josie, and we have made it to Saturday night without any casualties. Judging by the popcorn being thrown at the TV, I’m not so sure we will get out of this weekend unscathed.

“Maybe we shouldn’t...” I never thought I’d see the day when Korren backs away from a battle.

“Yeah.”

“Are they okay?”

“HA!” Shit. I failed to stop the loud burst of laughter, and now I have three grown men staring at me with their hands pressed to their heaving chests in fear. Their terrified expressions only serve to make me laugh harder.

Now that they see who it is, I’m bombarded with a collection of curse words and grumbling.

“Damnit, Nolan! You scared the ever-loving shit out of me!” I snort at Mir again because this is just too hilarious.

“Are you guys actually that scared to go hang out with them?” I lean my shoulder against the wall and cross my legs. The pose makes Ryan’s eyes smolder before his nerves get the better of him again.

“What if they don’t want us to hang out?” I bite my tongue so freaking hard at how terrified he sounds.

“They aren’t rabid animals, Ry. We are going to have to leave this hallway at some point.”

“AHH! I could just-”

Three rushed “Not it’s” drown out the screaming in the background. Kicking myself off the wall, I roll my eyes and stroll past them.

Peeking over the couch, I see Jo and Evie have made the living room into a gigantic nest of blankets, pillows, and snacks. It looks like absolute heaven down there. Jo throws her hands up in exasperation at the TV; seems the guy in their chick flick is pissing them off.

Instead of interrupting their moment, I hop over the back of the couch and land on the cushions behind my girl. Sweeping the hair off her neck, I give her a gentle kiss. “Hi, baby.” I’m not ashamed to admit that I hold my breath, waiting for how she might respond. There’s a ton of popcorn strewn about and a whole lot of exasperated energy.

Her pale neck tilts to give me better access before she looks back and gives me the most breathtaking smile. Dark hair framing her dainty features, she looks completely stunning.

“Hi.” That one breathy word from her pretty, plump lips makes me want to kneel before her and give her my soul. “Want some?”

I hadn’t realized she’s been holding out a piece of chocolate to me; my focus is solely on her shining eyes. Words fail me, so instead, I open my mouth and hold back my moan when her fingers graze my lips after releasing the piece of chocolate.

Eve’s neck flushes pink, and she offers me a shy smirk before turning back to their movie. So enamored with my girl, I didn’t realize the guys settling around the living room either. Ry’s head is now in her lap, happily enjoying the way she plays with his hair. Amiri and Korren have taken up other spots on the large sectional with their own sweets too.

No fear taints this moment between friends and family. We can just...be.



## Chapter 29

### **Evelyn**

Today is one of those days. Nothing is necessarily wrong, but nothing feels quite right, either. The guys finally went back to work full-time yesterday after a weekend of making sure I can fend for myself now that I have my cast off completely.

It's been a long two months of recovery, and at first, I was grateful for them to get back to their own lives, so I could start figuring out my own stuff. Sure, they had been swapping off with each other who worked from home for the last six weeks, but I was starting to feel prickly with eyes constantly on me.

I just want to be normal.

Whatever I'm feeling right now, though, is not normal.

I just got off a call with my therapist about an hour ago. She has been so amazing since I started seeing her all those months ago, but sometimes...sometimes therapy doesn't make me feel better.

She makes me think harder than I would without her. On days like today, it hits a little harder than I was ready for. Everything is over, and now I have to get ready to live, which seems fabulous and everything I deserve...I just get scared. And tired.

Frowning down at the blanket covering my lap, I pick at the lint. I was excited about the silence in the house, except now my thoughts seem much louder.

My guys are so happy and excited for the future. I know they see me struggle sometimes, but I've also held back. I can't bring myself to let them down and take away the joy they have at no longer having a threat to our family out there.

We are safe. I am safe.

All four of them have begun asking me some hard questions...do I want to start school again? Where do I want to live? Do I want to have a job? The one that makes everything in my body shut down is, *do I want to have a family?*

My throat closes, trying to hold back the emotional torment that wants to pour out of my body.

I haven't had sex with any of them yet, but it's only a matter of time. I want to so bad. I found out something I didn't realize would ever break me in half during my appointment last week.

I have had doctors tell me a horrific amount of bad news, but this one hit the hardest because it was something I didn't realize I wanted until I was told I couldn't have it.

I can't have babies.

A choked sob breaks free as I curl in on myself on the couch. I want a family. Sharp jabs of pain puncture my chest and gut; *I can't give them a family.*

I cry for the future that was taken from me. The worst thing that the monsters could have deprived me of. Fuck, I thought I was shattered when they stole my virginity...that has

nothing on the torment of knowing they stole my children from me.

I will never get to meet Nolan's baby, who would have had his curly hair and dark eyes. I am robbed of giving Korren his dark-haired, grumbly spit-bubbler. Amiri will never hold his chocolate-skinned sweetheart, and Ryan won't coo at his giggly blondie.

*I just want my mom.*



## **Amiri**

“What do you guys want for dinner?” I tap my thumbs along the steering wheel, anxious to see Eve after another long day away from her.

“I can make something so you can have the night off, man.”

I scowl at Ryan in the rearview mirror. “If I’m taking a night off of cooking, then we are ordering in. You are not allowed to touch my kitchen.”

He huffs and crosses his arms, “My kitchen too.” I ignore his pouting and tell Korren to ask Evie what she wants for dinner.

Our schedules lined up today, so we carpooled into work, plus it kept all of us from leaving too early. I’m regretting that decision now because I can’t freaking wait to wrap my girl in a hug. It’s so hard spending time away from her and knowing she’s alone at the house only makes it worse.

According to my counselor, I know the threat is gone, but this anxiety is a trauma response. After our parents sat down and told us it would be a good idea, we now have our own therapists. None of us complained; we all struggle from time to time, and to build a happy and healthy future for Eve, we need to work on ourselves, too.

“She isn’t answering.”

“What?” My snap is instantaneous. My imagination runs wild, taking dark turn after dark turn. What the hell does he mean? She isn’t answering.

“Maybe she’s just not by her phone right now,” Nolan reasons from his spot behind my seat.

“I told her to keep it on her at all times!” Korren’s roar makes me cringe, and my pulse skyrockets.

“Bro, chill. I’m sure she’s fine. You can’t control her like this; you know that.” Ryan chimes in softly, attempting to keep everyone calm.

“I’m calling Mia.” We fall silent when Kor lifts the phone to his ear. *Come on, Eve...don’t prove our anxieties right.*

“I want to hear!”

Flicking the Bluetooth on and connecting his phone, Mia’s voice breaks through the car speakers, “Hey, I was just about to call you. I’m with Eve; everything is okay.”

“Why isn’t she answering her phone, and why are you there?”

I go to scold Kor for being so damn rude to Nolan’s mom, but she beats me to it, “Watch your tone. She was having a

hard day, so she called me over to have girl time. Bring pizza,” and with that, she ends the call.

“She was having a bad day, and she didn’t call us?” The hurt in my brother’s voice has me frowning in confusion.

“Think about it as she was having a bad day, but she sought the help she needed. I’m proud of her for reaching out to Mia.” Ryan and Nolan look contemplative in the backseat but nod in understanding, while Korren just frowns out the window. Eve not calling him is a big blow to his insecurities of not being enough, but if she called Mia instead of us, then I trust she did what was best for her at that moment.

“I’ll order the pizza,” Nolan mumbles after a moment of silence. I barely hear him on the phone as I drive us home a bit faster than I normally would.

Before I know it, I’m throwing the car in park and rushing to the front door ahead of the other three. “Eve?” I call out as soon as I’m through the threshold, making my way through the hallway and into the space between the kitchen, dining room, and staircase.

“Hush, you.” In my haste, I didn’t notice Mia sitting at the island with a glass of wine in her hand.

“What’s going on, Ma?” Nolan asks as the three of them crowd around me. “Where’s Evie? Is she okay?”

Mia’s stern expression softens at the anxious energy suffocating the room around us. “She’s fine, sweetheart. She’s taking a bubble bath with a glass of wine.”

“What happened?” Ryan makes his way over to her and drops a kiss on her cheek before sitting.

I don't miss the way her lip quivers before she swallows down whatever was saddening her. "She texted me and asked me to come over. When I got here she was crying on the couch, so we talked for a while. And now she's relaxing with some bubbles."

"What was wrong, though?" Kor's voice is tight next to me.

She sighs, "Boys, that's something that is not my place to say. She can talk to you about it when she's ready okay?"

I can feel my brother's intake of breath beside me as he gets ready to speak, but before he can, I lay a hand on his arm. "Thank you for being there for her today, Mia."

She waves me off with a watery smile. "No thanks needed, hun. She's my daughter. I won't say no to pizza, though. Eve needs some, too; I don't think she's eaten all day."

"WHAT?!" There are moments in life when the beast lying dormant in your body roars to life, making you more animal than human. "Eve...eat?" And unfortunately, my beast wakes up when my loved ones don't fucking eat.

"Caveman no speak?"

I whirl around at the humored voice of the woman that just had me seeing red. Eve's black hair is damp and hanging loose around her dainty shoulder. Her eyes are a little bloodshot but wide and filled with humor. The teeny smirk pulling on her scar has my shoulders relaxing again; she looks okay, if not a bit tired. And hungry.

What has me even more relieved than seeing my pretty girl's face is the knock at the door, signaling pizza has arrived.

“You okay, sweet girl?” I can’t help but ask her as she limps down the stairs.

Padding her way toward me, she wraps her arms around my waist with a small nod that ruffles my shirt and just about makes me purr. “I love you,” she murmurs into my chest and almost manages to hide a sniffle.

“I love you too.” Bending almost in half, I drop a lingering kiss on her vanilla-scented hair. “So much, Angel.”

Just before she goes to burrow into me further, I get a whiff of cheesy goodness and scoop her up into my arms. “I can walk now,” she grumbles but snuggles her way into my throat.

“This is for me.” Dropping into the corner seat of the couch, I arrange her on me with a blanket. I don’t even have to say a word before Nolan drops a pizza box and water beside us. He nods when I thank him and gives our girl a gentle kiss, making her hum out a happy breath.

As soon as I pop the lid open, her sleepy eyes snap open and land on her most favorite pizza. Thin crust, supreme. The others complain that so many toppings shouldn’t be put on such a flimsy crust.

Me? I agree with them, but I get to sit closest to her on pizza night because we share. Nobody has found out about my genius idea, but I’ve noticed some longing looks lately. My guess is they will all ‘realize’ that it’s not so bad.

“Why are you pouting?” She asks around a mouthful.

*Am I?* I laugh and shake my head. “I didn’t realize I was, Angel. How’s the pizza?” My chuckle continues when she responds, “Sssgood.”

Warmth floods my heart, watching her take teeny bites out of the large slice while sitting in my lap. I hate how little she weighs, but I've gotten better about realizing that she will always be fairly small.

It's fine as long as she eats. I frown at that...Mia said she didn't eat today. "You're pouting again." This time, her lips turn down as well after she pats them clean on a napkin.

"What did you eat today?" I ask, keeping the accusatory tone out of it, but she still drops her eyes in shame. "Hey, it's okay. Mia just mentioned you might not have eaten much. Do you want to talk about it?"

I don't make her look at me like the others might. It's late, and she's had a bad day; if she wants to relax and soak in my comfort, I can give her that. "Not yet. Is-is that okay?" With that, her eyes lift on their own without me prompting her.

I'm so fucking proud of her.

"That's okay, Eve. I promise. Just know we are here whenever you're ready okay?"

I melt at the grateful smile she gives me before tucking back into her dinner. This is why our family works so well... because when Eve sought me out, she found the comfort and the response she needed for this moment. Each man in this house is different, but we fit together perfectly.



## Chapter 30

### **Evelyn**

It's been an entire week since my boot came off, and I *still* haven't had an orgasm. My breakdown five days ago has them tiptoeing, and I'm about to explode. So much of my anxiety has burned away in the raging inferno that is my libido.

The cringy scrape of Ryan's fork on his plate does nothing to deter my goal. My goal? Oh, I'm going to get all the fucking orgasms.

The tension around the table is misunderstood and made clear by all the nervous glances the guys are shooting each other. I sigh, and it's like the bubble of stilted silence bursts.

“What's wrong?”

“Did we do something?”

“Are you hurt?”

“Do you not like the food?”

I snort and push away from the table, collect all the empty plates and take them to the sink. Instead of rinsing them and putting them away like I normally would, I turn and lean my butt against the counter. Feeling a little evil, I stay quiet and raise an eyebrow at their long faces.

“Fire, what’s wrong?” Nolan stands so slowly, his muscles rippling with each movement, making me huff in frustration.

The other three follow suit and stand. My eyes track the way Korren’s bicep bulges through his shirt when he pushes his chair in and how Amiri’s jaw clenches, making his throat bob.

“Baby girl…” Ryan trails off when my eyes shoot to a strip of skin on display when he pushes his unruly locks away from his face. I lick my lips, but my distraction is snuffed out when I hear his husky laugh. His smirk is sinful. “Oh, I think I know what’s wrong.”

I basically pant as he prowls closer to me. I bite my lip to smother the moan that already wants to slip free. They haven’t even touched me, yet I feel like I’m about to tip off that blessed edge.

If this were any other moment, I might giggle at the way all four of them walk towards me in slow motion with matching looks of desire. “What do you need, little fighter?” Oh fuck. Korren’s rumble rattles my clit enough to make me whimper.

“Words, Eve.” Less than two feet away from me now, the four of them surround me against the counter.

Nolan’s reminder to speak has me opening my mouth, but no sound comes out. Ryan saves me with a question that makes me hot all over, “All of us?”

“Please,” I whimper, my panties already flooded with my arousal.

“Bedroom. Now.” Amiri’s growl makes me shudder until I’m upside down and being rushed up the staircase over Ry’s shoulder. I ignore the shouts of being gentle with me because fuck that.

I rub my thighs together, trying to release the ache the entire way to my bedroom. I’ve gotten zero relief by the time I’m gently laid across my comforter. It’s not Ryan who follows me down, but my best friend.

Nolan searches my eyes as he cages me in, his arms bracketing my head and his thighs between mine. “Whenever you want to stop, use your words. You have to tell us what’s okay and what’s not. Promise?”

“Promise.

“We are serious, Eve. You are in charge here no matter what, okay?” Ryan’s voice is firmer than I’ve ever heard when Nolan leans back onto his heels. It makes me feel cherished.

The bed dips, and Amiri is beside us. “What do you want, Angel?”

I gulp, “Everything. I just...I’m scared.” My voice wobbles, but I push on, “I don’t want to hurt.”

“Sex isn’t meant to hurt, sweetheart,” Korren tells me as he sits on my other side and trails his fingers up and down the column of my throat.

I feel safe with Amiri and Koko lying beside me, Noly sitting between my legs, and Ryan standing at his back.

“It-it won’t hurt?”

I watch all their gazes soften, their touches more insistent than before. “No, it won’t hurt. What do you think your triggers might be?”

I shove down the burn of tears and the ball of stress, trying to ruin this moment. “Um, no pain, please.” Their nods of encouragement and understanding give me the strength to continue, “Maybe not from behind, either. For now, at least. I don’t want to be pinned down...maybe in the future it-it can be something to work up to, just not now.”

They all exchange glances and wordless communication. “Do you trust us, Angel?” My response is honest, “I trust you all.”

“We have an idea, baby girl.” At Ry’s words, the two men on either side of me dip their mouths and wrap my pulse in their warmth, flicking their tongues across the beat. “How do you feel about a demonstration?”

Realizing my eyes rolled into the back of my head, I open them and moan out my confusion at what he means.

“Nolan and I can show you how painless sex can be without you needing to test it out first. What do you think?” Before he’s even finished asking me, Nolan tips his head to the side and arches his back into the man, running his tongue up his neck. Twin shudders roll through Nolan and me. “We can stay right here while I show you how good I can make our man feel until you decide you want more.”

Without waiting for my response, Nolan’s shirt is removed in a flash, and a firm hand dips beneath his sweatpants. My best friend grips my thighs tighter in his palms as a breath gets lodged in his throat.

“Lift,” Miri’s throaty purr tickles my ear. I lift my arms and allow them to remove my tank top, leaving me in a thin sports bra. “Can I take this too, Angel?” His eyes are like dark pools of desire. I keep my arms raised in answer.

I suck in a gasp when the cool air greets the stiff peaks of my nipples. “Mmmm, so sexy,” Korren groans, and in the next moment, the frigid air is replaced with his hot mouth around my nipple. I cry out and arch into his touch, “Oh shit.” Amiri trails his tongue down my chest in enticing swirls.

“Eve. Words.” Even with his hands down Nolan’s pants, Ryan checks in with me to make sure I’m okay.

“Yes,” I hiss when a tongue swoops into my belly button. “More.”

“Good girl.”

*Holy fuck.* Those words make me want to please him even more. The praise has me feeling all warm and tingly.

I shift, trying to relieve the ache in my center and get away from the wetness of my panties. More. I need more.

“Clothes. Off. Now.” My lust-addled mind can’t come up with proper sentences. I just need them. I swear, in less than five seconds, we are all naked, and the guys are back in their positions. Who took off the rest of my clothes? I don’t know.

I allow my eyes to trail over each ripple and dip of mouth-watering muscle until my eyes latch onto a burst of red on Koko’s bicep. I choke. “Koko,” I breathe, completely at a loss of what to say.

A large Phoenix spans his bulging bicep with a line of words that make my heart thunder in my soul.

“Surprise, little warrior. Thank you for living. I love you.”

Before my overwhelming emotions get the best of me, a finger swipes through my folds. “Fuck baby, is this for us?” I nod frantically at Nolan’s question. I watch in fascination and confusion until a love bite on my breast makes me moan and snaps me out of the darker thoughts rising to the surface.

A choked gasp that isn’t mine has my eyes shooting back to the two between my legs; Nolan’s head is thrown back, but I can’t see what’s happening. Even though I’m seeing his cock for the first time, I can’t think past the panic that’s stealing my breath away.

“No stop!” I scramble to my knees and grab Noly’s shoulders, forcing him to look at me, but what I see isn’t pain or fear...no...I see love and lust.

Ryan stops moving behind him, but I still don’t know what’s going on. Instead, I try to drag Nolan away from whatever is going on.

“Shh, Eve, look at me. It feels so good. He’s not hurting me, I swear. He’s making me feel really good.”

My eyes ping pong between his, in time with my thundering heartbeat. I just don’t know and-

“New plan.” His eyes roll back a bit when Ryan steps away. A gentle caress on my bare back has me searching behind me to find Amiri watching me with understanding.

I don’t fight when he pulls me away from Nolan and into his broad chest. “He’s more than okay.” My lip wobbles until he chases away my lingering fear with a kiss that fuels the flames once again. When Mir pulls away, I try to follow.

Instead, I'm rewarded with a soft chuckle and a nudge. "Watch, sexy girl. See how it doesn't hurt."

Gripping my chin, he forces my gaze to lock on Ryan lying against the pillows and Nolan straddling him of his own free will. I didn't see how they got into the position that they are, but Ry's hands are tucked behind his head while our boyfriend moves up and down along his length by himself. Nolan groans long and low with his head hanging back on his shoulders like before, but this time...I can see he's enjoying himself.

*They look so good together.*

I don't realize I'm gyrating my hips in time with Nolan until Amiri's thick fingers press against my clit. "That's it, Eve. Let me take care of you." I nod frantically without looking away from the men moving against each other in a passion I've only read about in books.

Just as my movements become jerky and my knees begin to shake, Korren lays down beside Ryan with about a foot of space between them. The distraction keeps me from noticing the travel of Amiri's fingers until they are notched at my entrance.

I freeze.

Then I'm fucking devoured.

The grip on my chin makes my head tilt back in offering, which Mir wastes no time taking advantage of. His tongue sweeps deep into my mouth, basically fucking my mouth. I whimper at the sizzle of lightning shooting through my veins and the ache in my arched back.

It's then I realize...*I'm riding his fingers*. My tears of progress and joy have nothing on pure bliss pulsing through my body. Just as I'm about to teeter over the edge, his dark fingers leave my opening.

I gape at him when he sucks every last drop from his digits. "You taste so good. She's ready for you, brother."

*Sweet hell.*

Gripping my hips, he guides me to crawl over Korren's legs and straddle his waist. Uncertain, I don't let my body weight rest on him. My thought process is squandered when a warm hand grips mine.

"You are doing so good. Want to help Nolan feel even better?" I can feel my eyes widen, but excitement buzzes through me as Ryan draws our hands closer to Noly's bobbing cock. "Like this."

He shows me how to grip and move, and as soon as I wrap my hand around Nol at the same time, his hips jerk violently. "Oh fuck yes!" Bouncing feverously, he sucks in a sharp gasp, "Hold on."

I immediately remove my touch from his body, but before I can fear touching him against his will, he snags my hand and looks into the depths of my soul. "Together?" Slowing his movements to a halt, Nolan leans over and licks the seam of my lips in a move that should be fucking filthy, but all it does is give me some naughty ideas. "What do you want, Evelyn?"

Before I answer him, I let my eyes trail over a relaxed, sweaty Ryan, then to the man beneath me. Korren's muscles are bunched, his tattoos just begging to be worshipped...and



yet he waits with a small smile curling his cheeks. Tearing up at the love I feel around me, my gaze lands on my fourth boyfriend, kneeling on the sheets at my side and caressing every inch of my skin. I shiver in delight at his tenderness.

“I want everything.”

With one hand holding Nolan’s, I snake the other between my legs and grip Korren’s heavy cock. I open my mouth to ask for his consent, but before a sound can escape, he says, “Yes, Eve. Take whatever you need; it’s yours. I’m yours.”

A tear does fall at his declaration.

“Ours.”

The rumbled promise on all sides gives me the courage to nudge my opening against his heated tip.

My skin itches, and I feel like something is trying to crawl out of my body; I can’t do this. I can’t, I can’t, I can’t!

“Together.” A tight squeeze on my left hand yanks me back to the here and now. I pierce Nolan with my pleading eyes, and he understands me perfectly. Instead of a squeeze, my hand gets pulled down at the same time, a tweak of my nipples has me dropping all the way down.

“Oh fuck,” Korren grits out beneath me, his hands now fisted at his sides.

“Good girl.” Ry’s eyes are an endless ocean of lust as he scans me from head to hip. “Try it again.”

I frown, too lost in the fullness and stretch. A warm set of hands grip my hips and lift me. “Like this, Angel.” With his

breath tickling my neck, he drops me back down gently on Korren's dick.

"Oh-ohhh. Do it again," my demand is a moan.

"Last time, then you try it yourself." I don't have the capacity to understand the silent conversation happening between the brothers because I can feel him dragging against my walls.

The hands leave my hips, and now I just sit there with a cock inside me. Before I can get lost in my head, Amiri ducks his head to swipe a lick along my breast, causing me to gasp and grind.

"Just like that, sexy girl. Ride my brother; take what you want."

It's then I realize, my head is tilted back just like Nolan's was...but now I understand the pure bliss he must have been feeling.

A loud moan tumbles from my lips when something presses on my clit and has me shooting my eyes open and looking down. *Oh my, that feels good.*

"Words." Ryan's harsh tone doesn't faze me because I can see how much he's holding back in every clenched part of his body. I tilt my hips experimentally at the same time Koko surges up a tad. I gasp and slam my hands down on the broad chest beneath me. "Eve!"

"Yes, yes! Good. More!"

He fucking purrs and grabs Nolan by his hips and fucks him from below. The sight makes me nervous until the hand he still has a hold of is brought to his weeping cock. He's

beyond words, so I give a lazy pump and absolutely gush when his guttural moan reaches my ears.

I barely have to move my wrist as he fucks up into my hand, and again I realize I'm moving with him and begin to focus on the drag of Korren's cock inside of me. The squelching sound makes my cheeks heat, but gratitude overpowers it when Kor keeps his hands off me.

Up, swivel, down.

Faster.

Lost to the fog and the looming peak, I cry out when Amiri's firm fingers strum my nub, and his magical mouth sucks my stiff peak into his mouth.

I crash and burn.

My brain fizzles like pop rocks.

My nerves spasm.

A fresh wave of heat coats my insides when an army of roars sounds through the room.

I collapse on a moist chest and enjoy the darkening of my vision.

This is the oblivion I deserve.

“Fuck! I didn't use a condom!”

Dread pools in my tummy before sleep takes me away in blissful ignorance.

# Chapter 31

## **Korren**

“What?” Ryan hisses at me as he cleans up Nolan, who has flopped back onto the bed beside me. He stays quiet and contemplative while he draws lazy circles on her back where she’s sleeping on my chest. “How do you fucking forget that?”

“Keep your voice down,” Amiri snaps, but it has nothing on my thundering heart. I can’t believe I forgot to use a fucking condom.

“Did you pull out?” Nol murmurs without taking his eyes off her.

My throat closes up, guilt strangling me from the inside. “No,” I croak, shame heating my cheeks.

“No?” Ry’s voice is absolutely incredulous now. I wince, feeling the evidence pooling along my lower tummy where her core drips. “Fuck!” The wet rag in his hand goes flying, making a wet splat sound on the wall.

“Ryan. Quiet!” My brother whisper-yells, having come back from the bathroom with his own wet rag. I swallow my shock when he reaches around Eve and wipes her clean, then swipes up the mess on my stomach, too.

We don't say a word, and the awkward moment doesn't matter as much as letting our girl sleep after her first time with us. God, I messed up.

"It's not only your fault Ko. I was right here and guiding her...I didn't think of it either." His eyes drop, the demons in his irises weighing him down with blame.

"What do we do then?" The golden boy is now pacing back and forth at the bottom of the bed, doing nothing to help my anxiety. Actually...no, I deserve to feel this shitty. "How do we talk to her about this?"

"We talk to her as a family and ask her what she wants to do," Nolan answers like it's the most obvious thought to have.

My eyes burn as I press my lips to the top of her head. Her first good time, and I go and ruin it. Will she ever trust me again? Does she want kids? She has thwarted the topic at every turn...even conversations about the future seem to be hard for her. This is basically fucking forcing the conversation now! She has no choice. I took that choice away from her because I didn't put her first.

A soft snore beside me draws my attention down to a sleeping head of brown curls beside me. "Get some sleep." Amiri's words have Ryan huffing, crawling back into bed, and wrapping around his boyfriend. My eyes droop just as my brother lies down on my other side and tosses the comforter over us.

My sleepy, distraught mind doesn't care we are all cuddled close and butt-ass naked.

I just need my girl to be okay.



I've never been the deepest sleeper, so when I wake up to an Eve starfished over Ryan and Nolan instead of me, I crawl to the foot of the bed so as not to wake anyone.

Showered and dressed, I prepare the big coffee pot for today. It's early, the morning sunrise peeking through the windows scattered through the main level. Content with my cup of coffee and not risking Amiri's wrath, I park myself on a stool, forgoing an early breakfast.

"Morning."

My deep sigh ends with a grunt of surprise when my brother walks in. "Jesus, Amiri. What are you doing awake?"

He smirks over his shoulder, grabbing a mug. "Well, you see, there was this ass wagging in my face when I was awoken earlier. The nausea wouldn't let me sleep after that." He shudders and pours himself his own cup of coffee.

Chuckling, "Sounds gross," I murmur. It's comfortably silent for a few minutes while I watch him gather ingredients for biscuits and gravy.

"I had a dream about the first night Ryan showed up drunk at our house. Remember that?"

How could I forget?

It was a night like any other; Amiri and I playing video games after Mom and Dad went to bed. We weren't allowed to be up that late, but I had snuck into my brother's room because I couldn't sleep.

We had the TV quiet enough that when we heard retching out on the lawn, both of us stiffened and immediately rushed to the window. Of course, we knew that our best friend wasn't doing good after his dad died...but hell...he wasn't doing okay at all.

The handsome class clown was curled up in front of Miri's ground-level window at twelve past midnight on a Tuesday.

All thoughts of caring about waking our parents went out the window at the same time we did. Between the two of us, we dragged him into the room and did our best to clean him up with a damp towel and tucked him into Miri's bed.

That was when Ry started crying. He broke that night, and we pieced him back together as well as a couple of teenagers could. It wasn't only us who listened to his story of what was going on at home; his mom was emotionally abusive to the golden happy-go-lucky boy.

I had snuck out to get a glass of water and found our parents with their ears pressed to the door. Instead of yelling or scolding us, my mom brought us a glass of water, a wet rag, and a bowl to keep beside the bed.

"I'm so proud of him." Lost in my own thoughts, I miss whatever Amiri might have said before those words. I'm so proud of Ryan too. With the support and love of our family, we took him in however and as often as we could. He never fought against the help...no; he held on tight to the love we offered.

"Me too. I've been worried, though. The way he shut down at the hospital..." I trail off as guilt gut punches me at the

reminder of how I treated a member of my family while they were in pain.

“Yeah, me too. He’s seeing his therapist even more than we are, so I’m relieved that he’s taking his mental health seriously, you know?”

“Yeah,” the word comes out as a long sigh. I feel like everything is out of control. Sure, working through some stuff in therapy has been very helpful, but tackling something like my deep-rooted issues isn’t going to happen in just a couple of weeks.

Silence ensues once again, both of us lost in our thoughts. Mine mostly consisting of the dreaded conversation we need to have with Eve today.

“Good morning.”

I jump and choke on my coffee when three sets of voices bounce down the stairs at the same time. “Jesus, why is everyone awake so early?”

“Bro. It’s eight.”

I turn to him with my mouth open and words falling out, “How long have you been cooking for?”

His dark brows narrow. “It’s been staying warm in the oven for a while, and have you not noticed me refilling your cup multiple times? I even called you an ass for not saying thank you.”

“Shit, sorry, man. I must have been zoned out.” Abandoning my mug, I sweep Eve off the last stair and give her a hug, soaking in her heat and softness. “How are you doing?”



Her blush lights up her face. “I’m good.” Fuck, the breathiness of her voice makes me so damn ready for another round.

Not wanting to embarrass her anymore, I settle her into a seat at the dining table. “Hungry, little fighter?”

“Yes, please.” Her sleepy smile is wide, and I can’t help but drop a kiss on her lips.

Breakfast is a quiet affair, Eve seemingly content and at peace while she munches on a strawberry. Nolan does a wonderful job keeping her mind off of any heavy topics, and Ry manages to toss a few jokes in here and there between his anxious shifting. Amiri is tense beside me, but he smiles just a little every time she takes a bite. Me? I can barely choke down anything; my nerves make me sick.

Far too soon, breakfast is over, and Evie is loading the dishwasher as she always demands.

*Shit, shit, shit.*

We all trade looks and come to the consensus that it might be best for Nolan to drop the news.

“Eve, we need to talk.”

“And what made you think you should say it like that?” Ryan’s tone is incredulous, and I must say, for the guy who thinks he knows more about women than we do...that was just dumb.

“What else was I supposed to say?” His hands shoot into the air, scoffing and annoyed that he was chosen to broach the topic.

“Something less terrifying, perhaps?” I snort at Amiri’s comment, even though this fucking sucks. “Maybe, hey baby, we want to talk to you about something.”

I frown. “That’s not much better.”

“Or-”

“For the love of everything unholy!” Our heads whip to the woman pointing a knife at us in the kitchen. *Oops*. “Spit it out.”

“Um,” I cringe at the lost sound in Nolan’s voice. I think we took away some of his confidence. “Come sit, Fire.” Okay, that’s a start.

Thankfully, she sets the knife down before making her way to the other seat at the table. On the other hand, though, her face is pale, and she has a small tremor buzzing through her body. All irritation sapped out by anxiety.

And now...everyone looks to me because when it’s all said and done...it’s my fucking fault.

“Eve, it’s about last night.” Her bony shoulders curl in on herself like she’s waiting for a blow.

“Did I do something wrong?” She won’t meet my eyes; they are trained on her hands, pulling at the strings of her frayed sleep shorts. “I’m sorry.”

“No, Eve! You did nothing wrong. It was me; I messed up, baby.” I can’t even bring myself to drag her gaze up to mine... I feel so ashamed.

“I-” *Fuck*. “I didn’t use a condom, and I didn’t pull out.”

This is the moment where I expect her to be pissed off or start crying. Maybe even walk away or start throwing shit.

What I don't expect is for her to brush me off.

"Oh, it's fine. Don't worry about it." Her body is still tense as she begins to scoot her chair out.

Gripping the bottom, I drag her chair back to the table so she can't leave. "Eve, do you understand what I'm talking about?" I can't be the only one confused by her reaction. Looking around the table, I can see matching frowns and bewildered expressions.

She finally tilts her head to look at me with a furrowed brow of her own. "Yes, I know what you are talking about."

"So why aren't you...freaking out?"

I stare at her hard and feel my stomach sink when her eyes start to water. I feel my own widen in panic, my body leaning into her space, ready to defeat those demons in the golden depths of her soul.

Again, she surprises me when she quickly swipes at her eyes and clears her throat, "Um, because you don't need to worry about that. It's okay."

I can feel my agitation rising because she's not explaining herself at all, and this is absolutely not okay. I could have gotten her pregnant, for fucks sake, and she still isn't fully healed from everything.

Oh my god. How could her teeny body ever handle a baby? My heart is in my throat. She is still skin and bones; I can't imagine if her body would be able to manage growing a baby. What if-

“I can’t get pregnant. Ever. What they did...there’s too much scarring. Or something. Either way, it’s fine, don’t worry about it.”

Did she just fucking say what I think she did?

## Chapter 32

### **Evelyn**

It's been a minute since I've shut down, but I can feel myself retreating. Yet, I can't quite get to the blissful state of oblivion like old Eve could. Unfortunately, it's a skill that I grew out of and can no longer use to help me in this new life.

I curse my therapist...sometimes, it's frustrating how good she is.

*Might as well just say it.*

"I can't get pregnant. Ever. What they did...there's too much scarring. Or something. Either way, it's fine, don't worry about it."

*There, I said it.*

The stunned silence has me itching to hightail my ass out of here. Nolan looks ridiculously disappointed; whether that's in me, the fact I won't ever be able to give him a baby, or something else altogether, I have no idea. My tummy cramps at the rest of their faces, all so similar to the sadness and discontent on my best friend's face.

What do I say now?

"What did you just say?" Koko's voice is like fucking ice.

Unable to look him in the eye again I murmur, “I’m infertile. My uterus has too much scarring and trauma.”

I flinch when the chair beside me goes flying backward and crashes onto the floor. I can’t make out what Korren’s saying under his breath as he paces the length of the dining room and into the kitchen.

A snuffle across from me almost makes me look, but I keep my head down. When the second chair, much slower this time, drags across the floor and a body leaves the table, I still keep my eyes lowered.

“I-” Amiri’s voice is scratchy, sounding like he’s in pain. I don’t deserve to look at the men I hurt.

I don’t know what I was expecting, but I guess I thought they might comfort me. That was selfish thinking. Of course, they would be pissed at the future I took away from them. I’m not whole, and now it’s only a matter of time before they send me packing.

I kneeled in front of this exact same table my first night here, terrified that I would get kicked out if I didn’t give them money. They didn’t want my money, though. And now I sit here, terrified I’ll be less than nothing in their eyes because I can’t give them the children they deserve. They want kids.

They want the one thing I can’t give them, so where does that leave me? What good is a girlfriend for a family that wants to grow?

I can’t help the whimper that slips out and the tears that soak my cheek.

The final two chairs groan and creak as their occupants leave them cold and alone. *Like I will be soon.*



## **Nolan**

I-I cannot comprehend the words that were just spoken to me.

“What did you just say?” I would yell at Korren for being so cold with Eve if I wasn’t in the middle of a complete and utter breakdown. It feels like my organs have lost their will to live.

“I’m infertile. My uterus has too much scarring and trauma.”

She repeats it. Eve repeats those heartbreaking words because we cannot even fucking fathom...anything. I think we knew to some extent how bad they hurt her in that way...but for those bastards to have damaged her this severely...

I recoil when Kor’s chair flies back as he shoots to his feet. Running his hands through his hair and yanking on the strands, he paces like a man fighting to control the beast inside of him that wants revenge.

The commotion doesn’t even stir the woman across the table from me. She does twitch a little when I sniffle back tears. *What is she thinking?*

My racing heart stutters to a halt at the hushed gag Ry lets out next to me. In a flash, he’s out of sight, and Eve still hasn’t said anything.

God. What the hell is she feeling? How long has she known? I can't believe she's held onto this horrible thing all alone. I ache for the baby that won't ever be part of me, but that's not as important as the woman currently shattering in front of me.

"I-" Mir cuts off just as fast as he started. What do you say to someone who has been ravaged so brutally that their future family paid the price?

She whines, and it snaps something inside of me at the same time it strikes a chord in Amiri. Kor stops all movement and locks his gaze on her as well. Up and out of our chairs, I don't hesitate to scoop her out of the seat and over to the couch. Dropping down and placing her on my lap, I grip her jaw in a firm hold like I've seen Kor do so many times.

"Tell me what you're thinking." I don't make it a question but a demand because whatever is going on in her mind is making her retreat from us. Her family. Right now, more than ever, we need to be here for her.

*Oh fuck.* Realization sets in, we haven't done that at all in the last five minutes. We shut down when she needed us the most.

As if I said the words out loud, the other three kneel on the ground in front of me where Eve is straddling my lap and shaking like a damn leaf.

We messed up.

"What's going on in your head, Eve?"

She snuffles and tries to pull her face out of my hand, but I won't budge. We are a family, and we are in this together. No



more hiding. I'm too preoccupied with Eve to care about the tears still dripping down my cheeks. No more hiding.

"I'm so sorry!" Her wail rips my chest open in agony. She screws her eyes shut. "I-I can't give you a family, and I'm too broken!"

It's no secret that the guys and I want kids, we've been talking about it here and there with and in front of Eve. I think because there is no more threat and an entire future ahead of us, our excitement about the life we have always wanted has clouded our perceptions.

*How long has she known?*

We have noticed that she doesn't like to talk about goals and plans, so we quieted down a bit on the future talk...but we don't even know what she wants in life. I think we all assumed that somewhere down the road, there would be minis running around the house and swimming in the pool out back.

What does Eve want?

"Baby, do you want kids?"

I hold my breath, watching her eyes flick back and forth between my shoulders. I can tell she's working something out in her mind, so we all wait with bated breath while she gathers her thoughts.

A teeny nod.

"Words." My eyes flick to a sickly-looking Ryan at my feet before quickly reverting my attention back to my girl.

"I do-I did. I want a family, but they-they took that away from me!"

*There she is.*

Shoving off my lap, I let her go, not because I'm afraid of the fire she's radiating but because a flame needs air to roar.

The guy's scramble to get out of her way and sit on the couch to watch her as she paces back and forth in front of the sectional. All her tears have dried up, replaced with a passion only my Evie harbors.

"I want a family. I want to give you guys a family. I want a future, but I don't know what that even looks like. I know the future I wanted when I was seventeen, except I don't know what future I want now. I don't know who I am, and how am I supposed to figure that out when I am so damn broken?" Her voice rises with each word, making our postures straighten to attention.

"Tell us about the future you wanted, Angel." She doesn't stop her rapid steps. Her response is the indication we need to know that she heard Amiri.

"I wanted to get a degree in psychology! I was going to be the person to help survivors and victims, but then I became the victim!"

"And do you still want to do that?" Korren asks.

"I don't know! How can I help someone when I can hardly help myself? There are so many people out in the world struggling and not enough therapists to help them. How do I take this," she gestures to herself in wild fury while growling, "and guide people to a better future?"

"By doing it for yourself, baby girl." Ryan's voice is so gentle, I melt a little at the way he's handling this situation.

She stops moving, her hair in disarray around her shoulders. “I’m scared. What if I can’t help anyone and I leave them doomed?”

“Are *you* doomed?”

She whirls on me, her eyes alight with indignation. “No, I am not doomed!” God, she’s fucking beautiful.

“Would you do everything in your power to help someone?”

“Of course!” She snaps, furious that there would be any other answer.

“Do you want to help people?” I keep pushing. I know her enough to know that she will keep going in a downward spiral unless we push her to start thinking about the right questions.

“Yes, I want to help people, but I have to be good enough for them! I’m not!”

“So how do you get better for them?”

That gives her pause, and I lowkey want to pat myself on the back for making her think about the options. Because this woman has her entire life ahead of her, and we will give her all the options she could ever fucking dream of.

“How do you get better for the people you want to help, Eve?”

I watch as her dark brows crinkle together. “I go to school...” she trails off, still working through her thoughts. “I keep going to therapy. I get a job or volunteer somewhere for experience.”

“Good girl.”

Ah fuck, now I have a boner. Between my fiery woman and my boyfriend praising her, there was no way I could stop the blood from rushing to my cock.

“I’m going to do it. I’m going back to school. I want to be better!” Her statement is firm as she clenches her fists in a tight grip. Eve is fighting for her future as we speak...she just needed a nudge.

“And kids?” I don’t know if I should ask, but that was where this talk initially started, and our family needs to have this conversation. I almost regret asking and pushing her for more when her shoulders slump forward, and the light in her eye’s dims.

“I really wanted kids.”

“Wanted?” It’s Korren who picks up on questioning her.

She frowns at the rug, scuffing her toe through the fabric. “Want,” she whispers before she looks up again. “I didn’t think I would ever want kids after what they did to me...but with you guys, I want that so bad. I can’t have it, though; they stole it!”

“Eve, listen to me when I say this.” Kor leans forward, bracing himself on his knees. “We can still have babies, sweetheart. There are other options. If you don’t want to do surrogacy, then we can always adopt. We can love kids who don’t have a family, sweetheart.”

“It’s not the same.” Her tears have started anew, making my heart thump hard in my chest.

“I know it’s not the same, baby girl, but imagine how much love a child who doesn’t have any could have in our family?”

Ryan isn't begging her to decide; he's begging her to have hope and realize all her options. "We don't have to decide now, just know that there are other ways you can have a baby. We do not blame you, nor do we harbor any kind of negative feelings toward you about this. All those rage-filled thoughts are aimed at the monsters that hurt you, Eve. You are everything, and you make our family whole. I'm so so sorry that this was taken from you, from us, but we love you no less than we did before we found out. You are not alone. We are heartbroken with and for you. Understand? Not because of you."

Damn, he gives the best speeches.

"Promise?"

That sparkle of hope in her eyes makes me fucking melt. Ryan may have been the one to say the words, but he spoke from all of our hearts.

"To the ends of the earth, Angel."

## Chapter 33

### **Evelyn**

“Mm...” my moan draws out as I wake to featherlight kisses on my tummy. My hand latches onto the head of curls beneath my chest. I allow my eyes to flutter open and suck in a sharp gasp at the lust I find in Noly’s dark gaze.

“You taste so yummy,” he murmurs against my skin. When I don’t say anything, he lifts a bit. “Do you want me to stop?”

I shake my head in response but am scolded with a nip by my ear. “Eve,” the warning comes from Ryan, who I hadn’t noticed beside me when Nolan was so close to where I want him the most.

“No, don’t stop. Please,” it’s a breathy plea that ends with a gasp when a hot tongue swirls around my belly button.

“I bet he would look so good between those firm little legs of yours, don’t you think?” The dirty talk in my ear draws a whimper out of me because, holy fuck, yes. “You going to let him have his snack? He’s been such a good boy waiting for this moment all these years.”

The praise makes Nolan groan. The next second, my shorts and panties are ripped off like they were never even there to begin with, and his shoulders spread my legs wide. A deep

inhale has me looking down in confusion. “You smell like honey. Can I taste you?”

I dare any woman out there not to fucking blush when your best friend sniffs your pussy and begs for a taste. A tug of my earlobe and my response flies out, “Yes!”

With one long swipe of his tongue, Noly makes my body shiver in delight and shock. I never knew this could feel so good. Deft fingers tug on my nipples over the thin tank top I’m still wearing. My nails claw into the tattoos on Ry’s forearm while he plays me like his favorite fucking game.

“Ah!” My garbled moan rushes out when Nol nudges a finger into my entrance at the same time, he sucks my nub into his mouth.

Just as my tummy swoops and my back begins to bow, the husky voice beside me breaks the spell, “I want a taste.”

I whimper when Nolan’s touch leaves my body, but when he comes up smirking and dripping in my juices, I almost cum right then and there. I’m teetering so damn close to the edge when he leans across my body and gives Ry a messy kiss that makes me writhe.

They pull away, gasping and looking ready to devour each other. They are so fucking sexy together; I could just watch them all day long and be completely happy. I don’t mind being between them, either.

Sparkling eyes dip down to me. “Do you want me, Evie?” Nol settles over me with his forearms, bracketing my head much like he did last week. The smile he gives me is easy, and

so loving that it makes my eyes water and my scarred lip quiver. “You can say no.”

“I want you so bad, Nolan. I want everything. Please. Please love me.” I want his body against mine and moving in tune with me...Our entire lives together were meant to bring us to this moment.

I’ve been in love with my best friend, my life partner, for as long as I can remember. I don’t want to wait another second to connect with him on a new level.

He must read the sincerity and devotion in my watery eyes. The head of his cock nudges my entrance before he slowly enters me all the way. A tear drops onto my face from above; Noly’s crying.

I grip his cheeks in mine. “I love you.” Just as I touch my lips to his, he bottoms out inside me, pulling matching moans from both of our chests.

His weight lifts, and I cry out, not wanting him to leave me, but then he’s slowly sliding back in again. It’s slow; it’s emotional, it’s...*Nolan is making love to me.*

“I love you, Evie.” His lips pull away long enough to declare his feelings for me, then they are back and sucking the air right out of my lungs. Where he starts, and I stop doesn’t matter anymore. We are one; we are each other’s.

My orgasm is a low, tantalizing bliss that has lava licking up my spine and sending shivers through my limbs. “Nolan!” I grip him to me, never wanting to let go. A shot of warmth coats my insides, his narrow hips stuttering as he gasps out my name into my neck.



We lay like that while he peppers my neck with kisses for long enough that my joints are beginning to ache. “Alright, baby, off. Let’s get our girl cleaned up.” I bet I blush from head to toe at the reminder we just did that in front of Ry.

Dropping a final kiss to my collarbone, Noly sits up and gives Ryan his own kiss. I look to my left in embarrassment to find him leaning against the headboard with a dopey smile. “Hi, pretty girl.”

“I-do you-I can...” His boner is standing proud next to me. I feel like I should be doing something about it.

“We have all the time in the world, Eve. No need to rush anything...this was time for you and Nolan. Plus, I can’t keep you locked up here all day; you have a gift waiting for you downstairs.”

*A gift?*



“No peaking!”

“Say that again and see what happens!” Ry’s said that at least eight times since I came out of my bedroom. Nolan’s chuckle rumbles my back, his cool hand covering my eyes. I wonder if he can feel how my heart is racing in this position or if he knows how much trust I’m giving him to hold me like this.

“Don’t let her fall, Nolan.” My anxious annoyance snuffs out a bit at Koko’s protectiveness. “Watch your step!”

Just as the words leave his mouth, Noly's arm around my waist lifts me; my legs sway in the air as he steps down the porch stairs. My squeal has a chorus of masculine laughs wrapping around my body. I smile in response, a sense of contentment settling my nerves.

“Okay, okay, okay! Ready?” I can't tell if Ry's crazy excited or nervous, and it makes me really damn curious about this gift that mysteriously couldn't be brought into the house.

Ryan joked that he could make it work until Amiri shut that shit down with a glower and threatened to make him sleep outside if he damaged our house.

“Is anyone else scared?”

What the hell does Amiri have to be scared of?

Before I can ask, the Arizona sun blinds my poor eyeballs. Scrunching up my face and squinting my eyes, I make out the line of all four of my men standing side by side.

“Where is it?”

Ryan starts bouncing on his toes and points behind me. “Merry Christmas, little Goddess!”

I turn and... “Who the hell did this?” I screech in outrage and lowkey excitement. The white Ranger Rover is absolutely STUNNING and WAY too much to accept.

“Shit!”

“Fuck, it wasn't me!”

“I'm scared.”

“I did!”

I turn to find three of my men backing away in fear while my golden man is wiggling around like he's too excited to control his own body.

A strange sense of static and bubbly energy builds in my fingertips and toes, my knees brace themselves, my fingers clench, and then I explode.

“I LOVE IT!!!”

Taking off into a limpy sprint, I run circles around my beautiful new machine, gasping at each new shiny thing I find. On my last lap, I detour and fling myself into Ryan's arms like a monkey.

“I love it! Thank you, thank you!” Peppering kisses all over his face, I pause for a deep breath, “I love you, Ryan, thank you.”

“You're welcome, baby girl. Where do you think you will take it first?”

What a wonderful question.

*I know exactly where I will go first.*

# Chapter 34

## **Evelyn**

“Hi, Momma.”

Grass pokes the bare skin of my legs where I sit beside the bouquet of flowers, we brought for her.

“They wouldn’t let me drive alone, imagine that. I suppose with a brand-new car, allowing the girl without much driving experience to go by herself makes sense.” I huff a laugh as I run my fingers over her name.

“You were the first place I wanted to go, Momma. I miss you so much.” I swallow down the sob that wants to escape. “I can’t cry yet; I have so much to tell you.” I smile and wipe a tear away.

Where should I start?

“I’m going back to school. I think I want to be a therapist like I planned before everything happened.” I sigh, “I wish I could hear your voice. None of this has been easy, Mom. I just-I miss you.”

Tipping my head back, my chest spasms. “I’ve really needed you. I can’t-I found out I can’t have babies and you

weren't there." Scoffing to myself, I train my gaze back on her resting place, "That was selfish, I'm sorry."

"The guys, they want a family and so do I. Not now, of course. I have a ton of work to do on myself before I'm fit to be a mother." I frown, my thoughts are a jumbled mess as I try to piece together everything, I want to tell her. "I think I want to adopt. I want to help people, I want to give a child a home and a family. God Mom, my men are going to be amazing fathers one day. I wish you were here to see it when the time comes."

Another piece of grass pops out of the soil at my picking. "I don't think this lingering sense of loss will ever go away... my future family was tortured out of me." Heart rate spiking, I fling my frantic gaze around, making sure nobody heard that. What a terrible thing to say in a graveyard to your mother.

"I'm thinking about volunteering at a shelter before I get back into working. The guys say they will support whatever I choose to do. I'm choosing to get better...to *be* better. I have a long way to go."

### **Camila Evelyn Yvonne**

I had her tombstone changed last week with some of my family's inheritance. Momma is no longer trapped by the name Miller. The family money meant absolutely nothing to me... but the letter she wrote will forever be etched into my soul.

I pull it out of my pocket and reread the words she wrote to me so long ago.

*Little Warrior,*

*You turned 13 today, and I'm terrified. I don't know if I can handle your teenage hormones...you best not start hating me, my sweet girl. You are forever my best friend. A live-in, lifelong soul mate.*

*I hope like hell you won't have to read this for a long long time. When you do though, I want you to know how thankful I am. I could apologize for your father, but our life together was never about him. It was about you and me. Evelyn Faye, thank you for making me the most lucky and loved woman in the world. I have no doubt that whatever life throws at you, you will rise from the ashes.*

*Nolan's Little Pheonix. I hope one day I will be able to walk you down the aisle to marry that young boy. He's been yours since you were babies, I swear. There are so many things I could say to you, but you, my little warrior, have the spirit of a thousand lives, you will be just fine without me.*

*So, thank you, my daughter, for the life you have given me, for every life before, and for every single one after.*

*Wherever you are, however far you go, I will always be with you.*

*Fly free. I love you.*

*Momma*

My tears soak the page while I choke on a hiccup, "Just one more thing, Momma." I wipe my tears and straighten my spine.

My shoulder heats, and I smile, knowing she is listening to me. I am no longer the girl who cowered and cried I am now the woman who fights and hopes.

“I changed my name. Evelyn Miller is no more...I think you will like what I decided.” A wide smile spreads my scarred lips.

My name is Evelyn Faye Yvonne, and I fly free.

# Epilogue

## **Korren**

“Be right back, pretty girl.” I give Eve a soft smile as Ry sits her on a bench with her half-drunk iced coffee. I hate how red her eyes are and the blotchiness of her cheeks...I wish I could bring her mom back, so she never has to feel this sorrow.

Turning from her sleepy gaze, the guys and I make our way down the path toward Camila’s resting spot. We didn’t tell Eve that we wanted a moment with her mom, but she just nodded quietly and sipped on her nine-dollar beverage in understanding.

My eyes burn, a snuffle sounds behind me, and my throat closes with emotion. We reach her resting place, and all take a knee.

I go first.

“I wish I could have met you, Camila, even though you probably would have disapproved...I’m told I can be kind of an ass.” I take a deep breath. This is harder than I thought it would be. Eve’s mom can’t respond to me, but I believe she’s listening, so I have to make a good impression.



Ryan's soft chuckle loosens my shoulders. "I'd like to think that I would have been able to win you over once you saw how much your daughter means to me. I need you to know that I love her with everything I am and will protect her until my last breath."

"I come here to thank you for raising the woman of my dreams and to ask for your permission to spend the rest of my days loving Evelyn Yvonne to my fullest."

A strangled gasp makes me choke when a weight settles on my shoulder. I duck my head as tears stream from my eyes.

"Thank you," I whisper between heaving breaths, for I know she has granted me her love and support.



## **Ryan**

Korren's emotion steals the breath out of my lungs. It's so raw and real to be here on our knees in front of the woman who gave life to our Evie.

"Hi." I gulp. "I'm Ryan. I, um, I hope one day I can refer to you as Mom. I haven't had one in a long time, and you are one of the most wonderful women I have ever learned about." Pausing, I suck in another breath.

"I'm sure you know that I am in love with not only Nolan but your spitfire of an offspring as well." Nolan snorts and nudges me with his shoulder. I smile, some confidence restored at my joke, making someone laugh.

“I have two things I want to ask you.” The burn in my eyes finally wins out and coats my cheeks in moisture.

“Please give me your blessing to make your daughter laugh every day because I don’t know what I would do without her smile in my life. And secondly, please be my mother-in-law.”

Curling over my knee, I sob as my heart is stripped bare...I don’t have a mom worth anything more than a bottle of liquor, but this woman in the ground created a Goddess that sparked loyalty and love like nothing I have ever heard of...I just want her to love me back.

My heaving chest settles like a weight is forcing it to steady. The steady calm is accompanied by warmth on my shoulder.

Camila might not ever be able to hug her new sons, but she will, from here on out, be the woman I call Momma.



## **Amiri**

As soon as Ryan calms, I rub my sweaty palms on my shorts. “I know I will never be able to take care of Evie the way you did, ma’am, but I would love your blessing to try my hardest.” I swallow the emotion that builds.

I love your daughter far beyond this world. I swear she will never go hungry, never want for anything. I’ll make sure she’s always warm but not too hot or cold. I promise on anything I can that I will do right by you and the love of my life.”

The words are out now, only to leave behind the crushing weight of uncertainty. How am I supposed to know if the incredible spirit of the woman that once was would be able to accept me without being here?

If she were here, would she truly think I am worthy of Eve?

“I-I love her, ma’am. Please don’t ask me to go on without her because I don’t think I can.”

I hold my breath, waiting for some sort of sign to tell me that I am accepted into the family surrounding my girl.

Just as I’m about to get up and leave, my knee drops back down into the grass. It was a push, a force that nudged my back to the ground and left a lingering feeling of support on my right shoulder.

*Thank you.*



## **Nolan**

“Hey, Momma C. I miss you. You know that?”

I’ve come and visited her many times before, but it never removes the twisting sadness in my soul...she was like another mother to me, and I will forever feel the gap where Eve’s mom should be.

“I know you already approve of me.” I give her stone a wink even as my heart titters in my chest. Damn, I miss her. “I came to tell something instead.”

I feel the gaze of the men beside me; their support and understanding are an energy I will never be without. Nor will our Evie.

I allow my tears to flow, unashamed of the emotional hurricane swirling through my body.

“I came to tell you that you were right. Evelyn is every bit the fighter you saw her as when we were too little to understand just what that could possibly mean.”

I meet Ryan’s gaze, then Amiri’s and Korren’s last, feeling a sense of rightness wash over me at the nods they give me.

“I’m here to tell you that she is so much more.”

A true smile lifts my cheeks and glasses, all while I sniffle and cry on my knees in front of the other woman who raised me to become the man I am today.

“Your daughter is beyond words, Momma C, but there are some we have found to come close to the other-worldly being that is Evelyn Faye Yvonne.”

I look skyward and cry even harder when a warm touch brushes my cheek. I close my eyes and bask in the love and heat of the sun.

“She is a fighter and a Phoenix, as we have always known her to be. She is made of fire hot enough that the gates of hell melt.” I smirk at the thought. “Evie is an Angel sent from the sky to bless the world around her. Finally, she is a Goddess we will forever worship and cherish.”

I hum deep in my throat. “She is hope, Camila, and she has risen.”



# Epilogue

## **Evelyn - 4 years later**

“You did really well today, don’t sell yourself short! Same time next week, have a good day!”

Smiling at the screen, I shut down the session and begin some paperwork for the call. This specific client has been making incredible progress, but that doesn’t mean setbacks don’t happen. I’m glad she called, though. It’s one of the things that I, as a therapist, will always make time for; client emergency calls.

A knock at the office door makes me grin and power down the system. *I wonder which one got impatient.*

“Can I come in, Angel?”

My tummy swoops in excitement, something that hasn’t gone away after all this time. My toes still curl when they make me feel good, and my breath still catches when they give me blinding smiles.

“Come in!”

Anticipation sizzles through my veins as the door creaks on its hinges, and my dark man sweeps in. Behind him, I hear the

telltale signs of a Saturday afternoon in our home. I hum, watching his thick thighs bunch in his jeans as he strides toward me.

A husky chuckle reaches my ears, “See something you like, sexy girl?” The thin straps of my thong don’t stand a chance against Amiri’s rumbly tone.

My tongue darts out, suddenly very parched. “Mmm, maybe.” My breath stutters when his knees hit the ground in front of my chair; big hands slide up my jean-clad thighs that are so tight he might as well be touching my bare skin.

“Keep nibbling on your lip, and I’ll have to soothe the ache, Eve.” His warning does nothing but make me bite harder.

Being the biggest of my guys, he towers over me even from our positions, with him on the ground in front of me. His hand wooshes my long dark hair off my shoulder; then his lips are on mine in a hungry sort of dance.

Groaning, my hands move of their own accord, ready to tear his clothes off and have my wicked way with him against my desk.

“Mommy! Look what I made!

Amiri’s chest rumbles in a sexy laugh and presses his face into my chest before looking up at our little girl.

“Little warrior, get back here!” Koko shouts from deep in the house, probably freaking out at our toddler’s fabulous escapee abilities.

I bite back my laugh when she shoves the door wide and tumbles into my office in all her fumbling glory of white-

blonde curls.

“Let’s see, baby!” Mir scoops her up and places her on his bouncing knee, still kneeling in front of me. “Oh wow! You made that?”

“Don’t let the little minx fool you, bro.” Ry waltzes into my office, looking like sex on a stick. “Rae Camila Yvonne, what did I tell you about fibbing?”

I tuck a wayward ringlet behind her ear and admire her pearly skin as she pouts at the man scolding her.

“But Daddy, I won’t ever be as good as you.” Her teeny voice is a whine that makes my heart fissure, and Miri chuckles, seeing right through her game.

“Raebae, did you steal Daddy’s artwork again?” Nolan makes himself known as well with a boop on her nose.

“Yeah, Papa! But look, it’s me! So...mine!” Hugging the drawing to her chest, she gives her daddy a big smile before launching into my lap when Korren rounds the doorframe. “Shh!”

I giggle when she buries herself beneath my blouse and shushes me. Raelyn’s birth mother chose us to adopt her while she was pregnant, so my sweet girl has been ours since before she took her first breath.

“Little Warrior...” Kor’s thundering voice sends chills down my spine and makes Rae squeak a laugh into my tummy.

“WHERE’S MY FAVORITE LADY?”

Squirling out of my lap and away from me, Rae squeals, “Auntie Jojo and Lisa are here!”



“Ah, ah!” Korren scoops her up and tosses her in the air with a bright smile as he nuzzles their noses together. A small smile graces my lips as he sets her down like he always does when she tries to leave a room without giving me love.

Bouncing her way back to me, my little girl crawls her teeny self onto my lap and wraps her arms around my neck. “I wuv you, Momma.” Then she’s gone in a flash, excited to see her aunties.

Amiri helps me up and guides me out of the room with an arm around my waist. Rambunctious laughter and happiness tinkle through my ears and tickle my chest.

*This is the future I always wanted. Minus one person.*

Warmth surrounds me from all sides, a hug only a mother could give.

A tear drips from my lashes.

*Mine is always with me.*

# THE END

FOR NOW...

I love this family too much to completely close their story for good.

I think after all I have put you through, you deserve a spicy holiday novella at some point.

\*Wink\*

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# Coming Soon

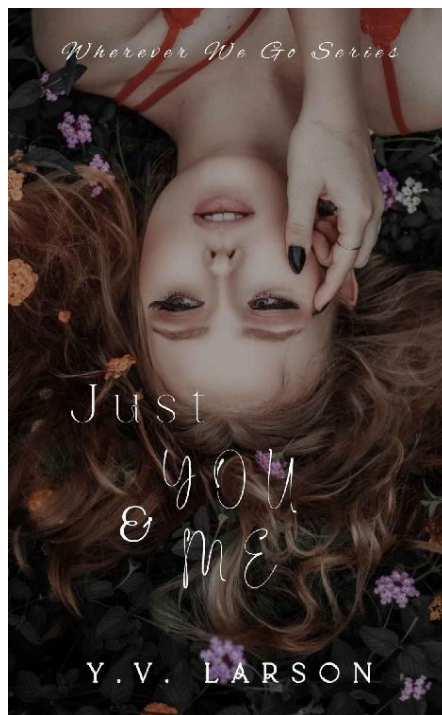
Join Rylee and her five-year-old daughter Layla on their journey to finding love, safety, comfort, and family!

\*Single-Mom Standalone

\*MMMMF

\*Traumatic Background

\*Spicy



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# About the Author

I've seen many ways author's go about making this page, but I'm going to make mine casual. I don't like writing about myself, nor do I want to do it in a formal way. I have to do that in my graduate program WAY too often. That being said, you get the real me for this.

I haven't had writers block up until this moment.

For starters, I love to read (crazy right?) When I was a pre-teen, I read constantly (YA Fantasy). It was a way for me to float off into another universe and avoid real life. I stopped reading at some point, until COVID happened. That's when my obsession with reading began again. Reverse Harem's came later though, it just happened to be a coincidence that I picked one up. Now, I can't get enough!

As for writing, I have always loved to write and have taken as many creative writing classes as possible. Since I was that pre-teen sucked into stories about men with wings (and abs), I knew I wanted to be an author.

I turned to my husband a few months ago and said, "I can't wait to write a book someday." I was probably swooning

over how amazing Kerry Taylor is. His response was, “Why not now?”

I messaged Kerry the next day, completely fangirling over my phone when she responded. And so, I began Eve’s story with the support of my mentor, my husband, and my entire family.

Juggling grad school, working at a domestic violence program, being a wife and mom of three dogs and a cat, I was surprised with each chapter I completed. Eve and her men took the reins most days, and there have been many moments I’m shocked about what they chose to do. My husband likes to call me a witch that my characters write through.

I have poured my heart and soul into this fictional family; they truly are an extension of me. I can’t wait to continue my path of being an author...I don’t think it’s something I’ll ever give up.

When giving your reviews, remember this is my first series, so please be gentle. While I welcome constructive criticism, please be kind.

Thank you!