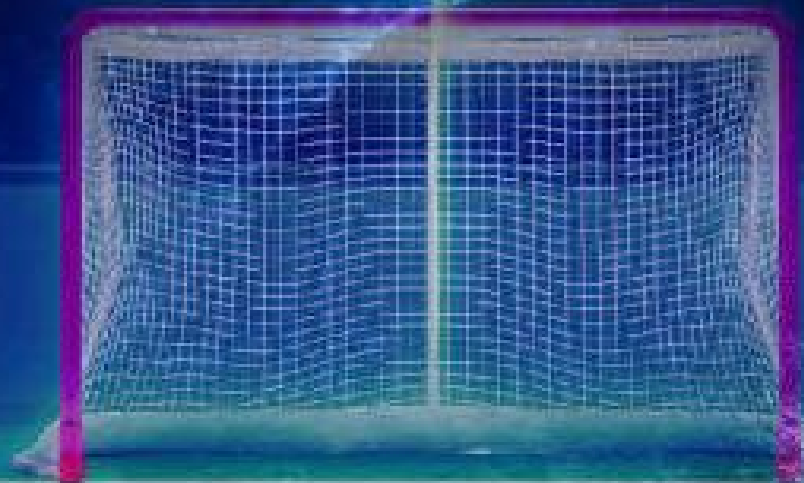


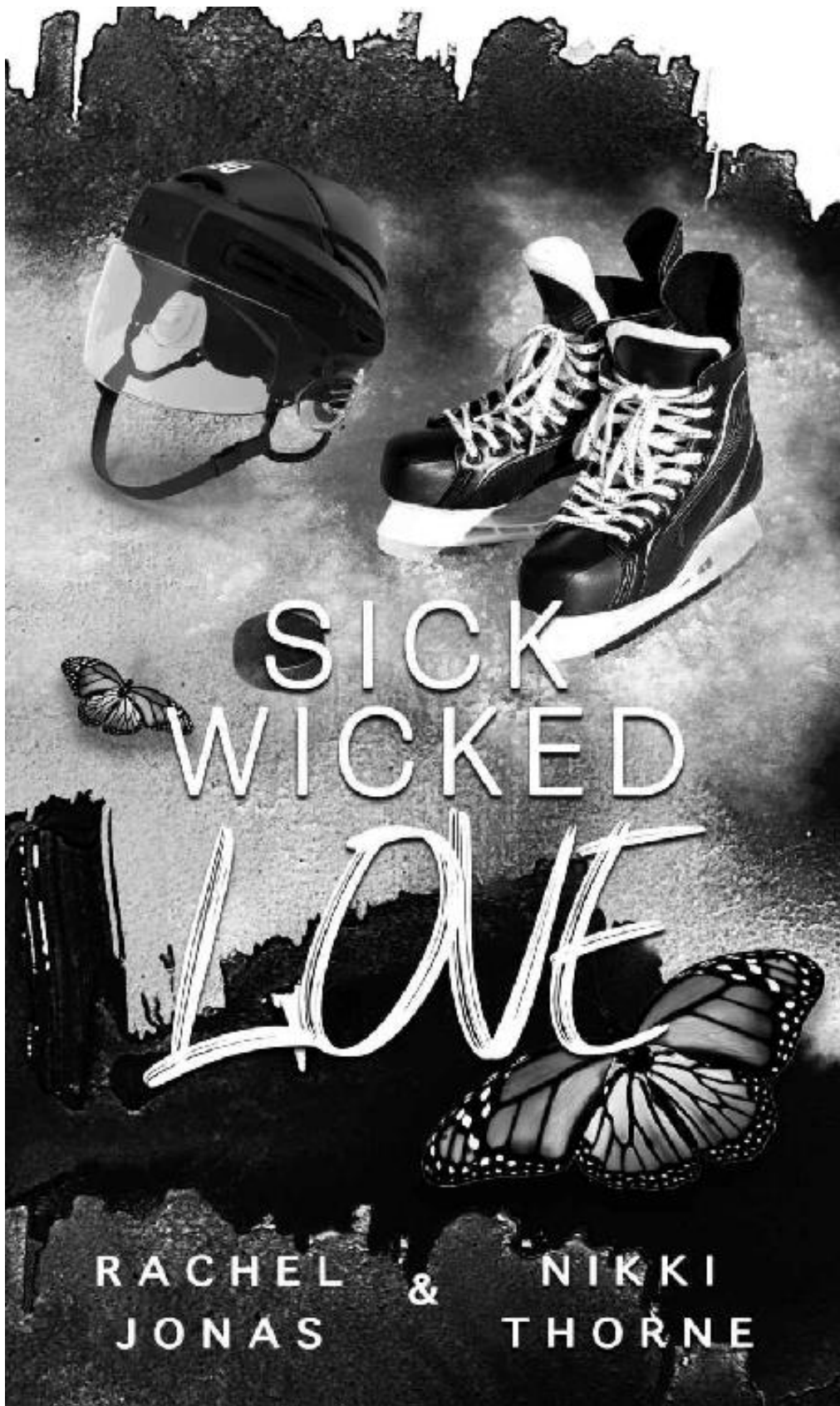
RACHEL & NIKKI
JONAS THORNE

SAVAGE KINGS OF BRADWYN U #3

SICK WICKED

LOVE





SICK
WICKED
LOVE

RACHEL JONAS & NIKKI THORNE

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Published December, 2023





WRITTEN AS RACHEL JONAS

THE LOST ROYALS SAGA

The Genesis of Evangeline

Dark Side of the Moon

Heart of the Dragon

Season of the Wolf

Fate of the Fallen

DRAGON FIRE ACADEMY

First Term

Second Term

Third Term

THE VAMPIRE'S MARK

Dark Reign

Hell Storm

Cold Heir

Crimson Mist

WRITTEN AS RACHEL JONAS

& NIKKI THORNE

KINGS OF CYPRESS POINTE

Golden Boys
Never his Girl
Forever Golden
#Pretty Boy D
#Mr. Silver
#SexyBeast

SAVAGE KINGS OF BRADWYN U

Break the Girl
Cold As Ice
Sick Wicked Love

CROOKED CLASSICS

Devotion



DESCRIPTION

Now a complete series

The stars of my university's hockey team always have each other's backs. Like family. Now, they have mine, too.

My sister's death nearly broke me, and the monster who hurt her nearly killed me when I got too close to the truth. But I'm alive... thanks to the ones I used to call my enemies.

Vince, Ash, Tate, and Micah.

Things are heating up quickly, and the closer we get to the fire, the more we get burned. But it's tough to stay vigilant when we're not even sure who the true enemy is.

They certainly know who we are, though, and they're not shy about exposing our secrets. The fact that they know things we planned to take to our graves is unsettling. To the point that it has us paranoid, constantly watching our backs.

Our world is all chaos and pain right now, but we find solace in each other. The only thing we know for sure is that no matter what comes at us, we're strong enough to face it.

Together.

More about **SICK WICKED LOVE**

- Dark Themes
- Enemies to Lovers

- Hockey/Sports Romance
 - RH/Why Choose
 - Plus-Size Heroine
 - New Adult/College Romance
 - KINGS OF CYPRESS POINTE Crossover (absolutely no need to read that series first)
-

This book is dark and twisted, but keep in mind that it's a work of fiction. Nothing between these pages reflects the authors' views, nor does it imply that they condone any of the situations or actions you'll read within the series.

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The male characters in this series proudly wave all 99+ of their red flags. In other words, this dark bully romance contains graphic content and questionable behavior not suitable for or enjoyed by all readers. If you're sensitive to certain themes and scenarios, check the full content warning inside the book. Read responsibly and at your own risk. This is the final installment in a trilogy, and it does end in an HEA.

This list is in no way exhaustive, so please read responsibly and at your own risk.

For all inquiries, please contact:

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SICK WICKED LOVE

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DEDICATION

This one's for the unapologetically loud, fierce, magnetic girl I met in 8th grade, who taught me that curves aren't a curse but a blessing.

That year, I learned to love myself and never stopped.

Chapter 1



Micah

My hands and clothes reek of gasoline, and every time I breathe it in, that terrified look on Dahlia's face flashes in my head.

No one knows better than me that I'm an asshole, but she definitely deserved that shit—being taken to the woods in the middle of the night, being taunted until she talked. It was the only way to know for sure if she had anything to do with Bird being attacked. Besides, the long walk home will do her some good. At the very least, it'll teach her not to fuck with any of us again.

I try not to think about whether making her walk home in forty-degree weather, soaked, was too much. My actions tonight won't exactly help me win any chivalry awards, but I did what I had to do—we did what we had to do—for Bird, and it worked.

Had it not been for my... unconventional methods, we would've never known for sure that Dahlia's been working with Whitlock. Nor would I have been made aware of him threatening to let out the one secret I planned to take to my grave. And while Dahlia seemed pretty adamant that what happened to Bird had nothing to do with Whitlock, I'll decide whether that's true for myself.

We speed toward his place, and I know the way like the back of my hand. I glance over at Ash in the driver's seat, then to Vince in the back. When I face forward again, I'm focused on the fact that, no matter how sick or twisted things get, these two and Tate have had my back through it all.

Even on the few occasions when they think I've crossed the line.

They haven't said a word since they watched me tell Dahlia she'd be finding her own way home tonight. But deep down, I trust that they understand why I took things so far, why I came within an inch of lighting that bitch up like a fucking Christmas tree.

If this is what it takes to protect Bird, I'm willing to toe the line between sanity and insanity every damn time.

Ash clutches the wheel tighter, and I know we'll have to talk about this shit sooner or later. So, we may as well get it out the way.

"Listen, I—"

My words cut off when a call comes through, interrupting my thoughts. Seeing Tate's name, my gut twists into a knot. He's on Bird watch while we're out, so if he's calling, something must be wrong.

"Yeah?"

"Is she with you?"

His question has me breathing twice as fast, twice as heavy. Hearing the panic in his voice doesn't help.

"No, she should be at the house."

My response has Ash's head whipping toward me. Vince scoots to the edge of his seat as I put the call on speaker.

"Well, where she *should* be and where she *is* are two different things. I checked all three of your bedrooms, looked all over the house. Nothing." He sounds rushed, filled with panic.

"Have you tried calling her?" Ash chimes in.

"Three times. No answer."

Tate's reply makes the air in the truck feel thick, charged with bad energy. Without a second thought, I'm back on my phone's home screen, getting ready to pull up the app when Tate speaks again.

“Hang on. It’s her. She sent a text.” He pauses for a second to read, but it feels like a lifetime. “She says she’s fine, and she’s safe, but there’s something she needs to take care of. Alone.”

When he adds that part, I bite into my lip. Here I was, thinking she knew better than to pull some shit like this again. Especially considering what happened last time.

I go back to the app, pulling up Bird’s location only to see that she’s in the middle of fucking nowhere. And for all we know, that wasn’t even her texting, which is why she should’ve adhered to the strict *No More Bullshit Nighttime Meetups* policy.

“Sending you her location,” I say to Tate. “Meet us there.”

“On it.”

We end the call, and I shoot him the info before putting it into Ash’s GPS.

“What’s the plan once we get there?” he asks.

“First, we verify that she’s actually safe. Then... I guess we wait.”

I’m seething, trying not to be pissed that she’d do this again. And now, I’m thinking back to a time when I wasn’t nearly as vigilant as I should’ve been. A fact I didn’t know to be a fact until it was too late.

Until my girl was lying on the pavement in some abandoned warehouse.

Another pain hits me in the gut, but it isn’t fear this time. It’s sadness. And anger. Anger toward the sick fuck who did that shit, anger toward myself for letting it happen. I vowed to never be blindsided like that again, so Bird may bitch and moan when she sees us pull up, but she’ll have to deal with it.

That’s the price of being with us.

The price of being our girl.

“So, what are we telling her about Dahlia? About Whitlock?”

I peer into the rearview mirror and lock eyes with Vince after he asks.

“We tell her nothing.” The firmness of that answer seems to shock them both into silence. “She’s dealing with enough as it is. Knowing the two of them were plotting against her, and knowing there might be someone else in the mix, fucking things up... it’d be too much. So, for now, we leave things as they are. As far as she knows, we didn’t even leave the house.”

“So, she’s just supposed to believe we’ve been there the whole time?” Ash scoffs. “I’m not lying to her, which means there’s a hole in your plan.”

My eyes cut to him. I get that he’s turning over a new leaf or some shit like that, but now’s not really the time for whatever valiant bullshit he’s trying to pull.

“Fine.” My jaw aches when I grit my teeth. “We won’t lie. We’ll simply... omit. If we never outright say we left The Den, it’s a non-issue. The Den’s a big place, so it’d be easy for her to believe she just missed us.”

The guys are quiet now, even after I explain, but I know in my gut this is the best way. More than anything, our main priority is protecting Bird. And that’s an all-encompassing deal. It doesn’t just stop at physical protection. It includes emotional shit, too. We know for sure that Dahlia won’t be trying anything new. Not after what we just did to her, so at least *she’s* no longer a threat. So, once I’ve had a chance to sort things out with Whitlock, bringing up what happened tonight to Bird would be a moot point.

“No.”

I glance toward the backseat to stare at Vince. “What do you mean *no*?”

“No, I won’t fucking lie to her,” he shoots back. “Leaving shit out counts as lying, and that’s not how we function. We all keep saying she’s one of us, so that means she gets treated like she’s one of us. We don’t do lies.”

My breathing deepens. Mostly because I hate that he’s got a point. A point I’m currently trying to find fault with. He’s

backed me into a corner, forcing me to eat my own words, and I'm not thrilled about it.

“Fine.” My jaw throbs with tension again. “But we don't bring up the other threats Dahlia mentioned. Not until we know more. Agreed?”

Neither answer right away, but when Ash finally nods, I see Vince do the same from the corner of my eye. So, it's decided. I guess this is how we'll compromise.

The silence inside the truck is deafening, a telltale sign Ash and Vince aren't exactly happy with me tonight. They're not fans of my *choices*, the lengths I'm willing to go, but if there's one thing I've never been afraid of being for the people I care about... it's the villain.

Everyone's got their part to play, and maybe this time around it's my turn to be the bad guy.

Stevie

The car teeters over the uneven pavement, and I'm trying not to panic. My racing heart and sweaty palms, however, are a dead giveaway that panicking is *exactly* what I'm doing.

I shoot Maddox a look from the passenger seat. He's focused on the road, gripping the steering wheel so tight his knuckles have gone white. There's a strange feeling that's settled into the pit of my stomach. It's this overpowering sense of barely knowing who the guy sitting beside me truly is.

Yes, we've been friends for years.

Yes, we know one another's fears and insecurities, each other's secrets.

But the secret I discovered tonight about him and my sister... it has me second-guessing that. Actually, it has me second-guessing *everything*. Right down to whether Maddox has been wearing a mask the entire time I've known him, and I'm just an idiot for not seeing it sooner.

He glances toward me, as if sensing my eyes on him. But then, his gaze quickly darts away and shifts back to the road.

"I know you think I'm some kind of monster, Stevie, but things just got... complicated. I swear to you, there's an explanation for all of this."

My eyes fall closed because that's exactly what I'd expect a guilty person to say. Have we really come to this? A

friendship that's dead in the water, shriveling and dying beneath the weight of a blanket of shit a mile deep?

We pull off the side of the road, and as I feared, I have no clue where we are. I glance down at my phone as he puts the car in park, only to see I've missed a slew of calls and text messages from the guys. Of course, they aren't content with my vague explanation, but that's all I have to offer them at the moment.

Tucking my phone away, I breathe deep, bracing myself for whatever twists and turns this conversation might take. Maddox sighs, too, and I shoot a look his way, feeling anger seep back into my bloodstream.

"Why?" I blurt out, feeling tension in my jaw as I glare. "Why her? Or at the very least, why not tell me the truth when you saw me driving myself crazy, trying to figure this shit out? Or even better, you could've just stayed away from her, because you *knew* dating my little sister was a line that should *never* be crossed."

Maddox's eyes fall closed, and his lack of a response is driving me insane.

"Answer me!"

He flinches when I yell, but several seconds pass before his lips part to speak.

"I wish there was a clean, clearcut answer to give you, Stevie, but—"

"Cut the shit, Maddox. At this point, there's nothing you can do to save face or make this all seem less shady. So, you may as well just come out with it."

Shame washes over his face when he lowers his gaze, shakes his head. "I never meant to hurt you. With *any* of this," he adds, but hearing that only makes me more frustrated. More angry.

"Don't act like my feelings matter. Don't pretend that you even thought about me while you were fucking her."

He winces when the harsh words leave my mouth, but I want it to hurt. I want everything I say to kill him a little until he's actually dead.

"That's where you're wrong."

I scoff when he speaks, rolling my eyes before turning to stare out the window, needing a break from staring at his pitiful expression.

"You were *all* I thought about, Stevie." The words leave him almost too softly to be heard. "Every time I looked at her, laughed with her... *kissed* her... my thoughts were on you."

My stomach rolls at what I think he's saying. Especially because I also think he believes this confession will soften me toward him.

"You used her. Because you and I were never going to be a thing, you thought fucking around with my sister was the next best thing."

It's not a question. He's all but said it himself. Just in a less direct way.

"Did you know she was pregnant?" I ask, not bothering to wait for him to respond to my last statement.

The few seconds of silence that precede his response tell me everything I need to know. "Yes," he admits, and my stomach turns again.

"And did you... were you the one who..."

The words won't even leave my mouth, but he reads between the lines, and I don't have to say it.

"Stevie, I would never hurt anyone. You know me."

"That's the problem, Maddox. I *don't* know you. Not anymore. The guy I knew would never cross the many, *many* lines you've crossed."

I push my fingers through my hair as every sordid detail rushes through my brain like a raging river.

"For fuck's sake, she was underage. And don't come at me with any *age of consent* bullshit. Mel was a kid, a little sister

to us *both*.” My voice trails off, and he doesn’t rush to defend himself.

With three years between my sister and I, I was nineteen and she was sixteen at the time of her passing. Which means the same age difference existed between her and Maddox. The legal red tape doesn’t interest me. All I know is she was too young, and he preyed on her.

“I’m not sure what you want me to say,” Maddox adds, sounding like the reality of finally being caught has humbled him.

“I want you to say that you’re a piece of shit,” I hiss. “I want you to say that you’re a predator. I want you to say that you know you fucked up and that you understand why this is the end of our friendship.”

He’s quiet, and in my peripheral vision, I see his head lower.

Another thought dawns on me, and I shoot him another look. “Since you and my sister shared so many secrets, did you know about Dusty? Did you know who he was?”

Again, his silence is loaded.

“What the *actual* fuck, Maddox? You knew, and you didn’t ever plan on telling me?”

“Things were complicated.”

“Yeah, I heard you the first time, but this one’s really simple, actually. If you call someone your best friend, and you’re holding a piece of life-changing information, you open your damn mouth and tell them! There’s nothing complicated about it!”

He’s shaking his head before I finish. “It’s complicated because Mel asked me not to tell you.”

It feels like all the air gets sucked out of the car as we sit in the deafening silence. “Why? Why would she not want me to know? Especially when she went out of her way to find and visit Dusty to make sure the story checked out?”

Maddox shrugs. “It doesn’t feel right speaking for her when she never just came out and said it, but I got the sense that... she just wanted to protect you.”

“From what?”

He takes a deep breath and shifts in his seat. “I know you’re older than her, but she was very careful about your feelings. She looked out for you, too.”

I can’t help but scoff. Honestly, I don’t think either of them were all that worried about my feelings.

“I mean it,” he says, hearing the sound that’s just left my mouth. “She was so bogged down with drama—hers, other people’s—and I think she just wanted to spare you from it all. Including the potential fallout from your bio dad entering the picture.”

“Yeah, well that wasn’t a call for either one of you to make.”

He nods. “I can see that now, but in the heat of the moment, with how your mother reacted and begged her not to reveal it, I think Mel just got confused. And... maybe she knew she wouldn’t be here to help you through it.”

My heart lurches when he says that part, and I hate that sadness creeps in. The only emotion I welcome at the moment is anger.

“And I know you, know the way you think,” he says. “So, I’m guessing you’re also wondering why I’ve tried to caution you from looking deeper into things, but this is why. Mel made me swear to protect you from whatever she was up against.”

“Yeah, well, that plan went to shit.”

“I don’t disagree,” he says, his voice soft and solemn. “But I had to try. It was the least I could do for her, seeing as how some of her pain and heartbreak was on me, too.”

I glance his way, and he seems to sense the question on the tip of my tongue.

“Yes, she knew,” he says. “She knew she was my second choice. She knew that, if given the chance... I would’ve been

with you. In a heartbeat.”

There’s a twinge of sympathy ushered into my heart by his words, but I quickly dismiss it because it’s undeserved.

“And for what it’s worth, I didn’t know she’d been raped,” he shares. “After you told me the date it happened, it made sense. I was away, camping with my dad that weekend, but I did talk to her that night. She was sad and didn’t want to actually talk, but she asked me to just sit on the phone with her until she fell asleep. I never got out of her what happened, but... I knew it was bad. So bad that she never came back from it.”

I zone out, listening to him speak. A flashback rushes in and then it’s gone. It’s of Mel coming home that night, slamming the front door before racing up the steps toward her bedroom. I saw the tears, so I chased after her, but she wouldn’t talk.

There’s a strange sense of relief that comes with Maddox’s recollection. I remember that camping trip, and I also remember the timelines matching up. So, while he’s cleared of one offense, he’s still guilty of the other.

“We shouldn’t talk anymore.”

“Stevie, that’s—”

“Unless there’s other information you’ve withheld, and you decide to be forthcoming with it, don’t ever call or text me again. I mean it.”

His breathing gets louder and faster as my words settle into his head. “This is bullshit.”

“No, this is reality,” I shoot back. “You fucked up, and these are the consequences.”

“I—”

His words trail off as a set of headlights pull directly in front of us, temporarily blinding us both. But then those lights go dark, and I recognize the truck at approximately the same time Maddox does.

I swear, his frustration is palpable as the passenger door of Ash's truck opens, and Micah steps out, stretching to full height before slamming the door shut again. He walks between the two vehicles and leans against the grill of the truck. He's casual but clearly gives zero fucks what I *or* Maddox think about them showing up here.

He's a stalker, but... he's *my* stalker, I suppose. And even though the others don't exit the truck like *this* macho asshole, I know they're there, too.

Thick, solid arms fold across Micah's chest, and his pecs flex beneath his gray t-shirt with the motion. It isn't lost on me that his eyes never shift to meet mine, because he's deadlocked on Maddox, giving this look that screams '*one false move, and I will fuck you up.*'

"You felt so unsafe with me that you had them come here?"

There's no clearcut response to Maddox's question. Partly because I *didn't* feel safe with him at first, but also because I didn't call the guys to come babysit me. They just... showed up. But I can't very well tell Maddox that.

"I texted them because they worry."

He scoffs and anger flares within me again, causing my gaze to shift from Micah to Maddox.

"It amazes me that, given the circumstances, you still think you have a right to judge my choices."

I reach for the handle and get one foot outside his car when he speaks.

"Stevie, wait! You can't just... end it here," he says, and I don't miss the air of pleading in his tone, nor do I miss it in his eyes when they land on me. "I'm not ashamed to say it."

"To say what?"

His chest heaves, and I swear his eyes are glassier than they were a moment ago. "I'm not ashamed to say that... I love you. With my whole fucking heart."

That twinge of sympathy flashes within me again and, like before, I shove it down to the pit of my stomach.

“Did you know she was being followed? Did she mention anything about thinking someone was stalking her?”

When I meet his gaze, his brow furrows with confusion, and maybe a little frustration, too. “No, but... that’s seriously all you have to say? I just poured my heart out to you, Stevie.”

I draw in a breath, and having my final question answered, I’m officially done with this. Done with *him*.

“I’ll be by to get my car from your dorm sometime tomorrow.”

I feel his eyes on me as I climb out the car and slam the door shut behind me. Literally *and* figuratively. My steps carry me around the hood of the car where I meet Micah, and his arm slips around my shoulders. He’s silent as he walks me to the back to sit beside Vince, and when my eyes lock with Maddox’s through the windshield, I’m angry with myself for missing all the signs.

Never again will I be so trusting, so blind.

If my former best friend has taught me nothing else, he’s taught me that nothing and no one are ever quite what they seem.

Stevie

The guys are quiet.

Too quiet.

It's hard to gauge their temperament when they aren't speaking, but my first guess is that they're pissed. Maybe I should've said something before leaving. Maybe I—

“What was this about? You... running off tonight,” Micah asks, interrupting my thought. His tone is direct, but not stern.

“Maddox and I needed to have a very serious conversation.”

“And it couldn't have waited until morning?”

“No, it was important. I wanted answers tonight.”

“Care to share *what* was so important?”

Okay, so he's definitely being short with me now, but unfortunately for him, I'm not in the mood. Not with the night I've had.

“If you must know, I found out my best friend was fucking my little sister,” I snap, feeling fresh rage creep into my bones as I'm forced to admit it out loud again.

“That's not entirely surprising,” Micah grumbles to himself, and I don't appreciate his cynicism.

“Yeah, well, I guess that makes *one* of us who didn’t have their reality shattered tonight.”

Asshole.

When I swipe a tear from my cheek, Vince’s hand slips into mine. “Lay off, Mic. There’s a time and place to be a dick. This isn’t it.”

From this position, seated directly behind Micah, I have a clear view of his face in the side mirror. At Vince’s words, Micah’s eyes slam shut, but not before I think I see them fill with regret.

“We were just worried. That’s all.” The explanation comes across as somewhat of an apology, taking the edge off.

“I know. But I didn’t see any of you around when I left, so I just slipped out, mostly in a rage-induced haze,” I admit, remembering how my chest burned when I laid eyes on the receipt from Mel’s box of mementos. The seemingly innocent receipt that eventually incriminated Maddox as Mel’s mystery boyfriend.

“I’m sorry,” Micah says, his voice calm and even now. “Not just about losing my temper, but about Maddox and your sister, too. Can’t be fun finding out some shit like that.”

No fun indeed.

“Did he say anything useful?”

I sigh, thinking over the details. “Only that there’s no way he could’ve been her attacker, which I guess is something. Everything else that came out only proved that he’s a liar.”

My thoughts shift back to Dusty, and how so many people were willing to take to their graves that he’s my father. People who all claim to love me.

But I don’t want to think about that, so I push it aside.

“Were you three at the house when I left? I mean, I snuck out, so I didn’t exactly look for anyone, but I kind of expected to get caught before I made it to the door.” I laugh a little, thinking again what thorough stalkers they are.

But the lighthearted question suddenly feels heavier when the guys all share a glance, as if they're trying to get a story straight before answering.

“We met up with Dahlia.”

My eyes nearly pop out of my head when Micah speaks, giving a response I never saw coming.

“What? Why?”

More silence, another of those loaded glances.

“Because we had reason to believe she and Whitlock were working together, which meant we also had reason to believe she might've known something about you being attacked. So, we picked her up to have a little talk.”

My head spins, wondering what all this means. “Was it true? *Were* they working together?”

Vince squeezes my hand a little, and my attention shifts toward him. “She admitted to it, but we also know she didn't have anything to do with the attack.”

I find myself not wanting to know what it took for them to get that kind of information out of her.

“What was she planning with Whitlock?”

“From what we could gather, Dahlia just wanted to fuck with you,” Ash explains. “So, she exchanged a favor with Whitlock to get it done.”

“What sort of favor?”

“All the reports against the frat? Whitlock put her up to that shit. Every false claim, every violation we've acquired... it's all been her and Whitlock.”

I don't miss how venomous Ash's words are. I can only imagine the toll accusations like that have taken on their brotherhood, but at least now they know.

At least now we *all* know.

I've been so lost in our conversation that it's just dawning on me that we're not headed back to The Den.

“Where are we going?”

“Tonight’s kind of a two-part ordeal,” Micah speaks up, and when Ash glances into the rearview mirror, I notice lights trailing close behind. When I turn and look out the back window, I spot Tate’s car, which leaves me even more confused and intrigued.

Before I can ask for more detail, I spot Greek letters not belonging to The Savages. Ash kills the headlights and comes to a stop at the curb with Tate pulling up right behind us, darkening his headlights as well. At first, whatever this is feels like a sneak attack, but when Micah hops out, slams the door behind him with reckless abandon, it starts to feel more like an ambush.

“Shit.”

That one word flies from Ash’s mouth as he climbs out of the truck, following behind Micah as Vince does the same. But not before aiming a sternly spoken, “Stay here,” in my direction.

I want to protest, want to chase after them with hopes of diffusing whatever this is I feel unfolding, but I’m glued to my seat, frozen.

The last door slams shut as my gaze shifts out the window. Just in time to spot Tate joining the other three as they trudge toward the front entrance of a frat house. I hold my breath, thinking Micah intends to ring the bell or even pound the frame with his fist. But what I absolutely was *not* expecting was to see him rear back as he lifts his foot into the air, right before slamming the sole of his shoe into the door, kicking it in.

He struts inside like he owns the place, and my heart races. I can’t get my seatbelt off quickly enough, so I fumble before finally being free from it, and then stumble out of the truck. Sprinting toward the porch, I hear an argument already raging at full blaze, and my only concern is for my boys. Whatever happened tonight, whatever led to *this...* isn’t worth the trouble they could land in if things go too far.

And if I know them like I *think* I know them... things almost always go too far.

The second I walk through the front door, the sight I lay eyes on is Micah on top of Whitlock, slamming his fist into Whitlock's face over and over again.

“Just fucking admit it was you, bitch!”

Whitlock doesn't respond to Micah's accusation as he struggles to block the blows.

“You targeted Stevie, and you targeted the Savages,” Micah shouts. “You're a fucking coward. You didn't even have the balls to own that shit or even do the dirty work yourself!”

I'm in shock, watching him pummel Whitlock as steps thunder upstairs. Tate's got a hold of Micah, but his hands keep slipping because Micah's positively feral tonight. Vince and Ash step up when it becomes super clear things are getting out of hand, and even with all three exerting all their strength, it takes a few seconds to pry Micah off him.

Whitlock leans to the side, spitting blood onto the worn wood floor, and even with the damage Micah's done, Whitlock smiles.

“Never could control that temper of yours,” he taunts.

“Fuck you!” Micah tries and fails to break free from the guys. It's at this moment that two bodies fill a doorway, and it takes half a second for Whitlock's frat brothers to volley a look between him and Micah to put together what's happened. Their expressions turn furious the next second, their fists clenching at their sides. My guess is that the only thing stopping them from launching a full-on attack is knowing they're outnumbered.

“You thought you could bring the Savages down, asshole? Well, unfortunately for you, *and* that bitch Dahlia, we got the proof we need, and it's *your* shit that's about to get shut down, motherfucker. First thing in the morning, I'm putting in a request to meet with the IFC, and they'll hear about everything.”

There's still amusement in Whitlock's expression when he sits up, tilting his head while staring at Micah. "Okay, so you've got me by the balls, but... are you sure you want to out me?"

"I swear to you, I'll nail your ass to the wall, dickhead. And as soon as I can prove it was you who attacked Stevie, you're a fucking dead man," Micah adds. "Dahlia might not think that was you, but I know what a sick fuck you can be."

Whitlock laughs again, and it's unsettling to see that Micah's threats don't have him shaken. Not even a little.

He swipes a trickle of blood from his lip before meeting Micah's gaze again. "I seem to recall you having your own little secret you might not want getting around. Am I wrong about that?"

My gaze shifts to Micah, only to observe how he'll respond, and I don't expect what I see. He recoils, visibly standing down. So much that the guys don't even have to hold him as tightly as before. Whatever Whitlock's hinting at, Micah's affected.

Whitlock's gaze shifts to me next, and he smiles. It's that same look he gave that night at the hockey game, right before he and Micah went at it.

"You never answered my question the last time we had this talk," Whitlock says. "What do you think your girl would do if she knew the real you? Knew the shit you're really capable of?"

My heart thuds against my ribs and the room grows eerily quiet, especially with how loud and chaotic it had just been a moment ago. Micah's shoulders heave with frustration and you couldn't cut the tension in the room with a chainsaw. He looks Whitlock up and down, and then spits on him where he's still recuperating on the floor from getting his ass kicked.

Whitlock doesn't lash out, though. Instead, he laughs like someone who *wasn't* making false claims.

He laughs like someone who's got... leverage.

“Who knows? Maybe you and your dad can be cellmates,” Whitlock adds, and that’s the last straw.

Micah’s arms and legs thrash as he tries to break free, but the guys seemed to sense that this was coming, so they managed to grip him tighter before the outburst.

“We have to get him out of here,” Tate says with a grunt, struggling to control Micah.

Whitlock’s smile broadens. “Good call, Ford. Get out and take your fucking stray with you. And the next time he thinks about trying to rat someone out, remind him he’s got just as much to lose as I do.” He pauses and his gaze shifts to me. “Hell, maybe more.”

I break eye contact and follow the guys out the door, not even looking back as I feel Whitlock’s stare boring a hole into me. I’m with Tate. Our priority is to get Micah out of here and save him from himself.

But something tells me this shitstorm is far from over.

We step out onto the porch, and Micah snatches out of the guys’ grasp. They block the door, so he can’t go back inside even if he wants to, but that doesn’t seem to be his focus. Anger and frustration roll off him in waves. His shoulders are so tense it looks like they’re somehow larger than before.

“Fuck!” Heat from Micah’s breath puffs from his lips as his voice rings out into the night.

“Come on. We’re taking you home.” Ash reaches for Micah’s arm, but he snatches free.

“I need to take a walk,” Micah grumbles.

“Fine, Vince can drive my truck home. I’m coming with you.”

Ash is already handing Vince the keys when Micah cuts a look his way.

“You’re not coming.”

“Like hell I’m not,” Ash counters, but Micah’s not budging. The rims of his nostrils flare, and he doesn’t even

look like himself anymore. He's different when he rages, and I'm not entirely sure he wouldn't use physical force to make sure he isn't followed.

Ash glances down at his arm when my hand lands there, thinking it's time I intervene. "Maybe we should let him walk it off. Blowing off a bit of steam might do him some good."

I offer a wary smile after making the suggestion, partly because I'm not so sure this is a good idea, but I know how I get when it feels like I'll implode. And I recognize that look in Micah right now. It's better to let him roam for a bit than to risk him throwing a punch at one of the guys and possibly damaging the friendship beyond repair.

"Fine," Ash caves, staring Micah down before he finishes. "But remember, if you do something fucked up, you're not the only one affected. Shit rolls downhill, Mic."

"And instead of walking, do us all a favor and take my car," Tate offers. "I'll ride to The Den with everyone else."

Micah takes the keys, and without a word, he walks toward the road, fuming like the raging bull I've seen him turn into on more than one occasion. He burns rubber on the take off, then turns the corner and disappears.

All any of us can do at this point is hope for the best, and hope Ash's words of warning didn't fall on deaf ears.

Stevie

I should've kept my big mouth shut.

If I had, Micah would be home, and I wouldn't be pacing in front of the library window while Tate, Vince, and Ash all worry, too. They haven't come right out and *said* that they're worried, but I've been around them enough now that I can recognize it.

I see it in the tension on Tate's forehead as his brow furrows.

I see it in the way Vince sits in a daze, his eyes trained on the ceiling.

I see it the way Ash's jaw clenches and unclenches, over and over again.

It only makes matters worse that they've hardly said a word since we returned to The Den an hour and a half ago. It's hard not to wonder if the silence is because they all secretly blame me for us not knowing where Micah is right now.

"I'm sorry."

Those words tumble from my mouth before I can lose my nerve, and all three sets of eyes flit toward me, causing my stomach to sink.

Swallowing the lump in my throat, I continue. "I shouldn't have suggested that we let Micah go. You three know him a lot

better than I do, and I—”

“Stevie,” Tate cuts in, quieting me. “There’s nothing to apologize for. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

Tate’s words don’t do much to dispel my guilt.

“No, Micah’s not exactly stable tonight. He’s not thinking clearly, and I shouldn’t have butt in.”

Ash’s brow quirks and I’m not sure what he’s thinking. “Bird, you can’t butt in when you *are* in,” he says, bringing warmth to my face when he acknowledges me in this way. “You were right. Micah’s an adult. As hard as it is to see sometimes, he doesn’t need us coddling him.”

The guilt’s starting to fade a little.

“Do you guys think he’s okay?” My voice sounds small when asking, filled with concern. It doesn’t help that Vince’s initial response is to shrug his shoulders.

“Unfortunately, it’s a tossup,” he says. “Sometimes Mic legitimately just needs to get shit off his mind. Other times... he goes off the rails. Like he did *last* time.”

My gaze shifts back toward the window, remembering how dark he went not so long ago.

“Micah’s gonna be fine,” Ash sighs, sounding more confident than the rest of us. “But what about you?”

I peek at him from over my shoulder first, then turn to face him. “Me?”

He seems confused when he nods. “You found out some pretty heavy shit about your sister tonight, *and* about your friend. That couldn’t have been easy to take.”

It’s like my concern for Micah has completely overshadowed my own feelings. Until just now, when Ash brings it up.

Hugging myself when I let my weight fall against the wall, I shrug. “I’m kind of... numb,” I answer. “It hit me hard hearing him admit to everything, but honestly, it feels like that’s how it’s been the last few months in general. I mean,

sure I'm pissed, and I'm hurt, but... I can only bleed out so many times before there's not much left."

Ash nods, and I think he legitimately understands what I feel. Hell, they probably *all* understand.

"I just can't believe I missed all the signs," I admit. "I mean, there had to be something Mel did or said that should've tipped me off. But I had my head so deep in the sand back then, I didn't even realize she was hurting. Didn't even realize she'd changed so much."

"That's not on you," Tate cuts in. "We were all her age once. Hiding things from the people closest to us was practically an art."

I smile a little. "Yeah, I know, but it was just... all going on right under my nose. I mean, how did I not realize she and Maddox were hanging out? How did I not realize they were on the phone with each other? How did I not realize my sister had lost her fucking virginity? I, legitimately, missed everything."

An arm slinks around my shoulder, jarring me from my thoughts. It's Tate, and as he stands at my side, I feel a little less alone in all this.

Fucking Maddox. I had no idea what a snake he could be, what a liar. His comment runs through my head. The one about how he always thought of me when he touched Mel. He claims she knew she was a stand-in for me, but does he think that means she was okay with it? Does he honestly think that shit didn't hurt her?

I blink a few times to fight the urge to cry. That asshole doesn't deserve my tears. All he deserves from me is hatred and silence, and I plan to give him both.

"I just need something to feel normal."

I didn't mean to say that out loud, because it's not the guys' problem to fix, but it just kind of tumbled out of my mouth.

Tate squeezes me harder, bringing me to his chest, and then my eyes fall closed when he kisses the top of my hair.

“If we could take it all away for you—the pain, the anger, *all* the bad—any one of us would do that for you. In a heartbeat.”

It means something that I not only hear his words, but I feel them. I stretch toward him, and he leans in the rest of the way, placing a kiss on my lips this time, instead of my hair.

“You said you need something normal,” he says once I settle back on my heels again. “What about your group?”

The question catches me off guard, so I don’t respond right away.

“It sounded like you were a big help to a lot of people there. Maybe that’s what you need. To focus on helping others through their problems while you sort out your own. At the very least, it might take your mind off shit.”

I mull that over. I do really miss my friends there, miss seeing how I was actually making a difference in their lives.

“That might be a good idea.”

My response draws a smile out of Tate, and I begin to settle on this being exactly what I need. An outlet. A distraction.

My eyes shift to Tate’s phone when he pulls it from his pocket. For a split second, I’m hopeful it might be Micah calling, but he’s just checking the time.

“I’m staying, but I need to turn in,” he says. “I’m assuming the couch is free?”

Vince nods. “Always for you.”

A laugh leaves Tate, and his arm slips from around my shoulders. “You say such sweet things.”

He takes a step, but before he takes another, the front door swings open, and then slams shut. We all look that way, catching Micah’s angry glare as he storms through the foyer, tosses Tate his keys, and then continues toward the stairs without a single word.

Right away, it's like the entire vibe within the house shifts as he passes through. We all share a look, and I'm not sure what the others are thinking, but I'm not convinced we're out of the woods just because Micah's made it home. Sure, we don't have to worry about his safety, but I can't be the only one thinking it...

Where the hell did he go, and what did he do?

I try to believe it's like Vince said. That he very well could've just cooled off then came home, but that's the problem. No one can be sure.

"I'll go check on him," I volunteer, and when no one protests, I get the feeling they're somewhat relieved that visiting Micah's room in this state isn't on them.

I take the steps slowly, thinking of what I'll say when I get there, but as it turns out, it wasn't necessary because he isn't here. I step into this dark space and step on his discarded clothes—the same gray tee and jeans I'd just seen him in a moment ago. Assuming he swapped them out for a towel and headed to the shower, I scoop them up from the floor and walk toward the hamper. I intend to just drop them in, but I feel something in his jeans—his lighter and a pack of cigarettes. I place both on the desk, but this time when I take a step, a scent stops me in my tracks.

Holding his clothes closer to my nose, there's a trace of his cologne, but also... gasoline? My best guess is that he stopped to top off Tate's tank before bringing the car home, and possibly got a little on his hands and clothes. I toss everything into the hamper and sigh, glancing around his dark bedroom. My stomach's still turning when I drop down onto his bed, kicking my shoes off before bringing my feet up onto his comforter. With the silence, I'm able to think.

Which, tonight, isn't the best thing.

I cycle through it all—confronting Maddox, the fight between Whitlock and Micah, worrying about him while he cooled off. I'm so in my head that I don't even realize how much time has passed. Not until the knob to Micah's door turns and light floods in from the hallway.

Startled, our gazes lock when I bolt upright in his bed.

“Hey,” I practically whisper. “I just... I came to check on you, but if you want to be alone, I can go.” My stomach churns again, and I expect him to say that space is exactly what he needs, or maybe the opposite, that I’m welcome to stay. But instead, he closes the door behind him and says absolutely nothing.

Like, at all.

My gaze trails his silhouette when he crosses the room, and it stays trained on his back when he stops at the dresser and rubs on deodorant. Next, he grabs a spare lighter and cigarette pack from the top drawer.

“The lighter from your jeans is on the dresser,” I speak up, wishing he’d say *something*, but he’s still silent.

He turns, then stalks this way, the masculine roll of his shoulders illuminated in the hint of moonlight piercing through the blinds. His hair’s wet and weighted down, resting on his shoulders in slight waves, and the sight of him—tall and broody—makes me lose my breath. He stops at the nightstand to place the lighter and cigarettes there, and I still can’t take my eyes off him.

It isn’t lost on me that it’s completely inappropriate to be wishing he’d pull off his towel and come take out his frustration on me, but that’s exactly where my thoughts have gone. I’m actually so deep in this thought that it seems to blur the line between fantasy and reality when the white towel slips from around his waist just like I imagined.

The bed sinks when he climbs onto the mattress. Within seconds, he’s on me, unbuttoning my jeans so hurriedly that it’s clear his rage hasn’t even come close to subsiding. In fact, he seems even *more* enraged than when I last saw him.

Micah can be a man of few words, but he wears his heart on his sleeve. Most don’t see it that way, but I do. The anger and frustration, it all stems from his fierce need to protect the people he cares about. And when he thinks he’s failed them, or when he doesn’t think he’s good enough, the anger turns

inward. Until the pressure builds and he explodes, creating one hell of a blast radius. Shrapnel embeds itself in the skin of anyone too close, but even then, that damage is only a fraction of what he's done to himself.

Deep down on the inside, where he thinks no one sees it... but *I* see it.

Because I see *him*.

My clothes are yanked off my body, then tossed to the floor with reckless abandon. There's nothing gentle about the kiss that crashes down on my mouth. It's rough and full of misdirected hatred.

When I touch him, his skin's still damp against my palms. He settles between my legs, aligning his hard length at my entrance, and I hold my breath, bracing for impact, but it doesn't matter. He slams into me, feeding me his cock, feeding me his pain. I agreed once in the not-so-distant past that I'd go down into the darkness with him, as deep as it runs, and I meant every word. So, if what he needs tonight is to make my body feel as broken as he feels on the inside, I'm ready.

A violent, rhythmic thudding fills the room as his pelvis slams against my ass, over and over again, and I'm struggling to breathe.

"Open your legs," he rasps, and I follow his command, but when he rears back and presses his hands to my inner thighs, holding them down toward the mattress, I'm guessing it wasn't enough.

He pounds into me this way, driving deeper and harder into my pussy, using his weight to hold me open for him. The pain is intense as the muscles and tendons in my thighs are stretched to the max, but so is the pleasure.

"Am I hurting you?"

The breathless question almost doesn't register, because I'm zoned out on the feel of his thick head plunging into me, but when he asks again, I come to my senses.

"Bird... am I hurting you?" The question is spoken more sternly this time, but he doesn't break rhythm, doesn't go

easier on me.

I squirm a little, aching in places I've never ached before, but I've got the presence of mind to answer truthfully.

"Yes." I gather the sheet into my fists.

I half expect Micah's pace to slow, but instead, he asks another question.

"Do you want me to let up?"

My teeth sink into my lip, and I arch toward him, desperate not to lose this feeling when I whimper a response.

"No. Please."

He takes my answer for what it is, an invitation to fuck me hard and fast, and when I climax, that comes hard and fast, too.

"Fuck! Micah!"

I'm loud. *Too* loud. But there's no keeping quiet when he's fucking me into a completely different universe, giving me what has to be akin to an out of body experience.

He pumps into me a few more times before his hot release shoots into me, spilling out of my pussy, running down my ass and onto his sheet. He doesn't stop thrusting in until he's empty. His shoulders fall a bit and, already, I can see that the tension has started to subside.

He rubs a hand down my stomach to the top of my pussy, and he swirls my sensitive clit with his thumb until I can't take it anymore, laughing as I swat his hand away. To my surprise, he laughs too, and I don't care that it's dim and nowhere near as lighthearted as usual. It's a laugh. From the man who looked like he'd burn down the whole campus a couple hours ago.

The scent of body wash and the shampoo I left in the shower waft toward me when he doesn't bother pulling out or rolling onto the side of me. Instead, he just gently leans forward and rests his head on my breasts. He's quiet, maybe listening to the sound of my heartbeat leveling off after he

made me come, but he seems content. More content than I could've hoped for or expected tonight.

I stroke his damp hair, and think he's fallen asleep, but then the depth of his voice breaks the silence.

"You're not allowed to leave me," he says. "No matter how bad shit gets, no matter what I become, no matter what you find out I've been all along... you can't go."

The words are ominous, but I don't take them as a threat. That would've been the *old* Micah's way. With this new version that's emerged as the trust between us has grown, there isn't an unspoken '*or else*' attached to the end of that statement. Instead, this feels more like a... request.

A plea.

Like he's seeking reassurance that, no matter what, I'm with him.

With *all* of them.

"I've already told you, you four are stuck with me," I tease, but when he lifts his head and meets my gaze, the emotion behind his eyes catches me off guard.

"No, Bird, I mean it. I need to know that whoever and *whatever* I am outside these four walls, will never affect who I'm allowed to be in here. With you."

He goes quiet on me, not elaborating more than that, so I'm forced to draw my own conclusion. This is about Whitlock. Or, rather, what Whitlock said. The part about there being something Micah has to keep hidden.

Something Micah seems to be terrified will one day come to the light if Whitlock has anything to do with it.

I place my hand on the side of his face, making sure to have his full attention when I speak.

"Micah Locke, you have my word. Short of one of you four breaking my heart or causing me physical harm... again," I add with a bitter smile when I remember the brand on my hip that matches the boys', "I'm not going anywhere. I meant what I said. You're all fucking stuck with me."

He studies my gaze for a moment, and when he cranes his neck so he's able to reach my lips, I know I've finally gotten through to him. Whatever he's done, whatever he hopes to keep buried as deeply as possible... he has me.

All my boys have me.

Stevie

My hands shake a little while placing a small notepad and pencil on each seat in the auditorium. It's been a while since I've met with my group, but Tate was right. This feels necessary. It's that *something* I've been in search of to make life feel somewhat normal again.

I've missed this space and the friends I've made here. I reached out to them four days ago, the morning after the shitshow with Whitlock, and the drama with Maddox. Responses came into the group chat before I'd even climbed out of Micah's bed to shower, and everyone seemed happy to meet up. So, we agreed to get together a few days later, and now, here we are. Or rather, here *I* am, alone in this comfortingly familiar space, waiting for the other group members to join me.

It was Ash's intent to skip practice to wait for me in the parking lot, but I insisted that he go tonight. It took me promising to leave right out with the group once we're done, instead of alone, but he finally agreed. Otherwise, he would've been on "Bird Watch" tonight, missing practice.

Again.

I'd love to prove that I'm independent and capable of taking care of myself, but I'm admittedly grateful for how they look out for me. We've all been on edge. Between the info

they pulled out of Dahlia, Micah clashing with Whitlock, and me cutting off Maddox, things have felt... weird.

So, yeah, a touch of normalcy is much appreciated.

My eyes flit toward the door when it flings open, and in walks Drew. The smile on his face warms me up immediately, making it even more apparent how much I missed this. He pulls me into a hug before we even speak and, at first, I'm tense and a little uncomfortable with the contact. But then, that all melts away.

"We missed you, woman," he says, still squeezing me.

"I've missed you all, too."

He pulls away but stays close, eyeing me when he asks, "And you're sure you're up to this? You're not rushing into things?"

I'm already shaking my head before he even finishes. "Nope, all good."

Mostly, I'm certain that's the truth, but there's, of course, a small part of me that will probably *always* think it's too soon.

"Pick a seat," I say with a smile, and he drops down onto a chair halfway around the circle.

Three more members walk in, including the twins, Misty and Marley. Like Drew, they greet me with smiles and hugs. Claire pops in a few minutes later, and she welcomes me the same way. One by one, the seats fill, and I think we've even gained a few new members. All eyes are on me when I finally take my seat, greeting them with the best smile I can muster for now.

"Welcome back, everyone. Long time no see." They respond with smiles and a few kind words, and I relax a little. "It's been a while. I'm sure you've all heard what happened by now, but—"

"They still haven't caught the guy?" someone interrupts, causing me to stop midsentence with my mouth open.

I blink twice before I'm able to answer. "Nope, not yet."

“And still no leads either?” someone else wants to know.

I shake my head. “No leads, either.”

“Shit’s messed up,” Drew mumbles.

“Facts,” Claire chimes in. “You’re like, the nicest person I know. Makes no sense why someone would target *you* of all people.”

My breath quickens as the many reasons someone *would* want to target me cycles through my thoughts.

“Yeah, well, these things happen sometimes,” is the vague response I give, but I can see in their faces that this isn’t over.

“How have you been feeling? I mean, yeah, physically, but we all know the mental and emotional distress is the hardest part to get over,” Misty says, her eyes softening with compassion.

“I, uh... I’ve been good. Mostly. I’ve got people around me who really look out for me, keep me centered.” My thoughts shift to the guys, remembering how each one has done his part to make me feel safe.

“How was it going back to school and work?” Marley asks. “I mean, if it had been me this happened to, I swear I wouldn’t trust *anyone*. Maybe not ever. Unless, of course, they catch the guy.”

Misty nudges her, maybe thinking the statement was too much.

“It was tough at first,” I answer. “Somedays, it’s *still* tough, but I just choose daily to not let the asshole stop my life. Sure, I could sit in a room, rocking in a corner all day, but then it’s like he wins over and over again. Every time I choose not to live because of what he did. So, in a way, me going on with my life is my way of telling *whoever* he is... to go fuck himself.”

Quiet laughter flutters around the circle, and I smile a little. Surprisingly, this isn’t so tough to talk about. I hadn’t intended for today’s session to be about *me*, but it’s nice to know they care.

“So, moving on, is there anything anyone here would like to share or get feedback on? I’m sure we have a ton to catch up on,” I say with a smile, scanning the group for raised hands.

Claire’s pops up. “I’ve started seeing a new guy,” she shares, causing my face to light up.

“Oh, that’s great! How long’s it been?”

She shrugs. “A few weeks? Maybe a month?”

A girl seated beside her gives her a high five, and I laugh.

“Tell us about him. Where’d you two meet?”

“At my job, actually. I got his coffee order mixed up with another customer, and while the *woman* went from zero to sixty, telling me what a dumb bitch I am, the new guy jumped in to defend me. Long story short, the woman apologized and left, and when my boss gave me a break to calm down, Dante joined me. That’s his name,” she adds with a grin.

“Well, that sounds like quite the eventful meet-cute,” I say, smiling because *her* smile is so infectious.

“It was, and the best part is that he noticed the scars on my wrist while we sat and talked. It gave me an opportunity to explain, but he made sure to tell me I didn’t have to, which only made me more comfortable. But this eliminates that awkward moment I always run into down the road, when I feel obligated to fill a partner in on my past. He already knows, and he doesn’t care. He just sees me.”

Everyone in the circle claps, sharing in Claire’s good news.

“Now, we’ll be expecting weekly updates,” Marley says with a laugh, and the rest of the group seconds the idea.

“Anyone else have news to share? Good news? Bad news? Anything before we get started?”

I scan the circle again, giving them time to speak up and be heard, and just as I’m about to explain why I’ve handed out notepads and pens, another hand goes up. I smile at Liz, a girl who shows up every now and then.

“Whenever you’re ready,” I say, giving her the floor.

She's a bit shy, so she starts with her gaze fixed on the floor, and then her eyes finally meet mine. "I guess this isn't really body image related, but... it still feels like something worth discussing."

"Of course. Nothing's off-limits," I remind her.

She smiles and takes a breath. "It's about a girl in my Psych class. I mean, we don't really interact much, unless you count that time she asked to borrow a pen, but it's still kind of messing with me."

My gaze narrows. "What's the matter? Is she okay?"

Liz shrugs. "That's the thing. No one knows. She just... went missing."

Chatter picks up around the circle, but I hold my hand up, and they settle down so Liz can continue.

"Went missing?"

She nods. "Yeah, not quite a week ago. She left the house late one night after someone knocked on the door and told her to come out. All her roommates know is that it was a male voice, and then they heard a vehicle take off. They assumed she'd be back that night or even the next morning if it was someone she was seeing, but... it's been days."

"Yeah, but it's kind of weird we're just now hearing about it," someone comments.

"Apparently, it's just become a concern," Liz says. "At first, her family and roommates just assumed she was off somewhere with a guy, and she'd be back. But she left without her phone, her purse, or any personal belongings. Just her shoes and the clothes on her back from what I've heard."

"What's her name? Maybe some of us might know her. We could help spread the word," someone else offers.

The space goes quiet while we wait for Liz to answer, but when she does, the entire room begins to spin.

"Her name's Dahlia. Dahlia Torrence."

There's chatter around the circle, but the conversation may as well be in a different language because I can't comprehend any of it. My heart races, and I feel sick to my stomach.

"Excuse me." I barely get those words out of my mouth before I fly out of my seat, headed straight toward the bathroom. When I stop at the sink, staring at my horrified reflection, I'm trying not to panic, trying not to jump to conclusions.

The sequence of events leading up to Dahlia's disappearance aligns with what the guys told me. That they picked her up and took her somewhere to get information out of her. But now, I'm left to wonder... did things go further than that?

Bracing the edge of the sink, my eyes slam shut, and more details come back to me. Specifically, how Micah went off on his own shortly thereafter, and there's also that cryptic comment he made. Or rather, it was a question. He wanted to be certain that, no matter what he did, no matter what came to the light about him... I'd never turn my back.

Now, considering this new information, I'm forced to question what exactly he was concerned I'd find out he'd done.

Rushing back to the group, I keep things vague, simply stating that we'll have to cut things short today. As far as they know, I'm suddenly not feeling well, and we'll reconvene next week. Once I grab my things and lock up, with little to no thought for my safety, I rush across the parking lot, racing toward my car.

I've got a one-track mind, and a very clear idea of what I need.

Answers.

Micah Locke... what the fuck did you do?

Stevie

Maddox: Can we talk?

Barely glancing at the text, I push through the main entrance of the arena. Maddox will have to wait. Or, better yet, he can accept that our friendship is over and respect that we have boundaries now. Boundaries that include him not calling on a whim or... *ever*.

I'm a bundle of nerves while making my way to the large expanse of windows overlooking the ice. The team's just finished up with practice, so I've still got time to sort out what I'll say to them, because the car ride here wasn't enough.

I don't want to accuse Micah, or *any* of the guys, but... to the best of my knowledge, they were the last to see Dahlia the night she went missing, and I need answers. Even if the signs are all pointing in the direction I think they are.

But... how do I feel about that?

How do I feel about the possibility of my boys having done something terrible? Even if I also believe it was done to protect me? It dawns on me that I'm nervous, yes, but I'm not upset, not disgusted or angry. So... what does that say about me? What does it mean that I've already decided that nothing can make me turn my back on them? If I'm honest, my only *real* concern is what might happen if they get caught.

As long as they're okay, I'm... I'm okay with whatever they've done.

There, I said it.

As fucked up as that may be.

I make my way down the steps to my left and the stairwell lets me out right beside the locker room. Players start filing out one-by-one, and I'm pacing, waiting for my boys, wringing my hands like a worried mother. The door unlatches again and it's them. Right away, they seem to read the concern on my face, and their conversation and laughter fades.

"What happened?" It's Micah who's asked, but it's clear from all three of their expressions that this is the question on their minds.

"We need to talk." A few more of their teammates pass by, and I wait until they're gone to explain. "It's about Dahlia."

Their expressions shift again, and they're hard to read, which sets my nerves even more on edge than they already were.

"No one's in the arena anymore," Vince says. "We can talk there."

I follow as they lead the way. We settle on the bleachers and the only other soul in this space is the Zamboni driver who's already tending to the ice. The guys' full attention is on me.

"What's this about Dahlia?" Ash asks, and the only way to come at this is head on.

"She's missing."

I study their expressions again. This time, they look at one another instead of me.

"What do you mean she's missing?" Micah's brow tenses when he asks, and I find myself studying every single detail when the question leaves his mouth. Like, did he flinch? Does he look guilty? I realize I'm not exactly being subtle and snap out of it.

“One of my group members brought it up tonight. She said that neither Dahlia’s housemates, nor her family, have heard from her since... since the night she was with *you* four.”

I’m careful with my words, making sure to sound as non-accusatory as possible. Despite where my thoughts are leaning.

“Shit.” Vince’s tone is riddled with frustration, and... I don’t know... maybe something more? It’s hard to tell if that’s real or imagined on my part, brought on by what I suspect might’ve happened.

My mind’s reeling, and I’m tempted to ask the question, tempted to address the elephant in the room head-on.

Fuck it.

“Was it you? *Any* of you?” I try not to look directly at Micah, but I swear I feel his eyes on me.

None of them jump to speak right away.

“What exactly are you asking us, Bird?”

Micah’s tone is low and vague, just like all their other reactions tonight. I swallow deeply, meeting his gaze because I need to see it in his eyes when I come straight out with it.

“Did one of you... hurt her?”

His jaw ticks, and he doesn’t even blink. “Do you mean, did we *kill* her?”

My heart leaps, seeing the darkness in his eyes when he asks. I swallow again, making it a point to keep my eyes locked with his.

“Yes,” I admit. “That’s what I’m asking.”

You could cut the tension between us four with a knife. Meanwhile, my heart’s nearly beating out of my chest, and I can hardly stand the waiting.

Micah’s lips part to respond, but I think I should speak first.

“I don’t care,” I blurt out. “Not... that I don’t care if she’s alive or dead, hurt or *not* hurt, but... I don’t care if the three of you took matters into your own hands.”

I’m breathless after admitting that, knowing how sick and twisted that may make me sound, but it is what it is. And if there are any people in the world who I can be this open and honest with, it’s them. So, I figured I’d just... put it out there.

Micah’s eyes narrow, and his head tilts as a look of subtle surprise curves his lips into the faintest smirk. So faint, I’m not really sure I’m seeing it.

“I know that if this has anything to do with you three, whatever you did... it was because you care about me. And, somehow, you thought it was best. But I just need to know if any of this will come back to bite us in the ass once the dust settles.”

Vince looks up, staring at the machine making its rounds on the ice. “We didn’t hurt her,” he says, speaking for all of them. “We talked to her, and we threatened her, but we didn’t hurt her.”

“Threatened her how?”

Vince breathes deep, preparing to answer, but Micah speaks up instead. “We took her to the woods, and we—*I*—doused her with gasoline. She talked when I lit my cigarette and threatened to drop it.”

My thoughts drift back to the other night, when I tossed his clothes into the hamper and smelled the gasoline. I compose myself and don’t react.

“And that’s it? You threatened her, then dropped her back off?”

Micah doesn’t jump to reply this time, but eventually, he opens his mouth and gives an answer I wasn’t expecting.

“Not exactly. We untied her from the tree, then... we left,” he admits, holding my gaze as if to wait for the reaction I held in with his last response. But, again, I make sure my face gives nothing away.

“What about when you went off on your own?” I ask next, feeling my stomach sink. “Did you track her down? Do more than just... threaten her?”

Micah does that thing where his jaw ticks again.

“I wasn’t even *thinking* about that bitch,” he snaps. “If I was gonna hurt someone that night, it would’ve been Leo fucking Whitlock.”

A deep breath fills my lungs, and it isn’t lost on me that I *want* to believe him, but I’m still not sure.

“Okay. Alright.” I pause there, trying to think. “From what I heard tonight, her housemates didn’t see it was you guys who picked her up, nor did they see the truck. They only heard it. Do you think anyone else on the street might’ve seen?”

Ash shakes his head. “We were careful, kept our heads on the swivel. No one was out and we were quiet.”

My heart is still unsettled, knowing this doesn’t mean they’re in the clear.

For now, all we *do* know is that sometime between when they abandoned Dahlia in the woods, and whenever she was reported missing, she changed course. And whether that means she’s fine and hiding out somewhere, possibly with Whitlock, or... worse, the boys say they aren’t responsible. I have to trust that’s enough. Have to trust they haven’t just invited trouble to their doorstep.

“We need to lay low.” Hearing me speak, Micah and Vince’s gazes narrow, and Ash cocks his head. “Moving forward, we have to behave as normally as possible. So that, on the off chance someone *does* come to suspect you, from the outside looking in, it won’t be because they caught anyone acting out of character. We keep our noses clean, show up where we’re supposed to show up, and no one *behaves* like they’re guilty, because no one *is* guilty.”

Ash and Vince nod, but Micah’s staring. Maybe because he expected a different reaction, a *harsher* reaction, but I’m in this with them. All the way.

If they didn’t already know this... they know it now.

Stevie

The rink's been slow today, giving me more time to think than I'd like. Mostly about Dahlia and how two more days have passed without a single soul having seen or heard from her.

I'm torn. On one hand, it's no secret I can't stand the bitch. But on the other, I don't wish on *any* family what mine went through when we lost my sister. So, if by some small miracle Dahlia can turn up safe, without any real harm having come to her, I'd actually be grateful.

My phone buzzes, and I check the text.

Vince: Just checking in. All good?

I slow down and exit the rink before responding.

Stevie: All good. Just a bit preoccupied.

Vince: Well, if you get a break soon and want to talk, I'm out in the parking lot.

A smile curves my lips at the thought of him being so close. My protector.

Stevie: I'll check in with Kip.

I tuck my phone away and start toward the back office, knocking while Kip rambles to someone on the phone. When I crack the door, he waves me in.

“What’s up?” he whispers, covering the receiver with his hand.

“Mind if I take fifteen?”

He glances toward the clock, then gives a thumbs up. “Go, but if you leave the building, take your coat. It’s freezing out there. Winter might be setting in early,” he adds. The reply reminds me how grateful I am for being allowed to wear jeans to work instead of shorts for the next several months, until the weather turns mild again. I shoot Kip a peace sign, which he responds to with a thumbs up before going back to his call.

I take his advice, stopping to grab the hoodie I brought with me when I first got here this afternoon. He’s right, if it was chilly then, it’s sure to be even colder now that the sun’s gone down.

Exiting the building, I spot Vince in the truck on the far side of the lot. Still, he flashes the lights to make sure I see him. A breeze whips through, and I hug myself in the hoodie while making the short trek. Once I open the passenger side door, a blast of heat rushes out, and I’m grateful for it.

He takes my hand to help me in, then I close us inside.

Vince points.

“That hoodie definitely looks familiar,” he says with a smile, and I glance down at the Bradwyn U Kings logo in the center, with two hockey sticks crossing underneath it. Smiling, I shrug.

“Yeah, I stole it from this hot guy a few weeks ago, but I’m pretty sure he said I could keep it,” I tease. It’s become one of my favorite pieces of clothing. Even after washing it—and using a little peroxide to scrub Micah’s blood out of it after our tryst in the elevator—it still smells like Vince.

“Keep it. It looks good on you,” he says, and I smile at the compliment.

“Thank you.”

Nodding, he smiles back. My head hits the headrest and I take a breath, trying not to think about Dahlia, but when *Vince*

brings her up, that's kind of impossible.

"Have you heard anything else?"

I shake my head. "Nothing new, but it seems like *everyone's* talking about it now. In my group. In all my classes. And did you notice the flyers posted all over the quad?"

"You mean all over *campus*," he corrects. "Shit's getting weird."

I couldn't agree more. "I've been trying to block it out, but I've got this feeling in my gut that... she might not turn up."

"Don't think like that. Maybe we just scared her, and she's hiding out somewhere. Things got pretty intense that night. She could easily see us as a threat."

I hear him, I want to *believe* him, but I'm just not that hopeful. But still, I mutter a soft, "Maybe."

It still feels possible that Micah may know more than what he's shared with the rest of us, but since our talk that night at the arena, I've decided to let it go. So, whether I'm right or I'm wrong, it will only come up again if *he* chooses to talk about it.

Vince's hand slips into mine, and his is warm and soft. With the heat blasting, the interior of the truck smells like him—soap and a hint of cologne. My guess is he's freshly showered since likely coming straight here after practice. I squeeze his hand tighter, just needing to know he's real, needing to know he's really here with me.

"Come here," he rasps, seconds before his hand slips beneath my hair, gripping the back of my neck. I lean over the armrest and let him have my lips, enjoying how he's so warm against my chilled mouth. I take ownership of his tongue next, and I needed the familiarity of his taste to center me again, to remind me that I'm safe.

"How much time you got?" he asks against my skin.

"Probably about ten more minutes."

I feel him smiling now. "A lot can happen in ten minutes."

He doesn't need to say more. I've already pulled away and started unbuttoning my jeans, staring as Vince lowers his sweats a bit, and then his underwear. I'm on him in a flash, straddling his thighs. A laugh leaves us both when my ass nudges the horn on the steering wheel, prompting Vince to fumble with the lever on the side of the seat to lower it, giving us more room. And then, I slowly lower onto his dick, sighing at the sweet relief. He sucks my lips harder as I take him in. His chest tenses where my hands rest on it, his heart hammering beneath my palms. I give him a moment to relax, because he still hasn't quite gotten used to this new feeling, but I can only hold off for so long.

Slowly at first, I ride him, sitting upright to brace one hand against the driver side window for leverage, and then I find my pace. It's urgent and rough, resembling something like a hate-fuck as his dick pushes deeper and deeper inside me, but that couldn't be further from the truth. There's nothing even close to hatred between us, only fondness and—

“I love you.”

My body goes still, and my eyes lower to Vince, thinking I've just hallucinated. Because I could've just sworn I heard him say something.

Something... I couldn't have possibly heard.

But when I fail to move, fail to speak, or even *blink*, he takes over, pumping into me. With how powerful his hips and thighs are, he moves me easily on top of him, and the intense sensation returns, making my heart race like it'd done before his voice brought it shuttering to a stop.

His hands, which held my waist at first, inch their way down to my ass as I begin to move again, matching his rhythm. Our bodies collide together like some kind of carnal orchestra, and I'm already close.

“I fucking love you,” he says again, but this time, there's no mistaking his words. They register within my head *and* my heart, and warmth blooms in my chest.

I arch forward, feeling his hands cup my ass more while he thrusts up, pounding into me.

“I love you, too.” My words are breathed against his cheek just before I lose it altogether, gasping through an orgasm that ushers him into his own.

His heat fills me, and I find his lips as we both finish, and he empties into me, creating a sticky mess between his body and mine. Meanwhile, I’m lost in him, lost in those words.

We stay like this for longer than we should, especially seeing as how our time is limited, but it’s a moment that deserves to be reveled in. Eventually the kiss slows, and we manage to tear ourselves apart, but when we do, Vince’s green eyes are locked on mine, and my entire body warms when he lifts his hand to my chin, stealing one more kiss from me.

I climb off his lap, and he passes me a clean towel from his duffle bag in the backseat. We’re both silent now that we’re not riding so high on our emotions. Reality sets in, and I can practically feel his anxiety spiking from what he admitted in the throes of passion.

“My timing was probably a little off,” he says, insecurity bleeding into those words. “I know you said it back, but you didn’t have to. I guess... *I* just needed to say it.”

His words resonate with me, that he needed me to know he felt this way. My stomach twists into a knot, and I’m tempted to keep my thoughts to myself, but that’s not really us.

“There was nothing wrong with your timing.” I meet his gaze and smile. “If I seemed hesitant to say it back, it wasn’t because I question my feelings. It’s just that I’ve... never said that to anyone before. Not in a romantic way.”

I tuck my hair behind my ears when I start feeling awkward. But then Vince takes my chin again, and when our eyes lock, the awkwardness fades because anywhere I’m with him, it’s a safe space.

“I’ve never said it before, either,” he admits. “But I swear to you, I’ve never been more sure about *anything* in my entire life than I am about my feelings for you.”

There's always this sweet innocence to him that I can't get enough of. It adds to the sincerity of his words, because I know beyond the shadow of a doubt that he means them.

Our lips touch again, and as soon as it ends, he breathes a quiet laugh against my mouth.

“Shit.”

“What is it?”

Vince shakes his head. “The guys are gonna kill me.” When he laughs, I do, too. “I just admitted that I'm in love with you while we were in the middle of fucking. I'm not really sure how this was supposed to be handled—given our unusual... arrangement, but something tells me I fucked it up.”

I laugh again, because he's definitely right about our circumstances being unusual.

“Well, I disagree.” He arches a brow, listening as I explain. “You four have a bond independent of me, and I like to think I have a bond with each of you that's completely separate, too. That means we all move at our own paces, and there isn't anything wrong with that, and there definitely isn't anything to feel guilty about. That's honestly my favorite thing about being with you guys. We all just kind of... make sense, you know?”

He nods thoughtfully, seeming to agree, so the discussion about it ends there. We fix our clothes and share one last kiss before I turn to head back in, but the feel of Vince's fingers encircling my wrist stops me.

We lock eyes and a loud laugh leaves me when I'm yanked back toward him for one last goodbye kiss. He doesn't say those three little words again, but I feel them in the look he gives just before he lets me go. I slam the door and glance back in his direction several times, wishing my shift had already ended so my time with him didn't have to, but alas...

Halfway to the door, I'm still smiling, hearing his confession ringing inside my head. I pull out my phone as it vibrates. My first thought is that it'll be Vince, but I'm just as pleased when I see who's *actually* messaged instead.

Dusty: Evening, Sweetheart. I've been thinking we should hang out soon. I don't mind making a trip to you this time. Whenever you're free.

I'm grinning so hard my face hurts as I type back. An unfamiliar feeling blooms right in the center of my chest. I never imagined this would be my life, never imagined I'd have a father who actually wants to see me, wants to spend time together.

Stevie: How about tomorrow?

I don't even consider that it might be a bit overzealous to suggest that we meet so soon until after I've already hit *send*.

Dusty: I don't have anyone to close the diner on a short notice, but I'll try to work something out ;)

Stevie: No, don't bother! I'll come to you. Want me to stop by the diner when you close?

Dusty: Sounds perfect. See you then.

I reach the door to the rink, grinning from ear-to-ear, waving at Vince before I head in to finish my shift. With so much bad shit going on in all our lives, I was beginning to think I deserved to have a good night for once. And now, thanks to Vince, and even Dusty, I can say that I have.

But another thought flutters in as I return my hoodie to the back room...

This feeling that's made me warm and tingly all over, the one my boys have actually been giving me for a few weeks now, the one I got when I ended the call with Dusty...

It's easy to place.

Because something this powerful can only be known by one name.

Love.

Stevie

A couple laughs outside my driver-side window. I peer up from my phone just as they pass and head into the store, then I glance down to re-read Dusty's text.

Dusty: Dress fancy. I've got a surprise.

Those instructions are the reason I pulled over 10 minutes before arriving in Cypress Pointe to change into the dress I wore to my great uncle, Elton's, funeral two years ago. There was no way I could drive in heels, so the bathroom of the *Sip n' Snack* became my changing room.

As I shift into reverse, my stomach twists. Even after working several hours at the rink, even after my mid-shift workout with Vince, I still hardly slept. All because I've been so eager to see Dusty tonight. It only added to the excitement when he told me to dress up. Whatever he has planned is fine with me, but it's nice to have a father who actually cares enough to *make* plans.

I'm smiling when I pull out into traffic, and I don't fight it, knowing everyone I pass on the road probably thinks I'm insane. Who cares what they think, though? Tonight's gonna be epic. I can feel it.

A quick ten-minute drive, and I'm easing into the parking lot of the diner. It's closed, of course, but that was the plan. Dusty said he'd get things locked down, then we'll hang out.

My heart pounds as I turn off the engine and lights, then grab my things before stepping out into the cold. I see my breath in the wind as I shrug into my coat, headed toward the door. Dim light casts a faint glow on the interior, but I don't see Dusty anywhere. Still, I tug on the handle, and to my surprise, it's unlocked. A bell chimes overhead when I step inside, and Dusty pops his head through the cutout between the dining area and the kitchen. There's a huge grin on his face that's infectious, and I can't describe the feeling of knowing that seeing me is the reason he's so happy.

"Shit, guess this means I'm running a little late," he laughs. "Have a seat right over there. I'll be out in a sec."

I follow his gaze to the booth I always seem to wander into in the far back corner. Only now do I realize it's been set nicely with cloth placemats, two nice place settings, and unlit candles. My steps echo through the empty room, and I slip out of my coat and toss it over the back of the booth before taking a seat.

"How was the drive?" He raises his voice a little, so I can hear him even with the distance between us. There's a heavenly aroma coming from the kitchen, and a pot clanks.

"It was fine. Coming in this late, I got to miss all the traffic," I answer with a smile.

"Yeah, I hate that you have to keep driving all this way."

"It's no bother, really. I had the day off today, so..."

"Where do you work again?"

"A skating rink not too far from campus. I've been going there all my life, got to know the owner pretty well over the years, so it just seemed like a logical place to apply for work when the time came."

There are more pots moving about, then it gets quiet. "I can't skate to save my life. Dance either," he adds with a laugh. "Forget having two left *feet*. I've got two left *hooves*."

Shaking my head, I smile as my odd train of thought leads me to a visual of him awkwardly maneuvering across a dancefloor with goat legs.

The door from the kitchen swings open and out comes Dusty, wearing a nice dress shirt that's rolled to his elbows, a tie, and dark slacks with an apron around his waist. He's balancing two loaded plates, and I can already feel my stomach growling.

He lowers the food in front of me, and I'm sure my eyes light up, seeing the trouble he's gone through—lambchops, roasted asparagus, mashed potatoes, a dinner roll.

"You did all this after working all day?" I ask, peering up to meet his gaze.

He gives a casual *it's-no-big-deal* shrug. "Couldn't half-step when my girl was driving all this way to hang out, now could I?"

I breathe deep, feeling oddly overwhelmed. All because he cooked for me and dressed up for me.

"Almost forgot the best part," he says, fishing something out of his pocket. A second later, I see it's a lighter, and he stretches his massive arm across the table to light both candles. "There. Now, we're fancy."

I laugh and so does he.

He leaves me again, but this time he's only grabbing drinks. So, when he returns to the table, he sits, and we dig in. At first, we eat in silence other than the low droning of music coming through the speakers. Peace and quiet are nice, but I prefer conversation.

"How's your—"

"How is—"

Dusty and I laugh when we both speak at the same time. "You first," he says.

"I was just going to ask how Scarlet's doing?"

Dusty nods and swallows a sip of his lemonade before answering. "She's great. Took off like a bat out of hell the second her shift ended. Her best friend, Shane, is in town on leave for a few. I actually told her to just take a couple days off to spend time with him."

“Him?” I ask, arching a brow. “My best friend’s a guy, too.”

Was... a guy.

The self-correction makes me pause with my hand halfway to my glass, remembering Maddox and I are no longer a thing.

Dusty doesn’t seem to notice I’m thrown off when he responds. “Yeah, and oddly enough, he’s a Ruiz, one of your mom’s people.”

I cock my head to the side, piecing it all together. “Wow, I guess the two families are really entangled.”

Something I said has Dusty chuffing a short laugh as he pops a piece of asparagus into his mouth. “Oh, sweetheart, you have *no* idea.”

“Well, now I’m intrigued, so you *have* to tell me.”

He smiles and wipes his mouth with a napkin. “I’ll give you the overview, but you’d need a notepad to keep it all straight.”

“I’m pretty good with details. Try me.”

“Well, for starters, there’s the history between me and your mom. Then, my *older* niece, Scar’s sister, Blue, had a long-term thing going with one of your mom’s second cousins, Ricky. Then, later on down the line, Blue ended up *marrying* someone who’s kin to the Ruizes by way of an illegitimate son born to the family patriarch. So, yeah, you could say my people and the Ruiz family have been... what’d you call it? Entangled? Yeah, we’ve been *entangled* for quite some time.”

He sips his drink again, but this time there’s a strange look in his eyes. It makes me wonder if he’s thinking about Mom again, reminiscing.

“I wasn’t going to tell you this, but... me making you lambchops tonight wasn’t totally random,” he admits. “They used to be your mom’s favorite thing for me to cook. I once teased that she only came home because she knew there’d be a plate of these waiting on her when she rolled into town.”

I'm conflicted. On the one hand, wanting to hear more. On the other, not exactly wanting to talk about Mom. We still haven't spoken since our blowup during the cake tasting. She's called and texted, but I've wanted nothing to do with her. Mostly, because I'm pretty sure anything that leaves her mouth will be a lie anyway.

"Seems like you two were really close."

Dusty nods. "Yeah, you could say that." He seems distant again, but comes back to the present a little quicker this time. "When we weren't at each other's throats about one thing or another, she was my best friend."

He smiles and I realize something. While I've been focused on my *own* hurt, I didn't realize Dusty's hurting, too. I'm not the only one she hid the truth from.

"I can't believe she was never going to say anything." The words leave my mouth quietly, because it's honestly uncomfortable talking about this, but who knows better how fucked up this all is?

"I'm sure she had her reasons."

I scoff at his response. "Saving her own *ass*, maybe."

He smiles at that, but I notice that his expression seems completely void of anger, which I can't say for myself.

"I might have a smidge more compassion for her because I've known her family my whole life. You could say I know where the bodies are hidden. And I don't mean that figuratively."

My brow furrows when I realize he isn't joking about that.

"I know you said they're a bit rough around the edges, but... they're *that* rough?"

Dusty nods slowly, swallowing a bit of his mashed potatoes. "They've got a reputation. And it isn't for being kind and forgiving. Your mom was never quite cut from that same cloth, though, which meant that life, pretending she didn't know what world she was living in, started eating away at her. If I had to guess, she thought that, somehow, if I knew about

you, she'd still be tied here in some way, and she couldn't afford to have that happen."

I hate that he's making me see this from a new angle. I'd convinced myself that this had all been about keeping the man I *thought* was my father in her life. Only now that Dusty's shed a bit more light on the way things were back then, I can't help but to wonder if it's deeper than that. She needed a clean break from here, from the death and chaos that likely surrounded her, and she couldn't do that if she didn't sever the tie between her and Dusty completely.

Even if that meant keeping us from one another.

This doesn't excuse what she's done in any way, but... it helps to know she might not have just been aiming to keep her spotless, Mary-Sue record clean. She was legitimately running from something.

"But anyway, all of that was a long time ago and there's so much going on in the present to talk about," Dusty pipes up. "Which brings me back to *my* question. How's school?"

I swallow my food but purposely don't make eye contact. It's not so much school that's an issue, but the drama around campus—Whitlock, Dahlia still not being seen or heard from, Maddox.

"School's fine," I say, and it isn't a total lie. School itself *is* fine. But Dusty seems to sense that there's more.

He sets his fork down and gives me a look that can only be described as "The Dad Look". Although it's my first time experiencing it, I know.

"What is it?" he asks.

I push food around with my fork and carefully weigh my words.

"Things have just been off since Mel passed. And I guess the bad kind of seeped into other parts of my life, you know?"

When I peer up at Dusty, I don't miss the concern in his eyes. "Yeah, I might know a little something about that."

He doesn't elaborate, but he strikes me as a man who's seen a thing or two.

"A lot came out once she was gone."

"Feel free to tell me that I'm a nosey son of a bitch and to mind my business, but... do you mind telling me what happened to her?"

I know I've given him bits and pieces the two times I've been with him, but never the whole scope of things. Still, I keep it simple, sharing enough that he gets an understanding.

"She was sexually assaulted, and then she committed suicide. But after she was gone, I discovered the friend she was with that night was raped, too, but didn't see the guy's face who did it. And according to several sources, her rapist may have been stalking her before the attack."

Dusty's silent. I'm curious what he's thinking, but his expression is difficult to read.

"Are you suspicious it's someone she knew? I've heard that that's usually the case," he says, and I don't miss that his tone is gentler now, understanding that this is a delicate subject matter to tread.

"I'm not sure," I say with a shrug. "It honestly feels that way sometimes, but I can't help but think I'm missing something. It's enough that I find myself wanting to start at the beginning, reevaluate everything I *think* I know, and see if anything clicks."

"Yeah, well, be careful with that, Stevie. Especially if you think she was being stalked by this asshole beforehand. You could accidentally put yourself in harm's way and not even know it."

My gaze lowers again, and I'm silent, remembering the fear and anger I felt when I woke up in a hospital bed all too recently. Apparently, I've zoned out too long, because Dusty's taken notice.

"Talk to me," he says. "Has something already happened? Has someone threatened you?"

His question is hard to answer because, while there were no words spoken, it's hard not to consider being attacked a threat. A warning that, if this person wanted to, they could do far worse to me.

"I was... taken several weeks ago. Whoever it was, they beat me up pretty badly, and while I can't say for certain it was the same person who hurt my sister, it's the only thing that really fits."

I leave out how Whitlock is still one of the guys' number-one suspects. My gut tells me Leo has just been a distraction, a shiny object to focus on while the *real* culprit points and laughs while we chase our tails.

When I meet Dusty's gaze again, his jaw is tense. So tense I'm not certain he's not grinding his teeth.

"Change of plans," he says in a deep, stern tone I haven't heard from him before, but he's serious.

He drops his fork into his half-eaten plate, so I can guess I'm expected to do the same.

He stands, blows out the candles, then grabs my coat off the back of the booth. When I get to my feet, he holds it while I slip both arms inside.

"Make sure your car's locked up, and bring your purse and phone with you," he says. "You and me, we're taking a little ride."

Stevie

If Dusty were anyone else, my boys excluded, I'd be nervous being driven out to the middle of nowhere this late at night. But despite hardly knowing him, I trust him.

It's eerily quiet as we pull up to an old, abandoned barn. Dusty steps out of the truck, and my eyes are glued to him as he goes to the back seat, then reaches beneath the bench. He pulls out a black case, punches in a code, and when the lock beeps, he pulls out the last thing I expect to see.

A handgun.

He tucks it into the waistband of his slacks before pulling a bag from underneath the seat next. Then, after tossing it over his shoulder, he shuts the door behind him. The nervousness that was absent before is suddenly present. It's not that I'm concerned for my safety, but rather a general sense of dread.

What the hell are we doing here?

My door unlatches, and Dusty offers his hand to help me climb out. I walk a few feet in my heels when he realizes my shoes aren't exactly ideal for this terrain, and he doubles back to the truck. Half a second later, he places a pair of slides on the ground in front of me.

"Here, change into these," he says, offering his hand again while I balance myself, dropping a few inches when I step out of my heels and into the far more comfortable option. My toes

are freezing now, but the slides are definitely the lesser of two evils.

He leaves me again, this time to toss my shoes onto the passenger seat, then we're walking toward the barn again.

"What is this place?"

"Back when I was in high school, I had a couple friends who grew up here. But their family moved out and it fell into disrepair. Now, on occasion, some of the local kids throw Halloween parties here. When they're not defiling the cemetery, that is," he adds with a quiet laugh. "But tonight... this old, rundown barn is target practice."

I swallow deeply, wondering what I've gotten myself into. While wearing my funeral dress, at that. Could be a fitting outfit, considering my life could end tonight.

"Watch your step." Dusty guides me by my elbow around a large rock I almost didn't see, and a few yards later, we stop beside the hood of a rusty, weatherworn car that's been left here to rot. "Ever handled a gun before?"

That feeling of dread returns. "No. Can't say I'm a fan of them."

He chuffs a short laugh. "Well, I'm not sure many sane people *are* fans of guns, but they're somewhat of a necessary evil. And given what you told me tonight, I'd sleep better knowing you're capable of defending yourself."

He's said it before, but I can sense it myself now. That he would've been one hell of a protector had we come into one another's lives sooner. Had we been given the chance, that is.

"I'll try it, but don't be disappointed if I suck," I say with a laugh.

"Nah, you could never disappoint me."

He pulls the gun from where he'd tucked it into the back of his waistband, then lowers the bag from his shoulder, placing it on the hood of the old car.

"Is driving around with a pistol in your backseat normal around here?" I tease.

He smiles and shrugs. “Was for me. My sister’s ex was always an inch away from needing me to put a bullet in his ass. So, I’ve always been of the mindset that if you *stay* ready, you don’t have to *get* ready. And the bad thing is, my nieces and nephew wouldn’t have even missed him if it’d come to that.”

A laugh leaves me as he pulls a piece from the bag that I recognize, but can’t exactly identify.

“This is a magazine. You feed the rounds into it flat side first, with your thumb against the pointed part of the bullet. Then, once you’re done loading it, you slide the mag into the handle as far as you can, slap it in the rest of the way with the heel of your palm, and listen for it to click. Just like this.” He smacks the bottom until it pops into place. “Got that much?”

I nod, but have more questions about his brother-in-law.

“Yep,” I answer. “But you can’t just say that about your sister’s husband and—”

“*Ex*-husband,” he corrects.

“Right, but... was he really that bad?”

Dusty shoots me a look that answers my question. “He was that bad and worse,” he laughs. “But if I’m being honest, my sister isn’t any better. She’s one of those women who thinks parenting is a part-time job. I mean, in that respect, I suppose Mike—that’s her ex’s name—he’d get points for at least sticking around. Even if everyone *wished* he’d left,” he adds. “But to prove to you that miracles really do happen, he finally got his shit together and started actually *acting* like a dad. Only, it was a bit late if you ask me.”

I study him when he says that, and words just kind of come to me, then fall out of my mouth.

“I don’t think it’s *ever* really too late to start being a dad.”

He meets my gaze when I finish, knowing I’m speaking to the guilt he carries. Guilt that’s completely misplaced, seeing as how our circumstances were quite unconventional.

Smiling, he nods. “I suppose you’re right.”

I feel compelled to hug him for some reason, but that seems like a bad idea while he's holding a gun.

He points at it again. "Ok, first things first. Your safety stays on until you're ready to shoot. Pistols aren't usually marked, so when it's in *this* position, that's how you know the safety is on."

He holds it up so I can see that the tiny lever on the side is angled upward.

"It prevents the slide from pulling back, which means you can't load one into the chamber, can't *release* one from the chamber."

I nod, understanding.

"Good, now let's get it in your hands so you can get a feel for it," he says, and I want to vomit.

"I—aren't you gonna go first?"

My question has him laughing. "If you want."

"Yes, that's definitely what I want."

He angles his body toward the barn, then releases the safety. Next, he pulls the top of the gun back until it clicks and springs forward again. He adjusts his posture while staring down the length of the barrel, and once he's aligned his shot, he squeezes the trigger.

A flash brightens the space around us for the fraction of a second as a loud bang echoes through the darkness. The spent casing falls somewhere near our feet, and I'm just a little more shaken than before. I'd never seen a gun fired in person and realize how much power they packed. I guess what I've seen in movies and on television didn't quite do it justice.

"Here, now you give it a go," Dusty says, engaging the safety again before offering me the gun to try next.

Cool steel settles in my palm, and I swallow deeply. Never in a million years would I have imagined my life would come to this, needing to know how to handle a gun, but here we are, I guess.

“First rule of trigger discipline is that you *never* put your finger on the trigger unless you’re ready to shoot. So, just rest it against the side here while I get you ready.”

Shaking in these borrowed slides, I nod. “Ok.”

He adjusts my fingers around the handle a bit, then takes a step back. “Ok, good. Now, feet apart and breathe.”

I inhale deeply, then let it out.

“To aim, you’ll want to raise the sights to eye-level, and you see those two pegs at the back?” He pauses, waiting for me to nod. “Ok, so you’ll want to adjust your positioning until the peg at the nose of the gun sits perfectly between the ones at the back of the slide, and you can see all three. The goal is to have that middle piece aligned with whatever you’re targeting. Wherever that point is, that’s what you’ll hit.”

I nod again, but have zero confidence in myself.

“So, if you’re all lined up, put your finger on the trigger, but don’t pull it.”

My heart’s racing and I’m sweating despite the cold.

“Whenever you’re ready, disengage the safety, then... squeeze.”

My pulse quickens yet again, but I follow Dusty’s instructions—releasing the safety, cocking the gun. Then, as my finger tightens against the trigger, I decide to follow through and just... do it.

That same loud crack blasts through the air, but I didn’t expect there to be so much kickback.

“*Fuck* yeah!” Dusty shouts, celebrating while I smile and try to wrap my head around the fact that I actually just did that. “Give it another try. See if you can hit that window over there.”

He points at the lower right side of the barn, and I angle the gun that way, cocking it before lining up the next shot. Then, I squeeze the trigger. The sound of shattering glass has him yelling again, and he draws a laugh out of me.

“Well, it’s official. You’re a dead-eye shot, just like your old man,” he says. “Want to try again?”

Having loosened up a little, I nod. “Sure. What’s my new target?”

He looks around, then points at a dormant tractor. “Right there.”

I cock the gun again, align it, and when I pull the trigger, the bullet ricochets off the rusted beast I was aiming for.

“Are you fucking kidding me right now? You swear you’ve never done this before?”

I shake my head. “No. Never.”

He stares at the tractor, still in awe. “Well, shit. Remind me to never piss you off.”

I click the safety back into position, then carefully hand the piece back to Dusty. He double checks that it’s secure, then unloads it again, still smiling to himself.

“Un-fucking-believable.”

There’s no missing that he’s proud of me, and I kind of like the way that feels.

“Since you’re so comfortable with this one, I’m letting you keep it,” he says, and that’s when the smile on my face starts to slip.

“I—what?”

He glances up from repacking his bag to meet my gaze. “I’m sending you home with it. Temporarily, anyway. Either I’ll make the trip up to your town, or you can come back here, but we’ll get you licensed, and I’ll buy you your own after that.”

I don’t speak, but apparently my expression says it all. Dusty stops what he’s doing altogether, turning to face me.

A heavy sigh leaves him as he holds my gaze. “You’re an adult, and I get that, but... regardless of when I learned you’re mine, those are the facts. You are indeed mine.”

I swallow the emotion his words pull up from deep inside, from a place I don't think I ever realized existed until right now.

"Now, I'm sure neither one of us expected that I'd shift into *Overbearing Dad Mode* in zero seconds flat, but... here we are," he adds, laughing a little. "My nieces will attest to the fact that I'm not an easy man to shake. I come on strong when it comes to the people I care about, and now, whether you like it or not, that includes you."

I laugh a little, but keep listening.

"All I'm trying to do is keep you safe, Stevie. The world can be one hell of a scary place, and all I'm asking is for you to take the gun, let me keep teaching you how to use it, and *be* ready, so—"

"So, I don't have to *get* ready," I interrupt, finishing the saying he used a little while ago.

He smiles and nods. "Exactly."

I glance at the gun again, not feeling much differently about it even though I've shot it now, but... I hear him. And I get it.

"Okay," I concede with a nod.

There's no missing the look of relief that sweeps over Dusty, and I appreciate his concern more than he'd ever imagine. He tucks the gun into the back of his waistband again, and his arms are around me the next second, squeezing me in what feels like a bear hug. My cheek presses to his large, barrel-like chest, and I settle into his warmth, trying not to count how many of these I've missed over the years.

"I'm sorry. I'm guessing this wasn't exactly the father-daughter date you hoped it would be."

I smile, trying not to cry mascara all over his shirt. "Actually... it was perfect," I admit. "I wouldn't have changed a single thing."

He laughs and squeezes a little tighter, but the moment is interrupted when a notification goes off on my phone. Once,

twice, then it's firing off too quickly to keep count.

"Must be important," Dusty says, loosening his grip so I can check the phone. It's the chat with my group blowing up. I open it and the first message I see is Claire's, and my stomach drops.

Claire: Guys... they found Dahlia.

Marley: Oh, thank God. I was starting to think the worst.

Drew: Same. Usually when someone's been gone this long, it doesn't end well.

Claire: No, you don't understand. They found her body. From what I heard, a couple hunters came across her in the woods a few hours ago, but that's all anyone's saying.

Misty: OMG! That's so fucked up!

Drew: That's it. I'm withdrawing next semester. I'd like to actually live to see graduation.

The messages continue to flood in, but despite staring directly at my phone screen, I'm not reading any of them. Because what we all feared just became reality, and hearing the tragic update has me thinking so, so many things.

"Shit..."

"Something wrong?"

Dusty's question goes unanswered for half a second, while I gather my thoughts. It's impossible not to revisit my conversation with the guys, impossible not to wonder again if they told me all there is to know. Or more specifically, if *Micah* told me all there is to know.

"It's just... something with school," I say, not wanting to say too much.

When I meet Dusty's gaze and force a smile, something tells me he isn't buying it. Yeah, he only recently became a dad, but he's been a father-figure to his nieces and nephew for years. Which means he's probably not a stranger of being lied to.

His stare is so intense that I have to look away, but he doesn't press the issue. Instead, he finishes packing up, and we make our way back to his truck. The entire walk there, I'm reeling, trying to make sense of what I've just heard, trying to make sense of what it means moving forward. But the truth is, I don't think any of us are prepared for the shitshow this could become.

Slamming both doors, we close ourselves in, then Dusty starts the engine. He's silent at first, but then he speaks up and says what's on his mind.

"If things get too bad, Stevie, I need you to know my door is always open. Whatever happens, no questions asked. My home is your home."

My heart squeezes at his offer, especially because I know he's being sincere. He takes my hand, and I'd been prepared to tell another lie—that I'm fine and everything's okay—but I never open my mouth.

Because in this moment, I'm positive there are only four reasons I'm not taking him up on this offer *tonight*.

Vince, Ash, Tate, and Micah.

If it weren't for my boys, I would happily watch Bradwyn U grow small in my rearview mirror.

Stevie

The second Vince opens his bedroom door, he takes one look at me and knows what I need.

“Come here. It’s okay.”

My eyes blur with tears when I melt against his chest. He closes the door behind me, and I’m grateful to be alone with him in the silence. On the short walk from the front door of The Den to Vince’s space, I heard Dahlia’s name spoken at least five times from various corners of the manor.

It’s safe to say news of her body being found has spread quickly.

Her body... it’s strange to even think those words.

Driving in from Cypress Pointe, her death was all I could think about, and my emotions have been an odd combination that’s hard to express. It’s no secret that there was mutual hatred between she and I, but I’d never wish death on her. Well, it’s possible I’ve thought it a time or two, but I never actually wanted her dead. Now, I’m left to wonder what truly happened to her that night. If *this* mystery is anything like the one surrounding my sister’s death, I may never know the truth.

I’m numb as I stand there, locked in Vince’s arms. I don’t have to question why I’ve come to him and not the others. There’s no question that my bond is fierce with *all* my boys, but there’s a gentleness about Vince that began calling out to

my heart while I drove. Hence the reason I never knocked on anyone's door but his. When my soul craves comfort and tenderness, I know I'll find that in him.

He gently rubs my back and this... *this* is exactly what I hoped to find here.

“What the hell is going on?”

When I whisper these words against his shoulder, I'm not expecting an answer, but still, it feels better saying them out loud. Things are so incredibly fucked right now, and as if I weren't already terrified enough, what's happened to Dahlia makes it seem like everything's just gone from bad to worse.

“You're safe here, Bird. You're always safe with us.”

His words are comforting, but they also make it clear that he has no idea why I'm crying. Truth is, my gut tells me that this thing with Dahlia is the beginning of one epic shitstorm that could have dire, long-lasting consequences.

“What if someone finds out she was with you guys that night? What if it somehow comes out that Micah was unaccounted for hours later?”

Vince continues to rub my back while I ramble, but there are even *more* questions firing off inside my head.

“None of those things are going to happen,” he tries to assure me, but in all honesty, he can't guarantee anything. Now that she's been found, no one can possibly predict how the next several days or weeks will play out.

“If something happens to you guys, if something happens to *any* of you, I'll—”

“Whoa, hey. Nothing's gonna happen,” he says again, but this time he takes my shoulders and puts a few inches between us. His eyes land on me, and... I almost believe him.

He looks me over, only now seeming to notice I'm still dressed from my meet-up with Dusty.

“You need to relax,” he says. “Let's get you changed.”

I'm left standing there while he goes to his drawer and pulls out a t-shirt with the logo of a pro hockey team he must be a fan of on the chest. When he returns to me, he holds my hands to balance me as I step out of my heels. Then, he unzips the back of my dress and lets it slip down my shoulders, falling to the floor. I'm relieved when he frees me from the restrictive satin, and then my stockings. He crosses the room again to hang my things from the hook on the back of his door, then comes back to remove my bra before slipping the t-shirt over my head. I'm perfectly capable of dressing myself, but I don't stop him from babying me, taking care of me. I'd do the same if he was as distraught as I am at the moment.

"Shouldn't we be doing something?" I ask. "It feels strange to just sit around doing nothing."

"We *are* doing something," he says, and my eyes flit to his as he takes my hand and walks me around to the side of his bed. "Micah and Tate are at a party. They rushed out as soon as we heard what happened. People are sure to be talking about Dahlia, so we're hoping to get better info than what's been officially reported."

Officially reported? My heart races at the thought of how big this will be. This case is sure to gain national attention within a day or two.

"Ash is stopping in to talk once he's done in the shower," Vince adds, pulling off his own t-shirt before sliding into bed behind me.

I'm grateful for his warmth. Especially when he slips his arm around my waist, and his chest warms my back. Solid thighs are flush against mine when his body curves to fit the shape of mine, and he was right. This is helping me relax.

His heart beats only slightly slower than mine and that settles me, too. And eventually, mine slows to match his.

"Better?" he asks, and I nod against his pillow, breathing deep. "Good. Now, stop worrying. No one saw us with her that night. And even if someone did and we didn't notice, they sure as hell would've said something to the authorities by now."

His rationale calms me just a little more, but I'm still uneasy. He must sense it, because he moves my hair away from my neck and places a kiss there. The heat of his breath is soothing. So much that I close my eyes a little. He does it again, presses his mouth to the side of my neck, and I instinctively push my hips back toward him.

"I know this seems bad right now," he says, "but what matters most is that we're innocent. So, *because* we're innocent, there's no way this shit can get pinned on us. If all else fails, we've got the truth on our side."

Moist heat from his lips touches my skin again, and I remind myself not to get too carried away. Ash will be in soon, and I'm guessing he's not expecting to walk in on a fuck session between me and Vince.

Only, Vince seems a little less resigned to the idea when his long fingers inch their way up my thigh beneath the cover. He stops at the elastic of my panties cinched across my hip. He slips a finger underneath it, and I get the feeling he wishes they were somewhere on the floor instead of covering my body.

"Think he's still in the shower?"

I smile when he asks about Ash, shrugging a little. "Maybe."

He kisses my shoulder this time and the long, hot breath he releases against it has my nipples hardening beneath the borrowed t-shirt. He's hard against my ass, and I swear I hear his voice in my head, saying those three little words he professed outside the rink the other day.

Three little words I swear I feel from all four of them, despite Vince having been the only one brave enough to admit it so far.

I don't protest when I feel him slipping out of his sweats behind me. Nor do I stop him when he tugs my panties down my thighs before dropping them to the rug. He turns me over onto my back, and the next second, he settles between my legs and heat from his tip nudges my opening. He pushes in as I

stare down my body at his cock disappearing inside me, and my eyes threaten to roll back, but I keep them open so I don't miss when he does it again.

“How the hell do you feel this fucking good?” he says with a sigh of relief. Their praise always goes straight to my head, and knowing I'm the only girl he's ever been with makes me feel dangerously possessive.

He grips one of my hips and pushes in deeper, and a gasp leaves me. Enjoying the reaction, he does it again, but then my eyes flit to the door when someone taps it twice with their knuckle.

“Come in,” Vince calls out, not bothering to stop or even *look* like he's considering pulling out.

My chest heaves when Ash steps in wearing a Bradwyn U hoodie and basketball shorts. We lock eyes. Here I was thinking my heart couldn't possibly race any faster, but when I take in the smirk now set on his lips as he watches us, it's going fucking wild.

“Am I... interrupting?”

“Not at all,” Vince answers, a smile ghosting on his lips now, too. “Just taking care of our girl.”

Our... girl.

Shit.

Those words go straight to my head like strong alcohol on an empty stomach. My eyes are glued to Ash as he slowly turns the lock, sealing us in as he keeps his stare trained on me and Vince.

Vince slides into me, making a sticky wet sound that fills the room. Ash comes around the side of the bed for a better view, and my eyes are locked on him as he grips the bottom of his hoodie, pulling it off his inked torso and over his head to toss to the floor. He's solid and defined everywhere, and it's hard to know where to settle my eyes when every inch of him screams perfection. But I've come to accept something about my boys. The same awe and adoration that fills my expression when I look at *them* is present when they look at *me*, too.

Like now, as Ash's eyes roam from my face to my tits, down my torso, and finally to where Vince relentlessly pounds into me. My breath ceases when Ash rests one knee on the mattress, and then leans in to cover my mouth with his. Like it's being drawn to a magnet, my hand moves to his back, feeling his warmth against my palm. The kiss deepens and Vince shoves into me harder, faster. I'm aware of Ash's hand on my stomach, I'm aware of it moving toward my navel, but then it leaves my skin, and he pauses mid-kiss. I stare at him, confused when he pushes two fingers into his mouth, and then pulls them out half a second before his lips are on mine again. But then, that confusion leaves me when the soft, damp pads of his fingertips slip between my lower lips, teasing slow circles over my clit. The motion awakens the nerves there as my core tightens around Vince.

"Shit," Ash groans with a smirk. "Is that what you needed, Bird? Both of us pleasuring your pussy at the same time?" He breathes that question into my mouth, but then plunges his tongue into it too quickly for me to answer. But we both know my answer would've been *yes*. Then again, the way I moan into him in that same breath should be answer enough.

It isn't lost on me that he knows, too. Knows the tragedy surrounding Dahlia that's newly unfolded. And with my boys being as in tune with me as they are, it shouldn't surprise me that they'd know how frazzled I am, shouldn't surprise me that they'd know how to settle me down.

I lean into it—their attention, their affection being aimed only at me.

My lips separate from Ash's, and I stare down my body, to where Vince grinds between my legs, nudging Ash's hand with every thrust because of where he's placed it over my pussy. No, they're not touching one another for pleasure, but there's something about seeing that they're comfortable being so close, that there are no boundaries where *my* pleasure is concerned.

"Don't you dare fucking come."

Ash's harshly spoken words have my eyes flitting up to meet his. The sternness in his gaze has the gentle thrumming in my clit leveling off again.

How the fuck did he know?

"Save that shit for me," he rasps, speaking loudly enough for Vince to hear, too. I guess as much when Vince quickens his pace, pushing in and out of me until his eyes roll back.

"Hold it, Bird," Ash warns again, and the next second, Vince slams in so hard the sound of our bodies colliding fills the room.

"Fuuuuck," he groans, and I feel the mounting pressure of him emptying inside me, spilling down my ass as he pumps in a few final times before his entire body goes still on top of me.

My hand moves to the back of his head, gripping him there as he catches his breath and comes down from the high. He gathers himself, then stares me in the eyes. His words from the other night echo inside my head, but he doesn't say them out loud. But with that one simple glance, I know what he'd say if it were just the two of us.

It's fine. I feel it, Vince.

And I love you, too...

Spent and satisfied, Vince rolls off me, warming the side of my body with his own. Ash kisses me again. His fingers slow a little, but they're still on my clit, still teasing. I'm content and more relaxed than I thought possible, considering. But then, at the feel of the stickiness between my legs cooling on my inner thighs, I'm reminded that I can't lie here indefinitely.

"One sec," I say against Ash's lips, but when I try to pop up on my elbows, intent on grabbing a towel, he captures my mouth again, drawing a smile from me.

"Did I give you permission to move?" he asks, the sternness of his voice causing my heart to race.

"No, sir," I breathe into him, and he smirks while kissing me again.

"I like that. Such a good fucking girl."

My back arches with those words, pushing my chest toward the ceiling with the motion. Vince seems to take notice, and the feel of him gripping my breast, then sucking my nipple into his mouth is my undoing.

I'm in a daze, unaware of what's real and what's part of the fantasy I've concocted, but the sound of my own labored breath leaving my mouth startles me back to reality. It's at the feel of Ash's fingers leaving my clit, and then slipping lower, until he plunges them inside me. Deep and easy because I'm filled to the hilt with Vince's cum. He doesn't even seem bothered as it coats his fingers, and a rush of excitement has my heart beating like the wings of a hummingbird.

And it damn near stops when he rises to his knees, only pulling his fingers free to settle between my legs. Then, as I watch with wild fascination, turned the fuck on just by the mere thought of what he'll do, Ash pushes his thick, solid cock inside me, forcing more of Vince's cum to gush out onto the sheet.

What... the actual... fuck?

My entire body feels warm, and thanks to the dim lighting, I can clearly see my skin reddening, flushing because these boys—*my* boys—have me so incredibly turned on.

“Fucking hell,” he groans, and I can't stop thinking of how his massive, throbbing dick is currently slathered in his best friend's cum.

Does he like that?

Or is he simply unbothered by it?

Knowing Ash—the man with zero triggers—it's likely the latter. I've never met anyone so uneasily rattled.

My fingers trail the familiar terrain of his skin—the puffy remnants of old wounds that have long-since healed, reminding me of those my boys have begun to heal within my soul. He thrusts in again, making me throb with the deep, aching need to come for him. Vince sucks harder, twisting his tongue around my nipple as he squeezes my breast, sending waves of pleasure coursing through me from every direction.

“Come for us,” Ash demands, and I’m so, *so* close when his voice darkens. “You like this shit, don’t you? Me fucking you with your pussy still filled with Vince’s cum?” A dark laugh leaves him and the sound of it feeds something within me. “I see straight into you, Bird. And you *love* it because you’re a filthy fucking mess.”

I nod against the pillow, agreeing with everything he’s said, but I’m barely coherent. He senses it, that I’m teetering on the edge, so he brushes his thumb over my swollen, throbbing clit as he thrusts deeper.

His words linger with me, filling my head. And as if my body wishes to respond with a resounding, ‘*yes, sir,*’ my pussy tightens around his cock like a vice. I reach for Vince beside me, gripping the back of his head, and his hand moves to my throat, squeezing as I begin to feel like I’ll literally float off his bed. The sound of a wet *pop* fills the air when he abandons my nipple to connect with my mouth instead, sucking my tongue and lips with the same feverish urgency as I shiver on his mattress.

Tears leave my eyes, undoubtedly causing my mascara to leave dark trails down my cheeks. And when Vince forces my mouth wide, giving me his tongue, I imagine my lipstick must be smeared and faded, too. A filthy fucking mess, just like Ash said.

Vince’s grip tightens around my throat, and I crave the pain, the danger.

“You’re beautiful when you cry,” Ash croons.

Now, I’m even more aware of the wetness streaming from my eyes to my hair as he drives deep, shifting my entire body with the almost violent movement. I’m at the peak of orgasm when his grip on my thighs becomes painfully tight, and were it not for being locked in a kiss with Vince, I’d watch Ash lose himself. But for now, I let the feel and sound of him coming undone be enough.

He lets out a tense groan, and his stroke deepens as he releases into me, adding another surge of cum to what’s already been left behind.

The room goes quiet aside from the sound of Vince's slow, sensual kiss, making me even more obsessed with him than I already am. Ash hasn't pulled out. He's just resting inside me, stroking my thigh while both our hearts settle.

Eventually Vince's lips travel to my ear. "Promise me you'll stop worrying, Bird. We've got you. We've *all* got you."

The words sink in and, for now, I'll do that. I'll stop worrying for however many minutes or hours that lasts.

I showed up in a panic tonight, never expecting to find any measure of solace. It isn't lost on me that there are still so many things to discuss, so many things to sort out, but... even in the midst of chaos, they've given me a sense of calm, a place to feel sheltered.

In my eyes, these boys—with all their red flags and triggers—are something far different than what the rest of the world sees.

They're my peace, my refuge.

They're the eye of the hurricane.

Stevie

It's all so... familiar.

Candles flickering in the dark of night. Sporadic sniffing brought on by the sobs of those left behind to mourn a young life gone too soon. Whispers on the lips of those wondering what *really* happened.

I now know all candlelight vigils are the same—somber, heartbreaking.

I experienced it first with Mel, and now, Dahlia.

All four of my guys are here, surrounding me on all sides. They're quiet, holding candles like everyone else, but their heads are constantly swiveling. It's as though they're on the lookout for danger, making sure I'm protected. We're bundled in coats and hoodies to block out the cold, our breath trailing into the chilled air with every exhale. We haven't spoken since leaving the house. Not even during the car ride. Despite there being a million things to discuss. But I suppose none of us wants to be the one to bring any of it up, for fear of popping this delicate bubble we live in. A bubble filled with false security and so many unspoken words.

There are familiar faces in the crowd. I've spotted members from my group, my former housemates, and a few I recognize from class. At the center of everything, someone's hung a collage of Dahlia's most memorable milestones on an easel. Her first birthday, her first day of kindergarten, when she lost her front teeth, winning first place in a cheer

competition, her holding a ‘sweet sixteen’ balloon. I hated this girl. I mean, I absolutely hated her. But as I zone out on those photos, those moments frozen in time, I’m struck with the realization that she was more than just some bitchy girl I sometimes wanted to break in half. To many of those standing around, she was a classmate, a friend, a loved one, a daughter.

Despite how I felt about Dahlia, she was human and... there are definitely people who will miss her.

I scan the crowd again, and then wish I hadn’t when I spot Leo Whitlock. He’s several yards away, but his eyes are already locked on me and the guys. I’m curious how long he’s been watching us, that slow, menacing smirk curving his lips. Unable to stomach him any longer, I look away, averting my eyes anyplace else.

My phone buzzes in my pocket, and I peek at the screen only to be thoroughly irritated to see a message from Maddox.

Maddox: I know you’re trying to hate me, but I’m not going away, Stevie.

Of course, I don’t respond, but that doesn’t stop him.

Maddox: At least let me know you’re okay. I heard about Dahlia, and I imagine it’s been a little triggering.

He isn’t wrong, but I don’t owe him any sort of explanation. So, I put my phone away and breathe deep when I look up and try to forget he even exists. When I glance up *this* time, there’s a new set of eyes on me, but this gaze is less menacing and more... curious.

Clearing my throat, I accept that Frank’s on his way over. A breeze moves his long trench coat, and his badge glints on his waistband as he passes beneath a streetlight. The guys notice him making his way over, but Ash is the only one who’d recognize him from their brief run-in outside the police station weeks ago. My posture stiffens, and I’m not sure why, but I brace myself.

“I’m... gonna step away for a sec,” I announce, thinking it’ll be that easy to slip away from the guys, but Vince has my wrist.

“You know this guy?” he asks.

“He’s an old friend of the family. I’m just going to see if he has any information about what happened.”

Vince’s eyes stay locked on me, and it takes a moment for his grip to loosen. “We’ll be close,” he promises, and I didn’t expect anything less.

Frank sees me meeting him halfway and nods toward the liquor store parking lot on the opposite corner. I cross the street, slowing my pace when he stops beside the aged brick of the building, a neon sign buzzing several feet above our heads. In my peripheral vision, I spot four shadows moving this way. It’s the guys, but they keep their distance, being obvious but not overbearing.

Frank’s gaze flashes toward them, and his expression hardens. “I see you’ve upped your bodyguard count.”

I smile a little to dispel some of the tension in the air. “They’re friends,” I lie. “They just want to know I’m safe.”

Frank meets my gaze again, and his expression’s softened a bit. “Because you were attacked,” he says flatly. “Yeah, I came across your police report. I had no idea.”

My gaze lowers when he brings it up.

“Why didn’t you say something? You could’ve asked for me, you could’ve *come* to me, Stevie.”

His brow arches when I scoff.

“What’s *that* supposed to mean?” he asks.

“It means you’ve only ever shown loyalty to one member of my family, and I didn’t see the point in wasting my time.”

He looks genuinely wounded by my words, but I don’t put too much stock in that.

“I’m loyal to *everyone* in this community, including you. *Especially* you because, despite our differences, we’re like family,” he adds, and I hate that I detect sincerity in his declaration.

“I just didn’t think to call you,” is the last thing I have to say about it, and Frank doesn’t push.

“They never got any leads on who might’ve done it?”

I shake my head, wishing I didn’t have to talk about this anymore.

Frank lets out a deep breath into the wind, gazing down the street.

“It’s just got me thinking.”

I blink up at him. “Thinking what?”

He shrugs and I listen harder. “That maybe there’s a connection? Between what happened to you and what happened to this girl? Only, you were clearly much luckier than she was.”

The thought of it sends a chill down my spine, imagining if things had gone differently for me, imagining my mother having to do this a second time.

“It’s just too big of a coincidence,” he adds. “I saw in the report that your addresses match.”

I nod. “We were housemates until recently.”

“What changed?”

I think over the details. Details I’ve been trying to forget. “I was attacked right outside the house. So, when they released me from the hospital, I just... I couldn’t go back there.”

“I don’t blame you,” he says. “And now for a *second* tragedy to strike someone who lives there... it’s just all so strange.”

He zones out, and I decide to ask a question of my own. “What.. *happened* to her?” The words leave my mouth slowly, and I realize I’m not positive I even want to know. But I *need* to know.

“There isn’t much I can say, but... I can tell you that girl suffered,” he adds, and the look on his face confirms the severity of whatever they found.

“Was she beaten? Stabbed? Or... how did it happen?” I know I’m likely pushing it, and the sternness in Frank’s eyes only makes that more apparent, but I need to know.

A hard breath leaves him, and he looks away, observing the crowd again. “The asshole, *whoever* he is... he set the poor girl on fire.”

My stomach has never felt more unsettled. So much that I actually think I’ll vomit right there on the pavement. The only reason I’m able to keep it together is because I’m determined to avoid suspicion, but... I haven’t forgotten the powerful scent of gasoline on Micah’s clothes. And he even admitted to dousing Dahlia in it to get her to talk. I cast a look over my shoulder at the guys, but my eyes only lock with one.

Micah.

His expression is dark and menacing, like he knows what I’ve just asked Frank, knows what I’m thinking.

I face Frank again, trying my best to keep my expression from giving away my suspicion.

“Anyway, if you think of anything that might help the case—big or small—you know how to reach me.”

Instead of heading back to the vigil, he walks in the opposite direction, letting a truck pass before crossing the street to his car. My thoughts are on the vague details he shared about Dahlia. Namely, the portion that now has me even more suspicious about Micah’s whereabouts the other night.

Between this and whatever Whitlock’s holding over his head, I’m starting to wonder... do I even really know what Micah’s capable of?

“You good?”

I peer up when Tate asks, and then let my gaze lower to Frank as he pulls off from the curb, likely headed back to the station.

“Yeah, he just had questions about the night I was attacked.”

“He thinks there’s a connection,” Ash says flatly, and I nod. He sighs, conveying his frustration. “Maybe having a dead girl on their hands will give the cops the push they need to finally light a fire under their asses.”

“Something’s gotta fucking give,” Micah grumbles, but I’m only half paying attention as my phone buzzes.

I glance down, expecting to see another desperate plea from Maddox, but instead, someone’s messaged from a private number.

Unavailable: You should really be careful talking to the cops.

My head snaps up, whipping from one edge of the growing crowd to another.

Stevie: Who the fuck is this?

Unavailable: Trouble seems to follow young girls in this town. Wouldn’t want anything bad to happen to you.... Again.

It’s hard to focus and my hands shake as I text back.

Stevie: Stop being a coward and stop hiding. Come out into the open and talk shit to my face.

On some level, I want this, want whoever sent the message to show themselves, but on the other... I’m afraid. *Shaking from head-to-toe* afraid.

Several seconds pass and there’s no response, and when I storm back toward the vigil, hellbent on finding the son of a bitch who texted, the guys are on my heels.

“What is it?”

I ignore Tate’s question because I’m on the hunt, looking for who might seem suspicious, looking for anyone watching us. But I don’t see anyone or *anything* out of place.

“What is it, Bird?” Micah says this time, and my only response is to show him my phone, so he can read it for himself. “He’s here.”

“*Who’s* here?”

He shows Ash the same text I just showed him, and the others lean in to read, too.

“Ash, you and Tate head west. I’ll see if I can catch him around the side of the building. This asshole *has* to be lurking somewhere close by.”

On Micah’s command, they fan out, but Vince stays close to my side, gripping my waist as his head swivels, watching our backs. I feel safe with him, but I’m worried about the others, rushing off into the darkness, *hoping* to find trouble.

The words from the text are on repeat in my head, how the one who sent it seemed to be alluding to there being a connection between what happened to Dahlia and what happened to my sister. And also, what happened to me. Now, I’m suddenly second-guessing my suspicion of Micah, thinking he might actually be innocent after all. Maybe what he’s already admitted *was* the whole truth, and... I should’ve given him the benefit of the doubt. I’m too wired and anxious to feel guilty right now, but I’m almost certain I will later.

It feels like a lifetime passes while Vince and I wait, but luckily, Micah, Tate, and Ash are all in sight, out of breath from running, chasing ghosts.

“Nothing,” Tate reports, and Micah shakes his head, expressing the same.

“Damn it!” Frustrated Ash glances around again, but whoever this guy is, he’s hidden himself well, and clearly plans to stay that way.

But one day, I have to believe he’ll be brought to the light, and I’ll get my life back. Minus the worry, without having to constantly be looking over my shoulder.

At least, this is what I need to believe.

Tonight’s been eerily quiet. It’s almost as though we’ve somehow brought the somber atmosphere of the vigil home

with us. And now, as we sit in the library of The Den, none of us speak.

Not about the vigil.

Not about the strange texts I received.

Not about my talk with Frank.

But that latter point is burning a hole right through me. Especially as I mull over the few details I was given. I need to say it out loud—things that can't be sugarcoated, can't be prettied up. So... they'll just have to take it as it is.

“She was burned alive,” I blurt out, and all four sets of eyes fall on me.

“What? The cop told you that?”

I nod, answering Ash's question, desperately wishing I could wake up from whatever this is.

“What the fuck is happening?” Tate says, pushing both hands into his hair as he begins to pace.

“I don't know, but... I need to ask you guys something. Something I've asked already, but it's different now,” I add, feeling my heart race ten times faster.

Vince leans forward in the armchair, resting both elbows on his knees while he stares, waiting.

“You had *nothing* to do with this, right? I know you told me the part about picking her up and—”

“That's the *only* part, Bird,” Ash cuts in. His voice is stern, but not angry. “You already know we're all a little fucked up. Believe me, even if we made a mistake and things went bad, we wouldn't leave you in the dark.”

I hold his gaze and despite none of this making *any* sense, I believe him.

“What she really wants to know is if *I* lied to her,” Micah speaks up, and all our gazes shift to him next. My stomach sinks hearing him say those words. Mostly, because I feel guilty. But also because he isn't wrong.

Out of the four Savages I know, the one I could see losing their cool and hurting Dahlia... is Micah.

He stands, and my eyes follow as he stretches to full height. He's always got this menacing look about him, but it's somehow even heavier today, more prevalent.

"What more do you want me to fucking say?" he scoffs, his mouth curving into a dark smile that never reaches his eyes. "I already gave you my word on this."

That thundering inside my chest intensifies, causing my entire body to quake now.

"I know, I just..."

"I told you—we left her in the woods, then Tate's call came through, letting us know you were missing. We came and picked you up, that bullshit went down between me and Whitlock, then once I took Tate's car, I just drove around downtown a bit to clear my head."

He holds my gaze and with my whole heart, I want to believe him, but...

"Mic's telling the truth." Tate's steps halt near the window. "If I'd known his whereabouts were in question, I would've spoken up sooner."

I shift in my seat, curious how he can be so sure.

"I've got a device on my car from the insurance company. All I have to do is open up the app and see where my car is, where it's been. After Mic got back that night, and I was finally thinking clearly enough to remember the app was even a *thing*, I checked it out. He left Whitlock's, drove downtown, then came back to The Den. And unless he's incredibly stupid and set Dahlia on fire in the middle of a busy intersection, I'm guessing he was nowhere near wherever her body turned up."

The guilt is back. And this time, I can't bring myself to look at Micah.

"I honestly don't blame you for thinking it," Micah says, and that knife in my heart twists in a little deeper. He already

sees himself as a fuck up, now it's possible he thinks I see him that way, too.

"I'm sorry, I just..."

"Bird... I'm not mad." This time, the gentleness of his voice makes me meet his gaze, finding a softness in his expression I think I've rarely found there. "But I need you to know that the four of you are the only people on this planet I'd never lie to."

My chest feels tight. How could I have ever suspected him? How could I have not believed him?

"We've all seen some ugly shit, and some of us have *done* some ugly shit, but this circle, the five of us... this is a family. And in *this* family, we trust, and with trust comes honesty."

He's one-hundred percent right. And leave it to me, with my trauma and fucked up world view, to not be able to see it sooner.

He's like a wall when I stand and rush to hug him, needing him to feel that I'm not only sorry, but I believe him.

"So, now we've gotta address the million dollar question," Vince speaks up. "Who the fuck saw us that night? Someone had to have been out there in the woods, had to have seen us with Dahlia to know about the gasoline."

"Is it too big a coincidence to think that maybe it's not all connected?" Tate asks, ever the voice of reason.

Micah's chest rumbles against my ear when he speaks, still holding me in his arms. "Factor in those text messages Bird got tonight, and it's *way* too big a coincidence," he says. "I didn't know about the fire, but I heard she was found near the train tracks a couple miles from where we dropped her. My guess is she was following them, thinking they'd eventually lead her back to civilization."

"Which would *have* to mean she was being followed."

"Or *we* were being followed," Vince adds, correcting Ash, making an already intense situation a whole hell of a lot more tense.

“I guess now we know for sure. This wasn’t some random act of violence. Whoever texted Stevie is the same person who killed Dahlia,” Tate says. “And we can assume that’s *also* the same person who attacked Stevie that night, and...” His voice trails off there, but the sorrowful look that fills his gaze is telling.

“They’re likely the same person who hurt my sister,” I say, finishing Tate’s sentence.

The room goes quiet. We were all thinking it. I was just the only one who could bring myself to say it out loud.

“Bird doesn’t leave our sight. She goes nowhere alone, and—”

“No.”

When that one word leaves my mouth, I feel their stern gazes locked on me.

“What the fuck do you mean, *no*?” Micah growls, his grip on me tightening just a little. I’m not even sure he’s aware of it.

“I mean, you four already do so much. I’ve moved in and disrupted your lives enough. You’ve got lives and hockey and—”

“Fuck hockey.” There’s a sharp edge to Micah’s tone, so I’ve clearly triggered him. “You’re our responsibility and we’re not having a repeat of what happened before.”

There’s a sharp edge to his tone, and I can guess he’s not only remembering *my* attack, but also the tragic death of his sister.

“I hear you, Micah, but... you do know there are things I’ll have to do on my own. Right?”

He stares down at me and the only word to describe the look he gives is *ferocious*. I swear I can hear his thoughts. Swear I can read his mind as the words *Like hell we can’t* flutter through. But he doesn’t say them out loud, and when his expression shifts again, softening this time, I’m a little

surprised. Maybe it's because he knows he comes on a little strong sometimes, and this is a delicate situation.

For all parties involved.

“All any of us want is to keep you safe.”

He says this as if I didn't already know, as if their actions don't scream this loud and clear right in my face. Every single day.

“I know, but you won't have to worry for long. Dusty, made sure I was covered before I left.”

The vague response has Micah arching a brow. And without looking, I'm certain the others are giving me similar looks.

“Covered?” he asks.

I nod. “He took me shooting when we hung out the other night.”

Vince laughs. “What the fuck? You mean the night you came home in a damn dress?”

“He heard things had gotten to be a bit dicey out here. So, because he lives so far, but still wants to know I'm safe, he taught me how to shoot, and... he also gave me his gun.”

I'm not sure how to read the guys' silence, but when Vince laughs again, and then Ash, I turn to face them.

“Not sure how legal it is to just, you know, hand a registered firearm over to someone, but... sounds like he's kind of reckless when it comes to people he cares about,” Ash says, adding, “like us.”

I smile, seeing definite similarities between them.

“Wasn't sure about the guy at first, but... I think I might already like him.”

I couldn't agree with Tate more.

“I can't promise we won't hover,” Micah admits, “but I promise to at least be subtle about it.”

His honesty draws a laugh out of me, and I nod. “Fair enough.”

I went from having the shittiest of father-figures in my life, to him being completely replaced by a brigade of fierce protectors.

In my guys.

In Dusty.

None of us know where this is all headed, but I do know one thing. I’m not on this path alone.

Stevie

Dahlia's face is everywhere.

The *'Have you seen me?'* flyers are pinned to every post and event board between my car and the building where my next class is held. The corners of the now purposeless pages blow in the chilled air as a breeze whistles past.

As Vince watches me cross the court before he heads in the opposite direction for class, I hug myself tighter in my coat, feeling like this is all one big, terrible nightmare.

That sensation lingers with me when I step into the building, mostly ignoring the ambient conversation carrying on around me. All I can think about, all I *see*, is an image of Dahlia's body going up in flames as she experiences her final moments.

The lecture hall is nearly full when I take my seat, and Tate's standing near Professor Lange's desk, organizing a stack of papers on the corner. We lock eyes, share a quick smile, then my gaze lowers to my textbook as I pull it from my bag.

Class goes by in a blur. Much like the last few days have gone by in a blur. The world just feels so surreal all of a sudden. Even more than before. I've taken probably half the amount of notes as the others seated around me, which I'm

sure I'll regret when the next exam rolls around, but it is what it is.

Life's been dark lately. So dark that I'm giving myself a pass for not being completely with it right now.

My classmates rise from their seats, having already gathered their things, and I'm a bit behind, of course. As I shove my book back inside my bag, the last remaining footsteps echo through the room, then the door slams shut.

Professor Lange and Tate exchange a few words at the front of the hall, then the professor takes off, too, leaving Tate and I alone in the vast space. He's gathering his things, but I feel his stare on me. Like the other guys, he's been watching me closely, likely wondering if I'm really as okay as I seem to be. Also, like the others, he probably knows I'm not.

"I've got a bit of a break. We should go grab something to eat."

My stomach turns at the thought of food when Tate suggests it. Something about seeing Dahlia's flyers all over the place killed my appetite.

"Not all that hungry."

"Okay, coffee then."

I smile a little. I'm not really in the mood for that either, but I *am* in the mood to sit with him and just... *be*.

"Okay," I say with a nod.

He grabs the last of his things, then we exit the lecture hall together, headed down the steps toward the entrance. We walk closely, but don't touch one another. Even though everything in me wants to slip an arm around his waist and lean into his warmth, but it isn't allowed. He works here, and I'm a student, which means it would definitely raise a few eyebrows. More so if they knew our parents will be marrying one another in less than a month.

At his car, he opens the passenger door for me, then once I'm seated, he stops at the trunk to drop his things inside. He climbs in and starts the engine, then turns on the heat. At first,

the air coming from the vents is just as cold as the air outside, but it warms quickly, and I'm toasty as we drive, distancing ourselves from campus.

Once we're both positive no one will see us, it's like a switch flips. Tate's hand moves to my thigh, and he leaves it there. I squeeze his forearm, and my head falls to his shoulder, and I remember a time not so long ago when we both fought this in our own way. Fought the undeniable attraction that made the room spin when we first met. But not anymore. We've accepted that what exists between us is unbreakable.

Soft music flows from the speakers and it fills the silence because we don't speak. I hadn't realized this was exactly what I need before now. So, of course, someone decides to text, and the alert is jarring.

Mom: Hey, Beautiful. Hope I'm not bugging you during class.

I stare at the text. It's been weeks now since we've talked. Not for her lack of trying, though. Typically, I read her texts, feeling the desperation as she tries to break the ice. Then, I simply let the screen go dark and never get around to replying.

But this time feels different. Dusty isn't exactly a fan of the way she handled the situation concerning him either, but he was definitely in favor of me forgiving Mom sooner rather than later.

Mom: I know you're probably busy, but I just need to know you're okay. I heard what happened to Dahlia. It's just awful, and I can't imagine what this must be like for you.

Guilt twists into my gut, burrowing deep inside, too deep to easily be ignored. So, I hover over the keyboard a moment, torn on what to do.

Stevie: I'm fine.

I type more, but quickly delete it, not wanting to seem too open. Too... forgiving.

Mom: I'm glad to hear it. Any chance you're free this evening? I've got my final dress fitting. I can't think of anyone else I'd want to be there with me.

Shit... that's today.

This wasn't a last-minute thing. I had this date on my calendar for weeks now, but honestly didn't plan to be involved with any of the wedding stuff moving forward. We haven't talked through anything, and honestly, I wasn't sure I wanted to.

But Dusty's words didn't fall on deaf ears. So, maybe it wouldn't hurt to just... see where things go.

Stevie: I'll be there.

Mom: You have no idea how much this means to me. See you this evening!

I lower my phone as we pull up to the curb in front of a small café downtown. I wait while Tate comes around to open my door, then we're inseparable again—arms linked as we walk in sync, only separating when he opens the door and lets me walk in first. The small booth in the corner looks cozy, so we gravitate there, slipping out of our coats before settling in.

Now that I'm relaxed, I look him in the eyes, remembering all our stolen moments and the secrets we'll both take to our graves. The thought of it makes me smile.

"You're beautiful, you know that? Even when you're stressed," he adds, and I smile more.

"Good thing. Because, lately, all I've *been* is stressed."

He reaches for my hand across the table, and I stare at our fingers when they interlock.

"It's a lot for you being on campus right now." He doesn't pose that as a question, because he knows. "It was weird walking up to the building, seeing her face everywhere."

I nod, wishing I could just blink and this would all go away. "We weren't even *close* to being friends, but... no one deserves what happened to her."

The chatter from other patrons fills the silence when we both fall deep in thought. Then, when Tate smiles, I'm intrigued.

“What?”

He flashes a look toward me. “I still can’t believe your dad gave you a gun.”

My mind goes back to that night, the feel of the cool steel against my palm. “Yeah, that makes two of us.”

“He seems like a good guy, though. I’m happy you found him.”

“Me, too. Even though it would’ve been nice to know he existed years ago.”

“But I’m a firm believer in everything happening for a reason.”

I smile a little. “Oh, gosh. You’re one of *those* people.”

He laughs at my snideness. “One of *what* people?”

“The ones who really do see the glass as half full.”

“And you’re not?”

I think about that for a bit, and what was shaping up to be a lighthearted conversation begins to feel a bit somber as I consider why I’m a little jaded. The things I’ve seen, the things I’ve experienced, have taken a toll on me, left me with wounds and scars that remind me of the terrible acts people are capable of committing.

“I guess I haven’t been that way for a while now,” I answer, choosing to leave it at that.

Tate stares at our hands laced together at the fingers. “Well, I’ll be optimistic for us *both* then,” he says with a smirk. “One day, life will be normal again.”

A thought pops into my head, and I laugh a little. “Any chance someone will normalize being in an intimate relationship with their stepbrother? Because that’s one I’m not holding my breath for.”

He smiles, too, but his expression is definitely more serious. “Maybe. Maybe not. But either way, regardless of how people feel about it, nothing and no one will ever change this. Us. What we’ve become.”

His gaze lifts to meet mine now, and his sincerity never ceases to amaze me. I'm still in awe of him when he leans in, and I do the same, meeting him at the center of the table for a kiss. It's not quite a peck, but not quite rated R. But it *is* enough to emphasize the odd dynamic of our relationship.

A relationship that Tate has just declared indestructible.

They overwhelm me, my boys. And I'm also painfully aware of needing an escape. Hence the reason my gaze shifts to the restroom, thinking that might make for a decent place to sneak away for a moment.

"Hi there! What can I grab for you two?"

I peer up at the waitress for a moment, then lower my gaze back to Tate. "Actually, something just came up. We're just going to use the restroom then head out. But thank you."

"No problem! Stop in and see us again sometime," the woman says, and then she leaves me to explain what I'm thinking to a very confused Tate.

"I'll go in first. Then, come in after me in two minutes."

It takes that look of confusion a moment to fade from Tate's face, but then it does as understanding sets in. He appears to be at war—the practical side of himself likely giving him shit about wanting to take me up on the offer. But I know he'll give in. Something I've learned about my stepbrother-to-be is that he enjoys the thrill of fucking me in places we might be caught, enjoys the idea of someone seeing him balls deep in the one girl on this planet he shouldn't be touching.

"Okay," he says with a deep breath and a nod.

I smile, happy he didn't deliberate too long.

His eyes are on me as I slide from the booth, grabbing my jacket so we can make a mad dash for it when we're done. Once I'm in the restroom, I hang my coat over the metal divider, do a quick scan to make sure we're alone, then I shoot Tate an *'All clear'* text. Not even thirty seconds later, he bursts into the bathroom, and my feet leave the floor when he lifts

my legs to his waist like I weigh nothing. He kisses me rough and deep. Like I'm all he's ever wanted or needed.

My eyes are closed, but I'm aware of being inside a stall now. Tate fidgets with the lock for a few seconds longer than if his hands weren't occupied. I take his tongue and feel absolutely consumed by him. He's all heat and hands, only lowering me to the floor long enough to wriggle out of my jeans and underwear in the tight space before hanging them from the hook on the door with his jacket. He uses that time to unzip his slacks, and I'm oddly turned on that he's in work attire—a button-down with a dark tie that I wind my fingers around.

He scoops me up again, slamming my back against the dividing wall. My sweatshirt acts as a barrier between my skin and the chilled metal. I'm vaguely aware of my coat slipping over the wall and onto the floor, but it's honestly a forgotten thought the next moment. There's a sense of urgency we both feel, knowing someone could pop in at any moment and catch us in the act. A fact that has Tate wasting no time bending his knees slightly to align his cock with my core, and then standing to full height again to power into me.

I suck his lips harder, feeling him slide in and out with ease because I'm so fucking wet and turned on. My fingers move into the back of his hair, pulling a little when he goes harder, backing his hips away, only to slam forward again.

“I'll never stop fucking you,” is the breathy promise he sighs into my mouth, forcing me to swallow his words. “No matter what. Never.”

I brush my tongue over the smoothness of his bottom lip before biting it just enough to let him know I'd never *let* him stop.

With his tongue in my mouth, I begin to climax, feeling my body clenching down on his cock, squeezing him tighter. Based on the heavy groan vibrating against my lips, he feels it too. Now, his heavy breathing matches mine as he follows me over the edge, releasing inside me.

His kiss forces me to keep quiet, but I lose myself, accidentally biting down on his lower lip. A hint of warm copper fills my mouth, but Tate doesn't even flinch. Instead, he kisses me deeper, as if tempting me to hurt him again.

We ride the swell of the wave until it begins to wane, and I enjoy the feel of him growing soft inside me. It means he's satisfied. It means he's currently experiencing the same rush of contentment he's brought to me.

The kiss slows, and little by little, we come back down to Earth. It only sobers us more quickly when the door to the bathroom creaks open, and then closes. My hand flies over my mouth as I stare wide-eyed at Tate, who's currently holding in a laugh.

Holy shit...

How much did the person hear?

Were they coming in or leaving out? We wouldn't know with how loud we were.

"Tate!" I whisper.

Apparently, hearing the genuine horror in my voice is all he can take, because the laugh he'd been holding in bursts from his mouth now.

"It's not funny!" I say quietly, which only makes him laugh harder.

Listening again, there aren't any footsteps, so it's obvious it's just us again, but... how long was it *not* just us.

My hand covers my face again as Tate continues to hold me around his waist. "Oh, God."

"Relax." He presses a kiss to the space in the center of my forehead not covered by my fingers.

"Relax? That poor woman just heard everything."

He chuckles again. "Well, maybe now we've given her a good laugh for the day."

"Yeah, or maybe we gave her reason to go get the manager."

He pauses mid-kiss, with his lips pressed to my ear this time. “Good point.”

With that, he lowers me back to the floor, then after he zips up, he heads to the sink and wets a few paper towels so I can clean myself up. It’s not quite a hot shower, but it’ll have to do for now. I finish dressing while he straightens his clothes, then we leave the bathroom in tandem, doing a walk of shame that gets us more than a few looks. I’m definitely red-faced, but Tate’s just trying to keep his smile to a minimum.

Meanwhile, I’m not sure which of the women staring at us with judgment in their eyes is the one who walked in on us, but it may as well be all of them at this moment. But then Tate’s hand slips into mine, warm and comforting. And with that one gesture, I’m aware of the escape he’d just given me, and it reminds me not to take shit so seriously.

Did I just fuck my hot stepbrother in the bathroom of this classy café?

Yes, I absolutely did.

Does our addiction to one another likely secure our spot on some future episode of a trashy talk show?

Possibly.

But do I regret that shit?

Hell no.

Not even a little.

Stevie

Even without makeup, without her hair all done up and pinned just right... she's beautiful. Watching over my mother's shoulder, as she takes it all in, the sight of her in this dress, it's hard not to smile.

Part of me thinks she didn't expect to find happiness, but Rob came into the picture and changed all that. Now, she's preparing to open her heart for a second time, going all in because no amount of sadness was enough to kill her spirit. Through it all, she still believes in love.

I'm stuck on this sentiment, wishing I still felt close enough to her to say these things out loud, when I realize the tears streaming from her eyes might not be tears of joy. Then, when she covers her face with both hands, it's confirmed.

I'm in this weird limbo, wanting to comfort her, wanting to keep my distance because there's been so much bad blood between us. But then my heart tugs me in her direction, remembering that she isn't all bad.

"Mom," I call out quietly, taking a hesitant step in her direction. "What's wrong?"

She doesn't answer. Instead, her shoulders simply lift with a shrug. The woman trying on a dress in the mirror beside us eyes Mom with concern, then her gaze slips to me, and I'm

pretty sure she's wondering why I'm not comforting her. So, I step a little closer, placing a hand on Mom's elbow.

"Tell me what's wrong."

This time, she turns—red rimmed eyes and all.

"It's just that... I'm happy," she bellows, which has me arching a brow.

"Yeah, but... aren't you supposed to be?" I smile a little, but her tears flow harder and faster.

What the actual fuck?

The saleswoman who'd been assisting us today walks up, and at the sight of Mom bawling, the smile immediately fades from her face. "Oh, dear! Is everything okay? Is it the dress?"

I smile a little in an attempt to neutralize the situation. "No, the dress is perfect, actually. But would you mind helping her get out of it, so I can take her somewhere to settle down?"

"Of course! Right this way, sweetheart," she says to Mom, and then they disappear inside the dressing room.

It gives me time to think, to get myself in the frame of mind to comfort a woman I haven't felt very fondly toward lately. So, by the time Mom emerges from the room, I take in the sight of her puffy eyes and realize it's not so hard to feel compassion for her after all.

"I'm sorry," she says, forcing a smile. "I'm not sure what came over me."

"It's fine. I'm sure taking such a big step brings up a lot of emotions." I watch as she digs through her purse, looking for her keys, and I wrestle with an idea that eventually tumbles out of my mouth anyway. "Want to... go grab milkshakes?"

She peers up and I don't miss the look of surprise in her eyes hearing me ask.

"I—sure. That'd be nice." She smiles again, and I follow her out to the parking lot.

My eyes slide left, to a pickup truck with yellow parking lights beaming through the darkness. Mom wouldn't know

this, but we're being watched. By Micah tonight.

"I'll follow you," she says, and my gaze flits away from Micah, back to her.

"Okay. There's a place just up the street."

She flashes another hopeful smile, then we each head to our cars. It's a short drive to the ice cream shop, and lucky for us, the cold temperature has scared most people off. So, aside from the employee behind the counter, it's just me and Mom.

She pokes a spoon into her scoop of strawberry ice cream, but there's little to no eye contact. If I didn't know any better, I'd say I've been wrong about her, thinking she'd been sitting at home feeling smug and justified in her stance on the whole *Dusty situation*. But maybe she *does* have a conscience about the whole thing, because that definitely looks like guilt on her face to me.

"Mom, talk to me."

My words have her drawing in a breath, then she swipes at a lone tear that slides down her cheek.

"I'm just... nervous. And sad," she admits.

I reach across the table, but don't interject.

"I know you think I don't know I failed you girls, but believe me, no one knows that better than me. I live with that truth every single day, and it kills me knowing how badly I screwed up. Mel's gone, and now, you hardly even take my calls."

Whether she deserves my sympathy or not, she has it. Sitting here, it's tough not to put myself in her shoes, feeling what I imagine she feels when she wakes up in the morning and neither of her girls are around.

"Mom, sure you've made mistakes, but... we *all* have. And what happened to Mel wasn't your fault."

She shakes her head. "No, it was, Stevie. There were signs, cries for help, but I stuck my head in the sand, thinking she was just being a normal, hormonal, teenage girl. But she needed help. She needed me. Her mom."

There's a lump in my throat now, hearing words leave my mother's mouth that I've thought myself a thousand times.

"Okay, then, if it's on you, losing her is on me, too," I say. "Because I should've seen it too. There's no one in this world she's closer to than us, so we'll have to share that burden, I guess."

Mom shakes her head again. "It's different. I'm her mother."

"And I'm her big sister. I was supposed to protect her. She was supposed to come to me with the heavy things she was too embarrassed or too scared to come to you and Jake about."

I pause, realizing this is the first time I didn't call the man who raised me *Dad*. But he isn't that, and it feels good to shed that weight off my shoulders, honestly. Mom's eyes are on me, too, and I realize it must've been just as jarring for her hearing it as it was for me saying it.

"The point is, maybe we all dropped the ball in some way, but at the end of the day, Mel's gone, Mom. And there isn't a single thing any of us can do to change that. If there were, she'd be sitting at this table beside us."

There's a lump in my throat when I picture it—my sister seated in the chair beside me, smiling and being carefree while drinking a chocolate shake.

"The point is, all we have is each other now, so... we need to decide what that looks like for us moving forward."

She purses her lips and drags her spoon across her scoop again, tasting it slowly to bide her time before answering.

"But I messed up with you, too," she says. "It's been a tough few weeks without you. And now there are the constant news updates about Dahlia, making me worry, making me wonder if it's somehow related to what happened to you."

She looks up, finally meeting my gaze.

"Stevie, if things had gone differently when you were taken, if you'd... if someone had..."

Her voice trails off when she gets choked up, and I squeeze her hand again.

“But it didn’t, Mom. I’m still here.”

She sets her spoon down and places her other hand on top of mine.

“And I thank God for that every day. You have no idea.”

“I know.”

“But I messed up. I handled the situation with Dusty all wrong. I should’ve told you. I should’ve told *him*,” she admits. “I was afraid of having everything fall apart if I told the truth, but it all fell apart anyway. I was ashamed of what I’d done, pretended it never happened, and in return... I’ve made the one person in this world I can’t live without hate me.”

I stare into her eyes. Eyes that remind me so much of my sister, and my heart softens even more.

“You’re absolutely right. You should’ve told me,” I say. “But I don’t hate you. Couldn’t even if I tried.”

When I smile, she does too, stealing one hand back to wipe another tear.

“Dusty’s a good man. Always has been. I’m sure if you reached out again and—”

“Already did that.”

Her eyes widen with surprise. “You... really?”

I nod, and my smile widens a bit when I think of him. “We actually went on our first father/daughter date recently.”

“Stevie, I... what a brave move.” The guilt in her eyes is replaced with pride.

“All I did was make the first call to tell him what I knew. But he’s the one who reached out after that. Turns out, he doesn’t hate the idea of being a father.”

Mom smirks again, and I don’t miss the look of nostalgia that settles over her. “He’s a great guy. One of the best. You’re

lucky to have him, and I'm so, *so* sorry I robbed you of that growing up. I know Jake was hard on you, and—"

"Mom, don't. There's no need to apologize. I have him *now*. That's all that matters."

The bitterness I felt toward her was already beginning to wane, but it's gone now. We've both acknowledged that the situation should've been handled differently, and I trust that she might've done things differently if she'd known it'd all work out in the end. So, I'm choosing to move forward instead of living in the past.

Mom snuffles and uses her napkin to dry her face. "I'm sorry for being such a mess. Tonight was supposed to be fun and memorable, but I guess I kind of ruined that."

"Nonsense. Finish up your ice cream. We'll catch a movie."

I didn't expect her eyes to light up the way they are now. "I'd like that."

I sip my shake and reflect on how I thought tonight would go. But instead of the two of us plastering on fake smiles, skirting around all the things that needed to be said, there was finally some honesty shared between us, and I hope that continues.

"I'd like that, too," I finally answer, and something hits me.

For the first time in my entire life, I have *two* parents who love me for exactly who I am. And if I do say so myself, that feels pretty damn good.

Stevie

The arena is packed like usual, because this entire town loves to watch our boys on the ice, but tonight feels different.

There's a certain electricity I've come to expect to find here, as fans rile each other up, anticipating another explosive game. But instead, there's a somberness lingering in the air, hovering over every row of seating and the ice. Like a wet, tear-soaked blanket.

Mom was right the other night. Dahlia's death is everywhere, down to the details about her being found burned in the middle of the woods, with no explanation of how she got there, who she was with, and who's responsible. While I know the answer to those first two questions, the latter is still a mystery.

A mystery that's haunted me since the story broke, nearly a week ago.

Tate's seated beside me, his arm draped across the back of my seat when a voice comes over the loudspeaker, asking everyone to stand for the National Anthem. We rise to our feet, and Tate removes his baseball cap, holding it over his chest while the song plays. But when it ends, before we lower to our seats again, the voice rings out once more.

“And now, a moment of silence for our fallen Bradwyn University student, Dahlia Torrence.”

The arena goes almost completely silent, the eeriness becomes more pronounced, and my heart feels inexplicably heavy. Every day, I feel more and more conflicted. Because of my harsh feelings toward her, coupled with my growing sympathy toward those who loved her.

The image of her burning body flashes into my head again and it jars me, forcing my eyes to reopen during the somber moment. It's the same image that's now begun to haunt me in my dreams. It's always the same, just Dahlia, alone in the middle of the woods, burning as her final cries of pain are carried up into the wind and her short life comes to an end.

The voice comes across the speaker again, this time telling us to take our seats as the game is set to begin. The crowd gets keyed up like before, but I'm still in my head.

“You all right?”

Tate's arm drapes across the back of my seat again, and I lean into his side from across the armrest between us. I wouldn't dare give him the details of the image my mind keeps insisting on conjuring. It's bad enough *I* have to see it. So, I force a smile instead, then nod like nothing's wrong.

He studies me for a few seconds, then his eyes finally leave my face, landing on a target over my shoulder. The soft expression he'd just looked at me with fades in an instant. I follow his gaze.

Right to Leo Whitlock.

No way he's here to show his support for the boys, so now I'm on edge, wondering what this is about. And when I spot the backs of white posterboard signs resting on the seats in front of him and his boys, there's a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach.

“Fucking assholes,” Tate grumbles, and I couldn't agree with him more.

We focus on the ice again as the puck drops, and Micah takes possession of it. Like always, he moves so swiftly and gracefully on the ice that you'd swear he was born with those skates on his feet. I look to Vince next, and then I find Ash.

They're the same—confident, dominating on the ice like they own it. I don't realize I'm smiling until my cheeks tighten, watching them move. Watching them rule this space with their quick, calculated moves that quickly results in the first goal of the game putting a point on the board for Bradwyn.

We're all on our feet, cheering our boys on, which is why I hardly notice Tate and I suddenly have company. I recognize that face, because it looks so much like Micah's.

"Fancy seeing you here," Micah's dad teases, laughing as he brings Tate into a rough hug.

"Good seeing you. How was the drive?"

Micah's dad shrugs. "Eh, you know. Flipped a few drivers the bird, ran a few assholes off the road. The usual."

The two share a laugh, and then Nate squeezes past us, eyeing the seat beside me. But before he sits, he stops and gives me a hug. One far less rough and macho than the one he gave Tate. Thank God. Not sure my ribs can handle that kind of force.

"Stevie, right?" he asks, releasing me before continuing toward the seat next to me.

"Yep, and it's Nate, right?"

He nods. "Yep, which should be easy, considering that other guy over there has practically the same name."

I smirk, saying their names interchangeably in my head. *Nate and Tate. Tate and Nate.*

"Have things been good since we last talked?" he asks, and the question feels slightly loaded. Is he asking in general? Or is he specifically asking about me and his son?

"Things are good," I say, which is true when it comes to me, Micah, and the rest of the guys but I can't say as much for everything else.

He smiles and the expression makes him and Micah favor even more.

“And... you’ve been well?” I ask, not wanting to seem rude despite knowing very little about his life and what goes on in it from day-to-day.

He stays focused on the game, watching Ash move skillfully across the ice. I stare, too, impressed when he practically knocks a guy off his skates when he slams a shoulder into him, somehow still managing to maintain control of the puck.

“Things are good. Same shit, different day.”

We turn and lock eyes for a split second when he smiles, then we shift right back to the game.

I know a bit about Micah’s past, which means I know a bit about Nate’s—the loss of his daughter, the bitter divorce that followed years later. Yet, somehow, he seems like he’s held it all together. Seeing him coping, managing such a great loss, gives me hope that maybe one day, I’ll be able to do the same.

“Yeah, Ash! That’s what I’m fucking talking about! Whoop!” Nate yells, jumping out of his seat at the same time Tate does. Ash has just scored a second goal, earning our boys a two-point lead, while the other team has yet to put anything on the board.

Things shift on the next play, though. The other team steals the puck from Fletcher, running it all the way back across the ice, swiping it into the Bradwyn U Kings’ net.

“Fuck!” Nate groans, pushing a hand through his hair, but he doesn’t seem too stressed about it because we’ve still got the lead. However, on the next play, the other team ties it up, so that’s no longer true.

“Get your head back in the game, boys!” Nate yells, his voice thundering across the arena when he stands to his feet again, cupping both hands around his mouth. He’s loud enough that he gets Micah’s attention, and from what I can see through the cage of his mask, he isn’t impressed by his dad’s version of encouragement.

Nate takes his seat, seemingly unfazed by receiving the death stare from his son. Meanwhile, Tate and I share a subtle

look, wondering which way this will go.

We break for a few during intermission, taking bathroom breaks, and then meet back at our seats with drinks and popcorn going into the second period. Vince makes the next goal, gaining the lead for the Kings again, but that lead is quickly snatched away when the other team scores a point. And then another, putting our boys behind for the first time since tonight's game began. The atmosphere in the arena has certainly shifted. Bradwyn fans are a lot quieter than they were last period.

We go into the *third* period with the same energy—those who came here with hopes of the Kings taking home a win feeling a bit tight around the collar as that win is beginning to look less and less likely to happen. The opposition just made two easy goals, and as the clock winds down toward the final play of the game, there's no missing the tension.

Micah takes center ice again, and despite his best effort, he loses the puck to the other team, and I have a sinking suspicion that his father's words may have had something to do with his sudden lack of focus. With this team being one of the better teams I've seen them play against, they already had their work cut out for them. But ever since Micah locked eyes with Nate in the stands, it's been all downhill.

The crowd groans when Bradwyn's goalie takes yet another blow to the ego when the puck slips past him, prompting Micah to curse so loudly on the ice that I hear him all the way from my seat. He's frustrated and wearing it all over his face, in his posture. I'm so focused on *him*, though, I hardly notice movement in my peripheral vision off to my left. But when Nate lets a growly, "Are you fucking kidding me?" roll off his tongue, I look that way only to find Whitlock and crew on their feet, laughing like a pack of assholes. They hold signs in the air, and I read them in silence.

'You're on fire, Locke!'

'Burning up!'

'Where there's smoke, there's fire.'

The sound of their laughter has me balling my fists as my heart races, fantasizing about rushing over there, then hauling off and hitting Whitlock right in his shit. But then I look at those signs again. More closely this time.

The fire references.

They're... a bit too on the nose.

And all of a sudden, my heart's racing for a different reason. A question crosses my mind and, instantly, I'm sick to my stomach.

Does Whitlock somehow know the boys were with Dahlia that night?

Does he suspect Micah or any of them have something to do with her death?

"Excuse me," Nate calls out, getting the attention of a nearby security guard. Once the guy meets his gaze, Nate gestures wide-eyed toward Whitlock and his merry band of fuckboys. "Are you just going to let this happen? That dickwad over there's heckling my kid."

The security guard seems to finally remember he has a job to do, which includes not letting players get harassed on his watch, and then stomps dutifully toward Whitlock. The security guard is discrete, so I'm unable to hear what *he* says, but Whitlock smiles his cocky smile, then flashes a look toward me before focusing on the guard again.

"Seriously? We're just having a little fun. You're gonna kick us out for that?" Whitlock pleads, still smirking because he takes *nothing* seriously.

"Absolutely," the guard assures him. "Grab your things and go. I'll even walk you out because I'm nothing if I'm not chivalrous," he teases.

When Whitlock doesn't argue, I'm guessing he foresaw his stunt playing out this way. Just to be a dick, he raises his sign one last time, grinning as he shakes it toward the ice, likely to make sure Micah sees it. Then, he and his friends move toward the exit without a fight. But why *would* he fight? He got

exactly what he wanted. To be seen, to get inside Micah's head.

Before he's gone, we lock eyes, and the idiot winks at me before a dark laugh leaves him. Then, he's gone. They all are. With their sick senses of humor and their signs.

I lean deeper into my seat, not saying a word. But neither are Tate or Micah's dad. If Nate weren't sitting so close, I'd have reached for Tate's hand a long time ago. With what I just saw, I could use a little reassurance because, if I'm not entirely losing my mind, Whitlock knows something.

And the last person you want knowing your secrets... is the devil.

Stevie

None of the guys like losing, but Micah's taking this one especially personal. In his eyes, he got in his head and made simple mistakes that cost them the game. But the thing is, no one's blaming him *but* him.

I stare at his back as he sits there, head in his hands while resting on the edge of his bed, towel around his waist. His hair dries slowly, falling in loose waves on his shoulders because it's grown out some. He asked me to come to his room tonight, so I'm here, wearing a t-shirt I stole from his drawer, warm beneath his blanket. I've lifted his blinds to watch the first snow of the season fall, covering the ground outside in a thin dusting of white.

We haven't spoken since he got back from showering, but I take a chance and place one hand on his back. He's solid to the touch. Still, there's no missing the knots in his muscles where tension has him wound tighter than usual.

"Micah."

My voice is soft and small. I'm not afraid of him, but I'm mindful of not pushing him to speak.

"I'm here," I say. "Whatever you need me to say or do... I'm here."

His broad shoulders and back move slowly with his breathing, but he doesn't make a sound. But just as I'm

tempted to lower my hand and give him space, he reaches around, takes my hand, and pulls me toward him. I scoot in his direction, pressing my cheek to his back as my arm encircles his waist. The tips of his fingers trail my skin and as my weight settles against him, and my eyes drift closed to the sound of his beating heart, this moment easily becomes the most intimate we've ever shared.

More intimate than letting him be my first.

More intimate than the nights we've fallen asleep with him holding me in this very bed.

He lifts my hand to his mouth, kissing the back of it, and I find myself wishing we were face-to face, instead of me curled against his back, leaving me to guess his expression.

"You know you can talk to me, right?" I ask softly.

"Not in the mood," he grumbles, but then his voice softens a bit. "But... if I was gonna talk to anyone, it'd be you."

His hand tightens around mine, and our fingers lace together. I believe him.

He saw Whitlock's signs tonight. *Everyone* did, thanks to the commotion caused by the security guard escorting him out. And that move he made, shaking the sign toward Micah... there's no way he missed it.

The words on those stupid boards flash in my head again. The fire and burning references. My stomach twists a bit, remembering how smug Whitlock had been while he held them high for everyone to see. To the rest of the world, it may have seemed like harmless taunting. But to those of us who know about the guys' run-in with Dahlia, it felt like a threat. It felt like Whitlock knows more than he's letting on.

"You're shaking."

It isn't until Micah calls it out that I realize I'm vibrating against him, my nerves getting the best of me.

I'm silent as he suddenly seems to snap out of his daze and shifts in the bed, turning to lie flat on his back before pulling me against his side. It feels natural when I lift my leg, sliding

it across his waist, feeling the softness of his towel against my inner thigh. He pulls the comforter over us both, and I can guess he doesn't plan to put actual clothes on tonight. The pads of his fingertips brush over my arm and, just like that, I'm not shaking anymore.

"You're good at that."

"Good at what?" he asks.

"Calming me down. Even though I'm supposed to be the one comforting *you* tonight."

He chuffs a short laugh and it's more than I thought I'd get out of him, considering.

"I'm fine. That loss just stung a little. I could've been better out there, but I just... I couldn't seem to get my head in the game."

He doesn't speak Whitlock's name, but we both know that had a lot to do with it. It also didn't help that his dad yelling from the stands had already seemed to set Micah's nerves on edge. But he's allowed to have an off game. They *all* are.

I want to be closer, so I push my hip across the mattress, and then nuzzle my nose against the side of his neck before closing my eyes again. The motion causes the leg covering Micah's waist to brush over the front of his towel again, but *this* time, I've accidentally awakened the beast. His cock hardens beneath the soft fabric and Micah's chest rises when he draws in a breath. It wasn't my intention to get him riled up, but it looks like I've done it anyway.

"Sorry," I whisper. "I know you're pissed and not in the mood. I was just—"

I stop speaking when a soft laugh jolts through Micah's chest. "Not in the mood?"

I blink a few times. "I mean, you're upset about the game, so I figured sex would probably be the furthest thing from your mind."

He laughs again, a bit more lighthearted this time. "Bird, lying here so close, with your tits jammed against me like this,

the heat of your pussy against my thigh... how the hell could I *not* be thinking about fucking you?"

My face heats up with his words. He's always so vulgar.

And I always love it.

I want to touch him, want to kiss him, but I'm still a bit hesitant, thinking it might be insensitive to make a move, but he's just said that wouldn't be the case because he wants it, too.

His nipples harden against my fingers when I slide my hand across his solid chest. I shift on the mattress, craning my neck until I can reach his nipple with my mouth this time, brushing the wet heat of my tongue across it. He groans and threads his fingers through the back of my hair, tugging a little.

"You're so fucking sexy," he says in this gruff tone that has me wanting to give him more.

I tease my tongue across his chest again, pushing my hand beneath the covers, over the knot secured in his towel. The edges of it are already parted, resting at either side of his eager cock that's sprung free. I grip it in my fist, pumping slowly as Micah pushes his head deeper into the pillow. I brush my thumb over his tip, swiping a bead of precum with the motion as he draws in a breath.

Soft, puffy veins texture his cock, becoming more pronounced as he grows harder in my hand. Touching him this way brings out the dirtiest thoughts. Thoughts of riding him, being pinned beneath him while he slams into me, having him in my mouth.

I wet my lips, not hesitating to hop up in bed when the idea flutters into my head. I toss the t-shirt I stole from him to the floor, then my knees sink into the mattress as I make my way to the bottom of the bed. I settle on top of Micah's legs, straddling his calves, my tits resting on his thighs as I lower my mouth onto him.

"Shit." That word falls from his mouth as he gently gathers my hair into his fist, winding it around his hand while I take

him in again, feeling his swollen tip nudge the back of my throat.

“You’re so fucking good with your mouth, Bird. I swear...”

I find myself turned on by his praise, so I suck him harder, faster.

“You like that shit, don’t you? Hearing how crazy you make me? Seeing me go fucking feral every time your hands are on me?” he asks, and my response is to focus on his tip, tasting more of his precum.

“Fuck... how are you so damn amazing?” he croons, stroking my ego again. “Keep that shit up and I’m gonna explode inside your beautiful mouth.”

The ‘threat’ has my heart racing, and I grind my pussy against his leg, needing some small measure of relief as he talks shit to me, turning me on with every word. He groans, and I imagine it’s at the feel of my wetness against his leg.

“Do you want that?” He tugs my hair just a little with the question. “Do you want me to come in your mouth and show you how fucking insane you make me, Bird?”

I’m practically panting now, nodding while I take his cock in deep, letting him know he’s completely right. I *do* need to know how fucking insane I make him.

“Then, don’t stop,” he says. “You’re sucking me perfectly. I’m so fucking close.”

I swear I’m starting to sweat, wondering if *my* need for him to come is somehow stronger than his own. I don’t think I realized how deeply I craved the taste of him, the *sound* of him, until he finally lets go, releasing into my mouth. The heat of a hot, powerful stream splashes the back of my throat, and Micah groans loudly. He moves his other hand into my hair, grazing his fingertips over my scalp in this soft, caring way that contradicts how he pulls my hair with the *other* hand. A contradiction just as stark as his personality.

Soft and rough.

Sweet and cruel.

He empties into my mouth, and I don't let him fall from my lips until he's gone soft, completely sated. He stares, watching me lick my lips clean, and then crawl up his body until I'm straddling his waist.

"Feel better?" I ask. He doesn't hold back when I kiss him, tasting his cum on my tongue.

"Always with you," he says, causing my head to swim.

I lower my ass, resting on his dick, still dampened with spit and cum. He isn't hard anymore, but I can still feel his size against my skin, can still imagine what he'd feel like inside me. When I grind down onto him, he must sense my need, because he slips his hand between our bodies while the kiss deepens, and then pushes two fingers into me.

A shuddering breath leaves me, and his other hand squeezes my waist. He brushes his thumb against my clit, over and over again as I ride his fingers, pretending they're his cock as I near the edge, feeling my core tighten around him.

"Your pussy is fucking exquisite, you know that?" He breathes the question against my mouth, and then takes my tongue again before pausing to say more. "I'd live inside you if I could, feel your hot, tight cunt squeezing my dick, making me come over and over and over again. Until I die of starvation because I couldn't leave you. Not for a fucking second."

I breathe in, inhaling the scent of soap on his skin as his hand moves from my waist down to my ass, gripping me tighter.

"We're never letting you go, Bird," he growls. "Not even if you wanted us to."

I feel his smile through our kiss, and the promise feeds me, makes me feel more possessive of my boys than I already do.

"You better fucking not," I whisper back, pulling his bottom lip into my mouth, sucking the softness of it.

I ride his fingers harder and he pushes them to the hilt, seeming to sense that I need to feel him deeper. My clit—swollen and sensitive—throbs as he massages it relentlessly with his thumb, and it's enough to bring down the orgasm I've been so incredibly desperate for.

I whimper into his mouth, feeling him hold me even tighter now.

“That's it, beautiful. Come for me.”

He swirls his fingers a little, creating more friction as I reach the peak of the orgasm, riding high for several seconds before feeling myself start to come down. My hips rock a bit longer, pushing his fingers into me, and then my body goes still on top of his, but the kiss doesn't end for several seconds after that.

Chest-to-chest, his heart races against mine, and I feel his slowing as mine does the same. Eventually, I'm able to tear myself away. Well, somewhat, anyway. I don't go far, sliding off to the side, resuming my original spot beside him, my leg draped across his waist again.

He presses a kiss to my forehead and the softness of it surprises me, although I suppose it shouldn't anymore. He's been this way with me for a while.

“The game was shit,” he says, “but you did it again.”

“Did *what* again?”

The hand on my shoulder pulls me in closer, and my breasts press against his ribcage.

“You make it all seem so fucking small,” he says. “Like winning or losing out on the ice doesn't even matter. Like nothing matters... but *this*.”

My heart squeezes at the thought of taking the pain away. I wish he'd seen I was strong enough to take on his dark days before, instead of spiraling, but that time apart makes me more grateful that he gets it now.

He finally gets it.

There's a hint of a smile on his face when he kisses me again. His hand moves into my hair, and then he pecks my lips twice more before letting his head fall to the pillow again. Only, when he does, he does a slight double-take toward the window. I follow his gaze, expecting to see nothing but falling snow, but instead, a strange orange glow flickers from ground level.

“One sec.”

His words prompt me to lift my head, so he can slide his arm from underneath it. Then, he climbs out of bed, securing his towel as he makes his way over to the window, peering down at what's causing the strange light.

“Shit.”

I sit upright, watching as he pulls a pair of sweats from his drawer. His panic is contagious, and I pull the t-shirt back over my head. My stretch pants are tossed over the back of his desk chair where I left them earlier, so I slip back into them, trailing Micah when he flies out of his room. He bypasses the elevator for the stairs, and our steps echo through the stairwell, and he bursts through the doors, into the corridor that takes us past the study.

I stop for my slides by the front door, but Micah charges out barefoot, full steam ahead, ignoring the freshly fallen snow beneath his feet. He storms down the sidewalk and around the side of the manor where the view from his window would've been. He gets there before I do, and when he stops dead in his tracks, I'm afraid what I'll find when I catch up.

But then I do, laying eyes on the same visual as Micah.

Two mannequins lying in the grass, charred, flames dancing as they stretch toward the sky. There's a sign staked a few feet away, but it's not just any sign. It's one of Whitlock's posters from earlier tonight. I stare at the words, *'Where there's smoke, there's fire'*. Then, my gaze shifts to the mannequins.

Two mannequins.

But why? Why two? One representing Dahlia, I'm sure, but... who's the second one supposed to be?

Before I can ask questions, Micah doubles back, storming toward the house, the tension I'd just relieved him of now raging to full strength yet again. His brothers file out of the house, carrying large bowls and buckets filled with water to put out the fire. They're all confused, none seeming to know what it all means... except Vince and Ash.

They flank me at either side, staring at the blaze with their arms folded across their chests. Neither speaks, but with the anger and concern filling their gazes, I can guess we're all thinking the same thing.

This feud between Micah and Whitlock just reached a whole new level of fucked up. And as for the rest of us... we're all caught in the middle.

Stevie

“That’s seven.”

I glance up, meeting Kip’s gaze when he makes the offbeat comment. “Seven?”

Smiling, he nods. “That’s how many times you’ve checked your phone in the last five minutes.”

My face warms with embarrassment, only now realizing he’s been paying attention. We’re hosting a birthday party tonight, so it’s all hands on deck, making sure the little shits don’t burn the place down or accidentally kill themselves.

“Sorry. Someone keeps calling from a number I don’t recognize. I’ll just ignore it. Won’t happen again.”

He places a hand on my arm, and his expression softens. “I’m just giving you a hard time,” he chuckles. “Go take your call, sweetheart. We’ve got this covered. Could be important,” he adds, and I was just thinking the same thing.

“Thanks, Kip. Be back in a sec.”

My skates move across the thin carpet as I make my way to the back room, and I close myself into the break room, already dialing the number as I lower into a seat. It rings once before someone picks up.

“Stevie.”

It takes a moment to recognize the frantic voice on the other end. “Nora?”

“Thank God you called back.”

Suddenly, I’m sitting straighter in my seat, feeling alarmed. “Where are you calling from?”

“My cell,” she says, and I’m confused.

“Oh. I guess I didn’t realize you’re allowed to make calls while you’re in the facility.”

Last I heard, there was a strict policy in place about patients not having much contact with the outside world, but maybe she’s surpassed that portion of the treatment.

“No,” she says, her voice breathy, like she’s on the move while speaking. “I moved facilities about a week ago. Had to,” she adds, not explaining anything beyond that. “But that’s not why I’m calling.”

My brow tenses. “Ok, then what’s up?”

She takes a deep breath before explaining. “I’m on new meds, and they’re awful. They make it hard to keep my eyes open past two in the afternoon, then I sleep like I’m in a coma for the next four to six hours. I woke up around seven, right before I first called you, but something wasn’t right,” she says, and there’s no missing how her voice shakes now. “At first, I didn’t notice it, but when I turned to put on my slippers before heading to the bathroom... I saw it. Someone had drawn on my window.”

There’s a lump in my throat when I swallow. “What was it? What did you see?”

Nora draws in another breath. “A butterfly.”

I fall silent, thinking of all the things my sister has collected over the years with butterflies all over them—t-shirts, diaries, headbands, socks, keychains, pictures, phone cases. They were her signature. Anyone who knew her knew she loved butterflies.

“I don’t understand.”

“Yeah, that makes two of us,” Nora scoffs.

“Was the drawing on the outside or inside?”

“Outside. The facility is all one floor, with a courtyard in the middle, which means whoever did this had to have gotten in before going out to the courtyard to find my window. Which means they know exactly where I am, exactly how to get to me. Shit...”

Her voice trembles, and honestly, I don't blame her. She's as deep in this as I am. Hell, *deeper*, considering what happened to her the night she and Mel were chased, taken down, attacked.

My eyes fall closed as a shiver rips up my spine.

“I came here thinking I could get away, but... I should've known better. I should've known I'd never outrun this asshole.”

“Wait, *that's* why you transferred? You requested it?”

“Stevie, shit was getting weird,” she answers. “Things would come up missing that I knew for a fact I hadn't misplaced. Personal shit, like underwear, a photo of me when I was a kid that I kept in the corner of my mirror. Then, my roommate's shit started coming up missing, too. She blamed *me* for it, of course, but who'd believe that someone was coming into a locked facility, into our bedroom, just to steal random, meaningless items?”

My mind's racing. “Did they take anything else? Or did you notice anything out of place, tonight? Like, maybe he took something this time, too?”

“He didn't take anything, but I was reminded of something he snagged right before I transferred,” she says. “I know I gave you the box of letters I wrote Mel, but... I kept one thing for myself. A memento.”

“What was it?”

“Lipstick. Mel's favorite shade,” she says. “And that fucker *wanted* me to know this was him tonight. He used the lipstick to draw the butterfly and write the message.”

“Message?”

“Shit, that was the eeriest part. It just said, ‘*Two down*,’” she adds, and my heart’s racing as quickly as my head is now.

“What do you think it means?”

I almost hate that I asked, because I’m not entirely sure I want to know.

“Honestly, I don’t have a clue, but whatever it is... it’s all bad.”

We’re both silent, and I can guess she’s trying to make sense of things.

“Be careful, Stevie. My gut’s telling me this is nowhere near over. There’s more, but... it’ll have to wait. I’m not comfortable mentioning it over the phone.”

I hear her, *agree* with her, but now’s not the time to hide under a rock. If this asshole is starting to act out, being bold enough to send messages, there has to be a reason for that. Like, maybe we’ve hit close to home with something, and he’s desperate to scare us, desperate to convince us to stop trying to smoke him out. So, my only intention is to push harder.

“I’m coming to see you,” I say in a rush.

“Tonight?”

“Tonight. Send me your address. I’ll drive up after work.”

“Stevie, I... it’s too far, and they’re calling for heavy snow. You’ll be on the road until well after midnight.”

“Doesn’t matter. I’ll be there.”

Nora hesitates a moment, then caves. “Fine. I just sent you my location. Text when you get here. I’ll find a way out. Gotta go,” she whispers when someone enters the room with a question, and then the line goes dead.

My eyes are fixed on the wall as I try to put these new facts into perspective, but without a point of reference, that’s almost impossible. But there’s one thing I *can* control, and that’s getting to Nora tonight, just like I promised. Whatever she’s holding in, whatever she’s afraid to say for fear of being

watched or overheard... I'll do whatever it takes to get to her and hear her out.

I can't make up for missing the signs with Mel, but I can sure as hell do what's in my power to be there for Nora. And that's what I intend to do.

We've been on the road for hours, and I feel bad having Ash drive me after what I'm sure was a tough evening at practice, but he insisted. Before I could even argue that I'm capable of driving myself, he not only pointed out the obvious dangers we've faced lately, but he also made it clear that he'd never let me drive in such dicey weather.

It's near-whiteout conditions. Even with his wipers going at top speed, it's hard to see the road just a few feet out in front of us. Somehow, he's still calm and confident, while I'm in the passenger seat tense and silent.

Halfway there, we stop for food. He fills up the tank, then comes out of the gas station with a cup of hot chocolate to keep me warm. I relax a bit, ashamed to admit that I'm grateful it's *him* behind the wheel instead of me. He makes it look easy, regaining control of the truck the couple times we nearly spun out.

I'm relieved to see the sign for the facility lit up as we creep up the length of a long driveway, killing the headlights so no one notices. Nora made it clear that this visit has to be a stealthy one, so we're respecting that.

"Did you text her yet?" Ash asks.

I shake my head. "Nope, doing it now."

I tap out a few words to Nora, then wait to hear back. When my phone buzzes, my heart races.

"It's her. She said to back out and wait for her on the street. She'll come to the truck."

Ash follows directions, placing his hand on the back of my seat, using the rear window to back out to the street again. The engine runs, but the lights are still off, making the dark figure stalking toward us all the more ominous. Hunched in a dark jacket, Nora approaches the driver's side, knocking on the window before she climbs in, brushing snow from her cropped hair.

"I can't believe you came in this weather," she says, out of breath from her trek through the cold.

"It sounded important, so..."

She nods at my words, and I don't miss how she passes a hesitant look toward Ash. When I texted, I told her I wasn't alone, but I get it. I'm a bit paranoid these days, too.

"Nora, this is Ashton Blaine. Ash, Nora."

He glances over his shoulder at her, offering her his hand to shake. "Pleasure."

With her eyes narrowed, she returns the gesture. "Likewise."

She's clearly suspicious of him, but I can't blame her. The girls been through hell.

"He's cool and safe to talk around. He already knows everything."

Nora nods, still eyeing Ash. "He your guy?"

It's a bit more complicated than that, but I nod back. "Yeah."

This seems to ease her mind about talking in front of him, and she settles into the bench seat behind Ash and me.

"You mentioned there being things you're not comfortable saying over the phone," I prompt her, knowing she's on borrowed time. I'm guessing the facility does bed checks at night, so it'd be in her best interest to get back inside as quickly as possible.

Nora nods again. "I hate that you had to drive all this way, but... what I've been thinking isn't the kind of thing I thought

I should tell you without it being face-to-face.”

My brow tenses at her words, and I’m already filled with concern. “What is it?”

Her eyes lower to her gloved hands clenched in her lap. “I’ve been wondering if... if Mel’s death was really a suicide,” she admits, and there isn’t any one emotion to describe how I feel. Now I get why she wanted to talk in person. This isn’t at all what I expected to hear tonight.

“Do you... I don’t... I don’t understand.”

She lifts her eyes and meets my gaze again. “I’ve always thought something was off about the way Mel died. I mean, yeah, she was going through a lot of shit, and the attack fucked with her head a bit, but... it just never quite added up to me. Never quite felt right.”

I turn, facing forward in my seat again, my focus on the vacant road as snow continues to blanket the ground. I feel both sets of eyes on me as I think, considering Nora’s claim, but it hasn’t quite settled in yet. The idea that my sister didn’t *leave* me, but instead... she was taken.

“I’m sorry I... I’m not quite sure what to say.”

“Believe me, Stevie, I wouldn’t have even brought it up if I didn’t think there was something weird going on, but when I saw that message on my window today, it felt like confirmation. Like this guy *wanted* me to know he did this, and worse still... that he isn’t finished.”

Nora’s words cycle through my thoughts, parts of her theory making sense, others not so much.

“The message said *two down*, right?”

Nora shifts her posture in the backseat. “Right. Which I took to mean he’s already got two victims,” she reasons. “And I know what you’re thinking. Maybe it’s a reference to there being two victims he’s assaulted, as in Mel and I, but I swear to you it was deeper than that. It *felt* deeper than that. While I know that if I’m right, Mel is the only girl who’s died that we know, but—”

“Not the only,” I cut in, breathing more rapidly now. “She was just the first.”

Nora scoots forward, resting on the edge of the seat now as she places a hand on mine and Ash’s headrests. “Talk to me,” she says. “You know I’ve been living under a rock lately. Was there someone else? Another girl?”

I glance toward Ash, sharing a look of concern, wondering how much to say.

“A girl on campus was recently found dead. Burned to death. She was... my old roommate, actually.”

“What? And it’s not just random?”

I think of all the ways Dahlia is connected to me and the Savages, all the ways she’s gotten herself entangled in our lives, and I shake my head.

“No, we’re pretty sure it wasn’t random.” That’s all I’m able to say without putting it all out there.

“Shit.”

Shit is right.

“If this is true, if this is all real, that means we’ve been dealing with more than just an asshole rapist... It means we’re dealing with a stone-cold killer.”

My stomach twists in a knot at the thought of it, my sister’s death being a homicide instead of a suicide.

“I don’t even know what to do with this information,” Nora mutters, seemingly to herself as she ponders in the backseat. “He knows where I am, and he can get to me anywhere I go.”

I turn to find a distant look in her eyes, and I recognize it. It’s the same one I’ve worn many days, feeling as though it’s inevitable that this situation will only end in tragedy.

“If anything happens to me, anything at all, don’t let them tell you it was a suicide.” The reality of her words hits me hard and fast. “I know things might seem pretty bleak for me right

now, but trust me, Stevie, I'm not suicidal. Not even a little. I intend to live a long, happy life once I'm out of this place."

There's only sincerity in her eyes, and I don't doubt a single word that leaves her mouth.

"Okay. You have my word. I believe you."

She holds my gaze a moment longer, then nods before looking away. "I should go. I'll check in if anything new comes up."

"Okay but, Nora..."

Her hand on the handle, she looks at me. "Yeah?"

"Take care of yourself. I mean it."

There's an innocence in her eyes that, for a second, reminds me of Mel, and I envision her, wishing like hell I could turn back the hands of time. Only, I know that's impossible. What's done is done, Mel's gone.

But... Nora isn't.

She's right here, in the flesh, and ensuring her safety just moved up to the top of my priority list.

Ash

It's certainly not the Ritz, but it was close to where we exited the freeway, and they had vacancies, so *Mo's Motor Inn* is where Bird and I are laying our heads tonight.

She's sitting on the edge of the bed, scrolling her phone in a daze. She hasn't said much since we left Nora back at the facility, and I'm guessing that's because coping with her sister's death as a suicide was one thing, but to now question whether it was murder? I can't even imagine what she must be thinking.

"Come here."

She glances over her shoulder when I pull my shirt over my head, tossing it to the armchair in the corner before pulling back the covers. I turn off the lamp beside the bed, and then climb onto the mattress. She smiles when I pat the space beside me, and doesn't hesitate to join me.

She's sleeping in the tank she'd been wearing under her long-sleeve tee and a pair of panties, seeing as how neither of us packed or planned to spend the night in this small town. But the low visibility made braving the hours long drive home a hazard. So, we're making the best of it.

Not that it'll be so hard to enjoy a night of solitude with my girl.

“Talk to me,” I say, my lips pressed to her forehead as she snuggles into my chest, her nose pressed to my throat. Our arms lock each other in, and as her tits push against my chest, I swear our hearts are beating in sync.

“I feel... I don’t know what I feel,” she says, stopping herself from speaking her original thought out loud.

“Whatever it is, no matter how dark, no matter how ugly, you can say it with me, Bird. You know I don’t judge.”

She lets out a breath and it warms the hollow of my throat.

“It’s just that... I... Is it bad that I’m almost hoping Nora is right? Does that make me a terrible person, because I’d be somewhat relieved if what happened to Mel wasn’t just the result of a culmination of failures and missed signals on my part?”

I take in her words, letting their meaning sink in.

“First of all, nothing you could say or do would *ever* make me see you as a terrible person.” Her fingers, splayed across my back, flatten into my skin more when she grips me tighter. “Secondly, I get it. You’ve spent all this time blaming yourself, thinking you failed your sister in some way that led her to do what she did. And now, if she died at the hand of someone else, it takes away that possibility altogether.”

She nods against my arm that rests beneath her head, confirming that my assessment is spot on. “Yes,” she says. “That’s exactly it. And I hear what you’re saying, but... it feels counterintuitive to be relieved by the idea that someone hurt her.”

I squeeze her a little tighter. “But is it, though? Is it really that hard to understand why you’d be relieved to finally let yourself off the hook? Especially seeing as how everyone but you seems to know there’s nothing you could’ve done or said to change things.”

She stiffens in my arms then, and I wonder if I’ve maybe said too much.

“I’m not trying to push your buttons, Bird. All I mean is, either way, whether her death was something Mel took into her

own hands, or if it was someone else, it's not on you."

There's still no sound coming from her, but she's not as rigid against me now.

"You know I'm right, don't you?"

Still no words, but at least she nods, giving me hope that something I said got through. I hate that she's so somber, though, stuck inside her head. It takes a sec to come up with something, then I think I might know how to fix this, take her mind off things for just a little while.

"Get dressed," I say, prompting her to groan and scoot closer.

"Why?" she whines. "I'm so, *so* warm."

Laughing, I kiss her forehead. "You won't regret it. Promise."

She groans again when I pull away and stand from the bed, and even grabs my wrist in an attempt to stop me.

"Whyyyy?" she whines again, a hint of amusement in her voice.

"Because it's a beautiful night, and we shouldn't spend it cooped up in this room."

"Beautiful?" she scoffs. "You consider a blizzard and freezing cold temps beautiful weather?"

"Only since meeting you, my dear. Now, *every* day is lovely," I tease sweetly, laughing when she rolls her eyes.

"Yeah, okay, Prince Charming. Laying it on a little thick, aren't you?"

I steal a peek at her when she climbs out of bed, wearing hardly anything. She's braless underneath her tank top, and her panties barely contain her ass. I must be crazy suggesting that we leave the bed. Especially seeing as how there are so many fun things we could do *in* it.

But I shake the thought from my head, knowing she needs more than something physical from me tonight. She needs a friend, someone to take her mind off the dark shit for a change,

and I can do that. I can be her friend. I can ignore that she looks like a fucking sex goddess as she shimmies back into her jeans, bouncing in all the right places while I can practically taste the wetness of her pussy on my tongue.

Yeah. I've got this. No problem.

I swallow hard when she looks at me, trying not to think about how we should just get naked and fuck.

“Where are we going?” she asks.

I shrug, twisting my t-shirt in my hands until it's facing the right way, so I can pull it over my head.

“Not far, but you'll need your hat and gloves.”

She's frowning now, which has me smiling.

We finish dressing in silence, slipping into our coats when we're done, and I feel Bird questioning me as she trails me out into the cold. Then, when we walk in the opposite direction of my truck, I can guarantee she's frowning.

“We're walking?” she asks.

“Yup.”

Her steps halt, and I turn to face her. “Seriously?”

I hold back a smile. “Yup.”

Her head cocks to one side, and although she's not saying it out loud, that look on her face screams, *‘What the hell is happening?’*

I don't speak either. Instead, I bend down and grab a handful of snow, keeping my eyes trained on Bird while I pack it into a tight ball, and one corner of her mouth curves up.

“Ashton Blaine, don't even think about it. I swear to you, if that snowball so much as—”

She stops midsentence when the handful of snow hits the front of her coat with a thud, and then breaks apart at her feet.

My face hurts with how hard I'm grinning now. “What's that you were saying? If I throw that snowball, what was it you were planning to do?”

“You motherfucker,” she grumbles, scooping up snow, working fast to pack it, then she aims right for my shoulder and it lands.

“Shit. Didn’t realize you’ve got an arm.”

“Yeah, well, I guess you should’ve thought about that before starting a snow war.”

Seeing some of the tension slough off as she gets into it makes coming out into the cold in the middle of the night seem like less of a bad idea.

We’ve got the small yard beside the motel to ourselves, the red glow of the neon sign above tinting the snow as we track through it. Using things like guests’ cars, a large AC unit near the building, and a few scattered picnic tables for cover, we chase each other around the lot, nailing snowballs at one another’s heads like we’re enemies. I don’t think I’ve heard Bird laugh this much or this hard before. Ever. Especially when she beams snow right at the back of my head.

I turn, glaring at her, holding in a laugh as she takes cautious steps backward.

“You think that shit’s funny?”

She backs up more, holding her fingers about an inch apart. “Maybe a tiny bit.”

I hold my hands out menacingly, letting her know that as soon as I can catch her, she’s mine.

“Would you believe me if I said I was aiming for your ass?” she asks, playing innocent.

“With *your* aim, no chance.”

It’s hard to tell if her cheeks are red from laughing or from the wind. “Then... is it too late to say I’m sorry?”

I nod, but don’t answer, seeing an opportunity to take her down, tackling her into a snow bank that cushions our fall. I’m forced to take back my words. *This* is the hardest I’ve ever heard her laugh. And the sound of it... it’s fucking music to my ears.

“Shit! It’s touching my back!” she squeals, but I don’t move, keeping my weight on top of her while she reaches hysterics.

There’s no way every guest in this place doesn’t hear her. But I don’t care. It’s not every day that she gets to have a lighthearted time like this, and there’s not a chance I’m stopping her.

“Ash! Please! It’s so cold!”

My lips press to her ear as she giggles and squirms underneath me. “Tell you what. I’ll let you up, but only if you cooperate.”

“Ok, fine! Whatever you want. I’ll do it!”

“Anything I want?”

“Anything!”

It’s impossible not to laugh with such an ugly, desperate sound bubbling from her throat right now.

“Fine,” I say, bringing my lips to her ear again. “I want you to make me a promise.”

“Okay, fine! Whatever!”

I ignore the urgency in her voice, taking my time getting it all out. “I’m gonna tell you something, and when I do, you have to promise you won’t respond. Not a single word.”

“Fine! Yes! Okay!”

She’s desperate, at her wits end, so I free her, rolling onto my back, bringing her with me until she’s on top of me, straddling my waist.

“You promised. Remember that.”

She’s still breathless from laughing so hard, but she’s focused, staring at only me as I hold her where she is, keeping my gaze trained on her when I let the words leave my mouth. Words I’ve wanted to say for a while now, but wanted to wait for a moment alone. A moment when it was just us. Just like this.

“I’m in love with you.”

My mouth feels weird after saying it, partly because of the way I chose to word it. Not that I love her, but... that I’m *in* love with her. I’m not sure there’s a difference, but that felt more fitting. Felt more... accurate. Because whatever this is that I feel for her, this feeling I’ve never had for anyone else, I’m in it. Deep.

“Ash...”

I smirk, shaking my head at her. “You promised, remember? You’re not allowed to respond.”

“Yeah, but—”

“You promised.”

She seems confused by this, but it’s the way it has to be. I’ve known I’m in love with her for a while now, and when she finally says it back, I want it to be because it’s what’s in her heart to say. Not because I caught her off guard, and she felt obligated. The only thing worse than a pity fuck is a pity ‘*I love you*’.

That shit makes my skin crawl just thinking about it.

Besides, I’m confident that even if she doesn’t feel that way *now*, she will one day.

I’m just about to explain all this to her when I open my mouth, but instead of words coming out, I’m welcoming her tongue *in*. She kisses me hard and deep, and I can’t help but to feel she’s found a loophole. She’s keeping to her promise and not saying anything, but this kiss... it’s saying more than words ever could.

Snow crunches beneath us and falls on top of us, surrounding us just like our emotions. I’m not sure about *her*, but I hardly notice the cold anymore. The kiss slows to a stop, and she stares as she hovers above me.

“Am I allowed to speak now?”

I study her face, pushing purple tinted strands behind her shoulder before pulling her hat down to cover her ears.

“As long as you’re not saying it back.”

She breathes deeply, which means that’s probably exactly what she planned to do, so she sinks her teeth into her lip instead, rolling her eyes with a smirk as she tumbles to the side of me, landing on her back in the snow. We lie there like that, staring at the sky as the constantly falling flakes make it look like we’re traveling through the stars, zooming through our universe to some distant place. Her gloved hand finds mine, and I love that neither of us is in a rush to get inside. Right here, in the frigid cold, we’re content.

I laugh a little, and her gaze shifts to me. “What?”

I shrug my shoulders, suddenly feeling proud of myself. “Just thinking. It’s kind of cool that I got to say it first, that I beat the other guys to the punch,” I add.

Only, when I expect Bird to respond, she stays silent. When I glance over at her, she’s gnawing the side of her lip.

“Actually... it was Vince.”

The rims of my nostrils flare. “That little shit.”

Bird cracks up again, and I’m only half as amused as she is. “If it makes you feel any better, being second doesn’t take anything away from the moment.”

“Don’t patronize me.”

She laughs even harder now, rolling close again. “Aww, don’t be like that.”

I pretend to pout, and she kisses my cheek. “That asshole stole my thunder.”

“He didn’t. I swear it means just as much *now* as it would have if you’d been first. Promise.”

I sigh and she kisses my mouth this time, melting the few flakes of snow that had just fallen on my lips.

“But Vince did do one thing differently,” she says, taunting me.

“What was it? He had roses or some romantic shit like that, didn’t he? ...Motherfucker.”

Another laugh leaves her, but she shakes her head. “No,” she says. “All he did was let me say it back.”

She blinks her big, dark eyes at me, and I melt for her. With the backdrop of the wintery sky behind her, she’s somehow more beautiful than I’ve ever seen her—the tip of her nose red, her hair a little windswept where her beanie isn’t holding it in place.

I push a hand behind her neck and bring her mouth to mine. “Fine,” I say, holding her gaze. “Go ahead.”

A slow smile spreads across her beautiful lips, and I revel in every syllable that leaves them the next second.

“I’m in love with you, too.”

I lift myself until I’m propped on my elbows, bringing me closer to her face. She doesn’t wait for me to initiate, holding my jaw while she hungrily brushes her tongue over my lips, and then slips it into my mouth.

“We should go inside,” she breathes, and we’re quick getting to our feet, hand-in-hand as we make our way back to our room.

The door barely closes before we’re on each other, clumsily pulling articles of clothing from one another’s bodies. Within seconds, we’re completely naked and back on the bed, our icy skin slowly warming from the closeness. Then, we’re burning up from the friction as I cup Bird’s chin, shoving my tongue in her mouth right as my dick disappears inside her.

“Oh, fuck. Shit, Ashton!”

I’m relentless, recklessly pounding into her because I’ve needed her pussy so badly tonight I could hardly think straight. She stretches for me, her tightness barely giving to fit me, but she takes it, whimpering each time I take every inch away, and then feed them back inside her hard and fast.

“You were made for me, you know that?” I breathe against her ear, lowering my entire body to cover hers. The sheet covers my ass, and Bird slips her hand beneath it, gripping me, silently begging me to grind deeper.

“Right there. Just like that,” she whispers when I rotate my hips but don’t pull out. She’s got all of me, churning into her core, making her so fucking wet there’s no way she’s not leaking all over the sheet.

“Ash,” she whines, and hearing my name leave her lips in that sweet voice of hers, I’m desperate to come. So desperate, I can’t seem to stop myself when the urge to spill into her overtakes me.

“Fuck!”

That word leaves me in one husky breath, feeling my cum flow into her deep. She’s so fucking tight, and so fucking perfect, I couldn’t help myself.

“Shit,” I pant, lowering my lips to her shoulder when I realize she wasn’t finished. “I’m sorry. You just—”

I never finish my sentence, because she’s already kissing me, squirming with need beneath me. My girl wants to come, *needs* to come, so who the fuck am I to keep her waiting?

I gaze up at her as I inch my way down the landscape of her beautiful body, kissing between her breasts before stopping to suck one of her tight nipples into my mouth, and then the other. She doesn’t blink as I lick a circle around her navel, and then move lower, opening her lower lips to expose her clit.

“Ash, wait,” she whispers, and I know what she’ll say.

She’s a good girl, unaccustomed to being fucked by a filthy prick like myself, so she’s probably going to try and suggest that I let her clean up first, wash my cum out of her pussy before I go down on her, but she doesn’t realize that isn’t necessary. I’m not one to shy away from a bit of a mess. If she didn’t know that about me already, she’s about to learn.

“Ash!”

My name leaves her mouth in a far less dainty way this time as she grips the headboard, arching her back toward the ceiling. I draw her clit into my mouth, holding her hips in place when she tries to climb the fucking bed, but I won’t allow that shit. I know it’s intense, but she can take it.

“Oh, fuck!”

I can't even blink, not wanting to miss a moment as she begins to climax, coming against my tongue as the most tantalizing moan I've ever heard leaves her lips.

That's it, beautiful. Come for me. All over my mouth, my tongue. Give me all of you.

Her heels press into the bed when her body contorts one final time before relaxing. She's breathless, a fucking mess as she lie there, her ass resting in my cum that slid out of her. The rest, leaking out of her tight little hole. I push one hand up her body, squeezing her tit while kissing the inside of her thigh, letting her come down slowly because we've got no place else to be.

As soon as she's settled, I take her hand and make her follow me to the bathroom where I wash her clean, and then myself. When they checked us in, we took a room with two queen beds because it's all they had, but now that we ruined the other, we're grateful to have a dry place to sleep.

Our conversation is short and light before she drifts off, and I follow her into sleep with her warm breath moving over my arm where her head rests. I could've slept in until checkout, but the sound of voices on the other side of our room door startles me awake as sunlight seeps through the curtains. With one eye open, I ease out from under the covers, and the movement has Bird sitting up, too.

“What is it?”

“Not sure,” I shrug. “Sounds like people right outside the window.”

She pulls the comforter over her naked body, holding it tight across her tits while I dress and make my way over to the curtains, pushing them back to see what's up.

“Shit.”

“What is it?”

“Shit, shit, shit.”

“What happened?”

“My tires,” I say, gritting my teeth as I slide on my hoodie.

“What about them?”

“Some asshole slashed them.”

“All of them?” she asks.

“All of them.”

I pull on my shoes, and then storm out into the snow, leaving Bird inside in the warmth.

The onlookers’ gazes shift to me when I approach my truck, assessing the damage. “This your car, man?” one of them asks.

“It is. Did anyone see who did this?”

They all shake their heads. “No, we were just about to head up the road for breakfast and noticed the damage.” The man—an old guy who reminds me of my high school science teacher—points at the front passenger tire. “See that? It’s long and clean. Someone came through here with a knife, probably while we were all inside asleep, and sliced you clean open.”

“Fuck.”

Normally, I would watch my mouth around old people, but this shit’s ridiculous. “Did they get anyone else?” I ask.

The gathering crowd all look at one another, and then shake their heads.

“Doesn’t seem like it. Pretty sure it’s just you,” the old guy says.

Just fucking perfect.

“Fuck!”

“If you need help getting where you need to go, just come beat down our door. We’re in eleven.”

“Thanks, Sir. I appreciate it,” I manage to say, despite being so fucking pissed I could spit fire right now.

When I trudge back into the room, dialing a tow truck, Bird’s already on the phone.

“You’re sure?” she says, concern marking her expression. “And her roommate hasn’t seen her this morning, either?”

That look spreads, deepening as she clamps her teeth down on her lip.

“Okay, well can I leave you my phone number if you find her? Or if she calls?”

She waits, and then blinks when I guess the person on the other end of the line agrees to contact her if there’s new info, and then Bird gives out her number.

“Thanks.”

She ends the call, and I hadn’t completed mine, wondering what has her so concerned.

“It’s Nora,” she says. “With what happened to your tires, I had a bad feeling, and... she’s gone.”

“You think *she* did this?”

Bird’s eyes slam closed as she finds the right words. “No. But I’m concerned that whoever *did* might also go after Nora.”

Tension spreads across my brow, not knowing what to think or feel. We’d gone to sleep having found a small measure of peace. And now, today, reality swept in and stole it all away.

Which seems to be life’s theme lately.

Micah

It's not even nine a.m., and it's already been a shit morning.

First, being woken up at the ass crack of dawn by Ash was fun. Someone trashed his tires, but the tow driver says it's against company policy to transport more than one person in his truck at a time, which left them scrambling for a ride. Vince volunteered to drive up to West Hell, or whatever podunk town they found themselves in last night, and I'm lying here, staring at the ceiling, wishing I could fall back asleep.

Somehow, I manage to push all the weird shit that's happened out of my head, and my eyes start to close. If it weren't for the heavy footsteps storming down the hall, I'd be on my way back to dreamland. But that idea gets completely shot to hell when my bedroom door flies open, and I find myself staring into the angry, red face of the last person I expected to see this morning.

My fucking father.

"What the hell?" I prop myself up on my elbows, squinting at him.

"What the hell is right," he shoots back, slamming the door shut behind him. "Tell me what the fuck you did, and tell me now. The *whole* fucking story, Micah. None of that half-assed bullshit you try to feed me any other time."

A heavy sigh leaves me. “What did I do now?”

“What did you do now?” he asks, sounding exasperated, but I’m genuinely confused, not trying to be a smart ass.

He grabs his phone from his back pocket, and that’s when I notice his hands are shaking. Almost so much that he can hardly scroll to whatever got him so hyped up that he drove all the way over here, through the snow, this early in the day.

“This, Micah,” he hisses, aiming his phone screen toward my face.

At first, I’m not even sure what I’m looking at, and then an image starts to take shape. An image that has me sitting straighter, grabbing the phone from his hand for a closer look.

“Who the fuck sent you this?”

“Is that even the important question?” he snaps. “I need you to tell me what you had to do with this. Who would send me a picture of a fucking crispy body, Micah, like some kind of warning.”

I hear him. Hell, I feel his wild energy swirling around the room, but I’m focused on the details—the brunette hair, swatches of a red t-shirt, a gold hoop earring.

“Fuck.”

“That’s all you have to say?”

“That’s... that’s Dahlia’s body,” I choke out, feeling sick to my stomach.

“It’s not just her body,” Dad says, talking quieter now, realizing this probably isn’t a conversation others need to eavesdrop on. “This is crime scene-level shit. So, who the fuck took it? And why the fuck are they sending it to *my* damn phone, Micah?”

I do a double take from the phone to his face when I realize what this is.

“You think this was me? You think I did this?”

He sighs, locking both arms across his chest as he begins to pace. “I didn’t think much of the signs that asshat Whitlock

was holding at your game, because he *always* seems to be going on about something. But then there's *this* shit."

He stops there, but I know this isn't the only reason he thinks I'm capable of committing an act as disturbing as what's happened to Dahlia.

It's because... it wouldn't be the first time.

I place his phone down and lean forward, cradling my head in both hands. I don't need this shit. Not today. Not ever. I used to think I'd one day get to move on from what I did, but somehow... it always seems to come back to haunt me.

Usually, it's in the form of Whitlock's taunts. Unfortunately, when everything happened, we were living in the same town. He was at the party when I left. He was at the scene while the fire department tried to contain the blaze. And he knew that if anyone had motive to light that asshole's house on fire... it would be me.

"I didn't do this," I grumble, but my dad just scoffs. I look up at him, glaring as frustration causes my head to throb. "Then if you're so certain it was me, why stop by at all? Why not just go right to the cops and turn me in?"

"Because if that's what I wanted, I would've done it years ago, Mic."

The room is silent, but I swear his words are still reverberating off the walls, punching me right in my fucking head, over and over again.

Shaking my head, I scoff, finding it hard to look him in the eyes.

"You're never gonna let me live that down, are you?"

I hear my dad's footsteps again, but he doesn't answer right away. I imagine that's because it was a dumb question. There aren't many men who would cover up their son's involvement in the housefire that killed a man, and would then never mention it again in life.

"I'm just trying to make this make sense," he says, and I don't try to analyze that. It's my own damn fault he even

thinks I'm capable of this shit.

"We're not sure what happened to Dahlia, but we're pretty sure *her* attacker is the same person who attacked Stevie."

His brow gets tense. "Attacked her? I didn't know anything about it."

And you wouldn't if you hadn't come here today, accusing me of murder.

Again.

"Have you told the police this?"

Taking a deep breath, I rub my hand over my face. "It's being taken care of, Dad, just... give it a rest."

"Micah, you... This isn't some petty, fly-by-night, kid shit. You do know that, right? If you think there's someone out there doing these things, someone *still* out there," he adds, "then you're not handling it on your own."

"I said it's handled," I snap, anger getting the best of me when I glare up at him. "You've got some fucking nerve, you know that? Barging in here like some kind of hero or some shit? Where the fuck was all this when I needed it?"

"Where was—" He stops abruptly, bristling his anger. "Micah, I covered for you. I made that *whole* entire thing go away, and this is what you want to say to me?"

I bite the inside of my cheek, trying not to rage, trying not to say things I can't take back, the taste of warm metal filling my mouth.

"Did you ever stop to think that if you'd handled it, if you'd done more to get that asshole who killed my sister—*your* daughter—put behind bars, none of that shit would've happened?"

He falls silent, and I'm reminded why I never reach out to him, why we'll never have a normal, functioning relationship.

"And for the thousandth time, Wade Hamond's death wasn't on me, either."

My mouth twists after speaking the name of the drunkard who killed my sister.

Dad scoffs. “Last time I checked, *letting* someone die is the same as killing them.”

An indifferent shrug hits my shoulders. “Yeah, well...”

This time, when the room goes quiet, I know the conversation’s dead. There’s no more to be said, no chance of finding common ground.

I’m lost in a dark memory now, one where I snuck into a man’s home late one night, after having way too much to drink at a party, only to find that man passed out drunk on his couch. I recall the feel of cool steel in my hand, a switchblade I had every intention on using to slit that prick’s throat. However, when I got there, fate intervened, and I didn’t have to lift a finger.

As I stood there, staring at the man who hit my sister with his car, killing her, taking her away from us, his cigarette falls from his fingers. He’s completely out of it, completely unaware that he’s no longer alone, and he’s also not aware of the small fire that’s started on his couch where the cigarette’s landed.

I remember staring at the small flame, my smile growing as it began to spread. And I remember that split second when I was at war within myself, wavering between calling for help, and just... letting this finally end it. After that moment of deliberation, I reached a decision, and walked out of there like I’d seen nothing.

Over the years, I’ve wrestled with a thought, wondering if it would have worn on my conscience more if I’d saved him—a monster who barely saw the inside of a jail cell for what he did—versus living with the truth.

That I let him die, and never felt a single ounce of remorse about it.

None.

I get it. My dad thinks this makes me broken, thinks it means his only son is a sick, twisted bastard who doesn’t value

human life. But in reality, that couldn't be further from the truth. I value it. More than anyone will know. But when pieces of shit like that harm innocent girls, rip families apart, they're no longer human to me.

Those are words I've actually spoken to my father before. On the night he found me hiding in the woods, watching the blaze that somehow dulled my pain for just a little while. He didn't get it then, and he wouldn't get it now. But he did what he had to out of obligation, and probably because my mother couldn't have handled losing *me* on top of having just lost my sister. So, despite believing I was as guilty as the day is long... he scrambled to get me out of there, and then promptly hauled me off to juvie, effectively making me someone else's problem.

The only loose string in all this has been Whitlock. His dad, being an officer, worked closely with the fire department. He knew the connection between the fire victim and my family, and Whitlock was all too eager to tell him how I'd been drinking illegally that night, and how I disappeared from the party around the same time the fire started. There was never any proof it was me, but Whitlock and his father didn't need it.

In their eyes, I was guilty.

Completely.

“Who sent it?”

Dad looks up when I repeat my earlier question, but the blank look in his eyes doesn't give me much hope. “It was unavailable. I've got no clue.”

That would've been too easy, I suppose.

“If anything else comes through, let me know. We're handling it,” I repeat.

He looks up, meeting my gaze with this hard look that's tough to read, but as he makes his way to the door, not uttering another word, it softens, filling with regret, sadness.

Worry.

While I wouldn't admit as much to him... I'm worried, too.

More than anyone fucking knows.

Alone in my room and thinking way, *way* too much, I find myself climbing out of bed, mindlessly pulling on sweats over my shorts, a hoodie. I've got my foot in one shoe when my door swings open again. This time, it isn't my father, but Tate with a very confused look on his face.

"I passed your dad on my way up. Everything cool?"

I'm seething and can hardly form a sentence. "Not even close."

He closes the door behind him, and I tie both my shoes, then stand.

"Where are you going?"

I don't have time for this shit, and I'm not in the mood for him to talk me down. "Move."

I step left, but he grips my shoulders, holding my gaze. My brothers are among the few I wouldn't swing on for putting their hands on me when I'm angry, but with the pure rage flowing through me right now, he's pushing it.

"Where the fuck are you going?" he asks again, his expression stern this time.

"To have a little chat with Whitlock," I say, admitting out loud where my thoughts are currently focused.

The signs at my game, the mannequins burning in the yard, and now this. Not many people would have access to photos like that, but with his dad's connections within the police department, it's not much of a stretch that he'd find a way to get his hands on them.

And now, he needs to be taught a lesson.

"Hold on, hold on," Tate says, inching back to block the doorway when I eye the handle. "Not sure what he did this time, or what you *think* he did, but you're not thinking clearly.

You're pissed, and I get it, but there's a lot at stake right now, Mic."

He holds my gaze, determination in his eyes.

"He sent my dad fucking crime scene photos of Dahlia, Tate. *Fuck* the stakes!"

Tate shifts, blocking me when I attempt to leave again. "Listen to yourself," he says. "Fuck the stakes? Are you forgetting this isn't just about you? Isn't just about us? What about Stevie?"

Her name settles in the pit of my stomach like a stone when he says it. I blink a few times, trying to block him out, knowing he's using her because she's my soft spot.

"If you go over there, if you do something to Whitlock in broad daylight, while all this other shit is going on... you'll get arrested," he says. "And what do you think that'd do to her? She needs you right now, Mic. She needs *all* of us."

My shoulders heave and I hate that he's managed to dispel some of the rage. I *want* to be pissed at the world, so I can channel it and rain down hell on Whitlock.

But he's right. It isn't just about me. And I owe it to our girl to stay present, to stay level-headed. She dealt with it when I went off the rails before, and I won't put her through that again.

"Fine," I concede, but I think Tate knows this isn't over for me. It says as much when his stare lingers on me a moment, full of distrust and skepticism.

"I just stopped by to check on things, but I need to get to work," he says wearily. "Tonight's my dad's tux fitting, but I'll call when I'm done."

I nod, but don't speak.

"I know this is tough, Mic, but... you're doing the right thing."

I hear him, and I know he means well, but Whitlock is treading on thin ice. The next time that motherfucker pulls some shit... I'm laying his ass out right where he stands.

Tate

My mind's been on the incident with Micah all morning. Twice, I texted to check in, just to make sure he didn't leave the house after I did, intent on dealing with Whitlock in the only way Micah knows how.

With violence.

What's worse is that neither Vince nor Ash are there to keep tabs on him, to wrangle him in if he does, in fact, decide to "pull a Micah".

I work in a daze, trying not to worry, and by the time evening rolls around, I'm packing up my things, *still* thinking about it. This time, I don't stop myself from texting, but I send it to the group to pretend I'm not just checking up on Mic.

Tate: Everyone cool? Ash, Stevie, did you guys make it back okay?

Stevie: All good. Took forever, but we made it home in one piece.

That's *something*, but not enough of a response to reassure me that Micah hasn't gone off on his own. So, being the big brother the guys sometimes hate as much as they love, I dig a little more.

Tate: Glad to hear it. Are you at the guys' practice? Are they on the ice yet?

I shove a folder into my bag and start toward the car, checking the time to make sure I'm not running late for the tux fitting. I've got a solid twenty minutes, which means I should pull up just in time.

Stevie: I'm with my group today, so I'm on the other side of campus. Won't see any of them until Vince meets me here afterward.

Shit.

I check the clock again, gauging whether I'll have time to make an impromptu stop at the arena. However, it doesn't really matter if I have time, because my mind's already made up that I'll drop in and check up on everyone.

And by *everyone*, I mean Micah.

Luckily, there's a space near the door, so I whip my car into it and shut off the engine. I'm inside the arena less than a minute later, heading toward the sound of hockey sticks scraping over ice, and Coach's voice calling a play. They don't even have to know I'm here. I just... I need to know our enormous problem didn't get any bigger today.

Standing at the door, I study the ice, looking for last names on practice jerseys.

Blaine.

Ricci.

I search again, looking for the one I *really* came here to check in on, but don't spot him. Instantly, my mind begins to conjure up all kinds of shit—like how maybe I shouldn't have left him alone this morning, like how a lot of time has passed and who knows what he could've done by now.

My heart's racing, and I'm already reaching for my phone to let Dad know I won't be able to make it when another player skates out to the ice.

Locke.

My heart settles, knowing they're all where they're supposed to be. Feeling how worked up I got, I laugh. These

assholes are going to give me a fucking heart attack one of these days.

I'll be late, but I've still got time to get to the shop. I leave the arena and pull into the lot next to Dad's car, seeing through the window of the storefront where he's standing with the other groomsmen, likely waiting for me. I lock my car, shrugging into my coat as I rush toward the building, thinking up a believable excuse for why I'm late.

"You made it."

The bell's just chimed over my head when Dad greets me. I force a smile and hug him back when he leans in.

"Yeah, sorry I'm late. A student stopped me at the last minute with questions about the study guide."

"Not a big deal," he says. "We're still waiting on Jimmy anyway. That guy can never make it *anywhere* on time."

I study my father, noting the unmistakable excitement in his eyes. Hell, it's all over his face. I've seen it there a lot lately, and I know it's one-hundred percent got everything to do with Val being in his life.

I was too young to remember much about how him and Mom were together, but I got the impression their life together was filled with ups and downs, but maybe more downs. Over the years, he's had a relationship or two, but never anything as serious as this. Never anything that's made him as *happy* as this.

He gravitates back toward his friends, and my thoughts shift to that day he cornered me in the lecture hall, describing footage he'd seen of me leaving the house from Stevie's window. Had that conversation gone a different way, I hate to think what might've happened.

Would he have told Val about it?

Would she have called things off?

I stop myself, knowing it's pointless to think about all this, because I have exactly zero intention of stopping what I've started with Stevie. Which only leaves us one option.

They can never find out.

“Holy shit! Is that what I think it is?” Logan is Dad’s loud friend, so I hear him over the rest of the guys when they gather around Dad, gawking at something on his phone.

“Oh, to be young and flexible again,” Pete says with a laugh. “My bones ache just *thinking* about fucking in a cramped space like that.”

Dad shushes him when a salesman glances over, likely wondering what the hell they’re watching. I arch a brow, making my way over out of curiosity. It’s not every day a group of middle-aged men stand around giggling like middle schoolers.

“Who sent it to you?”

Dad shrugs when Logan asks. “No clue. Says it’s unavailable. Probably meant to send it to someone else.”

“Look closer,” Pete says. “That ain’t Val is it?”

Dad playfully elbows Pete in the ribs. “Watch it.”

Pete responds by putting his hands in the air, surrendering. “Just looking out for you.”

“Yeah, well, trust me. My Val’s too sweet for something like this. We leave fucking in bathroom stalls to the kids.”

Hearing him, hearing *those words*, my heart sinks.

“What is it?”

When I ask, Dad pauses the video and hands it to me. “Press play. It’s a little out of focus, but... it’s pretty clear what’s happening.”

I force a smile, then focus on the screen. First, there’s just a *women’s restroom* sign in the frame, but then the door creaks open. The person filming seems to be moving intentionally slow as they creep deeper into the bathroom, focused on an all too familiar green stall. They ease up to the small crack between the makeshift, metal walls, and continue filming.

The sounds inside the tux shop fade away, and despite the volume on Dad’s phone being on zero, I swear I can still hear

the scene as it plays out.

Stevie's panting breaths.

The shit I said while I drove my dick into her.

This is... it's us.

I remember the hurried steps that rushed out when we were finished, what we naively assumed was just some poor old woman needing to use the space. But now I know. Whoever this person is that's trying to ruin all our lives, they were there that day, too. Following us, filming us.

I'm grateful for the blur as they zoom in, capturing a moment Stevie and I thought was private. It explains why my dad isn't currently ripping me a new one right here in the middle of the tux shop.

Sweat has my shirt sticking to me as I panic, wondering if it'd be too obvious if I *accidentally* deleted this shit from his phone. It'd be just my luck that he'd pull it up again later to share a laugh with Val or something, and one of them would spot something and figure out it's us, me and Stevie.

My finger hovers over the trashcan icon, and just as I'm about to say *fuck it* and delete this shit, Dad motions toward me.

"Do me a favor, son, and delete it. Last thing I need is for Val to use my phone to order a pizza or something and *that* pops up."

He and his friends all laugh, but I don't waste a single second erasing it, feeling like the universe just did me a solid. My hands are still trembling when I hand it back, doing my best to play it cool. But considering what just happened, that's almost impossible.

I step away from the guys again, taking out my phone as I pretend to be casual about things. Meanwhile, I'm actually shooting the group a text.

Tate: Meeting at The Den tonight. It's urgent.

Stevie

More and more, this is beginning to feel like an emotional support group, instead of being focused on body positivity. But honestly? Whatever void they need this space to fill, this hour of safety, I'm good with that. There's been so much happening around campus, it's understandable that people need to vent, express their fears. So, what better place to do that than somewhere you already know and trust the people surrounding you?

Today, we mostly discussed the details that have surfaced around Dahlia's death. It's unnerving to *everyone* that there's not even one hint of who's done this. Various members reported that they no longer cross campus alone at night, and that they've avoided social gatherings for fear of being harmed. I don't blame them. What once felt like a normal, safe college experience, now feels like we're living in some sort of slasher flick.

Stacking chairs, I glance up at the big clock on the wall, knowing Vince is already outside, waiting, and probably watching the front door like a hawk. Imagining it, I smile.

I've just straightened the stack of pamphlets on the table near the door when my phone rings. Not recognizing the number, I'm tempted to ignore it, but my gut tells me to answer, so I pick up.

"Hello?"

“Stevie, it’s Nora.”

My stomach and head both start to spin. “Nora! Where are you? I called the facility when I couldn’t get your cell this morning, and they said you went missing?”

“Less missing, and more... AWOL,” she says with a laugh. But I don’t find anything funny.

“Where are you?” I repeat, feeling like she might’ve ignored that question on purpose.

“Around.”

I take a breath and lower into a chair. “Are you safe at least?”

“I am, but please don’t tell anyone you’ve heard from me. Not even my uncle. I only reached out to *you* because... well, I didn’t think it was fair to let you worry about me. I’m fine. Seriously.”

That resonates with me, that she knew her disappearance would hit me differently. Maybe she even knows I’m particularly sensitive about this because of what happened to Mel.

“Thanks. Your secret’s safe with me,” I say. “But what’s your plan? Why’d you leave?”

“Honestly, I just need to lay low. Someplace *he* won’t think to look for me,” she adds. “Just be safe out there, Stevie.”

The line goes dead after that, before I can ask any further questions, leaving me to hope and pray she’s actually someplace safe. I’m just about to lower my phone into my bag and finish locking up when I notice I’ve missed a text.

Tate: Meeting at The Den tonight. It’s urgent.

Great. What the hell else could possibly have gone wrong?

Vince and I pull up, noticing light coming from the study window. Once inside, I'm not surprised to find that the others have gathered there, their grim expressions stealing what little hope I held that this conversation won't suck.

Figures.

They each peer up, and I don't miss the sympathy in their gazes, further letting me know I won't like where this is going.

"What's up?" I sigh, lowering onto the side of Micah's chair. His arm instinctively encircles my hip, his hand resting on my thigh.

Micah and Ash both shift their gazes to Tate before he speaks, leading me to believe he's been appointed tonight's spokesperson.

"Well, I'm starting to think our problem's gotten even bigger," he says. "There've been too many things going wrong lately, too many strange coincidences."

"Why? Did something else happen?" I ask, although I already agree with him. It just sounds like something new may have spurred this conversation.

He nods and there's concern in his gaze. "Ash's tires being slashed, someone sent Micah's dad pics of Dahlia's crime scene—"

"Someone's been messing with Nora, too," I cut in.

Tate's brow furrows even more. "Messing with her how?"

"Well, at the facility where she started out, some of her personal effects started coming up missing. So, she took it as a sign that she needed to transfer. Only, when she did, she woke up to a cryptic message drawn on her bedroom window in my sister's lipstick—a butterfly, and the words *two down*. Butterflies were my sister's favorite, so it's clearly someone trying to strike a nerve."

Tate takes a deep breath, and the others are silent. "And I'm not convinced everything Mic's been experiencing is all on Whitlock, either. Although, that part is entirely possible. Still, we can never be too careful," he says.

“Fuck.” Ash stands from where he’s been seated on the couch, frustrated.

“There’s more.” Their eyes are on Tate again when he speaks. “Tonight, while I was at the tux fitting, someone sent my dad a video.”

My brow tenses. “What kind of video?”

Tate meets my gaze, and I’m not sure why I find sympathy there. Not until he speaks, anyway.

“Of us,” he says, and the blood goes cold in my veins. “Before you panic, Dad didn’t know what he was looking at. All he saw was the green bathroom stall, then two bodies, but there weren’t any details he could use to identify us.”

“Are you fucking kidding me? What if he sends it to my mom? What if—”

“Relax, Stevie,” he says, and I meet his gaze again, hoping like hell his calm demeanor means he has a plan or something. “I deleted it from Dad’s phone, and I’m pretty sure that if your mom had received it, one of us would’ve heard something by now. I’m pretty sure this guy just wants to rattle us, wants us to know how close he can come to ruining our lives.”

“Which means *we’re* getting close,” Vince chimes in, his voice sounding dark, sinister.

I push a hand through my hair. “The person we heard leaving the bathroom that day. That was him,” I realize, needing to speak the words out loud.

To know that the person who hurt my sister, Nora, Dahlia, *me...* was so close we could have reached out and grabbed him, is unsettling. He’s not afraid to toe the line, not afraid to risk being seen.

“So, where the fuck does this leave us?” Micah wants to know.

Tate lets out a hard sigh before attempting to answer. “We can’t go to the police,” he says. “We need to lay low, avoid further fallout and provocation.”

I hear him, and I even know his response is probably the most reasonable thing to do. Only, I strongly disagree. If we're getting close enough to make him uncomfortable, I take that to mean we're too close to stop now.

"So, that's it? We just sit back and do nothing? Meanwhile this dick is sending shit to our families, trying to out our secrets?" Micah grumbles, speaking my thoughts out loud.

"It's what's best, Mic," Tate reasons. "It's what will keep everyone safe until we sort this shit out."

"And how exactly are we doing that while we sit in the shadows with our tails tucked between our legs?" Micah snaps again.

His question is met by silence, revealing that Tate may not know how to fix this, and also revealing that his main focus is everyone's safety. But if we never push back, if we never draw this guy out into the open, we may be forced to live this way indefinitely.

"I say we do like Tate says, lie low for a bit, and strike when an opportunity presents itself," Vince chimes in. "Whether that means taking something solid to the cops, or taking matters into our own hands. Either way, I don't recommend that *any* of us run headfirst into danger."

His gaze shifts to me when he's done, and I get the feeling that his speech was only meant for me.

"Good, then we agree?" Tate asks, and his question is met with a nod from Ash and Vince, and silence from Micah and me.

He eyes the two of us, sighing heavily when he realizes we're not completely onboard. But he leaves it at that, knowing we're both too stubborn to completely give in.

"We have to communicate," Tate adds, grabbing his keys from the mantel as he prepares to leave. "If anything new arises, we let the others know right away. Agreed?"

This time, he's not met with any pushback. We all respond favorably for the first time tonight.

He nods, gently squeezes the back of my neck on his way out, and then he's gone.

The rest of us linger there in the study for a while, and I imagine the guys are trying to process the truckload of new information that's just been dumped on them. Sort of like I am.

My thoughts shift back to Nora, feeling even more worried *now* than when I'd heard from her earlier. If this guy really is out there, watching our every move, turning up the heat, who knows what could happen if he finds her, scared and alone?

My only comfort is that Nora's one of the most resilient people I know. So, if anyone's capable of making it out there on their own, it's her. And while we didn't always see eye to eye on things, I'd like to think she realizes I'm someone she can trust, someone she can call if things get bad.

Because based on what's gone on just this week... things are definitely getting bad.

Stevie

The arena's still buzzing, alive with energy even a solid twenty minutes after the game's ended. It was a close one, but our guys came into the third period fired up. They scored two goals that resulted in a one-point lead for the Kings, enough to secure the win.

With Tate absent due to a late faculty meeting, I'm waiting alone in the lobby as a sea of bodies flows out to the parking lot, letting in a blast of wintery air every time the automatic doors spring open. I shrug deeper into my coat, checking the time. The guys should be out any minute, but I've had about all I can stand of the cold.

Going against the flow of the crowd, I make my way toward the hallway near the restrooms, just around the corner from the locker rooms. There, I'm shielded from the wind, but still where the guys can find me.

I've been hoping to hear *something* from Nora, but she's been silent. Hasn't returned a single call or text. I've wondered if she's been in contact with Frank, so he doesn't worry, but I wouldn't dare call him and out her secret. I gave her my word that I won't tell anyone I've seen her around, and I intend to keep that promise.

Even if it feels like the wrong thing to do.

A group of girls burst out of the bathroom, giggling and talking about the game. One even points out how hot the players are, and I have to smile, not disagreeing with her. Especially when it comes to three in particular. I'm still distracted, thinking about the guys, and their fan club filled with hockey hopefuls and puck bunnies when the door to the men's room swings open next.

I peer up from my phone and do a double-take when I realize it's Whitlock, drying his hands on his jeans as he spots me. I hate the slick smile that curves his lips every time our eyes lock. It's there now, as he walks this way. My body stiffens at the realization that he intends to speak, especially seeing as this will be the first time we've interacted with one another with none of the guys around.

"Well, if it isn't the Savages' favorite pet," he says, his smirk widening as he comes to a stop before me. Up close, he's bigger than I imagined, about the same height and build as the guys. I don't like that he's able to stare down on me, making me feel small and vulnerable in his presence.

"Why are you even here?" I ask. "Don't you have better things to do than sit in the bleachers, taunting Micah?"

He pretends to be thinking deeply, and then shakes his head. "Nope, guess not."

I roll my eyes, unable to take his smugness any longer.

"Besides, shouldn't I be the one asking that question? Why are *you* here? You have to know you can do better, right?"

My brow tenses, feeling the sudden urge to punch him in the face. But he studies me, and I'm not sure what to think when he begins to laugh.

"Oh, shit. You actually have feelings for that asshole, don't you?"

I'm silent, not wanting to give Whitlock any sort of ammunition. The less he knows, the less I *confirm*, the better.

"What the fuck could you possibly see in him?" he asks. "Micah's as damaged as they come. I mean, sure, he's okay for now, but have you seen the temper on that guy? Do you

honestly feel safe with him? I mean, who's to say all that rage won't be aimed at *you* one of these days?" He eyes my hair, then reaches out and twirls a section of it before I push his hand away.

"Don't fucking touch me," I snap, taking a step back from him.

He laughs, of course, not the least bit fazed. "All I'm saying is you can never be too careful around someone like him. He's a ticking timebomb. I get what he sees in you, though. The face, the tits... your ass," he adds with a smirk as he tilts his head, damn-near undressing me with his eyes. "Yeah, you're definitely fuckable."

"You're a literal piece of shit. You know that?"

The insult doesn't upset him. In fact, he seems to lean into it.

"Maybe, but your boyfriend isn't exactly a ray of sunshine either," he says. "Tell you what. Hit me up when Locke disappoints you. Because, with him, that shit's inevitable. A little revenge fuck could be fun for *both* of us. And who knows, if you like it, we could make fucking behind his back a regular thing."

He grabs my waist, and I slap his hand away. "Touch me again, and I swear I'll break every single one of your fingers."

Laughing, he backs off, holding his hands up in false surrender.

"Chill," he says, winking as the distance between us grows. "You know where to find me when you're ready."

Micah

Their conversation plays on repeat in my head. It took everything in me not to react right then, not to come out from around the corner and let Whitlock know I'd heard every

fucking thing he'd said to Bird. But in a little while... he'll know.

He'll know, and he'll *fucking* regret talking to my girl, putting his damn hands on her.

The street light changes to red, and I make the snap decision to ignore it. If I stop or slow down, I'll lose him.

I hang back far enough that he doesn't seem to notice Ash's truck behind him, so things are going according to plan so far. I've got exactly thirty minutes before my phone starts blowing up with calls and texts from Bird and the guys, wondering where I went. While the rest of the team is out celebrating our win, I've borrowed the truck under the guise of needing to make a quick stop back at the Manor for my wallet. They got a ride with Fletcher to the restaurant, and I intend to join them.

As soon as I've handled this.

Whitlock makes a sharp left, and I'm right behind him, hearing Tate's plea in my head. He begged me not to hurt Leo after his last stunt with my dad, one we can't say for sure was him. But even if it wasn't, the signs at the previous game, the mannequin, were *already* enough to warrant an ass kicking. But tonight, trying to fuck my girl... that was the nail in his coffin. There isn't anything anyone can say or do to stop me this time, and I swear my fucking dick's hard just *thinking* about what I'll do to him.

He pulls into the parking lot of a bar, and I intentionally drive past, not wanting him to see me trail in behind him. After circling the block, I pull in, too. His car's empty now, which means he's gone inside, so I pull up a few spots away and breathe, giving myself one last chance to be rational, knowing full well that this *is* me being rational. It's nothing short of a miracle that I haven't taken care of this asshole sooner.

But tonight, I intend to right that wrong. And when I'm done, Leo Whitlock will know who the fuck I really am.

The line trills in my ear as I phone the bar, gazing up at the neon sign on the roof as someone picks up.

“Bill’s,” a woman answers.

“Yeah, hi. I just left a second ago and thought you should know someone left their lights on out here. It’s a blue Jeep. Parked near the back corner of the lot. They’ll want to turn them off. Otherwise, they’ll be coming out to a dead battery later.”

“Geez,” she grumbles. “I’ll make an announcement now. Thanks.”

“No problem.”

I end the call and air surges into my lungs. By the time I’m done, no one will have a clue this was me. I blocked my number and this place is so outdated, I don’t spot a single camera. It’s almost as if the universe *wants* me to do this.

Wants me to finally taste the sweetness of revenge.

God knows it’s been a long time coming.

I hop out and pull the hood of my sweatshirt up over my head, thinking about Whitlock’s proposition as I grab the baseball bat from the bed of the truck. I imagine it, him touching Bird like *I* touch her, him fucking her... And it’s enough to have my arms aching with tension, with unshed rage I can’t wait to take out on the one and only target that deserves it tonight.

Leo fucking Whitlock.

I crouch down beside the truck, watching the front of the building. The second I see the door spring open, adrenaline surges through my veins, causing my heart to race as he comes into view, rounding the corner, heading to check on his Jeep.

But before he can make it that far, I rush out of the shadows, swinging the bat right for his kneecap.

“Fuuuck!” he cries out, folding to the pavement in a heap. The sound of him wailing is like music to my ears, and I get a rush seeing him lie there, holding his knee as he experiences pain I can’t even begin to imagine. Baseball isn’t my sport, but

I'm nasty with a bat. Which is why there's no doubt in my mind that I've completely shattered his bone.

Just for good measure, I point the bat downward and slam it into his ribs, hearing him sputter for breath as I take off, rounding the corner back toward the truck. I'm fucking wired like a kid on Christmas morning as I toss the bat into the passenger seat, then burn rubber out of the lot with my headlights off.

He won't be able to prove this was me, but damn... I pray on everything within me that he fucking knows it.

Stevie

I still can't believe that dick made a pass at me, *touched* me. It's all I can think about tonight—all through the team dinner, and the hours that have passed since making it back to The Den.

I nearly mentioned it to Micah before remembering his temper, and how, lately, it's been tough keeping him from retaliating against Whitlock already. So, I figured it's best not to poke the bear. Hence the reason I'm currently standing at Vince's door, knocking while he shuffles around on the other side of the threshold.

When he opens up, shirtless with gray sweats riding low on his waist, I completely lose my train of thought.

"H—Hey," I stammer, my eyes roaming over his broad, solid chest, his chiseled abs. "Busy?"

By the time the question finally leaves my mouth, Vince is smiling from ear-to-ear, like he's reading my thoughts.

He swings his door open wider, inviting me in. "Busy, yes," he says with a quiet rasp. "But never too busy for you."

He latches the door behind me, and that's when I notice his tripod set up in the corner of the room, a dark backdrop and a chair strategically placed in front of it. It's strange seeing this side of things, when I've gotten so used to watching him through a screen.

“Shit, I didn’t mean to interrupt. I can come back later.”

I take a step toward the door, thinking I should go. What I have to say would only weigh him down, put a damper on his performance. But he touches my waist, and I halt.

“Or... you could stay,” he says. “We can talk about whatever you came to talk about, and then... maybe you can film with me.”

My gaze flits to the camera, remembering the high it gave me being live our first time, and the thought of it has my panties suddenly feeling damp against my skin.

“Actually, we don’t have to talk. I was just going to mention something that happened after the game, but it’s not important.”

There’s concern in his expression, but I stop him from trying to draw any sort of conversation out of me when I stretch up on my tiptoes, coming closer to matching his height, and then kissing him.

It only takes a second for him to get out of his head, to wrap his arms around me. I feel him growing hard inside his sweats, his dick nudging me, stealing my attention.

“Where’s the paint,” I mumble against his lips, which has him smiling against mine.

“Closet. Top shelf.”

We kiss for a few more seconds, because I can’t seem to tear myself away, then I’m in his closet, pulling down the box with the body paint hidden inside. I find the play sheet there as well, so I toss it to Vince, and he strips his bedding to replace it with the rubbery covering.

He smiles, watching as I strip down to my underwear, and I gawk as he tucks his thumbs inside his waistband, lowering his sweats. It was already apparent by the level of detail where the fabric outlined his dick that he wasn’t wearing anything underneath. But seeing it spring free from his pants has me aching with need.

“Toss me a jar,” he says, standing before me, looking like I dreamed him.

I hand over the paint, then breathe deep to keep my composure when he turns me, undoing my bra. Then, he bends to remove my panties, and I step out of them before he sets them aside. It’s insane how comfortable I am being naked with them now. There was once a time that I dreaded these moments, but now, I live for them, feeling their appreciation for my curves with even the slightest touch of their hands.

A laugh slips out when Vince presses his hand to my breast, squeezing it to leave behind a blue handprint. He moves on to my ass, taking extra time painting detail with his fingertip. He finishes, and it’s his turn. I paint a sinister smile on his face in blue, cover his brand and the rest of his torso in the trio of colors, and then I lower to my knees, gripping the base of his cock in my hand.

“Hmm... I wonder if I should give a preview,” I tease, “but I’d hate for your viewers to miss something.”

I peer up at Vince from my place on the floor, only to find him staring down on me, his lips slightly parted, waiting in anticipation.

“Fuck the viewers,” he groans, and I can’t fight a smile, watching his breath cease as I part my lips, and then swipe the tip of his dick with my tongue.

Long fingers wind into my hair, and I take him into my mouth fully, feeling his solid length and the veiny texture on my tongue.

“Is it bad I don’t want you to stop?” he asks, his voice husky and filled with need.

“No, not bad, but it’ll be more fun if they’re watching us, watching you come in my mouth,” I taunt him, only kissing the head now. “Don’t you think?”

He’s expressionless at first, but then a smirk curves his lips. “You’re such a fucking tease. You know that?”

I shrug innocently, and then back off, letting him step away to turn off the overhead light, and then to turn *on* the

blacklight and camera.

He approaches again, and I'm still waiting on my knees to please him.

"Ten seconds," he says quietly, and I count down in my head, calculating how many more seconds must pass until I can have him again.

A green light pops on beside the red indicator on the camera, and I know it means we're currently live. I don't rush to take him into my mouth again. Instead, I tease him a little, and likely his viewers, too. The solid structure of his thighs fills my hands as I touch him, pushing my palms upward, from the backs of his knees, to his ass, gripping him tightly as I trail kisses across his waist. His dick jumps, grazing the side of my neck when I trace a circle with my tongue below his navel.

He gathers my hair in his fist, slowly winding it around his fingers, and I love the feel of it, the sensation of him tugging lightly, taking control.

"Tell me what you want," I say softly, unsure whether my voice picks up on camera, but this isn't really about them. They're merely bearing witness to an act that would take place with or without their presence.

I peer up as Vince stares down on me, lust lingering in his gaze as I repeat myself, more assertively this time. "Tell me... what you want."

"I want your lips on my dick," he says, clearly holding back a little.

"And... what else?"

He doesn't miss that I'm being coy, and he smiles. "I want you to suck it" he says. "Suck it until I can't take it anymore, and I explode in that pretty mouth of yours, feeding you my cum."

My nipples harden, and I push closer to him, letting my breasts press against him.

"Then give it to me."

His grip on my hair tightens, and my jaw widens to take him in, staring as his head falls back with relief.

“Holy shit, Stevie,” he breathes, surprising me when he uses my real name instead of *Bird*. I guess he’s enjoying this.

My hands brush over his ass again, and it’s impressively toned and smooth, making it impossible not to squeeze it tighter. Making it impossible not to scoot closer on my knees just to take more of him.

The notifications are going wild, and I can only imagine what they’re saying, what they’re thinking, how they’re touching themselves while they watch. I wonder how many of them wish they were him, or how many wish they were *me*. My pussy is soaked at the thought of it, at the idea of us being completely alone, and yet, nothing’s ever been further from the truth. They’re all here, too, silent participants in our act.

“I’m so fucking close,” Vince groans, and the hold he has on my hair tightens when I slurp down on him further, feeling pressure from his tip nudge the back of my throat.

My eyes water and saliva seeps from the corner of my mouth as I strain to take him all in, focusing on making him feel as good as humanly possible. My nipples are solid pebbles as they brush against his thighs, and the friction makes me even wetter.

“Fuck. I’m—”

No other words leave Vince’s lips as he releases in my mouth, his cum exploding down my throat, hot streams pumping over my tongue.

“Oh, fuck,” he groans again, and my sucking is relentless, taking everything he has, making it mine.

Slowly, he grows soft between my lips, and I’m eventually forced to release him. More notifications flood in, and my pussy’s already aching for him when I rise from the floor, only to be instructed to sit.

A rough shove accompanies Vince’s command, and with his hands on my shoulders, I’m forced to lower into the chair he’s set out. My elbows settle on the armrests, and I gasp

audibly when he reclines the seat. He grabs my hips roughly and pulls them right to the edge, bringing my pussy to his face. Without words, he opens me, staring at how my arousal has my clit glistening.

He lifts his gaze to mine, never breaking eye contact as he forms his lips around the sensitive bud and proceeds to suck and tongue my clit so perfectly that I know this won't take long.

"Shit," I whisper when he moves two fingers inside me just to bring me closer to an already fast-approaching orgasm. I'm delirious and nearly let his name slip out, but catch myself at the last second.

My clit throbs with the most delicious ache as he sucks and teases it, making my hips writhe in the seat. But my squirming only makes him give me more, sucking so relentlessly that I come undone for him, just like he wants.

"Vince," I mouth, but manage to hold the sound in so no one hears. My head falls back, and my fingers push over his scalp as the orgasm rocks me, feeling as though a small bit of life's left my body as I'm swept away.

Soft kisses to my pussy bring me down slowly, the tenderness of the gesture making it difficult not to fall asleep right where I sit. Vince's hand pushes up my body until it reaches my breast, and as he gently squeezes, my hand rests on top of his. He was perfect tonight, and I can only imagine that the audience thoroughly agrees.

I'm silent, watching as he stands, then crosses the room to the camera and shuts it off. It's just us again, and the moment that's true, he approaches me in the chair, and scoops me up out of it, carrying me to his bed with ease. I'm lowered onto the mattress gently, and then his warm, solid body fills the spot behind me, getting so close there isn't an ounce of space in existence. Without a word, he gets into his usual position—his dick pressed to my ass, one arm underneath my head, and the opposite hand gripping my breast.

A content sigh leaves his mouth before he places a kiss to my shoulder, and I swear he's asleep before the smile he's

brought to my face has even begun to fade. I'm grateful that he has this way of making all the bad shit seem lightyears away with so little effort. And as he drifts off, I pull the covers higher, covering us up to our necks as I whisper the last thing that needs to be said.

“I love you.”

Stevie

We slept like the dead, and I awaken on my back, sunlight peeking through Vince's blinds, beaming through my eyelids. I'm still naked from the night before, and moist heat suctions down around my nipple. Squeezing my thighs tight when my pussy reacts, I smile and grip Vince's shoulder.

"Good morning," he pauses to rasp, and then puts his mouth to work again.

"Good morning," I giggle, enjoying his warmth beneath the comforter.

He shifts until he's on top of me, aligning his dick with my entrance. When he pushes into me, it's an impatient motion that has me gasping, reaching for the headboard. I didn't get to feel him like this last night, and I missed it. He pumps his hips rough and fast. His eyes stay locked on my tits as they bounce in rhythm, and I come for him so easily, tightening my legs around his toned waist as I squeeze, locking him in place.

"Fuck, yes," he groans, pushing into me deeper when he comes, his eyes rolling back just as his lids slam shut. A satisfied smile curves my lips and thanks to this early morning surprise, the day is off to a great start.

He pulls out of me slowly, reaching to the nightstand for a towel he left folded there. My guess is he'd already been awake, possibly to use the restroom, and he came back with

plans to fuck me awake. Hence being prepared with a towel before my eyes were even open. I clean myself off as he rolls onto his side, kissing my shoulder once before grabbing his phone.

“Should we keep with our tradition?”

Smiling, I set the towel aside and turn to face him. “What tradition is that?”

“Well, the last time we filmed together, we fucked the morning after, then read comments from the night before.”

I smile at the fact that he even committed any of that to memory.

“Sure,” I nod, curling into his side as he opens his account and goes right to the comments.

“Let’s see,” he sighs, beginning to scroll. He gets to the good stuff, and we read in silence what onlookers had to say about last night’s impromptu performance.

Anonymous: (\$30 tip pledged) “I almost didn’t tune in tonight because I need to study, but holy shit am I glad I’m a slacker.”

Anonymous: (\$15 tip pledged) “Sheeee’s Baaaaaack!”

Anonymous: (\$15 tip pledged) “Our boy eats pussy like it’s his favorite meal.”

So far, this is the best comment. Doesn’t hurt that I completely agree with it.

Anonymous: (\$25 tip pledged) “I just nutted so hard watching her swallow his load. No lie, there’s jizz all over my damn keyboard.”

This time, it’s Vince who’s smiling.

Anonymous: (\$40 tip pledged) “Does anyone else get the sense that these two are actually into each other? Like, it’s not just about getting off?”

My heart thunders reading this, finding it strange that someone who doesn’t know us, someone who merely watched

us through a screen, came to this conclusion. A very accurate one might I add.

Vince scrolls to another comment, but this one looks different. It's marked as private, which I didn't even know was a thing.

“Not all comments are public?”

Vince shakes his head, answering my question. “Nope, viewers have the option of marking their posts private, so only the host can read it.”

I'm intrigued, wondering what was said that somehow required this level of discretion. Especially seeing as how the others are so forward with their thoughts.

Anonymous_Private: (\$5 tip pledged) “Why didn't you save me?”

I read and pause, feeling my brow tense with confusion. “What the fuck?”

“Who knows? Sometimes, people online get incredibly weird.”

Vince moves on to the next comment, and I'm surprised it's another secret message.

Anonymous_Private: (\$5 tip pledged) “Did you even notice I wasn't okay?”

Anonymous_Private: (\$5 tip pledged) “I was so alone. Where were you?”

A sick feeling works its way from my stomach to my throat as bile rises. These comments don't read like your average online weirdness. They read like they're coming from... Mel.

Anonymous_Private: (\$5 tip pledged) “If anyone could've saved me, it would've been you, Stevie.”

Vince closes the comments just as I hop out of his bed, pushing my fingers into my hair, thinking too many things all at once.

“What the fuck was that?”

My voice is low and shaky. Vince is out of bed and holding me the next second, as I break down.

“How the fuck did he find us?” I ask, feeling my throat tighten as I fight tears. All the shit that asshole posted there for Vince and I to read has it’s intended effect. It’s fucking with my head.

Royally.

I lower to the edge of the bed, still clutching my head, only now remembering I’m naked. I’d zoned out reading the messages, for some reason feeling as though my sister had really typed them, feeling as though she could’ve said those words herself.

Verbatim.

“Vince, I... This has to end.”

He drops down beside me, his arms bringing me in, holding me together when I feel like I might actually fall to pieces.

“And it will,” he promises, but I don’t see the light at the end of the tunnel. “I think it’s time we go to the cops.”

“No!” I pull out of his grasp a little, staring into his eyes. “If we do that, they’ll have to know what you three did to Dahlia. There’s no way they wouldn’t jump at the chance to lock you guys up for her murder. No cops,” I say sternly.

Vince breathes deep. “This guy’s everywhere, and he’s turning up the heat, Bird. I’m not sure what else we can do. He obviously knows how to access all of us, knows how to fuck up our lives. Isn’t it just a matter of time before he sends some bogus shit to the authorities and frames us anyway?”

His question has me feeling sick again. He makes their getting turned into the police feel like an inevitability. And I wouldn’t be able to take it if that happened. I’ve already experienced the heartbreak of losing someone I love. No way I’d survive losing three more.

I stand from his bed, quickly gathering my things.

“Where are you going?”

“I’ve got something to take care of,” I say. “And I can’t be followed this time.”

Shooting him a stern look, he holds my gaze.

“Promise me,” I add, praying he complies, and I don’t have to purposely evade him and the others today. I’d rather not do things that way.

“Only if you tell me straight up where you’re going.”

As much as I’d like to just put my foot down on this one, I know that won’t work. If I’m going to expect them to bend a little, I’ll have to do the same.

“I need to talk to Mel’s counselor, so I’m skipping class and heading up there after I shower.”

Vince holds my gaze, and I don’t miss how that hard look he’d just leveled on me a moment ago softens now. Maybe this means he’ll let me have this one thing, let me do this on my own.

I’ve put off meeting with Mel’s counselor, Carroll, because I know they aren’t technically allowed to divulge sensitive information about their patients. However, with Mel no longer being with us... maybe there’s a chance.

“Go,” he says gravely, sounding as though he already regrets this decision. “I’ll handle the others.”

I rush toward him, squeezing him in a hug. “Thank you,” I whisper, grateful that he gets how this might be a sensitive situation.

This guy is closing in on us. I mean, *really* closing in on us, so the quicker we can smoke him out into the open—*without* getting the police involved—the better off we’ll all be. From there, we’ll at least know who and what we’re dealing with, and can come up with a more solid plan from there.

As I head out of Vince’s room, I’m not sure what will come of this meeting with Carroll. But one thing’s for sure...

It couldn’t possibly set me back any further than I already am.

The office is empty, but I hear the receptionist's voice, likely in the dean's office. *All* the admin offices are tucked around the corner, so I can't see who's who and what's what, which means there's nothing to do but wait.

I've been sitting here for five minutes, shaking the entire time. I'm not even sure showing up here today will do any good, but I have a small sliver of hope that my sister may have shared something with Carroll that could help. Worst case, she didn't mention the stalking or the attack at all.

Best case?

Mel's mentioned a name.

No, not where she gave up the identity of who attacked her, but maybe just a casual mention that could've seemed completely meaningless at the time. However, something like that could mean the *world* to me today.

The sounds of a door opening and closing, followed by high-heeled footsteps has me perking up, waiting to see who'll emerge from around that corner. How lucky would it be if it were Carroll? Although, I wouldn't know that right off the bat, seeing as how we've never met. The one I lock eyes with isn't the counselor, but rather the next best thing.

"Ms. Heron," a familiar voice practically sings. Mrs. Holland was always my favorite admin. I used to assist her during my lunch hour my last two years as a student here, and this welcoming greeting I receive from her only proves that the closeness between us hasn't faded.

She rounds the corner and pulls me into a deep hug. One so warm that I close my eyes, relaxing in her embrace.

"So good to see you," she goes on. "And I'm so, *so* sorry about your sister. You have no idea how many times I've wished there was a way I could reach out to you and just... tell you that you're not alone."

I manage a small smile, still wrapped in her arms. “Thank you. That means a lot.”

She finally lets go, but keeps her hands on my shoulders, looking me over with a smile that only adds to her grandmotherly persona. Doesn’t hurt that she always wears her stark white hair in a bun, smells like fresh baked cookies, and was known for bringing me whatever leftover stews or soups she cooked up at home.

“What brings you in today?” she asks, releasing me fully now as she heads toward her seat.

For some reason, despite having known her for years and building a bond with Mrs. Holland, I hesitate. Partly because I know I intend to ask the counselor a plethora of questions I’m not even entirely sure she’s allowed to answer.

“Actually, I’m here to speak with Carroll? I don’t have a last name for her, but I do know she’s one of the counselors on staff.”

I intentionally keep my expression lighthearted to avoid raising Mrs. Holland’s suspicion. When she smiles back, I relax a bit.

“Well, you’re half right,” she says, chuckling. “Carroll *is* the last name. First name, Joshua.”

Joshua Carroll.

Okay, didn’t see that one coming.

I feel my brow quirk as my thoughts twist and turn, reframing themselves around this new information.

“Oh, then... I guess *that’s* who I’m looking for. Is he in? I know I didn’t make an appointment, but I won’t take up too much of his time.”

“Actually, you’re about a month too late,” she says.

My brow tenses. “I don’t understand.”

Mrs. Holland looks over her shoulder before gesturing for me to come closer. If history is any indication, this means she’s about to give me some juicy gossip.

“He was let go,” she says. “He was taking a copious amount of days off, which, as you can imagine, didn’t sit too well with the superintendent.”

Only having small bits of the picture has me fighting back frustration. “Why was he taking so much time off?”

“His wife,” Mrs. Holland explains. “She’s had a difficult pregnancy, and I honestly can’t blame Josh for wanting to be there for her. It’s their first child. If I recall, they only married a few years ago.”

I nod, beginning to understand.

“I’m sorry, dear.”

Mrs. Holland’s words of solace are sweet, but they do very little to help with my dilemma.

“No, I appreciate your help. Must not’ve been meant to be.”

She smiles again, but it’s filled with pity. I get it. She thinks this is the end of it, but if there’s one thing I’ve learned about myself, it’s that I don’t give up easily. So, as I turn to exit the office, a new strategy is already starting to formulate. And as I settle back in my car, it’s a full-blown plan.

I scroll social media, looking for someone named Josh Carroll, but not just *any* Josh Carroll. He’ll likely live in the area, and thanks to Ms. Holland, I also know he’s currently taking care of a very pregnant wife.

It doesn’t take long to narrow it down to a few living close enough to be the right Josh, and with a little more digging into their pics, I find who I’m looking for. It’s a t-shirt with my old high school logo in the center of the chest that gives it away.

“Gotcha,” I say. “Now, let’s see what you know about my sister.”

A quick search pulls up his home address, and I prepare to play the part of creepy stalker, because there isn’t a single person or thing that can stop me from doing this. If I don’t get the answers I need, it won’t be for lack of trying. That’s for damn sure.

It's the middle of the day, which likely means he's at work—whatever new job he's settled into since leaving the school—so I'll hold off until evening. That gives me time to make my last class and think of what I'll say. God only knows I'll need to practice what I'll say to convince these people I'm not there to dismember them. But the plan is simple, and I'm surprisingly firm on it. I'll knock, explain who I am, then see if I can't charm the responses I need out of this *Josh Carroll*.

With any luck, tonight will change everything.

Fingers crossed.

Stevie

Breathe.

This is what you wanted, remember?

You drove to the other side of town for a chance to talk to this guy, so... go talk to him!

Once I manage to silence the doubtful thoughts pouring from my subconscious, I turn off my car, then head to the red door of the small two-story I'm praying belongs to Josh. Here's hoping the info was accurate, and I'm not currently trudging up the walkway of some serial killer's death lair.

There's an ounce of hesitation as I raise my hand to the doorbell, then push it, listening to the drawn-out chimes ring on the other side of the threshold. My heart races when I hear footsteps next. After that, I'm staring into the bright, smiling face of a woman I'm guessing to be Mrs. Carroll. Her large, round stomach gives her away instantly.

Hers is the same face I saw in the social media posts that led me to this doorstep. Only, in the photos, she didn't look nearly as confused as she does now.

"Hi, sorry to bother you. My name's Stevie."

Her brow lifts a little and I assume that doesn't exactly clear things up.

“I know this is unexpected, but I used to be a student at the high school Josh worked for. I hoped he could help me with something.”

She looks me over, her hands pausing where mine are wringing together in front of me. Her eyes soften then, and she steps back, pulling the door open wide.

“Please. Come in,” she says. “I’m Kristy, by the way.”

“Nice meeting you.”

I step into their home, only now seeing the endless stacks of moving boxes the door kept hidden.

“It’s a mess, right?” the woman jokes, slowly rubbing her stomach as she looks around.

“No, not at all. Moving out or moving in?”

“Out,” she says with a tired sigh. “You’d think we would’ve waited until the little one got here to make such a big transition, but nope. When Josh sets his mind to something, it’s as good as done.”

She latches the door closed behind me.

“Speaking of Josh, let me grab him for you. He’s out in his workshop.”

“Workshop?”

Another smile brightens her face. “Yeah, it’s kind of his haven. I’m only allowed inside when he escorts me,” she jokes. “Since moving on from the school, he’s been working from home, selling upcycled furniture online.”

I smile back, but I’m stuck on her word choice. If by *moving on* she means *got fired*, then we’re on the same page.

“Be back in a sec. Can I get you a bottle of water or anything while you wait?”

“Oh, no thanks. I’m fine.”

Kristy nods, then I watch as she waddles from where we stand in the front hallway, through the kitchen, then out the back door. The window just above the sink provides a clear

view of where she's gone, so I see her approaching the door of a moderately sized shed, and then knocking.

Breathing deep, I look around. There isn't much left on the walls. No family photos, no artwork. The mantle over the fireplace is bare, too. The larger pieces of furniture and rugs are all that still decorate the place, leaving it to feel cold, empty.

There's light chatter coming from the back, then the door off from the kitchen swings open again, but Kristy isn't alone anymore. Josh—who I also recognize from the pictures—walks in behind her, and I stand a little straighter, clearing my throat as I gather my thoughts.

As they approach, Josh first has his eyes on his phone, but when he looks up and meets my gaze, there's a flicker of something that moves across his face. Recognition maybe? As if my being here has just startled him. I get that a lot. Apparently, it's because my sister and I look so much alike it can be jarring to people who aren't expecting it. So, to dispel some of the weirdness, I put on a smile and brace myself before greeting the infamous Mr. Carroll.

He seems younger in person, his dirty blond hair a bit disheveled, lacking any real form. I imagine it's from having spent the day out in his workshop, toiling away at whatever project has kept him busy lately. His wide-set blue eyes are kind, and I imagine Mel must've felt the same way, allowing her to trust him, confide in him.

Hopefully.

“H—hi,” I stammer. “I'm Stevie Heron.”

Josh seems to come to his senses, blinking hard as he wipes sawdust onto his shirt before extending his hand to shake mine.

“Yes, hello. Pleasure.”

We shake and there's still a bit of awkwardness in the air. Guess that's to be expected when you show up on someone's door in the middle of the evening, unannounced.

“We haven't met, but you know... *knew*... my sister, Mel.”

Josh's expression shifts, and his smile fades a little. "Yes, of course." He turns to Kristy, placing a hand on the small of her back. "Stevie's the sister of the student I lost last year."

Kristy's eyes fill with concern when they land on me again. "Oh, my gosh! I was so sorry to hear about her passing. Such a tragic loss."

My heart squeezes a bit, and I swallow deeply to keep my emotions in check.

"Thank you."

"Your sister was a very sweet and kindhearted girl," Josh says. "She was struggling with a few things, but I never expected that she'd... I... her passing just came as such a shock."

Kristy reaches for Josh's hand. "How are your parents, Stevie?" she asks. "I know a loss of that magnitude rocks a family to its core."

I nod, agreeing with her completely. "They're... dealing."

Josh purses his lips together, but doesn't speak.

"Know what? We'd love to have you stay for dinner," Kristy chimes in. "If you don't have plans already, that is."

My lips part, but no sound comes out at first. But then I remember why I'm here, to get answers, and staying for dinner might help with that. So, I force a smile despite the sudden onslaught of sadness.

"Sure. That'd be nice."

She clasps her hands together. "Perfect. The sauce is almost done. Why don't *you* have a seat in the dining room," she suggests, gesturing toward the entryway on the right. Then, she looks at Josh, adding, "And why don't *you* go change your shirt and get washed up."

He looks down, assessing the state of his shirt, and then smiles when he seems to agree with his wife's idea. He presses a soft kiss to her forehead. "Okay. Be right back."

He traipses up the steps, and I head to the dining room to wait. There are more boxes stacked in a corner, and an empty China cabinet nearly takes up an entire wall. I zone out listening to Kristy bang around in the kitchen, only to be distracted by my phone buzzing in my pocket. My first thought is that it's the guys, despite me having given them a complete rundown of where I've been and where I was headed. I even included the address and a screenshotted pic of Josh and Kristy from his socials.

But it isn't them.

Mom: I can't believe this is happening again. Are you okay?

I frown reading her message, having no earthly idea what she's talking about.

Stevie: I'm lost. What's up?

Mom: I can't believe you haven't heard. Just got an email from the university about a new investigation on campus. There's been another attack.

Stevie: What? Who now?

Mom: The kid wasn't even a Bradwyn student this time. He went to Elmcrest. Apparently, he was hanging out at a bar last night and some guy beat him up in the parking lot.

Mom: His name's Leo Whitlock. Do you know him?

I lower my phone. There's suddenly a knot in my stomach. This happened last night, while Micah went M.I.A. before the team dinner. To his rival, no less.

Stevie: Nope, never heard of him. Keep me posted, though.

Mom: Will do. But please, PLEASE stay safe, Stevie. With all that's gone on in recent weeks, I'd like for you to at least consider moving back in. We can chat about it after the rehearsal dinner. That's next week. DON'T FORGET!

Stevie: I'll be there.

I lower my phone, feeling stressed as shit, but have to quickly hide the horror from my face when Kristy pops in,

carrying a platter of pasta. She sets it down in the center of the table, then goes back to the kitchen to grab a tray filled with garlic bread.

“I always cook too much,” she says with a smile. “Looks like it paid off today, though.”

Clearing my throat, I try to forget about Mom’s text and the implications it carries.

“Did you come from a big family? I hear people who are used to cooking for a crowd often have a hard time scaling back.”

She pauses, perches her hands on her hips while she thinks about it. “You know what? I did. So, you might just be right.”

I smile back, tucking my phone away. Just then, Josh bounds down the steps in a new shirt, and with his hair brushed neatly into place. He shoots me that strange look again, but it’s gone just as soon as it came. Apparently, not even sporting purple hair dilutes the similarities between my sister and me.

Josh lowers into his seat at the head of the table and reaches for his fork.

“Well, eat up,” Kristy announces, but then points at my chest. “Oh! You attend Bradwyn?”

I glance down at my sweatshirt—the one I’ve effectively stolen from Vince. “I do.”

She stares at the logo in the center. “I’m guessing you’re not on the hockey team, though. Is your boyfriend?”

I’m a bit taken aback by her forthrightness, but gather myself quickly. “He is.”

They are.

“Oh, how sweet! Do you play any sports?”

“No, I’m about as coordinated as a calf on ice. No one wants to see that,” I tease. “I do host a body positivity group, though. We meet a couple times a month.”

Kristy's eyes light up when she taps Josh's arm. "Sweetheart! That's perfect," she says, and then turns to me before explaining. "Stevie, let me get your number so we can set something up."

It takes a moment to realize she means *right now*, but then I fumble for my phone punching in her number when she rattles it off. The moment I'm done, she has me shoot her a text so she can lock me in, too.

"Josh was just saying how much he misses working with kids, helping them. He's gifted to do that type of work if you ask me. And he doesn't complain about it, but I can tell he's missed it."

I swallow deeply. "Yes, I heard you were recently let go," I say to Josh, but Kristy's lips have already parted to answer for him.

"He was," she confirms, "and it was utter bullshit. This pregnancy has been tough. Tougher than I think either of us bargained for. So, yeah, there have been a lot of impromptu visits to urgent care to make sure things are okay, but he always kept the school up to date. Still, I guess it wasn't enough."

She pats Josh's hand sympathetically.

"But it's worked out. His furniture business has taken off, which more than makes up for his salary. And who knows, maybe you two can even collaborate on something with your group."

"I—maybe," I stammer, forcing a smile. My group is a safe space, and I'm not sure how they'd respond to bringing in someone new in a mentor capacity, but I'll just keep that to myself for now.

Satisfied with having planted that seed for a possible future collaboration, Kristy settles down again and finishes not one, but *two* heaping bowls of spaghetti. I suppose that's what they mean when they mention pregnant women eating for two.

We finish the meal in silence. There's a bit more banter here and there, but nothing heavy. Part of me feels strange

bringing up some of the more sensitive subjects with Kristy in the room. Her being with child and all.

As if she's just sensed my need for privacy, she grabs a dish and dismisses herself. When Josh tries to help, she volleys a look between him and I, and then urges him to sit and chat with me.

God bless her for that.

At first, he's tense and visibly uncomfortable. I suppose I'm giving off the same energy, seeing as how I'm not really sure how to get this conversation going.

"I'm sorry my stopping by turned into a whole... thing, but I really would love if we could talk about my sister for a bit."

Josh offers a warm smile, and then props his elbows on the table. "Sure, how can I help?"

I let out a breath, sorting my thoughts before speaking. "Well, I just... Losing my sister was tough, but honestly? The hardest part has been all the unanswered questions. Not knowing the details of her death has left me feeling like I'm grasping at straws."

Josh's brow gathers. "Details? I didn't realize there were any questions surrounding her death. The last I heard, it was classified as a suicide."

I nod. "It was, but..."

My words trail off, feeling like I'm betraying my sister's confidence. But then I let myself feel the fact that she's not here.

"Mel was... raped. And she didn't tell me or anyone else, for that matter, who was responsible."

Josh sits back, wide eyed as he stares at the table. "Wow."

His reaction leaves me feeling defeated, because it sounds like this is news to him as well.

Shit.

"Well, if you're wondering if she confided in me, I'm sorry. She never said a word about it," he says. "But if you're

on a mission to find the guy, I can only offer professional advice.”

I swallow, trying to hide my disappointment. “Sure. Thank you.”

“From experience, most women who are assaulted... it’s someone they know, someone they trust. Like... maybe a friend, a boyfriend or an ex. Or even a relative—a brother, father, grandfather. An uncle.”

My thoughts snag there, maybe because there was a slight difference in the way he made that last suggestion.

“Did she mention something about an uncle?” I ask. Or, in this case, more of an *uncle-figure*.

Josh puts his hands up, shaking his head. “I’m not saying she did, but... your sister talked very freely in my office. There were things I didn’t think twice about until she was gone, and I’m only saying that... maybe your sister’s story is more like a lot of other girls than I realized.”

My mind and heart are both racing, and I’m suddenly in a rush to leave, in a rush to confront a demon I thought I’d already slayed.

Josh seems to be reading into my silence. “Are you... okay? I hope I haven’t upset you, it’s just—”

“No, you were helpful actually. Thank you. And I need to go, but please tell your wife I said dinner was amazing.”

Josh stands when I do, already heading for the door. He walks me out to the porch.

“If you need anything else, you know where to find me.”

I nod, feeling incredibly thankful.

“I will. Thanks again.”

I hurry to my car, fumbling with my keys, because for the first time in a long time, I might actually have a viable lead.

And his name is... Officer Frank Russo.

Stevie

There's speeding, and then there's what *I* just did, making it across town in record time. Without much thought about what I'll say when I get to his door, I take the stairs by two, going off pure adrenaline. It's still fueling me when I ball my fist and slam it against the door of Frank's apartment.

"Frank!" I shout, banging again.

I've just lifted my hand to knock for a third time when it quickly swings open, and I'm met by a scowl.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?"

"Let me in," I seethe.

"What? No! You don't show up at my place in the middle of the night demanding—"

"Either let me in or I'll tell your neighbors what a sick piece of shit you are."

Frank stares me down, likely knowing I'm not afraid to follow through on my threat.

With immense hesitation, he steps aside, and I storm in, eyeing the empty beer bottles on the coffee table, the muted basketball game on the television. I'm guessing this is his typical nightly routine.

"What the hell is this?"

I turn to face him, folding my arms across my chest. “Was it you?”

Two vertical lines form between his eyes. “Was *what* me?”

“With Mel. Were you the one who... the one who raped her?”

He takes a step back, and that look of confusion doesn't fade from his face. Josh's words are stuck in my head, what he brought up about my sister mentioning an uncle possibly having done something that made her uncomfortable. Whatever she said, it was enough that it stuck in her counselor's head. It was enough that he hinted at it tonight.

“You're out of your damn mind, kid. Get back in your car, take your ass home, and sleep off... *whatever* this is.”

“Answer the fucking question!”

He stares, maybe shocked that I'm not backing down. “You and Mel were like daughters to me, Stevie. So, where the fuck is this coming from?”

Daughters.

We were like daughters to him.

He's forgetting something. I haven't forgotten how he looked at me when I stopped by that night, looking for Mel's dad. He was a little drunk, his guard was down, and he looked at me like he thought fucking me was an option. That's not exactly how a father looks at his daughters.

“Cut the shit, Frank. Were you the one who went after my sister?”

I don't know why I thought he'd just come out with it. I don't suppose I actually expect him to, but I at least need him to know I know what he's done, know what he's capable of.

And poor Nora.

Would he really do something like that to his own niece? He wouldn't be the first, but the thought of it sickens me.

“Now, this is the last time I'm gonna say it, Stevie. Turn around and get the fuck out of here. Are you fucking high or

something?”

His brow creases as he looks at me more closely, as if actually trying to decipher whether I've taken something tonight.

“I'm sober, you asshole. And I won't let this go,” I warn him, heading toward the door. He won't admit to anything. Not tonight. Not without me having some kind of leverage.

My fingers twist around the knob, but I halt when he speaks over my shoulder.

“You know what? I'm actually glad you stopped by tonight. I think you just changed my mind on something.”

My heart races, but I don't turn to face him.

“Interestingly enough, that Whitlock kid who was attacked last night... he seems to think your friends had something to do with it,” he says with a low chuckle rumbling deep in his chest. “And here I was, all set to dismiss it because he doesn't have any real evidence, but... I'm starting to think that might be worth taking a closer look at. Maybe you *should* stick around. You could tell me *all* about where your friends were last night. Doesn't that sound fun?”

The hint of beer on his breath turns my stomach when he laughs again, too close to my ear for comfort.

I'm silent and hate that I don't have a response, fearing that my lack of an answer might add to the guilt he's already pinned on me.

Frank steps closer and the floor creaks beneath his weight. “Do us both a favor and get the *fuck* out of my apartment,” he warns. “And if you have another temporary lapse of insanity, before you come storming over here like you're big shit, remember who you're dealing with.”

From over my shoulder, he points at his badge and gun resting on the half wall beside the door.

“Get the fuck out,” he growls, his voice low and sinister.

I don't linger, fearing he might actually follow through with his threat to investigate the boys. Had I known they were

on his radar, had I known he was on this case, I would've played my cards much, much differently. So, as I ride the elevator down to the first floor, I'm forced to consider that I might've just fucked up.

Royally.

My phone's going wild as I rush out to my car, so I check my messages while I walk.

Micah: Where the fuck are you? You said you'd keep us posted if we let you go alone.

Vince: Bird... sound off or we're coming after you.

Ash: Two-minute warning.

Stevie: I'm fine. On my way home now.

Stevie: But... when I get there, I think we need to talk.

Stevie

Tate leads us to the event hall, then locks the door, sealing us all inside. It's a completely dark, windowless space, so there's no chance of anyone seeing that we're here or overhearing our conversation.

A conversation I wish like hell didn't need to happen.

One of the four guys makes his way over toward where I remember there being a makeshift stage. A moment later, the room is cast in dim light that doesn't quite reach the other side, and Micah hops down from the stage with a thud. The single bulb hanging from a cord now provides a small amount of light as it swings back and forth. It makes shadows from the mismatched seating and tables dance across the walls in strange ways.

Everyone's quiet. And seeing as how I'm the one who's called this meeting, I suppose it's on me to break the silence. So, here goes.

"I think I fucked up." I force the words from my lips because there's no point sugarcoating it. "After dinner with Josh, my sister's counselor, and his wife, he and I talked about Mel." I pause to gauge their expressions. "He didn't know anything about her assault, but he hinted at Mel having mentioned something about an uncle. My dad's friend, Frank, the cop from Dahlia's vigil, is the only uncle we've ever had. So... I went to see him."

“And?” There’s already suspicion flaring in Micah’s eyes.

“And... I kind of went in guns blazing, accusing him of having been the one who hurt Mel.”

I wring my hands together when I can’t think of anything else to do with them.

“I’m guessing something made you realize it wasn’t him?” Vince asks.

“No,” I say, shaking my head. “I mean, he denied it, but I sort of expected that. But what *did* happen, is he may or may not have threatened to investigate whether Micah was involved in what happened to Whitlock.”

Tate’s brow furrows, but when he passes a look toward Micah, I get the feeling this topic has already come up and been discussed while I was out today.

“Whitlock is pointing the finger at Micah,” I tell them. “Frank wasn’t going to look into it because there was no real cause to, based on lack of evidence, but now, because of me, he threatened to question Micah about it.”

The guys are all silent and I feel like literal shit. As if there wasn’t already enough going on with us, now there’s this, too.

“I’m so, *so* sorry. I should’ve just kept what Josh said to myself for now, until I know more, but now I... I ruined things.”

“This isn’t on you,” Micah speaks up. “It’s on me. I let my temper get the best of me, and I lost control.”

His admission has Tate grimacing again.

“What... why’d you do it?” I ask sheepishly, still swimming in my own shame. “I mean, I know Leo’s a dick, but why now? You’ve been good about letting things roll off your back lately.”

Micah doesn’t speak. And when Tate shoots him another look, I’m guessing he already knows the answer to my question.

“Well, right before you walked in, Micah decided to spring a shitload of good news on us,” Tate practically growls. “He overheard your conversation with Whitlock. Overheard Leo making a pass at you, and Mic clearly doesn’t know how to let shit go. Not even when *all* our asses are currently in hot water.”

My heart beats wildly when my gaze shifts to Micah. He holds my gaze, not blinking even once. I recall the details of that conversation yesterday, when Whitlock cornered me in the hallway after the guys’ game. We weren’t far from the locker room, but I had no idea Micah had come out and was, apparently, standing in earshot.

You could hear a pin drop, and all of a sudden, this conversation feels a bit crowded.

“Do you three mind if I talk to Micah alone for a second?”

Vince pushes off the wall first. “We’ll be in the study.”

Ash follows him out without protest, but Tate isn’t hiding his feelings all that well. He’s frustrated and, from the looks of things, livid with Micah for having gone off the deep end, but what’s done is done.

Tate finally leaves after a standoff with Micah, now it’s just us. Me and the brute who apparently put quite the beating on Leo.

Staring into Micah’s dark eyes, my hands move to his face, cupping it as I speak. “Talk to me. You know I’d never give Leo the time of day, so it can’t be that you were jealous after what you overheard. So, what was it?”

Micah’s breathing deepens and I steady mine, waiting for his reply as I stare up nearly a foot to hold his gaze.

“I did it because that asshole can’t just say shit like that to you and walk away. So, I made sure it’ll be a very long time before he can walk *anywhere*.”

The corner of his mouth curves ever so slightly. So slightly that I can’t tell if I’m imagining that he seems to be fighting a smile or not.

“But you had to have known this was bad timing... right?”

His shoulders relax a bit now, as if he’s suddenly being more reasonable, coming to his senses.

“I wasn’t thinking about it all that much at the time, but... yeah. I know I fucked up. Which is why it’s not on you that Frank is threatening to look into things. If I’d left things alone, none of this would’ve happened. You know it. I know it. And Tate’s made it *incredibly* fucking clear that *he* knows it.”

I nearly laugh when he says that, remembering how Tate nearly killed him with that dark look in his eyes, but the weight of the moment prevents it.

Micah’s hands loop my wrists, pulling them from his face to bring them behind his neck. I hold him there, feeling his pulse against my palm as his fingers trail down to my waist.

“I couldn’t stand the thought of him thinking he could disrespect you like that, Bird. I couldn’t take him thinking it was okay to say shit like that to my girl and get away with it,” he says. “Something inside me just... I couldn’t let it go.”

No sooner than that last word leaves his mouth, my lips are on his. Comfort moves through me the instant we connect, and he pulls me tight to his chest. His heart’s beating wild and strong against my breasts, and his emotions move through me like a wave. The anger, the fear, the possessiveness. Everything. All of it.

He’s right. What he did to Whitlock *does* complicate things further, but it’s impossible to be angry with him. Impossible not to feel anything other than protected and cared for when I know there was no ego involved. This thing Micah did, this *reckless* thing, it happened because...

“My whole heart is yours. You know that?” he says, his lips still brushing over mine as he speaks. “Tell me you’ve known for a while now that I fucking love you, Bird.”

There’s a lump in my throat, making it impossible to speak actual words. So, I nod, drawing in the heat of his breath just before he kisses me again. He pushes a hand between us, slipping it inside my pants, and then into my underwear. I

inhale sharply through my nose as he touches me, making me feel his words in real time.

“I love you,” he says again, soaking his fingers when he pushes them deep into me, just as his tongue slowly strokes mine. My back meets the wall and I let it hold me when my knees threaten to give out. He always knows exactly how I want and need to be touched.

“I love you, too,” I breathe.

He brushes two fingers over my clit in quick circles, tempting me to go right over the edge. I grant him that, gripping the back of his hair, pulling his mouth down to my neck. He kisses me there, sucking my throat as I come, whimpering while my entire body shakes, sandwiched between his solid frame and the wall.

“You’re ours, Bird,” he whispers against my skin, his touch slowing as I settle. “I’ll lose my shit every time anyone outside this family touches you. And I mean I will absolutely fuck up someone’s world, Bird. If they disrespect you like that dickhead did, I’m not responsible for what happens next.”

He peers down on me now for a moment, then his mouth crashes against mine. And with this one gesture, I feel that vow being burned into the very fabric of us.

Stevie

The last twenty-four hours have been nothing but a stress-induced haze. I hardly slept, which naturally led me to endless doom-scrolling. Social media was flooded with “Get well soon,” posts tagging Whitlock, and an update from one of his teammates was somewhat grim. Apparently, doctor’s are speculating that he may never play hockey again. Someone else in his circle added that they’ve also heard he’ll be lucky not to walk with a limp for the rest of his life. While I *should* feel a twinge of sympathy for the guy, that’s hard considering what he’s done to Micah, what he said to me after the last game. So, I’ve decided I won’t let myself feel anything about it. Not joy, not vindication, but I’m woman enough to wish him the best during his recovery.

That’s it.

That’s all I’ve got for that piece of shit.

This Whitlock drama, in tandem with everything else, makes it feel like any minute now the entire world will implode around me. It’s easiest to describe the current state of my life as one elaborate fever dream rolling into another.

“Sound good?” Dusty asks, and I snap out of the daze I’ve slipped into.

“Yeah, sounds perfect.” I hug myself inside my coat while answering. With Mom and Rob’s quiet little rehearsal dinner

turning into more of a rager for the middle-aged, I had to step out into the freezing cold to take Dusty's call. However, had I known this was going to be about getting me signed up for the training course to carry a handgun, I might not've picked up.

"All right then. I'll text in a couple days to see what your schedule's looking like for next week."

"Or the week after," I chime in. "Mom's wedding's coming up so..."

"Say no more. I can imagine your plate's full. Text me, and we'll coordinate a time."

"Awesome. Talk soon."

"Night, sweetheart."

I end the call, then lower my phone, grateful for the blast of warm air that hits me when I step back into the hotel. I walk to the small banquet room where Mom, Rob, Tate, and about twenty of their closest friends and family sound like a crowd of one hundred. If the noise level is any indication of how excited they are to see these two married, I can only imagine the kind of energy they'll bring to the actual wedding.

Someone randomly grips my hand and twirls me to the music when I walk past. I'm promptly let go and cast a smile at Mom's best friend, Maria's, husband who flashes a boyish grin and glassy stare. With me too far out of his grasp, he reaches for one of the female server's hands next, spinning her in the same manner.

Yep, he's *big* drunk.

But honestly, with all the liquor flowing tonight, it's amazing anyone's still upright.

I spot Tate at a table on the other side of the small room, and with every seat around him completely empty, I'm excited to finally have a moment's peace. His eyes are on me when I drop down into a chair, then he smiles a little.

"Fancy seeing you here," he teases, flirting with his eyes.

"Ditto," I say back. "You were running around so much, I mistook you for a server, like, twice."

He laughs, then sips his drink. “Yeah, my dad’s had me on my feet, going out to the lobby to find people who didn’t know which room we’re in, meeting my aunt on the freeway when she ran out of gas, and he even had me take cake to the front desk staff. Just... fun. Loads and loads of fun.”

He flashes a weary smile, and I nearly forget where we are and place my hand on his. But at the last second, I remember and refrain.

“Well, at least you’ll get a good night’s sleep.”

“Yeah, we’ll see about that.” When he tosses back his drink—punch instead of alcohol—I get the feeling he’s about as likely as *I* am to get any kind of rest. With everything that’s gone on, I never quite relax enough for that to happen anymore.

“You look... really pretty.”

The compliment has me turning away from a drunken line dance getting fired up on the dancefloor to see his face. He takes me in, and I don’t miss how a breath hitches in his throat. Nor do I miss how his choice of words makes me swoon. He didn’t call me sexy, or say that I’m hot. He called me pretty, and somehow, that’s even better.

I glance down at the navy-blue dress that hugs my figure all the way down to my knees. It’s strapless, paired with a vintage, silver shawl, but the best accessory I’m wearing by far is the shapewear snatching me in in all the right places.

“Thanks, and you look very handsome.”

He smiles in this way that makes me wonder if he’s really clueless as to how attractive he truly is. My gaze lowers to his dark suit as he adjusts the thin, black tie around his neck.

“Thank you.”

He hits me with a half-smile that I swear makes my ovaries weep, and then, beneath the table where no one can see, the back of his hand brushes mine. It’s a slight touch, but it’s enough to acknowledge the connection between us, and I feel my face warming as I undoubtedly blush.

“Tate.”

The sound of Rob’s voice startles us, prompting us both to quickly place our hands on the surface of the table. I’m flooded with guilt for not having been able to resist even that small bit of contact. But I’m relieved to see there doesn’t seem to be any trace of suspicion in Rob’s eyes as he nods toward his son.

“Y-Yeah?” Tate answers, clearing his throat as he speaks.

“Cliff here had a little too much to drink, so he’ll be cutting out early,” Rob explains, nodding toward the giant red-haired man he’s currently keeping steady on his feet. “Mind helping him to his ride? The driver should be pulling up any second.”

Tate’s already on his feet. “Sure.”

“Thanks,” Rob says. “I’d take him myself, but Val—”

“No need to explain. Tonight’s about you guys. I’ve got this,” Tate promises.

Rob seems relieved to have help tonight. And with all Tate’s done to step up to the plate, I don’t doubt for a second that that’s true.

“Hurry back if you can,” Rob chimes in again. “Someone slipped Val a note that they put together a video collage for us, and I don’t want you to miss it. They’ll be firing it up any minute now.”

“I’ll be quick,” Tate promises.

“I’ll come with you,” I offer, standing as I smooth my dress down my hips.

Rob hands his friend off, and I walk slowly with Tate through the hotel lobby, and then to the SUV waiting out by the curb. I hang back while Tate verifies that the driver knows where he’s headed, and then he sends them off, patting the roof of the car. He walks back into the building beside me, and I can’t help but wonder if he’s fighting the urge to hold my hand like I’m fighting not to hold his.

He smiles at the front desk attendant when we pass through the lobby, then he points to our left.

“This way,” he says.

My brow quirks, and I smile. “The banquet hall is the other way.”

“I know, but this will only take a second.”

“What about the video collage? Your dad’s gonna—”

“My dad’ll be fine. Come on.”

He holds his hand out and his eyes smolder while I consider it, glancing over my shoulder toward the room where our parents are partying. But who the hell am I kidding? I’ve never been able to resist him.

“Fine, but if we’re late to the video, I’m blaming it on you.”

“Fair enough.” Tate tosses a cautious look toward the banquet hall again before grabbing my hand, leading me toward the hallway with the elevators.

I shuffle behind him in my heels, trying to keep up with his long, quick strides. I’m beyond curious where we’re headed, and a soft yelp leaves me when I’m suddenly pulled around a corner, stopping in an empty hallway lined with dormant conference rooms.

“What are we doing? What did you want to show me?”

Tate smiles, and I feel my heart pick up speed as he answers. “This.”

The heat of his body consumes me, and I place my hands on the lapel of his suit when he brings me to his chest and kisses me. It’s an impatient kiss, one filled with heat and passion that becomes more apparent when he pushes his tongue into my mouth, tasting like strawberry and vanilla from the cake we were just served not so long ago. And despite knowing what a monumentally terrible idea this is, I can’t fight it. Can’t fight *him*.

But his will is stronger than mine. Even with the large bulge pressing into my thigh as he begins to ease back.

“Spend the night with me,” he says. “It’s the weekend. You can spend it at my apartment. I’ll cook for you, we’ll binge TV, and just... be.”

I don’t even mean to smile, but I feel my lips curve with the suggestion. “Okay, yeah. Sounds fun.”

He seems to like that answer, and I’m already imagining it. I’ve never stayed the night at his apartment, and I have a feeling that’s not an invitation he extends often.

“As soon as this thing ends, we’ll meet up at my place, and... we’ll see where things lead.”

He smiles again, as if he doesn’t know good and damn well where things will lead.

Us.

In his bed.

Annoying the shit out of his neighbors with the noise we’ll cause.

“Let’s get back before they notice we’ve been gone a while,” he says, lifting my chin as he pecks my lips again. “Then, after that, you’re all mine.”

Licking my lips when he pulls away, I nod. “Okay.”

His hand feathers over my hip lightly, but he knows we can’t walk away holding each other. So, he pushes his suit jacket open and shoves his hands into the pockets of his slacks. There’s a loaded silence between us as we make our way back, and I breathe deep when he grips the handle to the party room where, like I guessed, the movie has already begun playing.

Following Tate, we’re halfway to our seats when I glance up at the projector screen, doing a double-take as the grainy footage bounces around. The hand of the shaky cameraman eventually steadies, but... the location seems familiar. Not only that, but I expected to see a collection of moments Mom

and Rob have shared over the course of their relationship, but this isn't anything like that.

The camera man rushes through a café, and it takes a second, but I recognize the place. It's the spot Tate and I stopped in not so long ago, when he took me for coffee to help clear my head. So far, we're only seeing the cameraman rushing through the dining area to a green door.

"The bathroom," I say under my breath, at approximately the same time Tate looks up, noticing what's happening.

"Shit. Dad, kill it!" he shouts, hoping to get his father's attention across the room as he rushes that way, but it's too late.

Quiet moans float through the speakers mounted all over the room, loud and clear.

With tears blurring my eyes, I slide a hesitant look toward my mother as she stands, slowly crossing her arms, her eyes fixated on the screen.

"Who the fuck is playing this shit?" Tate asks, moving through the crowd, making his way toward a cutout in the wall where light from the projector lens spills into the room.

I shift back toward the screen as things unfold, and I'm numb, frozen in place as the camera is hoisted over the high wall of the bathroom stall, angled perfectly toward Tate and I as we fuck against the wall, our faces clear and impossible not to recognize.

My hand shakes as I bring it to my mouth, suppressing a loud cry, feeling the weight of shame and embarrassment flooding every cell of my body. I'm too afraid to meet anyone's gaze as shocked gasps and whispers begin to fill the room. It makes me sick to my stomach to know they're talking about me, *watching* me.

On the screen, my head falls back as the moment Tate and I shared intensifies, and I'm sickened when someone laughs, watching him power into me, his... stepsister.

Suddenly, the screen goes black, but the sound continues to play. I glance over my shoulder to see that Tate's used his suit

jacket to toss over the projector to cover our sins, but it's pointless now. Everyone knows, everyone's seen.

Including our parents.

I don't stop to assess them, don't stop to see how they're taking it. All I want is to get the hell out of here and... possibly move out of state.

Or, hell, maybe out of the country.

All I know is I can't be here a second longer. So, I run to the table to grab my phone and keys from where Tate and I were sitting, then I rush toward the door. I half-expect to make the dramatic exit on my own, but to my surprise, a warm palm presses against mine, and Tate leads the way, pushing through the doors of the banquet hall, and then the doors of the hotel. We don't speak, don't discuss what I'll do with my car, he just opens the passenger side door and closes me inside before hopping in, starting the engine.

We pass the entrance on our way out of the parking lot, and he speeds up when our parents rush toward us, banging their palms on the windows to stop us, but there's no chance of it.

Tonight, things were taken too far. The very thing we'd hoped to avoid came back to bite us right in our asses, and I can't help but to wonder if this is retaliation. No, Frank didn't show up at The Den and haul Micah off for questioning, but... he made some very real threats last night.

And now, with things possibly ruined for our parents, it's clear that the guys and I grossly underestimated how far things would go.

A mistake that might just be the biggest we've made so far.

Stevie

Three days.

He hasn't left my side, hasn't brought up the fiasco at our parents' rehearsal dinner, and I'm grateful for the break from wondering what my mother thought of seeing me being railed by her stepson.

Oh, God.

My mother's seen me having sex.

This... THIS is rock bottom.

My head settles on Tate's shoulder as we sit, cuddled on his bed with our backs resting against the headboard. There's a TV in the corner, but we haven't turned it on today. Instead, we've held down this spot with the blinds closed. He's brought me food and tea, catering to me as if he weren't put on the spot the other night, too. But he's somehow only focused on me, getting *me* through this nightmare. As if I'm the only victim.

"We're never gonna live this down, are we?"

His thumb moves in slow circles against my shoulder, then he kisses my forehead.

"Well, if you're asking whether people will magically forget that this happened... no," he says, and the sound of him laughing actually makes me smile. I smack his arm.

"Stop," I whine. "It's not funny."

“Not even a little,” he says, “but at least we were humiliated together, right?” He kisses my hair this time, pushing strands of it out of my face.

“This has Frank written all over it,” I grumble. “He didn’t take Micah to the station, but he sure as hell made up for it, didn’t he?”

My phone vibrates on the nightstand, and I toss my head back with a groan.

“That’s probably your mom again. Maybe you should answer,” he says. “It’s been a few days, and I’m guessing she’s worried about you.”

Worried and disgusted.

I sigh, knowing I’m nowhere near having the nerve to face her. Not even over the phone.

“We’ll have to face them sometime, Stevie. I’m not looking forward to that any more than you are, but... it’s inevitable.”

His words twist my stomach in knots. Because he’s completely right.

“Let’s just stay in our bubble a little while longer.”

He cups my chin and kisses me once. “As long as you need to.”

Our eyes are locked. He studies me in this thoughtful way that makes my breathing unsteady. He tucks my hair behind my ear, and I melt against his side.

“Believe me, I know this was bad, but... is it weird I’m relieved?”

I feel my face scrunch with confusion. “Are you fucking serious?”

He smiles when I laugh. “I mean, think about it. They know. They know we’re attracted to each other, know we’ve gotten, you know, close. Now, there’s no need to lie to them about anything. I know whoever this guy is, he meant to ruin us, but... maybe he just set us free.”

I'm not quite sure what to say to that, but oddly enough, Tate's explanation resonates. Although, this freedom he speaks of came at an outrageous price.

"It's a blessing, Stevie. Not a curse," he says, and then we kiss again. "You're lucky I love you. If you'd been anyone else, I wouldn't have thought twice about leaving you that night, saving my own ass."

He laughs, but I'm not even sure he realizes what he's said.

"You... love me?"

The question leaves my mouth, and then Tate does the strangest thing. His brow lifts, and he shoots me this look, as if to ask if I'm crazy for questioning it.

"Was... that not obvious?" he grins.

"I mean, I kind of *guessed* it, but... you can never know for sure until someone comes right out and says it."

His lips brush mine. "Then, let me make it abundantly clear, Stevie," he says, kissing my top lip first, then the bottom, then my chin before looking me square in the eyes again. "I love you. And in case *this* part isn't as clear as I think it should be, you should also know that no one can ever change that."

My heart feels like it doubles in size from the squall of emotions that passes over me. I lean in, intent on making him feel as good *physically* as he's made me feel *emotionally*, but an urgent knock at the door interferes with my plan.

A deflated sigh leaves Tate, and I pull back.

"One sec."

He stands, and my eyes are glued to him as he crosses his bedroom in sweats and a snug white t-shirt that hugs his muscular physique in just the right way. My back falls against the headrest, and I wait not so patiently while he addresses the unexpected visitor.

Muffled voices carry in from the living room, and it only takes half a second to recognize that one of them is, in fact, my mother.

“Shit. Shit, shit, shit.”

I button the night shirt I borrowed from Tate, then place one foot on the carpet to find pants or at least *underwear*, but before I have the chance, my mother knocks twice, and then pops her head into the room. So, my only option is to tuck the covers tight around my legs and hope for the best.

She flashes a cautious smile and the one I return feels identical.

“Hey,” she says, and her voice sounds softer than usual. Softer than I *expected*, which I interpret to mean she pities me. Still, that doesn’t mean she isn’t also angry.

“Hey,” I say back.

It’s difficult to maintain eye contact when I’m certain all she sees when she looks at me is me getting fucked by Tate in a public restroom.

Shame.

Guilt.

I look away, hearing Tate and Rob having what sounds like a civilized conversation on the other side of the door, although it’s too quiet to make out actual words.

“How you holding up?” Mom asks.

The question brings back the memory of what happened with undesired clarity, and my eyes slam shut.

“Fine, I guess.”

She takes a step into the room, and I hug myself a little tighter, only now thinking I should’ve gotten out of Tate’s bed for this conversation. But here’s hoping she thinks he’s been sleeping on the couch. Which, for the record, he has not.

“I’ve been trying to call, but you haven’t picked up.”

I shrug, feeling the sting of tears as I recall the whole sordid incident. “Haven’t felt much like talking.”

She takes a few more steps in, then lowers to sit on the corner of the bed.

“Listen, Stevie, I—”

“I’m so, *so* sorry,” I say, accidentally overtalking her. “You first.”

She repositions herself so she’s staring at me fully. “There’s no need to apologize. I’m not angry.”

My gaze lifts to meet hers when she says that, because how could she *not* be? “Mom, I ruined your party. It’s okay to be upset. And... all those people.”

At the thought of it, I hide my face in my hands.

“*All those people* were drunk, Stevie. Half of them probably didn’t even remember where they’d been the night before by the time they woke up.” She laughs and it eases my mind some to know this isn’t an act she’s putting on.

Her lips purse together, and now she’s the one looking away. “It was hard to understand at first,” she admits, “but I think I get it now. I mean, you and Tate are both young, attractive, good-natured people. And, I can imagine you two maybe experimenting once or twice.”

She shifts uncomfortably with those words, and she isn’t the only one.

“Mom, I... It wasn’t just that one time,” I admit. “And it wasn’t just experimenting. I... there are feelings involved. *Mutual* feelings.”

I clasp my hands in my lap, unsure why I felt the need to explain this, but I guess it’s so she doesn’t think the pull between us is strictly physical. It’s deeper than that, and only a few moments ago, we expressed just *how much* deeper.

She clears her throat. “Oh, I see.”

I watch her body language to see if it gives anything away. Like, if she’s angry now, but I don’t notice any real change.

“And Vince? Did you end things before you and Tate started... you know?”

I swallow deeply and look down at my hands, knowing the truth would be too difficult for her to understand. That Vince

knows and accepts that I love them all.

“It’s... complicated. *Very* complicated, but we keep the lines of communication clear.”

Mom’s head tilts, maybe wondering how in the hell Vince knows, wondering how I can be so level-headed about it, but she wouldn’t get it even if I tried breaking it down. So, I leave her confused and questioning me with her stare.

She leans in, placing her hand on mine. “You’re not alone in whatever you’re feeling right now. Not sure if you know this, but I’ve had a recent experience in humiliation myself,” she jokes. “It may or may not have involved my daughter discovering just how incredibly flawed I am.”

Our eyes lock, and I see water pooling in hers. “Dusty.”

She nods, offering a sad smile. “You have no idea the shame I feel for having kept that from you, Stevie. I will *never* forgive myself.”

My brow furrows. “Why not? I meant it when I said *I* forgive you. There’s no reason for you to hold onto that, Mom. We all make mistakes. Obviously,” I add with a small laugh. “Yeah, some are bigger than others, but that’s just life. We’re human and flawed and just trying to do the best we can.”

She stares a moment, searching my face, and then she leans in for a hug. “I’m having the hotel look into the camera footage to see if we can sort out who did this,” she says, squeezing me tighter. “They have to pay for what they did to my little girl. I’ll keep you posted if anything comes of the investigation.”

I nod against her shoulder, wanting to tell her who I suspect is behind *everything*, but fear of being wrong again stops me. Or perhaps it’s fear of further provoking Frank than I already have.

So, instead, “Thank you,” is my only reply.

Her hand moves in slow circles over my back. “Of course.”

She releases me and stands. There's a very noticeable weight lifted from my shoulders, and I find myself wishing I'd picked up the phone and had this conversation sooner. No, it doesn't erase what happened, but it sure as hell makes me feel like I might not've ruined everything.

"How did Rob take it?" I ask, which has her turning to face me again.

"He's a guy," she says with a laugh. "Once he realized I was okay with it, he changed topics. Actually, I distinctly recall him moving on to talk about another house he and Tate are trying to acquire."

I laugh, imagining how easy going he must've been during that conversation. This definitely could've gone worse. And best of all, now they know.

I peer up as Mom watches me, her eyes softening. "I love you, sweetheart. And nothing will ever change that."

"I love you, too."

With that, she leaves the room, latching the door behind her, then Tate joins me a few minutes later, after seeing our parents out.

He smiles when he lays eyes on me, likely noting that I'm slightly less distraught about how things played out.

"Good talk?" he asks.

I nod. "Far better than I imagined."

He drops down onto the bed, and I resume my position at his side, beneath his arm, my head on his shoulder.

"I told her how we feel," I admit, holding my breath because I only now realized that might not be what he wanted.

"I told my father that I'm in love with you, so... I guess we effectively brought them up to speed."

I laugh and can't help but imagine the conversation those two must be having while they drive home. But I find myself not really caring all that much now that I know we don't have to hide and be ashamed of what we feel.

Tate kisses my forehead, and I grab the back of his neck, taking his lips instead. “I love you, Mr. Ford.”

He smiles into our kiss this time, pulling me even closer. “And I’m completely obsessed with you, so love doesn’t even begin to cover it.”

My face aches when I grin harder than what should be humanly possible, and then I let him lay me on my back, kissing his way down my body when he unbuttons the night shirt I borrowed. He dips his tongue into my pussy, only to realize I’m already wet for him. He rises to his knees, pushing the waistband of his sweats down his toned thighs with urgency. I stare down my torso, focused on where he aligns his cock with my pussy, and then sinks inside me with a groan.

I’ve been fucked by Tate before, but I now know what it feels like for Tate to *make love* to me. And as he quickly brings us both to orgasm, and I push my fingers across the back of his neck, there’s a completeness within me, knowing I have all their love, and they have mine.

I clench around Tate’s dick as I cry out, and he empties into me while Micah’s declaration from the other night rings inside my head. He called our unit of five a family, and as Tate’s body tenses in pleasure, I think I finally understand what was meant by that.

We’re locked in, bonded, and nothing in this entire world could ever change that.

Nothing.

Ever.

Stevie

Rob's best man concludes his speech, and glasses clink together when he proposes a toast in closing. I lock eyes with Tate a few seats down the table. Only my mother and his father are seated between us. We both sip the sparkling cider that was served to every table before the speech began, and I definitely wish it were something stronger.

Today's been... interesting. The wedding went off without a hitch, but there were whispers. Those who weren't at the rehearsal dinner had spoken to someone who was, which meant news of mine and Tate's video debut spread like wildfire. I didn't hear any of the commentary in detail, but I can imagine some of what might've come up.

But today isn't about me, isn't about Tate. It's about Mom and Rob.

They've been grinning at each other all day—through the ceremony, as the crowd received them and blew bubbles as they walked to their limo, and even as they ate dinner, sharing their first meal as a married couple. In approximately forty-five minutes, they'll be making their planned exit, stopping off in the changing room to switch into travel attire, before hopping on a plane headed to Barbados. There, they have a two-week vacation planned where I *hope* they forget everyone and everything not on that island even exists.

Which is exactly the way it should be, because they deserve it.

I look at Mom, finding it impossible not to smile as I watch her. She looks like a dream, wearing the simple, yet elegant white dress she chose months ago. Her hair's pulled into a wispy bun with small flowers arranged around it, and her cheeks tinge pink. Not from the light dusting of blush the makeup artist smoothed on, but because she's incredibly happy and can't stop smiling tonight. I don't blame her. She found the love of her life, and for the first time in a long time, she's settled and at peace.

I may not have always believed she deserved that, but that may have been a little self-righteous of me. She's my mother. Nowhere has it ever been written that this title is synonymous with perfection. The only requirement is that she love me and act in my best interest. Even if those decisions aren't always the *right* decisions. Still, I couldn't have made a better choice than to forgive her and move on. If we hadn't mended the bridge between us, I would've missed all this, and that would've been a tragedy.

Tate's eyes are still on mine at first, but when his gaze rises over my shoulder, and his smile fades a little, I can't help but to follow his line of sight.

Right to Maddox.

There's a sour feeling that twists in my gut at the site of him. It's been several weeks since we've spoken, and I honestly thought he'd skip today, despite Mom having sent him an invitation. She had no idea about the drama between us, so I don't blame her. But Maddox? He definitely should've known better than to show his face here tonight. Even if there are only minutes of the celebration left.

"Excuse me," I say to mom, hiding my true thoughts behind a smile.

She takes my hand when I place it on her shoulder, kissing it before she lets me go.

With my dress hiked in my fists, I cross the banquet hall, flashing more fake smiles as I pass friends of the family and relatives on my way to launch a verbal attack on my former best friend.

“What the hell are you doing here?”

Maddox takes several steps back as I stomp toward him. Eventually, we’re outside the double-doors again, standing in the lobby where we’re alone for now.

“I was invited.”

“Yes, and when we stopped being friends, I assumed you knew that meant you were *uninvited*.”

He scoffs at something I’ve said. “We’re still friends, Stevie. You’re just pissed at me.”

“Pissed? Are you fucking kidding me? That doesn’t even *begin* to cover what I feel toward you, Maddox. You fucked my sister, then lied to me about it! And don’t even get me started on all the secrets you kept. Secrets that could’ve actually helped me, at that!”

He lowers his head as if hearing me say it out loud has him reliving it all again.

“You should go.”

I turn on my heels, expecting to hear him exit behind me, but instead, I hear one word... “No.”

Sighing, I close my eyes. “Maddox—”

“Ok, yes, I fucked up. *Big* time,” he adds, “but there’s no way you’re willing to just say you’re done with me. No way you’re willing to forget all the times we were there for each other when no one else even gave a shit what we were going through.”

I don’t speak, seeing those moments he’s just spoken of flash inside my thoughts.

“You were a good friend until you weren’t.”

“No, I’m *still* a good friend, your *best* friend,” he reiterates, “which is why I’m asking you... no, *begging* you to

forgive me, Stevie. I know what I did was inexcusable. I know it's forever changed the way you look at me, but... I think we're better than this. We're better than letting a mistake—although a huge one—ruin years of what we built.”

I don't turn to face him, but I hear his louder-than-usual breaths as he stands there, awaiting my answer.

My head lowers, thinking about my own recent offense, a relationship I kept secret that someone I loved might not've approved of. And whether I like it or not, I soften toward him. Just a little.

When I sigh and cross my arms over my chest, he takes a step closer, but doesn't try to touch or hug me, which I'm grateful for.

“Stevie, please.”

I swallow deeply, and the motion seems to take some of my pride with it. “Fine,” I concede. “Stay, but no promises.”

“I'm good with that.”

“And this doesn't mean we're friends again. In fact, I can almost guarantee things will never be what they were, but...”

When my voice trails off, he finishes my thought. “But you're willing to give me a chance? See where this goes?”

I straighten my posture, pursing my lips before giving an answer.

“Yes.”

He breathes an audible sigh of relief behind me, making it clear how he's been carrying this, how it's weighed on him.

My phone goes off in the pocket of my dress, and I glance at the screen, feeling my stomach churn at the sight of the word *Unavailable* flashing across it.

“I guess I'll see you inside,” Maddox says, touching my shoulder briefly as he heads into the reception without me, having no clue how my heart's racing right now.

At first, I'm comforted that it's only a text message this time and not a call. But then I realize I've been sent an image

and that all changes. Before I've even gotten the nerve to open the *first* one, another pushes through, and my phone lights up again and again as it floods with this sick bastards messages.

My hands shake so badly, I'm hardly able to unlock my phone. I'm not immediately certain what I'm looking at, but then awareness sets in. The pictures... they're pages from a diary.

Mel's diary.

I'd recognize those lavender, butterfly-printed pages anywhere, because I'm the one who bought it for her. Feeling faint, I stagger back until my back touches the wall. My eyes scan the pages, seeing my sister's words spilling out in her own handwriting.

For a moment, I actually believe my heart might stop as one passage in particular stands out to me. She seems surprisingly upbeat, positive. Two things I hadn't seen a lot from her near the end. But... according to this, she felt herself coming out of a long stint of depression, stating that she's ready to tell "M" that they're either together out in the open, or not at all. She expressed that she was "finding her voice", and was beginning to consider finally going to the cops to tell them what happened to her that fateful night. Although, in the very next breath, she expressed doubt that they'd believe her over her attacker. But even with that crippling doubt, she seemed determined.

I continue reading, feeling the confused scowl on my face, all as I'm trying to reconcile these words with the fact that she committed suicide soon after they were written. It just doesn't quite add up. Especially when she says in her own words: *For the first time in a long time, I want to live again.* She went on to write out an enthusiastic—although half-assed—plan for joining me at the college I'd chosen, someplace she'd have a fresh start. She mentioned maybe dragging Nora along, kicking and screaming if she had to, but again... these don't sound like the words of a girl content on giving up on everything and everyone she'd ever known.

They sound like hope and excitement.

They sound like... life.

I clasp a hand over my mouth and tears stream down my fingers.

Another text comes through, but it isn't a picture this time. It's instructions, a promise to reveal himself, a promise to tell me everything, but only if I make a promise of my own. I have to come alone.

I stare at those words for several seconds, but don't respond. It's tempting to go, to have all my questions answered, but I won't risk my life for that.

Stevie: Go fuck yourself, you psycho. I'm not coming, and I'm also going to the police.

My heart races as I realize I actually mean that, terrified what it could mean for the boys and me if we do, but I have to trust that justice will prevail. I *have* to.

Because that's all I have.

Unavailable: Might want to reconsider that.

The response has my thoughts slipping back to Frank, wondering if the reason he suggests that I 'reconsider' is because they'd never believe me over him.

Stevie: Fuck. You.

I lower my phone, panting for air as I pace, lifting my phone again when he responds.

Unavailable: You should seriously think things over.

An image pops up and I fall against the wall again, recognizing the girl in the picture even without seeing her face. It's Nora. And from the looks of things, she's doped up on something, and there are so many cuts and bruises on her arms. As I stare at the still of her, unconscious, vulnerable, it's impossible not to see her life laid out over my sister's. I wasn't there to save Mel—whether she took her own life or there were other circumstances surrounding her death.

But things are different this time.

For starters, I'm here, I'm aware, and I can do something about it.

Stevie: Where?

Unavailable: The last place you saw your sister outside of a casket.

Unavailable: Park someplace else and leave your phone. I know someone tracks you, and I swear to you, Stevie, if I so much as SUSPECT for a single second that you've breathed a word of this to anyone, especially the cops, the whole house goes up in flames. With me inside. With Nora inside. And whatever answers you want to your questions about Mel. Don't test me.

My heart drops, and I accept the reality I'm facing. Mel loved Nora. No, not in the way that Nora loved *her*, but it was real, and it was deep. And while I missed my first opportunity, it isn't lost on me that another chance to right my wrong may have just dropped right into my lap.

I have to do this.

I have to try.

And... I have to do it on my own.

Stevie

With everything in me, I know I shouldn't have come alone.

My mind races, thinking of how things could've played out if I ignored the very specific instructions I was given. But every scenario ends badly, which means this was the only way.

One misstep could cost Nora her life.

A chill races down my spine, and it has little to do with the frigid temperature as I walk from where I left my car hidden around the corner to the front porch of my old house. I imagine Nora being at the mercy of the man who chased and attacked her and Mel just over a year ago.

Did he touch her again?

Is she even still alive?

Am I walking to my own death?

My steps slow, but I don't stop. If Nora were Mel, I'd want someone to at least *try* to save her. Even if the odds of them being successful were incredibly slim.

It isn't lost on me that I'm in the worst possible scenario. I stashed my phone in the lobby at the banquet hall, so I can't call anyone, and the boys won't know where to find me. I changed into clothes I'd left in my car, so I'm at least mildly prepared for whatever awaits me, and I'm armed with the gun Dusty insisted I take. However, I barely know how to use it.

But despite the odds, I'm here, rounding the back of my childhood home, trying the knob to the back door.

There's this sinking feeling in my gut when the knob twists all the way and the hinges squeak. It's completely dark inside, and eerily empty now that Mom cleared it of all our things right before it sold. Taking a step inside, I'm reminded of the many, *many* reasons I hate it here. It still looks and smells like home, but it never felt that way after we lost Mel. The thought of her has me recalling the images I was just sent, the snapshots of her diary, leaving me to wonder, again, if we had the wrong idea about her death all this time. And honestly, thinking she might've been taken from us instead of choosing to leave on her own... somehow stings even more.

I swipe away a tear as I take more steps, needing my vision and my head as clear as possible. I'm already at a massive disadvantage, so the more aware I am of my surroundings, the better.

The sound of my echoing steps is unnerving, making me breathe loudly as I walk deeper into the house, only stopping when I spot something on the floor. Carefully, and after surveying my surroundings, I stoop down to investigate.

Pictures cut into pieces. Pictures I soon realize are all images of my sister. They create a trail leading toward the basement door, which is partially open, but completely dark on the other side. My heart hammers inside my chest and, for a fraction of a second, I consider running. It'd be so easy to just turn and leave, call the police and let whoever this bastard is burn himself alive in this place like he threatened to do. The world would be better off without him.

But... Nora.

And, as he pointed out, he's got all the answers, the keys to all the doors that have been locked for me over the past year. So, I stand again, focusing on the basement door as I head that way, praying like hell that this somehow goes in my favor.

The door creaks open like a true haunted house, not just one with *memories* that haunt me. The bulb at the top of the steps stays dormant when I flip the switch, which means there's no power. And without my cell handy, I'm also without a flashlight.

Nice.

I take the first step with caution, listening for any sign of life, any clue as to what I'm walking into. It takes a moment for my eyes to adjust to the darkness, and I realize there's faint light coming from somewhere off to the right, likely around the corner and near the back wall. It isn't a comforting realization. I'm still walking into a trap. One laid by a certified psychopath.

But Nora needs me.

A surge of bravery fills me and, for a moment, my throat relaxes from feeling completely seized when I first walked in, and I call out to her.

"Nora!"

My steps halt while I listen harder, and if my ears aren't deceiving me, I heard a faint groan from the same direction as the dim light. But that's it. Nothing else. I can feel every beat of my heart at the thought of her still being alive.

Maybe there's a chance.

Maybe, by some small miracle, we'll both walk out of here today.

Maybe.

I put one foot in front of the other, forcing myself to keep moving forward, even if my gut's telling me to stop, telling me to turn back. But just then, I hear another distressed groan, and I know I can't stop now.

My shoes touch concrete again, and I feel completely exposed now that I've reached the bottom. A few steps more, and I spot the source of the dim light—a single candle. A candle illuminating Nora's silhouette. She's seated in a chair, tied down, her head hanging in the crook of her shoulder,

barely conscious. Instinct urges me to rush toward her, but wisdom is the reason I take my time, doing my best to see through the darkness, knowing the man who ruined my life could be lurking anywhere.

My hands shake, and my throat throbs with the need to call out to Nora again, but fear's stolen my voice. I take one more step, with maybe ten feet separating me from her, when I spot something at the far wall. That lone candle was sitting at the base of something. Something I can only call a... shrine.

"Go on. Get closer. Take a look," a voice calls out. It came from some unseen place, prompting me to spin in that direction, but it's far too dark to distinguish a figure from the shadows. But one thing is abundantly clear to me.

That voice does not belong to Frank.

"Who's there?"

Dark laughter fills the space around me, a sound so deep and menacing, my skin prickles with goosebumps. "One thing at a time," he says, and I try my best to place his voice to identify him, but I fail. "Take a look," he repeats. "It took me a long time to put it together."

My gaze shifts back to the shrine, and I'm terrified to even move at this point.

"I thought we talked about the importance of you doing as you're told."

I breathe deeply, doing my best to push past the fear holding me in place. It takes a few seconds to get up the nerve to put one foot in front of the other, but when I do, I rush toward the shrine, seeking comfort in the sparse trace of light glowing from the candle. First, I glance over my shoulder, expecting this piece of shit to chase after me, but he doesn't. A quick sweep proves that it's still just me and Nora.

I face the shrine next, and my eyes roam the collection of pictures and trinkets scattered across a makeshift altar. I feel sick to my stomach as I view pictures of Mel, realizing he's also collected some of her personal items. Her hairbrush, a bottle of her nail polish, her retainer, a stuffed animal, a tube

of lipstick, a pair of her underwear, her diary, and the matching ink pen with a spring-mounted butterfly on the end.

When did he take these?

Have they been missing since we first lost her?

It's honestly such a blur, which leaves me to wonder if they were taken before or after her passing. But in either case, the bigger question is... how?

How did he get close enough to take *any* of these things?

For a moment, this question looms over my head, but then I remember how he got to Nora, snuck in and stole some of her belongings, stole her roommates' belongings. This is his thing, and he's apparently really good at it.

The sick fuck.

I scan the items again, spotting things I hadn't noticed before. He's got pictures of Nora, pictures of *me*, proof that he's been following me for at least as long as I've suspected, but likely longer.

I think back to that night at the skate rink, when I swore someone had snuck in and was coming after me. I'd convinced myself I was just paranoid and losing my shit, but now I'm even more convinced it was him.

"It's quite the collection, isn't it?" he says, speaking from the shadows again. "I like to think of it as a labor of love."

His use of that word... *love*... it has my blood boiling. I'm tempted to lash out, but I catch myself, knowing that would be an incredibly reckless move. My gaze shifts to Nora, taking note of her condition. Blood oozes from a cut above her eye, and from another on her jawline, but she doesn't appear to be harmed otherwise as she blinks slowly, fighting for consciousness. A swatch of silver tape covers her mouth, and her clothes don't appear to be torn. Aside from a few dirt smudges, they're intact, which gives me hope that he hasn't assaulted her again.

How long has she been here? How long has she been like this—drugged, gagged, and bound? Wondering if anyone

would ever come for her?

“Ok, so you got your way. I’m here,” I seethe, keeping my eyes trained on Nora. “I’ve seen your fucking shrine, now let me get her out of here and—”

“But you’ve got so many questions,” he cuts in, debris from the aged cement floor crunching beneath the soles of his shoes. “It’d be a shame to think that you came all this way, all the way back home, and didn’t ask me a single thing. Wouldn’t it?”

I swallow deeply, hating that he’s made Nora and I a part of his disgusting game, but I know what it’ll take to come even remotely close to getting us both out of here alive.

“Fine, you want me to ask you questions? I’ll ask questions,” I say through gritted teeth. “Why her? Why my sister?”

He laughs and the sound of it sends a chill racing up my spine. “Because Mel was a forgotten girl, Stevie. But it all worked out. You and your family might not have seen her, but I did.”

Those words are like a knife right to my heart, thinking that anyone would consider Mel ‘forgotten.’ I fight the swell of emotion that makes more tears sting my eyes. In a nutshell, my sister was bleeding in open water, and he was the fucking shark that caught her scent.

“You’re a lying piece of shit,” I hiss. “My sister was loved.”

“Maybe,” he says casually. “But she was nowhere *near* as loved as you are, isn’t that right? With all your boys always around you, always with their hands on you... *in* you,” he adds with a sickening laugh.

“Fuck you.”

“Let’s be honest Stevie, you haven’t got time to fuck anyone else,” he says, still sounding amused. “Tempting offer, though. Don’t think for one moment that I don’t want to say yes. From what I’ve seen of your... *performances*... you’d show me a hell of a time.”

My eyes fall closed, and I recall his comments flooding Vince's DMs after our last livestream, remembering how exposed and humiliated I felt, how it broke me hearing the things about my sister, all tying back to his reasoning tonight.

He considered her to be a forgotten girl, someone no one loved, someone no one looked after.

A hand pulls my hair behind my ear, and I gasp, shifting to turn when I realize he's so close. However, a powerful grip on both my shoulders stops me.

"Not yet," he whispers, forcing me to settle for his voice when all I want, all I've *ever* wanted, is to see his face. "Ask another." His tone is smug, frustratingly calm.

I swallow my pride, biting back the words I'd rather say, posing another question instead.

"I know you were the one. I know you attacked me that night." I'm panting as the memory returns, playing inside my head like a bad movie.

"That's not a question."

"Fine. Why? Why take me? Why beat me? Why not... why didn't you..."

"Why didn't I kill you?" He finishes my thought so casually. As casually as someone might ask the time or where they can grab a good cup of coffee.

"Yes," I answer gritting my teeth. "Why'd you let me live?"

He's quiet, and I can only imagine he's giving the question some thought. "I took you because I thought it'd teach you a lesson, thought it'd show you why you shouldn't be fucking with me," he forces out, but then his tone mellows. "But then I tried a different approach, which was to show you how easily I could dig into *your* life. Why do you think I crashed your livestream session? Or shared that *incredible* video footage from that café rendezvous with your mom?"

"To make me back off?"

“Yes!” he answers with a laugh, shaking his head. “But you’re extremely fucking persistent, and every time I lifted my head, you were still there, still... fucking... digging.”

Yeah, dickhead, because my sister was loved. She wasn’t some fucking forgotten girl.

“And as to why I didn’t kill you, I suppose the only explanation is that... I didn’t want to. The thought of you being dead didn’t appeal to me nearly as much as keeping you alive. Not at *that* time, anyway.”

He touches the side of my neck lightly again, and I cringe, shrinking away from the contact.

“Another,” he beckons, and I’ve accepted that I’ve got no choice but to play the role of his puppet.

“How did you find Nora when she changed facilities?”

“Ah, that was a cinch,” he brags. “My credentials made it embarrassingly simple to move freely in her world—among the troubled, the tormented.”

There’s a hint of amusement in his tone, but I’m focused on the words themselves.

His... *credentials*?

It takes me a moment to piece it together, but then I have it. And when I turn to face him this time, he doesn’t stop me. The smile on his face tells me he let me turn because he wants to look into my eyes, wants me to see the wickedness in his.

“Josh.” His name falls from my lips in a whisper. Understanding sets in, the realization that he had full access to my sister, details about her home life, and so much more was right at his fingertips. She had every reason to trust in him... right up until she didn’t.

My mind races, backtracking the wide range of information I’ve gathered over the past several months. I lock in on the first time I even learned Josh existed. Although, I had no clue who he was at the time, only that my sister had started seeing the school psychologist to work through some

emotional issues. It was Tori who first mentioned it, without either of us realizing that we had him.

The real source of Mel's pain.

All this time, Josh had been the villain in my sister's story, and she died without ever feeling safe enough to utter his name.

"Surprise," he grins, and my stomach turns, processing how this new information changes *everything*.

An angry tear slips down my cheek, and I hold his gaze, unable to blink. "She trusted you. A person in your position is supposed to *help* people, not exploit their weaknesses, you fucking piece of shit! How could you take advantage of her like that?"

His blank stare infuriates me, painting him in the light of a true sociopath—lacking any trace of remorse.

"Has anyone ever told you how ungrateful you are?" he asks, and I take a step back, only for him to take one forward.

"Yeah, well, you're insane. Has anyone ever told you that?"

He recoils at my use of the word insane, and I almost regret using it.

"Stevie, I *spared* you," he says, and if I'm not mistaken, he thinks I should be thanking him. "I mean, not only did I let you live that night, I took care of you."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

He shakes his head, seemingly in disbelief. "Who do you think took care of that bitchy roommate you hated?"

My gaze lowers when he refers to Dahlia. While I knew he was responsible for her death, it's shockingly surreal to hear him admit to it.

"You murdering her was *not* for me. That was because you're fucking evil."

He cocks his head as confusion fills his eyes.

“No, I finished her because she was a bigger problem than you realized. A bigger problem than *any* of you realized. After your boys took her out to the woods that night, humiliated her, made her walk in the cold, she wasn’t going to just... stop,” he says with a laugh. “If anything, she was going to get worse. If I hadn’t stopped her, she would’ve retaliated out of revenge. And she wouldn’t have targeted your beloved frat house fuckboys, Stevie. She would’ve targeted *you*. How can you not see that?”

He’s... justifying it. Justifying that he followed her to those train tracks, that he set her on fire, ended her life.

“Ungrateful,” he mutters to himself, not blinking once as he stares me down. “After all I did for you, hoping you’d just... see. But I should’ve known. Mel didn’t get it either.”

He shakes his head, seeming to have some sort of revelation.

“I mean, why the hell do you think I bought this fucking house?”

My brow quirks when he says it. I thought he’d simply broken in, brought me here as an ironic gesture, but never in a million years did I think this lunatic had actually purchased the house.

“You what?”

His eyes dart toward me, and I can’t even begin to comprehend. “I got it so I could feel close to her, close to you,” he adds. “Kristy and I have even chosen which room will be the baby’s nursery.”

I don’t have to guess if he mean’s Mel’s room. His obsession with her makes that a no-brainer.

“Turns out, this place is perfect for a family our size, and it’s got plenty of room for when we decide to grow. And as you can probably guess, considering the tragedy that occurred here last year, we got it for a steal.”

He laughs and I clench my fists. “You’re fucking sick. I—”

Josh's head cocks and the unhinged look in his eyes steals the words right out of my mouth.

"Sick?" he says sharply, holding my gaze. "No, Stevie, what I am is committed. I fix people's problems for a living, so when I see someone I think I can fix... they become my focus."

"You mean they become your obsession, and you stalk them."

He flinches at that word, and I guess I've hit another nerve.

"Your sister, she wouldn't... what's the word. *Yield*," he finally says, deciding that's the proper word. "And I've learned that you're no different."

My heart races, having no idea what any of this means. But to me, it equals darkness and death, because that's all I've known him to bring into anyone's life.

"Your wife," I say quietly, remembering her kind face, her growing stomach. "She'll be devastated when she finds out what you've done. And trust me, she *will* find out. I don't care how well you think you've covered your tracks, this won't stay hidden."

He's quiet. For long enough that I think I may have truly gotten to him, but then his voice rings out again.

"You won't likely believe this, but despite what you've dreamt up about me, it was never my intention to hurt your sister. But she was just so... set in her ways. If you ask me, her friends were to blame. They had this tight, toxic hold on her that was completely impenetrable. It didn't matter what I said, she just kept doing all the wrong things—drinking, drugs, slutting herself out for that weak little shit she was seeing. Despite my telling her it was *you* he really wanted, despite him being too ashamed of her to even let her tell anyone they were dating."

An image of Maddox flashes in my head when he refers to him, and it seems I'm not the only one who despised that connection.

"I couldn't change her."

My brow tenses at his choice of words. “It wasn’t your job to change her. It was your job to *help* her, but instead you took advantage of her and—”

“And what?”

There’s a glimmer of hope in his eyes, as if he wants to hear me say it. As if he wants to hear me say out loud that I now believe that he... that he...

“You’ll feel better once you get it out. Once you say the words out loud. Trust me,” he croons.

“The one thing I will *never* do is trust you.”

Another dark laugh bellows from his throat and it sends a rush of terror shooting through me. He stares, and his eyes are empty, soulless.

He circles me slowly. “You’re all beyond saving. Especially *this* one.” He nods toward Nora, and when he kicks the leg of her chair, she groans again. Then, his gaze shifts right back to me.

My heart’s racing, and I can’t hold off asking any longer. Despite knowing he wants nothing more than to hear these words leave my mouth.

“Did you kill my sister? Did you take her life, and then make it look like a suicide?”

Fighting a smile, he cocks his head. “Trick question.”

“That’s actually a very *direct* question. Did you fucking kill my sister or didn’t you?”

Hot tears race down my face, and I don’t bother wiping them.

“Mmm... we’ll go with ‘yes’, but... didn’t we all kind of kill Mel? You? Your parents. Her friends? The asshole boyfriend? Don’t you see that, Stevie? Mel’s death was a... collaboration. I mean, sure, yes, I’m the one who slid the razor through her wrists, but we *all* played our parts. All of us.”

The proverbial knife twists again, cutting deeper.

“No, we were there for her. We—”

“Failed? Let her die miserable and alone? Yes, you definitely did all of those things.”

More tears rush from my eyes, and I don't miss how they feed his darkness, making it grow within him by the second.

“You know this doesn't end well for you, don't you?”

He steps closer, and I back up, finally snapping out of the guilt-induced stupor that nearly made me forget I'm in mortal danger.

“You're wrong. I called the cops. They'll be here any minute.”

He laughs. “Stevie, if you'd called someone, they would've already been here. Just admit that you obeyed my wishes. You came here tonight without telling a soul, and now you'll die here, in this house, just like your sister did a year ago. Honestly, if you think about it, it's not only ironic... it's beautiful.”

I take another step back, only stopping because my heel catches the corner of the altar, causing it to topple. Josh's eyes widen as the items scatter across the basement floor, and while he's distracted, I reach to the back of my waistband, gripping the cool steel handle.

Josh stops with little less than two feet of space between us, hands raised, staring down the barrel of Dusty's gun. For the first time tonight, I don't feel completely helpless. And the look of surprise in Josh's eyes doesn't suck either.

Beside him, Nora's eyes are finally open, and although she's still a little out of it, she recognizes me, and relief hits her so powerfully, she tears up. I stay focused, though, ignoring the fact that I want nothing more than to comfort her, tell her this nightmare could very well be over soon.

“Ok, let's talk this through,” Josh says, and I can't help but to feel like he's about to try to deploy some of his professional tactics to get inside my head. “You don't have it in you to shoot me. It's not as easy as it looks.”

“Really? Pretty sure I just release the safety, like this, then aim and shoot your ass.”

He glances down at the gun again when the safety clicks.

“Easy,” he warns, and my heart races when his foot moves, bringing him one step closer.

“Back... the fuck... off. Let me get Nora out of here safely, and I’ll consider not blowing a hole in your damn skull.”

He eyes the gun again, and at the exact time he lunges for it, I pull the trigger, hitting his shoulder when he pushes me off balance, knocking the gun to the floor.

We both dive to the cement, scrambling for the pistol. I’m about a foot closer to where it’s landed, but there’s no chance of reaching it when Josh climbs on top of me, flipping me onto my back before pinning my wrists to the ground. Blood pours from his shoulder, soaking the sleeve of his gray t-shirt, racing down his bicep in thin, red streams.

“Fucking bitch. You really thought you could get away from me that easily?” he teases. “If your sister’s death should’ve taught you anything, it’s that I’m inescapable. She ran her little heart out, but in the end, I trapped you both using the same bait.”

Laughing, he peers up at Nora, who’s now crying an entire river as she struggles against the ropes around her wrists and ankles, watching as I writhe beneath Josh. Then, she shrieks in horror when his hands move to my neck. Air sputters from my mouth, and my hands flail wildly as panic sets in. Clawing at his face and arms does nothing. If anything, he grows angrier, which makes him squeeze harder. It doesn’t take long for my vision to start growing dim. Nora’s desperate sobs are the soundtrack to my death as I stare up at Josh’s face, his jaw tense as he squeezes harder. So hard a vein in the center of his forehead protrudes and throbs, matching the intensity of his fury.

I’m hit with the notion that his twisted, rage-filled expression was the visual that accompanied my sister into death, and now... it’ll be mine. Nora shouts again, screaming despite the tape covering her mouth, and I can’t help but wish

I could apologize to her, tell her I'm sorry I didn't get here sooner, sorry I couldn't do more to save her, save *us*.

She screams out again and it's a desperate, blood-curdling sound, one so disturbing and pleading that it startles me back to consciousness. But my strength is waning, which becomes evident when my hands are no longer raised in defense, but have fallen to my sides in defeat. The scattered collection of the shrine lie beneath me, and I find it oddly comforting to be surrounded by my sisters things as I slip away, my fingers twitching as the last ounce of strength starts to fade.

The room's just gone black when Nora shouts at me, and I flinch awake again, my eyes widening, my hands pushing against the cement floor. It's purely a reaction of shock, but... this time... I feel something. An item beneath my hand that I hadn't noticed before. It's long and cylindrical, and small enough to wrap my fingers around, so I do. And with the last of my strength, I raise it at full force, aiming right for the side of Josh's neck.

At first, I'm dazed, focused on the tiny butterfly bouncing near his throat, which is when I become aware of what's happened. It was Mel's pen. That tiny object I stabbed toward Josh's neck. Blood gurgles in his throat as he abandons me to tend to his wound, stunned as he rolls off of me. He pulls the pen out, which proves to be a mistake when blood spurts from the opening, gushing between his fingers as he squeezes and turns onto his stomach. He crawls away, likely headed for the basement steps, but I can't let him go. If he makes it there, he'll lock Nora and I down here while he goes for help. And if that happens, we're still as good as dead.

Still mostly out of it from nearly losing consciousness, I grab Josh's legs, and I climb the length of him, not stopping until I'm on his back, and I'm able to lace my fingers around his throat. From this angle, he isn't exactly flexible, so as I pull back, forcing him to arch, he loses strength and finally, *finally*... I've got the upper hand.

He attempts to grab my hands, force them apart, but with the amount of blood covering us both, he doesn't stand a chance. I'm distinctly aware of how he's got a little less fight

in him with each passing second, but I don't let up. I won't until I know he's dead and I can get Nora out safely.

In a completely unexpected twist, tears stream down my face in sheets as emotion after emotion rises within me like the tide. Mostly, it's knowing that none of this will bring my sister back, but at least I can say I ended this for her. Ended it for me, my family, ended it for Nora.

A loud gasp rushes from my mouth when it dawns on me that he's no longer moving. It's as if a switch flips, and it hits me that I've just... I've just...

Oh, God.

I recoil, climbing off of him, wiping his blood on my shirt as I scoot across the basement floor, wanting as much space between him and me as possible. Heavy sobs choke out of me, and I can't see through the tears, and all sound is in a vacuum as I stare at Josh's lifeless body, knowing I did what had to be done, but...

Oh, God.

Nora's voice fades in from the nothingness, and I rush to her, ripping the tape from her mouth, casting a look toward Josh every few seconds, making sure he isn't moving, isn't coming after us. Nora can't even form words with how she's panting and crying, having been through the second most horrific ordeal of her life.

"It's okay. We'll be out of here in a second," I say through my own sniffling.

My hands are practically vibrating as I struggle with the knots, but I eventually have her free.

Free.

We're... free.

I wasn't sure I'd get to say those words.

And as we hobble up the steps together, crying and holding one another, for the first time in a long time, I can finally, *finally* breathe, because... it's over.

Fucking.

Finally.

Stevie

Just for good measure, I close and latch the basement door behind Nora and me, imagining Josh somehow returning from the dead to climb the stairs and finish us off.

No surprises.

You can never be too sure about these things.

Clutching my shoulder, Nora limps toward the front door. Freedom lies just on the other side. With no phones, and with my car blocks away, I'm not sure what we'll do once we step out into the freezing cold, but the important thing is we're both alive to decide what those steps will be.

"Come on. I've got you."

"You came for me," she whispers, and our steps slow. "You knew you'd probably die trying to save me, and you came anyway."

More tears move down her cheeks as she considers it, that I've risked coming here. I face her, cupping her cheeks in my hands, this girl I once nearly went to jail for fighting because I was filled with so much misplaced hatred.

"Of course, I did. It's what Mel would've done."

She chokes back a sob, and our foreheads touch. I can't explain it. My body is still in fight or flight mode from the

surge of adrenaline, but I'm calm. And for the first time since my sister's death, I have... closure.

My eyes reopen when Nora chuckles. "That was fucking badass, Stevie."

Using the back of my hand to clear tears, I smile at her, still feeling Josh's slowing pulse against my palm, and then the moment when it stops.

"Yeah, badass," I echo. "Nothing a few decades of therapy won't cure."

She pulls me into a hug, and I embrace her back, tightening my grip when she does the same.

"Come on. We need to get help, and you need a doctor."

She lets go when I pat her arm, then I help her hobble across the front hall, favoring her left ankle. I can only imagine the fight she put up while being brought here, what Josh must've done to subdue her.

I twist the knob, but the second I pull the door open, what looks like an entire convoy speeds into the driveway and up to the curb in front of the house. Startled, Nora takes a step back, but when I recognize Ash's truck, and then Tate's car, I squeeze her.

"We're safe. I know them."

She glances toward me for reassurance, and then settles down. We move out onto the front porch just as sirens that were once wailing from a distance grow louder. A moment later, flashing red and blue lights color the street. The doors to the guys' vehicles swing open, then all slam shut at once.

My pulse thunders as they race toward me. Despite their speed, it feels like they're coming at me in slow motion, because they can't get here fast enough. Then, just when I think I can't take the distance any longer, I'm in their arms, completely surrounded. I smile against one of the guys' chests, feeling so many strong arms pulling me close.

One by one, they let go, giving me room to breathe.

“You had us scared shitless,” Micah says, his words riddled with emotion. I know they all have so many questions, and I’ll tell them everything.

“We thought we lost you. I mean, *really* lost you,” Vince says.

“You’re covered in blood. You’re hurt,” Ash adds.

“No, it’s not mine. I’m fine.”

I stare at their concerned faces through watery vision, remembering how one of the thoughts that came to me while I lie on the basement floor was... I’ll never have this again. I’ll never touch them again, never get to tell them I love them again.

“Your eyes. They...”

It isn’t until Micah cups my chin and stares that I realize I must look like hell. Being choked out tends to do terrible shit to the whites of a person’s eyes, so I can only imagine there are broken blood vessels.

I lower my gaze from his, hiding the damage as best as I can, but he lifts my head again, and there’s no disgust, only anger. Rage. My guess is that the only thing stopping him is that the cops are circling the house, preparing to head inside, guns drawn, ready to take down the bad guy.

Little do they know, he’s not in any position to put up a fight or dodge bullets.

“I’m fine. I’m here,” I tell him, feeling his heart in this moment, feeling him struggling with his past trauma. But the darkness in his eyes fades, and I know I’ve reached him, pulled him back like I imagine he’ll always need me to do.

“How’d you know where to find me?” I ask, lifting a hand to brush away more tears, but Vince beats me to it, moving his thumb across my cheek.

“After about the fifteenth time I called your phone, I finally stepped out into the lobby of the banquet hall to try again,” Tate says. “Your phone was ringing in a plant near the door. I rushed out to the parking lot, saw your car was gone, so

I put the guys on alert, then I... had to get your mom involved.”

My heart sinks, hearing that he had to ruin my mom’s day, but of course he had to. On cue, she pulls in behind the cops. She’s out of the car quickly, considering she’s still wearing her wedding dress, but she’s frantic, scanning the darkness for me as Rob trails her.

But then she and I lock eyes, and with her dress gathered in her fingers, she rushes over to me. I try to stop her, not wanting to ruin her gown with the blood and filth on my shirt and hands, but she doesn’t even consider it, pulling me into a tight embrace.

“Oh, thank God! You’re okay.”

More tears flow as she strokes my hair, and I nod against her shoulder. “I am.”

“Excuse us. Is there anyone else inside?”

I pull out of Mom’s arms and meet the gaze of the officer who just spoke. “Yes, but he’s... he’s not...”

“He’s fucking dead,” Nora pipes up. “Dead as a doornail. And that asshole deserved it.”

After gawking at her for a moment, the corner of my mouth curves into a smile.

The officer nods toward his comrades and they cautiously step inside, giving Mom an opening to hug me again.

“When Tate said he found your phone in the lobby, I turned on your car’s LoJack system, and we used it to track you here. I knew in my gut something was wrong, so I called Frank and told him we needed people out here.” She takes my face in her hands. “Sweetheart... what happened? Why are you... why are you *here*? Who did this to you?”

Before I’m able to answer, an EMS tech approaches and escorts Nora to the back of an ambulance.

“Mom, it’s... I’ll explain everything. Just know that I’m here for Mel. It’s *all* been for Mel.”

She studies my face, and still holding it tight, she places a kiss on my forehead.

“I’m sorry I ruined your day. It was supposed to be perfect, and I messed it up, but I—”

“Stevie, just... stop,” she says with a teary smile. “My only concern is that you’re okay. As long as that’s true, this day *is* perfect.”

I smile when she kisses my forehead again. But then, she spots Frank rushing toward Nora, likely with plans to make a huge fuss over her and ask her a million questions.

“Sweetheart, I need to speak with Frank to explain, but I’m not going anywhere.”

I nod, reassuring her with another smile. Before she goes, she takes a look at the guys, her gaze lingering on Tate and Vince in particular, and then she leaves us. I can only imagine she’s still trying to sort out how Vince allegedly knows about Tate and hasn’t left, but that’s another conversation for another day.

As she walks away, Frank and I momentarily lock eyes, and I’m hit with shame, remembering our last interaction. It all seems so stupid and half-cocked now that I know the truth. I suppose he’s the first stop on my apology tour.

A moment of privacy with the guys is actually right on time, so I face them again. They’re still so quiet, looking me over like they think I’ll crumble into a million tiny pieces right before their eyes.

“We should’ve been here. You should’ve called us, so—”

“No.” I earn myself a hard glare when I cut Ash off. “It had to be me. *Only* me. It was the only way.”

A literal chill rushes down my spine thinking of what might’ve happened to Nora if I’d deviated from Josh’s plan. From what I saw here tonight, he was just unstable enough to follow-through with every sordid threat he made. Right down to burning this place down with him and Nora both inside.

Vince pulls me into another hug, and his timing is perfect. He reached for me right when I thought I might fall apart. This night is far from over. There will be a lengthy conversation with the cops, followed by an equally lengthy conversation with the guys, explaining things right down to the smallest detail, but it's over.

Finally.

My world still feels quite surreal, but here with my boys, in their arms as they surround me... this is as real as it gets.

EPILOGUE

One month later...

Stevie

The sound of Mom and Rob belting out *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer* as they pull fresh-baked gingerbread cookies from the oven means our annual Christmas party is in full swing. Although, the guestlist looks a lot different than past years. For starters, all my boys are here—Tate, Vince, Ash, and Micah—and I have a feeling that, moving forward, *no* holiday will feel quite right without them all at my side.

Micah pulls me into his lap, and I'm grateful for the moment of privacy, a moment where I don't have to pretend there isn't any affection between us. Sitting so close, I hear the phone trilling against his ear, and his heart thrums.

"Hey, sorry I missed you," he says, brushing the pad of his thumb across my knee while his dad responds on the other end.

The conversation is only slightly stiff, as these two are just starting to chat more regularly, but the love in their words can be felt.

In the month since... well, since we finally got our lives back, Micah's made his dad a priority again. We had a long, difficult conversation, one that shed light on what Whitlock's been holding over Micah's head all these years—the fire resulting in the death of the man who killed his sister. But

there was no way to fully tell that story without also sharing the part Nate played in protecting his son.

That talk went on for hours, until the sun came up, and when it ended, Micah and I had gone through an entire pack of chocolate chip cookies, *I'd* gone through a box of tissues, but Micah emerged with perspective. No, his father may not have shown love in the way Micah wanted or needed back then, but Nate makes it very clear that he puts Micah first. Always has. Always will. And, according to Micah, seeing how easily I forgave my mother inspired him to give it a try, too. Hearing that was kind of a proud moment for me, but I can't take credit for how they've healed and reconnected. It's all completely, one-hundred percent them.

Micah laughs quietly. "Yes, we're still stopping by New Year's Eve. Wouldn't miss it," he promises.

I pull out my phone to add the event to my calendar, but I see a missed text when I do.

Almost there.

Shit. That was ten minutes ago.

I shoot out of Micah's lap while the conversation with his dad switches to the camping trip they plan to take this summer. Passing by the dining room in a rush, my steps slow when I spot Tate, Ash, and Vince seated at the table, carefree as they share a laugh. There's this warm squeeze in my chest brought on by nothing more than this brief glimpse of them. It's crazy how they can do that, make me feel so much so easily. And it's even crazier how quickly they can make me lose my train of thought.

I stand there a moment before remembering where I was headed.

"Right. The mirror."

I stop to fix my hair in the reflection, admiring the new color. Ash re-dyed it for me just this morning. Bright red for the holiday. Then, I straighten my Grumpy Elf t-shirt just as the doorbell rings.

My heart's racing so hard I feel it in my ears, but all the anxiety about how this could go fades the moment I open the door. Dusty smiles from the other side, his cheeks red from the cold air and wind, despite the massive beard covering most of his face. A glittery red box rests in his hands and childlike excitement rushes through me, knowing the snowman tag hanging beneath the bow has my name on it.

"You made it!"

I've barely gotten the door closed when I wrap myself around his neck, melting into the bear hug he greets me with.

"My little girl invited me over for Christmas dinner. Where the hell else would I be?"

It isn't lost on me that this isn't the most ideal situation for him to walk into—dinner at his ex's house. A house that she shares with her new husband. An ex who also hid the existence of his only child from him for years. So, because they're adults and clearly more emotionally aware than I am, he and Mom had a long talk before tonight. They cleared the air, agreed to be in one another's lives as much as being in *mine* requires, and there were even apologies made. It wasn't easy for either of them, I don't imagine, but that makes it all the more meaningful he's here.

I step back, remembering he'd probably like to get out of his coat, hat, and scarf.

"For you," he says, handing over the box so he can shrug out of his things.

Holding the box to my ear, I shake it, listening to see if anything rattles, then I test the weight of it.

"It's a gun, isn't it?"

The joke draws a hearty laugh out of him when he places his things on the coatrack. "No, but your birthday's right around the corner, so get ready," he teases back.

"Should I wait until everyone else opens their things?"

He shoots me a sneaky look, then peeks into the dining room where the table's starting to fill up.

“Nah, I won’t tell if you don’t.”

Smiling, I turn to sit on the steps, unlacing the ribbon with care, but I’m not nearly as dainty when it comes to the wrapping paper. I tear through it quickly, and then pop the two pieces of tape on the box underneath it. Dusty balls up the trash I’ve dropped to the floor as I pull out a large book from inside.

“It’s an album,” he explains. “I added pics of me from over the years, and my entire family is in there.”

I open the cover, staring at the smiling face of a little boy who can’t be more than two. Even without the beard and muscle, I recognize it as Dusty. My fingers trail the details, and my throat tightens with emotion.

“I want you to know the other half of yourself. I want you to know *me*,” he adds, and now my eyes are blurring. “And when you get time, I’d love it if you could put one of these together for me, too. I’ve got a lot of catching up to do.”

I nod, brushing a tear aside. “Of course. I can do that.”

The empty box falls to the floor when I stand, squeezing Dusty in one arm while I clutch the album in the other. The floorboards creak, and I glance over as Micah steps into the foyer, tucking his phone away.

“Oh, Dad, this is Micah.”

I let Dusty go, and he turns, locking eyes with the six-foot-something beast who’s stolen his daughter’s heart. Well, *one* of them, anyway.

The pair exchange a firm handshake, and I smile, fully aware of how Dusty’s sizing Micah up right now. I know most girls get embarrassed and even angry about shit like that. But me? I appreciate it, knowing he cares enough to be concerned about the people I let into my life.

“Nice to meet you,” Dusty says. He’s friendly, but reserved.

“Same, sir.”

Dusty smiles a bit. “Sir. I like that. Sounds like someone raised you right.”

“I like to think so,” Micah laughs.

Dusty’s gaze slides toward me. “Is this the uh... the boyfriend?”

My stomach twists a little, but I expected this. “It’s... complicated.”

I smile at Micah, knowing I’ll have to baby-step both Mom *and* Dusty into the truth.

“Can I get you some punch?” I offer. “Mom thought we might be a little light on gravy, so she’s warming up more, but we should be eating soon.”

“Punch sounds good.”

I spin on my heels, about to take a step toward the dining room when the doorbell rings again.

“You get the door, I’ll grab his drink,” Micah offers.

I mouth a silent *‘Thank you’*, and then glance through the peephole.

My heart skips a beat at the vision on the other side of the threshold. The door swings open, and I meet Nora with a greeting that rivals the one I’ve just given Dusty. Only, I’m cautious because she’s only been off crutches for a week.

“Um... Merry Christmas?” she says with a laugh.

“Merry Christmas.”

As we embrace, I hear a car door close in the driveway, and my eyes pop open, realizing she granted my wish. She invited Frank.

“He... came?”

We separate and she nods. “He did. And it didn’t take the amount of convincing I thought it might.”

I focus on Frank, pulling the lapel of his trench coat closed to shield him from the cold as he trudges this way.

“Do you mind if I—”

“Take all the time you need,” she says, patting my arm as she walks past. “I’ll just be in the dining room gawking at your fine-ass boyfriends.”

I laugh, happy at least *one* person here knows the truth. And she didn’t judge, of course. But she did, however, tell me that I’m officially her shero.

Her *badass* shero, to be exact.

I’ll take it.

She pulls her arms free from her coat, placing it on the coat tree before belting a loud *Merry Christmas* to announce herself to the rest of the guests.

Frank makes it to the porch and glances up, meeting my gaze at the exact second I decide to step out into the cold. His head tilts when I latch the door behind me, hugging myself in my sweater.

“Mind if we talk?”

He’s cautious at first, but then his eyes soften. “Depends. Got any wild accusations to throw my way tonight?”

He smiles and the tension eases a little.

“Yeah, about that. Listen, that wasn’t my proudest moment. I was high on emotion, and—”

“We’re square.”

I arch a brow at him. “We are?”

He nods. “We are.”

I’m quiet when he turns his head, gazing down the street as large snowflakes begin to fall.

“You were right. That thing you said about me only being loyal to your dad.”

I nod slowly, remembering that part of the conversation.

“He’s my friend and that colored my opinion of the people in his life, and I’m man enough to admit I was wrong. As a cop, I know the importance of thinking for yourself, reaching your own conclusions, and I failed at that. If I hadn’t, maybe

you would've felt comfortable coming to me for help when things got tough."

I let that sink in, and it isn't lost on me that that probably wasn't an easy thing to admit.

"Apology accepted."

He nods. "And just to prove I'm someone you can count on moving forward, I fixed that little problem your boy had."

It takes a moment to catch up, and then another to realize that Micah's situation is the one he's referring to.

"You mean Whitlock?"

Frank nods. "Yeah, *that* problem. Now, I can't do anything about him running his mouth with his theories, but I can at least promise you that from a law enforcement standpoint, there's nothing to worry about. Whether he did it, whether he *didn't* do it... you kids are in the clear."

I place a hand on my chest, and if it weren't for fear of my tears turning to ice sickles, I'd cry again.

"Thank you. You have *no* idea what a difference this makes."

He nods like it's no big deal, when it's honestly a *huge* deal. "No problem. Now, if we're all good out *here*, I'd like to get in *there*, because I seem to recall your mom having one hell of an eggnog recipe."

A laugh leaves me, and I unlatch the door, opening it to let him pass through. I don't follow right away, standing there a moment, watching the snow, smelling the aroma of Mom's dinner, enjoying the sound of laughter and Nora trying, and failing, to get everyone to join her in a Christmas carol medley. It all just feels so... perfect.

My head lowers when a text comes through, and I smile.

Maddox: Merry Christmas, Stevie. If you're up for it, we should hang out when I'm back in town. I know we've got a lot to talk about, but I'm ready whenever you are.

I type out my response and hit send.

Stevie: I'd like that. Merry Christmas.

I step back into the warmth, watching from the doorway of the dining room. My family—my *entire* family—is seated around one table on my favorite holiday. My heart swells to the size of this state, and I'm so grateful for all that I have.

If this year has taught me one thing, it's to never take life or family for granted. And as I live and breathe, I swear not a single day will pass that I won't go out of my way to make it known to each one how important they are to me, because once someone is gone... they're gone forever.

“Merry Christmas, Mel,” I whisper to myself as I join the others, and if I had to sum my new world up with one word, it would be... complete.

Thank you so much for reading SICK WICKED LOVE! If you'd like to let others know of what you thought of book Two in the series, simply [CLICK HERE!](#)

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A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Thank you so much for reading *Sick Wicked Love, Savage Kings of Bradwyn U, Book 3*.

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ABOUT RACHEL JONAS

Rachel Jonas also writes as Nikki Thorne.

Hey, I'm Rachel! Consider this your formal invitation to hang out in my private Facebook group, THE SHIFTER LOUNGE. You'll get fun book convo, exclusive giveaways, and other random acts of nerdiness!

Don't usually talk to strangers? No worries! Allow me to introduce myself. I'm a Michigan native, wife, and mother of three who made a career of indulging the voices inside my head :) With several completed series, and stories in both the paranormal and contemporary YA/NA romance categories, there's something for everyone!

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