

NOTHING IS AS
IT SEEMS...

SKIN

WITH ME

BEX DAWN AND HALEY TYLER

Sin With Me

Bex Dawn & Haley Tyler

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Dedicated to someone who started as our PA but has become
so much more.

To our chaos coordinator, celestial sister, our friend,

Brittany Maahs

I will not have you

without the darkness that hides within you

I will not let you have me

without the madness that makes me

If our demons cannot dance

neither can we

— *Nikita Gill*

Author's Note

Hi, lovely reader!

We wanted to thank you for choosing to read *Sin With Me*, our first co-written project.

A quick note:

We've been working on this story for a year. Can you even believe it? After months of sleepless nights and a million transformations, we're so fucking happy to let you into the little world of Divinity Falls.

This story, these characters, the world, all mean so much to us. They are a part of who we are, and we hope by the time you're done reading, they've engrained themselves in your soul, too.

If you haven't noticed, we haven't put the tropes or triggers anywhere. We felt like if we did, it would spoil a few things in

the book, but we encourage readers who have any triggers to check them out on our website before reading. We never want anyone's mental health to suffer because of our book, so please read responsibly and with caution.

Remember, this is a **dark** romance and has **dark themes** that may be upsetting.

Sin With Me is an immersive experience, so keep an eye out for clickable links. If you missed the link, there's a QR code at the end for you to scan!

Another thing to remember about this book is that **NOTHING IS AS IT SEEMS.**

So, buckle up and get ready to *Sin With Me*. It's a bumpy, wild ride.

Love you,

Bex & Haley

For a full list of tropes and triggers, check out our website [here](#).



Stalk Us

**Be a good little slut and follow our
socials.**



Playlist

LISTEN TO THE FULL SIN WITH ME PLAYLIST [HERE](#)

SONG DEDICATION — SPIRACLE by FLOWER FACE

Here Comes The Sun - The Beatles

Follow You - Bring Me The Horizon

Fast Car - Tracy Chapman

If I'm There - Bad Omens

Iris (Acoustic) - Goo Goo Dolls

Sinners (feat. Thomas La Rosa) - Ari Abdul

Chasing Cars - Snow Patrol

Comin' Home - City and Colour

Isaac - Bear's Den

labour - Paris Paloma



0:0 Eve

FOUR YEARS AGO

P^{ing.}
Ping.

Ping.

No one ever tells you what a funeral is really like. They don't talk about the soul-shattering wails of mourners as they stand graveside, loudly expressing their devastation. They don't recall the distinct scent of fresh, wet soil and decay permeating the air. No one talks about the salty taste of tears that coat your tongue as you try again and again to remind yourself this is real.

No.

All they ever recall is the pain.

The living, breathing pain that settles so deep inside you you can't remember a time before it existed. It aches and throbs, festering like a fatal wound until you have no choice but to block it out entirely and sink into a state of complete and utter nothingness.

I'm doing everything in my power to fight it, but it's a losing battle.

I know people are staring at me, expecting me to be the sobbing, mournful mess of an orphan I'm supposed to be. I'm left with nothing but the faint memories of my father, the fresh memories of my mother, and the love of the only two people I have left in the world.

Ping.

Ping.

Ping.

Rain pelts us, but I barely feel it. I barely hear the dull ping as it lands on the flower-covered casket in front of us. I can't stop staring at the freshly turned earth, at the dirt that's slowly becoming mud. At the casket sitting just above the deep hole, almost ready to be lowered and forgotten into the ground.

My mother is in there. In that beautiful, ornate box. Dead.

My mother is dead.

Isaac's arm tightens around my shoulders, and I almost let out the sob I've been holding all day. I don't know why the tears haven't come, why they *won't* come. A lump has been thick in my throat since I woke up this morning, but my eyes have stayed dry.

I was a child when my father died. I don't remember the funeral. I don't remember feeling like this. I don't remember the sounds or smells or tastes. I only remember digging my

face into Mama's neck and letting her hold me as I fell to pieces.

I was too young to truly understand the finality of death, but I felt it. I felt it deep to my core, but Mama was there, holding me and comforting me with her familiar warmth.

A warmth that no longer exists because she's dead

Dead, cold, and almost buried.

Ping.

Ping.

Ping.

An ugly choking sound leaves me, and Isaac reminds me he's here, holding me closer, silently reminding me that I'm not alone. But it's not his arms I want around me, it's not his comfort I seek.

My gaze slides to Roman's, and his hazel eyes sear into my soul. He stares at me as I rest my head on his father's arm, at the way Isaac's hand flexes on my shoulder, his gold wedding band barely glinting in the cloud-covered sun.

A balmy, warm breeze blows across my sticky skin, sending a shiver down my sweaty spine. It's over ninety degrees today, but clearly God didn't give a shit about the heat, and decided to add rain into the mix. I don't swear much, but I'm pretty sure the Lord is fucking with us.

I almost scoff.

It's fitting He'd do something like this—make us stand in the hot rain and mourn Mama. He didn't care when He took Daddy from us years ago. He didn't care when He took Mama from me days ago. Why would He care about the damn weather?

I shove back the emotions that have swirled inside me since the moment I saw her being wheeled toward the ambulance.

It's not fair, I know that. I can't blame the Lord for nature any more than I can blame Him for calling Mama to Heaven. Accidents happen. Isaac has reminded me of that time and time again in the last week. It's no one's fault.

Still, it's hard to not be angry with God when He's taken so much from me before I've even had a chance to live.

Isaac squeezes my shoulders, pulling me from my whirling thoughts. I tilt my head back, getting a small glimpse of him before shutting my eyes to block the rain.

“What do you say to some peach pie when we get home?” he murmurs, and I nod, unable to speak. I drop my head, letting the raindrops slide down my face, pretending they're the tears that I know should be falling. “That's my girl.” His voice is a harsh whisper. Roughly, he clears his throat, and the sound of him choking on his emotions has me choking on mine.

Despite agreeing, I won't be eating any of the peach pie even though it's my favorite. I know he's just trying to take the pain away and get me to finally eat something, but I can't bring myself to tell him I never want to eat another bite of peach pie

again. It'll remind me of her—everything will. But knowing I'm eating our favorite treat without her just won't feel right.

Going on living without her won't feel right.

He kisses the top of my head, his lips lingering as he breathes deeply before pulling away. He clears his throat again, and I glance up, finding him pinching between his brows. He looks exhausted. Heavy, dark bags are growing under his chocolate brown eyes.

And it's not until this moment I realize I've not only lost my mother, but he's lost his wife. My heart aches for him; it aches for Roman.

Isaac has been staying strong for me. He's been nothing but painfully stoic since Mama died. He's been a rock for me to lean on. And Roman has been...

"Preacher Isaac," someone calls from behind us. I drag my gaze from Isaac's, finding my stepbrother's just as the voice rings through the solemn air. Roman's square jaw flexes, his eyes hard as he stares at his father. His expression is clear—*do not leave us*. Not right now. Don't go to your flock. Stay with us, your family. Your children.

"I'll be right back," Isaac promises, kissing my temple. He hesitates, his arm still around me. "We've got this, sweetheart." His voice is thick with emotion as he searches my eyes. I swallow hard and nod against him, feeling the thirty bobby-pins keeping my thick mess of curls in place, dig into my scalp. I ignore it and let the tiny pin-pricks of pain ground me.

It's better than feeling nothing.

Isaac gives me another squeeze before dropping his arm to his side. Without his shelter, the harsh rain begins pelting me harder. He pauses, looking between Roman and me. The tension grows thick between the two of them but no one speaks as Isaac turns and leaves to be with his flock.

I stare back at the casket as it's lowered into the ground. Preacher Hale's earlier words come back to me, and anger comes with them.

God needed another angel.

What about Isaac, my stepfather and her loving husband? Or her stepson, Roman? What about our church and this town? Our friends? Grandma Jean? Oli and Chase? She's been like a second mother to them. Surely they need her more than Heaven does.

What about me?

If God really knew anything, He'd know she was needed just as badly here, in Divinity Falls, as the preacher's wife and my mother, more than He needed another angel. He has millions of them, why did He have to take her? He already has Daddy and Cami.

Why would He take her before we were ready to let her go?

We're left scrambling to pick up the pieces and figure out how to live in a world where she doesn't exist anymore. How am I supposed to continue on with my life knowing she's missing every milestone? How am I supposed to be happy

when I graduate, or at my wedding, or when I have my first baby, knowing she's not there to celebrate with me?

It's not fair.

It's not fair.

It's not fair.

“Goldie?” Roman murmurs, his voice almost inaudible over the rain and my spiraling thoughts. I look up at him, but can't say anything. There's nothing to say. I've exhausted every word over the last week trying and failing to figure out why she's gone.

I know I should be falling apart. That I should feel something other than this bitter emptiness. But I don't. I can't.

“It'll be okay,” he says. I press my lips firmly together at his words, trying to stop my chin from quivering. Whatever strength he's carrying for the both of us nearly breaks when he sees it. I notice it in his eyes, the pain he's trying to hide. “It'll be okay.” He says it again like the more he says it, the more we'll believe it.

But we both know it won't be.

Things are different now.

He wraps his pinky tightly around mine, and a tear finally drips from my eye, down my cheek, and falls to the wet ground. His hold tightens, and I shuffle closer to him, needing his warmth. His protection.

As I steady my breathing, I look around. Mama is fully lowered into her eternal resting place, and mourners surround the deep hole as they pay their final respects. The rain comes down thickly around us, coating the well-manicured cemetery in hot, humid water.

I glance over my shoulder, finding Isaac talking with an older man. He's gripping a worn Bible, holding it close to his chest under his black coat, like he's trying to keep it dry from the rain. My head tilts to the side as I watch them, and a tear slides from the corner of my eye into my hair. The man meets my gaze and gives me a sympathetic smile. I nod respectfully, because that's what's expected from me, and face forward again.

Roman's finger stays wrapped around mine in a wordless pinky promise until the last of the mourners finish throwing dirt and flowers on Mama's casket. I refuse to let go of his hand, knowing without it, I'd crumble to the ground.

"Hi, kids." Roman stiffens beside me as Mary approaches. I try to pull away, but his pinky tightens further, leaving us locked together. "I'm so sorry, Evie." She gently grips my shoulder, a soft, pitying smile on her face. "I know how hard it is to lose a mother." She glances at Roman, her face still soft.

I feel him vibrating, and I know he's moments away from exploding. His lip twitches, like he's holding back a snarl, and I squeeze his pinky with mine, trying to ground him. It doesn't help.

“I know how much she loved you both,” she continues. “Jane was a good woman.” She looks over my head at Isaac and the church’s congregation, as she says, “You were both so lucky to have her as a mother.”

“She’s not my mother,” Roman hisses, and Mary’s eyes snap to him. “And Eve isn’t my sister.”

He lets go of my hand, and I feel like I’m falling. Like I’m moments away from fainting. Like the world is spinning and spinning. Like everything is out of control.

Roman takes one step away from me and the small distance he’s put between us feels like a mile. I want to reach for him again. I want to sob in his arms and beg him to comfort me, demand he make everything better, that he makes me better.

But he takes another step away.

“I just meant—”

“Thank you, Miss Mary,” I say, interrupting her before she can do any more damage. “She was the best.”

I feel Roman’s gaze on me, burning into the side of my head. If I look at him, I will break, and I can’t do that yet. I can’t break in front of everyone. In front of the town. The church. In front of Mary.

They already pity me, and I don’t want to make it worse.

“You know I’m always here for you,” she says softly. “For you both.” She risks a glance at Roman, but I still don’t. “Anything you need, I’m here.” I nod again, giving her a

watery smile as she pulls her hand away and heads off toward Isaac and his group.

Finally, I glare at Roman, but he just stares blankly back at me, like he's daring me to say something. He knows I won't when we're surrounded by people, so I grip his wrist and yank him from the gravesite. He lets me lead him down the worn path that separates our church and house, split by wildflower fields and Barry's Pond.

Roman grunts but follows me, and never pulls his hand away. I try to ignore his towering height behind me, at the way I know he's only moving this way because he wants to and not because I have any strength to make him.

The walk is silent, but I can't mistake that for peace. My heart knows better. My life is full of anything but peace right now.

When our house comes into view and I see the massive crowd already gathering outside for the wake, I nearly scream. I just want one moment. One lousy moment alone with Roman to talk about this. To talk about everything. I just want everyone to go away and let me attempt to cry about my mother without their prying eyes.

I come to a stop, and Roman collides into my back. I nearly fall, but he drops my hand and grips my waist to steady me, his fingers digging into my black lace dress. Chills ripple down my spine as I peer over my shoulder at him. His gaze is intense, and all knowing, and my mouth goes dry.

I can't stop staring at his eyes, letting his gaze ground me.

Hazel.

That's what color he says they are, but to me, they're more. Greens and golds, browns, with flecks of grey.

Beautiful.

“What?” he grunts, pulling me from my thoughts. I swallow hard and turn fully toward him, but he doesn't remove his hands, letting them shift then settle once more on my hips.

His thumbs trace circles on my lace covered flesh, but he doesn't acknowledge it and I think for a moment that he might be doing it without even realizing. The thought and familiarity of his touch settles something in me, giving me the strength to finally open my mouth.

“Ro,” I whisper, flicking my eyes between his, searching for anything, for something in his eyes that will tell me how he feels. “Can we talk about—”

“Not right now,” he says, glancing over my head at the group of people. He steps away and rubs his palms against his black slacks as though he's trying to wipe away my touch. His soft expression is gone—my Roman is gone.

“But I just need to know—”

“Goldie,” he snaps. “I said not right now.”

The only real words I've said all day, the only words that haven't been some variation of *thank you for your condolences*, and he shuts them down.

He shuts me down.

How can he do that?

Be everything I need and want, but take it away so easily?

“But—”

“No.”

That’s it.

Just that one word, that one declaration leaving no room for debate.

My lips part at the surprising anger in his voice, but before I can say anything else, he storms away in the opposite direction of where we’re meant to go, and I’m left even more alone than I was before.

I know I’m not really alone. I know I still have him, and Isaac, and my best friend, Olive, and her older brother, Chase. I have the congregation and my friends at school.

But I don’t have my parents.

I don’t have my real family.

As I watch Roman storm away into the thicket of grass and trees, I’m left wondering how I fit into his life. Where do I fit into Isaac’s family now that Mama’s gone?

Am I just the orphan girl he’ll take in because of pity, or will he send me to live with Grandma Jean, forcing me to start over in a new town once more?

Despite all the chaos and destruction that my life has become this last week, I find myself more lost than I’ve ever been as a single question permeates my mind.

Where do I go from here?

Forbidden

**For the lips of a forbidden woman drip honey, and her words
are smoother than oil. - Proverbs 5:3**

1:1 Eve

PRESENT

“Wow, Olive.” I can hear the choked humor in his voice from several feet away, but my sweet, smiling bestie remains oblivious as always. “This is great. Really.”

Oli grins, bobbing her head in agreement. Her blue eyes sparkle with excitement and mischief as she claps excitedly. Today her hair is pink, yesterday it was blue. Her hair color tells me all I’ll need to know about her mood, and pink is good.

“Well,” she shouts. “Put it on, Preacher-man!”

This time, Isaac really does choke but indulges Olive as he drapes the new grilling apron over his head and ties it behind his back. He runs his hands down the thick material, straightening it awkwardly.

“Yay!” she giggles. “Give us a spin.” She twirls her finger in a circle, and finally, a smile spreads across my face.

He lets out an exaggerated sigh, but does as she requested, knowing she won't give up until she has her way. I cover my mouth, stifling a burst of laughter as I take in the white apron with the words *Wake Pray Grill Slay* scrawled across the front in large letters. It stands out against his blue linen button-down and khaki shorts, so un-Isaac-like that laughter-induced tears pool in my eyes.

A chorus of cheers follows, but a loud shriek has everyone, myself included, freezing. "Wait!" Oli cries, her hands flailing in the air. Her tight black turtleneck shifts with the movement, the ripped-up band tee overtop of it hiding her midriff. "I can't believe I almost forgot the best part!"

She dashes across the lawn, her black and purple plaid skirt billowing in the breeze, gracing everyone with a full view of her fishnet tights, and dives for a box stashed beneath a picnic table. Throwing the lid over her head without a second thought, she digs through its contents.

I cringe as it collides with a pitcher of sweet tea, watching as Tanya jumps up and grabs the heavy glass before it can smash into the table and destroy everything. Her sudden movement has her own glass tipping over and landing on a platter of uncooked hotdogs, sending them toppling to the ground. Hank lets out an excited bark and flies across the lawn toward his next meal.

Everyone moves out of his way, knowing they'll be bowled over in the chaos. John, the chubby basset hound's owner, tries

to catch him in time, but it's no use. Before anyone can move to stop him, the dog devours his treat.

Oli, too distracted to notice or care about the havoc she's created, whirls around with the box in her hands and skips through the pile of people and food, somehow making it out unscathed.

Unable to do a damn thing but watch the scene unfold with my mouth hanging open, I track her until she stops at my stepfather's feet and thrusts the open box into his nervous hands.

Isaac bites his thick lower lip and peers over her head, scanning the huge fenced-in area that makes up the front half of our church. My head cocks to the side as I take in the way he anxiously makes sure everyone in our congregation is well despite the destruction.

There are hundreds of people gathered for the annual Divinity Falls Baptist Church 4th of July picnic, and not a single person looks anything but tickled right now. Slowly, bright laughter fills the air, mingling with the scent of barbecued meat and suntan lotion.

The sound of kids splashing in Barry's Pond can be heard in the distance. The leaves rustle in the wind, and the tall grass around the thicket of trees sashays, creating a summer symphony. It's early evening, and even though it's been a hot, sticky day, there's a wonderful breeze that sends bursts of delicious smells my way.

Everyone is happy.

Everyone is always happy here.

We're a family through and through, and that's all because of Isaac.

As if he can hear my internal thoughts, his dark gaze meets mine. Even from a distance, I can see the way he softens when he spots me—the same way he always does.

All those years ago, when I was terrified about where I may end up after losing Mama, I had no idea that it would be exactly where I'd already been. Right here. With him.

Isaac never pushed me away or treated me as though I was a burden. He never made me feel like anything but his. He may not be my father, but he is my friend. My family.

He tilts his head to the side and cocks his brow, silently asking me what I'm doing so far away, outside the party area. I tip my shoulder in a shrug, and my exposed back scrapes against the willow's rough bark, but I don't move, content to sit here and watch everyone.

I'm happy for them. I really am. I'm glad they can get together and smile, enjoying the day for what it is—a celebration. But I can't stop the way it causes the empty space in my soul where Mama and...

I swallow thickly and plaster on a massive smile, willing the sadness away and reassuring Isaac all at once. His lips part like he's about to speak, and a pitiful whine spills from Oli's mouth at the same moment she stomps her foot petulantly, and our moment ends.

His eyes snap to my best friend. I can't hear what she says, but I'm assuming she's giving Isaac a mouthful for ignoring her. No one ever calls Oli on her shit, but sometimes I worry they just might. This is the South, after all. People aren't afraid to tell you how it is while *simultaneously blessing your heart*, consequences be damned. Sure, it might be sweet words, but we can all read through the lines.

Seconds later, she produces a white chef's hat, throws the box on the ground, and waves her hand, forcing him to bend at the waist so she can tug it onto his head. The tight cap presses down on his short, slightly peppered brown hair, plastering it to the sides of his head and forcing his ears to pop out a little.

A loud burst of laughter flies from me when she poofs up the hat, exposing the phrase *Grill Daddy* for everyone to see. Isaac makes a weird face but quickly forces his lips to curve in a smile before pressing a kiss to the top of Oli's head and shooing her away.

"Alright, y'all," Mary calls, stepping up to his side when Olive skips toward me. As Isaac straightens the apron again, Mary tucks her arm into the crook of his elbow, her red-painted nails digging into his tan, corded forearm.

My smile tightens as I zero in on her touch. It's possessive, the way she's grabbing him. He pats her hand, letting his fingers linger on hers before dropping his arm away.

My smile falls completely.

I swallow thickly as I watch them. Ugly jealousy bubbles to the surface, and I don't know why. It's not that I want Isaac to

be unhappy or that I don't want him to move on. Just not with her.

“That was plenty of excitement,” she laughs, her blonde hair blowing in the summer breeze. “Preacher Isaac,” she smiles up at him, and I want to fucking scream, “ready to get this party goin’?”

He gives her a smile before turning it toward the congregation.

“Let us pray,” Isaac says, bowing his head as he takes off the chef's hat.

My hands ball into fists, ripping the grass from the ground. Oli plops beside me, snickering as she gently elbows me.

“You look like you ate something sour,” she teases, flipping a lock of my blonde hair off my shoulder. “Oh, and Kevin said he could see up your dress.” She gives a pointed look at my bent legs and the hem of my white ruffled dress that's slightly riding up my thighs, so I let them drop to the ground.

“He could not,” I huff out, and she shrugs. “This dress isn't short enough for him to see anything.” I mentally run through which panties I chose to wear today. Thong or boyshorts? Thong or boyshorts? I shift, and the cool grass under me chills my cheeks.

Shit. He totally just got a show.

“You think he's ever seen a vag before?” she asks, and I gasp mid-breath.

“Maybe online,” I say, but honestly, I can’t see him ever looking it up. He wouldn’t even know what to Google.

“Speaking of,” Oli says, drawing the words out. “How much have you made this month?” My eyes dart around the small group gathered around us.

“Not now,” I hiss, and she gives me a sly grin, knowing this is not something I’d ever want to discuss in public.

“Do you need us to make another *special* run?” She wiggles her brows at me, her mouth opening in an excited smile as she bumps my shoulder with hers.

“No,” I scoff, still scanning the party to make sure we have no eavesdroppers. I slide my eyes to her and smile back, unable to hide it anymore. “I have a package coming to your house.” She claps and lets out a piercing cackle, drawing a few people’s attention.

“What is it this time?” she asks, scooting closer. Her face is only inches from mine, her smile wide as she rubs her hands together. “Is it a butt plug? You know, they have ones with tails. You could have a tail, Evie! How cool would that be?”

“That’s definitely more your thing,” I laugh, and she nods her agreement, a serious expression overtaking her innocent face, and I immediately know she’s imagining just that. My eyes narrow on her. “What animal would you pick?”

Her green eyes lock onto mine as she bites her tongue in concentration, considering my question as though I asked her what the capital of New Mexico is instead of what type of

animalistic butt plug she'd wear. I watch her work through it, thoroughly entertained by my best friend.

Suddenly, she grins. It's not a normal look. It's slightly crazed. Oli's fingers pinch together, open and closed, open and closed, like tiny chopsticks. "A little baby lobster," she coos.

I blink once. Twice. My mouth opens and closes just like her fingers did a moment ago as she mimed—pinchers?

"Olive—" I say slowly, hating to be the one to bust her happy bubble. It's my least favorite thing in the world. "Honey. Lobsters don't have tails." At least not the kind she's thinking of.

Her hands drop, and she rears back like I've slapped her. "I know that."

"But do you?" I ask, brushing the wayward strands of my chaotic curls from my face when a gust of hot wind blows through the party.

She huffs. "Of course I do. Why would you even say that?" Completely confused, my hands flail between us. "Because you were talking about bu—" I snap my jaw shut seconds before loudly making a scene in the worst place imaginable. I lean forward and whisper-hiss, "You were talking about butt plugs with animal tails on them, Olive. Lobsters don't have tails."

She closes the few inches separating us, coming in so close her breath fans across my lips with every word. "I thought we were just naming animals."

“Have you been drinking?” I murmur, glaring at her as the heady scent of vodka permeates the air. Olive grins, bobbing her head. “How?” Alcohol is strictly forbidden.

Here, at least.

Divinity Falls isn’t a dry town by any means, but we’re on church property, and being the unofficial child of the town Preacher means something to these people. It comes with certain—*expectations*. Even at 20 years old, sobriety is one of them. Especially considering Isaac’s past.

She pulls back and quickly scans the crowd. I follow her gaze, finding everyone now occupied with eating the freshly barbequed meat and sides as they chat loudly with their friends. Oli spins, giving her back to the group, and tugs her legs up into a bent position before digging into her Doc Martin.

Seconds later, she produces a small pink metal flask from the depths of her shoe, and I’m left gaping in shock. Without a word, she reaches over me, plucks my favorite yellow Yeti bottle of sweet tea from the ground, and removes the lid.

“What are you doing?” I choke out, even though I know exactly what she’s doing. She ignores me and uncaps her flask.

My eyes dart over Oli’s head, and I scan the party once more, my heart racing in my chest. Getting in trouble is the last thing I want to do right now.

My gaze immediately snags on Isaac at the pit with his back to us. The woman wearing a fitted red, white, and blue dress that shows way too much cleavage is glued to his side like a second skin.

That unfamiliar pang of jealous irritation burns in my chest again before sinking into my gut and settling like a brick. It aches in a way I haven't felt for a long damn time, and I instantly hate it.

Why is Mary all over him?

And why do I care so much?

Oli thrusts my cup at me forcefully, and it snaps me from my staring contest with Mary and Isaac's backs. I watch her take a quick, unmixed gulp of the fiery liquid before returning the flask back to her boot. I hold in a gag, not wanting to think about the boot alcohol now mixed in my tea. A shiver of repulsion dances along my spine but it's immediately overshadowed by the loud tinkling laughter that I unfortunately recognize.

I grit my teeth at the sound.

"Oh, Evie," Mary coos loudly. "Come eat." Her face contorts into a disapproving look as she scans Oli and me sitting ungracefully in the dirt and grass, but quickly masks it. "Bring your friend." With that, she spins and turns her attention back to my stepfather.

An irritated scoff slips from my lips as I roll my eyes, unable to hide my disdain for her anymore. I shove to my feet, Oli

following close behind.

“It bothers you that she’s touching him.” The simple, effortless way she drops such a line has me freezing mid-step. Completely unaware, she runs into my back with a grunt.

“You’re delusional, Oli,” I say, ignoring the way her words pierce my chest.

Oli grabs my cup and lifts it to my mouth with a cocked brow. “Delusion is where success lies,” she says matter-of-factly.

I take a quick, deep pull from my straw, wincing at the burn from the alcohol. “I can’t tell if that’s very Gandhi or very ganja of you.”

She shrugs as her lips curve into a sly grin. She tucks her arm into mine and tugs me toward our friends and families.

“Probably both.”

1:2 Eve

“Are you sure you have to go?” I ask, pushing a wayward strand of Clover’s hair behind her ear. She looks up at me, anxiety clear in her big onyx eyes, and nods warily. I sigh, tugging the frail girl in for a hug—a hug that’s probably too tight, judging by the huff of air she lets out. “Be careful,” I whisper.

It takes her a moment to slowly sink into me. Before I know it, she’s sucking up my affection like a person starved of water in the desert. It hurts my heart desperately, knowing how rare touch is to her. Her body is warm and clammy, likely from all the long layers she’s wearing, but I don’t pull away.

“I know,” she murmurs.

With one last squeeze, she lets me go and steps back. Awkwardly, she smooths her hands down her oversized, floor-length, long-sleeved dress. The dress doesn’t match the sweltering Georgia summer heat; it’s so outdated, I have no doubt it’s second—or Hell, it may even be third-hand. Either

way, she's still adorable and holds a special place inside my heart.

I tip my lips up in what I hope is a reassuring smile and spin her toward her foster mom's beat-up gold minivan. It's too dark out here to see Ms. Willa, but I don't need light to know that she's glaring at Clover. And at me.

Shit, she's probably giving the entire congregation a withering look right now.

Not that it matters.

I've learned that what people think of you is of little consequence. They'll do what they want, say what they want, think what they want. And there's not a damn thing any of us can do to change it.

As Clover drops her head and climbs into the back of the van, quietly closing the door behind her, I turn away from the party, needing—something.

Space.

Air.

Freedom.

I need freedom.

Three words I've never dared to speak—never dared to even think. *I have freedom*, I remind myself. Even if Isaac and the church are stifling and I dream of so much more, this is my life, and I have to believe I'm free.

It's nearly nine, and darkness has taken over the fields surrounding us. Colorful quilts dot the grass around Barry's Pond, only lit by random streaks from sparklers or the glow from people's phones. Families have split off to find places to sit and enjoy the fireworks show beginning soon.

Oli left over an hour ago, saying she had to head home to feed the kids their holiday meal. I chuckled but nodded, knowing her babies are her life. The girls we used to hang out with in school took off, finding guys to cuddle up with for the show, leaving just Clover and me.

But now she's gone, and it's just me.

Always just me.

Sighing, I head back to the row of picnic tables and grab my cup and cardigan. I tug it over my shoulders, making sure my phone is still tucked in my dress pocket before skimming the party again. I don't know why I feel like I'm forgetting something, like something is missing.

It takes me two passes before I see him. But once I do, I know that it's not something I'm missing.

It's someone.

Sharing a red, white, and blue patchwork quilt on the southern dock of the pond are Isaac and Mary.

It's my mama's quilt—her favorite Fourth of July one.

The quilt she made for this exact party almost ten years ago, the first time we attended it as a family. The first time she jumped up and down, clapping and cooing about how this was

her favorite holiday in Divinity Falls. The people. The pond. The church. The fireworks and food. *What's not to love*, she'd said.

This.

This is something I don't love.

Watching what was once our thing become *their* thing.

Anger and frustration wash through me so rapidly, I almost vomit all the alcohol I greedily chugged during dinner while watching Mary fawn all over him. At least Isaac didn't fawn back, but he didn't push her away. He didn't say anything to make her stop. He didn't make her sit somewhere else so that I could sit on his right side, like always. He didn't reprimand her for filling his plate or sweet tea every time it got low—that's my job. I take care of that for him. Not her.

He didn't do anything, and that's what killed me the most.

It's stupid—I know it's stupid, to be mad or jealous. I know I shouldn't feel this way.

I shouldn't feel any way. Not toward him—about him.

My stepfather.

Swallowing thickly, I shake my head, deciding to call it an early night. I'm suddenly not in the mood to celebrate anymore. Not that there's been much to celebrate in the last four years.

I shoot a quick text to Isaac—one I'm sure he won't notice with *her* all over him—letting him know I'm going home

before I take off toward our house on the opposite side of the pond.

I try not to stare at it, at the pond I've spent ten summers swimming in. Making memories in. Celebrating every holiday with my family at.

My family was once beautiful.

Then it broke.

Then it was mended.

Then...

Then it broke again.

No, it shattered. It shattered so thoroughly it could never be put back together. Even though Isaac has tried to fix it, tried to get the old Eve back, tried to promise me that we don't need anyone but each other, my heart still hurts.

Everything still hurts.

I used to think my family was like one of the patchwork quilts covering the tall grass around me. I used to think it was beautiful, four different personalities all coming together to make something broken whole again.

Mama used to say so, she used to swear it. Tell me again and again that it didn't matter if our family looked different from others, that it was okay that Daddy was with God finding peace after such a long fight.

I used to believe her.

Now I know better.

“Eve?” a deep, slightly nasally voice calls. I jump with a gasp, bringing a hand up to still my racing heart, and whirl on the sound of footsteps steadily closing in on me. Kevin’s hands fly up as he offers me an apologetic look. “Heck. Sorry. I called you a few times. I thought you heard me.”

I swallow, shaking my head to clear my depressing thoughts. I’d been so caught up in the past I didn’t even realize he was here.

I tear my gaze from his concerned eyes and take in my surroundings. I’m already home and in the front yard. I can barely hear the music and laughter from the party in the distance. The random lights that filtered through the field are now dim.

It’s quiet.

Peaceful.

Lonely.

“Are you okay?” he asks. My head jolts in his direction once more.

Shit. I really need to get it together.

“Sorry,” I murmur, rolling my shoulders back.

He scans my body quickly before his gaze snaps back to my face. Beneath the bright moon, I can see his pale cheeks turn pink. Kevin swallows audibly and coughs into his fist. I smirk, barely containing the inappropriate laugh bubbling up my throat.

Though I don't know him super well, Kevin and I are friends. I guess. We were in the same grade growing up, and he attends our church with his family every Sunday. Teaches the boy's Bible study class at the same time I teach the girl's. He's quiet. Kinda nerdy, but nice.

When it's clear he's not going to do anything besides flick his stare between my face, my body, and the tall grass beneath us, I break the silence. "Did you need something?"

He palms the back of his neck, causing his red Polo shirt to lift high on his waist, exposing an underwhelming patch of light skin above his dark jean shorts.

Holy hell. Jorts. He's wearing freaking jorts.

The alcohol-induced buzz makes itself known again, and a giggle pushes out of my throat before I can swallow it down. His eyes widen as I slap a hand over my mouth. He exhales roughly, giving me a lopsided smile.

"I was," he murmurs, stumbling over his words. "I was wondering if—"

"If?" I press, wanting to get back to the house so I can hide away in my room and check emails. Or watch the fireworks from my window.

Or—fuck.

Maybe I'll take advantage of the rare moment alone in the house and take a bubble bath with some candles, a smutty book, and my favorite vibrator.

My core clenches—fully on board with that idea. Me time. That will definitely help me forget and banish the weird mood I’ve been in all day.

I smile.

“Is that a yes?” Kevin asks, suddenly standing right in front of me.

I blink a few times, having completely forgotten he was even here. My mouth opens to disagree, unsure what the hell he’s even talking about, but the hopeful, excited look on his face is too much for me, and I find myself nodding slowly with an awkward shrug.

I have no idea what I just agreed to, but Kevin immediately grins widely and releases a noise that, if I’m not mistaken, sounds a hell of a lot like *yippee*.

What. The. Fuck. Have I gotten myself in to?

Kevin grips my hand, and unlike Clover’s balmy warmth, I find his clammy palm disturbingly gross. Before I can pull away, he’s tugging me toward the northern dock.

My heart picks up its pace, turning from slightly amused to panicked within seconds. When it’s clear the dock is Kevin’s intended location, I shake my head rapidly and pull him in the opposite direction without a word.

His bushy brows lift, but he doesn’t argue, letting me take the lead. I find a patch of grass that overlooks the lake, clear from any trees or obstructions.

“Uhh.” I clear my throat. I just want to go inside my house but I can’t now. I’m stuck. I gesture to the ground, assuming he came here to watch the show. “Is this cool?”

He nods eagerly and produces a blanket, seemingly from thin air. My eyes gape as he lays it out in the grass and takes a seat. Am I that damn preoccupied that I didn’t even notice the blanket?

Shit.

I can’t back out now, not with him looking eagerly up at me.

Groaning internally, I primly take a seat next to him, tucking my legs beneath me and dropping my belongings to my side.

Can’t see my panties now, can you, Kev?

I scoff to myself and lift my drink to my lips, needing another hit of what Oli aptly named Devil’s Juice. She’s not wrong. I swear, she had to have emptied the entire flask in my tumbler. At first, I was pacing myself, not wanting to be obviously drunk around Isaac.

But now...

Now I need it.

Badly.

“So,” Kevin begins, glancing at me from the corner of his eye. “How has your summer been?”

I release a puff of air that’s somewhere between a scoff and an irritated grunt before taking another drink. A bigger one.

“Just peachy.” I give him a sidelong look, catching his gaze riveted to my exposed calves. “Yours?” My question is blunt—slightly too loud.

I expect his eyes to be guilty when they snap up to meet mine, but they aren't, and he doesn't.

Nope.

Instead, the quiet, bashful nerd that loves Jesus more than air, slowly lets his wandering gaze travel up the length of my body, doing nothing to disguise the obvious desire he's feeling.

He wants me. Is that why he came here?

I take in his appearance, really take him in. Maybe for the first time.

Kevin's not tall. Around five-foot-eight on a good day, not too thin or thick. Definitely not muscular. He's just—average.

His brown hair is greasy and messy. Not artfully, either. Just messy as it hangs over his ears and forehead in a grown out semi-bowl cut. He definitely needs to cut it. Soon.

He wears dark-framed, rectangular glasses that complement his brown eyes. His face is clear from stubble—actually, there's not even a slight shadow dimming his jaw, and if I had to guess, I'd say he doesn't shave. Not yet.

Maybe not ever.

He does have pretty eyelashes, though.

Like really pretty.

I'm jealous.

I giggle again at the wayward direction of my thoughts and sloppily tug the straw into my mouth. A pathetic whimper escapes me when I realize my cup is empty.

My lower lip rolls out in a pout, and suddenly, this waterside fiesta is no longer entertaining.

Kevin chuckles, tipping my lip with the crook of his fist. Not in a sexy way, either. More like a fatherly *aw shucks*, kind of thing.

"You're so cute," he mumbles, biting his lip. His Adam's apple bobs. "Pretty, actually."

"Umm," I mumble, thoroughly confused. "Thanks?" The word comes out as a question, but I don't think he notices or cares. "You're—" I hold my breath as I search for the right word. "Nice."

It seems to be enough for him, because he grins his thanks at me, like I've just given him the best compliment he's ever received. It might be the only compliment he's ever received.

Sad.

"I've never done this before," he rushes out. My brows knit together as he scoots closer to me, bunching the blanket slightly.

"Done what?"

The words barely leave my mouth before his lips are on mine in a sloppy, wet kiss. I'm too stunned to react. My body

just freezes.

His tongue slides along the seam of my sealed lips, and it wakes me up enough to shove him away.

“Kevin!” I shout, more shocked by his forcefulness than anything else. “What are you—”

“You said yes,” he whines, leaning closer. He hesitates before resting his long hand on my knee. His touch is nervous, like he’s never felt a girl’s skin before.

“To what?” I hiss, pushing his hand off. He cocks his head to the side, his eyes narrowing as he stares at me.

“Kissing,” he says slowly. “At the house, you said yes.”

I try to rethink everything I said literally just moments ago, and I can’t remember ever telling him I’d kiss him. Then I mentally slap myself.

Is that a yes?

I internally groan at my own stupidity, but, like...who asks that shit?

“I didn’t mean—” I stop myself as I watch the light dim in his eyes. It’s just a kiss, what could it hurt? It’s not like I have anything better going on tonight, and I could use the distraction.

Stop, Evie. That’s rude as hell. I swallow, feeling fully chastised by my own inner voice. He really is nice. And cute—in an odd duck kind of way.

He's obviously never kissed a girl before, and am I really going to lose anything other than a bit of my dignity and some time? Maybe a bit of saliva and skin cells, if I had to guess. My first kiss was awful, maybe I can make his decent.

"Alright," I sigh. That light sparks in his eyes again, and he lurches toward me, his body vibrating with excitement. I put my hand against his shoulder, stopping him. If he's going to kiss me, I need to teach him how to do it right. "Let me show you what to do."

He eagerly nods as he sits back, letting me shift on to my knees. Placing my hands on his shoulders for balance, I lean forward until my lips touch his. I inwardly cringe, but remind myself I'm doing a good deed.

Or maybe I'm just horny and lonely, and Kevin is here.

Shit—for all I know, he'll be some sort of a sexual savant once the nerves wear off.

One can only pray.

His hands rest on my hips, and I'm surprised at the feeling that shoots through me. He's not hesitant or fumbling now—his touch is firm and sure. I like that.

I whimper as I shuffle closer to him, and the sound seems to make him feral. His fingers dig into my hips harder, pulling me forward until my breasts rest against his chest.

If Oli saw me, she'd be rolling on the ground howling with laughter. If literally anyone else saw, I'd be mortified for being caught kissing Kevin. But we're alone, and it's dark.

I slide my leg over his and straddle him. My dress rucks up around my thighs, letting me feel his hard length under his jean shorts.

Don't think about the jorts.

Don't think about the jorts.

He gasps as he pulls away, his eyes wide as I rest my thong-covered middle against him.

He stares down at my bare legs glistening in the moonlight. At the place where my dress is raised high, and even though he can't see my pussy, he knows it's there.

“Oh my goodness,” he breathes. “You're so warm. It's so—can I see?”

I blink at him. “See?”

“Your—your—vagina.” The word is barely audible, and I choke on a laugh. Grabbing his hand, I bring it to my breast, letting him feel the full softness of it. He adjusts his rapidly fogging glasses with his other hand as he squeezes. “Wow.”

“It's my pussy, Kev,” I say, my voice softer. “You can say it.” I rock my hips against him, and his entire body goes rigid.

“My—*goodness.*”

Yeah. That word might be ruined for me.

The pulse in his neck throbs wildly, and I lean forward to run my tongue along it. He's vibrating with restraint and need, and I smile to myself, loving the power I have over him—over all men.

It's something I find highly addicting, in a world where I have little to no control. Few choices are mine, but the ones that are...I make them count.

Like this one.

"Please, Eve," he chokes out. "Can I please see—" He pauses as I tug at his earlobe with my teeth. "Oh, my. Oh, Gosh." I pull away as his eyes turn Heavenward, his throat bobbing as he swallows thickly.

I have to slow down or things will end far too soon for poor Kev.

His hand falls away from my breast to settle against his chest like he's trying to calm his racing heartbeat. He stares up at me before he lowers his eyes to my dress again. I think he may not know where to look, or maybe he's trying to confirm this is all really happening.

Not that much is happening. Not yet. That's okay, though. I can be patient.

"You want to see my pussy, Kevin?" I ask soothingly. His mouth opens and closes a few times before he nods frantically. "Say it." He shakes his head, not letting a sound or breath slip out.

I slide from his lap onto the blanket in front of him. Placing my feet on either side of his knees, I tug my dress slowly up my thighs. The alcohol coursing through my body gives me enough courage to actually do this. Doing it for a camera is one thing, but in person, it's totally different.

Closing my eyes, I pretend I'm back in my room putting on a show for my fans. They love this. When I wear a chaste-looking dress and tease them like some sort of filthy, fallen angel.

The cool air hits my panties, and my head falls back. I let myself bask in this feeling of freedom. Of tiny rebellion.

Kevin's hand lands on my shin, and I look back at him, finding his eyes glued between my thighs. He licks his lips as he awkwardly slips his legs out from under mine and shifts to his knees.

"Can I—" His hand slides higher up my thigh, and I let my legs open further. "I've heard men will use their tongue to pleasure a woman." My eye twitches at his words. "I want to try that."

I hesitate. Do I really want Kevin to be the first to go down on me? Kissing him, showing him my panties, is one thing. But this?

I take a deep breath, mentally warring with myself. We've already come this far, is letting him eat me out really that bad? If nothing else, a warm tongue might be all I need to get myself off with the help of my fingers.

"Okay," I rasp, drawing the word out. He looks absolutely freaking giddy.

If I didn't know any better, I'd say he's controlling an enthusiastic hand clap/yippee combo, and it makes me dry up like the Sahara. Slowly, I reach down and tug my panties to

the side, letting him get a good view of what's probably his first-ever pussy.

He blinks a few times, readjusting his glasses as he leans forward to get a closer look. His jaw flexes before he flicks his eyes up at me.

"It's so—" He leans back a bit, letting his hands flail as he searches for the words. "Well organized," he says decisively.

"What?" I blurt. "Well organized?" Surely I heard him wrong. I let my panties snap back into place. That was too much—who says that? What does that even mean?

"No, wait," he says, gripping both of my knees and forcing my legs to stay open. I feel like I'm getting a pap smear. "It's just so...tidy. Everything's in its place." He darts forward, pushing my panties to the side, and runs his fingers gently through me horizontally. "I can flip through your pages like a Bible," he murmurs to himself, licking his lips.

"What the fuck, Kevin?"

His mouth opens and closes, his eyes wide as he tries to backtrack. I don't know if I should be insulted or not. He keeps a firm grip on my knees, and I stop trying to close my legs.

"Don't ever say that to a girl again," I snap, and he nods like I've just given him the best advice he's ever gotten, and he's tucking it away into the back pocket of his fucking *jorts*.

"It's just—it looks different than what I thought," he continues. "It's so smooth, and opens like a rose—is that why

vaginas are called flowers?”

What am I doing?

Why am I doing this?

I don't make bad decisions. I think things through before I do them. I'm not a spontaneous person, and I'm definitely not a girl who has random hookups with guys by the lake.

Even going through everything over the last four years, I've never stooped this low. I've never let anyone else touch me, except for—I push thoughts of *him* away.

I know it's the combination of the holiday, the lake, and the alcohol making his ghost reappear in my thoughts tonight. I can't escape him, no matter how hard I try.

A warm, wet tongue sliding against my clit pulls me from my thoughts. I jolt at the feeling, at the sudden pleasure that shoots through my body. Before I can do anything, he licks again, this time avoiding my clit and focusing all his energy on my left lip.

“Wait,” I sigh, moving my hand to his head. “To the right.” He ignores me and continues licking my lip. His tongue swipes against my clit, and I moan, trying to encourage him.

It does—but it encourages him to continue licking the wrong spot.

I lift my hips, trying to find his tongue with my clit. But every time I move, so does he, keeping his attention on his chosen spot. I groan in annoyance and gently shove his head away.

“Did you have an orgasm?” he asks breathlessly. I open my mouth to tell him no, I sure as shit did not, but shut it again.

I should tell him that this was the worst sexual experience of my entire life, but I don't. I can't hurt him like that, not when he's looking at me like an eager puppy waiting for a treat.

A treat.

God, no.

I don't want to reciprocate. I just—I can't.

“Yeah, Kev. I did,” I easily lie. He beams at me, and any guilt that I should feel for lying isn't there.

“I've also heard of men using their fingers,” he says, giving me a sly smile. “Can I?” He holds his hand up and wiggles his fingers, making me cringe.

This should probably be the line. I should stop it all here. I should go inside the house, turn on the bath, and finish myself off with my vibrator. Wash this night away.

Before I can tell him no, his finger is probing my pussy, trying to find my entrance. I jolt and try to scoot back, but it's too late. He finds it and gently tries to push inside, meeting maximum resistance.

“I thought it was supposed to be wet,” he says under his breath, trying to force his finger in. “Is it broken?” He looks at me accusingly and my mouth falls open.

Okay, I'm done.

That's the last straw.

“No, it’s not broken,” I hiss, shoving his hand away as I right my panties and pull my dress down.

“But I’ve heard vaginas lubricate themselves. Why isn’t yours—”

“Lubricate yourself, asshole.” I shove him backward, and my eyes widen as he loses balance and begins to roll down the slight slope toward the lake. “Kevin!” I throw my hand out as water splashes everywhere.

My body jerks at the loud bang as the first firework lights the sky, bright red reflecting off the rippling surface of the lake. Kevin’s head bobs above the water, his glasses gone as he whips his head to the side, plastering his hair to his forehead.

I should feel bad about pushing him into the lake, but I don’t.

After today, after watching Mary fawn all over Isaac, I don’t feel anything but annoyance and anger. Anger at him for not pushing her away, anger at Kevin for his audacity, anger at myself for ever getting in this situation, to begin with.

Anger at Roman—so much festering anger for him.

I shove to my feet, grabbing my tumbler and phone, and stomp toward the house, leaving the partygoers and Kevin behind.

Fuck this holiday.

1.3 Eve

“**Y**ou did what?” Olive screeches, making me wince at the sharp sound. “Poor Kev. He just wanted to get his little willy wet—wait, he did!” She clutches her stomach as she throws herself back on the bed, howling with laughter.

“Oli,” I groan, covering my face with my hands. “It’s not funny.”

“Oh, it’s freaking hilarious,” she laughs, wiping her eye and smearing her eyeshadow across her temple. “I wish I could’ve done it. Do you think he’d let me push him into the lake?” I slide my eyes to her, finding her smiling so wide I can see all her teeth.

“You want to hook up with Kev?” I ask, and she tightly scrunches her face.

“Ew, no.” She gives an exaggerated shiver. “Don’t be ridiculous, Evie.”

“But—nevermind,” I sigh as I push off my bed. “I need to get ready to go to the church.” She groans, loud and long, and

throws her arm over her face.

“You’re always at the church,” she cries dramatically.

“Isaac needs me.” Moving to my closet, I scan it until I find my yellow cardigan.

“He could always ask Mary to help,” Oli snickers, and I clench my jaw. Just the sound of her name makes me irritated. I glare at her over my shoulder, finding her on her belly with her chin propped on her hand as she watches me. “What?” She kicks her feet in the air with mock innocence.

She knows what.

“He doesn’t need to ask Mary anything,” I say sharply, and look back at my clothes. I roughly push them aside until I find a white dress and yank it off the hanger. “He has me.”

“But what about when you leave?”

I pause at her words, unable to ignore the twisting anxiety in my belly. When I leave?

I’ve always thought about traveling the world, but that’s nothing more than a pipedream. Everyone has them. Sometimes they come true, but more times than not, dreams just shrivel up and die, left in a box of unrealistic childhood musings.

Besides, Isaac needs me here. He needs my help. He couldn’t run the house or church by himself.

“I’m not going anywhere,” I lie easily, the words tasting like ash on my tongue. With my back to her so she can’t see the

truth stamped on my face, I step out of my jean shorts and pull my tank top over my head.

“Yeah, but when you move out,” she pushes. “You can’t stay here forever. You’ve always wanted to travel, Eve.” I ignore her as I slide the flowy dress on.

“He doesn’t need Mary,” I say again, shaking my head. She watches me as I finish getting dressed, but stays unusually silent. I don’t want to know what she’s thinking. Whatever it is, it can’t be good.

“It really upsets you, doesn’t it?” she finally asks as I smooth my finger over my lips, blending the pink lipstick in. I stare at myself in my mirror, letting her words settle inside me.

It does.

It really upsets me, and I don’t understand why.

Isaac was never my father, and he never pretended to be, but he’s always been like one to me. It’s only been us these last four years, and even though I call Oli my best friend, Isaac truly is.

He’s been there for me in ways no one else ever has. He’s held me while I’ve cried and has always figured out a way to make me laugh. Without him, I don’t know where I’d be. I know I’d be lost. I wouldn’t know up from down, left from right. He’s more than just my friend and stepfather. He’s—I don’t even know what he is.

But I do know that he’s mine, not Mary’s.

“I need to set up for the meeting,” I say, ignoring her question. Turning toward her, I smooth my hands over my dress.

“Oh, the triple-A meeting?” she asks as she pushes herself up. Her legs dangle over the edge of my bed, swinging back and forth.

“That’s not what it’s called and you know it.” I shake my head, my lips tipping up at her ridiculous name for it. “You gonna be okay getting home?” She waves dismissively as she pushes to her feet, grabbing her shiny patch-covered backpack and slinging it over her shoulder.

“Of course,” she scoffs. “As long as Deputy Dumbass stays out of my way, I’ll be golden.” She glares at the wall as if he’s standing in front of her. I laugh as I grab her shoulder, gently tugging her toward me for a hug.

“Be good,” I say, gently chiding her. She may only be five months younger than me, but Oli is different. Fragile. Too pure for this world. I worry.

“I’m always good,” she says, scrunching her nose at me. I don’t argue with her—in her mind, she is always good. And she usually is. When she’s not wreaking havoc on the town.

We walk to the front door with our arms looped together. I don’t bother locking it; nothing happens in our small town to warrant it. As we step off the wrap-around porch, she gives me another quick hug before sprinting toward her little blue car riddled with bumper stickers. I chuckle, unsure how her short emerald wig stays in place when she moves like that.

She waves at me as she backs from the driveway. It takes three tries before she finally gets her car turned around and is heading down the long road back into town. I stare after her, at the giant plume of dust as she speeds away, no doubt screaming along to her music.

I smile to myself as I make my way toward the church, cringing at the spot Kevin and I had been last night. I still can't believe I did that. It must've been Oli's alcohol because there's no way I would've ever been with him sober.

Right?

Right.

I don't like Kevin. Not like that. And I'm definitely not a random hookup kind of girl. Well, I haven't been. But I'm 20 years old, single, and available. Despite the way Isaac would look down on me dating, there's nothing to say I can't.

But the thought of dating, of spending my time with random guys, especially the ones around town, makes me nauseous. Like, literally want to vomit. It always has.

I used to think it was because I was just so nervous around boys. Always fumbling over my words, my fair cheeks flushing scarlet every time one of them would talk to me, or hell, look at me.

As I got older, I figured it had more to do with the fact that it was the wrong boys talking to me than anything else.

Until that all changed.

Now I have no idea what my deal is. No one's grabbed my attention or held it long enough for me to try. To care.

Maybe Kevin was right. Maybe I am broken.

Sighing, I shake my tumultuous thoughts away as I close in on the church. I pause, taking a moment to inhale deeply, letting the humid air settle deep into my lungs and ground me.

This.

This is my favorite place.

Growing up the daughter of a preacher in a little place called Haven, Georgia had its perks. One of them being the home my father was given for his role in the town. It was an adorable yellow Victorian with a white wooden porch swing that Mama would spend every night on, rocking us back and forth while singing *You Are My Sunshine*.

When Daddy died, I thought I'd never find another place that called to my heart the way that house did. I thought I'd never feel at home again.

Then Isaac came back into our lives and made sure Mama and I had a safe place to land.

That place was Divinity Falls.

Four hours North of where I was born and raised, Divinity Falls is a charming, sweet town filled with wonderful people. Though it's mostly a farming community, the town is well-maintained and loved. Being just off the main highway headed toward the city of Mammoth makes Divinity a common

pitstop for travelers, keeping our businesses busy and economy afloat.

Named after the multi-level falls on the edge of town below the major mountain peaks, this place is one of a kind.

Special.

But it's the church that instantly made me feel at home here. The church and the land it's on. Just like back home in Haven, the town preacher was given a residence for himself and his family. Isaac and Roman spent years settling into the property before we came along and gave it a much needed woman's touch.

Or so Mama always said.

My home now may not be a sweet yellow Victorian, but the two-story, white colonial is just as pretty. It shares land with the church, surrounded by fields that bloom full of wildflowers in the hot summers. Barry's Pond separates the church and our house, and it only takes a ten-minute walk to travel between the two.

Something that I'm unbelievably grateful for on hot afternoons like this one.

"You comin' or goin', child?" a scratchy voice quips, making me jump. My hand lands on my heart as I whirl on the owner of the voice.

My eyes land on Mr. Peters, a kind elderly man who attends these weekly meetings without fail. I exhale a shaky breath and smile widely at him.

“Coming.” I nod toward the entrance of the church, just beyond the white picket fence I’d been rooted in front of. “Join me?” I offer him my elbow, knowing he’s a bit unsteady on his feet these days.

He grins, his pink sunken cheeks wrinkling with the movement, and accepts my offer, tucking himself into my side.

“Runnin’ a little late today,” he grunts, watching my sandaled foot kick out to toe-open the swinging gate. I smirk, knowing there’s no way in Hell he’s late. The man will be early for his own funeral.

“We’ve got plenty of time,” I murmur, patting his hand. I usher him ahead of me and let the gate latch closed behind us with a *clunk*. “Besides,” I add, meeting his grey eyes with a bright smile, “they’d never start without the life of the party.”

He scowls at me, but I wink, letting him know I see through his grumpy exterior.

“Stop flirtin’ with me, girl,” he grumbles, his face going even pinker. “I’m too pretty for you.” He hugs my arm tighter as we slowly make our way up the few steps to the front door of the weathered white ship-lapped building.

My head falls back as a loud laugh spills from my throat, instantly making me feel brighter than I have in days.

“You’re right.” I grin at him, squeezing his solid arm between my fingers. “But a girl can dream, right?”

He scoffs, meeting my gaze. At eighty-something years old, Norman Peters is an inch shorter than me but stocky as all get out. He could bowl me over in an instant, if he had the energy and mind to do so. But the sweet expression on his face whenever I see him tells a different story.

The man's a teddy bear, through and through.

Except for right now.

"You'll be dreamin' for a long time," he quips, narrowing his heavily hooded eyes at me. "My Helena would have your ass if she caught you checkin' me out. Territorial, that one."

Bringing my hand to my chest, I gasp, rearing back in mock offense. "Mr. Peters," I say, aghast. "Not in front of the Lord." I eye the interior of the church dramatically, as though God Himself is standing before us with a judgemental stare.

He rolls his eyes and brushes me off as we near his preferred pew in the second row. "After all I've given up and done for this world, the Lord owes me a few free ones."

I sober, his words hitting me like a punch to the gut.

I know it's not tit for tat. I know we don't do or give to receive. But sometimes it feels unfair. Sometimes it feels unbelievably one sided.

With every new tragedy, every new loss, the scales keep tipping and tipping. Never in my favor. Never my direction.

How much more weight can they take before the scale finally snaps? And where will I be left when it happens?

Mr. Peters clears his throat, cocking a bushy grey brow at me and awareness pricks at my skin. I zoned out. Again.

Get it together, Eve. You've got shit to do.

I smile, backing away so he can get settled and ready for the meeting. I toss a thumb over my shoulder stupidly. "I'll be over here if you need anything."

Ignoring me, he pulls his tiny notebook and pen from the front pocket of his worn blue button down and settles it on the back of a pew Bible, using it as a makeshift desk. As a representative of the church, I know I should correct him, tell him it's bad form to do such a thing, but I can't seem to make my mouth move.

Especially not when I see his clouded eyes gloss over as he reads the recent letter he's begun working on. With the distance between us, I can't make out much beyond the header.

My dear sweet Helena,

Oh, how I miss you.

My eyes burn and I rapidly blink away the tears as I turn and rush away.

Poor Mr. Peters.

And Mrs. Peters.

A tragic love story, ended way too soon.

Don't they always, a little voice whispers in my ear. Does true, life-long love even exist?

As I round the corner, headed for the office in the back of the church, I barely stifle a scoff.

No.

No, I'm not sure it exists at all. Life has shown me time and time again that love—real, honest to God, everlasting love, is a boldfaced lie. A pipedream—just like my dreams to travel.

It's nothing more than a wish.

Something to hold on to when the darkness creeps up on you, encroaching on your soul. It's a comfort, meant to keep you sane so you don't realize how utterly depressing life really is.

I swallow thickly as I grip the handle to Isaac's office. My eyes flutter shut as I try to will the nasty thoughts pressing in on my mind to back off.

I shove the door open, finding his office empty and exactly as I left it for him before we took off for the holiday. My heart sinks. There's an immediate pang in my chest knowing that not only did he come home late and leave early, he also never showed up for his Saturday office hours.

“What are you doing, Isaac?” I murmur, shaking my head. I close the door and it slams loudly, echoing off the narrow hallway walls. “And why do I care so damn much?”

1.4 Eve

“S orry I’m late, y’all.”

I turn toward his voice, my heart leaping into my throat as I watch him emerge from the hallway I just left. Isaac adjusts his rolled sleeves, pushing them to his elbows.

“A phone call kept me busy,” he says, throwing his thumb over his shoulder. My eyes narrow slightly. A phone call? With who?

His powerful gaze searches the church, and when he finds me, his shoulders relax and a small smile graces his full lips. It’s infectious, and I can’t hold my own grin back.

Everyone and everything around us falls away as we stare at each other. The glint in his eyes, the crinkles around them, tell me so much, apologize for so much, and I feel all my earlier anger melt away.

How can he do that? Bring me so much comfort after depriving me of it?

Before I can analyze it too much, a tap on my shoulder pulls me away from him, and I turn my attention to the man standing beside me. He's more than a few inches taller than me, maybe a few years older, too, with dark hair and light, kind eyes. He's a handsome man. One I don't recognize.

"Is this the AA meeting?" he asks, his voice raspy. His eyes dart to the circle of chairs in the center of the small stage, already filled with people.

"Yes, sir," I say, smiling up at him. "I'm Eve."

"Marcus." I hold my hand out and he gently takes it, gripping it for a beat too long. His brows dip as his gaze searches mine, and I gently tug my hand from his. He swallows thickly, his shoulders bowing in a fraction.

"You okay?" I ask, and he clears his throat.

"Just a bit nervous." He laughs, rubbing the back of his neck, and I give him a sympathetic smile. That's understandable.

"We're so happy you're here, Marcus." I clasp my hands tightly together in front of myself, trying to refrain from fidgeting. He really is cute.

Isaac shuffles around the stage, murmuring to other attendees and moving some seats around to make space for the newcomer. Marcus says something, his dark brows lifting slightly as he waits for my answer.

"I'm sorry, what?" I ask, shaking my head slightly. He laughs, showing off his deep dimples. I bite my lip in embarrassment. Shit. I'm like a fawning virgin.

“I asked if you’re here for the meeting, too,” he says, scanning my body. “I can’t imagine a girl like you ever being addicted to anything.” I cover my mouth as I choke on a laugh.

If only he knew.

“We all have our vices, Marcus,” I say softly. “I’m Preacher Isaac’s stepdaughter. I’m just here to help set up.” I gesture to the table of refreshments I’m working on now that the stage is as it should be. He nods in understanding and glances at Isaac as he happily catches up with Opal and Tom. “But if you need anything at all, don’t hesitate.”

I smile up at Marcus, waiting for him to take his seat. Like a slap to the forehead, I realize he doesn’t know what to do or where to go. Placing my hand on his upper back, I gently guide him down the aisle toward the intimate meeting area. I’m unsure if I imagine it, but it almost feels as though he shudders under my touch.

“Sit wherever you’d like,” I whisper, not wanting to call too much attention to him when he’s so obviously nervous. His throat bobs as he swallows, looking around the small group. It’s mostly men, but a few women are scattered throughout. He looks hesitant and doesn’t budge a step. “God accepts us all, even if we’ve made mistakes in the past. We’re like a family here, and everyone will welcome you with open arms.” He gives me a tight-lipped smile before sliding into the nearest empty chair.

“Thank you, sweetheart,” Isaac says softly, his voice warm and familiar. The sound of my nickname coming from him

snaps my spine straight. Heat rushes through me at the soft smile on his face, but just as quickly as it came, he looks away and is all Preacher again. “I see we have a new face tonight. Welcome...” He lifts his brows expectantly, and Marcus clears his throat.

“Marcus, sir,” he says, bowing his head slightly. Isaac’s smile stays in place as he stands, clasping his notes, Bible, and hands in front of him. The glinting cross behind him is the perfect backdrop, reminding us all that he’s a man of God—a man God chose to preach his word and teachings.

“Well, welcome to our little meeting, son,” he says, waving his hand around at the group. “Though, as Eve said, we’re more of a family. We’re happy to have you here.”

I clear my throat as I turn on my heel and head toward the refreshments table in the back. I still have a few things to do. I’m moving slowly today. Or maybe I’m just hanging around intentionally.

My smile stays in place as I listen to Isaac talk with everyone. He’s not one of those annoying Preachers who spout gospel at you, or makes non-believers feel like they’re going to Hell for not following the word of God. He welcomes everyone, just like my daddy did—Isaac learned from the best.

My hands are steady as I set everything up, putting the snacks, coffee and water in their rightful places. I even prepared fresh sun tea today, knowing it would be an extra warm evening.

“Since Marcus is new, maybe we can go around and tell him a bit about ourselves? Maybe our stories if anyone feels up for it?” Isaac suggests.

“You go first, Preacher Isaac,” Bobby, one of the men around Isaac’s age, calls. I smile to myself as I turn around, my hand resting over my heart as I watch Isaac’s face turn a light crimson. He rubs the back of his neck, huffing out an awkward laugh.

“Oh, I’m sure y’all don’t want to hear that story again,” he says, waving a dismissive hand in the air. I love his story—we all do.

The man who came from nothing, who had hit rock bottom, and clawed his way to the top and turned into a man of God. A family man. It’s a beautiful and heartbreaking tale. One I’ll never tire of listening to.

Everyone assures him they want to hear him tell it again, and he huffs out another laugh. He sets his notebook and Bible on the podium before sliding his hands into his pockets and begins pacing the stage, his eyes on the floor. Even from a distance, I can see his Adam’s apple bobbing repeatedly as though he’s swallowing down a thick lump in his throat.

“Well, I was living in Florida with the mother of my child,” he begins. My heart squeezes painfully. A crease forms between his brows, like recalling the past hurts him, and I’m sure it does. Reliving his struggle must be hard, but he’ll do it for them. This group of survivors. Warriors. “Roman, my *son*,”

his voice tightens on the word, and my hand wraps around Mama's pendant around my throat, "was only four."

As I watch him pace, his lips moving to tell the story he's told so many times before, I find myself remembering the first time I heard it and the impact it had on me. Even at such a young age, it made my soul ache.

For Isaac.

For Roman.

Even for his late mother, Camilla.

Isaac's smile is wide as he looks around the table. I can't contain my own as I watch him give Mama's hand a tight squeeze. She grins so widely, so happily, her cheeks turn pink.

My stomach flips.

It's the first real smile I've seen from her since Daddy.

I glance at Roman, finding him slouched in his chair, his arms folded over his chest as he glares at his bare plate. My smile drops as I rack my brain for anything that will make him smile. Make him happy.

I like when he's happy.

I open my mouth, a joke I heard at school on the tip of my tongue, but quickly snap it shut when Mama calls out to me. "Why don't you say grace for us, Evie?"

I swallow the ball in my throat as I turn back to her and Isaac, away from Roman. I force my face into a happy

expression and nod.

“Daddy’s prayer, okay?” I murmur, shooting a nervous look toward Isaac. Mama gives me a sad smile, but it’s Isaac who responds.

Reaching across the table, he grips my small hand. “Of course, Eve. Whatever makes you happy.”

I turn to take Roman’s hand, completing our family circle because that’s what will make me happy right now. He glares at me. I roll my lip out in a pout that normally works and sure enough, he sighs loudly and takes my free hand.

“In a world where so many are hungry, may we eat this food with humble hearts. In a world where so many are lonely, may we share this friendship with joyful hearts.” I smile big, feeling closer to Daddy than I have in a while. “Amen.”

“Amen,” everyone agrees, releasing one another so Mama can dish out dinner.

Like always, she starts with Isaac, just like she did with Daddy, and I suck up the lesson like a sponge. I may only be ten-years-old, but she’s already teaching me how to be a good wife someday. A good mother.

Jumping to my feet, I reach to the center of the table, and pick up a heaping spoonful of mashed potatoes before dumping it onto Roman’s plate. It splatters a bit, making me giggle.

“What the hell are you doing?” Roman hisses quietly, batting my hand away.

I ignore him, already accustomed to his sassy, grumpy ways. We've only been living with the Payne's for six months, but it's enough to understand how things go around here.

Isaac smiles and leads.

Roman grumbles and stomps.

Mama cleans and cooks, keeping the house in order.

And me? I play. I learn. I practice. Just like now.

So, instead of giving up my attempts at servitude, I pick up a fresh, warm dinner roll and butter it up for my prickly stepbrother. I drop it on his plate and move on to the chicken breasts, swapping dishes with Mama.

"Eve," Roman grunts, loud enough to call attention from the grown ups. I pause, meeting his stare. He swallows loudly, his eyes darting from mine to Isaac's. "I got it. Just worry about yourself."

My brows bunch up and my chest aches. I don't know what to do. I know what I should do. What I'm supposed to do. But I also know I'm supposed to listen, especially to the men of the house.

Nodding slowly, I settle back in my seat.

As everyone turns to their meals, I watch Roman fall back into his silent, angry ways and something pricks at my mind. He's not used to being served or taken care of.

Not like this.

“Didn’t your mama serve you dinner?” I ask quietly, leaning toward him. I know Roman’s mama died when he was young, but surely, he has to remember a time when he was taken care of. “Maybe your Grammy?” My Grammy Jean would often take care of me when Mama and Daddy couldn’t.

Roman’s eyes snap up to mine. His mouth opens and closes, but nothing comes out. His shoulders bunch up high then drop down low. He looks...he looks sad.

I immediately want to take it back. Before I can, Isaac jumps in like the peacekeeper he is.

“Roman didn’t get much time with his mama before the Lord took her, Evie,” he says softly, patting the back of my hand. “Not everyone is blessed with women as wonderful as you and Jane, you know?”

I try to swallow, but my mouth is suddenly so dry I end up coughing. I grab my glass of milk and take a big gulp, calming my lungs so I can respond.

“I know, sir,” I agree. And I do know. My friend Katie at school doesn’t have a mama or a daddy. It’s just her and her Aunty Nina. I look to Roman, wishing I could jump up and give him a big hug. Wishing I could promise he’ll never know that kind of pain again. “I’m sorry, Ro.”

He ignores me, shoving his potatoes around his plate. The table falls quiet. Questions bounce around my mind. Questions I know I have no right to ask.

Mama must see it on my face. She knows I'm inquisitive. Knows I can't just let things rest—try as I might.

She squeezes Isaac's free hand. "Maybe it's time, hm? Maybe it'll help some. Bring us together."

Isaac shoots a sad look at Roman who's sunken impossibly further into his wooden chair. It's like he wants to disappear. Completely the opposite of his son, my stepdad rolls his shoulders back, sits up tall and nods.

"I grew up in a tiny town in Florida. Smaller than this one. Camilla, Roman's mom—she was my high school sweetheart. We fell in love, and even though we were young, God blessed us with Roman."

I think I might imagine it, but I could swear I hear Roman huff a quiet laugh under his breath. Isaac goes on like he didn't hear a thing.

"But Cami—" He breaks off, swallowing thickly. Mama jumps to her feet and stands behind him, massaging his shoulders in encouragement. Isaac pats her hand and gives her an adoring look. My stomach flips. I hope someone looks at me like that someday. "Cami had a hard life before we met. A hard childhood. Her family—" He shakes his head. "Let's just say, they weren't like this one."

"What were they like?" I ask, unable to bite my tongue.

Mama shoots me a disapproving look. "Do not interrupt, Evelyn Jean."

I roll my lips between my teeth and nod solemnly.

Isaac's lip tips up in the corner. "It's okay, Jane." He presses a kiss to her fingertips. "Cami's family drank and—they did bad things." He runs a hand through his hair. "Which is ultimately what took Cami's life."

A loud screech sounds from the opposite side of the table and my head snaps, just in time to see Roman stomp away toward his room. The kitchen fills with thick tension that confuses me.

I'm sure Roman is sad. I'm sure he doesn't want to hear about his mama dying. Especially if it was in such a way. I know I don't like hearing about the months and months Daddy suffered from cancer before the Lord finally granted him peace.

But Isaac doesn't seem to agree. He moves to stand up, his face red and angry. Luckily, Mama whispers something in his ear, calming him down before he and Ro can get into it.

Again.

They argue sometimes. Mama says it's because Roman's a teenager and that's what teenage boys do. Isaac says it's because Ro is lost.

Personally, I just think no one's taken the time to understand him. Something I'm trying to do. If he'll let me.

Isaac exhales roughly and drops into his chair. It takes him a few moments to get back into the story, but when he does, Mama's in her chair and Roman's tucked away in his room, probably laying on his window seat with a book in hand. I, on

the other hand, am leaning forward in my chair, eager to know everything I can about our new family.

“Cami struggled. She didn’t take to being Roman’s mom very easily. He had colic.” I give him a questioning look, and he smiles sadly. “It means he was a sick baby and cried a lot. We didn’t have much support or money. We needed a new start. It was hard for us and we made mistakes. We drank. We partied. It wasn’t a good time for us, Evie.”

He bites his lips as his eyes close tightly. Mama sniffles, dabbing her cheeks with a floral hanky, and my heart sinks.

“I wanted to start over. Wanted a new life for my family. A life away from everything bad. Everything ugly. When Roman was four, I packed all our belongings in the tiny station wagon I’d saved up for and promised them both something better.”

He takes a big breath, letting it out slowly.

“You did the right thing,” Mama murmurs, gripping the golden heart necklace Daddy gave her tightly. “You did the right thing for both of them.”

He gives a look of disbelief and blinks rapidly. It’s then that I notice the redness in his eyes, the tears dampening his thick, black lashes. They make me cry and I sniffle behind my hand.

“I know,” Isaac agrees. “You and Grant showed me that. It’s just hard to believe sometimes.”

He turns back to me, offering me a sympathetic look when he notices my tears. “We’d stopped at a hotel a few hours away from our destination. I was exhausted after driving for nearly

a day straight. We rested for the night, had a late lunch, and gassed up the car.”

“I had a couple beers with my burger, but Cami didn’t. She was sober.” He shakes his head again, his fists clenching and unclenching on the table. “I thought she was sober. I don’t know where she got it or when, but at some point, Cami had gotten drunk before offering to drive us the rest of the way.”

I suck in a painful breath, my mind already racing with what could have happened. I know you can’t drink and drive. I know what can happen. It’s how old man Jameson lost his life back in Haven last year.

“I was still tired and agreed. Everything was fine. The sun was shining. The windows were down. The music was loud. We were singing. Roman was laughing.” He swipes at his cheek angrily, wiping the fallen tear away as if it were never there. “We were starting over. And then we were crashing.”

He presses his face into his hands, his shoulders shaking with the force of his tears. Mama wipes her face softly and looks at me, picking up when he’s unable to.

“Camilla died on impact. Roman was okay, but Isaac was a bit banged up.” She smiles sadly. “The crash took place in Haven, Georgia.”

I gasp, my wet eyes going wide. She gives me a knowing nod.

“Roman was placed in emergency foster care and since your daddy and I were certified and available, he was placed in our

home while Isaac handled some things.”

I knew they’d lived with us when I was a baby, but I was too young to remember. I never knew why. No one ever told me this story before and I never thought I could ask.

“He worked really, really hard to get better so he could get Roman back.” She presses a soft kiss to Isaac’s bunched up hand. “And he did.”

“With your help,” Isaac grunts, clearing his throat. “And Grants.” He looks at me. “And yours.”

“I helped?” I whisper, wiping my cheeks.

Smiling, he nods and holds his hands out for me. “Come here, sweetheart.” I take a shaky breath and all but sprint to the opposite side of the table. Isaac bundles me up in his big, safe arms and drops me on his lap. “You did. Your whole family put mine back together and I don’t know where I’d be without you.”

Isaac Payne turned tragedy into greatness. He saved himself. He saved Roman. And looking back, I think he may have saved me, too.

1.5 Isaac

Sizzling bacon and freshly buttered toast wafts through the house, the underlining scent of thick, nutty coffee mingling in the air. Eve's sweet voice accompanies it, and I smile to myself.

I adjust my cufflinks before sliding my hand over my hair, smoothing it down, making everything perfect. My dress shoes are shined to perfection, my pants are ironed and creased, and my shirt collar is starched just the way I like it. Eve did well.

It's a far cry from how I grew up.

"Worthless." My father's voice echoes in my head and I squeeze my eyes shut. In the darkness of my mind, I can feel his fist against my ribs, feel his belt across my back.

My eyes snap open and I meet my gaze in the floor-length mirror.

He's gone and dead; his ghost can't hurt me. He *won't* haunt me.

With a deep breath, I turn on my heel to head out my bedroom door. The folded corner of my comforter catches my eye, and I try to ignore it as I stroll across the room. But with each passing step, anxiety twists my chest and I rush to the bed, fixing the blanket the right way.

I wouldn't have been able to go about my day if I'd left that. It would've been all I thought about, so it's best I just fix it now.

Already feeling calmer, I turn back to the door, ready to start my day.

Each step down the staircase makes me smile wider. I round the corner and am forced to stop in my tracks, finding Eve twirling around the kitchen, a spatula in her hand as she sings along to a song coming through her phone speaker.

She puts me in a trance, she always has with that voice of hers. It's angelic—*she's* angelic.

Before I can close the distance between us, *that* spot catches my attention. Suddenly, it's a night four years ago and blood is covering the floor. It's staining my hands, my clothes, under my nails. I hold Jane's lifeless body in my arms and stare down at her, my eyes wide as I try to take in the damage.

She's dead.

I shake myself and make my way across the kitchen, dodging the dining table on the way. She doesn't sense me as I approach, and it only makes my grin broader. She's always in her own little world, oblivious to everything around her.

Resting my hands on her waist, she lets out a little yelp that has me chuckling to myself. She fumbles for her phone and turns the music down before spinning toward me. I keep my hands where they are, firmly wrapped around her narrow waist, noticing the way my palms fit the curve perfectly.

As if she were made for me.

My brows bunch together. *Where did that come from?*

“You scared me!” she laughs, swatting my chest.

“It’s not my fault you’re so unaware of your surroundings, sweetheart,” I say, pressing a kiss to her cheek. She laughs again, shaking her head. Her golden curls sway with the movement.

“Breakfast is almost ready,” she says, smiling up at me. Her blue eyes shine brightly in the morning sun pouring in through the garden window above the sink. Fresh sunflowers are sitting on the windowsill, just like they are every week. “Your coffee is already on the table.”

“No—”

“No sugar,” she says, lifting her perfect brow, her lips twisting in a wry grin. “I remembered.”

I knew she would.

There’s not much she doesn’t remember about taking care of me and our home. After Jane passed, Eve became the woman of the house and she fell naturally into that role. She was born to be a homemaker and a wife.

I give her another gentle kiss on her temple, and when I pull away, her full pink lips are parted. I feel like she's about to say something—hell, I might even be about to say something, but then there's a loud popping sound followed by an intense burning smell and whatever just passed between us dissolves.

Eve whirls around toward the stove, quickly snagging a dish towel and pushing the cast iron full of bacon off the burner.

“Shoot,” she breathes, giving me a guilty look over her shoulder. “I'm sorry, Isaac. I burned the bacon.”

My jaw clenches, but I force myself to swallow.

“That's alright, sweetheart,” I say, the words sounding strangled even to my own ears. Her shoulders drop, so I grab her elbow, pulling her toward me. Wrapping my arm around her waist, I rest my head against hers. “It's okay. We don't need bacon this morning.”

She sighs and leans into me, and that's my cue to move away. I cannot be holding her like this. Even if I've done it a million times before, it feels...different. She feels different this morning, and I can't put my finger on why.

Apart from that momentary tension, I don't know what it is that's making her more womanly today. Is it her smile? Or the softness of her body? The supple curves of her breasts beneath her pajama top or the thickness to her ass under her yoga pants

I stop myself and take a large step back, my hands falling to my sides.

Roughly, I clear my throat and drop my gaze to my shoes. I have no business noticing my stepdaughter's breasts. *Eve* and *breasts* should never be in the same sentence. Not that she doesn't have great breasts, but—

What am I doing? What the hell is wrong with me?

“Thanks for the coffee,” I say, my voice strangled. My hands are sweating and my heart's racing a mile a minute. I need—*something*.

“Yep,” she says, sounding just as strained. She busies herself as I move to the table and take my seat at the head of it.

My sermon notebook is lying beside my mug, as it is every Sunday morning.

This.

This is what I need.

Focus. Devotion. The Lord.

Grabbing my pen, I flip the notebook to today's sermon and begin going over the notes I made last night. As I silently work, Eve plates my food before her own. She sits at her usual spot across the table, the only sounds filling the kitchen are the metal prongs of her fork hitting her plate.

I risk a glance up, finding her staring intently at her scrambled eggs. She's not eating them, just pushing them around the flowery dish. Somehow, she's made herself smaller. She doesn't look like the same woman I saw when I entered the kitchen this morning.

Instead, she looks like the lost little girl she still is.

Sighing, I close the notebook and turn toward her. She doesn't look up at me, doesn't take a bite, doesn't do anything but play with her food.

"You need to eat before it gets cold," I tell her, grabbing my fork and shoveling eggs into my mouth, knowing she won't start eating until I do. Her bottom lip slips between her teeth as she nods.

So meek. So obedient. *So sweet.*

She brings a bite to her mouth and slowly chews before taking a sip of her sweet tea. I've never met anyone more addicted to iced tea than she is. I can't help the chuckle that escapes me, and she finally lifts her eyes to mine.

"What?" she whispers.

"You and that dang tea," I say, shaking my head with a smile. "I think you'd inject it straight into your veins if you could." The corner of her full mouth tips in a grin.

"I wouldn't get to taste it if I did that," she says, picking the glass up again with a giggle that punches me straight in the gut. Maybe lower. "And I love to taste it." She wraps her lips around the straw, and I stare, my mouth going dry as she swallows with a happy hum.

I feel lightheaded as all the blood in my body heads south. I try to look away when she sets the glass down and goes back to her food, but I can't. She stabs a chunk of watermelon and

brings it to her mouth. As she bites down, a trickle of juice drips from the corner of her lush, pink lips and down her chin.

My jaw tenses. My hands tighten into fists under the table as she drags her finger up the trail of juice and sucks it off, completely oblivious to the borderline pornographic show she's putting on.

Get it together, Isaac. Don't be a sick asshole.

“Eve—” My voice is raw as she snaps her eyes to me, blinking those big baby blues innocently. God, she really has no clue. I clear my throat and take a long drink of my coffee, ignoring how hot it is as it burns its way down my throat. I focus on the pain, needing it to yank me back from whatever messed up place my mind has gone all of a sudden. “I’ll need your help after church this morning. I’m meeting with Mrs. Johnson.”

“Again?” Eve asks, tilting her head to the side, her expression turning concerned.

“That baby of hers is still sick,” I sigh, drumming my fingers on the table.

I sigh for a million different reasons. Maybe because I don’t know what to do to help Mrs. Johnson or her son. Or because I don’t know why the hell I’m looking at my stepdaughter like this. Maybe because I’ve finally gotten my erection under control.

Thinking about work, that’ll get the blood flowing away from my dick.

“Oh, no, that poor thing,” she says, pressing her hand to her heart. I nod, agreeing with her. “We have to help them, Isaac.”

“I know, sweetheart,” I say, my voice thick with exhaustion, despite the fact I just woke up. I shake my head, turning back to my plate and going over my notes. We fall into a comfortable, if not unusually silent, meal.

The sound of Eve’s chair sliding across the worn wooden floors pulls me from my preparations. I blink rapidly, clearing my mind. My plate is empty and she offers me a soft, demure smile as she clears my place setting. With her hands full, Eve turns toward the sink, her round ass swaying side to side in her black, form-fitting pants.

Without my permission, my eyes zero in on the movement.

Is she even wearing panties under those? They’re skintight.

My knee jerks, colliding with the bottom of the table in an effort to tamp down my sudden erection. Again.

What the hell is wrong with me today?

Eve hums as she bends over the sink and begins to wash the breakfast dishes. Those fucking pants are molded to her ass, giving me the perfect impression of the skin I know is silky soft beneath them.

The Lord is testing me. He has to be. Why else would He put such temptation before me when I’m already struggling so much?

I can’t have this. Can’t be thinking like this. But then, she sways her ass to the music in her head, taunting me, and I

snap.

“Eve!” My barked voice echoes around the peaceful kitchen as the sound of a dish colliding with the porcelain ricochets off the walls. She squeals and turns wide, doe eyes my direction. I swallow, roll my neck a few times, and give her a forced smile. “Go get ready for church, sweetheart. I’ll do the dishes for you.”

She gapes at me. “What?” Her head’s shaking before the words have even formed. “I can do it. I’ll be quick, I prom—”

“Go,” I snap, jerking my finger toward her room down the hall. I never raise my voice. Not at her. But she—*something* is messing with my head today. “Hurry up. I don’t want to be late.”

Swallowing roughly, she jerks a nod and rinses her hands before practically sprinting from the kitchen. My fingers find my temples as I try to rub away the tension building behind my eyes.

Since I can’t rub anything else.

My dick is hard as I make my way to the sink and my jaw tenses as I roll my pristine sleeves up. My eyes narrow on the coffee cup and utensils sitting in the warm, soapy water. I can already feel the grime on my fingers and the wet splashes on my clean shirt before I’ve even touched them and it creates an anxious burn in my gut.

Twenty minutes later, I’m freaking out and filled with agitation as I wait for Eve. My eyes flick to the clock over the

sink.

Once.

Twice.

Three times.

Two past eight.

Time to go.

It was time to go two minutes ago.

I jump to my feet and tuck my notes into my briefcase before charging down the hall. I pass the empty room on the left, eyeing the closed door as though it's about to jump out and bite me. Seeing the scuff marks at the bottom of the door from the years and years of him kicking it open, the dull brass knob that was once shiny and perfect, now worn from his dirty hands touching it, only serves to irritate me more.

I give it a wide berth, passing the Jack and Jill bathroom connecting it to Eve's room.

Her door is open a few inches and I wrap my hand around the knob, shouldering my way in as I call out.

"Let's go, Eve. We're—" The words die on my tongue when my eyes land on my stepdaughter as she tugs a long zipper up the side of her curvy body.

Her creamy skin, sunkissed from days at the lake this summer, is so soft and sweet looking, I have to clutch my hand into a painful fist to keep myself from reaching for her.

She jolts, sliding the zipper the rest of the way up before turning toward me. “Isaac!” Her breasts heave with her labored breaths. I clench my jaw so tight my teeth might crack.

“We need to go,” I grind out. Pink rushes to her cheeks, her rosebud lips shiny from gloss, part on a silent answer. My eyes drop to her chest, the luscious curves of her large breasts too pronounced in her little sundress. “And put on a sweater. Cover yourself up, for Christ’s sake, Eve.”

My voice comes out harsher than I’d intended, and I immediately regret it. I pull my eyes from her cleavage, finding her face closed off. Embarrassed. Sad.

“I’m just trying to protect you from wandering eyes, sweetheart,” I say softly, stepping toward her. “You know how boys are.” She lowers her gaze to the floor, nodding solemnly. “Hey, look at me.” I hesitate before reaching out, gently gripping her chin between my thumb and forefinger.

Her big, round eyes meet mine, the blue in them so fucking bright it feels like looking into Heaven.

“You know all I ever want is to take care of you,” I murmur, stroking my thumb along her jaw. Her throat bobs as she swallows. “I just want to protect you.” She nods, her chest heaving more than before. “Put on a sweater. For me?”

Her tongue darts out, tracing over her sticky lips, and my eyes zero in on it. Without my permission, my grip tightens on her jaw.

Temptress.

Such a little temptress.

Even if she doesn't know it, even if she's not doing it on purpose, she's the temptress and I am Adam, baited by her fruit.

It's a test, one I refuse to fail.

I force myself to move away from her. Even feet apart, we don't drop each other's gaze, both of us just as confused at what's happening between us.

"We need to go," I rasp. She swallows again, and I watch the movement of her throat, gritting my teeth at the sight.

Quickly, she finds a cream cardigan and slides it over her pastel green dress. Her fingers tremble as she slides the small buttons through the holes, doing it up all the way and covering her breasts from anyone's wandering eyes.

They're hidden, but *I* know they're there. I know they're soft and round, and just begging to be squeezed and sucked on. To be worshiped and fucked. Marked up.

I snap my eyes to hers, finding them unexpectedly heated. Roughly, I clear my throat and take another long look at the girl before me—no, not girl. She's a woman now. One I hardly recognize anymore but love all the same.

Over the last four years, our connection's only grown. Eve trusts me, needs me. After losing her mom, and then Roman, we're all we have.

I can't fuck this up.

She can't lose someone else.

I can't lose someone else.

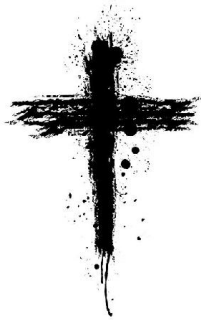
With a thick swallow, I let the daunting weight of the realization sink in. Though it kills me to pull my gaze away from her and the sinful body that's urging me to stray from my path, I do it. I have to. Without another word, I turn away from Eve, putting some much needed distance between us.

But with every step, my cock throbs, and I know I need much more than the strength God can grant me.

I need church. *Now*.

I need The Lord and all the grace he can possibly offer.

I need a motherfucking exorcism from the demons that have infected me—my temptress stepdaughter.



“What did the doctors in Mammoth say?” I ask, fighting the urge to run my hand through my hair in frustration as my eyes flit between the whimpering baby in Charlene Johnson’s arms and the four other hellions wreaking havoc on my office.

She snuffles and tugs her child closer to her chest as though her presence alone can protect him and my heart squeezes, reminding me of the reason we're here.

“He has C.O.M.” At my blank look, she expands. “Chronic Otitis Media. It's the ear infections. He needs surgery.”

She shakes her head and tears leak down her thin, pale cheeks. I quickly hop up and pass her the box of tissues sitting on my desk. She lifts her lips in a grateful but exhausted smile just as a pile of books topples from my shelf in the corner.

My head whips around, finding her middle two children standing over the mess with sheepish expressions on their faces. I swallow the acid clawing its way up my throat until it settles deep in my gut.

I hate messes.

“Jasper. Izzy. Clean that up right now,” Charlene hisses, clearly embarrassed on her children's behalf. Rightfully so.

The children ignore her, their eyes never leaving mine. I'm sure they're tracking the way my jaw ticks increase with every passing second. When it's clear they're not going to listen to their mother, I cock a brow, giving them a meaningful warning look and letting my serene expression slip momentarily. Their eyes widen and the children immediately drop down to clean up.

This.

This is why women and children need a man around. Protection. Guidance. Obedience.

Letting out a tired breath, I retake my seat and turn to Charlene. Her oldest child, a twelve-year-old daughter named Bonnie, is sitting next to her and holding her toddler, Austin, with one hand and texting with the other, oblivious to her surroundings. Austin's using my favorite pen to aggressively scribble on the newspaper I'd sat aside to read later. His little tongue is peeking out between his gapped teeth in concentration and while some would find it cute, all I can focus on are his sticky hands and cheeks.

Are they all sticky?

What did they eat to make them look that way? Candy or maybe ice cream? Why would she feed them that so early?

Were they like that all throughout church?

Are my pews sticky now?

As the questions cycle through my brain, my palms begin to sweat and my right eye twitches repeatedly. I need to get this shit over with ASAP. I need them out of my office and then I need—

I need this entire place sterilized.

I might need to just abandon this office and find a new one. It'll never be clean again. Never clean enough.

A wail pulls my attention from where I'd been absently watching Austin miss the newspaper by a mile and mark up my newly polished cherry desk. Harvey, the sick baby in question's face, is scrunched up and nearly purple from how

hard he's holding his breath. His tiny hand is tugging harshly on his right ear, turning it red.

Charlene cries harder, the sound grating down my nerves.

Her family continues their destruction—unrepentant and uncaring of the chaos they're creating or the state of their mother.

I lean back in my chair and grip the arms so hard my fingernails dig into the wood. I count backward from ten, breathing deeply through my nose.

Ten seconds isn't long enough, and I start over.

Thank God the Lord only gave me one child. I don't know what I'd do if I'd been subjected to more.

Thoughts of Roman flit through my mind, taking me to a different place and time altogether. A simpler time. A time when I'd be able to handle a situation like this easily. A time when he would've obeyed without question or complaint. Before it all got so messed up.

A soft knock on my door snaps me from my thoughts, and everything comes back into focus.

Charlene shushes a whimpering Harvey and blows her nose. She drops the wadded up tissue onto my desk and swaps it for a new one. Swallowing roughly, I roll my neck on my shoulders and lean forward, steepling my hands beneath my chin.

“Come in,” I call out, my voice raw.

Seconds before I lose my ever-loving mind, Eve glides into my office with a bright white smile gracing her stunning face. Golden light shines in behind her from the open door at the end of the hall, creating a downright biblical image, and my world *stops*.

Her eyes meet mine and her smile widens. My Adam's apple bobs with the force of my breathing. My heart rate picks up for an entirely new reason and everything inside me relaxes. My muscles uncoil, my palms cool, my throbbing headache ceases.

Her presence is a balm to my nerves. Always has been.

Charlene snuffles loudly and Harvey whines. Eve blinks rapidly and shakes her head. Her gaze flies around my office, taking in the destruction. Her eyes widen in shock, but beyond that, she keeps her reaction tempered.

Pasting on a wide, fake smile, she claps her hands loudly and gathers everyone's attention.

"Have I got a treat for y'all or what?" she beams excitedly.

The kids jump up as one, eager for whatever she's got planned. "What is it, Miss Evie?" Jasper shouts.

Eve plants her delicate hands on her lush hips and cocks her head to the side. Her small foot taps and she gives him a stern look.

"Well, I don't think I can tell you quite yet." She glances around the room and presses a hand to her chest in mock

horror. “Seems Preacher Isaac’s office might need some tidying up first, don’t y’all think?”

Charlene’s lip twitches and she buries her face in her son’s hair to hide her smile. The children rush to straighten their messes and Eve turns her attention toward their mother. She closes the distance between them and bends at the waist to meet her eyes.

My gaze immediately snaps to her perfect legs as the dress rides up along the back of her thighs. My cock twitches. The creamy expanse of skin on display does nothing to soothe my reaction to her and thoughts of this morning fill my mind.

The way she sucked on her straw. The sight of licking watermelon juice from the pad of her finger. Her thick ass in those goddamned pants—

“Now, Mrs. Johnson,” Eve coos, interrupting my downward spiral. “Why don’t you let me take him so you can speak to Preacher Isaac openly about everything troubling you, hmm?”

She’s so soft-spoken. So calming. So fucking genuine.

She’s *pure*.

And here I am thinking about tainting her. Dirtying her. She’s perfection personified and all I want to do is *ruin her*.

I force myself to look away, turning to my Bible and rereading the passages I’d highlighted for today. A fitting sermon, given my current state.

“When tempted, no one should say, ‘‘God is tempting me.’’ For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone;

but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.”

Death.

That’s exactly what lies ahead if I fall down this path.

Death of everything I’ve worked so hard to create. Death of the life I love and the world I deserve. Death to honor and pride.

It’s not worth it.

An hour later, I’m shaking Charlene’s hand and herding her from my office with a genuine smile and a solid plan to help her family.

“Thank you so much, Preacher Isaac,” she sobs. I nod, gripping her shoulder. “I don’t know what we’d do without you.”

“You don’t need to thank me,” I say softly, meaning it. “Divinity Falls Baptist sticks together. We’re a family. Your children are God’s children and they deserve the very best.”

She smiles, blotting the tears coursing down her cheeks. “Things just haven’t been the same since my Earl died. Divinity Falls was truly blessed the day you came to us. You’re a wonderful man.”

Pride fills me so quickly, my chest flutters and I’m reminded of why I do this.

“Thank you for your kind words,” I say as I open the door to turn her toward her family. “I’ll get back to you once I’ve gotten more information on the bake sale.”

She shakes my hand, thanking me once again, and turns away. The sound of Eve’s sweet, tinkling laughter fills the church, echoing off the walls, and it goes straight to my dick. Anger and frustration fill me, mingling with the desire I can’t seem to shake.

“Mrs. Johnson,” I choke out. Covering my mouth, I cough into my fist to clear my throat. I smile. “Please tell Eve to come see me.” My cock twitches against my thigh painfully. “In ten minutes,” I rush to add.

She bobs her head and disappears down the hall, toward the nave where I assume Eve is entertaining the children.

My office door closes with a soft click. I stare at the handle, my heart racing against my ribcage. My mouth turns dry as my fingers trace the lock. The sound of it clicking into place is like a bullet penetrating the air.

My forehead drops to the heavy wooden door and my clammy palms press into it as I war with myself internally. I keep my back to my office, unable to take in the crosses that I know will taunt me, *judge* me.

My eyes flutter closed. I try—I *try* so fucking hard to breathe through it.

The anxiety clawing at my insides.

The guilt churning in my gut.

The visions dancing through my brain.

The incessant throbbing of my heavy cock between my thighs that's digging into my zipper painfully, the same way it did this morning in the kitchen as I watched my stepdaughter bend over the kitchen sink in those motherfucking pants like the beautiful temptress she is.

Before I know what I'm doing, my pants are open and around my thighs, my boxer briefs yanked down below my ass cheeks, and my cock is in the unyielding grip of my fist.

I hiss out a sharp breath and tug harshly, relishing the bite of pain at my rough treatment. A bead of precum dribbles from the reddened tip and leaks to the floor in slow motion. My eyes lock on the movement. My breathing picks up and I *know*—I just know that the second it hits the carpet, all bets are off.

It feels monumental. It feels like crossing an invisible line. One that I won't be able to take back and fuck—it feels *good*.

It hits the floor and my cock jerks. My free palm flattens against the door and I push away so I can watch my hand fuck myself, imprinting the vision in my mind so I can replay it again and again as I look at *her*. As I watch her. As I imagine my fist is her dripping cunt wrapped around me while I ruthlessly fuck her against this goddamned door.

My hand works my cock like I'm trying to prove a point. To who? I don't fucking know, and right now, I don't care.

My balls pulse with my heartbeat as I picture Eve in those pants this morning. The way the black material pulled tight,

exposing her creamy skin beneath them.

My fist tightens.

The heavy creases of her thick ass cheeks against her long thighs. The perfect line separating her down the middle.

My hips thrust in time with my hand.

The way the material gathered against her pussy lips, barely containing her sweet Heaven from my sight.

My spine tingles.

I picture those perfect, pink lips wrapped around her straw, imagining it was my leaking cock instead.

I bite my lip to stifle a moan.

Instead of the juice trickling down her chin, I picture it's my cum after I've shot my load down her throat as she choked on my fat fucking cock.

My body trembles and a bead of sweat drips from my temple.

The sound of Eve laughing is so loud, it penetrates through my door, reaching my ears and sending me over the edge. I paint the wood with my cum as her tinkling laughter settles into my bones.

My head.

My fucking soul.

I groan, my body shuddering with the force of my orgasm. It takes me far too long to pull myself together and clean up my mess, but only seconds for regret and disgust to settle in.

What the fuck have I done?

1.6 Roman

Vibration shoots through my hand, up my wrist and into my arm as I drag the needle back and forth, shading the tattoo as my client, Iris, a girl in her early twenties, pretends it doesn't hurt. The bright fluorescent lights reflect off the ink as I wipe a paper towel on her skin, smearing the black.

"You need a real job," my boss, Kon, grumbles from across the room. My eyes flit toward his station, finding Chase lounging in his tattoo chair. "And get the fuck off my chair. I have a client coming."

"Not for another half hour," Chase says dismissively. He continues scrolling on his phone, and I look back at the tattoo I'm finishing up, refusing to get involved in another one of their pointless arguments. "Anyway, I have a job."

"Influencing isn't a job," Kon growls. "You're basically a con-man."

"Why do you care so much?" Chase asks, setting his phone down, blatantly goading the giant Russian. I shake my head,

scowling at their bickering as I lean back.

“All done,” I say, my voice hoarse from disuse, and tap Iris’s leg. She lets out a long breath. “You took it like a champ.” Chase snickers from his seat, and I shoot the back of his head a glare. Asshole. “Take a look.”

She gives me a wary smile as she slides from the chair. I roll my gloves off, tossing them in the little metal bin beside my workspace. She walks to the mirror and turns, her eyes lighting up when she sees the finished piece.

It’s a bouquet of flowers blooming on her thigh, and the sight of the sunflower standing out amongst the others shoots a pang through my heart.

It reminds me of *her*.

Everything reminds me of her.

I shift my shoulders, making my shirt readjust across my back, and let out a harsh breath.

“It’s beautiful,” she breathes, turning back toward me.

This is my favorite part of the job. Seeing a client happy, seeing their face light up, or their eyes getting teary when they see the art I’ve permanently inked onto their skin. It makes everything worth it.

Chase and Kon continue to bicker in his booth across from mine, but I tune them out as I smile tightly at my client.

“Honestly, Roman. It’s the best piece I’ve ever gotten.”

I snort and fold my arms over my chest, leaning back on my stool. “That’s your third piece and they’re all from me,” I say, tilting my head toward her.

“Yeah, but it’s still my favorite.” Her lips tip in a teasing grin, and I shake my head.

“Get out of the chair!” Kon’s voice booms through the shop. Iris jolts at the sound, and my smile falls.

“You need anything else?” I ask her as I stand. She shakes her head as she flips through her wallet, pulling out a few hundreds and shoving them at me. “Thanks.”

This is the part I hate.

I hate that people have to pay for art to be a part of their body, but I can’t give away tattoos for free. I need to survive, but I hate taking their money. I just want to do what I love, and what I love—

A hard breath whooshes out of me.

As Iris leaves, she wisely decides not to look in on Kon and Chase. I, not so wisely, decide to play referee. As always.

I lean against the frame and fold my arms over my chest as I watch Kon tower above my best friend, glaring down at him like his wrath alone will smite him. Like glaring at him will scare Chase enough to move—or do literally anything. Fat fucking chance.

“I’m comfy,” Chase whines, scooting further down in the chair. Kon’s broad chest slowly expands as he takes a deep

breath. His face doesn't soften. If anything, the deep breath only makes him more agitated.

"I'm surprised you don't have some party to go to tonight," I say. Chase looks at me over his shoulder, his dark blond hair falling in his face as he shoots me a mischievous grin.

"Who says I don't?"

I shrug and use my chin to point at the chair. He rolls his eyes as he slides off, purposefully shoulder-checking Kon as he passes. The giant nearly implodes.

Chase taps on his phone, grinning to himself before turning it around to show me the screen.

"Oli dressed Robert up in a suit," he says proudly. I blink at the photo. The possum, actually dressed in a little suit with a bowtie and top hat, looks bored. He's used to Oli's shit, so I shouldn't be surprised he doesn't care about the weird outfit, but damn. A possum in a fucking suit?

"What?" Kon grunts, and takes a step forward.

"Nothing." Chase flashes me a smirk as he slides his phone back in his pocket. "You wanted me out of your precious chair so badly, you don't get to see what Robert looks like in his formalwear."

Kon grumbles to himself as he prepares his station for his next client. I can't make out what he's saying, but I hear a clear, "Little blond shit." Chase must hear it too, because he throws his head back and laughs. Kon glowers at both of us and switches to muttering in Russian instead.

“Oli said Eve has been helping her with the animals,” Chase says casually, shooting me a glance.

My jaw clenches until it feels like my teeth are about to crack.

“She’s real good at it,” he continues. “Oli said she can lure them out—”

“They don’t need to be luring anything out,” I snap. “Why does Oli even have those fucking things?” I shove my hand through my hair, my annoyance spiking.

“Those things?” Chase laughs, and the sound grates my nerves. How is he so effortless and happy all the fucking time? I’m tired of hearing his laugh. I’m tired of seeing him smiling.

Why is he even bringing Eve up? He knows how I feel about her—*why* I feel the way I do. Why is he purposefully trying to piss me off?

I stomp back to my side of the shop, ignoring him as he follows along behind me, seemingly oblivious to my inner turmoil. Looking at the mess of ink, paper, and needles makes me even more fucking tired.

Tired of cleaning. Tired of waking up. Tired of pretending.

Just fucking *tired*.

“They’re not things, Ro,” Chase says. He slides onto my chair and I glare at him from the corner of my eye.

“Get off.” I shove his shoulder, but he keeps his ass planted in the seat. “I need to clean it. Get off.”

“They’re animals,” he continues, ignoring me completely. Huffing out a breath, I turn back to the mess and wrap everything in the paper lining the little steel tray. “And she loves them like they’re her babies.”

“Yeah, it’s fucking weird,” I grunt. I feel his gaze on me, but ignore him as I toss everything into the bin.

“She’s not weird,” he says quietly. I let out a long breath, but I don’t take it back.

Olive *is* fucking weird. Even if Chase doesn’t see it, everyone else does. I haven’t seen the girl in forever, and I still know she’s just as weird now as she was when we were growing up.

Turning, I glare down at him. “What do you want, Chase?”

“Do you want to go to the party with me?” I press my tongue into my cheek as I stare at him. “You don’t have to drink.”

“But there’s still booze there,” I say, and he shrugs.

“Thought you weren’t gonna let it control you anymore,” he taunts. “I thought you were stronger than your—”

“Fine,” I growl. He flashes me a triumphant grin, but it doesn’t meet his blue eyes. “I’ll go, but I can’t be out all fucking night.”

“Where are you going?” Kon asks from the doorway, his meaty, tattooed arms folded over his barrel chest. I know he’s not talking to me.

Chase's grin turns mischievous as he gives all his attention to the giant man. "You're not invited."

Kon's thick beard shifts as he clenches his jaw. "I didn't ask if I was invited," he shoots back. "I asked where you're going."

"Since you're not invited, you don't need to know." Chase's smile is wide as he goads him.

I barely listen to them argue as I shove past Kon and head down the hallway toward the bathroom in the back to wash up. Their voices carry through the empty shop, Chase's cackle loud and manic. I push open the door, letting out a long breath as it clicks shut, blocking their voices completely.

Do I really want to go to this stupid party?

Even though alcohol isn't the problem it used to be for me anymore, I still don't love being around it. I won't give in to it again—never.

I'm not him, I remind myself.

I am not my father.

But reminders of home have come up too much tonight. First with Iris' tattoo, then Chase's fucking comments, and now my father has weaseled his way into my mind. I need to do something to avoid spiraling. Again.

I should go to the gym. I should tell Chase to go to this fucking party by himself.

I shift my shoulders again, wanting to claw the shirt on my back to shreds—wanting to claw the flesh beneath to shreds.

He knows I hate hanging around his dumb football friends—I left that life behind a long time ago and the idea of going back to it gives me a migraine. Unless it's an influencer party. Fuck. I hope it's not an influencer party. They're worse than the eternal frat boys.

Turning the water on, I cup it in my hand and splash it over my face. With a deep breath, I brace my hands on the edge of the counter, my fingers digging into the granite. My head stays bowed as I breathe through every image flashing through my mind.

Eve with flowers woven in her golden, curly hair, the sunlight a halo around her.

Eve smiling at me.

Eve's soft, lilting laugh floating through the house.

Eve's blue eyes shining in the sunset reflecting off the lake.

Then *him*.

My father's brutal face overtakes the memories of her, dimming them, and reminding me of who she chose. She chose to stay there, with him.

The usual pain and rage boil in my chest at the reminder. She chose him. She chose *him* over *me*.

My eyes squeeze tighter as I try to shut them out—shut her out. But I can't. Tonight, she's too strong. He's too strong. I

feel my past barreling toward me, and I'm helpless to do anything but brace for impact.

I force myself to remember that place, Divinity Falls, isn't my home. It never was. I always felt like an outsider—*not with her*, a little voice in my head says. *She didn't make you feel like an outsider.*

As if on cue, my eyes drop to my tattooed knuckles without permission.

Home.

The counter creaks as I clutch it harder.

This is my home now—Mammoth is my home. Deliverance Tattoo is my home. Kon is my family. Chase is my family.

Eve and Isaac. Divinity Falls.

They're *nothing*.

Slowly, I pry my eyes open and stare at my reflection in the vintage, cracked mirror. My hazel eyes are shadowed, and there are deep bluish-purple marks under them. It feels like no matter how much sleep I get, how much water Chase forces me to drink, those marks remain, a permanent reminder of my past. Of what I did to myself.

I shove my hand through my shaggy black hair, and watch as it falls back in place, covering my forehead but leaving the upside down cross tattooed underneath my left eye visible. Stubble is forming across my tan skin and I run my hand along it. I had a beard once. But that was when I was in the pits of

Hell, barely able to make a coherent sentence, much less take a fucking razor to my face.

But I'm different now. I'm not the same as I was.

I'm not him.

I'll shave before we head out to the party. I'll change clothes, and pretend like I didn't have a breakdown in the bathroom of Deliverance just an hour before. I can knock knuckles with random dude-bros, and grin at pretty girls, and say no to drugs and alcohol.

I just have to make an appearance, then I can go home and workout until my body is too exhausted to move. Until I can't breathe or think.

Until I can't *remember*.

And I'll do it all again tomorrow. And the next day. And the day after.

This is my life now.

My penance.

1.7 Eve

“Thank you, Jesus,” I murmur, sliding the potholders from my hands and tossing them on the counter as I eye the perfectly cooked roast. It took me nearly all day, but seeing Mama’s recipe turn out so well made it all worth it.

Smiling to myself, I spin around, turning my attention back to the salad. I chop a fresh tomato and add it to the heavy glass dish along with the lettuce, cucumbers, and feta. The walnuts I roasted this afternoon get sprinkled over the top with a dash of seasonings.

Happy to be almost done, I cover the salad, slide it into the fridge, and make quick work of finishing the homemade peach dressing Isaac loves so much.

Everything has to be perfect tonight.

Just as I’ve finished the dressing, the timer on the oven goes off. The beeping fills the kitchen, temporarily drowning out the sounds of *Stubborn Love* by *The Lumineers*.

I rinse my sticky hands and dry them off on my apron before sliding the garlic bread from beneath the broiler. Golden, buttery goodness wafts from the loaves, making my stomach growl and mouth water.

I'm starving.

My eyes flick up to the clock on the wall. Half after five. *Shit.* How did the entire day pass without me realizing it? My gaze slips from the clock to my body, and I grimace.

I'm still wearing my workout clothes from this afternoon, and I feel disgusting.

Exhaling roughly, I rush through the rest of my chores. Setting the table, cleaning the few dishes in the sink, fluffing the pillows in the living room.

Perfect. It has to be perfect.

I cleaned the house this morning after Isaac left for work. I'd had just enough time to get a quick yoga routine in but got distracted by the complicated roast recipe.

After covering all the dishes with foil, I grab my phone and run to my room, stripping off my clothes as I go. I toss them all into the hamper and turn the shower on. While it heats, I pile my thick blonde hair into a bun on the top of my head. With only twenty minutes until he gets home, there's no way I'll have time to wash and dry it.

My eyes flick over my naked body. I've never been one to care too much about appearances, especially my own. I'm

pretty. I know I am. It's not a cocky or conceited statement. It's just true.

Up until recently, I never paid much attention to it—my body, my face, my hair. None of it.

But growing up the way I did, there was an unspoken pressure to behave and look a certain way. Mama and Daddy would never have told me to put any stock in the way I look. They cared about the heart of a person, not their external beauty, so that's what I cared about, too. But being the only child of a small town's golden family came with a notoriety the three of us never asked for.

But it was there just the same.

Mama was beautiful, and I was—*am*—her spitting image. Or so everyone constantly told me.

Tells me.

I swallow thickly, my eyes gliding over my heart-shaped face, big blue eyes, thick, pink lips, and my wild golden hair, all my mother.

My body is not like hers, though.

Jane Meyer was a short, thin woman with minimal curves. She was effortless and natural. Bright. My father, however, was tall and broad. Those who didn't know him would likely call him intimidating based on his size alone, but when he smiled or laughed, there was no denying his pure, kind soul.

Much like my mama, my waist is slim, but my breasts, thick thighs, and ass are definitely not. Thankfully, I got some of my

dad's height, so my exaggerated curves are somewhat proportional and don't stand out.

Unless I want them to—*need* them to.

As a child, I mostly ignored my looks, simply smiling when people would *coo* and *aww* over the Preacher's beautiful daughter. Even in high school, when my body had grown from cute and innocent to curvy and distracting, I covered myself with respectable sweaters and loose-fitting pants. I stuck to my studies and threw myself into academics, hiding behind my braces and glasses.

I remained the Preacher's innocent, golden child.

Until I didn't.

Shaking my head, I turn away from the mirror and jump into the steaming shower. I shut my thoughts of the past off and rush through a quick routine, mentally going over my speech for tonight.

It has to be perfect.

I'm out of the shower in less than five minutes, and spreading lotion on my entire body before tugging my hair from its bun. I leave it down in my usual natural, chaotic curls that stop at the middle of my back.

Dropping my towel into the hamper, I slip on a pair of lacy white boyshorts and a matching bra. It takes some finagling to tuck my boobs into the demi-cups, and after a minute of shoving, I give up and dive into my walk-in closet.

I spend a ridiculous amount of time that I don't have to pick out a dress.

It has to be perfect.

My eyes skim the vast collection that's grown over the years—a mixture of my dresses and mama's too-small ones. My fingers glide over the familiar silks and linens, only pausing for a moment to let my chest ache. My hands clench the material I grew up clinging to, but I release it before any memories can sink in.

I don't have time.

Before I know what I'm doing, I've snatched my favorite sunflower dress from the hanger, needing the comfort now more than ever. A big grin tugs at my lips as I move to drag it over my head. It's more bohemian than what I typically wear around here, but it's me. It's comfort and sunshine. It's bright afternoons riding a bike downtown, or strolling through wildflower fields. It's joy. I love it.

I pause.

It's all wrong.

I turn back to the section of my Sunday best, knowing it's what he likes to see me in.

Respectable. Demure. Appropriate.

And tonight is all about Isaac. He'd want to see me in one of my church dresses.

Except—

I let my sunflowers slip through my fingers as impulsivity pulses through me, washing away any rationality. Instead of falling into sad memories of Mama's dresses and Daddy's laughter, I sink into the familiar recklessness that's become my best friend lately.

Without letting myself question my clothing choice, I step into the form-fitting pastel green dress that hugs my exaggerated curves.

Remembering the way I caught him staring the other day, I tug my suppressed boobs up instead of hiding them away like I usually would. And in a final act of rashness, I rush through a full face of makeup.

Sliding on a pair of heels that are completely inappropriate for dinner at home with my stepfather, I shake my hands out and take one final look in my full-length mirror.

No one could confuse me for an innocent preacher's daughter anymore. I'm all woman now, and it shows.

Biting my lip to stifle a smile, I skim my shaking hands down my body in a move that's become second nature. Slow and effortless. Sensual.

I can do this.

I've just set the final bowl onto the table when I hear the familiar sound of tires crunching on gravel. I exhale a shuddering breath and switch the music coming from the little speaker to his favorite playlist. My eyes skim the house and

dining room, doing one last check as I make my way to the front door.

Everything feels like it's happening in slow motion, like I'm on the outside watching a movie of my life. In this moment, I'm greeting him as a wife would greet her husband, dinner on the table, and dressed to sinful perfection.

My hand grips the handle.

A smile forms on my mouth.

Then I'm opening the door just as he's making his way up the steps. His eyes are on his phone as he absently scrolls, his other hand wrapped around the brown leather messenger bag that holds his worn Bible and notebook.

I take him in while he's distracted.

It was another hot, humid day, but he's still dressed professionally. Despite only having office hours for counseling, he's wearing a white polo shirt and black slacks, creased and tailored to fit him like a glove.

Not a single hair is out of place and his shoes are so shiny, you could use them as a mirror. He slips his phone into the pocket of his slacks, and I hold my breath.

His gaze slides up as he reaches for the door, still unaware of my presence. He pauses mid-step, a hard breath whooshing from his lungs. Slowly, so *fucking slowly*, he takes me in.

My heart races against my ribs as I watch him scan me, his eyes heated in a way I've never seen before.

Reckless.

He takes his time, silently devouring me. My stomach clenches.

Dangerous.

My hand tightens on the old brass knob as his penetrating gaze sinks into me like a lover. My chest heaves.

Inappropriate.

Isaac's eyes finally meet mine. They're usually a rich brown. Sometimes darker when he's upset or angry or golden when he's laughing. The happier he is, the brighter they are, like some sort of window to his soul.

But right now—

Right now, they're practically black. I'm not totally sure what that means, but judging by the heated expression on his beautiful face, I can take a wild guess.

My heart skips a beat as an unfamiliar emotion washes through my body.

No. Not unfamiliar. Just unfamiliar with *him*.

He's so damn handsome.

Impulsive.

He swallows and his Adam's apple bobs. "Eve," he rasps, clearly just as affected as I am. We stare at each other as seconds bleed into moments. My words escape me. I'm frozen, unable to speak or move.

What is happening to me?

Tonight has to be perfect.

Shit.

“Hi.” I smile brightly. Shaking myself from the spell we’ve fallen into, I step back, opening the door and waving him inside. “Dinner’s ready.”

Isaac takes a deep breath, his dark brows dipping in confusion, but he follows my lead, and steps into the house. I take his bag and set it on the little entry table.

“Sweetheart,” he drawls, his eyes wide as he takes in the polished floors and spotless surfaces. “What’s gotten into you?” The house is always clean and Isaac’s hardly a messy man, but today, it’s perfect. His mouth opens and closes, gaping like a fish from the pond.

Giggling to myself at his unusually shocked state, I grip his hand, gently tugging on it. He shakes himself out of his daze enough to chuckle, and lets me drag him to the dining table.

“Sit,” I demand, smiling brightly up at him. He shakes his head but gives me a grin that matches my own, and pulls out his chair at the head of the table, gracefully folding himself into it.

“What is all of this, Eve?” he murmurs, spreading his napkin across his lap, his gaze flitting over the full meal before him. It’s a bit much for Monday night’s dinner, but it’s necessary.

Feigning innocence, I shrug, pouring a glass of sweet tea for myself and water for him. I drop them both on the table and

pause beside him, anxiously stopping myself from reaching for the serving utensils.

“Can’t I just do something nice for you?”

Again, his brows dip, and my palms begin sweating. Did I get this wrong? Is it too much? Will he see right through me?

He sighs and finally gives me an approving nod. That same megawatt smile returns to my face, and I quickly serve him. His hand reaches out, palming the center of my back as I set his plate before him, leaning close enough to smell his rich cologne still clinging to his body. I falter in my steps and lift my eyes to meet his gaze.

“It looks lovely, sweetheart. Really.” His hand slips away just as quickly as it came, but the heat of it burns through my dress.

As if he knows the effect he has on me, he smirks and my knees go weak at the sheer beauty of it. Isaac’s face is cleanly shaven, like always, exposing his chiseled jaw and sharp cheekbones. Even in his early forties, he still looks like some sort of catalog model. He doesn’t fit in here. Never has.

Neither have I.

The thought reminds me of why I did all this in the first place, and my insides twist. It certainly wasn’t because I love being the dotting wife-like housekeeper I’ve become due to circumstance.

Quite the opposite, in fact.

“Thank you,” I murmur, swallowing around my dry mouth. I gently slide into my seat across from him, and as soon as he takes his first bite, I dive into my food, letting it distract me from the sudden bout of anxiety settling in my gut.

We fall into easy, familiar conversation, chatting about the people Isaac counseled today and the renovations taking place at the old Wagner house. He tells me all about the new town gossip he heard from the group of older women who come in every Monday to use the chapel for their knitting group.

It’s simple and comfortable.

It’s natural.

It’s mundane.

Boring.

Lifeless.

And if I don’t do something about it, it’s my future.

Slowly our conversation dies, and he serves himself a second helping of salad. I continue to push my potatoes around my plate as my nerves grow. Every time we’ve had this conversation before, it’s gone badly, but things are different now. I’m different.

I’ve graduated. I’m twenty-years-old. I’m an adult.

I’ve done things my stepfather would have a heart attack over.

I can do this.

I take a deep breath and set my fork down. My hands tangle on my lap and I fight the urge to fidget.

“Isaac,” I say softly. “Can I speak to you about something?”

He swallows his bite of fresh tomato and washes it down with a gulp of water before turning his attention to me. His lip twitches, and he leans back in his chair. The wood creaks beneath his weight.

“I knew there must be a reason for all this buttering up,” he jokes, tossing his folded napkin onto the table beside his plate before absently straightening it out.

“What?” I ask, blinking rapidly.

“Come on, Eve.” His brow cocks. “Your mama’s roast takes at least six hours and it’s perfect. No doubt you stayed glued to that oven for half the day.” He chuckles deeply, crossing his toned arms over his chest. “Let’s hear it, then.”

Shit. Shit. Shit.

Biting my lip, I nod. Of course, he saw through my plan. I take a deep pull from my straw, letting the sweet, icy beverage calm my nerves. It’s now or never.

I clear my throat and meet his gaze head on.

I’ve done much crazier things than this before and survived. Like that one time I spread my legs for fucking Kevin.

I can handle this.

“There’s this art festival coming up in Savannah,” I hesitantly start, swallowing thickly. “My favorite—”

He shakes his head, cutting a hand through the air. “No.”

That’s it.

Just one word and the conversation is done.

But I’m not. Resisting the urge to stand up and scream about the injustice of it all, I breathe deeply, forcing myself to remain calm and level-headed, knowing that’s the only way to get through to him.

“Can’t we talk about it?”

He sighs heavily, gripping his water glass. “I don’t want you driving to Savannah alone.”

Ha. Easy enough. “I won’t be alone. Oli’s driving.”

Isaac laughs. Actually laughs, his head thrown back and everything. “You think I’d let you go all that way with Olive Tanner and her deathtrap?”

“It’s not a deathtrap,” I mumble, but he goes on.

“Not to mention, she’s a horrible driver.”

Well, he’s not wrong.

“I could drive if I had a car,” I state, gaining momentum along with my frustration. “But I can’t get a car because I don’t have any money.” Not completely true, but he can never know that. “And I don’t have any money because I don’t have a job.”

He stares at me for a long moment, his hands flexing against his glass as his jaw ticks, but I refuse to drop his searing gaze. If anything, I force my spine to straighten. I don’t know how

long we stare at each other, but by the time he opens his mouth to speak, I feel ready to combust.

“No.”

Dropping his arms, he leans forward, picks up his fork and continues eating.

My stomach sinks through the chair and drops directly onto the shiny floor.

No? Again, that's all I get?

Now my mouth is the one to gape like a fish out of water. The room spins at his easy dismissal. How can he just—he just —

“*What?*” I finally squeak out. I clear my throat, my chest pounding for a whole new reason. “I don’t understand. I’m an adult. I need a job—”

“We’re done discussing this,” he shouts, his fork clattering against his plate. I inhale sharply and lean back, putting distance between us.

He sighs, his eyes fluttering closed. He pinches the bridge of his nose and suddenly, he looks every bit his age. Shaking his head, he murmurs, “Sorry, sweetheart.”

“It’s okay,” I whisper through a tight throat, even though it’s not. It’s anything but okay.

I needed this.

A job.

Freedom.

I need to get out.

“But, Isaac.” I swallow, licking my dry lips. “I’m twenty. I’ll be twenty-one soon. I want to contribute to the house, and help out. Don’t you think I need to have some experience? I’ve never even left the state and you know how badly I want to see the world.” I’m suffocating and he doesn’t even see it.

His eyes snap to mine.

“No, I need you,” he says softly. “I need you *here*, Eve. I need your help at the church, you know that.”

Though it grates on me to say it, I force her name from my lips. “You have Mary.” I swallow a gag, keeping my face blank.

“She’s not you,” he grumbles, rolling his eyes. “No one else helps me the way you do.” He smirks, and I tamp down the wave of inappropriate warmth from his words. “Come on, sweetheart. You’ve been my helper since you were fourteen. You’re the perfect assistant. You know how organized I need things. You anticipate what I need before I even have to ask. You’re so good with everyone, and they all adore you. We’re a team.”

Guilt pulses through me at his words.

We *are* a team. We’ve been a team for a long time. After Mama died, and Roman left us, it’s just been the two of us. Isaac and me.

But—

I shake my head, a small laugh slipping through my lips even as my heart cracks painfully. “But I don’t make any money at the church. I can’t help out around the house if I’m not making any money. We need—”

“I said *no*, Evelyn,” he snaps, shoving to his feet. The chair clatters loudly against the wooden floor behind him and I flinch, my eyes going wide. He leans forward, gripping the edge of the table, his gaze angrily locked on mine. “I said no,” he repeats. “If I can’t pay you, what makes you think I can pay anyone else?”

“That’s what I’m saying,” I whisper, forcing myself to trudge forward. I want to reach over and grab his hand. I want to hug him.

I know this hurts him. I know he’s worried about me. About the house and the church. Money. He’s always so worried about everything, and I just want to take some of it off his shoulders. If I wasn’t here, he’d have one less thing to worry about, but I don’t say that. I can’t.

“If I could get a real job, I could contribute and you wouldn’t have to work so hard,” I say, my voice tight. His face shudders, and his head drops heavily forward.

“Oh, sweetheart,” he groans. Pushing away from the table, he closes the distance between us. His finger reaches up and softly skims across my cheek. “I am the man of the house. *I am*. It’s my responsibility to take care of you. To keep you fed and sheltered and warm. It’s me that needs to worry about you,

not the other way around.” My nose scrunches, and he chuckles, his finger still stroking my cheek.

“I can take care of myself,” I say.

His fingertip slides down my cheek to my jaw, and I barely suppress a shiver as he glides it to my chin. He grips it between his thumb and forefinger, tilting my head back to meet his stare.

“Where’s the fun in that?” he murmurs.

His eyes drop to my lips. His thumb ghosts over my bottom one, and this time, I can’t control the way my body reacts. A breathy sound leaves me without thought as I lose myself in his touch. His scent.

Familiarity. Comfort. Consistency.

“I appreciate you wanting to help out,” he says softly, pressing down harder on my lip and it takes everything inside me not to dart my tongue out to feel him, *taste* him. “But the answer is no, and I’m done talking about it.”

Everything inside of me deflates and I no longer want him touching any part of me.

I look away, and he sighs heavily, dropping his hand to my shoulder. He squeezes it gently, and I grit my teeth, forcing my anger and disappointment down, knowing it won’t do any good right now. When he’s done, he’s done.

“Keep it down while you clean up,” he murmurs. “I have an early morning. I’m leaving at six.”

He bends down and I turn to give him my cheek like I do every night before bed, but he misses, his lips landing softly on my jaw instead. I expect him to move right away, but he doesn't. Instead, his lips ghost against my skin as he whispers, "Be a good girl while I'm gone."

I suck in a sharp breath. Whether it's from his proximity or his words, I'm not sure. I don't care. Because of him, I'm molten lava as anger and unexpected arousal collide inside of me.

Before I can try to figure it out, he drops his hand and steps back. Seconds later, he's turned away and is heading upstairs.

"Have a good week," I whisper to his retreating form. "Without me."

1.8 Eve

The early morning balmy air sticks to my skin as I tuck my legs under me, clutching my cup of sugary sweet coffee tightly in my hand. I stare out at Barry's Pond, watching the sun slowly rise over it, reflecting off its surface. It halos the cross on the church's roof across the lake, and I stare at it, transfixed.

Isaac was already gone when I woke a few minutes ago. I knew he would've been, but going into the kitchen and knowing he wasn't coming down for breakfast was bitter sweet.

I'm still upset about last night. I need a job. I need freedom. I need to get out from under his thumb, but I can't do that when all my time is spent at the church or taking care of him and the house.

And it's not that I don't love the church and all the people in our congregation, I do. Does it make me a bad person to want more from my life than following in my mother's footsteps? Is

it such a terrible thing to want to travel, and live, and just experience life outside of Divinity Falls?

To be tied to a man who is more than just my stepfather. One who only keeps me around due to some sick sense of obligation to his late wife. He didn't have to keep me here. He had a choice. After Mama passed, Grammy Jean offered to take me in but Isaac declined. It was the same week Roman left and part of me has always believed that had Roman stayed, Isaac wouldn't have felt so alone. He wouldn't have needed me.

Does he even need me now?

Do I want to be needed by him?

That's a question I find myself wondering far too often. Isaac and I have a weird relationship. It's comfort and connection. Friendship and family. It's a bond formed by tragedy and heartache that most days feels unshakable.

But then there are nights like last night.

Nights where I feel more prisoner than anything.

Sighing, I blink away the wetness gathering in my eyes and slip my phone from my hoodie. With Isaac in Tennessee at the South Baptist quarterly training for the next week, I'm free.

Well, as free as I can be while still working at the church, maintaining the house, and picking up a lot of the appointments he'll miss.

But at least I won't have a babysitter.

Or a curfew.

I smile, opening the private email folder hidden deep in my phone where no one, especially Isaac, would ever find it. It's been over a week since I've had enough time to catch up on notifications and requests.

Usually, I try to create as much content as possible when he leaves once every few months, knowing I won't find the kind of privacy I need when he's in town. But I can't fulfill requests or take on extra gigs when he's home. There's no way.

A giggle builds in my throat at the thought. Holy shit. I can't even imagine Isaac catching me. He would *die* and then he'd resurrect, just to kill me and drag me back to Hell with him.

Once I've accessed my messages, I skim through them, looking for any that catch my eye. It's hit or miss, and I'm likely pickier than most people. Not because I don't need the money—I do. I'm just still coming to terms with this new *hobby* of mine.

I've been camming for a few months now. It was never something I'd imagined getting paid to do, and it took a lot of convincing to give it a try, but once I did, I was hooked.

It's powerful.

Exhilarating.

It's also scary as hell.

So much so that had it not been for my best friend, I would have never given camming a try. But Oli convinced me.

It's because of her that I'm here scrolling through filthy, insane, and depraved requests from people all over the world. It's because of her incessant pushing, where she all but created the Favorite Fans account for me, that I have a hidden box full of kinky costumes and sex toys. Not to mention I'm thousands of dollars closer to my goal.

Leave Divinity Falls and see the world.

See *everything*.

What started off as me posting mostly innocent faceless images has now become a living, breathing job. I took requests and posted random content. I grew my follower count and subscriber list. All the while, learning what I enjoy, exploring my body, and embracing my sexuality.

Something I *never* thought I'd do.

I uncross my stiff legs, letting them fall so I can push myself on the porch swing. I've just lifted my coffee to my lips when my eyes land on a particularly wild request.

Fuck yourself using a wooden broom handle with a plastic bag over your head. Don't come until you can't breathe: \$150

Holy fucking shit.

My coffee sprays from my lips as I choke on nothing, the line replaying through my mind. A bark of laughter escapes me at the absurdity of it. I get crazy requests daily. Some are downright insane but this? This is suicidal. Don't people know that?

I grimace.

They do. They totally do and unfortunately, I think that's part of the kink for them. I'm not one to kink shame. In fact, I'm pretty open to just about anything. Even if it's not something I'd personally try, I can objectively appreciate it.

As long as it's consensual, legal, and safe, who am I to judge? Except for this request.

Definitely not safe and definitely not happening.

Dinosaur costume and dildo: \$50

Pass.

Pretend to be my mom and punish me: \$25

Double pass.

Rub your clit and call me baby: \$50

Not bad.

I almost select the last one, knowing it's an easy gig, but the next request catches my eye first.

Fuck yourself in a schoolgirl outfit. Refer to me as Daddy and tell me you've been naughty: \$500

Hell yes. That's a shit ton of money.

A massive smile spreads across my face as I select the message and jump to my feet. I skim the words rapidly, already absently nodding along with the request. It's nothing crazy or descriptive. Just a man with a school girl fantasy. He even offered to tip me an extra hundred if I play with my ass

while impaled on a dildo. The only caveat is that he wants me to film live so we can chat.

I can definitely do that, and I have just the costume to fulfill this man's fantasies.

I reply, letting him know I've accepted the request and will be on in an hour. I'll need some time to get ready. He immediately agrees, and I chuckle. Damn. He's eager. Eager is good. Eager means extra tips and a quick payday.

Stripping my clothes off as I go, I head to the Jack and Jill bathroom that I've claimed on the bottom floor of our two story house. I cringe when I pass Ro's old room, like I always do. A pit forms in my belly, like it *always* does. I force the anger and sadness down, refusing to let it spoil my good mood.

I'm about to make a shit ton of money and that's all that matters right now.

Just like last night, I pile my hair onto my head, but instead of taking a quick shower, I opt for a bath. I get better tips when I'm shaved from head to toe like some sort of naked mole rat. I turn the water on hot, pour a cup of peach scented bath salts into the mix and a splash of matching bubble bath just because it makes me happy.

I set up my speaker with my favorite playlist, turning the volume to a wholly inappropriate level with a big smile on my face. My eyes skim my bathroom looking for—

Shit.

Grabbing my empty coffee cup, I head to the kitchen for a refill, completely naked and unbelievably free. The cool morning air is blowing through the open window above the sink, sending shivers down my spine, and I grin.

Freedom.

The melodic sounds of *Summertime Sadness* by Lana Del Rey spill from the bathroom down the hall, filling the kitchen in a way that has me spinning and singing as though I really am free. As though I'm actually in control of my own life. My own choices.

As though I *have* choices.

My smile tries to waiver but I shake off the depressing, truthful thoughts reminding me that this isn't real, that I'm not really free. I force them away. There's no time for them. Not here. Not now.

My phone pings, the sound coming through my speaker.

I grin again, knowing it's a notification from the camming app I use. There's definitely no time for sadness because right now, I have a nameless, faceless man waiting with a full wallet, ready to fund my future.

I take my time in the bath, soaking and shaving. Making sure I'm not only fresh and clean, but relaxed. Being relaxed is key, I've learned. Relaxed and confident.

I get out just minutes before I've gone pruny, and quickly lotion my entire body. Usually, I keep my hair up and off camera, along with my face. But a naughty schoolgirl costume

screams for braided pigtails. Once those are done, hanging down past my shoulders in thick Dutch braids, I head to my closet.

Dropping down to my knees softly, I crawl toward the back where boxes of my parent's belongings are stashed. Baby blankets, photo albums, and random knick knacks that I'll treasure till I die.

There's another box, a smaller one I refuse to acknowledge that taunts me every time I come to this back corner. It's full of all the things I wish I could say to Roman, but he left before I had the chance.

Ignoring Roman's box, I press a kiss to my fingertips and place it over top of my parents' names scrawled in Sharpie on the simple brown cardboard, silently apologizing for this.

For my life.

For the way I've turned out.

Damn. Daddy would be so disappointed if he could see me now.

Sighing, I shake my head and shove the boxes to the side. A fourth nondescript box sits just behind my family treasures, in a place I know no one will ever find. Isaac doesn't like to talk about Daddy and he *really* doesn't like to talk about Mama.

Or think about.

Or remember her.

No, Eve, I internally snap. Stop it.

Tugging the heavy box from its hiding place, I drag it along the old wooden floor. The boards creak beneath its weight and I pause with my brows furrowed. I don't remember it being this heavy the last time I dug it out. Stopping in the center of my room, I drop to the floor, the cool wooden planks sending a chill across my bare skin.

I flip the lid off, tossing it to the side, and take in the contents.

When I started, I borrowed clothes from Oli. Even if she mostly covers herself with long sleeves and tights, she still has revealing clothes that I never thought I'd buy for myself. But here I am, with a box full of stuff that would make even the biggest sinners blush.

Slowly, over the last few months, I've been gathering supplies. Basic lingerie became cute outfits, which soon became more hardcore getups. I started off with just one pocket vibrator, but then, someone requested dildo play and another begged for anal beads.

My collection's grown—a lot.

Which is insane, considering how hard it is for me to buy supplies.

It's not like I can just go downtown and walk into Mrs. Walton's Corner Store looking for butt plugs and vibrating clit clamps. I can't order from online sex shops and have them delivered to my house, either.

I shiver at the thought.

If Isaac found out...yeah. No thanks.

Instead, Oli gets things for me. She orders them online and has them delivered to her house since she lives alone. She cleans them, tucks them into her backpack and sneaks them over, leaving Isaac and Divinity Falls none the wiser to what sweet, innocent Evelyn Meyer is getting up to.

Thank God for best friends like Olive Tanner.

And, according to the contents of my overstuffed supply box, I owe her once again. I'm sure she'll collect soon. Likely in the form of chocolate with a heavy side of emotional blackmail.

I know she sounds like my pimp, but she's not—as much as she wishes she could be. She didn't force me to do this. She just opened the door and I stepped through it.

A massive smile spreads across my face as I sift through the new toys and outfits the sneaky little brat snuck into my box. Probably the other day when she was *napping* while I was baking.

Knowing I'm nearly out of time, I shove it all to the side to inspect later and pull out what I'll need for this gig. Once I'm dressed, I crawl to my bed, tossing the yellow, ruffled comforter out of my way so I can slide under my bed frame and grab the rest of my supplies.

Ring light.

Check.

Camera.

Check.

Tripod.

Check.

Pretty white rug I lay out on the floor so no one, and I mean *no one*, could possibly ever link me to Goldengirl69.

Check.

In no time, everything's set up and I'm ready to start.

I've long since lost those nervous butterflies I used to get before recording or hopping on a live chat with someone. You should've seen me the first time. I fumbled over every word, felt so uncomfortable and shy to be doing what I was doing. But for whatever reason, my shyness, the innocence, garnered me more tips than I could've ever imagined.

Men, because that's who most of my clients are, are into crazy things. They've asked me if they could call me by their stepdaughter's, biological daughter's, and niece's names. They've asked me to humiliate them, laugh at them, tell them they're unloveable and unfuckable. They've wanted to dominate me, call me their dirty whore. They've asked if I could be their Mommy, or their teacher, or the naughty little church girl—that one came naturally.

A twinge of guilt hits me.

I haven't been doing this for long, but I've gotten used to it. To the power and the money of this job—when can I call it my career? I've forgotten that beneath it all, I'm still just Eve—*Goldie*.

I'm still that scared, lonely girl who selfishly wanted nothing but *more*. More freedom. More experiences. More laughter. More love.

More. More. More.

My gaze catches on the map above my desk, and I'm reminded why I'm really doing this. That empty map without even one red pin is why I'm doing this, why I *need* to do this.

By this time next year, I'm hoping to be on the open road, traveling through America, just me and my future van and my music. Freedom for as far as the eye can see.

And once I've seen every corner of this country, I'll move onto another, and another, and another, until I've seen every country on this planet. But in the pit of my stomach, something tells me even after all that, I'll still be searching for something. That I'll never stop searching for a home, for a place where I feel like I truly belong, where I don't have to hide any parts of myself.

Where I'll be free.

Does a place like that even exist?

I shake myself. Now is not the time for an existential crisis. I have money to make.

After putting my outfit on and taking my mom's necklace off, setting up my camera, light, and laptop, I sit on the white carpet, my legs spread just enough to be enticing, but still closed enough to be modest. It's a game I've played for weeks,

that line between angel and devil, and it's one I've gotten freakishly good at.

One minute until showtime.

I fluff my skirt out as I bring up the Favorite Fans request. With a deep breath, I type one word.

Goldengirl69:

Ready?

Daddy555 immediately calls and with my face still way above the camera, my body appears on the screen. I'm not dumb enough to actually show my face when I'm doing this. Even if just one person found out, they'd definitely tell Isaac, and he'd *definitely* kill me.

Deep breath.

My cursor hovers over the answer button for one ring, two, three.

Exhale.

"Hi," I say when I answer, twirling the end of one pigtail around my finger. I can't see much of his face, only the stubble coating his jaw, and his pressed button down shirt, the sleeves rolled up to the elbows. His chest is broad, and he looks fit. In my mind, I'm imagining him hot as sin, and not a creepy man with a Daddy kink.

He leans forward, his arms shifting into view slightly. A second later, his words pop up in the chat box.

Daddy555:

Hi, sweetheart.

My stomach bottoms out at the pet name. Isaac has been the only one to ever call me that, and panic sets in. I try to swallow past the sudden dryness in my throat, but I can't.

“You don't wanna talk?” I ask softly, trying not to fidget.

Could this be Isaac?

The thought flashes through me like a hot bolt of lightning, and I can't get it out of my head. If he knows and he's watching me...

No, he wouldn't do this. If he found out about me doing this, he'd immediately drive home and give me a terrifying lecture. He wouldn't pay me five-hundred dollars to call him Daddy and tell him I've been naughty.

But he has been touchier than usual lately. Is that because he knows about this? Does he think I'm a whore and will be fine with any advances from anyone?

I know he's lonely, he has to be. He hasn't been with a woman since Mama, so he must be craving it. Even a stoic man like him isn't immune to the natural desires everyone has.

But with *me*?

I try to shake that thought away, but I can't. And it freaks me out. Not because I'm afraid of Isaac—far from it. But I'm terrified the thought doesn't repulse me. That it doesn't make me want to die.

I hate that it makes my body tingle and my pussy throb.

Daddy555:

I just want to watch you.

Daddy555:

You're very beautiful.

“Thank you,” I breathe, not faking the blush creeping across my chest at the compliment.

I don't get called beautiful often by these men. It's usually hot, or sexy, or cute. Rarely beautiful.

“I wish I could see more of you.” I smooth my hand over my braid, eyeing the small amount of his body that I can see. He looks attractive, but with him mostly hidden, it's hard to tell.

Daddy555:

You're one to talk.

“Sorry,” I say, laughing softly with a shrug. “I don't show my face.”

Daddy555:

I understand. It's safer for the both of us this way.

He continues on before I can respond to that odd statement.

Daddy555:

How was your day?

I know he's not really asking *me*, he's asking the fantasy version of me. I force myself to clear my throat and get into character.

“Promise you won’t get mad?” I ask, bunching my skirt in my fist, raising it higher on my legs as I feign fear.

Daddy555:

I can’t promise that, sweetheart.

The word almost takes me out of it again, but then a sick thrill shoots through me.

What if this really is Isaac?

Daddy555:

Tell me anyway.

I might as well make the show good for him.

I let out a long, dramatic sigh, and watch his mouth tuck up at the corner in a smirk. “Well,” I say, twirling my pigtail again. “I got detention today, but it wasn’t my fault.”

He types out his response, his muscles shifting with the movements. He’s sitting against a blank wall, so I can’t see his background. Maybe if I could see it I could figure out if he’s at the hotel Isaac said he was staying in.

Daddy555:

Not your fault?

Daddy555:

What happened?

I probably should’ve come up with a better story while I was in the bath, but I didn’t think he’d want details. I thought it

would be a quick and dirty chat. *A sorry for being a bad girl, Daddy, not tell Daddy how you fucked up.*

“I got in trouble for talking during class,” I say. He nods like he’s disappointed, his lips pressed into a thin line.

For a second, I truly believe it’s Isaac by that gesture and expression alone. The amount of times I’ve seen him nod disappointingly, or press his lips together when he’s trying to keep calm is alarming. Mostly, those looks were pointed at Ro, but I’ve definitely been on the receiving end of them. Especially lately.

“But it wasn’t my fault,” I quickly defend, biting my lip. “The boy who sits next to me was pulling my hair.” I slowly lift my skirt up as I speak, trailing my fingers gently over my exposed thighs.

Daddy555:

A boy?

Daddy555:

You’re not allowed to talk to boys. You know that, sweetheart.

The messages come immediately, and a rush of adrenaline shoots through me as if it’s really Isaac scolding me. Even if it’s not, I’m definitely getting wetter at the thought of being reprimanded by this stranger.

I nod, my shoulders slumping, remaining in character. “I know.” I swallow roughly, my mouth suddenly dry. “I’m sorry, Daddy.”

The man clicks his tongue but no sound comes through my speakers. He shakes his head, and again, that familiarity plays tricks on me. I know the likelihood of him being Isaac is close to none, yet I still can't help but fantasize about the possibility.

Daddy555:

I'm very disappointed in you.

Daddy555:

What will you do to make it up to me?

The end of my braid wraps tightly around my finger before I shift to open my legs for him. "I'll do whatever it takes. You know I don't like to upset you."

Daddy555:

Take your panties off. Show me how wet you are for Daddy.

With my heart in my throat, I push to my feet, making sure to keep my face out of view while I shimmy my panties down. When I lift them up, I'm shocked to find them already visibly wet with my arousal.

My hand shakes as I drop back down to my knees and lean forward, showing him the wet spot. His head tips back and I imagine him groaning. I want to see him. See more of him. See *all* of him.

Daddy555:

Such a naughty girl, already soaked for me.

Daddy555:

Spread your knees wide and show me what I own.

Own?

That shouldn't be so hot.

“Oh my God,” I murmur, doing as he's asked. My bare knees slide on the rug as I spread them wide and lift my skirt, showing him my wet center. My hand slips between my thighs, but I pause. “Can I touch myself, Daddy?”

Daddy555:

You may.

Daddy555:

But you can't come.

Daddy555:

Not until I say so.

“Okay,” I breathe. My heart is pounding against my ribs with every message he sends, and I don't understand why. I don't usually get turned on like this during a gig. Most days, I need lube just to ride my fingers.

Not today.

I circle my clit slowly, moaning with every pass. My nerve endings are firing rapidly, my body twitching.

Daddy555:

Unbutton your blouse.

Daddy555:

I want to see all of you.

“I want to see you, too,” I blurt. My cheeks turn pink at the admission, but I don’t take it back. He doesn’t respond, so I keep going, my heart sinking for some unknown reason. I unbutton my top, letting the sides part naturally to reveal my braless breasts.

Daddy555:

More.

I shrug my top from my shoulders with excitement, momentarily forgetting that I’m supposed to be teasing this man. I’m left in only my tiny skirt that’s sitting high on my waist but rucked up enough to expose my pussy.

Daddy555:

Fuck.

Daddy555:

Play with those pretty tits, sweetheart. Pinch your nipples for me. Make them hard.

I moan again, this time louder. I abandon my aching core and glide my hands up my exposed stomach, cupping my large breasts. “You like what you see, Daddy?”

Daddy555:

Stunning.

Daddy555:

How big are those?

I barely stifle a burst of laughter at the weird question, letting it slip out as an innocent giggle instead.

“I don’t think you’re supposed to ask me that, Daddy,” I whisper, smiling coyly.

Daddy555:

You owe me for being naughty.

“Double D’s.” I pinch my nipples hard and my head tips back at the sharp burst of pleasure that rips through me.

Daddy555:

Fuck. I knew it. Knew you’d be perfect for Daddy.

Daddy555:

Play with that needy little cunt for me.

“Do you wanna see how wet I am for you?” I ask, pinching my nipples one last time.

Daddy555:

Yes. Spread yourself open and show me. I need to see it.

Daddy555:

Right now.

He’s just as needy as I am and it’s doing things to me.

Slipping my finger through my pussy, I gather my wetness and slide a finger inside myself, then two. Just like with my panties, I raise my hand, separating my sticky fingers for him to see.

“Can I see you, too? Will you touch yourself for me, Daddy?” I bring my fingers to my mouth, sucking my arousal from them with a loud, throaty moan so there’s no doubt what

I'm doing. "I wanna see your big cock." My words are mumbled, my fingers still deep in my mouth.

I hold my breath as he types out his response, and go back to circling my clit. A small shudder works through me with every pass, and I swear I see him mouth the word, "*Fuck.*"

Daddy555:

You can't see me, sweetheart. But know I'm touching myself. I'm stroking my cock just for you.

Daddy555:

You're making me so fucking hard.

I whimper at the words, at the surge of power. "Please," I cry. *Shit.* We haven't even really started and I'm already begging. "Please, Daddy. Plea—"

Daddy555:

Enough.

My mouth snaps shut as I choke back my words.

Daddy555:

Do you have your toys with you?

I suck my lip between my teeth as I reach for the dildo I have laying beside me. It's purple and sparkly with a solid suction base. It's just big enough to make me feel full.

Breathless, I hold it up for him to see.

Daddy555:

You know what I want.

I lower it between my legs, sliding up higher on my knees so it'll fit. I purposefully rub it over my clit, moaning at the feeling, before sliding it to my entrance. I can't suction it to the floor, but in this position, it should stay upright. I drop my hips, my aching pussy beyond ready to be impaled.

Daddy555:

Slowly, sweetheart.

Daddy555:

Ride Daddy's cock slowly.

I whimper at the words.

"I wish I could hear you say that," I breathe. I slowly entice the head into my entrance, groaning as it slips inside. "Like this, Daddy?"

He types with one hand, and I smile to myself, knowing he's stroking his cock while he watches me. I press my hands onto my thighs as I lower myself, feeling the full stretch of the dildo. My head tips back until it fills me completely.

Daddy555:

Just like that.

Daddy555:

Fuck yourself, sweetheart.

God, that damn nickname. He's killing me.

Daddy555:

Imagine it's me.

“Yes,” I hiss, lifting back up and dropping down slowly.

Daddy555:

Tell Daddy how much you like him stretching you.

“Oh, God,” I cry, lifting my hips and dropping back down again, feeling every artificial vein and ridge rub against me. “It feels so good, Daddy. So big.”

Daddy555:

Remember not to come.

Like I can control it.

“Tell me what you’d do to me,” I moan, losing the skit and embracing this connection we’ve formed.

Daddy555:

Fuck, baby.

Daddy555:

I’d pick you up and drop you on my throbbing cock just like you’re doing right now.

“More,” I whimper, pinching my nipple with one hand and rubbing my clit with the other.

Daddy555:

I’d grip those luscious hips and use your dripping pussy to get myself off. Use you like a good little toy.

I nod, wanting that more than anything. My eyes squeeze shut, picturing warm brown eyes and a sharp jaw.

A chat notification pings, but I ignore it as I lose myself further in the fantasy. My pussy flutters and I feel my orgasm coming, barreling closer toward me, and I can't stop it.

I won't stop it, even if I could.

"Please," I moan. "I need to—" Another moan cuts off my words.

Sweat coats my skin, my breasts bounce with every rise and fall of my hips, and my toes curl, tangling in the white rug. I pinch my hard nipples, tugging them roughly with every panting breath. I feel every bit the naughty school girl I'm supposed to be.

Another ping.

Dammit.

Daddy555:

Don't you dare fucking come.

Daddy555:

Don't make me punish you.

Daddy555:

Enough, brat.

"I'm sorry." Blinking rapidly, I force myself to focus on my client, remembering I have a job to do and I can't just find my own pleasure. "Are you fisting your cock for me, Daddy?"

Daddy555:

Fuck yes.

“Fuck yourself harder,” I whimper. “I want it hard.”

My vision turns spotty as my thoughts shift from this man before me to a different man. Another man who also wears white button downs and calls me sweetheart. One who relishes in bossing me around and telling me to be good.

But fuck if I don't want to be bad for him.

Daddy555:

You look so pretty with a cock inside you.

Daddy555:

You're taking it like a good girl.

“Oh my God.” His words paired with the intense fantasy inside my mind are ruining me. Fucking *destroying* me.

Daddy555:

There is no God here, sweetheart. Just Daddy.

“Holy shit,” I rasp, riding the dildo with everything I have. My knees and thighs burn, but I don't dare stop.

As though he has a direct line to my thoughts, his next message comes through, popping the bubble of desire coiling tight in my belly.

Daddy555:

Stop when you're about to come.

I feel my orgasm *right* there. Just a few more strokes, and I'll explode.

“Daddy,” I whine, pinching my nipples again. I try to force myself to stop, but it’s so fucking hard. I’m teetering on the edge, so close to falling off.

The sound of a tip coming through fills my computer speakers and I freeze. Like ice water being dumped on me, I remember what I’m supposed to be doing here. I’m putting on a show. I’m being *paid* to do what *he* wants. The original \$500 is already in my bank account, but he wants more.

I want more.

Swallowing thickly, I stop everything even though it kills me. My hands drop to my thighs and I look at the camera. The dildo’s buried deeply inside me, my pussy contracting around it with every pulse and breath.

Still, I wait.

Daddy555:

Such a good little girl.

“Tell me what to do next,” I say, my chest rising and falling with each shaky breath. “Tell me how to please you.”

Daddy555:

Be a dirty girl for Daddy and play with your ass.

I pause. This always takes me out of it, but I have to remind him.

“It’s extra,” I say softly. “You have to pay upfront.”

He stops stroking himself long enough to quickly send me another hundred dollars, then his hand disappears again.

I shift off my knees, and recline back, holding myself up with my elbow, carefully keeping my face out of view, as I press the dildo deeper inside me. My head falls back as I let out a long moan.

Fuck, it feels so good.

I reach back to my stash and grab the bottle of lube and small butt plug I'd pulled out when he mentioned anal play. I bring them in view of the camera, ready to prepare the toy like I've done so many times before.

Daddy555:

No.

I freeze.

Daddy555:

No toy. No lube. Use your fingers and your pussy juice.

“What?” I gasp, my brows pinched.

Daddy555:

You're wet enough to take it. I can hear your sloppy sounds through the computer.

Daddy555:

Come on. Do it for Daddy.

The plug and lube slip from my fingers, dropping to the carpet with a soft thud.

Fuck. This guy's so hot and I don't even know what he looks like.

“How do you want me?” I ask, shifting on my knees. “What do you want to see?”

Daddy555:

Turn around and bend forward with your legs spread so I can see it all.

Daddy555:

I want to see your fingers disappearing into that virgin asshole.

I let out a long breath before rolling onto my hands and knees. It takes a bit of maneuvering to keep my face hidden while in this position. Slowly, I dip my fingers into my pussy, embarrassed heat rushing to my face when I realize how right he is. I’m soaked—*dripping*. All because of this man. This stranger.

It’s Isaac, a little voice in my head sings. I try to push that thought away, the image of him behind me, lining his cock up with my ass, but I can’t. I can’t stop imagining the sounds he’d make, the tight grip he’d have on my full hips, the unapologetic way he’d sink inside me.

My pussy spasms around my fingers and I let out another embarrassingly loud moan.

Would he be gentle with me?

No, my brain laughs at me. *Definitely not*.

I shiver at the thought and focus on my fingers. I pump them a few times, wanting them to be as wet as they can be before I

slip them out. I lower my cheek to the rug as I slide my fingers higher, inhaling sharply as they brush over my asshole. I drop back down onto the dildo, rocking my hips rhythmically.

My eyes close as I slowly press one finger inside, gasping at the fullness. It's Isaac's finger I imagine, and I can't help the next whimper that slips from me.

I push further in, absently shocked I'm actually enjoying this so much. Being stretched wide around a dildo with my fingers in my asshole while on camera for a stranger.

It's a stretch, but I slip my other hand between my legs and find my clit with my fingers. I circle it and zaps of electricity shoot through my body. My core clenches around the toy and my fingers, causing black dots to dance around the edges of my vision.

I'm so close. So close.

Cha-ching.

Cha-ching.

Fuck!

"I'm so close, Daddy," I shout, my body shaking with the need to come. I need it like I need air. "Please!"

My second finger joins my first, and I cry out at the fullness. Slowly, I slide them in and out, harder and deeper each time, my other hand still working my clit.

I can almost hear Isaac growling, "*Take it, sweetheart.*"

My body begins vibrating, and I rub my clit faster. With my eyes still squeezed shut, I can't help but see Isaac's face straining as he pounds into me, his usually perfect hair mussed from me running my fingers through it, his lips red and swollen from kissing me.

I moan at the images playing out in my mind, at the controlling, brutal way I imagine Isaac would fuck me. A part of me wants it rough, and I know he'd give it to me like that. He's too passionate of a man to be gentle. And I don't want him to be.

My muscles tremble with the effort to hold back my orgasm, but I don't know how much longer I can last.

"Please, Daddy," I cry, my fingers moving faster as my hips slam down on the dildo. My body is a trembling, needy mess. I'm shaking from head to toe. "I—I can't—" I shake my head, my cheek digging into the carpet. "Can't stop—"

But it's too late. My orgasm barrels into me with the force of a tsunami just as a new sound fills the static air of my bedroom.

"Come, sweetheart." I jolt at the raspy sound of his deep voice. "Come with me."

"Oh my God," I scream, my mind hazy and ears ringing from sheer ecstasy.

"Fuck," he bellows. "Wish I could fill your tight pussy up with my cum."

His voice washes over me as the last tendrils of my orgasm send shocks throughout my body. It's deep, raspy, and raw, like he rarely speaks. It's not the rumbling, jovial sound I'm so used to hearing every morning and night. It's not him.

Not Isaac.

And with that stark realization, the high I'd felt only moments ago disappears entirely, leaving me cold and trembling on the floor for a whole new reason.

1.9 Eve

“**Y**ou can do it,” I murmur, giving Clover an encouraging nod, lightly tapping on the paper. “Try it again.”

She huffs a breath, sinking deeper into her chair. Reaching up, she massages her temples, letting her fingers trail across her scalp with a grimace.

“Another headache?” I ask softly. Her gaze darts up, a sad, dejected look in her big brown eyes. She tugs her lip between her teeth and shrugs. “Clover—” I start, a bit of a warning in my voice.

“It’s fine, Miss Evie.” She waves me away, turning back to her math homework.

Sighing, I push to my feet and step around the back of her chair. My fingers glide gently over her head, and she cringes again. Her long, thick dark brown hair is braided so tightly, it’s pulling against her scalp. It’s hurting her.

Anger and frustration fill me so rapidly, I'm surprised I'm able to choke it back down.

Leaning in, I murmur, "Let me."

Without giving her a chance to shove me away or refuse, I quickly untie the end, frowning at the heavy weight of her long locks. I uncoil the braid, giving her head a much-needed break so she can focus on her studies.

"There," I smile, squeezing her petite shoulders. "Much better, right?"

She releases a shaky breath, her eyes scanning the small room in the back of the church we reserve for Sunday school and tutoring. There's only one other student here today, a little boy named Douglas who's curled up on a bean bag with his picture book.

Seeing him, she relaxes even more and gives me a grateful smile.

"Thank you."

With a nod, I drop back down in my seat, taking her in. Clover is nearly seventeen, but you'd never know it based on the way she carries herself. She's wise beyond her years. Quiet. Reserved and respectful. She's a bright girl with an even brighter future.

If only her foster mother agreed.

Willa is a horrible woman. I know it's not very Christian of me to say that, but I don't care. Besides, if Jesus took one look

at this sweet, innocent girl in front of me and the Hell she's been through, I'm sure he'd agree with me.

Shaking those thoughts away, I lean forward and dive back into helping Clover with her math. She's a brilliant girl, but the foster system and lack of consistency has left her with gaps in her education. It's frustrating.

As much as I wish I could, I can't control what goes on in her home. And even though Willa is a raging bitch with a penchant for borderline abusive clothing, painful hairdos, and a strict curfew, Clover assures me she's safe with her. Well cared for and looked after, if not lonely as hell.

A little while later, I'm helping her pack up her backpack when she pauses, textbook clutched in her hands as she stares up at me. I'm not a tall woman by any means but Clover is *tiny*. She may be wiser beyond her years, but she doesn't look it. She looks so young, sometimes I forget how old she really is.

Her doe eyes are wide and unblinking as her tan cheeks turn pink. She's just so dang cute.

"Yes?" I drawl, my lip twitching.

Clover's fingers tighten around her book as she shifts awkwardly. "Umm," she whispers before clearing her throat.

Her gaze skims the empty room, no doubt buying herself a moment's distraction to gather herself. We both already know we're alone. Douglas was picked up an hour ago, and the

church is utterly silent, apart from the sounds of her shifting uncomfortably.

Tilting my head to the side, I grip her elbow, bringing her attention back to me. A heavy ball of worry forms in the pit of my belly. She's not just nervous—she's terrified.

“Clo, what's going on, honey? Are you okay? Do you need something?” Oh, God. Please don't tell me Ms. Willa has finally done it. Finally crossed that line. I suck in a breath. “Are you hurt or a—”

“Will you teach me how to flirt with boys?” she blurts, her cheeks staining a deeper blush as she gawks up at me, like she can't believe she really said it.

I freeze, unsure what to do or say.

Did I hear that right? Surely, I misunderstood because there is no way—

“Please, Miss Eve? I just...” She brushes off my hand and gathers the textbook in one arm, letting the other flap anxiously as she begins to pace. “I'm almost seventeen-years-old, and I've never been kissed or asked on a date. I've never danced with a boy or, heck, I've never even held anyone's hand.”

She shoots me a look, her eyes dropping to my own hand which is still suspended in the air between us as my mind fritzes.

“I mean, I've never held anyone's hand who was important.”

“Thanks.” I huff out a laugh, finally dropping my hand only to cross my arms over my chest. “That’s so sweet of you.”

She grimaces, resuming her pacing. “Sorry,” she murmurs. “That’s not what I meant.”

“I know.” I sigh, watching this darling girl spontaneously combust before my eyes. “What’s going on, Clo? What’s this really about?”

She freezes, her head snapping in my direction. Her eyes have grown impossibly wider, and I’m pretty sure she’s barely breathing.

“Wh-what makes you think something’s going on?”

I arch a brow, my foot tapping on the wooden floor. I may be far from being a mother, but I know a few tricks when it comes to dealing with deceptive teenagers.

Perhaps I learned it from watching Mama and Isaac handle Roman for so many years. He was a wild, chaotic teen.

Thoughts of the Roman I once knew, the one I grew up hearing stories about from my parents, fill my mind. Reminders of the small child they’d once loved and cared for, as though he were their own. The same boy that, in a sick twist of fate, became our family in a way I’d never imagined.

Then I think of the way he left me. Left Isaac. The way he fled in the middle of the night without a second look. Only a fucked up text, ending whatever relationship we’d been tentatively creating and breaking my heart in one brutal act.

“Miss Evie, are you even listening to me?” Clover cries, shaking me by my bicep.

I blink rapidly, focusing on the frantic girl in front of me. “Sorry,” I murmur. “What did you say?”

“I said,” she breathes, her hand digging into my arm. “Will you help me? Will you teach me how to get boys to talk to me? To like me?” Her eyes are teary, and it breaks my damn heart.

Oh, hell.

“Honey,” I coo, brushing her hands away so I can pull her into a hug.

Indecision wars within me. I can understand where she’s coming from. I sucked with boys when I was her age, too.

I huff a breath quietly. I *still* suck with boys. If it weren’t for the internet and my stepbrother, I’d be just as innocent and lost as she is.

Lord help me. I’m in no place to give any advice.

Not to mention, Ms. Willa will kill me if she finds out I’m helping Clover with boys. Worse than that—she’ll take it out on Clover, and that’s not something I’m willing to risk.

She sinks into me, her head nestled against my chest. I squeeze her tightly, willing to give her every ounce of comfort I possibly can, before she goes back into that cold, emotionless house.

“Listen,” I start. “Let’s start small, okay?”

“What does that mean?” she mutters against the soft cotton of my dress.

I chuckle, patting her back before releasing her and stepping away so I can see her face. I palm her cheek. “It means,” I begin, my lips lifting in a full smile, “we start with the basics.”

She gives me a confused look, her brows scrunching adorably. “Basics?” she squeaks.

I nod. “What’s his name?”

Her mouth opens and closes, gaping like a dying fish, and I can’t hold it in anymore. A loud laugh bursts from me, and she lets out another shocked squawk.

“How did you know there’s *a him?*” she hisses.

She’s just so damn innocent, and I can’t help but imagine what I was doing earlier before coming here.

I used to be her. I used to be innocent. Now I’m—well, now I’m so far past the line of innocence, I don’t even know what the line looks like anymore.

Hell, it was just a few weeks ago, I was drunk in front of the entire congregation. Wandering around the church lawn with a tumbler full of alcohol and a heart full of jealousy about my hot stepfather flirting with Mary.

I was so angry, so *jealous*, I went and spread my legs for Kevin, offering him my pussy on a grassy platter.

Fucking Kevin, for Christ’s sake.

I fall apart at that.

What has my life come to? I'm a *cam-girl*, of all things. A cam-girl who fucked herself while fantasizing about her stepfather railing her instead of the dildo.

I'm losing it.

My stomach cramps with the force of my laughter, and I double over, wheezing and wiping at my wet cheeks. At this point, I'm not even sure what the tears are from, laughing or the sudden burst of emotion clogging my throat.

It's not funny. None of this is funny. But I can't stop.

"Miss Eve. You have to be quiet," she cries, shaking her head rapidly. "Shh. Please, shh. Don't tell anyone." Her eyes continually dart to the closed door, separating us from the empty church, like she's waiting for Jesus himself to burst through at any moment. If that were the case, I'd be nothing but a bit of ash on the rug from the force of the epic smiting I'm due.

Sucking in a panting breath, I force myself to get it together. I can't do this here. Not now.

"Sorry," I gasp with a thick cough, clearing my throat. I wipe my cheeks again. "Sorry, honey. That wasn't about you." I grimace from the way my outburst probably looked to this sweet angel.

Her head bobs, her face a mask of worry and nerves.

"And to answer your question," I continue, squeezing her hand. "There's *always* a boy."

A man.

A stepfather.

A stepbrother, my mind supplies unhelpfully.

She opens her mouth to respond, but a booming voice fills the air, stealing her words from her lungs.

“Clover, time to go!”

She wilts before me, becoming a shell of herself before Ms. Willa has even finished speaking. Clover swallows thickly and nods. She drops her head and turns away from me to finish packing up her backpack. I dart forward, gripping her by her shoulders, and tug her into me.

“Wh—” she starts, but I shake my head, rushing to rebraid her hair. She sucks in a panicked breath, and I try to soothe her.

“It’s okay,” I whisper. “You’ll go. You’ll be brave. You’ll be resilient. And when things get tough, you’ll think of—”

“The Lord,” she mutters. “I know.”

I huff a laugh, tying the band around the end of her braid. Bending down, I whisper in her ear. “No, honey.” I press a kiss on her cheek. “When things are hard, you’ll think of the boy.”

We all do.

1:10 Eve

“Oh, come on,” I cry out, pointing an accusing chopstick at the TV screen. “He’s totally fucking Lindsey on the side.”

“I think I love him,” Natalie, the hopeful single, gushes, making me scoff into my broccoli beef. *“He’s definitely the one.”*

Rolling my eyes, I settle deeper into the couch, preparing to watch this whole shit storm blow up in poor Nat’s face the second she finds out her bestie’s a lying ho.

Lindsey’s eyes widen, but I see it. The guilt. It surprises me, but not nearly as much as her acting skills. *“I’m so happy for you, girl. He totally loves you too,”* she simpers.

“I thought you were better than that,” I grumble with disappointment. “It’s always the ones you least suspect.”

Sighing, I finish my broccoli beef and swap it out for spicy cashew chicken and steamed rice. The first bite has a loud moan slipping through my lips, but I can’t help it. Golden Bull

is my favorite and I only get to indulge in the delicious, savory, carby, MSG overload once every few months, if that. Isaac *hates* it. He hates it so much he swears he can smell the spicy aroma days after still wafting around the house. In his defense, Mama felt the same.

I huff a laugh, eyeing the massive meal I have spread out across the coffee table. He'd blow a pupil if he saw me right now. Wearing nothing but an old t-shirt I love and a cheeky thong, curled up and eating Chinese food on the couch. Drinking stolen wine straight from the bottle because I'm too lazy to wash dishes on my week off.

I did, however, open up all the windows in the living room and kitchen, as well as the front door, leaving just the screen closed to keep the bugs out. I may be rebelling this week, but I'm not suicidal.

"I love you, too, Natty," Jordan, the two-timing-ass-face, coos before smashing his lips to Natalie's. The camera pans just in time to see a dramatically enraged Lindsey in the background.

Smiling, I stuff my face, enjoying every horrific second of the trashy show. Is there anything better than reality TV?

The episode ends just as I finish my dish, bathing the house in silence. I momentarily let myself absorb the hum of cicadas trickling through the windows. I can hear the water lapping against the dock with every slow drag of humid air. The huge mossy oak tree out front shudders as though it's breathing. The old tire swing creaks with every sway.

It's peaceful in a way that settles me down to the bones.

So peaceful that I find myself drifting off.

Until a loud *bang* breaks through the relaxing silence, making me jump. My wine bottle jostles from its home between my crossed legs, but I catch it before it can spill anywhere.

My body tenses, and my hand around the glass neck tightens as my skin prickles.

Maybe I just imagined it.

Rolling my shoulders back, I force myself to relax, knowing it's unlikely anyone's way out here in the country on a weeknight. Everyone knows this is Preacher Isaac's house, and he's adored. They wouldn't fuck with him.

Right?

But then, the bang sounds again, this time louder. It's enough that I can tell it's coming from the kitchen or maybe just outside, in the backyard.

Swallowing thickly, I slowly rise and snatch my phone from the coffee table. My finger hovers over my contacts, but I freeze.

Who would I even call?

Isaac's not in Georgia right now. Oli would be useless in a fight. Well, okay, that's not true. She'd be scrappy as fuck, but she's tiny. And she has the animals to think about.

Wait. What?

“Fuck,” I breathe, shaking my head. I must be drunker than I’d realized.

Glancing down at my phone, I scroll through the few contacts I have saved. My finger hovers over the one man I know will help me, without a doubt. He’s always been here for me when I’ve needed him before. Surely, he’d come if things were bad. Even if he is far away.

When the bang sounds for a third time, followed by a loud grunt, I press *call*, consequences be damned.

Bringing it to my ear, I slowly skirt around the coffee table, keeping my eyes locked on the kitchen. From here, I can see the dining table, slightly illuminated by the light over the stove.

It’s dark in the house, just like I was taught. If you’re going to sit naked in the living room with the windows open like so many in the South do, make sure you turn the lights off so the neighbors don’t get an unpaid peep show.

I may be a cam-girl, but I do have some decorum. I am my mother’s daughter, after all.

“Eve?” His voice filters through the phone and into my ear, soothing my frazzled nerves almost instantly. “Are you there?”

I swallow roughly, nodding my head. Then I shake it and scoff quietly when I remember he can’t see me.

“I’m here,” I whisper, my eyes still trained on the quiet kitchen.

He pauses and the sound of a loud shout followed by a door slamming shut has me pulling the phone from my head with a grimace. He grunts, then clears his throat.

“What’s wrong? Why are you calling me?”

I cringe. Of course, he knows I’d only call this late if something’s wrong.

“I’m home alone,” I breathe, tightening my free hand around my wine bottle. If nothing else, it’s a weapon. “But I hear someone out back.”

He doesn’t respond, his heavy breaths the only sound between us for a long drawn-out moment. Maybe he’s at the gym.

“Uhh.” He clears his throat again. “Not that I don’t love hearing from you, Evie, but why would you call me? I’m in Mammoth. If someone’s in your backyard, you need to call the sheriff.”

“No!” I cry, immediately berating myself for the loud noise. “No.” I force the word out in a whisper, shaking my head rapidly. My eyes skim my bare legs, the messy living room, and my very evident drunkenness. “I can’t call them. I’m drunk and there’s spicy Chinese everywhere.” My hand flails around. “And I’m *naked*,” I whisper-hiss.

“Oh my God!” he shouts. “I don’t wanna hear about that shit, bro. Fuck. You’re like my sister. That’s disgusting.”

“I’m not—” I start, but he quickly breaks out into a chorus of *la la la*, ignoring me. “Shut up, *bro*,” I scoff.

He bursts out laughing but quickly stifles it when another *bang* has me screaming. This time, it's followed by a loud, rapid knock against a window.

“What happened?” All previous humor has left his voice. Apparently he's taking things more seriously now. Good. “What's going on, Eve? Are you okay? Do you need me to come or get Roman—”

“No!” The word pushes from my lungs. “Don't you dare tell him, Chase Tanner.” I take a deep pull from the bottle and tuck it under the crook of my arm. “I've got this. Just stay on the phone with me in case I need you to call for backup.”

“Jesus, Eve,” he breathes. I can just picture him running his hand through his short dirty blond hair as his blue eyes stare Heavenward. “What will you say if you need help? Like, worst-case scenario—there's a robber, and he's trying to burgle you or some shit.”

“What will I say?” I mumble as I reach down and snatch up the iron poker from next to the fireplace, inspecting it. It'll do. “If a robber is trying to burgle me or *some shit*,” I mimic, creeping toward the kitchen, “I'll scream help, Chase. Obviously.”

“It's not obvious!” he cries. “*Obvious* would be calling the goddamned cops, not your best friend's older brother that lives literally hours away, Eve. Fucking Hell.”

I giggle, then quickly tuck my lips between my teeth as I reach the white cabinets closest to the hallway. My eyes scan the U-shaped kitchen, looking for any sign of robbers, but I

come up empty-handed. Just as I'm about to report back to Chase, a black shadow pops up out of nowhere, filling the small garden window above the sink.

“Oh, fuck no!” I scream, tossing the poker across the kitchen. “Nope. No. No. No!” It clatters to the ground uselessly. I dart backward and collide with the dining table, nearly dropping everything in my arms.

“Eve!” Chase shouts at the same moment another very familiar voice yells, “It’s about damn time you showed up, bitch. I’m catching the heebie-jeebies out here!”

Breathing out a sigh of relief, I sink against the table and laugh. “Oh, thank you, Jesus.”

“Eve?” Chase snaps, sounding frantic. “I’m calling the cops if you don’t say something right the hell now.”

Grinning, I tip my head back. “It’s fine, Chase. Apparently, your sister is out doing something that’ll likely get her locked up.”

“As long as it’s jail, I’m fine with it.” I bite my lip at his mumbled words, knowing the weight of them with my whole heart. “Are you sure it’s her? Is she okay?”

Pushing off the table, I close the distance between myself and the window, stepping over the abandoned poker on the floor.

“Oli!” I call, poking my head into the box window. “You good?”

“I think I have the plague,” she groans.

“Excuse me?” Chase cries. “What does that mean? Is she okay? Is she dehydrated?” He continues on with his inane barrage of questions that will probably go on for the next hour, so I make an executive decision and hang up on him.

“Your brother’s going to call you in ten seconds,” I laugh, dropping my phone onto the counter. Leaning over, I flick the switch for the back porch light and immediately come up short. I open my mouth to say *something* but am interrupted by Oli’s phone ringing.

The sound of *Fetty Wap’s 679* fills my otherwise quiet home, making me chuckle.

“What?” she snaps, lifting her black-gloved hand to her ear as she answers the call. “No, Chase. I can’t talk right now. I’m busy.” She pauses, her free hand flailing in exasperation. “It’s top secret, I can’t tell you.” She scoffs. “Of course, I wouldn’t kill you, silly.” She grins manically. “I’d let the goats do it.”

My eyes rake over her body, still not sure what to make of her appearance. She’s dressed head to toe in black. Black leggings, hoodie, gloves, and combat boots. Yet she’s topped it off with a pink crochet beanie that’s tugged down over her face with holes cut out for her mouth, eyes, and nose.

I cock my head to the side as my eyes narrow. I’m pretty sure that used to be *my* beanie. I also believe it once had a pig face where the holes now exist.

I roll my eyes. Brat.

“Yes, I’ll call you tomorrow.” She nods, adjusting the pack on her chest. My chuckle turns into a full belly laugh. I don’t know how I missed it. “Yes, big brother. I promise I’ll be good.” She visibly crosses her fingers, moving them around in a weird dance. “I can’t make any promises on the plague yet. The itches could be from mosquitoes or scurvy. Only time will tell. Kay, love you. Bye. Oh my God, Chase. Bye!”

Oli pockets her phone and turns back to face me, her chest heaving. We stare at each other for a long moment. I take another sip of wine, sad that some of my buzz disappeared in the previous panic.

“Why are you wearing that shirt, Eve?” she finally asks, tugging on her—*my*—beanie.

Ignoring her question because there is no way in fuck I’m getting into *that* right now, I arch a brow.

“Why does your possum have a baby bottle, Olive?”

She gasps, covering said possum’s snout with her little hands. “This isn’t for Robert. How could you even suggest that?” I point toward the obvious signs.

“You have a baby bottle strapped to the infant carrier he’s snoozing in.” Because, of course, my best friend is wearing her pet possum like a baby. She hardly goes anywhere without the damn marsupial. “It’s a valid assumption. Has he gone off the solids or something?”

Oli releases her protective hold on the creature and snatches the whole-ass baby bottle from the corresponding

compartment on the strappy contraption. Waving it in the air between us, she grins.

“It’s a mojito.”

I grin back. She’s such an adorable weirdo.

“Where’d you get the booze?”

Giving me an exasperated sigh, she tips her head back and waterfalls the drink into her mouth with a sloppy squirt like some kind of frat dude doing a kegger.

“I’m a nineteen-year-old orphan crouching in my grandmother’s house. Where do you think I got it?”

“Grandma Helen’s liquor cabinet,” we say in unison. My head tilts to the side as the rest of her statement sinks in. “Wait. *Crouching?*” I ask, my brows furrowed. She nods rapidly and drops down in a crouch as if that explains everything.

“You know. Like staying somewhere when you’re not supposed to be.” She jumps up and shrugs. “Crouching.”

“You mean *squatting?*” I cackle, taking another drink of my wine. Her eyes narrow through the thin slits of her mask. Her mouth opens and closes for a second before she finally scoffs.

“Whatever. Same thing.” Nodding, I agree, leaning further over the sink to see her better. “Where’d you get yours?” Her fingers come up to pet the top of Robert’s head absently as she takes another swig from her bottle.

Clicking my tongue, I ignore the small flicker of guilt that swirls in my chest.

“It was left over from the 4th of July picnic.” She nods like she expected that answer.

“So the church cellar.”

“The church cellar,” I agree, grimacing.

I’d pilfered the bottle after Clover had left. In my defense, the church cellar is full of donations from various fundraisers. We usually bring them out at weddings or parties hosted on the premises. But the wine rarely gets chosen, the people of Divinity preferring beer and spiked punch over anything that can be deemed *fancy*. Therefore, I feel justified in my stolen contraband.

“So,” I drawl, crossing my arms over my chest as I lean against the counter. “What’s all this? And why didn’t you just use the front door? You know I’m home alone this week.”

“Didn’t fit the vibe.” She scoffs.

“And what vibe would that be?”

She throws me a massive smile that looks creepy as hell in the shadowy light. “A B&R.”

Sometimes, hanging out with Olive is like trying to decipher the dictionary in another language with your eyes closed and your head buried in sand.

“Try again,” I coax. “Use your words, Oli.” She gives me a judgmental look.

“It’s a B&R, Evie. Those are the words. God, do your research before the next brief. You’re embarrassing Robert.” She points at the possum with a huff.

I toss my hands up in apology, barely able to keep my laughter in as I speak. “I’m so sorry, Robbie. I’ll come prepared next time.” Oli nods, petting the still-slumbering animal.

“Since you’re new at this, I suppose I’ll fill in the gaps.” She glowers at me. “Just this once.”

“Thank you, oh magnanimous one.” I mock a bow.

She tosses the little tendrils of green hair poking out beneath her hat over her shoulder. They don’t move, but she doesn’t notice or care.

“Good girl,” she says, and I gasp, clutching Mama’s necklace as though it’s pearls. She does something with her face that I think equates to a salacious look. “Liked that one, did you? I picked it up on PornBub.”

Sighing, I decide to save that entire conversation for a later date. *Much* later.

“What is going on, Oli? Just give it to me straight, please. It’s late and I’m missing my show.”

“Fuck, okay, *Grandma*. I didn’t realize eight was your bedtime these days.” Shit. It’s only eight? When did I get so old? “So, we’re doing a break-in and rescue down at the PP on Main. Suspects are currently being held hostage in a glass box

where they're forced to watch as their family members are taken one by one and executed right in front of their eyes."

I shudder, hating the horrible vision she's dramatically painted but unable to fully commit to becoming appalled quite yet.

"Go on."

"What else is there to say, Evie?" she cries, her hands flying up at her sides. "It's patricide. Matricide. Homicide. All the *cides*! We have to do something!"

"Okay, one," I hold up my finger, "it's none of those things unless—" I swallow, shaking my head. "You know what? Nevermind." Running my hand through my hair, I groan. "So what it sounds like is that you want me to commit a crime with you. Is that what you're saying?" She waves me off.

"Law is an abstract concept." She drags her finger over Robert's nose lovingly. "It only exists if you believe in it and if you don't believe in it, you can't get in trouble." She glances up at me, a calculating expression taking over her visible features. "I live a lawless existence, Evie. The rules don't apply to me."

Unable to formulate a response to that, I say nothing. Standing up straight, I eye her outfit again.

"I'm assuming you want me to change for this shit?" I ask dryly, and she nods, snapping her fingers.

"And make it fast. We don't know how many lives have been lost while I've had to stand out here and break down the

circle of life to an educated adult.” She scoffs and looks at Robert. “She becomes a pornstar and suddenly, her brain cells go—” She brings her hands up to his little head as she mimes a brain exploding, “*Poof.*”

Groaning, I grab my wine and stomp to my bedroom. “Get your ass inside and close up the house for me. If I’m committing a crime tonight, I want a nice, safe bed to come home to.”

“Whatever, Grandma,” she shouts. “I’ll make sure to have you home in time for your programs.”

Ten minutes later, we’re standing in front of Oli’s old beat-up car, both of us decked out fully in dark clothes. She’s still got that damn possum strapped to her chest, baby bottle in one hand, her keys in the other.

“What do you think you’re doing?” I jolt forward, grabbing at her keys. “You can’t drive, Olive. Neither of us can.” My eyes dart pointedly at her drink.

“Like I’d ever risk Robert’s life like that.” She shoves her bottle in my mouth, nipple first. “It’s a virgin. Unlike you.” I nearly spit the disgusting drink out the second it touches my tongue. She grins. “Grandma only had the mixer. She’s out of rum.”

I slap the bottle away and wipe my mouth with the back of my hand.

“Yeah, well, I think it’s expired,” I gag. Oli shrugs and tosses the bottle into her back seat.

“Makes sense. She hasn’t been home in over a year.” She drops into the driver’s seat, a hand protectively over Robert’s head. “Get in, hooker. We have babies to save.”

Groaning, I drag my feet with every step before reluctantly falling into her passenger seat. “Are you going to tell me what exactly we’re doing or not?” Turning on the car, she throws it in reverse and cackles, giving me a wicked look.

“Not.”

In no time, we’re pulling up in front of Praying Paws Pet Shop. It’s only half after eight, so the town’s not completely closed down for the night yet. The Crispy Biscuit is still open, serving the dinner crowd just a few buildings down. The quaint street is illuminated by string lights, zigzagging from pole to pole.

It really is an adorable downtown.

“Okay, so,” Oli starts, flicking off the ignition. She reaches into the back seat and digs around for so long, I actually worry she’s forgotten what she was looking for. Finally, she tosses an empty backpack into my lap, followed by a small bundle of blue fabric. “Wear that.”

I pick up the fabric, turning it side to side in confusion. She flicks on the overhead light and I gasp.

“Oli, no,” I hiss.

“Evie, yes,” she mimics. “Put it on so we can go inside.”

I take another look at the beanie and cringe. It looks normal on top, but the bottom has a giant, knitted beard. Shaking my

head, I throw it at her.

“Trade me.”

“I can’t. That one will scare them,” she says ominously as her eyes home in on the massive glass windows in front of the pet shop. “And they’ve already seen enough horror to last them a lifetime.”

“Okay,” I snap, unable to stand the tension anymore. “Tell me what the hell is going on right now, Olive, or I’m leaving.” Wiping at her eyes, she snuffles quietly and nods.

“It all started earlier this morning,” she begins. “I was out taking the kids for their post-breakfast walk. Potato was out of kibble, so I had to stop into the pet store.” She turns to me. “You know how she gets without her kibble.”

I nod in understanding. The pygmy goat is practically feral at the best of times. Without her steady meals, she’s basically a garbage disposal on crack.

“So there we were, in the food aisle, between the fresh mush that smells like sewer water and the doggy bacon strips.” She snuffles again, squeezing Robert closer to her chest. “And that’s when it happened.”

“What happened, honey?” I coo, completely invested in her saga.

“Do you know what they do with the mice here, Eve?” she wails.

Oh, no. My heart sinks, knowing exactly where this is going. I quickly school my features, playing dumb.

“What do they do?” I murmur, my palms sweating around the ugly hat. She gags dramatically and covers Robert’s ears.

“They feed them to Bunny!”

“They feed the mice to bunnies?” I choke out. That’s new information.

Oli gags again. “No. Bunny is the python!”

Heaven have mercy. She has no idea the irony in that.

Swallowing, my eyes scan my best friend’s tortured features before flicking to the pet shop. Suddenly, it all makes sense.

“Oli,” I breathe. “You know I love you, but if Isaac finds out that I’ve broken into a pet shop in the middle of the night with you, he’ll kill me.”

She shoots me a glare.

“Fine. We’ll stay here and talk instead.” Her nose wrinkles distastefully as she inspects her hot pink nails. “Tell me why you were wearing Roman’s favorite t-shirt—”

“Fine!” I shout, throwing the door open. I quickly yeet the stupid beanie into the backseat because fuck that. It’s hot as Hell out here. “Let’s go. But you owe me.”

“Oh, yeah?” she snaps back. “How about I fulfill my debt by buying you loads of rubber cocks and butt plugs?”

I gasp, my eyes flying across the empty street. Thank fuck no one’s around right now.

“Christ on a cross, Olive. Shut your big trap.”

She cackles and jumps out of the car with a happy dance. She quickly secures the empty backpack onto her back and readjusts a now very awake Robert on her chest. She struggles for a moment, making me laugh.

“Being a single parent is so hard,” she whines.

Strolling toward the front door, I notice the light in the back is still on and cringe. Mr. McTavish is going to lose his shit.

“You could just hire a sitter next time you want to test the limits of Divinity’s law enforcement,” I say dryly. A grunt behind me has my head snapping back just in time to see Oli drop to her knees and crawl toward the door.

“Get down, Eve,” she hisses. “The cameras.” She points up, giving me a reprimanding look.

Ignoring her, I lean against the door and toss a wave at Mrs. Kane, the bookstore owner, as she locks up.

“Have a nice night, Tilly,” I call.

“You too, girls.” She waves back without pause. Not even when Oli pulls out a lockpicking kit from Robert’s carrier. “Get back home safe, y’all.”

“We will,” I promise. “Tell Mr. Kane, we say hello.”

“Eve,” Oli grunts. “Zip it.” I mime zipping my lips, and she pauses what she’s doing. She holds out her hand, palm up. “I think I’ll keep a hold of that. You can’t be trusted.”

I toss her my fake key and gesture for her to get back to work. Sometimes with Oli, it’s easier to just play along.

Besides, her delusions are my favorite part of my days.

After a few minutes of unsuccessfully trying to pick the lock, she screeches in frustration.

“What the heck? It worked last time.”

I don't even ask what she means by that, eager to get on with the *legal* part of my night. I gently shove her to the side and wiggle the lock she'd been working on back and forth, using my body to block her view. I quickly turn the old silver knob, letting the already unlocked door creak open slowly. I don't think she's even realized the pet store isn't closed yet.

“Wow, Oli,” I praise. “You did it.” She gasps and jumps to her feet, clapping triumphantly.

“I knew that *Crime for Dummies* book would pay off, eventually.”

She silently takes a step inside, her eyes skimming the shelves of glass tanks rapidly.

“So pretty,” she murmurs. With a heavy breath, she turns to me and slips Robert from her chest. “Here.” She thrusts the creature into my arms. “Hold my marsupial.”

Before I even have a chance to adamantly scream *fuck no*, she's on her stomach and rolling around while chanting, “*The name's Bond. Olive Bond.*”

Sighing, I settle Robert into the crook of my arms like a baby. He really is the most docile, ugly little thing I've ever seen.

He was originally purchased as someone's pet when he was a baby, then turned over to a kill shelter when he'd reached maturity. His previous owners forgot that cute little babies grow into full adult animals and didn't want him anymore.

He's never known what it's like to be anything but a pseudo-child to humans.

Poor guy.

At least Oli loves him like he's her own infant.

"Eve. Help me," she calls, popping up two aisles down, right in front of the giant tank of feeder mice. One of the parrots in the massive iron cage in the corner squawks, making me jump.

"No, thank you," I politely decline. "I'll stay here and keep a lookout. Be your guard." The words have barely left my lips when Mr. McTavish slips from the back, his arms full of doggy stuffed animals and his old school headphones secured tightly over his greying head. "Shit." Rubbing the space between my brows, I mentally plan out how I can get back at her for this.

"You poor babies," she whimpers, hugging the tank to her chest. "Don't worry. Your new mommy's here."

"Oli," I murmur, watching as Mr. McTavish drops a toy and struggles to pick it up with his arms full. He still hasn't seen us, which is no surprise. The man should have retired forty years ago. "How are you going to get them all out of here?" She shoots me a look.

“The backpack.” She turns back to the mice. “Duh.”

“Duh,” I scoff, petting Robert. “Why didn’t I think of that?”

“Honestly, Eve. Use your brain.” Olive opens the tank of mice, sliding the heavy lid onto the floor with a *bang*. “Come to Ma—”

“Hey!” a loud voice booms.

I’d been waiting for it, but clearly, my bestie is truly as oblivious as I feared because Mr. McTavish’s shout sends her flying inches from the ground with a scream.

In her panic, Robert’s carrier, still strapped to her chest, smashes into the glass tank. She falls backward and I swear, everything after that happens in slow motion.

Oli’s arms pinwheel as she falls, catching the edge of the tank. It topples onto its side, spilling hundreds of tiny white mice all over the place. The only saving grace is that the glass didn’t shatter, but everything else is pure chaos.

“What the hell?” Mr. McTavish shouts. “Oh, no!”

“Holy fucking shit balls,” Oli cries. “The babies!”

“God, no!” I scream, making a mad dash for the checkout counter. I scramble on top of it just as the little white rodents begin their journey to create maximum destruction. “Olive!”

“Get them!” she wails, throwing herself to her feet just as Mr. McTavish comes charging down the fish aisle. “Help! Help!”

“No.” I panic, tightening my hold on Robert as one of the little beasts comes skittering toward us. “No, Robert. Stay!”

He doesn't listen, too enthralled by the insanity. He hisses loudly and scrambles from my arms too quickly for me to react. The sound sets Oli off again, and she runs toward us, desperation in her pretty blue eyes.

She trips over the mass of rodents and collides with what I can only assume is *Bunny's* tank. The lid falls to the side with a metallic screech which inadvertently sets the birds off.

“No!” Mr. McTavish screams. “Bunny, don't do it!”

“What?” Oli cries, still chasing after both Robert and the hoard of demon balls. “Oh my God. No babies, don't do it!” We watch in horror as the mice scramble up every surface, most of them to their deaths unknowingly. I watch as a few of them shove their way into the various bird cages, but quickly look away when shit gets bloody.

“Oli,” I breathe, knowing this is killing her.

“Call nine-one-one!” she screams. “I can't save them all!” She turns to a shell-shocked Mr. McTavish and shakes his shoulders. “Get it together, man! These are our children! They're dying! It's carnage!”

His mouth opens and closes, but he's unable to speak, breaking my heart all over. Oli scoffs and turns back to the bloodbath. She dives into the melee and finally gets a hold of Robert.

“Don’t look, baby,” she soothes, covering his eyes. “This will scar you for life.”

The bell over the door dings and I cringe all over again, wishing with everything I have that I’d stayed in tonight.

“What in the Hell is going on in here?” a heavily accented voice shouts. “Looks like the second comin’ of Christ.” Oli spins toward the newcomer.

“Oh, Deputy Dumbass! Thank God you’re here.” Paul’s eyes widen as he grips his belt.

“Olive,” he sighs, shaking his head. “How many times do I have to say it? My name is not—”

“We don’t have time for this! There are bodies everywhere,” she shouts, tucking Robert back into his carrier. “We need help! Send for SWAT. Or the National Guard! *Tell them we need help, STAT!*”

Paul looks like he’d rather be anywhere else. A sentiment I fully understand.

“I don’t think backup will help, Olive,” he murmurs, swallowing thickly as he examines her. “I think we might need an exterminator.”

“No,” Mr. McTavish and Oli bark in unison.

The deputy scans the floor where mice are still loitering like the Hell goblins they are. His eyes finally meet mine and I see the disappointment there. But also, the regret.

“You know I’m gonna have to tell him, don’t you?” he mutters.

Groaning, I fall to my back on top of the counter.

“Yeah, I know.”

“Deputy Dumbass,” Olive snaps. “Why are you just standing there? I said we need help. Use that megaphone thingy and call for backup.” She waggles her finger at him as he shakes his head, running his fingers through his curly hair.

“Oli—”

“Was Jesus drunk the day he made you?” she cries. “Holy shit, man! I said call an ambulance. The FBI. The mafia, if you have to! It’s carnage in here!” She’s wailing now, completely losing the plot.

Covering my face, I breathe through the nausea making my insides roll and force myself to accept my fate.

There’s no turning back now.

In two days, I’m dead.

1.11 Isaac

I take a long sip of the ice-cold water before me, my shaky fingers white around the glass. Heavy velvet drapes cover the windows, sunlight peeking in through the gaps, and the lighting overhead turned way down. Marble flooring, crystal service ware, deep red walls. It's a comfortable space, dark without feeling claustrophobic. Luxury at its finest.

I've always thought it odd that these things are held in such a place. Seems counterproductive. Regardless, I enjoy these trips. Probably more than I should.

A waitress in a cocktail dress with sky-high heels floats past me, her movements a perfect dance. Even with her hands full of high-class food, she still walks with more elegance than most people I know.

My father's voice finds its way back into my mind, telling me I don't belong here. Reminding me that at my core, I'm just trash.

But I force it out.

I'm not that man anymore. The one who lived in the rundown trailer park, in a home that was more shell than anything else. Where the lights never worked, and the water ran brown. In a place where the neighbors may have argued, but our tin walls *shook* with the force of my father's fists.

It's a painful thing to remember; my childhood. My life before Divinity.

There's a reason I ran with Cami and Roman. It wasn't just because I was craving the sight of long, winding dirt roads and acres of cornfields—though I have grown to love them.

It's because I couldn't do *that* anymore.

Be *there*.

But more than anything, it's because I didn't want to become them. I didn't want to be an alcoholic with a penchant for violence, like my father. Or be like my mother—someone who loved drugs so much they'd rather spread their legs for their next fix than remember they had a child to feed.

No. I did the right thing. I made the right choice and even with his voice in the back of my head telling me I'm just like him, I know better.

I might struggle with addiction, but I'm not trash.

I am not my father.

With a deep breath, I swallow another mouthful of water, ignoring the sweat gathering on my brow and the way my starched shirt collar is sitting awkwardly. I try to force myself

not to adjust it, to not focus on the way it's rubbing against the wrong spot on my neck.

Breathe.

In.

Out.

In.

Out.

I can't stand it.

Reaching up, I readjust my collar until it's perfect. Until I can't feel the fabric rubbing my skin raw. I stare at the folded napkin on the table, debating if it's clean enough to touch my face with. I can't risk staining my dress shirt with sweat right now, but I can't walk around like a sticky behemoth. It's improper and I have a reputation to uphold here. An image to maintain.

Fuck it.

Grabbing the white cloth, I bring it to my forehead, letting the fabric hover over my skin while I debate my next move. It smells like bleach, which is the only saving grace I can cling to. If it were bleached, there wouldn't be any germs.

Gently, I dab at the sweat beaded across my brow, cringing every time the fabric touches my skin.

I never used to be this bad. I could walk through a dirty supermarket and not worry about the germs clinging to me. I could leave my bed unmade, or my towels unfolded, but now I

can't. Now, any amount of imperfection makes my skin crawl, like a million fire ants are skittering across my body.

It started four years ago, after Jane's death. I scrubbed the floor that was stained with her blood for hours and it still wouldn't come out. Every day, I sank to my knees and scrubbed. I'd feel Eve standing over my shoulder, looking as broken as I felt, but she wouldn't say a word. She'd just silently watch.

Then one day, I stopped scrubbing that spot and moved onto the next. Then the next. Then I realized I had to double and triple check the locks at night, or else I couldn't sleep. Slowly, I began rereading my Sunday sermons three times—not two, not four. *Three*.

Somewhere in the last four years, my quirks stopped being quirks and started being my way of life.

My phone rings and jolts me from my thoughts. Carefully, I place the napkin back on the table, knowing I won't touch it again. Pulling my phone from my pocket, I read the name and let out a quiet groan.

“Hello, Mary,” I sigh. “What can I do for you?”

“Well, I have some news,” she says, sounding giddy as hell. Knowing her, it's some useless catty drama back home. I pinch between my brows as I wait, already feeling a headache coming on.

“So,” she breathes, her voice taking on a conspiratorial tone. “Evelyn and Olive Tanner broke into Praying Paws last night.

Paul Tanner, you know—” She rambles on about something else, but a dull roar starts in my ears, making me dizzy. “Oh, Isaac. You know, Paul, right? The deputy. He—”

“What do you mean, they *broke in*?” I snap, then force myself to reign it in as my eyes dart over my surroundings. Shit. I exhale deeply. “Are they alright?”

“What? Yes,” she scoffs dismissively. “I overheard Tilly Kane going on about it. She heard from Mr. McTavish himself. Olive let out all the mice and the python! From what Tilly was goin’ on about, it sounded like an almighty bloodbath. Can you believe that?”

Actually, yes, I can believe that. It sounds exactly like something Olive would do. Eve, on the other hand?

Well, she’d do it for Olive. I don’t think there’s much she wouldn’t do for that girl. Which makes me worry. If she doesn’t know how to say no to Olive, she could manipulate Eve and get her to do her bidding. Apparently, she already has, if Mary’s information can be trusted.

And it usually can be. She’s the town gossip for a reason.

“Is that all you’re calling me about?” I drawl, feigning a calm I don’t feel. What I *do* feel is an overwhelming urge to drive back to Divinity and redden Eve’s ass for taking a risk like that. It was foolish. Selfish, even.

“Aren’t you—but Eve—” She pauses and I can just picture her mouth gaping open. “She should be punished, Isaac.”

“How I choose to handle things with my stepdaughter isn’t your business,” I say darkly, my hackles rising. “Now, do you have anything else for me, Mary?” My jaw tenses at the silence on the other end of the phone. “Do you have everything set up?”

“Yes, sir,” she mutters. “Everything is ready. The signs, posters, flyers, and buttons. The ad in the paper is ready to go, too.”

“Perfect.” I let out a relieved breath. Those are a few things I can check off my list. Despite Mary’s affinity for gossip, she’s a great secretary of sorts. Which is why I’ve used her to organize the church bake sales and events since Jane’s passing, as well as a myriad of other tasks.

Jane was far better, and the congregation loved her more, but Mary is a fine replacement. *For now.*

“Of course,” she simpers. “Anything else I can do for you, you just let me know.”

I take another deep swallow of my water, finishing it off. I lift my free hand, signaling to the waitress for a refill. She smiles politely and nods before quickly darting toward the long, polished bartop on the other side of the hotel restaurant.

I smirk to myself. Good service.

Mary makes a sound, reminding me that she’s on the other line. I run my finger down the side of my glass, collecting the beaded condensation while I think.

There's nothing she can do for me while I'm here. I'm prepared. I have been all month. Besides, these trips are becoming a run-of-the-mill thing. Back home, however...

"She's okay? There weren't any charges for breaking in? Property damage she's at fault for?" If so, I'll need to move some things around to pay any fees. It'll be tight, but I'll do it to wipe Eve's mess clean.

"Uh." Mary clears her throat. "No. Not that I've heard. Mr. McTavish let them off with a warning since he hadn't actually locked up yet and Chase Tanner took care of the rest." She huffs, muttering something about the man having more money than God. I ignore her comment and the irritation it causes.

"Wait," I growl. "Did they or did they not *break in*?"

She sighs heavily. "No, not really." Lord help me. This woman and her exaggerations. "But you know Olive. Anything could happen with that girl."

I nod absently, adjusting my collar again as the waitress deposits my drink on the table before me, removing the old one. She smiles sweetly, catching my attention. Her body is thin and willowy. The black dress fits her slight curves like a glove, leaving nothing to the imagination. Her long hair is up in a high, chic ponytail, showing off the long expanse of her neck.

She's beautiful.

But when my eyes catch on the deep brown color of hers, I realize it's all wrong.

Her hair is dark, not golden. Instead of thick bouncy curls that fall in cascading waves just above a thick, biteable ass, her hair is pin-straight and falls to the center of a thin, shapeless body.

The realization that I don't like the differences is startling.

"Anything else, Mr. Payne?" she asks, her voice heavy with innuendo that catches me off guard. My brows peak.

Holding a finger up to the waitress, I return to my call. "Thanks, Mary. I'll let you know if I need anything else." Without waiting for her response, I end the call and smile at the waitress. "I'm good, sweetheart. Thank you."

Her smile slips momentarily, and her body twitches, as though she's disappointed by my answer.

"Of course, Mr. Payne." Her repetition of my name doesn't escape me. If anything, it makes me sit up taller. I'm known here. It's nice. "Good luck today." With that, she gives my body one last appraising look before turning away.

Chuckling to myself, I shake my head. The city is a wildly different place than I'm used to. My smile quickly fades as I stare down at the now-full glass.

What the hell was Eve thinking? Why would she break into a damn pet shop, of all places? I should've asked Mary who else knew, but it was probably spread all over Divinity by now.

I pinch between my eyes, trying to breathe through the faint throbbing in my skull. She knows how it looks for the

preacher's stepdaughter to get caught up in trouble. She knows I don't like the town gossiping about us.

We're supposed to set the standard for life in Divinity. We can't do that if she's traipsing about town, wreaking havoc with Olive.

But her words from the other night come back, hitting me square in the chest.

I'm an adult. I can take care of myself.

She might be an adult, but in so many ways she's still just a naive little girl who needs my guidance. She needs me to take her by the hand and show her the world. She relies on me as much as I rely on her.

I know she thinks she wants to travel and party and live the life every other twenty-year-old does. But that's not her. She's not the party girl type. She's far too much of a homemaker to live life on the road. It's a dream she's clung to since the day I met her, but that's not who she is. She's romanticized it in her head to be something that it's not.

I know what she needs, and what she needs is to be safely home with me, where I can keep an eye on her.

Picking up my phone, I scroll to her number, needing to hear with my own ears that everything's okay back home.

"Sir. We're ready for you." A masculine voice startles me and I nearly drop my phone. My eyes snap up, finding a familiar well-dressed man smiling down at me.

“Hello, Elijah.” I grin, gathering my notebook and briefcase from the table before climbing to my feet. I reach out, and he grips my hand tightly. “How’ve you been, son? Family good?” He chuckles, releasing our shake with a shrug, and guides me toward the restaurant exit.

“Lenette’s pregnant, so—” He trails off, his cheeks reddening. My head tips back with a deep laugh.

“Good Lord, son. What’s that now? Four?”

His cheeks stain even darker. “Five. She’s pregnant with twins.”

Oh, fuck that.

“Well,” I say, shaking my head and keeping my real thoughts buried deep. “Every child is a blessing.” He grunts, not agreeing or denying.

“You’re still young,” he says, eyeing me. “Any more kids in the cards for you?”

My head swings toward him, my eyes so wide I can *feel* the horror on my face. I almost choke on my tongue at his suggestion.

“No. Definitely not.” I grip my notebook tightly, my palms already sweating at the thought. “One is good for me. I’ve known from a young age that I didn’t want more than that. Got a vasectomy shortly after Roman was born.” *Maybe Elijah should get one.* The thought passes, but I ignore it. That would be rude.

Elijah pauses, giving me an odd look. “Don’t you have two kids, sir?”

This time, I do choke.

Thoughts of the way I’d been imagining Eve just moments ago penetrate my mind, and I panic. Shaking my head adamantly, I correct him.

“Nope. Just the one boy.”

Because lately, the idea of Evelyn Meyer as anything even resembling my child makes me sick.

Fuck.

1:12 Roman

“That’s it, man. Keep going. Damn. You look so good right now.”

“Shut the hell up, Chase,” I bark, breathing heavily. He shakes his head, crossing his muscular arms over his chest.

“No can do.”

Idiot.

“Sure as fuck can and will.”

“Nah.” He smirks, running a hand through his messy, sweaty hair. “I’m like a proud daddy right now.”

I scoff. “You’re not a daddy.”

Focusing on the tension in my right bicep and the placement of my elbow, I squeeze my fist and curl the fifty-pound weight again. It doesn’t hurt yet, so I keep going.

“I’m *your* daddy,” Chase murmurs huskily.

Groaning, I flip him off with my left hand, never losing my stride. “I’ve never had a daddy a day in my life.” He bites his

lip, letting his eyes track down my bare tattooed chest.

“Want one?” he asks, and I huff an indignant breath, shooting a glare his way.

“You could never be a daddy.”

“Hey!” Chase protests, shoving off the weight rack he’s been hanging out at for the last ten minutes while *I* work out. “I’ve been a daddy plenty of times. In fact—I daddied the fuck out of that brunette last night.”

Remembering a photo he posted yesterday with a few other models wearing similar swimwear, I nod. “The dude or the chick?”

“Yes,” he says bluntly, flashing a cocky grin.

“Mhm,” I absently murmur, watching my form in the massive wall of mirrors across from me. Belatedly, his words sink in, and I pause to gape at him. “Wait—*what?*”

“I daddied both of ‘em.”

“Like a train? You were at a photoshoot in Atlanta ‘til after midnight. Back in Mammoth by three. How did you have time for that shit?”

“Keeping tabs on me, baby?” He blows me a kiss and thrusts his hips, drawing a guy’s attention at the bench next to us. I give him a tight-lipped smile.

“Fucking hell,” I mumble. *Why me?* Why did I choose this asshole as my best friend?

“And to answer your question, I’m great at multitasking. I could teach you, if you want.” I ignore him so he closes the distance between us, grips my cheeks in a move that would get him knocked the fuck out if my hands weren’t full, and tilts my head back. “Ever heard of cuckolding, Roman? Want me to break it down for you?”

I elbow him. *Hard*. The hit lands in his gut, and he releases me with an *oomph*, stumbling backward.

“Jesus fucking Christ. I don’t know why I keep you around, you freak.”

“Because you love me and no one else can tolerate your surly ass except Kon, and that’s only because he’s just as much of a dick as you are.”

“He’s not a dick.”

He totally is.

Chase chokes on his water. “What are you talking about? Kon is literally the biggest asshole I’ve ever met.”

Now it’s my turn to fuck with him. I wait until Chase jumps up to the pull-up bar and grips the assists.

“You sure like talking about Kon’s body parts,” I say.

“Huh?” he grunts, lifting himself up and dropping back down slowly with intention, and, unfortunately, perfect form. Once he’s pulled himself back up, I continue.

“First it was his dick, now it’s his asshole.” I chuckle breathily, my lungs aching from exertion. My muscles finally

burn, so I sink into the pain, letting it ground me. “You have first-hand knowledge of his cock and ass? Is there something you wanna tell me, Chase?”

“Shut up,” he snaps, dropping to his feet with a huff. He looks away, fucking up his hair again, clearly avoiding having to answer.

“Knew it.” I bark out a loud laugh. “You and Kon are finally fu—“

Turning back to the mirror, he points an accusatory finger at me and barks, “Look at your reflection! You’re at least seventeen percent less hot than you were before. Talking is messing up your form. Time to shut the fuck up.”

“No, it’s not,” I scoff.

“No, seriously.” His eyes dart from my reflection to his camera set up on a tripod across from us. “Your form is slipping, Ro. Get it together. You’ll embarrass me.”

“No, I fucking won’t because you’re not posting me on your social media,” I grunt, tossing the dumbbell to the floor next to the bench.

“Uh, yes I am. The two of us together are like influencer gold.”

With a grin for his fans, Chase slowly lifts his form-fitting tank over his head with one hand, flexing every muscle in his body as he does it. Using it to wipe some barely-there sweat from his forehead, he winks at the camera before turning back to me.

“And for the tenth time, you aren’t better at lifting just because you do it in front of a camera.” I don’t know why I keep arguing, besides the fact I enjoy pissing Chase off.

“I know a hell of a lot more than you.” He gestures to his bare chest. “*Obviously.*”

I roll my eyes and snatch up my water bottle from the floor. “You forget who it is that taught you how to lift in the first place, fucker.”

Chase wiggles his eyebrows at me and steps up to the squat rack. “Ah, but I’m the one who gets paid for it. I’m practically a professional worker-outer, now.”

“You get naked and take pictures of your abs. That’s not a career.” I know I’m goading him right now and I don’t give a fuck. The more I can get Chase to talk about himself, the less likely he is to talk about me.

“I make twenty times what you make annually, and I work thirty percent less. I’d say I’m the winner in this situation.”

He’s not wrong.

Tattooing, especially in a place like Mammoth, isn’t likely to have me retiring comfortably anytime soon, but I make decent money. No two days are ever the same. My clients are great, for the most part. Deliverance is a badass place to work. Besides, Kon is not only a great boss, but a good friend. A father-figure.

I’ll never leave.

Not to mention, I genuinely love what I do.

“I’m right.” Chase smirks, noticing I’ve gone quiet. I just glare at him.

“I’m still a better worker-outer than you,” I grumble, picking up the weight again.

He gasps, clutching his chest. Such a drama queen. “Did you just say worker-outer? Hell, Ro. That’s not even a real word.”

My mouth drops open.

“You said it first!” Shaking my head, I turn back to the mirror. Fuck. We spend too much time together. “Never mind. Leave me alone.”

“No can do.” He grins. Despite myself, my lip twitches.

“Sure as fuck can and will.”

“We’ve been here before,” he muses, shoving my shoulder. I roll my eyes, the stupid grin I’d been holding back finally slipping some.

“I recognize that tree.”

“God, I love you.” I bark out a laugh at his happy sigh. “You’re the only one that quotes *Gilmore Girls* with me.”

“Only because you’ve forced me to watch it at least a thousand times since I met you,” I groan. He smirks, uncaring of the torture I’ve endured on his behalf. “Besides, Oli quotes shit with you all the time.”

“Not correctly,” he scoffs.

Moving the weight to my left hand, I get into position to repeat the curl with my opposite arm. We’ve been here for a

half hour already. Normally, I'd stay for another hour or two. Sometimes, lifting to the point of exhaustion is the only thing that quiets my mind.

Unfortunately, it's Saturday. Which means, not only did I work ten hours today, and my workout is getting cut short, but we're throwing a party tonight at the loft.

Correction—*Chase* is throwing a party.

Luckily, this one won't have any of his high-class, weird as fuck, influencer, wannabe model friends. This one's for Kon's birthday. The man that my best friend has most *definitely* fucked.

“Speaking of Oli,” Chase starts, murmuring quietly, which can only mean one of two things: something bad happened to his little sister, or his next statement involves *her*.

I swallow thickly, showing nothing on the outside, even while my insides are turning into liquid.

“Uh-huh?” I grunt.

I force my entire existence to focus on the burn and stretch caused by the heavy weight in my left hand. I pay attention to the way my veins bulge every time I flex my muscles. The way my fingers ache from how tightly I'm gripping the harsh metal.

“She got into some trouble the other night.” I say nothing, waiting for him to continue. “She broke into the pet shop and caused the death of over two hundred feeder mice, broke a bunch of shit I had to pay for on the down-low, and caused a

python named Bunny to go into some sort of catatonic hibernation that has Willy McTavish worried sick.”

I freeze up at that. My mouth drops open, but snaps shut before a sound can come out. Not for the first time, I find myself speechless where Olive Tanner is concerned. Don’t get me wrong, she’s a sweet girl, but she’s...different.

“Is she okay?” I finally ask. It seems like a reasonable response.

“Shaken up. As she should be.” He groans, palming his face. “God, she’s going to be beside herself when she realizes all those mice are dead.”

I finish my rep and stand, dropping the weight back onto the rack. I move to the pull-up bar Chase abandoned and start the next set of exercises.

“She already knows what she did.”

“No, she doesn’t.” He shakes his head rapidly. “And if it’s up to me, she’ll never find out. Hopefully, people will keep up the story that they all got the medical attention they needed and wound up in a rehab facility in California, where they’ll spend the rest of their million years of existence frolicking under the warm sun and swimming in the ocean.”

My chest rumbles with laughter.

“If she doesn’t know they’re dead, how did you find out? Still subscribing to the Divinity Falls newspaper or what?”

Pulling myself up, I drop back down quickly before repeating the rep again and again. Without much time, I’ll

have to do supersets to get the same muscle fatigue I need in order to sleep.

Chase makes a garbled sound and rubs the back of his neck. “Eve called me.” I freeze. “*Twice.*” I drop down, my workout completely forgotten with those words.

“The fuck?” My heart hammers in my chest as I wipe the sweat from my upper lip with the back of my hand.

I grab my water bottle and give Chase my back while I try to get my shit together. Why would she call him? I know they talk, but from what Chase has said over the last couple of years, it’s only when he contacts her.

Once a month, on Mondays, he calls Olive to check in. After he talks to her, he calls Eve. They speak for a few minutes. She’s apparently tight-lipped, but kind. Then, he tells me in the vaguest of terms what’s going on back home, weaving her in where he can without seeming obvious.

I always nod, feigning indifference, while soaking up his words like a lovesick fucking sponge. Chase always prattles on, acting like a town gossip, when really, we both know what he’s doing. And we both know *I need it.*

But—*she* called *him*.

“Well, the first time she called,” he starts, seeming way more uncomfortable than usual.

Normally, he’s practically gloating about their conversations, knowing it drives me nuts.

“She was home alone.”

I hate it.

“And drunk.”

My eye twitches.

“She also mentioned something about spicy Chinese.”

My brows furrow.

That’s an oddly specific thing to say.

He covers his mouth and fake-coughs what are clearly the words, “*and she was naked.*”

I swallow the rage building inside me, willing my body to calm the fuck down. I roll my neck on my shoulders and exhale roughly.

“Let me get this straight,” I drawl. “Eve called you while alone, drunk, and naked?”

“She was eating Chinese, too,” he blurts. My hands ball into shaky, tight fists at my sides.

“Any reason for that, or did she just need a late-night chat?”
With you. The words almost slip out, but I catch myself.

“She was scared,” he mutters. Fuck. That hurts. It shouldn’t. I know it shouldn’t, but *fuck*. “She thought someone was in the backyard breaking in.”

And she called Chase.

Not me.

“Where the fuck was Isaac?” I growl.

“The conference.”

Right.

Of course he was.

Couldn't stick around, even for his do-over kid. His golden child.

“Anyway,” he continues, oblivious to the war I'm internally waging. “She was scared, drunk, and didn't know who to call, but it all worked out. Ended up being Oli on one of her wild outings. She roped Eve into a rescue mission to save feeder mice. Shit went wrong, and chaos erupted.”

He huffs a laugh, his face taking on that look of pure love and adoration he gets whenever he talks about his little sister. It's a look I understand. Though, I'm not sure the expression on my face shows it right now.

The thought of Eve, *my Eve*, alone, scared, drunk and fucking naked, brings on many goddamned thoughts. None of them sisterly and all of them bitter and painful.

“Paul, my cousin, showed up and vouched for Oli and Eve, but called me to fill me in on what went down. Eve called me the next day to let me know what story she spun about the mice to make sure we're on the same page.”

“Glad it worked out.” Swallowing, I turn toward the lockers, pretending like everything he just told me doesn't have any effect on me at all. “Let's get the fuck out of here.”

“Hell yes!” He quickly packs up his shit and chases after me. “Party time, bro.”

Fuck. Partying is the last thing I want to do right now.

1.13 Roman

Bracing my forearms on the metal railing, I flick the lighter open, then shut. Over and over, open and closed. The flame dances for only a moment before it's snuffed, then it's back, just as bright and hot as before.

The dull thud of the bass rattles my chest as I watch the partygoers below. Some are standing against walls talking. A few found spots on couches or chairs to make out. There's a group of frat dudes playing beer pong on the polished oak dining table. Most are grinding on each other like they're fucking in the center of my living room.

I don't really give a shit who fucks where, but the buck-naked trio to the right is currently fucking where I eat my FruitLoops.

I cringe, already calculating the cost of having our place deep-cleaned tomorrow. Fuck it. I'll make Chase foot the bill. This was his idea, anyway.

Smirking, I stare down at the crowd from my perch on the floating loft, watching them like I'm a dark God, and they're nothing more than my entertainment.

It's an illusion.

I just want this party to be over with. I want my house empty and silent. I want *peace*. But it's barely one, and Chase is known for his parties lasting until the sun comes up. I'm a long way away from the quiet I desperately crave.

I suppose I could just leave. But then I risk the chance of my bedroom becoming the next cum-dumpster, and that's not something I'm willing to risk.

Since Chase told me about his phone call with Eve, I haven't been able to get her out of my head. Truthfully, I haven't been able to get her out of my fucking head since the day she toddled into my life. Her smile and blue eyes were too kind to be coming from a two-year-old. She lit up my dark world at a time when I should have fallen apart.

Without knowing it, Evelyn Meyer and her family saved me when my mother died.

Then they were taken from me, too.

She was taken from me.

Eight years later, she was back, having experienced a similar loss. Almost a decade had passed, and myEve was finally back. But it was too late. We weren't the same innocent children we'd once been.

She'd seen things no one should have to. She'd held her dad's hand while he died a slow, excruciating death. She'd watched her mom fall apart, losing the love of her life. She lost her home next. The town that once worshiped them, abandoned the preacher's family in their time of need.

She'd done it all before she was even a teenager, and she handled the pain and mourning with grace. Because of course she had.

Eve didn't do anything ungracefully. She was too perfect, and it pissed me off.

She lost everything, but so did I.

The Eve that was once my anchor became my enemy. All she ever was, was the golden child, the child Isaac wished he would've had instead of me. He constantly compared us. Pointing out my faults, while praising her every move. It wasn't a secret she was his favorite—she was everyone's favorite.

Shit, I'm pretty sure Chase prefers her to me sometimes.

A part of me is happy she had someone to call when she was scared. A bigger part of me is fucking pissed it wasn't me. But the logical part, the part that I hate to listen to, knows she wouldn't call me. And that same part knows even if she did, I probably wouldn't answer.

If she waltzed into this party and walked right up to me, I'd turn her the fuck around and tell her to go home. Okay, that's

not true. I don't know what I'd do. I don't know if I'd fuck her first. Or fight her. Or just scream at her.

And that's the problem.

No amount of therapy, alcohol, cigarettes, or time at the gym can smother the burning rage I feel in my chest. Nothing can make it go away. At some point in my life, what was once just a dull flame filled with anger and indignation began to grow, and it never stopped.

Now it's an inferno.

And in the last four years without her to control it, I've been riding the edge, preparing for the moment I explode.

I feel it just under my skin, bubbling and boiling closer to the surface. I know it's about to happen. I'm nothing but a ticking time bomb, ready to obliterate anyone and everything in my path.

One day, there will be nothing left but the smoldering embers of my anger. And I have no one else to thank for that but Eve.

And Jane.

And Isaac.

Fuck him.

I pinch between my eyes as I take a deep breath, trying to push their memory away.

Sometimes I miss her. On nights like this, I miss hearing her laugh while calling me Heathen. I miss the way her eyes

sparkled in such a sincere way, you knew she was genuinely happy. And when they sparkled because she saw you...*fuck*. You felt a million feet tall, like you were the only thing in her orbit.

And then she'd look away, and all the air in your lungs would be sucked out. She has that power and doesn't even know it.

Didn't know it.

Does she know her power now? I have no idea. I don't know who Eve is anymore and sometimes, I wonder if I ever did.

I do know one thing, though.

She's not the same sixteen-year-old I once loved. And I'm not the same eighteen-year-old she loved back.

We're nothing more than strangers, and it's all her fault.

"Hey, Ro."

I blink a few times, realizing I've been staring at the flickering open flame on my Zippo. Clearing my throat, I turn my head enough to look at the blonde beside me.

"Hey," I murmur, my brows furrowed. I don't recognize her, but that's normal at Chase's parties.

Her ruby red lips are tipped up, and her eyes are glazed just enough to let me know she's drunk, but not to the point of being incoherent. She's aware, but the liquor has made her brave. She'd have to be to talk to me.

“Why are you up here all alone?” she asks, her voice a low purr as she spins a strand of her shoulder-length hair around a finger. I roll my eyes and turn my attention back to the partiers below. “Don’t you want to be down there with everyone?”

“Obviously not,” I drawl. She stares up at me, her fake-tanned skin glowing under the dim overhead lights. Her dark lashes flutter across her pink cheeks as she giggles.

“Is there something I can do to take that scowl off your face?” She rests her hand on my shoulder, letting it slide down the slick leather covering my arm until it falls back to her side. I clench my jaw at the contact.

I stay silent. I don’t need to indulge her in conversation. She came up here to fuck. That’s what she wants, and you know what? So do I.

I just want to forget about this fucking day and everything Chase told me. And if I can’t drink my life away the way I desperately crave to, I might as well fuck it away.

Not even bothering to look at her, I let my lighter flick once more before releasing the trigger and snapping it shut.

“Get on your knees,” I say, just loud enough for her to hear me. She blinks, but the shock quickly wears off.

“Here?” She glances around, then down at the people beneath us. She doesn’t look turned off by the idea of a house full of strangers watching her get throat fucked.

I step back enough for her to have room to kneel before me as I slip my lighter into my jacket. Her plump lips tip up in a

grin as she drops to her knees, uncaring of her bare legs slamming against the harsh flooring.

For a moment, all I notice is the color of her hair. Blonde. It's distracting, immediately causing my mind to wander. Then she glances up at me, and I see her eyes.

Green. Not blue.

Everything after that trickles in like water moving through oil. Her hair isn't the right blonde. It's fake, and too pale, nearing on white. The frizzy ends tell the tale of one too many times spent beneath bleach. Her skin is too orange to be a real tan. And while her tits are nice, they're not *hers*.

Fuck.

I need to get my goddamned stepsister out of my head once and for all. How can she still have this much power over me when I haven't seen her in years?

It pisses me the hell off.

Focusing on the anger roaring through my veins, I rip my jeans open, shoving my boxers down with one hand as I grab the back of her head, wrapping her mocking hair around my opposite fist.

"Suck," I growl. Her mouth barely opens before I shove deep inside, hitting her throat with the first stroke. My head tips back as she swallows around me.

The woman braces her hands on my thighs, more than likely needing me to be gentler, to slow down, but it only spurs me

on. She should have asked for that before. But she didn't. She came up here knowing who I am. Knowing *what* I am.

I'm Roman motherfucking Payne—*Pyro*.

I'm not kind. I'm not sweet and gentle. I'm not anything more than the rumors have promised and I don't give a single fuck.

I thrust harder, groaning at the sound of her violently gagging, imagining it's Eve instead. I batter the girl's throat, taking out all the pent up rage on her the way I wish I could on my stepsister.

"Take. It," I grit out, my teeth clenched so tightly, my jaw trembles. The feeling of her wet mouth wrapped around my cock is a bliss I didn't realize I needed.

Fuck yes.

With my eyes closed and my fingers tightly tangled in her hair, I let myself sink deeper into the familiar vision as though it's a movie instead of a disjointed memory. One that's been added to with wild conjurings I've created over the years.

What does she look like now?

Is she different?

Are her tits still the perfect handfuls I once worshiped with my hands and mouth for one stupid, reckless night? The ones I fantasized about for far too long, even before then?

Is she still golden blonde with wild curls that fall down her graceful back?

Is she still as perfect as I remember or is—

The girl's teeth scrape against my sensitive skin, causing my knees to jerk and my head to snap back down, disrupting the fantasy. Her watery green eyes peer up at me, red-rimmed and frantic. Black lines coast down her face. Her sticky red lipgloss is already smeared around her mouth.

Her claw-like fingernails dig into my jean-clad thighs as she silently begs me to be kinder. To let her breathe.

My dick throbs and swells, but I'm still a long way from coming. I can feel it building, but every time I thrust, every time she moans, all I see is an image of Eve flashing through my mind.

Her on her knees, sobbing and begging.

Her in pain, choking on my cock.

Her naked and writhing beneath me as I torture her sweet body, denying her again and again...

It pisses me off and turns me on in equal measure.

Shaking my head roughly, I try to force Eve from my mind. I just want one goddamned night without her consuming my every fucking thought.

More determined than ever, I shove the blonde away so hard, her back hits the metal railing surrounding the loft. Her full chest heaves beneath her tiny red dress as she takes deep breath after deep breath, her saliva dripping from her chin to her chest, shiny under the lights.

“Up,” I grunt, clenching my throbbing cock in a death grip. I stroke myself roughly while eyeing the woman.

She’s hot as fuck, I remind myself. And she wants this. Wants me.

“If you’re still desperate for my cock, get up,” I drawl, smirking as I point at the railing. “And bend over.”

With wide eyes, she scrambles to obey. Her quick response should turn me on, but it doesn’t. Part of me wishes she would have fought me on it. Given me sass or argued. Maybe, I want her to give me a reason to be rougher with her.

Maybe I *need* it.

Gripping the back of her neck, I shove her further over the bars. A few people cheer from down below, but I ignore them as I fumble for the condom in my wallet. I rip it open with my teeth before rolling it over my still-dripping cock.

Rucking up her barely-there dress, I stare down at the slight curve of her ass, her cheeks separated by a mostly non-existent pink string. It’s a nice ass. Small, but nice. I hold on to that thought, refusing to allow any others to penetrate my brain.

“Move your panties or I’m ripping them off.” I let my thumb slip below the tiny string, tug it back and release it with a *snap*, emphasizing my demand.

The nameless, faceless girl cries out and scrambles to obey me once more, yanking the g-string out of my way. Without her hand to hold herself up, she falls forward even more,

thrusting her ass into my waiting lap. She grinds against my cock, moaning wantonly.

Without warning, I shove inside her. Reaching over her body, I tangle my fingers into the hair at the base of her neck and squeeze roughly, tugging the strands by the root with every brutal thrust. My other hand finds her bony hip, and I dig my fingers in until I'm positive it hurts, but she doesn't bat my hands away. If anything, it just makes her pussy tighten around me more.

I slam into her, not caring if she gets off or not. She came up here to fuck me, I didn't seek her out. If she wanted to come, she should've found someone who gave a fuck about her. She shouldn't have taunted the callous monster everyone knows. But she did.

It's her fault.

She deserves it.

"Yes!" the woman cries, sounding fake as fuck. "It's so good. You're so big, baby."

Shut up.

"More!" Her voice takes on a breathy pornstar quality with every scream.

Please, shut the hell up.

"Harder!"

This time, I can't keep the words in. "Shut the fuck up," I hiss, gripping her hip tighter and practically ripping her hair

from her scalp as I force her back to arch.

With every fake moan, every word she cries, I feel my hard-on start to die. The condom chafes against it, getting caught in the tight flex of her inner muscles. The only saving grace is that she's so wet, she's dripping around my cock, letting me know how desperately she wants this. How much she likes being fucked like a toy.

It should feel good.

It should feel fucking incredible.

But her voice is grating on my nerves, on my goddamned brain. It's sinking in, deeper and deeper, ruining the tiny tendrils of blissful peace I'd finally managed to find.

With every cry and whimper, my soul aches. It reminds me that *this*, the girl, the place, my life—it's all fucking wrong.

Ignoring my previous demand, she releases her thong, letting the string slap the side of my balls as she blindly searches for something to grip onto. I grit my teeth at the sharp bite of pain, but let it ground me, bringing me back to the present. Her claws dig into my thigh, just below my ass, like she's trying to encourage me to fuck harder.

So I do.

But my cock's so damn numb, I'm not even sure it's still attached to my body. She rolls her hips and moans loudly, uncaring of the huge crowd gathered below and watching her performance. I'm pretty sure she likes it.

I don't, but I also wasn't thinking when I agreed to fuck her.

She swivels her body again, tipping her head back like she loves the rough way I'm tugging on her hair. At this point, I'm surprised her spine hasn't snapped.

Flashes go off, and she moans louder. These assholes are taking pictures? Videos? Fuck.

I squeeze my eyes tightly shut, trying to drown her and the crowd out and just focus on the tight friction of her sloppy cunt. But with every fake scream, every practiced and perfected moan, I find my cock getting softer and softer until my hard-on is gone.

God fucking dammit.

The blonde cries out, "Yes, baby. Your cock is so hard in my pussy."

At that moment, it all makes sense.

Motherfucking lying, manipulative cunt.

She's putting on a show for the cameras. She's probably the one that set it all up to begin with. No doubt she wanted a way in with the infamous social media star; my goddamned best friend.

I pull out of her, yanking the condom off and tossing it over the ledge, not caring if it lands on some asshole. Better the condom than the lying bitch still panting and whimpering before me. She blinks rapidly, slipping away from the railing. It's then I notice her top's pulled down, her heavy, fake tits fully on display.

Jesus fucking Christ. How did I miss this?

My zipper's not even halfway up before her bullshit begins.

"I can suck it till it comes back," she whines as she whirls on me.

I shoot her a menacing glare the second she drops to her knees in front of me again, her dress still fucked up and around her narrow hips. She reaches for my depressingly flaccid cock, yanking my zipper back down.

"Don't touch me," I snarl, batting her hands away.

She ignores me as her hands find their way back to my jeans. We play a ridiculous game of keep-away with my dick that quickly turns into a painful rendition of whack-a-mole when she inadvertently smacks my balls, though something tells me it's intentional.

"Get the fuck away!" I bellow, the force of my anger shocking her back onto her ass. Her green eyes are wide as she stares up at me, her lips parted.

Green. Not blue.

Green. Not blue.

"But—but—"

I don't let her get another word out before I shove my cock back into my jeans, and head for the stairs, stomping down them with enough force to shake the entire platform.

"You prick!" she cries, sounding petulant as fuck. Partygoers cheer me on, further pissing me off. "Your dick's not even as big as the rumors said!"

This.

This is what I didn't want. A crowd. A show. People. I hate it.

I stomp through the massive open space that makes up the majority of Chase and I's home. It's a converted industrial warehouse with floor to ceiling windows that span the brick walls.

The living room, kitchen, dining area and foyer are all one big open space. A hall off the kitchen leads to Chase's big ass room and bathroom. Off the living room, in a mirrored layout, another hall leads to my identical room. There are two other rooms, one in each hall. Chase has claimed one for his office. The other is a room reserved for Oli on the rare occasion she visits.

The colors and theme of our place gives a dark, moody aesthetic, despite the huge windows. But Chase brightened it up by covering it with an obscene amount of house plants. Something about better air quality or some shit.

Either way, it's a nice place and one I could never dream of affording on my own. If not for Chase's insane influencer income, we'd both still be in the piece of shit apartment we rented when we first moved to Mammoth to attend the university.

Fuck, that feels like yesterday, yet somehow, forever ago.

The darkly stained concrete floor is silent beneath my booted feet as I shove through the drunken crowd. Some asshole claps

me on the shoulder, and it takes every bit of strength I have in my body not to light him on fire. My fingers itch to slide my lighter from my pocket, but I ignore the craving.

For now.

“You look all lighty right now, bro,” Chase chuckles, throwing me a bottle of water. “Here. You need this.”

Sighing, I drop down onto the couch between him and Naomi, Deliverance’s receptionist. The girl in question turns to me with an exaggerated gag.

“That was utterly disgusting, Roman.”

“I’ve fucked worse,” I shrug.

“Oh, God,” Chase groans. “Remember Beth?” I snort as I take a sip of water. Yeah, that bitch was annoying. And gross. Pretty sure she was fucking half the guys she worked with, too.

“Or Annalise?” Naomi says.

“Hey, she wasn’t that bad,” I counter. “She had some issues —”

“She came at you with a fucking knife!” Naomi shouts, her dark eyes bugging out.

“That was part of her appeal,” I say, shrugging again, my lips curling. “Crazy chicks are amazing in bed.” Chase chuckles and knocks his knuckles against mine.

“Amen to that.”

Naomi eyes me speculatively. “What?” I grunt.

“Why do you have to be so fucking aggressive?” she murmurs, her brows pinched as she bites her thick lower lip. I cock a brow in question. “You fucked her like you were trying to kill the poor thing.”

Chase barks a laugh and slaps me on the shoulder. “Ro doesn’t know any other way to fuck. There’s a reason they call him the Pussy Annihilator.”

My face scrunches up in distaste at the nickname, but I don’t disagree.

It’s not like I can tell them that every time I fuck a chick, I’m imagining my younger stepsister and the way I want to fuck the betrayal right out of her. That I pretend every brutal, punishing thrust is teaching the lying bitch a lesson.

Instead, I just smirk at my friend, letting her see the violence simmering just below the surface.

“You two are pigs,” Naomi scoffs.

“Come on,” Chase says, leaning forward to look at her past me. “Like you’ve only dated winners.” The conversation goes on, both of them oblivious to the chasm of depravity churning in my gut.

“I—” she starts, her head shaking.

“Don’t even try to defend yourself,” I say, lifting my brows. “Noah?”

“Okay, that was one guy,” she says, rolling her eyes.

“Mateo?” Chase reminds her, and she groans.

“He doesn’t count.”

“Dylan,” Chase and I say at the same time.

“You’re assholes.” She folds her arms over her chest, slumping back on the couch with a huff. “Such assholes.”

“Whatever,” Chase laughs. “You know you love us.” If looks could kill, Chase and I would be dead.

“The next person I fuck will be a woman,” Naomi declares with a nod. “Until then, I’m celibate.”

“Yeah, right,” Chase and I say, once again echoing each other.

He elbows me. “Jinx.” He grins. “You owe me a blowjob.”

I scoff, pointing to the hussy on the loft that’s already found someone else to take my place. “Chicks are everywhere. Find one.”

“Speaking of chicks.”

I slide my eyes to him, my brows raised. “You’re always talking about chicks,” I say dryly. “And dicks.”

He ignores me as he scrolls through his phone, the screen lighting up his face. His eyes are bright and wide, but I know it’s not just from the alcohol. It’s excitement. *Genuine* excitement.

“So, I found this girl, right?” he says mindlessly, still scrolling, the images moving quickly on the screen. “And I’m pretty sure she’s my soulmate.”

I snort and take another deep drink of the water, still reeling from the colossal mistake I just made upstairs. Fuck. That video's going to be everywhere and despite Chase's insistence, I've done all I can to avoid the limelight.

Shaking off the anxiety that pricks at my skin, I scan the party around us. Unsurprisingly, Kon is sitting by himself at the kitchen island, the grumpiest expression on his face I've ever seen, as though this entire party isn't in the big fucker's honor.

"You think everyone is your soulmate," Naomi mumbles, bringing me back to Chase.

She's not wrong. Chase loves love. Loves to be loved, and loves to love. He's never had a casual fling or long-term partner that he hasn't thought he was tied to cosmically. In a way, I envy that ability. I'd rather love love than hate life and everyone in it.

"This girl is different," he says seriously. "She's so hot, it's sinful. Her body, bro? Curves for days." Okay, he's piqued my interest. I want to know who this new girl is. "Her thighs are thick, hips and ass perfectly fuckable." He shakes his head with a grimace. "I even love her skin. I'm crazy for her."

"How many dates have you been on?" I ask. He doesn't reply. "You have gone on a date, haven't you? Or at least hung out with her?" He lifts his shoulder.

"I found her on Favorite Fans." I blink at him.

“You think a cam-girl is your soulmate?” I deadpan. “Man, you’ve lost your mind.” Grinning, I shake my head in exasperation and finish off my water.

“Wait until you see her,” he breathes. “You’ll be in love, too. But don’t get any ideas. She’s mine.”

Suddenly, he turns his phone, the bright light blinding me.

“Turn your brightness down, Jesus fuck.” I yank his phone from his hand and adjust the bright light, but my retinas still feel burnt to a fucking crisp.

“Trust me,” he scoffs, running a hand through his perfectly messy hair. “She’s worth the pain.”

Blinking to focus, I grunt. “Doubt it.” No woman is.

“You guys are disgusting.” Naomi jumps up, tossing her long black hair over her lean shoulder before stomping away.

My thumb settles on the screen, ignoring both of my friends as I focus on Chase’s phone. The chick’s Favorite Fans account is already loaded, her photos splaying across the screen.

She’s hot, I’ll give him that.

With every swipe of my thumb, I fall deeper into her. In every photo, her body is positioned in such a way that keeps her face just out of frame, but her alluring curves on perfect display.

Her, on her knees, her thighs spread wide, her back arched beautifully, thrusting her large breasts into the camera.

In the first picture, she's wearing a long white t-shirt that's slid over her delicate shoulder, exposing the long expanse of her neck. The bottom hem is pulled up just a fraction at her hip by a clenched fist, giving me a peek at the creamy skin beneath.

It's sexy and understated. A complete opposite of the slut I just had my cock inside.

The next photo is in the same position, but she's wearing a naughty schoolgirl outfit that shows off more of her body. I get what Chase meant when he talked about her skin. It's fair with a perfect golden tan, making random freckles and moles on her body pop.

"Dude," my best friend groans. "I came so hard when she posted that one."

I fake-gag, shooting him a dark look. "*Dude*. There are some things I don't need to know."

He waggles his brows, completely uncaring. With a scoff, I turn back to the phone.

I vaguely take note that in each picture, there's something dark blocking the background. Maybe a blanket or sheet. That paired with the fact that she pointedly keeps her face out of the shots makes me grin.

The girl's hiding in plain sight. Keeping her identity hidden while her body's boldly on display, knowing her subscribers don't give a shit who she is beyond the fantasy she's painting.

And paint she does. Like some kind of world-renowned artist, she *creates*.

Every photo shows a bit more skin, a bit more bravery, telling a story.

An oversized t-shirt. The almost nervous way she touches her own body. It's practically virginal.

A short silky robe that's parted at her tapered waist, exposing a hint of her cream colored matching panties and bra. Barely anything is showing, but with one finger placed gingerly over the curve of her breast, *I feel it*.

She's learning her body. Exploring. Growing more in tune with her own sensuality with every gentle touch.

The next one is the same outfit, but she's turned the opposite way and lost her bra. The silk is fully open, pooling just above her ass in a sexy sweep. All I can see is her exposed back, golden-tan skin fully on display. There's nothing raunchy about it. It's more like art than anything.

A nurse's costume complete with a mini skirt, white bra and stethoscope hanging loosely around her chest.

She's finding her dark side.

Some scrap of lingerie resembling an angel outfit that's at complete odds with the way her small hand is buried between her luscious thighs. Her back is bowed, her head tipped back, telling the viewer she's mid-orgasm without words.

She's finding her pleasure.

A black lace bra and panty set.

Then red.

Thongs. Boy shorts. Heels. Bare feet.

She's stunning in every way.

I find myself enraptured by her. Not just her alluring, sexy curves, but the graceful way she bends. The delicate way she touches herself. The teasing strokes. The arch of her neck. The way tiny tendrils of light colored hair spill over her shoulders, tickling her soft skin.

She's beautiful.

“So hot,” Chase groans, peeking over my shoulder as he palms his denim-covered dick. “Keep going. Her tits are in the next one.”

I roll my eyes. Jesus. He's memorized her feed. But I say nothing and scroll, anyway.

“Fuck,” I breathe, my previously irritated cock pulsing in my jeans. It's then I realize I'm rock fucking hard and leaking in my boxers.

In this photo, she's wearing nothing at all. The first thing I notice is her body. The curves I'd previewed before are just as I'd imagined, my brain filling in the gaps her clothes created.

The girl's tits are large enough that I know they'd overflow in my big hands. Her nipples are dusty pink little rosebuds, hardened in pleasure.

Her waist is small but natural, showing off a sexy ass fuck roll above her hips. Her smooth skin is rippling with feminine curves below her belly button, leading down to a cleanly shaven cunt that's fully on display because her thick thighs are spread wide, granting everyone—granting *me*—a perfect view of the dildo buried deep inside her.

It's because of that fact that I nearly lose my battle with touching my own cock. The urge to rip it from my jeans and satisfy the ache deep inside me rides me hard, but Chase's next words rid me of the impulse.

“Click that button at the top,” he murmurs, his breath ghosting over my cheek from how close he's sitting. I bat his face away, but he ignores me. “It's videos, man. Hurry up. I'm seconds from jizzing in my fucking jeans. It's like you're edging me.”

Groaning, I move to click the button he indicated but freeze on the spot. My eyes shift from the dildo her tight little pussy is straining to accommodate and land on her breasts once more.

Pinching the screen, I bring the phone closer to my face to get a better look. My body stiffens as the air is yanked from my lungs. My head spins with the force of it all, the realization equivalent to being struck by a semi-truck.

I'd recognize that birthmark anywhere.

“It's her.” The words tumble from my lips without my permission, but I can't take them back. I can barely move or think.

My eyes remain locked on the heart-shaped mark just above the woman's left nipple. It's dark enough to be unmistakable but hidden enough to remain a secret.

From everyone except *me*. Because *I* am the one who spent hours staring at her body. *I* am the one who worshiped it like it—like *she* deserved to be worshiped. *I* am the one who traced that adorable little spot with the pad of my fingers, then again with my tongue, memorized it. Committing the imagery to my brain for eternity.

“What?” Chase grunts, trying to snatch the phone back. I shift, moving it out of reach as my grip tightens, nearly shattering the screen. “Dude.”

“It's Eve,” I murmur, swallowing thickly. What the fuck? What's happening right now? There's no way. No fucking way. My Eve—

No.

Not my Eve.

Not anymore.

Maybe not ever.

But...she wouldn't do this. She wouldn't fucking dare.

Chase barks out a loud laugh and shoves me. “Bro, come on. You're just seeing what you wanna see.” He shakes his head and moves to snatch the phone up again. “Trust me. I'd know.”

My fingers release the screen and I quickly flick the button, switching the profile to her video collection.

I have to know for sure.

I have to.

The first video is one of her in that same sexy school girl uniform I'd been gawking at only minutes ago. I click the sound controls on the side of the phone, turning it up as loud as it can go, but it's still hard to hear beneath the pulsing beat of the music.

Or maybe that's just my heartbeat.

"Do you like the way I touch myself?" she breathes, her words like an icy bath over my burning skin.

I watch with horror and rage like I've never known before as she drifts those delicate fingers over her sternum, down her ribcage before slipping them beneath her skirt. I can just make out the way she tilts her head, letting two golden blonde, curly pigtails fall in long streams down her chest. They almost reach her belly button, granting me the perfect view.

It's *her*. I know it is. I'd know that fucking hair anywhere.

"Do you want me to touch my pussy, Daddy?"

I can't help the way my already throbbing cock jerks at that. Fucking hell. I suck in a sharp breath, reminding me that I've been holding all the air tightly in my lungs.

"That's not her voice, Ro," Chase says, this time more delicately.

With a snarl, I shove the phone next to his ear, forcing him to understand the chaos raging inside me. He grins at me,

listening to her sultry murmur.

But then *she laughs* and Chase pales.

My gut sinks at the confirmation. I knew it.

I fucking knew it.

“What the fuck?” he mutters, his hands flexing on his thighs. Eve laughs again and I can just picture her head tilted back, her golden curls bouncing with the force of her happiness. “*Oh my God.*”

Chase bolts up and I let the phone clatter to the couch in his absence. He runs his fingers through his hair and shoots me a look of abject horror before glancing down at the phone. Eve’s laugh has now switched to moans, and I nearly pass out.

“I fucked—” Chase starts to say, but his words quickly turn into a gagging fit. Unable to move or speak, I watch him disintegrate. “I fucked myself to—” He gags again, this time harder, causing him to double over. “I fucked myself to Eve.” He splutters, saliva dripping from his mouth before he shoots up, sending wild eyes my way. “She’s like my sister!”

He pivots, stumbling three steps before vomiting profusely into the massive ceramic vase of a tall houseplant by the front door. He heaves and heaves, crying incoherent words. Even from the couch, I can see his body shaking.

Just then, Kon reaches us, his eyes as wild and panicked as Chase’s. “What the fuck is going on?” he bellows, his Russian accent thick with his anxiety.

“I fucked my sister!” Chase cries again, and finally, I summon the strength to roll my eyes. “A lot!”

Kon blinks at me, then Chase. “Uh—” He clears his throat. “What?”

Chase shoots an accusing finger at the phone. “Turn that shit off. I can’t bear to—” He gags and wretches. “I can’t hear it again.” He shakes his head. “*Never* again.”

Kon looks down at the phone on the couch. His eyes widen and he takes a step forward, cocking his head to the side, dragging my attention with it. It’s then that I see Eve wildly fucking herself on a dildo with her fingers lodged deep in her ass, her frantic, begging moans filling the air.

“Please, let me come, Daddy. *Please.*”

Oh. My. Fucking. God.

I snatch the phone up seconds before my friend reaches it, and turn the video off. I barely resist the urge to punch him until this entire thing fades from his memory. Without a word, I practically sprint down the hall to my room, Chase’s phone tucked in my clenched fist, Eve’s cries of pleasure still echoing around my brain.

My bedroom door slams behind me and I lean against it, breathing deeply. My eyes squeeze shut, but the second they close, all I see is her.

My fist collides with the harsh wood behind me, rattling it against the hinges. An inhuman roar flies from my lips as I double over, panting heavily.

What the fuck is she thinking? Why would she do this? Does she need money that badly?

The inane barrage of questions fill my mind on a continuous loop, but one question is louder than the rest. *Where the fuck is Isaac and why isn't he taking care of her?*

I drop down on my bed with a heavy exhale. If I was home, I'd *never* fucking let her pull this shit. She'd never have to resort to getting naked and fucking herself in front of the world for money. And it *is* about money.

I know her well enough to know there is no other reason for why she'd do this. There is no other possible explanation. It just doesn't make any sense.

Even when I lived with my father and Jane, we'd struggled. Being a small-town preacher doesn't pay shit, but they'd had the life insurance money from Grant after he passed. Not to mention all the money that comes in from donations. Most of it's supposed to go back into the church fund, but it's also meant to pay Isaac a salary.

The home is paid for through the church. The town pitches in with meals at least a few times a week for no other reason than to just contribute. It's how small towns are, especially Divinity Falls.

Why would she need to cam?

Is Isaac pimping her out?

Have things really gotten that bad?

And why do I care so fucking much?

Without conscious thought, I'm scrolling through her profile again. This time, with a keener eye, as though the closer I inspect, the more answers I might find. Or maybe I'm just looking for undeniable proof that this truly is Eve.

Even though I already know it is.

I'm four videos in when my opposite hand finds the button on my jeans and two videos later, my heavy, aching cock is in my palm.

I angrily clutch the burning flesh, my jaw tight with rage at the entire situation. I don't *want* this. I don't want to watch her touch her perfect body—a body that's changed so fucking much since I left. I don't want to stare at her gorgeous, heaving tits as she bounces on yet another dildo, or fucks her ass with her pretty little fingers. I don't want to jerk my leaking cock to the sounds of her heady, melodic moans filling my room.

But I do.

And I can't stop.

“Oh my God,” she sighs, her voice a breathy little whimper that shoots straight to my balls. My spine tingles. “So good. It feels so good.”

“Fuck,” I grunt, squeezing my cock harder. I've only just started and unlike before, upstairs with that girl, I don't want it to end. I don't want to come. Not like this. Not to *her*.

Yet, I still don't stop. My cock is purple and swollen from my punishing grip. Chase's phone is creaking under the

pressure of my tight fist.

But I keep pumping, keep fucking myself to the sight of Eve naked and writhing before me.

“Please,” she begs no one, her head thrashing side to side just out of view. Her golden hair caresses her hard nipples and my mouth waters with the need to suck. To bite. “*Please, please, please.*”

“Come,” I grunt, my brows furrowed, my teeth aching from the force of my anger. “Come for me.”

She nods as if she can hear me, letting me slip further into my delusions as she fucks herself harder with her fingers. Her other hand reaches up, finding her nipple blindly. She pinches hard and I feel it shoot through my body as though it's me she's touching.

Rough. My girl likes it rough.

Things *have* changed.

“I'm gonna come for you,” she cries. “Just for you.”

In the moment, I believe her. I let her words sink into my skin, let them penetrate so deep, they reach my fucking soul.

Precum is covering my fist, gliding my movements in an erotic, brutal dance. My eyes home in on her thick hips as they tighten around her small fist, squeezing so hard, her skin turns red. I pick up the pace, licking my lips as the familiar tingle shoots through me.

Eve screams, her beautiful body shuddering in ecstasy. Like there's some kind of invisible string tethering us together, I explode, coating my hand and chest in a release that feels never ending. It's so long, so potent, I cry out.

My heart pounds in my ears, creating a dizzying whoosh. When it finally clears, silence descends upon me and the weight of it is stifling. I glance down, seeing a still image of Eve's body in front of the camera. A before shot with a play button over her covered tits, taunting me.

Chase's phone flies from my hand, colliding with the brick wall and clattering onto the cement floor. The screen is shattered and black, a visceral reflection of the rage bellowing inside of me.

I rip my shirt over my head, cleaning the evidence of my mistake from my skin as though it never happened.

Unfortunately, I know it did. And with the way the images of Eve are burned behind my eyelids, I have no doubt tonight is yet another mistake I'll never be able to rid myself of.

"What the fuck?" Chase shouts, charging into my room, his eyes wide and frantic.

Dropping down onto my bed, I shoot him the middle finger and close my eyes, still panting heavily. "I owe you a new phone."

1:14 Eve

“**F**uck,” I mutter, brushing sweaty strands of hair off my forehead with the back of my flour-covered hand. I shoot an irritated look at the ball of dough in front of me, willing it to rise the way it should have.

I poke it. No spring. “Dammit.”

The sound of *Dreams* by *Fleetwood Mac* wafting through the sticky, heated kitchen is the only thing keeping me from having a full-blown Oli-level meltdown right now.

After a week of living alone, I have to admit I’m not very excited about going back to my previous lifestyle.

Isaac’s been taking these training trips for as long as I can remember. I know he’s doing the Lord’s work. That he’s following his calling in training new congregation members and hopeful preachers. I know he’s giving back in the way he feels necessary.

He’d once told Mama he does it because everyone deserves the kind of second chance she and Daddy gave him after he

lost Cami. That everyone, even the worst of the worst, deserves a chance to know God.

I get it. I really do.

But sometimes, I question it. Not Isaac. But the Lord. Faith. Religion as a whole.

Actually, I find myself questioning it a lot lately.

Regardless, I'm thankful for the times Isaac's away. The times I'm free to do and be as I please. I may not be able to get away with leaving the state, but I do get a taste at what my life will be like soon. As soon as I've saved enough to make my dreams come true.

As I continue working the dough, my mind flits to the notebook I keep stashed in my closet with my camming stuff. This week, I kept busy between tutoring, making content, and the chaos my best friend dragged me into. But I was still able to make time to fulfill quite a few private requests, bringing me that much closer to my goal.

I want to see the world. Want to dance along the paved stones of the Great Wall of China. Drink wine beneath the Eiffel Tower while wrapped in a lover's arms. Photograph the Aurora Borealis in all its grandeur. Fall into utter stillness as I gaze up at the Great Pyramid of Giza. I want to see the sun rise off the Golden Gate Bridge and set over the rolling hills of Ireland.

I want to see *everything*.

Explore, taste, touch, and feel. I want to give my senses all they desire and satiate the aching, clawing needs that dwell inside my soul.

I want to *live*.

And no matter how much it breaks my heart, I can't do that here.

So, I can.

I spread my legs for the world, and I embrace the power it grants me, at least for that short time. I smile and moan as I fuck myself on camera, basking in the blissful orgasms I bring myself while rolling in the fruits of my labor.

I take their money, and *I don't care*.

Because though I may be showing off my body in my most private moments for anyone who wishes to pay, I *own* those moments. I own my body.

In those moments, I'm my most powerful version of myself.

In those moments, I hold the key to my future.

And after all the moments I created this week, I'm just under two grand shy of being able to begin the first leg of my dreams.

I don't realize I'm smiling, lost to visions of the grand adventure that awaits me, until strong hands grip my hips.

I scream.

Flour goes flying everywhere.

The hands tighten.

I whirl around, my eyes wide, another scream lodged in my throat as my balled-up, doughy, flour-coated hands come up between us.

Only I don't come face to face with a scary, nameless attacker, but something much more terrifying.

My demanding, infuriating, wonderful, *insanely hot* stepfather. A stepfather that loves and adores me. One that has taken care of me since Mama passed and for years before that.

A stepfather I shouldn't be looking at the way I am, imagining all sorts of filthy, depraved scenarios like the one I've been replaying in my mind all week.

Fuck me harder, Daddy.

I choke on the air in my lungs, stumbling forward. My messy hands land on his taut biceps in an effort to steady myself, forcing the fucked up thoughts from my head.

Isaac's mouth is gaping open, his eyes wide in shock. His hands are still wrapped around my hips, his heated skin burning into me like an inferno, lighting me up in ways it definitely shouldn't as it penetrates through my simple cotton shift dress.

Was it him? I can't help the question from repeating in my mind again and again. *Was it him?* No, no way. He wouldn't. He couldn't.

But...what if?

Our eyes remain locked on each other. His chocolatey warm gaze is much darker than usual, verging on black with the

intensity of his stare. There's a slight tick to his cleanly shaven jaw, the corded muscles in his throat flexing with every pulse.

It's then that I notice the white dusting of flour coating his pristine, slicked-back hair. It's trickled down to his neck and shoulders, covering his black t-shirt like bright snow. The scene is only compounded by the fact that I'm still gripping his dark shirt with my powdery hands, making him even more of a mess.

My heart begins to thud painfully in my chest, though I'm not totally sure why.

Maybe it's because I don't know how Isaac will react to being disheveled, even slightly. He's so particular about his appearance.

Or maybe it's because as we continue to stare at each other, his eyes drop to my lips more than once. His hands flex on my hips, sliding up inch by inch until they rest on the narrow dip of my waist, causing me to gasp quietly.

"Eve," he breathes, his voice near guttural.

Unable to speak, my body sways into his, soaking up the heat emanating from him in brutal waves. His lids are heavy, his muscles bunched. Isaac's fingertips dig into my soft flesh as a barely audible moan slips from my lips. His Adam's apple bobs with the force of his swallow.

Wetting my dry lips, I try to force my chaotic mind to focus, searching for something—*anything*—to say.

But instead, Isaac's eyes drop to my lips, tracking the movement, and I turn to ash. My fingernails dig into his biceps as my core begins to throb, burning with the thick tension building between us.

It's crazy.

Absolutely insane.

Forbidden and all sorts of wrong.

But it's also palpable. Undeniable. The chemistry flaring to life between the two of us is unlike anything I've felt in a very long time. It's something I thought I'd never feel again, and it's....

Everything.

"You're home early," I whisper on a heavy exhale as I desperately try to cling to the last vestiges of my sanity. Isaac's eyes snap from my lips to my eyes, but he doesn't release me. If anything, he grips me harder, like the idea of letting me go pisses him off just as much as the idea of staying.

He nods slowly, pulling me in tighter, aligning our bodies entirely. "I missed you," he rasps.

He missed me?

My body shifts, nerves dancing through me at his words. At his penetrative stare. The tiny hairs on my arms stand up, pricking with the force of unbidden desire that's sweeping over me in caustic waves. My hips brush against his, and I...I feel him hard between us.

Holy fucking shit.

My eyes widen, but before I can say or do anything stupid like grip his hard cock in my palm, just to be sure, he leans in.

My heartbeat picks up even more until I'm sure he can feel it thudding against his tight, muscular chest. Isaac dips down, his breath wafting across my face with every deep exhale.

By the time he reaches me, I'm vibrating with need.

His soft, firm lips press against my cheek and my eyes flutter closed. Between one breath to another, his lips move from one side of my face to the other.

I tremble in his grasp but don't dare open my eyes, for fear of breaking this moment before...before—

His lips ghost over the corner of my mouth, and I nearly detonate on impact.

“Eve,” he murmurs again, and I shudder.

Swallowing, I wrap my fingers around his arms, refusing to let him go. My eyes are still closed, knowing the second I open them, this will all disappear.

“Yes?”

Isaac inhales deeply, breathing me in. His lips move with his words, toying with me—drawing me in until I'm unsure where he ends and I begin. I'm ensnared. A mouse in a trap. A fly in a sticky web.

I'm his prey, and God willing, my stepfather is about to devour me.

His voice drops infinitely lower until his words are nothing but a breath between us. “You’ve made a mess of me, sweetheart.”

My mouth gapes in shock at the husky rasp in his barely-there voice. But, once again, he catches me off guard before I can respond. Isaac’s hands slip down my body, but not before he gives my upper thighs a nearly imperceptible squeeze, just below my ass cheeks.

A whimper lodges in my throat, but I swallow it down, forcing my heavy eyes to peel open. Isaac steps back, grinning widely, and offers his hand to me.

“Dance with me, pretty girl.”

Air catches in my lungs, but I find myself unable to deny him. My still-floury hand reaches out between us, gripping his much larger one as a wide smile spreads across my face.

“Why, handsome,” I gasp, pressing my opposite palm to my chest as I feign a heavy Southern drawl, “How could I ever deny you?”

The sound of his deep chuckle fills the kitchen alongside the crooning melody of *Can’t Take My Eyes off You* by *Frankie Valli*. A shocked sound escapes my lungs as Isaac yanks me into his body and wraps me up. I’m still struggling to catch my breath when he begins to move the both of us in time with the beat.

Giggling, I wind my arms around his neck, letting him sway us around the kitchen. With a small sigh, I rest my head on his

chest, not caring about the mess I've made on him or the flour that'll be on my skin.

At this moment, it's just us. The outside world fades, and I forget that he's my stepfather and we shouldn't be this close. I forget about the almost-kiss we just shared. I forget about the way I've been touch starved for years, and how this is filling me up in ways I didn't know I needed.

He spins us, my hair flying out behind me. My head falls back, and another bright laugh pours from my open mouth. Suddenly, he dips me, my back bending deeply. He keeps one of his strong arms banded taut against the curve just above my ass and the other nestled in my hair.

As he pulls me upright, I wrap my arms around his neck again, keeping my head tipped back to stare up at him. His once seemingly black eyes are now molten chocolate but grow soft as he sifts his hand through the long strands of my hair.

"What's gotten into you?" I laugh softly, my fingers tapping the back of his shoulder even as shivers wrack my body at his gentle touch.

Instead of his lips tipping up like I expect, they tip down and a deep crease forms between his brows. My own smile falls as I anticipate his words.

His eyes search mine and a heavy weight grows thick between us, replacing the previous desire almost completely. His mouth parts, a heavy exhale gushing from his chest as though the words have been stolen from his lungs.

A knock comes from the front door before either of us can say anything and it's like that fucking knock has somehow burst our bubble. The tension fades out of us, and Isaac all but shoves me away, his hands tightening into fists at his sides.

I stumble, fighting the weakness that's suddenly appeared in my legs.

We stare at each other, the few feet between us feeling like an entire ocean of bad mistakes. My throat feels too dry. My eyes burn. My heart is hammering so hard I'm sure it's about to shatter.

He glances down at himself, huffing out an annoyed breath as his arms shoot out to his sides.

“Go on,” I say, wiping my hands on the tea towel I'd tossed on the counter earlier. Swallowing thickly, I shove all my emotions deep down to inspect later. *Or never.* “Clean up. I'll get the door.”

The words have barely left my mouth before he's rushing toward the stairs.

I watch as he ascends the steps to his bedroom, taking them two at a time. How could he do that? Go from sweet and light, to abruptly pushing me away like we hadn't just shared a moment. And not just any moment...*the* moment.

Another knock, this one rapid and impatient, draws my attention, and my head snaps to it. With a deep breath, I toss the towel back on the counter, wiping my mostly clean hands

down the front of my apron as I make my way through the kitchen.

My knees lock up just as I hit the threshold to the living room. Decorum smacks me in the back of the head as though Mama's standing behind me herself, tapping her toe, her hands planted on her hips. Shaking my head, I remove my apron and hang it on its hook, ignoring the ghost of her.

God, she'd be so disappointed in me.

Another knock rattles the door and I jump, letting out a squeak.

Get it together, Eve.

Dread pools in my stomach with every step toward the front door and I don't know why. It's like it knows whoever is on the other side and is screaming at me not to answer. To just pretend like we're not home. To stay in this little burst bubble that Isaac had created for us.

But my hand wraps around the brass doorknob and twists anyway.

"Hi—*oh*, you're a mess, girl," Mary says. Her disapproving gaze skims my body and her brows crash together, clearly finding me lacking.

The rest of the dread drops into my stomach like a lead brick, and I have to swallow back whatever retort was about to launch itself off my lips.

"Mary," I say, trying to sound pleasant, but I know she can read my true thoughts on my face. Roman always did say I

have a terrible poker face. If he was here, he'd know exactly what's running through my head.

What the fuck is *she* doing here?

“Thought I'd welcome Isaac home from his long trip,” she says, smiling brightly, losing the sneer she'd grown at my appearance. Her pearly whites are bright against her tan skin in the Georgia sunlight, and my hand wraps tighter around the doorknob, suddenly feeling inadequate. Her hair is perfectly coiffed and curled, her makeup flawless, despite the heat.

How did she know he was already home? He wasn't supposed to be home for another few hours, at least.

She must read the question on my face because her smile turns feline. “We talked on his drive home,” she says slyly. “And while he was away,” she tacks on, adding more nails to the proverbial coffin appearing at my feet.

Every drop of blood drains from my body, spilling into the wooden box like some macabre vampire movie.

Except it's not a movie. It's my life and it's perpetually fucking me in the ass.

Did he call her and not me? Why would he do that? Why would he let her know he was already on his way home, but not me? He barely even spoke to me in the last week and I didn't push it, knowing, *assuming*, he was too busy.

Guess not.

“We had the most pleasant chats,” she continues, oblivious to my inner turmoil. I swear on everything that is holy, Mary

preens at the obvious discomfort emanating from my still form.

Get it together, Eve. Fuck.

It'd always been clear Mary had a thing for Isaac. Even before Mama died, she'd never kept her hands to herself. But after Mama, it was like she saw the missing hole in our family and tried to claw her way into that spot.

I'll be fucking damned if I ever let this viper step into my mama's role.

“Anyway, I thought I'd bring him some pie.” She holds up a dish I hadn't noticed was in her hands, her French-tipped fingers clutching the glass tightly. The gingham towel beneath it perfectly matches her blue dress and I cringe. “I know how much he loves peach.”

My cringe morphes into a glare.

Peach pie. Seriously?

It was only his favorite because Mama and I made it. He doesn't like anyone else's. Only ours—mine. Certainly not Mary's.

She *knows* this.

“Oh, Mary.” I glance over my shoulder, feeling like I'm in slow motion as I watch Isaac stroll down the hall wearing fresh clothes with his hair fixed back to perfection. He smiles widely at her, looking past me as though I don't exist at all. “What're you doing here?”

He steps behind me, his chest only a few inches from my back. I feel his warmth radiating off him, and it takes all I have not to lean back into him. To seek his safety, knowing it'll soothe the rawness Mary's caused.

"Thought I'd come see you," she says, batting her lashes up at him. My hand tightens again, and the door creaks with the force of my grip.

Isaac's hand rests on my lower back, and instead of giving me the comfort I desperately hoped it would, it only makes me tense. He doesn't seem to notice or care, because he keeps it there, taunting me—taunting her. It makes me feel like a pawn between them.

"Well," he says, stepping back and dropping his hand to his side, "come on in."

I whip around to face him, my mouth gaping open. "What?" His eyes stay on her, his genuine smile never falling for a moment.

Is there more here than I thought? Does he really have feelings for her? Can't he see what a user she is?

"Oh, thank you, Isaac," she simpers.

Mary steps inside, her footstep muffled from the entryway rug that *I* chose. Slowly, the door shuts, trapping the balmy afternoon air outside. I continue staring at Isaac, willing the scene before me to change.

No one moves. No one says anything.

We stay huddled by the front door, me gaping up at him, him staring at Mary, and Mary—how could he just invite her in? Another woman, here in our home. In my space. In Mama’s space.

Doesn’t he see how wrong that is?

And it *is* wrong. Isn’t it?

Before I can say anything, Mary spins around, thrusting both her tits and the pie at my stepfather. Grinning widely, she coos, “I baked this for you.”

Slowly, Isaac accepts the covered dish and smiles back at her. “Why thank you, Mary. That’s so very kind of you.” He turns, passing me the pie and cocking an expectant brow. “Isn’t it, Eve?”

I glower up at him for a split second before my manners kick in, snapping into place like a taut rubber band. Swallowing down an indignant hiss, I nod. “Sure is.”

My words are kind, but my tone is like icy shards shooting from a cannon, preparing to do maximum damage.

Mary waves her manicured hand between their bodies, dismissing the thanks. “It was nothin’.” She bats her eyes up at Isaac. “I just hope you like it. It is award-winnin’, after all.”

I scoff.

Isaac shoots me a withering glare.

I barely suppress a foot stomp.

Mary ignores everything, spins in place, and guides her own damn self through our home as though she has a right to. “Let’s get that pie in the oven, or it won’t keep.”

The only thing missing from her demand is a haughty snap over her shoulder but like the good God-fearing woman I am, I smile. Isaac shakes his head at me and turns to follow her. The second I see his back, I drop the mask, flipping them both off with the hand not poking holes in the pie crust.

Fuck fearing God.

The only thing anyone should fear is my foot up Mary’s power-walking ass.

1:15 Eve

I stare up at my bedroom ceiling, my hands braced on my stomach. I try to focus on the way my hands rise and fall with every breath, but I can't.

All I can think about is the disappointment in Isaac's eyes last night as I abruptly shoved my chair back and declared I needed to go to bed. The way his jaw had ticked and his hand had tightened around his fork. The way Mary's eyes had shimmered, like she was happy to get rid of me.

And she probably was.

Inwardly, I groan and throw my arm over my eyes. Isaac didn't come to my room to reprimand me after she left. He hadn't even checked on me while I was cleaning the kitchen, or after he locked up the house before bed. He always at least pokes his head in to say goodnight, but not last night.

Instead, I'd stepped out of my room at ten, fully anticipating finding him sitting at the kitchen table, waiting for me to emerge so he could scold me. A weird pang of disappointment

shot through my belly at the sight of the cold, dark kitchen. At the empty chair at the head of the table.

Was it weird I wanted him to say something? That a part of me craved his scolding. His discipline.

Dinner with Mary had been exactly as awful as I'd thought it would be. She hadn't shut up about herself, or the way she was *changing lives* in church.

It had been damn near impossible to keep my eye roll in check at that.

Apart from listening to people's problems, she doesn't do all that much. Don't get it twisted—she *loves* listening to their problems. If you want to know what's happening in town, all you have to do is ask Mary. She's like a walking, talking gossip encyclopedia of Divinity Falls, hence her new column in the town paper: *Ask Mary*. Another thing she prattled on about last night.

I snort at the thought. Oli will have a field day when she finds out.

A soft knock pulls me from my thoughts, and I shoot up in bed. My fingers tangle in my yellow comforter, my heart slamming against my rib cage, already knowing who's at my door.

“Eve?” Isaac murmurs, his voice thick with something unfamiliar.

“Yes?” I call back, gripping the blanket even tighter as my brain all but blanks out.

His fingers drum across the wood separating us, and a heavy weight falls on my shoulders.

“May I come in?” he asks before clearing his throat. “We need to talk.”

Swallowing thickly, I toss my legs over the edge of the bed and push to my feet. The old wooden floor creaks beneath my weight. My hands instinctively smooth down the flowy blue and white summer dress I threw on after my shower. It has a low neckline, and the hem hits mid-thigh.

It’s one of the dresses I reserve for when Isaac’s not home, but it’s so hot today, and my mind has been in the clouds since I woke up.

Dammit. I should have worn something more appropriate. I knew this was coming.

I knew this was coming.

Fuck.

What does that say about me?

Feigning a confidence I don’t feel, I throw my shoulders back and close the distance between us. Suddenly, my hand aches to rip the door open so I can see the shock on his face when he takes in my outfit, but I don’t give in.

Instead, I adjust the dress again, this time tugging it down a little in the front. I run a shaky hand over my long, wavy ponytail, letting it fall delicately over my bare shoulder.

The feeling of my fingers wrapping around the cold brass handle feels like jumping off the rope swing and falling into the icy depths of Barry's Pond in the dead of winter.

The door groans as it opens, slowly revealing my hot-as-sin stepfather in all his brooding glory.

I scan his body from bottom to top, leaving what I know will be a raging scowl for last.

He's dressed casually in dark jeans and a fitted white tee. Seeing Isaac so undone has a shiver rolling through my body. *Fuck*. He looks hot in a suit or his Sunday best. Adorable in his khaki shorts and polos while he's corralling kids out on the church lawn. But seeing Isaac like this, casual and comfortable? Content at home with *me*? It's crazy.

My lip twitches when my eyes catch on his aged but clean house shoes. He refuses to walk around barefoot, a quirk that's only gotten worse in the last few years.

Isaac doesn't think I notice, but I do.

I think my stepfather would be shocked by *just* how much I see.

My palms feel clammy and there's a fine shiver inching its way down my spine as I take in his fit body. Isaac is a tall man, standing at just over six-feet. His legs are lean, his hips narrow, but I've seen what he looks like beneath his clothes. Beneath the perfect façade he likes the world to see.

Isaac is *hot*.

His body shows his love for running and his need for perfection, down to every delicious ab gracing his stomach. He's not huge, his body isn't cut, but *fuck* if I haven't caught myself salivating over him a time or two.

Okay. More like twenty.

A throat clearing has my gaze snapping up to meet his. Isaac's brown eyes are twinkling with a mischief I'm unused to, but one I noticed yesterday as he spun me around the kitchen. His lips and brow kick up at the same time as he crosses his muscular arms over his chest.

What the hell is going on?

I feel like I've been dropped into an alternate reality. One where Isaac *plays* instead of *preaches*.

"Find something you like, sweetheart?" he drawls, his voice huskier than I've ever heard before. The shiver previously dancing along my spine morphs to full-body shudders.

What. The. *Fuck*.

"Uhh," I cough, suddenly feeling lightheaded. "You knocked?" I avoid his question and knowing gaze, praising myself when my voice doesn't squeak.

A quiet chuckle slips from his lips and I damn near pass out. Seriously. I don't understand what's happening right now.

Isaac holds his hand out between us, palm up. "Come with me."

It's a demand, not a question. Yet the open hand between us feels like a lot more than anything I've ever been offered before.

Except for a time four years ago when someone else, another Payne man, made a different offer. One to take away the bone-crushing, Earth-shattering pain that'd been splintering through me, nearly breaking me in two.

And take away my pain, he did.

And so much more.

Shoving those memories away, I reach out and accept Isaac's hand—the man who's here. The man who stayed. His fingers immediately wrap around mine, flexing almost painfully. I let the pain anchor me to this moment, with him, not with a ghost from my past.

I'm breathless as he leads me through the house, the only sound is my bare feet padding across the worn planks and his deep breaths.

Glancing up at him, I find his expression soft, almost sweet. Something that's not dread or anxiety swirls in my belly. I can't decipher it, but it feels a lot like excitement? Like anticipation.

“What's going on?” I ask softly. He squeezes my hand in response, his full lips tipping up in a secret smile.

Butterflies swarm my insides as he pulls the door to the sunroom open. I hesitate, my expression wary as I stare up at him. Isaac hates the sunroom, preferring to lounge in his old

leather recliner in the living room. The sunroom is my place, where I do my yoga and read. It was Mama's place before that. It's where I go to feel close to her.

Does he know that?

Pushing my doubts aside, I step inside and try not to let my shock show as I take in the rearranged furniture. The white wicker chairs are pushed closer together, a small white-painted iron table sits between them, a vase holding a few lopsided sunflowers in it.

"Isaac?" I breathe, still taking everything in. He ignores me as he leads me to the chair and gently guides me onto it. I sink down, my breath hitching as he slides his hand down my ponytail with a tiny tug before moving to the chair beside mine.

"Since our dinner was interrupted," he says, grabbing something on the floor beside him, "I thought we could have lunch together."

"In here?" I look around as if this isn't my house, like it isn't the sunroom that I've spent nearly every morning in for the last four years.

I watch, wide-eyed, as he sets a plate in front of me before placing a paper-wrapped sandwich on it. He leans over again, producing two bottles of water and sets them on the table between us. Lastly, he settles his own sandwich on a plate and leans back in his chair.

“I didn’t make it,” he admits shyly, gripping the plate. “But it’s from The Crispy Biscuit, and I know how much you love their BLT’s.” I smile softly as I unwrap the brown paper, nearly moaning at the rich scent of bacon wafting from it.

“You didn’t have to do this,” I murmur, glancing at him through my lashes.

“It wasn’t any trouble.” My stomach tightens at the way his voice dips, the way his eyes drop to my mouth. “Eat up, sweetheart.”

God, what’s wrong with me? Why was that so freaking hot?

I watch as he lifts his usual order—a turkey sandwich on wheat with extra tomatoes—and sinks his teeth into the soft bread. My pussy stupidly throbs at the way his tongue snakes along his lower lip, licking up the crumbs.

Fuck. I’m so, *so* screwed.

He dabs the rough paper napkin at the corner of his mouth, and I immediately drop my eyes. Eating shouldn’t be hot, but he somehow makes it seem like the most erotic thing in the world.

“Listen,” he says, drawing my attention again. I look up, finding him staring intently at me. “While I was away, I did some thinking.”

My stomach twists for an entirely new reason. I should’ve known there was a reason for this lunch, and it wasn’t to make up for Mary crashing dinner. My body tenses and I set my

sandwich down, unable to think about food while he's looking at me so seriously.

"I wanted to talk to you about this last night, but..." He trails off on a sigh, and I nod, not needing him to finish the sentence. I know why we couldn't. Because of *her*.

"What did you want to talk about?" I warily ask, unsure if I want to actually have this conversation or not, but I'm here, right where he wants me, unable to leave.

A million things run through my mind as I try to think about what he could possibly want to discuss. But then I remember the pet store incident and I want to crawl into a hole and die.

Had he found out? Of course, he had. He's Isaac. He knows everything.

Shit. I'm about to be a whole-ass grounded adult.

"I know you really wanted to go to Savannah with Olive," he says, and I blink at him. Okay, not the direction I thought we were going. Regardless, my stomach sours at the reminder of how quickly he'd dismissed me before he left. "But I can't stand the idea of you being in the car for that long of a drive without me."

"I'll be fine," I say softly, and he gives me a grim smile.

"I thought Cami would be fine, too," he murmurs. "But she wasn't. She died behind the wheel, and every time I think of you driving, it makes me sick. I—I can't lose you, sweetheart." His voice thickens, and regret pools in my gut.

I hadn't even thought about Cami or his trauma. How could I be so selfish? Of course, he wouldn't want me driving. He was in the car. Roman was in the car. They both watched her die. *Jesus.*

"It's okay," I say, hesitating before reaching out and grabbing his hand. He wraps his other hand around mine, absently stroking his thumb back and forth.

"I know I'm not Olive," he says softly, his eyes on our hands, "but would you want to go with me? I booked us a hotel room and bought tickets to the festival already, but if you'd rather not go, I can cancel."

My heart stops.

Time and air whooshes between us like waves lapping at the sand as I struggle to breathe. My mind races rapidly, searching for an explanation for this—his behavior, the shift between us, his thoughtfulness.

Confused doesn't begin to explain how I feel right now.

"You bought tickets?" I whisper, and he glances up at me through his thick, black lashes. Hesitantly, he nods.

Every conversation I thought we were going to have disappears from my brain. This wasn't what I had anticipated. I thought he was going to scold me about the pet store or tell me how terrible I'd acted last night in front of Mary. I thought he was going to talk to me about literally *anything* else.

While I really wanted to go with Oli, going with Isaac will be...fun. We've never done anything like this, not even as a

family before everything fell apart.

Trepidation bleeds into excitement as I picture it. Seeing him away from Divinity Falls, away from the church, nothing more than a regular man, not Preacher Isaac. The vision does stupid things to my heart. Just the idea of him in casual clothes, strolling the hot streets of Savannah while we look at all the artwork has me giddy.

“Just us?” I ask, and he nods again, still looking unsure. “That’s—” My free hand flutters at my side as I search for the words, but nothing eloquent enough comes so I settle for simplicity. Honesty. “Thank you, Isaac.”

His throat bobs as he swallows, his eyes still on mine. Roughly, he clears his throat. “You’re welcome, sweetheart.” His hold tightens on my hand, and I can’t help but smile.

I’ve never seen him like this, but it’s endearing. It reminds me that he’s a real person. That he’s still just Isaac.

My Isaac.

With one last squeeze, he releases me and turns back to his sandwich. My lip twitches, my heart races and my stomach is full of butterflies, but I follow his lead, happy to leave everything else unsaid. For now.

But apparently, he has other plans.

My fingers wrap around the soft, doughy bread and just as I’ve pressed it between my lips, he speaks again, his voice a deep, commanding rasp.

“Oh, and Eve?” I bite down and blink up at him. “The next time you do something as reckless as break the law or foolish as attempt to keep it from me—” He breaks off and the sandwich slips from my fingers.

I swallow thickly at the sheer intensity of the expression on his face. Leaning across the little table, he grips my chin tightly, demanding my full attention.

The butterflies turn to pterodactyls.

“I will not hesitate to put you over my knee and punish you.”

My lips part and his thumb darts up, swiping away the crumbs there.

“Do you understand?” he rumbles. His eyes are on fire, keeping me locked in, unable to look away or blink. Did he just say what I think he did? *Oh my God*. “Evelyn. I asked you a question.”

“Yes, sir,” I whimper.

His jaw ticks and his fingers tighten, but I’m not afraid. Apparently, I’m also not smart, because instead of backing down against his anger, I taunt him. My tongue darts out, lashing across his thumb and his responding growl sends electricity straight to my clit.

His lids flutter closed and his thumb lingers, pressing down my lip until it’s in his grip. Just as I’m about to say fuck everything and suck his digit into my mouth, he yanks his hand away, leaving me to fall heavily into his absence.

“What were you thinking?” he asks, and I let my shoulders rise and fall in a shrug.

“Oli needed me,” I mutter. He nods like he’d been expecting that answer.

“You have to be smart, sweetheart. Just because she wants you to go on these wild adventures doesn’t mean you have to,” he says gently. I take a shuddering breath, the previous excitement about our trip to Savannah fading with each passing second.

I like the wild adventures, I want to say. I want to tell him, despite the anxiety of the evening and knowing he was going to be pissed, I had fun. I felt like I was living.

But I can’t tell him that. He won’t understand.

“Eat,” he growls like he knows what I’m thinking. I can’t miss the disappointment in his tone, but I force myself to ignore it.

“I’ll do better,” I breathe. “I promise.”

“I know, sweetheart,” he sighs. “I know you’ll be good for me.”

A jolt of unexpected pleasure shoots through me and I drop my eyes to my sandwich. How can he do this? Pull on my emotions like a puppet master? He can make me so excited, so horny, so small. But in the end, I’m happy.

I’m happy.

Right?

Settling into my chair, I do as he commanded, catching a glimpse of him sliding his plate up his lap, right over his crotch. I try to hide my smile, knowing he's not as unaffected by whatever's happening between us as he'd like to pretend. We're both so fucked.

As I tuck into my meal, I taste nothing, too caught up in the vivid images and promise of our trip playing through my mind.

Every single one of them is about how it would feel to fuck my stepfather.

Shit.

1.16 Eve

The cork makes a loud *pop* as I yank it from the bottle. Normally, I don't drink when I know Isaac will be home. But I don't know where he is, and at the moment, I don't care.

All I care about is downing this entire bottle and forgetting about this shitty day. Every year I'm reminded of who I've lost and what their absence has left in my life—*our* lives.

Four years ago, my life ended. Colors stopped looking as vibrant, food stopped tasting as good, tea wasn't as sweet, music wasn't as soulful, art didn't bring me to tears, and traveling stopped being my number one goal. Nothing seemed important after I lost them.

Mama died so suddenly that the church had to rally together to make her funeral happen while Isaac, Roman, and I grieved her loss. Everything that happened from the night she died, to the funeral flash in my mind like hazy images, strung together haphazardly. They don't make sense. They're not clear, but

always unrelenting, playing again and again, refusing to let me forget.

The blue and red lights.

Isaac's lost eyes.

Roman.

Her casket being lowered into the ground.

The text.

And then the rest is just a blur.

I squeeze my eyes shut as more vivid memories assault me. The bright flashing lights filling our dark yard. The way she jolted as the medic rolled her lifeless body down the driveway on a gurney. The empty way Isaac had stared off into nothingness, looking emptier than I'd ever seen anyone. The way Roman had rushed forward, stopping the medics and removing her necklace for me, knowing I'd want it. That I'd *need* it.

The shock.

The way the coldness had settled over my body.

The denial.

Oli's arms around me as I collapsed to the ground. Chase's comforting words. Roman's intense expression as he crouched in front of me, promising me that I'd survive the unsurvivable. That he'd be with me every step of the way.

He lied.

When I needed him most, he left me, and never thought twice about it. He left me, and moved on to some girl the first night he was away.

I press the bottle to my lips and tip my head back, swallowing deep mouthfuls of the sweet wine.

I don't need him, I remind myself. I've dealt with this day every year by myself, and I made it through. *Without* him.

Without anyone.

Isaac has been here physically, sometimes, but mentally... he's gone. He checks out for the three days that follow her death anniversary every year, and I'm left to deal with everything by myself. Every year, I hope it'll be different, but it never is. Today's the final day, the day we buried her. The day Roman left.

Like clockwork, Isaac will come back tomorrow, acting like nothing happened at all, smiling and preparing for the week ahead as usual.

Gripping the bottle by the neck, I shuffle through the house, stumbling over my feet and running into walls. My vision is blurry, my breathing erratic as I look around as if I've never seen our home before.

Every inch of this place has a ghost, either Mama's or Roman's. Sometimes I even see Daddy, which really fucks me up since he passed before he even knew this house existed.

The Lord doesn't give us challenges we can't survive, Daddy would always say. But how does He know what we can and

can't survive? How did He know I'd survive becoming an orphan at sixteen? How did He know I'd survive losing Roman?

Despite his rough edges and asshole ways, Roman was mine. He was everything to me. My best friend, and at times, my enemy. He understood when no one else did. He was there when no one else was.

We didn't make sense—he was all dark, and I was all light, but when we came together it was explosive.

I don't realize I've stopped in front of his door until my hand wraps around the cool doorknob, grounding me in this moment. It feels wrong opening it, like I'm breaking the seal on a forgotten tomb.

But I can't stop myself from shoving the door open and stepping inside.

Apparently, I'm a masochist.

It's dark, and cold, and everything is exactly as he left it. The bed still unmade, books scattered on the floor. The cushions on his window seat messed up, because he never straightened them after he got up. He just...left them.

Like he leaves everything—*everyone*.

A mess.

I flip the light on, bathing the room in a golden glow that almost burns my eyes more than the tears building in them.

I haven't been in here in four years.

It was a Friday, the day Mama died. I'll never forget that because while I was cheering on Roman at his football game, she was bleeding out, alone. I don't remember much of the next day, but I do remember the one after.

In the pitch black hours of the morning before her funeral, I fell apart. But my stepbrother put me back together again. He was kind and loving, making promises I swore he'd keep. He held my hand throughout the day, protecting me, ensuring I was okay. Giving me the comfort I so desperately needed.

Then he took it all and ran in the dead of the night like a thief. Like a coward.

Those were the worst days of my life, but I can't help thinking about them. Maybe I could've done something differently. If I would've stayed home instead of going to the football game, I could've been there for Mama.

But I never missed a game. Even when Ro was a total dick to me, I still always cheered him on. I always wanted him to look up at the seats and find someone rooting for him.

They played beautifully that night. Better than ever. Roman was a natural, that's what everyone said. But that night, he was a god. I'd never seen anyone play like that. Chase was great too, of course, but there was just something about Roman.

And then we stopped for ice cream, just like we always did after they won. Chase made sure everyone was going to drink plenty of water and eat their veggies the next day, and Oli promised him she would, even though we could see through

the lie. Roman just rolled his eyes when I'd made my promise, knowing I was serious.

He shook his head and slung his arm around my shoulders, a rare display of affection. I'd leaned into him, into his warmth and safety as Chase drove through town, soaking up Ro's affection and attention like a sunflower starved of sunlight.

That's how much I craved him. *Needed* him.

God, I had no idea how badly I needed him.

Not until my world fell apart.

It was a normal night. A *better* than normal night. It was one of the best nights of my life. I'd always been nothing but the quiet preacher's daughter, the football star's nerdy stepsister.

I spent years watching him with girls, flirting, touching, kissing. They came and went like his bedroom door was a revolving one. I watched and I smiled, all the while ignoring the way my heart cried for him with every beat.

I just wanted Ro. His attention. His affection.

I wanted him to look at me the way he looked at random girls. I wanted to feel his arm around my shoulder like I was *his* girl.

And that night, I had it.

In the backseat of Chase's car, I had his attention. I had his arm. His laughs and smiles. His eyes fixed on me like he finally saw me.

I'd never felt so hopeful before in my life, but that night, with him, the windows down and music blaring, I knew he was mine. I knew there was no way we could ever go back to the way things were before.

That night he shifted my world.

There was a moment. A moment when everything disappeared around us. The music in the car went silent, taking Chase and Oli's bickering along with it. The air grew static and my body turned to lava. Roman had leaned in, clutching my body to his like he could feel the world shifting too.

But then, we pulled up to the house and I saw the first ambulance, before a second. The cop cars. Isaac frantically running his hands through his hair.

And instead of my world shifting to something amazing, it crumbled, the pieces of my perfect night falling through my fingers.

Exhaling harshly, I sink onto the bed and take another long pull of the wine. Everything had gotten so fucked up so fast after that.

Two days after she died, we went to the funeral. And it had been miserable. Hot and humid and rainy. But I hadn't cared. I hadn't complained. I'd barely felt the discomfort.

With Roman by my side, I felt like I could take on the world. With him, I felt like everything was manageable. Like the pain wouldn't last forever, because he'd kiss it away. He'd fight the demons in my head, and he'd hold me through my tears.

I knew I'd be safe with him.

My heart would be safe.

With the bottle still plastered to my lips, I look around the room, feeling like I've stepped into a time machine that's taken me back four years.

Everything is the same, and, yet, it's all so different.

I'm different. I know he has to be. Isaac is. The world outside this room is. But this space, this little, dusty space is exactly as it was.

And it should make me feel safe, like I have a piece of my Roman back, but it only makes the wound I've pretended was healed, split open wider.

Four years and we haven't seen or heard from him. The only reason I know he's still alive is because of Chase. I refuse to look him up online or let Chase tell me anything specific. Just the perfunctory, *we're all good*, is all I'll allow.

If Roman wanted us—if he wanted *me* to know how he was doing, he'd come home. He'd at least fucking call.

Instead, he hides away in Mammoth, just over an hour from Divinity Falls, and pretends I don't exist. So I do the same. Or I try to.

“You suck at pretending, Evie,” I scoff, and take another pull, letting my eyes drift over every inch of a room I've both loved and hated over the years since moving here. Loved because, at times, it was a solace for me. Hated, because most of the time, it was the place Ro hid from us, refusing to be a

part of our family. A place where he withered and broke. A place where *I* broke.

A place he put me back together.

My gaze lands on the window seat, the blue dust-covered cushions still slightly dented and torn from wear. I can practically see him sitting there, his nose in a book while the sun sets behind him, oblivious to the outside world. Sometimes he'd balance a sketchbook on his thigh and draw something only he could see in his mind.

“Evie!” Mama calls. “Let’s go. The Daytons are waiting.”

With a grin, I yank my sundress over my bathing suit and snatch my sandals, tossing them into my lake bag. “Coming, Mama!”

I slide my bare feet across the wooden floor into the hallway, just in time to see Isaac bend down and kiss her head, murmuring about heading down to the dock to set up. I pause, my gut twisting. Daddy’s only been gone for a few months. Seeing Mama with someone else, so close like that...

It’s weird.

I miss my dad.

The front door swings shut and Isaac jogs down the few porch steps, tote bags and towels in hand, leaving Mama and me to bring the cooler. She stares after him for a long moment and I stay rooted to the dark hallway, unable to move.

What’s she doing?

Finally, she sniffles and turns around. She doesn't see me yet, so she doesn't know I'm watching as she quickly blots her tear-stained cheeks with the neck of her t-shirt dress.

"Why are you sad, Mama?" I can't help but ask, my stomach flipping once more.

She spins to face me, blinking quickly before plastering on a big smile. Her eyes scan me and she clicks her tongue. "Evelyn Jean, you're missin' somthin'." Her accent is so much thicker than mine. It makes me jealous. Everyone loves her voice.

I shrug and scoot further from my room. "Huh?"

"Didn't I tell you to get your floaties?"

I growl and plant my hands on my hips. "Mama, I'm ten. I'm not a baby anymore."

With a long sigh, she closes the distance between us and grips my cheeks. With a kiss to my nose, she sniffles again. "I know that, Sunflower. You're not a baby, but you'll always be my baby."

I wrap my arms around her, digging my head into her chest. Mama's a small woman. At ten, I'm already almost to her shoulders. She was so much smaller than Daddy and everyone says I'll take after him with my height. I hope not. He was huge.

"I love you, Evie," Mama whispers, kissing my head as she runs her fingers through my crazy curls, so much like her own. "Always and forever."

I snuggle deeper, content to never let go. "I love you infinity more."

She tickles me. "Dream on." Giggling, I pull away and she gives me a quick tap on my tush to get me moving. "I have to grab my stuff upstairs. Do me a favor and get the sunscreen from your bathroom, please?"

With a nod, I skip back to my room and into the bathroom. I toss the sunscreen into my bag, but my eyes catch on Roman's bedroom door, the one that leads to our shared bathroom. Guilt churns in my gut. It's family day at the lake with the neighbors. He should be there.

Swallowing hard, I set my bag on the counter and knock before I chicken out. He's always so moody.

"What?" he snaps.

I grip the handle and pull the door open an inch. His room is dark, like always. "Roman?" I say softly, trying to keep my voice light and happy, like Mama's. "It's Evie."

"No shit," he growls. I gasp at the curse and open the door another inch, just in time to see him roll his eyes.

"Don't swear," I admonish.

"Don't swear," he mocks in a fake girl voice. He glances up at me and smirks behind the curtain of hair. "Fuck."

I glare at him. "You're a godless heathen."

Completely unbothered, he shrugs and goes back to reading.

I think he wants me to be scared of him, but I'm not. How could I be? He's sad, just like me. Just like Mama. God says we should never judge others and always forgive them.

So I do.

Pulling the door open fully, I let the bathroom light spill into his room. Like I expected, he's sitting on his window seat with an old book in his hands. He's dressed in all black, his dark hair messy and covering his face. The curtains are parted just enough to give him light to read, but not enough to actually see his room.

"You wanna come to the lake with us?" I ask, biting my lip and wringing my hands. "It's a nice day outside."

"It's hot," he grunts, shifting deeper into his little cocoon.

Giggling, I state the obvious. "That's why we're going swimming, silly."

Roman huffs and lifts his book. "I'm reading. Go away."

"You're always reading," I point out.

He grumbles, "And you're always talking."

I smile and lean on the doorframe. "If you're going to read in the window, maybe you should open it?" My brows dip low and I point a finger at the huge window next to him, the one that looks right out at the lake. It's such a pretty view. He should enjoy it more. Maybe if he did, he wouldn't be so sad.

His head jerks up, making his hair swish back, granting me my first view of his face in days. "Maybe you should get the

fuck out," he hisses, throwing a pillow. I slam the door just before it hits me.

As though it's happening in real time, the *bang* of the bathroom door closing jars me from my flashback, throwing me into the present. Tears steadily fall down my cheeks from the intensity of it all. I let them fall, knowing there's no stopping them.

Sitting in Ro's room, his leather and musk scent still heavy in the air, brings me right back to where it all started. When I was just an innocent kid mourning the loss of her father, and he was just a moody twelve-year-old with an attitude problem and penchant for dark rooms and old books.

God, how things have changed.

My eyes scan the room until I get to his overflowing bookshelves, taking in the finer details I missed before. Trinkets, books, papers and junk line the old wood, but his favorite books were always in a stack by his bed. I land on his trophy collection and my stomach sours.

He hated them. No one knows that but me.

As much of a jock as Isaac wanted him to be, Roman wasn't. His soul ached the way only an artists' can. He was always so silent, so involved in the world in his head. I was jealous. What was it like up there? I knew whatever it was, it was beautiful. That it was better than the real world.

The trophies, though. He displayed them for his dad, knowing how proud they made Isaac.

“Holy shit, man. State champs, can you fucking believe it?” Chase shouts, patting Roman on the shoulder before lifting his arm in a celebratory cheer. “Q.B. of the century, ladies and gents!”

I press my back further into the lockers and clutch my math book to my chest, hoping to disappear into the worn, blue metal without anyone noticing me.

Roman shrugs off his hand, ignoring the praise. “Whatever,” he grunts. Chase tries again, shoving the monstrosity of a trophy into Ro’s arms. My stepbrother glares at the chunk of heavy gold like it’s personally offended him, refusing to accept it.

“Come on, man,” Chase cries. “It’s the first championship Divinity has had in over fifteen years! It’s a big fuckin’ deal.”

Roman slams his locker shut and scowls at Chase, ignoring the group of jocks and cheerleaders gathering around them.

I bite my lip. I don’t understand why he’s always so mad at the world. Chase is right. Roman was incredible last night. He’s Divinity Falls’ star quarterback, and he’s only a junior. I’m a freshman and I even know how big of a deal that is.

Lindsay Kemper, the cheer captain and resident mean girl, pushes her way through the crowd and wraps herself around Roman.

My gut drops and my books nearly spill to the floor along with it. Ro tenses but she ignores it, dragging him into her body by his thick bicep. His eyes flutter closed, and he inhales deeply, his jaw tensing in the way I know means he's about to lose it.

The world around him goes on. Chase yells and cackles at something another football player said. Lindsay's friends all find their own jocks to climb. Students push through the busy hallway, oblivious to what's happening.

But I see it.

I see the way he fights the urge to shove her off. I see the way he wants to run and hide in his room, like always.

I see him.

Someone bumps into me, shoving me harshly into the lockers. My books drop and I cry out as my shoulder collides with the metal. He turns and shoots me a glare, as if I'm the one that hit him. His eyes rake down my body, starting at my braided pigtails, taking in my floral dress, one of Mama's own creations, all the way to my worn tennis shoes.

"Fuckin' freak," he scoffs.

My stomach flips and bile crawls up my throat. I know I'm not a freak, but I'm not popular. Even if we've been here four years already, I'm just Roman's annoying, goody-good stepsister.

A girl I don't know but vaguely recognize from my math class slides up next to the guy and kisses his cheek before turning a

sharp look toward me. She grimaces. “If God loved you so much, church girl, why’d he make you so ugly?”

Unable to help myself, my tongue runs over my braces and my eyes wince behind my glasses.

Without another word, the couple spins and continues on their way like they didn’t just make me want to both vomit and cry right in the hallway. Dropping down, I grab my spilled books before anyone can step on them.

Just as my fingers have wrapped around the spine, a feminine laugh filters through the busy hall and penetrates my foggy mind like a knife through butter. My head snaps up and the tears I’ve fought to keep at bay return with a vengeance, burning the backs of my nose.

Roman is looking right at me, an unreadable expression on his handsome face. I blink and it’s gone, replaced by a harsh smile meant to inflict maximum damage. He doesn’t say anything. Doesn’t come to my rescue. Doesn’t even look away. He just wraps his arm around Lindsay and drags her body into his.

Right there in the hallway, with his eyes on mine, he kisses her. One hand tangles in her hair roughly, the other slides up the back of her bare leg and disappears beneath her skirt. She moans and leans into him, wrapping his letterman jacket in her fingers like she has any right to.

I finally lose my battle with my tears.

One slips down my cheek.

He smiles viciously, her tongue still down his throat.

And inside, I shatter.

“Church girl,” I mutter, rolling my eyes. If I had half the backbone I have today, I would have punched that bitch right in her nose. I giggle to myself, feeling slightly lightheaded from all the wine.

Okay, I probably wouldn’t have punched her, but I would have at least clapped back with something, *anything*, instead of just taking it. I took the bully’s shit—I took Roman’s shit. I was so caught up in the idea that people were inherently good that I gave everyone the benefit of the doubt.

I scoff.

If only I knew then what I know now.

People aren’t inherently good and not everyone deserves your forgiveness. Some wounds, some mistakes, are just too big to absolve. Some sins will never wash away, and not all sinners deserve to be cleansed.

I roll my eyes, taking another swig. More and more, I’m beginning to sound like Roman. I still remember the way he’d question religion with his books, finding any way to back up his allegations.

And in this household, that’s exactly what they were. Allegations, deserving of punishment.

The thought has me jumping up and making my way to his bookshelves on unsteady feet. My fingers trace the dusty wood

as I skim the collection of books. There are gaps showing where he once pulled books out and decided he liked too much to put them back. From there, they found a new home in the stack by his bed. The books he cycled through again and again, finding comfort or contemplation in the old pages like they were his best friends.

I swallow thickly and let my eyes flutter closed. I wanted that role. So badly that at one point, I resorted to stealing his books in an attempt to figure out what exactly kept him so hidden away from life. Hoping, *praying*, that maybe I could be that for him, or at least understand it enough that I could make a place for myself in his world if he refused to join mine.

I tiptoe through our shared bathroom, keeping the lights off. Roman's out with his friends, but since he refuses to keep in touch with Mama and Isaac, we never know when he'll be home.

Without a sound, I sneak into his dimly lit room, letting his scent wash over me like a weighted blanket. It's only been the last year or so that Ro's started to wear cologne. Isaac hates the smell, but Mama said we should be grateful for it since teenage boys smell bad.

I disagree.

Roman smells amazing all the time.

I cringe.

“You’re such a creeper, Evie,” I murmur. Double checking that his main bedroom door is still closed, I dart to the ever-growing pile of books next to his bed, searching for the one I know he cherishes most. Maybe if I can understand what’s inside, I’ll understand him a little better.

The Brothers Karamazov by Fyodor Dostoevsky.

My fingers trail over the worn, well-loved book. It feels like electricity sparking through my body from that slight touch. Is that how he always feels?

The book is thick and heavy, the cover tattered, the pages bent and marked up. I trace the inked words Roman’s added throughout and a pang of longing hits me right in the chest, settling along something else that feels a lot like victory.

I smile to myself.

Finally, a window to his dark and brooding soul.

With my pilfered treasure tucked closely to my chest, I dive toward his desk and search for supplies. Once I’ve got what I’ll need, I double check that everything is exactly how I left it and go back to my room, eager to dive in.

Roman didn’t come home at all that weekend. Mama had been beside herself but Isaac brushed her off, reminding her that teenage boys who acted out were sometimes reckless. I’ll never forget the way Mama stared up at him, blinking wildly in confusion that morphed to hurt.

But life is a fickle, fickle thing, Isaac, she'd said. You, better than anyone, should know that.

The reminder had cut deep. How quickly Isaac and Roman had lost Cami, Ro's mom. In the blink of an eye, their entire world had changed irrevocably. Isaac shut down, and Mama went to the sunroom to keep watch, but I know she was crying, probably thinking about Daddy and how our lives had changed just as quickly.

If it hadn't been for Oli, I would have been right there next to Mama, keeping my eyes on the long gravel driveway looking for a familiar face. But Oli had let me know Ro was with Chase all weekend and that they were safe. So, I let myself fall into the philosophical dialogue of his favorite book, making notes and scribbling my own annotations to every passage and line I didn't understand or had thoughts on.

It was a risk, and, at the time, I knew he'd likely get mad. But I didn't care.

Legally, Roman was my stepbrother. But in reality, he was so much more and, somehow, nothing at all.

I wanted him to be everything.

"Where the fuck is it?" Roman shouts as something in his room tumbles to the ground with a heavy thud.

I startle, jumping so high I practically fall off the bed. His footsteps pound against the bathroom tiles, and I let out a squeak, scrambling to hide the book.

But it's too late.

Tension bleeds from his too still body as he grips my bedroom door frame with white knuckles. I freeze, his stolen book clenched between my fingers just as hard. His chest rises and falls, his eyes both wild and narrowed all at once.

Unable to help myself, I scan his body, drinking him in as though it's been months instead of days.

Roman isn't massively stacked like some of the other players on the team. He's as tall as Isaac, but he's more muscular than his dad. His shoulders are broad, his arms thick and veiny, showing off how many hours he spends practicing. His tapered waist is narrow and from the very few times I've seen him shirtless, I know his deeply tanned stomach is chiseled.

He makes a rumbling sound in the back of his throat and I realize I've been staring at his body for too long. But I can't help it. His tight black tee strains against his chest with every irritated breath and my stomach dips.

I swallow thickly, clutching the book like a lifeline as I watch his sharp jaw tick in time with my racing heart. His black hair is still as unruly as it was when I met him, but now it's pushed back, showing off his brutally handsome face. His thick brows are bunched, and his hazel eyes that flit from gold to green to brown are pinched tight as he glowers at me.

With high cheekbones, a slightly dimpled chin, and angles that could cut glass, Roman truly looks like the God he claims to hate. But to me, he's always been more akin to an angel.

A fallen one, like Lucifer, but an angel just the same.

“Eve,” he grits out, finally speaking for the first time in...

How long have we been staring at each other? Crap.

“Why do you have that?” His voice is guttural, pained. It wrecks me and glues me back together all at once.

I don't understand it.

Barely able to catch my breath from the sheer intensity of his overwhelming presence, I slowly push to my feet, remembering why he's actually here. It's not to check out his weird little stepsister, I know that, but sometimes I can't help but imagine what that would feel like. We're older now, at fifteen and seventeen, and lately, our age difference doesn't feel so big. Especially at times like this.

Stepping forward, I push my shoulders back, forcing myself to stand strong before him. I had a reason for taking his cherished possession and over the weekend, I learned something about Roman.

We aren't all that different.

*And the insight, the thought provoking comments he made inside of *The Brothers Karamazov*, they were—incredible.*

He's brilliant and I don't think he has any idea.

Smiling up at him, I press the book to his chest. “I just had to know,” I say, proud when my voice doesn't come out as a creepy, breathy whisper like it does in my head.

His eyes, so beautiful and different than any I've seen before, flit between mine as though he's searching for something. His Adam's apple bobs and the tension straining his every muscle slowly begins to bleed out, spilling into me, infecting me like a disease, a sickness.

I want more.

"Know what?" he rumbles, his brows dropping even more in confusion.

This time, my smile, nor my confidence, is fake. I press the book harder into his unrelenting body, willing him to take it before I snatch it back. Slowly, his hands lift and his gaze drops.

As he cracks the book open, taking in my various pink notes, ones I was careful to make on stickies or in pencil, his fingers tighten.

"For years I've wondered what goes on inside your head," I murmur, not wanting to scare him away. Roman is like a terrified deer in headlights, liable to spook at any sound or movement. "You're so quiet, so content to be alone."

"I'm not alone," he chokes out, his grip practically tearing the book in half. "You ruined it."

Ignoring the second part of his statement, I step closer, bringing our bodies mere inches apart. "Even in a room full of people, you're alone," I whisper. He flinches, slamming the book shut and snapping his eyes to mine. I swallow thickly. "You think no one notices, but I do. I see you."

“Shut up,” he hisses.

Shaking my head, I press to my toes, reaching for his ear as though I have a secret, but really, I just need him to hear me—really hear me. “I see you, Ro. I’ve always seen you. But no matter how closely I looked, I could never figure out your secrets.” I blindly tap the book, squeezing my eyes shut. “I see them now.”

He practically chokes in response.

“I just wanted to feel close to you.” The words are barely a breath but as he sways into my body, I know he’s heard me.

With a sharp exhale, I step back. One step, two, until my legs are touching my bed. The distance kills me, but he needs it.

“It was amazing, by the way.” I point to the book and smile. “But there was a lot I didn’t understand. I left my questions on the notes and my ideas in the margins.”

“Why would you—” He breaks off, shaking his head. “Wait, you read the entire thing? In three days?”

Smiling widely, I drop onto my bed and scoot back, my phone already in my hand. “What, like it was hard?” Giggling, I respond to a text Oli sent, knowing I can’t push him too hard. Ro has to be the one to make the next move. “Let me know what you think of my notes. Especially the one on page two-eighty-six.”

From the corner of my eye, I watch as he flicks the page silently and stares, reading the myriad of post-it’s I left for him. His brows dip, then lift, then dip again. His mouth opens

and closes and I know I've succeeded. I know I've impressed him.

Without a word, he spins on his heel, slamming both our doors behind him.

Two days later, the book is under my pillow, blue notes tabbed all over, responding to my questions and new notes asking me more.

For the first time since we met, I finally feel like my stepbrother sees me.

It's unlike anything I've ever experienced before.

We passed *The Brothers Karamazov* back and forth for nearly a year. At some point, we stopped analyzing the award-winning novel and just started using it as a vessel to pass notes. So many notes.

Thoughts on the world, questions about our existence. Sometimes it was just simple things like my new favorite song or a movie he thought I'd like. And sometimes, it was more.

I missed you yesterday.
Where were you?

I had to stay late for practice.
I should have skipped it

Why's that?

You're so much
prettier than Chase

Today was a hard day.
It felt dark.

Tomorrow will be better.

How do you know?

I promised to always
be your light, and I meant it.
I'll shine for both of us. Ro.
Always.

Thank you for tonight. ♡
You don't have to thank me.
It was my honor.
So chivalrous of you.
What can I say? Giving you your first kiss
practically makes me a hero
Asshole.
Why, Evelyn Meyer, did you just swear?
On paper? What would your mother think?
Shut up, Heather
You're the one with the dirty mouth.

I smile, scrubbing my face dry of tears. That book holds some of my very best memories. What I wouldn't do for just one more peek at it. One more walk down memory lane, to a time when things were so much simpler.

I turn my head toward the floor, half expecting to see the stack of books lying there, our book right on the top like always. But they're not there. They're gone. They were one of the few things he took with him when he left.

Of all the things he abandoned, he didn't abandon those. He took them, protected them. Cherished them.

Loved them.

It's a stark reminder that though he fled in the night like a thief, barely giving himself enough time to leave me a shitty goodbye note, he had enough wherewithal to pack his books.

His *books*, for fuck's sake.

Why couldn't he love me the way he loved them?

I was ready to give him everything—I *did* give him everything. My most special gift, I gave it to him and he threw it away like it meant nothing. And then he left.

My tears grow thick as I take another swig.

Scanning the room, my gaze catches on the sunflower claw clip on his headboard, and a sob shoves its way out my throat. I forgot about that clip. It had been my favorite.

The night before the funeral, Roman had taken it from my hair and used his dexterous fingers to massage the ache from my scalp. He'd hummed *You Are My Sunshine* to me, knowing it was mine and Mama's song, and I'd cried against his chest.

Then he took the pain away.

I squeeze my eyes shut again, blocking out the images of him above me, inside me. Sometimes I feel like the pain of his abandonment is worse than the pain of losing Mama.

She didn't have a choice when she left me. He did.

With a shaky hand, I reach for the clip. It feels like it's miles away, and it takes my fingers an infinite amount of time before they brush over the rhinestones. He'd bought it for me at a little shop downtown. It wasn't expensive. We'd still been kids when he got it for me, but I couldn't stop bugging him about it. I went on and on about how beautiful I thought it was.

It reminded me of Daddy's nickname for me, one Mama took on after he passed. *Sunflower*.

Every time I mentioned the clip, Roman told me to shut up. That I was annoying him. But that's what I was supposed to do, right? Be his annoying baby sister. We were never siblings, though. We never had that relationship. It was always more of a comradery. We were both broken kids from broken homes whose broken parents found each other. Even as a young child I knew that.

One day, I found that clip on my bed. I'd run into his room, bursting through the door the way he hated, and threw my arms around him. He'd tried to shove me away, pretend like he hadn't been the one who'd gone back to that shop and bought the clip, but I knew it was him. Who else could it have been? I never mentioned it to anyone else.

Reluctantly, he'd hugged me back, saying nothing, but I felt him smile against my cheek, and I knew.

He was *good*.

His rough, calloused fingers run over every dip and curve of my face. His eyes are reverent as he traces the freckles covering my cheeks. I smile softly at the small tickle and Roman bends down, his body a comforting weight above mine, and kisses me until my smile transforms into something else.

Something wholly different.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" he breathes against my jaw, peppering kisses across my skin. His fingers trace the heart-shaped birthmark on my breast, sending shivers down my spine.

Again and again, only to replace his touch with his tongue as though he can't get enough.

"Goldie?" he murmurs.

I get lost in the feel of him, forgetting he'd even spoken in the first place. God, he feels so good.

I just need to keep feeling good.

Need to feel something, anything, besides the aching chasm splitting my chest in two.

He kisses me again and his warm breath ghosts over my ear.

I shiver, digging my nails into his bare hips.

"Goldie?"

I blink, this vision leaving behind that same chasm as once before. My hand is still hovering over my clip, but I can't bring myself to pick it up. To disturb it from its resting place, knowing *he* was the last person to touch it. Knowing *he* was the one who put it there.

Knowing what *he* did next.

It's been four years since that night. Four years exactly, to this date, and yet I still can't move on. Why can't I just let it go already? Let Roman go.

He let me go. Easily, too. He walked away with nothing but a quick, callous text telling me I wasn't worth ruining his future over. The night after my mother's funeral, he packed his

shit up and went away to college two weeks early and he never came back.

Four years ago, yet it feels like yesterday. He started a new life and left me behind, broken beyond repair.

So broken that I've started to question whether or not I'll ever be whole again.

1:17 Eve

“E^{ve?}”
I jerk my hand away from the clip as though it’s burned me. With a gasp, my head swivels toward the door. Isaac stands there, concern on his usually clean-shaven face. Right now, though, he looks exhausted. His cheeks are covered in a few days’ worth of scruff. His hair is disheveled, and his hands are shoved into the front pockets of his wrinkled slacks as he shifts uncomfortably.

He’s so undone, it nearly has me choking on my ragged breaths. Isaac is *never* undone. Never anything less than perfect.

“What are you doing in here, sweetheart?” he asks gently, his voice scratchy as though he’s been screaming.

He won’t come into the room. He just stares at me, but I feel the tension rippling off him. He wants to look around, and God willing, I want him to.

No.

I *need* him to.

I need him to acknowledge the son that left him, the man that left us both. Need him to understand how deep this ache is. How deep the devastation runs. To tell me he feels the same, so maybe I won't look so crazy.

But Isaac does none of those things.

He won't take his eyes off me. Like if he ignores our surroundings, we aren't in Roman's room. Like he never existed at all.

I wish I could pretend so easily.

"I—I don't know," I admit. My voice is raspy as I speak. I don't sound right. I sound like a broken, empty version of myself. It's how I feel. How I've felt for the last four years. I clutch the wine bottle closer to my chest, surprised he hasn't chastised me for drinking yet.

"Well, come on." He holds his hand out, and I notice it trembling.

Suddenly, his disheveled appearance becomes clear in a way it hadn't before. His raw voice. The exhaustion marring his face. The tremor wracking his every muscle. The clothes covering his toned body, the same ones he was wearing yesterday when he passed through the house in a blur.

How could I be so selfish? This day has to be as hard for him as it is me, if not worse. *He* was the one who found her lifeless body lying at the bottom of the stairs. *He* was the one who cleaned the blood off the floor, casually spilling across the

landing as though it had any right to. As though it wasn't once the life force that kept my mother alive, breathing, *existing*—

Another sob leaves me, and his face crumbles. “It’s okay, sweetheart.” He hesitates before taking a step forward. He’s barely in the room, but I can feel the discomfort eating at him.

Yet, he’s doing it for me. He’s ignoring the way he feels for *me*.

Maybe I haven’t been alone. Maybe I’ve just been too busy being a dumb, selfish girl that I didn’t notice the man in front of me and the way he selflessly cares for me.

The one who lost not just his Cami, but then my dad, his mentor, mom and Roman, all within such a short time frame. He’s lost so much and somehow, I’ve forgotten that I’m not the only one suffering.

Of course, he hides.

He’s broken, too.

“Isaac,” I choke out. “I can’t—*please*.” That snaps him out of whatever he’s feeling and he rushes to my side before gathering me in his arms.

“I’m here,” he murmurs as I press my face into his chest. His big hand rests on the side of my head, cradling it like it’s precious—like *I’m* precious. Softly, his lips press against my hair and he lets them linger. “I’m right here, sweetheart.”

He holds me while I break. Everything I’ve tried to hold in comes pouring out. Gently, he rocks us back and forth, shushing me and murmuring comforting, incoherent words.

The memories that haunt me and the alcohol coursing through my veins make me feel more broken than usual, and I cling tighter to Isaac. I know he has to hate this, that I'm soaking his shirt with my tears, that I'm making a mess of things, but he doesn't say a word. He just holds me.

"I've got you," he promises again, his breath a whisper against my hair. I squeeze my eyes shut, letting more tears overflow. I try to calm down, but the intense, raw emotions from the day have me taking staggering breaths. I'm nearly hyperventilating, but he rubs his hand down my back in long, soothing strokes, the steady rock to my raging sea.

I take a deep breath, inhaling his usual spicy scent, something peppery with a hint of heated bourbon and sandalwood, letting it ground me. Calm me. After countless minutes, I pull away and roughly wipe my face with my shaky hand. The wine bottle is still clutched in my other, and again, I'm surprised he hasn't said anything.

Instead, he slowly takes the bottle from me, and inspects it, twisting it in his hands, his eyes glued to the sloshing liquid inside. "Where'd you get this?"

My heart thumps in my chest, waiting for the chastisement that I already know is building on his tongue. Swallowing roughly, I shrug. "Church."

The single word is a barely-there whisper, but the tension between us is akin to a bomb, waiting to explode.

He blinks, long and slow. Then, he's laughing. My brows crash together in confusion. "Of course, it is," he chuckles.

“Fitting, isn’t it?”

I don’t understand what he means by that but before I can question him, he lifts the half-empty bottle to his lips. A gasp leaves me as he tips his head back, taking a deep pull of the pilfered wine.

“I didn’t mean to tempt you,” I breathe, my eyes still wide. “Isaac—” My head is frantically shaking and my hands are outstretched, ready to snatch the bottle back as guilt pulses through me.

“It’s fine,” he rasps, using the back of his hand to wipe his upper lip in a move so unlike him. He glances sidelong at me, his eyes red-rimmed. “Truthfully, I had a drink at the church. Probably from the same stash you snagged this from.”

The confession is a tumble of emotions that I can’t process fast enough.

Frustration. Anger. Sadness. Defeat.

Resignation.

It’s the last one that has me forcing my lips to move in a barely there response.

“You did?” I blink at him, even more shocked than before. Isaac doesn’t drink. Isaac shouldn’t drink, he can’t—

“A few,” he confirms.

But he did.

“You don’t drink,” I murmur, my cheeks burning with shame. “You don’t.”

“Today, I do.” Glancing away, I watch him take in Roman’s room for the first time. *Really* take it in. The veins in his neck are protruding with the force of his emotions, his cheeks turning pink beneath the low light. “On this day, I do.”

I swallow roughly as he takes another long drink, leaving the bottle only a third of the way full. I consider his words, confusion pulsing through me.

I know why today is so hard for me. It’s the day I gave myself over to the man I loved more than life. The day I buried my mother. The day I lost my first love. Though today isn’t the anniversary of Mama’s death, it’s the day we buried her. Yet, I’m surprised it’s enough to drive him to drink.

To break his vows.

He’s always been so strong, so stoic.

“Why?” I whisper and then squeeze my eyes shut at the insensitivity of the question, especially now when he’s clearly hurting. “I’m sorry—”

My words are cut off when I feel the slightly warmed mouth of the bottle press to my lips. My eyes snap open, meeting his. He presses harder, his brow tipping up in challenge.

“Drink, sweetheart.”

The command makes my body shiver, and without thought, I oblige. With my eyes on his and my lips around the bottle, I let my head fall back. He watches me swallow the room temperature liquid, searing me with his unwavering gaze. I’m

surprised I'm able to stay upright. Though his body is tense, his hand is steady as he pours the wine down my throat.

Unable to help myself, I wrap my mouth around the bottle's neck and suck before releasing it with a *pop*.

Isaac makes a choking sound, his brown eyes heating and his Adam's apple bobbing under his light coating of stubble. My tongue darts out, licking up a sticky drop just before it hits my chin.

"Christ," he rasps, his jaw ticking. "Eve—"

My fingers lift from my thigh and I wrap them around the bottle, tipping it in his direction once more. I feel reckless. Out of control. My body is on fire for him, and, try as I might, I can't stop.

Do I even want to?

"Drink," I command, repeating his words at him.

I'm sure I'll feel guilty about asking him to drink tomorrow, but I take comfort knowing he'd been drinking before he arrived. He was suffering like me, in drunken silence.

He *needs* this.

And so do I.

He huffs a breath as he snatches the bottle from me. His fingers graze mine and electricity sparks through my body, heating me from the inside out. With his hooded, dark eyes on mine, Isaac wraps his lips over the glass, savoring my taste from it as though it's the sweetest ambrosia.

I whimper, feeling my pussy throb in response to the dirty, illicit act. It's so wrong, so forbidden, yet my body can't help but react to him. He's not even touching me. Not speaking or doing anything lascivious, but I feel like his mouth is buried between my thighs, teasing me, *tempting* me.

"Isaac," I breathe. Every inch of my skin is on fire. My short dress is thin, the straps barely there, but I feel like I'm covered in thick, itchy wool as I stand beneath the sun. Too hot. Too tight. Too much.

Not enough, my mind chants. *More*, it pleads.

His shoulders bunch at my breathy tone. The bottle slips from his fingers, landing between us on the bed. I swear under my breath as I scramble to grab it before it spills. Isaac moves at the same time, and our heads collide painfully.

I jolt, pulling my hand from the bottle to rub my aching forehead. The bottle tumbles off the bed and I vaguely notice a few splashes hitting my bare legs before it rolls across the wooden floor, leaving the sweet liquid to spill from it.

I groan and hear Isaac make a similar sound. And then his hands are on my face, pulling my attention from the runaway bottle.

"Shit, sweetheart," he breathes. My eyes meet his and my hand falls to my lap. He sears me with that look—that frantic, heated look. He scans my face, my forehead, searching for injury. "Are you okay?" I can't answer him, because honestly, I'm not sure.

“Your eyes are so dark,” I slur, swaying slightly into his body. Not because I’m drunk, but because of his proximity. This close, I can really smell his scent. Can clearly see the scruff lining his jaw. Can count the lashes framing his nearly black eyes. He’s overwhelming. He’s...

“Intoxicating,” I whisper.

His lip tips up, and his grip on my cheeks tightens. I shift, lifting and bending my leg to face him fully. I don’t want his touch to disappear. I want to lean into it.

Want more of it.

Need more of it.

“I think you might be, yes,” he rumbles, a slight chuckle to his words. His brows lower, and his usual disapproval shines through his expression, but there’s something else to it. Something that makes my already tense, hot body, heat further. “Are you drunk, Eve?”

I shrug, rubbing my cheek against his palms. God, he feels so warm. So good. My chest aches as the realization sinks in. Am I so touch starved that this feels magical or is it just *him*?

“I don’t know,” I murmur, answering both his question and my own. My eyes flit between his, searching for the answer. Does he have it?

Isaac watches me and the crease between his eyebrows deepens. I reach up, smoothing it out.

“You look so sad.” And he does. I’m not sure I’ve ever noticed before now. “Are you sad?”

His lashes flutter closed and he breathes deeply, his fingers digging into the soft roundness of my cheeks. When his eyes blink open once more, they're molten. Fire and lava. Deep, cavernous pools dragging me down, down, *down*, into their depths.

"I don't want to talk about it, sweetheart." The words are barely audible, but with the distance between us closing by the second, I hear them just the same.

I nod into his hands and let my fingers glide down his cheek, learning. Exploring.

"Okay," I whisper. "What do you want to talk about?"

My heart is hammering in my chest, my skin covered in goosebumps, but I lean in closer, addicted to the feeling.

Alive. I feel alive.

For the first time in forever, I'm alive.

This thrill is the same I feel when I cam. That moment just before I come, knowing someone out there is coming with me, *because of me*. Power. It feels like power and in a world where I have so little, it's addicting.

But this—*him*—it's more. It's not power, or addiction. It's this indescribable ache building in my chest, and it's all because of him.

Isaac shakes his head, his tongue darting out and wetting his lower lip. My gaze tracks it as my body trembles in response.

"I don't think I want to talk at all."

His hands shift and it feels like time stands still as I wait for him to lead, to choose where this goes. Long fingers slide down my cheek, wiping away any remaining tears covering my skin before settling around my lower jaw. His fingers flex, their length reaching all the way around my neck, and I moan, sinking into his touch.

My eyes droop and my head grows dizzy. He's not squeezing my throat, but the threat—the possession—is there.

And like the willing lamb I am, I submit myself to his slaughter.

Isaac leans in, finally eating up those few inches I despised so much. His breath ghosts across my lips. My eyes flutter closed.

“Do you want to talk, Eve?”

My hands grip his wrists tightly, not to pull away, not to remove them. Not to beg for mercy.

But to demand more.

I push his hands harder against my throat, whimpering with my silent, obvious plea.

“I need to hear you say it,” he growls, even as his fingers flex against my racing pulse. Not tightening, not the way I want them to. Just a gentle reminder that he's holding me, controlling me. “*Say it.*”

I try to breathe, try to swallow, try to do anything other than focus on the ache pulsating between my legs. With my eyes

locked on his, my nails clawing into his too-perfect skin and his intoxicating scent permeating my every nerve, I give in.

I give in to the desires that have writhed between us for the last few weeks, maybe longer, ebbing and flowing like a living, breathing thing. Give in to the weakness clouding my judgment, whether from the wine or just because I know in my heart I want this—*him*. I don't know or care.

Maybe in the morning I'll lie to myself and say it was just the wine, that the alcohol made me stupid. Maybe I'll question myself and my morals, and tell myself something that'll make up for tonight's mistakes.

But right now, I don't care.

Right now, I need to feel good. I need to forget. I need him to make me forget.

I need to give in to the newfound recklessness that constantly flows beneath my skin, begging the world to hear me, see me, *remember* me.

But mostly, I give in to my need for *him*.

Isaac.

My caregiver. My protector. My savior.

My stepfather.

“No,” I say, proud of the steely edge in my voice despite the way my body trembles for him. “I don't want to talk.”

The words are barely out of my mouth before his lips are on mine.

1:18 Eve

I whimper against him, and he lets out a feral growl, one I've never heard him make before. The wine coursing through my mind makes me forget that this is my stepfather kissing me. Once it catches up and I realize what's happening, my initial reaction is to pull away.

But I don't.

Instead, I sink more into him, wrapping my arms around his neck and pulling him closer to me. His arm bands around my waist and he roughly yanks me to him, letting me feel his hard body in a way I've never felt before.

His firm lips move over mine, granting me my first taste of him, the traces of the wine and something else, something darker like whiskey, dance along my tongue. I greedily want more.

I crave it, *ache* for it. And like he's directly linked to my mind, he opens for me, thrusting his tongue into my mouth. Unable to help myself, I suck on it, wishing it was his cock.

Who am I right now?

The question barely forms in my mind before Isaac distracts me with a deep, throaty groan. His hands trail down my back, over my dips and curves, taking them in with an aggression I'm unprepared for, but melt into.

"Fuck," he breathes against my lips and my head bobs in agreement. Fuck is right. My fingers tangle in the back of his hair, keeping him exactly where I want him as he squeezes my ass, tugging me onto his lap.

The world swirls around me, shifting rapidly in flashes of light and color, bright behind my lids. I wrap my legs around his hips, needing to feel all of him. His jeans are scratchy against my bare legs, his shirt too thick between us.

My hips grind maddeningly against him, and the thick outline of his hard cock hits my clit with every pass. I moan into his mouth and he responds by thrusting up into me until I'm mindless and crazed.

My fingers slip from his hair, finding the buttons of his shirt with startling ease. I'm shaking too hard to undo more than a few of them and I quickly become irritated.

Too many clothes are between us. I need to feel him. *Touch* him.

But before I have a chance to protest, to make my demands known, the world shifts again. With a frustrated growl, Isaac wrenches his mouth from mine and tosses me onto the bed, quickly following after me.

I bounce, my head landing on the dusty pillow that still smells faintly of Roman, making my throat threaten to close.

“Eve,” Isaac rasps, and I blink rapidly, forcing my mind to stay here in this moment and not the memories trying to drag me under. “We shouldn’t. This is so fucked up.”

“I know,” I whisper. It’s seriously fucked up.

He brushes hair from his face. “You’re drunk.”

“I know.” I’m not. Not really. “So are you.” His eyes flit between mine and a look I can’t decipher fills his heated gaze but says nothing.

I focus on my rapid heartbeat. The dim light filling the room spills across the two of us, painting a sinful image. My legs spread wide, my dress rucked up around my hips and I’ve no doubt my white lace panties are on display.

He’s on his knees, frozen between my legs as he takes me in. His throat bobs, his jaw ticking wildly. With his penetrative gaze on me, his attention riveted to my skin, I feel seen in a way I haven’t in...in years.

It makes me bold.

Biting my lip, I let my trembling hands slide down my overheated body, enthralled by the way his dark eyes track my every movement. I palm my heaving breasts through the thin material of my sundress, wishing he’d just rip the damn thing off me. But he doesn’t. He doesn’t move or breathe, just waits. Watches.

It’s unnerving in the best way.

Thankful I skipped a bra today, I pinch my nipples and my back arches as a moan spills from my lips.

Isaac groans and cups his cock through his jeans. “Sweetheart.” He shakes his head, but he doesn’t stop palming himself. If anything, he squeezes harder. “I don’t—” He breaks off, swallowing thickly.

Abandoning my breasts, I tug my dress higher, knowing the light’s casting a soft glow between my thighs. I can feel the wet spot on my panties growing with every second and I want him to know how turned on I am for him. How wild he’s making me feel.

I pull my panties to the side and my clit throbs as I graze it with my pinky. My hips roll and Isaac shifts closer, his gaze never leaving my pussy. He licks his lips and squeezes his cock so hard I know it must hurt.

“Touch me,” I whimper, my nerves quickly fizzing out the longer he just stares at me with those dark, keen eyes. “*Please.*”

His head jerks up. Something in my voice snaps his control, and he growls, “*Fuck it,*” before slotting himself between my thighs. His mouth comes down on mine once more and relief washes over me.

I writhe under him, biting his lip with a needy cry. His hands shift between us, his knuckles brushing over my soaked pussy as he unbuttons his jeans. I thrust into his touch, quickly losing my grasp on reality.

The past and present war in my mind, but I force myself to stay here. I force the ghosts in my mind away.

His fingers slip through my throbbing core seconds before I feel his pulsing cock against me.

“So wet,” he rasps. “So wet for me, baby.”

“More,” I beg, clawing at him. “More, Isaac.”

His name on my tongue right now feels like a sin bursting from the deepest parts of my soul. It feels forbidden, illicit.

It feels *good*.

My hips grind against his hot flesh as the room spins. His mouth glides across my cheek, my jaw, finding a spot on my throat that has my entire body shaking. My head tips and my hands slide down his back, blindly finding his hips, urging him forward. Silently begging him for what my lips refuse to ask for.

I feel him press against my entrance and my eyes blink open rapidly. *When did I close them?* My gaze lands on the sunflower clip and the sight of it makes my heart clench.

“You want more?” he grunts. “Say it, Eve. Tell me right now.”

The demand in his tone makes me tremble. I fight the nerves forming in the pit of my belly, knowing what he needs to hear. My tongue darts out to wet my lower lip, and he tracks the movement.

Be brave, Eve. Take what you want for once.

“Fuck me.”

“Goddamit,” Isaac rasps seconds before he shoves into me in one brutal thrust. My back bows off the bed in a silent scream and my pussy clenches around him. “Holy shit, you feel so fucking incredible.”

“So do you,” I choke out. The sudden burst of pain is everything I didn’t realize I needed, and as he settles deep inside me, it feels like a puzzle piece slotting into place.

I wrap my legs around his hips, locking us together, determined to stay in the moment, ignoring everything outside of our little bubble. Maybe if I can do that, I can forget where I am. I can forget what drove me to drink in the first place today.

Dark eyes lock onto mine as Isaac shifts his hips. He doesn’t wait for me to adjust, doesn’t wait for me to be ready. He pulls back out and slams forward, forcing all the air from my lungs. He does it again, fucking into me at a maddening pace that causes his pelvis to drag against my clit with every thrust.

Ecstasy races through my body, igniting my veins with so much pleasure, I feel my body tightening, ready to explode. My eyes roll back, a moan slipping from my parted lips as he finds a spot inside me that drives me wild.

I haven’t had anyone make me feel this good in forever.

Fuck. I haven’t had sex since...

Isaac bites down on my neck and it’s exactly the pain I need to yank me from the past again. My fingers find their way to

his firm ass and I dig my nails into the harsh fabric of his jeans, giving the pain right back as if I can claw myself into the present.

His tongue soothes the small hurt as he murmurs against my skin, “We shouldn’t be doing this.” I thrust my hips, fucking him right back. He groans low in his throat, the sound tortured. “But I can’t stop.”

“Don’t,” I beg. “Don’t ever stop.”

Don’t stop making me feel. Don’t stop making me forget.
Don’t stop loving me.

“Fuck,” he pants, taking me to my limits with his brutal fucking. His eyes meet mine and he releases my thigh to brush hair from my sweaty face. “You’re just as desperate as I am, aren’t you?” I nod rapidly, my eyes wide as I stare up at him. I can’t believe we’re doing this. “Been picturing this for weeks, sweetheart. Picturing the way your tight little cunt would take my cock.”

“Oh my God,” I cry, his words slicing into my flesh and setting me on fire. I meet him thrust for thrust, giving as much as I’m taking.

“That’s it,” he grunts, slamming into me harder, forcing the bedframe to rock against the wall loudly. “Right there, sweetheart. You’re taking my cock so well. Gonna make me come, aren’t you?”

“More,” I plead. “I need—” I break off, my eyes burning for some stupid reason. “I need—*something.*”

I feel my orgasm teetering on the edge, but it's just out of reach, just like all the memories that resurfaced as soon as I stepped into this goddamned room. I can almost hear Roman's whispers in my ear with every harsh thrust from his father, can almost hear his mocking laughter, the way he'd give me that disapproving look at the situation I've found myself in. I swear I can see his ghost lingering in the dust around us.

It's making me question my sanity.

Isaac presses his lips to mine and slows his pace, moaning into my mouth as his achingly hard cock drags out, then back in. I release the death grip I have on him and slip my hands beneath his shirt, relishing the feel of his hot skin against my palms. His arms wrap around me, pulling me into his body before surprising me by flipping onto his back, switching our positions.

With a squeak, I clamor to right myself, surprised his cock has remained lodged deep inside of me. I plant my knees on his sides and shift to get comfortable. I rock my hips, getting used to the feel of him from this angle.

God, he feels massive inside me.

Isaac chuckles and tugs my dress up to my waist before gripping my bare hips, just above my panties. "Ride me, sweetheart. Make yourself come."

I'm too embarrassed to tell him I've never done this before. Never been in this position. Too ashamed to admit I've only ever had sex once while also being terrified to admit I've ever had sex at all—even more terrified to admit *who* I'd had sex

with. It's not a topic in our household that's up for discussion and it's definitely looked down upon by the church.

But so is fucking your preacher stepfather.

And your stepbrother.

And camming for the world to see.

What would God think of me now?

“Eve,” Isaac rasps, his voice laced with pain. I meet his gaze, surprised to find his brows bunched together and a bead of sweat coursing down his temple. “You have to move, sweetheart. You’re killing me.”

I grip his chest, using it for balance, and tentatively roll my hips again. I gasp at the pleasure that ricochets through me. It's just like fucking one of my dildos suctioned to the floor, but *so much better*.

My hips move again, and his eyes practically roll back in his head.

“Oh shit,” I moan, increasing my pace.

Against my will, my eyes dart to that fucking clip and the memory tries to penetrate my mind once more. With a frustrated growl, I lean forward and swipe it from the bedpost, letting it plummet to the floor.

The sight of the old metal and plastic snapping in two is as symbolic as it is painful.

Isaac's grip tightens as he bucks up into me, chasing the finish line we're both desperately craving. His face is tortured

in pleasure-filled agony, trapping me in his orbit. He's beautiful like this—untethered, holding nothing back. It's like I'm seeing him for the first time.

Leaning forward, I capture his lips again, unable to stay away now that I've tasted him. He exhales heavily into my mouth and I groan as the new angle sends zaps of pleasure throughout my entire body. I roll my hips harder against him, shivering as his cock rubs my g-spot.

“Eve,” he rasps against my lips. My nipples brush against the fabric of my dress with every heart stopping movement, rendering me unable to respond. “Eve, I—”

Isaac breaks off with a throaty sound that goes straight to my clit. His arms band around my lower back, anchoring me to him, leaving nothing between us but our clothes. I feel his knees shift behind me, finding leverage before he thrusts harder, *faster*, bringing me *higher, and higher, and...*

His body tenses and his teeth sink into my lower lip so hard I feel blood instantly pool in my mouth. My heart is in my throat, my limbs locked in his grip as the first pulse of his hot cum spills inside me.

“Fuck,” he groans, his head falling back to the pillow. His cock twitches and throbs as cum fills me for the first time. I swallow roughly, consumed by a tsunami of unexpected emotions.

Isaac's hold on me slackens as his body goes limp beneath me. His Adam's apple bobs, and his eyes dart to the side awkwardly.

“Shit,” he murmurs, brushing his hair from his sweaty forehead as I push myself upright, feeling his cock soften inside me. “It’s been a really long time.”

I shake my head and slip off of him, falling onto the rumpled bedspread at his side.

“It’s okay,” I croak, my voice raspy from everything we just did. “It’s okay.” I repeat the words, unsure of who exactly I’m trying to comfort.

I clasp my legs together and quickly right my dress, feeling every inch of my body blaze with fire as he climbs from the bed. His cum seeps from my core, leaking onto my already wet panties and mortification mixes with panic.

Isaac clears his throat and turns his back to me as he tucks himself into his jeans. He won’t meet my gaze, but I can see the way his head tilts, inspecting the room for the first time. Emotion lodges in my throat.

What have I done?

His body twitches, and I can’t ignore the way his hands shake before he tucks them into his pockets. Slowly, he turns around connecting his gaze with mine.

“Do you need—”

“No,” I interrupt, too mortified to ask for anything. “I’m good.”

His head bobs in a nod as he backtracks toward the door. With one deep breath, one last look that’s indecipherable, he spins away, slamming the door behind him.

1:19 Eve

*I*n for five, out for five.
*I*n for five, out for five.

My eyes drift shut as I arch my spine, bending deeply into the pose. The feeling of my yoga mat beneath my fingertips and the sun beaming through the windows of the sunroom grounds me in a way so few things do anymore. Maybe ever.

I hold the pose until my lower spine is no longer burning, reveling in the deep, cathartic stretch, before shifting into Downward Dog. My thighs tingle and protest at first, reminding me of what I'd done to make them ache in the first place.

My throat burns just as badly as my muscles and try as I might, I can't force the thoughts of last night away.

I tossed and turned, replaying every second I spent with Isaac. Every heated touch, every rasping moan. Even the fact that he'd come inside me twisted my stomach, and not in a bad way.

In for five, out for five.

In for five, out for five.

I squeeze my eyes shut as I remember how I'd been so caught up in my thoughts I dug myself deeper into the pit of bad decisions. My fingers found their way between my thighs and in the pitch black silence of my room, I succumbed to the fantasy that I created. Wishing Isaac would have stayed rather than running away, that he'd joined me in my bed, fucking me again and again instead of leaving me to clean up the mess by myself.

Literally.

In for five, out for five.

In for five, out for five.

My phone pings with an incoming message but I ignore it, already knowing what, *who*, it is. I roll my eyes, forcing myself to stay present, unwilling to give up my morning routine for anyone.

The old pipes rattle above me as Isaac turns the shower on, and I let out a low groan. I guess I will give up my routine for *someone*. Huffing, I drop to my knees, my head tipping back as I stare up at the slats in the ceiling. The rickety fans whirls, each rotation lulling me deeper into a trance-like state.

This is my favorite part.

Shavasana.

Reconnecting with my spirit, grounding myself mind, body and soul. Normally, this is the time I'd be setting my intentions for the day, but without my permission, those damn thoughts of last night come tumbling back in.

His hips grinding against mine. His lips trailing along my throat. His teeth tugging on my lower lip until it bled.

My tongue darts out, tracing the wound, and I smile to myself at the visceral representation that last night was real. My smile widens as I realize that the small cut will be visible at church this morning and I half wonder if anyone will notice it.

Will it be a beacon, alerting everyone of the taboo night I shared with their beloved preacher, or will they assume it's nothing more than an innocent mark?

Shaking my head at the sudden turn of my thoughts, I shove to my feet with a deep sigh. Apparently I'm done for the morning. After rolling up my mat and rearranging the furniture in the sunroom, I snag my phone and heave out an annoyed breath.

Daddy555:

I want to see you again, sweetheart

Goldengirl69:

I'm not taking any requests at this time.

Daddy555:

Come on. You don't even have to wear anything special. Just be yourself.

Goldengirl69:

Not today. Sorry.

Daddy555:

I'll double your rate.

Daddy555:

Please.

Locking my phone, I shuffle through the house toward my room, Daddy555's messages lingering at the forefront of my mind. For the first time, I question my hidden life. Isaac knows nothing about me camming, and if he did, he'd lose his mind. But after last night, I feel like I should come clean. Or at least leave camming behind?

But my mind shifts to the empty map on my wall, reminding me why I decided to do this all in the first place. Freedom. Adventure. Travel. It's what my soul craves.

Maybe I can have both.

As I step into the hall, my gaze instantly slides to Roman's room. Without hesitation, I shove the door open. Leaning against the doorframe with my arms crossed protectively over my chest, I take in the destruction I'd been too distracted to clean up last night.

Rumpled sheets, spilled wine, a pillow on the floor next to the shattered sunflower clip I once cherished.

Like two broken, lost souls, Isaac and I fell into each other, desperate to take away the ache that exists deep inside us. Without thought of the repercussions that'd exist in the daylight, we found solace in the time capsule we'd sealed for Roman long ago.

My mind locks on that as I look around, a sudden burst of anger surging through my body. *He* left and I kept everything just as it was, for him. Waiting for him to return. Wanting him to feel like he was home again, like we hadn't forgotten him. Like we hadn't abandoned him the way he had us.

Fuck that.

Roman doesn't deserve the loyalty he so effortlessly burned to the ground all those years ago.

With indignation rolling through my veins, I stomp through the dusty tomb and rip the cum-stained sheets from his bed. They land on the floor in a heap and another plume of dust flies through the air, nearly choking me.

Too long—it's been too damn long that we've existed in limbo, waiting, hoping, *praying*, he'd return to us. Too long I've tiptoed past his door every day, pretending like the man who haunts both my dreams and memories still exists on the other side.

How many days did Roman hide away in here, refusing to acknowledge his family, his duties, *me*? How many afternoons did he spend hidden behind his drawn curtains, acting as though the world outside didn't exist?

Like I didn't exist.

Gripping the old fabric tightly in my fist, I shove the curtains open, letting bright morning sunlight grace the room for the first time in...ever. The sun illuminates the truly awful state of the room. Dust covers every surface in a thick, cloying layer. Particles dance through the rays streaming in from the window, pointing out every inch that desperately needs to be cleaned.

Bending down, I pick up the remnants of my hair clip, holding one half in each hand. Somehow, the pieces feel symbolic, as though it's a perfect representation of myself. Shining and bright on the outside, tattered and broken on the inside and split down the middle—torn between my past and present.

Swallowing thickly, I shove the clip into the pocket of my hoodie, saving it for later. I know just what to do with it.

But first, I need to clean.



“Good morning, Eve.” Mary’s voice pulls me from the new messages and I close the Favorite Fans app, locking my phone and pressing it face-down on my thigh.

Daddy555 just won’t quit this morning. It’s becoming annoying.

“Hi, Miss Mary,” I say, dabbing the sweat from my forehead with the back of my hand, trying to stomp my annoyance down.

It’s hot and humid. My dress is clingy, and my hair is sticking to my neck. I hate being sweaty, especially when I’m supposed to be at my best. Despite knowing it gets hot in the church, I’m a million times hotter because I had to walk.

And I had to walk because instead of waiting for me like usual, Isaac left while I was in the shower without a word.

Now I’m royally pissed off.

“You’re looking—”

“Hot,” I finish for her, laughing tightly. She presses her lips into a thin smile as she sinks onto the pew beside me. We’re front row, as usual, and waiting for Isaac to appear from his office.

I dab my forehead again and glance over my shoulder, finding the church full. People wave fans in front of their faces, trying to fight the heat. Some are sitting, but many are standing. We don’t have a lot of seating, so it’s first come first served, but everyone saves at least one spot for me at the front.

Today, unfortunately, Mary snagged the seat beside me.

I should have brought my big purse so I could at least feign saving a seat for Oli. I internally scoff. She never wakes up early enough for Sunday service.

“Are you excited about the announcement today?” Mary asks, leaning toward me.

“Announcement?” I push my brows together, confused. “What announcement?” She smiles coyly before turning her attention to the little stage. Her annoying grin widens as Isaac’s heavy footfalls bound up the few steps.

“Good morning y’all,” he shouts loud enough for everyone to hear, even Old Man Jenkins in the back. I stare at her a moment longer, wishing I could read her fucking mind.

What announcement?

Slowly, I turn toward the stage, really taking Isaac in for the first time since last night. He’s somehow taller and more handsome. His presence is bigger—more consuming. Now I know what his lips taste like, the way his hard body feels over mine, pounding me deeper and deeper into insanity.

It was blissful and idiotic, yet it happened and I don’t want to go back to how things were before.

My pussy pulses as a vivid memory of Isaac hovering above me, his hips driving into me like he was trying to exercise my soul of demons, flits through my mind. I cross my legs tightly and shift in my seat.

Mary grips my hand, snagging my attention. I jump with a tiny gasp. My neck snaps in her direction so fast, my head pounds in protest. Mary doesn't pay me any mind, staring straight ahead, her smile saccharine, her eyes wide and doe-like. I yank my hand away, nearly gagging at the way our sweaty palms glide against one another.

Gross.

“God Almighty, this is so excitin’,” she breathes, leaning forward in anticipation.

What the hell has gotten into this woman? Apparently the demons left me and entered her.

“Amen,” the congregation murmurs as one, lifting their heads from their respectful bows of praise before turning their attention back to our faithful leader.

Shit, I missed the morning prayer. I'm seriously out of it right now. As if to agree, my head throbs painfully.

With a grimace, I snatch my hanky from my small purse and blot my forehead like the lady my mama raised me to be. Isaac gently lays his Bible onto the pulpit and slides his hands into his perfectly ironed slacks.

“Before we get started with today's service, I've got a bit of an announcement to make.” His cheeks, golden tan from hours spent out at the lake, go pink with embarrassment and it makes me sit up straighter. Everyone in the church makes sounds of excited encouragement, but I tune them out, my entire being homing in on him.

Isaac slips a hand from his slacks and awkwardly rubs the back of his neck. “We all know Mayor Alexander—he’s done great work for Divinity over the last twelve years.” He drops his hand and turns a genuine smile to the pew where our Mayor claims a seat every Sunday. “I think I speak for all of us when I say we appreciate the heck out of you, James.”

Mayor Alexander blots at his forehead with his own hanky and nods kindly. “It’s been a great run,” the ruddy older man agrees. “But it’s time to pass the baton to someone else.”

My eyes narrow as I stare between the two men. People shift in their seats, the excitement in the room palpable.

Isaac makes a sound of protest. “Are you sure you don’t wanna come on up here and say a few words? I’m sure everyone would love to hear from you.” His voice goes a bit more Southern than usual at the statement, and my brows dip.

Being born and raised in Florida, his accent isn’t nearly as thick as Mama’s was, but sometimes, when he’s nervous or excited, it gets thicker. Roman always hated it, but I find it comforting. Not right now, though. Right now, it just pisses me off.

The mayor waves him off. “I’ve had my moment in the limelight, Preacher Payne. Get on with it before we bake to a crisp, won’t you?”

Everyone laughs, murmuring sounds of agreement. I stay silent, but my body betrays me by releasing another rivulet of sweat that trickles down my spine.

“Stop with all the suspense,” Mrs. Baker calls, her usual softness replaced by irritation in the sweltering heat. “I’m about to croak. Spit it out, already.”

Chuckling, Isaac claps his hands. “Alright, alright. Don’t go startin’ a riot.”

He moves to the center of the stage and scans his eyes over the packed old building, taking in his loyal flock like God looking over His sheep. When he finally gets to my section, Isaac pauses, meeting my eyes with an unnerving gaze that makes me want to both wither up and die, and preen.

“Mayor Alexander came to me recently to let me know this term of service will be his last.” The murmurs grow in volume. A strange buzzing starts up in the back of my skull, like talons scraping over my scalp. “And I’ve decided to run in his stead.” The whispers turn to gasps. The buzzing transforms again, merging with my already pounding headache and becoming a crushing full-body weight.

It shouldn’t surprise me when Mary’s claps are the loudest in the entire fucking building, but it does. My head slowly turns, my eyes narrowed, my heart in my throat.

“You knew.” I spit the accusation at her. But like a bullet ricocheting off metal, it bounces off her shoulders with a prim, nonchalant shrug.

“He needed someone to confide in.” I bite my tongue so hard it damn near bleeds. The urge to scream is unbearable.

He had *me* to confide in. It's what I was there for—so he wouldn't be alone. So he had someone to lean on. To take the weight off his shoulders and help him carry it.

“Besides,” she continues, pulling me from my seething thoughts, “all those late-night phone calls and how often we talk, it was bound to come up, eventually.”

My nails prick into my bare thighs and my head goes light, reminding me to breathe or risk passing out here and now, making a bigger mockery of myself than I already feel.

How could he not tell me?

Mayor. It's a big deal—it's massive. It means more time spent away from home, the church. Campaigning. There will be an election—though I doubt anyone would run against him. He's loved here. Adored. He'll win. And then...

Then I'll lose him.

My brows crash together and my stomach threatens to revolt, my meager breakfast churning wildly in my gut.

Surely he'll make more money as Mayor. Is that why he's doing this? Guilt trickles in, mingling with my already fucked up thoughts.

But then another realization settles in.

I already do so much for him and our tiny, unconventional family. For the church, the town. How much more will I have to give?

Fingers brush over my shoulder in a move that could be misinterpreted as kindness, but I know better.

“I’m surprised he didn’t tell you,” Mary murmurs, keeping her voice down to not disturb Isaac, who, at some point, got on with the service.

Great.

The sooner he’s done, the sooner I can bolt.

I adjust the straps of my dress, trying to shrug her hand off. “It’s fine,” I whisper. But it’s not. Not at all. “He’s just been busy.”

Why am I making excuses for him?

Mary nods sympathetically, her tongue clicking in a motherly chastisement. “I know, dear. He works so hard.” Her gaze flits to Isaac and I swear to all that is holy; there are actual stars in her green eyes. “He does so much. Such a shame he does it all alone.”

“He’s not alone,” I hiss, my fists tightening around the hem of my dress. “He has me.” She blinks.

“But how long will that really last? Soon enough, you’ll leave the coop and where will he be then? Alone again.” She wipes the bleeding edge of her red lipstick with her finger, fixing a small smear. “We can’t have that, now can we?”

My heart pounds in time with my headache and my previous nausea returns with a vengeance. I can’t respond. Her words strike their intended mark with uncanny accuracy.

She's somehow found my biggest fears. The deepest wells of my guilt, my sadness. More than anything, I want to leave Divinity Falls. But with that dream, that soul-deep desire, comes unfathomable shame. It's why I haven't left yet, despite technically having enough money to do so. I *could* go. I might not get as far as I want to, but I've made money online, good money, and I'll continue to make it on the road.

If I just made the decision once and for all, I could see the world. I could leave this tiny backwards town. I could finally be free.

I could finally *breathe*.

But if I leave, he'll be alone and I can't do that to him.

Can I?

"Good thing he has me," Mary murmurs, making me jolt. "I'll be there every step of the way. Helping him win the election. Planning his schedule. Preparing his sermons. Cooking his meals, too, if that's what he needs. I'll hold his hand, don't you worry." She pats my shoulder placatingly, giving me a sympathetic look laced with triumph.

But I am worried.

Worried about how *furious* her words make me.

I shouldn't want to inflict violence on someone, especially not her, but here I am, immediately filled with sick images of my fist pummeling her face at the mere idea of her touching what's mine.

Because after last night, that's exactly what Isaac is.

Mine.

1:20 Isaac

She's pissed at me.

Her pretty cheeks are bright red in the cab of my truck as she does all she can not to meet my gaze. Her body is tightly wound, her arms clenched across her generous breasts as she looks out the window.

I can't help but stare at the creamy swell that's barely contained by the flimsy material. My cock pulses in time with her angry breaths.

Christ, she's beautiful.

Too beautiful for her own good. It's infuriating. But what's more frustrating is the instant reaction my body has to the sight of her. All she has to do is breathe, and I'm seconds from exploding.

I hate it.

I thrive on control. It's how my life has to be: order, *discipline*.

Pulling up in front of the house, the truck is barely off before Eve's door flings open, and she leaps out, her sundress billowing in the summer wind. I sigh as I slide out, my gaze glued to her body as she bounds up the porch steps.

She steps to the side, her arms crossed over her chest again as she glares at the front door. I pause when I get to her, my eyes flicking from her to the door.

"Waiting for me to open it for you?" I laugh. Her eyes slide to me, and if looks could kill, I'd be a pile of ash.

"It's locked."

"Why would you lock it?" I blink at her. We never lock the door. She shrugs, huffing out a breath.

"I don't know. I just did."

I stare at her for a long moment, waiting for more of an explanation. She's not acting like herself, but I understand why.

I fucked up.

I came before I was ready for it to be over. Then I was too much of a coward to face her and what we'd done together. I didn't know what to say or how to approach it, approach her.

So, I didn't.

I hid in my room until this morning, then went to the church like I did every Sunday. Except, unlike every other Sunday, I left her behind to fend for herself.

Kind of a dick move, but I couldn't face her.

I tried to shake it off, if for no other reason than to simply get through my day. I failed. Epically.

The second I saw her sitting in the pew, her big eyes staring up at me with equal amounts of ire and admiration, I felt it all crumble—all the lies I'd told myself last night, the false pretense that things would go back to how they were, dissolved in a puff of acrid smoke.

Who the fuck was I kidding to think we'd still just be Isaac and Eve, stepfather and stepdaughter, in the morning? I should've known that wouldn't be the case. I should've known that after a single taste of her, I'd never be able to go back.

My hand wraps around the doorknob, the key shaky as I fumble to slide it into the lock. I feel her beside me, her sweet warmth radiating off her like hellfire. The door barely opens before she steps forward, her breath harsh.

“Why did you leave me this morning?” she asks as I push it open further and step inside, dropping my sermon bag onto its rightful hook, maintaining an ounce of order where I still can. I take off toward the kitchen, leaving her to trail after me.

Fuck, I need to get away from her.

She's too tempting. Too sweet.

Just too *much*.

I head to the fridge, flinging it open and grabbing the pitcher of lemonade she made yesterday. It's a rare day I drink anything other than water, but I need something to take the edge off.

I'd rather the wine we had last night, but lemonade will have to do. I messed up once, I can't do it again.

"Isaac—" I don't look at her as I pull a glass from the cabinet. "Are you drinking lemonade?" I nod, my back still to her, but I can't miss the shock in her voice. Sighing, I bring the glass to my lips, wincing as the tart, too-sweet liquid hits my tongue. I hate this shit.

"Hell," I choke. "Did you use a whole bag of sugar?" I turn toward her and lean against the counter, still wanting to keep as much distance between us as possible. Not for the first time, I wish our small square-shaped kitchen was bigger. Maybe if we had an island, I could hide behind it the way I want to hide behind my lies.

"What—no." She lets out an irritated huff as she points to the pitcher. "I used the normal amount. Stop distracting me! Why did you leave this morning? You called for me but didn't wait."

"I was letting you know I was leaving," I say, feigning a nonchalance I don't feel. Is it hot in here? My fingers shake as I fumble with the top button of my dress shirt. "Just like I do every other Sunday."

"No," she drawls, her cute brows pinched taut. "We drive together, especially during the summer. You know how hot it is. I was all sweaty—"

"Everyone was sweaty, sweetheart," I say gently, hiding my smile at her dramatics. She huffs out another breath, rolling

her eyes as she looks around the kitchen. “I didn’t know walking would upset you so much.”

“It’s not about the walking,” she mumbles. I take another sip, holding in a gag at the overly sweet drink. I turn and pour the rest down the drain, choosing my preferred water over this liquid diabetes concoction. “It’s just—last night—”

I drop the glass in the sink, wincing as it bounces off the porcelain. Luckily, it doesn’t shatter, but I wish it would’ve. It would’ve been the perfect excuse to not talk about this. To ignore what happened. Just for a bit longer.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I take a deep breath, forcing my racing heart to slow. “Drop it, Eve.”

“But—” I whirl around to face her again, my hands gripping the edge of the counter. She’s closer now, her face open and completely readable.

That’s what I’ve always loved about Eve. That she doesn’t try to hide her emotions, I can read them clearly on her face.

“Look, about that,” I sigh, and her doe eyes widen innocently. “Last night was—”

“Don’t say it was a mistake,” she whispers, her throat bobbing. “Please.”

I stare at her, my fingers digging into the old wood. It wasn’t a mistake. I don’t know what it was, but mistake doesn’t feel right.

Instead of saying anything, though, I push off the counter and head toward the stairs. I just need time to think. To figure

out exactly what I want. What we need.

“Isaac!” she cries, following after me. I say nothing, quickening my pace.

Our footsteps are loud as we climb the steps. The temperature in our home grows with every *thump* of my feet against the cursed staircase I hate so fucking much, and I find myself choking on the stagnant air. My eyes flutter and I mindlessly begin to unbutton my too-tight shirt once more.

Before I make it to my door, she grabs my wrist. “*Stop.*”

The single whispered word is like an atom bomb dropping into the center of our house. Just like that, Eve implodes my carefully laid plans with the snap of her dainty fingers. I take a deep breath, praying for patience, my free hand braced on the wall, my back still to her.

“Let me go,” I say softly, but she doesn’t.

Breathe in.

“Why didn’t you tell me about running for mayor? Why would you tell Mary and not me?” she asks, her voice shaky.

Breathe out.

My brows push together, and I slowly turn around, balancing on the step above her.

“What?”

“You’re running for mayor,” she repeats, and I don’t miss the hurt in her pretty blue eyes. “Why didn’t you tell me? I thought—I thought you tell me everything.”

“I do, sweetheart,” I murmur, the small lie flowing easily from my sinful tongue. “But why would you care about this? It means nothing. James asked if I’d be interested, and Mary convinced me it’d be a good idea.”

“But how did she know?” Eve cries, the sound broken.

My brows crash together and my heart rattles with anxiety. “She was in my office when he came to talk to me,” I say slowly, shaking my head. “Why does it matter?” She stares up at me, her gaze clouding with tears.

“Why was she in your office, Isaac?” she whispers. “Are you—are you two—” She can barely get the words out, and I grip her wrist.

“No, sweetheart. We’re not.”

“But, she said—”

“It doesn’t matter what she said, does it?” I ask, my tone hardening in frustration.

There are so many things I keep from Eve. So many. To protect her. To protect the foundation we exist on. She’s so innocent, so young. Fragile. We don’t have conversations like this and it’s the exact reason why I can’t have things changing the way she’s asking for. *I can’t*.

“You trust me, don’t you? Mary and I are nothing to each other. Nothing other than friends.” I stop short of saying how useful Mary is. She picks up the pieces where Eve can’t, keeping my life—*our* lives—running smoothly. I don’t say that though, knowing it’ll make things worse.

“She’s your friend,” she drawls, testing the words. I nod.

And it’s the truth. Mary is a beautiful woman. She’s kind, and giving, and loves helping the community and the church. But she’s not my type.

Cami was short with dark hair and eyes, her skin deeply tanned and her Puerto Rican soul fiery. She was beautiful and exciting. But more than that, she was fun. And being raised the way I was—in that trailer with my sorry excuse for a father—I desperately needed fun.

It was part of the reason I was with Cami. We offered a mutual escape, falling easily into drugs, alcohol and sex. But then she got pregnant and we didn’t have a choice but to be together and suddenly her fire wasn’t so cute anymore.

She wasn’t wife material. She wasn’t mother material. She wasn’t *good* for us.

Then there was Jane. Sweet, sweet Jane. She was the perfect woman who offered Roman and I solace at the perfect time.

Graceful and beautiful, with long blonde hair, similar to Eve’s. It was always tied in a neat bun, but at home, she let it free and I loved it. Loved running my fingers through it, tugging on the tangles. The way she made sure the kids and I were well taken care of, even before herself. She was the definition of a southern housewife.

But she had her downfalls, just like everyone did. She compared me too much to Grant, her late husband. And, despite his best efforts to push her away, she never gave up on

Roman. No matter how many times I told her he was a lost cause, that he'd rather spend his time fucking and fighting than being a devout Christian or quarterback, she never stopped trying.

It broke a piece of my heart, but I'd long since learned that Roman and I were like oil and water. We didn't mix. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't get through to him.

But now he's gone, and it doesn't matter anymore. Our relationship, or lack of it, doesn't matter. I've moved on. I've had to.

"Why didn't you tell me, though?" Eve asks again, her voice hushed, her fingers clenched tightly in her tiny, indecent dress.

"Sweetheart," I sigh and pinch between my eyes, soothing the building pressure away. I'm too tired to talk about this. Too worn out from the emotional ups and downs the past twenty-four hours has had on me. Too damn hungover and yet somehow already craving the sweet release I'll find at the bottom of a bottle.

"I have a right to know these things," she says, and slowly, my eyes flutter open, my forehead creasing.

"Do you?" I quip. Her resolve nearly crumbles, but she puts on a brave face, straightening her shoulders. My gaze narrows as I scan her, taking in every tempting inch. She really is a stunning little thing.

I hate it.

“It affects me,” she says confidently. “I should’ve known.”

“Actually,” I drawl, “it affects *me*.”

“But—”

“No, Eve,” I say, cutting her off with a slash of my hand. I’m quickly tiring of this conversation. Why can’t she just understand? “I didn’t tell you because it wasn’t important. You don’t have to worry about it because I will take care of things just as I always have and you need to let me,” I implore, running a finger lovingly down her cheek to soften my words. Her jaw tenses, and fire dances in her eyes.

This is new.

She’s combative, but never defiant. Yet there it is, burning bright. It makes my lips twitch and my heart race in excitement.

“Just keep being the good little girl I know you are, and everything will be fine,” I murmur, my eyes absorbing every hair and freckle as though they might disappear.

Eve’s eyes widen at my words but she quickly shakes it off, jerking her head from my touch. My teeth grind.

“How can you act like nothing happened?” She hisses. “You *came* inside of me, Isaac. You didn’t even have the decency to wear a condom.”

I can’t help it, I chuckle, waving the concern away. The idea of me procreating ever again is laughable. “I had a vasectomy while Cami was pregnant with Roman.”

Eve blinks rapidly, clearly not expecting that. And why would she? Sex isn't a topic I ever thought we'd discuss, especially not my ability to reproduce. "You did?"

"Yes." The word should be comforting to her. The fact that birth control isn't something she'll need to worry about with me, but instead of relaxing, she seems to bristle more. Fuck, I can't win here. "What now, Eve?"

"You should have told me so I didn't spend all night freaking out," she mutters, shaking her head in frustration. "Regardless, how can you pretend like last night changed nothing?"

"Because it didn't," I say sharply. Her head rears back and her lips part. "Forget about last night. Now go—"

"You can't fuck me then go back to treating me like a child," she interrupts with a shout, her hands darting out as if to shove me. She drops them at the last second and I'm thankful for it. That's not her, not us.

But I can't have her behaving like this. Already the façade, the perfectly sculpted world I've created for us to exist in, is crumbling, making my head spin.

"Language," I snarl.

She huffs a sardonic breath that makes my hand tingle, ready to punish her defiance. This isn't how I raised her. "I think we're past that."

"You'll respect me, Eve," I say, stepping to the edge of the stair, towering over her. "You'll watch your language. You

understand me?” Her eyes shudder at the firmness of my tone, and a sick sense of triumph fills me.

“Yes, sir,” she rasps with a deep breath. “I just meant—”

“I know what you meant. But this conversation is over.” I turn to head the last few steps to my room, but her voice stops me again.

Dammit, so close.

“I just don’t understand.”

My grip on the banister tightens and, as if it could block out her words, I squeeze my eyes shut.

“I thought I meant more to you,” she rasps.

Those are the words that finally break me.

Whirling around, my eyes are wide as I stare down at her, my chest heaving with each labored breath. My body is trembling, my gaze blurring around the edges. I tried. I tried so fucking hard to protect her from this, from me.

“How could I ever give you more than I did last night?” I say, my voice raising with each word. “Everything you are threatens the very foundation of our lives, Eve. We can’t be anything more. I can’t give you anything other than what I already have.”

“But—”

“But nothing,” I interrupt, yelling now, hating every acrid word spilling from my damned lips. “What do you think people would say if they knew I slept with my stepdaughter?”

They'd run me out of town. They'd burn me at the damn stake." Her breath comes in a short gasp, and I soften my face and tone. "It's not your fault, sweetheart. We both made our choices, but with the mayoral race coming up and the church, we have to keep what happened between us."

"I don't want to," she whispers. "I—I don't regret it. It meant something to me, Isaac. It's the first time in years that I've felt something other than alone." Her nose gets red the way it does right before she cries, and my resolve to stay away withers and dies, just like the future I've carved out.

Gripping the back of her neck, I pull her mouth to mine, kissing her hard. She gasps against me, her breath warm and sweet as I inhale her. Devour her. So good. She tastes so fucking perfect. Feels so right against me.

"You think you don't mean anything to me?" I growl. "You think you had no effect on me? That I've been able to think about anything other than the way it felt to be inside you?"

I can't take it anymore. Just the soft touch of her lips against mine is enough to break any restraint I had on myself.

"If you want me so bad, show me," I demand.

Gripping her thin wrist tightly, I yank her up the remaining stairs between us and back her against the wall next to my door. My hands trace down the sinful curves of her body, finding the hem of her dress blindly. I gather the thin fabric in my fist, bunching it around her waist as I shove my knee between hers, forcing her legs apart.

Eve's hot, already-wet pussy connects with my thigh and she gasps, her hands moving to my unbuttoned shirt as if to steady herself. She doesn't move her hips like I expect, so I drop my hands to them, my fingers digging into her soft flesh as I force her hips back, then forward, encouraging her to use me.

"Isaac," she whines, the sound going straight to my throbbing cock.

I cut off any more words and press my lips to hers again. Finally, she grinds against my thigh on her own, and I groan into her mouth, feeling her wetness soak into my pants.

"That's it," I grunt, feeling feral as she writhes in my arms. The dark, ugly pieces of myself that I've spent years burying, healing, battling against my ribcage, clawing to get out.

When lust has conceived, it brings forth sin: and sin, when it is finished, brings forth death.

I repeat the scripture again and again, trying to ground myself, right myself, but I can't. It's impossible when I'm with her, her breath fanning against my face, her whimpers of pleasure permeating my every cell. It's like she's rewriting my DNA.

I squeeze my eyes shut, desperate to shove my demons back where they belong, but with every pant and moan, I lose.

Maybe I was always destined to.

I tighten my hands around her hips and force her down, making her grind that sweet pussy harder, slowly dying inside as she begs for more. "So greedy, aren't you?" I rasp.

“Jesus,” she breathes, dropping her head back. My hand lifts and wraps around her throat. I don’t squeeze, I just rest it there as I press her back against the wall. Still fighting. Still denying the darkness.

Her tongue lashes out, licking along my jaw. My shiver turns to a full body shudder when she bites down on my throat with bruising force, marking me. It snaps something inside me, and just like I knew it would, the ugliness slips free.

“My dirty little tempestuous slut,” I hiss in her ear, letting my fist close the way it’s been begging to. “You did this. Spread your legs and tempted me with your innocent cunt. Fuck yourself harder. Take what you asked for.”

Eve moans—moans like the needy whore I know she is. Her hips move faster as she drags her pussy along my leg, humping me like a bitch in heat.

“Isaac,” she cries again, her hands tightening in my shirt. “I—I—”

“This is why I have to pretend like nothing happened,” I growl, my voice low and rumbling against her skin. “Because the second I think about you, about your perfect, tight pussy wrapped around my cock, I lose control. You do this to me. You make me a monster.”

“Oh God,” she moans breathlessly.

“There’s no room for God here, sweetheart. Only me.” Her eyes squeeze shut, her mouth hanging open as she moves faster, rolling her hips harder, chasing her pleasure.

It's beautiful to watch an angel fall.

My hand tightens around her throat, my gaze glued to her face as I watch her lips tremble. "That's it," I whisper, entranced by the way her cheeks turn bright red. "Come on my leg like the needy girl I know you are." Her breath catches as her eyes tear up. With parted lips, her entire body goes taut and I know she's right there. "Come for me, Evelyn."

She cries out, her thighs squeezing mine between them as she comes. I force my thigh to move, drawing out more of her pleasure. She tightens her shaky hands, her little whimpered pleas spurring me on as I continue dragging my thigh against her dripping core.

"Please," she whimpers, her head thrashing back and forth in my gentle grip. "Please. Please. Please—"

I pull my leg away, leaving her breathing heavily as she leans against the wall. A cool breeze hits my leg, letting me feel exactly how wet my nice church pants are. It's as sexy as it is infuriating.

This entire thing is one mess after another.

Moving my hands to the buckle of my belt, I undo it. Her eyes flutter, her hungry gaze devouring my movements as she watches me whip my belt off in a fluid motion. I have to wrap it around my hand before I let the darkness give me a better use for it.

"Isaac," she breathes, but I ignore her as I kick my shoes off and shove my pants down my legs. She's watching me like

she's anticipating something more, but this was all I could give her without losing every bit of sanity I have left.

Now, I have to go pick up the fucking pieces she shattered. There is no other option.

"You made a mess," I grit out, tossing the wadded up pants at her. "Clean it up."

Before my bedroom door slams shut, I catch her choked out words and feel them settle deeply inside my soul. "What the fuck was that?"

Running a hand through my hair, I whisper an answer, knowing she can't hear me. "Your ruin."

Because there is no way this thing between us ends in anything but our mutual damnation.

But fuck, if I'm not excited to burn.

1:21 Eve

“Holy Christ,” I murmur, eyeing the opulent hotel. My fingers clutch the handle of my overnight bag like I’m afraid it’ll drown in the shiny marble flooring, never to be seen again.

Isaac chuckles softly and steps up to the front desk to check us in, leaving me to peruse the lobby. I’ve never been to a hotel like this—one with an elevator that goes above three. My eyes search the vast expanse surrounding me and, sure enough, it’s thirty floors.

I swallow thickly.

How on earth is he affording this?

Shaking my head, I force myself to accept the gift, the kindness, without question or guilt. This weekend isn’t for my conscience. It’s an adventure—hopefully, the first of many.

The only real trip I’ve ever been on was the one to Atlanta with Mama all those years ago. It was just after Daddy started chemo. He’d arranged the whole thing. Planned it so his

favorite girls would be out of the house when he returned, unwilling to let us be tainted with the truth of his illness.

I'm pretty sure Mama knew exactly what he was up to, putting on a happy, brave face for my benefit, but I had no idea.

At the time, we didn't have a lot of extra money. Our car and home were nice, but they were provided by the church. The hotel we stayed at in Atlanta was a couple-star motel off the freeway, but Mama, being her sweet, vibrant self, made it an adventure, just like everything else.

Growing up, I never felt like I went without. I never felt the hunger so many do. Never questioned my safety. Never felt the loneliness other kids experienced.

Kids like Roman.

My parents were wonderful humans. They did the best they could. I'll never fault them a single thing, but sometimes—*sometimes*—I wish we could've had a bigger life. Not financially. Not in opulence or jewels. Just *more*.

I wish I wouldn't have lived a childhood in a tiny, religious town with closed-minded people, only to find myself in another town that's just as stifled. Just as backward. I wish I would've had more friends and less prying eyes. Less sheltering and more experiencing.

It feels suffocating.

More often than not, I feel like I'm still choking on the thick repression of my existence.

I click my tongue, tracing my fingers over one of the cognac mid-century couches adorning the waiting area. I sound just as broken and pessimistic as Ro used to.

“Eve,” Roman sighs, pointing to the highlighted quote in our shared book. “Read it again. Really read it. What’s it say?”

He passes me the book, and our fingers graze each other, sending shivers down my spine. I swallow back the breathy sound that tries to escape, forcing myself to focus on the words.

“The mystery of human existence lies not in staying alive, but in finding something to live for.”

He nods, shoving his messy black hair from his face. “And what does that mean?”

My eyes track his movements, absorbing them like a woman starved of oxygen. I blink. Once. Twice. “It means life is precious.”

He cocks his head to the side, and that damn wayward strand falls in his hazel eyes again. “Is it?”

“Obviously,” I scoff. His brow arches in disbelief. “Roman, life is precious. You only have one. You can’t waste it. You must live a big life. Exist big. Otherwise, what’s the point?”

Ro gives me a long, questioning look. “And do you want a big life, Golden Girl?”

Chills break out over my skin at the nickname—one that started off as an insult feels like so much more lately. I smile

widely. “*The biggest.*”

My eyes squeeze shut, and my stomach flips uncomfortably. I haven’t thought of him much lately, especially not in the last three weeks since the anniversary of Mama’s death. I’ve been too busy trying to wrap my brain around the insanity of my new normal.

I scoff internally. As if this thing between Isaac and me could be considered *normal*.

He’s been hot and cold, pushing me away and pulling me back in, just like that afternoon outside his room. Some days, he doesn’t speak to me at all, choosing to pretend I don’t exist. Part of me likes those days, sinking into the idea that ignorance truly is bliss.

But then, Isaac will storm into the house after a long day of campaigning, looking exhausted, and pin me to the hot stove with drugging kisses, and chaotic hands, reminding me exactly what bliss feels like.

A hand ghosts along my spine, and I jump, letting out a squeak. Isaac’s breath tickles the back of my neck and his touch gains pressure. Looking over my shoulder, I find a soft smile gracing his too-handsome face.

It makes me dizzy.

“You alright, sweetheart?” he chuckles.

I place a hand on my chest, breathing deeply. “You scared me.”

He kisses the side of my head. “We wouldn’t want that, now would we?” My mouth gapes open, and my brows dip. Who the hell is this man, and where is my stepfather? “Come on. Room’s ready.”

Unable to find any words, I simply nod and let him turn me toward the elevator. I expect his hand to disappear since we’re in public, but it doesn’t. To anyone else, we could be just any other couple here for a weekend away.

No one knows us.

We’re three-hundred miles from Divinity Falls. Neither of us have ever been to Savannah, and even if someone did recognize us, his touch could hardly be misinterpreted as anything but a friendly gesture.

To anyone except me.

To me, it feels like a brand. Red-hot and iron infused.

I have to choke back the permanence that settles deep in my bones at the thought.

The elevator dings, announcing our arrival to our floor, and I blink rapidly to focus, realizing I zoned out again. Isaac’s hand on my lower back guides me down a long, winding hallway. We stop in front of an unassuming door at the very end of it and for some reason, the sight of the soft grey wood makes my heart hammer in my chest.

One door.

Not two. Just one.

Isaac is calm. Completely unphased and unaware of the maelstrom of emotions battering around inside me.

His hand is steady as he slips a plastic keycard from his back pocket and scans it. His voice is soft as he guides me inside with a whispered, “Go on, sweetheart.” His touch is gentle when he slides his fingers down my spine in a barely-there gesture.

I swallow hard as I scan the wide open space, devouring every inch of the hotel room, burning all the tiny details into my brain forever.

The room is larger than I’d been expecting, and much nicer. A dark wood desk with the fanciest lamp I’ve ever seen sits in one corner, overlooking one of the many windows. A dresser in the same dark wood sits in front of the bed, a TV mounted to the wall above it.

I kick my sandals off, feeling the soft carpet beneath my feet as I move to the windows overlooking downtown. People bustle about, rushing to get to their jobs, or tourists looking for their next stop.

A two-seater couch and armchair are on the opposite side of the room, a small coffee table between them. Isaac sets our bags on the sofa casually, his focus solely on them.

I can’t believe he’s not looking around like I am. This has to be the nicest place either of us have ever stayed, yet he’s acting as if this is just another day. Like we’ve done this a million times before. Like we’ve stayed somewhere like this before.

It's a beautiful place—clean and safe, and smells like fresh roses. I have the perfect view of the sun high in the sky, and I know tomorrow morning, when the sun is first rising, I'll have the most breathtaking view of it, of the way it'll bathe downtown Savannah in a soft glow.

But even in its beauty, the one thing I can't get past is the bed.

Because there's just one.

“One bed,” I breathe, running my sweaty palm across the creamy duvet.

Excited anticipation washes over me, replacing some of the nerves that'd been growing since he told me about our trip all those weeks ago. One bed. It has to mean something.

“I want to unpack before we head out,” he calls.

I spin to look at Isaac, watching as he sets about mindlessly straightening everything in that way I find so frustrating, yet charming. Content to watch him, I slowly sink onto the bed and run my fingers through my tangled curls.

After unpacking all his clothes, hanging the ones that'll crease and tucking the rest in the dresser, he places his bag on the floor with a single-minded focus. Enthralled, I watch as he slips his lightweight jacket from his broad shoulders and hangs it on a hook, leaving him in a tight white t-shirt and dark jeans that fit him like a glove.

Jesus, he's so hot.

With flecks of salt and pepper weaving throughout his thick hair and stubbled beard, Isaac looks every bit his forty-one years, but I've never thought of his age before. Not the way I am now.

Since I met him, Isaac's been there for me. He's cared for me, protected me. And when Mama passed and Roman left, he kept me. With that one act alone, he became so much more.

More than a friend or a stepfather. More than a guardian.

Just *more*.

"What's that look for?" he murmurs, pulling me from my thoughts and mindless ogling.

I smirk and shrug, unwilling to divulge how deep my feelings for him are. It's silly—childish, even. "Nothing," I lie. My fingers trace over the soft blanket beneath me, my nerves threatening to choke me. "There's just one bed."

I don't know why I say it, but something inside me needs his confirmation, his reassurance.

Despite the fact that we've been messing around for weeks, he's still yet to readdress the conversation we had after church that day. Even worse, when we're outside the house, he acts like I don't exist at all, only to turn around and lavish me with attention the second we're alone, filling me full of sweet words and cum.

I understand the need for discretion but it's slowly driving me insane.

Isaac cocks his head to the side, observing me, making me squirm. My skin breaks out in vicious goosebumps. His attention is unnerving.

“Did you want two beds?” he drawls.

“No,” I blurt, and immediately chastise myself.

Way to keep it cool, Eve.

His lip tips up in a quick smile but it falls from his face just as quick. Suddenly, he looks nervous. “I wanted a nice room for you. I know this is your first big trip.” He shifts awkwardly. “Don’t you like it?”

It takes a moment for his words to sink in, but when they do, the feeling I’ve grown accustomed to wearing like a second skin penetrates my happy bubble once more: *guilt*.

Of course, there’s only one bed. The hotel is gorgeous, the room is massive and near the top floor. It had to have cost him a ridiculous amount. Two rooms would have been out of the question and I doubt a double room would have had such a lovely view without costing an arm and a leg.

The urge to apologize hits me like a wrecking ball, but I choke it down. I’m smart enough to realize Isaac doesn’t do anything he doesn’t want to and like he said, he wanted this to be special for me. I’ll be damned if I ruin his surprise.

Pushing off the bed, I let the hem of my long flowy skirt drop to my bare feet and close the distance between us. With my head tilted back, my long hair ghosts the middle of my back, tickling the bare skin between my skirt and crop top.

“I couldn’t have chosen better myself. It’s perfect. I love it.”

I almost say I love *you*, but stop myself before it can slip out. I’ve told him I love him hundreds of times over the years, but with the shift in our relationship, the words feel like something else all together. Something neither of us is ready to address.

His smile is wide, making my heart flutter chaotically. It quickly transforms to a look I’ve grown to crave over the last few weeks. One promising filthy nights and filthier words. My clit pulses in anticipation.

Isaac presses his lips to mine, letting his fingers trail a delicate path along my collarbone. His touch grows in strength with each agonizingly delicious second until finally, the heavy weight of his hand settles around my throat.

“And how are you going to repay me, sweetheart?” His words are a thick rasp against my lips and I almost moan at the sound. My tongue darts out as I meet his piercing gaze.

I’m not proud of the way my voice shakes as I speak. “I thought you didn’t want my money.” His chuckle is dark and filled with promises I’ve yet to interpret.

“I don’t want your money, I want your mouth.”

This time, I do moan. My body goes lax, my weight heavy against his tightening palm, letting his grip on me keep me standing.

“It’s yours.”

He gives the delicate column of my throat a tight squeeze, cutting off my oxygen. It shocks me as much as it turns me on,

and I can't fight my body's natural response to panic. My hands dart out, wrapping around his wrist but I don't pull him off. Not yet.

Isaac watches me, absorbing my reaction as though he's studying his precious Bible. The lack of oxygen takes me longer than it should to understand what he's looking for.

With a shaky, shallow inhale through my nose, one that's practically useless, I go limp in his hands, offering him my submission.

The response is immediate. Isaac releases my throat and wraps me in his arms as his mouth collides with mine again. The kiss is brutal, punishing yet adoring all at once.

It's an oxymoron. It should be impossible, yet with every second that passes, I fall more and more under his spell. I sink deeper and deeper into all that is him.

My friend.

My lover.

My stepfather.

His fingers thread through my hair, tangling in my wild curls. The tug and pull forces my neck to arch and a heady moan pours from deep inside me. He breaks our kiss, panting hard.

"You're right," he grits out, sounding tortured. "Your mouth is mine. I own it just like I own every sinful fucking word that spills from these thick lips. Every depraved desire." His thumb

traces my swollen bottom lip before he presses forward, prying my mouth open. “Suck.”

My hands find his hips and I squeeze them to keep myself upright as I do what I’m told, sucking his thick digit between my lips like it’s a popsicle. My tongue traces it, exploring, *learning*.

Isaac shivers and the sight of it has me dripping between my thighs. My ability to bring out this side of him is empowering. It’s like camming, but better because I’m not hiding. He knows it’s me wrapped around him, bringing him pleasure. He knows it’s me giving myself over, unrestrained and free.

“I own this mouth,” he continues, licking his own lip as if unable to stand not tasting me. “And I want to watch it swallow my cock whole. On your knees, Evelyn. Show me how good you can follow instructions.”

His thumb slips from my lips with a *pop* and I barely contain a needy whimper at his words. I’m so turned on, so dizzy with desire, I don’t even think twice before sinking to the floor before him.

“Yes, Daddy,” I whisper, shooting him a coy smile as I reach for the button on his jeans. He smacks my hand away and shoots me a disapproving glare.

“Do *not* call me that,” he snarls, his jaw ticking wildly. Feeling properly chastised and unbelievably idiotic for the joke, I swallow thickly as I nod. Bending over, he pinches my face in a firm grip, squishing my cheeks between his fingers as he presses my head back, forcing me to look into his dark

eyes. “When you’re naked and serving me, you’ll call me My Lord and nothing else. Do you understand?”

I shift, feeling wetness soaking through my lacy thong. Shit, why is that so hot? It’s seriously fucked up and should send me running for the hills but instead, I find myself seconds from bowing and worshipping at his alter.

“Yes, My Lord,” I whisper, unable to break his all-knowing gaze. “And what will you call me?” His eyes search mine as his fingers dig into my cheeks.

“When I see you like this, greedy and wanton, begging for my cum as if it’ll cleanse you of all your sins, it fucks with my head.” His grip softens with his expression. His lips ghost across my forehead as he murmurs, “My temptress little slut.”

“Holy shit,” I choke out before I can stop myself, my mouth suddenly dry.

Isaac huffs a laugh and stands tall. “Shirt and bra off. Let me see those perfect tits.”

I move slowly, with intent, as I follow his orders. My eyes stay locked on his, only losing his gaze when I pull my top over my head. My white lacy bra goes next, and then, I’m bare from the waist up. My long skirt is scrunched up around my thighs but nothing is visible.

I half expect him to tell me to take everything off but his brown eyes turn molten, going practically black with desire, and I know he’s lost. Lost to the ache pulsing between us, the

darkness he continually warns me against. The demons he swears thrive beneath his skin.

I didn't see them before, but now, with the way he's towering over me, his expression full of ownership and filthy intent, I believe it.

He has the Devil inside him and I, his willing lamb, am begging to be corrupted.

"Have you ever sucked a cock?" he murmurs, his fingers deftly working over the buttons and zipper as he watches me. I bite my lip and shake my head. His smile is borderline feral. "You'll learn to please me, then."

"Okay." The word is nothing more than a puff of air as his long, curved cock springs free from his pants and bobs between us. My mouth practically waters, even as my stomach twists with nerves.

I'm a fucking camgirl, for craps sake. I get naked and play with myself for the world to see and I do it happily, without a second thought. I fuck my ass and use toys. My sexy talk rivals Isaac's.

He's right, I am a slut and I love that about myself. I embrace my body, my dirty thoughts and desires. When I'm on camera, I revel in my feminine power, feeling every bit the sexual goddess I pretend to be.

I'm hardly virginal, but the reality is, before Isaac, I *was* practically a virgin. I'd only ever had sex with one other person, and it was just once. Missionary, in the dim light of

Roman's bedroom. He was way more experienced and knew what he was doing, guiding my body every step of the way, down to my very first, *and second*, orgasm.

Being with Isaac has been wholly different.

He hasn't guided me or coaxed orgasms from my body in slow, luxurious seductions. He's forced them from me with sheer determination, making my body bend to his will as if he truly is the Lord.

Everything with him has been explosive. The first time we fucked, our first kiss. The afternoon on the stairs and every kiss and touch since. This, my first blow job, feels every bit as impulsive and uncontrollable as the rest of him.

I lick my lips and nod as the truth finally washes over me.

It's not just what's between us that feels akin to a violent hurricane, ready to destroy at any second.

It's *him*.

He is the the storm, and fuck if I don't want to be swept away in his current.

"Open wide, tongue out." I do as he commands, tucking my legs beneath me to give me more height. "When I fuck this throat, you'll gag and choke around my cock. Don't panic, don't resist. Just accept the gift I'm giving you. Do you understand, Temptress?"

Licking my lips, I nod, feeling a sudden burst of nerves ricochet over my skin. Isaac steps forward and without any other warning, his leaking tip is pressing between my teeth.

“Fuck.” His groan is throaty in a way I’ve never heard from him before as he shoves himself deeper until he’s nearly in my throat, just as he’d promised.

I gag, not expecting the intrusion to be so painful. My hands fly up, gripping his jean-clad thighs, but I don’t push him away. I don’t think I could even if I wanted to.

His fingers thread through my hair and his head tips back in bliss, making me feel powerful. I relax my body, letting my throat follow suit, trusting him to take care of me.

“That’s it,” he coos, tugging me back softly by my hair. “Let me in your throat, temptress. Let me have what’s mine.”

I shudder at his words and try to nod around his cock. He pulls his hips back and then, all bets are off.

With a guttural sound, he slams forward, fucking my mouth with the same brutality he shows my pussy. Spit leaks from the corners of my mouth, my throat already too raw to swallow it down.

There’s something about the uncontrolled way he’s using me, groaning and shaking as though he can’t hold himself back, that has me ready to come without even touching myself.

My thighs clench tightly and the movement causes my stiff clit to throb with need. Unable to help it, I grip his thigh with one hand, keeping a bit of control where I can, and drop my other hand between my thighs. My skirt is easy to yank up and

seconds later, my fingers are sliding beneath my drenched thong.

“Christ,” he grunts, his eyes tracking my every movement. “You’re such a greedy little slut, you can’t stop yourself, can you?” I moan, sucking his cock harder as I slide two fingers deep inside myself with a whimper. “Fuck, Eve, you’re going to make me come already.”

I bob my head, doubling down my efforts as my orgasm begins to build. His thrusts increase with every suck and flick of my tongue. I match his pace, rolling my thumb over my clit.

My entire body is shaking, my nipples throbbing in time with my heartbeat. I can feel my eyes watering as my body begs for oxygen, but I don’t stop, refusing to relent when we’re both on the cusp of ecstasy.

“I can hear how sloppy your cunt is from here,” he groans, palming my neck tightly to keep me in place as he shoves himself deeper. “Breathe through your nose and swallow around me.”

My hand freezes and my throat protests. But, with watery eyes, I meet his burning gaze and force myself to relax. The place deep in my chest that aches for his approval, his praise, wants to please him. I feel my muscles convulsing around him, and his cock twitches as precum slides down my throat.

“Eve,” he rasps, a desperate, wild look blanketing his expression. “I—fuck—” He steps back and rips himself from my mouth, making me choke and splutter, falling forward in

his absence. His fist wraps around my hair and he uses his tight grip to tug me upward like it's a leash.

I cry out at the sharp burst of pain and stumble to my feet. Before I can say a word, I'm being shoved into the unforgiving wood of the door. He rucks my skirt up and bunches it around my waist before his hand comes down on my bare ass cheek, making me scream. It's more the shock of the smack than the pain that causes the sound to rip from me, and after the sting sinks in, I'm ready for another.

Isaac's body blankets my back, the heat of him searing me like the sun. "Pull your panties to the side for me, temptress, I need to feel your dripping cunt wrapped around my cock."

"Fuck," I whimper, sliding them to the side. His hand settles between my shoulder blades, forcing me to bend at the waist with my cheek pressed into the door.

The position, the bright light streaming in through the windows, leaves nothing to the imagination. He can see all of me, and despite having thousands of subscribers who've seen the same view, this feels different. It's more intimate, more exposed.

His hand comes down on my ass cheek again, not hard enough to bruise, but enough to sting, making my core clench around nothing.

"Please, Isaac," I beg, shaking from head to toe.

I feel the swish of air ghost across my pussy seconds before his hand connects with my throbbing flesh.

“What did I tell you to call me, slut?” he hisses, slapping me again, and again until I’m writhing and crying out for more.

“My Lord!” I cry. “Please fuck me. I’m so close.”

He chuckles darkly. “Such a greedy fucking cunt, isn’t it? Thirsty for your Lord’s cum.” His free hand trails softly over my spine, the other gripping my hip with a bruising force. “Don’t worry, baby, I’ve got you.”

There’s a mocking lilt to his voice but I don’t care as long as he gives me what I want—what I’ll die without. I don’t have to wait long because as soon as the thought crosses my mind, Isaac shoves his cock inside me in one brutal thrust, filling me almost painfully. His hips pound against my ass, shoving me into the door with every punishing roll of his body.

“Yes,” I cry out, rubbing my clit furiously as my orgasm barrels into me, lighting up every cell and nerve like fireworks. “Oh my God!”

Isaac groans, his relentless thrusts halting as I clench down around him. “Fuck, fuck, fuck.” My orgasm goes on and on, one rolling into another as the first pulse of his cum explodes inside of me.

“Holy shit, Eve. Your pussy’s squeezing the hell out of me. Christ.”

It feels like hours pass before I’ve finally caught my breath. Isaac exhales a deep, shaky breath and slips from my abused core, leaving a trail of his sticky cum to trickle out. I groan,

using the door to push myself upright then grimace when more liquid spills down my thigh.

“Damn,” he murmurs, handing me my shirt and bra. I cock a sweaty brow at the proud look on his handsome face. “I like seeing you like this.”

“Fucked half to death?” I huff, sliding my bra on.

He clicks his tongue and turns toward the bathroom, likely to clean up. I yank my shirt on and follow him, needing to do the same.

“Don’t swear, sweetheart,” he gently chides.

I shove him playfully, my hand falling to my side like a dead weight. I honestly do feel like he fucked the life from me. “I think we’re past that, Isaac.”

I snag a washcloth from the vanity and flick the tap on hot. With one look in the mirror, I’m thankful I didn’t wear any makeup today due to the heat. I’m a mess.

After rinsing my face, I wet the cloth and wring it out. Isaac leans against the counter, his arms crossed over his impressive chest, and tilts his head to the side. “What are you doing?”

The confused look I give him should say it all but I clarify with words. “Cleaning up,” I say. “Obviously.”

He shakes his head and snags the wet cloth from my fingers, using it to wash his sticky, softening cock before tossing it into the hamper in the corner. I gape at him but he ignores me and closes the distance between us. Without a word, he slides my soaked thong into place and rights my skirt.

“What are—”

His lips press against mine as he cups my mound through my clothes. His mouth trails across my jaw until he reaches my ear and murmurs, “I want you walking around with my cum running down your thighs so all of Savannah knows who you belong to.”

“Isaac, I can’t do that—” I start, shaking my head even as a shiver rolls down my spin.

“You can and you will, little temptress.” He kisses me again, this time, so hard and thoroughly, I forget what I was protesting in the first place. He smacks my sore ass and turns me toward the door. “Now let’s go. We’ve got an art exhibit to see.”

1:22 Roman

The tent does nothing to squash the sweltering Georgia sun. I wipe my forehead with the back of my hand, barely holding in an annoyed groan at Chase's incessant talking. I shrug my shoulders, readjusting my tight black tee, and tense my jaw.

"Why are you here again?" I grumble, glancing at him over my shoulder. The fucker doesn't look sweaty in the least. If anything, the light sheen on his golden skin makes him look better. It's ridiculous.

"My pretty face is the thing that brings people in," he says, blinking in innocence.

"My work brings people in," I counter. He throws his head back and laughs, his throat bobbing and blond hair swaying.

"You're the grumpiest fucker on the planet," he says. "Maybe it's your work that draws their attention, but it's me who makes them actually stop." I roll my eyes and face forward again, my elbows braced on the folding table housing

prints of our flash tattoos and business cards. I flick my lighter in my hand, watching as the flame dances in the breeze.

Not for the first time since the party, my mind wanders back to Eve. What's she doing? Is she camming for some guy right now? Is she naked and fucking herself for the world to see?

My initial rage has simmered for weeks. And, like the emotional masochist I am, I subscribed to her Favorite Fans using a pseudonym. I told myself it was just to keep an eye on her, to make sure she wasn't getting harassed by creeps. But I know that's not true.

Because every night since I subscribed, I've fucked my fist to her videos, to her pictures. She hasn't updated it in weeks, and a part of me is worried, but another part is anxiously waiting for a new video, a new post, anything that tells me she's still alive, that Isaac hasn't found out and fucking killed her for ruining his precious reputation in that God forsaken Podunk town.

"Why did I move to America?" Kon grumbles, his accent thicker with his annoyance as he rounds the thin post in the center of the tent, a deep scowl on his bearded face. "And why did I choose the fucking South?"

I huff out a breath, the closest to a laugh I'll give, and ignore his dramatics. My gaze stays on my lighter, my thoughts still on Eve as I watch the metal lid open, the flame flickering to life, only to be snuffed out by the lid again.

Over and over, again and again, I watch the flame come to life then die.

“Anyway, so, I talked to Oli last night,” Chase says to no one and everyone, always eager for an audience. Sometimes, I wish I was more like him. Instead, I’m content to blend into the background. “Apparently, Robert got sick and she had to take him to the emergency vet.”

“Does Divinity even have an emergency vet?” I ask, my brows furrowed as Chase takes a deep breath behind me. My focus is still solely on the lighter, on the fire.

“Nope,” he says heavily as though the weight of the world rests on his shoulders. “She drove to the town over in the middle of the night, only to be told he was fine. That she’d given him too much damn peanut butter.” I snort a laugh at that, my lips tipping up. “I was so pissed at her.”

“Why?” I turn to look at him, resting my arm on the folding chair. He takes another deep breath, his face uncharacteristically serious.

“She drove by herself! It was one in the morning and she drove by her-damn-self.” He lets out a frustrated sound, throwing his arms out. I don’t want to ask—I don’t want to know. But I can’t stop the words from forcing their way out.

“Why didn’t she take Eve with her?”

He pauses and glances at me. “She’s not in town,” he says, and my brows lift.

“What?” I growl. “Where the fuck did she go?”

“No idea,” he says, shaking his head. “Eve wouldn’t tell me.”

I try to squash down the instantaneous rage at the realization that he spoke to Eve, *again*, but I can't. The turmoil that always writhes beneath my skin has been boiling for weeks now, ever since I saw that damn video. I can feel it getting closer and closer to the surface, like it's waiting to strike.

I just hope that when it does, it's not in the wrong direction.

"And Oli doesn't know?" I push to my feet, ready to sprint to Divinity and make Olive tell me where the fuck Eve is. My heart is hammering in my chest with every ragged breath. I haven't seen the girl in four fucking years. She's an adult, for shit's sake, she can take care of herself.

Except, she clearly can't, the little voice buried deep in the back of my mind hisses.

"She just said Eve went out of town for a few days," he shrugs, still eyeing me warily. "It's not a big deal. She's a grown woman, Ro. She can do what she wants."

My hands ball into tight fists at his words even though they echo what I just told myself.

Maybe she's a woman now, but she wasn't the last time I saw her. She was still a girl, still scared but curious about the world. And now? Now she's camming and traveling and doing fuck only knows what else. She's not the same girl I left. She's reckless and crying out for attention in all the wrong places.

If that doesn't scream disaster waiting to happen, I don't know what does.

Chase's gaze turns sharp as he watches me, his brows pushing together. "Hey, man, are you okay?"

"Great," I mutter as I shove past him. "I need a smoke."

Grabbing my pack of cigarettes from the table in the back, I leave the small white tent and stand off to the side, hidden from view but still able to see everyone exploring the festival.

It's a hot day, and I shouldn't be surprised there are so many people here, but fuck. They're like ants. There are a million of them.

Ripping the box open, I pull out a cancer stick and slip it between my teeth, the nicotine already doing something to calm me. The sound of my lighter flicking to life again, the faint sizzle of the paper as it ignites, the warm fire so close to my face, the thick smoke as it invades my lungs—it's a ritual I'll never give up.

I take a long drag, inhaling the smoke and holding it in until it makes my chest ache, until I feel my body begging for oxygen. Slowly, I release it, my eyes fluttering shut as I take another long inhale. It grounds me, makes me feel somewhat human.

Another pull, and I open my eyes, the bright sun reflecting off the concrete momentarily blinding me. Everything adjusts, the world around me dimming as my body continues to quiet. I scan the little groups of smiling people, the parents with their young kids, pointing and showing them the beauty of the world.

That bitter part of my soul rears its ugly head at the sight. For a short time, I saw the world that way. Eve taught me what the world could be. That it could be gentle and full of laughter. Full of love.

All I'd ever known was discipline—from my father, from the church, from God, from my coaches. Punishment in the form of harsh words, harsh hands and harsher lessons. Punishment in the form of losing my mom.

But then Eve came into our lives and everything got turned upside down.

For the first time, I watched my usually harsh father become soft. His touch was soft with her, with Jane. His eyes were warm, his smile was genuine. Everything about him changed seemingly overnight.

He couldn't keep the charade up forever, though, and parts of his darkness began to seep through. Not enough to alarm anyone, but the deep breaths he took to try to keep his composure, or the way his hands balled into fists, told me he was riding the edge of his control and I knew an explosion was bound to happen.

But it never did.

Never in front of me, at least.

Jane and Eve continued thinking he was the perfect man and father. That he was a good, God-fearing Christian. But I knew the truth. I knew what lurked in his soul, what demons he fought.

The same ones that exist in me now, crawling over my too-tight, scarred skin, begging to be set free.

A bright, tinkling laugh pulls me from my spiral and I blink a few times, the bright sun blinding me once more. My cigarette is almost gone, but as I hear the laugh again, it falls from my fingers to the ground.

My mouth parts and smoke billows out as shock fills me.

Eve.

My Eve is right there. So close I swear I can smell her sweet peach scent.

She's taller than she was the last time I saw her, and her body is more filled out. Her hair is still as wild as it's ever been, but there's something on her face—a genuine happiness I haven't seen in a long fucking time that guts me.

Despite myself, I look above her head and meet my father's gaze head on. He stares directly at me, his dark eyes scorching what's left of my black soul.

Then he looks away.

He looks away as if he hadn't just seen me, his only son, for the first time in four years. He looks away as if I'm nothing more than trash—and to him, I probably am.

To him, I'm just some tattooed fuck puffing away on a smoke, nothing more than a dreg of society. A memory of his not-so-pristine past.

And he looked away.

He just...looked away.

A weird mixture of relief at the fact that I won't have to speak to him and disappointment that he didn't recognize his last remaining family member, fills me with a force that has me doubling over. My skin itches again, the desire to scream, to cry, to bleed out here on the hot cement, bubbles up inside me.

But then the adrenaline hits. The anger. The rage. It takes everything left inside my broken soul not to chase after them. Not to demand to know what the fuck they're doing here.

Then, as if answering my silent question, Eve pushes onto her tiptoes and presses a kiss to Isaac's cheek. He smiles down at her, and even if his face is warm and inviting, his eyes aren't.

I've seen those eyes—I've been haunted by those eyes my entire life, and they're anything but warm.

With another bright laugh, she tugs on his arm and drags him to a booth a few down from Deliverance's tent.

And, just like that, they're gone.

They're out of my sight like they were nothing more than the smoke I just exhaled.

A sinking feeling hits my gut, and I know not even another cigarette will squash what I feel, what I hope to not be true.

Is she fucking him?

The question is like a bomb in my head, and once it goes off, I can't ignore it.

She's here with him. Kissing him, holding his hand, hanging onto him as though she's utterly familiar with his body—his touch. They look far too comfortable with each other for just a stepfather and stepdaughter.

They look like a couple.

All the rage from the last few weeks finally boils to the surface, and I stomp my way back into the tent, barely resisting the urge to rip the entire thing down and burn it to a pile of ash. At least then I'd have a visual representation of the war happening inside of me.

The destruction.

I grab my keys from the back table, my hands shaking as every emotion imaginable rolls through me.

“Where are you going?” Kon barks, his Russian accent thick with anger. Too fucking bad. “We have customers. They came all this way to see you.”

“I can't be here,” I say, my voice too raw, too exposed, like a live wire waiting to ignite. I don't sound like myself. I sound like the shell of a man I once was. Alone and broken. Homeless.

Chase is by my side in an instant. He hovers, not touching me, but close enough to let me know he's there. He knows. He always knows. If not for Eve, he'd be the other half of my soul.

I can't look at him.

I can't.

I'll break.

"I have to go," I rasp. My lighter is clutched tightly in my shaky hand as I roll my shoulders. "I—"

"Go?" Kon's feet pound on the pavement as he makes his way to me. "What do you mean, *go*?"

"I mean, I have to go," I grit out, my anger hotter than the sweltering day. "I'm leaving."

Before they can ask more questions, I force my way between them, ignoring their shouts as I stomp down the long rows of booths, heading for my car. I don't bother with my tattoo equipment, knowing one of them will pack it up for me. I don't think about anything other than giving into my desire to flee.

I can't be here when I know *they're* so close.

Maybe it's been years since I last saw her, but I knew her better than anyone. And what I saw wasn't right. What I saw, the truth of it shattering any hope I had left for her, settles deep in my soul.

That wasn't my Eve.

My Eve is long gone—maybe she's been gone as long as I have. But knowing this is the way her life has turned out makes me sick. Knowing she's opening her legs for men—

even if it's just online and they can't actually fuck or touch her, it still makes my blood hum.

But what makes me murderous is the way my father's touch was so familiar. The way she didn't even hesitate to kiss him. The way they seemed so at ease with each other.

This isn't a first for them.

And that knowledge has me speeding away from the festival, and heading straight for Hell.

1:23 Isaac

The sound of Eve humming fills the cab of my truck and the familiar tune has my lip kicking up into a smile that makes my cheeks hurt. Or maybe that's just because after the weekend we shared in Savannah, the muscles there are uncharacteristically sore.

I can't remember the last time I smiled or laughed so much.

It felt different there, away from the prying eyes in Divinity. We didn't have to worry about angry whispers or damning gossip. Eve was different in Savannah, too. Lighter. Happier. The knowledge that I'd been able to do that for her, make her laugh and dance around the streets freely, made something in my chest soften. Something I haven't felt in...

I don't even know how long.

I'm almost sad to return home. But the world doesn't stop just because we'd like it to. It goes on, people continue to exist and need, their greed for other's time and energy unrelenting.

I enjoy my work. Thrive on the order and structure. I like being needed. Feeling important is a heady thing, especially when you were raised to be nothing more than an afterthought, only granted attention in the form of callous words and painful strikes.

I roll my neck side to side as if to shrug off the unwanted memories of fists meeting flesh. Eve's humming comes to a stop just as I turn down the familiar gravel road that leads to our home.

We didn't speak much on the drive back, content to just enjoy the scenery and relax after a busy, hot weekend exploring Savannah. The art festival was interesting, but not really my scene. Seeing her in her element made it worth the discomfort. Spending nights and mornings wrapped in each other was just an added bonus.

With a sigh, she gives me a rueful smile as I put the truck into park. "Home sweet home."

At her reluctance to get out, I laugh and press a kiss to her temple. "Come on. We've got to get ready for church in the morning."

She huffs, sliding from the cab when I do. "And make sure Kevin didn't burn the place down."

I roll my eyes but my gut clenches just the same. I spin toward the church, squinting when the glare of the setting sun bounces off Barry's Pond, nearly blinding me. With my hand over my eyes to shield me, I can just make out the perfect, if not worn, shiplap structure. Four white walls. Still intact.

I release a long breath making Eve burst out with laughter. She bumps me with her hip and passes me a few of our bags to help carry. “I was just kidding. He wouldn’t dare.”

I cock a brow, ushering her toward the front door. “And why’s that?”

“He loves Jesus too much to play with fire.” With a smirk that promises secrets I don’t want to hear, she fishes the keys from my front pocket, purposefully running her fingers over my semi-hard cock in the process. I gnash my teeth, making her squeal and hastily unlock the door.

“You’re lucky my hands are full, temptress, or I’d redder that ass again.”

She giggles, holding the door open for me even as she backs away into the dark living room. “Promises, promises,” she tuts. I kick the old wooden door shut with my foot, a feral grin curving my lips. “Too bad you’ll never be able to catch me, old man.”

An uncharacteristic growl rumbles up my chest at her taunting. She does this to me. Brings out a side of me that I’ve never experienced before. “Old man? Is that right?”

She bites her lip, blinking up at me innocently. “I mean, not *that* old.” She taps her chin as if in thought and I shock myself when I stay rooted to the spot, indulging her innocence. I thrive on it as much as I want to strip her of it, own it for myself. “You were able to keep up pretty good this weekend.”

“I think you’re the one that struggled to keep up with me, sweetheart,” I scoff.

“You *are* quite insatiable,” she laughs, closing the distance between us. Her arms wrap around my neck as she peers up at me. Her face was bare from makeup all weekend, showing off her cheeks, pink from the sun and her lips, red and puffy from my mouth and cock. She’s stunning.

Unable to help myself, I bend, meeting her in the middle with a soft kiss. “Did you enjoy yourself?”

She pecks me again before offering me a serious look. “I had such an amazing time. I can’t thank you enough, Isaac. Seriously. I’ll never forget it.”

I smile. “I’m glad, sweetheart. We’ll have to do more things —”

My words die on my tongue as a sound I’d recognize anywhere whispers through the darkened room, filling the space around me, taunting me with its ugly, blackened promises.

Evil, it coos, raking against my skin like razor sharp knives.

Eve’s face falls, her suntanned skin draining of all color. Her back goes ramrod straight and then she’s spinning to face the room behind her.

It can’t be.

There’s no way. No fucking way.

Her back presses to my front, but I'm still frozen, unable to move, or barely breathe as I stare into the darkness. The unmistakable flick of a lighter opening fills the deadly silent room again, and I know—I just *know*.

It's him.

He's back.

Eve screams and darts behind me, shoving me forward in an effort to hide. The bags fall from my hands, hitting the ground with a *thud*. Her nails dig into my sides, but it's still not enough to make me move. My heart is in my throat, my brain is pulsing with a deafening roar, dulling out all of my other senses.

Flick.

Flick.

Flick.

Orange flames dance through the darkness once, twice, before they catch, lighting the end of a cigarette with a glowing ember.

“Oh my God,” Eve murmurs, pulling me back as a shadowy figure pushes up from my recliner, rising like Lucifer from the depths of Hell.

Flick.

Thump.

Flick.

Thump.

Heavy boots collide with the floor, creating a staccato beat that matches my painful heartbeat with an uncanny resemblance. And it should. He is my blood, afterall. His heartbeat is my heartbeat, fine tuned at its deepest layer.

His boots scuff against the wooden floor, making the boards beneath him creak as he comes to a stop before me. The sun shines in from a crack in the curtains, casting a warm glow over the demon who haunts my nightmares.

My son.

“Well,” Roman drawls, his voice darker and raspier than I remember it. “Aren’t we cozy?”

Temptation

**Lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil. -
Matthew 6:13**

2:24 Roman

I bring the cigarette to my lips, forcing my hand to not shake with the emotions roaring through my body. There are so many. It's chaos inside my soul and I can't pick one solid thing to feel right now.

I feel everything.

I feel nothing.

But mostly, I feel disgust.

I can't even fucking look at her. If I do, I'll burn this entire house down with the three of us inside. The only thing that steadies the storm battering against my mind is *him*.

My eyes stay locked on his. The darkness in them dances with the reflection of my flame and for a second, I truly see the Devil I've always imagined him to be.

I've never seen him shocked before. He's always one step ahead, always ready for whatever punch is coming his way. But I have the upper hand this time, and I won't waste it.

“What are you doing here?” he demands, his voice deep and raspy, lacking the strength I know he has. The cigarette shifts as the corner of my mouth tucks up in a sick grin.

“Am I not welcome in my own home?” I drawl. His mouth opens, then shuts, filling me with a false sense of joy.

Pinching the cigarette between my fingers, I pull it from my lips and blow a steady stream of smoke in his direction, reveling in the instant reaction I’ve longed for since I was a kid.

His eyes shut and his face twists with disgust. I can’t help the deep satisfaction I feel seeing how unprepared he is for this meeting. How he’s unraveling before my eyes in a way only he can. On the outside, my father is still composed, and if you didn’t know what to look for, you’d think he was unphased.

But his hands are shaking, and his pupils are blown out so much, his eyes are black. His body is tense, every muscle a taut bow ready to snap.

From the corner of my eye, I notice the luggage he’s carelessly dropped to the wooden floor.

Isaac would *never* do such a thing.

I smile wider.

“Why are you here?” he asks again, gritting the words out through clenched teeth. My cocky mood shifts to anger, and I take a step forward.

Like he doesn’t know why I’m here. The reason is standing behind him, cowering like the innocent child I met all those

years ago.

She's not innocent anymore, though, is she?

All those years of silence, of positive reports from Chase. Tales of the shit she'd gotten up to with Olive. I thought she was fine, growing up and testing her wings the way she'd always dreamt.

Was it all a lie to cover this up? How long has it been going on? Was she still a kid when he started touching her?

Vomit claws its way up my throat, but I choke it back. If I go down that path right now, I'll lose any semblance of control I'm clinging to with a death grip and I can't.

Not yet.

"Why the fuck do you think I'm here?" I growl, my spine straightening.

Last time I saw him, he was taller than me. Not by much, but it felt like a huge difference back then. It isn't until this exact moment that I realize why.

He wasn't larger than me physically, he just *felt* that way.

But I've grown, both in height and muscle. Not only that, I'm not afraid of him anymore. I'm not the same boy that left this house.

Now, I'm his worst nightmare coming back to haunt him.

"Roman," Eve gasps, and it's the first time since she stepped into the house I truly *feel* her. My name coming from her lips,

in this place, brings back all the memories I've worked so hard at suppressing.

It makes me feel like I'm drowning and I have to shake off the maelstrom of emotions ripping me apart, limb by limb.

"I'm not fucking talking to you," I snarl, still not looking at her.

I can't.

"Don't speak to her like that," my father grits out. My brow kicks up as my head rears back.

So, that's how it is?

He's in deeper than I thought.

After I saw them together at the festival, I jumped on my bike and raced here. Of course I did.

She's camming, and apparently, fucking my father. I thought something was wrong. I thought I could get to the bottom of it.

I thought I could help her.

But then I replayed the way she kissed him over and over in my head, and I knew it wasn't *him* pursuing *her*. It was the other way around. He stood stoically, like he always does, and let her fawn all over him.

It's the way he likes things. He doesn't want to chase, he wants to *be* chased. And Eve...she's too damn good at chasing. Relentless, even.

Except for when I really needed her to follow.

Maybe that's why I'm here. To intervene her path, or to trip her up a few times. Maybe it's because I can't stand the idea that she's happy while I'm miserable.

Or maybe I'm just an asshole.

"Were you on vacation?" I ask, pointedly looking down at the bags they dropped when they realized they weren't alone anymore. I kick the bag closest to me with the toe of my dirty boot, knowing it'll drive him mad.

Isaac stands a little taller, his chin tipping back as his eyes narrow.

There he is.

My blood hums as he sizes me up, probably figuring out his chances of overpowering me.

I see the moment he realizes he can't.

It's fucking incredible.

"We—what are you—"

"I said I'm not talking to you." I finally lift my eyes to Eve's, and her giant baby blues, the ones I've dreamt about for years, look...haunted. Terrified, maybe. Definitely shocked. I'm just not sure if it's because I'm here or because she's been caught with her legs wide fucking open.

A shudder of revulsion works its way down my spine.

"We were on a trip," Isaac finally says, pulling my attention away from the whore at his back.

“Figured,” I say with a nonchalant shrug as I take another long drag, imagining the way he’d scream if I snuffed the ember out on his lying, ugly face. “Where?”

“Why does it matter?” he replies, his voice deathly low.

I’m tired of playing with them. I want them to know I know. That I saw them. That I can ruin their lives with one word. I just wish I’d taken a picture.

Finally, I hold all the power in a house where I lost so goddamn much.

“I saw you at the art festival in Savannah,” I say, my tone emotionless.

He looks like he’s about to puke and the traitorous bitch sucks in a sharp breath that makes me want to laugh. Instead, I take a step back, bringing my cigarette to my lips again as I slide my opposite hand into my jeans.

“What?” I grin. “You didn’t recognize your own son?” I nearly choke on the word. I haven’t been his son in years.

It makes me sick I share any blood with this fucking asshole.

And she willingly lets him touch her, kiss her, *fuck* her.

My skin burns and I wonder if I might be in Hell.

“What?” he breathes, his voice barely audible. “You were—”

“You looked right at me,” I say around my cigarette, tipping my shoulder. “And you didn’t even recognize me. But what shocked me more was you.” I turn my attention to Eve,

pointing the cigarette at her shocked face. She crumbles under my full attention. “How long?”

“What?” she chokes out, still hiding behind the prick as though he might keep her safe.

That’d be the day.

“How long have you been fucking my father?” I drawl.

“Roman,” Isaac snaps. “Stop it.”

“Did you at least wait until she was legal?” I ask, turning my attention back to him. “Was Jane’s body even cold before you jumped into bed with the younger model?”

Eve whimpers, the sound truly pathetic, but I can’t look at her anymore. It makes me too fucking mad to see her. To see the woman she’s become.

This isn’t how things were supposed to go. She was supposed to leave and travel. She was supposed to see the world. But here she is, playing whore to the man who ruined my life. Who destroyed whatever soul I had.

To know she chose him over me makes me fucking disgusted.

No, it enrages me. It makes me see red.

How could she?

After everything we’d shared, how could she pick him? When I’d promised her the world, *why him?*

“You were there,” he says dumbly, still sounding shocked.

I let a puff of smoke out again, watching with grim satisfaction as he bats it away from his face.

He looks different than I remember. Older. Fine lines are around his mouth, and grey peppers his temples. But his eyes are the same. They'll never change.

I hate that it's like looking into a mirror of my future self.

“Are you here for money?” he asks. “Are you blackmailing me?”

I throw my head back and laugh sarcastically. “That’s hilarious,” I say. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. I’m just here to visit my stepsister and father. Don’t let me get in your way.” Even though it enrages me, I step back and wave my hand between them. “Get back to whatever I interrupted. I have shit to do.”

I don’t, but being near them is making my skin crawl. All I want is a drink right now. I just want to down an entire bottle of liquor and say fuck the consequences. Right now, I don’t care about my sobriety. I care about numbing what I’m feeling.

I move toward the front door, expecting them to part for me. But they still stand there, between me and my exit, eyes wide. I drop the smoked cigarette to the wood floor and grind it into ash with the tip of my boot.

“I said I have shit to do,” I bark, my fingers already wrapping around my Zippo.

“Why don’t you just leave then?” Isaac sighs. “I’ll give you whatever you want. Just leave us alone for good.”

Eve makes another sound, this one almost as though she’s protesting his statement, but I ignore it. Nothing out of her mouth can be trusted, not anymore. Not when it’s been so obviously tainted by the Devil himself.

Turning to face Isaac, the man who tore my life to shreds, again and again, I smile, letting him see the true extent of the monster he created. “I don’t want your money, Dad.” Bile fills my mouth at the name, but my hand roughly tapping his cheek makes it all better. “And I’m not fucking going anywhere, so be a good host and make up the couch for me, yeah?”

His cheeks turn red from the force of keeping himself in check. Out of the corner of my eye, I clock the way his fists clench so hard, he’s likely drawing blood and internally, I fucking *preen*.

Glad to see it’s his blood being spilled this time.

“You’re really staying?” Eve whispers, stepping from behind his back for the first time.

We’re only inches apart now, nothing but stagnant air and a world’s worth of feelings between us. Slowly, my gaze moves from Isaac’s to hers, and I’m shocked at what I see.

It’s not the tears streaming down her pretty pink cheeks or the tiny tremble in her lower lip that surprise me. Not the way her shoulders shake or her pounding pulse below her ear.

It's the small, golden-tan, freckled hand extended between us that takes me by surprise, as does the hopeful expression in her shimmering eyes.

But more than that, it's *me* that shocks me the most.

Instead of being happy to finally be in her presence, or thankful that she wants me here, I'm fucking *elated* to have the opportunity to destroy every ounce of hope festering inside her.

Smiling softly, I lean in, letting my finger ghost across her cheek without making contact and whisper, "Aren't you excited to have me back, little sister?"

2:25 Eve

“Aren’t you going to go after him?” I cry, throwing my hand at the door Roman just disappeared behind, his cigarette smoke still lingering like a bad dream. My body is frozen in shock, and I’m half wondering if that really just happened. If Roman is really back.

When silence greets my words, I whirl on the man hovering in the darkness, my heart lodged in my throat. “*Isaac!*”

“I can’t do this right now,” he says under his breath, his hand fluttering through the air absently.

He looks around, his eyes more frantic than I’ve ever seen them. His fingers rake through his hair repeatedly as he spins in place, blindly searching. Swallowing thickly, I yank the curtains open, bathing the dim room in the soft Georgia light that’s such a contradiction to the ugly darkness blanketing my every nerve.

Isaac blinks rapidly, trying to adjust to the change. His dark eyes meet mine and I choke at the coldness reflected back at

me. It's as if *he's* gone, and his body is nothing but a shell of the man I know and love.

"Isaac," I say again. This time, there's no hiding the pleading in my voice.

He shakes his head once, saying nothing, his lips pressed tightly together. He ignores the bags he'd abandoned on the floor, just like he's ignoring me, and snatches up his keys.

My mouth opens and closes as he shoves his way past me, his cologne momentarily filling me before Roman's thick scent invades my senses again.

The door opens, the quiet screech of the screen loud in the otherwise oppressive silence. I'm unable to do anything but watch his shadowy form leave, slamming the door shut behind him.

So many emotions roar through me. A weird sense of excitement because Roman's home, but also dread because of what that means for me. For *us*.

Roman's back.

I run my hand through my hair, tugging on the tangles my fingers come in contact with. I can't begin to understand Roman's thoughts. If he saw us at the festival, why didn't he just say hi? Why come all this way? To embarrass me? Embarrass Isaac?

I shouldn't feel like this. I should hate that he's home—and don't get me wrong, I do. I *do* hate that he's back after so much time away. Though he didn't die the way Mama did, I

mourned him just the same. Grieved his loss at a time when I could barely keep my head above water.

Still, that undeniable school girl crush I've always had on him has reared its ugly head and I can't push away the feelings that are there, lingering just under the surface, begging to be let free.

I hate it.

And I hate him for making me feel this way. For bringing these feelings back up. For making me feel anything at all.

Tires crunching on gravel pull me from my thoughts, and I yank the door open, watching Isaac's truck speed down the long drive, dust clouds billowing up on either side. My mouth drops open in shock.

I can't believe he's running away. That he's leaving me here, *alone*, with Roman.

But a part of me understands why. Why Isaac has this intense desire to flee as far away from Roman and the memories that'll inevitably come with his sudden return, make sense to me.

Maybe because I feel the same. Maybe because more than anything I'm terrified of what exactly Roman's return will dredge up for me.

For Isaac.

Roman's abandonment affected more than just me. It tore my stepfather apart, and seeing his son again probably brought

back all those emotions. I know it's hard for me, but I can't imagine what it's like for him.

For both of them, a little voice whispers in the back of my mind, reminding me Isaac isn't the only tortured man here anymore.

My hand mindlessly moves to the locket at my throat, and I glide it along the gold chain. Back and forth, as I watch the dust settle. Feeling the weight of the pendant between my fingers grounds me, but it also sends me into another wave of chaotic emotions.

Flashbacks of our drive home flit through my mind.

The country roads passed by in a familiar blur. The scent of Isaac's cologne mingled with the earthy smell of sprouting corn. The song Mama used to sing me while toying with this very necklace had spilled from my lips as I relaxed happily in our little bubble.

I was so blissfully happy, so unaware of the devastation and chaos that was waiting for us. For the man waiting to pop the delicate bubble we'd just formed in such a brutal, sudden way.

I blink back the stinging building behind my eyes.

Where did Isaac go? I bite my lip and wring my hands, going through every possible place he could've gone in my mind. But I come up empty. Other than the church or this house, he doesn't have a solace. He has God, and he has me.

But he drove the opposite direction of the church, and he's definitely not here at home with me. So, where did he go?

I look around as if I'm expecting him to drive back and hop out of his truck, a giant smile on his face. But I know that won't happen. He's gone.

Where did *Roman* go?

A part of me is on edge, anticipating him jumping out of nowhere to scare me. Just to be a nuisance, like old times. But when my heartbeat finally settles, I realize I truly am alone.

Everything is silent, even the summer bugs and birds are long gone. The breeze has died down, leaving the trees to relax where they stand. The grass is motionless, the lake a still, peaceful surface, reflecting the clear blue sky.

The world is holding its breath as though it knows something is coming. The calm before the storm. It's eerie.

Everyone is gone.

And if I were smart, I would be too.

Instead, I find myself stepping out onto the porch and looking around. "Roman?" I call hesitantly, his name feeling foreign on my tongue as my voice cracks.

Nothing. If he's nearby, he doesn't show himself.

I take another step, the old boards creaking under my feet. My heart hammers in my chest as I inch my way closer to the edge of the porch, still scanning the vast expanse of land before me.

In late summer, the field separating our home and the old church is full of overgrown wildflowers. Usually, I love the way they look surrounding the lake, but right now, they feel ominous.

My eyes catch on a black beast of a motorcycle parked under the old oak tree by Barry's and my stomach flips.

Is that what he drives now?

Chase never told me. Internally, I scoff. Why would he? I never asked about Roman. Why would Chase willingly tell me something as silly as what Roman drives—or rides—now?

And how the hell didn't I notice it when we'd gotten home? It stands out amongst the otherwise serene landscape like an eyesore.

Fuck.

I didn't notice because I'd been too wrapped up in Isaac, in his touch, his scent. Too lost in the memories of the way his body felt moving inside mine, his hard cock sliding down my throat, between my thighs—

Shaking my head to clear the memories, I take in the seemingly peaceful day around me as I quickly make my way down the steps. If Roman's bike is still here, and I'm assuming that is his bike, then where is he? He left out the front door only minutes ago, I should be able to see him. It's not like he can just disappear.

But he can, a voice in my head sings. He's disappeared before, who's to say he won't again? That's what he does, after

all.

My stomach churns with each step across the driveway. Gravel crunches under my sandals as my eyes scan every inch of the area around me, looking for the moody asshole.

In some ways, he's exactly the same. But in most ways, I don't recognize him. He's massive—taller and more filled out than I remember. His hair is impossibly blacker, and his eyes...I've dreamt about those eyes for years, and they're exactly the same. They're haunted, but soft. Like him.

Or, at least, that's how he used to be. There was nothing soft about the Roman I saw today.

When he'd refused to look at me, to even acknowledge my presence, I studied him. I don't know if it was out of shock, or if it was an overwhelming need to burn him into my memory in case he disappeared again. Whatever the reason, I took in every inch, inspecting him, memorizing him.

When he left, he still looked like the growing teenager I'd known for so many years. A jock who dressed to fit in, sporting his letterman jacket more times than not. He drove a simple car, one Isaac sold years ago after he left.

Now, he's merely a shadow of the boy I once knew. Once loved.

Tattoos snaked up his arm and across his hands and knuckles. There was another on his throat, though I couldn't make out what it was. His left ear was pierced, some sort of unrecognizable jewelry dangling from the lobe, and his right

nostril had a black ring through it. On the opposite side, a small upside down cross is tattooed just below his eye.

Somehow, he's exactly who I thought he'd be, and nothing like the man I imagined. He's rough and dark on the outside, that'll never change. But his energy, the look in his eye, the dip of his lips—he's seen things. He's been through things. Things I know nothing about, and likely never will.

Before I realize where I've gone, I'm standing at the white gate of the church. I stare up at the dilapidated shiplap building, squinting as the bright sun reflects off the paint.

He's not here. I don't know why I came here. Maybe so I can talk to Mama and try to figure out this mess. What would she do? She always knew the right things to say, always knew how to get through to Roman. I wish I was just an ounce of the woman she was.

Instead, I'm *this*.

A secret cam-girl who's fucking her stepfather. Who lost her virginity to her stepbrother the night before her mother's funeral. Who lives a second life while despising the one she lives. Who's broken and torn, yet happy and in love.

In love with her stepfather.

God, if she could see me now.

I shove the gate open and stomp down the path, rushing to get inside. I haven't prayed in a long time, but maybe I need to.

I'm so fucked up.

Choking back a sob, I hurry up the few steps to the door. My stomach rolls when I see it's already slightly parted, the thick, humid air from inside somehow hotter than outside.

"Hello?" I croak as I push the door open wider, letting the sun bathe the dark room in light. The cross is illuminated above the little dais, and it makes my breath catch.

I've questioned my faith for years, but there's no denying the beauty that exists between these four worn walls.

It's not the building or what happens here. It's not the Lord's word echoing off the rafters like a distant memory of salvation and grace. It's not the Bibles or pews. It's not even God himself that makes me question my faith.

It's the light spilling through the cracked windows, golden and elegant, dancing over the wooden floors. It's the way the leaves hanging from the trees outside cast shadows throughout the sunlight's glow. The way nature interjects her way inside man's creation forcefully, reminding us that *she* was here first.

How can anything so beautiful exist so easily without a power to have crafted it all by hand? It's almost *too* perfect, too magnificent to have just *happened*.

God exists. The proof is in his creation.

But then I remember all the ugly in the world, the hate and evil, the vile things humans do to each other and it makes me wonder, if there is a God, where is he? Why is he allowing this? Why take my parents from me? Why give Daddy cancer, or take Roman's mother?

Why hurt good people?

I swallow thickly, a second quote, one not from the Bible, bubbles up my throat along with the first, two sides of the same questioning coin.

The awful thing is that beauty is mysterious as well as terrible. God and the devil are fighting there and the battlefield is the heart of man.

Dostoyevsky was right. There is a battlefield happening inside me.

Constantly.

Rip.

Flick.

My head whips around, trying to find the source of the sound. Burning fills my nose, then the barely there whisper of someone blowing out a breath. I squint as I scan the room again, my eyes catching on a small ember glowing from the back corner where the sun can't reach.

It's fitting.

He's always liked the darkness, preferring to wither in the shadows than to grow in the light.

"Roman?" I breathe.

No answer.

Nothing.

Just another flick of his lighter, and the sizzle of paper. I sigh, letting the door close softly behind me.

I hadn't expected to see him here, of all places.

Apparently we're doing this now.

"Those things will kill you." I take a step toward him, then another, closing the distance between us. My eyes widen when I get close enough to see it's not a cigarette he's burning. "*Roman!*" My voice echoes against the walls, disrupting the silence.

I rush forward between the pews, my hands already outstretched. He doesn't look at me as he rips another page from the Bible and flicks his Zippo open, lighting the thin paper on fire, blasphemous smoke billowing up toward the rafters.

"Stop it!" I cry as I reach for him, but my feet catch on a leg of the narrow pew and I fall forward. He doesn't try to catch me. Instead, he shifts his weight to the side, letting me land heavily on the unforgiving wood beside him.

Pain shoots up my wrists as I catch myself, a soft grunt leaving me when I try to hide my pain.

Another rip.

Another flick.

Another sizzle of paper.

He doesn't care, I idly think. Does he even know I'm here?

Finally, I look up, watching as he lets the ash fall to the floor, covering his boots and jeans on the way. He slides his gaze to me as he slowly rips another page out and lights it on fire, the

move so practiced, he doesn't even need to look to see what he's doing.

It's as terrifying as the bleakness in his once luminous hazel eyes.

"What are you doing?" I breathe.

"What does it look like?"

His eyes lower to my trembling hands as I push myself up. I'm too close to him—our bodies are too close. It's been years and though my soul knows him, recognizes him on an intrinsic level, I don't *know* him anymore.

This Roman is not my Roman.

Yet, I can't bring myself to move away.

This is the closest I've been to him since the night he left me, and I can't force myself to put distance between us, even though I know I should. I don't *want* to. I just want to stare at him until I've seen every new feature he's developed, every new freckle, every new line.

Everything.

I just want to share breath with him, breathe him in so his familiarity can settle in my bones the way it once did, soothing me.

Before I can do something reckless like lean into him, he pulls me from my nostalgic thoughts as he chuckles. "Close your mouth, Golden Girl. You're drooling."

My hand instinctively moves to my chin, ready to wipe the saliva away. It glides along dry skin, and my face burns red as he lets out a low laugh. I don't know what's worse—the way he effortlessly laughs at me, or the hurtful rendition of the nickname he once gave me out of love.

For years, Roman called me the golden child of the family. He always said that I was the child his father wanted. That I was stuck up, a show-off. That I was taking his place.

The golden child turned to Golden Girl. Eventually, that name changed. Adapting to the nickname he murmured again and again while worshiping my body, kissing away the pain. While devouring me. *Loving* me.

Goldie.

“Same dumb kid you always were,” he mutters, and the words slice deep. It's like he somehow knows exactly where my thoughts went. “So fucking gullible.”

“I'm not a kid anymore,” I say defensively, blinking away the past. Roman slides his eyes to me again, his sardonic smile falling as his body stills.

“No,” he breathes. “You're not.” His throat bobs as he drops his gaze, taking in my sundress, my bare arms and legs—my *body*. It's so different from the one he last saw all those years ago. Time has changed us both.

Before I can appreciate the feeling of his full attention on me, he looks back to the Bible and rips another page out haphazardly. The flame flickers to life moments before he

holds the paper over it, watching as it sizzles into nothing, burning away like it never existed.

“You’re going to Hell for that,” I mutter, rolling my eyes.

His fingers pause, his body tensing as he stares down at the book. Slowly, he turns toward me. The heavy weight of his gaze sears me more than his flame would, and I gasp, falling slightly back. My chest heaves with my labored breaths, and his eyes drop again, taking in my breasts. They’re larger than they were before.

I’ve grown up.

Doesn’t he see that?

The thought barely forms before he’s leaning his massive body over mine. My breath catches when the Bible tumbles to the floor, his Zippo nowhere to be seen as he braces one hand on the back of the pew, the other on the wood by my head. The heat of his body radiates off him like an open flame, and I clutch my hands tightly in my dress.

“If you’re so worried about my damnation, why don’t you get on your knees and pray for me, little sister?” he says huskily.

Heat courses through my body at his words, at the tone of his voice, and I clench my thighs together. One knee hits his and I know he can feel me restraining myself below him.

His eyes drop to my lips, and they part, a small breath leaving me as I force myself to not beg him to kiss me. To take me right here on this pew for God and everyone to see.

So long.

It's been so fucking long since I've felt him, tasted him.

Would he taste the same as he did before?

The wood creaks under his hand as he grips it tighter. His eyes lift to mine again, and the heat in them is nearly my undoing. I suck in a sharp breath as his Adam's apple bobs, clearly as affected by our proximity as I am.

“Are you going to kiss me?” I choke out, my voice breathless.

The corner of his mouth kicks up, his eyes narrowing as he shifts his gaze between mine. His tongue darts out, wetting the soft expanse of the lips I once knew so well.

“Depends,” he whispers, bringing his mouth closer to mine.

His breath brushes against my jaw and my eyes flutter shut. My heart pounds in my chest and a fine sheen of sweat breaks out along my forehead. “On what?” I breathe.

I gasp as his lips ghost over my cheek, my back arching up into him. His heavy chest presses lightly against mine as he moves his mouth closer to where I want it.

Dizzy.

I'm so fucking dizzy.

The room is spinning. My heart pounds between us like it's trying to claw itself out of my chest to him, like it recognizes him. *Needs* him.

I hold my breath, anticipating his lips crashing into mine, giving me a taste of the man I've been desperate for for years. Without me telling them to, my legs drift open, silently begging him to settle himself between them like that spot is his rightful home.

His lips settle just above mine, teasing me with every slow inhale and sharp exhale. Smokey warmth fills me, lighting my nerves of fire.

“On whether these sweet lips have been wrapped around Daddy Dearest’s cock yet,” he murmurs.

For a breath, *just a breath*, weighted silence falls between us, so heavy it’s practically choking me.

My eyes shoot open and I stare up into his amused face as the words sink in. Boiling rage overtakes every other emotion I’d just been feeling. Anything kind I’d just thought, any excuse I’d been ready to make for him, flies out the window.

“How—how dare you?” I shove his chest, and he falls back into the pew, letting out a low laugh. Heat rises to my cheeks when I shove my dress down, covering my thighs as I get to my feet.

“You’re the one opening your legs for everyone,” he muses, snatching the Bible from the floor. “It’s a valid question.”

My mouth opens and shuts as rage rolls through me. “You’re a dick,” I snarl, and he laughs again, the sarcastic sound grating down my nerves.

It’s almost worse than if he’s physically hit me.

“I am what you ride, little sister,” he throws back in a mocking voice.

I turn away from him, my dress billowing out around me as I storm through the church, the scent of burning Bible pages filling the air once more.

“Make sure to wrap it before you hop on. Don’t want to spread diseases. Who knows what Daddy has these days,” he taunts.

I throw my middle finger over my shoulder, and he lets out a roar of laughter, this one less sarcastic and more real, but just as dark.

Despite the hot day, goosebumps ripple over my skin when I step into the blinding sunlight. The echoes of his soul-deep laughter and burning papers chase me home, mocking me the entire way.

I’m so fucked.

2:26 Isaac

My son is back.

The words have echoed in my mind all day, over and over, like a taunting mantra. He's back, and he knows. He knows about Eve, and I'm terrified of what he'll do with that information.

He holds the key to our lives. His knowledge threatens to shake our entire foundation, everything I've worked so hard for. Everything I've built. But with one word, one exaggerated statement, he can send it all up in flames.

I don't know if he's here for money, for revenge, or just because he wants to be a terror in our lives. I don't know what he wants from me. I can't fix it if I don't know what he's thinking, what his motivations are.

I parked my truck five minutes ago, but I haven't been able to force myself to get out yet. My hand is still wrapped around the door handle as I stare up at the house that has looked like so many different things to me over the years.

A fresh start. A new family. The end of a dream. And then another. The start of something good.

And now...

Now it looks like a deathknell.

The upper floor is dark, but the bottom isn't. The kitchen light is on and I can see Eve's shadow flitting around like it always does. That sight alone has something in my chest settling.

But then the realization that she might not be alone has my spine snapping straight once more.

Fuck.

Is she even safe with him? I don't know who he is anymore.

Maybe I never did.

With a steadying breath, I force my body to move. I jump from my truck, letting the door close softly behind me. My fingers strangle my keys, but the sharp bite of pain keeps me breathing.

I take a few long strides up the dirt driveway to the porch steps, and that's where I pause again. I can't go in there, not with *him* here. Not with the boy I raised and watched run away from his family, turning his back on us. He broke my trust, again and again. He shattered our lives with reckless choices, and then he broke Eve.

He might've pretended to hate her, but I saw the way he looked at her, the way she watched him. They had a secret life,

away from Jane and me, and a part of me was always envious. Not of my son or their friendship, just that Eve was able to get through to him when I never could. I wanted that. I wanted to know that when I told him something, he'd listen to me the same way he'd listened to her.

But he never did.

I thought she'd finally changed him. Brought him out of his shell, and made him see what was right in front of him all along. The endless possibilities here, the life we could've all had. The family.

I thought she'd fixed the broken child I'd once failed to heal.

I thought things were better.

Then Jane died, blowing up our world in one singular second.

And Roman...he made a choice. One none of us would ever come back from.

I take another deep breath, calming my frazzled nerves, and bound up the steps, forcing myself to push away everything I've felt all day.

The door creaks open, and the thick, warm scent of roasted meat hits me. This is familiar. This isn't new. Eve cooking dinner is the same as it is every other night. And if he's not here, then I can pretend like everything is fine.

I can check on her, have a meal with my Eve, then go up to my room and avoid seeing him.

I repeat the steps, the list, in my head again and again, forcing order into my life where chaos is trying to encroach.

My footsteps are silent as I walk through the living room, anticipation swirling in my stomach. My recliner is empty, which settles something deep inside me. The memory of him rising from the dim corner earlier, leaving the worn leather rocking behind him, is a sight I'll never get out of my head. The hope that Roman isn't in this house has me damn near giddy as I round the doorway into the kitchen.

I come to an abrupt halt.

There he is, lounging back in Jane's old chair like it's a goddamned throne. His dirty, booted feet are kicked up on the table. He's got a fucking cigarette hanging out of his mouth as he puffs cancerous smoke through our otherwise pristine home. His tattooed arms are folded over his chest and an evil smirk is etched across his once-familiar face.

The sight has me nearly blacking out.

Who the fuck does he think he is? This is *my* home, *my* life.

He's the one who decided to leave it.

"Get your feet off the table," I snarl, stepping forward. My fingers wrap around the back of my chair, gripping it so hard my knuckles begin to pulse.

Lazily, Roman glances up at me over his shoulder, that damn cigarette still perched between his lips. My eyes flit over the changes displayed across his body and mine tenses with every new discovery.

But nothing is as bad as the cross on his upper cheek, just below his right eye. It's upside down, spilling out like a tear.

I want to rip the blasphemous symbol from his fucking skin.

“Good of you to finally join us, Isaac,” he drawls slowly, a cocky smile forming on his face before looking back at Eve. He says nothing else, dismissing me entirely.

In. My. Own. Home.

My shirt feels too tight. My skin itches. My neck muscles are throbbing from strain, the force of the words I'm choking back almost too much to bear.

And there my son casually sits, oblivious to the upheaval his presence alone is causing as he watches Eve move around the kitchen. Her shoulders are tense, but her back is to us. I can't see her face. If I could, I'd know exactly what she's thinking.

He flicks his lighter, and she jolts as if she's been burned. His smirk grows. She shakes it off and goes back to moving pasta from the pot to a serving dish. He flicks it again, and she quietly curses as she spills a small amount onto the counter.

Rolling my shoulders to relieve the tension growing, I peel my fingers from the chair one by one. I need to intervene, even if it's the last thing I want to do. They're adults. I have no desire to play mediator as I once did.

“Stop bothering her,” I mutter, moving past him.

“Not doing anything,” he laughs. “Just sittin' here.” There's an arrogant drone to his words, like he knows the speed at which he speaks is enough to piss me off.

He's right.

I stop by his chair and stare down at him. He doesn't look at me, but he knows I'm here. The hand holding his lighter balls into a tight fist, the only sign he's even slightly bothered by my presence.

"I said get your shoes off the fucking table," I quietly hiss, keeping my voice down so Eve doesn't get upset.

I force myself not to reach out and shove them to the floor. I can't touch him. If I do, all the control I've worked so hard at finding today will snap.

With a huff, he drops his feet heavily, letting them thud on the old wood. Choking back a reprimand, I skirt across the kitchen toward Eve. She's yet to speak, and I have no doubt she's mad at me.

Again.

Smiling to myself, I step up behind her and settle my hands on her hips. She's changed from the dress she was wearing earlier, and based on her wet hair piled in a bun, I'm guessing she's showered.

A brief moment of insecurity fills me as vitriolic words flit through my mind, sounding a hell of a lot like my father's voice.

Why did she change? Shower?

Did she have a reason to?

Is she covering something up?

She was home alone with Roman, and they have a past, a history. Of course, she'd go right back to him. I'm nothing.

Nothing.

Noth—

“I missed you,” she murmurs, sinking into my touch. Her words effectively end the spiral forming inside me, and I settle into her, letting her familiarity keep me present. “Where’d you go?”

My spine stiffens again.

I don’t want to talk about where I went or what caused me to leave in the first place. It’s taking all my damn willpower to stay here, in this room, ignoring the dark presence looming behind us.

Instead of answering, I slide a hand up her body, grazing over her leggings and long t-shirt. She tenses but doesn’t stop me. My fingers ghost over her exaggerated curves and a sense of pride fills me, knowing how stunning she is, how perfect, how *mine*.

“I missed you, too,” I say, not so quietly. The sound of his lighter flicking again, and again, at a quick pace, makes me smile inside.

Reaching her throat, I tip her jaw back, making her look up at me. She is barely breathing, her muscles locked like a bug caught in a spider’s web. I like it. Probably too much. Having her at my mercy is a heady thing.

Without a word, I press my lips to hers, swallowing down her shocked gasp. It takes her a second, but then she melts into me, letting me take my fill of her sweet taste. She makes a sound of contentment in the back of her throat and my hand tightens around her hip, dragging her thick ass into my cock.

My spine tingles with the knowledge that he's watching, seeing the way I touch her, seeing the way she responds to me. The way she so effortlessly sinks into my body, my kiss. The way she *gives* herself to me, freely, willingly, happily.

If I didn't know any better, I'd swear I heard his teeth grind.

She pulls away first, and it makes my jaw tick, but I allow it. I want her to give me full submission, want her to let me take control of everything. It's my job. I *need* those things from her.

But I know it'll take time.

I choose to say nothing and release her, fighting the desire to slap her perfect ass before I go. She sighs and picks up the bowl she'd been preparing as I make my way to my seat, finding my glass of water, plate, and utensils already there like they are every other night. A sick sense of satisfaction fills me when I realize there's no place setting for him.

Eve hasn't served Roman.

She doesn't want him here any more than I do.

That thought alone has even more anxiety leaving me.

Her eyes flit between the two of us and her shoulders sag. She sets the dish in the center of the table before returning to

the counter to grab the last two plates and coming back. Roman leans forward, his legs spread wide and his elbows on the table as he tracks her, that fucking cigarette still between his lips.

A billow of smoke comes from him, and I hold my breath as I bat it away from my face. He's like a fucking chimney. Since when did he start smoking? I don't remember him ever doing this shit.

"Put it out," I bark. "No smoking at the table."

His glare slides to me as Eve takes her place in the seat between us. I'm at one head of the table, he's at the other. He never sat there. His spot was always across from Eve, never across from me.

With his eyes on mine, he takes a long drag before pinching the cigarette between his fingers. The smoke stays in his lungs as he presses the ember-tip into the old wood, snuffing it.

"Roman!" Eve gasps, her chair screeching as she pushes it back. I don't know what she thinks she can do. She can't fix it. The damage is already done. He's burned a hole in our damn table.

I swear I see his lips tuck up in a smirk as he releases the smoke poisoning his lungs, letting it blow over the food in front of us. A muscle feathers in my cheek, and my hands ball into tight fists on my lap. I can't handle this. He's too much.

I've never wanted to down an entire bottle of whiskey as fucking badly as I do right now.

Before I can say anything else, Eve sets a piece of breaded chicken on the plate in front of me. She reaches for the pasta, her hands trembling as she puts a scoop next to the meat, making sure to not let anything touch. She finishes off by adding some green beans, then sinks back in her chair, her eyes glued to her plate.

“Following in Mommy’s footsteps, I see,” Roman sneers. Eve seems to fold in on herself, her hands held tightly in her lap. He leans closer, and I nearly see fucking red. “Well? Aren’t you going to serve me, *little sister*? Or do you only serve the men whose cocks you’ve sucked?”

My hands slam on the table, making the dishes rattle, and his head snaps up. His jaw tightens as he glares at me, but I just glare back. “Do not speak to her like that,” I snarl.

We stare at each other for a long moment, the tension between us building with every painful second. I wait for his retaliating words, whatever shit he’s going to spew from that vile mouth of his. But he just stares at me, goading me. I force myself to take a deep breath, then another. I have to calm down, but it’s damn near impossible when he’s sitting only a few feet from me, mocking me.

I see Eve wipe at her face from the corner of my eye, and I slide my gaze to her. Seeing her so closed off, so small and broken-looking, makes me deflate.

“Come on,” I sigh, waving my hand at Roman. “Eve worked hard on this meal. We can’t ruin it.”

“It’s okay,” Eve whimpers, her eyes still downcast. I want to reach for her. I want to take the pain away, but I can’t. So I just stare at her.

“Get yourself some food, sweetheart. Thank you for dinner.” She glances at me and gives me the softest smile I’ve ever seen from her. It immediately disappears when she looks at Roman.

He doesn’t notice, he’s too busy piling his plate full of food. He always ate a lot when he was growing, but I assumed he would’ve grown out of that. Apparently not.

Instead of setting his plate on the table, he leans back, holding his plate in one hand while he spreads his legs as far apart as they’ll go. He doesn’t wait for us, he just starts shoveling the food into his mouth, his gaze focused solely on that, nothing else.

I finally break and reach over, resting my hand on Eve’s shoulder, giving her a reassuring squeeze before digging into my own food. She slowly serves herself, her hands violently trembling with every movement.

No one says anything. No one looks at each other. We just eat in tense silence, Roman periodically refilling his plate, then leaning way back again, spreading himself like he owns the fucking place. Eve barely touches her food, but downs glass after glass of sweet tea.

Roughly, I clear my throat. There’s years of baggage between the three of us, but maybe if I can placate my son enough, he’ll leave again. Or at the very least, tell us what he

wants from us, *me*, so he can be on his way back to whatever hellhole he's crawled out of.

“So,” I say, drawing Eve's attention. Roman still eats like someone's going to take his plate from him at any moment, completely ignoring me. “What's new?” I cringe as the words leave my mouth. *What's new?* Everything is new.

His fork screeches on his plate as he flicks his eyes up to mine. “What's new?” he slowly repeats, tasting the idiotic words like they're a new spice. I grip my knife and fork tighter in my hands as I nod, clenching my jaw so hard it hurts my teeth.

“You look...” I take in his appearance again, and, not for the first time, wonder where the hell I went so wrong with him. I tried hard to put him on the right path, the righteous path, but he fought me at every turn. “You look well.”

He huffs out a humorless laugh as he shoves to his feet, ignoring me. I watch as he dumps the rest of his uneaten food in the garbage before turning to the sink. I glance at Eve when he flicks on the water, his back to us. Her lips part and her eyes widen as she watches him clean his plate silently.

The look on her face has my blood boiling.

I push my chair back, grabbing my plate before reaching for hers. “You done, sweetheart?” I ask softly, swallowing back my emotions the way I have all day. The way I have for years.

“What?” She glances up at me, looking just as shocked. She blinks rapidly, like a spooked animal. It irritates me even

more.

“Are you done?” My fingers grip the porcelain plate as I wait for her to nod. Finally, she dips her chin and I move behind him, scraping our food into the bin before knocking him out of the way with my elbow.

“What the fuck—” His head snaps to me, his jaw tense. “I’m standing here.”

“Well, I need to wash these,” I say with a shrug, choking back the rest of the statement—*it’s my fucking house. Don’t like what I do? Leave.*

Roman lets out another laugh that makes me see red. We reach for the bottle of dish soap at the same time, but I get to it first. Triumph blazes through me as I pour it on the plate.

“Have you ever done this before?” he asks under his breath.

“I’m not an idiot,” I mutter, and he snorts. I choose to ignore him as I scrub my plate, trying to not think about the wet food sliding over my fingers as I rinse it off.

He finishes before me, and I step fully in front of the sink. I thought he’d leave, but he doesn’t. Instead, he leans back against the counter beside me, and the tale-tell sound of his lighter flicking to life, then the sizzle as he lights up a new cigarette fills the kitchen. I let out a long, tired breath.

Everything is going to be a fucking fight, it seems.

Just like when he was a kid.

“Not in the house,” I snap. He ignores me and blows out a puff of acrid smoke. I squeeze my eyes shut before reaching over and grabbing a towel, wiping my hands off as I turn to face him. He smiles and inhales another drag, his fingers pinching it as he watches me. Taunts me.

Rolling my neck, I pray for some kind of divine intervention to come down and smite his annoying ass, leaving me to my peaceful existence.

When nothing happens, I grit out, “I assume you’re staying here tonight?”

Roman’s eyes narrow and flick from me, to Eve, back to me again. With a sarcastic sound, he jerks a nod toward the living room. “Chair seems as good a place as any.” He tilts his head to the side, his eyes twinkling as he waits for my reaction.

“Sleep on the couch,” I sigh, refusing to let him bait me anymore. I’m fucking exhausted.

With a disappointed click of his tongue, he pushes off the counter and makes his way toward the back door. I let out a relieved breath that he’s at least taking his bad habit outside.

“Thank you, Ro,” Eve says quietly just before he’s out of sight.

His steps falter by the table, and he looks down at her. I hold my breath when he scoffs and leans over. Her giant blue eyes stare up at him, and I take a step forward, ready to intervene.

Slowly, he pulls the cigarette from his lips and lets it hover over her glass. As if in slow motion, I watch as he releases it,

letting the half-smoked stick fall into her sweet tea. With a smirk, he taps the now scorched wood with his fingertips, and makes his way out of the kitchen, leaving Eve gaping after him and me filled with more rage than I've felt in years.

2:27 Eve

The soft click of my bedroom door shutting sounds like a bomb, and I jolt upright. It's dark. The sounds of night are spilling through my open window, intermingling with my ragged breaths.

Blinking rapidly to adjust to the darkness, I inhale sharply when I spot a figure hovering in front of the closed door. Visions of the past, of similar nights, fill my mind in a tsunami of memories, nearly choking me.

My mouth parts, Roman's name already forming, but it dies on my lips as the figure steps forward.

"Eve," the raspy note to Isaac's voice sends a shiver of worry down my spine and I shove the blankets off, ready to go to him. "Stay."

Swallowing, I watch as he steps into the moonlight streaking across my bed. Eyes wide, I look him over, concern and panic flitting through my already too-nervous body. I couldn't sleep.

I just kept replaying the events of today, letting them wear a hole through my brain.

He's still wearing the same clothes he'd been in earlier, which is surprising since it's been such a long day. His button-down is wrinkled, his jeans creased in such an un-Isaac like way that it makes my breath catch. More than that, he's barefoot.

Isaac *hates* being barefoot.

But what really has me worried is the darkness in his gaze, the circles beneath his eyes and the overwhelmingly lost expression on his handsome face.

We're falling apart with Roman back. Our previous peace, our comfortable routine, has been ripped apart like a tornado's torn through our home.

My hand reaches out and my heart begins to thrash around my already aching chest. "What's wrong?" I whisper.

It's a stupid question, I know it is. So maybe that's why he ignores both my words and my hand as he begins to unbutton his shirt. He steps further into the faint light, closing the distance between us, and I catch the sight of his jaw ticking, his Adam's apple bobbing, his fingers shaking.

He looks strung out.

"Strip," he commands, his voice dark and unlike anything I've heard before.

My head rears back, and my throat tightens. "Wh-what?" I stumble over the word, my tongue feeling too thick in my dry

mouth. He throws his shirt to the foot of my bed and starts working on his belt.

“I said strip,” he grunts. He must see the shock on my face because he pauses, his eyes fluttering closed as he takes a long, deep breath. When he looks at me again, some of the coldness is gone. “Please, sweetheart.” Without another word, I reach for the tie on my cotton shorts and slowly tug them down my thighs.

Maybe it’s because he used the nickname I’ve grown to love so much over the years, the comfort of it a soothing balm to my frazzled nerves. Maybe it’s because his voice cracked on the word *please*. Or maybe it’s the raw desire burning in his gaze that lights a need deep inside me that I’ve grown to crave these last few weeks.

His jeans hit the foot of my bed, followed by his boxer briefs. Not even a second later, he’s on me, yanking my shorts and panties from my body with a viciousness that fills me with nervous anticipation.

I trust Isaac. I know he’d never hurt me.

But if he did, he’d make it so damn good, just like in Savannah.

The reminder of the way he fucked my throat, the way he spanked my clit while murmuring depraved words before ruthlessly pounding into me, has my now bare pussy growing damp.

He shoves my oversized t-shirt out of his way and settles between my thighs, letting the heavy weight of his body pin me to the mattress. My fingers skim his back, reveling in the feel of his smooth skin.

It dawns on me then that we've never been fully naked with one another. Every time we've had sex, or been intimate, it's been rushed and desperate in the heat of the moment. We've torn at each other's clothes, barely having enough time to free ourselves before frantically connecting.

This is the same, and yet wholly different.

He's different.

And maybe, maybe I am too.

"Fuck," he breathes, dropping his forehead to mine. His thick swallow is audible before he speaks. "Christ, Eve. Tonight was—" He breaks off, shuddering when my fingers reach the soft strands of his hair.

"Hard," I finish, nodding against him. "I know." And it was. But hard is an understatement.

His eyes meet mine and though his body is still tense, his muscles taut with an emotion I can't place, his gaze is begging me to look deeper, to understand.

"Are you okay?" I murmur, my brows furrowing as he presses a soft kiss to the corner of my lips. It's gentle, but firm. It's Isaac, and somehow, not. I reach up, trying to connect our mouths, but he pulls away until I flop back down onto my pillow.

He chuckles softly, the sound both mocking and primal, causing my thighs to tighten around his hips. His lips ghost over mine as his hands glide up my body and beneath my shirt. Gently, his thumbs brush over my hard nipples, sending shivers down my spine.

“No,” he whispers. “I’m not.”

“What can I do?” I ask, the words nothing but a breathy moan as he pinches the tight bud roughly.

My back arches when he does it again, but all too soon, he stops, releasing my nipple. I freeze, confusion washing away some of the lust consuming me. He pinches my other nipple, twisting it until I gasp.

“Please,” I beg. For what, I don’t know. More? Everything?

He bites my jaw. “Ask me again.”

Desire, pain, and confusion swirl inside me, making it difficult to process his words. He switches to the other nipple again and tugs it, forcing the skin of my breast to pull tight.

Clarity washes over me with the sting. “What can I do?”

His cock is hard between us and his hips roll, teasing me, *taunting* me. He flicks my nipple one last time and leans back onto his knees. His eyes are deep pools of obsidian as he stares down at me, his pulsing length gripped tightly in his hand.

“You know what I want, temptress whore.”

I swallow, my eyes devouring every inch of his naked form as my nerves hum to life. His body isn’t massively stacked

like some men I know, or cut like Roman's.

He has a runner's body—narrow and fit, muscular without being *too* much. His stomach is flat, the outline of his abs slightly visible in the dim light. His Adonis belt is prominent, as is the dark dusting of hair that leads down to his perfect, curved cock.

I lick my lips and my thighs twitch as my pussy grows needy. His knees keep me in place and a whimper leaves me. The sound turns to a cry as his hand comes down roughly on my outer thigh, nowhere close to where I really need him.

“What did I just say?” he grits out, tightening his grip on his cock until the tip turns a deep shade of red. I bite my lip at the sight. It looks painful.

My need for him morphs into something else as worry settles in for who might hear us. I'm not stupid. I know our situation isn't normal. I know what people would think if they knew. I know what Roman probably thinks. He'd said as much.

Whore.

Slut.

Following in my mother's footsteps.

That comment hurt the worst.

A hand comes down on my thigh again, this time harder, but in the same spot. I choke out a sound somewhere between a moan and a cry, and my eyes snap to Isaac's. His brow flicks up with a silent question, with an expectation for me to follow

his lead. With a deep breath, I shove everything outside this room away.

It doesn't matter. Nothing matters but us.

I force my needy body to relax into the bed. My eyes flutter and my chest heaves as I give him what he desires so much. What *I* desire.

My submission.

“Take what you want, My Lord,” I whisper, meaning it. His groan is deep and throaty, sending shocks right to my dripping core. His fingers trail down my stomach, his touch light and teasing.

“That's right,” he coos, his smile borderline feral. His white teeth glimmer in the moonlight, making him look every bit the demon he prays against. “Keep your legs spread wide and I'll give you what you want. What this desperate little cunt needs.”

My entire body shudders at his words, and without conscious thought, I go lax, following his orders.

Leaning forward, he runs the head of his cock against my pussy, groaning when he sees how wet I am. He hits my clit once, twice, three times, sending ecstasy racing through me.

It takes everything inside me to stay still, but I can't swallow back the pathetic whimper that escapes.

His eyes lift to mine and his smile slips. His expression shutters, morphing from playful and taunting, to dark and cold before flitting back to his usual steady calmness.

Finally, he presses against my entrance, and I grip the sheets so tightly, I'm surprised they don't rip. Everything inside me rejoices, but he stops again. I almost cry at the torture, but I lock it all down. With his eyes on mine, I know he's baiting me. Silently exerting his dominance, his control.

It makes sense.

He thrives on control. Needs it in every aspect of his life. Why would sex be any different?

When he's satisfied with me, he chuckles darkly and grips my thighs, keeping me exactly where he wants me, before shoving himself forward, impaling me fully in one deep stroke.

I cry out, but he quickly silences me with a brutal kiss. His hips pull back, leaving just the tip inside before thrusting back in so far, he bottoms out.

Again and again and *again*.

His tongue tangles with mine and I give up holding back and give into the need to feel him, to touch him. To *love him*. My fingers dig into his shoulder blades, my nails pricking his soft skin. He grunts and bites my lip in warning before pulling away.

My tongue lashes out, relishing the taste of him, but I pause, noticing something different yet familiar. My brows dip, my fingers falling away from his back, and lift to my numb lips.

"Why do you taste like whiskey?" I ask, my voice sharper and louder than intended as my heart races for a whole other

reason.

His hips stutter, the pause so brief, I wonder if I imagined it. “Be quiet so your brother doesn’t hear you,” he snarls before silencing me with another kiss.

Fuck, he’s right. I don’t want Roman to hear us.

But I do.

Instead of considering the ramifications of *that*, I focus on the one part of his statement that pisses me off the most. I shove my hands between us, pushing him back. “He’s not my brother,” I hiss.

His features harden, and his thrusts stop all together. “I told you to be quiet,” he bites out as he sits up.

My mouth opens, a retort already on my tongue, but I don’t get a single word out as he snatches the hem of my shirt and rucks it up, stuffing the cotton into my mouth. I could just spit it out, but the cold warning in his eyes keeps me frozen.

His fingers dig into my rounded hips and he uses his unforgiving grip to flip me over onto my stomach. The room spins and I scramble to get to my knees, my shirt still lodged between my teeth.

His touch grazes my spine in a gentle caress, making goosebumps pop up in his wake. His body blankets mine; his cock ghosting over my throbbing core.

His fingers wrap around the back of my neck in a brutal, rough hold as he murmurs, “I told you to shut up. You failed to obey me, and now you’ll suffer the consequences.” I look at

him over my shoulder. His lips are still puffy from devouring my mouth, but they're tipped up in a calculating expression. "Be a good whore for me now, Evelyn."

His grip tightens on my neck as he guides my face into the pillow, forcing my ass higher into the air. Panic sparks in my gut for a moment before I shove it away, letting anticipation fill me once more.

When he's confident I'll stay still and behave, he releases my neck before gathering my hands at the base of my spine. My face pushes deeper into the pillow and I have to focus on my breathing so I don't freak out.

"Such an disobedient little girl." He clicks his tongue disapprovingly, and my body tenses. "Stay just like this. And you're not allowed to come until I feel you've earned it."

I moan around my gag and nod into the pillow. I'll do anything, give anything, just for him to touch me. To fuck me.

His cock slides against my core and I send a silent thanks to whoever's listening when he doesn't tease me again. In one swift motion, he's seated deep inside me, filling me in ways I didn't know possible. I'm thankful for the shirt as a scream of pure pleasure rips its way from deep in my lungs.

Isaac's thrusts are wild and unhinged, jostling my body like I'm nothing more than a rag doll. I slip and slide, unable to hold myself up. His hand comes down on my ass five times in rapid succession and I press myself harder into the pillow, screaming in pleasure filled pain.

“I told you not to move these,” he snarls, gripping my wrists and pressing them back where he wants them.

He twists his body, his hips rolling as a rustling sound fills the room seconds before I hear the clinking of metal, then feel the distinct sensation of leather tickling my spine. My whole body tenses, making him groan.

“I bet you’d love the feeling of my belt across your ass, temptress,” he laughs. “You’re already choking my cock and I haven’t even used it yet.” He smooths his hand over my ass before slapping it, making me jolt. “Maybe next time.”

I shake my head, not at all prepared for that, but he ignores me as he binds my wrists with his belt. The leather is worn and soft, still slightly warm from his body. He tightens it, making sure I can’t get free, and the sense of helplessness he wants me to feel washes through me.

The second I’m bound and completely vulnerable, he slams into me, this time with a relentless force that makes my eyes roll back. He doesn’t pause, doesn’t stop, doesn’t give me any time to prepare myself. He just fucks into me, pounding me harder than he ever has.

I lose track of time with my face in the soft linen of my sheets, my mouth biting down harshly on my shirt and my body helplessly bound. His cock hits me with a bruising force every time he bottoms out but the drag of his curved tip brushes my g-spot when he pulls out, sending unreal zaps through every inch of me.

He repeats the process until I'm mindlessly begging, incoherent sobs spilling from my lips. I don't know what I want. Maybe to come. Maybe to never let this feeling of complete submission go away. Whatever it is, I beg him for it. I beg him until my throat is raw to give me what he wants, to give me what he knows I need.

"Who do you belong to?" he bites out, his fingers digging into my flesh. I cry out his name, the sound muffled from the fabric bitten between my teeth. His fingers tangle in my hair and he uses his grip to yank me up, leaving me completely at his mercy. My breasts sway with every vicious thrust. "Who, Temptress? Who do you belong to?"

I spit the shirt out as my spine deeply bends, making me whimper in protest. "You," I cry, his cock hitting me in a whole new spot. "You, My Lord. I belong only to you." I'm a babbling, shaking mess as I cry and plead. "Please. Please, let me come, My Lord. I'm s-so close."

My pussy tightens around his cock, proving how badly I need my release, clenching down so hard he stutters and moans low in his throat.

"Fuck, Eve," he rasps. "You're gonna break my cock in half."

His grip in my hair tightens, and he forces my back against his chest, my bound arms still between us. He lifts his free hand to my mouth, forcing two fingers down my throat. I gag around him, feeling saliva drip from my mouth and soaking my shirt. He thrusts them in time with his hips, each one more

harsh than the last. Finally, when I feel like I can't take any more, he rips them from my mouth and brings his wet hand down on my ass.

Slowly, his damp fingers slide between my cheeks, and I tense as he rubs them against my hole. "Shh," he coos, his tone and thrusts at odds with each other. "Relax. Let me in." He doesn't give me a chance to fully relax, to prepare myself, before he presses in, stretching me until I feel a burning shoot up my spine.

"I can't wait to take this ass someday," he mutters, licking a path down the side of my neck. "Take it, own it, just like the rest of you."

I nod, feeling helpless tears track down my cheeks. My clit is throbbing painfully, begging for attention. I'm so wet, I can feel it leaking down my thighs.

"Tell me I can," he grunts, his cock thickening as his orgasm nears. "Tell me I can fuck your ass. Tell me and I'll let you come."

He presses in deeper, pressing his fingers in more, and it's my undoing. My pussy spasms around him as I cry out a hoarse, *yes*.

"That's right, baby," he moans. "Scream louder. Let your big brother hear what a filthy little slut you've become. What a perfect, dirty girl you are for his father."

My heart skips a beat and my lungs lock up with my body. But then, he's there, letting the curve of his cock do the work

for him, while his fingers thrust deeper into my ass. I cry out as my orgasm slams into me, my mouth open and eyes crossed.

Isaac moans low and deep as he comes with me, filling my pulsing pussy with his hot cum. I tremble in his arms, my body going limp with every searing second of my orgasm.

“Oh my God,” I choke out breathlessly. His body jerks with the last of his pleasure, and he huffs a tired laugh as he slips from my sore pussy and ass. He spans me lightly before pressing a kiss to my shoulder.

“*Lord*, but I’ll let it slide this time,” he says. Smiling weakly, I fall limp against him as he quickly untethers my wrists and rights my shirt before helping me lie down.

I’m exhausted, and my body feels like it’s been put through the best hell imaginable, but as I watch him silently slip back into his clothes, my mind starts to race again.

I curl my aching arms under my head as I watch him. His muscles aren’t as tight as they were before, his eyes not as haunted. But there’s still a slight tick to his jaw that I don’t think I’ll be able to help him get rid of.

We both know what’s causing his anxiety, and it’s asleep on the couch, as if he doesn’t have a care in the world.

Out of nowhere, guilt collides with my already tired body, making my eyes burn.

Did Roman hear us?

Is he still here, or did he leave?

Do I even care?

Swallowing thickly, I watch as Isaac buttons his shirt with his back to me, like he didn't just fuck me into oblivion.

"Why are you getting dressed?" I murmur.

He pauses, his shoulders tensing before he relaxes them. Turning, he lets out a soft laugh as his hands drop to his belt. My gaze focuses on it, and I know I'll never be able to look at it the same.

"I'm going up to bed," he says as if it's obvious.

My chest aches. "Why can't we sleep together? Like we did in Savannah."

He lets out a long breath, dropping his head as he shakes it. "You know why."

Because of Roman, is what he means. I'm not stupid. But if Isaac thinks there's any chance his son didn't hear us fucking, he's delusional. In fact, I'm pretty sure he *wanted* Roman to hear. So, if he knows we fucked, then why does it matter if he knows we sleep together, too?

I chew on my lip, trying to keep the questions I've buried deep, at bay. But now with Roman back, and watching Isaac finish the last of his buttons, I can't help it.

"What are we?" I blurt, inwardly cringing at how immature it sounds. "I mean, what is this? Us?" I wave my hand weakly between us.

Another sigh leaves him as he straightens, rolling his shoulders. “We can’t be anything, sweetheart. Nothing more than this. I’ve told you this already.”

My throat burns and I bat the tears from my cheeks. “But I don’t understand.”

Obviously, I know how bad it would be if news of Preacher Payne fucking his stepdaughter got out. But would it really be that bad? We’re having sex. *Regularly*. He’s possessive of me and my time, my body, my pleasure. He loves me and I love him. Surely, he knows this can’t go on without one of us getting attached.

My stomach rolls at the thought.

His fingers trail over my cheek softly, wiping away another tear. “This is it, Eve. You, me, sex—” He breaks off and looks away, letting his hand fall to the sheets. His jaw pops and he rolls his neck on his shoulders before standing. “I can’t give you any more than this. You need to wrap your mind around that and lose any foolish dreams of anything more.”

Before I can respond, he heads for the door and leaves, letting it click shut behind him.

Then I’m left alone in my dark, quiet room with nothing but the sounds of nature and the feeling of Isaac’s cum spilling down my thighs, to keep me company.

2:28 Roman

“**Y**eah, man, I’m fine,” I sigh, adjusting the collar of my t-shirt. It’s hot in Georgia all the time, but here, in Divinity, it’s fucking *stifling*.

It probably has more to do with this house and the people inside it than the town itself.

I hate it here.

Kon clears his throat, his raspy voice thick with discomfort. He hates talking on the phone more than he hates anything else. Which is saying something, because the grumpy motherfucker hates everything.

“But you left.”

I roll my eyes just in time to see Isaac make his way down the stairs. My throat burns with irritation and my muscles go taut, but I force my outward appearance to remain the same unaffected mask I always wear.

“I had shit to take care of that couldn’t wait,” I drawl, letting my lip tick up in a smirk when Isaac jolts. He freezes at the

base of the steps and stares at me. I kick my legs out, sinking deeper into his beloved chair.

Kon grumbles something in Russian that I'd usually be able to decipher, but I'm too distracted by my prick of a father eyeballing me to care.

On the outside, he's pristine. His white collared Polo is starched to perfection, his grey slacks ironed within an inch of their existence. His hair is slicked back and his shoes perfectly shiny.

But, just like me, he's a liar.

If anyone looks close enough, they'll see how much he's struggling right now. Lucky for him, no one around here cares enough.

Or maybe they're just blinded by the façade he's worked so hard to perfect.

I see it, though.

His left eye is twitching, his jaw is ticking, the veins on his forearms bulging from the force it takes to hold himself back. His usually clean-cut, smooth face is covered in scruff, like mine. But if you know Isaac well, you can see what he hides, even beneath all that.

The darkness.

"How long are you gonna be gone?" Kon grunts, interrupting my thoughts.

Licking my lips, I tilt my head to the side and smile. “As long as Daddy Dearest will have me.” Isaac’s eyes narrow to thin slits and his mouth parts as if he’s about to disagree.

So, I throw him a wink, knowing he won’t do shit with Eve home, and settle deeper into the leather chair.

He glares at me for another second before cutting his hand through the air in frustration, and storms out of the house, letting the screen slam shut behind him.

With a shaky hand, I pull out a cigarette and slide it between my lips as I tune back into my phone call. My lighter stutters for a second before igniting the tip, and I pause. I’ve practically been chain smoking since I got here, and it’s on the last dregs of juice.

Taking a deep drag, I let my head fall back.

Better this than drinking.

Kon is still sputtering in disbelief, making me chuckle. He had no idea where I fucked off to yesterday afternoon, just that I had an emergency. He’s a chill boss, doesn’t ask much of us beyond doing our job well, but he’s also my friend. More like a father, actually.

Besides Chase, Konstantin is the only person who gave a shit what happened to me all those years ago when I left Divinity. He picked me up and took me in, literally. I owe him everything.

Including the truth.

“You’re with that fucker?” he hisses. “What the fuck, Pyro?”

I smirk at the nickname. Not many people in Divinity know me by that name, but everyone at Deliverance does.

“Well,” I mutter, taking another hit. “He’s not here right now.”

He grunts. “But *why* there?” Pausing, he clicks his tongue in understanding. “Is she alright?”

I swallow back the words that want to fly free at his question. The fury and dire need to lash out. To burn shit. To quench the ache in my throat that’s begging for a drink.

I choke it all down the same way I’ve choked down my emotions since I got here. The memories this house brings back threatens to send me down another spiral. But I promised myself three years ago I wouldn’t do that again.

It’s nearly impossible to ignore the ghosts lingering in the house, the memories of Jane and Eve laughing and playing. The way Isaac seemed to thrive as a father to a kid who was actually good, and not troubled like me. The way Eve and I seemed to connect on a soul-level, not just as friends, or step siblings, or lovers, but as something else entirely.

I’ve tried to ignore everything and I have to. I don’t have a choice anymore. The memories I once held close to my heart are now tainted.

Tainted with the vision of Isaac kissing *her* last night in the kitchen. His hands on her body like they had any right to be there. His mouth on her skin, his cock nestled against her perfect, thick ass.

My jaw grinds so hard my teeth throb.

The sound of her coming for him last night.

“Roman?” Kon murmurs. “You there, man?”

Sighing, I rake my fingernails over the arms of Isaac’s chair, relishing in the long streaks I leave behind. I blow out a stream of smoke and pinch the cigarette between my fingers.

“I’m here.”

I watch as the golden-orange ember sizzles and sparks against the brown leather, eliciting the strong scent of smoke and chemicals.

Relief fills me at the sight. It’s like a visual representation of my soul.

“Look,” I murmur, pushing up out of the chair before I light the whole thing on fire, letting it burn to ash along with this godforsaken house. “I’ll be back for my clients tomorrow. Don’t worry. I’ll take care of it.”

“I know,” he sighs. “I knew you wouldn’t flake unless it was bad.”

It *is* bad. I don’t say that, though.

Eve’s bedroom door clicks closed and my spine stiffens. I roll my neck as I focus on my call and the feeling of the acrid smoke burning my lungs, letting it ground me.

“I gotta go,” I say, watching her step out of the hallway, a sandal in one hand, the same ratty leather bag she’s always carried in the other. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Her eyes snap up at that, and she gives me a confused look before shaking it away.

“Alright. Just take care of yourself,” Kon mumbles, his voice softer than usual. It makes my chest clench, aching for his familiarity. My home. My family. It’s not here. Not anymore. “And don’t think I didn’t notice you avoiding my question.” I grin at the rough bark in his tone.

There he is.

I end the call and shove my phone into my back pocket. Eve’s eyes rake over my body, taking in my tight black tee, black jeans, and combat boots. It’s basically my uniform at this point. Same shit I was wearing yesterday, and the same shit I’ll wear tomorrow. I don’t know why she’s looking at me like this. Regardless, I let her take her fill, doing the same thing right back.

She’s wearing a long, yellow sundress that’s flowing around her ankles with white polka dots on it. It’s got tiny ruffled sleeves and a neckline that, on anyone else, would be modest. But on Eve, it’s indecent, with her tits practically spilling out.

Her long, curly hair is down and free, framing her delicate shoulders with a wildness I’ve missed seeing. She’s barely wearing any makeup and her freckles are visible from here.

She looks hot as fuck.

And it pisses me off.

“You’re leaving?” she asks quietly, and I blink, stopping my obvious ogling.

Damn, she really is different from the girl I once knew. Even after seeing her naked body on Favorite Fans, I'd still expected her to look the same. But right here, right now, it's clear the Eve I left four years ago is gone.

“Seriously, Roman?” She scoffs, crossing her arms below her tits, shoving them up higher as she tries to put on a show of a confidence I don't buy. Her chest is heaving rapidly, her pulse jumping in her throat. “What are you looking at?” She's uncomfortable with my attention on her, and it ignites something inside me.

Good. She should be uncomfortable. *I'm* fucking uncomfortable.

“Nice hair.” I smirk around my cigarette, taking another drag as I close the distance between us. A ripple runs over my back as I pass the old bookcase with my eyes locked on hers. “You look freshly fucked.”

Her blue eyes widen, her hands fall to her sides, her shoe and bag dropping to the floor. For every step I take forward, she takes one back, until she hits the living room wall and has nowhere left to go.

Fuck, it makes me feel good. She's like a little bunny, helpless against the big bad wolf.

“Stop it,” she weakly protests.

With just inches between us, I can smell her sweet scent wafting off her as if my nose is directly planted in her soft hair. It makes my body hum. I bring a finger up and wrap one

of her slightly frizzy curls around it. Her hair is naturally curly, but untamed and always more on the cusp of a crazed bed head than anything.

“So soft,” I whisper, rubbing the strands between my fingers. “Does Daddy play with your hair? Get it nice and fucked up when he’s deep inside your traitorous cunt?”

“Ro,” she gasps, her neck craned back to meet my eyes.

Eve’s not short for a woman, but I’m tall. Taller than her, taller than Isaac. She barely comes to my shoulders and with her eyes locked on mine, wide with fear and anxiety, I feel massive. I feel powerful, which isn’t something I ever thought I’d feel standing in this house.

And she—she looks small.

I hope she *feels* it, too.

“What’s wrong, little sister?” I blow a stream of smoke in her face, chuckling at the dramatic way she chokes and sputters. I pull the cigarette from my lips, and tug her strand of hair, forcing her to keep her eyes on mine. I lean in, getting far closer to her than I’d intended. “Having buyer’s remorse?”

She tries to bat my hand away, but I tighten my fingers in her hair until I’ve got a chunk fisted in my grip. I click my tongue in warning, committing every guilty, sad look that flits across her porcelain skin to my depraved memory.

“You know,” I whisper. “I always knew when you made the choice you did, things would never be the same. But you know what they say. You made your bed, and now you have to lie in

it.” My eyes flick between hers, my hand shaking with the need to press my cigarette against the wood by her head, to send everything up in flames around us. “I just didn’t realize it was *his* bed you’d be lying in.”

She gives up trying to remove my fingers, my grip unrelenting and settles for shoving at my chest. It does nothing but cause her pain.

“What are you talking about?” she hisses, her blue eyes burning with so many emotions, they become clouded. I can almost watch the memories flit through her mind like a movie. But then she blinks, and our bubble pops. “Let go of me.”

Shaking my head in disappointment, I tug on her hair one last time, and bring her curls to my nose, inhaling deeply. Just one hit before I turn my back on the lying bitch.

“Mmm,” I mutter, my eyes fluttering closed. “Peaches and sin. My favorite.”

I release her and step away, needing the distance like I need fucking air. Spinning, I snatch her leather bag from the floor and slide the strap on my shoulder as I head to the front door.

It takes her a second to catch up, but when she does, I can hear her stumbling to get her second shoe on. “Where the hell are you going? That’s my bag!” She chases me, breathing heavily. Stepping onto the porch, I release the screen door, letting it smack her in the face.

“Ow,” she groans, slamming it shut as I hit the stairs, making my way toward the church. “Seriously. Where are you going?”

I need my bag. I have to get to—”

“The AA meeting,” I call over my shoulder. “You better hurry up.” I check my watch, smiling. “It starts in fifteen minutes, and you know how Daddy Dearest hates to be left waiting.”

She lets out a faint cry filled with rage and stomps past me, yanking her bag as she goes. I clutch it harder, keeping it planted firmly on my shoulder.

With her eyes on me, I toss my finished cigarette into the lake as we pass it and grin when she gives me a shocked look.

She’s so easy to rile up.

“Jesus Christ,” she mutters, falling into step beside me. “You’re so fucking annoying.”

My head falls back with a genuine laugh. Reaching over, I ruffle her hair. “Shit. Little Evie’s got a potty mouth these days.” She jerks away from my touch and shoots me a death glare, but I just waggle my brows. “You do all sorts of filthy shit with those lips now, huh?”

Her mouth falls open and she stumbles mid-step. I fight the urge to catch and steady her, tightening my fist on her bag instead.

She rights herself, and lets out a long sigh. “Why are you really here?” she asks. “Just to be a dick? Do you want to hurt us?”

Us?

That hurts more than it should. She's looking out for him, Isaac, not me. We used to be an us. Now...

Now we're nothing.

"Roman?" I pause at the seriousness of her tone and meet her gaze, taking in the genuine worry there.

She's scared. Of what, I'm not entirely sure. If this were four years ago, I'd know exactly what she's thinking with just a look. But it's not and I don't know this version of Eve.

With her fear in mind, her legitimate need for me to be honest with her, I give her my real answer.

"Yes," I say, and toss her bag at her, the reminder stark in the burning Georgia light.

She catches it with a huff. "Yes, what?"

Pulling out another smoke, I leave her behind the same way she left me four years ago. The same way she's still leaving me.

"I'm here to make you hurt."

2:29 Roman

I sink further into my pew at the back of the church, and watch as Isaac pretends Eve doesn't exist. What's worse is watching her dutifully set up the refreshment table like some kind of doting housewife while shooting longing, sidelong glances his way.

It's pathetic.

She's pathetic.

Fuck, I really hate it here.

Running my fingers through my hair, I kick my booted feet up onto the back of the pew in front of me, settling in to watch the shit show. I lie to myself and say it's so I can keep an eye on her, make sure he doesn't do something stupid like hurt her.

But we all know the truth: I'm just a masochistic asshole who likes to writhe in my pain.

It's familiar. It's mine, and no one can take it from me.

It's comforting in a way not many things are anymore.

My gaze stays on Isaac as he circles the chairs, straightening them until he deems them perfect. Eve's back is to me as she sets up the paper cups by the coffee pot, and lines the little cookies up on a serving plate.

As I look back at my father, I find him already glaring at me. I grin and sink deeper into the pew, silently challenging him to do something.

Come on, you fucking prick. Where are those balls you used to have?

Eve spins, her mouth open like she's about to say something. But when she catches sight of our stare-off, it clamps closed again. The silent church is thick with palpable tension, and my fingers itch for my lighter, for the familiar *flick* as the flame comes to life.

But I keep my gaze on his, forcing myself to not move, to just stare. To dare him to make the first move. Maybe if she saw him, really saw him, she wouldn't be here anymore.

His jaw tenses, and his hands tighten into shaky fists. I smile broader, my lips parting to show my teeth. He shuffles forward a step, a chair blocking him from moving any closer, and my heart rate kicks up.

Eve's body tightens as she lurches forward, as if she's ready to throw herself into the middle of the fire for us.

No. Not us. Not anymore.

For *him*.

Suddenly, a loud bang has all three of us jumping in unison. I can almost see the tense bubble physically *pop* when Oli storms in like the Devil himself is on her ass.

“Oh thank fuck,” she cries, her hands flying in the air. “I thought I was gonna catch on fire there for a second.” She spins around, her arms outstretched, showing us she’s fine, and God didn’t smite her.

Eve giggles quietly, her delicate hand covering her mouth to stifle her laughter as Isaac freezes in place. I can’t help my own smirk from splitting my face at the little psycho.

“Olive,” my father chides, a warning in his tone. It makes me bristle.

I expect him to say more, to yell at her or punish her, but he doesn’t. Instead, he shoots a look between Eve and me, runs a hand over his shirt to smooth out the non-existent wrinkles, and glances away, his jaw ticking.

My brows furrow.

What the fuck?

Oli plants her hands on her narrow hips and pops one to the side, her pink dress swishing with the movement. “So, what’s crackin’, God Squad? Why’s it so tense in here? It’s like someone died.”

“Oli,” Eve mutters, shaking her head. “You can’t say stuff like that.” She turns back to the table, but not before I catch her smirk.

Olive huffs and stomps toward her friend, her black combat boots loud in the echoey church. “And why the hell not? I’m not lying. I know better than to do that on holy grounds.”

“Because,” Isaac grunts, his deep voice still rumbling around the old church, “it’s disrespectful.”

I can’t help it. I scoff at that. *Loudly.*

He’d know all about being disrespectful, wouldn’t he?

He shoots me a glare, and I lift my hand, my middle finger raised high.

“Look, I may not be perfect, but Jesus thinks I’m to die for,” Oli purrs, pulling my attention from my father.

I turn in time to watch Eve’s head fall back, a loud squeal of laughter coming from her as her best friend bats her doe eyes, her expression so much like her brothers.

This time, I’m the one hiding my laugh behind my hand. I should be recording this shit for Chase. He loves seeing his sister thriving in the real world.

Actually...

Grinning, I pull my phone out and quickly bring the camera up, my eyes darting around like someone might be standing behind me.

“Seriously, though,” Oli says, bumping her hip with Eve’s. Her long rainbow hair sways across her back with the movement. “What are you doing here?”

Eve gives her friend a look. “You know why I’m here,” she says slowly. “I texted and told you. That’s how you found me, Oli.”

“Obviously,” she mutters, rolling her eyes. “It’s the triple-A meeting, just like every Monday. But,” her voice drops low as she leans in, “your house is empty.” She shoots me a long look and my brows lift. “It shouldn’t be empty now that you have a new houseguest.”

She wiggles her fingers at me beneath her chin and I lift mine in a barely-there wave.

“So?” Eve still doesn’t get it, but I do.

That must be how she’s doing it—living a second life and camming behind everyone’s back. She does it when she’s home alone, taking advantage of the long hours Isaac spends away.

“Shouldn’t you be like, *you know?*” Oli waves her hands around in exasperation. Eve blinks in confusion so Oli makes a lewd gesture that I’m pretty sure is referring to a suction cup dildo and it finally dawns on Eve.

“Shut up,” she hisses, giving her friend a look that promises violence if she doesn’t close her mouth and I internally preen.

Bingo.

I was fucking right.

“Almost set up, girls?” Isaac calls, arranging the last chair before he checks his watch. “Meeting’s about to start.”

Eve rushes to set out the last tray of cookies and scrambles to pick up the trash. I roll my eyes. How fucking depressing.

“I’m done,” she calls, shooting Isaac a sweet smile. He pauses long enough to give her one back, but it quickly drops when the door opens and a guy I don’t recognize walks in.

Eve and Oli look up, both with unreadable expressions. Eve breaks first, shoving the trash into Oli’s arms. She dusts her hands across her dress and steps toward the newcomer, her hand already outstretched politely.

“Marcus,” she says in a soft, earnest voice I haven’t heard since coming back. “How’re you doing this evening?”

His grin is wide as he closes the distance between them, a look of gentle familiarity crossing his features. My feet drop to the floor with a quiet *thud* and my phone falls to my knee. I sit up a bit taller, content to remain invisible until I’m ready to be seen.

“About as good as can be expected,” he says, running a hand through his dark hair. It falls just below his ears in natural, floppy waves. “I can think of better things to do on a Monday than be at an AA meeting, but...” He breaks off with an awkward shrug.

Eve smiles and rests her hand on his arm, giving it a soft squeeze that I instantly clock. His muscles flex, tightening the form fitting material of his white t-shirt. I do a quick scan of his body, my eyes narrowed.

He's tall, probably an inch or so shorter than me, but similar in my size and build. He's dressed casually in a tee and jeans but it's the shiny leather shoes that throw me off. He's not from around here. If he were, he'd know better than to kick it around the sticks with shoes like those.

"We're just happy you're here," Eve says sweetly, making my attention snap back to her. "It's a good thing, Marcus. You'll see with time."

If she were talking about the church, God, religion, I'd scoff, wondering where my Goldie went. The one who stayed up late at night debating theology and spirituality with me. But, I know she's talking about the meeting and as much as I hate my father, I can't fault anyone for seeking help in their recovery.

I may not have gone through the program, but I know it works. Kon swears by it. It's because of him, and him alone, that I could pull myself from the pits of addiction. But, like a lot of addicts, I'm still in it most days.

The guy, Marcus, leans into her touch. "Thank you," he murmurs, his eyes locked on hers.

Unable to help myself, I flick my gaze to my father's, needing to see what he thinks of their interaction, but I find the stage empty.

Of fucking course.

He's never where he should be when I need him.

Though her hand on his arm was a polite reassurance that she quickly dropped, his touch on her lower back is anything but, and I find the rage I constantly battle with rearing its ugly head.

I shouldn't care. I shouldn't give a single shit, but with every person who looks at her, touches her, acts like they have a right to her when she was once mine...

I swallow thickly, shaking those thoughts away.

She hasn't been mine in a long fucking time, and honestly, the more I watch her with my father—their casual touches, the way she preens under his gaze—the more I wonder if she ever was mine at all.

Marcus murmurs something to her too low for me to hear and she nods, that sweet smile still plastered on her pretty face. His hand falls away, and he tucks it into his pocket as he makes his way to the stage just as Isaac comes out from the back hall where his office is.

“You know,” Oli mutters sadly, pulling me from the conversation the two men are quietly having on stage. “I once knew a man who was a junkie until he found God.” Eve's eyes snap up, wide and confused. “Found him the day he overdosed.”

“Oh, good Lord,” Eve groans, her head falling back. Oli cackles and shoves Eve playfully as the door opens again, this time much quieter.

A laugh bubbles up my throat, spilling from my lips before I can choke it back, and I quickly cover my mouth with my fist, pretending to cough. Eve's nose wrinkles in distaste at my reaction, but she also doesn't pay the newcomer any attention.

In fact, I'm pretty sure she's looking anywhere but at him. Her eyes hit the rafters, the old floor, the cookies, her fingernails, which she then chews on.

Weird.

The guy practically skips into the church when he clocks her. I do a double take, my lips tipping up when I recognize him. Shit. What's his name? He's a few years younger than me, right around Eve's age. He looks the same as he did growing up, gangly and awkward, with grease-slicked brown hair and a shirt buttoned up all the way to his chin, despite the heat.

He was a nice enough guy, but weird as shit.

What was his name again? Something with a K. Kyle? Keith?

He abruptly stops, his gaze on Eve as she continues to do everything she can to ignore him. I flick my eyes between them, my elbows braced on my knees.

"Eve?" he starts, his voice barely above a whisper.

She looks like she's praying for the ground to open up and swallow her whole. Quickly, she snags the trash back from Oli, busying her hands, and whirls on the kid. There's none of the genuine southern kindness in her expression when she looks at him, her smile one-hundred-percent forced.

“Hi, Kevin.” Kevin! Fuck, there it is. I chuckle to myself. He looks like a Kevin. “I didn’t see you there.”

My lip twitches. She’s a shit liar.

He blushes, adjusting what I’m assuming is a stifling collar, before waving her away. “It’s no big deal. Umm, I was wondering if we could talk.”

Eve chokes on her tongue, her eyes gaping. “T-ta-talk?” she stutters, and I find myself practically falling off the pew as I lean in to get closer. This shit is better than those fucking reality shows Chase makes me watch. “Talk about what?”

Kevin’s face is bright red now, and he’s starting to sweat.

Come on, kid. You can do it. Spit it out.

“I—” He bites his lip. “I—”

Oli steps up, her hands full, and places herself between them. “Hey, Kev,” she starts, an innocent look on her face. “Did you hear that one about Adam and Eve?”

The kid side-steps Olive, but she jumps in his way. He does it again, moving to the left to try to get Eve’s attention, but Oli blocks him again. They do this dance four times before he finally stops and sighs.

“What are you talking about?” he mutters, sounding petulant as fuck.

Oli’s shoulders shake with silent laughter. “They were the first people to not read the Apple terms and conditions.”

My eyes burn with the force of keeping my laughter in, but Eve isn't nearly as successful. She turns her back and cackles into the drinks, her arms still holding the trash.

Kevin doesn't laugh, doesn't even smirk. And to be honest, I'm pretty sure that one went straight over his head.

Before he can respond, Isaac calls out, ending the chaotic conversation. "Ah, Kevin. How are you, son?"

My smile drops at that and I lean back, popping my neck side to side.

Such a fucking prick.

"Preacher Payne," Kevin gasps, his head snapping to the side. He takes five rapid steps away from the girls and straightens his glasses. "I'm excellent, sir. Thank you." He flicks his gaze back to Eve.

"I'll be back," he quietly mutters.

Olive chuckles. "That's what Jesus said."

Eve groans. "Lord help me."

"Oh look," Oli says, clapping as Kevin moves on, his head held high, his sights set on Isaac. "All the men you've fucked are in the same room. Can you believe it? What are the chances?" She sighs wistfully and brings her hands to a prayer position as she looks up at the rafters. "Sweet baby Jesus, thank you so much for—"

She breaks off as Eve elbows her hard enough in the gut to make her grunt out a breath. She sputters and bends over,

holding her stomach, looking every bit the drama queen she's always been.

“What the shit, dude? What if I'd been holding Robert? You could have done serious damage. And how could you live with yourself, knowing you injured your nephew?”

“I'll show you damage, Olive Tanner,” Eve hisses, grabbing Oli by the arm and dragging her outside. Her cheeks are bright red, her skin flushed and sticky with sweat. “I can't believe you just fucking said that...” The rest of her angry rant disappears as the door softly clicks shut behind them.

My brows crash together as Oli's words sink in. She's fucked everyone in this room?

I look around, my eyes lingering on each man. Isaac, I know about. But does Oli? Me, obviously. My gaze zeroes in on the new fucker, *Marcus*, and I grit my teeth together. Did Eve fuck him? Her touch was casual, but his wasn't.

Did she just want a casual hookup? A fling? While he wanted something more? He was looking at her like she was his next goddamn meal.

“So, Preacher Payne.” Kevin's nasally voice pulls me from my seething spiral, and I turn my attention to him. He's the last guy in the room, but I can't imagine Eve giving him the time of day. So either Oli was talking about just Isaac and me, or this fucker Marcus has been between Eve's legs. “I wanted to discuss my internship with you.”

Isaac lets out a long breath as he turns toward Kevin, his hands sliding into his pockets. “How about we set up a meeting for when I return from my next lecture?” he asks.

“Well, I was hoping—”

“I’m a bit busy here,” Isaac says, and my brows lift at his tone. I sink back into the pew as a few more people filter in through the door. “Come by in a few weeks, but make sure it’s during my office hours.”

Kevin’s shoulders round as he nods pitifully. I can’t help but feel a bit bad for the guy as he trudges down the aisle of pews. His eyes scan the room, meeting mine briefly before bouncing back.

“Roman?” He stops in the aisle, uncaring of all the people he’s blocking. “Roman, is that really you?” Biting my tongue, I tip my chin at him. “You’re back.”

“I’m back,” I say, nodding. I fold my arms over my chest and sink further down in my seat.

“But—but—*you’re back.*”

I don’t know why he sounds so shocked, or why he’s making it sound like it’s life changing information. It’s not and his life will literally change zero percent from my sudden appearance.

“Yep.” I nod a few times and look around the room again. It’s filling up quickly now, with people coming in the side and main doors. Eve and Oli are still nowhere to be found, though.

I feel the kid’s eyes on me, and I let out a long breath as I look back at him. He glances around, his hands wringing

together in front of him. “What’s up, Keith?”

He swallows. “Kevin.”

I press my tongue against the inside of my cheek, considering him. I don’t know why, but I don’t like him. In fact, the more people filter in, the more hateful stares I receive, the more I realize I really don’t like anyone in this fucking town.

“Well, anyways,” he looks around again before taking a step forward, “can you do me a favor?”

I huff out a breath. I don’t even know this guy.

“Depends on what it is,” I drawl. “What do you want?” I almost expect him to ask if I can put in a good word for him with Isaac. But he shuffles closer, too fucking close for my comfort.

I choke a little on the overpowering scent of his aftershave, which is weird because he doesn’t look like he can even grow a beard yet.

“You think you can talk to Eve for me?” he whispers. “I know things ended badly between us, but I’d like to give her another chance. You know, she’s so pretty and nice. I think we could be a great couple.”

I blink at him.

What the fuck?

It takes my brain an insane amount of time to process his words, but when I do, it feels like my thoughts are making

their way through sticky tar.

“What?” I choke out, completely dumbfounded. “Eve?” I hold back from adding the word *my*. Eve’s not my anything. Not anymore.

“Yeah,” he says, nodding a few times. “Can you tell her to call me?” I just stare at him, shock taking over my body.

“Call you,” I repeat slowly, the words tasting bitter on my tongue. “And you two are... *friends*?” He pushes his glasses up his nose as he laughs.

“Well, if things go my way, I’m hoping we’ll be a bit more than friends, if you know what I mean.” He waggles his brows at me making me gag into my mouth.

This is the guy Eve fucked? This is who Oli was talking about?

The side door opens, and Eve and Oli come back in, the latter looking disgruntled. Eve comes to an abrupt stop when she sees me talking to Kevin, her eyes widening.

That expression alone tells me everything I need to know, and I force my face into a grin. A small part of me wants to punch this kid. Marcus, too, though I’m not sure why. Definitely Isaac.

But the rest of me is too busy reveling in the terrified look on my stepsister’s face. Too busy imagining the way she’ll cry and beg me to stop tormenting, stop laughing, stop *hurting*.

“Sure, Kev,” I drawl, sliding my eyes to him. I tap his shoulder in a friendly gesture. “I’ll make sure she gives you a

chance.”

“Oh, thank you,” he says, smiling broadly, looking downright giddy. “She’s a special girl.”

I let out a laugh, unable to hold it in.

“That she is,” I agree, my eyes on hers. “Definitely special.”

Kevin scurries from the church, and Eve finds a spot on the opposite side of the room, her and Oli sitting close together so they can quietly talk. I barely pay attention to the meeting, focusing solely on her. Before I even realize it, Isaac calls it to a close, and Eve is on her feet, telling people bye.

I stand up, rubbing my hands down my thighs as she moves to the refreshments table and starts cleaning up. Isaac stacks chairs and shakes hands while people leave.

With a deep breath, I make my way toward Eve. I lean back against the table when I get to her, my arms folded over my chest.

“So,” I start, looking around the room. That Marcus fuck is still here, but he’s in line to talk to Isaac. Maybe he’s no more than a guy who needs help and wants nothing to do with Eve. But I didn’t like the way he was looking at her. “You and Kev?”

Plates and cups clatter to the floor as she sputters. “What?” she gasps.

“He asked me to tell you to call him sometime,” I murmur. “Wants to give you another chance. Tell me, little sister, are you dating Kev *and* Daddy Dearest?”

“I—I’m not dating Kevin,” she hisses, frantically looking around, probably making sure no one is close enough to hear. I let out a low laugh and watch as she drops down to pick up the fallen items.

I *could* help her, but I won’t.

Why would I when she looks so good on her knees?

The room quiets down, and I glance around again. Apart from Isaac and Oli, it’s empty. Everyone cleared out quickly, not that there had been that many people to begin with.

“How many other guys have you dated?” I ask, mostly to taunt her, but also because I really want to know. I shouldn’t give a shit but it’s like an ache, clawing and throbbing at my chest incessantly. “Marcus?” She looks up at me from the floor, fire burning in her eyes.

“How do you know Marcus?” she spits, her eyes narrowing.

“Small place,” I shrug, trying to ignore the way she so easily becomes defensive about the guy. “I heard his name.”

She nods as she stands, still looking suspicious. A long, weighted silence pulses between us, filling the space so severely, I’m practically choking on it.

Finally, she glances at me from the corner of her eye. “I don’t date.”

I scoff. “Sure.”

“What?” She drops the stuff on the table and turns to me, looking annoyed. “I don’t.”

“You’re telling me you haven’t fucked anyone since—” I cut myself off, the words dying on my tongue. She stares at me for a beat longer, her lips pressed into a thin line.

“Fucking isn’t dating.”

She’s right. It’s not. I haven’t dated a single person in my entire life, her included. Because what Eve and I were was beyond that. It was everything. It was nothing. It was confusing.

It was *us*.

And though I’ve fucked tons of faceless, nameless women since her, I haven’t dated a single one.

I bite my lower lip and nod slowly. “You’re right. Fucking isn’t the same as dating, but you can’t seriously tell me you haven’t been with anyone else since—”

“No,” she interrupts, backing away as her eyes hit the ground. “I haven’t.”

That shouldn’t make me feel good. But it does. For one millisecond, I feel good knowing she’s been untouched since me. Then I remember who was inside her last night, and I see red.

Stepping closer, her breath catches as she lifts her eyes to mine.

“Not until you hopped into bed with my father,” I murmur, the anger in my voice clear. She looks around like she’s worried someone might’ve overheard, and I bark out a

humorless laugh. “Don’t worry, Golden Girl, no one’s around. It’s still our little secret.”

The door opens, and our gazes shift to the newcomer. My brows lift as Mary heads straight for my father. He doesn’t even look up from what he’s doing, not until she’s on him.

She hisses something low enough for only him to hear, and he stiffens. He looks around, a similar expression to the one Eve just had. Our eyes meet, and I lift my hand to wave at him. His eye twitches, and a sick sense of satisfaction fills me.

Mary says something else, and his head snaps in her direction. I glance at Eve, finding her white-knuckling the paper plates she was cleaning up. She looks pissed, and I let out another laugh, shuffling closer to her.

She doesn’t bother looking at me; she just stays focused on Isaac and Mary as he drags her from the main room down the hall to his office.

“What’s the matter, little sister?” I whisper, twirling a lock of her hair around my finger. She bats my hand, but I tighten my grip. “Worried Daddy’s fucking around on you already?”

Her body stiffens and her throat bobs with worry. My hand drops away from her hair and trails down the curve of her spine lightly. A shiver chases my touch and I can’t help the grin that lifts my lips.

“Don’t worry,” I whisper, my breath ghosting over her jaw. “I’m sure you’re much tighter than her.”

Her mouth falls open, her eyes widening as the words sink in. As soon as they do, she braces her hands on my chest and shoves me away as hard as she can.

“You’re a fucking pig,” she spits, and I let out another low laugh as I pull my lighter from my pocket and turn toward the door, a cigarette already between my lips. I fucking need one.

“Actually,” I pause, glancing at her over my shoulder. I smirk as my eyes drift over her perfect body. “Maybe you’re not tighter. You seem to get around.”

With that, I spin on my heel, letting the door slam shut behind me.

Fuck her, and fuck this town.

2:30 Eve

Anxiety twists my stomach as I dry my hands on the kitchen towel. Today's the day that Isaac leaves for South Baptist training again. He'll be gone for two weeks instead of his usual one, which means I'm stuck with Roman for fourteen days.

Alone.

Just the two of us.

It makes me itchy, and my body too hot, in the worst way. He's different. *Of course*, he's different. He's not the same boy I knew all those years ago. He's a man now—a dark, damaged man who is a total fucking douche.

I hang the towel on the hook by the sink and spin around to face the kitchen. Other than Isaac's footsteps as he walks around his bedroom, packing his last-minute items, the house is quiet. It's almost peaceful. But I know better than to let my guard down.

Even if Roman isn't currently here, he's coming back. He didn't tell us where he was heading off to this morning. He just left and promised to be back later.

Though it felt more like a threat than a promise.

Isaac's heavy footfalls bounding down the stairs draw my attention, and I look away from the scarred table to focus on him as he enters the kitchen, his luggage in hand. He pauses, his eyes swinging around the bottom floor.

"He's still not here," I say, and it's like a weight lifts off his shoulders. "You really have to go?"

He gives me a firm look, one that tells me his answer before he even speaks. His bags drop to the table and I bite my lip to stop it from trembling.

God, Eve. Why are you like this? Stop being so fucking clingy.

"You know I do, sweetheart," he says. My head falls and I stare down at my hands. Why is this so hard? It shouldn't be so hard.

Isaac lets out an exhausted sigh, and guilt hits me.

I'm sure he's tired. Tired of this—of sneaking around and pretending like we're nothing to each other in public and everything to each other in the dead of night, between the sheets. It kills me he won't commit, but I understand why. I don't blame him for being scared of the backlash. But a part of me wishes he'd take the risk.

That *I* was worth the risk.

Even if he says he can't do it because of his status in the community, I have a feeling that things will work out. Eventually.

"It's just two weeks," he says, placing his hands on my shoulders. I nod, still keeping my gaze downcast. His fingers graze my jaw before gripping my chin. I finally force myself to peek up at him from under my lashes.

"I'm going to miss you," I murmur, and he smiles softly.

"We've done this a million times," he says, pressing his lips to my forehead with a light chuckle. "You've never missed me before."

"I always miss you," I defend. He huffs out a laugh before dropping his hands away. "You're positive—"

"I tried to get out of it, but we need the extra money," he says. My mouth snaps shut, and he clicks his tongue. "We've talked about this, sweetheart. Multiple times. I have to work. I *have* to."

Truthfully, I'm not even sure what exactly he does at these conferences. But he makes a decent bit of money that we, and the church, desperately need.

So, I nod and force myself to suck it up. I can't expect him to drop everything just because I'm afraid of being left alone with my stepbrother for a couple weeks.

Not afraid that he'll hurt me, just afraid of...*what am I afraid of?*

It's not like anything will happen. I can't stand him, and he clearly hates me. Which begs the question: *why is he here?* Really?

He still hasn't given us a reason for his return. A part of me is screaming to not look a gift horse in the mouth, to just accept and appreciate that he's back. But a bigger part of me, the part that realizes he's different, is telling me to kick him out. This isn't his home anymore. It hasn't been for a long time.

It hasn't felt like my home either. Without him, this place was more of a time capsule, sitting stagnant in Mama and Roman's memory.

"I'll be home soon," Isaac says, pulling my attention away from thoughts of his son. I swallow thickly and look up at him, nodding slightly.

"I know," I say, forcing myself to smile again. I'm proud when my lip doesn't wobble.

I want to ask him to define our relationship again, just one last time, before he leaves. But I don't want to start a fight. I just hate that he's leaving and he'll be around other women, not that I think he'd do anything with them.

But what if Mary calls again? He won't turn her away or ignore her calls. And if they really talk as often as she made it seem, then who knows if she'll call him while he's away?

Who am I kidding? Of course she will. She'll probably call him while he's on the road.

Jealousy is an ugly emotion, and it's one Mama always told me to never feel. She knew how possessive I could get of things I loved and always taught me to share. It was to always share my toys, though. Never the man I was sleeping with.

What would she think if she were here?

She'd be disappointed. Would she hate me? Would she hate Isaac?

"I'll be back soon," he says, and I huff out a small breath.

"Drive safe," I mutter. He kisses my cheek, and when he pulls away, I lean into him, silently begging for his lips. But he just steps back, moving to grab his bags off the table.

"Be good while I'm away," he says tightly. "Don't get into trouble with Olive again, and if he—" He cuts himself off, his face shifting to anger. "If *he* bothers you, call the police." My eyes widen and I jerk forward a step.

"The police?" I breathe. "I wouldn't call them on Roman."

"If you have to—"

"We'll be fine," I say, shaking my head dismissively. "*He'll* be fine." His lips stay pressed into a firm line as he stares at me. "Isaac—"

"I have to go," he breathes, shaking his head. "Just be good."

I watch as he turns on his heel, his shoulders tense. My breath whooshes out of me when I can't see him anymore.

I can't believe he wants me to call the cops on Ro. I'd never do that. I may not know him anymore, not like I did, but I still trust him. Even if he is a total dick, he wouldn't hurt me.

Right?

No. What am I talking about? This is Roman. Of course he'd never hurt me.

Not physically, at least.

Before another thought can filter through my frantic mind, Isaac is back in the kitchen, rushing toward me, his bags not in his hands anymore.

"Isaac," I gasp. It's cut off when he crushes his lips against mine, his arms holding me tightly to his chest as he ravishes my mouth with his.

My body slumps against him, my arms wrapping around his neck to hold me up. But as quickly as he came, he pulls away again, breathing heavily. He presses another light kiss to my lips before murmuring, "Remember who you belong to, temptress."

2:31 Roman

When I got back from Mammoth late last night, Isaac was gone and Eve was holed up in her bedroom. She didn't bother coming out for dinner, and I didn't bother checking on her. She's an adult. If she was hungry, she could fend for herself.

But it felt weird to act like I was alone in this place.

I still haven't been to my room. I don't know if I want to see what they've done with it. If they've cleared all my shit out and turned it into an office for Isaac, or maybe a darkroom for Eve's photos.

Not that I've seen her take a single photo since being back.

She still hasn't come out of her bedroom today, and it's past noon. I heard the shower running this morning, so I know she's at least alive. Maybe she's upset about Isaac leaving, but this isn't her. Moping and staying in bed all day because of a guy?

Even when she had that awful first kiss with Tommy McKinney and was so upset she was nearly in tears over it, she didn't sulk in her bedroom. That was always what I did. Not her.

She kept moving through her day. She sat at the lake, in the sun, and was upset, but she didn't wallow. Maybe it's because Tommy McKinney was just a dumb kid, a guy who gave her a terrible first kiss and he meant nothing to her.

Isaac—Isaac means something. As much as I hate to fucking admit it, she cares about my father. Loves him, probably.

And why wouldn't she? She loves everything. She's sunshine and innocence. Hot summer days and golden smiles. Of course, she'd give Isaac her warmth. Her light.

But he'll do this to her. Turn her into a cold, dark shell of the girl I once knew. The girl I loved. Even if this is just the beginning of her becoming a husk of her former self, he's going to destroy her.

I know it.

He destroys everything.

Having had enough, I push to my feet, determined to get her to leave her fucking bedroom and at least eat something. She can't do this for two weeks. *I* can't do it for two weeks.

My footsteps are loud in the silent house as I stomp my way through the house, ignoring the pull my closed up bedroom has on me, and bring my hand up to bang on her door.

I pause when I hear her voice. It's a soft, lilting sound, so different from when she talks at church, or even to Isaac. To me.

But it's familiar.

Breathy.

It's the voice she uses when she's camming, tired and dreamy, but still warm and full of life.

Full of *lust*.

It's not overly produced, like you know she's putting on a show. Somehow, it's intimate, like she's speaking directly to you, to your soul. And it makes you feel seen in the way only Eve can see you. Even if her face isn't in the camera, she brings warmth to her content.

The warmth of a girl who's so desperate to make people happy that she'll kill herself in the process.

But she's doing this now, while I'm home?

Fuck, does she know I'm here?

Dropping my hand to the doorknob, I twist it and slowly open the door, letting it swing until it softly knocks against the wall. She jolts and spins toward me. I grin at her shocked expression.

But it's me who's really shocked.

There she is, fully naked, holding a purple vibrator to her clit. Her back is arched, her blonde hair tumbling down the perfect curve of her back. Her face is clear from makeup, her

freckles shining brightly in the natural sunlight pouring in through the window.

I've watched her videos, scrolled her pictures. Saved them. Jacked off too many times to count.

I've memorized her. Every inch. Every freckle. Every moan.

But there is nothing, *nothing*, compared to seeing her like this in person.

My body hums, coming to life and catching on fire all at once.

Her bright eyes are wide as she stares up at me, her mouth parted. The vibrator falls from her hand and *buzzes* against the wooden floor.

I wave my hand at her. "Don't let me interrupt," I mouth, and her eyes jerk back to her setup. It takes work, but I finally tear my eyes from her skin, the curve of her thick hips, the dips and peaks of her ass.

She's fucking hot.

I bite my tongue and look around. Her setup is an impressive one. Professional.

How long has she been doing this?

There are black sheets set up on a portable clothing rack, and a small white rug is under her, hiding her surroundings from view.

Smart. No wonder I couldn't tell where she was in any of her videos.

Her phone sits on a small tripod, recording her at the perfect angle to keep her face out of view. Her laptop is set up next to her, out of camera, probably so she can watch the feed. To her right is a big box of toys, and I practically choke on my tongue when I see her collection.

Fuck, this isn't a casual thing for her. It's a goddamn job.

It makes me sweaty and on the verge of puking.

I shake myself, forcing thoughts and worries away as I watch her. "Are you live?" I ask, my guttural voice barely above a whisper. She's still frozen with shock, completely unable to do anything but stare at me. Finally, she hesitantly nods. "Well, give your subscribers a show."

Her face goes pale, then turns red as the seconds pass. Her body shakes, her eyes going glossy.

Seeing her naked, looking like sex personified, is one thing. But seeing her like *this*, terrified and vulnerable...I bite the inside of my cheek as my heart squeezes and my cock throbs. It does something to me.

I grin, settling against the doorframe and folding my arms over my chest, feigning a nonchalance I don't feel.

Honestly, it makes me sick to think this is what she's been doing only a few feet from me. Fucking herself on camera for these men. *For men like me.*

She blinks a few times as she takes in the *fuck you* expression on my face. Her eyes narrow as she straightens her shoulders, her previous confidence filling her once more. I

almost see the words flit through her mind as her lips tip up in a small smirk.

Game on.

Turning her attention back to her viewers, she grabs the vibrator and slides it down her body, teasing herself. It coasts over her chest, her delicate collarbone, the swell of her heavy breast, before finally landing on her nipple.

It's pink and taut, begging for my teeth. My dick jumps when she licks her lips seductively and spreads her thick thighs wider, letting the rug slip beneath her.

My jaw tenses, and my mouth goes dry while I watch her smile softly at some nameless, faceless fucker instead of me.

"Thanks, Daddy," she laughs softly, and I jolt a step forward. My shaky hand slides into my pocket and I pull my phone out, my attention on her until the last second. My thumb trembles as I slide it over the screen and bring up her livestream.

Fuck.

Her tits are perfect in person, perfect on this little screen. Just fucking perfect. Every motherfucking inch of her is.

I hate it.

The comments flit across the screen quickly, and I scroll up, looking for the comment she just responded to. My eyes latch onto one, the only one it could've been.

Daddy555:

You look beautiful, sweetheart.

My heart hammers in my chest. *Sweetheart?* Are you fucking kidding me?

My throat burns with bile, then twists to something deeper. Darker. Is this Isaac? Surely fucking not. He can't know about this. He'd lose his shit if he did.

But...

Daddy555:

Pinch those sweet tits. Show us what a good girl you can be.

I clench my jaw so tightly I swear I feel a tooth crack.

“Daddy,” she whimpers, and my eyes snap up to her. Even if I can see her on my screen, I need to see her in person. Her eyes latch onto mine as she slides the tip of the vibrator over her clit again and pinches the nipple I'd just been salivating over. “Like this?” Her voice is a breathy moan, sending shivers down my spine.

As if she's asking me, my chin barely dips in a nod, and she smiles triumphantly.

I shake myself. Shit. This isn't how this was supposed to go.

I was supposed to come in here and drag her ass to some shitty diner and force feed her. I was supposed to make her drink fucking water, because if Chase has taught me anything, it's how important that is.

I was supposed to make her life a little less miserable today.

Instead, I'm standing in her doorway with an aching hard cock while I watch her fuck herself for these men.

A *ding* has me jolting upright and pulling my attention from her to her computer. Another one, and another. She looks back, smiling as she reads the requests. I drop my gaze to my phone, reading in horror at the things they're asking her to do and the money they're offering.

iluvtits69:

cover your toes in hot mustard and suck it off. (Tip: \$100)

beachedwhale:

Degrade me again, please (Tip: \$250)

I choke, my phone nearly slipping from my fingers as I look back at her. The vibrator's gone silent, forgotten, as she works both nipples between her thin fingers. Her back bows and she whimpers.

I squeeze my jaw, fighting the urge to rip my cock out. Christ, she's effortless.

"Whale," she says softly. "You're such an ugly, disgusting pig. You should be embarrassed." My mouth opens, then closes. "And you have the smallest cock I've ever seen."

This time, I can't close my mouth. It just hangs open while I watch her spew this shit casually, like she's done it a million times before.

My girl. My sweet, angelic Goldie.

Fucking hell.

beachedwhale:

Thank you, mistress. (Tip: \$250)

She smiles brightly as Whale tips her generously. Shit. She makes a fucking killing doing this.

“Tits, I’m not doing that,” she says politely, and my brows lift.

“You’re not?” I ask, unable to stop myself. “I thought you’d do anything for a dime.”

She shoots me a withering glare and shrugs. I scoff, rolling my eyes. Eve responds by sliding her hands up her body in a slow, sensual move, before lifting one above her head out of shot, and promptly flips me off, mouthing, *fuck you, asshole*.

With a final glare, she turns back toward her audience, trying to forget I’m there. But I won’t let her.

I can’t.

I may be turned on, but I’m also pissed the fuck off and the longer I stand here, the longer I watch her effortlessly turn strangers on, spread her thighs for them, touch herself for a bunch of nobodies, the more incensed I become.

My fingers ache for my lighter, but instead, I pick up my phone again. My lips lift in a genuine smile as rage and heartbreak war for dominance inside me. I flick the Favorite Fans app closed and bring up my camera.

If she wants to go to war, to war we fucking go.

2:32 Eve

*O*h fuck, oh fuck, oh fuck.

What is he doing here? I thought he was still away. The house was silent all morning, and I didn't see him when I came out for my morning coffee. If I had, I wouldn't be doing *this*. Not here, not now.

And why hasn't he flipped yet? Lost his shit on me for doing this?

I thought...

I thought...

I thought he would have cared.

My eyes burn, but I blink the reaction away before he notices.

Swallowing thickly, I pretend I'm alone in this room, putting on a show for my fans. It's nearly impossible with Roman's dark presence looming over me. But I have to. I can't stop now.

I can't let him win.

I throw my head back at something one of my viewers says, feigning pleasure when all I feel is chaos.

“Thank you for the tip, Furby.” Internally, I roll my eyes. *Furbys4Lyfe*, really? What is this, 2000?

Roman scoffs and shuffles around like he's trying to get comfortable.

Is he seriously just going to stand there, watching me like I'm nothing more than his personal entertainment? Like this isn't killing him inside?

Fuck. What if it's not?

That thought is almost worse than anything else.

Goosebumps cover my skin, and I fight the urge to cover up. I feel exposed and vulnerable knowing Roman is judging me. Not just my body, but judging what he's seeing now. Not for the first time, I wonder what he's thinking of me. If he's disgusted, or if he regrets ever knowing me.

Loving me.

Shaking off the drastic turn my mind has taken, I flick my eyes to the left side of the screen, scanning the rapid commentary from viewers. My eyes nearly roll.

Tits joins every one of my lives and they never fail to request the most ridiculous content for minimal prices. I may want to reach my goal sooner than later, but I have my limits. And toes? Definitely a limit.

I idly run my vibrator over my clit, reveling in the sharp zaps it sends down my spine. That combined with Roman watching me has my pussy wetter than usual. It's hard for me to focus enough to come during these things. There are so many people, so many requests. Good and bad.

So many gross, hurtful comments.

Daddy555:

Where's your plug, angel?

Angel? That's new. I almost laugh at the nickname. He couldn't be more wrong, but I stifle the reaction. It's a relief when he doesn't call me sweetheart. The name grates on my nerves every single time I see it.

I read his question again and my core spasms, causing pleasure to ricochet throughout my body.

"Oh, Daddy," I breathe, laughing softly. "I have a surprise for you."

I swear I hear Roman hiss out a sharp breath and I fucking *preen* at the sound. If he's bothered now, I can't wait to see how he reacts to a change of scenery.

Turning off and dropping the vibrator, I spin around, careful to keep my face off camera. It's hard, but I've learned my angles. I slide the laptop closer, keeping the live up as I give my viewers a new show.

Daddy555:

Such a good fucking girl for me. You knew just what I'd want. Fuck, baby. (Tip: \$300)

Furbys4Lyfe:

Dayuuuum.

thehornyraven:

Wish it was bigger. Like my cock.

Katiebobatie:

@thehornyraven don't you mean smaller?

thehornyraven:

Fuck off, bitch. Bet you're ugly as fuck.

thehornyraven *was banned*

Katiebobatie:

Thank you mods. Get it Goldengirl. You're so hot. (Tip \$25)

Katiebobatie:

Sorry I can't give more.

I smile. She's so sweet.

“Thank you, Katie. I just appreciate you being here.” And I do. It's nice having women drop into an otherwise overly masculine site.

I do a little shimmy, dropping my chest to give them a better view, including the prick who's yet to move an inch from the door. Unfortunately, it puts Roman right in my line of sight and I'm unable to resist looking in his direction.

I'm on my hands and knees, my bare body on full display, my legs slightly spread so everyone can see the plug I put in earlier. There's not an inch of me hidden. All my flaws, my imperfections, are out there for the world, for *him*, to see.

My mouth goes dry as I meet his gaze, then starts to salivate when I see him roughly gripping his cock over his jeans. The bulge is impressive, even from here, and I have a momentary flashback to that night all those years ago.

God, he'd been so big when he slid inside me. So thick and hot. I felt every ripple, every vein, even through the condom. It hurt, but then it became a delicious stinging warmth that spread throughout my body.

And when he came, he sent me spiraling toward my second orgasm with just his cock and sweet words.

My eyes flutter closed and I reach between my thighs, remembering I have a show to put on. I have to *finish*, so I can escape.

When I blink open again, it's to the sight of Roman standing just a few feet before me, his phone in one hand, his jean-covered cock in the other.

"Say something," he mouths, a devilish smirk on his too handsome face. My jaw ticks even as my nipples begin to throb, aching for something, anything.

I flick my gaze to the computer screen, finding another slew of requests and comments. The primary ones are from

Daddy555, like usual. He's insistent, but the reminder that I'm supposed to be performing helps me stay in the moment.

"Fuck," I moan, rubbing my clit. My fingers tremble when I realize how wet I am, even as my chest begins to ache. This is fifty shades of fucked up. "I'm so wet for you."

When I say it, my eyes snap to Roman's against my will, just in time to see his glaze over with pleasure. I swallow dryly, unable to tear my gaze away. But he's not focusing on me, he's focusing on his phone. Is he watching my livestream when I'm right here in front of him?

Then, my eyes go wide.

Fuck.

Fuck.

Fuck.

What if he's telling someone? What if he's telling Isaac? He wouldn't do that, would he? Tattle on me?

Shit.

I moan loudly, my fingers sliding down further toward my entrance. His golden-green eyes flit to mine, just like I knew they would.

"What are you doing?" I mouth, jerking my chin to his phone. My heart is in my throat as I watch his grin grow, his expression shifting from turned-on and irritated to something I can only describe as cocky assurance.

Slowly, so fucking slowly, he turns his phone to face me. His thumb hovers over what's clearly a still image of me.

I blink rapidly, my brain trying to process what I'm seeing. He presses *play* as he crouches, his body still out of the shot, but his face close enough to mine that I can hear him softly whisper, "I've got you now, *sweetheart*."

The last word is a venom-filled hiss, but I'm too busy trying to stay upright, to avoid passing out from panic to care.

Because on Roman's tiny screen isn't just my live feed, it's *me*.

Me from his view from the doorway to my childhood bedroom. There's nothing hidden, no secrets, no clever angles.

Just my face, my body, my toys, my show, my room.

Just...*me*.

My eyes flit from the screen to him and back again. I'm laughing with my viewers, moaning for them, playing with my clit, showing them my ass. It's a performance and there is no denying who's behind it all.

The room spins as genuine terror overtakes my body, and my voice, no matter how much I try to stop it, trembles as I breathe, "Wh-what—"

Roman smirks and tugs his phone back. His free hand comes up to my frozen face and traces my jaw, his touch so soft I almost mistake it for kindness. But then, he grips my chin hard enough that I know it'll bruise. I want to pull away. I want to

fight, to scream, but I'm frozen. Stuck immobile in his beautiful, deadly stare.

“Here's what's going to happen, little sister,” he whispers, tugging me further out of frame. “You're going to fuck yourself for everyone to see, including me. You're going to keep going until you come, and when you do, you're going to scream *my name*.”

I balk at that, finally finding my strength and sense to tear my head away. “Like hell I am,” I hiss, shaking my head as I push back onto my haunches. Leaning forward, I smash the mute button, ignoring the live for a second.

Roman pushes to his feet and shrugs too casually before turning to his phone again. He messes with it for a second, then flips it back to me. On the screen is the video he took of me, but it's sitting idle in a text box, waiting to be sent. Vomit fills my throat when I catch the receiver's name.

Isaac.

“You wouldn't dare,” I snarl, my voice cracking.

Roman grins, pocketing his phone. “Do what I said and I won't,” he says, as though he doesn't hold my entire fate in his big, tattooed hands. “But make no mistake. One slip up, one bitchy move, and your entire world will come crashing down around you. The whole world will see the face of Goldengirl69.”

“What do you want from me?” I choke, my eyes flicking to the flurry of comments flying across my screen. People are

going to be so mad. “I don’t—”

He points to the camera and takes another step back. “Do it.” His head cocks to the side. “Fuck yourself, and all of this stops. That’s all you have to do.” He bites his lips, his eyes scanning over my body. “Shouldn’t be that hard to whore yourself out one more time, hmm?”

“Fuck you, Roman,” I grit out, anger and indignation filling me in a heartbeat at the fucked up name.

How dare he? I know he’s not a virgin. He wasn’t a virgin when he took *my* virginity and I have no doubt he’s fucked his way across Mammoth since me, just like he fucked his way across Divinity before me.

But fine. If he wants a show, he’ll get a goddamn show.

And he’ll regret every second of it.

Reaching over, I snatch my toy box and quickly rifle through until I find what I need. A smirk spreads across my face when my fingers wrap around the toy, but I quickly hide the victorious look before Roman can spot it. After getting into position, I flick the mute button off and release a low, pathetic whimper.

“I’m so sorry,” I whine, suppressing a shudder when my new toy clicks on. “Technical difficulties. I have no idea what happened.” I let out a throaty moan. “But I promise to make it up to you. I’ll be your perfect, dirty little slut now.”

Immediately, the comments start pinging in, one after another. The dialogue goes from royally pissed off to putty in

my hands within seconds.

iluvtits69:

where the fuck are you

beachedwhale:

We can't hear you, mistress. Are you okay?

Daddy555:

What's happening?

Daddy555:

Wtf. Come back. You're not done.

Capricornstalker:

She's such a fucking bitch.

Katiebobatie:

**eyeroll* men are idiots. She's glitching, obviously. Be patient or leave.*

Daddy555:

Welcome back, sweetheart. We missed you.

iluvtits69:

fuck yeah

beachedwhale:

omg I'm so hard for you, mistress. I'll do anything you say.

Smiling to myself, I push my ass into the air and widen my legs, granting everyone a perfect view. My plug is still in, but it's small enough that I can handle a larger-sized dildo. I adjust

the settings on my Triple Rabbit Vibe and run it through my wet pussy, coating it.

“I wanna play a game,” I whimper as the vibration from the toy hits my clit.

The dildo is thick, veiny and realistic, but it has an extra curved portion shaped like a rabbit that’s meant to stimulate the clit. I know my favorite settings by heart and it never fails to get me off.

Daddy555:

You don’t make the rules.

I scoff silently and roll my eyes. I absolutely do, but these dicks are just too full of themselves to see it.

“I do right now. I promise you’ll like this game, though. Please play with me, Daddy?” I insert an extra breathy whine at his name, knowing he never tells me no. He may get on my nerves but at least he’s consistent.

Capricornstalker:

I just wanna cum (Tip: \$50)

Daddy555:

Okay, angel....

iluvtits69:

Nice cunt. You’re dripping.

beachedwhale:

I’m leaking, too. (\$75)

So. Easy.

“Okay,” I breathe, sliding the head of the silicone cock into my pussy as I ignore the impulse to once again look at Roman. I can’t. I have to pretend he’s not here or this won’t work. “I’m gonna tell you exactly how to fuck your cock, step by step, and then we’re going to come at the same time.”

I push the toy deeper, crying out, knowing it’ll hook every single one of my loyal fans, except the women, but I’ll have to come back for them later.

“It’ll be like you’re here, fucking my dripping pussy. Railing me hard and fast, just the way you want.” I pull it back out, letting everyone behind the camera see how wet I genuinely am. I don’t know what it is. If it’s the game, the threat, or Roman watching me, but I’m suddenly beyond horny.

I want this orgasm like I want my freedom.

“And then,” I pant, slapping my clit with the thick toy, and my hips jerk in response. “When I tell you to, you’ll pretend you’re filling my needy pussy up with your cum.”

I hear a grunt from my left and try as I might, I can’t ignore him completely. His eyes are riveted to my ass, to the space between my thighs where my dildo is slowly disappearing inside me. His phone is long gone, his pants are unzipped, his cock straining to get out of his boxer briefs. He’s squeezing it like it’s offended him and his free hand is continuously raking through his hair.

He’s falling apart and I’ve only just started.

Grinning, I look back at the screen, seeing nothing but tips and excitement.

Perfect.

“First,” I start, slowly pulling my toy back out before pushing it in. I keep the pressure light, the pace slow, knowing I need to work them all up. “I need you to pull your cock out and wrap your hand around it.” I pause and my spine tingles when I hear the nearly silent sound of material shifting. “Fuck, look how hard you are. Is that all for me?”

I shove the dildo in hard, making my spine bow as I cry out. The *ding, ding, ding* of comments coming in, followed by the *cha-ching* from tips should make me feel victorious, but it’s nothing compared to the knowledge that he’s listening to me.

“It’s so big, so thick.” I rotate the dildo, making sure the rabbit hits my clit with every slow, steady pump. “I want you to clear your mind and pretend it’s just you and me here. No one else. Nothing else exists.”

My throat aches with my words.

I don’t know why I said them but I can’t take them back and as they hang heavily in the air, I can’t help but wonder.

Is he listening now?

Daddy555:

Fuck, baby. Keep going.

“Such a good boy for me,” I praise, rocking my hips. “Now lift your hand and spit.”

The unmistakable sound of Roman spitting has my entire body lighting on fire and a real moan that's born in my soul pushes from my lips before I can help it.

He says nothing.

Does nothing.

He's waiting for me.

Oh, God.

“Take your wet hand and soak your perfect cock for me. Make it nice and slippery, so it'll fit in my tight little pussy,” I command.

At some point, my eyes close as the mental picture I'm painting takes over. Except in my mind, it's not a faceless man behind a computer screen, but it's not the man it should be, either.

Instead, I can't help but picture my asshole stepbrother being the one filling my cunt with the cock I've ached for for years.

My hips continue to rock as I brace the dildo between my legs. With every thrust and roll, my shoulder falls closer and closer to the floor. I moan, the vibrator inside me kicking up a notch.

“I'm already so close, just thinking about the way you'll feel when you're finally inside me,” I whimper. “God, it'll be so good. So perfect.” I bounce my thighs, letting gravity pull me down further on the dildo. “Squeeze your cock harder. Fuck yourself for me, nice and slow.”

I try to mimic the movements I'm telling them. I try to keep it slow and pace myself. But with every roll, every whimper, every tingle sent shooting up my spine, I grow closer to my release, and it's all because of *him*.

The sounds of Roman jacking off, the slow, rough pump of his wet palm against his leaking cock is almost too much. He's panting, trying to stifle it, but I can hear it. It's almost like he's bent over me, his breathing harsh and warm against the back of my neck, sending pleasure shooting through my body.

"Oh my God," I cry. "That's it. You're doing so good. You're so fucking hard, I bet you're throbbing in your hand." I swallow, finally letting my eyes open.

Like magnets, our eyes meet.

His jeans are undone and pulled down just enough for his cock to be out. It's as thick and perfect as I remember. And it's locked in his borderline punishing grip as he slowly strokes himself.

"Fuck," he grunts, his brows pinched tightly together. His jaw ticks, and his Adam's apple bobs as he forces himself to swallow. Irritation laces his face, his entire body poised and ready to snap. Yet he still continues to do as I've commanded. Continues to follow my lead.

I lick my lips, my every muscle shaking with need, with trepidation.

With fear.

Why am I doing this?

I can't stop. I can't let him tell Isaac. I can't let him share my face with the world. I have to win this silent battle we're having but *why* am I so fucking turned on?

He's an asshole. A bully. He's the man who loved and left. He breaks things and right now I think he might be breaking me.

"I need you," I whimper, my eyes still locked on his. His thighs shake as I increase my pace, fucking myself in earnest. "I need you so bad. Fuck me, please. Fuck me hard and fast. I need to come."

His pace picks up as his body sways toward me. I watch the way his fist tightens as he slides down his length, loosening as he nears his heavy sac. I watch the way his hand curves over his purple mushroom head with every swipe, gathering the wetness coating his cock in a continuous stream.

I watch and match his every movement. I fuck myself exactly how he is, and with every stroke, every whimper and moan, I fall deeper into the pits of depravity.

"That's it," I choke out, my eyes burning with tears. "Harder, baby. You're right there, I feel it. Get ready to come with me."

Why?

Why?

Why?

"Fuck me like you mean it. Make me feel it. I wanna feel *you*," I beg, the words garbled. I don't even know who I'm talking to anymore.

Ping.

Cha-ching.

Ping.

Ping. Ping. Ping.

Cha-ching.

Distantly, I hear the sounds of comments and tips trickling in. But the roaring pleasure in my body drowns it out. I feel like I'm floating between realities. Right and wrong. Heaven and Hell. Paradise and damnation.

Roman steps forward, his gaze tortured as though he's feeling every confusing thought with me. His body trembles, his brows still knitted together. He's sweating, his t-shirt clinging to every inch of his sculpted chest.

Fuck, he's beautiful.

My eyes rake down his body, taking him in as I pick up my pace. My clit throbs, begging for release, and with every deep stroke, my ass pulses around the plug. My gaze latches on his hand, the one tightening impossibly harder around his angry cock.

Home.

His knuckles say *home*.

My eyes narrow and flick to his other hand, the one that's shifted to hold up the base of his shirt like he knows he's about to come.

Sick.

Home Sick.

Home Sick.

Homesick.

I choke out a sound somewhere between a sob and a moan and look away. What does that even mean?

I have to finish, have to finish, have to—

Fingers wrap around my hair and jolt my head back. I'm tugged up and out of frame so fast, I barely have time to scramble, keeping the toy plunged deep inside me.

"Eyes. On. Me." His voice is a rasp so deep, it sounds like it was born in the pits of Hell.

I meet his wild, broken gaze, and the look I see there has me spiraling toward the edge. *Need.* So much need and desire, it's practically pouring from him in palpable waves.

He jerks harder, bringing his cock to my face. It's red and there's a vein peaking out from under his massive palm that's throbbing wildly. The tip is leaking, every rough swipe of his fist pushing more precum out.

"Roman!" I cry, the word tumbling from my lips as my orgasm crashes over me. It's so hard and intense the scream is a garbled mess of whimpers and choking sounds.

My body shudders as my pussy clenches around the toy, my ass spasming around the plug. My hands dart out, gripping his thighs as the room spins. Before I can pull them away, his

head tips back and a guttural groan fills my room as his cum paints my face.

I blink once before squeezing my eyes shut. I flinch with the first splash and shiver with the second. My cheek, my jaw, my lips and dripping down to my chest. It's messy and all over the place and I should move, should punch him right in the cock, but I don't.

Instead, I fight the almost overwhelming need to *open my fucking mouth*.

I don't.

I can't.

I can't.

When he finally stops shaking, finally stops panting and releases me, I blink my eyes open.

His face is red, but his expression's unreadable.

Unable to speak or move, I stay locked in his orbit, his commanding gaze. Roman's *that* powerful. He doesn't need to tell me what to do with words. He can rule me with just a look, just a flick of his tattooed wrist.

Homesick.

I pull away, falling back onto my haunches as a potent blush stings my cheeks. What the fuck did I just do?

His smirk is slow and feral as he tucks his still-hard cock away. With a shrug, he steps back.

“What a waste,” he scoffs, shooting me a disgusted look.
“That wasn’t even worth the fucking subscription fee.”

2:33 Eve

Wind whips at my face as I peddle down Main Street, heading for The Crispy Biscuit across town. Oli invited me to lunch, and after the incident with Roman yesterday, I need an excuse to get out of the house.

He's not home today. Said he had a job and client to get to, whatever that meant. I hadn't thought about his job when he came back. His boss must be very understanding to let him come and go as he pleases. Maybe he's his own boss. He's too much of an asshole to have a job and not get fired immediately because of his terrible fucking personality.

My hands grip the handlebars tighter, the thick plastic digging into my palms. Why am I doing this? Forcing myself to think about him? After yesterday, he made it clear what he thinks of me and it's not good. He doesn't respect me. Hell, I don't think he even likes me. But he won't leave and I don't know why.

And now, he knows my secret. Not just that, he holds my fate in his phone. One stupid video could ruin me. Why did I

have to taunt him? Challenge him?

Before, just him knowing about Isaac and me was enough to put me on edge, but now, he can completely destroy me. He knows too much about me. He's holding too much over my head for me to ever feel a moment's peace again.

And I don't know anything about him.

Sometimes it feels like I never did. But then I think about everything we shared, the secret midnight meetings, and sitting too close on my bed while we read from the same book. When he finally let me have a glimpse into that mind of his, I felt like I was finally seeing him. But now, we're back to being strangers. Now, it's like all the memories I have are just a mirage, like they never happened. Like *we* never happened.

I pull up outside of the café, and when I don't immediately spot Oli's little car in the parking lot, I sigh. It's the only one covered in bumper stickers and multi-colored dyed seats inside. It's impossible to miss.

She told me to meet her at two, so here I am, but where is she? I swear, she'd be late to meet God. I snicker at the thought. She'd purposefully be late, just to keep the man upstairs waiting. To show him some humility, she'd probably say.

Sighing, I park my bike at the metal rack and make my way inside. The hustle and bustle of the little café does something to calm my racing heart.

After Roman left my room last night, my viewers went crazy trying to figure out who the mystery man was. But it wasn't like I could tell them it was my asshole stepbrother. I couldn't tell them anything, so I just wiped as much of his cum off my face as I could and wrapped up the stream.

When I came out into the living room, he was gone. I don't know where he went, and I don't care. He could've drowned in the lake for all I care. After that stunt, he's lucky I didn't lock him out of the fucking house.

Instead, I just stayed in my room until he texted me that he had to go to work this morning. How courteous of him, to let me know his whereabouts. It was probably a taunt to let me know I could cam in peace.

I didn't put much thought into it, too caught up in the realization that after all these years, he still had my phone number memorized.

His was different, though.

I should know. Since the night Roman left, I've sent hundreds of texts that have gone unanswered. Almost every single day, I've reached out. At one point, I received an automatic reply that his number had been disconnected.

But he...

He had *my* number.

He could have called, he could have reached out, and he didn't. Not until now. Why?

It seems to be a constant question in my mind these days.

I click my tongue. Men suck.

“Hey, Eve,” Cassie, the hostess, calls as I walk in. I smile brightly, bringing my hand up to wipe the sweat from my brow.

“Hey,” I say with a wave. “Can we get a table outside? I’m waiting for Oli.” She nods happily as she grabs a couple menus, and leads me through the little restaurant.

“So, I heard Roman’s back in town,” she says conversationally. My jaw clenches at the sound of his name. “Is Chase with him?”

“No,” I say tightly. “Just him.”

“Oh.” She hesitates by the table as I pull my chair out. I lift my brows expectantly. Her hands wring together and she snatches her notepad from her apron. “Can I get y’all anything to drink?”

My eyes narrow, but I nod. “I’ll take a sweet tea and Oli will want her usual.”

Cassie jots it down, her head bobbing nonstop. The second she’s done writing, she blurts, “Could you ask him to call me? Roman, I mean. I’d love to catch up.” She tucks her dark hair behind her ear, and it takes everything I have not to roll my eyes.

“Sure.” I murmur, giving her a tightlipped smile. “I’ll let him know.” She beams and dips her head in thanks.

I slump into the chair and look out at the lazy downtown of Divinity Falls. Gathering my hair in my hand, I lift it off my

neck as I fan it with my other. It was the wrong day to choose to wear it down. It's so damn hot. I should have picked an inside table, but I didn't know if Oli would be alone.

Scanning every car that drives by, my irritation grows. Where the hell is she? I knew I should've taken my time getting here. But she made it sound urgent.

I sigh again. It's not her I'm annoyed with. It's Roman. It's me. It's Isaac. It's the mess the three of us are in. It's the fact that Roman holds too much power in his stupidly tattooed hands.

Homesick? Seriously?

"Eve?" My head jerks up at the sound of my name. "Whoa, sorry." Marcus holds his hands up, his brows bunching in concern. "You okay?"

"Oh, I'm fine," I breathe, running a shaky hand over my sweat-damp hair. "How are you?" He lets out a breathy laugh as he moves closer to the table.

"Fine," he says, sliding his hands into the pockets of his dark green cargo shorts.

I do a cursory glance, taking him in. He's paired the shorts with a casual white v-neck and a pair of Sperry's. I only know the brand because I've always liked them but they're hard to find around here. Where is he from? He doesn't act or dress like he's from the south and he doesn't sound like us. California, maybe? I wonder what brought him here.

Marcus rocks back on his heels, pulling my attention and my absent smile falters. What's wrong with me? I need to stop being so rude and get it together.

"Would you like to sit?" I wave my hand at the empty chair beside me, leaving the one opposite me open for Oli. She won't be happy to have an intruder, but she'll have to deal. She was late, not me.

"You wouldn't mind?" He grabs the back of the chair as he speaks, pulling it out, not giving me a chance to say anything. He scoots it closer to me as he sits and leans his forearms on the table, his eyes on mine. "You sure you're good?"

"Oh, yeah," I say, waving him off. I'm not. Not even close. But it's not like I can tell this random dude that I'm in a pseudo-love triangle with my stepfather and stepbrother. "Just hot."

I wave my face again.

Christ, I'm so fucked.

"You know, you can tell me anything," he says slowly, his pretty green eyes laced with concern. "I'm a great listener."

"I'm sure," I laugh. I rest my elbow on the table and prop my head on my hand. "If I need a confidant, I'll find you, okay?"

"Deal." He grins, his eyes twinkling. Glancing at the empty chair, his smile falters. "On a date?"

"With my best friend," I say, a teasing note in my voice.

“Good,” he mutters, his smile turning genuine again. My brows lift, but before I can say anything, he continues. “I actually wanted to ask you something.”

Disappointment fills me. Marcus is a cute guy, he’s really sweet and seems like he’d be fun to date. But I can’t be with him. I have Isaac. And Roman.

No.

I have Isaac. *Just* Isaac.

But do I? a small voice whispers.

Bracing myself to turn him down, I force a pleasant smile on my face, one that he returns. He leans to the side and grabs his phone from his pocket and stares down at it as he scrolls, bracing his forearms on the table. I blink at him.

“I got an interview at the autobody shop down on third,” he says, and my smile falls completely.

What?

“Congrats,” I say slowly, and his amused gaze slides to mine. I shake my head, forcing myself to stop reeling from the turn in events. I’d expected him to ask me out, but now that he’s not, it’s throwing me for a loop.

My brows crash together. Did I want him to?

No. Definitely not.

Right?

“Thanks,” he laughs, turning his attention back to his phone. “But I haven’t been there in person yet. I saw the ad in the

paper and had a phone interview, but they wanted to meet me before agreeing to anything. You know how it goes.” He waves his hand dismissively and I nod. I don’t. I have no idea. I’m not allowed to have a job. I bite my cheek. Another thing I can’t say. “Anyway, I have no idea where it’s at. Could you show me?”

He turns his phone around, letting me see a map of Divinity Falls on the screen. I huff out a breathy laugh and scoot my chair closer to him, leaning across the corner of the table to get a better view.

“May I?” I ask, pointing at the phone.

He pushes it into my hand, and I grin to myself as I pinch the screen, enlarging the map. I search for the street Bob’s Auto Shop is on. I can see why he was confused. The Maps app hasn’t been updated with the newer shops in Divinity.

Every so often, I glance up at him from under my lashes, and his eyes snap away. It takes me looking at him three times to realize it’s my tits he’s staring at, not me.

It was hot, and when Isaac is gone, I can wear the things I normally don’t. So I’m wearing one of my usual sundresses, but this one is a bit tighter and shorter than usual, and my tits spill over the lace top. It’s not his fault for staring, it was mine when I chose to wear this.

But he could be a bit more discreet.

“Here,” I breathe, sliding the phone across the table to him. I tap on the screen, showing him the road the building is on.

“You have to drive about five minutes out of town and turn down the old ranch road to get there. But you can’t miss it.” He roughly clears his throat and nods a few times.

“Thanks,” he rasps.

Seconds later, Cassie bustles by and drops off our drinks, barely sparing a moment to hear me say thank you before heading back inside.

I pull my drink to my mouth and take a deep swallow, my eyes fluttering closed as it instantly quenches my thirst. Marcus makes a choking sound and my eyes snap to his. I blink rapidly, my cheeks turning red for reasons other than the heat.

“Looks good,” he rasps, his voice deep and filled with gravel.

My mouth falls open and my head slowly tilts to the side. His voice sounds familiar in an odd way. It doesn’t freak me out or send shivers down my spine, nor does it make me feel comfortable. There’s just that tiny thing inside my brain, feeling almost like *deja vu*, but you can’t place where or why.

“Uh huh,” I awkwardly agree, my cheeks on fire.

We’re still sitting too close to each other, his slick arm resting against mine. Our gazes meet, and, for one brief moment, I can almost pretend I’m out on a date with a guy my age, one who actually likes me and can be seen in public with me. My lips part as the images flit through my mind like a movie, then I blink and the bubble pops.

“Eve, I—”

“Howdy, bitches.”

He shoves his chair back, letting it topple to the ground. I jolt away, my heart lurching into my throat as I glare up at Oli. She grins like she knew exactly what she was doing.

“Who are you?” she asks, jerking her chin at Marcus as she slides into her chair, ignoring the way he’s fumbling to right his own. She stares at him in that unnerving way of hers, still grinning while he stumbles over his words.

“This is Marcus,” I answer for him, and he gives me a thankful look. “You saw him at the meeting the other night.”

Her eyes narrow as she scans him. “What’s your poison? Dexies? Snow? Ice, maybe?” I groan, scrubbing my hand over my face. She snaps, jolting forward. “I bet you’re a Moon Rocks kinda guy.”

His mouth gapes open as he blinks in confusion. “Moon—snow...” He rubs his stubble covered jaw. “What the hell is a *dexie*?”

Oli gives him a look that screams *oh, bless your heart*. “Triple A lingo, my guy. Get with it.” She smirks, snagging her drink. “I bet it’s the sauce,” she mutters around her straw, the thick pink liquid slowly making its way to her mouth. “The hot ones always go for the sauce.”

“*Sauce*? Triple...” He looks at me again, completely at a loss for words. I don’t blame him. I’m lost, too. Just not for words. I have plenty of them.

Gripping his forearm, I shoot a look around, making sure we're alone. "She means AA," I whisper. His throat bobs as he swallows, nodding slowly. I glare at my best friend and hiss, "You can't just go around saying that, Oli. People deserve discretion."

"It's okay." Marcus waves me off, silencing my chastise. "This is a small as shit town. I have no doubt everyone knows everyone's business here."

"Too right," Oli agrees, bobbing her head. "Mrs. Jackson probably knows the last time you tiddled your—"

"Olive!" I gasp, kicking her under the table. "Oh my God." I rub the space between my brows and glance up at him. "I'm *so* sorry, Marcus."

His eyes flit between us, looking somewhere between awed and terrified of Oli. To be fair, I don't blame him. She's wearing a short black wig cut into a bob with a t-shirt that reads *World's Sluttiest Dad*. It doesn't make sense, but it's Oli. She doesn't make sense. I scan her, my eyes narrowing.

Where's the possum?

Shit.

Marcus clears his throat and rubs his neck, shooting me a weird look. "Right. Well, thanks again, Eve." He smiles at Oli. "I'll see you around." He lifts his hand in an awkward farewell as he stumbles back a step.

I give him a tight-lipped smile, wiggling my fingers in a wave, and watch as he hurries back into the café before

turning a seething glare to Oli. She lets out a high-pitched cackle, throwing her head back, her stiff wig barely shifting with her movements.

She wipes dramatically at her eyes, flicking her fingers like she's flicking tears from them. "Sorry to break up your hot date," she says, still laughing.

"He just wanted directions," I mutter, but the words only make her laugh harder.

"Oh, I bet he did," she cackles. "Directions to your pussy."

"Oli," I groan, but can't hide the smile that curls my lips. She laughs a final time, but her grin never falls. "So, mind telling me why you were late?" In an instant, her expression changes.

Knew it.

"Oh, you know, the animals," she says, waving a hand dismissively. I settle back into my chair, preparing myself for whatever she's about to tell me. Whatever happened wasn't about the animals.

Clearing her throat, Oli flicks her gaze from mine to the quiet downtown streets. Every few minutes, a car or beat up truck inches by, letting pedestrians cross with a wave of thanks. I keep my mouth shut, letting her figure out how to say whatever she needs to say. Sometimes it takes her a while. Feelings and honesty aren't Oli's strong suits.

"It was just a hard morning," she finally murmurs, her nails digging deep grooves into her crossed bare legs. My brows dip

and I lean forward, my heart kicking up.

“Did something happen to make it that way?” I slowly ask.

She clicks her tongue. “That douchebag on Call of Duty royally fucked me again.”

My lip twitches. “ShadowStalker? What did he do now?” ShadowStalker has been apparently messing with Oli when she streams, or games, or whatever she does. I don’t know. The lingo goes right over my head. I try to understand it all, I really do, but Oli is like *seriously* into gaming. She spent a fat chunk of her mom’s life insurance money on a whole set-up and now it’s how she makes money.

Groaning, her head falls back and if it weren’t for the grey beanie she’s wearing, her wig would probably fall off. “Yes. He’s been stream sniping me. Every single game, he somehow always knows where I am and takes me out before I have a chance to defend myself.” Her hands fly in the air and my eyes widen.

“He’s ruining my K/D, Eve!” she wails. “It’s a travesty. He’s like a fucking stalker, I swear to Imaginary Sky Daddy.”

I watch her mutter to herself for a solid two minutes, rambling on about numbers and players and something called aces. I lean back and drink my tea, content to let her rant it out until she’s ready to bring me back into her world.

Suddenly, she blinks and falls silent again.

I know there’s something more going on, but I know she hates being pushed. I have to be careful how I go about asking

her, how I check in with her.

“Anything else happen?” I coax, watching her cautiously.

It takes her a few minutes to gather her thoughts again. The entire time, she picks. At her fingernails, her clothes, her heavy stack of woven, bright bracelets. She spins the beads on one, the word *happy* written in rainbow letters is a slap in the face to her current dark mood.

Oli’s voice trembles when she finally begins, her words laced with the weight of her emotions. “Eve, this morning—” she breaks off, sucking in a sharp breath. “It was like trying to swim through molasses. I couldn’t shake off the heaviness, couldn’t find a reason to get up. Even my fur babies, my little bundles of joy, couldn’t force me out of bed.”

She shakes her head, clicking her tongue in a silent reprimand to herself when her eyes start to water. Meanwhile, my heart is shattering for my best friend. She tries so hard to be strong, to put up a good front in an attempt to convince the world she’s okay.

“Oli,” I sigh, my own voice choked up. I’m at a loss for words and though it kills me, I know she prefers it that way. Olive hates platitudes, even if they’re full of honesty.

“Some days,” she murmurs, coughing to clear her throat again. “Everything feels so beautiful. It’s like the world is painted in bright colors and glitter and I can’t help but be swept away by its magic. But most days... most days it’s a storm, Evie.” She finally meets my eyes and I see the devastation there. The chaotic swirls of emotions she normally

tucks down deep. “Sometimes it’s like a dark cloud is threatening to swallow me whole.”

She shudders, the memory still vivid in her mind.

“It’s like... it’s like I’m drowning in my own head. The highs are so high, and the lows...” Her voice wavers, and she takes a deep breath. “They’re suffocating, Eve. I can’t keep doing this.”

I reach out, taking her hand in mine, a silent gesture of support. I know it’s all she’ll allow but my body is shaking with the need to go to her, to wrap her in my arms.

“Olive, I’m so sorry you’re going through this. You know I would do anything to fix—”

Her tear-filled eyes narrow on me. “I don’t need to be fixed,” she mutters, her chin wobbling. “I’m not broken.”

I give up the fight for distance and jump up before dropping into Marcus’ abandoned chair and tugging it closer to her. My hands wrap around both of hers, gathering them into my lap.

“Listen and listen good,” I whisper, glaring right back at her. “You, Olive Tanner, are anything but broken. You are fierce, loyal and protective of those you love.”

Oli rolls her eyes and looks away. With a growl, I toss her hands in the air, shocking her, and grip her little round cheeks.

“None of that.” I tsk. “You are one of the kindest people I know. Seriously, Mother Teresa would be taking notes if she met you.” I tighten my grip when she tries to pull away. “You

sprinkle goodwill like a fairy godmother with an unlimited supply of pixie dust.”

“Pixie dust, hmm?” she murmurs, her thick lower lip folding out in an adorable pout. “Wish I really had some.”

“Me too.” I smooth my fingers over her cheeks before dropping her face and gripping her hands, knowing I have her now that she’s smiled. “You’ve got this amazing strength in you that I find incredible. You take every day like a badass, even the hard ones. It’s like your superpower is never giving up.”

Her eyes flit to the sky as a low chuckle rumbles up her throat. “I’d prefer to fly.” Her head snaps back to me, sending a stray tear coasting down her cheek. I wipe it away. “Actually, no. Not flying.”

I cock my head, a smile slowly spreading across my face. “What then?”

“Spontaneous orgasms.”

My head falls back on a loud laugh that has me feeling brighter than I have in days. “See?” I shove her shoulder. “Look what you can do, Oli, just by being your sweet self.”

She bites her lip, her laughter fleeting. Leaning in closer, I lock eyes with her. “But what really blows my mind, honey, is how fiercely you protect the people,” I pause for emphasis, “*And animals* that you love. It’s like you’ve got this mama bear energy, ready to pounce on anyone who messes with your

pack. You make us all feel safe and cherished, and that's something truly special."

"Thank you," she whispers, her bright eyes darting between mine. "I'll be fine."

My heart clenches. I know she's at her max for emotions today. She's officially done talking about this. I just wish I could do more.

"Hey," I say, my voice steady. "You know you can always talk to me. Whatever it is, we'll face it together." I give her a reassuring smile, hoping to ease some of the tension etched across her face. "You're not alone. You have so many people in your life who love and adore you. We'll find a way through this, okay? You're strong, and I'm here with you every step of the way."

Oli's lips quiver, and she nods, a mixture of gratitude and relief washing over her face before she takes a quick, deep inhale, and shoves it deep down like always. My lips roll between my teeth. I know change won't happen in a day, but eventually, I hope she understands how much I meant everything I said—how true it all is.

With a wide smile, she picks up her glass and lifts it for a cheer. "Thanks, slut. I don't know what I'd do without you."

Sighing, I clink my glass with hers. "Keep calling me that, and you'll find out."

She takes a quick drink of her strawberry and mango smoothie before arching her brow at me. "So, best friend of

mine,” she drawls. “Anything on *your* mind?”

Yes.

Everything.

I want to tell her that, want to unload and get her thoughts about my utterly fucked up situation but after everything she just said...

I swallow thickly and force a smile.

It would be so inconsiderate to unload on her right now. She has enough going on and my problems pale in comparison to her daily struggles. So, instead of doing what my mind’s been begging me to do for weeks, I shake my head and wave over the waitress.

“Just that I’m freaking starving,” I chuckle. “Let’s stuff our feelings with carbs.”

Oli sighs happily. “Ah, carbs. My true soulmate.”

Same girl. Same.

2:34 Eve

My toes float through the cool water, the sun reflecting off the lake's surface like a mirror. Absently, I lift a strawberry from the bowl and take a bite, letting the sweet juice trickle down my throat. It's nearly sunset, and I can't remember the last time I spoke to someone.

Roman was gone again this morning. I still don't understand why he's here. Why won't he just leave me alone? Especially now that Isaac's gone. I take another bite, Isaac's name clanging through me.

Isaac.

I keep trying to push him out of my mind, but I can't. His presence looms over me, reminding me that I only have to deal with Roman alone for another week and a half. It seems like a lifetime will pass before I see him again.

It's only been a few days since he left, and already, Roman has embedded himself so deeply into my life again that I know

when he leaves, it'll destroy me all over. It's not fair for anyone to have that much power over someone. But he does.

They do.

A loud engine pulls me from my thoughts, and I glance over my shoulder, finding Roman parking his bike near the front porch. He throws his long leg over it and stands, scanning our small yard. His eyes briefly meet mine before he continues his scan, then they snap back to me.

I lift my hand in an awkward wave, a small smile tipping my lips. I shouldn't be happy to see him after that shit he pulled the other day. But it's nice to not be alone.

He hesitates, looking at the front door before he steps around his bike and strides toward me, his steps unhurried. Shock fills me. I almost expected him to ignore me and go inside.

Instead, he steps onto the rickety dock, his jaw tensing as he looks around, muttering under his breath about how this thing should've been torn down a long time ago. I smile again and look at the water, another strawberry in my hand.

From the corner of my eye, I watch him untie his boots and kick them off, still grumbling about the whole thing. "I didn't ask you to come over here," I say, still not looking at him. My voice is hoarse with disuse, raspier than usual. "You don't have to take your shoes off." He ignores my words, as he sinks onto the wood beside me.

"What are you doing?" he asks, cringing as his feet hit the cold water.

“What’s it look like?” I take a bite of the new strawberry. He turns to look at me, but I choose to ignore him, to stay looking at the way my feet swish through the water.

Words die on his lips as he stares out at the lake, reclining back on his tattooed hands. He lets out a long sigh, and I finally look at him, finding his gaze far away. Lifting the bowl, I hold it between us. “Strawberry?”

His lips kick up at the corner before he grabs one, his eyes locked on mine as he takes a bite. My breath hitches, his gaze holding me captive as he chews slowly, the juice staining his full lips. The moment stretches forever, the silence like a comfortable blanket around us.

It almost feels like we’re kids again, just getting out of the house, away from our parents to talk about our lives, our dreams. To talk about everything and nothing. To read our book silently, to discuss it animatedly. To live, and breathe, and just...be.

Those were my favorite memories. The ones where we just existed together.

“I never thought we’d be here again,” he breathes. I fold my lips between my teeth as I drop my gaze, feeling the weight of his words to my core.

“Me either,” I admit. *But I’m glad we are*, I almost say, but force myself to stop before the words can leave my lips.

Silence fills the space between us again, more palpable than before. His hand grips the edge of the dock, his gaze still

locked on the side of my face. “Where were you today?” I ask.

“Work.”

I wait for more of an explanation, for him to open up about his day, but when he says nothing else, I let out a small breath and stare out at the dark water again.

My tongue runs over my teeth while I silently fight the urge to pry, to poke the bear until he’s forced to spill all his secrets. Why is it he can know my biggest, deepest secrets, the ones I keep buried deep in my closet; camming and Isaac, but I don’t even know where he lives?

“What do you do for work?” I practically blurt, the words and questions becoming too much to contain. He gives me a sidelong look and I sigh. “I mean, I have no idea where you live or work or who—”

I break off.

Does he live with someone? Does he have a girlfriend?

My eyes shoot to his left hand, searching for...

“I’m not married, Eve, fucking hell,” he snaps. Roman runs a hand through his hair, messing up the dark strands. He pauses for a long moment and I almost think he won’t answer, but then, he shocks me. “I’m a tattoo artist in Mammoth at a shop called Deliverance. My buddy, Kon, owns it.” He gives me a look. “And I live with Chase, but you already knew that.”

My cheeks burn. I did know that part. Chase told me casually one day a few years ago but things could have changed since then.

“I always knew you’d be an artist,” I say honestly, giving him a genuine smile as my chest fills with pride. “You’re so —”

A *ding* comes from my phone, interrupting me before I can finish. I glance at him, his eyes pleading with me to not look. But I do. I have to. It could be Oli, she might need me. Or it could be Isaac.

I swallow thickly as I grab my phone, flipping it over and staring at the message. My heart lurches into my throat, my fingers tightening around the little block.

Daddy555:

Private session. \$500

He’s been getting more aggressive lately, more demanding. There’s no more requesting or asking me to do things for him. He tells me what to do, like he thinks he owns me. Like he thinks he has any right to.

“Eve?” Roman’s voice pulls me from the messages and I lock my phone, slapping it face-down on the dock again. With a deep breath, I plaster a fake smile as I look at him. His brows bunch tightly together. “Don’t do that.”

I blink at him. “Do what?”

“Pretend like you’re fine when you’re not,” he mutters, shaking his head. I open my mouth to protest, to tell him I don’t do that, but I do. I *know* I do.

“I’m fine, Roman,” I sigh. His gaze burns me alive, and it takes all I have not to squirm under the full weight of his

attention.

“Was it him?” he finally asks.

“Who?”

He lets out a humorless laugh, one that sends a chill down my spine. “You know who.”

“It wasn’t Isaac,” I say, and he nods, but it looks like he doesn’t believe me. “It wasn’t. It was—” I cut myself off.

I may be nothing but a cam girl, and I may not know their real names, but I value the privacy between my viewers and me. They come to me, trusting I won’t out them to the world. That’s why I simply say *Favorite Fans*, instead of dropping Daddy’s name.

“Why do you do it?” he asks, almost reluctantly. I pause, letting the question fully sink in before I answer.

“It’s a means to an end,” I say, then shake my head. “No, that’s not entirely true. I do it because of what it represents.” I nod, liking that answer. It’s what’s kept me continuing down this path for the last few months.

“And what’s that?” he murmurs as I pick up another strawberry from the bowl. He follows suit, grabbing his own and eating it in one bite. I nibble the tip, thinking of how to explain this to him.

“I like the freedom,” I say softly, smiling around the strawberry. I turn to stare at him, finding him already watching me.

His eyes, gold and greens, browns with flecks of amber, are so familiar, so comforting. Maybe that's why I find myself spilling words I never thought I'd say out loud. Not to anyone and especially not to *him*.

"I like the small, unknown rebellion that makes me feel alive in an otherwise dead life." I take a sharp breath, releasing it slowly. "I like knowing I can be anyone. I'm not Eve when I'm camming, I'm someone else. Someone powerful. Someone...someone worthy."

"You *are* worthy," he whispers. I shrug as I take another bite, feeling the juice drip from the corner of my mouth, down my chin. Before I can move, he reaches out, dragging his thumb along my skin, gathering the sweet liquid on the pad of his finger.

My mouth slackens as I watch him bring it to his lips and suck it off. "I can't believe you just did that," I choke out, and he sends me a cocky grin.

"Fruit's never tasted so good," he says, and I feel my face flush. Huffing out a laugh, he leans toward me, gently nudging my shoulder with his.

Again, that familiarity rushes through me. This is Roman. My Roman. And, right now, sitting here while the sun sets and our favorite fruit between us, it feels like the last summer night before school. It feels like Mama's about to come out of the house at any moment to tell us to clean up before dinner. Like we're about to get up, Roman's book tucked under one arm, me tucked under the other.

It feels like nothing has changed, like we're nothing more than those kids we were when the whole world went to shit. The kids that thought they had their lives ahead of them, lives that would be colorful and full of adventure. Lives that they'd spend together, wandering from place to place, filling that map in my room with little pins.

Sadness fills me as I think about all our wasted plans, and I blink back the sudden burning in my eyes. "What is it?" he murmurs. I shake my head, unable to speak. If I do, everything I've wanted to say to him will tumble out and I can't do that. Not here, not now.

Instead, I change the subject away from our dreams. Instead, I dive headfirst into the past, into a safe memory.

"Do you know what this dock reminds me of?" I ask, and he blinks.

"What?"

"Tommy McKinney," I say. A brief pause, then he throws his head back and laughs. I can't help the giggle that bubbles up my throat, my smile as genuine as it's been in months. In years.

"Shit," he laughs. "I forgot about that poor bastard." He shakes his head, wiping at his eye. "You did him so dirty, Gold —" My breath hitches as he catches himself before the full word falls from his lips.

"Me?" My eyes widen. "He's the one who made my first kiss terrible."

“But memorable,” he counters. “No one has a good first kiss. It’s the second one that always makes up for it.” My face flushes as I dip my eyes.

“You did,” I agree. “Best second-first-kiss a girl could ask for.”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” he mutters, but I just shake my head.

He doesn’t understand.

When Tommy pulled me under the bleachers when I was fourteen and shoved his tongue down my throat on a dare, all I could do was squeeze my eyes shut as I prayed for it to be over quickly. Then I came home and dove headfirst into the lake, wanting to wash the feeling of him off me. Moments later, Ro was there, swimming under the dock to find me.

“What’s wrong?” he asks, our voices echoing under the dock. “What the fuck happened?”

“Nothing,” I whimper, wiping the tears from my cheeks with the corner of my hand.

“It doesn’t look like nothing,” he counters, shooting me an irritated look. “It’s obviously something, or else you wouldn’t have jumped into the lake with your school clothes on.” I shrug as much as I can while trying to stay afloat.

“I don’t wanna talk about it,” I sigh. “It was just a bad day.”

“You don’t have bad days.” I stare at him, wanting to tell him I have so many bad days, that sometimes my bad days outweigh my good ones.

But I don’t.

I stay quiet. I keep the words in, because I’m supposed to be light. I’m not supposed to bring darkness into our lives. I’m supposed to be happy. Not sad. Not broken, even if I feel like that sometimes.

“Tell me what happened,” he demands, swimming closer. It’s just now I realize he’s actually in the water with me, and my legs momentarily stop kicking. I begin to sink, but then he’s there, grabbing my waist and pulling me closer, holding me above the water.

“Be careful, Goldie,” he chastises.

“I just—I didn’t mean to,” I breathe, my hands sliding onto his shoulders. It’s then that I notice he’s fully clothed and I realize he was so worried, he jumped in after me without stopping to get undressed.

His dark brows bunch together, his fingers gripping my waist tighter. “What happened?” he pushes, his voice a hushed whisper. I’m not kicking my feet anymore, not when he’s holding us up on his own, refusing to let me drown.

I almost don’t tell him, but more tears burn my eyes as I think about Tommy’s gross lips on mine, the way he’d held me too-tightly. Fear had coursed through me, not entirely because I was afraid of him and what he’d do, but because if we were

caught, what would Mama say? She'd be so disappointed in me, but I know she wouldn't listen if I told her it wasn't my fault. That Tommy had just grabbed me, and kissed me, and wouldn't let me go until I kissed him back.

A hot tear streaks down my cheek, and Roman's hand leaves my waist long enough to brush it away. "Golden Girl," he whispers, hauling me closer to him.

"Tommy—" I cut myself off with a deep breath. "Tommy McKinney kissed me today." He pauses, his forehead scrunching up.

"He...he kissed you?" He repeats slowly. "And that's why you're upset?" I nod and inhale a shaky breath. "Was it not good?" I shake my head, words still lost to me.

Maybe one day I'll explain it all to him, but right now, it's impossible to say anything without feeling like a dam is about to break. His arm slides around my waist and he pulls me tighter to his body.

"Was it your first kiss?" he murmurs, and I nod again. His eyes drop to my lips, and suddenly, I don't feel like crying anymore. Instead, my throat feels tight for an entirely different reason. My entire body feels tight. "You know," he breathes, "your first kiss is supposed to suck. It's the second one that makes up for it."

"Really?" I whisper, and he bobs his head, his face inching closer to mine. My mouth opens before I can stop it. "Then I can't wait for my second kiss." His lips twitch up in a small smile.

“I can help with that,” he says, his hand sliding into my wet hair. “If you want.”

“How?” His face comes closer, until our breath dances between us.

“Just tell me yes or no,” he whispers. My eyes flutter shut as his mouth slides over my cheek. “Tell me yes, Goldie.”

“Yes.”

My fingers ghost over my lips, sucking in a sharp breath as the memory clangs through me, forcing me to relive the moment that changed everything forever. I blink a few times as the past and present bleed together until all that’s left is the here and now.

“That feels like forever ago,” he mutters, and I nod my agreement.

It *was* forever ago. We were just babies, still learning how to coexist with conflicting emotions warring inside us about the other. In some ways, things haven’t changed. In some ways, we’re exactly the same.

But then I look at him, the man beside me, and realize that everything is different and no matter how badly I want for us to be who we used to be, it’ll never happen.

That girl and boy are long gone, buried six feet under and never coming back.

I clear my suddenly too-dry throat, and straighten my shoulders. He must have the same thoughts going through his

mind because he copies me, his shoulders pushing back as he looks out at the pink-golden sky.

“You know,” he mutters, “I always knew you’d live your life for the camera. Just never in front of it, not like you are now. I thought you’d travel the world, taking photos of everything. Animals, people, buildings. I thought you’d create art, not...” He shakes his head, but not like he’s disappointed. More like he can’t find the words. Finally, he lets out a harsh breath. “Look, do what you want.”

“I will,” I say, cutting him off. “I like what I do.” He eyes me skeptically.

“Just...” He sighs again. “Do me a favor?” Hesitantly, I nod. “Be safe. Don’t get yourself into trouble. Just...take care of yourself.”

I smile to myself, dipping my head to hide it. “I will,” I say, then huff out the laugh I tried to hold in. “Oli always says someone is going to stalk me with a machete.”

His eyes widen comically. “Don’t even joke about that shit,” he hisses, and I flash him a grin. “It’s not funny.”

“Oh, it’s a little funny,” I tease. When he doesn’t so much as crack a smile, I rest my hand on his forearm. “Don’t worry, Ro. I’ll be fine.” He doesn’t look like he believes me, but he bobs his head in agreement.

What more could he say? Even with that stupid video he has of me, he can’t stop me from continuing.

A part of me wonders if that video was leaked, if I'd feel even more free. I wouldn't have to live a double life. I could be who I wanted to be, and maybe make more money by putting my face in videos. I could finally leave Divinity, if for no other reason than to not deal with the lingering glances.

"Come on," he groans, pulling my attention from my thoughts. I blink up at him as he stands, pushing his hands into his lower back. "Today was long. I'm tired."

"Why aren't you sleeping in your room?" I ask, gathering my bowl and phone from the dock. When I look back at him, his brows are pulled tightly together.

"My room?" he repeats, and I nod. I almost lock my arm with his as we walk back toward the house, but I stop myself. We're not there. We might never be there again.

I don't understand this fragile dichotomy we have with each other. One second, he's the biggest asshole I've ever met, then the next, he's staring down at me the way he used to, like I'm something special.

"I thought you got rid of my room," he says quietly. "Sold all the shit inside and turned it into something else." I shake my head as he speaks.

"It's exactly as you left it," I say. *It's been waiting for you*, I almost add. *I've been waiting for you*.

I refuse to let the words spill out.

"Come on." I hold my free hand out to him, my breath caught in my lungs as I wait for him to take or leave it. He

hesitates, and I see the thought flit through his mind. Leave it.
Leave me.

Instead, his giant, warm, calloused hand slides against mine, soothing me in a way I haven't been soothed in four long years.

2:35 Roman

My fingers shake as they wrap around the beat up brass doorknob. My heart is thundering in my chest, and I'm not sure why. Maybe it's because I have no idea what I'll see on the other side of this door. I know Eve said everything is as I left it, but part of me doesn't believe her.

How can I? It's been *years*, and I wasn't exactly a welcome occupant, even back then. I assumed long ago that Isaac threw everything out. Fuck, at one point, I imagined him burning the house to the ground just to rid the world of my existence.

The floorboards groan behind me and I know she's there, silently waiting for me to make my choice. For a moment, just a moment, I can pretend she's standing at my back to support me, to make sure I'm okay. But she's not, she's just being polite.

Eve is always polite.

It's annoying as fuck.

With a deep breath, I squeeze my eyes shut and turn the handle. The door creaks open, and I step inside the room that holds fragments of my past, like old Polaroids yellowed by time. The air seems to hold its breath, as if the very walls remember me.

My breath catches in my throat. Not only is everything exactly as I left it all those years ago, it's clean, *cared for*. My brows crash together and my mouth opens then closes, silent words building, then immediately dying on my tongue.

She took care of my things?

I know it was Eve. It had to be. Isaac would never.

I swallow roughly, taking another step in. My palms are sweating, so I slide them into my jean pockets. I fight the urge to look behind me, to see if she's still here, but I can't. I don't want to see if she's left.

I don't want to know if I'm alone.

I used to be able to feel her presence whenever she entered a room. Eve had this energy about her. It called to everyone, drawing them in like a magnetic force, irresistible and unyielding. It was the same for me. I was a moth to her flame but now...now I *am* the flame and that Eve, the one I used to know? She's nothing but a pile of ash carried away in the sticky Georgia air.

Shaking my head, I exhale a deep breath as I let the weight of my lighter in my pocket ground me.

The window seat, bathed in bright, afternoon light, draws my attention. I slide my free hand from my pocket and trace my fingers over the heated window. The curtains are open.

They were never open when I lived here. Not when anyone could see me, at least.

My eyes take in the perfect view of the lake, the old tree and tire swing, the dock. Memories flit through my mind like a macabre slideshow. I can still feel the cool touch of the glass against my cheek. All those days I spent watching the world outside while I remained cocooned in my own private sanctuary. My own refuge from the chaos in my mind, my soul.

I watched as my small family of two became four, then three. Isaac accepted them into our home so easily, and dismissed me from it just as fast. He didn't need me when he had the perfect do-over kid. The religious, sweet girl who radiated sunshine and loved to smile. The Golden Girl.

And Jane? She was the perfect, doting wife and mom. It was nearly effortless for them to adapt to the lifestyle Isaac wanted so badly, and why wouldn't it be? That's the kind of life they lived back in Haven with Grant. It was second nature to be *the preacher's family*, and I...

I didn't fit in.

So, I stayed out.

Biting my lip, I shove away from the window, from the memories.

Maybe I wouldn't have stayed away if it wouldn't have been so easy for me to disappear. Did they even notice?

Against my will, my eyes flit to the door and my heart contracts, my mouth going dry. She's here. She didn't leave.

"You okay?" Eve murmurs.

She stayed.

I nod, unable to speak. Her arms are crossed over her chest, her brows furrowed in concern. Or, at least I think that's what it is.

"Do you want me to go?"

My tongue runs across my teeth for a few beats as if I'm thinking about it. I don't want her to know how badly I want, *need*, her to stay. Finally, I shrug and turn back to my room.

"You can stay if you want."

I swear I hear her huff a laugh and it lightens something deep in my gut, letting it unfurl slowly.

My eyes wander to the bookshelf, a faithful protector that safeguards the stories of my childhood. I trace my finger over the familiar spines, each one a time capsule of a different adventure, a different world. The leather bindings and worn edges tell tales of late nights and early mornings, of escaping into realms far beyond the ugly confines of my tattered life.

"Steinbeck," I muse, a wistful smile dancing on my lips. "Hemmingway." My fingers linger on *Crime and Punishment*, the pages whispering secrets of struggle and redemption,

before landing on the empty spot next to it where a book once lived before I moved it to my nightstand.

“I miss it,” Eve whispers, the words barely audible. I don’t need to look at her to know what she’s talking about. The empty space exists for a book ingrained in my every cell. A book I loved—*love*.

I bite my lip to stifle the words, *we can read it again*. Instead, I push away from the shelf and turn to my bed, refusing to look at her. If I do, she’ll see everything I’m trying to hide.

“You should buy a copy then.”

This time, she scoffs, and it’s anything but quiet. I chuckle, but the sound dies on my lips as I take in the new comforter on my bed.

The old one was black and worn, my refusal to redecorate despite Jane’s insistence meant I’d been sleeping with the same blanket for years. But now it’s blue and quilted, brightening up the room. I idly wonder if they’ve been using the room for guests, but easily dismiss it. Isaac hates people in his house, his space.

As I stand in the center of my old room, I can’t help the swell of conflicting emotions. It’s just a room. Just four simple walls. Shelves covered in trophies that mean nothing and books that don’t matter. Not really.

The person who left here at eighteen was a different soul, raw and broken, carrying the heavy weight of an ugly past. I’d

like to say I've changed. That there's been some massive metamorphosis in the last four years, but seeing it now...

Seeing the books, the dark walls and overwhelming *emptiness*. The visceral representation of the way I hid from my world, from life, from existing—it's really not that different from how I live now.

Now, I just hide it better.

“So,” she drawls, stepping just inside the doorframe she'd made a home out of. My eyes pull from the wall I'd been staring at and I arch a brow. “You gonna sleep in here now, orrr...”

Eve breaks off, her lip kicking up in a small smile, but there's something else there in her eyes. Eyes that are almost uncomfortably locked on me as she refuses to look around.

My head tilts. It can't be all that weird for her to be here. She's been cleaning it, maintaining it. Or maybe she just came in here to tidy up when I dropped in unexpectedly a week ago. Either way, she's acting like she's terrified of my room almost as much as I was.

“You should,” she murmurs. “Sleep in here, I mean. The couch isn't all that comfortable. It's old and there's that stain on the left arm from Robert. I tried to get it out, but possum pee is surprisingly resilient and nothing worked. Well, vinegar did, but then it just smelled like pickled pee and the cushions are all saggy and—”

My hand claps against her mouth as my brows crash together. She's rambling. I haven't heard Eve nervously word vomit since she was in high school. Back when she was just that quiet, sweet church girl with braces and glasses, wearing the dresses Jane lovingly stitched up for her.

Eve, my Eve, stopped being that girl long ago and I haven't seen a single sign of her since I got here.

It's surprisingly refreshing.

Better than the unaffected front she's been wearing like a mask.

"I'll agree to sleep in here on one condition," I murmur. Her wide blue eyes turn up to mine, her mouth still muffled by my tattooed hand. It looks so different, standing out against her smooth, tan skin. "You shut the hell up."

Eve narrows her eyes to a glare.

"Actually, make that two conditions."

She rolls her eyes but doesn't pull away. Inside, I preen.

"You promise not to cook a single meal for the next ten days."

Her words are muffled against my palm. "How am I supposed to eat then?"

With a grin, I pinch her cheeks and lean in, bringing her face close, too close, to mine. "Ever heard of Doordash?"

2:36 Isaac

Dim lights in the smoky room flicker, casting long shadows across the worn green felt table. Tobacco smoke and the low murmur of hushed conversations hang thick in the warm air. It's a world so far removed from the pulpit, I can almost forget that's my life. The place I stand every Sunday, a room full of saints, is the opposite of this room of depraved sinners.

An innate need burns deep inside me to do this, taking my choice from me.

I glance at the cards in my hand, fingers gently caressing the smooth edges. The Jack of Hearts winks at me, nestled between a Queen and an Ace. It's a hand worth betting on, and tonight, I need a win more than ever.

Today was bad.

Most days are, but today was truly awful.

My skin feels too tight. It feels itchy. The memories of my past rub against the recesses of my mind, making me feel raw.

Fuck.

I hate it.

Today, my father taunted me. The harsh memory of his fists gliding over my cheek while spewing words more devastating than any blow he could land.

All day, I tried to ignore it while I did what I needed to do. While I smiled at new faces and shook hands, pretending to be something I'm not. No matter how hard I try, I'll never be one of them. I'll never have the money they do, or the expensive suits and nice cars. I'll never live in the mansion or have a trophy wife.

Not for the first time today, my mind flits to Eve.

What would she say if she knew where I was right now? What would she do if she were here?

I adjust in my seat, picturing her perched on my knee while I dropped the cards on the table. She'd wiggle with excitement, and I'd unashamedly watch her tits bounce—all the men at the table would.

And then...

Then, after I won the giant pot, I'd take her to my room, throw her on the bed and fuck her in the pile of money. I wouldn't stop until she was a panting, boneless mess.

God, I wish I could share this part of my life with her. That I wouldn't have to hide.

“Are all bets in?” the dealer asks, pulling me from my thoughts. Everyone dips their chins, and the dealer pulls a card from the pile, flipping it over and sliding into the middle of the table with the other cards.

My mind drifts as everyone makes their bets again.

What’s Eve doing right now?

We haven’t had an actual conversation in days and that’s just far too long for me. I sent her a text this morning, only to get a little heart as a reply. Then, before entering this room, I sent another text, just to check in on her, to make sure Roman isn’t bothering her, and nothing. She hasn’t replied. I don’t think she’s even read the message.

I can’t help myself from spiraling into a million possible reasons why she isn’t answering, and every one of the scenarios ends with Roman taking what’s mine.

The game continues. Chips slide across the felt and fingers tap against the table as bets are made, until, finally, I lay my cards down. My heart jumps into my throat as I scan everyone’s hands.

I won.

I fucking won.

The dealer slides the chips in front of me, and I quickly add them to my ever-growing stash. The men around the table, so different from the ones I spend my days at home with, grumble their congratulations. Even if their words are hollow, I take them.

Another hand.

The dealer shuffles the cards, my eyes tracking the movement like I'm in a trance. He quickly gives each of us our hand, and I flip the corners of the cards up to see what I got.

My heart skips a beat.

Everyone shoves their antes' into the middle of the table, and I hesitate before matching the bet. I could've raised, but that would show my hand too soon.

An electric current crackles in the air as the tension between the group rises. My mind tries to force me to think about Eve again, to think about the way she's been silent on me since I left. But I stay in the here and now, focusing on the cards in front of me.

The River, the final card, flips over, and my heart leaps. The Ace of Spades stares back at me, sealing my fate. A pair of Aces and a Queen—my heart pounds in my chest.

I've done it.

Knowing what's about to happen, I slide my hand forward, the chips clinking together in a triumphant symphony. There's a brief pause as everyone takes in my cards, then the room erupts in a chorus of applause and muttered curses. My fingers graze over the smooth chips, the rough-worn fabric as I rake in my winnings.

It's been a good night. A winning night.

My mind floats back to Eve and, in this moment, I want to share it with her. I want to tell her that I've won.

But she can't know.

She can *never* know.

2:37 Eve

“Wow,” I half-moan around a mouthful of bacon covered mac and cheese. “This is *so* good.”

Roman chuckles, bumping my knees with his. “Told you.”

“For once, you were right. It’s shocking, honestly.” Ignoring his glower, I lick the cheesy spoon for good measure before dropping it back into the styrofoam dish. “God, I love Doordash.”

“You’re so easy to make happy.”

Bobbing my head, I lean across the coffee table in the living room and stab my fork into a delivery container full of chicken and cheese flautas. Before the fried, yummy goodness makes its way to my lips, Ro snags my hand and redirects it to his waiting mouth.

“Hey!” I cry, batting him away before he can eat the whole thing in a single bite but it’s no use, his mouth is huge. Giving him a glare that would wither a weaker man’s balls, I brandish

my now empty fork like a weapon. “There’s an entire table full of food. Get your own, asshole.”

He waggles his brows, and the movement is so like the old Ro, the one who I pried from his shell before he left, that I find my cheeks burning.

Even after all this time apart, he still gets through my walls like no one else can. Except now, he’s got the added perk of being covered in a myriad of black and grey tattoos, a few piercings, and a new haircut that makes him look both stylish and grungy.

He’s so damn hot and I find my mouth watering for a reason other than the delicious scents wafting from our feast.

“Why would I when yours is so much better?” he asks, his annoyingly thick lips ticking up in a grin that has me wanting to bolt for the hills.

It should be illegal to look the way he does. All rippling muscles, tapered waist, chiseled jaw. His hair is flopping haphazardly across his forehead and it falls every time his head shifts from the food to the tv to me.

Like now.

“What are you looking at?” His expression is so damn cocky, so self-assured, that I can’t help but want to actually stab him.

Rolling my eyes, I ignore the way my entire body flushes under his attention and turn back to our spread. We’re both sitting cross-legged on the floor, our backs to the sofa, the coffee table covered in all the different things I couldn’t decide

between for dinner. We basically sampled one item from every restaurant within a twenty-mile radius.

I had no idea Divinity Falls even had options like these, or that there were places just outside of town filled with amazing cuisine. Fuck, I didn't even know what Doordash was, and that's just sad.

So fucking sad.

My smile falls and I poke around at the shrimp dish in front of me.

I feel him shift at my side before I see him, his messy hair flopping into his eyes as he pops into my line of vision.

“Why do you look like that?” he murmurs. “What just happened?”

There's something to his tone that makes me melt. Something protective and worried, like he's ready to go to war against an unseen enemy just to bring my smile back. I don't know why, but for a brief moment, my eyes burn even as my heart drops to my stomach and twirls around.

With a shrug, I force a small smile to my face. “I don't know what you're talking about.”

“Don't do that,” he chastises, shaking his head. “You were laughing and then you weren't and I know it has nothing to do with this bullshit show you're forcing me to watch.”

I scoff. “You love Big Brother.”

“So do you,” he mumbles before slowly licking sauce from his lips in a way that’s anything but brotherly. My core heats even as my brain screams at me to pull away, to protect myself.

So, I do the only thing I can think of and punch him in the gut. Or try to, but he swats my hand away before I even make contact.

“Stop being a brat and tell me.”

Sighing, I go back to my lo-mein. “I just can’t believe I didn’t know what Doordash was.”

It’s such a small, simple thing, but it’s a perfect reflection of my life.

Small and simple when all I want is big and complex, wild and unpredictable.

He stares at me for a long moment, but once again, I ignore him. It’s easy to do. I just pretend like it’s his ghost, a memory of the boy I used to love all those years ago, hanging out with me while binging trash tv like we used to. Ro and I may not have been together, but we were getting there.

Slowly yet surely, he was becoming mine and I his.

And then, he left, and I spent the next four years having conversations with his ghost. Imagining I wasn’t so alone.

Maybe...

Maybe this is all just another dream.

“What the hell did that little shrimp do to you?” His deep voice rumbles against my skin, sending a path of shivers across my scalp. I blink at him, then to the shrimp he’s referring to. It’s mutilated. “Don’t murder the poor thing, Eve. That’s so selfish of you.”

My head snaps to his, my mouth falling open as a shocked sound makes its way up my throat.

“Did you—” I break off, my brows crashing together. “Did you just say a shrimp pun? Like, a joke? A real one.” My head shakes, utter shock and confusion rippling through me. “Seriously?”

Roman’s face splits into a shit-eating grin as he flicks my nose. “Close your mouth, Evie, or I’ll find a way to fill it.”

My hand jolts out, his words snapping me from my stupor. I palm his smug face and shove him away from me with a frustrated sound. “Get over yourself,” I hiss. “Not everyone wants to worship the ground you walk on, despite what you may think.”

He shrugs, uncaring, and reaches over my plate for a slice of pizza. “Whatever you say.” My eyes are riveted to Roman as he tips his head back, somehow fitting nearly an entire piece of meat-lovers in his mouth at once.

Smirking to myself, I snatch his phone while he’s distracted since mine’s in my room charging, and snap a quick photo. “You deep throat that meat so well,” I chuckle, snapping a few more photos of him practically moaning around the sausage-goodness. “I’ll tell Chase he taught you well.”

With a snicker that's one hundred percent devious intentions, I flip his phone around, showing him the photos I took.

Roman chokes around the pizza, his face turning red in an instant. He coughs for a solid minute before he can breathe again, let alone speak. "What are you doing?" he rasps, his eyes wide on me sending the photos to Chase. "Why are you on my phone, Eve?"

I pause, my smile falling as I look up at him. "What?"

He reaches out and snatches the phone from my fingers. I don't miss his irritation, it's obvious. Every muscle is taut, his brows are furrowed, his eyes narrowed. But beneath that, I see something else. Something that looks a lot like panic.

And then it dawns on me.

He doesn't want me to see what's in his phone.

The urge to apologize, to keep the peace, to ask for his forgiveness for touching what doesn't belong to me, is strong, but I can't get the words out. Because, for once, the need to please, that's ingrained in me down to my marrow isn't as important as the hurricane of emotions swirling through my gut.

What is he hiding?

But is he *really* hiding anything? It's his phone and I have no right to its contents.

What are the contents, though? Women? Sexy and naked in compromising positions, no doubt. His conquests. The women he spends late at night with while he strokes his cock,

imagining they were there with him. Women with perfect bodies, thin and curvy in all the right places who aren't fucking their...

Oh my God!

What am I doing?

I'm jealous. Impossibly, disgustingly jealous of women I don't know, pictures I've imagined. I feel sick, completely on the verge of vomiting up my meal at just the thought of his hands on someone else. Hands that don't belong to me. Haven't belonged to me in years.

Biting my lip, I shove myself up from the table and start to collect the various dishes spread out. I can't sit here. I can't pretend any longer.

A hand comes down on top of mine, stilling me. My eyes snap up and I come face to face with the man himself. The man causing me so much turmoil and confusion by just merely existing.

What would happen if he did more than that?

"Leave it," he rumbles. His hand slides down mine and wraps around my wrist, sending goosebumps up and down my skin. Goosebumps that have no right existing in this room—this house.

Swallowing, I nod once, then shake my head, my eyes still locked on his. I feel like I'm in a trance. "I'm sorry," I start, letting the to-go container slip through my fingers. "Were you not done?"

Ro's head cocks to the side slowly, like a predator, and the sudden urge to flee ricochets through me once again. "No, Eve," he whispers. "I'm not done."

I swallow thickly, my eyes darting between his. Roman's Adam's apple is bobbing, his jaw flexing. His hand hasn't released my wrist yet and with every aching second that passes, his fingers tighten as though he's afraid to let me go.

Or maybe he just sees the way I want, no *need*, to run. The way every molecule in my body is dancing with equal amounts of panic and joy. Panic at having him so close, his knowing eyes riveted to me, taking in too much, seeing everything I'm trying so hard to hide. Joy because he's here.

Why are you here?

Why did you come back?

Why did you leave?

And because he sees so much, I know he sees the questions there, too. But he's unwilling to answer them, so instead, he releases my hand and looks away, freeing me and breaking me all at once.

Clearing his throat, he pushes to his feet and turns around, flicking off the end table lamp.

"Ro—" I break off when he drops down to the couch, tugging me with him. I fall onto the old cushions with an *oomph*, my boobs bouncing under my loose t-shirt from the sudden jolt. I groan. "What are you doing?"

Roman taps my knee, murmuring, “Leave the food and just be, Evie. You have no obligations right now. No chores. Nothing but you, me and trash tv.”

It’s hard to force my body to relax. To stare at the mess in front of us, the chaotic mix of foods wafting from the table and drifting through the house on a warm evening breeze. To not jump up and restore the living room’s normal order. But as minutes turn to hours and the sound of Roman’s laughter tangles with my own, I find it easier and easier to relax.

“Fuck, this is ridiculous,” he mutters for the hundredth time as he rakes his fingers through his hair. He shoots me a scowl. “I can’t believe I’m watching this shit.”

A giggle slips from my lips, surprising me. I nestle deeper into the couch, getting comfortable. My shorts ride up and his eyes zero in on the small gap now exposed, just below my hip bone.

He swallows audibly and shoots his gaze back to the tv before muttering something about getting candy and jumping up from the couch, practically sprinting to the kitchen.

“We don’t have any,” I call, quietly snickering at his over-the-top reaction. I grab a throw pillow from the floor that we’d used to sit on and snuggle with my head on one end of the couch, my legs tucked into me. “And how can you possibly eat anything else?”

“Because no meal is complete without dessert,” he scoffs, appearing out of nowhere. His arms are full, wrapped tightly around his loot, a wide smile on his too-handsome face. “So

figure out a way to make room or I'll force you to eat it for breakfast.”

“You might not need to force me. Depends what you've found.”

The look he gives me is all male pride as he sets everything down on the table with more care than I'd think him capable of. My eyes widen in shock at what he's found.

“Where the hell did you find Sour Skittles?” I choke out. “Did you seriously bring your own candy with you?”

Roman rolls his eyes and lifts my legs before dropping to the couch. My mouth gapes and my throat bobs as he rearranges my calves on his thighs. “Didn't need to.” He shrugs and leans forward, lifting a medium-sized baking bowl I'd missed and settling it on my belly. “Why buy more when I have a stash here?”

“I don't even want to know,” I mutter. He probably taped an emergency pack behind the toilet like a crazy person. He's always been a fiend for sour stuff. “You know they're probably expired,” I point out.

“Pshh.” His tattooed hand flicks, dismissing me. “Expiration dates are a conspiracy. There's enough chemicals in the food we consume that it could probably survive an apocalypse.”

“Whatever you say,” I laugh. Tipping the bowl, my brows dip when I take in the contents.

Out of the corner of his eyes, Roman watches me. “You didn't have any Reeses Pieces so I used your chocolate chips

from your baking shelf.”

The awkward, unsure lilt to his voice—the way it slightly cracks like he’s afraid I’ll throw the bowl in his face and tell him he’s an idiot...it softens something deep inside me.

Some of the hate, the anger I’ve held onto for so many years, smoothes away, being replaced by the warm feeling I always used to get whenever he was near.

But the bowl he’s prepared for me is what really starts to tear down those walls I’ve long since put up. I don’t know why, but it feels like a silent peace offering. An apology.

I’m just not sure what for.

Popcorn and Reese’s Pieces is my favorite treat. Sweet and salty. The perfect combo with a hint of gooey peanut butter. I haven’t had it...

Fuck, I don’t even remember the last time I had it.

The fact that after all this time, he still remembers my favorite snack shouldn’t make me feel this way. It’s silly, but my heart soars and my eyes once again burn. I blink away the random emotion his thoughtfulness brings on.

“Thank you, Ro,” I whisper, shoving a chunk of chocolaty-popcorn into my mouth to stifle the words that want to spill out.

He smiles softly and pops a Skittle between his lips. With our eyes locked, I watch it happen with rapt attention.

The shift.

The nearly imperceptible twitch.

His jaw pulses once, twice before spasming into a tight pucker.

And then, his eyes water.

My cheeks are puffed out like a chipmunk, burning as if I'm covered in flames from the force of the laugh building in my chest. It wants to come out, but I hold it...

And hold it...

And...

The candy flies across the room as Roman doubles over, coughing and spluttering. His hands go to his throat in a dramatic show that's fitting of Oli's theatrics.

"Oh my God!" he shouts, frantically searching for something to drink. He snags his glass of milk from earlier. Something he's used to wash down the flaming wings we ordered.

My hand flies between us in a poor effort to stop the accident that's about to happen. But it's too late.

His head tips back. He takes a big gulp and then...promptly spits it back in the glass with a disgusting gag that makes my own stomach twist.

"Fuck! Holy shit!" He chokes again, half-cough, half-gagging. "That tasted like rotten pickles and moldy sour cream."

The laugh finally bursts free, so loud, so wild, that it echoes around the room. I have to clutch the bowl to my chest as I fall

to my side, cackling like a madwoman.

“Fuck off,” he grumbles, rubbing his tongue on a napkin with a hiss.

A hideous snort slips out and my mouth snaps shut. Roman’s eyes dance with laughter, his face lighter than I’ve seen it since he showed up, before he also loses it.

I don’t know how long we laugh, but when we finally settle down, my sides are burning and my bladder is aching. He flips through the channels, looking for a movie as I happily munch on my popcorn, content to just *be*.

Is this the kind of life that would exist for me outside of Divinity Falls? One with laughter and midnight snacks? Trying new foods and experiencing the randomness that life has to offer?

My eyes roam over the comfortably familiar living room. The windows are open, letting in the night air that smells so much like home and my body settles even as my soul dies a little more.

At some point, my eyes start to drift, heavy from endless episodes of the show he pretended to hate but ended up loving and bowls full of carbs. Roman’s fingers smooth a relaxing path up and down my bare legs, lulling me deeper and deeper into a comfortable bliss that so rarely exists for me.

I know I should feel guilty—and I do.

I miss Isaac. I miss his smile and his hugs. I miss the solid reassurance and the stability our daily life offers. I miss his

laugh, his calming voice, his familiarity.

I know our life is small, but to me, it's comforting.

I love knowing he'll be home every night and waiting for me every morning. I love knowing that with him, I never have to feel alone. With him, I'm safe. With him, I know without a shadow of a doubt, he's not going anywhere.

And despite the monotony of it, I genuinely enjoy taking care of the house, having something to offer in return. It's what Mama did for Daddy, for me, for Roman. And she was the best person I knew. Surely, she can't have been wrong.

Roman's fingers slide down my legs and wrap around my right foot. I quietly giggle and twitch without opening my eyes. "That tickles."

"Shh," he whispers. "This is the best part."

I have no idea what he's watching and as he starts to knead the sole of my foot, I don't care.

Smiling into my arm, I fall asleep with one thought on my mind.

The only thing that would make this entire night better, is if Isaac were here with us.

I'm not sure what exactly wakes me up or how long I've been asleep, but I'm too comfortable to move, so I don't. I'm warm and cozy, my body cuddled up deeply against something hard yet comforting.

No. *Someone.*

Even with my eyes closed and my brain foggy from the deepest sleep I've had in what feels like forever, I know whose chest my face is nestled on. I know whose fingers are running through the long strands of my wild hair, smoothing out the chaos that was created in my sleep. And I know whose heart beats in a soothing cadence beneath my ear, lulling me back to sleep.

And above all else, I *know* I should move. Should jump up, apologize and run away, but I just can't because even with all the reasons this is such a bad idea, it still feels so fucking good to be cherished—even if it's fleeting.

So instead, I keep my eyes closed, my breathing relaxed and just take in the moment. The feeling of his soft t-shirt against my cheek and hand. His muscular arm wrapped around my back, keeping me tethered tightly to his body. His legs tangled with mine, the material of his sweatpants soft against my bare legs.

In our church, we have a saying. *Peace isn't found in the absence of a storm. It's found in the presence of God.* I used to think that was true, but now, here with him, like this, perfectly content to just exist in this moment, in our bodies, in our minds, exactly as they are, I know it's not.

Peace isn't found, it's accepted. Peace exists all around us, all the time. But you have to close your eyes and let it in. Sometimes, it's the quiet moments that speak the loudest. Sometimes, it's the quiet moments that make you feel the most alive.

His fingers shift, moving to gently detangle a new section and I smile against him. He pauses for a brief second, letting me know he felt it, then continues on without a word.

In the utter contentment bathed around us, a quiet song builds in my chest. I hum the words that are so familiar, so precious they're reserved for moments like this.

You Are My Sunshine, was Mama's song for me. She sang or hummed it almost every day, even when I was a teenager, grumbling about not being a baby anymore, but I never meant it. Never wanted her to stop. Never wanted the song to end.

Until it did.

Roman's body stiffens, and he sucks in a quiet breath. "Goddamn, I missed that sound."

I swallow thickly and blink back tears I didn't know had built. I sniffle into his shirt, trying to hide the way my heart throbs so deeply. For Mama. For Daddy. For Roman. Maybe even for Isaac, who's not here to dry my tears like he has so many times before.

Roman shifts our bodies, flipping us so I'm beneath him. My hands fly up, gripping his hips to steady myself, but I keep my eyes squeezed shut, afraid of what I'll see.

His calloused fingers are gentle as they coast along my cheek, wiping the tears away. His thumb ghosts over my cheekbone, my jaw, my eyes, as if he's exploring. Relearning the face he once knew so well.

I feel him pause over my freckles, spending extra time there and I have a sudden need to see his expression. My eyes are slow to open and when they do, it's not the same dimpled smile he used to get whenever he counted my freckles. He's not smiling at all.

His eyes are heavy with emotion, his Adam's apple bobbing repeatedly as his gaze flits all over my face. His thumb is still exploring and every pass, every inch he discovers, has my body lighting up as though I've never been touched before.

I bite my lip, my heart racing between us. My hands tighten around his lean hips, digging into his shirt until it gives way, and then suddenly, I'm gripping his skin instead.

His thumb slides across my jaw as his body settles between my thighs, heavy and oh so welcome. He tugs my lip from between my teeth, clicking his tongue when he takes in the deep grooves there.

“Don't do that,” he whispers. “I can't stand to see you hurt.”

But you are hurting me.

I want to say the words, but I choke them back. I want to tell him that for years, *he's* been the one breaking me. When he was here, when he was gone. He always leaves me shattered, and he does it so easily.

I want to say it but I can't, so instead, I say the only thing I can. The only thing that makes any sense to me right now as emotions build and build and build...

“Ro,” I breathe, confusion and lust lacing the single syllable. I’m so lost, so unprepared for this, that I feel like I’m swimming through molasses, trying to find which direction is up, but I can’t. I can barely breathe.

His thumb slips between my lips, and my tongue flicks out, licking the pad. “Goldie,” he chokes out, his voice breaking.

The name.

His name for me—the one that melts my heart and ignites my soul all at once. That one word and all the walls come tumbling down, laying in broken chunks of devastation and reckless abandon on the living room floor around us.

I don’t know who moves first, but then, his lips are on mine. Hard, demanding, as if he can’t possibly hold himself back, yet soft and coaxing, like he’s trying to keep me here, knowing I’m liable to panic.

Roman groans into my mouth, the sound deep and rumbling against my chest as his fingers sink into my hair. Mine grip his body tighter, my tiny fists unyielding, refusing to let go.

I can’t let go. I can’t.

As if he can sense the unspoken words chanting through my mind, his rough hands tug my head back, deepening the kiss until a needy moan rips from my soul. A guttural sound leaves him, one as desperate as mine.

My hips tip up, grinding against the solid length between us. The world melts away with his mouth on mine, his body a heavy, reassuring weight.

Finally, a tiny voice whispers in the back of my mind.
Finally, he's back. My Roman is back. He's back. He's b—

“I can't do this,” he whispers, his deep voice cracking with the pain his words have created. He shoves his body back, his eyes wide and frantic. He climbs from the couch and I stare after him in shock. “I can't go down this road again. Not when I know I'll be the one to lose.”

And then, he leaves, breaking me just like I knew he would.

So damn easily.

2:38 Eve

“Hi, Mama,” I say as I lay sunflowers across the base of the cross-shaped gravemarker. The concrete bench is hard and unyielding as I sit on it, heated from the sun, the stone soaking the heat up like a desperate lover.

My fingers twist around my phone, my mind screaming at me to check the time again, to just see how long it’s been since he left, but I force myself not to. I can still feel his lips on mine, the way his breath ghosted over my skin. I can still feel my heart falling, my soul falling with it.

I can feel him pulling away, jumping out of my reach and to his feet, his hand raking through his hair, expression hard as he stared down at me like he was desperate. Like he was angry. Like he was accusing me of something I didn’t know, that I didn’t understand.

It took all I had not to beg, not to fall to my knees in front of him and sob. To worship at his altar, praying for forgiveness—demanding he pray for mine.

“Sorry I haven’t been to visit in a while,” I choke out. My throat threatens to close as I stare at the stone in front of me.

Jane Anne Meyer-Payne.

She never gave up Daddy’s last name, and it was always something I silently thanked her for. For never making me feel like I had to give him up either. For never leaving him in the past and fully sinking into the Payne’s. Even if they were our new family, this our new home, Daddy would always remain a steady presence.

A sob shoves its way up my throat at the thoughts of him, the way he loved Mama so fiercely. I’d always dreamed of having a love like theirs, it was something fairytales were made of. But then he died, he left Mama, and even if she pulled herself together, Isaac there to help her put the pieces back, she was never the same. Her smile was never as bright, her eyes never as warm.

It was like the day Daddy died, she died with him.

Maybe I did, too.

“Life has just been so crazy lately,” I continue, wiping my cheeks with shaky fingers. My phone is like a lead brick in my hand, a siren calling me to look, begging me to take a peek.

I force myself not to.

“You wouldn’t believe the things that are happening,” I mutter. “Roman’s back, Mama. Can you believe that?”

I told her everything. I sat right here the morning after he left and held onto the stone like it was her; like if I held on tight

enough I could pretend like it wasn't the unforgiving, harsh stone that marked her forever grave. Instead it was her again, my mother hugging me back, whispering soft things as she petted my hair, promising it would all be okay.

But she didn't do that. *She couldn't.*

So I held onto the stone, hugging it tightly to my chest like it was the only lifeline I had in the middle of a hellfire so hot, it scorched any peace I had left.

"He's so..." I let out a harsh breath, tears still streaming freely down my cheeks.

I don't know what he is.

Without telling myself to, my eyes lower the phone as I flip it rightside up. The time mocks me. It's been hours since he left, and an abyss of emotions has opened in my chest, all screaming at me the truth: *he's never coming back*. I'll never see him again.

He's abandoned me, just like he did before.

"You wouldn't even recognize him," I tell her gravestone. The sun beats down on me, the only warm comfort I have in this otherwise bleak cemetery. My throat threatens to close, her name a blurry mess, a mere shadow of the vibrant soul she used to be.

Tipping my head back, I stare up at the blue sky, clouds floating along like it's just another day, like I'm not sitting where I am, talking to this inanimate object like it's my mother.

I *want* it to be my mother.

“Why?” I whisper, the word breaking. “Why did you have to take her?” The words spill out before I can catch them, the truth whisking away on a hot wind. More words form on my lips, words I’ve never dared speak, or even think. Words I’ve never let myself feel, not until this moment. “*I hate you.*”

They rip from my throat with such ferocity, I almost don’t recognize my voice in the silence. Once they’re out, every other emotion, every other word I’ve held in since the day Daddy got sick comes out with them.

“I hate you for taking them all from me.” I cry to a man I know isn’t listening, to a mythical being floating somewhere above, looking down on me, probably with a mocking smile on his face.

He’s won.

He took Daddy, then Mama, then Roman. Isaac’s next. Then who? Will I ever have anyone? Will anyone stay long enough for me to give my heart to, to trust He won’t tear it up, stomp on it, and hand me back the bloody, pulpy mess?

How much more do I have to give before I’ve given everything?

“What did I do?” The words are asked between broken sobs, my breathing the harshest it’s ever been. Still, I try to hold on. I try to stop myself from breaking to a point of no return. “I’ll fix it. Just tell me what to do. Give me a sign. Anything. I just—what do I have to do? Don’t take him from me again.”

There it is.

The real reason I'm so angry, why I hate Him so much. Because He took Roman from me, and I know this time, once he's gone, it'll be for good. I'll never see him again. I'll never have these torturous moments with him again, and even if he's killing me slowly, I can't give him up.

"Please," I beg, nearly crumbling to my knees. "Don't take him."

But I know no one is listening. Mama isn't. Daddy isn't. God definitely isn't. And the man I want has disappeared, the aching pit in my stomach reminding me of his absence with every second that ticks by.

My head falls forward, my eyes immediately latching onto the time. Only a few minutes since I stepped foot onto sacred ground, and already I'm itching to leave. To get away from the place that holds so much pain, I can barely breathe.

But I force myself to stay put, to stare at Mama's marker again, to fill her in on my life. I haven't been here in weeks. After that first night with Isaac, it's been harder and harder to face her, even if it's just her grave I'm having to face.

A part of me worries she's cursing me from Heaven, but then I remember this is Mama, my mama. She'd never do that.

She's up there with Daddy, dancing to their favorite song, her favorite dress swaying around her thin legs as he holds her closely to his broad chest. I can almost see it, the way he's

clutching her to him, like he's afraid of losing her. But she holds him back, just as tightly.

I saw it a million times, the way they floated together around the kitchen like they were the only ones in the entire world. Everything fell away from them. I could see it in their eyes, the way they got so lost in each other that you knew they were soulmates. That they were made for each other—not in the way people always think they're made for their person, but in a real earth-shattering, cosmic-shifting, planet-shaking way. Every star aligned to create their souls, every path shifted to make sure they met. They were destined for each other, from the second the universe was created.

They were soulmates.

Their love is the kind I've always dreamed of, the kind that lights fires and burns hot enough to sear the sun. But a part of me wonders if a love like that comes around once in a lifetime. If I'll ever find that—if *anyone* will ever find that love again, or if it was just saved for them.

I force myself to take a breath. Stop. I *need* to stop.

Every love is different, I remind myself. What I have with Isaac, though not as explosive as Mama and Daddy's was, is still...something. It's good. We're good. Even if we can't be anything to each other in public, one day, we will be. I have to hold out hope for that.

But another voice in my head, one louder than the rest, reminds of Roman and the way he looked at me last night. The way he brushed his fingers over my curls and let his body

wrap around mine. Soft features, joking smiles, teasing words, feather-light touches.

Roman.

It was perfect.

We were perfect.

Stop.

I can't go down this path with him. Not with Isaac and I still so fresh, so fragile. One wrong move, and everything will break. Roman can't break this. Because, no matter how much I might miss him and wish to never lose him again, I know I will.

He can't stay here forever. He has a life in Mammoth, one I'm not a part of. One I'll never be a part of. I'm not naïve enough to believe that he'd give up everything for me, so why should I give up anything for him?

The reality of the situation isn't lost on me. I want him to stay. Only moments ago, I was begging God to not take him from me again, but it will be his choice. At the end of the day, I won't have anyone else to blame but him for leaving. I can't blame Isaac, or God, or anything other than the fact he doesn't want me. He didn't choose me. He chose himself and his life over what we could've had.

And the truth of that rips my soul in half.

Shoving to my feet, I press my fingers to my lips and transfer the kiss to the top of the cross, sending a silent prayer to Mama. I need to get away from here, for just a while. Then

I'll come back and I'll fill her in completely, to apologize about Isaac, to tell her about Roman. But right now, everything is too much. The sun is too hot, and the air is too thick.

I just need to leave.

To breathe, and get away.

I want to run. I want to escape.

I want to jump on my bike and peddle as fast as I can, for as long as I can. I don't want to stop until I've soared past the Divinity Falls city limits and I'm free.

With a deep breath, I shake those feelings off. I'll be able to do that one day, but right now, I just need a break.

Breathe.

In.

Out.

In.

Out.

I walk through the cemetery, unlatching the small gate and closing it behind me. Grass crunches under my sandaled feet, the sound of the water from Barry's lapping in the distance as the breeze sashays through the trees. It's a symphony of nature, reminding of the beauty the world has to offer.

Right now, with my heart raw and emotions high, breathing in the air perfumed by wildflowers, I pause. Even if my life goes to shit again, if I lose everything and everyone I've ever loved, I'll still have this. The beauty and freedom of the world.

Of nature. Of all the things that remind me what it's like to be alive.

My eyes drift to the time on my phone again, and all the hope that just filled me, disappears.

It's been hours.

I tell myself I don't care. I try to force myself to believe the words, too. But it's hopeless.

I'm hopeless.

The church is halfway between the cemetery and our house. It usually takes no time to get to the midway point, but today it feels like it's dragging on forever. The white shiplapped building, the sardonic cross atop it, feels like a hallucination, like a figment of my past that still lingers as I try to claw myself away.

As I step in front of the gate that leads to the pathway toward the rickety church steps, I stare up at it, at the House of God, and wonder how differently my life would've been if I'd never left Haven.

My gaze scans the peeling paint, the splintered wood. From afar, you can't tell how dilapidated it's becoming, but upclose, you can see every imperfection. You can see it cracking under the pressure God and His disciples have put on it. The once perfect structure is now nothing more than a faint memory of the glory it used to live in.

The slightly open door catches my attention, and my eyes narrow. No one is supposed to be inside today. Anxiety swirls

in my stomach as I shuffle a step forward. Maybe it's Roman. Maybe he came here to think. Not to pray—*never* to pray.

Maybe just to burn more Bibles.

I scoff. If he keeps going at this rate, we won't have anymore, and Lord knows we can't afford to replace them.

My feet glide me along the path toward the stairs, and I hesitantly take a step up, then another. I keep going until my foot hits the landing and the old wood creaks under my weight. The door is only open a crack, but it's enough for me to wonder if it's a silent message from him, one telling me to enter. To come find him. To chase him.

I shake myself. That's ridiculous. Only I can look too much into the possible hidden meaning of an open fucking door.

But I can't help myself from pushing it open further and stepping inside, hesitantly calling out, "Roman?"

I look around the dark room, the aged pews and worn floodboards a mix of comfort and anguish. Lately, this place has been feeling less like a sanctuary, and more like a prison.

Slowly, the sunlight fades away, the creaking hinges slicing through the calm air before the deafening click of the door closing.

"Not Roman," a voice says, and I gasp, spinning around, a hand pressed firmly to the center of my chest. The shadow looms over me, tall and imposing. It takes my eyes too long to adjust, my heart pounding under my hand.

I squint as the figure steps forward, the muted sunlight shining in through the window beside us, illuminating his face. “Marcus,” I breathe, relief flooding me. “What are you doing here?”

“Waiting for you,” he mutters, stepping toward me. My breath catches, and I stumble away, trying to put distance between us. I hadn’t realized how close he was. “I thought you came here every day.”

“Not every day,” I say. My heart is wildly beating for an entirely different reason now. “Do you need something? Help with more directions?”

“I don’t need fucking directions,” he spits. I jolt at the harshness of his tone, shuffling back another step. His chest heaves, and his eyes are wild as he watches me—*tracks* me.

“Then what do you need?” My voice quivers, the words escaping in a breathless rush. I’m trapped by his piercing gaze, a knot of fear tightening my stomach.

His brows furrow, eyes narrowing, lips pressing into a thin line as he practically snarls, “You don’t recognize me?” He advances, and I’m paralyzed, unable to move. “*Golden Girl.*”

The name momentarily means nothing, then, as it sinks in, fear like I’ve never known overtakes my entire body. I tremble as a coldness starts at the tips of my fingers and works its way up my arms.

“W–what?” I breathe. “I don’t—”

“Don’t fuck with me,” he says. “I know who you are.” His lips kick up in a smirk, one that’s ugly and so unlike the man I’ve come to know. “It hurts you don’t recognize me, sweetheart.”

My eyes nearly fall from my head as I stare up at him. He takes another daring step forward, but my feet are firmly rooted to the spot. “Da—” The name almost slips, but I stop myself. “I don’t—”

“Say it,” he growls. “Say my name.”

“Mar—” His face shifts into something angrier, and finally, my feet decide to move. I retreat once more, only to collide with a rigid pew. I’m trapped between him and the wood, unable to escape. “*Daddy.*”

His eyes flutter shut as he takes a deep breath, his nostrils flaring. “You say it so sweetly,” he murmurs. Slowly, he looks at me again, his pupils blown and body taut. A hot, rough hand lands on my thigh, the short fabric of my flowy dress doing nothing to protect me from his unwanted touch. “You’re always so sweet, though, aren’t you?”

A surge of bile claws up my throat as his face inches closer, his breath a chilling caress against my cheek. “Please get away from me,” I manage to say.

I never thought one of my viewers would track me down in the real world. Oli’s warnings, though mostly jokes, now feel hauntingly prophetic. Roman’s cautionary words slam into me, the urgency in his voice echoing, pleading for me to be careful and stay out of trouble.

Yet here I am, engulfed in a situation that's the very definition of trouble. He's not here. Isaac's not here. I'm utterly alone, with this man who holds absolute power over me. He can take anything he wants, and I'm helpless to stop him.

"Please," I choke, the word ashy on my tongue. I just want him to leave me alone so I can flee to the safety of my bedroom. But he doesn't. Instead, he presses forward, his hand finding its way higher up my leg.

"It was just a coincidence I found you, Golden Girl," he whispers.

The name that doesn't belong to him feels like needles on my skin. His face is mere inches from mine now, and my breathing turns shallow.

"When I first heard your voice, I thought you sounded familiar. It took me a moment to place you, but when I did..." His tongue darts out between his lips, tasting me as he lets out a soft groan. "I've imagined so many things, Golden Girl. All the things you've done for me online, we can do in person. All the times you begged me to fuck you, to pump you full of my cum, can happen now."

This wasn't supposed to happen. I was supposed to always stay anonymous.

"We can film things together, just like you did with that fucking guy the other day," he spits, his voice taking on an angrier note. "Who was it? If I would've known you wanted someone to cum on your pretty face for all your viewers, I

would've introduced myself sooner." My heart is in my throat, my eyes still squeezed shut as his body hovers over mine.

"Please," I say again, but he ignores me, pushing further.

"Why would you let someone else touch you when you belong to me, Golden Girl?" His voice is breathless, almost guttural. My skin crawls, the possessive words forcing themselves to embed in my soul. "We're going to have so much fun together."

That breaks me out of my frozen fear-like state, and I bring my hands up between us, planting them firmly on his chest. I shove him as hard as I can, a sick sense of satisfaction filling me as he stumbles back a step.

Immediately, I move to escape, but his hand wraps around my upper arm. He whirls me back toward him, his face contorted into a fury I've never seen before. "Where the fuck do you think you're going?"

His hand rises, and I watch as it comes down. It slams against my cheek, and I fly backward, a scream ripping from my throat. I crash to the floor, my hand instinctively moving to soothe the throbbing sting.

An ugly, sinister sneer twists his mouth, my body vibrating with terror as I stare up at his towering figure.

A bang clashes through the church, the sound ricocheting off the old rafters. The air between us shifts and the building settles, like the walls themselves are cowering. And as if the

Gates of Hell have opened, an ominous figure emerges from the darkness, his face etched in absolute fury.

My Prince of Darkness.

2:39 Roman

*B*urn it down.
It would be easy. So fucking easy.

Burn it down.

I sit alone in the stifling quiet of my father's office, the air heavy with the scent of old books and the remnants of his lies. The dim light from the old windows casts long shadows, as if even the church itself can't bear witness to the secrets held within these walls.

This room is supposed to be a sanctuary for those seeking solace, but I know it's nothing more than a prison of hypocrisy.

Flick.

The polished mahogany desk, the one he sits behind everyday, a symbol of authority, bears the weight of a man who wears his righteousness like a mask. My father, the preacher, a figure revered by the congregation, the monster behind closed doors.

There's paper covering nearly every inch of the wood. It's a mess. It wasn't before I got here, but now it is because I couldn't stop wondering if he'd fucked her here yet.

Every drawer was organized, every corner perfected. Now it's as chaotic as my thoughts and the drawers are as empty as the organ barely beating in my chest.

I left her.

I couldn't stay.

Not when she tasted so good, felt so right.

Not when she's not mine.

Burn it down.

I ripped apart his Bible. Thought about burning it, but then I got distracted by the words he jotted down on scraps of paper and jammed between the holy pages like the dirty secrets they are.

I pick up a page, my eyes scanning the familiar scrawl and my brows furrow.

For the lips of a forbidden woman drip honey, and her words are smoother than oil.

"Proverbs 5:3. How fitting," I mutter, palming my lighter, as I move to the next sheet.

Flick.

Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

My lips wrap around the words, the verses coming back to me as though it was just yesterday I was forced to memorize

them. Repeat them. Again and again.

“Matthew 6:13.” The next. “1 Corinthians 6:11.” Another. “Romans 4:25.” The sheets drop and with every one, the temptation to destroy it all grows. “Luke 11:49.”

Burn it down.

I drop my lighter and it clatters to the heavy wooden desk, the black leather wrapped Zippo tainting the otherwise white surface. A single sheet of paper falls to the floor, catching air on its way and pulling my attention with it.

My head cocks to the side slowly and I blink, some of the previous numbness washing away. The curtains are thin cloths with frayed edges. They go from floor to ceiling, only feet away from the worn floorboards and nearly rotting rafters.

It would be *so* fucking easy.

Would the curtains light quickly? Would the flames slowly build in intensity, creeping inch by inch until suddenly, the air would shift, the fibers would catch and then the entire thing would ignite?

It would be so beautiful.

Flick.

As I run my fingers over the worn armrest of his leather chair, I can almost hear his thundering voice echoing through the hallowed halls. The verses he preaches, the warnings against deceit and cruelty, ring hollow in my ears, even as pain builds slowly in my chest.

Isaac is the very embodiment of the false prophet he so eagerly condemns.

The memories surge forth, unwanted and relentless. The sharp sting of his backhand, the cruel words that cut deeper than any physical blow, the nights I spent cowering in my room, praying for deliverance from the man who should have been my protector.

Burn it down.

I shove up to my feet, letting the rolling leatherback chair slide across the floor, banging into his bookshelf. I follow the chair and kick it out of my way, watching it fall to its back with a *thud* that feels utterly anticlimactic.

With a huff, I turn to the books and graze my handwork with my fingernail. The shelves are laden with leather-bound Bibles and theological memoirs that are now turned backward, their spines hidden, their pages on display so he can't find what he needs.

How many times had he thumped these sacred texts, preaching to the congregation to live in accordance with their teachings? How many times has he convoluted those words to serve his own twisted desires? How many times has he used them on me? On my mother or Jane?

On Eve...

Flick.

His wall of crosses didn't survive my redecorating, either. I turned them all upside down for no other reason than it'll piss

my prick of a father off to no end.

I really considered destroying the old portrait of Jesus, but he's too fucking creepy to touch as he looks down from the wall, his eyes seeming to follow my every move. It's such a stark juxtaposition to the man who claims to represent him, a cruel mockery of the love and forgiveness that figure embodies.

Not that I believe it either way.

I've always questioned my faith, the teachings preached and forced down my throat from the time I could taste them. And in questioning my faith, I've questioned my life, my death. There is no Jesus or Hell after death for being a bad human. Nothing but the purgatory I've existed in since the day I was born.

Though I don't believe in Hell, there have been times when I've questioned the existence of Heaven.

I found it over the years, in fleeting moments filled with golden sunshine and sugary peach pie. In soft, warm humming and smooth, freckled skin. I've found Heaven once or twice and it exists in her eyes. The blues so blue, they make me feel like I'm floating in the very paradise my father swears I'll never see.

But I've seen it. I've touched it, held in my hands, in my soul.

I've found a Heaven that he can never hope to explore because no matter what I may believe, no matter what happens

from here on out—Evelyn Jean Meyer was made for me.

Her Heaven exists to brighten my Hell and the flames surrounding my soul, born from the tattered, ugly cloth they cut me from, are meant to heal her broken edges.

Flick. Flick. Flick.

The room seems to close in around me, the walls echoing with the ghosts of the sermons he delivered from this very church. The church from which he preached love and salvation, while he practiced cruelty and manipulation. His voice mixes with my own, the ugly taunting inside me grows louder and louder with every fucking heartbeat.

You don't deserve her.

You're tainted.

You're dirty.

You'll wreck her.

I swallow and catch the sound of much quieter words, whispers in the back of my mind.

You love her.

You need her.

She's yours.

But she's not.

Not anymore. Fuck, maybe she never was. If she were, then she would have—

Everything inside me stops as a blood-curdling scream echoes throughout the church. I blink, wondering if I imagined it, but it's immediately followed by the sound of something falling to the ground, the old floor creaking. Then the unmistakable screech of a pew being shoved.

My breath comes fast and shallow, heart pounding like a relentless drum in my chest. Panic grips me as I spin away from the bookshelf, the room now a blur of frenetic motion.

The scream cuts through me like a blade, replaying again and again. My mind races, struggling to process the impossible. This place was supposed to be empty, the church cloaked in the silence of sacred solitude. But there is absolutely no doubt in my fucked up mind that the voice is one I'll recognize to my grave.

What the fuck?

I'm moving before I even realize it, tripping, stumbling over the shitshow I created in Isaac's office when I ran here early this morning, escaping from the very woman I'm desperate to get to.

My booted foot comes up, slamming through the hall door as my eyes frantically scan the church for Eve. The door reverberates off the wall and echoes against the rafters.

The church, once a sanctuary, now feels like a cavernous chamber of shadows, but I still find her almost immediately. The sight that greets me shakes every ounce of numbness I'd worked so hard to find in Isaac's office, replacing it with a fury I've never felt before.

My Goldie lies on the cold floor, her body curled in on itself, silent tears streaming down her perfect face. A man stands over her, his mouth running with words that make her shake and have me momentarily frozen. But then, his hand wraps around her hair, tilting her face toward me.

Multiple things click in my hazy mind at once.

He's touching her.

She's bleeding.

He's hurting her.

She's bleeding.

He's scaring her.

She's bleeding.

Rage surges through me, a wildfire of protective instincts. My fist clenches around my lighter, knuckles white, as I charge towards him, the wrath of the very devil my father once swore I embodied, pulsing through my every vein.

“Get the fuck away from her!” The words explode from me, a primal roar of warning.

The man turns, his face a mask of surprise and disgust. His eyes meet mine, a chilling recognition passing between us. His lip curls and he has the audacity, the fucking nerve, to turn back to Eve as though I don't exist.

Marcus.

Marcus is going to *die*.

Eve looks up, her tear-streaked face a portrait of relief and fear. She reaches out a trembling hand, a silent plea for salvation. My steps falter for a moment, the sight of her vulnerability a dagger to my blackened heart.

She's bleeding.

Fury blazes once more, propelling me forward.

With a surge of strength born from desperation, I launch myself at the fucker who dared to walk in these doors and touch what doesn't belong to him. My hand wraps around Marcus' shirt and I tear his body from hers, throwing him into a pew and watching as he crumbles to the ground.

I want to look at her, to go to her, but I can't.

Not yet.

I follow him down, needing him to stay that way so I can take care of Eve. No words are spoken as I put my fist through his stupid fucking grinning face. Each blow is a testament to the depths of my rage. The impact reverberates through my bones, but I press on, unyielding in my determination to protect the woman I love.

The woman I've always loved.

Will always love.

It only takes one hit for his smile to drop, two to make him bleed the way she is and three to see his eyes roll to the back of his head.

It's not enough, but it has to be for now.

Soon. Soon I'll make him regret every decision he's ever made that led him here.

My own eyes flutter closed for a brief second while I take a moment to just fucking *breathe*. I need to get my shit in control, need to get my head straight before I check on her. I don't know what he did or why, don't know his intentions or if he did...if he did more than just make her bleed.

If he—

If he—

“Ro,” Eve chokes out, her voice thick with tears and terror. The sound does something to me, snapping me from my spiral. With another hit for good measure, I shove my body from his and turn to her, my beautiful, broken girl.

“Goldie—” I swallow, my voice cracking. Her nickname is still so fucking unfamiliar on my tongue despite how many times a day it's rolled through my mind in the last four years.

I shake my head, choking on the air in my lungs as her wide, tear-stained eyes blink up at me with so much fear and gratitude.

She licks her lip, her tongue coming back bloody. Her brows crash together as though she's just realizing she's hurt, and maybe she is. Maybe it's the first time she's letting herself feel anything other than the terror I saw on her face.

Her finger swipes at the tiny trickle coming from her split lip and she stares at the redness staining her porcelain skin with wide, doe-eyes.

I swallow roughly and close the distance between us, unable to take the broken look marring her beautiful features. She should never look this way. She should never feel this way.

And if she were mine, she wouldn't—

I put a stop to those thoughts by scooping her up, shaking her from wherever her mind had taken her. She sucks in a gasp and scrambles to clutch herself to me. Her thin arms wrap around my neck as I adjust her, cradling her to my chest like she's the most precious thing in my world.

She is.

We stare at each other for a long moment, her lips parted with words that won't come out and my heart lodged in my throat, choking me.

Then Marcus groans and Eve shudders, remembering he's still here, and it propels me forward. I make it through the church, dodging pews, and through the front doors, in record time. Then light is spilling down on us, momentarily blinding me.

I blink, my eyes adjusting, my arms unwilling to let her go.

Eve tightens her hold on me as though she feels the same way and that little ball of emotions in my throat slowly unfurls, letting me find my voice again.

“Are you okay?” I know she's not, but I need to hear her say it.

She bobs her head once, then shakes it once, before nodding again. My lip twitches despite the rage still pulsing through

me. As much as it kills me, I slowly release her, setting her gently on her feet. I right her dress, making sure she's fully covered, before taking a step back.

Not because I want space between us, because to be honest, I don't want a single inch separating her from me right now. But because I have to see.

I grip her shoulders and bend, forcing her tear-stained eyes to meet mine. "Talk to me, Goldie," I whisper, though there's no mistaking the demand. "Are you okay?"

My thumb brushes over her cheek, the red mark from where he hit her even more clear in the bright afternoon light.

Fuck, I can't wait to kill him.

I smooth my hand over the welt before tracing her lip. Her hand comes up, cupping mine as she leans into our combined touch.

"I'm okay," she breathes. At whatever look she sees on my face, her mouth curves in a brittle but honest smile. "I promise. I'm okay, just—" she breaks off with a shrug. "Rattled."

I nod and breathe deeply, needing to ground myself before I ask the next question. The question that might or might not keep me from spending my remaining years in a prison cell.

"Did he touch you anywhere else?" I rasp, my eyes locked on hers despite how badly I want to squeeze them shut. But I can't. I have to know. I have to see the honesty in her eyes when she answers.

Her face shutters, the small amount of light she'd managed to find, disappearing at once. I snap up, trying to pull my hand away as a savage growl flies from somewhere deep inside me. Turning back to the doors, I prepare myself to take a life, seriously take a life, because if he, if he—

“Roman,” Eve cries, trying her damndest to yank me back to her. “Roman, no, stop!” I shoot her a look, one that has her brows crashing together with hurt. “Stop. He didn't, I mean.” She shakes her head, her breaths sawing in and out. “He didn't touch me. Not like that. He just said some shit, and then this.”

She gestures to her face and drops my hand, letting her head fall with it, as though she's ashamed. Of what, I have no idea, but I can't fix it right this second.

I will. I'll try. But not now.

I step forward and cup her sweet face, forcing her to look up at me. To not hide, to not cower from the unseen enemy in her head. I swipe her cheeks, the tears steadily trickling from her red-framed eyes, and commit this look to memory.

The mark on her cheek, growing angrier by the second. The clotted cut on her puffy lower lip. The devastation in her usually light, joyful eyes. The way her body curves in on itself as if to hide from her own thoughts, her own heartache.

I commit it to memory, and then I vow silently to make him pay ten times over.

But I don't tell her that. I can't.

“I need you to do something for me, Goldie,” I breathe, smiling inwardly when she immediately nods up at me. “I need you to go home and ice your lip and cheek. Can you do that for me?”

Her eyes narrow, then flick to the church. “What are you going to do? Roman, don’t—”

God, I want to kiss her so badly right now. Want to use my lips to stifle her panic, to soothe her, to help her, but I can’t. I can’t and it’s killing me.

Instead, I press my thumb to her lips and cock a brow. “I’m not going to do anything but call the cops. They can handle him.”

I expect Eve to sigh in relief, to deflate in my hands and obey my request but she doesn’t. Not even close.

Somehow, she grows more terrified, more frantic, as her head whips back and forth. She grips my wrists, imploring me to listen. “You can’t, Ro, please. He’s, he’s...” She breaks off, her eyes fluttering shut as she takes a deep breath. “He’s from Favorite Fans. I didn’t know, but he did, somehow and I...” Her eyes spring open again. “If you call the cops, he’ll tell them who I am, how he knows me, then everyone will know. *Everyone.*”

By *everyone*, she means Isaac. The pure terror in her eyes kills me. But part of me, the part of me that’s festered and writhed, growing over the years like cancer until it consumed me, the hate I have for him, for her, the betrayal that’s only amplified now that I know their filthy little secret...

That part of me smiles at her fear. The way she shakes in my hands. The way she *begs*.

It wants to ruin her the way she ruined me. The way they both did.

But, it also wants *me* to be the one to take her down. To make her feel the ugly, bone-deep devastation that I felt when she chose my father over me. I want to be the one to enact that revenge, and not because Marcus is forcing my hand.

So, instead, I swipe her cheeks again and kiss her forehead. “I won’t call the cops, I’ll just make sure he leaves town and doesn’t tell anyone.” The words are whispered against her peach-scented skin and I close my eyes, inhaling her deeply before stepping back. “Now be a good girl and go home. Can you do that for me?”

Her eyes are weary, untrusting, as they flick between mine but then, she’s whispering a defeated *okay*, and turning around to leave. I watch as she slowly makes her way down the few stairs, then the walkway, checking over her shoulder every few feet.

Finally, when she’s reached the halfway point and I’m sure she’s not coming back, I slide my hand into my pocket and grip my lighter. The thing is small, like an extension of my own hand at this point, but it’s reliable. It’s a comfort, reminding me that I’m the one in control now.

I step into the church silently and let the door quietly click shut behind me. Marcus is awake now, his eyes frenzied as he searches for a way out. I grin. He must have figured out the

back door is padlocked from the outside and that the front wasn't an option.

I cock my head, watching him mutter to himself as his gaze locks on a window near the front. It's lower to the ground, the browning around the edges giving life to decay and rot. It probably wouldn't be all that hard to bust through it, but then all my fun would be ruined.

Flick.

His head snaps to me and he pales at whatever he sees etched across my face.

Burn it down.

I step forward, one hand casually in my pocket, the other wrapped around my lighter, as I slowly make my way toward him.

Flick.

“Hey man,” he starts, backing toward the stage. “Whatever you think I did, it's bullshit. That bitch is nothing but a lying whore.”

I consider stopping his frantic ramble but I don't. Liars always spill the truth eventually and I'm betting on him accidentally letting it tumble from his bloody lips.

Burn it down.

Marcus trips as he scrambles up the three steps that lead to the stage, but rights himself at the last second. Behind him is

the massive bronze cross that Isaac uses as a backdrop, the windows spilling golden light in around it, haloing Marcus.

It's symbolic, really.

Me standing in the cross-shaped shadow of The Divine light my father likes to bathe himself in.

We're steps apart now, and he has nowhere to go. "What do you want?" he sputters, his back pressing against the cross. "I don't want trouble man, she's not worth it."

Oh, and that's where he's wrong.

Eve is worth *everything*.

Flick.

I charge forward, my fist colliding with his face as my free hand wraps around his throat, keeping him in place. Marcus snarls, his own fists joining the battle as though he feels he might stand a chance.

He doesn't.

He has no idea what writhes and cries inside me. The black, inky tar that bleeds through my veins. The flames that burn my soul to embers every time I remember it exists.

The struggle is a chaotic dance of fists and fury, a symphony of violence in the falsely sacred hall. The pews stand as witnesses, their wooden frames behind us bearing silent testament to the clash of wills. The church itself seems to shudder, as if it can barely contain the turmoil within its walls.

I don't know how long we purge our demons on each other. Maybe seconds, maybe longer. All I know is that it's not his face I'm seeing as I intact my revenge, as I unleash everything I've felt building for so fucking long.

It's not Marcus's face that's bloody and broken.

It's not his body I've riddled with my hatred.

It's not him at all.

Finally, with a final surge of strength, I drive the asshole backward, his form crashing against the pulpit. He crumples, defeated, his eyes staring blankly before falling shut. My breath comes in ragged gasps, the taste of victory acrid on my tongue.

I want more.

Need more.

It's not enough.

Burn him down.

My knees bracket his body, keeping him pinned to the ground. His eyes slowly flutter open as he releases a deep groan.

“Wh-what do you wa-want?” he stutters, and pride fills me at the thick blood coating his teeth.

My lighter once again finds my hand and I bring it to his jaw, tracing the cool steel over his heated, marred skin. “Who are you?” I murmur, watching my finger hover over the trigger.

So easy.

It would be so easy.

“Marcus,” he mutters, his cut brow pinching. “I didn’t lie.”

I narrow my eyes as a calm I haven’t felt in so long washes over me as if I really have finally purged my demons.

I haven’t. I know the high is temporary.

“And why are you here, Marcus?”

He licks his lips, his eyes flicking away. I can feel his heart hammering beneath me. Can see it jumping in his neck.

Flick.

The flame roars to life, and I smile.

“Do you know what I love so much about fire, Marcus?” I ask, gliding it just millimeters from his skin. His eyes snap back to mine and he shakes his head, feeling the slight burn from my flame. He freezes and chokes on his next breath.

I laugh.

“Take this lighter, for example,” I continue, tracing his face with it. Not touching, but the threat is there. “The flame is small but mighty. All it takes is one spark, one breath, one gentle, innocent wind and everything disappears, leaving behind the remnants of its existence in unrecognizable ashes.”

It’s the perfect metaphor for my life.

Something so small, so innocent on its own, can become utterly destructive if fed the right fuel.

I am that flame and this place, these people, my ruination.

He thrashes under me as I bring the flame to his hair. It wouldn't ignite, just singe. But based on the way he panics, I'm guessing he doesn't know that.

“I wonder if they'd be able to identify your ashes, Marcus,” I muse, tightening my hold on his body until he stills. “If they did, who would they tell, hmm? You got a wife at home? Kids? People who will miss you when you disappear, floating away on a strong breeze as though you never existed?”

I skim his pulse, letting him feel the heat before releasing the flame. He deflates and I press the burning hot metal to his skin, hard enough to scar his flesh.

He screams and I roll my eyes.

This is nothing.

Burn him down.

“Tell me now or I'll fucking destroy you, right here, right now. I don't give a fuck if I take this entire building down with you.” I smirk, lighting the flame again with a shrug. “I'd prefer it, honestly.”

“Fine,” he grits out. “I didn't come here for her. I moved here because my grandfather died and I took over his house. I didn't know who she was, didn't know she was the preacher's kid.” He swallows, his eyes wide. “Didn't know 'till I heard her speak.”

“And?” I drawl, my heart thumping wildly.

He swallows. “I just wanted to get to know her, man.” He shakes his head, burning himself again before crying like a little bitch. I scoff. “We were so good together. She put me first. Spent hours with me. She liked me the most.”

He’s rambling now, his words sloppy and disjointed, but I get the jist. He’s a fucking creep from that goddamned app that thinks things between him and Eve meant more than they did. He has no idea he was just a means to an end, a sick fuck with a deep wallet and convoluted thoughts.

He’s an idiot.

“But then something changed. She wouldn’t give me the time of day on the app anymore. Started flaking and turning me down. And then in person, she was sweet and—”

His body tenses and I see how he feels justified in his actions, the way he feels she belongs to him, even now.

Something that’s solidified when he spits, “*She’s mine.*” And then, his face turns red and his body goes rigid. “But she’s a fucking whore and she let some other man touch her. Let him fuck her mouth, come on her face when she—” He’s panting, trembling and me? I’m fucking grinning. “When she was supposed to be with *me.*”

“So, you thought you’d take her back,” I surmise. “You saw what you think you saw and wanted to stake your claim.”

“She shouldn’t be touching anyone else. If she gives it up that fucking easily, then I should have gotten what I was owed after all that money I spent on the whore.”

I click my tongue.

And there it is.

I bring the lighter to his cheek, tired of fucking around. The flame dances and burns. Marcus screams. I slap my free hand to his mouth, shoving him into the floor and silencing him as I continue to make charred paths over his face.

“Listen and listen good you insane motherfucker,” I hiss, getting all up in his face. “Eve is not yours. She was never yours. She will *never* fucking be yours. She owes you nothing. Not her time. Not her attention. Not her gratitude.” I press harder, keeping the flame on the same spot, his hammering pulse. “And not her goddamn body.”

I chuckle when he starts to cry. I’m half afraid he might piss himself.

“And that man you think you saw?” I murmur, my eyes fluttering at the scent of his burning flesh. “The man who fucked her face and came all over it? Marking her, claiming her?” I lean down, finding his ear. “It was me and *fuck*, she felt so good swallowing my cock. Taking me into her sweet cunt. Wrapped around me until I filled her with my cum.”

It’s not true. Not in this lifetime, at least. Not that he needs to know that.

Marcus screams under my hand, but I’ve had enough.

“Here’s what you’re going to do.”

I move the lighter to his cheek, burning just below his eye so everyone can see his scarred tears.

“You’re going to sell that house and get the fuck out of Divinity Falls. You’ll never look at her again. Never touch her again. Never even fucking think of her again or I swear to the God who’s watching you burn that I will finish this and I won’t stop until you’re a pile of ashes at my feet.”

Jerking back, I release the flame and press the now scalding metal to his fresh burn, relishing in his screams.

“And then,” I hiss, shoving to my feet. “I’ll fuck her in your ashes and make sure it’s *my* name she screams.”

With that, I turn my back, leaving him to sob on the floor.

Seconds before the door slams behind me, I call over my shoulder, “Get the fuck out of my town, Marcus, and stay the hell away from my woman.”

I may hate this town and all it stands for, but I’ll be fucked if I leave her again after this.

Even if I have to make her hate me in the process.

2:40 Eve

The rope digs into my palms, its coarse texture gnawing at my skin as I tightly clutch it. My toes caress the soft grass, grounding me in this moment of fleeting adrenaline. I thrust myself away from the Earth, letting the tire swing carry me back and forth.

Birds sing their sweet songs, bugs hum, and the wind blows like it's just another day. But my cheek throbs in time with my heart, reminding me that it's anything but. It's different.

I'm different.

The collision of my online and real life was something I never thought would happen. I was always supposed to keep them separate, and until Roman, I had. But he waltzed back into my life, shoving the door open, and finding me in my most vulnerable state.

And I baited him. I liked challenging him.

Maybe it was because I knew even if he hated me, even if we were nothing but strangers to each other now, he still

wouldn't hurt me. Not the way Marcus wanted to.

Of course I cared that Roman knew, and I care about the video of me on his phone that he can so easily share with the world. But somewhere deep down, I hoped that my Roman was still in there. And today, with him towering over Marcus with fire in his eyes and a deadly threat lingering in the air, I know I was right.

My Roman isn't totally lost. He can still find his way back.

He protected me today. He didn't leave me like I thought he had. He was there, and he saved me.

He saved me.

Tears burn as they fill my eyes, blurring my vision of the world around me until it's nothing but a smear of bright lights and soft colors. My feet shove off the ground again, sending me soaring higher than before. The wood of the old oak creaks as I'm propelled backward, the wind blowing through my hair, giving me a false sense of freedom.

I try to push the images of the past hour from my mind, but it's impossible. My eyes squeeze shut, a single tear streaking down my cheek as the feeling of Marcus' hands on me replays again and again, the words he'd said, the way his breath felt against my skin.

A thick lump forms in my throat, and it takes all I have to force the emotions I don't want to feel down. It's almost too much as the reality of my life settles around me in a thick smog.

I can't believe I'm doing this. Camming for money. Sharing the most intimate parts of myself with strangers online. At first, it was all a game. It didn't feel real. But now...

"Eve?"

My head snaps up at the sound of my name, and my heels dig into the hard dirt as I come to an abrupt stop on the swing. He takes a large inhale of his cigarette before flicking it to the ground, putting it out with the tip of his boot.

Roman storms toward me, his eyes dark and fiery. "What are you doing?" He scans me, just like he had in the church, and it makes my entire body heat. "I told you to ice your lip."

"You should really quit smoking," I say, deflecting. "It's a disgusting habit."

His brows furrow as his thumb hovers over my cheek, not making contact, before yanking his hand away. "You're hurt."

"I'm fine," I mutter, lowering my eyes. It's not to dismiss him. I just don't want him to see the truth there.

I'm *not* fine.

I might never be fine again, not with the stark reality that what Marcus did, what he said, the way he'd pursued me won't be a one off. Men like him will find me. They'll hunt me down and stake their claim, just like he tried to do.

The tears I've been trying to hold in finally begin spilling out. I take a shuddering breath, trying to calm myself before I can burst into a fit of hysterics in front of Roman. That's all I need to happen on top of this already shitty day.

He rounds me, and wraps his hands around the harsh rope, right above mine, our skin barely touching. The slight warmth of him, the comfort of him being so close, yet still not fully touching me, has a sob pushing out my throat.

“Talk to me,” he rasps, gently pulling the swing backward, then walking it forward. “Tell me what happened.” I cover my face with my hands, letting myself sink into self pity for only a moment. “*Goldie.*”

The name wrenches fresh tears from my eyes. Goldie. It’s a name that’s been both haunting and a source of solace for so many years, and now, finally, he’s uttering it like it means something again. My shoulders shake as I force myself to take another gasping breath.

“I never realized that Favorite Fans would be so...” I trail off, shaking my head. “I’ve always loved it, you know? But now—now I think it might be time—”

“To quit,” he says. The words force my body to tense.

Quit.

It’s what I was going to say, but the word feels so final coming from him, almost like a demand.

“Maybe take a break.” I scoff. The swing stops moving, his hands still gripping it tightly.

“A break?” he slowly repeats.

My hands drop to my lap and I twist them together. My toes tangle in the soft blades of grass, trying to ground myself again, but it doesn’t work. Not with him looming over me, his

eyes searing the back of my head like I'd personally offended him.

“Was what happened not enough to scare you?” he says, his voice low. Wiping my tears from my eyes, my spine straightens as I lift my chin. His feet thud on the hard Earth as he rounds me again, crouching and gripping my cheeks in his rough palms.

I'm so taken aback by his sudden movement, by the way his hands feel against me, that my mouth opens, then closes, nothing coming out, not even a breath. Reaching up, I grip his wrists.

His eyes search mine, the look in them so frantic it makes my heart skip a beat. “Look what he did to you,” he murmurs, his thumb gently trailing along the already-swollen print on my cheek. It lowers, gliding along my skin until he reaches the corner of my lip. “He hurt you, Goldie.” His jaw tenses, his eyes darkening in a way that promises death. Not to me, but Marcus.

I can feel it, the way his body's trembling with his restraint. Like it's taking all he has not to turn around and hunt Marcus down, to finish whatever he started in the church. I don't want to know what Roman did to him after I left. Whatever it was, I know it wasn't good.

“You don't understand,” I whisper. His brows crash together.

“What?”

“You—you don’t get it, Ro,” I say, tugging his hands away from my face. I don’t know how to explain to him that I have to do this.

It’s the only freedom I have, it’s the only freedom I’ll ever have. I can’t let Marcus take it from me. I can’t let Roman or Isaac take it from me. The only way I’ll ever give it up is if it’s my choice.

Roman stumbles back a step, looking like I wounded him.

“Help me understand, then,” he says tightly. He stands too far away from me, his body coiled, like he’s ready to flee. Or fight. Maybe both. “Is this about money?” The question startles me enough that all I can do is blink. “I can get you money, Eve. I can get you all the fucking money you need. How much? Just tell me, and—”

“It’s not about money,” I interrupt, shaking the words from my head.

It’s true. Even if this started because of money, and I love the money I make, it’s become about a lot more than that. It’s become a silent beacon of defiance, a way to pretend that I have freedom and choices. That I’m in control of my own life.

“I just want you to be safe,” he pleads, and my heart warms at the words. I smile softly, kicking my foot over the grass.

“I know,” I say quietly. “And I am safe—”

“You weren’t fucking safe today,” he spits, his voice tight. Too tight to be anything other than furious.

“I’m fine,” I say, trying to shake off his concerns. He runs a frustrated hand through his hair, his boots digging into the dirt as he turns, looking out at the lake. I slide off the tire swing, needing him to understand, silently pleading with him to just listen. “This is the only part of my life I have any control over, Roman.”

“What are you talking about?” he scoffs. “You have control. You can leave anytime you want. You can travel. There’s a whole world waiting for you.” I shake my head as he speaks, the words ringing so untrue it makes my throat tighten.

He doesn’t understand.

“I can’t just leave,” I say. “I’m needed here. I have responsibilities, and I can’t leave Isa—everything. Oli. And the church. And—”

“Isaac doesn’t need you,” he snarls. “You’re not his fucking wife. You’re just a warm place for him to stick his cock.” I stumble back a step, my hand going to my stomach as the words hit their intended mark.

The truth I’ve been terrified to admit feels like a lead brick in my chest. I’ve fought myself, told myself I mean more to Isaac than just a hookup. He means more to me than that.

It was just us for so long, broken and grieving together, us against the world. And when I’m in his arms, it feels so good. It feels comfortable. Familiar and safe, like afternoons at the lake and nights spent by the fire.

I look away, not wanting to fight with Roman anymore. His words hit too deep, and after today, I can't take anymore pain. I just want to crawl into bed and forget this day ever happened.

“What? No smart remark? No comeback?” he taunts. My arms wrap around myself as I take a step toward the house. “You're not the same girl I knew. The old Eve would've fought with me. She would've told me—”

“I'm the same girl I've always been,” I say. He lets out a humorless laugh, and I whirl back toward him.

“You used to have dreams, Eve!” he shouts, startling me at his sudden burst of emotion. “You used to take pictures. You used to fill your walls with places you wanted to go. Your map!” He throws his hand toward the house, his face red with his anger. “It's fucking empty. Where are all the pins? Where's all your adventures?”

“I still have dreams, but I grew up.” My hands flail, my anger rising with his. “Not all of us can just take off and do whatever the fuck we want, Roman.”

He ignores me, stepping into my space. “You never use your camera anymore. You spend all your time at the fucking church or at home, playing Susie fucking homemaker. You're not a housewife, Eve. That's not you. It'll never be you.”

“Stop acting like you know me. You don't!”

“I used to know you better than anyone. What happened to my Goldie?”

“I haven’t been your fucking Goldie in four years!” The shouted words shove themselves out my lips before I can stop them. But once they’re out, I’m glad they are.

“What the fuck happened to you?”

“You left!” I scream.

He throws his hand toward the tire swing, his eyes blazing.

“You never came.”

2:41 Roman

You left.

My hands rest on my chest as I stare up at the dark ceiling, replaying the events from the day, the words she'd said—the words she'd *screamed*. The heavy truth of them that, instead of bringing me any closure, any peace, has only brought me more pain. More confusion.

You left.

I left, so she became this? A shell of the person I knew, nothing more than the sweet church girl she was forced to become. Everything that made Eve, *Eve*, has been stripped away. I've had fleeting glimpses of her old self since being back, but that's all they've been, fleeting.

You left.

If I would've known this is who she would've become, maybe I would've tried harder to stay.

You left.

Yeah, I left. But she never came.

She never came.

High above, the moon casts its silver glow, reflecting off the rippling lake's surface. Cicadas buzz loudly in the rainy night as I readjust my backpack on my shoulder, my other hand wrapped tightly around the coarse, damp rope of the tire swing for stability. The ancient oak shields me from my father's potential gaze, but I can see inside. I can see her room.

Her dark room.

I left a note on her pillow telling her to meet me here, at our spot. To run away with me.

To choose me.

But with every second that passes without her coming down those steps, without her by my side, her answer is becoming clearer and clearer. She's choosing Divinity over me. She's choosing my father over me. She's choosing to stay in her protective bubble, the one that's shrouded in falsities.

Yet, hope still claws at my insides. She'll come, a voice in my head reassures me. She'll be here.

I shift again, feeling the trembling ache in my legs from hours of standing. Raindrops cascade through the leaves, pelting me, but I don't move. I keep watch of the house, waiting, silently praying to a god I don't even fucking believe in that she'll choose me.

That someone will choose me, just this once.

Each droplet of rain on the lake is a harsh reminder of her absence. And the longer this goes on, the more her absence is beginning to feel like betrayal.

All the words she'd told me, were they just lies? Pretty promises to string me along, to make me feel like she cared? Like I was worth something?

Had she used me to make herself feel better, to forget about her pain for a while? Was I nothing more than a distraction?

Minutes bleed into hours, and the sun paints the sky a bruised purplish-pink haloed by oranges and yellows. It rises over the lake, creating a mockingly beautiful picture.

This could've been our sunrise, the one we'd remember for the rest of our lives when we looked back on this moment. On this night. The colors would've tattooed themselves into our souls, reminding us that we chose each other.

Rain continues falling, and my knees buckle as I take my first step in hours. I stumble forward, my hand reluctant to let go of the tire swing. Of this place.

Of her.

But I do.

I let go.

A knock pulls me from my memories, and I blink a few times, settling back into the space around me. Not under the tree. Not soaking wet, freezing to the bone.

Inside.

In my bedroom.

In Divinity Falls.

In Hell.

The door creaks open, and as if on instinct, I scoot over, making room for her. It's something we've done a million times, sneaking into each other's rooms in the middle of the night to read and talk and just be together.

Her hands land on my shoulders, and the icy feel of them jolts me out of the past and fully into the present. I gasp at how cold she is and throw the blankets back. Eve stumbles a step away, her eyes wide.

“What are you doing?” I hiss, sitting on the edge of the bed, gripping the sheets tightly to keep myself from reaching out.

I can't.

The memories are still too fresh in my mind, and it takes me a moment to realize something's wrong. I take in her appearance again and worry coils in my stomach.

Her hair is rumpled, her oversized t-shirt is hanging loosely from her thin shoulder. I blink. No, *my* t-shirt. One from high school with my football number on it. I blink at the relic, wondering why the fuck she's wearing it, then I shake myself.

It doesn't matter.

“What's wrong?” I ask, pushing to my feet.

Cool air greets my bare skin and I suddenly feel too exposed. Shoving past her, I grab the grey sweatpants slung over the

back of a chair and slide them up my legs, my back to her. My skin itches and I'm thankful for the darkness shrouding us.

"Someone's outside," she breathes, and my entire body freezes before a feral need to protect her overtakes me, washing away my errant thoughts.

I whirl around, my heart in my throat, my fists clenched at my sides. My eyes flick from Eve, to my closed window and back to her. I can't sit here and wait for shit to hit the fan but the idea of leaving her unprotected and alone. Vulnerable... *again.*

I shake my head and swallow roughly before pushing past her. I yank my phone from its charger and shove it in her hands, but she doesn't take it.

"Stay here," I say, dipping my head to look at her. "If I'm not back in a few minutes, call the police."

Her eyes aren't on mine, though. Instead, they've traveled down my bare torso, taking in the swirls of black ink and chiseled muscle. Her lips part, a silent breath leaving them as pink stains her freckled cheeks.

"Eve." I snap my fingers in front of her face, and she blinks, shaking her head like she's coming out of a spell. I force my phone into her hands, and when she finally wraps her fingers around it, I feel the tremors wracking her body.

Fuck.

Spinning toward the open bedroom door, I stride out, the old worn planks hard and smooth under my bare feet. Her soft

footsteps pad behind me, and I let out a low, annoyed growl, looking over my shoulder to find her too close to me.

“Dammit, Eve,” I grumble. “I told you to stay put.” She ignores me, moving closer to my side.

“Don’t you need a weapon or something?” she whispers, as if the person lurking outside is in the house with us. Shit, maybe they are.

I need to keep her safe.

The thought of her in danger, *again*, makes my blood boil.

“Wait,” she breathes, her cool hand sliding down my forearm before tightening around my wrist. Reluctantly, I pause. I want to get outside and hunt this fucker down. I want to rip him apart. I want to—

“What the fuck are you doing?” I whisper-shout, watching as she tosses my phone onto the couch and grabs the poker by the fireplace.

“What’s it look like?” she shoots back, her voice just as hushed. “You need to protect yourself.”

“And *that’s* your idea of a weapon?”

“It’s better than nothing,” she grumbles, and I shake my head.

“My bare hands are better than that fucking thing.”

“Conceited, are we?” She scoffs as she falls into step beside me. I don’t even bother trying to push her back. She’s too stubborn to listen.

The warm, humid night air wraps around us as we walk outside. She plasters herself against me as we move to the edge of the porch, slowly taking the steps down until we hit the grass. I'm on high alert, looking for anyone who might be trying to hurt us—*hurt her*.

Something crunches, and my head whips to the side. “Did you hear that?” she whispers.

“*Shh.*” Her arm snakes through mine, her body trembling harder than before. “Go inside.” She just shakes her head, that damn poker swinging from her other hand with every step.

There's a loud splash, and my head snaps to the other side, toward the lake. She lets out a small squeak as I drag her with me across the yard. I should probably feel scared. I should feel anything other than annoyed and pissed off.

But Eve lets out a quiet whimper, and my anger fucking *spikes*.

I know it's probably just an animal, a bird more than likely, but it was loud enough for her to hear inside and scary enough to make her come to me, despite our fight.

Which makes it my problem.

As we storm toward the lake, her reluctant to follow, a head dips under the water. I blink once, twice, wondering if I'm seeing shit but then, Eve inhales a sharp breath. My spine stiffens. She definitely saw that, too.

A yellow glowing light illuminates the water from below, and my steps falter.

What the fuck is that?

“Go inside,” I snarl, shoving her behind me, not giving a shit about her stubbornness anymore.

“I’m staying with you,” she mutters, tightening her arm around mine.

“*Goddamnit, Goldie,*” I hiss, running a hand through my hair as we fall into a silent glare-off.

Splashes in the water drag my attention from her and I shuffle forward, unsure of what to do. I can’t leave Eve alone, and I can’t jump in the lake. But I can’t let whoever it is get away—

“Oh my God,” she breathes. I glance at Eve over my shoulder, finding her eyes wide. “Do you think it’s—”

“Marcus?” I interrupt, because yeah, that was definitely my first thought when she said she heard someone.

I didn’t tell her how deep his obsession with her went. Didn’t tell her the shit he spewed in the church, how fucked in the head he is. But I wouldn’t put it past him to show up here in the dead of night.

If it’s him...I fucking swear to—

Eve pauses and her brows crash together in surprise.

“What? No, why would it be Marcus? Do you think it’s a robber? Or a drug addict? Oh, God, what did Oli say?” Her eyes go frantic, her hand tightening on my arm. “What if they’re on dexies, Roman? Or snow? Or—or—what was the

other?” She looks out at the lake again, the poker twirling recklessly in her hand. She’s about to stab herself with it if she’s not careful. “Moon rocks!”

“What?” *What the fuck is she going on about?*

“Moon rocks,” she says, nodding. “That’s the other drug Oli said people take. Could it be someone on—”

“Jesus Christ,” I breathe, shaking my head. My eyes flit back to the lake but everything’s suddenly gone quiet and dark. My jaw ticks as my hairs stand on end.

What the hell?

“Does Divinity have drug addicts?” Eve prattles on, and before I can tell her to shut up, she continues. “Who am I kidding? Of course, they do. I help with AA—no, that’s just for alcoholics, not—”

“Evelyn,” I snap, and her mouth immediately clamps shut. Her blue eyes are massive, and I slide my arm from hers, placing my hands on her shoulders. “*Go the fuck inside.*”

Something splashes from the water behind us and I push her as far away as I can before whirling around, ready to fight whoever it is. I’m pretty confident it’s not some tweaker on whatever the fuck Eve was talking about, but I’m also not willing to bet her safety on it.

And honestly, if it does turn out to be a duck or some shit, I don’t want her to bare witness to me tucking tail and taking off like a little bitch.

“Roman,” she breathes, and I nod, my eyes tracking the water.

“Go.” I wave her toward the house behind my back, but she still doesn’t move.

The surface breaks as someone pops out from under the water, a light strapped to their head. A soft grunt fills the air, and my brows crash together.

“I’ve got you now,” they mutter before letting out another grunt. “Come here, you precious little beast.”

What.

The.

Fuck.

They grunt again, and I start toward them, my hands balling into fists at my sides. “Hey!” I shout, and their head whips toward me, the light strapped to it blinding me. My arm raises, shielding my eyes.

Frantically, they turn away and buck in the water, sending it sloshing over the bank. A quick glance over my shoulder shows me Eve is finally smart enough to stay where I left her and not come anywhere near potential danger.

Grass crunches under my bare feet as I storm forward, ready to yank them from the water and send them home black and blue.

“Hey, motherfu—”

I pause when I get to the edge of the lake and look down, finding someone in full scuba gear flailing in the water. For a moment, I just stare, because what the actual fuck?

“Just come to Mommy,” she coos. “I’ll be a good mommy. You’ll see. Just come here—”

“Olive?”

Her head snaps up to me, the goggles obscuring her face, and the light blinds me again. “Turn that fucking thing off,” I grumble, covering my eyes with my forearm. “What are you doing?”

“Roman?” I grunt my confirmation, and she lets out a long sigh. “Oh, thank fake baby Jesus you’re here. I need your help.”

I squint, trying to see her past the bright light. “Turn it off!” She jolts at the sudden sound, but she doesn’t move.

“I can’t,” she says, her voice almost raspy, as she stares at the lake.

“Did you say Olive?” Eve asks, coming to my side. Her head tilts the second she sees her friend. “What are you doing, honey?”

“What’s it look like?” Oli wails, throwing a hand toward the water. Eve and I exchange a look, and when I glance back at Oli, I shrug. She lets out an annoyed cry before turning her attention toward the water.

It obscures her hands as she grabs hold of the weeds and jerks on it. “What the fuck are you doing?” My voice comes

out harsher than I'd intended, and Eve elbows my ribs, giving me a look that tells me to watch myself.

"You have muscles, don't you?" Oli huffs, ignoring my question.

"What?"

"Muscles, Roman!" she cries. "Do you have them or not?"

"Yes," I rush out, then clear my throat. "Yeah, I have muscles." Eve chokes on a laugh, and it's my turn to shoot her a look.

"Do you need help getting out?" Eve asks, but, again, Oli ignores the question.

"Get your ass in here and help me get this little bugger out."

I just stare at her. There's nothing to say or do.

"Roman!" I startle at the fierceness in her voice and straighten my shoulders.

"I'm not getting in the water," I say, my voice final, and her head turns back toward me, too slowly to be anything other than fucking creepy.

"You're refusing to help me?" she grits out, and my brows raise at her tone. "I'll tell Chase." I snort and fold my arms over my chest.

"How about we talk about this with you *out* of the water?" Eve suggests, but Oli and I stay staring at each other. Well, as much as I can stare at her with the fucking light blinding me.

"Tell him," I taunt, but it's empty.

Chase wouldn't only die for his little sister, he'd string anyone up by their toes and bleed them dry for her, too. I'm not stupid enough to think that being his best friend means I'd get special treatment.

"Just help me," she says, turning her attention back to the water.

"What is it?" Eve asks, shuffling closer. I almost reach for her, but we've already touched too much tonight.

"The Loch Ness monster," Oli states plainly, making Eve and I freeze.

"The...Loch Ness..." Eve looks at me and I shrug. I don't know what she's talking about. "Honey, this isn't Loch Ness."

Her head snaps back around. The light pisses me off. It's too fucking bright.

"Turn off the light," I snap for the umpteenth time, but she just stares at Eve.

"I'm not an idiot, Eve," she drawls. "I know where we are. But Ol' Nessy is right here in Barry." Eve's throat bobs as she swallows, nodding hesitantly.

"And..." Eve looks at me again, but I tip my chin down, silently telling her to deal with her friend. "And you're trying to *get*...Nessy?" She stumbles over the word and I crack a smile. "You're trying to get Nessy out of the lake?"

Oli lets out a long sigh, like she's so put out to explain herself to us. "Yes, Evelyn. I'm trying to bring Nessy home with me. I'll be his mother. I'll feed him, and—you'll let him

live in the lake, won't you? Just until I can figure out if I can get a pool big enough for him?"

"Needs to be a freshwater pool," I point out, and Eve nearly breaks her neck whipping her head toward me. Oli snaps her fingers, nodding.

"Good thinking, Payne. Knew there was a reason Chase kept you around." My smile spreads wider. "Now, get that muscley ass in here and help me."

"I'm not—"

"Yeah, yeah." Oli rolls her eyes. "You already said you're not getting in. Let's just jump to the part where you do what I want, 'kay?"

"I'm not getting in—"

"Are we really doing this?" she huffs.

"What?"

"This back and forth." She waves her hand between us. "We both know I'm going to ask a couple more times, then you'll grumble like the grumpy, emo asshole you are while you get in. Eve will stand there, looking pretty as usual, while you help me take Nessy home."

Eve giggles, and when I shoot her a glare, she tries to hide it with a cough. But her smile is bright as she stares down at Oli, and the look on her face is like a punch to the fucking gut.

She's just so beautiful.

I almost break from that look alone. I almost drag my ass into the freezing cold lake just to entertain her. But then our earlier words come crashing down around me and I'm reminded that we're back to square one.

We're nothing to each other but a past full of twisted, broken memories and hurt.

I have no reason to make her smile. Even if Oli's my best friend's little sister, I don't have to do shit for her. I especially don't have to feed her delusions.

"I'm not getting in," I repeat, my voice lower. Final. Eve's smile falters, her brows twitching together.

"But—"

"No, Olive," I snap. "It's fucking late, and I'm tired. Just go home—" Her face, still shadowed behind the headlamp, falls. Eve lurches forward, her hands wringing together.

"I know my muscles aren't as big," she says hesitantly. "But I can help, can't I?" I nearly scoff.

I understand why people are gentle with Oli. I understand why they tiptoe around her, making sure she's always happy and never upset about anything. I understand it all, but, in this moment, I can't make myself play the game.

Eve moves to the edge, and it takes all I have not to pull her away. It's dark, and she could slip—I stop myself. She's not my responsibility. Not anymore.

Oli's hand reaches out, and Eve meets her halfway. Their hands grasp each other, and Oli jerks back. Everything after

that happens in slow motion.

Eve's free arm windmills as she tries to catch her balance, but Oli's hold is too strong and down Eve goes. Water splashes as she lands in it, the droplets hitting my bare chest, sending goosebumps rippling over my skin.

For a moment, I just stare as Eve's head pops up, her hair plastered to her head. Oli throws her head back, laughing like a lunatic. The silver glow of the moon shines bright, showing Eve in all her wet glory.

"Oli!" Eve cries, running her hands over her face, wiping the water away, but her voice is drowned out by Oli's cackling.

Whirling toward the house, I shake my head.

I can't believe this is my life.

2:42 Eve

Gathering the books in my arms, I leave the tutoring room. After sitting in there for twenty minutes, waiting, Clover's foster mother finally called to reschedule. Which is probably for the best. I'm still exhausted after the stunt Oli pulled last night.

It took me way too long to explain to her that she was pulling on weeds, *not* Nessy. Then, when we climbed out of the water, she said something about needing to get back to the animals, and took off, leaving me soaking wet and freezing.

Roman was already asleep when I got inside—well, I assumed he was asleep since he didn't come out of his bedroom. After a shower, I only slept for a couple hours before racing to the church.

Now, all I really want is to go home and pass out.

I round the corner, coming to an abrupt stop when I spot someone sitting on the steps of the stage, looking out at the

pews. The cross behind him looks more like a bad omen than anything hopeful.

My heart lurches into my throat as I shuffle a step closer.

“What are you doing?” I ask, watching the cherry at the end of his cigarette burn brighter with his inhale. Roman’s dark hair sways as he looks my way, his hazel eyes piercing me to my core.

“What?” he breathes, his voice a low rumble as his head cocks to the side. “A sinner can’t seek salvation?” My mouth opens, then closes. The books feel too heavy in my arms, but I’m rooted to the spot, unable to move. “Isn’t that why you spend so much time here, little sister?”

A sneer curves my lips at the words. “Really? We’re back to that?” God, he’s such an asshole. Irritation fills my gut as I go to a pew and set the heavy books down. Crossing my arms, I shoot him a withering glare. “I thought we’ve moved past the *little sister* comments.”

“Now, why would you think that?” he chuckles, his tone mocking.

He’s reclined back on the stage, propping himself up on his elbow as he watches me with a sardonic grin. His legs are spread wide, a cigarette pinched between his fingers before he brings it to his lips, taking a long drag, his eyes never leaving mine.

“I’m not your sister.” His grin widens, morphing into something sinister, something so hot that it makes my blood

vibrate.

“Don’t pretend it doesn’t turn you on.” His voice is low like a lover’s caress, the sound ghosting over my flesh, leaving goosebumps in its wake. He flicks his cigarette to the floor, snuffing it out with the heel of his boot. “I have a solution to all your problems, Golden Girl.”

The words pull me out of his spell, and I shake myself, steeling my spine. “What? You’re leaving?” The words come out stronger than I feel, and it gives me a false sense of confidence, one I’m sure he can see right through.

He lets out a low chuckle and leans to his side, his eyes narrowed on me. I track his movements as he slips his hand into his back pocket and slowly pulls his wallet out. My stomach coils at the sight, and I swallow thickly.

“Not exactly,” he murmurs. His deft fingers spread his wallet apart before dipping inside and pulling a bill out. My heart hammers in my chest as I watch him flick it, letting the hundred float to the ground. He doesn’t move from his lounging position as he jerks his chin to the money. “Pick it up.”

My eyes snap to his.

A gasp spills from my lips, my hands balling into fists across my chest. “No.”

What the hell?

I’m *not* picking money up off the floor, money that he’s dropped for me. Fuck no. That’s...that’s...

That's one of the most degrading things I've ever been told to do and it's so much worse because it's *him*.

Another dark laugh falls from his lips before he pulls a few more bills out. They scatter on the sacred ground at his feet, between his spread legs, and he smiles. "How about now?"

My mouth goes dry as I take in the money, flitting from bill to bill. The colors are bright, the paper crisp, as though they're fresh from the press. No, from the bank.

He pulled money out...for this.

A lot of money. It's close to a thousand dollars, some twenties, some hundreds, all mine, if I just pick them up.

I hesitate, my foot shuffling forward a step without permission.

Can I do it?

I've had men degrade me, humiliate me, spew vile shit at me, but this? This has to be the worst.

And I'm actually considering it.

What is wrong with me?

My eyes flutter closed and I fight the impulse to rub the space between my brows as a headache forms. His words from the other day fill my mind, swirling at a chaotic speed, matching my heart rate.

What happened to your map, Eve? Where are the pins? The pictures? I thought you were going to travel. You had dreams.

What happened to you?

What happened to you?

The answer is, I have no fucking clue. I meant what I said that day. I can't just leave. It's not that simple, no matter how badly I wish it were. I can't drop everything and go travel the world. I can't give up my life here, a life of steady contentment and safety for a world of *what-ifs*.

Can I?

I step toward the closest bill, my hand itching to reach down and grab it. It's easy money. Probably the easiest I've ever made.

It would do so much. Get me so much closer to my goal. And with the income I lost from Marcus...

I swallow thickly.

Just do it. He's giving it to you. He wants you to have it.

Just take it.

My fingers twitch as my gaze rises to Roman's again. He's still watching me, reclined like a dark god, a mouth-watering, infuriating grin on his face. His chin dips in a small nod, encouraging me to do it.

Do it.

"Come on, Evie," he murmurs, drawing me into his dark orbit. "Sin with me."

My heart ricochets at his words.

Sin with me.

A shiver races up my spine as I shuffle forward another step. The bill is right there, within arm's reach now. I just have to bend over and take it.

Do it.

“Just do it.”

His words match the mantra in my head, the inner voice telling me to put my pride aside and just...

Fuck it.

I dip down, my fingers brushing over the crisp paper. He clicks his tongue, drawing my attention. My head lifts, my body bent in half as I raise my brows expectantly.

“On your knees, little sister.”

I snatch my hand away, jerking upright. “Hell no,” I hiss. “I’m not *crawling* for you.”

He lazily grabs his phone, scrolls on it for only a second, before turning it toward me. The video of me bent over, begging to be fucked while a dildo is shoved inside me, my lights and laptop set up in my room, plays. My moans are loud in the quiet church, and embarrassment rises to my cheeks.

“If you don’t want everyone to know that sweet little Evie is actually a filthy little whore, then you’ll get on your knees and crawl for me,” he says, his voice low. Bored, almost. I half expect him to idly inspect his nails.

My heart thuds against my chest. My eyes burn. My world spins. But all I see is him. A shadow of my past, now swathed

in darkness. It crawls over his skin like the inky tattoos etched there, a symbol of the devil writhing within his soul.

He's not the Roman I once knew.

He's not the Roman I once *loved*.

Twisting my hands together, I stare at him, trying to figure out how to get out of this with my dignity still intact. "You'd really do that to me, Ro?" I whisper, choking on an ugly ball of emotion.

He shoots me a feral grin. "What makes you think I wouldn't?"

Seriously? Does he have amnesia or am I just losing it? "I just—after everything—"

"Everything?" He lets out a humorless laugh. "You hate me and still, you were ready to spread your legs for me. I've been home for how long? And you're already desperate for my cock."

"This is low," I say, shaking my head as his ugly words pulse through me. "This isn't you." Or maybe I just never really knew him at all.

He's always hidden away. He's always preferred the darkness.

Maybe it's because the devil thrives in the shadows, praying on peoples weaknesses and fears. He finds them, twists them, becomes them, and then, he revels in your pain. Just like Roman. But as my eyes find his, I can't help but wonder if I've always loved the darkness more than I was supposed to.

I can't help but wonder if I also thrive in the shadows.

Sin with me.

“Just like I apparently don't know you anymore, you have no fucking idea who I am,” he snarls. “You have no idea the things I've been through, the things I've done. What I've seen.”

My lips fold between my teeth. He's right. I *don't* know. But whatever happened to him in the last four years has changed him irrevocably.

“Now, get on your knees and crawl for me.”

Any sympathy I might've just had for him flies out the window at his command, his arrogant expression.

He taps on his phone a few more times, then turns it around again, letting his thumb hover over the *send* button. Isaac. He'll send it to Isaac first, then to the rest of the town.

“Please,” I whisper. “Don't send it to him.”

“You know what to do then,” he grits out, his eyes darting to the money.

One slight touch of his finger can ruin my life, *yet...*

I almost want him to. I almost want him to just send it to Isaac, to the town, to let the world know that Evelyn Meyer is a whore. That I spread my legs for strangers online and I make a shit-ton of money doing it, too.

I almost want him to take the choice from me. To take the secret and hold it for me. Keep it. Do with it what he wants so

I don't have to hide anymore.

I shouldn't feel ashamed or embarrassed. I should feel empowered. I should feel proud of myself. I've created a business, a name for myself, outside of Isaac. Outside of Divinity.

I'm more than *this*. More than this box I've been forced to fit inside.

So, instead of giving Roman the satisfaction of thinking I'm doing this to save myself, my reputation, I drop to my knees, a sultry smile curving my lips.

If he wants me to crawl, I'll fucking *crawl*.

Sin with me.

His brow lifts as he watches me lower my hands to the ground. Slowly, so slowly, I drop all the way down, my mouth opening to grab the bill between my teeth. His breath hitches, his eyes widening. It's the only sign of his cool exterior breaking and it only lasts a second.

Then his cockiness is back, and he reclines further on the stage, getting comfy to watch the show I'm putting on.

His gaze burns as he watches me slowly crawl toward him, the bill trapped between my teeth. My breasts sway with each movement, drawing his attention, and it gives me enough power to not lose my resolve, to keep going.

Stopping at the base of the stairs, I peer up at him from under my lashes and drop the money from my mouth, back to

the floor. His throat bobs as he swallows, his gaze so intense, I can barely breathe.

“You missed one,” he rasps, letting another bill fall from his fingertips to his lap, right over the growing bulge under his jeans. I hesitate, still looking at him, gauging his seriousness.

He lifts his hips, readjusting his position, taunting me with the flash of green. “Take it.” His voice is guttural, a low rasp, and it sends searing pleasure shooting down my spine.

Cautiously, I lean forward, letting the bite from the wood floor digging into my knees ground me as I brush my lips over his hard cock, the rough fabric of his jeans the only thing separating us.

My teeth clamp onto the money and I linger for a moment, hovering above the hard length that I desperately want. He was right—he *knows* he was. But I force myself to pull away. The money falls from my lips and joins the growing pile under my knees, creating a throne fit for a powerful whore like me.

Because as I watch Roman, the asshole from my nightmares, the dark prince from my dreams, fall apart underneath me, I realize just how powerful I truly am.

His chest heaves with each breath, his hands clenching and unclenching at his sides. A vein in his neck throbs wildly, in time with his heart, and a sick amount of satisfaction fills me at the sight.

“Is that all you had, big brother?” I whisper, batting my lashes. His tongue snakes along his lower lip before he reaches

back into his wallet, pulling out more money.

A single hundred dollar bill.

He slides it under the waistband of his jeans, a clear taunt, before reclining again, both elbows braced on the stage. The money bends as he shifts his hips, giving the silent order to take it.

Resting my hands on his thighs, I lift myself to my knees, moving further between his legs. Roughly, he clears his throat, his eyes boring into mine as I lower my mouth.

“Fuck,” he breathes. I smile as I slide the money from his waistband, holding it between my teeth like a trophy. Pride shoots through me at the hungry look on his face.

Suddenly, his hands are on me, gripping my waist and yanking me up, forcing my body to glide against his. The money falls from my lips.

“Roman,” I gasp, clutching his shoulders tightly. He ignores me, dragging me *up, up, up*, until I have no choice but to straddle him.

“On my face, Goldie,” he rasps. “I need to taste you.”

My mouth opens and closes as the room spins around me. This took a turn I wasn't expecting, and now I don't know what to do. Do I leave the money and run? Pretend like this never happened? Or do I stay?

Do I sin with him?

I move my hands to his chest and gently shove him back. He falls to the stage, staring up at me with fiery eyes. "I've never done this before," I admit, and his hands drop to my waist.

"Don't think about it," he murmurs, his fingers digging in. "Just put your pussy on my fucking mouth and ride."

Anticipation swirls in my stomach as I grip his shirt in my hands, hesitating before sliding up the hard length of his body.

"Come on," he groans impatiently, slapping my ass roughly.

I jolt forward, my hands landing heavily on the wood above his head. My legs spread wide as I try to accommodate his broad shoulders, then I'm there, close to his mouth. I feel his hot breath against my wet panties, and a shiver snakes down my spine.

"So fucking wet," he growls. "I knew you'd get off on that." He hesitates before adding, "*Little sister.*" Something about it, the forbiddenness, the filthiness of it, has an involuntary moan slipping out.

My nails dig into the floor as I move my hips higher, hovering right over his face. His fingers slide under my panties and he roughly tugs them to the side. I glance down, finding my light yellow dress obstructing my view of him, and somehow, it's even hotter. It flows around us like a waterfall, and all I can do is *feel*.

He doesn't give me a chance to second guess myself, he grips my hips and tugs me down until his mouth connects with

my pussy. I cry out at the first feeling of his hot, wet tongue skimming over my clit.

“Ro,” I gasp, fire shooting through my body. He ignores me as he wraps his lips around my clit, sucking roughly on it. I jerk up, bracing my hands on my knees as my head tips back. The cross looms over us like God’s watching the Devil feast on me.

My hips roll, chasing the pleasure, not caring about hovering anymore. He growls, the vibration shooting through my body, as he pulls me the rest of the way down, settling me firmly on his face.

“There,” I breathe. “Right there.” I ruck up my dress and look down my body at him, finding his eyes already on me. We stare at each other, his tongue moving faster, my orgasm teetering on the edge already.

He nods, the stubble along his jaw scratching my inner thighs. “That feels so fucking good,” I moan. “Please, Ro. *Please.*” My hands slide up my waist, letting the flowy fabric drift back around him, hiding his face from me again.

Roughly, I cup my breasts, squeezing them until pain mixes with the pleasure. I’m so close. *So* fucking close. He doesn’t hold back, doesn’t stop. He just keeps forcing me higher.

Higher.

Higher.

He drags me back, then shoves me forward, making me grind against his face. I pause, understanding what he wants,

but unsure if I can do it. Then he does this wild thing with his tongue, and my eyes roll back.

Fuck it.

His tongue stiffens as I glide myself back and forth, riding his face in earnest now, using his nose and mouth and chin for my pleasure. Another feral-sounding growl rips from him, the vibration spurring me higher.

“There,” I cry, lifting my eyes to the cross again. “Oh, God. I’m about to—I’m—Roman!” I scream his name with my release, my hips moving faster, drawing my orgasm out. He forces me to keep grinding against him, not letting me stop until my body goes limp.

I lean forward, resting my hands on the wood as I breathe deeply. He pants under me, his breath hot against my skin. My eyes drift shut.

What the fuck did I just do?

Sliding off him, I kneel at his side. He stares up at me, his mouth and jaw still shiny with my release. His eyes search mine before he wipes the wetness with his hand and sits up.

“Don’t forget your money,” he says flatly, dismissing me before turning to his phone without another word.

My stomach bottoms out as I glare at his back. Instead of giving him what he wants, I right my clothes and push to my feet, forcing my knees not to wobble.

“Keep it.” I wave my hand toward him. “I make more than this in five minutes, anyway.”

2:43 Roman

“Why the hell are we here?” I grumble, tugging my shirt collar from my body. My tattoos start to itch with every person that turns to stare at us.

I don't fit in here.

Chase said we were going somewhere new for lunch but this...

This isn't what I was expecting.

As we make our way around the maze of tables, Chase shoots me a massive, borderline terrifying grin that's way too toothy to be real. It never drops, even as he hisses, “*Smile or I'll kill you.*”

It's creepy as hell and I wouldn't have appeased him if it weren't for the fact that *kill* comes out *kiss* because his teeth are all mashed together. Not to mention, he's in work mode right now and if Chase Tanner hates anything, it's being fucked with when he's in work mode.

So, I smile wide, step into his bubble and wink. “Oh, Chase,” I murmur, ignoring the waitress when she points to a table. “Are you saying that if I’m a bad boy, you’ll *kiss* me?”

His grin drops, his mouth gapes, his cheeks turn pink and then...

His head tips back with bright, genuine laughter. “Oh, sweet, sweet, baby Roman,” he cackles. “Don’t tempt me. You know I’ll do it. Any time, any place.”

I shoot him a death-glare and slide into my chair, giving him my back. “You’re so fucking annoying.” He’s literally impossible to fuck with.

Chase thanks the waitress, taking the extra second to squeeze her shoulder as he sends her dazzling smile before dropping into the seat next to me. “You only think—”

“What the fuck is this place?” Kon barks, interrupting him as he flicks his pissed-off gaze between Chase, the waitress he touched and the tiny metal chair he’s supposed to sit in. “This isn’t going to work,” he grunts, crossing his meaty arms.

Chase scoffs and rolls his eyes. He points to the chair. “Sit.”

And then the craziest thing happens.

Kon sits.

It’s one of the funniest things I’ve ever seen. Watching a man over six and half feet tall, built like a fucking tank, bend himself until he’s perched on a tiny chair, all while muttering in Russian.

I cock my head as the tail end of his rant trickles through.

Stupid fucking tiny chairs meant for stupid fucking tiny American's. He snaps his gaze to Chase before finishing, *He's lucky he's so fucking cute.*

Chase gives no outside reaction that he understands Kon's words except a slight twitch of his lip that he tries to hide behind his menu. But considering there's only like three things on the small paper, I don't miss it.

Before I can ask for the hundredth time what's going on between them, another waitress pops up, a bright smile plastered on her face. "Welcome to Fox and Hen! Can I get you all started on beverages? Some Pellegrino? A chilled coconut milk with peach and guava extract, perhaps?"

I blink.

And then I blink again.

Meanwhile, Kon is shifting uncomfortably in his tiny chair, his brows dipped low in confusion as he tries to figure out how not to fall. "Iced tea," he grunts.

"Water for me," I add, my lip lifting in a polite smile before I flick my gaze back to the menu. If you can even call it that.

"Sir, I'm sorry, but we don't have iced tea. We don't believe in caffeine, it distorts the body's natural sympathetic systems."

Kon's head snaps up, his cheeks burning bright red under his beard. His mouth drops open, then snaps shut, only to open once more. She shrinks back under his powerful glower. Chase

chuckles softly, giving her a look that's all honey and influencer-charm as he waves Kon off.

“Please excuse my friend. He's not from here.” If it's possible, Kon's face gets even redder at Chase's words. “We'll take three waters, please.”

She dips her head and quickly scurries away. I sigh, sinking deeper into my chair. It really is super fucking tiny. I barely fit in it and I'm nowhere near as big as Kon. My eyes flit over the menu as we fall into silence, only the sound of a packed restaurant to fill the air between us.

I try to focus on the words in front of me, but every time I start to read, my mind wanders back to Divinity. Even with eighty miles and years of pain between us, she's still consuming me.

My fingers tighten around the paper, the words blurring together as visions of what went down in the church the other day flicker through my mind. Without my permission, my cock stiffens in my jeans and I shift, trying to relieve the pressure.

It doesn't work and the memory loops through my brain again.

The sound of my name leaving her puffy lips, her head tipped back, her nails digging into my skin, the way she begged as she rode my face with abandon.

Fuck, she was perfect.

The waitress drops off three icy glasses with some kind of garnish on top, then hurries away, just as my mouth fills with the taste of Eve's cum on my tongue.

I snatch the glass up, vaguely aware of the bead of sweat dripping down my temple. I tip my head back, taking in a mouthful of the cold liquid before promptly choking and spitting it back into the glass.

Chase gives me a horrified look and quickly checks to make sure no one else saw what just happened. Kon immediately sets his glass back down with more force than necessary.

I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand, my tongue still burning. "What the fuck is this?" I hiss.

My best friend's eyes narrow to thin slits. He picks his glass up and takes a small sip, then another. "It's water," he says slowly, like I'm stupid for asking.

"Then why's it spicy?"

Chase rolls his eyes and sets his glass back down. "It's mineral water, Roman. It's been naturally filtered for over thirty years by the rocks of the Italian Alps." He runs a hand through his hair, somehow giving it the perfect tousled look. "Honestly, it's like you have no culture."

"I'm literally Puerto Rican," I grunt, crossing my arms and leaning back in my chair. It wobbles under my weight and I tense, but it holds and I say a silent thank you to the universe.

"Half," he scoffs. "Honestly, Ro, your Divinity is showing."

“What does that mean?” Kon grunts, his eyes flitting between the two of us. His hand wraps around his glass like he’s going to drink it, but he releases it just as quick, a dejected look on his bearded face.

I smirk. “You should drink it, Kon.” I jut my chin, my tongue poking the inside of my cheek to stifle a laugh. “You’d like it. Burns like vodka.”

His eyes narrow. “Why does that mean I’d like it?”

“Oh, poor, pretty puppy,” Chase murmurs, his voice condescending as hell. He rubs his thumb over Kon’s wrist and gives him a pout. “Because you’re Russian. Did you forget, honey?”

God, he’s so much like Oli, it’s scary.

Kon tosses Chase’s hand off like it’s burned him and the blonde man next to me falls into a fit of cackles. I can’t help but laugh along with him, but it dies a quick death as small plates of food are delivered to our table with a flourish unfitting of the hipster restaurant.

My eyes are wide as they take in the spread that looks anything but appetizing, and my hungry stomach protests.

“This looks amazing!” Chase beams at the servers. “Presentation alone is five stars. Please tell the chef I can’t wait to try everything.”

The waitress closest to him turns bright pink and stumbles over her words for a solid ten seconds. “Of course, Mr. Tanner. I’ll let him know right away.”

She practically sprints from the table and trips over another staff member before righting herself and disappearing behind the kitchen door.

“Probably couldn’t see past the hearts in her eyes,” Kon grumbles as he slides a tiny plate across the table, preparing to dig in.

Chase huffs, barely paying the man any attention as he fucks with his phone. Kon picks up his fork and suddenly, Chase lets out a loud squeak and bats the fork to the floor.

“What the—”

“Not before I take pictures!” Chase hisses, dropping his ass back in his chair. “I’m being paid to eat here and share my honest opinion. Don’t fuck up the vibe, dude.”

“Yeah, it’s *honestly* a waste of fucking time,” Kon snaps, pointing a thick finger at the plates Chase is meticulously organizing. “I can’t eat this shit.”

I bob my head. “We didn’t even order yet. What is it?” I stab some green goo with the tip of my knife, watching as it wiggles.

Chase smacks my hand. “It’s vegan gastronomy.”

His simple reply is so nonchalant that it renders me temporarily speechless. Kon, however, has lots to say. Most of it in Russian.

“Vegan?” he whisper-shouts and the vein in his temple pops out, throbbing angrily. “As in *no* meat? Do you even know me?”

“Yeah,” Chase scoffs. “I know you’ll die in the next ten years if you don’t eat a vegetable every once in a while.”

I let my head fall forward as I sigh in resignation, promising my stomach I’ll buy a burger on my way home.

No.

Not home.

Divinity Falls isn’t my home anymore. I could just stay the night here in Mammoth, back at the loft with Chase, but as soon as the idea appears, I shove it away.

I may hate her right now. May despise every choice she’s made, every decision that’s led her life down the path she’s taking, but I can’t *not* be near her. I don’t know why. It makes no sense.

Being around Eve is like standing too close to the sun.

It burns and aches, melting my skin away until I’m nothing but a painful shell of myself. It’s like my nerve-endings are too exposed, too raw. Every moment with her twists something inside me, mangling the softer parts of our past with the brutal anger and hurt we’re both drowning in now.

And for the first time in years, I don’t know where I stand with her.

When we first met, I knew what she wanted. Knew how badly she wanted me to let her in. She tried so fucking hard to shove her way between my cracks, forcing me to *see* her. And when I finally did, I couldn’t not love her. I couldn’t not want

to be with her every second possible. The more time I spent loving Eve, the more I started to be able to stand myself.

But then, she chose Isaac over *me*.

She chose Divinity over *us*.

And I—

I chose *her*.

Even when I left, I kept choosing her. I loved her from up close and then I loved her from far away, even while I hated her. But now, I'd do anything for just a day, one single day, where I don't love and crave Evelyn Jean Meyer with every beat of my blackened, toxic heart.

"It's in the fucking name," Kon snaps, shaking me from my thoughts. My head jerks up, finding him and Chase in an angry stare down. Kon's knuckles are white as he grips his utensils like he's ready to drive the knife straight through my best friend's eye.

And Chase...

I do a double take when I look at him. My lip lifts in a slow grin. Chase looks like he's ready to fuck the anger right out of my boss. Like seriously fuck him, right here, right now. I think the only thing missing is a puddle of drool under his sharp jaw.

"*It's. Part. Of. The. Aesthetic!*" He punctuates each word with a pointed shove to Kon's barrel chest. "*Eat the food.*"

“What’s part of the aesthetic?” I ask, picking up a piece of something that looks fried and popping it into my mouth.

“Fox and Hen,” Kon grunts, never taking his eyes from Chase. “Why would they name it that and then not serve meat? It makes no sense.”

I shrug, my brows furrowed as the thing melts on my tongue, leaving behind a gritty texture. I didn’t even get to chew it. “It’s a hipster thing.”

“Do I look like a fucking hippy to you?” he snarls, shoving Chase away. “Fine. I’ll eat the food but you owe me a burger.”

I nod, picking up a leaf to munch on. It tastes like dirt, but if we have to clear our plates to be able to leave, I’ll fucking choke it back the same way I choke back my words around my father. Easy. “You owe me one, too. And fries.”

Chase sighs. “It’s like force-feeding babies, I swear to God.”

I shoot him a look. “Some people would consider that abuse.”

He spoons some green goo into his mouth with a happy hum that makes me want to puke. “Those people didn’t raise Oli. Getting her to eat as a baby was like pulling teeth from a rabid rottweiler.”

“Speaking of Oli,” I drawl, still irritated over the shit-show the other night. “You need to control your sister better, Chase. She’s lo—” I stop myself just before saying *losing* it. I swallow roughly. “She’s looking for the Loch Ness monster in Barry’s. I’m worried she might drown.”

He huffs, moving on from the now empty green dish to something I think might be salad. It's hard to tell with the weird brown bits on top. He takes a heaping forkful, clearing the plate in one bite. His eyes roll to the back of his head as he moans.

“Fuck, I love Fakeun.”

Annd I'm done.

I drop my utensils and shove everything away except the spicy water which is surprisingly growing on me. It's so carbonated, I can almost convince myself it's beer.

“And I know all about Nessy.” I shoot him a questioning look. “Please tell me you'll look after the thing 'till we figure out the pool situation. I don't want another dead animal catastrophe like the pet store. I can't keep sending them all to California. It's costing me too much.”

Kon's mouth drops open. “But they died,” he points out. “You didn't actually send the mice to California.”

“Obviously,” Chase mutters. “But it cost me thousands to replace everything for Mr. McTavish and an extra grand to keep him from telling Oli what really happened. The old bat is surprisingly mouthy.”

“Chase,” I sigh, questioning his faculties for the millionth time in all the years I've known him. “Tell me you know Nessy's not actually in the lake. Tell me you know she imagined whatever she saw. You do know that, right?”

He clicks his tongue and tips his shoulders. “Who’s to say what she saw, hmm? Besides, from what I heard, Eve jumped right in to help her, so Oli can’t be the only one who saw the beast.”

I grunt, looking away. I don’t want to think about her or the way she looked when I watched her pull herself from the lake after I pretended to go inside.

I meant to, I really did, but I had to make sure they were okay. It was the middle of the night and anything could have happened. She could have drowned. Oli could have suggested a breath holding contest or some other random shit that would have no doubt gotten them both killed. I needed to make sure.

It was a mistake.

I should have gone inside.

Because when Eve pulled her dripping body from the lake, my t-shirt clinging to her naked form like a second skin, her head tipped back as she laughed freely, I...

I ached for her all over again.

She’s just too goddamn beautiful for her own good.

I hate it.

Hate her.

Hate her so fucking much.

Love her so fucking much.

“How’s it going at your dad’s?” Kon asks, his voice softer than I think I’ve ever heard it.

Chase points a spoon at him. “Don’t call the prick his dad.” He turns a toothy grin at me and drops his arm over my shoulders, pulling me into his side. “I’m more of a Daddy than that asswipe.”

I shrug him off. He’s not wrong, but I’d rather die than confirm his delusions. “It’s fine,” I huff, my jaw ticking, my glare locked on the table.

“*Riiiiight*,” Chase drawls. “And Kon’s sucking my cock tonight.”

Kon sputters out his water at that and I reluctantly find myself smiling despite the chaos raging inside me. I swear Chase giggles like a little girl at the shocked look on Kon’s face.

It takes the big man a few seconds to blink through it before shaking it off and turning to me, ignoring Chase completely. “Seriously. How’s it going? You said Isaac’s gone, so that leaves just—”

“Just you and she who shall not be named.” Chase pales and tugs on his lip, looking anywhere but at me. “Sure, sure. How’s that, uh, I mean, how’s *she* doing? Still good? Still naked—I mean, still doing her job or whatever?”

His hands flail through the air and I’m happy to watch him disintegrate. But then his words trickle in and anger washes over me once more.

“If by *working*,” I spit, “you mean taking her clothes off and fucking herself for the world, then, yeah. She’s still *working*.”

“Christ on a cross,” Chase gags, aggressively shoving the plates away. “I can’t do this.”

“Do what? Listen to your friend talk about what’s bothering him?” Kon tsks. “Don’t be so selfish, little brat.”

Chase sputters, choking on his tongue as his pupils practically dilate. “That’s—what? No, that’s not—*what did you just call me?*”

Kon shrugs, smirking. “Exactly what you are.”

Chase sinks back in his chair, muttering to himself. “Fuck, that shouldn’t be so hot but now I’m hard, and in this stupid restaurant with stupid rabbit food and I have a stupid fucking boner.”

I lean into his space. “Hey, Chase?”

He mumbles a half-hearted yes, still glaring at his junk.

“Remember when you jacked off to Eve?” A shudder runs down my spine at the words and I briefly entertain the idea of murdering my best friend, but it has the intended effect.

He whirls on me, his eyes flitting between mine. “I’m so sorry!” he cries. “Please don’t kill me. I know she’s all yours and shit but, dude, I swear I didn’t know.”

I lean back and wave him off. “Doesn’t matter. She’s not mine anymore. You can do whatever the fuck you want with the bitch.”

Lies. Lies. So many lies that taste like acid on my tongue.

“What happened?” Kon grunts, crossing his big, tattooed arms on the table as he leans forward. “Seriously, what’s going on?”

I’m not someone who talks about my feelings or opens up. Not even with these two people, my best friends, my only friends. The two people who know everything about me. Every dark, gritty detail, from a fucked up childhood, to losing her, to addiction and homelessness. They’ve seen me through it all.

But that doesn’t make splitting the wounds open any less horrifying. It doesn’t make telling them just how dark and fucked up my thoughts are any less scary.

Yet, it’s the soft look in Kon’s eyes, the one that reminds me he knows too much, has seen me through too much, that finally makes me crack.

“Eve is fucking Isaac.”

Four words and it’s as if a bomb’s been dropped right here in the middle of the restaurant. I have to grab Chase’s arm to keep him in his chair when he tries to explode from it.

“What the *fuck*?” he whisper-yells, his eyes huge, his fists clenching and unclenching. Kon’s not doing much better and I let out a long breath, raking my hands through my hair.

Yeah, that’s pretty much how I thought that would go.

“Pyro,” Kon mutters, his throat bobbing. “You can’t just drop something like that without giving details.”

So I fill them in on everything that's gone down since I've been back, leaving nothing out. If for no other reason than to just finally get this shit off my chest so I don't feel like I'm suffocating any more.

By the time I'm done, we've gone through six glasses of the spicy water and Chase is practically sitting in my lap, he's so close. Kon looks like he's ready to kill someone and I'm honestly not sure who it is. Eve, Isaac or me.

"You shouldn't have blackmailed her," he grunts, clicking his tongue in disapproval. "Or recorded her without her consent."

"Surprisingly," Chase mumbles uncomfortably. "I agree with the big fucker."

My mouth drops open. "Her consent is rubbing her cunt for strangers on the internet," I hiss, my fingers digging indents into my phone as though I can *feel* the video burning through the plastic. "If she doesn't want to be recorded, she shouldn't get in front of the camera."

"That's not the same thing, and you know it." I roll my eyes at him, but he ignores me. "You didn't screen-record the content she created. You recorded her face, her body, her setup, while she was in her home, her safe-space."

I scoff. "That place isn't safe."

I should know better than anyone.

Kon clears his throat. "Back to the Isaac part." I shudder in revulsion. "Have you considered that maybe he's manipulating

Eve into this—” He breaks off, his hand fluttering like he’s searching for the word. He snaps his fingers, brows crashing together.

Chase bobs his head like he’s found whatever Kon’s looking for. “Farce.”

Kon smiles. “Farce. Yes. Farce of a relationship.”

I had considered it. In fact, force or manipulation was the first thing I considered. It’s what brought me home. That, plus her camming, I really thought Isaac was behind it all. But then, I saw them together. I saw the way her eyes followed him around the room. The way she lights up when he looks at her. Saw the way he *bends* for Eve—something I didn’t think he was capable of.

Isaac is *softer* with Eve and Eve...

I shake my head. “Eve is a willing participant. Trust me. A very *loud*, very *willing*, participant.”

“Oh shit,” Chase groans. “You’ve heard them fucking, haven’t you?”

I grimace, bobbing my head. I wanted to kill myself that night. Literally jump off the fucking roof just to make it stop. The sound of her screams, his hand on her ass, his grunts. It was like being drug through Hell by my fingernails.

For a moment, just a brief moment, I thought he was hitting her. Thought it wasn’t consensual.

Then, I heard her moans start up. Heard her beg for *more*.

“Damn, look at you,” Kon murmurs. “You look like you’re gonna be sick. If it’s that bad, why don’t you just leave? Just let her do what she wants to do and come back home. She’s obviously happy.” He shrugs. “Maybe you should let her be.”

Chase makes a loud sound of disagreement. “I say, fuck that.” I dart my eyes to his just as his lips tip up. “Why should she get to be happy when you’re so fucking miserable?”

“I’m not—”

“You are, and don’t interrupt Daddy when I’m speaking—”

“Don’t call yourself Dad—”

“As I was saying,” he slowly hisses. “Don’t leave just to make her life easier.”

I roll my eyes. “Then what would you suggest?”

His grin is maniacal, reminding me so much of his sister. “*Stay* and make her life harder.”

“No,” Kon starts. “I don’t think that’s a good—”

“When will you all start learning not to interrupt me when I’m speaking? So rude.”

He jumps to his feet, tears a few hundreds out of his wallet and tosses them on the table.

“Thought they were paying you to eat here,” I scoff.

“Yeah, but the food sucked, and you talked about fucking your sister for an hour. They deserve some compensation.”

“She’s not my sister—”

“Anyways,” he waves me away, dismissing my protest, “I say, we make her life *really* fucking uncomfortable so she can know how it feels.”

“How am I supposed to do that?”

I can’t believe I’m entertaining him, but the thought of Eve being uncomfortable and miserable makes me oddly giddy.

Chase grins and waggles his brows. “Let’s throw a party in Divinity like the good old times.”

2:44 Eve

“Come on, Clo,” I murmur. “You’ve got it.” I trace the numbers on the paper, watching her lips move as she silently tries to figure it out in her head. “Write it down.” She sighs, but lifts her pencil to scribble the problem down, her tongue slipping between her teeth as she concentrates.

Leaning back, I tug my fingers through my curls, catching tangles the entire way down. Clover usually isn’t here this late, but with Willa working overtime, she has no one to pick her up, and I’d rather her not walk home at night. Even if Divinity is a small town, it’s not immune to creeps. I should know that better than anyone.

So, I’m waiting until I’ve worked up the courage to ask Roman to take her home. Her foster mother will have a heart attack if she finds out that Clover was riding on the back of a motorcycle, but, apparently, he doesn’t have a car. And since I don’t have one, I can’t drive her.

Maybe I can call Oli and ask her.

“I got it, Ms. Evie,” Clover quietly says, drawing my attention. I blink, realizing I’d been staring at the wall.

“Sorry,” I mutter, giving her a guilty look. “My mind is all over the place tonight.”

“It’s okay.” I smile. She’s too sweet for her own good. I quickly scan the paper, double checking her work before nodding proudly.

“You might not need tutoring anymore if you keep this up.” I tap on the paper, and a hidden smile curves her lips. “Or maybe you’ll take my job.” Leaning toward her, I bump her shoulder with mine, letting out a small laugh so she knows I’m teasing her.

“Don’t know about that,” she says, tucking her hair behind her ear. As soon as she got here, I took her braid out, letting her scalp have a break. I’d never seen anyone look so grateful, and it broke my heart.

I don’t know how to help her, how to get her away from that woman. I don’t know what all goes on at her house, but I can imagine it’s not good. If Willa is as bad as she is in public, how is she at home, when no one’s watching? How that woman ever became a foster parent is beyond me.

I make a mental note to talk to Isaac about it. He’ll know what to do.

My heart dips at the thought of him. I haven’t talked to him much since he’s been gone. He doesn’t like texting, and he’s

always too busy to talk on the phone, so our conversations are brief, if they happen at all.

But I can feel his need seeping through his messages when he sends them. Even if he doesn't say it explicitly, I know he misses me as much as I miss him.

Guilt claws at my insides. I've crossed so many lines with Roman while Isaac's been away. He never put a label on our relationship, but I know we're exclusive enough for me to not be allowed to ride another guy's face.

"Ms. Evie?"

I blink, reality slamming down around me. Giving Clover a tight smile, I open my mouth to say something. Before I can get a word out, the door opens and my attention moves to it.

A stupid part of me almost expects to see Roman, or maybe Isaac, even though he's not supposed to be home for a few more days. But when Kevin stands there instead, I deflate.

Clover's eyes widen, and she shuffles closer to me. I rest my hand on her shoulder, trying to calm her. She gets anxious being around strangers. Even if she knows who Kevin is and sees him at church, she has no real interactions with him. He's still a stranger to her, and I jump to my feet, moving between them.

He bounces on the balls of his feet, his face excited as he wipes his sweaty forehead with the back of his hand. "You didn't tell me there was a party tonight," he says, a gentle

chiding not in his voice. I open my mouth to ask him what he's talking about, but he continues. "Do you wanna be my date?"

I blink at him. "What party are you talking about?" I can't hide the irritation in my voice, but I don't think he notices.

"The party at your house." Pressing his index finger to his glasses, he shoves them up his nose, a lopsided grin splitting his face. "Anyway, about the date—"

"My house?" I jolt forward a step, but stop myself from going any closer. Glancing over my shoulder at Clover, I find her eyes even wider than before, her face pale.

"Oh, it's huge! There are so many people there. It looks like a lot of fun."

Taking a deep breath, I pinch between my eyes. Roman. Freaking Roman is throwing a party at the house, without telling me. Not that my objections would've made him rethink anything.

Shit. Isaac's going to kill me when he finds out.

Kevin's body bobs up and down, like he can't contain his excitement. "Well?"

"What?" I breathe, my annoyance spiking further.

"My date?" He looks at me expectantly, and I grit my teeth together.

"What are you even doing here?" I ask, shaking my head, trying to figure out what the fuck to do. Go and break it up? Or stay here and pretend like I'm oblivious to it happening?

“I was there but couldn’t find you, and Roman said you were here, so I ran over—”

I stop listening to him babble and glance down at Clover. She’s still looking nervous, but there’s a gleam in her eye, one I recognize.

Freedom.

“Anyway,” he huffs out a laugh, pulling my attention. “About the date—”

“Not tonight.” Turning back toward Clover, I ignore his sputtering and grab her arm. “Come with me, please.”

Reluctantly, she gets to her feet and follows as I push past Kevin and through the church. Her hand wraps tightly around mine when we get outside, letting the moon guide me home. Not that I’d fucking need it with the amount of lights, cars, and music coming from the house.

Isaac is really, *really* going to kill me.

Did Roman even think about Isaac before he decided to do this? I snort to myself. Probably. It’s probably one of the reasons he decided to. And upsetting me was just the cherry on top of it all.

I all but drag her, forcing her to move faster than her short legs can, and bound up the porch steps. The door is already open, welcoming us to a bustling house full of strangers.

Music blares, the walls rattling with the bass. I scan the sea of people, looking for one big, tattooed asshole. Instead of

finding him, I spot my best friend dancing, a bottle in her hand as she laughs with her older brother.

Keeping a firm hold of Clover's wrist, I pull her with me through the crowd, aiming for Oli and Chase. She sees me first, throwing her head back and letting out a high-pitched cry.

"About time you got here!" she shouts over the music, her face bright as she takes a long swig of the alcohol.

"Hey, Eve," Chase says, never letting his eyes linger on me for too long. I narrow mine at him, ignoring the way he's shifting, like he's ready to bolt.

"Where is he?" I growl, but he shrugs.

"Who?"

"Chase, don't fuck with me right now. Where is he?"

"Who's your friend here?" he asks, ignoring my question, and turning his attention to Clover at my side. She squeaks and dips behind me, but I feel her look around me, up at him.

"Chase!" He blinks, his blue eyes, the same shade as his sister's, widening as he looks back at me, then promptly away again. "Where. Is. He?"

"I don't know," he huffs. "I'm not his keeper."

"Relax, slutbag," Oli hollers.

Clover gasps, shuffling back a step. "Language," she mutters. Chase lets out a low laugh.

"Well, aren't you a cute little thing?"

“She’s sixteen,” I snap.

His smile immediately falls as he spins on his heel. “Bye!”

“Just have fun,” Oli whines.

“Isaac—”

“Will never know,” she says, grinning as she bumps her hip with mine. “He’s out of town. It’s not like he has a camera in the house or something.” She laughs at the thought, but my face stays serious, my stomach still in a tight knot.

No, he doesn’t have cameras in the house. If he did, he would’ve already learned about my camming and killed me. But he still has ways of finding things out, and he’s *definitely* going to find out about this.

“I just need to talk to him,” I mutter.

“Check outside,” Oli breathes reluctantly, running her hand through her hot pink wig. “He’s probably smoking.”

“Being inside hasn’t stopped him before,” I grumble as I pull Clover toward the couch. It’s surprisingly free, so I gently push her down onto it. “Stay here. I’ll be back, okay?” Her brown eyes are massive as she nods, her head barely moving.

It’s all the confirmation I need before I take off back through the crowd, aiming for the front door. If he’s not out there, I’ll have to comb through the people filling my house until I find him.

Then I’m going to punch him right in the dick for doing this.

The air is cool against my heated skin as I step outside. My head swivels, my eyes scanning the empty porch. There are people by Barry's, some hanging around the tire swing, but there's no one on the porch.

Almost no one.

My gaze catches on the burning red tip before I notice his massive shadow hidden in the darkness. His forearms are braced on the railing, his body leaning over it. Some of my previous fire fades as I step forward, pausing at the click of his lighter, the flame bursting to life, illuminating his face.

“Ro?”

Darkness envelops us again as the orange glowing life is snuffed. My body feels too heavy to move as I watch him let the flame flicker to life before letting it die again.

“What are you doing?”

Nothing. Not even a glance over his shoulder at me. It's like I don't even exist, like my words are nothing more than the wind.

I take another hesitant step forward, bracing myself for whatever he's about to say. But, still, he stays silent. When I get to him, I rest my elbows on the railing beside him, letting the old wood settle something deep inside me.

“Why are you out here?” I whisper, my attention catching on a girl not much older than me squeal as she runs from a guy. He grabs her, throwing her over his shoulder, making her let

out a deep belly laugh. The sight warms my chest, but it's not enough to thaw the icy man beside me.

“Why are you?” His voice is raspy, like he hasn't spoken in a long time. Or maybe it's from the cigarettes he keeps chain smoking. Either way, the deep roughness of it does something stupid to me.

“I was looking for you.”

The words fall out before I can stop them. There's truth to them, truth we both know. I *was* looking for him. I never stopped. Since the day he left, I've spent every day searching for the feeling only he can bring me, and now that he's back...

It's not the same.

“You found me.”

I stare at him, letting myself fully take him in for what feels like the first time. “Did I?”

His gaze slides to me, and it feels like I'm falling. Down and down the rabbit hole I go, knowing when I land, all that will be left is him.

I breathe him in. Smoke and leather. It's new, but the same comforting underlying purely Roman scent is still there. It'll never leave.

It's imprinted on my soul. I'd recognize it anywhere.

“Why'd you do this?” I whisper, the words carrying more weight than they should.

Why'd you come back?

Why'd you let me love you if you knew you'd leave?

Why'd you leave?

Why did you leave?

Slowly, he brings the cigarette to his lips as he looks out at the few partygoers in the yard. "What?" His gaze stays locked forward, his face expressionless.

Leave, I almost blurt, but stop myself. "Throw the party," I say instead. He huffs out a laugh, shaking his head.

"Because I could."

It's not the answer I was expecting. It's not the answer I wanted. And, even if I know he's talking about the party, something about it feels like the answer to all my internal questions.

Why'd you leave?

Because I could.

Why'd you let me love you?

Because I could.

Why'd you come back?

Because. I. Could.

"We're going to get in trouble," I mutter, and he snorts another breathy laugh.

"You are." His gaze finds me again, and my breath hitches. Instead of him feeling whatever I am, he smirks, and it's pure arrogance.

His hand lifts as he brings the cigarette to his lips again. “I told you to quit.” I reach to bat the cancer stick from his hands, but quicker than I can react, he grabs my wrist.

My eyes widen as he shoves me backward until I hit the wall, my breath caught in my lungs as I stare up at him. He tracks me, bringing his body close enough for me to feel the searing heat of him. The cigarette hangs from his lips, his eyes a dark flame that burns me to my core.

But it’s the slight tremor in his hand, the shudder that rolls down his spine, the deep swallow that makes his Adam’s apple bob...

It’s those things that give me pause.

“I wasn’t going to hurt you,” I breathe, trying to jerk my wrist from his grip. It tightens, his jaw tensing as his expression shifts.

“You already did.”

He throws my hand away, and I let it fall limply to my side. The honesty of his harsh words stabs me in my heart. With the hand that was just holding mine, he brings it to his lips, pinching the white stick between his fingers, his body still too close to mine.

“I’m sorry,” I blurt, my bleeding heart lurching into my throat. “I don’t know what I did to make you hate me.”

“No?” He lets out a humorless laugh, and I press my back harder against the wall, my nails digging into the wood.

“What can I do to fix it?” I rasp, and his lips curl in a wicked smile.

“It’s too late,” he mutters. I shake my head, not letting myself believe those words.

It’s *not* too late. It can’t be.

I can’t lose him again.

“Please,” I whimper. “I’d do anything.”

His brow raises, that same grin spreading across his face. “Anything?”

I swallow hard as I nod, steeling my spine with a strength I don’t feel. But it’s true. Now that I have him back, I’ll do anything to keep him. I’ll bleed myself dry for him. Even this fucked up version of the man I once knew. He’s different, but so am I. Maybe this new version of Roman is supposed to fit the new version of me.

Maybe we aren’t meant to be what we once were, but having him in my life, even like this, is better than not at all.

Slowly, he inches the cigarette toward my face, his eyes glued to the glowing ember tip like he’s under its spell. But I’m transfixed by him. By the tension etched on his brutally handsome face, every muscle taut, poised for the recklessness of this.

Just a breath away, he stops, letting the searing heat dance its warning along my skin. Finally, his eyes snap to mine, the orange light reflecting in them, painting him more demon than man.

“Would you burn for me, little sister?”

My breath catches, my jaw slackening as the threat of his words linger in the air. Without my permission, my hand lifts and wraps around his wrist. His brow kicks up, watching as I tug him closer, pushing up on my tiptoes, letting the heat give me more bravery than I’ve ever felt.

“*Anything*,” I breathe, my voice a barely-there whisper.

I watch as he pulls his hand away, my fingers still wrapped around his wrist. He brings the cigarette to his lips, inhaling a deep lungful of smoke. Slowly, he lowers his mouth, letting his lips ghost over mine.

My mouth drifts open and he exhales, making me breathe in the smoke. It burns as it goes down my throat, filling my lungs, causing my eyes to water.

Letting my eyes flutter shut, I release the smoke on a phantom breath. His body is so hot, so hard against mine. He braces his fist on the wall beside my head as he leans in more, invading me completely.

Anticipation swirls in my stomach as I wait for his searing kiss. Instead, he smiles against me, a dark laugh leaving him.

“You’re so desperate,” he whispers, his lips moving against mine. “It’s pathetic.”

My eyes fly open, my mouth gaping in shock. Moving my hands to his chest, I shove him away. He stumbles back a step, letting out another low laugh as he brings the cigarette back to his lips for the final drag.

“Fuck you,” I spit.

“Look at you, using big girl language,” he chides. “What would Daddy Dearest say?”

A sneer creeps across my face, and I whirl toward the door, needing to get the hell away from him. How can he be so perfect one moment, then so infuriating the next?

“Don’t forget to wrap it when you fuck someone tonight,” he calls, forcing me to come to an abrupt stop.

Slowly spinning back around, my hands ball into fists at my sides. “You’re such a fucking dick, Roman.” He grins, shrugging as he slides his hands into his pockets.

“Just looking out for you, little sister.”

God, I want to punch him. I want to steal that damn lighter in his pocket and light him on fire with it.

“Whatever,” I mutter, moving to go back inside. But, again, his voice stops me.

“Be sure to wear headphones tonight, too,” he says, and my jaw tenses. “Unless you want to hear me fucking someone better.”

So, that’s how he wants to play it?

I grin as I look at him over my shoulder. He returns it, a teasing note to his expression. “Game on, big brother. Game. Fucking. *On.*”

2:45 Eve

Reverberations of the bass pulse through my body as I step into the house, shadows dancing along the walls. Chase or Oli must've brought lights because every corner is bathed in a kaleidoscope of color, breathing life into the often dim house. It's like I'm seeing everything for the first time, like this isn't the place I grew up.

A hard body runs into my back, and I stumble forward a step, grunting out a breath. Glaring over my shoulder, I find Roman grinning down at me. He leans closer, his voice low as he says, "What's the matter, Goldie? Having second thoughts?"

I lift my middle finger before darting toward the kitchen, the sound of his deep laugh chasing me through the crowd.

If I'm going to do this, whatever *this* is, I need alcohol.

A lot of it.

"There she is!" Oli cries, holding a different bottle from earlier high in the air, her fist wrapped tightly around the neck.

A chorus of cheers follow, all from people I don't know. Chase pops up out of nowhere, a water bottle in his hand. "This is my best friend, y'all." She stumbles toward me, her wig lopsided, but a wide grin on her face as she slings her free arm around my shoulders.

"Water, Oli," Chase scolds, trying to grab the liquor from her. She holds it out of his reach, looking disgruntled.

"Leave me alone." She stumbles more into me, her arm tightening to keep herself upright. "I'm fine, Chase."

"Looks like it." He gives a pointed glare at her drunken state.

"God, you're so overbearing! Just let me be free!"

I laugh, reaching for the bottle in Oli's hands. She grunts, sounding annoyed, but lets me take it. I press it to my lips and tip my head back, letting the harsh liquid burn its way down my throat. A battle cry leaves her, her fist punching into the air.

After that, alcohol flows freely and I lose track of how much I drink, of *what* I drink. All I know is at some point I end up in the middle of the living room, Oli by my side, dancing as the music courses through us.

My fingertips trace a path along the curves of my body, gliding up through my hair, caressing with deliberate, languid touches. The strands cascade down my back in a long, curly blonde waterfall. Head swiveling side to side, a grin unfurls, stamping itself onto my face, refusing to fall.

Freedom courses through my body with an electric charge so wild, I can almost forget who I am, *where* I am. It's not like the freedom I feel when I can, or when I'm racing down the street on my bike. It's more than that.

It's the *true* freedom only reckless rebellion can cause.

My wildly beating heart pulses with the aching need to hold onto this fleeting moment, to not let it slip through my fingers. In this moment, this sacred, too-loud, too-bright moment surrounded by strangers in a house that isn't my home, I'm *more* than free. I've transcended who I was, and I've found who I was always meant to be.

And, for the first time in my life, I finally feel my true self: confident, vibrant, and utterly alive.

Scanning the party, I look for Roman, but it's hard to make out where he is with how blurry my vision has become. "I love this song!" Oli shouts over the music, and I laugh.

"You don't even know what it is," I call back, and she shrugs, bringing the bottle to her lips. My head falls back, a bright laugh leaving me as my eyes close. Body still swaying to the music, I let myself fall into the rhythm, into the united heartbeat of the crowd around me.

But then I look around again, wanting to find the one person who will stand out amongst everyone. He shouldn't, he's nothing more than a dark smudge on the vibrant world around me, but my heart sinks when he's nowhere to be found. I almost lose hope and let the music overtake me again, but then I find him, and my stomach drops.

A bleach-blonde woman with a barely-there red sparkly dress stands in front of him, the straps on her shoulders so thin, I wonder how the fabric hasn't fallen to her feet yet. His face is close to hers as they have a hushed conversation, only loud enough for them to hear.

He was serious about fucking someone tonight?

Betrayal fills me. It was supposed to be a game, a stupid thing we said to each other that had no merit to it. But here he is, talking to some woman—and Jesus, she's pretty. Pretty in the plastic kind of way, but still, I envy the way her dress clings to her curves, the way her silky hair falls down her back. She's probably one of Chase's influencer friends.

The thought clangs through me before self-consciousness settles in.

Is that what he likes?

He always dated the prettiest, most model-worthy girls when he was in school. And why wouldn't he when he looks like *that*? But it's been years, and his type hasn't changed. If anything, as he's gotten hotter, so have the women he fucks.

Before I realize what's even happening, she tosses her long hair over her shoulder as she whirls around. I expect him to follow, but he doesn't. Instead, he leans back against the wall, his arms crossed over his chest, a pissed-off look on his face.

Hmm.

I track her as she heads toward the group of dancing people I'm a part of, and before my sober mind can talk any sense

into me, I grab her arm.

“What the fuck?” She yanks away, glaring at me.

“I love your hair,” I blurt. She’s a bit shorter than me, even with her heels on, and much thinner. Her tits are big, definitely fake, but still so stupidly nice it makes mine feel inadequate.

“What?” Her perfectly sculpted brows pinch together before relaxing. She smooths her hand over the fine, silky strands as a smile curves her red-painted mouth. “My hair? Thanks.” She scans me, taking me in for the first time, and nods. “You’re pretty, too. I love the look you have going on.” She waves her hand at me as she speaks. “Very small-town-country-girl.”

Heat rises to my cheeks. “Not really a country girl,” I mutter, but she doesn’t hear me over the music. My mouth opens to ask her about Roman, but before I can get a word out, she steps further into my space.

“I can give you the number of my stylist,” she says, wrapping her finger around one of my curls. “He’d have *so* much fun with you.” Reaching up, I wrap my hand around her wrist.

Her emerald gaze locks with mine, and her lips curve into a broader, more feline smile. My heart lurches into my throat, but I’m unable to look away, like she’s caught me in her web.

“I’m Nikki,” she purrs.

“Eve,” I murmur, leaning toward her so she can hear me over the music. She hums, her hand sliding down my arm to my elbow.

“Dance with me, Eve.” Her other hand rests on the curve of my waist, and my breath catches as she steps even closer, completely invading my personal space.

“What the—” Oli cuts herself off, finally seeing the new person in our little group. “Get it, slutty-slutterson!” She cackles at her joke, tipping the bottle back and taking a deep mouthful.

Nikki’s eyes bore into mine, and it feels like the party melts away, like we’re the only two in the room. The bass rattles through us, like we’re sharing one body. But before I can get too lost in her, a massive, tattooed body steps too close to us, his leathery, smoky scent hitting me like a lead brick.

My head snaps toward him, ready to tell him to fuck off, but the words die on my lips. He wraps his arm around a dark-haired girl, pulling her closer to him before letting go. The corner of his mouth tips up in a taunting smirk and I read the message clearly in his eyes: *game on*.

His dance partner drunkenly throws her arms around him, stumbling closer, before snaking her body against his. Anger rises in my chest as I take them in, watching the way she touches him, the way he lets their bodies linger too close together.

Turning back toward Nikki, I find her grinning at me as if she knows exactly what I’m feeling, what I’m thinking. I wrap my arms around her shoulders as hers go around my waist. Our hips move at the same speed, our breasts pressing against

each other. Her sweet scent almost overpowers Roman's, but I can still smell him, still feel his looming presence.

I glance over and nearly riot. The girl has her back pressed to his front as she grinds her ass against his crotch. His eyes never leave mine, his hands resting on her hips.

I want to reach over and rip his hands off her. I want to shove her out the front door, tell her to never touch what's mine. But then Nikki's hand caresses my cheek, gently guiding me back to her gaze. My attention slides back to Roman, and I watch the girl dance on him from the corner of my eye. He doesn't do anything to push her away. If anything, when he notices I'm still watching, he presses his hips into her even more.

"Trying to piss him off?" Nikki murmurs, her sharp nails scratching a teasing line down my cheek, my neck, stopping at my collarbone. Goosebumps ripple over my body, and I let out a soft breath.

"Yes," I breathe. Her smile turns feral, and everything in my body heats. I don't realize what's happening until her mouth is on mine, her lips softer than any man's I've ever felt.

"Holy shit!" Oli cries, but I ignore her as I push harder into Nikki.

I feel the crowd around us part, giving us space, before flashes go off from every direction. Her tongue snakes along the seam of my lips and I eagerly open for her. Guys around us cheer, more flashes go off, but it's one reaction I notice more than anyone else's.

A soft snarl rips from where Roman was, and I know it's him. It only spurs me on, and I let my hands slide down Nikki's lithe body, her touch mimicking mine. We paw and grope at each other, her body so soft against mine.

"My room," I breathe against her lips, my forehead resting against hers. She nods, and I grip her hand in mine, dragging her through the crowd. More guys holler, making me momentarily second guess myself. But then I look over my shoulder, my gaze locking on Roman's fiery one, and I smile.

Nikki and I stumble into my bedroom, a nervous giggle ripping from my throat. It's cut short by the softness of her lips on mine again. I move to shut the door, but a hand bangs against it, jolting us. My head snaps toward the sound, finding Roman glaring at me, his chest heaving.

Instead of his presence doing anything to scare me into stopping, I grip the bottom of my dress and haul it over my head. Nikki's gaze rakes over my body before she smiles at Roman.

"Pretty little thing," she purrs, running her nail between my breasts. Slowly, she circles me, taking in every inch. Roman's body looms in the doorway, blocking everyone's view behind him.

Her hand slides lower, her finger slipping under the band of my panties. My breath catches and I look at Roman. His arms are folded over his chest, his jaw tense. But he dips his head in a slight nod, and warmth spreads through my body.

He wants this.

I can give this to him.

Turning my attention back to Nikki, I reach for her dress with shaky hands. With his approval, I don't feel as lost, like I'm doing this alone. With him there, even if he's feet away, I feel safe. Like he's with me every step of the way.

She grins as she lets me hesitantly slide the thin straps off her boney shoulders, letting the silky fabric fall in a red pool at her feet. She's wearing the tiniest thong I've ever seen, and no bra, her nipples already hard.

"I've never done this," I breathe, and she nods like she already knew that.

"Let me take your bra off, baby," she murmurs, her voice gentle. Slowly, her hand glides along my torso as she moves behind me. I look at Roman again, his eyes riveted to my body, to where Nikki is slipping her hands under the band of my bra and unhooking it.

My breath catches as it falls from my chest and down my arms to the floor. Her hands are warm as they slide along my skin, her breasts pressing into my back as she cups mine.

"There we go," she breathes into my ear, sending lightning through my body. A small moan slips from my lips as she lightly pinches my nipples. "That feels so good, doesn't it?" My mouth falls open as she twists them just enough to cause pain. "Tell him how much you like it."

I tip my head to the side, finding Roman watching us, his hands in tight fists across his chest. "I like it, Ro," I whisper.

He grinds his teeth together so hard, I worry he's about to break a tooth.

Almost like he doesn't mean to, he lets a hand fall and mindlessly run over the growing bulge in his jeans.

Is it because of her or me? The thought flits so quickly through my drunk mind, I can almost ignore it. But once it settles, I can't shake it.

Her or me?

Me or her?

Her lips press against my neck, pulling me from my thoughts, but my gaze stays locked on Roman's. He watches intently, his body taut and ready to snap as she kisses along my overly sensitive skin, her hands still groping my heavy breasts.

She gently guides me toward the bed, and I hesitate before climbing onto it, the coils barely creaking under our weight. Her kisses are soft on my skin as I fall onto my back, twisting so she's above me. The hardened peaks of her breasts glide over me, sending electricity zapping through my body.

My legs widen, and she settles herself between them. Reaching up, I tangle my fingers in her soft hair and tug her mouth to mine, moaning as she grinds her hips against my aching core.

My gaze slides to Roman, and I find him fumbling with his belt, his eyes on us—on me? Her? A small whimper leaves me as I watch him slide his hand into his boxers, and Nikki pulls away enough to look at him. She lets out a dark, sultry laugh.

“Isn’t he pathetic?” Her words are harsh, and I inhale a sharp breath. He pauses, his fist wrapped tightly around the base of his leaking cock. My breath hitches at the fiery look that crosses his face, the way his grip tightens.

Another laugh comes from her before she dips her head, kissing her way along my jaw, down my neck, to my chest. My eyes stay on Roman’s as he reluctantly slides his fist up, his neck straining as he strokes himself harder. My back bows off the bed as her hot mouth wraps around my peaked nipple, a cry slipping from my lips.

“*Fuck,*” Roman groans from the doorway. She smiles as her eyes flick up to mine.

“What do you say, Eve? Should we give him a show?”

I’m too far gone to care at this point, and I nod frantically at her words. Her smile is pure confidence as she sucks my nipple into her mouth, her hand sliding up my thigh. Her fingertips trace teasing circles over my panties, and my breathing turns harsh.

Suddenly, a few people scream in the other room, curses flying through the air, and Roman and I freeze. He glances over his shoulder, and when looks back, his face is pale and his eyes are wide.

“Get dressed,” he hisses.

I shove Nikki off me, and she tumbles to the side, laughing as I scramble off the bed. “What—”

“Now, Goldie.” His cock is already back in his pants as he dips down and grabs Nikki’s dress before tossing it at her. “You, too.” She catches it, but doesn’t move to get off the bed.

“Get out of my house!” a voice booms, and my blood turns to ice. I’d recognize it anywhere, and I turn frantic eyes to Roman.

“What’s he doing here? He’s not supposed to—”

“I don’t know,” Roman breathes, grabbing Nikki by her arm and hauling her to her feet. After I fumble with my bra for what feels like forever, I drop my dress back over my head. Roman forces Nikki to put her dress on right as Isaac fills the doorway of my room.

“What the hell—” Isaac’s black gaze shifts from me to Roman to Nikki. “What’s going on in here?”

“Sorry, babe,” Roman says to Nikki. “We keep getting interrupted.” He shoots a glare my way, one I feel to my core, and I drop my eyes. His hand stays tight around hers as he yanks her toward the door, but Isaac doesn’t move.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

“Where do you think?” Roman snarls. “Out of my way.” He shoulder-checks Isaac on his way out, his hand moving from her arm to the back of her neck. She sends me a sly look over her shoulder, one I don’t return, and wrap my arms around myself.

Isaac’s fury is palpable in my suddenly too-small bedroom. “Party at our loft in Mammoth!” Chase calls, his voice

carrying all the way to me. I glance up, looking past Isaac as I watch Roman and Nikki disappear with the crowd of people.

Isaac steps further into my room, slamming the door so hard the walls rattle. I glance at the empty map on my wall, watching the pictures around it shudder. “What the fuck was going on in here?” he growls.

“I—I—Roman—” I don’t know what to say, how to get out of this. I fucked up. Big time.

Isaac steps closer, so close his body heat sears me. I finally look up at him, at the rage boiling on the surface. “I’m sorry, Isaac,” I breathe. His nose scrunches, his face shifting into disgust as he lowers his head to mine. He takes a small inhale, recoiling.

“Are you drunk?” he hisses. My eyes widen as I cover my mouth with a shaky hand. A humorless laugh leaves him, and he shakes his head. “I’m gone for a few days, and you drink? Whore yourself out? What happened in here? What was I interrupting?”

“Nothing,” I say behind my hand. “I—he—”

Before I can get another word out, his hand wraps around my upper arm and he yanks me toward the adjoining bathroom, pushing the door open. He shoves me to the floor, the cold tile biting into my knees. A pained cry leaves me as he wraps my hair in his fist and wrenches my head back.

“Open,” he grits out. I don’t understand what he wants, so I just stare up at him, tears filling my eyes as his grip tightens

further. My hair screams in agony at the rough treatment, but he doesn't care. "Open your mouth, Evelyn."

Still, I keep my mouth shut. Confusion, pain, betrayal, all war inside me. Where did Roman go with Nikki? Was he really finishing what we started, just the two of them?

Before any other thoughts can assault me, Isaac's hand grips my jaw and pries my mouth open. I try to speak, but he shoves two fingers down my throat.

"This is for your own fucking good," he snarls. I grip his wrist, more tears streaming from my eyes, into my hair as he forces his fingers deeper. I stare into his black eyes, silently begging him to stop.

But he doesn't.

Not until he feels hot acid rise up my throat, then he pulls his fingers out, letting the searing liquid spew from my mouth into the toilet. My stomach contracts with each gag, sending bolts of pain through my body.

Finally, the vomit stops coming, and I breathe heavily, trying to stop myself from sobbing. But then he pulls my head back again, his fingers finding themselves back down my throat.

"Please," I mumble around him, but he ignores me. Saliva and tears drip from my chin onto my dress as sweat coats my skin. His fingers wiggle enough to trigger my gag reflex, and he yanks them back out, watching as yellow bile shoots from me.

Finally, he lets go of my hair, letting me fall to the floor in a boneless heap. The tile feels good against my hot skin, soothing me as I sob. My knees come up to my chest and I wrap my arms around them, letting myself break.

His gaze penetrates me to my core, but I can't make myself look at him. Humiliation mixes with the realization that Roman is balls deep in that random girl right now, and I'm here...breaking.

Alone.

"I'm so disappointed in you, Eve," Isaac sighs, forcing another broken sob out my throat. "Clean this mess up."

2:46 Eve

Roman:
Are you okay?

Roman:

Eve

Roman:

Answer me.

Roman:

Are you okay?

Roman:

I'm going to call the cops if you don't answer.

Roman:

I'm sorry

Roman:

Please answer me.

Roman:

Goldie, I'm sorry.

Me:

I'm fine.

Me:

Leave me alone.

With every text, the words burn a hole through my heart. Roman has been texting me since last night, trying to check on me, but his betrayal is thicker than his worry.

The feeling of Isaac's fingers in my throat, forcing the alcohol to leave my body is still fresh, but Roman's abandonment is too raw. I don't know where they went after they left my room. I haven't tried to seek either out.

I don't want to.

Last night, the two men I thought I loved shattered my trust, each in their own fucked up ways. Isaac shouldn't have done what he did. He should've been understanding. It was a side of him I've never seen, and never want to see again.

Roman knew I was drunk, and let me go too far with Nikki. The photos of us kissing are probably posted online already, shared with the world, and all of Divinity Falls, to see. He should've stopped it, should've stopped me.

But he didn't.

He urged me on, forcing me to fall deeper and deeper into his pit of sinful depravity.

But more than that, he should've stayed. He should've been there last night when Isaac was forcing me to my knees and shoving his fingers down my throat. He should've been there this morning, helping me clean up a party I didn't even throw.

He should've fucking stayed.

But he didn't.

He ran away. He abandoned me, just like he always does.

The harsh reality of his absence cuts deeper than anything Isaac could've done.

Fresh tears burn my eyes and I clutch my knees to my chest, forcing myself to hold in a sob. I've cried too much already, I can't anymore. No matter how badly my body just wants to cry and cry until I'm nothing but a puddle on the floor, I can't allow it. I have to be strong, if for no other reason than to not let them win.

I never realized how similar Roman and Isaac were until last night. As they stood there, their faces contorted with anger, their overblown egos battling for space in my tiny room, I saw it. The fleeting similarities. The deep connection they hate to have.

Roman's bigger, more muscular with tattoos and piercings, but Isaac has the darkness Roman craves, the darkness he lives in. He cradles it, protecting it, passing down just enough to his son to bind them together forever.

A soft knock at the door pulls me from my spiral and I wipe my cheeks with shaky hands. It could be either of them, but I don't want to see whoever it is. I want to be left alone, to dwell in my pity in peace.

But another knock comes, just as soft as before.

Sighing, I push myself up, my eyes downcast as I slide off the bed and slink toward the door. I didn't bother getting dressed today, knowing I wouldn't be allowed out of the house, anyway. So, an oversized shirt and my usual sleep shorts will have to do.

I cleaned the house alone, tidied everything until it was as perfect as it was when Isaac left, then came back to my room, needing to shut the world out. They were both gone, and despite the few texts from Roman, neither of them checked on me.

Really checked on me.

My hand wraps around the doorknob as another knock comes, sending fiery annoyance through my body. I yank it open, a glare already on my face. It falters when my eyes meet Isaac's—they're not black anymore. They're the usual golden color I love so much.

"Hi, sweetheart," he murmurs. Tears fill my eyes again, but I blink them away. Instead of moving to the side like he probably wants me to, I stay where I am, not letting him into my room. "Can we talk?"

Folding my arms over my chest, I force my glower to stay in place, not wanting him to see the full effect he has on me. I barely dip my chin in a nod, and stay where I am.

He huffs out a small laugh, dropping his head forward before looking at me through his lashes, a stupidly handsome smile on his face. “Can I come in?” He waves his hand toward me, his fingertips brushing over my shirt.

I jolt back a step and his smile falls, concern filling his face. “You can say what you need to from there.” I use my chin to point at him, and he straightens to his full height, his hands sliding into his pockets.

“I wanted to apologize,” he mutters. “And explain myself.” His eyes search mine, and, for one single, stupid moment, I almost back down. But I don’t. I stand my ground, not budging an inch. “Sweetheart, I’m sorry I was too rough with you last night.”

My throat tightens at the memory of the forced intrusion of his thick fingers, and I shake my head. Not good enough.

“Eve, I mean it. I should’ve...” He lets out a harsh breath, shoving a hand through his dark hair. “I should’ve been gentler with you, and I’m truly sorry, baby.”

Baby. Not sweetheart.

Tears threaten to fall again, and I roughly wipe at my cheek. “You hurt and scared me, Isaac,” I rasp, and he nods, stumbling forward a step.

“I know.” He holds his hands out like he’s pleading with me, looking and sounding pained. “I fucked up. But can you try to understand where I was coming from? I came home to a house full of strangers, and I was so worried something had happened to you. And when I got to you—” He cuts himself off, his face twisting. Not with anger, not like last night, but anguish. “You were stuck in this room with—with *him* and some girl I didn’t know. I didn’t know what they were doing to you. If he was trying to—”

“He wouldn’t do something like that,” I say quietly, wrapping my arms around myself as images of Marcus flit through my mind.

Roman would never touch me like Marcus had.

He saved me then, why didn’t he save me last night?

“And then I smelled the alcohol on your breath, and I wasn’t seeing *you* anymore. I was seeing Cami, and I couldn’t let you go down the path she had.” He stumbles forward another step, so close I can smell his aftershave. “I was trying to help you, trying to take away the thing that took her from me. You have to understand, Eve, I would never hurt you. I didn’t enjoy what I did, but I didn’t have a choice. I was trying to protect you.”

Cami.

Why hadn’t I thought of her? Of course, Isaac would freak out if he saw me drunk. Mama didn’t drink, but the last woman he loved that did, ended up dying.

And he's in AA, for Christ's sake. He runs the damn meetings. I know he's had some slip ups, but he's still recovering. He'll *always* be recovering. Yet, I let his house, his sacred space, be filled with the one thing that tempts him more than anything. The one thing he hates, the thing that's taken so much from him.

He was trying to protect me. Even if it hurt me, scared me, I know he was doing what he thought was best. He was trying to do the right thing. Trying to save me.

And that's more than I can say for Roman.

"I'm sorry, Isaac," I choke out. His arms open and I launch myself at him, letting his strong embrace anchor me to him, to this moment. "I should have known. I should have thought about Cami, about the drinking."

I think about all the people there—Clover. I abandoned her on the couch, not thinking twice while I played that stupid game with Roman, seeing who could one-up the other. It was ridiculous. Childish.

"All the people—do you think they drove drunk?" The words fall from my lips before I can stop them. "Oh, God. Isaac—"

"Jesus," he breathes, his body tensing. I almost slap myself. Why would I say that? Remind him further of Cami and her death? "Anything could've happened."

"I know!" I feel hysterical as I pull away from him. At the last moment, he grasps my face between his warm hands.

“What happened last night wasn’t you,” he says, and I shake my head, agreeing with him. The tears finally start to fall, but I don’t reach up to wipe them away. “You’re not that type of girl, Eve. You’re sweet, and you’d never do anything like that. You were manipulated by—by *him*.”

“I don’t know,” I cry, shaking my head again, trying to rearrange the jumbled thoughts until they make sense. “I just feel terrible. I should’ve stopped it. I should’ve—”

“Shh,” he breathes, stroking his thumb along my cheek, riding it of tears.

“How do I fix it?” I wipe roughly at my other cheek, my eyes searching his. “I just feel so bad. I—I want to do something to make it better.” I move my hand to the center of my chest and rub the aching guilt there.

He drops his hands and steps back, and it takes all I have to not reach for him, to not beg him to keep touching him. Folding his arms over his chest, he leans against the doorframe as he stares at me for a long moment.

“I can help you,” he says, his voice low, deeper and raspier than usual, speaking to something deep inside me. “I can help you get rid of the guilt. Would you want that?”

“How?” I breathe, and he smiles sadly.

“It takes a little outside pain to get rid of the pain inside.”

My stomach coils into a tight knot at the words. “Pain?” I whimper, and he dips his chin in a nod.

“Just a bit.”

“And it’ll get rid of the guilt?” I rub a soothing circle on my chest again, pushing deeper, trying to reach in and pull it out.

“It’ll get rid of all of it,” he says softly. “Just say the word, and I’ll help you.”

“Really?” I whisper, stepping toward him. “You’d do that?” Reaching out, he strokes his thumb along my cheek.

“You know I’d do anything for you, sweetheart.”

I melt into his touch, my eyelids fluttering closed. “Okay,” I breathe. “I’d like your help.”

There’s a brief pause, his finger stopping before he pulls it away. Then his mouth is on my cheek, kissing me gently. His lips trail to my ear, his breath sending a shiver of anticipation down my spine. “Get on the bed and wait for me, sweetheart.”

I swallow thickly as he pulls away, the sunlight too bright against my eyes. We stare at each other for a beat, then his mouth tucks up in a grin before he disappears.

Turning toward the bed, I hesitate. Wait for him on the bed? When he said he could help, I didn’t think he meant he’d fuck the guilt from me. A part of me doesn’t care. I’ll do anything to not feel like this anymore.

I crawl onto the bed, memories of last night with Nikki flashing through my mind. I still can’t believe I did that. My eyes close at the realization that I not only made out with a girl, but I was fully ready to fuck her, too.

In front of Roman.

My phone vibrates and my heart lurches into my throat. As I reach for it, I almost anticipate seeing his name on my screen. But when I flip it over, I smile to myself at the messages.

Oli:

What the hell happened last night?

Oli:

Have you seen my marsupial?

I move to type a response, but Isaac's steady footsteps fill the quiet, empty house, and I toss my phone back onto the comforter. Turning around, I kneel on my bed, facing the door as I wait for him.

His shadow slowly approaches, his hands full. I squint to see what he's carrying, and when he steps into the doorway, my eyebrows twitch together.

"Rice?" I flick my eyes up to him, a sarcastic grin spreading across my face. But when my gaze meets his, my body goes cold.

Gone is the warmth he just had. Gone are the golden eyes.

It's Isaac, but it's not.

His eyes are black again, almost as black as they were last night, and his body is coiled tightly, so tight he's about to snap.

"Clothes off, temptress."

I blink at him. "What?"

“Take your clothes off,” he repeats. “Don’t make me tell you again.”

I swallow thickly, my eyes wide as I watch him move to the center of my room and pour a mound of rice onto the floor. He glances at me, his brow raised expectantly.

Scrambling to obey, I slip off the bed and yank my shirt off, then shove my shorts down my legs, letting the fabric pool at my feet. “Bra and panties, too,” he mutters, his back to me as he pours a second pile of rice next to the first. “I want you naked.”

My throat goes dry at the words, but I move my trembling hands to unhook my bra. It floats to the floor, joining my other clothes, then my hands land on the waistband of my panties. I hesitate, forcing myself to swallow.

He stands at his full height, something else in his hand as he turns to watch me. My mouth falls open when I see the cat-o-nine tails dangling from his fingertips.

“What—” I can barely get the words out. “What is that?”

“Naked, temptress,” he grits out, his anger growing with every passing second. My panties fall to my ankles, and I step out of them, my eyes on his the entire time. “Good. Now, kneel.” He points the leather whip at the floor, right at the piles of rice, and I stumble back a step.

“Isaac—”

“You want to be absolved of your sins, don’t you, temptress?” he murmurs, moving toward me. Without my

permission, my head bobs. “Then do as your Lord says and kneel.”

My gaze shifts to the rice, and trepidation fills every ounce of my body. But this is what I asked for, so I step forward. My room feels impossibly large as I walk across it toward the rice.

Isaac clears his throat pointedly, and I take a deep breath before getting to my knees. A whimper leaves me when the rice digs into my skin, pricking it. As I settle my full weight on it, sharp, shooting pain rips through my body, and a cry I can't help shoves its way out my throat.

“Quiet, temptress.” The cool, smooth leather glides along my bare back, and I shy away from it. “You'll be still as you take your punishment.”

My heart is in my throat as I watch him circle me, the leather tracing my skin, around and around my body. Goosebumps ripple over me, the pain in my knees warring with the softness of his whip's touch.

“No punishment seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.” It's not the voice he uses during his sermons. This one is darker, more commanding, like it's not Isaac speaking, but someone else entirely.

“Hebrews 12:11,” I breathe.

“Very good.” My eyes flit to him, his touch still featherlight as he circles me. “Do you understand why I must do this, temptress?”

“Yes, my Lord.”

The leather leaves my back, and I let out a shuddering breath. It’s cut short as the first lash of the whip lands on my flesh. I jolt forward, a sharp cry leaving my lips. The pain is almost too much, but I grit my teeth and force myself back upright, waiting for the next blow.

“You’ll thank me after each lash,” he grits out.

“Th–thank you, m–my Lord.” Tears brim my eyes, and I inhale sharply. I can barely even feel the rice anymore, not with the stinging pain radiating across my back.

Another lash lands, harder than the first, and I scream, falling forward onto my hands. He makes a disapproving sound as he glides the tips of the leather straps along the length of my spine.

“Thank you, my Lord,” I cry, the words thick in my throat. The leather dips between my asscheeks, and I tense.

“Relax, temptress.”

But I can’t relax.

Not as the rice digs into new spots on my knees, my back screaming in searing pain. But the soft leather moves further down, tickling my pussy, and I gasp, my head falling forward.

“I heard about your little date at the coffee shop,” he murmurs, and my eyes snap open. I stare at the slats below me, my hands turning red from the weight I have on them.

“Date?” I breathe. The cool air brushes my pussy as he pulls the whip away. Lightly, he smacks it against me, and I suck in a sharp breath.

“Don’t play with me, Evelyn,” he growls. “You were with Marcus.”

His name clangs through me like a bad dream, and I squeeze my eyes shut again, trying to get rid of the memories assaulting me.

“I wasn’t on a date,” I choke out, but he ignores me, bringing the whip down on my ass. I cry out at the harsh bite of pain, jolting forward.

“Mary saw you,” he snarls. “She saw you with your tits out for him to see. She saw you touching him.”

I shake my head, the denial on my lips. But it’s true. I was with Marcus. I don’t remember if I touched him, but if he says I did, then I must’ve.

But it’s not what he thinks.

It wasn’t a date. I was just being nice, and Marcus mistook my kindness for something else entirely.

I almost tell Isaac the truth, almost tell him about the church but then I’d have to explain camming and I can’t do that. He can never know about what I do, about the way I spread my

legs for any and everyone willing to pay. He was furious last night, I can't imagine how he'd be if he learned the truth.

Instead, I shake my head, a sharp, shuddering breath spilling out. "I'm sorry, my Lord."

The whip comes down on my ass again, and I cry out. But this time, instead of it only bringing me pain, a twinge of pleasure shoots through me. It confuses the fuck out of me. Why, at this moment, would I be getting turned on?

"Did you think no one would tell your Lord what a greedy whore you've been?" he hisses. "Did you fuck my son while I was away, too? Did you tease him with your temptress cunt? Lure him into your bed?" He emphasizes each question with a harsh smack across my ass, the leather strips landing on my pussy and thighs.

"No!" I cry, shaking my head, my hair swaying with the movements. "I didn't fuck anyone else."

He moves in front of me and crouches, his firm hand gripping my jaw and forcing my head all the way back. I stare up at his face—his blazing, furious face. "Don't lie to me," he snarls. "I know what a whore you are." He squeezes his hand, squishing my cheeks between his fingers. "Tell me, temptress. Did you like spreading your legs for my son?"

My mouth opens, but from the corner of my eye, I watch his arm raise. He brings the whip down on my ass again, and I cry out.

"I didn't—"

“You’re lying!” he shouts, startling me. Standing, he rounds me again, and I feel the bulbous tip of the whip’s handle press against my pussy. I gasp at the warmth and look over my shoulder at him. A sneer curls his lip and he lifts his glare to me. “You’re soaking wet just thinking about it.”

“No,” I breathe, shaking my head.

He shoves the round tip in my face. “Get it wet, or it’s going in dry.”

My mouth falls open, mostly from shock, but he doesn’t care. He shoves it in, and all I taste is leather. I stare up at him, watching as he roughly thrusts the handle into my mouth, forcing me to gag. Saliva pours from the corners of my mouth, dripping onto the floorboards below.

“That’s it. Taste your greedy pussy.”

I whimper, my lips stretched so far around the handle, a sound barely comes out. My jaw aches as he forces it deeper, and I jolt back, but he follows, never letting it leave my mouth.

Finally, he rips it out, a disgusted look on his face as he looks at the spit-slickened tip. He shakes his head like he’s disappointed before he rounds me again, the rice crunching under his shoes.

I pant heavily, letting my head fall forward. He crouches at my side, the smooth, slick, leather pressing against my entrance.

“Tell me,” he murmurs as he puts pressure against me. “Did it feel good when he was inside you?”

“Isaac,” I moan, shaking my head. “I didn’t fuck him.”

“That’s not what I asked, temptress.” My pussy stretches to accommodate the wide girth of the bulbous tip. “I asked if it felt good with him inside you.”

Yes. The word almost slips out, but I catch it and shake my head again.

Four years ago, when he first slid into me, it felt fucking incredible. I haven’t fucked him since, and no matter how badly I wanted to over the last couple weeks, I didn’t.

I wouldn’t.

The tip finally finds its way in, and I cry out as I’m stretched too wide. “Look at your selfish cunt, swallowing it. You’re so fucking wet for it, Eve. You want it so badly.”

“Please,” I whine.

I don’t know what I’m begging for. For more. For less. For him. I don’t know. I don’t care.

He shoves in until the entire tip is inside me, and my eyes snap open. The criss-cross pattern of the leather rubs against my walls, forcing me to feel something I’ve never felt before. My fingernails dig into the wood floor as he presses deeper, forcing me to feel every inch.

“I’d give you my cock, but I can’t trust you not to come,” he mutters, thrusting the handle harder.

“I won’t! Please!” I spread my legs further, my cheek lowering to the ground. The rice grinds into my knees harder,

hitting new spots that aren't numb and are a million times more painful.

I clench around the handle as the pain ricochets through my body. But Isaac doesn't care or notice. He continues fucking me with it, not holding back. My clit throbs, begging for attention.

"Please," I whimper. "*Please. Please.*" My hand itches to snake down my body, to rub my clit, to come harder than I've ever come before.

"Greedy, greedy little whore," he scolds. "Naughty little temptress."

I push back against him, riding the handle harder than he's fucking me. The need to come overtakes me, and my mouth falls open, saliva spilling from it. "I'm so—I'm so close, my Lord. Please, may I come?"

His hand comes down on my ass, harder than the whip had, and I cry out, jerking forward. He spanks me again and again, the handle rubbing against a spot so deep inside me, my eyes roll back.

"Don't you dare," he grinds out. "This is a punishment, Evelyn. You're not supposed to feel good."

But I can't help it. Not when his hand begins caressing the searing flesh of my ass, rubbing the sting in. Soothing me.

"I can make you feel good, my Lord," I moan, my words a slurred, garbled mess. He lets out a low laugh, one that heats my body with embarrassment.

“I’m not giving you my cock,” he says. “You don’t deserve it.”

I whine, the sound so needy, so wanton, I don’t even recognize it as my own. He laughs again before he slides the handle from me.

“Wait!” I reach back, but he bats my hands away.

“What did I say?” His hand lands on my ass again, and I cry out.

“I can’t come,” I repeat his earlier words, and he nods. His hand slides into my hair and he wrenches me back to my knees, letting the rice grind into every inch of my battered knees.

“Open.” My head falls back as my mouth opens, his words guttural as he stares down at me. The handle slips back into my mouth, and this time, instead of just leather, I taste myself. It overpowers the leather, overpowers everything, and I moan. “Dirty little whore. You love the way you taste, don’t you?”

I try to speak around the tip, but I can’t. I nod, the whip waving, the tips ticking my skin with every movement. He strokes his thumb down my cheek, his eyes softening a fraction.

Gently, he pulls the handle from my mouth, and I take in a huge lungful of breath. “How do you feel, sweetheart?” he whispers.

“Okay,” I mutter.

Horny.

“Still guilty?”

I nod, my eyes dropping. His hand moves under my chin and I look up at him again. “You’ll stay kneeling until you’ve repented, understand?”

“Yes, my Lord.”

2:47 Roman

Do you ever feel like you're stuck on a ferris wheel with no exit?

Forced to see the same things over and over again, unable to stop. Except with every rotation, it gains momentum. The same sounds whirl by you and after a while, they all just become a chaotic, messy blur of static that you can tune out. Shapes become meaningless, colors abstract, people invisible.

Then, it's just you, alone in a spinning world and you have no choice but to sit back and let the ride continue to fuck you up.

That's how I feel now.

That's how I feel most days.

Like I'm just stuck in one position, watching as a meaningless world passes me by. Life makes choices for me and I have to just accept them because if I didn't, what kind of person would I be?

A bad one, riddled with the guilt of my choices, the mistakes of my past and the decisions that have tried to kill me.

Some days are worse than others, but most of the time, I'm just *existing*. Having out-of-body experiences that don't feel real and I'm powerless to stop them.

Last night, I was powerless.

I was powerless when Chase offered me a way to release the toxic, bitter feelings writhing around, deep inside me.

I was powerless as I watched my father's fucked up house of horrors fill with the type of people he hates most: *people like me*.

I was powerless when they started to destroy things, too caught up in the complete and utter joy that bloomed in my black heart with every drink that was poured and every act of sin that spread through the walls like a plague.

I was powerless when *she* showed up and looked at me with those brilliant blue eyes, begging for another piece of me.

Doesn't she know she already has all of me?

I was powerless when she asked me to play, when she taunted me, goaded me into showing her how dark I can really get.

I couldn't tell her no, I couldn't stop her. I didn't *want* to. Not when she kissed that fucking girl who had no right to touch me, to touch *her*. Not when she led her to her bedroom with that sweet smile plastered across her beautiful face.

Especially not when she took off her dress and silently begged me to tell her it was okay to let go.

I was powerless to tell her no. How could I when she was standing there, more free than I'd ever seen her? When she was finally embracing herself, finally acting her age, finally *living*.

If watching Evelyn Meyer self-destruct in the name of rebirth is the price I have to pay for the mistakes I've made, then I'll pay it a hundred times over. If I have to watch her touch someone else, listen to her break in ecstasy, again and again, I'll gladly be powerless, just for a chance to see her finally *fly*.

And then, I was powerless to stop what came next.

Just like I always have been.

Just like I always will be.

The second I heard his booming voice, I froze. It's a sound I hate with every fiber of my being. But then, I heard her cry out. I heard the devastation, the terror, in Eve's voice, and it was like a flip had switched.

The ferris wheel finally stopped moving. The world came into focus. People stopped being a blur, and all I saw was *her*.

All I ever see is her.

I knew I had to protect her, protect them all, from the wrath only I know exists. Had to get them all out to fix what I broke. It was instinct to grab the girl and shift the narrative. To give

Eve an out, knowing it would be so much worse if Isaac found out what was really happening in that room.

I meant to come right back. To get everyone out, to get the girl as far away from Eve as possible, before she could make things worse. I wouldn't put it past Nikki, the girl is as toxic as they come. I could see the words sitting there in her vile mouth, the shit she wanted to spew the second she saw my father show up.

She just had no idea that by trying to ruin me, she'd destroy the only woman I've ever loved.

But then...

But then, everything got fucked up.

I flick my blinker, taking the final turn in Divinity as the memories of last night play like a viscous, unrelenting movie in my mind. My hands tighten around the handlebars of my bike. I hit the gas the second I'm on the old deserted road and the engine roars, sending vibrations through every inch of my body, but it doesn't work.

It doesn't stop the inevitable.

My insides claw at me, rebelling every inch I take from Eve, from my father. Nikki clings to my side, suddenly stumbling when just moments ago, she was standing on her own. I don't even think she's been drinking, but I won't take that chance.

I can't.

Not when the past is still so damn close to repeating itself.

“I can totally drive,” she chuckles, rubbing her head into my chest as I half-drag her to the front yard.

I scoff, my eyes scanning the driveway for Kon. “I know.”

I have no doubt she can drive, but it won't be on my conscience if something happens to the bitch.

I may hate Nikki for what she did all those weeks ago at our loft. The sex-tape she probably made without my consent. The way she used me for her second of fame, just to get closer to my best friend.

But nothing compares to the way I despise her now. The sight of her touching Eve, kissing her, putting her treacherous mouth on a body that doesn't belong to her, makes me murderous.

My jaw pops from how hard I clench it when my cock pulses at the memory. I don't like the bitch, but seeing Eve like that, free and reckless for once, was so damn beautiful, I couldn't help but want to lose myself with her, even just for a moment.

Despite all that, I still refuse to let Nikki get hurt on my watch. I couldn't live with myself.

The yard is pandemonium.

Cars are spilling from every direction as kids, probably too young to have been here in the first place, take off before they can get caught. People are laughing and stumbling, keys are being tossed from hand to hand, dust is filling the muggy air and with every second that passes, the need to run back to her burns me.

“Pyro!” I deflate at the familiar voice. Thank fucking hell. My eyes find Kon’s across the yard as he charges toward me like a raging inferno, ready to explode. “Where is he?”

Panic is building in my chest and seeing the frantic look on my friend’s face makes it so much worse.

He knows.

He knows how bad this is.

I shake my head, and when he gets close enough, I shove Nikki into his unwelcoming chest. “I’ll find Chase. I need you to handle her.”

Kon glares down at the blonde who’s shrinking away from him. His bearded jaw clenches and I can see the no forming on his lips, but I’m already backing away, my eyes flitting toward the house once more.

“Please, Kon.” I run a hand through my hair, shooting him a quick look. “Please just do this for me, man. Just make sure everyone out here gets home safe.” I fish my credit card from my wallet and absently toss it at him. “Call Ubers if you have to.”

He throws it right back. “I’ll take care of it.”

His gaze snaps to the old farmhouse where people are still spilling out. Lights are flashing through the windows, strobes of white and reds and blues that feel all too familiar, making my knees buckle.

Seeing the house like this, people scattered everywhere, dust clouding the air, the lights...

It's too much.

“Make sure you find Olive, too, Pyro. Make sure they both get home, okay?”

I bob my head, watching as Kon practically forces Nikki into the back of his truck. Two more women who are clearly wasted, see her and scream in excitement before diving into the backseat with her.

Content that she's no longer my problem, I charge back to the house, dodging drunk teens and strangers with every step. My boots slam against the porch and the second my hand wraps around the door handle, the screen is kicked open.

My best friend stares at me with wide, terrified eyes. My eyes rake down his frozen body and land on the tiny girl lying motionless in his arms.

He swallows thickly and his blonde hair falls into his face as he mutters the last word I want to hear right now.

“Help.”

Nerves race down my spine as I pull up in front of the old house. I don't know what I was expecting, but it's not to see everything perfect and still, just like it always is.

Climbing from my bike is the last thing I want to do right now, but the overwhelming need to see Eve with my own two eyes, to make sure she's okay, to apologize for everything that happened last night, outweighs everything else.

I take the three steps in one long stride, not letting myself falter when I get to the door, or the living room. I don't stop moving, I don't even breathe, until I'm at her bedroom door.

But that's where I freeze, falling powerless once more.

Because this is the exact door frame I stood in last night as I watched Eve slip that pretty little summer dress over her head and find a piece of herself she never knew she lost.

It's the doorway I stood in as the ugly words writhed in my head, telling me I wasn't enough, wasn't worthy of her time, her body, her heart. As the whispered secrets glided across my skin like a lover's caress, reminding me of all the fucked up shit I did to put us in that position in the first place.

My fault.

You left.

You.

You.

You.

Because I'm the one who broke her.

And I'm the one who has to repent.

"Eve," I choke, my eyes squeezing shut to force back the next thing that happened in this doorway.

To force his black eyes out. Eyes that bled through my skin, finding my weaknesses and latching on like leeches as he stormed toward me, every inch the righteous fury he wields.

I knock again, but she doesn't respond and the ugly thing inside me riots like a battering ram against my chest, shoving me forward.

"Goldie, I'm coming in," I call, swallowing thickly.

The door opens with a creak, revealing an empty room bathed in bright light. I step through, my gaze looking for any sign of her. The bathroom door is closed and the sound of the shower trickles through the old wood.

With a sigh, I rake my hands through my hair, indecision warring inside me. I should leave. Should go right back to Mammoth like Kon told me to. I should pretend this house and everyone inside of it doesn't exist. It would be better for me.

I probably wouldn't be so fucking stressed all the time. So worried about her, about him and what he might do. I wouldn't exist on pins and needles, constantly on edge, waiting for the next time he wraps her in his arms and touches her like he has any right to.

I probably wouldn't be so fucking *tired*.

But I know I'm not going anywhere. I tried once. Four years ago, I left. I put almost a hundred miles between us and I still couldn't let her go. I still couldn't forget her. Forget him. Forget every memory I tried to drink away.

Even at the bottom of countless bottles, I still couldn't find peace.

Maybe I never will.

Sinners are supposed to burn in eternal fire, after all. Or so my father's always preached. I smirk as I wrap my fingers around my lighter.

Bet he had no idea I'd love the flames so much.

With a breath full of bone-deep exhaustion, I make my way toward Eve's bed. I haven't slept in over twenty hours and I'm running on fumes.

Last night was unexpected and fucked up, to say the least. Nothing went like I'd planned—not that I was really planning anything, but I certainly didn't expect to spend the night in a Mammoth hospital with a minor.

My boot crunches against something, and the sound of it grinding into the wooden planks makes me freeze. My brows furrow as I lift my foot to see what I accidentally ruined, *again*.

A choked breath gets caught in my lungs at the sight of the tiny white grain. My eyes blur, the room spins and I have to catch myself on the edge of her bed.

No.

I think I say it outloud but my ears are ringing.

My mouth goes dry and I shake my head, trying to clear the visions pressing in on the edges of my consciousness. I drop down to a crouch and roll my finger over the rice granule. Just one. It could be anything.

She could have tracked it in from somewhere else in the house—probably the kitchen.

Not anywhere else. Definitely not anywhere else.

Right?

“Get it together, Payne,” I mutter, flicking the grain from my fingers. I watch it land a few feet away and roll over the wooden planks before falling between them. “Fuck.”

Before I know what I’m doing, I’m on my hands and knees, searching for proof.

I find it in the middle of the room, caught between the half-inch cracks that exist between the wooden planks. Grain after grain of dry, white rice, taunt me like a sick joke.

How?

How could this have happened?

I was here. I was watching. I was making sure.

You left.

You left.

You left.

My fist slams against the floor, the grooves digging into my skin the same way the rice used to. The same way it probably dug into Eve’s perfect skin. The same way it digs into my soul, clawing at the scraps of the person I’ve struggled to become, reminding me that I’m nothing but *this*.

A sinner on his knees begging for forgiveness for a crime he didn’t commit. Asking a God he doesn’t believe in for another chance at being *better*. The echoes of my own labored breaths

reverberate through the room, matching the rhythm of my pounding heart.

I close my eyes, willing myself to find the words, to articulate the remorse that churns inside me, sitting on my chest like a heavy boulder, suffocating me. But the silence feels oppressive, as if even the walls are holding their breath, waiting for me to speak.

I failed her.

“What happened to you? What happened to my Goldie?”

“You left.”

“Forgive me, Goldie,” the words come out as a choked whisper, barely audible in the damned space. It’s a plea, a desperate cry to a God I’ve questioned and doubted. Yet here I am, stripped bare, my pride and skepticism cast aside in this moment of reckoning.

The room remains unchanged, the shadows unmoved by my words. The memories flood back, a torrent of regret and shame. The choices I made, the paths I walked, each one worse than the previous. I see the face of the man I wronged, no matter how much I tried to be better. The hurt and disappointment in his black eyes is etched into my conscience, replaying on repeat.

Time seems to stretch, the seconds melting into minutes as I kneel in the same place she did.

But then, devastation turns to anger. Rage, frustration and rath, replaces the hurt, the memories. I blink rapidly and the room comes back into view. It's then that I realize the shower's off. I can hear Eve moving around in the bathroom, a familiar song spilling from her quiet lips.

With gritted teeth, I climb to my feet and brush off my knees. Just like before, I don't hesitate as I charge forward and shove the bathroom door open.

Eve screams, dropping a towel she'd been using to dry her hair.

“What the—” Her voice dies off as she takes me in, my white-knuckled grip wrapped around the door handle, my face a mask of pure rage, my body primed to explode.

But then, her voice cracks as she meets my eyes and says, “*You're here.*”

Everything in me deflates. My shoulders fall from my ears, my fingers loosen their grip, my chest expands with a deep, shuddering exhale.

“You're okay.”

She blinks up at me. “Of course I'm fine,” she scoffs, crossing her arms over her chest. “No thanks to you.”

There's hurt in her voice, but she's pretending it doesn't exist. She's hiding, just like I am.

That's when I notice her eyes are red-rimmed and shadowed with dark circles. I take in the exhaustion etched across every

pretty line of her face. I see the weariness there, the hurt and fear she's trying to mask as fury.

My eyes slide down her body, looking for any sign of injury but I can't find what I'm looking for because...

A growl rattles my chest and the anger returns. "Why are you dressed like that, Eve?"

I know the answer.

To hide the evidence.

Her brows pinch together and her arms fall to her sides. Her fingers pick at the thick, oversized black sweats covering every inch of her skin. Her toes curl like she's trying to shrink away from me one inch at a time and the pink socks hiding her feet piss me off even more.

She shrugs, glancing away. "I'm cold."

"You're lying."

Her head jerks back, causing her soaked hair to leave drips down her cheek. They look like tears and the sight burns my throat. She bats them away and shoves past me.

"Fuck off, Roman," she spits, but I hear it. The way her voice breaks when she freezes in the center of her room.

It's all the confirmation I need.

Before I can question her, before I can yell at her, demand answers, she whirls on me, digging her tiny finger into my chest. Her face is red, her anger palpable, as she unloads all the hurt writhing inside her.

“How dare you!” she shouts, dropping her finger and replacing it with her palms. She pushes me backward, and I let her. She needs a place to put her pain, and I need to be the one to take it. “This is all your fault! You brought them all here. You made the mess, and *I* had to be the one to clean it up. Me, Roman. I had to fix what you broke. *Again!*”

My fingers are begging to thread through her hair, to grip her sweet face, to bring her into the very chest she’s battering as she releases the ugly demons burning in the pits of her soul.

But I can’t.

I can’t touch her or hold her. I can’t comfort her. Not when she’s right.

So damn right, it makes me sick.

So instead, I nod, agreeing with her as I continue to take her pain.

“I know, Goldie,” I grunt, my back hitting the wall. “Give it to me.”

Her face contorts and her eyes gloss over, but she doesn’t let the tears fall. She won’t give herself that freedom, not when she’s so close to breaking.

Maybe that’s why I lie when she finally asks me the question that’s no doubt been burning a hole in her chest since last night.

“Where the hell were you? Why didn’t you come back?” I swear the words *for me* are sitting on her tongue, but she chokes those back, too.

I can see how much she's aching. How much guilt she's holding—for what, I don't know. Maybe the party, people drinking and making a mess. Destroying property carelessly. Guilt she carries because she's such a pure, innocent soul who loves so much, so deeply, it hurts her to see the world hurt.

That's why I don't tell her the real reason I couldn't get to her the way I desperately wanted to.

I don't tell her about the tiny girl that Chase cradled in his chest and begged me to help. The small girl who had no business being at the party in the first place. The one who definitely had no business getting drunk with a group of random guys far too old to even look her way.

The girl Eve loves so much, looks after like a little sister.

Clover.

She was completely wasted when Chase found her, curled up in the laundry room by the back door. I'm so thankful he had the sense to do a final sweep of the house before corralling Oli into the back of his car.

Otherwise, no one would have found Clover in the darkness.

Chase and Oli were too drunk to drive, and I wasn't going to send them away in an Uber. Not with Clover's whimpers filling the stuffy Georgia air. Not with Chase's frantic eyes pleading with me to help her. A girl so small, so fragile, like Oli once was. I saw it there, the flashbacks, the pain of the past encroaching on his mind. It was written all over his face.

That's why I didn't think twice about rushing them to the hospital in Mammoth. I called Kon on the way and he took Oli home, got her bundled safely in her room at the loft, tucked away from the unexpected party none of us wanted to attend.

Chase and I stayed at the hospital while they pumped Clover's stomach and kept her comfortable with IV fluids until her foster mom showed up. I had to drag him from her side as he struggled with the unnecessary guilt sitting deep in his chest. I drove him and his car home, then came straight back to Divinity, thankful my bike was still at the loft.

Now, here I stand, in front of the one woman who, throughout it all, never once left my mind. And it's the guilt and devastation on her face that has me choking back the words, knowing it will only add more pain to her consciousness.

Instead, I shrug it off like nothing matters. "Chase moved the party to our house. I couldn't leave him to deal with it alone." Not a lie, not really. But it's not the truth and I hate it.

Eve shakes her head and steps back. My body turns to ice the second she's no longer in my space, but I let it happen.

She needs it, and I deserve it.

"Get out."

I don't want to.

There's nothing in this world I want less than to leave her right now. But Eve has so little control over her life and I

refuse to be something, someone else, that she has to fight for her right to exist the way she chooses.

So, I nod, choking back the words on my tongue and the emotions in my throat, like always. Turning my back to her, I step into the bathroom that connects our rooms. I may be leaving her, but I'm not going far.

"I'm so sorry, Eve," I say, hoping she hears the honesty in my voice.

As I twist the handle to my bathroom door, she leaves me with a parting jab that hits its intended mark, making my eyes burn.

"I'll never understand how it's so easy for you to keep turning your back on me, Roman. Never."

2:48 Roman

I'll never understand how it's so easy for you to keep turning your back on me.

Her words, the look on her face, have haunted me. The rice between the floorboards, Isaac's dark presence throughout the house, has haunted me.

Not being there to protect her has *haunted* me.

The little to-go boxes are hot as I pull them from the plastic bag, setting them on the counter. The salty, spicy, MSG-scented food wafts through the kitchen. I don't care if Isaac hates it. It's Eve's favorite, and she needs comfort right now.

It's been a week since the party, and I haven't left the house. Not once. I've canceled all my appointments at Deliverance, Chase packed me a bag full of enough clothes to last me forever, and I've settled in here like it's my new fucking home instead of the dungeon it's always been.

I refuse to leave her again.

I'll never understand how it's so easy for you to keep turning your back on me.

I swallow down the emotions that have threatened to spill over since I left her in the bathroom that day, covered head to toe in black sweats. Every day since, she's been in sweats, or leggings, or a hoodie so fucking big its more of a dress than anything else. It's the closest she's gotten to her usual flowy dresses, and it's fucking killing me.

Every time I see her in black, it slaughters another part of my soul. Every time I see her with her hair up, her face completely makeup free, her dresses hanging safely in her closet...

I'll never understand how it's so easy for you to keep turning your back on me.

The thing about her words is that they couldn't be further from the truth. Every time I've left her it's ripped me apart, absolutely shredded me into bloody ribbons, but I had to go.

I didn't have a choice.

“What's that smell?” Isaac's words pull me from my thoughts, and it takes all I have not to crush the flimsy to-go box in my hands. Glancing over my shoulder at him, I find him standing too close to me. Feet apart on the other end of the kitchen, but still too close.

I ignore him as I set the final box on the counter, hiding the trembling in my hands, before moving to the cabinet. I feel him tracking me, every step I take a taunt.

“What’s that?” he grumbles, his low voice reverberating off the walls. I take a deep breath, steeling myself before looking at him again. He’s stepped closer, trapping me. Panic threatens to rise, but I force it down.

Safe.

I’m safe.

“What’s it look like?” The words are said with more confidence than I feel, and I know he can see through it. The corner of his mouth tucks up in a smirk, his eyes narrowing. I turn away, moving back to the boxes of food.

I open them, letting the stronger scent permeate the air around us. A tremor racks my hands as I serve Eve’s plate, then mine. “You know I hate it,” Isaac says bitterly, and, unable to help myself, a smile curves my lips.

“Good thing it’s not for you then,” I murmur.

He stays silent as I finish plating our food, nothing more than a looming presence at my back. The porcelain trembles as I move toward the table, my eyes lingering on the burn mark I so carelessly left.

I’ll never understand how it’s so easy for you to keep turning your back on me.

My eyes squeeze shut, trying to drown out the cruel truth of her words. But they’re etched on my heart, a scar forever reminding me I let her down, yet again.

How many times is too many times? How much more can she really take?

The chair scrapes along the old wood floor and I sink into it, my back still to Isaac. It creaks under my weight as I shift uncomfortably. His footsteps are steady as he stalks toward me, his growing annoyance palpable in the too-small kitchen.

I feel him lower himself, putting his mouth too fucking close to my ear, and my hackles rise. “How much longer will you be here?” he sneers, his voice low enough for only us to hear.

The reason the son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the Devil.

I want to say it. Want to spit the words burning a hole through my brain, but I can't.

I can't.

His question lingers, but I'm frozen, completely unable to speak. My nails dig into my palms, my hand itching to grab the lighter from my pocket and let the flame come to life. I need the searing heat to remind me who I am, where I am, what year it is.

Not the basement.

Kitchen.

I'm twenty-two, not an eight-year-old kid.

He can't hurt me.

Not anymore.

“I'm talking to you, son.” His hand lands on my shoulder, his punishing grip tightening until I have to bite my tongue, using the pain to ground myself.

He can't hurt me.

He can't hurt me.

He can't hurt me.

But my body betrays me, tensing under his touch, and he huffs out a humorless, dark laugh. Goosebumps ripple over my skin at the sound, and I close my eyes. Tremors course through my body without my permission, and he leans closer. My breath catches in my throat, my eyes burning as his fingers sink further into my flesh.

“Look at you,” he whispers mockingly, his breath hot against my skin. “Still the same scared little boy you’ve always been.”

His words send me spiraling right into a memory that’s so visceral, so real, it feels like it’s happening right now, and try as I might, I can’t stop it.

“You’re an embarrassment!” he hisses, reprimanding me for ditching church this morning.

I didn’t tell him where I was going, but I just couldn’t do it anymore. I couldn’t sit there and watch him smile at his sheep. To listen to his lies. To see people fawn over the man who doesn’t exist. I couldn’t do it anymore.

And now...now I’m paying the price.

“I thought we were past this shit, Roman, but apparently, you haven’t learned your lesson.” He clicks his tongue and brings down the cat-o-nine-tails again. I groan quietly, biting

my cheek against the pain. “We’ll keep going until you’ve repented. Again, boy!”

Another hit, another gasp, another slap to the back of my head when I don’t immediately speak up.

“No punishment seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.”

“Again!”

I start to speak but I hear a sound, silencing me. My eyes snap up from the floor and up the old stairs. My heart thunders in my chest at the idea of Jane or Eve finding us when he’s like this. What would he do? What would they do?

A part of me wishes Jane would find out and take me, take Eve, and run far away. That someone, anyone, would choose me, protect me, love me. But a bigger part of me, the part that’s a realist, knows that won’t happen and even worse, knows that if Eve or Jane found out about this side of my father, they’d be just as unsafe as I am.

No.

That can’t happen.

So, I quickly look away from the closed door and grit my teeth against the next lash, keeping my cries to myself.

He huffs a laugh, the sound so cold, so terrifying, it sends shivers down my aching spine. “No one’s coming for you, boy. They’ll be at the church for another hour.” I swallow thickly. “Exactly where you should have been. You represent this

family. How do you think it makes me look when my own son can't show up to support his father, huh? How do you think that makes your stepmother look?" I grit my teeth at his words. "Why can't you be more like Eve? She's so good, so polite. Everyone loves her."

Bile pools in my throat.

He's right.

They've only lived with us for a few months and the entire town is already obsessed with my stepsister and her mom. They're perfect, happy and kind. They're good Christians.

Unlike me.

"No punishment seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it."

Again and again.

I don't know how long it goes on but by the time he's done, I'm a shell of the person I slowly started to become in the last few months.

Soft, padding footsteps pull Isaac's touch from me, and it's like I can suddenly breathe again. Inhaling deeply, I turn my attention toward the entrance of the kitchen, finding Eve coming to an abrupt stop.

My eyes rake over her, taking in her clothes. Black leggings, an oversized tee, and a chunky knit cardigan. Fuzzy cream

socks cover her feet, her blonde hair twisted into a clip at the back of her head, pieces falling out around her face.

She looks comfy, but I know her better. She's struggling, barely hanging on by a fucking thread. Even if she doesn't know it, I do. I see her, just like I always have.

She flicks her blue gaze between us, her eyes narrowing. "What's going on?"

"I thought you were at tutoring," Isaac says, his voice as casual as ever. My teeth grit together at the sound. How can he do that? Pretend like he wasn't just trying to make me spiral further into the darkness I've spent my entire life trying to claw my way out of?

Eve rubs the spot between her brows as she lets out a long breath. Dark smudges are under her eyes, her face pale. "Clover didn't show up again," she mutters, shaking her head. "Willa won't answer when I call. I don't know what to do."

Guilt twists my stomach at her words. I still haven't told her about staying in the hospital with Chase and Clover. I can't. She won't fucking talk to me.

"Well, maybe she's sick, or Willa's busy," Isaac says dismissively. "Give her some time." She nods, her smile watery as she lifts her gaze to him. But then it falls to me, and I swallow thickly. "Is that Chinese?" She points at the plate at her spot and I clear my throat.

"Thought we could have something different for dinner tonight," Isaac says, interrupting me. My head whips to the

side, glaring up at him as he grabs a plate from the cabinet. “Have a seat, sweetheart.”

She looks as stunned as I am pissed as she hesitates forward a step. “But you hate Chinese food,” she breathes, and he shakes his head, an infuriating grin on his face.

“I don’t hate it,” he mutters. “I just prefer...” He trails off as he looks in each container. “Oh, I forgot your drink. There’s tea in the fridge.”

I watch as he picks the broccoli from the broccoli beef and loads his plate with it before spooning the plain steamed rice next to it. He searches through the food, looking for more vegetables, his lips pursing into a thin line as he picks out the carrots and onions from other dishes.

“I got the food,” I grit out, and he nods.

“Yeah, I appreciate you picking it up for me,” Isaac says dismissively, letting the lie roll right off his tongue. My mouth opens and closes a few times, too stunned to say a damn thing.

What would be the point of arguing with him? Of trying to prove to Eve that it was me, not him, who got all her favorite foods?

Eve sinks into her chair, her eyes on her plate. I stare at her, willing her to look at me. To just fucking *glance* at me. But she doesn’t.

Tension ripples off us as Isaac makes his way to his seat, sitting in it like a throne. He settles in, his back straight and

shoulders squaring. “Shall we pray?” He smiles at Eve, one she returns.

It’s like I’m not even in the fucking room.

Clearing my throat, I force myself to lounge back, letting my legs fall apart. I fold my arms over my chest, a sarcastic grin spreading across my face.

“Pray?” I scoff. “Since when?”

“Since forever,” he grits out, and I grin wider.

“You haven’t prayed once since I’ve been back,” I say, and he blinks at the challenge.

“Well,” he sniffs, “we’re praying tonight.”

Eve throws her hand out, all too eager to please him. She hesitates before reaching toward me, but I just stare at it before flicking my eyes up to hers. I see the plea there, the hope she has that I’ll take it. Instead, I sink deeper into the chair.

It kills me to not touch her, to let him wrap his hand around hers. I want to rip it off. I want to throw her over my shoulder and take her home with me, where she can thrive.

But I don’t do any of that.

I watch as they bow their heads, Eve’s eyes open as she stares at her plate. Isaac’s flutter shut, and he straightens higher in his chair, ever the devout preacher, giving his thanks to a god who’s given him everything.

“Dear Heavenly Father,” he begins, and I grind my teeth together. “We thank you for the food we are about to receive,

and for the hands that have prepared it. Bless this nourishment to our bodies, and may it strengthen us for the tasks ahead.” My eyes bore into the top of his head, glaring a hole straight through his skull. “Let us also remember those who are in need and ask for your provision in their lives. In your name, we pray. Amen.”

“Amen,” Eve murmurs, her voice a barely-there breath.

She lifts her head and looks at me as she reaches for her glass of tea. Isaac pokes at his plate of chicken and vegetables with his fork, his brows furrowed.

“Men reject their prophets and slay them, but they love their martyrs and honor those whom they have slain.” The words fall from my lips like scripture, and Eve gasps, her eyes widening. I know she recognizes it. It was a passage in *The Brothers Karamazov* we underlined and highlighted a million times. We talked about it for hours.

Isaac pauses, his fork halfway to his mouth. Slowly, his eyes lift to mine. “Excuse me?”

“I’m sorry,” I laugh bitterly. “Did you not understand me?”

“Roman,” Eve hisses. Her hand tightens around the glass, but she doesn’t say anything else. What can she?

“Did you not understand since it wasn’t a quote from your special fairytale book?” Isaac’s fork clatters to the plate, his jaw working as he glares at me. “Here’s one you might get: *Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves.*”

“To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams,” he spits back, his face flushing.

I grin broader and lean forward, resting my forearms on the table. I know the Bible front to back. When I was a kid, I repeated scripture every Sunday like a dutiful son, then, when we got home, in the darkness of the basement, it was beaten into me.

I know it better than anyone in this room.

“The Lord detests all the proud of heart. Be sure of this: They will not go unpunished.”

His face flushes a deeper red shade, and I know I’m getting to him. *“Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.”*

A rumbling laugh slips from me, and I shake my head. “Really?” He’s fuming, his shell cracking in front of Eve. Her eyes shift between us as she sinks further into her chair, looking like she wants to disappear. *“Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged.”*

Isaac scoots further toward me, every muscle in his body taut as he snarls, *“Those who withhold the rod hate their children, but the one who loves them applies discipline.”*

“I have seen a wicked, violent man. Spreading himself like a luxuriant tree in its native soil.” The words are hushed as I speak them, but they’re loud in the quiet kitchen.

Eve’s eyes widen as she looks at Isaac. Her full lips part, a question about to leave when Isaac pushes to his feet. *“Do not*

spread false reports. Do not help a guilty person by being a malicious witness.” I can’t help it. I laugh again.

“You don’t think you’re guilty?” I sneer. “You think you were justified in—”

“Enough!” Isaac shouts, banging his hand flat on the table. Eve and I jolt at the sudden loud noise, but I force myself to stay calm. “Enough, Roman.” Hot anger spikes through me and I shove to my feet, resting my hands on the table as I glare at him.

“Why is it enough? You don’t want your dirty little secret to know the truth?” I shout, the veins in my neck straining.

“Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.” A small voice cuts through the air, and without my permission, my eyes drop to Eve. She stares at her plate, her arms wrapped tightly around herself.

I stare at her as I whisper, *“Whoever conceals their sins does not prosper, but the one who confesses and renounces them finds mercy.”*

“I said that’s enough,” Isaac growls, but Eve ignores him as she looks up at me.

“Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven,” she murmurs. Isaac’s breath is harsh as he watches us.

“Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord,” I breathe, and her lips twitch.

“I said—”

“Hate not those who reject you, who insult you, who abuse and slander you. Hate not the atheists, the teachers of evil, the materialists—and I mean not only the good ones—for there are many good ones among them, especially in our day—hate not even the wicked ones.” Her words stop me dead, and I stare at her.

“How did you remember that?” I breathe.

Her lips barely tip up in a sad smile. “How could I forget?”

2:49 Eve

The double doors of the church bang open and a small yelp leaves me as I whirl toward the intrusion. Willa storms in like Hellhounds are on her heels, her angry gaze sweeping over the church, stopping when she spots Isaac on the stage.

His head tilts to the side as he watches her, a Bible clutched in his hand. “Preacher Isaac, I need to—” She comes to an abrupt stop when she sees me. “*You.*”

“Ms. Willa,” I breathe, stumbling back. I glance at Isaac, finding him stepping off the stage. “What’s—”

“What the hell were you thinking?” she snarls. The Bibles I’d been replacing on the pews slip from my fingertips, my eyes widening. “She was under your care, and you let her get drunk!”

“Ms. Willa,” I say again, my voice shaking. “I—”

“Do you know how much money I lost?” She advances on me, her face turning red with her anger.

“Willa,” Isaac says cautiously, stepping closer.

“I had to take time off work!” she shouts. “And do you know what happens when I don’t work?” Another step toward me. My heart is in my throat as I look toward Isaac, silently praying for help. “I don’t get paid!”

“I—I’m sorry,” I stammer, but she’s not listening.

“How could you be so irresponsible?” She’s in front of me now, her finger waving in my face.

“Now, Willa.” Isaac tries to get her attention, but she’s focused solely on me. “Let’s go to my office—”

“I trusted her with you,” she continues. “You’re nothing but an irresponsible little bit—”

“Willa!” Isaac shouts, loud enough to startle her. Tears burn the backs of my eyes, my body trembling from fear and the realization that something must’ve happened to Clover. “Do not speak to my stepdaughter like that.” My eyes widen at his tone, my vision blurring further. “You’ll explain yourself calmly, or you’ll leave. But you won’t come into my church and insult my girl, understand?”

My mouth falls open as Willa sputters, turning a darker shade of red. But I can’t make myself care about her or what she has to say. Not when his words are ringing through me.

My girl.

Pride nearly sends me to my knees, then heat, searing white-hot heat shoots through my body. I’m his girl. It’s the first time he’s claimed me, at least publicly.

“My child—my *sixteen-year-old child*—was at a party at your house, *Preacher*.” She spits his title like a slur. “She got drunk enough to need her stomach pumped. And when I got to the hospital, she was there with two men—one of which was *your son*.”

Your son.

I gasp as the words settle, the stark realization that Roman knew all this time and said nothing hitting me in the chest.

Roman was there.

Roman knew.

Isaac’s throat bobs as he swallows, his eyes never leaving hers. “Then it sounds like your problem is with Roman, not Eve.”

“Clover was under Eve’s care,” Willa snaps, looking back at me accusingly.

“I swear, I didn’t know she was drinking,” I rush out, raising my hands innocently.

“Where were you when that was happening?” she asks, her eyes raking over me in a way that tells me she thinks I’m nothing but trash.

My eyes flit to Isaac’s just as he looks away, his jaw ticking, fists clenching, but I swear, he leans in ever so slightly like he’s also waiting for the answer.

Memories of the party, of Nikki, of Roman, flit through my mind, and I shake my head, forcing them away. I can’t think

about that, not now, not ever. But it's impossible to stop the assault of images.

"I'm sorry," I breathe, my head lowering. "I left her alone for only—"

"You left her alone so you could party and do whatever the hell you were doing!" Willa shouts. "You care more about yourself than you did my daughter."

"Please, Ms. Willa," I plead. "That wasn't my intention—"

"I don't care!" she shrieks. "I had to drive all the way to Mammoth in the middle of the night and I didn't get paid. The only saving grace is that her bills were paid—though I can't begin to imagine why. Otherwise, I would've been out thousands there, too."

"I understand." I drop my eyes to the floor again. "I'm sorry."

Isaac clears his throat, drawing her attention away from me. She's still fuming, riding an edge of fury I can only imagine. But Isaac willingly stepping into her line of fire for me has me breathing a little easier.

"I'm sorry Clover made the choices she did," Isaac says, and my eyes snap to him, finding him closer. His comforting presence settles my wildly beating heart. "But Eve can't be held responsible for the decisions your daughter made. I wish she would've made better ones, but what's done is done. Now, if you need help, we'll do what we can. But if you're just here to berate her, I think it's time for you to leave."

Fresh tears brim my eyes and it takes all I have to stay where I am, to not jump over a pew and run to him, to throw myself in his arms. He stares calmly at Willa, waiting for her response.

“I’m pulling Clover out of tutoring,” she says primly, lifting her chin. My attention snaps back to her.

“What?” I shake my head, moving forward. “You can’t—”

“We understand,” Isaac interrupts, but I shake my head again, unwilling to understand why Willa would take Clover out of tutoring when she needs it. She needs me. She’s not ready to leave. I’m not ready for her to go.

“But—”

Willa shoots me a withering glare that has me shrinking back. The words dance on my lips. *Don’t take her out. I’ll do better.* But she turns on her heel with a *hmph*, and I watch her go.

I just...

I stare at her as she walks through our small church, her head held high, her hand clutching her black purse. She doesn’t look back. She just leaves.

A sob spills from my lips, the tears finally falling. I failed Clover. I let her down. I know how badly she needed tutoring, not just because she needed help with math, but because she needed an excuse to get out of that house, and now...

“We have to help her,” I cry, wiping my cheek with my fingers. “We can’t let her take Clover out completely. Can you

—” Isaac’s hand lands on my back and I lean into his touch. “Can you talk to her? I’ll do what I can to prove myself. I just —she needs—”

“It’s going to be okay, sweetheart,” he murmurs, his voice a soft, soothing caress. I nod as I lean my forehead against his chest, breathing in his familiar scent.

Even though I really want to sob and break down and let everything out I’ve been holding in, I don’t let myself. Not yet. Not here at church. Instead, I take a deep breath, pulling myself together as I look up at him.

“There’s my girl,” he murmurs, making my heart skip a beat. He tucks my hair behind my ear, and I melt.

“You mean that?” I whisper. “I’m really your girl?” His smile is soft, it’s sweet, as he stares back at me.

“Of course. You’ve always been my girl.”

My hand rests on his chest, and he stiffens slightly as he looks around. “Not here, but tonight—”

“Or we can go now,” I breathe, my body coiling tighter. “We can come back later and finish. *Please.*” I can’t hide the whine in my voice as I press my body closer to his.

His jaw tenses as he looks around the empty church again, then his hand wraps around mine and he pulls me after him.

The quick truck ride from the church to the house is frantic, the energy between us buzzing with anticipation. And, as soon as we step inside, his hands are on me, groping and pawing at

my oversized dress, sliding the cardigan off my shoulders and letting it fall to the floor.

His lips find mine in a frenzied kiss, and I wrap my arms around him, pulling him closer. “I missed you,” I breathe.

And I have. Things haven’t been right between us since before he left for the conference. And then the party happened and everything went to shit. I miss him. I miss *us*.

Isaac nods, his breath shuddering as I nip at his bottom lip. “It’s been too long.” His mouth moves against mine with each word as he backs me against the wall by the door.

I grip his white button-down and pull it from his slacks, my fingers fumbling with the buttons. Letting out a frustrated growl, I rip my lips from his to look. “I can’t—”

“Look how needy you are,” he chuckles, putting his hands over mine, stilling me. “You worry about getting yourself undressed, temptress. Then I’ll take care of you.”

A shiver courses through my body, one full of anticipation and excitement as I reach for the hem of my dress. It falls below my knees, and the top completely covers my breasts. It’s one of my more modest dresses, one I know Isaac used to prefer I wear.

But now I’m his temptress, the woman who can bring this stoic man to his knees and I love teasing him.

I let my dress fall to the floor, exposing my white lace bra and panties.

“Fuck.” He takes me in, his gaze scorching, before his mouth lands on mine again with a groan. He slides his shirt off his shoulders, leaving him in his plain undershirt.

My hands move to his belt, and I easily unbuckle it, memories of the way it felt wrapped around my wrists making me whimper against his lips.

“I need you right now,” he rasps, and I nod, my hands trembling as I move to unbutton his slacks. He shoves my hands away before grabbing my arm and pulling me after him.

Excitement swirls in my stomach as he guides me through the house. For a moment I think he might be headed for his room, but instead of leading me to the stairs, he moves us to the middle of the living room. Without a word, he turns me away from him, his hand landing in the middle of my back.

“Bend over, temptress,” he mutters. “Let your Lord have his way with you.”

I whimper as I press my hands onto the coffee table, my body hinging at my hips. He rips my panties down my legs and I stumble stepping out of them. The second I’m free, he shoves his foot between mine, kicking my legs apart.

His zipper is loud as he undoes it, the feel of his slacks tickling the backs of my thighs as he lines up. My fingernails dig into the wood as I stare down at my hands, my heart thrumming in my throat.

“Ready for my cock, pretty little whore?” he murmurs, running his hand softly down my spine.

My aching pussy throbs as I suck in a sharp breath. His words shouldn't feel so good, shouldn't make me need him so badly, but they do. "Yes, my Lord."

A creak sounds and I stiffen.

"Wait." I reach blindly behind me, and his hand grips my wrist, pinning it to my lower back. "I think—" My eyes flit to the hallway that leads to our bedrooms and I find a giant shadow standing there, watching. "*Isaac.*"

But he ignores me as he shoves inside, his cock stretching me almost painfully. "Isaac!" I cry, my face shifting into a wince. Roman takes another step, the light nearly shining on him.

But he pauses.

His face is still hidden in the shadows, his hands clenching and unclenching at his sides. Isaac hasn't seen him yet, because if he had he wouldn't be fucking into me with so much ferocity, I nearly slip from the table.

"That's a good fucking girl," he grinds out through gritted teeth. "Such a filthy little pussy for me, begging for corruption. Isn't that right?"

My mouth falls open, his cock rubbing inside me harder and faster, driving my pleasure higher.

Roman's gaze is locked on mine, and I feel it penetrating me deeper than his father currently is. I moan, my head shaking back and forth as I try to find the words to make Isaac stop. To make him realize his son is only a few feet from us.

But it's hard. So hard.

Because with every drive of his hips, Isaac pushes me closer to oblivion. And with Roman watching...

A shiver racks down my spine just as Isaac's hand comes down on my ass, harder than he's ever spanked me, and I feel an immediate handprint bloom. I scream at the pain, clenching around him. He grunts out a rough breath, his fingers on my hip tightening as he spanks me again.

The harsh crack of his hand on my ass, over and over, is loud in the house. Only our bodies slapping together, the wetness of my pussy squelching with each thrust. Roman stumbles forward another step as Isaac's hand descends once more, harder than before.

"Isaac," I moan, blinking heavily through the lusty fog. "*Roman.*"

His movements falter, nearly pausing, but he doesn't. Instead, his hand slides into my hair and he wrenches my head back. "What the fuck did you just say?" he snarls, his breath hot against my skin as his hips roll into me.

"Roman!" I cry, lifting my shaking hand and pointing an accusatory finger at his son standing in the living room, only a few feet from us.

Isaac's thrusts stop, his thick, curved cock still buried deep inside me as I feel him shift. His body tenses, his hand in my hair tightening until I whimper at the pain.

“Are you just going to stand there and watch, or be a man and fuck her mouth?”

The words are like a bomb dropping in the center of our house, and, for one brief second, Roman hesitates. His gaze drops to mine, his square jaw tensing as he takes me in, his eyes trailing over my body, pausing when he sees where I’m locked together with his father. His hands tremble, but he doesn’t move.

He hesitates.

Isaac lets out a harsh laugh. “Either you fuck it, or I’ll find something else to fill it.” I glance over my shoulder, finding him with a mocking sneer stamped on his handsome face.

He doesn’t look at me as he begins thrusting again, his grip in my hair tightening. “Look how rough she likes it,” he mutters, yanking my head until my spine bends nearly in half. My back presses against his chest, my hands coming up off the table as he fucks into me harder. His lips find my neck and he bites down, growling, “*Such a fucking whore.*”

“Dad,” Roman breathes, a slight plea in his voice, and a whimper escapes me as I watch him stumble forward, dazed. “You’re hurting her.”

“Not yet, I’m not.” He says the words low, almost low enough for only me to hear, but Roman hears. And it’s like those are the words that take him out of whatever spell he was just under.

He strides across the living room, his eyes on mine as his hands fumble with his jeans. Stopping in front of me, we stare at each other as his father fucks me harder and harder, my tits bouncing with each thrust.

Isaac's hand smacks across my ass again, and I grit my teeth together. "Ro," I mouth. He reaches out, stopping himself before he can touch me.

My clit throbs in time with my heart, and I slip my hand down my body, Roman's gaze tracking my movements as my fingers move between my legs. A cry leaves my lips as I rub at my clit, driving my pleasure up.

"Filthy, cock thirsty slut," Isaac snarls. My other hand moves to my breast, and I grope it over my bra. I almost rip it off, needing more.

Roman's jeans are undone, but his cock isn't out. I lift my eyes to his, finding him just staring, his lips in a tight line.

"Please," I whine, and his throat bobs as he swallows.

"You want this?" he whispers. I open my mouth to answer, but Isaac cuts me off.

"Of course she does. Being a hole for men to use is all she's good for." My eyes widen at the harsh words, but before I can say anything, he shoves me down. "Now, stop being a pussy and fuck her throat. Make her cry for us."

I stare down at my hands again, Isaac's cock invading me the only thing I feel. But then Roman's warm hand slides under my jaw and he gently tips my head back.

“Eyes on me, Goldie,” he murmurs, his thumb stroking along my cheek. He swallows thickly, his Adam’s apple bobbing and I track the movement, entranced.

Without his instruction, I open my mouth, my eyes on his, just like he said. I wait, small moans leaving me as Roman pulls his cock out.

He’s not hard.

“I knew you’d get off on this,” Isaac grunts. “Watching your little girlfriend getting fucked by your dad. You’re as fucked in the head as she is.”

The tip of Roman’s dick is soft as it presses against my tongue. He pauses and glares over my head at his father, but the feeling of Isaac’s cock stretching me, filling me so completely, has another groan leaving me, even as his words spread through my veins.

It’s confusing.

I’m confused.

“*Well?*” I squeeze my eyes shut at Isaac’s taunt. I just want them to stop. To stop fighting, to stop arguing, to stop hating each other.

An idea rolls through my mind, and I flick my gaze up to Roman. Maybe I can be their bridge to each other. I can bring them back together, even for just a moment.

I reach for Roman’s jeans and tug him forward, letting my tongue slide along his thick head. He hisses through his teeth and his eyes find mine. I hollow my cheeks, letting Isaac set

the brutal pace of my mouth fucking as he pushes and pulls me on his cock.

Roman's hand finds mine on his jeans, and he holds it tightly. His thumb strokes lightly across the back of it as I try to get his cock hard with my mouth.

"That's it, Goldie," he murmurs. "Fuck. You feel so good."

"*Goldie*," Isaac laughs, the name sounding like a joke coming from him. "Stop being soft with her. I said she likes it hard. Don't you? Tell your big brother how rough you like it." His hand comes down on my ass again, and I cry out around Roman's cock.

God, it feels so good. I'm so wet, so turned on, I can't deny the truth in Isaac's words any more than I can stop the zaps of pleasure racing through me.

"Stop it," Roman growls. But Isaac doesn't. Instead, he spanks me again, and Roman's grip on my hand tightens.

"Are you really going to let your father fuck her better than you?" Isaac's words are almost as brutal as his thrusts.

Part of me likes it, the pain, having both my guys with me, but another part...

A snarl rips from Roman's throat as he shoves his half-hard cock further into my mouth, his focus on Isaac, not me. I gag around him, saliva pooling from my lips as I drop my hand to the coffee table, needing the leverage as they tug me back and forth between them.

Eyes watering and jaw aching, I stare up at Roman, at his pissed-off expression as his hand moves to my head. He doesn't push me more, he just rests it there, twining my hair around his fist, digging his fingers into my scalp.

“That’s it, son,” Isaac grunts, spurring him on. Roman’s growl is borderline feral as he thrusts harder, matching his father’s too-fast pace. My pussy clenches around Isaac as he spansks me again, the smack reverberating through my body. “She knows her place. Use her.”

My body heats at his words, a million emotions warring inside me. *Use her*. Is that all I am to him? To both of them? A warm hole to use when they want?

Roman’s neck strains as his hips move faster, his cock thickening. Isaac shoves himself deeper, forcing me forward, and I choke on Roman. But they don’t stop. Roman’s thrust is there, jerking me back, impaling me so hard on Isaac’s cock, I scream. Even though it’s muffled, I scream again, trying to get their attention.

But they don’t stop.

They don’t stop staring at each other, playing a silent game of chicken to see who will back down first.

“This is the next thing I’ll take,” Isaac mutters, his hand sliding down my back until his thumb rests against my asshole. I stiffen, every muscle in my body tensing. “Should I fuck it in front of your brother, temptress? Should I show him who you really belong to?”

I've played with my ass a million times on camera, but it's never been something I've wanted to do with someone else. Playing with it, seeing what feels good is entirely different than having someone shove their cock inside to brutally pound into you.

I try to shake my head, but it's impossible to move and I know even if I could, they wouldn't notice. Not with the way they're playing tug-of-war with me.

Isaac's thumb massages my asshole, and I clench around his cock. I can't deny how good it feels, how dirty and forbidden. His thumb slides in, his single digit is thicker than I was expecting, and I cry out. Toys, fingers, I've used it all. But this is different.

"I'll own every inch of this sinful fucking body," Isaac continues, his hips slapping against my ass. "I'll use her up and spit her out. Then you can have her, son. You can take my leftovers—"

"She was mine first," Roman snarls. My body aches with the constant back and forth, the way they're so carelessly using me.

"But she's mine now." Isaac's voice is dark and taunting, spurring Roman on. Even with his cock only half-hard, he's still thick, filling my mouth and pushing into my throat.

I rest my hand on Roman's thigh, trying to get him to let up enough for me to breathe. But he doesn't notice me. Not with his fiery gaze solely on Isaac.

“She doesn’t want you anymore.” I whimper at Isaac’s harsh words, and bang my hand against Roman’s thigh again, trying to get him to look at me, to ignore Isaac, to see the truth in my eyes.

I want him. I’ll *always* want him.

His teeth grit together, his face reddening as his thrusts grow more intense, more frenzied. More reckless. More careless.

Reaching back, I reach for Isaac, hoping he’ll stop before this goes too far. But he just laughs, wiggling his thumb as he thrusts deeper.

I try to cry Roman’s name, try to make a sound around the intrusion in my mouth, try to get away from the one in my pussy, but I can’t. I’m stuck. I’m helpless.

I’m helpless.

Tears spring to my eyes, and I try to force them away. But with Roman not paying attention to me, with Isaac goading him, trying to push him into doing something unforgivable, I nearly break. I nearly collapse. I nearly give up.

But I don’t.

I hit my hand harder against Roman’s thigh, hard enough to draw his attention, and when he looks down at me, he’s not himself. His eyes are different. They’re not the hazel color I love so much, no swirls of amber or emerald.

They’re dark.

His pupils are blown so wide, his eyes almost look black. And with his neck straining, his teeth bared, he looks like...

He looks like Isaac.

Whatever he sees on my face makes his movements falter before finally stopping. “Goldie,” he rasps as he pulls out of my mouth. He wipes my chin, but I shove his hand away.

“What are you doing?” Isaac asks, his voice low. “Put it back in. Finish—”

“*Goldie*,” Roman says again, his eyes on mine.

I want everything around us to disappear. I want to stop feeling Isaac’s punishing thrusts, the way his cock is slamming into my fucking cervix, the way his thumb is lodged deeper in my ass. But I can’t ignore any of it.

A tear slides down my cheek, and Roman stumbles back a step. My mouth opens, but I don’t know what I want to say. If I want to scream at him, if I want to beg him to come back, beg Isaac to keep going. To stop.

Nothing comes out, though. Not a sound. Not a breath.

Roman fumbles with his jeans, shoving his cock back into his boxers before flicking his eyes to his father. The hatred burning in them is enough to make me shrink away. But Isaac laughs. It’s a taunting, dark laugh, one that’s full of triumph.

“I—I’m sorry,” Roman says, dropping his eyes to mine.

And then he does what he always does—he turns, and runs. He goes back to his room, the bang of his door like a bomb

before Isaac slams into me so hard I jolt forward, my arms giving out. My face falls to the coffee table and I press it against the slick, cool wood.

He laughs again, his thumb still inside me, as he fucks into me harder. “Tight, young fucking cunt. So good for your Lord.”

My jaw clenches at his words, at the way he’s just...using me.

He’s using me.

Not caring about my pleasure, only his.

One more thrust, another, then he stills, his groan deep and loud as he spills inside me. I feel him fill me up, feel his cum overflow around his cock and drip from my pussy.

I feel him slide out of both my holes. And I feel him slap my ass.

“That was good, sweetheart,” he mutters, the sound of his zipper as he does his pants up a stark contrast to the sudden silence around us. “I need to wash up.” He smacks my ass a final time, then his steady, unhurried footsteps lead him to the stairs.

I count them as he ascends, then shut my eyes as his door closes.

Being a hole for men to use is all she’s good for.

Is that what he’s thought the entire time we’ve been together? That I’m just a hole for men? *For him?*

That it's all I'm good for?

I clench my jaw at the wave of emotions building inside me, but I force them down. I force myself to swallow everything that's building, because if I break, I won't ever be whole again. If I break, I'll shatter and there will be nothing left.

So I pull myself up, and, with shaky hands, reach for my panties lying discarded on the floor. My muscles tremble as I slip the fabric up my legs. My knees wobble when I make my way across the house, stopping to put my sandals on, to grab my dress and slip it over my head.

The sunlight is bright against my eyes as I pull the door open. Fresh air. That's all I need. Just for a minute.

But then my feet hit the gravel, and I begin walking. Down the long dirt road, the house at my back, Barry's water lapping in the distance.

I walk faster.

Being a hole for men to use is all she's good for.

I wipe roughly at my cheek as his words slash through me again, his cum spilling out with every step, soaking into my panties.

I begin jogging.

Faster and faster, each step takes me further away from the house, from the depravity. From Isaac.

From Roman.

My steps nearly falter.

I nearly go back.

Being a hole for men to use is all she's good for.

I run faster.

Faster.

Faster.

The wind whips at my face, my hair flying behind me in a blonde wave.

Faster.

My arms pump at my sides, my aching muscles too numb to really feel anything.

Faster.

Freedom courses through me. Or maybe it's not freedom. Maybe it's the same oppression I've always felt. Maybe I've just been pretending. Pretending that fleeting moments like this are the same as freedom.

I'm not free, though.

I've never been free.

Faster.

But with every step, I feel less like the scared little girl I've always been, and more like the woman I've always wanted to be. The woman Mama could've been if she hadn't been raised in the church, the woman I could've been if she hadn't raised me in it, too.

Free.

I want to be free.

Faster.

I run until I stop at a door. A teal door with painted blossoming flowers and animals and insects. The worn brass knocker stares back at me, mocks me, begs me to use it.

To just lift it and slam it back down.

To ask for help.

But can I?

She deals with so much on her own, I don't need to add more shit to her plate. I don't need to make my problems hers.

But she's my best friend, and I don't know what else to do. Where else to go.

My hand lifts, my breathing ragged in my shredded chest, as I wrap it around the knocker. I pull it back, and it feels monumental. It feels like everything's about to change.

It feels like freedom.

So close I can taste it.

I knock on the door, a smile barely spreading when I hear the chorus of animals begin to bark, whine and screech from the other side.

Then I hear her voice.

“Clam down, calm down,” she shouts over them. Tears fill my eyes before she opens the door, my body coiling with every step I know she's taking closer to me. “Who is it?”

I try to speak, try to tell her it's me, it's Eve, it's her best friend. But my voice fails. Nothing comes out. Why won't anything come out?

The door swings open, Oli's natural, thin blonde hair picked up in a loose bun at the top of her head. Her eyes widen as she takes me in, her pink lips parting.

"Eve," she breathes.

And that's what does it.

I break.

I crumple in front of her, falling heavily on the doorframe. But she's there. She's there. *She's there.*

Her arms wrap around me as she drags me inside, shooing her babies away as she leads me to the goat-eaten couch. I sink on to it, for once not caring about the chaos of her house.

"Eve," she says again, cautiously. "What happened?" She crouches in front of me, her hands braced on my knees.

"I can't—I can't be there anymore," I cry, shaking my head. I wrap my arms around myself, forcing myself smaller. "I can't be around them."

"Okay." She doesn't probe further. She doesn't tell me I'm being dramatic or that they're my family. She doesn't try to convince me to calm down or to go back.

Just, okay.

Okay.

Because it is okay. Or it will be, one day.

“They just—they used me and—” I cut myself off.

“Roman?” she murmurs, and I nod, wiping my eyes with the side of my hand. But it wasn’t Roman that hurt me so badly. His betrayal, his lack of caring about me, hurt. It stung.

But it was Isaac.

It was his words, the *truth* in them, the brutality of his touch.

“I can’t be there,” I say again.

“Then you won’t be there.” She says it with so much finality that I believe it. I look up at her, my vision blurry from my tears.

“I don’t know where to go, Oli,” I sob. “I don’t know what to do.” She grips my hand tightly, a small smile curling her lips.

“I do.” Her smile widens, turning feline. “*We go to Mammoth.*”

Sanctification

**You were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord, Jesus Christ. And by the spirit of our God -
Corinthians 6:11**

3:50 Eve

“Are you sure about this?” I murmur, my voice raspy. I can’t remember the last time I spoke. Oli didn’t make me talk the entire drive here, she just let me stare out the window silently. But now that we’re here, I need to pull myself together.

Her eyes narrow as she shoots me a look. One I know means she thinks that was a stupid question. Her mouth opens, but before she can speak, a loud *quack* fills the air, followed by a sharp tug on the bag strapped over my shoulder.

“Um,” I croak, pulling the fabric from the goat’s teeth. “I think Potato’s hungry.”

The duck *quacks* again.

The chicken *clucks*.

Robert *hisses*.

The goat nibbles on my thigh and I swear I hear a tiny *squeak* from the carrier at Oli’s feet.

It's been like this since we left Divinity and I wish I had it in me to laugh at the chaos, but I don't. I have nothing left besides bone-deep exhaustion and all I can think about is sleeping.

“Where are they?” she mutters to herself, ignoring me.

The animal pulls harder and its beady little eyes are daring me to tattle. My gaze flicks to Oli, finding her digging through her silver metallic backpack. The buttons and pins glimmer in the hall light and her rainbow-colored keychain with text written on it captures my attention.

Think Happy.

My throat burns and I look away.

If only it were that easy.

“Ah ha!” she cries, yanking a set of keys from her bag and holding them above her head like a trophy.

Seconds later, the door clicks open and Oli bursts through it like she owns the place. The birds come tumbling in after her in a jumbled mess of leashes and bags. I trudge forward, Potato at my side.

“Mama's home, bitches!” She kicks the door shut with the heel of her combat boot, emphasizing her battle cry.

I gape at her, my cheeks burning as I try to disappear behind a massive potted plant that looks like it belongs outside. I peek through the leaves, taking in the loft. Shock washes over me.

This is where Roman lives?

From the outside, it looks like a huge industrial warehouse in the center of Mammoth. It fits in with the urban downtown, blending in with surrounding buildings, hiding in plain sight. I had no idea it was a home until I was dragged through the halls and up to the top floor.

With brick walls, dark stained floors, and floor-to-ceiling windows, it looks more fitting of a magazine spread than a bachelor pad. The floating loft with a metal railing that's suspended over the living room is one of the coolest things I've ever seen. I twist my hands together, itching to explore, but I stay rooted to the spot.

I'm surprised by how pretty it is. The decorations are dark and masculine, but with the uncovered windows and insane amount of houseplants, it doesn't feel oppressive.

It feels *warm*.

It feels like a home.

“Go on, babies,” Oli coos, pulling my attention from the loft and back to her. She unstraps Robert from his baby carrier on her chest and sets him on the floor. “Make yourselves at home.”

He takes a hesitant sniff of the concrete beneath his creepy toes and wiggles excitedly, his red crocheted sweater shifting with the movement.

I bite my lip.

Christ, even the possum is happy.

Just as Oli's freeing the birds from their leashes, a door slams somewhere in the house. Feet thud against the floor and from my place behind the plant, I watch as Chase slides across the slick surface in nothing but boxers and socks.

"Woah!" Oli shouts, shielding her eyes with a gag. "Cover yourself, Chase! I don't want to see your wang-a-lang!"

"If you don't want to see my *wang-a-lang*, don't barge into my house at midnight!" he bellows back, hands flailing in the air. "Why are you—*holy shit*. Is that a duck? Oh my god, it is! Your duck is shitting on my new rug! It's from Anthropology, Olive!"

I take in their bickering from my hiding spot, thankful for the black hoodie and leggings Oli let me borrow. Something bumps my leg and I glance down, seeing the pygmy goat munching on the plant happily.

"It's not my fault you spend your riches on stupid junk!" she shouts back, her hands flailing blindly in the air, looking so much like Chase, it's almost funny. "If you don't want him to shit on your rug, don't get a rug!"

Chase gapes at her, his mouth opening and closing repeatedly. It makes my lip twitch and I briefly consider stepping out from behind the plant and being the brave woman my parents raised me to be. Before I can, another sound sends me shrinking further into the shadows.

"What the hell is going on out here?" a deep voice grunts seconds before the biggest man I've ever seen ambles from the

hall. He's covered in tattoos from nearly head to toe, but all I see is the giant dick barely concealed by his boxer briefs.

Holy shit, that's insane.

I think I gasp, but the sound is covered up by my best friend. Oli screams, dropping her hands as she darts forward, tossing her body over the carrier.

“Cover your eyes, Cheddar! There's a python in the room!” She turns her furious gaze toward her brother. “What the hell is this, Chase? A brothel? Don't you know how triggering this could be for him after what he's been through?”

The giant man comes to a stop, his dark eyes taking in the scene, completely uncaring that they're both practically naked. He runs a big paw through his long beard, his brows furrowing. His dark hair is pulled back in a knot. There are grey strands gathering around his temple and streaking his beard.

“I—I can explain,” Chase starts, his eyes widening. He glances up at the man, then back to Oli. He looks so panicked, so unlike himself, I almost laugh. “It's not what it looks like.”

“Oh, yeah?” she snaps back. “So it's not you getting dicked-down by a giant Russian with a firehose for a cock?”

Her brother sucks in a shocked breath, bringing a palm to his chest. “Olive Madeline Tanner! Who taught you to speak like that?”

She chuckles, rolling her eyes. “You, silly.”

He drops his hand and smirks with a shrug. “Yeah, probably.”

The big man says nothing, and it’s then that I realize he’s intently focused on *me*. I swallow thickly as I contemplate making an escape for the front door.

“Come out, Eve,” he commands before I can move, his voice laced with something I can’t place. My throat bobs.

How does he know who I am?

Chase’s head snaps up from where he was having a hushed argument with Oli about the contents of her carrier. “What? Eve’s here?”

Fuck.

Rolling my shoulders back, I let the goat lead me into the light. It takes everything I have to keep my head held high when all I want to do is run and hide.

“Jesus fucking Christ!” Chase shouts, stumbling back a step. He points an accusing finger at Potato, then to the animals surrounding him, saving me for last. “What the hell is this?”

Oli shrugs and drops to her knees, petting the duck like a puppy. “It’s giving *surprise*, don’t you think?” She flashes him a wry grin, her eyes sparkling with mischief only Oli is capable of.

I bite my cheek to stifle an unexpected laugh. I don’t think she knows how to use the saying properly.

Chase shoots her a glare and stomps his foot, his arms flying above his head, making his boxers shift. I look away. “No, Olive. It’s *giving* Noah’s Arc!” He shakes his head. “Nu-uh. I’m not doing this two-by-two shit. Get them out. This isn’t a farm.”

As if to disagree, Robert dashes forward and winds himself around the big man’s meaty legs, circling his ankles. The guy rumbles deep in his chest and lifts his leg, shaking the creature off.

“Your cat is ugly,” he grunts, shooting Oli a pissed-off look. “Why’s it wearing a sweater?”

“Because he’s cold, obviously.” She huffs, rolling her eyes. “And that’s not a cat. That’s my marsupial.”

“I don’t care what it is. Get it away from me.”

She sighs and crawls across the floor, bundling Robert into her arms before dropping onto her haunches to slide him into his harness. When she’s done, her eyes fly up and land right on...

“Stop staring at Kon’s dick!” Chase cries, shoving the man, *Kon*, back a step.

Meanwhile, I’m letting myself shrink further and further into the darkness clawing at my soul.

Kon? Like Roman’s boss, Kon?

Tugging on the hoodie, I gnaw on my lip. This isn’t what I wanted. I didn’t want to be surrounded by Roman. His people, his home, his scent. I didn’t want chaos or three sets of eyes

locked on me with varying expressions. I don't want questions or to talk.

I just want to sleep without thoughts of everything that happened earlier today. Without thoughts of Roman and, and...

"Anyway," Oli drawls as she climbs to her feet. "We're staying here for a while so you both might want to, you know," she breaks off, giving a pointed look at their bodies before gagging, "consider pants and maybe earplugs."

Chase grimaces and snatches a throw pillow from an armchair. His eyes flit to mine for a split second before he covers himself, his cheeks red. "Why do *we* need to wear earplugs?" he grumbles, his gaze floating around the room, never staying on me longer than a second.

"For the duck. Goose gets rowdy at night. I think it has to do with his trauma."

"I'm not even going to ask," Kon sighs, taking a step away. "I'm going back to bed."

Chase absently bobs his head, their interaction too familiar to be a one-time thing. Kon lingers a moment, his eyes narrowed on me, his face etched with questions. Luckily, he decides not to voice any of them and grumbles a half-hearted *goodnight* before disappearing from the room on silent feet.

"I guess you can stay," Chase mutters, still looking beyond uncomfortable. I scuff my foot on the ground, feeling equally weird.

Maybe I should have just stayed home.

Was I just overreacting?

Isaac's words still hurt, and Roman's one-upping game with his father still stings. But...was it *that* bad?

I could've gotten over it. Right?

Oli tosses her head back, laughing. The sound pulls me from my thoughts, and I blink as she slaps Chase on his six—no *eight* pack.

“It's funny you think you had a choice in the matter, big bro.” Her eyes find mine over her shoulder. “Come on, bitchpants. I'll show you to Roman's room.”

“*No!*” Chase and I shout at the same time. Our gazes collide and for the first time tonight, I think we might be on the same page. Swallowing, I search the room for what I'm looking for and point to a pretty suede couch. “The sofa's fine. I don't need anything special. I'm just tired.”

I fold my arms over my chest, fighting the urge to completely curl in on myself when he finally takes me in. His head tilts to the side, his blue eyes narrowing to thin slits, no doubt assessing my red, swollen eyes, messy hair, and random clothes that are nothing like my usual style.

Chase heaves a sigh and nods. “The couch in the loft is way more comfortable and no—“ He breaks off, his jaw tensing, and I wonder if the words he left unspoken are *no one's fucked on it*.

Then, I wonder if the *no one* he's referring to is Roman. Before I can spiral all over again, Chase picks up Oli's assortment of bags and leashes and spins on his heel.

"Go get settled, Eve. I'll be back with blankets. Oli and I need to have a little chat."

My best friend cackles and shoots me a wink before skipping away, her flock of animals right behind her.

The second they're gone, my shoulders slump and my body caves in on itself.

I'm not even halfway up the loft stairs before the first tear slides down my cheek.



"Seriously, Chase?" Oli shouts, shooting to her feet as she points an accusatory finger at Kon. "Are you really going to let your boyfriend kick your nephew?"

Kon grumbles something under his breath but ignores the chaos around him as he continues to plate eggs while carefully dodging Robert's unrelenting affections.

"First of all, Kon isn't kicking Robert, but if you're that worried, put him in his playpen." Chase points to the next-level setup that appeared sometime between last night and

when I woke up this morning. It's kind of adorable, to be honest. "And second," he crosses his arms over his chest, thankfully covered by a blue t-shirt today, "Kon isn't my boyfriend."

My eyes flick to Kon just in time to see him stiffen, but he shakes it off almost immediately.

"Oh, that's right," she murmurs, her lips tipping up in a slow grin that promises no one will like the next words from her mouth. "He's your *daddy*."

Chase gapes at her and Kon mutters something in Russian. Cackling, she drops to her chair and turns to me with a wink.

Sighing, I wrap my fingers around the cup of coffee Chase wordlessly handed me a few minutes ago, the ceramic hot against my skin. I spin the white and black polka dot cup around, my fingers skimming the uneven surface. My stomach drops when I see the large yellow smiley face staring back at me, mocking me, *laughing* at me.

I push the cup away.

God, it's like the happy is following me.

Kon gives me a weird look as he sets a plate in front of me. My smile is just as fake as the one on the cup as I murmur my thanks and quickly look away.

I barely slept last night. Between the fits of restlessness and anxiety, there were bouts of heartbreak that had silent tears pooling on my pillow.

I didn't break. Not yet. Maybe never.

But If I do—if I let the full weight of what happened yesterday sink in, their betrayal, the sound of Isaac’s voice, the hatred in Roman’s eyes, their brutality. If I let it all in, I don’t think I’ll ever be able to go back.

And I have to go back.

Right?

“What is she doing?” The quiet, deep rumble of Kon’s voice pulls me from my thoughts and I find my eggs half-stabbed to death. A flash of a memory of Roman and I weeks ago when he’d said something similar pulses through me, but before I can let myself dwell in it, Chase distracts me.

His head snaps up and whips to Kon, whose gaze is thankfully not on me. I follow his line of sight at the same moment Chase does. Against my will, a smile tugs on the edges of my lips.

“Come on, little baby. Eat for Mommy. That’s it. Open up for the train,” Oli coos. “No, no, no, Goose. Don’t eat Robert’s eggs. You have your own!”

She’s got the duck, the chicken, and Robert all lined up in a row. The goat’s sitting a few paces behind them, silently observing everyone. I have no idea where the mouse is, but judging by the way Oli’s sweatshirt pocket keeps bouncing around, I have an idea.

“What?” Chase asks, a wide, adoring smile etched across his face. He blinks slowly and turns to Kon with a shrug. “She’s feeding them breakfast.”

Kon's eyes narrow as she waves a fork of scrambled eggs through the air and into the chicken's waiting beak while making airplane noises.

His mouth drops open, then closes, before opening again. Meanwhile, my heart rate picks up at the confused but calculating expression on his face.

Oh, no.

“Does she not know?” he drawls. Oli pauses mid *zoom*. My head shakes, but it's not enough to stop in the incoming tragedy. “Feeding them eggs is cannibalism. That's fucked up.”

Chase gasps. I make some sort of noise between a choke and a gag. But Olive goes glacial. Like a scene from a horror movie, she slowly turns to Kon, her face drawn tight in an unreadable expression.

“What do you mean?” she mutters, her voice colder than I've ever heard.

Kon shoves a heaping bite of hash browns into his mouth before jabbing his fork toward the chicken. His little clipped beak is struggling around his food, but he looks happy. A far cry from how Oli found him a few months ago.

“You do know where eggs come from, right?” he asks, lifting his brows, and my knee bobs. “The chicken's eating its children.” The room goes silent.

Oli turns to stone, her brows dipping an inch. Her eyes flit from me, to Chase, to Kon, to the animals, then back to her

brother.

“What *exactly* do you mean?”

Chase shoots up, knocking his chair to the floor behind him. “Nothing!” he cries, shaking his head. “He’s joking.” He smacks the big man’s shoulder hard enough for the sound to echo off the walls, but Kon barely moves an inch. “Aren’t you? Tell her you’re kidding.”

“I’m not—” Kon starts, but Chase slaps a hand over his mouth, silencing him.

“It’s the only protein I can get her to eat,” he hisses. “Shut the hell up.”

Kon glares up at the other man and bats his hand away but says nothing else. Instead, he huffs and stabs his own eggs so hard, I’m worried about the plate’s safety.

“What’s he talking about, Chase?” Oli asks again, her voice full of an innocence that makes my heart ache. She’s not stupid or uneducated, but the world she chooses to live in is a safer one hand-crafted by those who love her. “You said the eggs came from a vegan farm in Canada.”

I swallow thickly, suddenly finding my coffee incredibly interesting. Kon makes a sound of irritation around his fork before murmuring something in Russian.

“So many farms,” he grunts. “Can’t keep ‘em straight.”

Her head cocks to the side, excitement lighting up her pretty baby blues. “There are more farms?”

Kon chuckles and takes a deep drink of coffee. He juts his chin at Chase. “Ask him.”

I swear her brother is seconds from passing out. He scratches at his jaw and swallows thickly. “Yeah, of course.” His head bobs. “Lots of farms. So many farms.” He snaps his fingers. “Like the one in California. The mouse one.”

Oli gasps and her fork clatters to the floor. “They eat the mice there?” she screeches. “You said it was a sanctuary. Not a farm!”

“Sanctuary!” he cries, nodding wildly, sounding panicked. “Yeah, it’s on the beach and everything.” I watch him disintegrate faster than should be humanly possible. He rakes a hand through his short blond hair. “They have dieticians and doctors.” She beams at his words and he snatches onto her happiness like a life raft, his lies growing more animated by the second. “Yoga and surf instructors, too!”

“Oh, for fucks sake,” Kon mutters under his breath.

“Therapists, too, right?” she asks, cuddling the mouse to her chest. I cringe, leaning back in my chair as it turns its beady little eyes on me.

He gulps. “Therapists?”

He sounds so lost and worried. I’d feel bad for him, but he put himself in this position.

She bobs her head, running a finger down the white ball’s head. “For the trauma.”

Chase bites his lip, his sharp jaw pulsing wildly. “Of course.”

Oli grins, leaning in with excitement. “Tell me more.”

“*More?*” he chokes out, his face paling. He gives me a pleading look, but I just shrug. He flips me off and I barely stifle a laugh before it slips free. I tuck my smiling lips between my teeth and send a silent *thank you* to whoever’s listening when my phone chooses that exact second to go off.

He continues to weave the web that’ll inevitably hang him as I slide my phone from the pocket of my borrowed hoodie. All the humor and lightness I’d finally found disappears like it was never there.

Isaac.

My eyes burn and I blink rapidly as I silence the call and shove my phone back into my pocket. I hadn’t heard from either of them since I left, and I’d been thankful for it.

I *am* thankful for it.

What would I even say?

Part of me is worried I overreacted. It’s the same part that knows Roman and Isaac care about me. That they’d never do anything to hurt me, not intentionally. They’d been lost to the moment, in the intensity of it all, their hurt and anger for each other.

I’d been caught in the middle.

Like always.

But they love me.

And I know they do.

They have to. Otherwise, what was it all for? Why would they string me along? Just for the fun of it? To watch me fall? To hurt me?

Even when Roman was gone, I know he loved me. Maybe not the way he should have or used to, but he *did* love me. Because I loved him. Maybe I still do. Maybe I'll never stop.

And Isaac has always put me first. Always made sure I had food to eat and a house to live in. Always took me under his wing and made sure I was safe and healthy.

But a bigger part of me knows that despite all that, they still hurt me. They still used me, ignored me, forgot about me. They didn't stop. Even when I was begging Roman, and trying to get away from Isaac, *they didn't stop.*

And that's what breaks my heart the most.

A hand on my forearm shakes me from my thoughts, and I choke on the air in my lungs. I look up to find all three of them staring at me.

God, I just want to disappear.

"You okay?" Oli murmurs, her eyes soft and open, ready for anything I'll say or need, just like always.

I take a deep breath, pushing away the crushing pain deep in my chest and nod, plastering another fake grin on my face. "Everything's fine."

Chase gives me a sympathetic smile. “That’s good.”

“It’s bullshit,” Kon scoffs.

I jolt in my seat, my head snapping to face him. I don’t even know Kon but the vitriol, the disgust in his dark eyes as he glares at me, is enough to have me withering in my seat.

“What?” I breathe, my voice low and confused.

He shakes his head, his bearded jaw tensing. He points an accusatory finger at me, his lip curling. “You’re not fine.” His accent is heavy with his irritation, but I understand him clearly enough.

My mouth goes dry as he takes me in, his gaze all too knowing.

I know what he sees. The borrowed black clothes, the same as last night. My hair is no doubt a mess, my eyes red-rimmed, worse than before from lack of sleep. How twitchy and off-kilter I feel.

But it’s what’s *deeper* that he sees and hates. The things I’m desperately trying to hide from everyone, including myself.

The disappointment, the loneliness, the humiliation.

Whore.

Being a hole for men to use is all she’s good for.

Use her.

Hurt her.

She likes it rough.

My eyes sting again, and I dig my nails into my thighs beneath the table. My muscles are locked up, ready to run, to hide, but I stay still, staring him down. This stranger, this man I don't know. This man who Roman cares about, his friend.

His family, he'd said.

"Look at you," he grunts, and I swear there's disappointment in his voice. It shouldn't be there. He doesn't deserve to feel that way about me. But he does, and it leaves me gaping. "Why did you run from him?"

My eyes flit between his, my heart jack hammering in my chest. I don't know who he's talking about, and that makes me nauseous.

Roman or Isaac?

I can't ask him that, though. I can't even speak. So I say nothing.

Kon huffs a laugh and shakes his head. "Selfish."

"Kon," Chase starts, shooting me a wary glance. "That's unnecessary."

My feet bob against the ground as I war with myself. To run, or to stay? Run or stay? Run or—

"It's necessary," Kon snaps, his palm colliding with the table. I jump and Oli grabs my hand, squeezing it tightly. "Who will say something if not me? She needs to be held accountable for her actions. For the hurt she causes."

I bat away a tear that sneaks through my lashes as anger replaces my confusion. Who the hell is this guy?

“You have no idea what you’re talking about,” I rasp. “No idea.”

His brows furrow as he leans back in his chair and crosses his arms over his thick chest. “Did you not make a mistake and run like a scared little girl instead of handling things like an adult? Instead of suffering the consequences of your actions as you should have? Did your choices not hurt people?”

Everything inside of me is burning, *throbbing*. It’s like a sickness in my chest, in my soul, and I can’t get rid of it. I can’t shake off the filth that clings to my skin. I can’t wash away the stain of my past.

Marcus.

Mama.

Isaac.

Roman.

Camming.

Lying.

Cheating.

Maybe he’s right. Maybe I deserved what happened. I’ve been camming behind Isaac’s back, sleeping with my stepfather, messing around with my stepbrother, keeping things from the people I love most in this world while spreading my legs for strangers.

God, I did something so stupid, so reckless, I wound up getting hurt. Stalked and attacked. Assaulted and violated.

I brought danger to my sleepy hometown, to the church, to the people who find solace in that sacred space.

I did that.

What about Clover? Poor, sweet and innocent Clover was hospitalized because of *me*.

And this man, this friend of Roman's, sees it all.

Has he told him how unworthy I am?

He should. Roman deserves to know.

Maybe that's why instead of exploding in anger, I find myself nodding and saying words that feel strange on my tongue.

"You're right." I swallow acid. "It is my fault."

Chase and Oli give me incredulous looks that are so similar, I should laugh. But I can't, because my eyes are too busy filling with tears as I keep my gaze locked on Kon's, letting him see the truth written all over my face.

His dark eyes narrow, his brows dipping low as he goes still. I can tell I've caught him off guard and maybe rendered him speechless. But there's nothing left to say.

So, I call on every lesson Mama ever taught me and slowly push to my feet, silently collecting empty dishes. No one speaks as I make my way to the sink and quietly wash them.

It's not until Chase grips my shoulders and murmurs a barely audible, *it'll be okay*, that I realize I'm crying.

I bob my head and wipe my tears on my arm. He gently moves me to the side, his eyes filled with sympathy that's too much, too *nice*.

Using his chin, he points toward the living room. "Second door in the second hall. I made up the bed for you. Clean sheets." He tilts his head to the side and looks somewhere over my shoulder. "Why don't you go take a nap?"

With a brittle, painful smile, I nod, and silently disappear, wishing with everything I have that maybe this time, I'll stay that way.

3:51 Eve

Someone jostles me, grumbling something in a language I don't understand. I swat at their hand, but their grip tightens. "Get up," the heavily accented voice growls.

I crack an eye open, noticing the ceiling that's not my ceiling first. Then the giant, tattooed, bearded man looming over me.

I jolt upright, shoving him away.

My heart is in my throat, and I press my hand to my chest. "Jesus Christ," I breathe, glaring at him. "What time is it?"

"Seven," he grunts. "Up. We have shit to do. Get dressed."

"What?"

But he doesn't answer me. He's already at the door—at Roman's door. I look around the room again, letting myself truly take it in for the first time. I'd been too out of it when Chase sent me here yesterday and judging by the time, I slept all day and night.

Black sheets, black comforter, black pillow cases. Clothes are strewn around the closet where black t-shirts are hanging. Two bookshelves, both dark wood, are overflowing with books.

And the smell...

It's so completely, totally Roman it makes my throat close up.

Where is he?

I shove the thought away as I slip from his bed, ignoring the need to snoop, to get to know him outside of Divinity. Instead, I stumble out of the room and down the hallway.

Kon is sitting on the couch, making it look way too small under him, as he rests his elbows on his knees, his phone in his hand as he scrolls. Robert snakes through his legs like he's a cat, and even though Kon looks annoyed, he's letting Robert do it. His eyes flick to me before returning to the screen.

"Is that what you're wearing?"

"Where are we going?" I groan, rubbing my eye with my fist. He lets out a long breath as he sets his phone on the coffee table in front of him.

"I'm teaching you how to drive," he finally says, looking at me. "Get dressed or you're going like that."

"But—"

"It's a skill everyone needs to know." His voice is so deep, so accented, so terrifying. I nod, swallowing thickly. We stare

at each other for a long moment, and I shuffle back a step.

“How do you even know I can’t drive?” I ask, and he shakes his head like it’s a stupid question.

“Doesn’t matter. I know you can’t. I’m teaching you.”

“But you hate me,” I blurt. There’s a tic by his eye as he glares at me.

“I do not hate you,” he grinds out. “I hate that you’ve hurt my friend. But if he can forgive you, so can I.”

I blink.

If he can forgive me?

“You’ve talked to Roman?” The words come out before I can stop them. His jaw tenses under his thick beard, and I think he’s not going to answer me, but then he dips his chin in a slight nod.

“Been texting him.” He waves his fingers at his phone. “He’s sorry, too.” I wrap my arms around myself as I take a deep breath.

“We’re driving?” I mumble, ignoring his words. Kon gives me a strange look, then another firm nod. “Where?”

“Dressed.” He points a thick finger at the hallway behind me. I hesitate. I don’t have clothes. I need to borrow an outfit from Oli. Shit. There’s no telling what she packed.

“Coffee—oh, you’re up.” My gaze snaps to Chase as he walks into the living room, holding a mug. It takes me all of five seconds to take in the rest of him, and my eyes widen.

He's shirtless with an apron on that says *Kiss the Influencer*. His head tilts to the side as we stare at each other. "You agreed?"

"I didn't have much of a choice," I mumble, shooting Kon an accusatory look. But he doesn't look apologetic in the least.

Chase opens his mouth to say something, but I turn on my heel, not wanting to entertain anyone anymore.

No more fake smiles.

No more pretending I care.

No more.

I slump away from Kon and Chase, leaving them in a hushed conversation, no doubt regretting their choice of letting such a sad, pathetic girl stay with them.

My stomach twists as I knock on Oli's door. Immediately, I'm met with the sounds of a duck screeching, and I shut my eyes, taking a deep breath.

Chaos.

My life is chaos.

Oli yanks the door open, her wig lopsided and her giant night shirt tucked into a pair of fishnet leggings. Her eyes are wide as she stands there, gaping at me.

"What?" she breathes, looking past me. "Is Potato okay?" She stumbles into the hallway, one sock on.

“He’s fine,” I say, shoving her back into her room. It’s painted a pale purple, posters cover the walls, and the bedspread is the same pink she has at home, covered in a million squishies. “Apparently, Kon’s teaching me to drive today and I need clothes.”

“Oh, yeah. He said he was going to do that.” She turns her back on me and moves to her pile of clothes on her bed. Waving her arms at it, she grins. “Have at it, gigglepuss.”

I blink at her.

“Gigglepuss?”

“Because you’re so giggly.” She winks at me before twirling her finger in the air. “Turn around and cover your eyes. Mama’s gettin’ naked.”

“Jesus.” With a groan, I slap my hand over my eyes and turn my back to her. She grunts a few times, stumbling into things, and I almost glance over my shoulder to make sure she’s alright. But I value my life and I know she’d be pissed if I looked. “So, you knew about Kon?”

“About Kon?” she repeats. “Yeah. Why wouldn’t I know about him? He’s Roman’s boss.”

“Yep. And?”

“And?”

“And Chase’s boyfriend, apparently.” Oli cackles, and I shake my head.

“I can’t believe he has a boyfriend,” she mutters. “So slutty of him.”

“Is it?” I murmur, then shake my head. “No, I meant you knew Kon was going to teach me how to drive?”

“Oh, that? Yeah. Chase really reamed him last night for being a dick to you. Think this is his way of apologizing.”

“Good to know.” I tilt my head from side to side, trying to loosen the tight muscles in my shoulders. “Can I look now?”

“What?”

“Oli,” I groan. “Please.”

“I’ve been dressed for like ten minutes,” she says slyly. “I don’t know why you’re still facing that way.”

Lord help me.

Turning around, I find her fully dressed in one of her usual outfits. She waves at the pile of clothes again as she sinks onto the bed and pulls her laptop onto her lap.

Without a word, I start going through the clothes, trying to find something, anything, that’ll work. But everything is brightly colored, ripped, covered in sequins or words. None of it’s my style.

But maybe that’s what I need.

To be so far removed from who I am, who I was in Divinity.

Pulling out a hot pink t-shirt that says *Hotter Than Your Grandpa*, I snort to myself. Taking my shirt off, I toss it on the bed before slipping the new one over my head.

I keep digging through the pile until I find denim shorts and slip those on. It's not the best outfit I've ever worn, but it'll have to do.

Glancing at Oli, ready to show off my clothes, I pause. Her brows are bunched tightly together as her eyes flit over the screen. "What's wrong?" I breathe, worry coiling tightly in my stomach. "Oli?"

"I can't believe him," she mutters so quietly I almost don't hear her. "I can't—Chase!" Grabbing her laptop, she leaps off the bed and strides out of the room. "Chase Joseph Tanner!"

Oh, shit.

My eyes widen as I hurry after her, finding her soaring through the loft, her tiny body full of anger. "Chase!" she screams again, and I sprint after her.

I come to an abrupt stop in the kitchen, finding Chase's eyes wide as he holds a foil-wrapped sandwich in one hand, a to-go cup in the other. "What is it?" He frantically scans his sister.

"There's no such thing as a mouse resort in California!" Oli cries.

Chase's eyes widen even more. "What? Yes, it—"

"I looked it up! It doesn't exist." She sets the laptop on the counter and spins it toward him. She points an accusatory finger at it. "*It. Doesn't. Exist!*"

"Oli," Chase starts, stumbling forward a step.

"Don't *Oli* me!" she screeches, the sound making me wince.

I glance at Kon, finding his eyebrows raised as he flicks his eyes between the Tanner's. He brings his mug to his lips and takes a sip before looking at me.

He notices me staring, and quickly looks away, but does a double-take, his eyes dropping to my shirt. His lips twitch before he shakes his head, looking at Chase and Oli again.

"I—I swear—" Chase tries to speak, but Oli lets out a huff and turns on her heel, her purple hair flying behind her.

"Just tell her—"

"Shut it," Chase growls at Kon. Kon's brows raise again; even I'm taken aback at Chase's tone. He takes a deep breath before looking at me, plastering a pleasant expression on his face. "Here's your—oh my God. Your shirt." I glance down at myself, feeling self-conscious. "I love it."

"Oh," I breathe, my face turning red. "It's Oli's." He lets out a low chuckle, shaking his head as he moves toward me.

Holding the sandwich and cup out, I hesitantly take it, glancing at Kon again. "What's this?"

"Breakfast sandwich," he says cheerily. "Gave one to Daddy Kon, too." He winks at the giant Russian, and I almost expect him to growl, or scold Chase. Instead, he just sighs, but there's a gleam in his eye, one that tells me he's not all that annoyed.

"These better not be that Fakeun shit," Kon grumbles, and Chase gasps.

"I'd never feed you fake bacon," he says, offended.

“You made me eat that foam shit at that place—”

“And I’ve apologized a million times for it,” Chase groans.
“And I bought you a burger.”

“Still hated it,” Kon mumbles under his breath before muttering something in Russian.

“Hey. I resent that.”

“You speak Russian?” I blurt, and Chase winks at me. My lips twitch as Kon grunts, his face still too serious. “So, bacon sandwiches?”

“Better be real bacon,” Kon growls as he storms past me. I shuffle to the side, letting him pass.

Jeez, the big guy likes his bacon.

“It’s turkey bacon. But don’t tell him.” I shake my head as Chase slings the apron off over his head and tosses it on the counter. “I need to check on her.”

“Yeah,” I agree.

We stand awkwardly in the middle of the kitchen, and Chase clears his throat. “Well. Anyway, have fun.”

I press my lips together in a tight smile as I nod. “You too.” He hesitates before hurrying past me, making sure to not touch me.

With a deep breath, I grip the things in my hands tighter before turning toward the door. Kon is waiting for me, his sandwich already half eaten. “Come.”

I follow him from the loft and down the steps to the parking lot. He leads me to an old truck, and I pause. “I can’t drive this.”

His brow kicks up. “Why not?”

“Because—” I don’t have a good excuse. I just don’t want to. I don’t know Kon, and I can’t get behind the wheel of *his* car. What if I crash? Or what if I do something to ruin it? I can’t afford to buy him a new truck, or fix whatever I broke. “Because it’s too big.”

Kon snorts as he unlocks the truck and jerks his chin toward it. Anxiety swirls in my stomach as he slides into the passenger seat, his face passive as he waits for me.

Resigned, I pull open the driver door and slip inside. Setting the coffee in the cup holder, the sandwich and my phone on the bench seat between us, I slide my eyes to the gearshift, then to the floorboard where the pedals are.

“This is the gear—”

My phone rings, interrupting him, and I jolt at the sound. Reaching for it, my stomach bottoms out as I read the name.

Isaac.

Pressing *ignore*, I set the phone back down and give Kon a guilty smile.

“Gearshift,” I finish. He roughly clears his throat as he nods. “And pedals.” I point to them and he nods again.

“What else do you know?” He leans back, watching me. My eyes flick to him before I look around again.

“Radio.” I point at it, and I feel him tense. “Seatbelt.” I grab it and slide it over my chest, the click locking it into place loud in the tiny cab. “That’s it.”

“That’s all?” he repeats. I take a deep breath as I nod.

“You probably think I’m an idiot for not knowing how to drive,” I mutter, dropping my head.

“How can I think that?” His voice is low, almost comforting. “It’s not your fault you were never taught. You can’t be blamed for your shortcomings.” I wince, his words hitting me right in the chest.

Shortcomings.

That’s exactly what it is. Being twenty and not knowing how to drive? Pathetic.

“I could’ve taught myself,” I murmur, and he clears his throat, shifting in his seat.

“You could have.” I look at him from the corner of my eye, shocked he agreed with me. “Or your parents could’ve taught you.”

“Or Roman,” I breathe. As soon as his name leaves my lips, I wish it hadn’t.

“It wasn’t his responsibility.” Again, his words hurt. But instead of only making me realize just how sorry my life is, they piss me off.

“But he could’ve helped. He could’ve done something—”

“He was a kid, just like you were,” he interrupts, his face hard. “Your mother and stepfather should’ve—”

“My mother was a *great* mother,” I snap, and he dips his chin.

“I didn’t say she wasn’t.”

We stare at each other, my chest heaving, my throat tight. “She did her best,” I continue. “And she died when I was sixteen. She wasn’t around to teach me.”

“So who did that leave?” His voice is steady, his face calm as he stares back at me.

Isaac.

It left Isaac.

And he didn’t teach me. He didn’t do a lot of things.

“He did his best, too,” I mutter, dropping my burning eyes. Kon grunts out a breath, sounding like he wants to say more but doesn’t.

I know he doesn’t believe my words. I barely believe them. Isaac could’ve tried harder. He could’ve done more. Instead, he made me help him at the church, take over for Mama in every way I could.

I squeeze my eyes shut.

Being a hole for men to use is all she’s good for.

Is that what Mama went through, too? Is that what he thought of her? How he treated her?

My stomach rolls at the thought of my mother, my sweet mother, being subjected to Isaac's words, to his depravity. I wipe roughly at my face before taking a deep breath.

Later.

I'll deal with everything later.

Not in front of Kon. Not when I'm about to drive.

I glance at him, finding him carefully watching me. "Gearshift," I rasp, resting my hand on it. He clears his throat as he nods, scooting slightly closer.

"Here are the keys. Do you know how to start it?"

"Put the key in and turn?" His lips twitch under his full beard.

"Right foot on the break, left on the clutch." He tips his chin toward the pedals at my feet, and my stomach twists with newfound anxiety.

Scooting to the edge of the seat, I press my feet on the pedals, watching him from the corner of my eye. He nods a few times, moving closer. "Now, put the key in."

My phone rings, and he lets out a frustrated breath. I glance at it, seeing it's Isaac again, and press *ignore*.

"Sorry," I breathe, but he shakes his head.

"It's fine." But it doesn't sound fine. His accent is thicker, and his body is coiled tighter.

"Keys?" I mutter, and he bobs his head, holding them out. My hand shakes as I reach for them, and it takes me three tries

before I can get the metal to slide into the hole. “Good. Now move to first gear.” I look at him like he’s crazy, and he cracks an almost-smile.

“Like this.” He grabs my hand, resting it on the gearshift before placing his over mine. He shifts our hands, and the truck shakes slightly. I inhale sharply, giving him a frantic look. “It’s okay. Ease off the break and move to the gas.”

“But—”

“You’ve got it,” he says, his tone leaving no room for argument. And, for some stupid reason, if Kon believes I’ve got it, *I’ve got it*.

I do as he instructed, my hands tight around the wheel and gearshift. “Good, Eve. Good. Now, ease off the clutch as you press down on the gas.”

With a deep breath, I do it. There’s the tiniest bit of friction, then the car begins rolling forward. “Oh my God!” I cry, and he finally lets out a soft chuckle, his hand tightening on mine.

“You’re doing it,” he laughs. “See? I knew you could.”

“I’m driving,” I breathe, shaking my head. My eyes burn as the car coasts slowly from the parking lot and onto an empty side road.

“We’re going to shift into second,” he says. “Ready?” I nod, not taking my eyes off the road. We’re barely going fifteen-miles-per-hour, but it feels like I’m flying.

Free.

“You’re going to do the opposite,” he instructs. “Ease off the gas, press on the clutch.” I concentrate as I do as he said, and he shifts our hands, the black knob digging into my palm. “Good. Good. Now, press on the gas, off the clutch.”

“How do you remember all this?” I whisper, mostly to myself.

“Once you learn, it’ll be like breathing,” he says. “So easy you can do it in your sleep.” I grin at his words.

One day, it’ll be so easy, driving will be like breathing. It’ll be just a part of who I am. It’ll be just another thing I can do.

And that spurs me on.

My phone rings again, and Kon snatches it off the seat. “Eyes on the road,” he barks. His commands startles me enough that I snap my attention to the road. “Fucker keeps calling. Can’t take no for an answer. Should’ve beat the shit out of him when I had the chance.” All the words are muttered under his breath, his accent growing thicker with each one. “He won’t bother us anymore.”

Setting my phone back on the seat, his hand finds mine over the gearshift once more, and he takes a deep breath. “We need to shift again,” he mutters, his voice still tight. But I do as he told me earlier, and he shifts for us. “Next time, you’ll shift on your own.”

“Did you text him? You didn’t say anything, did you?” I ask, worried he might’ve told him where I am.

His hand tightens over mine, and I wait with bated breath as he stares at me, his gaze burning a hole into the side of my head. “No,” he finally says. “I just shut the phone off. It was a distraction. No distractions while driving.”

I let out a relieved breath, my shoulders slumping. At least he didn't say anything. It would've been impossible to explain why this random man Isaac doesn't know had my phone, and why he's texting him.

But he didn't.

He just turned it off.

My skin begins to itch at the idea of Isaac calling and immediately getting my voicemail, knowing that my phone is off. How badly is he freaking out? Is he worried because he doesn't know where I am?

What about Roman? Is he worried? Is he okay?

The words are on my lips, but I swallow them down. I don't want to talk about it with Kon. I'm not even sure if he'd tell me the truth.

“Focus,” he scolds, and I clear my throat, blinking the thoughts away.

“I'm ready to go back,” I mutter.

His jaw ticks, but he tips his head slightly. “Turn around up here. Don't worry about shifting. Just press the pedals when I tell you to.” He lets me take my hand back and rest it on the wheel. I drive a bit further before turning around, letting Kon

control the gearshift as I drive down the deserted street until I coast back into the parking lot.

I do a terrible job parking in the same spot he was in, but he doesn't say anything. Instead, he claps me on my shoulder, nodding proudly.

"Not bad for your first time," he says. "You'll get better."

"Thanks, Kon." I give him a tight-lipped smile.

"Anytime, friend." His smile is borderline terrifying, but it weirdly soothes something inside me. "Anytime."

3:52 Eve

***D**o not exceed the posted speed limit, and adjust your speed based on weather and road conditions.*

Avoid distractions such as texting, talking on the phone, or adjusting the radio while driving.

Make sure all passengers are wearing their seatbelts at all times.

Use your mirrors frequently to check for vehicles around you and be aware of blind spots.

I rub my eyes as I yawn, dropping the book onto the bed beside me. Driver's manuals are one of the most boring things I've ever read, but I need to learn all I can before I take a driver's test. Not that it's any time soon. I need a million more driving hours. But I can still read and learn.

If my eyes can freaking stay open.

Why did I think reading this in the middle of the night would be a good idea? It's nearly impossible to stay awake.

I need to get up and get some water, or maybe do some light stretching to wake myself up. For whatever reason, since being here, I haven't been able to sleep. Not well, at least.

I don't know if it's being in Roman's room that has me on edge, or the fact that it's been days and I still haven't heard from him. I've gotten call after call, text after text, from Isaac, each one more demanding than the last. But I still haven't had the courage to reply.

And I hate to admit it, but every time my phone goes off, my heart leaps with anticipation. I want to see Roman's name on the screen. I want to hear his voice.

I miss him.

I could reach out first, but why should I? It was him who messed up, so he should fix it. He's always the one to leave, and I'm always the one to chase. But this time, it's the other way around and a part of me wants to see if he'll chase me. If he'll come after me like I went after him.

Footballs are thrown from room to room, guys yell at each other, girls squeal as they run past. Moving boxes are piled high, excited new college students are bouncing around and giving me anxiety. Everything is hectic. Chaotic.

This is where Roman lives now?

He left in the middle of the night a week ago after we buried Mama, saying he was going to school early but this...

This isn't what I was expecting.

My hands twist together, nerves tightening my stomach with every step down the loud corridor. I dodge people racing past, some looking like they're late to something, others running away from someone chasing them.

It's hard to believe this is what college is.

"Excuse me," I mutter, grabbing hold of a random guy's shirt. He pauses, an annoyed expression on his face until his eyes meet mine. Then a lazy grin spreads as he leans into me.

"Hey." He tips his chin, his gaze raking down my body. I tuck my hair behind my ear, feeling uncomfortable. "You go to school here?"

"I'm looking for someone's room," I say softly. "Can you help me?"

"Whose room you looking for, pretty girl?" He steps even closer, his strong cologne invading my senses. Heat rushes to my cheeks as I stumble backward. He chuckles, leaning his forearm on the wall above my head.

"Roman Payne's room."

My eyes flick between his dark ones. His brows bunch together.

"I don't know who that is." He shakes his head as he shrugs. "We can try to figure out where his room is if you want to come back to mine." That same sleazy smile spreads as he throws his thumb over his shoulder.

"Um. No." I'm not stupid. "Thanks anyway."

I shuffle away from him before he can say anything else, before he can move any closer.

Find Roman. That's what I came here to do.

"Hey!" the guy calls, but I wave at him over my shoulder and hurry down the hallway, scanning the doors until I find the one I'm looking for.

Chase Tanner is written on the whiteboard stuck to a door, and my heart lurches into my throat. Chase is Roman's roommate, so this has to be his room.

Can I do this?

I take a deep breath, forcing myself to calm down enough to knock. But I can't. What if he doesn't want to see me? Was he serious about never contacting him again?

He couldn't be. After everything we shared, after everything I'd given him...

Raising my hand, I tap my knuckles lightly on the wood. My stomach twists when no one answers. Maybe they're in class.

Or maybe they're ignoring me.

I knock again, a bit harder, and hold my breath as I wait. People continue running past, pushing into me and forcing me closer to the door.

Seconds pass, and disappointment blooms in my chest. He's not here.

But then the door opens, and my mouth parts. My gaze travels up long bare legs, the short hem of a Divinity Falls

Varsity t-shirt that hits her mid-thigh. Then I meet a pair of bright brown eyes. Her auburn hair is gathered to one side of her head, her lipstick smudged.

She's pretty. Gorgeous.

And she's in Roman's room.

I blink, the memory fading away and Roman's current room settling around me like a dream. Drawings cover the wall by his bed, like he spends his time sitting right here, drawing things before tacking them to the wall to remember for later. Beside the lamp, a haphazard stack of books lay on the bedside table, a long forgotten bottle of water pushed behind them.

Swinging my legs off the bed, my feet hit the wood floor, so unlike the worn slats at home. Here, it's smooth and cool, more like tile than actual wood.

Fancy.

The soft glow from the lamp illuminates the room enough for me to look around, to see the pieces of Roman I haven't had the last four years. His room is the same as it was in Divinity, covered in books and art and clothes. But here, it feels right. There, at home, it felt like a crypt of all his favorite things.

Here, his books aren't hidden away like a dirty secret, his art is proudly displayed. His room doesn't feel like a cage. It feels like a home.

His home.

Tears burn the back of my eyes as I move forward, heading straight for the bookshelves. What's he been reading? The same books he always has, or has he branched out? Are there new ones?

Books have always been the gateway into Roman's soul. They were the thing that connected us, the tether that brought us together. And right now, even though I'm still hurt by him, I need to feel close to him.

My fingertips run over the smooth wood of the bookshelf as I scan the spines. Names I've never heard of are mixed in with his favorites. There are some about tattooing, others that are so philosophical I know it'll take me reading them at least three times before I can understand what they're really saying.

My eyes scan the shelves again and again. With each pass, my heart sinks more.

Did he get rid of it?

A lump forms in my throat at the thought. He couldn't have gotten rid of it. It wasn't at home; I looked for it everywhere after he left. He *had* to have taken it.

But where is it?

Hands shaking, I turn my back to the shelves and scan the room again. Where would he keep it? My gaze lands on the stack of books by the bed and I nearly slap myself.

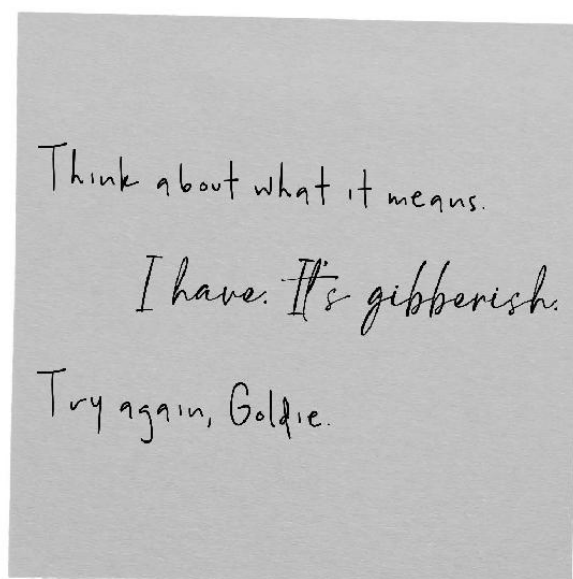
Of course.

I'm giddy as I stride across the room, my hands twisting together as I approach the books. Already, I see it. *I see it.* He didn't get rid of it. He kept it.

The Brothers Karamazov.

I pull the few books off it before holding it in my shaking hands, and sink to the bed. My fingertips trace the letters on the cover, and the tape holding the thick spine together.

Carefully, I flip it open, a sob sticking in my throat as the words we'd so carelessly written in margins stare back at me. A tear lands on the already water-logged page, but I still wipe it away. It's been well loved—damaged and taped back together, but *loved*.



Think about what it means.
I have. It's gibberish.
Try again, Goldie.

I wipe roughly at my face as I read the words, laughing softly when I remember frustratingly reading and rereading the same sentence nine million times. It didn't make sense, and as I reread it right now, it still doesn't make sense.

But it made sense to Roman. Everything always did. He could analyze things in ways I've never seen anyone else do. He's too smart for his own good, but always played it down like he was just a dumb jock. The stereotypical playboy.

He was so much more.

I gingerly flip the pages, scanning our faded words. What happened to this book? It's so ruined, so destroyed, why didn't he just get a new copy? I run my fingers along our written notes, feeling the grooves the pens made, and I smile to myself.

Did he keep it for me? So he had a way to feel close to me, too?

But I was only an hour away. Why didn't he just come home? Why didn't he just call me? Come back to me?

Why did he leave me in the first place?

The words burn through my brain, and I shut the book before sliding it back onto the nightstand. I can't handle the ghosts haunting me tonight.

With a deep, shaky breath, I make my way out of his room and down the hallway. I take in the high ceilings and tall windows, still shocked this is his home. All the years I thought about him, about where he was, I never pictured him in a place like this.

But this is where he's been, while I've been...

I round the corner into the kitchen, finding a shadow hunched over the island. A scream rips from my throat, panic

surging through me. Their head snaps up as they scream back.

“Chase?” I cry.

“Oh my God! What are you doing? Why are you screaming?” he shouts, moving to flip the light on. It momentarily blinds me, and I squint at him, finding him in a pair of low slung sweats and nothing else. “Stop checking me out!”

“I’m not!” I slap my hand over my eyes. “Oh my God, that’s so gross. You’re like my brother. I—” The thought of being with Chase like *that* has me swallowing a gag.

Footsteps stomp toward us and I slam back against the wall, knowing it has to be the giant Russian. My fingers part as he steps into the kitchen, his bare, tattooed chest rising and falling as he glares at Chase.

“I have to be up in a few hours. What are you doing? Why are you screaming?” he demands, stomping forward.

“Oh, no, please don’t worry about me. I’m fine.” Chase rests his hand on Kon’s chest, flicking his eyes up at him. “Me screaming in the middle of the night is no cause for panic.”

“That’s why I’m in here!” Kon takes a deep breath, his eyes briefly closing before he stares down at Chase. “What happened? Was there a bug again?” Chase’s face flames red as he glances at me, and my lips twitch.

He’s as dramatic as his sister.

Finally, Kon looks over his shoulder at me, and I lift my free hand in an awkward wave. “We scared each other,” I mutter,

dropping my hands to my sides. “I didn’t know he was in here and I screamed, then he screamed, and it—it was a lot.”

Kon pinches between his eyes as he sighs. “Go to bed. Both of you.”

“But I’m not tired,” I say, and Kon shoots me a look that has my mouth snapping shut.

“And I’m still busy,” Chase murmurs.

“Just make something up. Or tell her the truth,” he hisses, but Chase shakes his head as the big guy speaks.

“I’m buying it, Kon. End of story.” Kon mutters something in Russian that makes Chase grin at him.

“Be in bed in half an hour. If I have to come out here again, you won’t like it,” Kon growls. My eyes widen as Chase’s smile broadens.

“Promise?” He bats his lashes and I feel my face flush.

I should *not* be seeing this.

Kon grumbles something low enough for only Chase to hear before tapping his ass and turning on his heel. When our eyes meet, we immediately drop them to the floor as he makes his way out of the kitchen, back to their bedroom.

Or Chase’s bedroom? Wait, does Kon live here?

God. There are so many things I want to know, but will never ask.

Chase’s face is full of love and heat as he stares after the big man, and he lets out a content sigh before looking back at me.

“What are you doing in here?” he asks, dropping his gaze to the countertop. He slides onto a bar stool and pulls his laptop toward him again.

“I wanted some water,” I mumble, finally moving away from my spot on the wall. Instead of getting water, though, I stop beside him and look at the screen. “What *are* you doing?”

Resting my hand on the counter, I lean closer, my brows knitting together as I scan the website. “Don’t touch me!” Chase hisses, jerking his body away from me. I hadn’t realized I was even that close to him, and I immediately pull away.

“Sorry,” I breathe, scrunching my brows at his reaction. “What’s your deal?”

“Nothing. Just—” He scans me, his jaw tensing before he shakes his head. “Just don’t touch me.”

His attention returns to the laptop and I move around him, making sure to give him a wide berth, and grab a bottle of too-expensive water from the fridge. Twisting it open, I take a long drink, letting the cold water soothe my aching chest.

I glance at Chase, finding him already looking at me, but he quickly drops his eyes. Maybe he’s pissed I’ve invaded his place. I can understand that. I wouldn’t be excited to have my little sister, her animal-babies, and her damaged best friend as sudden houseguests.

But Chase has never been a dick to me like this.

I move forward, ready to go back to my room, but I pause beside him again, my soul aching.

Chase may not be my brother, but he might as well be. We've always been close. Since the day I met Oli, they've been a package deal. Add in the fact that he and Roman are best friends and I...

Well, I thought I meant more to Chase than whatever *this* is.

I try to swallow back the hurt, but it's impossible and I can't help the question as it leaves my mouth. "Did I do something to upset you?"

His spine stiffens as he sits up straight. "What? No."

"But you won't look at me longer than a few seconds, and when we're alone, you act like you hate me. If I did something, I'm sorry—"

"You didn't do anything," he mutters, shaking his head.

"Then what's the deal?"

I sink onto a barstool one away from him, keeping enough distance between us not to spook him again. He glances at me from the corner of his eye. "Truth for a truth," he says, and my brows lift.

"What's that mean?"

"I'll answer you, if you answer me."

My stomach twists. There's nothing about me he doesn't already know, either because of Roman or Oli, or because we've known each other for years. He knows everything.

Except the camming.

And about Isaac.

I'm assuming he knows about Roman and me, but I can't be sure Roman told anyone about that. It was only one night, and it apparently wasn't as life changing for him as it was for me.

"Okay," I breathe warily, eyeing him as he turns more toward me. He still won't look at me longer than a few seconds, and I sigh. "You go first. What's going on with you?"

His face reddens, and he rubs the back of his neck. "I'll tell you, but there's a caveat."

"And that is?" I narrow my eyes.

"No follow-up questions. And I'm not going in depth." My brows pinch together again, but I nod.

"Okay. Explain."

He takes a deep breath, his hands balling into tight fists. His eyes are on the counter, still refusing to look at me. "I found your Favorite Fans page a while ago. I didn't know it was you, not until Roman pointed it out—"

"What?" I cry, shooting off the barstool. "You—oh my God, I'm going to be sick. You found that? You saw *everything*?" I hold my fist in front of my mouth, and he points at me.

"Don't you fucking puke, Evelyn," he growls. "I already—oh God." He gags violently, jumping from the stool. "Jesus Christ. Right when I got it out of my fucking brain—" He gags again, bracing his hands on the sink. "I've already done this once, I'm not doing it again."

"You—" Other than feeling sick that he's seen me like that, I feel naked. Vulnerable in a way I didn't know I could feel.

“You saw the videos? The photos?” He gags again, and the sound nearly has me puking alongside him. But I grip the counter so tight my fingers turn white.

“I’m not—I can’t think about it.”

“But you saw—”

“Eve,” he pleads, turning back toward me, his face pale. “I didn’t know it was you. If I did, I would’ve never subscribed.”

“You *subscribed*? I’m going to be sick. Oh, God. Oh, *God*.”

“I didn’t know it was you!” he cries, but I shake my head.

“And you—you—” I point at his crotch, and he covers it with both his hands.

“I’m not telling you that!” But I already know the answer. It’s obvious by his reaction. “I didn’t know it was you!” He keeps saying it like it makes a difference.

But he’s seen me naked. He’s seen me fuck myself, heard me say things. Oh my God.

Then his words sink in.

I didn’t know it was you until Roman pointed it out.

“Roman knew, too?” I whisper-choke.

Chase’s face falls.

He knew before he came to Divinity. He knew before that day in my bedroom. He knew the entire time.

“I showed him,” he admits, looking guilty.

Is that why he came back?

I almost ask him, but I don't know if Roman would've told him, or if he would've made up another excuse to come home. Judging by Chase's expression, though, it seems that he already knows my question. He dips his chin, and I grit my teeth together.

Roman knew, and that's why he came back.

But why?

Did he think I was easy? That I'd give it up to him again, no questions asked, now that I'm a cam girl? Or did he come back to stop me?

Or was his intention to blackmail me the entire time?

I might never know.

With a deep breath, I refocus on Chase. "You've unsubscribed, right? You're not watching my videos anymore?"

"God no," he gasps. "I unsubbed the second he told me it was you."

"Thanks." I wrap my arms around myself. "And you didn't tell anyone else?" I can't look at him. I don't know why, but it feels like I've disappointed him somehow. Like I've disappointed everyone.

"No," he murmurs. His footsteps are soft as he walks toward me. I jolt when he rests his hands on my arms, gently squeezing. "Hey. Look at me." I swallow thickly before lifting my eyes to him. "You have nothing to be ashamed of. I get paid to take shirtless pictures, too."

My mouth opens and closes. That wasn't what I thought he was going to say. "But you haven't shown your entire naked body to thousands of people. You haven't—you haven't done those things on camera. Said those things."

"Not publicly," he mutters, and my mouth opens again. "But I'm sure one day, a sex tape of mine will be out for the world to see."

"You—you—"

"I'm too hot not to film myself fucking," he scoffs, stepping back. He gestures at himself, flexing his abs. "I mean, look at me. I'm only twenty-three once. I need to document it as much as I can, you know?"

"Chase!" I slap my hands over my eyes as he laughs.

"I'm sure I have a naked video on my phone," he murmurs. "I can show you if you think that'll make us even." I shake my head, my hands still covering my face.

"Please, no," I groan. "I don't want to see that."

"Suit yourself. I'm hot."

"Please stop."

He chuckles to himself and I slide my fingers apart to glare at him. "Sit." He jerks his chin at the stool I'd vacated, and reluctantly, I sit, dropping my hands to the counter.

His face is uncharacteristically serious as he looks back at me.

“When I looked at you, I kept seeing the videos replay in my head. But I’ll try to get past it, okay? It’s not your fault, it’s mine. I don’t want you to feel uncomfortable around me. And I promise, I want nothing to do with you.”

“Thanks,” I mutter. “You’re great for the ego.” He cracks a small smile, shaking his head.

“I don’t want you to think I want to fuck you just because I’ve seen what you do for work,” he says softly. “You’re still like my annoying little sister.”

I take a deep breath as I nod, giving him a tight smile. Weirdly, his words make me feel better. I trust Chase more than I trust most people. It’s why I’ve kept in touch with him for the past few years. Knowing that he doesn’t look down on me like I’m dirty, or like I’m a whore, or like I owe him something, makes me feel better.

It reminds me that there are good men in the world. At least a couple.

I clear my throat. “I guess it’s a good thing I shut my Favorite Fans account down,” I murmur. His eyes snap to mine and I shrug, tracing my fingertips across the counter. “I couldn’t do it anymore.”

Not after Marcus.

Not after Roman and Isaac.

Being a hole for men to use is all she’s good for.

He considers me for a long moment before slowly nodding. “If you made that decision for yourself, because it’s what *you*

want, then I support you.” His pinky brushes mine. “Whatever you decide to do, Evie, just know I’m in your corner.”

My throat goes tight at his declaration and I smile appreciatively, unable to put into words how grateful I am for him, for his support.

“Now,” he breathes, lightly clapping his hands together. “Are we past this?”

“Please,” I mutter. “Let’s go back to how things were before you saw my—” I trail off, swallowing thickly.

“Deal.” He grins as he slides his attention back to the laptop, his smile slowly fading.

“What?”

I move to the stool beside him, looking at the screen as he runs his hand through his hair. “I’m talking to a realtor in California.” I blink at him.

“Why?” I ask, drawing the word out. Is he thinking about moving there? “What about Oli? She won’t survive without you close.” And Roman. Will he move with him?

He gives me a guilty look before letting out a long sigh. “I’m buying a pet sanctuary for Oli,” he mutters.

“You’re...you’re buying her a pet sanctuary? In California? Even though she lives in Georgia and we both know she’ll never move from her house?” He glares at me from the corner of his eye.

“I don’t know what else to do.” He throws his hand toward the screen. “I fucked up by telling her I sent those mice to a mouse retreat. And I know how badly she wants to open one herself.” He scrubs his hands over his face. “I don’t know what to do.”

“You could tell her the truth,” I suggest, but he shakes his head.

“She was so upset when I talked to her about the mice. I’ve never seen her that torn up before. Even with everything she’s been through, losing those mice really hurt her.”

“I know,” I whisper. “But she doesn’t have to be coddled all the time, you know? She’s strong.”

“She’s been through enough, and if I can do something to help her never fall back into the place she was, I’ll do it. I’ll buy her a million farms. I’ll replace all the mice. I’ll do anything I can to never—” He cuts himself off, his voice thick. “I almost lost her once, Eve. I can’t ever come close to it again.”

I understand. I almost lost her, too. The things she’s gone through, the fight she fights every day, it’s inspiring.

“What can I do to help?” I ask, and he gives me a soft, grateful smile.

“Can you convince her to stop being so pissed at me? She’s barely said three words to me.” I hesitate before resting my hand on his forearm, squeezing gently.

“She’ll come around,” I murmur. “She never stays mad for long.” He runs his hand through his hair again, looking stressed.

“Yeah, but she was really upset this time. Could you please talk to her?” He barely looks at me, and I nod.

“Of course.” Dropping my hand back to the counter, I hesitate before getting to my feet, grabbing the bottle of water as I do. I make it almost to the kitchen entrance when his voice stops me.

“Why are you really here?” he mutters. “Roman won’t tell me everything, and Oli’s as tight-lipped as they come. So, what happened?”

I squeeze my eyes shut, the bottle shaking in my hand as I take a deep breath. “They used me,” I say softly. “They pushed and pulled until I broke.”

He doesn’t ask any more questions. He just lets me leave. Tears sting my eyes as I go back into Roman’s room and sink onto the bed. The chill from the bottle keeps me grounded, helps me not go back to that moment on the coffee table. I can still see Roman’s eyes, the way they’d darkened. The way he hadn’t looked like himself.

I take a deep drink of water, forcing myself to calm down. It wasn’t that bad. I’m not traumatized by it, I’m just hurt. Not physically. Just emotionally.

The two men I thought I loved, that I thought loved me, were using me as a toy, both trying to pull me closer to themselves.

But in the end, the toy broke, and we were all left empty-handed.

3:53 Eve

“Here, bitch. You drive.”

I barely dodge the keys thrown at me before they collide with my cheek.

“I could have lost an eye,” I hiss, shooting Oli a glare as I bend to scrape the keys from the parking lot outside the loft. My scowl flits from her, to her beat-up old car, then back again. “And I’m *not* driving.”

She merely shrugs and grins around her lollipop, completely unbothered. “Get in the driver’s seat, *Evelyn*.”

“I don’t have a license, *Olive!*” I shake my head, my palms going clammy. Kon’s only been teaching me to drive for a week. I’m not ready for some Oli-sized adventure. Not yet.

“Well, how else are we supposed to get there?”

“I don’t even know where *there* is!” I cry.

Her brows go high on her forehead. “It was then we discovered the pornstar couldn’t take directions, ladies and

gentlemen,” she murmurs, her candy bouncing in her mouth. “Ever heard of GPS?”

With a huff, I plant my hands on my hips and stare her down. The hot Georgia sun beats down on my bare shoulders as the humidity wreaks havoc on my poor hair, but neither of us moves. My lip twitches as I pull out the big guns.

Sliding my phone from the pocket of my new leggings, courtesy of the shopping spree Oli and Chase forced on me yesterday, I check the time.

“Goose needs to be picked up from the vet before they close at six. We don’t have time to argue.” That gives us ten hours, give or take, but I know she’s anxious about leaving the animals behind.

Oli convinced Chase that the only way she’d forgive him over the mouse debacle was to send the duck to a specialized vet to help him with his wing therapy.

Her smile drops and her eyes narrow, but seconds later, she’s stomping around her car and snatching the keys from my open, waiting palm.

“Get in the car, you passenger princess. I don’t have time for your antics,” she grumbles, slamming her door. Not even two seconds later, the engine rumbles to life, and she’s screaming muffled obscenities at me through the window.

Sighing, I climb in after her just in time to hear her mumble something about *spoiled bitches getting stitches for making her late*.

Before I can even respond, the car is lurching forward and I'm clinging to the handlebar above my head for dear life. Oli rolls the windows down as she speeds from the parking lot and right into oncoming traffic. My heart is in my throat. She ignores the honking and tires screeching, and I gape when she cranks the music up while simultaneously cutting someone off, blowing through a stop sign and cackling around her lollipop.

“Oh my God, Olive!” I scream, triple-checking that my seatbelt is latched properly before turning the music back down. She shoots me a wide-eyed, innocent look. “I know you want to take me somewhere today, but I'd prefer it not be Heaven!”

She scoffs and gives me a long, exaggerated look as she slowly, *purposefully*, flicks her blinker before merging onto the freeway at a much safer speed. “I'm surprised you still believe in that shit, Evie.”

I swallow her words down and look out the window, watching rows and rows of dense trees and greenery pass us by. I know I've yet to see much of the world outside Georgia, but the beauty of this place will never not surprise me.

Everything is so lush. So vibrant. So *alive*.

My soul aches to feel that way.

Oli turns the music back up, and my head falls against the headrest. Sliding my hand out the window, my fingers dance in the wind as I lose myself to my thoughts, the scenery passing by in a blur.

I'm not so sheltered that I'm oblivious to my lack of experience and knowledge. I know the world is a big place full of big things. I know life isn't as narrow as people in Divinity Falls would like everyone to believe. And I know the reason I feel the way I feel is mostly my own fault.

I was raised to be, live, and behave a certain way. I was born into a church in a town smaller than Divinity Falls. Daddy was the one and only preacher in Haven and had been for over ten years by the time I came along.

When he passed and we moved, I remember being so sad to leave the only place I'd ever known, to leave the home we'd shared with Daddy. To leave the cemetery he was buried in and the congregation who loved me like we shared blood.

But there was a small part of me, even when I was young, that wanted *more*. And that part of me was desperately hoping Divinity would be our new start.

A bigger life. A bigger world.

It wasn't.

Divinity Falls was, *is*, just as small-minded and backwards as Haven. But Mama needed Isaac, and I needed Mama, so I accepted my fate and my future, and followed in her footsteps. At some point, I grew up, fell in love, and got lost.

I'm still in love.

I'm still lost.

I could have left.

I could have walked out Isaac's door—my home—and never looked back. I could have turned my back on Divinity, on Christianity, and the church.

On God.

But doing that meant turning my back on all that's left of my family. Isaac, the dwindling memories of Mama and Roman. Even parts of Daddy live inside that little town. He may have never stepped foot in our church or home, but he taught Isaac the way of the Lord. He loved Mama and me with everything he had. All that's left of him is a little plot in Haven I haven't visited in far too long and the whispers of his ghost Mama and I worked so hard to keep alive.

With her gone and me here, where does that leave him?

Where does it leave Isaac or Roman?

Where does it leave me?

I've been away from home for a little over a week now and with every day that passes, I find my footing a bit more. Olive's made it her personal mission to cheer me up, one adventure at a time.

After Kon's first driving lesson, we explored Mammoth. Chase had explained that it's an old town that's been revitalized over recent years.

It's a beautiful blend of new and old, where life meets death in a way I've never experienced before. Remnants of buildings lay scattered next to remodeled vintage structures as though life has been breathed back into their bones. I understand why

he and Roman chose to make this place their home. It feels nothing like the Georgia I've always known.

It feels like *more*.

People of all ages danced in and out of shops or restaurants. Parents walked the bustling streets with their kids. Loved-up couples stumbled out of bars and climbed into cabs while wrapped in each other. Music filled the streets, along with the sound of laughter and genuine happiness from just the simple act of existing.

It's corny, but for some reason, hearing it made my eyes burn.

How is it I can come from a life so sheltered that seeing people my own age hooking up on street corners or smoking against a bar door can cause such a visceral, bone-deep reaction in me?

It was as though something in me lit up for the first time in my life, almost the way I feel when I'm behind my camera.

The feeling was so surprising, so addicting, that the next day when Oli said we were going to an arcade, I didn't fight her on it. In fact, I even smiled when we played a terrible version of indoor, glow-in-the-dark mini-golf. And when she begged me to ride the bumper-cars twelve times in a row, I *laughed*.

Malls, new foods, a concert in a park, a zoo, gallery after gallery of art exhibits, drinks with my best friend. Every new adventure has made me feel a little more alive than I ever felt in Divinity. Every day that passes where I'm not stuck in the

same monotony I'd grown used to, I realize just how caged I truly let myself become.

But it wasn't until two days ago when Chase bundled me in his tiny sports car and wordlessly drove me to a non-descript grey building downtown that I realized how *stupid* I've really been.

"What is this, Chase?" I murmur, my throat dry as I take in the cement building he parked in front of.

He shifts awkwardly, the leather beneath his jeans creaking with the movement. His fingers drum along the steering wheel and his jaw pluses, but he doesn't look at me. Not even when he finally speaks.

"Look," he sighs, spearing his fingers through his hair. "You don't have to go in if you don't want to, but I figured I'd give you the option." His Adam's apple bobs as he swallows. "I was raised in Divinity. Spent my entire life there. Raised Oli there, took care of my mom when—" He breaks off, shaking his head and I fight the urge to hold his hand.

I know how hard that time was for him...for his mom and Oli, too, even though she was too little to remember much. All I know is from stories I've heard over the years and even that was enough to break my heart for their family.

He clears his throat, his eyes finally sliding to mine. "When my mom and Oli were sick, there were no hospitals for them back home." My gaze snaps to the building, my palms going sweaty. "Divinity isn't known for its forward thinking. But here

in Mammoth, women have more options. More autonomy and control over their bodies.”

My eyes roam over the building again, taking in the women, quite a few of them obviously pregnant, to the Stork Parking signs and the medical symbols. I bite my lip as clarity washes over me.

“You brought me to see a doctor.”

He bobs his head. “A gynecologist. Same one Oli sees.”

I swallow roughly, my nails digging into my jeans. “But—” I pause, not knowing what to say.

Chase reaches over and grips my hand, squeezing softly. “You’re just as much of a sister to me as Olive is and if she were to find herself in a situation similar to yours, I’d want her to be checked out, to be safe.” He gives me a knowing look.

Because I’m messing around with two men.

Unprotected.

My head falls back and my eyes squeeze shut. “He said he’d had a vasectomy,” I choke out, my words barely audible. Isaac could have lied.

Roman and I haven’t had sex since we were younger, but Christ, we’ve gotten close and he’s never said a word about protection, his or mine.

Chase makes a sound in the back of his throat, somewhere between a gag and a growl. “I’ll tell you what I told Oli when

I gave her the talk all those years ago.”

“I’m not a child.”

He clicks his tongue. “Then don’t act like one.” I shoot him a glare and shuck off his hand, but he just holds it tighter. “Men are assholes. Plain and simple, Eve. They lie, steal and cheat but more than that, they’ll say any-fucking-thing to get their dick wet. Never trust a man.”

My eyes narrow as they slide down his body. “Says the man,” I mutter.

He huffs a laugh. “Exactly.”

Swallowing, I turn back to the doctor’s office. I’ve seen doctors before, but never in a place like this. And Chase is right; the doctors in Divinity don’t believe in birth control. They don’t prescribe it, hardly do female exams and if they did, they’d certainly tell the patient’s parents about it. Over Sunday waffles at Flo’s, no doubt.

Privacy doesn’t exist back home and women’s rights are far and few between.

But here in Mammoth, I’m free.

Here in Mammoth, I’m allowed to put me first.

With an unexpected snuffle, I tug Chase into an awkward hug that he slowly responds to, but when he does, I feel another piece of myself heal.

“Thank you for thinking of me, Chase.”

His hand rubs down my spine with a familiarity I’ve missed.

“Someone has to.”

A hand on my knee pulls me from the memory and I blink back to the present, finding Oli staring at me with a look of concern. Her lollipop’s nowhere to be seen, the music’s gone quiet, and the car is off.

I shake my head and look around, finding us parked beneath a heavily shaded area in a dirt lot. There’s nothing to see but thick greenery and blue skies.

“You good?” she murmurs.

My tongue darts out, wetting my dry lips as my head instinctually bobs, shrugging off her concern. “I’m fine.”

Her head tilts and her brow cocks. “Try again.”

My head stills, and I bite my cheek. I’m so used to being what everyone else wants me to be. A masked version of myself that’s easier for others to digest, to handle. Someone easy to be around that doesn’t take up too much space.

What would it be like to take the mask off?

“No,” I finally say, shaking my head. I meet her knowing blue eyes and see the understanding there, letting it ground me. “I’m really not okay.”

She stares at me for a long moment, but neither of us speaks. And in that silence, I find the quiet acceptance I needed. The one that tells me it’s okay to take the mask off. To take up space. To exist wholly as myself and not who others want me to be.

To exist *for* myself.

“That’s alright,” she breathes, breaking the silence. “No one’s actually okay, are they? Not really. Deep down, everyone’s a bit fucked up.” She shrugs, her face splitting into a smile. “Our grandparents lived through the Great Depression. That shit’s gotta be somewhere in our DNA.”

I roll my eyes, but before I can stop them, words fall from my lips that have lived on my tongue for far too long.

“How do you do it, Oli?” I murmur, guilt and worry filling me all at once. It’s not something we ever really talk about—what happened to her, what she lives with every day. She knows I’m here for her if she ever wants to open up, but she hasn’t yet and that’s okay.

I just can’t help but wonder.

She blinks a few times and turns to look out the window. We’re silent for a few long moments and I worry I’ve pushed too hard.

“It’s silly,” she whispers, her voice laced with vulnerability. I reach out, threading our fingers together so she knows I’m here. “I’m just delusionally optimistic.”

My head cocks to the side. “What do you mean?”

Oli swallows roughly and huffs a laugh. “It’s something I came up with after watching my mom struggle for so long.” My heart sinks and I let silence fill the car once more as she works through her thoughts. “I don’t remember much from when I was little, mostly the good days. But when we got

older, they happened so rarely. When her days were good, they were really good, and when they were bad...”

She breaks off, the fingers of her free hand digging into her leggings. I don't need her to finish the sentence, not really. I know how bad they got toward the end. I was there for that, at least somewhat. But back then, she and Chase did a lot to hide it from us.

“Anyway,” she murmurs. “I watched her disintegrate before my eyes and I swore I'd never be the same. Even when I was little, I knew I didn't want to be like her. She was always just so fucking *sad*.” With a shrug, she bites her lower lip. “I vowed to always be happy, even when I didn't want to be.” Her eyes find mine and though they're glossy, there's a lightness to them now.

“You're manifesting your own happiness,” I surmise, and she bobs her head. “It's brilliant.”

She blinks rapidly. “I know.”

I chuckle. “But why delusional?”

“Because I'm *delusionally optimistic* about my life, Evie, and I won't settle for anything less. People spend their time manifesting money and fancy cars and big houses and while I get that, I really do, I don't want all that. I just want to exist freely as myself without nature or DNA dictating what I have to be or where I'll end up. I create my own future and it all starts right here.” She taps her head and smiles at me.

I can't help but smile along with her, her words so similar to everything I'd just been thinking about.

"You make it sound so easy," I murmur.

Oli shakes her head. "It's really not, and I'm not saying it works one hundred percent of the time, but any happiness is better than none, right?" I open my mouth to say something, but she quickly pokes my chin and snaps it shut again. "No more talking. We're wasting time."

Without another word, she climbs from the car and tugs her silver backpack from behind her seat. Oli's door slams shut, but I still can't move.

I watch her adjust her denim ball cap that says *Dead Inside*, her thin blonde ponytail poking through the back. She bends down and hikes her baby pink knee-high socks up and over her lavender leggings before zipping up a matching hoodie. I'm still watching as she glares at me, huffs, and stomps over to my door before ripping it open.

"Out, sugarplum. We've got demons to fuck."

My eyes narrow, but I let her pull me from the car. She fiddles with my outfit, making adjustments here and there that are completely unnecessary. When she's done, she snags a matching backpack from the backseat and thrusts it into my arms.

"What are we doing? Where are we?" I ask the questions even as I thread my arms through the straps and follow her like a willing sheep being led to my eventual slaughter.

“You’ll see it when we get there.” She waggles her brows at my grumble. “Everyone loves to be edged, Evie. Get with the program.”



We’re standing on a cliff’s edge that’s suspended hundreds of feet in the air overlooking what feels like all of Georgia, and it took hours to hike here.

Through a forest that more times than not, I thought might swallow us whole and never spit us back out. It was hot, sticky, creepy and filled with bugs.

It was also one of the most magical things I’d ever seen.

Until now.

I suck in a gasp as I slowly step forward, taking in the incredible view. My heart drops when I see exactly how high we are from the ground below. Surprisingly, it’s not fear that consumes me, it’s something else entirely.

I feel the same as I do when I cam.

Exhilarated.

Powerful.

Free.

My eyes flutter closed as I take a deep breath, inhaling the thick, humid air. The breeze picks up, brushing my loose waves across my face. It's nearly silent, nothing but the sound of birds and leaves rustling to remind me of where I am.

With every breath, my mind clears a little more, leaving behind everything that's been plaguing me.

Isaac. Roman. Mama.

Divinity.

Marcus.

Camming.

My life.

Out here, I'm nothing but me, Evelyn Jean Meyer. I'm not a preacher's daughter or a stepsister. I'm not a camgirl or a failure of a friend. I'm no one's *sunshine, sweetheart* or the *golden child*.

I'm not *Goldie*.

My eyes burn and I fight the urge to blink the tears away like I usually do.

If I'm none of those things, then maybe it's okay not to hide.

Find myself. Own my space. Take off the mask.

The vast Georgia wilderness stretches out before me, and my eyes follow it all the way to the horizon. What would it be like to fly over the thicket of trees below? To be free enough to exist in a world where nothing is expected of me? To live so close to the sun, darkness never touches my soul again?

My phone vibrates in my pocket, interrupting my thoughts and I slide it out, hope and anxiety twisting my gut.

Isaac.

Again.

I hesitate, my thumb hovering over the little letters as I contemplate a response, but the longer I stare at his words, the worse the dread becomes. Instead, I scroll through the barrage of texts he's sent over the last few weeks, each of them more intense than the last.

Isaac:

Where are you?

Isaac:

I'm worried about you.

Isaac:

Come home, Eve. You're needed here.

Isaac:

Answer me.

Isaac:

Are you with him?

Isaac:

Pick up the goddamned phone.

Isaac:

You're acting like a child, Eve. You're blowing everything out of proportion. Come home so we can talk about it.

Isaac:

This is why I've never trusted you to be on your own. You can't handle the world.

With each text, my heart begins to race, and my palms sweat around my phone. I try to swallow the lump clogging my throat, but I can't as I reread the newest text. Nerves dance across my spine as fear coils in my veins.

Isaac:

If you thought the rice was bad, you have no idea what punishment waits for you when you finally come home.

I click out of my texts and shove my phone back into my pocket, barely resisting the urge to throw the thing off the cliff. With a slow breath, I let my eyes fall closed and force the negative emotions away. I don't want to think about him right now. I don't want to think about what waits for me when I finally go back home.

If I go back home.

I feel Oli brush up against me, and my shoulders drop another inch. Her fingers tangle with mine and a tear trickles down my cheek, quickly followed by another. Her hand squeezes mine as she takes another step forward, her tennis shoes inches from the edge.

"Oli," I warn, but my mouth snaps shut at the unexpected crack in my voice. I swallow, resisting when she tries to tug

me forward. “It’s not safe.”

She looks at me over her shoulder and smiles softly. “Life isn’t safe.” I watch her throat bob and my shoulders drop another inch. “You have to let go, Evie.”

“I don’t know how,” I whisper, but the admission sounds loud in the silence. I bite my lip, my chin wobbling.

With a giggle, Oli says, “I’ll show you.”

And I find myself captivated by the simple way she maneuvers through life. Oli’s been through so much, I don’t think anyone would question if she broke and never got back up, but she doesn’t. She somehow finds a way to keep going, to smile, to find humor in life. I don’t get it.

My eyes flit between hers and I watch as she turns to the vast open space before us, tips her head back and *screams*.

With a gasp, I jump, startled from the high-pitched, unexpected sound. She screams and screams, until her body seems to deflate and her voice goes hoarse. With a grin, Oli turns back to face me, her cheeks red and coated in tears, her eyes glossy but somehow, she’s lighter.

“That’s how I let go,” she murmurs.

My brows crash together. “You just scream?”

She shrugs. “Or rage out on some assholes online.” She mimics typing on a keyboard before chuckling. “Sometimes, I just hide Chase’s filming stuff so he picks a fight with me.”

A laugh bursts free from my lips, and I wipe my eyes, shaking my head. Oli gives me a soft look and juts her chin toward the place she'd been standing.

Her eyes dance with mischief, sensing my apprehension. "Seriously. Just try it. It's a release, a way to let it all go," she urges, her voice filled with a mixture of excitement and understanding. "No one's listening, no one's judging you. Out here, no one cares if you're imperfect."

I click my tongue. "Broken's more like it."

She bobs her head. "Same, dude. Same." I see the sincerity in her eyes.

Before I realize what I'm doing, my feet are moving until my toes are nearly hanging off the edge. I take a deep breath, summoning every ounce of courage within me, and then, with a force I never knew I possessed, I unleash a primal scream into the stillness and *let it all go*.

It tears through the air, carrying with it the weight of my hurts and pains. Every *no*, every dismissal, every sympathetic look I've gotten when talking about the world I want to explore. Every argument between Ro and Isaac, the way they so easily put me between their hatred.

The way they used me.

Whore.

Nothing.

Nothing.

Nothing.

I scream and scream until the word stops hurting and starts feeling like *nothing*.

Olive joins in, her laughter bubbling up and harmonizing with the echoes of our release. We stand there, on that cliff's edge, two souls connected by a shared moment of catharsis, surrounded by the beauty of the countryside that once held me.

No more.

As the last remnants of my scream dissipate into the Georgia air, I turn to Oli, tears of gratitude covering my face and this time, I let them. "Thank you."

She wraps her arm around me, a grin lighting up her face. "Anytime, hoe-bag."

My head falls back with a laugh, one that's filled with so much pure joy, something in me shifts and I know, I just *know*, I'll never let them take this away from me.

Not again.

3:54 Roman

I inhale a lungful of smoke, the cigarette pinched tightly between my fingers as I scroll on my phone. People requesting appointments, comments to respond to, emails—it's all too much. It's overwhelming.

And right now, I'd rather be doing anything other than this. My mind has been on Eve and *only* Eve. Since I heard the front door of my father's house slam, I knew she was gone.

I knew I lost her.

Then Chase called to tell me she and Oli showed up in the middle of the night with Oli's hoard of animals.

I guess I knew she'd run to Oli. Where else would she go? But I didn't think they'd come here, to Mammoth. To my house. My *home*.

Where's she sleeping? Is she uncomfortable?

Probably.

It's Eve. She hates bothering anyone, and showing up at Chase's house unannounced is probably making her anxious.

Is she even sleeping? Or eating? Drinking enough water?

Shit. I sound like Chase.

Sighing, I run my fingers through my hair, lightly tugging on the ends as I set my phone on the counter. The bell above the front door chimes, and I glance over my shoulder, internally screaming at having to welcome a new customer. The Zippo in my pocket burns, begging me to pull it out, to bring the flame to life.

Thankfully, it's just Kon, and I lean back against the wall, resting my head on it as I take another drag of my cigarette. Kon's dark eyes narrow as he stops in front of the counter. He taps two knuckles on it as he says, "Put it out, Pyro. No smoking in my shop."

Another long sigh leaves me. But I respect him enough to follow his stupid fucking rules. With a final drag, I tap the cigarette out in the small, makeshift ashtray, flicking the butt into the bowl, my gaze dropping to the pile of smoking ashes. Tension grows between us and I shift in my seat.

I know he's seen her, been around her, *talked* to her. He's keeping me updated, letting me know how she is. He's holding back, though. I know he's not telling me everything, that he's keeping enough to himself to either not worry me or force me into breaking and calling her.

I appreciate it, appreciate him.

But it's killing me.

The silence, the distance...

I can't take it anymore.

"How is she?" I reluctantly rasp, already knowing his answer. *Fine*. It's the same answer he's given me every time I've asked him.

"Fine." I roll my eyes. He folds his thick arms over his massive chest, his gaze palpable as he glares down at me.

"You done for the day?" he grumbles. My eyes lift to his, my hands clenching and unclenching on the countertop. I dip my chin in a slight nod. "Come with me."

"Where?"

But I'm already on my feet, following him through the shop. I'm not sure there's anywhere I wouldn't follow him. Kon's always led me toward the light—always guided me where I needed to go.

Since the day he pulled me from that soaking wet alley, cold, starving and drunk as fuck, he's had my back, and for that, I owe him everything.

We pass the busy private rooms, the *buzz* of tattoo guns filling the hall, to the locked door in the back, and up the steps that lead to his apartment above the shop.

Shit.

It's a mess.

Hurrying past him, I shove the door open before he can step inside and dive for my piles of dirty clothes and discarded takeout containers.

“Sorry,” I mumble, kicking a blanket on the floor off my foot. Kon stands in the doorway of his apartment and looks around, his brows raised high. “I was gonna clean up before you came home, but—”

I cut myself off, knowing he doesn’t care about my words. Action. That’s the type of man he is, it’s the type of man he’s tried to mold me into. And, up until recently, I thought I took after him.

But seeing her, being back in Divinity, forced me to regress back to the boy I’d been all those years ago. Stuck in my head, afraid of speaking my mind.

Sure, I poked at Isaac, poked at Eve. But when it came down to it, when I was alone with Isaac, all he was was my abuser and I was still scared, just like I used to be. I couldn’t even look at the fucking basement door without panic clawing at my throat.

I thought I was past that.

I thought I was stronger than that.

Apparently fucking not.

“You haven’t been this big of a mess since—”

“I know,” I grunt, cutting him off.

I haven't been this big of a mess since he first found me. Squeezing my eyes shut, I force myself not to go down that path, to not think about that time in my life.

I'd endured a lot in my life, but those months of drunk homelessness were the worst. I was lost and alone, missing Eve with every fiber of my being. I never thought I'd be a whole man again. I never thought I'd live outside the darkness.

But then a giant Russian bastard reached down, grabbed me, and forced me to my fucking feet. He forced me to fight.

Without Kon, I don't think I'd be alive right now.

Taking a deep breath, I turn back toward the man I consider my father, and nearly crumple under the full weight of his knowing gaze. "How is she, man? Really?"

"She's fine," he mutters. "Really."

I shake my head, refusing to believe it. How could she be fine when I'm not? How could she continue living when I'm barely surviving?

"Yeah?" I rasp, my eyes burning.

It's not that I want her to be doing bad. I want the opposite for her. But just knowing that she's in the same city as me, just a few blocks away, is fucking killing me. And knowing that she's apparently *fine* is killing me even more.

"As good as can be expected," Kon says warily, eyeing me. "She won't tell us what happened. You wanna explain?"

No. I don't want to explain anything.

I can't stop replaying those moments, the way I'd just used her mouth as my father goaded me. It makes me sick to think about. To know that he had that much power over me, that I could be so easily manipulated by him.

And then when I'd looked down at her, the betrayal in her eyes felt like a sucker punch to the gut. Then I ran. Just like I always do.

This time was different, though. I wasn't running to hide, or to protect myself or her from my father's threats. I ran to my room to pack, to get us the fuck out of there. But when I came out, she was gone, and Isaac didn't seem to give a shit. He just laughed and clapped me on the shoulder as he passed.

"I walked in on my dad fucking Eve," I start, and Kon's mouth falls open. "Then he convinced me to take her mouth, and—"

"Please tell me you didn't do that to that fucking girl," he growls. I drop my head in shame, nodding slightly.

"I'm sorry," I breathe.

"It's not me who you should be apologizing to."

It's times like this I wish I could have a fucking drink. Running my hand through my hair, I heave out a sigh as I look back at him. He uses his chin to point at the old couch I've been crashing on.

"Sit. Explain."

So, I sit and explain everything. From start to finish, leaving none of the nasty details out. I tell him how my father tested

me, how I used her. How badly I fucked up, and how I don't know how to fix it. I tell him that I regret ever fucking loving her, then immediately take it back.

Because I don't. I'll never regret that.

When I'm done, tears line my eyes as he stares back at me, his massive hand scrubbing his bearded jaw over his mouth. I hold my breath as I wait for him to speak, to give me some kind of advice I know will forever change me.

Instead, he just reclines back on the couch, his legs spread wide apart. My stomach twists as I stare back at him, feeling sick with anticipation.

"You're both just fucking kids," he breathes, shoving his hand through his hair.

"I don't feel like a kid," I mutter, dropping my eyes to my tattooed hands. I stare at the letters on my knuckles. Home. Sick. Homesick. "I've never felt like one."

Not unless she's around to shine her light on me.

"Can't believe he did that," he says darkly. He presses his knuckles into the palm of his opposite hand, cracking them. "Should've kicked his fucking ass the other night."

My lips tip up in a small smile at the thought of terrifying, hulking Kon taking on my father. He'd make Isaac his bitch, walk him like a fucking dog, and I'd happily sit and watch.

Slowly, my smile falls. "Does she hate me?" I whisper, my voice raw. Kon sighs loudly before resting his elbows on his knees.

“Pyro.” I keep my eyes on my hands, not wanting to see whatever bitter truth is on his face. “Look at me.” But I can’t. He taps the coffee table between us with his fingertips. “Look. At. Me.”

Reluctantly, my gaze raises to his. His face is hard as he stares at me. “I don’t know Eve all that well, just from what you and Chase have told me about her, and the little bit I’ve learned from spending time with her. But she’s a good girl, man. And, even if you don’t see it, she’s in love with you. So in love with you that when she ran away, she ran straight to your fucking house.”

“But she ran *from* me,” I mutter, and he shakes his head.

“I think somewhere deep down, she knew coming to Mammoth would mean coming to you. She’s choosing you.” The words make my throat tighten.

“You think?” I rasp, and he gives me a firm nod.

“I fucking *know*.”

“But I haven’t heard from her. I haven’t seen her. I don’t...” I sigh, trailing off. “I don’t know what to do.”

“Show her you love her,” he says quietly. “Don’t just tell her. *Show* her, Pyro. Words mean shit. Actions? They’re everything.”

Show her.

How?

How the fuck am I supposed to do that when she won't talk to me? When she probably doesn't want anything to do with me?

Kon clears his throat, drawing my attention again. "We're going for a drive later. I can talk to her for you if you want." He rubs the back of his neck, his tanned cheeks staining red.

"Going for a drive?" I repeat, my eyes narrowing. "Why the fuck are you driving around with my girl?" His lips twitch, but he shakes his head.

"I'm *teaching* her how to drive," he says. "You know she didn't know how? Doesn't even have her license."

It feels like the air's been knocked from my chest as I sit back in the chair. "What?" I rasp.

That never even dawned on me. I just...fuck, I just assumed. The bastard never taught me to drive, but I always just figured it was because he hated me so much.

But Eve—if nothing else, Isaac has always loved Eve.

"Yeah, said no one ever taught her."

"Jesus Christ." I shove my hand through my hair. "I can't fucking believe he didn't—" I squeeze my eyes shut, the truth sinking in.

Fucking asshole.

"It was another way to control her," Kon mutters, and my eyes flutter open. "Another way to manipulate her into thinking she had to stay. To keep her solely reliant on him."

“I fucking hate him,” I growl.

“You and me both.”

I grunt, folding my arms over my chest. He slaps his hands on his knees before pushing to his feet. “I’m grabbing some shit then heading back to your house,” he calls over his shoulder. I grin at his back.

“So, you two are a thing now?” I ask as he disappears into his bedroom. He pokes his head out to glare at me, his face hard.

“No.”

“Really? Seems like you are.”

“Pyro,” he warns. I chuckle to myself, sinking further into the couch.

“You’re sleeping at our place, in his bed. You’re being all domestic and shit.”

“Pyro!”

“Big, tough Kon whipped by little Chase.”

“Fuck off,” he growls. “Fuck *right* off.”

He storms from his room with a bag slung over his shoulder. It’s not lost on me that he’s taking more shit to our place. Whether he wants to admit it or not, he’s moving in with Chase, and things are getting serious between them.

I’m happy for them, they deserve happiness and if they can find it with each other, whatever. A part of me, though, resents

it. Not them. Not their relationship. Just that they're in love and happy and I'm...not.

Kon steps in front of me, pulling me from my thoughts, and I blink up at him. "You staying here again?" he asks, clutching the strap of his bag tighter.

Pulling my lighter out of my pocket, I flick it open, then closed. "Where else would I be?"

3:55 Eve

My hands grip the steering wheel tighter, the sunlight bright as it shines down on us, warming the car. I glance at Oli, finding her singing along to the radio, french fries stuffed in her mouth and her feet kicked up on the dash.

It's been the best day.

I forced her to go downtown with me while I took photos. It's been so long since I've used a camera. While it's not mine, it's Chase's, it was still a camera, and I was grateful to just be able to shoot. Oli even modeled for me, in her own odd way.

Everything has been perfect. *Almost* everything.

It's been two weeks, and I haven't heard from Roman. I've heard *of* him from Chase and Kon, but he hasn't called or texted. Not the way Isaac has. Each call, each text, has gotten more demanding, more aggressive. I know he's worried about me, that he's trying to get through to me, but I'm just not ready. Not for him.

Chase said Roman was giving me *time*, letting me adjust to this new way of living. But a pit has stayed in my stomach since I left Divinity without him.

“You sure about this?” Oli asks warily. I readjust my grip on the steering wheel as I nod.

“I need to do it,” I mutter as I pull into the parking lot. I feel Oli’s gaze on me as I shift into park, one hand still clutching the wheel.

Her hand slides over mine on the gearshift, and I finally look at her. “I’ll be with you.” My throat tightens, tears blurring my vision as I nod.

I truly don’t know what I’d do without my best friend.

She didn’t make me feel bad on the days I spent wallowing. She didn’t force me to get over it quicker, didn’t press me for answers before I could talk about it. But when I could, she was there, ready to listen. Ready to give me her shoulder and heart.

I turn my attention to the unassuming brick building, my gaze immediately landing on the sign.

Deliverance Tattoo.

It’s fitting, isn’t it? For Roman to run from Divinity and find Deliverance. And now, I’m doing the same.

With a deep breath, Oli and I get out of the car and head for the door. Every step toward it feels like an eternity, like I’ll never get there. My breath catches in my lungs as I wrap my

hand around the cool doorknob. I shove it open, the smell of disinfectant hitting me first, then the dim, moody lights.

I blink as I step inside, letting my eyes adjust. The bell above the door chimes, and a kind-looking girl, not much older than me, with dark hair, tanned skin, and dark eyes looks up from the desk.

“Hey.” She smiles, jerking her chin at us. Oli pops up at my side, her bucket hat low on her head. “What can I do for you?”

Oli nudges me with her elbow, and I hesitate before shuffling a step closer. My hands wring together, nerves tightening my stomach. “Um, hi.” I try to smile back, but it feels tight. Her expression never falters, never drops. “I’m here to get a tattoo.”

“Alrighty.” She opens a little book as she grabs a pen, her eyes scanning the pages. “I think Pyro has an opening this—”

“No!” I blurt, my body tensing at his nickname, and her eyes lift to mine. “No.” This time, I try to say it more calmly, and give her a tight smile.

“Okay,” she draws the word out, turning her attention back to the book. “Kon will be free this weekend.”

“I—he said he could do it today,” I breathe. Her brows bunch together as she pushes away from the book.

“Who did you say you were? I’ll ask him about it. He didn’t update the appointment book, but he usually forgets.” She grins as she stands, patiently waiting for my name.

I glance around, taking in the dark wooden floors and black walls covered in art. There's a long hallway leading to rooms. The sound of laughter and quiet murmuring fills the space, but I don't hear Roman. Don't see him.

Maybe he's not here.

She clears her throat and I jolt.

"Eve," I say, looking back at her.

"Just wait here, Eve. I'll go talk to Kon." She waves at a red leather couch and Oli immediately plops onto it. I sink to the cushion next to her, watching as the girl strides for the door in the front and pokes her head in.

"That wasn't so bad, was it?" Oli hums, scooting down further on the couch. "This thing fucking sucks. So uncomfy. He needs someone to redecorate. You think he'll hire me to do it? This place needs a couple animals."

"Unsanitary," I mumble, repeating Kon's words from this morning.

Oli had begged him to let her bring Robert to the shop, claiming he'd love it. But Kon firmly told her, and everyone around her—Chase and me—that having a possum in the shop would be too unsanitary, and if she brought him, we'd be kicked out.

Obviously, I believe the giant, terrifying man, so Chase is on babysitting duty today.

Oli huffs out a breath, folding her arms over her chest. "He doesn't know what he's talking about. Robert is more sanitary

than him.” My lips twitch at the thought of Oli telling Kon that.

The girl walks back toward us, and I stand. I don’t know why, but I feel awkward. Maybe this was a bad idea. Me? Get a tattoo? What was I thinking?

“Kon said he’ll be with you in a bit. He’s just finishing up with another client.” She waves back at the couch. “Can I get you a drink or snack or—”

“I’ll have a snack,” Oli interrupts. “What you got?”

“Oli,” I groan, but the woman just laughs.

“Snacks are back there, by the coffee. Help yourself.”

Oli rubs her hands together as she jumps to her feet, hurrying to the counter like a little snack gremlin, as if she didn’t force me to stop for burgers and fries on the way here. The bags crinkle as she flips through them, trying to find what she wants.

“Sorry,” I breathe, and the girl waves me off as she sits back behind the desk.

“Don’t even worry about it.” She scans me, her dark eyes missing nothing. “So, is this your first tattoo?”

“Yeah,” I laugh, brushing my thumb over my sweaty palm. “That obvious?” She chuckles, running her long fingers through her dark, silky hair.

“I always know who’s a virgin.” She flashes me a grin that has my face heating. “A tattoo virgin.” With a wink, she turns

her attention back to her phone, a hidden smirk on her face.

I let out a breath as I sink back onto the couch, fidgeting with my fingers as I look around the shop again. My body itches to explore, to find Roman's workspace. But I stay where I am.

Oli bounds back, her arms loaded down with bags. "Oli," I breathe, glancing at the girl, but she's not paying attention to us. "You can't take all that."

"Why not? I'm hungry, and this is free."

"I doubt it's free," I mutter. "Put some back." She scrunches her nose at me as she drops everything on the couch before sitting on the opposite end, the snacks between us.

Ignoring me, she grabs a bag and rips it open, most of the little crackers falling into her lap. She doesn't seem to mind as she begins chomping on them, the crumbs settling on her jeans and the couch. I sigh, giving the girl at the desk another apologetic smile, but she just smiles back, waving me off.

A tall man with broad shoulders and a beard strolls out of Kon's room seconds before he appears. The man says something to him and Kon grunts his response. My lips twitch.

Seems he doesn't talk to anyone, not just me.

A door somewhere in the shop opens as the man strides across the store, barely glancing at Oli and me, before slipping out of the shop. I stand, smoothing my hands down my leggings, and try to ignore the anxious twist of my stomach.

I step forward as Kon's eyes meet mine. His brows barely raise. "You're here."

"You told me to be here at this time," I say softly.

"Didn't think you were serious." He scans me like he's trying to find something wrong, like he's trying to see if he can tell I'm not ready for this.

But I am.

"Of course, I'm serious," I mutter. "Why would I ask for a tattoo if I didn't mean it?"

Kon glances behind him before looking back at me, sighing loudly and letting his shoulders fall. "Fine. Come on."

I take a step forward, then come to an abrupt stop as someone steps behind Kon. My breath catches as my eyes meet hazel ones.

"You're here for a tattoo?" Roman asks, his voice low. I barely manage a shaky nod, and he tips his chin back. Kon looks at him, his expression unreadable. "I'll do it."

"But, Kon—"

"No one touches you but me." My mouth snaps shut, my eyes widening at his growled words. He claps Kon's shoulder on his way past, the touch so familiar and effortless, it reminds me how close they really are.

I figured out how much Roman meant to Kon over the last couple weeks, but seeing them now, the way Roman is so comfortable around him, makes my throat tighten.

Apart from Chase, and occasionally me, Roman was never relaxed. He was always on edge, always ready to fight. But here, in this moment, even if he looks stressed, he doesn't look *on edge*.

He disappears into his room, but I stay frozen until I feel a light nudge at my back. Glancing down, Oli is grinning up at me. "Go on, then. Your stepbrother just went all caveman and claimed you."

"God, don't call him that," I groan, scrubbing my hand down my face.

"That's what he is." I shoot her a look and she chuckles, sliding deeper into the couch as she snacks.

"It sounds so—"

"*Incesty*," she interrupts, nodding as she pops a mini cookie in her mouth. "I love it."

"I wasn't going to say that," I hiss, glancing at the girl at the desk. She's pretending not to listen, but I see the way her lips are tipped up in a smile. "Just don't eat all their snacks."

"It's all gravy, baby," she grins, putting her hand behind her head. "Go get some."

"Oh my God." I give her a final glare, then hesitantly make my way to where Roman disappeared.

I stand in the doorway, watching as he sets up, his back to me. His broad shoulders are bunched as he moves effortlessly around the room. Looking around, I take in the framed art pieces on the walls, the stencils taped up, the random posters

and business cards, the stack of takeout menus in the back corner.

There's a black leather chair beside his leg, and a metal stand he's placing things on. A long black leather bed, like one you'd find in a doctor's office, is pushed against one wall, and a comfy-looking chair is in the center of the room. A floor-to-ceiling length mirror is on another wall, surrounded by photos of random people's limbs with fresh tattoos on them.

When I finally turn my attention back to him, Roman's already staring at me. I didn't even hear him turn around.

"Color?" he asks, and I blink.

"What?"

"Your tattoo." He jerks his chin at me, his eyes never leaving mine. "Does it have color?"

"Oh." I wrap my hand around my wrist as I nod. "Yeah. A bit. Just some yellow, maybe orange." He nods as he turns back to his tray, continuing to set up. "Kon said he can do—"

"*Me*, Goldie. Either I tattoo you, or you don't get one." I blink at his back. He lets out a long sigh, his shoulders dropping. "Unless you hate me. Which you should. You *should* hate me."

"Ro," I breathe, stumbling forward a step. "I don't hate you."

He shakes his head, and I wish I could see his face. He was always so good at hiding his emotions, but I could tell what he felt by his eyes. By the way he looked at me.

With a deep breath, I slowly move across the room to him. My hand clenches into a ball at my side. I want to touch him, comfort him. I want to make things better.

But I just stand beside him, letting his smoky, leathery scent ground me.

“You should,” he whispers. “I hate me.”

His words shatter my heart and any resolve I had to not touch him flies out the window. Slowly, I raise my hand, hesitating before resting it on his strong back. His muscles tense under my touch, but he quickly relaxes.

“I don’t hate you, Ro. I could never hate you.”

Even after everything, after all the years we’ve spent apart, all the things we’ve done to each other, the things we’ve said, the baggage between us, I’ll never hate him.

Ever.

He glances at me, his fiery gaze piercing my soul. His full lips barely tip up in a sad smile, the cross tattoo under his eye shifting with the movement. My breath catches as I stare back at him, my heart racing.

“I’ll make it up to you,” he murmurs, shifting closer to me. “I’ll make things right.” I shake my head, my brows bunching together. “I fucked up, Goldie. I’ll earn your trust again. I—I’ll fix this. I’ll fix us.”

So much weight to carry on his shoulders, so much responsibility he’s putting on himself. I inch closer and he

shifts, turning fully toward me. It would be so easy for him to dip down and brush his lips against mine. Will he?

“I can help,” I whisper. “I can fix it, too.” His eyes search mine. Carefully, his hand lifts, and from the corner of my eye, I follow it until he tucks my hair behind my ear.

“I missed you.” He wraps his arm around my waist, anchoring my body against his.

“I missed you, Ro.” My hand rests on his chest, and I feel his heart thundering beneath my touch. “Really, *really* missed you.” His gaze heats as he looks at my mouth, and I run my tongue over my bottom lip.

“Tattoo,” he rasps, his arm tightening. “Tattoo. That’s why you’re here.” But he can’t stop staring at my mouth. I can’t stop staring at his.

“Tattoo,” I repeat, nodding.

One breath.

Two.

I sway into him.

Three breaths.

His arm around me tightens, and my fingers flex against his chest.

Closer. Just a bit closer.

Four breaths.

“*Fuck*, I want to kiss you.” The rasp, the pain and longing in his voice, makes my knees buckle.

I blink up at him, my eyes nearly fluttering shut at the words, but I stop myself. I wait for him to make the first move.

But he doesn't.

Instead, he brushes a kiss against my forehead and steps away, putting too much space between us.

I almost reach for him, almost demand that he hold me, demand that he kiss me. But I don't. I twist my hands together, forcing myself to stay where I am, even though all I really want is to throw myself at him.

“What do you want?” His voice is low, his face flushed, his eyes hooded. I lick my lips again, nerves tightening my stomach.

“A flower and words on my arm,” I say quietly, running my hand along the spot on my upper wrist. “Roman numerals on my ribs.” His eyes dip to my waist, his jaw tensing like he can see through my shirt to the bare skin beneath. “I have photos.”

Pulling my phone from my pocket with shaky hands, I scroll through my photos until I find what I'm looking for. I turn it toward him and his brows lower as he scans the image, then nods.

“I need to draw something, but this is simple. Should only take a few minutes. Are you hungry? Thirsty? I can order some food. Or I have some water in the fridge—” He lightly kicks a black minifridge by his desk covered in stickers, and my lips twitch. “Think there's ice cream in the back—” He

takes off toward the doorway like he's about to hunt down the ice cream.

I catch his arm at the last second, stopping him. "I'm fine." His eyes search mine. His chest rises as he takes a deep breath, then nods.

"Sit, get comfortable. I'll only be a few minutes."

I sink into the chair, resting my arm on the long, flat armrest, and watch as he sits at his desk, hunching slightly over it while he draws. After telling him the numbers and what I want the stem of the sunflower to say, he goes back to drawing.

And he was right. It only takes him a few minutes before he's turning toward me, showing me his designs. I stare at them, my eyes burning when I take in the words that should be silly, the words that shouldn't have as much meaning as they do. But it's the numbers that stare back at me that make my throat tighten, make tears line my eyes.

Eight-seventeen-eighteen.

The day my life changed forever.

Nodding, I wipe my eyes before he can see the tears and give him a weak smile. "You're really talented," I tell him, watching as he copies the designs to transfer paper.

He huffs out a laugh. "Thanks."

Roman doesn't look at me as he traces it, all his concentration on the little pieces of art he's about to ink into my skin.

Finally, he turns toward me, his face serious. “Ready?” He scans my face like he’s trying to find something that’ll tell him I’m not ready, that I don’t really want a tattoo—two tattoos. But whatever he sees has him straightening his shoulders.

“Okay,” he breathes, rolling his chair toward me. “This arm?” He uses his chin to point to the one resting on the armrest, and I nod as he slides black gloves on before getting his machine and ink ready.

“How badly does it hurt?” I quickly ask, my heart rate kicking up a notch.

His lips twitch. “It’s a needle repeatedly stabbing into your skin with ink on it.” He slides his eyes to me, his white teeth showing as he smiles broader. “It doesn’t tickle.”

I roll my eyes. *Obviously*. But he has a million of them. It can’t be that bad, right?

After cleaning the area and shaving away any little blonde hairs, Roman covers my wrist in oil. I watch as he methodically works, his brows pinched tightly.

When he’s done transferring the sunflower to my wrist and we’re both happy with the placement, he scoots closer to me. His eyes meet mine for a brief second before he turns the machine on. It lightly buzzes and nerves fill my belly.

“You sure?” he murmurs. “You can come back another time.” I shake my head, swallowing thickly.

“Now or never.”

“That’s my girl.”

My heart skips a beat. That sentence, those three little words, shouldn't have as much power over me as they do.

Heat overrides the anxiety, and I smile at him. It might be the first real smile I've smiled in weeks. That realization has it falling slightly, and he notices.

Instead of saying anything, he grabs my wrist and slowly brings it to his lips. I choke on the air in my lungs, my eyes transfixed, as he presses the softest, sweetest kiss to the sensitive skin there.

My mouth goes dry as I watch him gently settle my arm back on the rest and dip the needle into the ink before bringing it to my skin.

I inhale sharply at the sting, but I was right, it's not that bad. Not until he starts dragging it up my wrist, creating the line. Suddenly, he begins humming, and it takes me a moment to realize what song it is.

Our song.

Here Comes the Sun by The Beatles.

"Ro," I breathe, but he ignores me as he begins writing the words *Delusionally Optimistic* in cursive, making up the stem of the sunflower. It's almost too much, the song, the buzzing, the burning, stinging sensation of the tattoo.

But I focus on him, on his soft, lulling voice, and sink into the experience, letting myself be fully present, letting myself *feel* everything. Before I can stop myself, I begin humming with him, and he smiles again, still concentrating on his work.

Finally, the song stops, and so does he. He leans back, squeezing my wrist slightly. “There. The words are done. Now time for the flower.” He glances at the colors of ink on the little metal tray and shifts his gaze back to me. “I specialize in black and white.”

I blink at him. “You can’t do it?”

“I didn’t say that,” he scoffs arrogantly. “I’m just saying, I don’t do color often. That’s more Kon’s thing.”

“So, you’re saying I should’ve gone to Kon?” I tease, and his eyes narrow.

“No. You’re right where you should be.” Heat rushes into my cheeks and the possessiveness of his words, of his stare.

It’s a different kind of possessiveness than Isaac. Isaac’s is too loud, too intense. Showboating. Roman’s is quiet. *Deadly*.

I force myself to stop comparing them. It’s not right, and it’s not fair to either of them.

Roman doesn’t seem to notice where my thoughts went as he picks up some of the yellow and turns back to my wrist. With a deep breath, he begins humming as the needle hits my skin. This time, it’s something else. A song I don’t recognize at first.

But when I do, my face breaks into a watery smile.

“*My Girl*,” I whisper. Ro ignores me and continues to hum.

My heart squeezes as I listen to him. But just as quickly as he started, the tattoo is over and he’s moving away.

“You did great,” he says, sliding his gloves off and tossing them in the bin. “Ready for the next one, or do you need a break?”

“I’m ready.”

After setting me up on the table with my shirt lifted, I squeeze my eyes shut at the sound of the buzzing. It’s quickly accompanied by another hummed rendition of *Here Comes the Sun* and I smile to myself, letting him quickly do the Roman numerals.

It takes him only a few minutes, then he’s done and slathering gel over the raw tattoo. “Eight-seventeen-eighteen,” he whispers, his gloved-fingers tracing lightly over the skin. His gaze lifts, meeting mine, flickering with some emotion I can’t place. “Why?”

I swallow thickly, blinking back the tears burning my eyes. “Tell me,” he urges softly.

“It was the worst day of my life,” I rasp. He pulls his hand away, and immediately, I miss his warmth. But he slides back on the stool, watching as I sit up and right my shirt, my legs dangling over the edge of the table. “It’s the day I lost the only person who saw me. The person who was my home. It was the day a part of me died, leaving me a shell of who I was.”

His throat bobs as he stares at me. His head falls forward. “Jane was a great woman,” he agrees, his voice soft.

I don’t mean for it to, but a humorless laugh escapes me. He *would* say that. He doesn’t even realize what the date was,

why it's so important. His head snaps up, his brows bunching together. "I'm sorry, Goldie. I know how much she meant to you."

Does he know how much he meant to me, too? Because that's what that date symbolizes.

The day I gave myself to him—in the dark, cold hours of the morning, he warmed my broken soul, promised me forever and made love to me. It was the same day we lowered Mama into the ground. The same day Roman left me, fracturing his promises only hours after he'd made them.

Eight-seventeen-eighteen.

The day the two most important people in my life were gone.

I wipe roughly at my face. "Not everything is as it seems, Ro." His eyes search mine. I know he has questions he wants to ask and a part of me is begging him to. To just open the door so I can tell him. But he doesn't.

He slides away and quickly cleans up his station. I hesitate, unsure if I should stay or go. But when I move to slide off the table, his head snaps toward me.

"Wait," he breathes, holding his hand up.

So, I wait.

I wait until he's totally done, then watch as he stalks back to me. He rests his hands on either side of the bed, leaning close and bringing our faces only inches apart. "How are you feeling? Lightheaded? Tired? Sick?"

I shake my head as he speaks. “I feel fine.” His eyes search mine, like he’s looking for a lie.

“You’ll tell me if that changes,” he demands, and a small smile twitches my lips as I nod. He kisses my forehead again, letting his lips linger as he releases a slow, shaky exhale against my skin. My eyes close and I lean into his touch, his lips, letting myself fall into him. “Let me take you somewhere, Goldie. Just the two of us. We need to talk.”

My stomach does a somersault at the words, but I know he’s right. We do need to talk.

So I give him my hand and let him lead us through Deliverance, and out to his bike.

3:56 Eve

The water is cool as I drag my toes through the lake, the wood of the dock hard beneath me. After the tattoo, I rode on the back of Roman's bike for the first time. To say I was freaking out is an understatement.

It was loud, and my legs were wobbly by the time we got here. He gave me his helmet. I didn't love that he wasn't wearing one, but he said he'd rather I be safe, which was stupidly sweet.

Now, we're sitting at a dock, looking out at a massive lake, and he hasn't said a word. Neither of us have. I don't know what to say. At Deliverance, we were distracted by the tattoo. We didn't want to say too much too loud in case we were overheard.

It felt like we'd put a pause on whatever tension was between us while he worked. But now we're alone, and everything that happened two weeks ago, the absence in that time, hangs thickly around us.

He roughly clears his throat before looking at me. I watch him from the corner of my eye, but keep my gaze downcast. I don't know if I can handle fully seeing whatever's on his face.

"Eve?" he rasps, his voice thick.

"Yeah?"

I kick the water, sending droplets flying. The lake ripples as they land, and I do it again, not letting the surface stay calm longer than a few seconds. How can it when I feel so unsteady?

"I'm sorry," he murmurs. My throat tightens and I squeeze my eyes shut.

I'm sorry.

Those words can hold so much weight, or none at all. It depends on him, on his intent. Does he mean it? Is he really sorry? Or is he just saying it because I'm upset? Does he even know what he's apologizing for?

"I'm sorry," he says again, his voice firmer. "I should've—I should've done things differently—"

"I couldn't breathe, Roman," I whisper, and his words die. Like a dam breaking, everything comes out, just like that day on the cliff. "I was trying to get your attention—I was trying to get you to look at me. But you wouldn't. You ignored me. You shut me out. I was scared. I was alone. And I couldn't breathe."

Every word is thicker than the last, the threat of breaking, of *sobbing*, lingering inside me, pushing at my chest, begging to

be let free. But I shove it down, all the emotions I've tried to ignore over the last few weeks.

I could pretend I was fine when I didn't have to look at him, when I could act like he didn't exist. But with him sitting beside me, with this conversation beginning, they're all bubbling to the surface and I don't know if I can take it.

He wraps his tattooed fingers around the edge of the dock, his knuckles turning white as he dips his head. Finally, I look fully at him, wanting to see what he's thinking, what he's *feeling*.

"I'm so sorry," he says again, his voice full of anguish. My heart squeezes, and I let my hand slide over the rough wood until it rests against his. His jaw tenses, more stubble coating it than the last time I saw him. "I should've stopped. No—" He runs his hand through his hair, letting out a harsh breath. "No, I should've never started. I shouldn't have let him goad me into it. I should've—I should've thought of you, not him. Not his words."

I nod as tears fill my eyes. He's right. He should've thought of me first.

"I didn't hate it at first," I admit brokenly, the words like ash on my tongue. "I thought it's what he wanted. I thought it's what both of you wanted, and I just wanted you to be happy. But then it was like I was a toy you were fighting over, and it started to feel different. And then you were checked out, focused on him, and I was alone. I felt alone. Like I was nothing but—"

But a hole for men to use.

I squeeze my eyes shut as the words slice through me.

I've tried not to think about them, and I've mostly been successful. At least during the day, when I'm too busy with Oli or Chase, or even Kon. Too busy to think about what happened, to think about Isaac and all the things he'd said. But at night, when I'm alone and I'm staring at the same ceiling Roman stared up at for years, everything comes crashing back down, reminding me why I'm here.

"He just pisses me off," Roman grunts. "But I should've controlled myself better. I should've taken you away the first day I was back." He shakes his head again. "I should've never let you stay with him in the first place."

With our hands still pressed together, I wrap my pinky around his, and he stiffens. He glances at me, his chest heaving with his breath. "The things he was saying," he mutters, his eyes searching mine, "how rough he was with you. That was normal? He did it like that every time?"

I see the pain, the reluctance to ask the question in his eyes, but he still does. "Not every time," I admit. "The first time wasn't so bad. Not so rough. It changed after that."

I can't tell him I liked it. The rough way Isaac touched me, spoke to me, punished me. I liked the things he did and said...

Until I didn't.

Roman clenches his jaw again, his pain melting away into something else, something fiery.

“He should’ve been gentle with you,” he says darkly. “He should’ve taken care of you, not berated you. Not hurt you.”

I shake my head, my brows pushing together as I glance back at the water.

“He didn’t hurt me,” I whisper. His pinky wraps tighter around mine, squeezing until I look at him again.

“The rice?” His voice is guttural, like he’s holding back. “What happened with the rice, Goldie? What else did he do?” I shake my head again, tears filling my eyes.

Goldie.

“Nothing,” I rasp. “He didn’t do anything.”

But he did, didn’t he?

He whipped me while I knelt on the rice, then fucked me with the handle. I was into it at the time, or I thought I was. But now...

“He didn’t hurt me,” I reiterate. “Everything that happened was consensual.”

Wasn’t it?

“It can be consensual until it’s not,” he murmurs. “He should’ve stopped the second he realized you were uncomfortable.”

“I was fine.”

But was I?

“If it was just rough, and you both wanted it, you should have had a safe word. He should have stopped.”

My heart squeezes in my chest and suddenly, my skin feels too tight, too hot, too *wrong*.

I shake my head again.

“Stop,” I rasp. “Nothing happened. He didn’t—he didn’t—” He didn’t hurt me. I can’t stop the words from playing on a loop in my head.

Isaac would never *hurt* me. He’s Isaac. Even if the last few weeks have been weird between us, he was still my stepfather, still the man my mother and I came to when we had nowhere else to go. He was the one who saved us, who protected us. He wouldn’t hurt me. He wouldn’t.

But with the way Roman’s staring at me, his eyes gentle, and a soft expression, his mouth tipped in a pitying frown, I start to second guess myself.

Did he hurt me on purpose? Was I always into it, every time, the *whole* time?

I was. I know I was.

Right?

Right.

If I wasn’t, he would’ve stopped. He would’ve never done anything to me that I didn’t want to happen. Even when he punished me, I all but begged him to. I needed his forgiveness. And he gave it to me.

“He didn’t hurt me.”

“Alright, baby,” Roman whispers, his pinky still tight around mine. With his other hand, he slowly reaches up and uses his thumb to wipe a tear away.

When did I start crying?

I swipe at my cheeks, ridding them of the tears I hadn't realized had fallen.

Why am I crying?

“Can you do me a favor?” he whispers, and I stare at him for a long moment before barely dipping my chin in a nod as I sniffle. “Can we go back to talking? I've been in Hell these last few weeks without you. I need you in my life, Goldie. Even if you hate me and you're still pissed at me, please don't shut me out again. Don't disappear. I'll do everything I can to prove to you that I can be the man you deserve. I'll do better for you, baby. Just please, *please* don't leave me.”

The raw begging in his voice has a sob working its way up my throat. I'm agreeing before the words even come. “You can't leave me either,” I rasp, and he nods, scooting closer.

His arms wrap around me, holding me tightly to him as his lips press against mine. It starts out gentle, so gentle I nearly cry again, but then his tongue sweeps into my mouth, pressing and dancing against mine, and every emotion leaves my body, leaving heat in its wake.

I grip his shirt in my fists, anchoring him to me like I'm terrified he'll go again, and he holds me back just as tightly.

I whimper into his mouth, and he lets out a low groan. “We can’t do this here,” he rasps against my lips. “I’m not fucking you on the dock for the first time.”

“It’s not our first time,” I remind him, smiling.

“It’s our first time back together,” he whispers. *Together.* “And I want it to be perfect.” Pulling away, he tucks my hair behind my ear. His eyes bore into mine, a wicked gleam in them. “That doesn’t mean we can’t do other things.”

My brows lift, a small laugh leaving as he nips my lips. “Yeah? Like what?” I’m surprised by the huskiness in my voice.

His hand rests on my thigh, and his head falls forward, staring at the black fabric of my leggings like they’ve personally offended him.

“I like you in dresses,” he mutters. I start to feel self-conscious, but he continues before the feelings can dig too deep. “Easier access.” He winks at me, a hot-as-sin smirk on his face.

“Roman!” I laugh, shoving his shoulder. He chuckles, his hand sliding higher, higher, until he’s at the crease of my thigh, teasing me. “*Roman.*” It’s a breathy moan this time, my body coiling tight.

“Tell me what you need from me, my golden girl,” he whispers, moving his face into the crook of my neck. My head tips back, eyes fluttering shut, as he kisses along the length of

my throat, gently biting and sucking. “Do you need my fingers? My mouth?”

Memories of me riding his face while I stared up at the bronze cross flash through my mind, and I press my thighs together. He laughs again, low and *so* fucking hot. “I think you liked that, didn’t you? My mouth on your tight little pussy?”

“Ro,” I whimper.

“I know, baby.” He sucks harder on my neck, and I know I’ll have a hickey there, but right now, I don’t care. I feel too good. “I’ll give you what you need. All you have to do is tell me.”

My eyes open and I stare up at the blue sky, the clouds floating by as Roman’s fingers tease and play with me over my leggings.

So much has happened between us. For years, *years*, we’ve danced this dance.

For years we’ve ached and fought and lusted and lost. But throughout it all, I’ve never not needed him. Never not wanted him.

Never not loved him.

And right now, it feels like all of it’s coming to a peak. Some insurmountable cliffside just begging me to jump off.

I used to think I needed Roman to catch me, but now I realize my mistake. I don’t want him in the darkness when it all ends. I want him by my side so we can fall together.

“I burned for you,” I whisper, and he freezes. “Would you drown for me?”

He pulls away, that same wicked gleam shining bright. “I’d do anything for you.”

I grin and flick my eyes to the water. He hesitates, looking at it before his attention returns to me. “What?”

“Get in,” I say, jerking my chin at it. “Let’s see how long you can hold your breath.” His eyes widen.

“You want me to—” He stares at the water, contemplating, then he nods. His voice is all fire and embers as he demands, “Take your clothes off. And keep your tattoos out of the water.”

He gets to his feet and quickly shucks his jeans and t-shirt off, leaving him in his black briefs, his tattooed body on full display. His thick, hard cock presses against the material and my mouth waters. After sliding my leggings down my legs, I shift onto my knees.

Towering above me, he stares into my soul as I kneel before him. This position should scare me, should bring back memories of that day, but it doesn’t.

Out here, with the sun shining and the blue sky reflecting off the crystal clear lake, I feel *free*.

Nothing can keep me here. Nothing can contain or trap me.

And with Roman’s heated but knowing eyes on mine, I know deep in my soul that I’m safe.

“Can I?” I whisper, shuffling closer.

“Jesus fuck,” he breathes. “It’d take a stronger man than me to deny you.” I smirk as I reach for the waistband of his boxers, but his hand catches my wrist. My eyes lift, finding his face serious. “You’re sure?” Licking my lips, I nod. His finger trails over my cheek. “I will not hurt you, Eve. Never again. You’re in control. Do you understand me? Always.”

I swallow, blinking past the emotion thrumming through my veins. “I trust you, Ro.”

Something about those words makes his eyes flicker closed as he releases a long breath. His fingers gently brush my hair back before palming my cheek. For a moment, just one moment, we breathe, letting the connection that’s always existed between us burn to life.

I know we still have so much to work through, to talk about, but right here, right now, I’m his and he’s mine.

Tilting my head, I press my lips to his palm, meeting his gaze when his eyes flick open. “I trust you, Roman.”

He hesitates before letting me go, and dipping his chin at me. “What are you waiting for then, Goldie?”

Just like that, the tension building between us *snaps*.

As soon as I slide his boxers down, his cock pops free, bobbing in front of my face. It’s so thick, so long. So perfect.

He kicks the briefs off, and I stare up at him, at his tattooed body that looks like it was chiseled from marble. Like he’s a god staring down at me, waiting for me to serve him.

No. Not like a god.

Like the Devil.

I grin as I wrap my hand around his shaft, squeezing gently. His thighs flex and he grits his teeth together, his hands clenching into fists at his sides. Slowly, I bring his tip to my mouth, my eyes on his, as I run my tongue over his head.

“Fuck,” he grunts, the veins in his neck straining. “Your mouth—*fuck*.” I take him deeper, swirling my tongue around and around his tip as I twist my fist, making his eyes roll back. “Like that, baby. Christ.”

I go until I hit my throat, but he pulls his hips back, his eyes hard as he stares down at me. “Not that deep, Goldie.”

Emotions bubble up, but I force them down. I know why he doesn’t want me going that far, why he has that crazed, almost panicked look in his eye. But right now, what happened with Isaac is the furthest thing from my mind.

I just want to make Roman feel good.

So, I bring up my other fist, letting it join the first as I stroke him, sucking him into my mouth enough to make his toes curl, but not enough to hit my throat. His hand rests on the back of my head, not pushing, just guiding, a calming presence to let me know he’s there.

“God, it feels so fucking good,” he groans. He’s holding back. I can feel it. His body is trembling, and he’s digging his fingers into his muscular thigh, trying not to lose control and fuck my mouth.

A part of me wants him to, but a part of me likes it like this.
Gentle.

It's different.

You're in control.

Always.

“You look so beautiful,” he chokes out. “So pretty on your knees with my cock in your mouth. My pretty little Goldie.” His fingers gently twist in my hair, and I moan, needing more. “Once you're done and you've swallowed all my cum, you'll get a reward, won't you? You'll get my face between those perfectly thick thighs. You'll get to come, and come, and come, until you can't remember your name.”

I moan again, my eyes on his as I move my mouth and hands faster. Is it possible to come just by words? Because I'm fucking close. I'm so wet, I can feel it every time my legs shift.

“That's it,” he grunts. “You make me feel so good, baby.” My hand snakes between my legs, and he grins, shaking his head. “No touching. Not yet.” I whine, drool spilling from the corners of my mouth as I move faster, feeling his cock thicken. “Be my good girl and wait for me to make you come.”

My eyes roll back at the words. Who knew that would be the thing that does it for me?

“Shit, baby. I'm coming. I'm—fuck.” He tries to pull back, but I follow him, taking him deeper. “Fuck, Goldie. *Fuck.*” He lets out a low groan, making me press my thighs together as

rope after rope of hot cum spurts from his cock into my mouth. I greedily swallow it all, savoring his taste.

Finally, he pulls away, his barely softening cock falling from my mouth as he stares down at me. He crouches and grips my chin, running his thumb along my wet lower lip. His gaze sears me as he searches my eyes, trying to find something.

“Are you okay?” he murmurs. “Did I hurt you?”

“No,” I whisper. His eyes narrow, but I shake my head. “I promise. That was—” A breathy laugh leaves me. “It was amazing.”

“I should be the one saying that,” he says. Leaning in, he presses his lips to mine and I freeze. He feels it and pulls back, looking confused. “What?”

“I didn’t think you’d want to kiss me after...” I trail off as he grins.

“I don’t care, baby.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

I bite my lip, feeling my face flush. I don’t know why it’s so hot when a guy has no issue kissing his girl after she’s gone down on him.

“I think it’s your turn,” he breathes, kissing me again, this time harder, as if to prove his point. He pulls away and looks at the lake, leaving me breathless. “And I’m getting wet.”

“Same.”

He blinks at me. I blink at him.

Then he throws his head back and laughs. “I’d fucking hope so,” he chuckles, facing the water again. He sighs, running his fingers through his hair. “Jesus, I can’t believe I’m doing this. Sit on the edge. I don’t want your tattoos in the water.”

I hide my smile as I crawl to the edge, watching him jump into the water. I hesitate before sliding my legs over, letting my feet dangle. He pops up, shaking his head until water splashes all over me.

“Roman!” I cry, holding my hands out even as a deep belly laugh falls from my lips.

So free.

“Oh, sorry.” He looks up at me innocently. His grin is all mischief. “Open your legs for me, Goldie.”

My mouth goes dry at the command, but I do it, watching him swim to me and brace his elbows on the dock. His wide shoulders nudge my legs further apart, my stomach tightening as he stares directly at my pussy.

“Closer,” he mutters. “I need you on the edge.”

Swallowing thickly, I move until I’m just a few inches from his mouth. His eyes lift to mine, the sunlight twinkling in them. He smiles so wide, his dimple pops out and my heart skips a beat.

“Ready?” he breathes. I can’t do anything but nod slowly and watch as he moves between my legs, dragging his tongue

along my slit. I gasp, my head falling back and eyes fluttering shut.

His tongue flicks against my clit, circling it until my breathing turns heavy. A growl rips from him and he pulls himself closer, forcing his tongue to move faster.

“Ro,” I whimper, sliding my hand into his wet hair. I grip it tightly in my fist, lifting my hips, silently begging for more. He slides his tongue lower, pressing inside me, and my legs widen even more, bringing me closer. “*There.*”

Dropping my head forward, my gaze meets his dark one, the look in his eye bordering frantic as he forces me closer to my release. We never break contact as he pushes me more, moving his tongue harder and faster like a man possessed.

God, he’s *ravenous*.

“Shit,” I breathe. “I’m so—” I cry out, my hand tightening in his hair. I know it has to hurt him, but it seems to only turn him on more. His hands wrap around my hips, his fingers digging into the soft flesh as he drags me closer, the dock rough against my skin.

His lips wrap around my clit and he sucks it hard into his mouth. My eyes roll to the back of my head as he does this wild thing with his tongue that sends me over the edge.

I scream, the sound echoing around us as my grip on his hair tightens. My legs clamp around his head, my hips grinding against his mouth as I ride out the last of my orgasm.

Again.

And again.

Just like he promised.

He doesn't stop until I've fallen back to the dock, my chest heaving, my skin coated in sweat as I stare up at the bright sunny sky.

Water splashes, then he's lying beside me. I snuggle into his side, sighing at the comforting weight as he rests his arm around my shoulders. His wet body soothes my heated skin, but it's his scent, even beneath the lake water, that calms me. My head shifts further onto his chest, and my eyes close as I listen to the steady beat of his heart.

He kisses the top of my head, letting his lips linger, and for the first time in forever, I feel...good. Content.

Happy.

"I'm so sorry for leaving, Eve," he murmurs. I squeeze my eyes tighter, trying to hold on to the fleeting moment.

"But you came back," I rasp.

His arm tightens, holding me closer. "I was always coming back for you."

It's the undeniable promise in his voice that has another layer of hurt slowly dissolving on the afternoon breeze.

Silence fills the empty space for so long I feel myself begin to drift. But then his voice stirs me awake again. "Hey, Goldie?"

"Yeah, Ro?"

“Will you go on a date with me?”

3:57 Eve

Bright lights, salty, nutty popcorn, sweet funnel cakes, kids screaming, families laughing, couples kissing.

The carnival.

I sigh as I take everything in again. I can't remember the last time I went to a carnival. And when Roman asked me on a date, this was the last place I thought he'd take me.

It was supposed to be just us, but when we rounded a corner, we came face-to-face with Chase, Kon, and Oli.

And Robert.

I was surprised they let Oli bring Robert in with her, but he'd been on the ferris wheel and apparently loved it. He also went feral for the funnel cakes and cotton candy.

Roman grumbled about it not just being us anymore, and while a part of me thought it was sweet, another part was worried he wanted to keep things a secret. I'm not even sure where we stand with each other right now. A date doesn't

really mean anything, does it? People go on dates all the time; it doesn't mean there's anything between them.

Every time hope swells in my chest, I stomp it down. I can't get hurt. Not again.

My heart keeps telling me Roman is here to stay, that he won't leave again, that he won't hurt me again. But my mind is telling me the opposite. That he's not the commitment type of guy.

"Goldie?" Roman nudges me and I blink, pulling myself from my spiral. I glance at him, smiling as I tuck my hair behind my ear. "You okay?"

"Fine," I laugh, shaking my head dismissively. "There's so much going on. It's overwhelming."

What happened to the space you carved out for yourself, coward?

One day at a time.

His face softens in understanding. "We can go," he murmurs, moving closer. "If it's too much, I'll take you somewhere else."

"It's okay." I give him another tight-lipped smile as we make our way through the thick crowd of people.

His hand wraps around mine, and on instinct, I pull away, looking around to make sure no one saw. But Chase and Kon's backs are to us as they move toward a booth, and Oli is way ahead of them, in line to get cotton candy.

“What?” Roman asks, pulling me to a stop beside him. His brows are pressed tightly together, the colorful lights reflecting off his hazel eyes as he stares at me, waiting.

I swallow thickly, gently pulling my hand from his. “Nothing.”

“Why’d you pull away?” he demands, and I take a deep breath.

“I—I don’t know,” I breathe. But I *do* know.

Isaac.

He couldn’t touch me in public, and a stupid part of my brain thought Roman wouldn’t either. That he’d want to hide this. Hide us.

“I just didn’t think you’d want them to know yet,” I mutter, using my head to point at Chase and Kon. Maybe not ever. Roman glances at them before looking back at me, his brows furrowed.

“Know what?”

“About...” I trail off. Was I looking more into this than he was? What if what we’d done at the lake, what he’d said, was just reconciliation? What if it didn’t mean anything to him? Not the way it meant something to me. “Nevermind.”

“Us?” His brows raise expectantly. “You think I don’t want them to know about us?” I shrug, wrapping my arm around myself. “Jesus, Eve.” He runs his hand through his hair, giving me a look I can’t quite decipher. “You’re not my dirty little

secret, baby. I'm not hiding you. I'll never fucking hide you. I want everyone to know you're my girl."

"Really?" I whisper, my throat tight.

"If that's what you want." I nod as he speaks, and he huffs out a laugh. He holds his hand between us, and I stare at it. "Then hold my hand, and don't let go until I tell you to."

Never. I'll never let go.

Heat rushes through my body at the sweet command, and I slide my palm against his, lacing our fingers together. I can't ignore the feeling of rightness that washes over me.

This feels right.

He feels right.

We push our way through the crowd, aiming for Kon and Chase. Kon is tossing rings on bottles while Chase cackles every time he misses. Which is often. I grin as we step up beside Chase.

"Hey, slutbag. Cotton candy?"

"Oh my God!" I press my hand to my chest, jolting as Oli pops up beside me out of freaking nowhere. Her blue eyes twinkle in the glow from the booth. She rips off a piece of pink cotton candy and hands it to Robert. I watch as he nibbles on it, letting it dissolve on his snout and mouth. "Don't sneak up on me, Oli."

"Why not?" She tilts her head to the side as she tears off a piece and pops it into her mouth. "A bit of fear is good for the

heart.”

“It’s not,” I breathe. “It’s really, really not.” Roman laughs beside me, and I glare at him.

“Cotton candy, Pyro?” Oli asks slyly. I narrow my eyes at her, then him.

“Why are you calling him Pyro? You’ve never called him that.”

“It’s his name, isn’t it?” She grins, pulling off another piece for Robert.

“His name’s Roman.”

“But they call him Pyro.”

I open my mouth, then close it and look at him again. “Why do they call you Pyro?” I ask, and he huffs out a laugh. Sliding his hand into his pocket, he grabs his lighter and pulls it out. With practiced ease, he flicks it open, the flame coming to life.

“Kon started it,” he mutters with a shrug. “I like fire.”

I can’t remember him liking fire when he was a kid. But as I take him in now, I’m reminded he’s a long way off from being the kid he once was. And a part of me is grateful for it. That he’s different. That he’s found himself.

It gives me hope I will one day, too.

“So edgy.” Oli grins, and I elbow her in the ribs, giving her a look to stop talking.

“So it is,” he chuckles, squeezing my hand tighter.

“Loser!” the booth attendant cries, drawing our attention. Kon throws his hands in the air, a pissed off expression on his face as Chase cackles beside him. He throws his arm around Kon’s shoulders, still laughing as he steers him toward us.

“That game is fucking rigged,” Kon grumbles, looking less pissed and more like he’s pouting.

“Yeah, it totally is,” Chase agrees, shaking his head and rolling his eyes when Kon isn’t looking at him anymore.

I feel Roman staring at me, and it takes me a moment to realize *what* he’s staring at. Me, yes. But my smile. They’re coming a bit more frequently lately, mostly around him and his friends. *My friends, maybe?*

“Come on,” he mutters, pulling me from the group, ignoring their hollers behind us. He drags me through the crowd, bumping into people and not caring.

“Ro,” I laugh, tugging on his hand. “What are you doing?” He shakes his head as he leads me to the ferris wheel, pulling me to his side. I stare up at it, at the pretty lights, then at him.

We wait in line for a few minutes, silently sneaking glances at each other. I don’t know why, but butterflies erupt in my belly the first time he looks at me. There’s something different about this moment. Something I can’t place.

Not tension—we’ve had loads of that, and this isn’t it. It feels like we’re standing on the edge of something massive, and with one step, everything’s about to change. Nerves swirl in my stomach at the thought.

Am I ready for that?

I don't have a choice but to be as I'm pulled onto the landing. Roman holds the little car for me as I slide into the seat, then watch as his too-large body squeezes through the tiny door. He hunches in on himself, trying to fit, but he looks happy. Like he's content being squished on this ride with me.

Reaching out, he grabs my hand and runs his thumb along the back of it. His eyes search mine, but I don't know what he's looking for. As I open my mouth, the car lurches forward.

"Look," he whispers, squeezing my hand gently. I turn my attention to the town around us, taking in the sweeping trees and the giant clock tower that looks so tiny from here, but massive up close. The way Mammoth comes to life at night. The way it looks like the twinkling lights of a city, but still feels like a small town.

I understand why Roman loves it here. Why he chose to run here instead of anywhere else.

It feels good here. Comfortable.

It feels like home.

"I haven't done this in a long, long time," he mutters, drawing my attention. I look back at him, my brows pushed together.

"What?"

"Been on a date." He looks out at the trees as we come to a stop at the top. I stare at him, the blue, purple, and pink lights reflecting off his face.

I almost forgot this was a date. I just feel so comfortable around him I hadn't even thought about it.

But that's what this is.

"It's my first one," I blurt, and his head whips to me.

"No, it's not."

"Yeah," I laugh. "It is. I didn't date in high school. Unless you call us hanging out *dates* then..." I trail off, shrugging.

"But you never went on any dates after—" He cuts himself off, but I don't need to hear the rest of the words to know them.

"No." I shake my head. I didn't even look at a guy for a long time after he left. I hadn't looked at one until I started looking at Isaac differently.

Guilt bubbles in my stomach at the thought of him. What's he doing? Is he freaking out because he hasn't heard from me? I can't make myself ask Roman if he's heard anything. Partly because I don't want to ruin our night, but also because I don't want to know the answer. Yes or no, it doesn't matter.

"Goldie," Roman mutters, reaching for my face. I jerk back, and his hand pauses midair. "It's okay. It's just me." I swallow thickly, leaning forward, letting him rest his warm palm against my cheek. I lean into his touch, my eyes shutting. "I've got you."

Tears sting the back of my eyes, and I don't entirely know why. Maybe because I know he means the words. Or maybe

because it's the gentleness of his touch, or the softness of his voice.

Whatever it is, I feel safe. Everything feels right.

"When are you coming home?" I whisper, letting my lids open. He stares back at me, his face serious.

"Home?"

"To yours, I mean." I pull away, and he drops his hand to my lap, his fingers wrapping around my thigh. "The loft."

"Oh." He rubs the back of his neck with his other hand as he sighs. "Whenever you give the okay." I blink at him.

"When *I* give the okay?" I repeat, my brows bunching. "I don't live there. It's yours and Chase's house."

He shrugs. "But you're living there right now," he says. "You feel safe and comfortable there. I won't take that from you."

My throat tightens, tears threatening to spill over as I stare at him, letting his words settle. He's fine living wherever he's currently living and letting me take over his house, his room, just so I can feel comfortable.

He's...

"Unbelievable," I breathe. His brows raise.

"What?"

"You—you—" The words won't leave my lips. I try to choke them out, try to force myself to say them, but I can't.

I don't even know what I want to say. Thank him, maybe. Or tell him how much he means to me, how much his words mean to me.

How much I love him.

"Thanks, Ro," I whisper, dropping my eyes. His hand tightens, and I peek up at him through my lashes.

"You come first, Goldie."

I search his eyes for any hint of a lie, but there isn't one. Of course, there isn't one.

"But you can come home," I murmur, and the corner of his mouth kicks up in a small grin.

"I can?"

I nod as I look out at the trees again. We're still stuck at the top, and this moment is fleeting. I know when we get out of this little bubble, it'll be different. Things will feel different. Not good or bad. Just...*different*.

The ride lurches forward, and slowly, we start our descent. His hand is a tight, comforting weight around mine and I smile as I look back at him, my chest warming.

"Will you?" I whisper. "I want you there. I—I miss you."

He inhales sharply, and I glance at him to gauge his reaction. Too much? Did I say the wrong thing?

But then his hand wraps around the back of my neck and he tugs me forward. His lips roughly press against mine as the wheel comes to an abrupt stop.

The attendant opens the door, but Roman doesn't let me go. He rests his forehead against mine, breathing deeply. "I miss you too, Goldie. So fucking much." I hold my breath, but when he doesn't say anything else, I pull away.

"Does that mean—"

"Yes," he interrupts. "I'm coming home."

3:58 Roman

Home.
It's a weird concept.

You'd think the house I just spent the last month in with the only blood family I have left would be my home, but it's not. It hasn't been for a long time. Maybe it never was.

The familiar door in front of me has my heart rate skyrocketing. My fingers wrap around the doorknob, and my eyes catch on the tattoo etched into my knuckles.

Home.

I glance at my other hand, my fingers flexing.

Sick.

No, Divinity wasn't my home at all.

I push through the door, the scent of tomatoey pasta sauce filling the air. A smile breaks across my face at the sound of laughter bouncing against the vaulted ceilings. I let the door close silently behind me and step inside, my smile growing as

my gaze snags on the plant Chase threw up in all those weeks ago.

I chuckle to myself, running my hand through my hair.

Fuck, time has flown by.

“Oli!” my best friend screeches, and my head snaps up, finding Chase gaping down at his sister, his arms outstretched wide, his favorite *Kiss the Influencer* apron covered in red sauce. “*What the fuck?*”

I freeze, watching as she innocently grins up at him, a spatula dangling precariously from her hands. She shrugs as she pops it into her mouth.

“Sorry.” Her words are muffled, the sauce dribbling down her chin.

Smirking, I cross my arms over my chest and lean against the wall, content to watch them silently, remaining unnoticed.

Chase grunts and smears the sauce down his cheek with a glare. Meanwhile, Eve does her best to keep from laughing, her eyes wide, her cheeks pink, and her pretty lips tucked between her teeth.

My chest warms at the sight of them all together and I wonder if this is what family is really supposed to look like, to sound like. The only thing that would make it better would be if—

Kon stomps into the kitchen, his bare feet slapping against the floor. My mouth drops open as I take him in, his black t-shirt tight against his massive chest, his hair tied up in a small

bun on the top of his head, and grey sweats wrapped around his thick legs. But it's not the comfortable attire he's wearing that has me so shocked, it's the fucking possum strapped to his chest.

Kon, my grumpy asshole of a boss, is wearing Robert the way Oli usually does. Despite the irritated look on his face, his tattooed hand runs over the creature's furry head while the other supports a baby bottle in Robert's mouth.

"What the hell is going on in here?" he grumbles. His eyes widen when he sees the mess Oli made. He lets out long sigh, shaking his head. "I'm not cleaning that shit up."

Olive scoffs and rolls her eyes. She points the spatula at him and her lip lifts in a smirk. "Last I heard," she drawls, flicking her gaze to Chase, "you *love* cleaning sticky messes off my brother."

Eve loses it then, a loud laugh bursting from deep inside her. I watch enraptured as her head falls back, her long golden-blonde curls dancing with her movements. I swallow thickly, the sight of her hitting me down to my bones.

Fuck, she's so beautiful. Like sunshine and light.

The thought has a memory pressing in and my fingers slide into my pocket, gripping my lighter tightly as I breathe through it.

The door slams behind me as I barrel into my room, my chest heaving, my back burning with every shift of my muscles. My

hands tremble, my heart thundering, and my mind whirling.

I can't believe he just did that—here, now.

I thought it'd stop when they moved in. I didn't think he'd have the balls to do it with Jane and Eve so close.

But he did.

I swallow roughly and bat the traitorous tears streaming down my face away.

“Be a man!” he'd commanded, and I tried. Fuck, I tried. But every time he yells at me, every time he stands over me, every fucking time he takes me to that place, I'm a small child again.

“No punishment seems pleasant at the time, but painful.”

The words run on repeat through my mind, and as much as I wish I could, I can't stop them.

Again and again.

I close my burning eyes and stumble toward my bed. But flashes of the basement cloud the darkness behind my lids, and they snap open again.

All that exists is the basement.

Him.

That fucking whip.

All I hear is the sound of the bookcase sliding across the old wood floors. The sound of the door creaking open, and my bare feet thudding down the concrete stairs, him following slowly behind me.

All I see is the dark room, the brownish-red stains dotted across the floor, the wooden beams that make up the ceiling I'm not allowed to look at.

All I feel is my knees as they hit the rice, the grains digging in, even through my sweats, his hot breath against my neck as he sneers his commands, the leather whip colliding with my bare back.

Again and again.

“Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.”

My raw, bloody knees hit the floor next to my bed and a pathetic whimper spills from my chapped lips.

Before I realize what I'm doing, my elbows are on the bed, my hands clasped together. My gaze finds the ceiling, and I take a deep breath. Looking up is something I'm never allowed to do when I'm with him. It makes no sense to me.

If God is real, He should exist everywhere. If He's real, He can't be an invisible being that exists only in the sky. And if He's real, why do I have to bow my head to show Him respect? If He's real, if He's all-knowing, all-forgiving, and all-powerful the way Isaac says He is, then why do I have to become a shell of myself to feel His love?

Swallowing thickly, silent tears stream down my cheeks. “Lord,” I choke out, hating the word while simultaneously clinging to it with everything I've got. “I don't know what I did to be born into this life, but I don't want it. I don't know what I

did wrong to make you hate me so much.” My mouth goes dry, and a sob spills from deep in my burning chest. “I’ll do better. I’ll try harder. I promise. I—I—” I squeeze my eyes shut. “I’m sorry.”

I stare at the white ceiling, seeing everything, seeing nothing. Wishing that just for once, He’d speak back. He’d say He made a mistake. He’d take me out of here. He’d help me.

Someone help me.

At the thought, my mind flits to Jane again. She’s still at church, still tutoring, still none the wiser of what happened today. She has no idea who she shares a bed with.

And Eve...

Sweet, innocent, Eve. She’s only ten. She’s just a kid. So are you, a quiet voice whispers in my mind, but I shake it away. I haven’t been a kid in a long time. Maybe I never was.

Yet with the vision of Eve lodged deep in my mind, I can’t help but let out a childish bargain that will go unheard, just like everything else. Maybe I’ll truly believe if He helps me for once.

“Please help me. Guide me. I’ll do anything to be a bit more like her. Show me the light because I can’t find it. I try. I—I really try.” I choke on another sob, this one wracking my body. Squeezing my eyes shut, I drop my head. “Please, Lord, all I see is the dark. I just want to see the light. Just once.”

Tiny arms wrap around my shoulders, and I jump, my head snapping up. My back burns with the movement and I

instinctually flinch, the pain still too close to the surface.

“It’s just me, Roman.” Eve sniffles, and I come face to face with her small, innocent, tear-stained eyes. They’re such a bright blue, so unlike anything I’ve seen before. But it’s the understanding, the sympathy and something else, something deeper, that I see in her eyes that takes my breath from my lungs.

“Wh—what are you doing here?” I rasp, but I don’t push her away. If anything, I sink further into her embrace.

She doesn’t know what happened in the basement. He stopped before they came home, but for just this moment, I pretend.

I pretend she came for me.

She licks tears from her lips and holds me tighter. “I’ll be that for you,” she whispers, her eyes darting between mine. “I’ll be your light.”

I sink further into her hold. Just for this moment, I’ll be weak. “You can’t.”

She pulls my head onto her shoulder. “I can and I will.” I’m surprised by the vehemence in her voice. “I promise I’ll always be your light. I’ll shine for you when you’re in the dark. You just have to open your eyes and see me.”

I blink back to the present, my throat thick with unshed tears. I knew the second Eve wrapped herself around me and promised to be my light that she was endgame for me.

I just had no idea that my father would eventually come in and fuck up the entire chessboard.

The basement clings to me, but I squeeze my eyes shut, willing it to disappear for good. It's not until I feel a warm hand on my cheek that I realize she's standing before me in the entryway of my loft. My eyes open, and just like she promised, that's all I had to do to see her light. The fire that always burns deep inside me cools to the gentle simmer I feel every time she looks at me.

Her lip tips up in a smile as her thumb brushes over my cheek and I swear it's like she knows exactly where I just went. I exhale a shaky breath, letting the past fall away where it belongs and reach for her, my fingers wrapping around her hips.

I tug her body into me, and she giggles, her chest colliding with mine. "You okay?" she murmurs.

Unable to speak, I bend down and capture her surprised lips with my own. For the first time, I kiss the love of my life in *my* home. My safe place. The place I made for myself with my chosen family.

Eve sinks into me, her fingers tangling with my shirt, and everything feels right. Resisting the urge to shove her against the wall and fuck her here and now, I pull back, resting my forehead against hers.

"I am now," I breathe, tightening my arms around her lower back.

Her eyes flutter closed, and she releases a soft sigh, tracing patterns on my chest as though she can see the tattoos beneath my shirt.

“Good,” she murmurs. “I missed you.”

And just like that, the mistake I made all those years ago hits me with shocking clarity.

“Please, Lord, all I see is the dark. I just want to see the light. Just once.”

Eve.

Eve is my light, and she was there when I needed her. I asked, I *begged*, and there she was.

She’s here.

And I’m never letting her go again.



“So,” I start, my voice raspy from laughing so hard at dinner.
“This is my room.”

I awkwardly run my fingers through my hair as the door quietly closes behind her. Eve turns wide, blinking eyes up at

me and for a moment, we just stare at each other.

Then, her head tips back with a deep belly laugh that has my frayed edges soothing.

“I know,” she chuckles, softly smacking my abs with the back of her hand as she passes me. I grunt, narrowing my eyes as her fine ass sways in her yoga pants. She drops down to my bed, looking beyond comfortable and too damn good in my space. “I’ve been staying here, remember?”

Right.

She’s been staying here.

In my home, my room, my bed.

The first night she’d shown up, Kon texted me. It was the only thing that kept me grounded when she disappeared. I knew I’d fucked up. Knew she needed space. She had every right to be upset, and as much as I wanted to call her, hear her voice and apologize, it’s not what she needed. And just like I promised at the lake, Eve comes first. Now. *Always*.

I bob my head, still rooted to the spot, unable to look away from her. A warm glow from a streetlight outside spills in from my window, illuminating her golden hair. She’s wearing my hoodie and no makeup, the tiny freckles dotting her cheeks on full display. There’s a soft look on her face as she watches me, her expression filled with humor and familiarity.

Not for the first time, the sight of her is like a sucker punch to my gut.

Fuck. She’s just so beautiful.

I swallow roughly, and though it kills me, I drag my gaze from her. I don't know why I feel so weird right now. So off kilter. I almost feel like I'm the one imposing.

My eyes slide across my room, noticing small changes she's made. My lips twitch when I realize she's tidied up. It even smells fresher, like she's kept the window open since I've been away.

It's so like her, always needing to feel the air on her face, to have the sun warming her skin.

My golden girl.

On my nightstand, I notice my usual pile of books is disheveled. A smaller stack on the right and a bigger one on the left. Next to it sits my worn copy of *The Brothers Karamazov*, a piece of paper shoved in the center like a bookmark.

Surprise flickers through me, and I finally close the distance between us. Tracing my finger over the embossed title, my gaze lifts to hers.

“You read it.”

It's not a question. Of course she did. It's called to her from the very beginning, just like it has me.

Eve scoots back on my bed and leans against the headboard. Reaching over, she slides it from the nightstand before bringing it close to her chest. She holds it gently, like it's just as precious to her as it is to me.

“I did,” she whispers, looking up with a slow smile. “Read with me, Ro? Like old times.”

Unable to deny her a single thing, I kick off my shoes, slide my phone, wallet, and keys from my pocket, and drop onto the bed next to her. I’m shocked when she immediately curls into my side like she used to and something in me settles.

Reaching for the book, I crack it open on my lap and stare at the torn and taped pages from years of use.

Eve laughs quietly. “I’m surprised you still have this copy.” She looks up at me, questions dancing in her eyes that have my heart squeezing. “Why didn’t you just get a new one? It’s so old.”

The question is whispered, the words practically disappearing between us. It’s the vulnerability etched on her face, the barely there plea to her voice that has me answering honestly, despite the pain in my chest.

I look down and run my fingers over the busted spine. God, this book has been through so much. Just like I have. Like she has.

Maybe I keep it because it’s a reminder of where I’ve been and what it took to get here, to this moment.

It’s been almost a year since I last saw her face. I have nothing left. Nothing but what’s on my back, and the alcohol burning a hole through my stomach.

As I walk through the rainy streets of Mammoth, my skin throbbing from the heavy, wet on my back clothes, I hold on to that burn, letting it keep me company.

I have nothing left.

No home.

No car.

No phone.

No money.

No friends or family.

No sunshine.

No light.

My fingers wrap tightly around my almost-empty backpack, and I'm reminded of another rainy night from months ago where I stood under a tree full of hope instead of on a dirty street full of vodka. It was a night so fucking awful, but I still had her, and somehow that made it not so bad.

Someone yanks the water-logged bag on my back so hard, I stumble backward, the grey world around me spinning. My head snaps up just as a dark figure in a soaked hoodie tears off with it.

For just a moment, one singular moment, I feel something other than drunk and numb. As I watch some lowlife take off with all I have left in the world, I'm so fucking angry that I do something beyond simply existing; beyond waiting for my eventual death.

I take off, my feet moving like lightning across the slick, dirty ground. I catch up to him faster than I should be able to. The world spins again, but this time it's not because of the alcohol coursing through my veins. It's me because I throw the fucker to the ground, rolling with him until I'm on top, glaring down at him.

His hands fly up, letting the backpack fall to the ground, his eyes widening. "What the fuck, man? It's only a backpack."

"No, it's not!" I roar. The anger, the hurt, the devastation that's been my life tears through me. It eats me up, lighting me on fire from the inside out.

"You can have it back!" he cries, sensing the darkness in me.

But it's too late.

I'm already gone.

My fists collide with his face. Again and again and again.

It's not until he whimpers, the sound so small, so broken, that I freeze. Blinking rapidly, I take in his bruised cheek and bloody nose. The fear in his eyes.

Fear because of me.

I'll never be like him.

I swore I wouldn't. I can't. No matter how angry I am.

With a growl, I shove off the guy's body and snatch the backpack. A snarl rips from my throat, but he's already

stumbling to his feet. His good eye, the one not swollen shut, silently begs me to leave him alone.

I stare after him for a long moment, watching him hobble away. My shoulders slump as I let out a long breath and turn my attention the opposite way.

Finding shelter from the rain in a covered alley, I lean against an old brick wall and slide down it, exhaustion replacing everything I'd just been feeling. The bag lands between my bent knees and I quickly unzip it.

I just have to see.

My fingers wrap around the hard surface, a tattered plastic bag keeping it safe. I swallow again, my mouth dry as I unwrap it. My fingers slide over the busted spine and my eyes burn. I wish I had tape, but you can't have silly things like tape without a home. Tape is a privilege.

But this book...it's an extension of me.

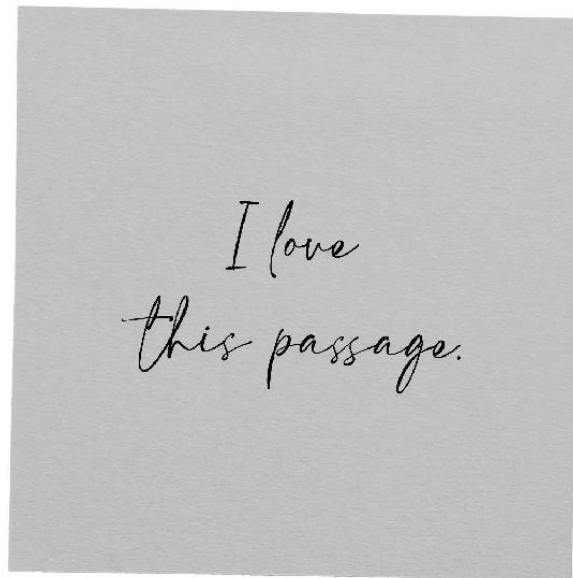
And it's safe.

"I've never seen a book worth fighting for," a heavily accented voice grumbles—Russian, I think. My eyes lift to him, watching as he brings a cigarette to his lips and takes a deep inhale, the tattoos around his throat bobbing with his swallow.

I look away and crack the book open, my thumb running over the familiar feminine scrawl along the margin. "This book is worth killing for." But I don't say the unspoken part of that declaration—the woman inside is worth dying for.

And out here, I just might.

“It’s not Dostoevsky’s story that made me keep it,” I murmur, taking in another note she left me all those years ago. It’s simple, irrelevant and unimportant, but to me, it’s everything. It kept me together when nothing else did.



“Why, then?” There’s that plea again, like she already knows the answer but needs to hear it anyway. I look at her, letting her see the truth in my eyes. Letting her see me.

“It’s not his story written on these pages, Goldie,” I whisper, brushing her hair from her cheek and tucking it behind her ear. “It’s *ours*.”

Her eyes gloss over. “*Ro*,” she rasps.

I don’t know who moves first, but seconds later, we’re colliding together, her sunshine blending with my never

ending darkness.

Her lips are so soft against mine, and I groan into her mouth, making her whimper. Heat rolls through my body at the sound and everything else outside this room disappears.

I shove the book to the side and wrap her in my arms, dragging her onto my lap. Eve gasps, her hands landing on my shoulders as her knees fall on either side of my legs.

She leans back and meets my gaze. Her throat bobs, nerves flitting across her face. Reaching up, I cup her cheeks, the gravity of the moment hitting me hard.

“You’re beautiful,” I murmur, meaning it with every bone in my body. Other words dance on my tongue, words I’ve said before, only to her, but now, they feel so different. They feel like *more*.

Before I can let them slip free, her hands leave my shoulders and she mirrors me, gripping my face. “So are you.”

My head shakes, but she drops a hand, letting it slide down to my chest. She presses it over my heart and dips her head, forcing me to meet her gaze.

“*You* are beautiful, Roman Payne.”

“Fuck,” I groan, fisting her stolen hoodie, and yank her to me. My mouth presses against hers and I devour my girl, letting her feel how much her words, her heart, her fucking soul mean to me.

She tears at the hem of my shirt frantically, and I chuckle into her mouth. Reaching back, I tug it over my head with one

hand and toss it blindly over her shoulder before wrapping my fists around her top.

“You’re in control,” I remind her, repeating the words from the lake. “Tell me what you want, Goldie.”

“I want you,” she says, not even hesitating.

I swallow another groan, my cock throbbing between us. Her hips tilt forward and she shivers, letting me know she feels how badly I want her. I smirk, my brow arching as I slowly lift the hem, my thumbs tracing patterns on her soft skin.

“What do you want me to do?” I murmur, my voice husky.

I pull the sweatshirt over her head, leaving her in just a sports bra and leggings. I take in her full tits, my mouth watering. Keeping my eyes locked on hers, I lean forward and wrap my lips around a hard nipple, the fabric dampening beneath my tongue.

She moans, threading her fingers through my hair, and I pull away. Her moan cuts off, and she scowls at me.

“Tell me what you want, baby,” I demand, my hands gliding up her body, learning her new curves. Her hips are wide and she has this adorable roundness to her lower belly that drives me insane with need.

My thumbs hook under her bra, but I pause, waiting.

Eve pulls away and my hands immediately fall to my sides as I silently vow to stop if that’s what she wants. With a confidence I hardly recognize, but find beyond sexy, she

smirks and pushes to her feet. I move to the end of the bed, my elbows resting on my knees, my fists clenched together.

With her eyes locked on mine, her arms cross over her chest and she removes her bra, letting it fall to her feet. Her breasts are heavy and perfectly rounded. Her hard pink nipples are begging for my mouth again, but I wait.

She slowly takes off her pants, then her thong, and they join the pile on the ground, leaving her completely bare. There's nothing overtly sexual about the way she moves or how she's undressing, but I find myself unable to look away, entranced.

I've seen her naked before. Once when we were younger and I'd had the honor of spending one night wrapped around her, worshiping her, loving her. I've stalked her Favorite Fans account, spent hours upon hours memorizing her body, devouring her curves, consuming the sounds she makes when she's writhing in pleasure.

I've had the privilege of having my mouth buried between her thick thighs, drinking down her sweet taste. I've heard her moan my name, covered her gorgeous face in my cum while she fucked herself for strangers. I've felt her come on my cock, felt her swallow my release.

I've *seen* Eve.

But right now, I feel like I'm seeing her for the first time.

And fuck, she's so damn beautiful. It takes my breath away.

She steps between my thighs, and I straighten, my hands landing on her hips. They flex, the need to touch her nearly

unbearable. She clutches my shoulders, her fingers gliding over my bare skin before threading through my hair. She tightens her grip and tugs my head back, making me hiss in pleasure.

“I want you to fuck me, Ro,” she says, her voice strong and steady. “I want to feel your perfect cock moving inside me. I want your body pinning mine to this bed.” I choke on my next breath as she bends down, her tits brushing against my chest. “I want to *feel* the way you fuck me for days.” Her breath tickles my cheek, and my grip tightens. “Is that clear enough for you?”

I lick my lips slowly, my heart hammering between us. “Get on the fucking bed, Eve.” I gently push her away and stand.

She rushes to obey, and I watch her get settled while I quickly remove my jeans and boxers. My fist wraps around my throbbing cock and I stroke myself, my spine already tingling with pleasure.

“Spread your pretty thighs for me and show me how wet you are.”

She whimpers, but drops her legs open. Her cunt glistens in the low light from my lamp, and precum beads at the tip of my cock.

“Fuck. That all for me, Goldie?”

She nods, her finger circling her clit. “I want you so badly.”

Fucking hell, she’s killing me.

I grab my wallet from the nightstand and fish out a condom. Eve's eyes track my movements as I rip it open with my teeth and roll it down my throbbing length. I see a flash of insecurity cross her face and I'm not sure why, but I have a few guesses. None of which I want to talk about, not right now.

"Keep going," I command, tossing the wrapper into the trash. "Slide a finger into your dripping little pussy. Show me you can be my good girl."

Her hips thrust into the air as she presses two fingers into herself and rubs her clit with her thumb. Her freehand plucks at her nipple and I almost come in the fucking condom at the sight.

"Please, Roman," she whines, picking up the pace. "I need you."

"You have me." I climb onto the bed, a breathy laugh leaving me as she whimpers again. "Already begging for me and I haven't even touched you yet."

"Then touch me!" she cries.

Smirking, I bend down and suck her aching clit between my teeth. She moans as I sink another thick finger inside her, stretching her. Our fingers move together, bringing her closer and closer to the edge. Her body shakes, and I know she's close. I pop off her clit and meet her eyes over her body.

"Fucking come, Eve. Right now," I demand. "Come, and I'll give you my cock." I bite down softly on her clit and she

comes apart, her pussy fluttering around our fingers.

My dick throbs as I lick up every drop of her release. Her fingers slide from her still pulsing core and I suck those into my mouth, too. Crawling over body, I let my hips settle between her thighs, my forearms resting on either side of her head. My lips meet hers and she eagerly kisses me back, moaning at her flavor on my tongue.

“Put me in you,” I whisper against her cheek, peppering kisses down her face to her throat. She reaches between us, notching my cock at her soaking entrance, and I slide in an inch. *Fuck, she’s tight.*

“Holy shit,” she whimpers.

“Goldie,” I murmur, my voice full of awe. *Fuck, she’s here. We’re here. She’s mine. All mine. My girl. Finally.* “So precious.” I kiss her jaw, whispering my reverence into the quiet room. “So perfect.” My lips ghost over hers. “God, you’re beautiful.”

Her eyes shine with emotion as I slowly sink into her for the first time in four years. My fingers trail gently across her cheeks, through her curly hair. Soothing her. Cherishing her. *Loving her.*

And I see it all reflected back at me.

So much damn love.

I settle deep inside her, pausing when she gasps. Her fingers wrap around my wrists tightly as she adjusts to my size.

“Fuck,” she breathes, her eyes never leaving mine. She flutters around me, her cunt practically choking my cock to death. “You’re so much bigger than I remember.”

An unexpected laugh bubbles up, and my head drops to her chest, rolling back and forth. “Only you can make me laugh when I’m seconds from coming embarrassingly fast.”

She giggles, the movement causing her pussy to clench around my cock again. I groan and my hips shove forward another inch, leaving nothing between us. Her laugh dies, and she moans.

“Fuck me, Ro,” she begs, grinding against me. “I’m ready.”

And so I do.

With my eyes locked on hers, I do something else I haven’t done in years, not since her, *only ever her*.

I make love to Evelyn Jean Meyer.

Our bodies move against one another, our breaths mingling, blending in the space between us. Her skin grows hot and sweaty with mine. Our sounds of pleasure create a symphony in my silent room.

Her fingers dig into my ass cheeks as her hips collide with mine, her body growing more frantic by the second. “Harder, Ro,” she begs, her eyes going distant. “Harder, *please*. Fuck me harder.”

I shake my head, my jaw tensing as I keep up the slow, deep roll of my hips. My cock bottoms out every time, but I don’t stop. Don’t stop feeling her, worshiping her.

Loving her.

“You don’t need harder, Goldie,” I grunt, changing my angle. I slide my arm under her lower back and lift her hips, tugging her pussy into my body so I can fuck her the way she needs. “You need deeper.”

Her nails dig in harder, her brows pinched together. “No, it’s not enough.” She lets out a frustrated sound. “Come on! Fuck me like I’m your whore.”

I freeze, my body turning to stone at her words. Eve’s jaw snaps shut and her eyes fall closed. I slowly lower us both back to the bed, and cup her cheeks, my cock still deep inside her.

“*Jesus Christ.* He fucked you up, baby.” A tear leaks from her eye and I lean forward, kissing it away. “You’re no one’s whore, Eve.” I whisper the words against her skin, kissing away each new tear as soon as it falls. “No one’s possession. No one’s toy.”

A broken sob leaves her and her arms band around me, keeping me where I am. “Don’t leave me again,” she cries.

My heart breaks at the desperate plea. How could I have ever thought she was whole without me? That she was happy and free while I was homeless and cold. How could I have ever forgotten that we exist better together, like we were cut from the same cloth?

Eve may be the sunshine I need to grow and thrive, but maybe she needs my darkness to rest, to exist in a space

without expectations.

I kiss her softly, rolling my hips. “Never,” I promise. My finger slips between us and I roll it against her clit. “Never again, Goldie. I’m yours, and I’m not leaving.”

“I’m yours, too,” she moans.

My cock pulses and I rub her clit harder, still keeping up my slow, deep thrusts. “Then come for me, baby. Come all over my cock.”

Her blue eyes lock onto mine. “Come with me, Ro.”

“I’m already with you. Always.”

I press my lips to hers and she cries out into my mouth, her pussy clenching so desperately around my cock, I can hardly move. She comes hard, pulling my own release straight from my body. Eve shakes beneath me as wetness floods the space between us, driving me higher and higher in the most intense orgasm of my life.

“Oh, fuck,” I groan, biting her jaw. “Mine. My Goldie.”

When she finally goes limp, I slide my lips along her jaw and find her ear, whispering the only thing I can when other words are still circling through my mind on repeat.

“You were such a good fucking girl for me.” I lick her throat, barely resisting the urge to mark her up so everyone knows who she belongs to. “You soaked my sheets.”

She laughs, her body shaking under mine, and another piece of me slots back into place, the feeling of home consuming my

tattered soul.

3:59 Eve

“Again,” he rasps. “Come for me again.”
“Oh my fucking God!” I shout, my body shaking as my fingers dig into the pillow under my face. “No more!”

He spreads my cheeks wider and his hot tongue slides from my clit to my ass with a single-minded focus. I scream again, the sound muffled in the bed. His hand collides with my ass cheek, not hard enough to hurt, but enough to bring me closer to the edge.

Roman licks me again, sending zaps down my spine when he gets to my ass. It feels so damn good. *Too* good.

“I said fucking come,” he demands, his voice guttural as he grips me, flipping me onto my back before diving back in. I cry out, my head shaking back and forth as tears of pleasure prick my eyes.

He woke me up with his face buried between my thighs, his mouth devouring my already wet pussy like he was starving. I’ve lost count of how many times I’ve come.

“I can’t,” I whimper, trying to shove his head away.

Never did I think I’d like having someone go down on me or that I’d be able to come from that alone, but Roman Payne is fucking *insatiable*, and I’m so here for it.

Except for right now.

Right now, I feel like I might actually die from coming too much.

“Yes, you fucking can,” he growls, sliding his fingers free from my core, the sound of how wet I am filling the room. He adds a third finger and works them into me, making my back bow off the bed. “Now. Right now, Goldie. Come all over my face.”

This is the third time one of us has woken the other up tonight and I realize I’m just as insatiable as he is.

It’s been days of this. Us wrapped in each other. Us making love, fucking, licking, biting, sucking. *Loving*. I know what we’re doing. We’re making up for lost time. We’re relearning one another’s bodies, hearts, and souls.

Together.

We’re together.

I am his, and he is mine, and I’ve never been happier.

Roman’s teeth latch onto my clit just as his fingers curve upward, hitting my g-spot. Everything is so much, too much, too sensitive, and heat rushes through me. One of my palms slaps against the bed as the other tangles in his hair, pulling

him closer. My hips grind against his stubbled cheeks as I do exactly what he told me to and come all over his face.

Squirting.

Something else I learned I can do because of him.

I turn my face into the pillows and scream out my release, my body shaking wildly with the force of it. He reaches up and grips my jaw, gently yanking my face from the pillow.

“No,” he grunts, shaking his head, his eyes more golden than hazel in the early morning light. “I wanna hear you scream for me. Let everyone know who’s making you soak my sheets.”

My cheeks burn as I take a heaving breath. “I’m not say—“

He curves his fingers back up and swirls his tongue over my clit and I cry out *again*.

Oh my God.

By the time I’ve come down, he’s wrung another orgasm from me, this one smaller, like a rolling after-shock, but just as mind-blowing. Roman wipes his face on the back of his hand and crawls up my body, his abs flexing with the movement and making my mouth water.

He smirks like he knows the effect he has on me, and presses a kiss to my lips. I groan, licking my flavor from his skin. I don’t know why tasting myself on him makes me feral, but it does. He presses one more kiss on my cheek and drops to my side, his arm covering his eyes.

My gaze slides over his body, gloriously naked and covered in tattoos, and my pussy somehow throbs again. But he doesn't move. Doesn't ask me to reciprocate. Doesn't make any advances to fuck me, to take care of his very hard, very perfect, long, veiny cock.

“What are you doing?” I ask, my voice still breathless.

He looks at me from beneath his hand. “Going back to sleep,” he murmurs before chuckling, his eyes landing on my heaving chest, my puckered nipples. “Unless you need another round.” He licks his lips. “I could eat again.”

I giggle as I roll onto my side. My fingers wrap around his cock and I pump him once, twice, loving the way he grunts deep in his throat.

“No,” I murmur, twisting my wrist. “I'm wondering why you're not buried deep inside me, taking care of *this*.”

He looks at me with an unexpectedly sad expression, and if I didn't know any better, I'd say he's pouting. “We're out of condoms,” he grumbles before shooting his gaze to the clock on his phone. “Store doesn't open for another hour.” He looks at me, his face completely serious. “Can you wait that long?”

I smile. “For you? I think I could wait a lifetime.” His face softens and I bite my lip, the words taking on a deeper meaning, though it still rings true. I swallow roughly, squeezing him harder. “I'm clean and on the pill.”

He blinks. “What?”

My eyes flit between his, my heart beating faster. “I got tested a few weeks ago and I’m clean.” *Thank fuck.* “I started the pill, too, and they told me to wait a few weeks, so I should be good and—”

He cuts off my nervous ramble by slipping his arm under me and lifting my body, making me straddle him. I gasp, righting myself with my hands on his chest.

My wet pussy settles over his hard cock and I moan at the feeling of his hot skin against mine.

“Are you saying you want me to fuck your tight pussy raw?” he asks roughly, his voice thick with desire, telling me just how much he likes that idea.

I nod slowly. “Are you—”

His hands wrap around my hips, his fingertips digging in, adding more little bruises for me to admire later in the mirror. My throat and body are covered in hickies and marks from every way he’s loved me. I’m not afraid of Roman’s possession, his claim on me. It turns me on he’s not scared to hold my hand in public or let people know I’m his.

He pulls me forward, gliding my pussy against him. His head hits my clit and I shudder. “I’m clean,” he says, his Adam’s apple bobbing. “I’ve never slept with anyone without a condom. Never. And I got tested recently. I haven’t been with anyone since before I went back to Divinity.”

The weight of his admission sits heavily between us. It’s been months, then, and as much as the idea of him being with

anyone else kills me, I can't be mad. How could I?

He was there while I was with someone else. He heard the way I sounded as Isaac fucked me, watched as his father filled me. The things he said, the way—

Roman sits up, bringing us chest to chest. “Right here, Goldie,” he murmurs. “Stay right here in this room with me. It’s just us, no one else.”

I swallow again, my head bobbing. “Just us.” I shift my hips, bringing us both higher and higher.

He moans low in his throat, and the sound sends goosebumps across my skin. “Tell me how you want it.” He says it every time, but it never ceases to amaze me. So much care, so much consideration for me, my body, my feelings, my comfort.

He puts *me* first in every move he takes and it makes me realize just how little freedom, how few choices I had before.

But not with Ro. Never with Ro.

My chest burns and my skin tingles. I grip his face, bringing our foreheads together. “I want you to fuck me like you love me.”

He sucks in a breath. His fingers tighten around my hips and he lifts me, shifting until he’s pressed against my entrance. And as he slowly lowers me down, filling me so full, so *deep*, with his bare, hot cock, he murmurs words I never thought I’d hear.

“I *do* love you, Goldie.”

My thighs hit his, his cock seated deeply inside me, but that's not why I feel so whole, so *full*.

I wrap my arms around his shoulders and kiss his jaw, his throat, his Adam's apple. I pull his earlobe between my teeth and suck softly, before biting down and whispering, "Then prove it."

Before I realize what's happening, I'm on my stomach and he's slamming into me. I cry out at the fullness, and he groans.

Roman slides a hand under my hips and yanks them up, keeping me in place as he fucks me hard and fast. His other hand tangles in my hair, wrapping it around his fist. My spine arches when he tugs, and I moan at the feeling of his body draped over mine. He's surrounding me fully and completely; every inch of me touching every inch of him.

"Roman!" I shout, my voice raspy. He rolls his hips, somehow sinking even deeper.

"That's it," he grunts, his teeth grazing my shoulder blade. "Feel me, baby. Feel all of me." His head shakes against me. "Fuck, I'm so deep, Eve. I'll never be out. Never not be with you."

I swallow, my hips thrusting into him, fucking him right back. "Say it again," I beg.

He picks up his pace, fucking me so hard my chest flattens into the mattress. His fingers press against the back of my

head, turning me so I can see him. The angle's hard, but his lips find mine for a long, desperate kiss.

"I love you," he whispers. "I *love* you."

I nod, my heart swelling painfully. "You're mine?"

He groans. "Fuck yes."

A shiver races down my spine, my core pulsing around him as my orgasm builds. "I'm yours," I promise.

"Then say it."

I meet his eyes, seeing everything, showing him everything. "I love you, Roman. I love you so much."

He sucks in a sharp breath and pulls out. I whine at the loss of him and he flips me back over. My back hits the bed and his arms band beneath my thighs seconds before he tosses them over his shoulders and slams into me again. My nails dig into his biceps, and his fingers wrap around my thighs as he folds me in half.

"Fucking hell, Goldie," he groans, his brows furrowed in concentration. "You feel so goddamned good. You've got me thinking all sorts of fucked up shit."

I moan, pinching my nipples, tugging them until I feel a slight burn. "Like what?" I ask hoarsely.

Roman shakes his head and shifts his hips. His cock hits me at a different angle, his head grinding into my g-spot. I beg him to tell me, a jumbled mess of words leaving my lips the closer I get. His eyes snap to mine and he swallows.

“Wanna come inside you,” he murmurs. “Mark you as mine, fill you so full of me, you’ll never be free.”

I nod, whimpering. “Do it.”

“Shit,” he groans. “You want me to fill you up with my cum, Goldie? You really want that?”

“Yes!” God, nothing’s ever sounded hotter. “Please, Ro!”

“Then come on my cock like a good little girl, one more time. Let me feel you drip down us both.”

My eyes squeeze shut at his words. His praise, the way he keeps calling me his good girl instead of his whore. It’s healing something inside me and he has no idea.

Roman’s fingers grip my jaw roughly and he tilts my head back. “Eyes on me, Goldie,” he demands, his words so familiar, I gasp. “That’s it. Eyes on me when you come on my bare cock for the first time.”

He rubs my clit hard and fast, leaving me powerless to resist his demand. I cry out, my fingers clawing at him, pulling him closer, dragging him into me. He leans forward and bites down on my nipple. I clench so hard around him, he hisses, and shouts out his own release.

He shifts back and his eyes snap down to where he’s still fucking into me in short thrusts as his hot cum fills my core. “Oh, holy shit,” he mutters, his voice laced with shock. “Look at the way you take my cum, baby. Sucking it down like a greedy, perfect girl for me.”

A sound of exhaustion slips from me as he slowly pulls out, his eyes still riveted to the space between my thighs. I suck in a gasp when I feel his fingers running down my aching pussy, shoving his cum back into me.

“Never seen anything as beautiful as you. Naked and flushed, with my cum dripping from your swollen, pretty pussy.” He looks up at me and holds his cum-coated fingers up to my lips. “Suck, Goldie.”

And I do.

“Mine,” he says, his voice guttural. I flick my tongue over his fingers, humming around our combined flavor.

“Yours,” I agree, smiling contentedly.

He quickly cleans me up, then himself, before dragging his t-shirt over my head and pulling me into his chest. My fingers trace the tattoos covering his skin. There are so many. Different shapes and patterns, pretty pictures and words, all etched in black and grey ink.

They’re beautiful and unique, just like him. But it’s the two words on his fingers that have drawn my attention since the day he finally came back.

My fingernail trails along the letter K as his hand rests over his heart, and I can’t swallow down my question any longer.

Unable to look at him, I keep my eyes on his chest and murmur, “If you were so homesick, why didn’t you just come home?” *Come home to me.*

He's silent for a long moment and I worry I've upset the peace we've finally found. When he speaks, I tense, waiting for the reprimand, the brush off, but it never comes.

Instead, he grips my jaw softly and guides my eyes to meet his. "Because my home isn't a place, Goldie." My brows narrow and his thumbs darts out, tracing my lower lip. "It's a person." I blink in confusion and he smiles sadly. "*You* are my home, and if I thought you wanted me to come for you, I would have. In a heartbeat."

"I did want you to," I say immediately, my eyes burning. I blink away the emotion. "I wanted you to come for me. I never wanted you to leave in the first place. I thought we'd always be there, together."

He shakes his head. "Divinity wasn't my home. It was never going to be my forever." His jaw ticks, but he presses a kiss on my forehead. "If I'd have known how you felt, I would have stayed anyway."

I hear the unspoken words. He'd have stayed, even if he was miserable. Because for as much as he loves me, he hates Isaac.

My heart squeezes at the thought of him. I may be angry with Isaac for what happened, what he did and said, but he's still my family. He's still the person who took care of me for so long, looked after me when I had no one else. And despite his faults, he does love me. He has to.

I owe it to him to have an adult conversation. To sort through everything. To repair whatever's left of our broken

relationship.

My fingers pick up their patterns on Ro's chest again as I contemplate how to broach the subject without starting a fight. He's not going to want me to go home. He's made that perfectly clear. He tenses every time Isaac texts or calls, his anger impossible to hide.

I have to go, though.

Before I can put a voice to my thoughts, Roman's rolling me onto my back and kissing me deeply, pouring his entire heart and soul into me. I don't know how he does it, but he's somehow hard again and I moan as he slowly slides deep inside me.

For a moment, just one more moment, I forget about everything that exists outside this room, except for him, and me, and the way we love each other.

3:60 Eve

“**F**uck, he’s going to be so mad at me,” I mutter to myself.

I’m not sure if it’s Roman or Isaac I’m talking about as I stand frozen outside my front door. Ro left for work a few hours ago and as sad as I was to leave our little cocoon for the first time in days, he needed to work and I needed to go back to my life.

I borrowed Oli’s car and practiced my speech the entire way here. Words I need to say, questions I need answered. My fingers tighten around the grocery bags as I release a long breath. It’s now or never.

Transferring the bags to one hand, ingredients for a meal I know he’ll love tucked inside, I shove the door open. Hopefully, it’ll soothe some of the anger I’ve seen in his recent texts enough for us to have an adult conversation about everything.

I made a decision that day on the cliff's edge as I poured my hurt into the universe and it's only been solidified over the weeks since. I've grown, changed, and I think maybe I might actually be finding myself now that I'm free from Divinity's oppressive ways.

Swallowing thickly, I step inside. I didn't see Isaac's truck outside, but I'm not surprised to find the door unlocked as usual. I let the door quietly click closed behind me. Kicking off my shoes, I drop my purse and phone on the entry table, leaving me in just a sundress, this one modest enough to cover the fading marks left from Roman's love bites.

I smile to myself, already missing him. Maybe someday we can all find a way to get along. I know it's deluded thinking. They've always hated each other, but we're all the family we have left. That should count for something, right?

My eyes flutter closed and I pause, breathing in the warm, familiar scent of whisky, leather and something else, something lighter.

Peaches.

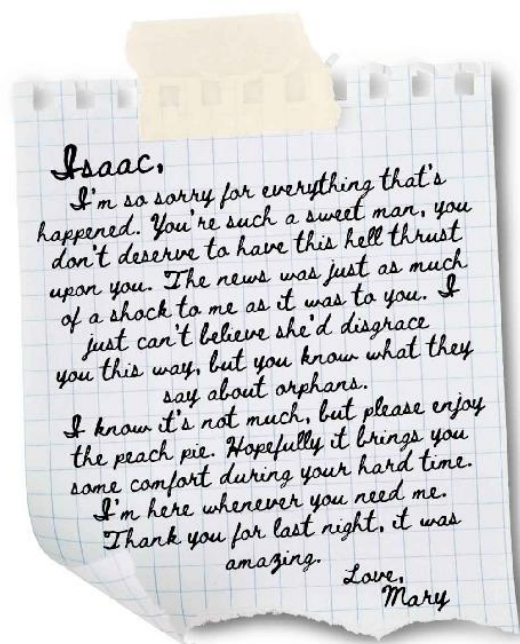
Brows furrowed, my eyes snap open as I step further into the house, scanning the living room for the source of the scent. I half expect to find my favorite peach candle burning on the TV stand, but it's not there. It's nowhere to be seen. My gaze snags on the coffee table and I quickly look away, silently padding toward the kitchen.

The house is just as clean as it was the last time I was here, and shock washes through me. It's not that Isaac is a messy

person. In fact, he's the opposite. But I've been the one to keep the house tidy and in order for the last four years. Mama did it before me. I've never seen Isaac lift a finger, to be honest.

That's not true, my brain chides. He does a lot for me. He works hard. *But so do you*.

I shake my head, the warring thoughts confusing and distracting me from what I came here to do. With a sigh, I set the bags on the kitchen counter, the scent of peaches even stronger. I freeze, spotting a familiar tea towel covering a pie dish, a note sitting on top written in feminine scrawl.



My heart sinks and my vision blurs. Mary was here? I barely resist the urge to throw the stupid pie away, but I can't think past her words. My gut sours at the implication, but it's not

jealousy I feel, not anymore. Not the way I'd feel if Roman was with someone else.

Maybe it was never the same. Maybe I was never jealous of Isaac physically being with someone else, just worried they'd take him from me. That I'd lose him for good and be alone in this world again.

My eyes fly over the words another time. What does she mean *the news*? What happened, and who is she talking about? Clover? Oli? Me?

Christ, we're all orphans.

A sound from somewhere in the house pulls my attention and I freeze, the note slipping from my fingers.

The creaking floorboards betray me as I make my way down the narrow hall, the old wood groaning beneath my weight. Roman's room, a dormant sanctuary of memories, looms in shadowed silence to my right. The jack and jill bathroom. A cracked mirror in the hall, reflecting a fragmented version of my anxious soul.

Every footfall feels like an eternity, each step filled with the weight of months of separation, of words left unspoken. Isaac's presence, unexpected but not unwelcome, coils my nerves into tight knots. I steel myself, trying to fathom the storm of emotions waiting on the other side of my bedroom door.

I hear him murmuring a jumbled mess of words I can't make out through the cracked door. The handle feels cold beneath

my trembling hand. I grip it, fingers white, and push.

The old wood yields, quietly groaning in protest. My breath catches, a breathless gasp escaping my lips as I take in the scene.

Isaac stands in the center of the room, a disheveled version of the man I once knew. His clothes, usually sharp and tailored, now hang askew, like they bear the weight of the world. His hair, once meticulously coiffed, is now a tangled mess. Fatigue etches lines into his face, each one a testament to the burden he carries.

But I can't take my eyes off my now destroyed sanctuary, the room I once found solace in. Clothes lie strewn, as if discarded in haste. Drawers gape open, their contents spilled like forgotten secrets. A beat of terror courses through me as my eyes land on my camming laptop, exposed and vulnerable. Boxes that were once tucked away in the recesses of my closet now lay scattered across the bed, their contents laid bare.

Oh, no.

Everything I use for Favorite Fans is spread across the yellow comforter, the evidence damning.

Every thong, every costume, every toy.

Every secret.

Every lie.

Every price I paid for the cost of my freedom.

A choked sound escapes my lips, a strangled cry of disbelief and despair, and my hand slaps over my mouth to stifle it, but it's too late. His head snaps up, his frantic, wild gaze landing on me, seeing but not.

Time stretches and distorts, the air heavy with the weight of *everything*.

Isaac's eyes, once familiar, now hold a strange mixture of regret and resignation in their nearly black depths.

I'm a statue, frozen in the maelstrom of this violation. The room seems to spin, the walls closing in, suffocating me. How did it come to this? Weeks of silence on my end, heart wrenching voicemails and devastating texts on his, all culminating in this moment of utter destruction.

My gaze finds my map, something left to me by my dad, in a shredded heap on my desk, and I step forward, my outstretched hand shaking. I pick it up, pain ravaging me from the inside out, but as the scraps sift through my fingers, anger swells, replacing some of the sadness.

I whirl on him. "How could you?" I rasp, my skin crawling.

"Eve, I—I had to. You don't understand." His fingers rake through his hair as he takes me in, his eyes flitting from me to the mess at his feet, then back to me. "You left me no choice. You wouldn't speak to me or answer my calls. I didn't know where you were."

But he did. Because in one desperate plea for peace, I sent a text. Just one. A response in hopes of getting him to let me go,

even just for a little while.

Me:

I'm safe. I'm in Mammoth. I need some time. Please just let me have time.

I don't point out his lie. There's no point. Not right now.

“Why did you do this, Isaac?” My jaw tenses, my fists balling at my sides as tears silently glide down my cheeks. “Why did you have to ruin everything?”

His hand lands on his chest, and he rubs the spot over his heart. “I had no choice,” he repeats. “After what Mary showed me, after what she said...” He runs his tongue over his teeth, his eyes briefly flitting to my laptop, a still image of me naked and riding a flesh-colored dildo frozen on the screen. His jaw pulses. “You've been keeping secrets, sweetheart.”

The nickname kills me, but it's what he said, the part about Mary that has me swaying. “What did she show you?” I breathe.

His hand slides into his pocket, pulling out his phone, and he glances down, tapping on the screen for a second before tossing it to me, an unreadable expression on his face. I catch it and my stomach rolls.

It's a social media post of me and Nikki that night at the party, making out on the makeshift dance floor. Her hands are tangled in my hair, my fingers wrapped around her shoulders. It's obvious we're into it and completely oblivious to the camera.

I swipe through the photos. The next one is of us smiling at each other, then me leading her to my room, my face clear to see. The last is of Roman leaning on my door frame, watching us, the photo taken from the living room.

My stomach rolls again and I worry I might actually puke.

But it's the comments that have me stumbling toward the bathroom.

EvanRaider:

*Anonymous camgirl has a face, and she's hot as fuck.
@divinityfallstimes look at your local celeb lol*

opensesame9:

Look at the little church bitch. Not so innocent anymore, are you @goldengirl69?

Penny_sundae:

@Goldengirl69 exposed

Franco237:

Fuck, look at her Favorite Fans account. She's so sexy.

Ursamajor:

@Franco237 do you have a link? Looks like her account's been disabled.

Franco237:

Really? Fuck that sucks. Glad I saved some pics. I'll DM you.

Ursamajor:

Thanks bro. Need more spank bank material lol

SuzieQue:

@Franco237 Bitch probably got what's coming to her. She's such a slut.

Yarapez7789:

@SuzieQue she really is. Men don't want trash that spreads their legs like that. Church girl my ass. More like church whore.

EvanRaider:

@Yarapez7789 speak for yourself. I'd fuck her till she can't walk lol look at those tits.

“I can’t—” I break off, trying to tell him, *someone*, that I can’t breathe, but the words won’t come.

His expression changes. The lost, sad look disappears in an instant, replaced with something else. Something darker.

“You can’t what?” he snaps, stepping forward. “Can’t face this shit? Can’t own up to your mistakes?” His finger darts out, pointing to my laptop, then to the phone. “*Look at yourself, Eve! Look what you’ve done! You’re a disappointment!*” He tugs at his hair and the room blurs as my chest caves in on itself. “I’m fucking *humiliated!*”

But I can’t hear him, can’t bear to comprehend the fractured reality before me. The shock, the anger, the accusations.

I’m everywhere.

Everyone knows.

Everyone.

Oh my God!

The need to run fills me with every word and I find my feet shuffling back a step for every one he takes.

I keep moving. I move past the map, the clothes, the sex toys, and my laptop with my Favorite Fans content folder open, exposing my dirty little secret in high-definition for him to see.

The phone falls from my hands, but I ignore it. I don't stop moving until I'm in my bathroom, fleeing the devastation, leaving behind the shattered remnants of a life once cherished. The small room stretches out, a narrow passage to a world unrecognizable, to a future uncertain.

What will happen now?

The door to Roman's room is open, a faint sliver of light spilling into the darkness. I take one step inside, seeking refuge in the remnants of innocence. The air is heavy with the scent of our childhood, of forgotten dreams and whispered secrets. I close my eyes, willing the past to wash over me, if only for a moment.

God, what I wouldn't do to be back in his home, his *new* home, his room, his bed.

His arms.

I never should have come here. Out of all the things that could have happened, that I could have found when I arrived

after so much time, it wasn't this scenario in the forefront of my mind. Never this. Not even close.

To be honest, I'd figured he'd moved on and given Mary's note, maybe he has. But why would he tear apart my room? What was he looking for?

Maybe I should just leave.

Before I can even process the thought, something in my room crashes and my head whirls around just as Isaac appears in the bathroom. I look up, meeting his eyes, and suck in a sharp breath.

Everything I once loved is gone, leaving nothing but an unrecognizable version of the man I used to know behind.

He advances on me, backing me into the counter. My hands shake as I reach up to press him away. "Isaac," I murmur, my voice cracking. "Talk to me."

His lip lifts in a slow grin and his fingers come up, tracing a path along my jaw. I jolt, his touch unexpected. *Unwanted*. My brows drop at the complete wrongness of it all.

"You want to talk now?" he whispers, gripping my jaw. "What happened when I wanted to talk, Eve? Where were you when I needed you? When I called?" He clicks his tongue. "You left me alone."

I swallow roughly, flinching when his grip tightens. My hands stop pushing him away and start soothing, calming, sensing the shift.

I've never seen him like this. I've known his darkness, his anger and rage. The night he made me vomit up the alcohol with a brutality that shocked me. When he punished me over Marcus, over the party and Roman. But even then, I understood. I knew why he felt the need. I knew he was protecting me.

He's not protecting me now, though.

I suck in a slow breath, my mind working through all the possible outcomes. I could yell. I could scream and tell him he's being unfair. I could shove him away. I could run.

But this is Isaac.

"You left me alone, Eve," he repeats, forcing my face to his. His jaw ticks.

I try to fight the words sitting on the tip of my tongue, but it's impossible to choke them back. Not now. Not after everything. "But you weren't alone," I whisper. "You had Mary."

And the church, the town, his friends at the Baptist trainings and here.

He's never alone.

I don't know what I expect him to say, but it's not for his head to fall forward with a deep, rasping chuckle. His breath fans across my face with the force of it, and I catch the now familiar tinges of alcohol. I grimace and shove him away again.

His eyes snap to mine, his laughter dying as though it was never there. Isaac's hand slides from my jaw to my hair. Before I even know what's happening, my long ponytail is wrapped around his fist and he's yanking my face to his.

"Is that what you're so fucking worried about?" he grits out, his cheeks turning red. I shove him again, this time harder, and cry out when he pulls my hair. "You're worried I fucked her, huh? Worried that while you were gone, spreading your legs for my pathetic waste of a son, I had my cock buried inside Mary's cunt?"

I should be shocked by the way he's speaking to me, but I don't care. Not as anger fills me at the way he refers to Roman. How dare he?

"He's not pathetic!" My fingers wrap around his as I scrape and claw against his grip. "Let me go, Isaac!" I shout, then whimper as I feel some of my strands of hair give way. "You're hurting me!"

His grin turns feral, manic as he shakes his head. "You have no idea what pain is," he murmurs. "None." And then he's using his hold on my hair to drag me to my bedroom. "But you will."

I scream, fighting with everything I have as I stumble behind him. My dress gets caught on the edge of my desk and I try to free it as the material pulls taut, warring with his punishing grip. But it's no use. It tears, and he laughs again, the sound so wrong, it sends shivers down my spine.

He shoves me, and I trip over a pile of clothes on the floor, catching myself on the edge of my bed. My eyes land on my open laptop, and bile fills my mouth at the sight. I try to stand up, but then he's there, his fingers digging into the material of my dress. He grips the neckline with both hands and pulls, ripping the thin cotton easily down my spine.

I scream, terror shooting through me at the sound, the feel of his rough hands on my skin as he shucks the material away.

Wrong.

So wrong.

I cling to my dress, holding it against my chest to cover myself before it falls any further. "What are you doing?" I yell, but he ignores me as he pulls the dress again, yanking it down. I let go, using both my hands to cover what I can, protecting myself.

I know he's seen me naked before, that he's had his hands on my body. But not like this, not by force, not without giving me a choice.

Not when I truly didn't want it.

"You're filthy," he spits, his voice devoid of any emotion. "Take off your clothes, you temptress whore, or I'll do it for you."

I choke out a sob and stumble again, this time over my dress, as I try to get away from him. But he's already there, ripping, tearing, *destroying*. I shake my head, crying useless tears that won't help.

Something in me snaps.

His hands are on my body, forcing me to give in, pushing me to do what he wants, but I'm not letting him take something else from me.

Nothing else.

I claw and slap at him. Shove and fight and scream and kick. I don't stop, even when he grabs my hair again and jerks me into his body. I don't stop, even when his hand collides with my cheek, making black spots fill my vision and blood coat my tongue.

I think I'm begging, a jumbled mess of words spilling from my tear-stained lips.

I think I'm making promises to a god I truly stopped believing in the day my world fell apart.

I think I tell Isaac that I still love him, that I'm sorry, that I'll do anything.

I think he doesn't care.

And I think he's going to break me, anyway.

My knees collide with the harsh floor as the room spins and he forces my face into my yellow bedspread, the white flowers blurring into nothingness.

I don't stop kicking.

I don't stop screaming.

His hand connects with my bare ass cheek. Once. Twice. Three times.

It doesn't turn me on.

It makes me vomit into my mouth and I spit it on the floor as I continue to fight. Continue to scream. Continue to make promises I'll never keep.

I hear his belt slide from his jeans, feel the cool leather as it lashes out, leaving burning devastation across my back in its wake. My arms give out and for a second, *just one second*, I forget to fight.

That's all it takes for him to make his move.

Isaac yanks my head back, forcing my spine to arch, and my throbbing arms lift from the bed. He chuckles and wrenches my arms above my head before tying them tightly together with his belt.

His finger traces across my tear-soaked cheek as he meets my gaze. "What's the matter, temptress? You once loved the feeling of my belt." He bends forward and licks up a tear. I jolt backward, but barely move an inch. Isaac glares at me. "Be a good whore for your Lord and stay still while I work."

I gag at the name, the words, his touch. "Work?" I choke. "What are you doing, Isaac? *Why?*"

"I'm fucking the whore out of you," he mutters as he leans over my body and presses play on the video. His fingers thread through my hair again, forcing my eyes forward. "1 Corinthians 6:11. Recite!" I jolt at the fury in his voice.

My brows furrow, and my head shakes, my throat burning. "Wh-what?" I know the verse. I don't understand, though.

“Watch what a fucking whore you are while I fix the mistakes you’ve made!” he bellows. “Now, recite!”

I choke on another sob, my world spinning. I keep my eyes locked on the video, watching as a faceless version of myself rolls her body against a sex-toy, surrounded by black sheets and darkness.

“You were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord, Jesus Christ, and by the Spirit of our God,” I sob. “I-I don’t under—”

I feel him then, his bare body against my thighs. My knees slip and slide on the wood as I try to get away.

“No! *No, no, no!*” I cry. “Isaac, please. *No*. I don’t want this. You can’t. You don’t want to hurt me. Please!”

He ignores me, tightening his grip on my hair, keeping my face pressed into the comforter, my arms aching above my head. I can’t move. Can’t fight. Can’t get away.

And I think he really doesn’t care.

“Recite!”

“No!” I scream. “No! Stop!”

But he doesn’t. I expect him to shove himself into my core, to fuck me the way he always has before, but he doesn’t do that either. I hear the sound of him spitting seconds before I feel the hot liquid drip down my back entrance and I tense.

Then, he’s *there*.

“No!” I scream again, shaking, trembling, *breaking*.

“If you move,” he warns, “it’ll hurt worse.”

He presses forward, the thick head of his cock shoving against something too dry, too tight. Ripping, shattering, tearing, *breaking*.

“I told you I’d take you here one day,” he groans, sounding dazed. “I promised you I’d own all your holes, and unlike you, I don’t break my promises.”

Burning pain is all I know as he forces me to accept him. Forces me to submit. To take something I never wanted.

“Just remember, this isn’t about pleasure. Lessons aren’t supposed to feel good, but you’ll be cleansed after this.” His hand rubs down my spine and I whimper. “It’ll be over soon and then everything can go back to how it was before.”

He’s insane.

How did I never see it before?

“Recite, whore!” he shouts, and when I don’t respond immediately, Isaac really does *break* me. I scream against the searing pain as he fully sheaths himself inside me.

The words tumble from my lips again and again, each time they become more and more meaningless. Each time, my voice becomes something I’ve never heard before. It becomes empty. It becomes nothing.

I become nothing.

My body rocks back and forth, my knees scraping against the floor as my chest hits the bed.

Pain.

Again and again.

Recite.

Pain.

Again and again.

Recite.

My eyes remain locked on the laptop screen and I watch the way I loved my body, the same body I currently hate for its mere existence. The same body that no longer feels like mine.

Will it ever feel that way again?

Pain.

Again and again.

Recite.

I used to think camming made me free, made me powerful. But now, I despise it all.

If I hadn't wanted to be free so badly, maybe this wouldn't have happened.

If I didn't want to leave, to have a life outside Divinity, maybe I wouldn't have made so many wrong choices, so many fucked up decisions, that put me in this moment, right here, right now.

But even as I think the thought, I know it's not true.

Isaac's mad about the camming. He's mad about the lies, the way I ran, but that's not what made him do this.

It was Roman.

It's always Roman.

And yet, as his name ghosts across my tongue and fills my veins, I'm still overcome with a sense of a longing, of appreciation, of *love*. He's my beginning and my ending. There's not a thing I wouldn't do for him, and if this is the price I pay to exist in his world, in his heart, to be loved by him, I'd do it all over.

Pain.

Again and again.

Recite.

Pain.

Again and again.

Recite.

I don't know how long it goes on, my mind fracturing in on itself, but suddenly, I'm being moved. I vaguely feel him slide from my ass with a groan. Feel him tug my burning, numb hands and force me backward. Feel his disgusting cock press against my lips as his manic eyes bore into mine.

And then, I feel myself die a little more when he shoves himself into my mouth and comes down my throat.

He releases me just as I bend over and vomit on the floor. The sound of his chuckle fills the room, but I ignore it, heaving until there's nothing left but pain and devastation.

“You’ve been sanctified, sweetheart,” he says softly, dropping to a crouch in front of my bowed body. His thumb traces my jaw and I try to muster the energy to glare at him, but I have nothing left. “Say *thank you, my Lord.*”

I want to tell him to go fuck himself.

Want to tell him I hope he dies.

That I hate him.

That I want to kill him for what he’s done—for breaking me once and for all.

But that’s not what I say. Instead, I find myself thanking my rapist for desecrating my body while parading as a false profit. “Thank you, my Lord,” I rasp, my throat raw from...

From *everything*.

He smiles, and the look is so soft, so kind, so *Isaac*, I wonder if the man I once loved ever existed at all.

I stare blankly at nothing as he slowly unbinds my hands and presses pause on the laptop. As he brushes my damp hair from my face and pushes to his feet. As he takes his time dressing like he hasn’t got a care in the world.

All the while, I wait, holding my breath, needing him to just *leave* so I can pick up the tattered remains of the person I used to be.

Isaac looks down, checking his watch. His brows lift. “Shit,” he murmurs. “I’ve got somewhere to be.” His eyes scan my

room and he grimaces. “Make sure you clean up. I don’t want to see this mess when I get home.”

With that, he spins on his heel and leaves, my door slamming shut behind him. One of my pictures falls from the wall with the force of it and I watch as it collides with the ground, the glass splintering and shattering into irreparable pieces, just like me.

3:61 Roman

My knee bounces wildly, my phone clutched tightly in my hand. Something's wrong. I feel it in my gut. Something is so fucking wrong, but I don't know what it is.

When I woke up this morning, Eve was gone, but the bed was still warm in her spot. I searched the entire loft and outside, but she was nowhere to be found. Despite myself, I assumed she went to grab coffee or breakfast or something. I forced myself to stay calm. To not freak the fuck out.

To not be overbearing. *It's not what she needs. She needs choices and freedom,* I reminded myself.

So I sat on the couch and waited.

And waited.

And waited.

It's been an hour since I woke up, and she still isn't home.

I've called her a million times, but she hasn't answered. Maybe that's what's killing me, the fact I haven't heard from

her. I don't know where she is, where she could be. Chase and Oli are here and Kon's at the shop.

But where the fuck is Eve?

I bring her number up and call her again. I don't care if I'm being annoying. I need to know she's okay.

"Calling *again*?" Chase grumbles as he walks into the living room, a cup of coffee in hand. He looks haggard. He's been trying to find a stupid farm to buy Oli and hasn't been sleeping for shit. But he keeps putting on a happy face so she doesn't worry.

Even if I understand why, he coddles her way too fucking much.

Running my hand through my hair, I keep the phone pressed to my ear as I nod, listening to it ring and ring, before finally going to her voicemail.

"I just have a bad feeling," I mutter. "Don't know why." He sinks onto the other couch, sipping his drink as he eyes me.

"Could it just be that she left without telling you? Ease up a bit, man."

I shake my head. That's not it. Yeah, I would've liked knowing where she was going, but that's not why I'm on edge.

Right?

No.

No.

I don't care about keeping tabs on her. I don't care that she made a decision for herself and left. I care about keeping her safe. But right now, I don't know where she is. And if I don't know where she is, then how the fuck can I protect her?

I press redial and her phone goes to voicemail again. A low snarl rips from me as I toss my phone onto the couch beside me. Shit.

"Oli doesn't know?" I ask, and Chase shrugs.

"She hasn't said."

Running my palms against my thighs, I shove to my feet. "Don't bother her," Chase calls, but I ignore him as I stomp through the house, dodging animals left and right.

Jesus.

What were they thinking, bringing all of Oli's *babies*?

I bang on her door until it flings open. She glares up at me, her wig a dark brown, almost black color today. My throat tightens.

That's not fucking good.

"Where is she?" I rasp. Her eyes shutter, but she doesn't say a word. She keeps her lips pressed into a thin line. "Oli, *please*."

"I said not to—" Chase stops beside me, looking between me and Oli. "What's wrong?" Her eyes snap to him.

"Nothing."

“Just tell me if she’s alright,” I plead. She scrubs her hand over her face as she lets out a long sigh. “I just need to know she’s okay.”

“She’s in Divinity,” she mumbles, and my heart stops. “Said she wanted to have an adult conversation with Isaac. Tell him she’s leaving for good.”

The words are like a bomb going off in my head.

Have an adult conversation with Isaac?

That’s impossible. But not only that, he’ll be pissed. More than pissed. He’ll be so fucking angry, he’ll blow Divinity up in his narcissistic rage.

And Eve’s unknowingly stepping right into the narc’s den, right when he’s about to snap.

“No,” I breathe, shaking my head. I stumble back a step. “*No.*”

“Roman?” Chase grabs my shoulder, but I shake him off.

“I—I have to go,” I croak. “Car. Can I use your car?”

“Yeah,” Chase says warily. “You okay, man?”

“I need to go.” I shake off his worried look as I bolt from the loft, stopping only long enough to grab my wallet and his keys. His car is fast and I’ll break every law I can to get to her.

Bringing the phone to my ear, I soar through town, aiming for the one place I never wanted to go again. Each ring causes more dread to swirl in my stomach.

“Goddammit, Eve. Answer!” I call her again, but it goes to voicemail. Three more times, and still nothing.

I glance at the time on the dash, noting the date. A thought crosses my mind.

Is Isaac even home?

Is he at his conference?

I know I shouldn't be texting and driving, but I don't give a fuck right now. I search for the number to the conference and call.

He's been going to the same place since I was a kid. Grant got him the gig training other Baptist pastors and hopefuls who have been through the same program as him. At one point, he was awarded some sort of accolades and now he leads forums every quarter.

It's a bunch of fucking bullshit if you ask me, but at least it means he might not be home.

My hand tightens around the wheel as I grip it, listening to the ring drone on forever. “Come on,” I breathe. “*Answer.*”

Weaving in and out of traffic, I make it to the highway toward Divinity and press on the gas. The engine rumbles louder as I speed down the road.

“South Baptist Union Ministry, training department,” a woman answers, her voice soft and accent thick. “This is Darla.”

“Hey, Darla,” I say, trying to keep my voice light despite the panic clawing inside my gut. “I need a favor.” She’s silent for a long moment before primly clearing her throat.

“Yes, sir?”

“I need to speak to Isaac Payne.” I grit my teeth, inhaling slowly as I pull out the big guns. “I’m his son and there’s an emergency at home. Is he around?” Fuck, the word tastes like acid on my tongue.

More silence.

Dread coils tighter.

“Isaac Payne?” she repeats slowly, and I grunt my confirmation, my mouth suddenly too dry. “Just a moment.” There’s a click, and my hand tightens around the phone as silence fills the line.

Shit.

Shit.

Shit.

Seconds later, she’s back. “Sir?”

“Yes?” I croak.

“Mr. Payne hasn’t attended this conference in over two years,” she murmurs, a note of something I can’t understand in her voice. “He was kicked off the board for breaking various conduct and regulation rules, and hasn’t been allowed back.”

“Not there,” the words tumble from my lips and I swallow roughly. “You’re sure?”

She clears her throat and lowers her voice. “To be quite honest with you, sir, it’s incredibly unlikely he’ll ever be allowed on our premises again with conduct violations like these.”

Roaring fills my ears.

He’s not there.

He’s not there.

He’s in Divinity, with Eve.

He’s with Eve.

“Sir? Are you still there?”

“Thank you,” I rasp, my voice barely audible.

My body begins trembling with a mixture of anxiety, dread, and rage. Before Darla can say another word, I hang up and try Eve again.

No answer.

“Fuck!” I shout, slamming my hand against the steering wheel. I press harder on the gas, and dodge around people, ignoring their honking as I pass them.

Why did she leave?

Why wouldn’t she tell me?

Probably because she knew I wouldn’t want her to come. Not alone, at least. So she decided to just come without telling me.

I saw the fucking rice in her floorboards. I know what kind of punishment he gave her. What is he doing this time? This was a lot fucking worse than throwing a stupid party. This was her running away, defying him, ignoring him, for over a month.

What is he doing to her?

My vision blurs as every depraved, fucked up thing he could be doing flits through my mind. Is he whipping her? Making her kneel on the rice again?

Did he take her to the basement?

I grip the steering wheel tighter, the leather creaking, trying to ground myself. Please, please, not the basement.

I can handle anything, but finding her in the basement? Finding her bloody and broken the way he used to leave me?

I can't—

I shove a sob down. She's not broken. She's not hurting.

Because if that's where she is, kneeling in front of that fucking cross on rice, reciting scripture as he whips her back until her skin slices open...

Shaking my head, I try to ignore the phantom feeling of hot blood dripping down my back.

He's a dick to her, but he'd never do the things he did to me. He wouldn't hurt Eve like that. Right?

But with every passing second that I don't hear from her, doubt starts creeping in. Maybe he *is* hurting her. Maybe he's

hurt her so beyond repair I can't fix it.

Then what?

What will I do?

I'll ruin him, that's what I'll do. I'll fucking destroy him for hurting her.

It's what I should've done when I first saw him touching her. I should've pulled her away when I saw them in Savannah. I should've saved her.

I should have saved her.

I never should've left her.

The drive is a blur, and by the time I make it to the front of the old farmhouse, I'm buzzing. My body is coiled tight as I shove the door open, leaving the car running.

My foot hits the center of the door, and old, rotting wood splinters as it flies open. It's dark and cool inside, just like it always is.

There's no sound. No movement.

Nothing.

There's *nothing*.

I storm in, my blood humming in my veins, my body begging me to kill him. To take my girl and go home. To leave him and this Godforsaken town in the rearview mirror and never look back.

Never come back.

It's eerily quiet as I step fully inside, and goosebumps ripple over my skin. I clench my hands into tight, shaky fists. My gaze moves to the bookshelf in front of the basement door, and some of the anxiety uncoils when I see it in its rightful place.

Then I hear something, a barely there whimper, and my head snaps toward her bedroom.

He's in there.

“Come out, motherfucker!” I shout, banging my fist against the wall as I make my way toward him. *“I'm gonna fucking kill you!”*

Resurrection

**He was delivered to death for our sins and was raised to life
for our justification. - Romans 4:25**

4.62 Roman

My blood roars in my ears as I move through the silent house. Everything inside me is screaming to get to her. To kill him. Rage like I've never felt courses through my body. Feet pounding on the floorboards, I barge into her room, ready to pounce.

But it's empty.

I come to an abrupt stop as I take in the chaos, the papers, clothes, and sex toys scattered on the floor. My heart lurches into my throat, my fingers white-knuckled around the doorframe.

Her laptop is on the bed, the screen black but facing the edge. The space there is empty, like someone had kicked everything to the side. My gaze drops to the floor, and my stomach drops when I see it.

Her tattered, ripped dress. Her panties and bra.

The drops of blood.

My gaze follows them, dread like I've never known before coiling in my stomach as I move through the trashed room and into the bathroom. My foot loses traction when I slip on a piece of paper and I pick up my foot, spotting her shredded, beloved map from her dad.

My heart aches.

Another whimper and my head jolts up. I swallow thickly, acid pooling in my throat as I gently press the bathroom door open. I have no idea what I'll see on the other side of it.

Is he still here?

Is he hurting her?

What did he do?

Kill him.

Kill him.

Kill—

Time stops when I see her.

My perfect, beautiful girl. My sunshine embodied. My Goldie.

The room spins as I stand frozen, watching her hunch over the vanity. With trembling hands, she tries smooth toothpaste along her toothbrush. It drips everywhere, down her hands to the porcelain counter below and she whimpers again. I take her in, bile rising higher in my throat as I see the smeared blood on her ass, on her thighs. The bruises in the shape of fingerprints on her hips.

She's naked. She's pale. She's shaking.

But she's not crying.

"Eve?" I rasp, my voice hoarse.

She jolts, a small sound leaving her as she stumbles away from me and into the wall, closing in on herself. My feet move without my permission, my body needing to get to her like I need to breathe, but she shrinks away, her arms wrapping around herself.

"Eve, baby, I'm not gonna hurt you," I choke out.

She shakes her head, her eyes wide as she stares back at me. I force myself to take a deep breath, to calm down.

Gentle.

She needs me to be gentle.

Her toothbrush is clutched tightly in her shaky hand like it's a weapon, her eyes still on mine. "Do you need help?" I gesture to it, and she briefly drops her eyes before finding mine again.

She shakes her head, still not speaking. Her lips are swollen and chapped, her hair tangled. There's a cut on her lip, a bruise on her cheek already forming, and her eyes are red.

She looks...

"Dirty," she whispers, her voice barely audible. I blink at her.

"Dirty?" Tears fill her eyes at the word, and panic claws at my insides. "You're not dirty." They drip down her cheeks as

she stares at me.

She looks so fucking lost. So empty.

I don't know what to do.

I'm still battling with the rage roaring inside me at the side of her like this, but I shove it all down. I have to. I have to.

Later.

With a deep breath, I move toward her. She presses harder against the wall like she's trying to get as far away from me as possible. Even though it kills me, I keep moving toward her.

"Let me help you, Goldie." She whimpers like a wounded animal, and it shatters my fucking heart. It rips my soul to pieces. It completely destroys me.

I don't need her to tell me what happened to know.

He needs to die.

I need to fucking kill him.

"Where is he?" I whisper. Fear fills her wide, haunted eyes, and I immediately want to yell at myself. It doesn't matter where he is right now. *She* matters.

Wrapping my hand around hers, I gently bring the toothbrush to her mouth. "Goldie," I beg, my eyes burning. I bend to her level, meeting her blue eyes.

She parts her lips and I press the brush into her mouth. Tears fall freely down her face, and every one that drops makes me more enraged. More pissed at myself for not getting here sooner.

For not protecting her.

With as much gentleness as I can muster, I brush her teeth. Her terrified eyes stay on mine the entire time, and I force myself to stay calm. To not vibrate with the deadly fury I feel coursing through my body.

“Spit.” I reach for her hair, and she moves away, so I drop my hand. “I’ve got you, baby. I’m here.” Her chin wobbles, toothpaste coating her skin.

She’s never looked like this.

I’ve seen her at every emotion, at every stage of life, but the person in front of me is unrecognizable.

I step away, letting her move to the sink and spit, rinsing her mouth out before she brushes more. She’s too rough. I want to reach for her, to stop her from hurting herself, but I can’t make myself touch her again. Not when it’s clear my touch brings her more pain than anything else.

But when she spits and the white foam is laced with blood, all my resolve snaps.

“No more,” I murmur, but she ignores me as she brings the brush up. “Baby, stop.” I grip her wrist lightly, but she wrenches it away.

“Dirty,” she says again, shoving the toothbrush back into her mouth.

“You’re too rough.” I say the words as gently as I can, but she still looks wounded.

“Dirty,” is all she says.

With a deep breath, I make her drop the toothbrush. When she reaches for it, I grab it and throw it into the bin by the sink.

“No. More.”

Her eyes are empty as she stares up at me, and I immediately deflate.

I don’t know what the fuck to do.

She glances at the shower, and understanding dawns on me. Dirty. She feels dirty. She needs to feel clean.

“Shower?” I whisper. Fresh tears fill her eyes, and my heart aches. Without a word, I turn the water on, letting it warm up. I contemplate taking my shirt and jeans off, but she doesn’t need to see a naked man. She doesn’t need skin on skin contact.

She needs safety.

Holding my hand out, I swallow thickly as I watch her just stare at it. A part of me doesn’t think she’ll take it. Why would she? Despite the last few days, I’ve given her no reason to trust me. To love me.

I left her when she needed me most. I let my father get into my head, I let him scare me away. I let him dictate my life—our lives. I could’ve taken her with me. We could’ve run away together.

So many things I could’ve done differently, yet I did none of them. And it all led us to this moment.

To her being bruised, and bloody, and broken. To her looking terrified to touch me.

That's not Eve.

Eve doesn't get scared. Eve doesn't break.

She plows through, no matter how hard life gets. She never stays down, she always gets back up.

But right now, looking at her, at the way her red-rimmed eyes are shimmering with more tears, I don't think she's going to get back up. I don't think she's going to be able to pull herself together this time. At least, not alone.

Her smaller, colder palm slides against mine, and genuine shock fills me. I try to hide it, but I know I don't do a good job at it. Gently, I lead her to the shower.

"It's not too hot," I murmur, but I don't think she cares. She nods numbly as she steps into the tub.

I hesitate before following her in. The water drenches us, soaking through my clothes and plastering her hair down her back, but she never lets go of my hand.

"I'll pack a bag when we get out," I tell her softly. "I'm taking you home." A broken sob leaves her, her eyes squeezing shut. "I've got you, Goldie. I've—" She crumples, and my arms wrap around her, holding her up. Her legs give out, but I haul her against my chest, holding her as she breaks.

It's the first time I've ever seen her cry like this. She didn't break when her father died, didn't break when Jane died.

Didn't break when I left, didn't break when Marcus attacked her. Didn't break in Mammoth.

But right now, after whatever the fuck my evil father did to her, she's breaking. She's fucking *shattering*.

She slips on the slick floor of the tub, and we fall to the floor. Her legs are folded under her, and I drop to my knee, blocking most of the water from spraying in her face. It mixes with her tears as they fall, and I gather her against my chest again, feeling them soak into my skin.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry." I keep saying it. I can't stop. The words just fall from my lips like a mantra, like the more I say it, the more it'll matter.

But it doesn't matter how sorry I am.

I failed her.

I let her down.

"Ro," she cries, sounding lost, but I'm here, holding her tighter, wanting to squeeze the pain from her.

"Shh, baby. It's okay."

It's not and part of me thinks it never will be again. But I can't say that. I'll never say it.

"No," she sobs, shaking her head. "I—he—he—"

"It's okay," I say again. She doesn't have to relive it. She doesn't have to tell me the details. I know enough.

"Dirty. I'm dirty. Don't touch—"

Frantically, she tries to pull away from me, but I don't let her. I hold on tighter. "You're *not* dirty." She gathers my wet shirt in her shaky fists as she sobs so hard she can barely breathe. I hold her while she breaks, repeating the words rolling through my mind, my heart, again and again.

I love you.

I'm sorry.

You're perfect.

I love you.

It's okay.

I'm here.

Her head tilts back, and I meet her broken gaze. There's a void where her light, *my* light, was. Now, it's empty. It's gone. Because of him. He took it from her, just like he took everything else.

I hold her face gently in my trembling hands, pressing my forehead against hers. It's the absence of her warmth, the familiar happiness that I've always loved so fucking much, that finally breaks me.

"I'm so fucking sorry." I squeeze my eyes shut as the tears fall. I don't want her to see them, but it's impossible. Reaching up, she wraps her hands around my wrists.

She feels so small, so fragile. *So breakable.*

Is that why he did this? Because he wanted to break her?

God knows how he loves to break the people he's supposed to love.

We hold each other silently, our tears mixing as the water washes them away like they never existed. Finally, when it turns cold, I pull away. Her eyes are puffy, her lips swollen, and cheeks red. She looks drained.

“Let me clean you up,” I murmur, brushing the wet strands of hair from her face. After adjusting the temperature, I turn the overhead faucet off and let the tub fill with water. I keep her in my arms as I gently wash her body.

I try not to think about it, try not to let my anger override my body when she whimpers as I clean the blood off. But she lets me. She lets me touch her, and wash her, and try to repair what's been done.

I know I can't. I know no matter what I do, no matter how hard I try, this will always haunt her. This will forever replay in her mind, and there's nothing I can do to fucking fix it.

Nothing.

I feel helpless.

I feel angry.

I feel like killing the motherfucker that did this to her.

4.63 Eve

I stare out the window, the day passing in a blur of blue and green as we drive into Mammoth. How can everything outside look so happy, so bright, when all I feel inside is a dark nothingness I've never known before?

I shift in my seat, my body still hurting and sore after...

Fresh tears well in my eyes, but I brush them away with my shaky fingertips.

How am I still crying? How do I have any tears left in my body?

I'm in sweatpants and a t-shirt Roman had in his old room. Honestly, I'm not even sure how I got dressed or to the car. After we broke down in the shower, everything was a blur. I don't remember anything.

But I remember Isaac—

I squeeze my eyes shut.

Don't think about him.

Don't think about him.

Don't think about him.

Roman hasn't touched me. He's barely said anything since we left Divinity. But I can't make myself care. I can't make myself check in with him, not when I feel so utterly ruined myself.

It feels like a heavy blanket is weighing me down, like it's pressing me into the seat. Panic bubbles up my chest, but I push it down. *Not now.* I've broken enough in front of Ro. He doesn't need to see it again. He doesn't need the burden of... me.

More tears leak from my eyes. They won't stop. No matter how hard I try, they just keep falling.

It takes me a moment to realize we're not moving anymore. Blinking, I look around. We're in a parking lot. I glance at him, finding him with a slight grimace on his face.

"This isn't the loft," I mutter, my voice raw, empty. I watch his throat bob as he swallows.

"No," he agrees. "It's not." I look around again, my brows pinched together.

"Where are we?"

He hesitates, his mouth opens, but no sound comes out. I stare blankly at him, just waiting. Finally, his shoulders fall as he sighs.

"The hospital," he whispers.

“What?” I shake my head, pressing into the door, away from him. “No. I don’t want to be here.”

“I know. But we have to make sure you’re okay, Eve.”

“No.” I shake my head again, folding my arms over my chest. “I don’t want to.”

“We have to know...” He trails off, his eyes pained as he stares at me. “He could’ve done permanent damage to your body, baby. We have to make sure you’re okay.”

Even though I don’t want it to, my chin wobbles.

He *did* do permanent damage, though. He destroyed me from the inside out. He took everything from me. The person I was before is dead, and she’s never coming back.

“Please,” I cry, tears blurring my vision. “Don’t make me go in there.”

“I’m so sorry, Goldie.” He sounds genuinely apologetic, but that doesn’t make it better. I don’t want to be here. I don’t want anyone else poking or prodding at me. I want to go home, to the loft, and sleep.

I never want to wake up again.

I can see it, the pity in his eyes, the way he’s hesitating, like he doesn’t think this is a good idea. It’s not. I just want to forget this ever happened.

But somewhere in the back of my mind, I know he’s right. That I *should* be here, that we *should* make sure I’m okay.

But why does it matter?

I'm not okay.

I'll never be okay.

“Please,” I rasp, begging him to not make me do this. His black lashes are damp, his hazel eyes red as he watches me.

“Don't hate me,” he chokes out. “I'm sorry, Goldie. I'm so sorry. I'm sorry—”

“Ro.” My hand grips the door, like if I hold on tight enough, he can't move me. But we both know he can. We both know whether I want to or not, I'm going into the hospital and those people in there will...they'll stick things inside me, swab me, take samples, push and pull me in every direction.

I won't be able to breathe—*I can't breathe.*

I try to take a breath, but my lungs won't fill with air. What's wrong with me? Why can't I breathe?

Just inhale.

Inhale.

It's easy.

Just do it.

But I can't.

I can't.

I can't.

Turning panicked eyes on Roman, I reach for him, but he's already there, his eyes as wide as mine feel. “I've got you,” he murmurs. “I'm here.”

I shake my head.

He wasn't there, though.

But he is now.

“Breathe, Goldie.” He smooths his hand over my tangled hair, his grip on me tight.

My chest feels too tight, and my heart feels like it's about to beat out of my chest. A cold sweat breaks out along my forehead, but my body flushes hot. Pins and needles shoot through my fingers until they feel like ice.

What's wrong with me?

“Ro,” I whimper again, gripping his forearm as tightly as I can, trying to ground myself.

“Shh.” His hand moves to the back of my head and he gently guides me to his chest. I listen to the steady beat of his heart as my vision blurs. Then he begins to hum. Softly at first, then gradually, it gets louder.

You Are My Sunshine.

I cling to the familiar, safe sound. Squeezing my eyes shut, I force air into my body. He doesn't stop humming until my body stops shaking and I pull away with a deep, heaving breath.

I stare into his eyes—his wet, tear-filled eyes. “Please don't make me go in there.” My voice is hoarse, barely audible.

“I have to.” He tucks my hair behind my ear, and I shudder, pulling away from him. Folding my arms over my chest, I

ignore the hurt that flashes across his face, and stare out the front window.

If he wants me to go in there, I won't make it easy for him.

Sighing, he shoves his hand through his hair, his eyes still on me. "I'm sorry—"

"You said that."

He deflates, his gaze still burning a hole into the side of my head. But I don't look at him. He turns off the car before getting out and rounding it. The door opens, and he stares down at me, waiting.

Still, I don't move. I don't acknowledge him.

He crouches beside me, resting his hand on the door. "I know you're going to hate me for this. I deserve it. But after you get checked out, I'll take you home. After I know you're physically okay, I'll give you whatever you want. I'll do anything you want. But I have to know you're okay, Goldie. I have to know you're safe."

My gaze slides to him, and he takes a deep breath, his eyes flicking between mine. He drops his head forward, his knuckles white on the door.

He looks so wrecked, so broken, just like me.

"I'll never forgive myself for what happened today, Eve. But please, fucking *please*, do this for me." His voice is so quiet I almost don't hear him.

I don't want to do this.

But I'm tired. Tired of fighting. Tired of pretending like I'm fine. Tired of the weight that's been on my shoulders since the day I was born. Tired of chasing. Tired of running. Tired of being something I'm not, okay when I'm not, whole when I'm not.

Just...tired.

He reaches his hand out, patiently waiting for me to take it, giving me the choice. I stare down at it, not wanting to.

I don't want to do this.

But then I look at him, at the brave face he has on for me, at the way he's prepared to do what he has to to take care of me, even if I hate it for him. When was the last time anyone did this? Mama loved me, but after a certain age, she didn't have to coddle me anymore. Isaac never did.

Roman...

He was the only one who ever cared enough to reach out to me, to make sure I was still holding on. Even if I didn't know I was white-knuckling my way through life, he did.

I slide my hand into his, and a relieved breath whooshes from him. He brings it to his lips and presses a gentle kiss to the back of it before unbuckling my seat belt and helping me out of the car.

My knees are wobbly as I walk through the parking lot and hospital. Everyone rushes around me. Voices blur together. People are faceless. Everything's hazy as we check in, and

I'm vaguely aware of telling someone what's happened. They double, then triple check I'm fine with this, and I am.

I am.

I have to be.

But I don't want to be. Who wants to be seen, be touched, after something like *that*?

Roman leads me to a waiting room and helps me into a seat. Nothingness calls to me and I let it.

It feels like I'm floating, like I'm in a dream.

Nothing feels real.

Nothing except Roman's hand around mine.

"Are you ready?" I blink a few times, everything suddenly crashing around me. "Miss?"

"What?"

"Are you ready to come with me?" The nurse is an older woman, her graying brown hair picked up in a bun, and her face soft with pity. It makes my stomach revolt.

"Go with you where?" I croak. Roman's hand is still around mine, still holding me in reality.

"To the examination room," she says softly, glancing at Roman. "Would you like him to come too?"

I glance at him, trying to read his expression. But I can't. He's carefully blank.

“No,” I whisper. Tears burn the backs of my eyes as his face shudders, his body tensing. “I want to do it alone.”

I know I have to let go of his hand, but I don’t want to.

I don’t want to do this.

But I can’t let him see me like that. I don’t want him to know what happened in my bedroom. I don’t want him to know what his father did, what he’s capable of.

I don’t want anyone to know.

Maybe I’m trying to protect Roman from the truth that’ll inevitably kill him—the truth of what, *who*, his father really is. Maybe if he asks, I can say I wanted it. Maybe if he asks, I can say it was my fault.

Maybe it was my fault.

My throat threatens to close at the memories that flash through my mind like still images. Phantom pain shoots through my body, and I squeeze his hand tighter.

“Will you please come with me?” the nurse asks softly. Gently.

“Go, Goldie,” Roman croaks, his eyes glossing over. I can see how tightly he’s holding his body, how badly he wants to come, to protect me, even from this. But he doesn’t. He’s trusting me to make my own choices. He’s supporting me, even as it kills him. “I’ll be here, baby. I’m not going anywhere.”

I nod, but still, I can’t let go.

What if he does leave?

What if when I come out of that room, he's gone and I'm all alone again? What if I have to pick up the pieces without him? I've done it before, but this time, I don't think I can do it again.

I need him.

"Don't leave," I whisper, begging another man today for something out of my control. Except Roman isn't his father and without pause, he nods.

"I won't. I promise." He swallows. "I'm never leaving you, Goldie."

"Swear?"

He slides his hand away enough to wrap his pinky around mine. Lifting our hands, he lets me see the pinky promise as he presses a kiss to my hand.

"I pinky swear."

4.64 Roman

My grip on Eve tightens as I shoulder my bedroom door open, letting it click shut quietly behind us. She doesn't even stir in my arms, but I know she's not asleep.

She's just empty.

She hasn't said a word since she silently walked out of that hospital room a half hour ago. She barely even looked at me. Her head was turned downward, her skin paler than it'd been before. The nurse shot me a sympathetic look, and I swallowed the chaotic swirl of emotions battering against my chest, and offered Eve my pinky.

This time, she didn't take it.

This time, she didn't even acknowledge my existence. She just walked past me, led the way to Chase's car, and waited. At some point during the drive home, she shut down completely, and I had to carry her from the car. All she's done is cry, the tears a never-ending stream down her cheeks.

I want to wipe them from her face, kiss them away, but I don't. I can't.

For a moment, just one split second when I'd picked her up, she flinched, and I'd half expected her to hit me.

To be honest, I'd prefer it if she had.

Anything is better than *this*.

My chest aches with a pain unlike anything I've ever experienced. It's worse than what I felt when my sick bastard of a father had me in that basement. Worse than any torture he forced me to live through. Worse than losing Eve and becoming homeless at eighteen.

It's worse than all of that because, through it all, I knew she was okay. Through it all, I knew she was safe.

Now...

Now she's not, and it's all my fault.

I gently lay her down on the bed, careful not to jostle her, but she still releases a tiny whimper of pain and I find myself ready to burn the world down all over.

Gritting my teeth, I pull the blanket over her body. "Do you need anything, Goldie?" I murmur.

Eve's wet eyes are open, but she doesn't look at me and she doesn't answer. Instead, she wordlessly rolls over, giving me her back, and snuffles.

I exhale slowly and bring my shaking hand up, brushing her hair behind her ear. She doesn't flinch this time, and I consider

it a win. I lean forward, instinctually wanting—no, *needing*—to kiss her sweet face, but I freeze before I can touch her.

She probably doesn't want me to touch her.

Inhale.

Exhale.

Inhale.

“I'll be right back, baby,” I whisper, my voice cracking. *I need a fucking minute to breathe.* “I'm just going to get you some water.” The lie tastes like ash on my tongue. “I'll be right outside the door if you need me.” *She won't. How could she? She hates me.*

I stand, waiting for her to respond, but she doesn't.

Can she even hear me?

My eyes scan her body once more. I have no idea what I'm even looking for. She's not okay.

I'm not okay.

I quickly turn around and leave the room, my blood thrumming wildly through my veins, burning me with every second that passes.

My too-tight hoodie I blindly grabbed from my old room grates against my bare back, and I yank it from my body, dropping it into the trash as I step into the kitchen.

I don't even remember drying off or changing into whatever I could find in my old dresser. All I knew was that I needed to take care of her and that started with getting her cleaned, dried,

and warm. After that, I bundled her into Chase's car, ran back inside and packed everything I could quickly get my hands on—her things, not mine.

I don't give a shit about any of my things inside that place. It could burn to the ground for all I care, but Eve should have a choice before losing her possessions.

Eve should have a *choice*.

I open the cabinet next to the sink and grab a glass before flicking on the tap. I watch my hand tremble as I hold the glass under the icy stream of water, and the sight of it brings me right back to holding her shaking body in the shower.

The fingers of my free hand wrap around the edge of the sink so hard, my knuckles pop.

She should have had a choice.

She should have had a choice.

She should have—

The sound of glass shattering snaps me from the incessant mantra circling through my brain and I blink rapidly, finding the cup scattered across the kitchen floor beneath the far brick wall.

Shattered.

Broken.

Irreparable.

My eyes catch on the dots of liquid across the floor, small, perfect circles. But instead of water, all I see is blood.

With a snarl, I reach for another glass and, without pause, launch it across the kitchen, relishing in the sound of it smashing against the harsh bricks.

Blood on the floor.

On her thighs.

On her ass.

I know what he did.

Another glass.

Another.

Another.

She should have had a choice.

I bellow my fury as I empty the cabinet, one glass after another. Each one leaves a bigger mess on the floor. Each one reminds me of the precious woman I love with my entire fucking being, wrapped in a blanket on my bed, unable to speak.

Barely existing.

I reach for another glass but there isn't one, so I pick up a plate instead.

I don't care about the mess, or how mad Chase will be. I don't care about anything except getting rid of this rage battering inside me, demanding I go back to Divinity and kill him.

Kill him.

Kill him.

Kill him.

I lift my arm to throw the plate, my muscles burning, my lungs aching, but the plate disappears as a hand lands on my shoulder. Black dots dance on the edges of my vision as I whirl around, my fist arched back, ready to lay a motherfucker out.

Kill him.

I see nothing but black dots and red blood and Eve, my sweet golden girl, crumpling to the shower floor.

I hear nothing but the sound of my rage-filled breaths clawing at my throat, my heartbeat pounding in my ears, and Eve's ragged sobs.

I'm dirty.

A hand wraps around my fist, big, hard, and unyielding. The pressure of it forces me to remain still, to not give way to the punch I desperately want to land. It's so unexpected; I stagger back a step.

"Roman!"

The word is muffled, like I'm underwater, but it feels wrong coming from those lips. My brows furrow, and I shake my head.

"Roman! Look at me, man!"

I blink rapidly and my muscles immediately go limp as I stare up into Kon's shocked eyes.

“What the fuck is going on?” he snaps, clutching my fist in one hand, the plate in the other.

Though his voice is loud and deep, he’s not angry. I know what angry men look like, and this isn’t it.

Instead, it’s an expression I’ve grown to know over the years since Kon came into my life and dragged me from that wet alley, drunk, depressed and ready to die. Since he shoved me onto his couch, fed me, clothed me, and got my ass sober.

He saved me from homelessness, from alcoholism, from disappearing into the rage that I was raised on.

He saved me from becoming my worst nightmare—*him*. My father.

And now, as he looks at me with nothing but love, acceptance and understanding, I know this man, my father born of trust, not DNA, is about to save me again.

This time, from myself.

“Roman.” He says my name again. *Roman, not Pyro*. The distinction is enough to shake me from the darkness trying to drag me down. Not fully, that’ll never happen, but it’s enough to give him a slight nod.

Swallowing thickly, my jaw tenses as I fight to keep my emotions in check. Now that the anger has dissipated, I feel hollow and raw.

Devastated.

Kon sighs, deflating, and drops my hand before setting the plate gently on the counter. He runs his fingers through his shoulder-length hair and I follow the movement, spotting Chase standing just behind him.

And it's when I meet my best friends terrified, worried blue eyes, that something else inside me shatters, just like the plates.

My knees shake and I barely catch myself on the edge of the counter as the first choked sob spills from deep inside my soul. I tuck my lips in, my chin quivering, and I hate myself all over for being so fucking weak.

Be a man.

I shake off my father's voice, my back burning from the ghost of his lessons.

"What the fuck?" Chase whispers seconds before I feel his arms wrap around me, pulling me into a hug. I want to shrug him off, tell him to leave me alone. But as my head falls forward, my chin hitting his shoulder as silent tears stream down my cheeks, I can't say a word.

I just...can't.

My hands lay limply at my sides, my jaw throbbing from how tightly I'm clenching it. No one speaks while I work to get myself back in control. His arms stay banded around me, and at some point, Kon's hand wraps around the back of my head. There's no judgment, no questions, no pressure to end this unusual moment of comfort.

Finally, I find the words I haven't wanted to say, words I haven't wanted to think. With more strength than I feel like I have left, I let them fall into the silence around us.

“He raped Eve.”

For a long minute, no one speaks and I peel myself away from them, discreetly wiping my cheeks on my bare shoulder. But then, all hell breaks loose.

With a deep sigh, I grab a bottle of water from the fridge and lean against the island while Kon and Chase shoot a barrage of loaded, jumbled questions at me. I take a long drink and drop it on the counter, my fingers wrapped so tightly around the plastic, the bottle bulges.

“Guys,” I grunt.

They're bickering with each other now, their voices loud, their faces a mixture of emotions I don't care to pick apart. My eyes flit to the hall that leads to my bedroom and I'm thankful to find it empty. The walls are thick as fuck, practically soundproofed from the brick, but still. She's been through enough. I don't want them to bother her.

“*Guys!*”

This time, they both shut up and turn to face me. Kon's tanned skin is red from his anger and Chase's eyes are clouded over.

“What happened, Ro?” he murmurs, his voice thick.

I take another drink, and with a deep, slow exhale, I tell them everything, leaving nothing out.

I start at the beginning, when I was a broken kid whose mom had just died, and I wound up in the nicest house I'd ever seen. I leave out the parts of my mom's death, fragments and flashes from that day that I still don't understand, but I tell them everything else.

About Jane and Grant, stories I've probably already spoken over the years, but for some reason, feel the need to purge again. I tell them about the little girl I met, only two at the time. Her hair was so gold, I thought she was an angel. I liked hanging out with Eve. I knew she wasn't my sister, not really, but she was a friend, sort of, like Jane and Grant.

I recall the way my father came in and out of my life that year. How he'd show up for meals in a place I eventually felt was my home. He'd stare longingly at the nice décor and watch the way Jane doted on Grant. The way Grant loved her and Eve.

They were so fucking happy and for a while, I was too.

Then, he got better and took me away.

I tell them about the basement.

The abuse, the lashings, the lessons. The confusion I felt as a little kid when he'd tell me to be better, to try harder, to be *different*. I didn't understand how my mere existence could be so wrong in his eyes, how I could embarrass him just by speaking.

But I did.

And then, Grant got sick and Jane called my father, asked us to come say goodbye. I was barely a teenager at that time, just a gawky preteen, but I remember it like it was yesterday. Remember seeing him for the first time in years, wrapped in wires and looking like a shell of the giant, great man I once knew. Seeing Jane, thinner and more worn out than before, but still beautiful.

I remember seeing Eve.

She was nine, her hair just past her shoulders, and a bit blonder than golden, but when the sun hit her just right, I swear, she glowed. And when she smiled at me? Christ, I was done for.

Will she ever smile at me like that again?

There, in the kitchen of my home, the only place I've ever felt I truly belonged, I purge my soul for the two people who've been there for me every step of the way. Even when the world tried to break me and the earth tried to swallow me whole.

For the first time, I admit I've been in love with Evelyn Meyer, my stepsister, my friend, my enemy, my *everything*, for as long as I can remember. And then, I tell them how I let the man I hate more than life itself destroy her.

I watch as Kon paces back and forth, back and forth, his motions smooth, yet erratic, like a caged lion—fierce, determined, strong. His lips move as he mutters words, a mixture of English and Russian.

“I should have fucking killed him when I had the chance,” he grunts, his fists clenching and unclenching repeatedly.

I run a hand through my hair. “So should I.”

His head snaps to me and he freezes, pointing a thick, tattooed finger at me. “Don’t you fucking dare, Pyro,” he barks. I cock a weary brow. “I see that look in your eyes. See the rage boiling inside you. You want to kill him. And if she weren’t here, you would. I know it. But I won’t fucking let you have that shit on your soul. I won’t.”

My hands smack on the marble countertop as I lean forward, my entire face a mask of rage.

“Of course I want to fucking kill him!” I snarl, my fingernails curling against my palms. “Tell me you wouldn’t if you were in my shoes.” My own finger snaps out, pointing at Chase. “If it was him that was violated? That lost something so fucking personal, so fucking *private*, that he’d never come back from it. Tell me you wouldn’t kill the motherfucker that touched him!”

The room grows silent and I regret the words immediately. It’s not my place to get between him and Chase, to make them admit things I know they aren’t ready for.

They’ve been toeing this line for a while, and now, whatever’s going on between them is fragile. I can’t break it. I shouldn’t have said it.

I look between them, seeing the sadness and fear on my best friend’s face. But beneath that is something else, and it makes

me feel like complete shit.

His cheeks turn pink as he looks away with embarrassment. Embarrassment because Kon didn't speak up in his defense.

I open my mouth to apologize, but before I can, Kon storms forward and shoves me into the counter behind me. His palms land on my shoulders and I'm pretty sure he'd be angrily fisting my shirt if I was wearing one.

"I would *destroy* any motherfucker who dared put a finger on him," he hisses, his vow low and guttural. "I would rip them from end to end just for looking at him wrong, for making him even question how incredible he is. And if some sick fuck like that piece of shit who hurt you, hurt *her*, ever thought of violating him, there wouldn't be a cell strong enough to keep me from turning them to ash and don't you ever fucking forget it, Pyro."

Swallowing, I bob my head, seeing the truth in his eyes, but also the understanding. *He gets it*. I knew he would.

There are no limits to what I would do for Eve. The thought of stepping up and confronting my abuser, the man who made it his personal mission to destroy me every day of my childhood, makes my skin crawl and body tremble.

It was one of the scariest things I could imagine—going after him, speaking out against him, making him pay.

But nothing is worse than finding Eve that way.

Nothing.

And for that alone, I'll face my demons every single day till I die if I have to.

Kon softens, his hands cupping my shoulders instead of squeezing them. "I'm here for you both, Roman," he murmurs. "Anything you need."

I hear Chase snuffle as he steps up beside Kon and nods, meeting my eyes. "Me too."

Kon's mouth tips up a fraction as he glances at Chase over his shoulder before looking back to me. "But mark my words, nothing good will come from doing what your mind is telling you to. Nothing good will come from what your heart," he breaks off, placing his hand on my chest, "your soul, is begging you to."

"He's right," Chase murmurs, a defeated look on his face. "You can't hurt him, Ro. As much as I hate to admit it, the fucker has clout. People in that town love him, trust him. If he winds up beaten and bloody, or worse, who do you think it'll come back on?"

Me.

Always me.

The tattooed, pierced fuck-up that disappeared for years.

The kid who got in trouble again and again. Who vandalized and broke shit. Who burned Bibles.

The high school playboy and jock that threw parties and let young, innocent girls get so drunk, they had to have their stomachs pumped.

And Eve...

Eve doesn't deserve to be put in the middle of that shit.

"If you get locked up, who will take care of her?" Kon murmurs.

I swallow, my eyes narrowing. "You guys." I mean it, too. I know they would.

Chase scoffs, rolling his eyes. "You're saying you want your girl alone with two hot pieces of ass like us?"

I snarl again and shove them both away, ignoring the way Chase chuckles and Kon huffs a laugh.

"Okay," I grunt. "I get it. But what the hell am I supposed to do?"

Chase hesitates, his eyes darting to the hallway where Eve is before the opposite hall where Oli is. "You said you took her to the hospital?" he murmurs. I nod. "Did she tell the police?"

My jaw ticks. "She wouldn't let me go in the room with her."

Kon makes a sound low in his throat. "Do you blame the girl?"

"Obviously fucking not," I hiss, tugging on my hair. Fuck, I feel sick. Sick and lost. I hate it. "I get it, but I have no answers. I don't know anything because Eve won't tell me what the hell happened to her."

"What happened?" a small, feminine voice asks, breaking through the tense kitchen.

As one, all three of us turn to the voice and my heart sinks as I find Olive standing before us, her face creased from sleep, a small, thin, blonde messy bun on her head.

I shoot a look at Chase, finding him pale and wringing his hands. Kon's jaw is tense, and for once, he's not looking at Oli with irritation, but love and concern. I step back, leaning against the counter with my arms crossed, unsure what to do or say.

It's not up to me.

It's up to Chase.

Oli steps forward, stopping right in front of him.

“What happened to my best friend, Chase?”

4.65 Eve

Something shifts on the bed beside me, and my eyelids flutter open. They're wet, like I was crying in my sleep. I probably was. They won't stop leaking, no matter how hard I try, they just keep pouring from my eyes.

Blinking a few times, Oli comes into focus. She's staring at me, laying close enough to be a comforting presence but far enough away to not touch me.

She's been here every day for...how long has it been? A few days? A week? A month?

It's all blurred together—Roman coming in and out of the room, bringing me water and food, making sure I take care of myself. Chase checking on me, reminding me to stay hydrated. Kon asking if I want to go for a drive, or get another tattoo or smash shit.

But it's Oli that's been the constant. She hasn't said a word. She just lays beside me. Sometimes she sleeps, sometimes she just stares at the ceiling with me.

“Morning, sunshine,” she mutters. Her thin blonde hair is picked up in a messy bun, and her face is makeup free.

I stare at her.

Even if I wanted to speak, it’s been so long, I don’t think I can. My throat feels weak, my body feels weak.

I *am* weak.

“I think Kon made breakfast,” she says softly. “Something from the home land.” She flashes me a grin, but it doesn’t reach her cobalt eyes.

My heavy eyes close again, and I beg myself to go back to sleep. Just for a bit longer.

“Do you wanna change clothes?” she asks. My hand balls into a fist under the pillow.

No, I don’t want to change clothes. I don’t want to eat breakfast. I don’t want to drink water, or talk to anyone, or see someone else’s pitying expression when they tiptoe into the room.

“I can make us some smoothies,” she suggests. “Pineapple and coconut smoothies with a dash of rum.”

Her words finally sink in, and a tinge of lightness warms my chest before it’s smothered again.

A pina colada sounds good.

Hold the pineapple and coconut.

It’ll take too much energy to get out of bed and drink it, though.

“Hm, not in the mood for something fruity?” She hums, then snaps her fingers, and I open my eyes to glare at her. “How about something else?”

My brows lift expectantly.

“I knew that’d pique your interest,” she mumbles. “Sweet tea? It’s your favorite.”

When was the last time I had tea? Or anything besides a few sips of water?

“I could sneak some of Ro’s cigarettes if you’re in the mood to rebel.”

I barely scrunch my nose at her. I don’t want to smoke. I still can’t believe Roman hasn’t quit yet. I tried to get him to stop but I don’t think the man listens to me or anyone.

I can’t blame him.

What’s the use?

“Or I could find us some wacky tobacky.” She wiggles her brows, and my lips barely twitch. “I saw that!” She points at me, a broad grin splitting her face. “You smiled!”

I didn’t.

Did I?

“Wanna watch something?” she asks, and I blink at her. “No? Okay. Wanna bake something? We can make a huge mess and watch Kon get that wild tic by his eye. He really should get that checked by a doctor.”

She’s right. He probably should.

“We could put googly eyes on all of Chase’s weights and see how long it takes him to notice.” I take a deep breath, but even that feels like it was too much work. Her smile slowly falls, her eyes losing the little light they had. “When are you gonna talk to me, Evie?”

My body tenses at the sadness in her voice, the way it cracks on my name, the seriousness of her sweet face. *The bags under her eyes.*

Fuck.

I slide my hand across the bed and rest it on hers.

“How long has it been?” I rasp, my voice hoarse from disuse.

“Eight days,” she whispers, her eyes glossing over.

Eight days.

I’ve spent eight days laying in this bed, in this position. I haven’t moved. I haven’t done anything except what I’ve had to to stay alive. And I probably wouldn’t have even done that if it weren’t for Roman.

His name sends a shudder through my body. He’s been so... *so kind*. So perfect. He’s taken care of me, and given me space. But he’s been there in ways I didn’t know I even know I needed.

He reads to me from the chair so I don’t feel alone, and sleeps in it until the nightmares come. Then, he lays next to me and hooks our pinkies together as though he knows anything more would be too much.

He's everything.

And I...

I'm nothing.

"Ro?" I croak, shifting my gaze to the open door, missing him with a depth I didn't think I'd ever feel again. Did he leave?

"In the living room," she quickly says as if sensing my panic. "He'll be in here soon. It's almost time for him to check on you." I look back at her, and she shrugs. "He checks on you every fifteen minutes."

I blink.

Every fifteen minutes?

Fresh tears fill my eyes. "He's been doing that the entire time?" I whisper, and she nods.

"It was every five minutes for the first few days, but I worked him up to fifteen. It was a fight, though."

Silence settles around us again, and I glance at the door, holding my breath as I wait for him to come. I need to see his face, really see it. She squeezes my hand again, and I turn my attention to her, finding her uncharacteristically serious.

Her mouth opens, but she hesitates. Finally, she lets out a long breath. "What happened, Evie?"

My stomach rolls at the question. Hot tears burn as they drip from my eyes and soak into the pillow. Even if I wanted to speak, I can't. My throat is too tight, words are too hard.

“It’s okay if you’re not ready to talk about it,” she continues, giving me a knowing look. “But I’m here when you are.”

Swallowing thickly, I nod, my hand still in hers. She brings it to her lips and kisses the back of it. “You’re not alone,” she murmurs, her breath tickling my skin as she gives me the exact words I needed to hear.

“He—” I squeeze my eyes shut at the memories. It’s been days, over a week, but it feels like it just happened. Like I’m in that room with him, on my knees—

“It’s okay,” she says, sounding panicked. She slides closer, but doesn’t touch me. “Stop thinking about it, Evie. I’m here. It’s okay—”

“Eve?” I stiffen at the deep voice, and burrow deeper under the blankets, hiding my body.

Dirty.

So, so dirty.

“Wait,” Oli hisses. “*Wait.*”

His footsteps are loud as he storms across the room, but he doesn’t touch me. He doesn’t pull the blankets back. But I feel him hovering, looking down at me.

“What’s wrong?” His voice is soft, *gentle*, and at complete odds with the memories assaulting my mind. I tune him and Oli out as I focus on my breathing, letting Oli’s hand still wrapped in mine ground me.

I’m safe.

I'm okay.

I'm in Mammoth, in Roman's bed, not in Divinity. Not in that room.

Not with Isaac.

A whimper leaves me at the thought of his name, the flash of his face through my mind.

Isaac's not here.

I'm with Roman.

I'm with Oli.

I'm with Chase. And Kon.

I'm safe.

I'm safe.

I'm safe.

My eyes flutter open, and I stare up at Oli's worried face. Her eyes are wide, her cheeks pale. It's been so long since I've seen her look like that, and I hate that I'm the reason for it.

But I can't make myself calm down. I can't make myself stop spiraling.

I was always the strong one. I made sure she was okay, not the other way around. I always protected her, cared about her. Now, she's doing it all for me. And being on the receiving end feels...wrong. It feels different. I don't like it. I don't like the pity, or the attention.

Is this how she always felt when we came to her house after everything happened? Did she hate the pity I know I had on my face? The sympathy?

“I’m sorry,” I whisper so quietly I don’t think she hears me. I know she won’t understand fully what I mean. But I need to tell her regardless. I am sorry, if I ever made her feel like that.

“Goldie?”

I stiffen again, but force myself to take a breath.

Roman. Just Roman.

Rolling onto my back, I tug the blanket down enough to look at him. He’s crouched by the bed, his eyes as wide as Oli’s, but there’s no pity there. Just concern and fear and *love*.

So much love.

“You okay, baby?” he whispers, his hands tightly gripping the comforter as if to hold himself back. I nod, my throat too raw and tight to speak. “Do you need anything? Water? I can make you something to eat—”

“I’m okay,” I croak, and he freezes. His eyes lift to Oli’s, tears filling them in an instant. There’s the pain again.

I see it in the way his brows bunch together and his jaw tenses, like he’s trying to hold back a sob. The way his Adam’s apple bobs as if he’s swallowing repeatedly. The wild thundering of his pulse right next to the angel wing tattoo that wraps around his throat.

So much.

He's feeling so much.

And I...

I feel nothing.

It takes that moment to realize he hasn't heard me speak in days. He's been by my side for a week, and I haven't said a word to him. I've barely been conscious enough to know he's been taking care of me.

"I'm okay, Ro," I say again, wanting to sound stronger than I feel. Wanting to be strong for him, for Oli.

"You're okay," he repeats, still looking shocked. "You don't need anything?" I shake my head and watch his Adam's apple bob as he swallows again. Nodding, he pushes to his feet. "I'll be in the living room if you need me. It's right down the hall —"

"She knows where the living room is," Oli snaps, and I flick my gaze to hers. "She's sad, not stupid." My eyes shift between them, waiting for a fight, but he just dips his chin in a slight nod.

"I know that," he mutters, looking at me. "I just—I'll be here, okay? I'm not going anywhere."

I nod, still staring at him as the words sink in. He's not going anywhere. *But what if he does?* What if when I go looking for him, he's gone?

My throat burns around the word but I force it out. "Promise?"

His face shudders and then softens as he slowly raises his pinky to the space between us. My hand shakes but I bring it up and latch my finger with his. A promise, a vow, just like the one he made me all those years ago at my mom's funeral.

I'll be by your side.

I'm not leaving.

And maybe, maybe he never did. Maybe he never will.

"I pinky promise, baby," he rasps, kissing the tip of my finger—just the smallest press of his lips. His eyes meet mine and I see the tear beading on his lashes. He quickly sets my hand back on my pillow and steps back.

I watch as he retreats from the room, and I roll back toward Oli, my gut clenching repeatedly with the force of keeping everything buried down.

"You didn't have to say that," I mumble. She shrugs, not apologetic in the least. She's not mean, but she's protective. She's loyal. I know she was just trying to help.

I force air into my lungs as I think about her earlier question. I thought Roman would've told her what happened. Maybe he didn't want to talk about it. Maybe he wanted me to be the one to share my story, if and when I was ready.

I don't really know why I start talking, why I tell her everything. I don't know *how* I tell her—not without crying. I don't know how she can still stand to touch me while I tell her what happened, what Isaac stole from me.

But when I'm done, tears are streaming down her face. Her cheeks are blotchy and her grip on my hand is almost painful. She just stares at me—she stares at me like she's in shock, like she can't believe Isaac could do something so awful.

I can't believe it either, and I think that's what I'm still struggling to accept. That the man I thought I loved, the man who took my mother and I in when my father died, the man who practically raised me, could do that to me. I always thought he was a good man. He had his issues, but everyone does, right?

Now I see those issues are deeper than he ever let on. The darkness inside him is worse than I could've ever imagined.

Worse than anyone could imagine.

God, what will Ro do when he finds out?

"I want to kill him," Oli mutters, angrily wiping her face with her free hand. "I want to rip his head off and put it on a pike in front of the church."

"So bloodthirsty," I murmur, forcing myself to be light. But it doesn't land, not the way I want it to.

"I'm serious," she growls. "I—I hate him. *I hate him.*"

"Oli," I breathe, but she shakes her head. I see her spiraling, see her going into the darkness she pretends doesn't live inside her. "*Olive.*"

She blinks and slides her gaze to me. Whatever she sees on my face makes her take a deep breath. I watch her ground

herself, then sit up. She folds her legs under herself as she stares down at me.

“What do you need?” she asks, forcing herself to be strong. “Food? Drink? Chocolate—”

A bleat has me gasping and sitting up on my elbow. Oli jumps up and runs to Potato. “Oh my God! Her first words!” she cries, throwing her arms around the goat’s neck. “She’s broken her vow of silence!”

I can’t help it, a small, breathy laugh leaves me. It’s enough to get Oli to freeze, then whirl on me, grinning. “A smile and a laugh in one day? Progress, baby.”

She pats Potato’s head, then sends the goat out of the room before sinking onto the end of the bed. “Now, what do you need? Ice cream?”

Ice cream? Fuck, I wish all I needed to fix the aching chasm inside of me was ice cream.

If only ice cream could fix how dirty I feel.

So dirty.

“Bath,” I mutter, and she hops back up.

“I can do that. Come with me.” She holds her hand out and I hesitate, but I force myself to take a deep breath and grab her hand, letting her help me to my feet.

I shuffle out of the room, my body still sore, and down the hall, following her into the bathroom. She scurries around,

grabbing stuff from under the sink as the bathtub fills with water.

“Pink, purple, or blue?” she asks, her back to me.

“What?”

“Pick a color.” She glances at me over her shoulder, her brows raised expectantly.

“I don’t care,” I mutter, but she stays staring at me. I sigh, leaning back on the counter. “Pink.”

She nods and turns back toward the water. Plastic crinkles, then she drops something in the tub. The bath bomb begins to fizz, staining the water a pretty, glittery pink shade as the room fills with a strong, floral scent that has my shoulders dropping.

“In you get,” she says, waving at the tub, her voice full of motherly concern. “Don’t come out until you’re ready. The guys can use the other bathroom.” She rolls her eyes, and I bite my lip. She’ll stand guard out in the hall if she has to.

“Thanks, Oli.” She grins and squeezes my arm as she passes, shutting the door firmly behind her.

I stare at the water, at the bottles she lined up on the edge of the tub for me to choose from. My hands shake as I pull my oversized clothes off and toss them to the floor. I’m still wearing Roman’s sweatshirt but it’s a different one than before. I have a vague memory of him asking me if I wanted to change myself or if I needed help, but my answer and everything after is a blur.

The water feels amazing on my skin as I sink into the tub, sighing at the sweet smell and warmth.

Running my hand through the water, the glitter dances and whirls, the light from the window reflecting off it. It looks so pretty. So...

The smile I didn't know I had on my face fades. I shouldn't be surrounded by something so pretty when I'm so dirty.

I'm fucking the whore out of you.

Words I didn't realize I'd ignored in the moment come tumbling back in, his voice deep and booming in the quiet recesses of my mind.

Filthy.

Ruined.

Sanctified.

My heart races as panic and disgust fill me, washing away some of the numbness and I claw at myself to get it back.

No, no, no!

Grabbing the loofa, I lather as much soap as I can on it and begin scrubbing at my arms. They turn pink and start to feel raw, but I don't stop. I can't stop.

Dirty.

I'm dirty, and I need to be clean.

You were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord, Jesus Christ, and by the Spirit of our God.

Pouring on more soap, I go back to scrubbing my body. It's so raw, it hurts, but I can't stop. Not yet.

Tears stream down my face as I frantically wash myself, watching the sudsy bubbles mix with the pretty pink glitter.

Too pretty.

Too dirty.

Too much.

A sob breaks from my throat, and I see my skin turn dangerously red, some areas forming scraped up wounds.

“You were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord, Jesus Christ, and by the Spirit of our God,” I choke out, the words, his voice, running on repeat through my staticky mind.

Recite!

Not clean enough.

Recite!

A soft sound catches my attention, and I barely stop moving the sponge along my skin, the words spilling from my cracked lips on repeat. But then I hear it again and I can just make out what it is as the next few notes are played out on a guitar.

My throat almost closes.

Pausing, the loofa still on my arm, I lift my gaze and stare at the door, listening as the song trickles in from under the crack.

Then I hear *his* voice.

“Little darlin’, it’s been a long, cold, lonely winter.”

Roman’s voice, his perfect voice I haven’t heard sing in so long, hits me, the force of it sending me back. I rest against the edge of the tub and sink into the water, the loofa still clutched tightly in my fist.

“Here comes the sun,” he sings, his raspy, melodic voice soft, but loud enough for me to hear. *“Here comes the sun...”*

The song ends, and panic rises, another voice cutting through the bubble of peace I’d finally found.

Recite!

I expect him to leave, to go away, to leave me alone and I quickly sit up, a wounded sound leaving me. But then he starts to replay the song, the acoustic chords filling the space between us and soothing my frayed edges.

And seconds later, his voice hits me and my tears, my never ending tears, finally slow.

Again and again, he replays the song.

Again and again, the words in my mind start and stop with Roman’s voice. It goes on for so long, I drift to sleep listening to it, cocooned by the warm water and safety of his voice.

Then I feel arms around me, lifting me out of the tub. I stir, nearly pushing away until his scent hits me. I whimper, gathering his shirt in my fist as he wraps a towel around me.

“Hush, Goldie,” he murmurs. *“I’ve got you.”*

I bury my face in his shirt, inhaling his comforting scent again.

My peace, my safe place, my Roman.

Lifting me, he carries me back to his room, and lays me on the bed, covering me with the blankets and tucks me in tightly. I expect him to leave, but he doesn't. He lays beside me, right where Oli had been.

He faces me and gently tucks my hair behind my ear. His eyes flick between mine, his touch featherlight.

“Don't stop,” I whisper, and his full lips tip up in a small smile.

“I won't stop until your sunshine comes back,” he promises.

I swallow around another wave of tears. “Don't stop,” I murmur, slowly sliding my pinky between us as I meet his stare. “Even then, don't stop.”

He sucks in a sharp breath and squeezes his eyes shut for a brief second, his pinky wrapping around mine, before blinking them open again.

“My sweet, Goldie,” he whispers. A tear trickles down his cheek. “Haven't you figured it out yet? Without the golden sun to show us how bright the world can really be, night would cease to exist.”

My lips part as his thumb brushes against my hand and starts to hum our song once more.

4.66 Roman

I skim the words, but I'm not really reading them. I haven't been able to sink into a book since Eve got home nearly two weeks ago, but it hasn't stopped me from reading—or trying to. Mostly because I can't sleep.

Every night, I sit beside her as she sleeps and I read, then reread the same pages. Usually, I'd be done with a book by now, but my mind isn't in it. It's on her.

After I sang to her the other day while she was in the bath, she's slowly opened up a little more every day. She's still quiet. She's still a shell of the person she was. But she's *trying*.

She's eaten more than just a bite of food here and there. And she drank tea. Which wouldn't be a big deal if she didn't usually act like she'd inject it into her veins if she could. She hadn't touched it—she had no desire for anything other than laying right where she currently is and staring at the wall.

But she wanted tea, and it's the first glimmer of hope I've had since I brought her home. I'm not stupid enough to think her drinking a few sips of sweet tea means she's alright. She might never be alright.

I know better than anyone how trauma can haunt you, how it can dictate every aspect of your life and personality. It changes who you are, who you could've been, and molds you into a person you don't recognize. A person you sometimes hate.

I refuse to let her hate herself over something that wasn't her fault. I won't let her spiral deeper, or try to fight alone. She has me. She has Oli and Chase. Hell, even Kon is going up to bat for her.

She's not alone.

"What are you reading?"

Her raspy voice startles me, and I snap my head down to her. Her bleary eyes stare back at me. She's lost, but not as empty as she was. Every day a bit more of her light shines in her eyes. A bit more life comes back.

It fucking kills me she ever lost it.

"*The Goldfinch*," I mutter, glancing at the book. She stays staring at me, like she's waiting for more of an explanation. But I don't know what else to say.

Silently, she scoots closer. She rests her head on my shoulder, and I inhale sharply, feeling my entire body tense at her touch. I hadn't expected her to touch me. She hasn't touched me in...days. Weeks.

She feels it, and pulls her head away. “What’s wrong?” she whispers, but I shake my head. Her eyes look sad as she pulls further away. “I’m sorry.”

I don’t need to be a mind reader to know where her head just went. I want her to touch me, I just hadn’t expected it.

When she moves to go back to her side of the bed, I grab her arm. Not hard enough to hurt, just enough to stop her. She pauses, flicking her teary eyes to me. “Don’t go. I just—” I clench my jaw as I stare at her, my throat tight. “I just didn’t think you’d want to touch me.”

“Oh.” She sucks her lip between her teeth, looking away. Tugging gently on her arm, her attention returns to me.

“Come here,” I whisper, laying back and holding my arm out. She hesitates, looking at the empty space where she belongs. I almost expect her to retreat entirely, to go back to her side, to her safe little area. And I wouldn’t blame her. She needs to feel safe. She needs to feel secure.

So when she nods and settles beside me, resting her head on my chest, I’m shocked as fuck. Trying to hide it, I drape my arm around her, and it feels so fucking right to hold her close, to have her reading the same book with me again, to feel her weight against me. I never want to let her go.

My eyes close, and I breathe in her soft scent. I’ve missed this—I’ve missed her.

“I can start over,” I mutter, flipping a few pages back to the beginning.

“It’s alright.” Her voice is so flat, so lifeless. So not her.

I ignore her words and settle in to try to reread the first page for the nineteenth time. Glancing down, I see she’s just staring at the book, at the words. Her eyes aren’t shifting like she’s reading, she’s just staring. Always staring.

I hate it.

I know where her mind is, and I don’t want her to relive it. I know it’ll be something she’ll never forget, something that will haunt her forever. But I can’t stand it. The faraway look in her eyes like she’s back in that moment. I don’t want her to hurt anymore. I just...I want to fix it. I want to soothe the ache, take the pain away, make her feel whole again.

But how can I? Only time and her own coping will help her get back to a version of the person she was before.

Clearing my throat, I turn my attention back to the first sentence of the book. I take a deep breath, then begin reading. I feel her tense, like she wasn’t anticipating my voice, but I keep it soft and low, hoping it’s soothing and not annoying her.

Slowly, she sinks back into my side, nestling in deeper as I read. Her eyes drift shut, but I know she’s listening.

It reminds me of when we used to do this late at night and she was too tired to read, but wasn’t ready for me to leave. I’d cuddle with her on her bed and read while she dozed. It helped us both not feel so alone.

An idea dawns on me and I hold her tighter. Books were always the tether to each other, maybe they can be how we connect again. With the plan in place, I continue reading and don't stop until she's asleep.

* * *

Two days and a book later, she's looking better. Her cheeks have more color, her eyes aren't as dim, her hair isn't as dull, and her face is...brighter. Lighter.

I've read to her constantly for the last two days. My throat hurts and I'm tired of the sound of my voice, but she's coming back to me. Slowly.

After I finished *The Goldfinch*, she just stared at the closed book like she didn't know what to do with herself. And honestly, I feel the same way. All we'd focused on for two days was this book. I'm starving, need some decent sleep, and a shower. But I'd do it all again.

Because now she's up and looking through my bookshelf to find our next read.

I can't remember the last time she was out of bed and walking around just because she wanted to. She's gone to and from the bathroom, but hasn't moved from her spot on my bed. Now, here she is, gripping the edge of the bookshelf as she scans the spines of the books. I can see her legs trembling from here, so I push off the bed and stride for her.

"Find anything?" I murmur, stepping behind her. No matter how badly I want to, I don't touch her. I want to wrap my arms

around her, hold her to my chest, and make sure she stays upright. But I don't. Her shoulders tighten, but she takes a deep breath and relaxes.

“Not yet.” Her fingertips dance along the dark wood as she searches for what she wants.

“What are you in the mood for?” I ask, moving to her side and leaning against the shelves. Her brows bunch tightly together as she shakes her head.

“You need a better system,” she grumbles under her breath. “I can't find anything.”

“I have a system.” She gives me a look like she doesn't believe me, and I grin. “My favorite's are by the bed.” I point at them, and she glances over her shoulder at the stack. “The ones I've read but hated are on the top shelf. The new ones are on the bottom shelf. Everything else is in between.”

She shakes her head, muttering to herself as she crouches to look at the next shelf. “I'm redoing this,” she finally says, glaring up at me through her lashes.

“Hey, don't fuck with my system.”

“It's chaos, Ro.” Without warning, she sits on the floor cross-legged and begins pulling books from the shelves. I push off the bookshelf, my spine straight and mouth open as I stare down at her in shock.

“What—*Eve!*” She ignores me as she continues pulling book after precious book from its home and drops it on the floor beside her. “What are you doing?”

“Alphabetizing your books,” she mumbles, still not looking at me. Suddenly, she glances at the closet. “I’ll work on that next.” I step in front of her, and she tips her head back to look up at me.

“Maybe you should rest, baby,” I say gently, but she shakes her head.

“Tired of lying in bed.” She goes back to pulling books off the shelf. “I need to do something. And your room needs to be fixed. It’s awful.”

“I wouldn’t say *awful*,” I mumble, looking around. It’s a bit messy, but in my defense, I’ve had more important shit to worry about than cleaning.

Sighing, I sit beside her on the floor and help her take the books off, stacking them between us. I can tell she doesn’t know what to say or do with me here, but I’m not leaving her alone. And I’m not letting her organize my life by herself, either. It’s not her responsibility, it’s mine.

“You don’t have to help.”

“I know.”

“So, why are you?” I can feel the strain it’s taking her to not look at me, to keep her focus solely on the books.

“Because I want to.”

Her hands falter, a book nearly slipping from her fingertips. She catches it at the last second, setting it carefully at the top of the stack. Those words grabbed her attention more than I thought they would, and she slowly looks at me.

“Because you want to? No one *wants* to clean and organize,” she says, her lips pressing together.

“You do.” I shrug and grab another book.

“But—but I always clean and Iss—” She cuts herself off, her entire body going so taut, it looks like she’s about to snap. I clench my jaw at the words, at her reaction to almost saying his name. “No one ever helped before.”

“Because *no one* was a fucking asshole and only cares about himself,” I growl. “I should’ve taken you out of that house years ago.” She shakes her head, tears filling her eyes.

“Not your fault,” she breathes, wiping at her cheeks. “You had to go.”

“I shouldn’t have gone without you.”

God, I hate myself. Why didn’t I just fight a little harder? Stay a little longer? Knock on her window that night instead of just standing in the rain and waiting? I should’ve gotten to my knees and begged her to run away with me.

I should’ve done more.

But I didn’t.

I left her there, to tether herself to the monster. I left her, knowing he’d sink his claws into her and never let her go.

Even if after I left I was in a bad place, I should’ve gone back. Once I was on my feet and living my life, I should’ve gone back for her. I should’ve talked to her like Chase did. I should’ve done more for her.

Her cool hand slides onto mine, and I blink, pulling myself out of my spiral. Not right now. I can hate myself later, but not in front of her. She needs me to be strong.

Resting my hand over hers, I give it a gentle squeeze before turning my attention back to the bookshelf. “So,” I breathe, feeling overwhelmed by the amount of books. “What’s the plan?”

She stares at me, her eyes boring into the side of my head. I don’t know what to say, what to tell her. She needs peace right now, not to hash out our past. And does it even matter? There are years between us and the kids we were back then.

With a deep breath, she slips her hand out from under mine and turns back to the books. “Take them all out, then alphabetize them.”

“You know it won’t last,” I mutter, flashing her a grin when she glares at me.

“I’ll keep the system in check.” I smile wider, shaking my head.

“Or you can let me live in chaos in peace.”

“You know I can’t do that,” she murmurs.

“Fine, but don’t touch my books by the bed,” I say, and she lets out a long dramatic sigh.

“Fine.”

She sneaks a teasing look at me, and her eyes are brighter. They’re lighter. Everything about her in this moment is lighter,

and it steals my breath. “Thanks for doing this,” I whisper, and a small smile tips her lips.

“You too,” she says just as softly back. My throat tightens, but I just dip my head and go back to the books.

God, I love her. So fucking much.

And if cleaning, organizing, and reading are the ways back into her heart, are the ways she’ll heal, I’ll never stop doing them. I’ll never stop giving her everything she needs, and more.

4:67 Eve

“**Y**ou think they’ll ever do a Mammoth Big Brother?” Oli asks from the other couch, throwing popcorn into her mouth. I grin around my straw as I continue staring at the TV. Roman’s head is down as he draws in his sketchbook. He won’t show me what he’s drawing, but I keep sneaking little peeks.

I can’t make it out fully, but it looks incredible.

“Doubt it,” I mutter.

“Oh, maybe Chase and Kon will be on it!” she laughs. “Imagine the drama when Kon finds himself another little boy toy.” Roman snorts and shakes his head, still not looking up. “There would be a murder.”

“You think Chase could murder someone?” I lift my brows, and Roman silently nods as Oli turns a thoughtful look to the ceiling.

“If someone tried to take Daddy Kon from him, yeah.” I huff out a laugh and turn my attention back to the show. I don’t

know when everyone started calling him Daddy Kon, but he doesn't seem to care. Even Roman teased him about it earlier, and is still alive to tell the tale. Kon just grumbles to himself, but doesn't stop anyone.

It's still surprising Chase is with the big guy, that Kon is even Chase's type. I always assumed Chase would want someone like him, but Kon is the total opposite.

"I'm hungry," Oli whines. "What's for dinner, Pyro?" I glance at him, finding his eyes on her.

"You're grown. Cook for yourself." She gasps, placing her hand on her chest.

"You're a terrible host," she mutters. "Making a guest cook for themselves."

"You just had lunch," I say, giving a pointed look at the bowl of popcorn in her lap. "And you're having a snack."

"Yeah, but popcorn isn't actually food." She waves dismissively. "Look at these guns." She holds her arms up, flexing, and Roman laughs softly. "I need sustenance to get big and strong." My brows lift, a small grin spreading across my face.

"So, lots of protein and veggies?" I ask, and she gives me a horrified look.

"Protein? Veggies?" Her eyes widen and she shakes her head. "I said I'm a growing girl, Evie. I need *sustenance*. I need mac and cheese."

With the decision made, she jumps to her feet, setting the bowl of popcorn on the coffee table as she passes, Robert on her heels. Laughing to myself, I settle deeper in the couch and fold my arms over my stomach as I turn my attention back to the show.

“When are you going to show me?” I mutter, still looking at the TV. Roman stiffens and I see him glance at me from the corner of my eye.

“When it’s done.”

“When will it be done?” I ask desperately, turning toward him. I just want to see his picture.

“Whenever I finish it,” he laughs. His expression softens as his hazel eyes flick between mine. I see the questions swirling in them, the things he wants to say but forces himself to keep in. Slowly, his lips part, a silent breath leaving him. It looks like he’s about to say something, but a door slams somewhere in the house, jolting us.

My gaze snaps up, finding Chase storming down the hall, looking annoyed. When his eyes meet mine, he pauses. “You’re out of the room.”

“She’s been coming out of the room for days,” Roman snaps.

“But she hasn’t stayed out here this long...” Chase shakes his head, his brows pinching together. “Whatever. Doesn’t matter. My home is your home, and all that.” He waves his

hand as he talks, then turns toward Roman. "I'm heading to the gym. You in?"

Roman opens his mouth, then pauses and glances at me. "Nah." His jaw tenses as he leans back on the couch. "I'm good."

I don't know how often he worked out before, but judging by his muscular body, I'm assuming it was constantly. And since everything happened a few weeks ago, he hasn't left my side.

He doesn't work and I know he's losing out on clients, on money. He doesn't go to the gym and when we were younger, he worked out to help with his stress. He's stressed now, but he doesn't do anything except wait on me hand and foot.

And while it's been nice to have him close, to know that he'll be there when or if I need him, I want him to do things for himself, too. I don't want him to put his life on hold for me.

Clearing my throat, I drop my feet to the floor and scoot to the edge of the couch. Both men look at me, Chase's brows raised. "I want to go."

Roman's mouth opens again, this time from shock. Chase just grins.

"What?" I breathe, looking between them.

"We stay there for hours," Roman warns, and I shrug.

"I want to get out of the house."

“It’s gross and smelly,” he continues. “There are a lot of people.”

I nod, my brows pinching together. “I know what a gym is. I run and do yoga. I’ve been hiking.”

He ignores me, continuing to ramble his warnings. “And he likes to film everything.” He jerks his thumb at Chase, who smirks and shrugs, uncaring.

My heart sinks, but I promise myself that I’ll get over it. I need to respect his boundaries. “I know I just dropped into your life, your home,” I start, swallowing roughly, my mouth dry. “So if you don’t want me to go—”

“No!” Roman blurts, cutting me off. “It’s not that. I just want to make sure it’s what you want.”

My shoulders drop and my lips lift in a little smile.

“It is.” I flick my eyes to Chase. “You do this for a living, don’t you? Could you, I don’t know, train me or something? I don’t know what to do.”

Chase rubs his hands together, giving me a maniacal grin. Roman groans, dropping his head back against the couch.

“You have no idea what you’re getting yourself into, Evie.”

* * *

“You’re losing muscle,” Chase grumbles, slapping the back of his hand against Roman’s flat stomach. My brows lift and my mouth goes dry as I take him in. Roman lost his shirt half

an hour ago, I don't think Chase ever had one, and seeing all those abs on display is making me stupid.

He doesn't look like he's losing muscle to me.

If anything, his abs look more defined than I've ever seen them and his shoulders look...

I swallow thickly. He's built like a god, like he was chiseled from marble. The Statue of David would bow down to Roman. And the tattoos? I'm actually dying.

"On the bench," Chase commands, pointing at it. "Another set." Roman glances at me, his face and body dripping with sweat. But there's a lightness to him I haven't seen in a long time, and it warms my chest. He needed this. To be here, around all these sweaty, grunting men.

I grin to myself.

"What?" he asks, ignoring Chase as he grabs a towel and wipes his face. Chase grumbles something about calling to check on Oli, and turns his back to us. Roman steps closer to me, his body radiating so much heat, he feels like a furnace.

"Nothing." I smile up at him from where I sit on a machine. Except for a few people, the gym is surprisingly empty.

"That face doesn't look like nothing," he murmurs, pointing at me. My face heats as I shake my head.

"It was just—"

"Ro!" Chase shouts. "Get your ass over here. Your muscles are getting cold. Let's fucking do this." Roman takes a deep

breath, rolling his eyes.

“Sorry,” he mutters, stooping to press a kiss to my sweaty forehead. He pauses when he pulls back, his eyes scanning my face. “You look beautiful, Goldie.”

I fold my lips between my teeth and drop my eyes to the floor. That’s the other thing he’s been doing a lot—complimenting me. Constantly. I can’t do anything without hearing him praise me.

It shouldn’t turn me into a pile of goo at his feet, but it does, every time.

His sweet words and gentleness soothes the ache in my soul. I still have nightmares. I still think about what happened. But every day, it gets a bit easier. Every day, I find a new reason to smile, a new reason to get out of bed.

Some days, like yesterday, it’s harder. But I force myself to get out of bed, to put one foot in front of the other. My body is fully healed now and I’m no longer in pain, but I know healing from something like this isn’t just about the physical injuries, it’s the mental ones, the invisible ones, that take the longest to heal.

But I’m trying. When I sat on the floor to organize Roman’s bookshelf, I made a decision.

I wouldn’t let Isaac win.

So, from that day on, I’ve been surviving out of spite. I’ve been pushing myself, working on getting better, on repairing

my soul, because I refuse to let Isaac hold any more power over me.

He controlled my life for so long.

No more.

No more.

With newfound determination, I settle back on the machine and lift my arms to the pads. Gritting my teeth, I push them forward, letting my weak muscles strain as the weight barely lifts.

“Come on!” Chase shouts, and my eyes snap to them. Roman’s on his back with Chase above him as he lifts a bar weighed down with plates on either side. “You got it!”

His arms tremble, his face and chest turning red, veins popping in his neck. His leg bounces, a grunt leaving him as his arms straighten, the weight proudly held above him.

“Again!” Chase demands. His hands hover under the bar, ready to catch it if Roman slips. It makes my stomach twist. But this is what they do, what they’ve always done.

“Excuse me. Miss?”

I blink a few times, my attention snapping up to the man approaching me. He’s tall, and muscular with light brown hair and soft green eyes. He gives me a gentle smile as he gestures at me.

“I hope I’m not bothering you. I just wanted to let you know I think your form is a bit off.”

I drop the weight back down and lower my arms to my lap. “My form?” I try to keep my voice light as I smile politely up at him. Using his hand, he points at the machine.

“There’s too much weight. And your arms are in the wrong places.” He steps forward, his hands outstretched. “May I?”

“What?” I shrink away from him.

“Help.” He lets out a low laugh, his eyes briefly dropping to my chest before meeting my gaze again.

“Um.” I glance at Chase and Roman, finding Roman finishing his last rep.

“I just don’t want you to hurt yourself,” the guy explains, drawing my attention back to him as he takes another step closer.

“Right.” My stomach twists, my hands going clammy. “I—I think I’m fine.” His smile falters.

“Really, it’s no trouble. I’m happy to help.” He places a hand on my shoulder, and my entire body locks up.

Suddenly, he flies to the floor, and Roman is standing in the spot he was in. His chest heaves as he glares down at him, his jaw tensing.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” he snarls. The guy gapes up at him. Crouching, Roman grips his sweaty shirt in his fist. He jerks him forward until the guy’s face is only inches from his. “Don’t touch my fucking girlfriend. Understand me?”

I inhale sharply at the words. *Girlfriend?*

Is that what I am to him?

I hope so.

The man scrambles away, his eyes wide as he stares up at Roman. “My–my bad, man. My bad.”

“Go.” Roman stands, towering over him as he points. “Don’t touch her. Don’t look at her. Don’t even think about her.” The guy’s head bobs as he stumbles to his feet, backing slowly away. “She’s *mine*.”

“I–I didn’t know she was yours. So–sorry.”

He doesn’t say anything, just glares at the man. My eyes slide to Chase, finding him with his arms folded over his chest as he watches. He doesn’t look like he wants to intervene. If anything, he looks *proud*.

Finally, the guy is far enough away that Roman turns to me. Immediately, he falls to a knee and scans me. “You okay, Goldie? Did he touch you? Scare you?” His voice is soft, sweet, *worried*.

Another piece of me heals.

“I’m okay,” I breathe, glancing in the direction he moved.

“Eyes on me,” Roman says gently. “Don’t worry about him. Look at me.” My gaze finds his, and I take a deep, grounding breath. “That’s my good girl.”

I nearly melt into a puddle. Jesus Christ.

His lips tip up in a small smile, his eyes still searching mine, still looking for any sign that I'm *not* alright. But...I am. I am okay. I'm fine, because I knew Roman was here. I knew he was only a few feet away, and he'd protect me.

I knew I wasn't alone.

My tongue runs along my bottom lip, and he tracks the movement. His eyes darken, and I press my legs together. Shit. Why is he so hot?

Why do I feel like this?

I've never had someone claim me so publicly, so primally before. But that's what he did. He made it known to that guy, and everyone in the gym, that I belong to Roman Payne.

And fuck if that doesn't feel good.

Heat courses through my body. His eyes are hooded as he stares back at me. Standing, he reaches out and I slide my hand into his, letting him help me to my feet.

We're standing too close to each other, but still, it's not close enough. His body is against mine like this for the first time in weeks, and I remember how much I missed the feel of him. How much I missed *him*.

But then someone clears their throat, and I look around. Everyone is staring at us. Some are trying to pretend like they're not gawking at Ro, but they can't hide it.

"Ro," I whisper, and he hums, swaying into me. He doesn't feel everyone's eyes on us? "Everyone is staring." Briefly, he glances around, then looks back at me and shrugs.

“They can look all they like,” he murmurs. “But they can’t touch what’s mine.”

My heart shoots into my throat at the possessive words. Roman’s possessiveness is different than Isaac’s ever was. His lingers under the surface, not too loud or obvious, but it’s there. A constant gentle reminder that I am his, and he is mine.

And then there are moments like this, where he doesn’t hesitate to pounce. To protect me. Claim me.

Without my permission, my body presses against his. He makes a sound low in his throat, his hands balling into fists at his sides. My breath catches as he stares at my lips. Anticipation swirls in my stomach.

Will he kiss me? Right here in front of everyone?

My eyes flutter closed, my lips already parting, silently begging for him.

“Fuck,” he breathes, then he’s gone. His warmth, his body, his presence. Gone.

My lids fly open, and I stare up at him. “Ro—”

“I’m sorry,” he rasps. “I didn’t mean—shit.”

He didn’t mean...what?

My body is still tight, my pussy still throbbing, and I want to feel his lips on mine. I need to. It’s been so long.

Reluctantly, he stumbles back a step, but my hand shoots out and grips his wrist. His eyes widen as I yank him forward. I’m

not stupid enough to think I can move him on my own. He's only moving because he wants to.

My hand slides around the back of his neck, his sweat slick against my skin as I pull him down. His eyes stay wide as my lips meet his. He's stiff for a moment, and I worry I've done the wrong thing. That I've somehow embarrassed him, or misread the entire situation.

But then his eyes close and his arm wraps around my waist, pulling me firmly against his body. I whimper as his tongue slides against my lips, and I open for him.

His other hand lifts to my ponytail, and he wraps it around his hand, tilting my head back, deepening the kiss. My clit throbs in time with my heart as his tongue sweeps into my mouth, a low growl ripping from his throat.

I'm frantic with my movements, sliding my hands over his slick, hard body, gripping his forearms, then his biceps. God, he's so big. So broad and his skin is so hot, it's searing me.

Mine. Roman is mine.

"Ro," I moan, and it's like the sound sets him off. His hands drop to my thighs, and he lifts me effortlessly. Someone, Chase I think, chuckles as I wrap my arms around Roman's neck. He carries me through the gym, somehow dodging people without breaking our kiss.

Then my back hits a wall, and I groan into his mouth. My legs are tight around his waist, pulling him closer to me. His hard cock grinds against me through our clothes, and for the

first time since *it* happened, I want to be filled. I want to be fucked. I want to come.

“Please, Ro.” I buck against him, trying to chase my orgasm. Just feeling him so hard between my legs, feeling him hot and throbbing, has me already so close.

So close.

“Such a greedy little thing,” he murmurs, kissing down my jaw. “Tell me what you need, baby girl.”

I shake my head, whimpering as his teeth sink into my neck. My head tilts back, resting against the wall as my nails dig into his back.

“Yes,” he growls. “Be my good girl and tell me exactly what you need.”

“Why do you want to talk right now?” I cry. “Please, Ro!” He chuckles, the vibration shooting through my body.

Pulling away, he runs his hand over my head, smoothing my hair down. His eyes search my desperate ones, a soft smile on his face. “I need you to fuck me,” I breathe.

His throat bobs as he swallows thickly, his smile slowly falling. “Eve,” he chokes out, dropping my legs. My feet hit the floor and I lean back against the wall in shock as he steps away. “I can’t—”

“But—”

“No.” He squeezes his eyes shut as he shakes his head. “*No.*”

Tears burn the backs of my eyes as he takes another step back. I want to reach for him, but his rejection burns too deep in my chest. I can't move. I can't breathe.

I can't do anything but watch as he retreats, giving me a backward glance that's full of sorrow and regret. But he doesn't come back. He just...leaves.

4.68 Roman

Her phone vibrates again, and I grit my teeth together. Glaring over Eve's sleeping body at it, I squint, trying to make out what the notification says.

I know it's not Isaac texting her. He'd have to be a fucking idiot to contact her after what he did. And he can't, anyway. I blocked him when we were at the hospital and Eve gave me her phone while she got checked.

He'll never have contact with her again.

And if I ever find out he has, all that'll be left of him is a pile of ash.

It vibrates again, and I grit my teeth together.

Could it be Marcus? He seemed like a dumbfuck. Maybe my threat wasn't clear enough. Maybe I need to hunt him down and make good on what I said.

She'd tell me if he was bothering her, though, right? She wouldn't suffer alone?

My gaze shifts to her sleeping face, and my hands ball into fists. Who am I kidding? Of course she would. She holds the weight of the world and all its problems on her shoulders.

After the gym yesterday, she closed in on herself. I don't know what I was thinking, how I could be stupid.

She's healing.

She doesn't need me grinding against her, kissing her, touching her. And when she asked me to fuck her, it caught me so off guard, I couldn't even think straight. All I could think about was that the last time she'd had someone between her legs, it hadn't been willingly.

And I'll admit it. I was scared.

I was scared of hurting her, of scaring her. Of making her retreat back into the shell she'd safely hidden inside for the last month.

But she came out of it on her own. She fought to keep her head above water, to not let what happened to her define her. But even her strength has boundaries.

And me fucking her against the wall of a gym locker room is not how she should be fucked for the first time after that. She needs gentle reassuring words. Slow strokes and sweet kisses.

I couldn't give her that yesterday.

The sound of her phone vibrating against the wooden bedside table is enough to make me snap, and I carefully reach across to snatch it up. Turning the brightness down, I type in her passcode and unlock the phone.

Twenty-eight fucking messages.

Who's bothering her this late at night?

My heart is in my throat as I click the messages open. Scanning the words, I let out a small, relieved laugh.

Fucking Oli.

Video after video, meme after meme. That's all she does. They don't even have actual conversations. It's just Oli blowing her up with this shit.

I scroll, chuckling to myself at the things Oli finds amusing. It takes me all of a second to remember this is Eve's phone and it's an insane invasion of privacy for me to be looking through it, so I click out of Oli's messages.

I almost lock the phone, but three words catch my eye.

Roman's Old Phone.

Then I read the timestamp.

Yesterday.

My stomach drops to the floor. What the fuck is this? My gaze slides to her, finding her still soundly asleep.

I shouldn't be doing this. I should lock her phone and replace it on the nightstand. I should pretend like I didn't see any of it.

But I don't do that.

With a shaky thumb, I click the message thread, and my throat immediately tightens, making it hard to breathe.

Message after message after message. I can barely read the tiny letters through my blurry vision. The phone shakes in my hand as I focus on the most recent text.

Eve:

You kissed me for the first time in weeks today. You called me your girlfriend. I've never been someone's girlfriend before. I'm happy I'm yours.

Roman's Old Phone:

This number is no longer in service.

I blink rapidly as I read it again. She sent this yesterday. She texted me—no, not me. Old me. My old number. She...

I read the next message.

Eve:

Today we finished organizing your room. You helped me the entire time and didn't complain. I know it's not a big deal, but it meant the world to me. I didn't feel alone.

Roman's Old Phone:

This number is no longer in service.

Eve:

I know you don't want me to go, but I have to. He said I was a child, but I'm not. I feel stronger than I ever have before, and it's because you're by my side. I think Isaac will understand once we talk. I love you, Ro. Be back soon.

Roman's Old Phone:

This number is no longer in service.

Dread pools in my stomach, and bile fills my mouth. That was from before...

I shake my head, panic filling my chest, wanting to go back to that moment and stop her from ever leaving. If only I'd known, I wouldn't have stopped her if she felt it was that necessary in order to move on, to grow. I would've gone with her. I would've protected her.

Self-hatred bubbles up and the same words I've said to myself every day since I found her in the bathroom in Divinity fill my mind.

You failed her.

I clench my jaw to keep my tears at bay. I can't cry. She needs me to be strong.

How can she stand to look at me? To touch me? Kiss me? I failed her. I hadn't protected her.

I can barely stand myself. But she still looks at me like I'm something special. She never lost that. Even when she had no warmth in her eyes, no light guiding her back to me, she still *saw* me.

She always will.

I keep going, scrolling back through time, watching events play out in reverse.

Eve:

Thank you.

Roman's Old Phone:

This number is no longer in service.

Eve:

You protected me today. I feel so stupid. Why didn't I see it? How could I have been so blind? The things Marcus said... was he right about me? Did I deserve this?

Marcus.

My hand tightens around the phone, a fresh onslaught of anger rising inside me as I read the questions.

No, she didn't deserve it.

He wasn't right.

It wasn't her fault.

She should've never felt unsafe doing her job, regardless of what it is. But he made her feel like she owed him something. He had delusions that she was his, that the things she'd said online and the performance she put on was real.

It wasn't.

Eve:

I learned you're a tattoo artist today. It suits you well. I'm so proud of you, Ro.

I'm so proud of you.

I read it again and again. She's proud of me. Would she still be proud of me if she knew all the things I did before making

it as an artist? Would she hate the man I was? Would she hate me for everything I've done?

Eve:

Please don't leave me again.

Eve:

I hate you. I wish you'd leave.

Eve:

Why are you here? Why did you come back?

Eve:

God, I missed you.

Eve:

You came back to me.

Tears burn my eyes as I scan the messages, scrolling back and back, reading every word she's told me. She used these messages as her diary. She used *me* as her diary.

Fuck.

Eve:

It's been weeks since I've written to you. I feel guilty for that, but then I remember you walked out and never looked back. I think I'm finally moving on. I hope you're good, Ro.

Moving on.

Judging by the date, she was moving on with Isaac. The message is from right before I saw them in Savannah.

How long had they been together before that?

Eve:

I'm sorry.

Eve:

I'm so, so sorry.

Eve:

It shouldn't have happened. I was drunk and maybe he was too. That's the only reason I'd do something so unforgivable. I slept with him in your bed, in your space. In the place that was once ours. What's wrong with me?

Eve:

Last night was...was it a mistake?

Eve:

I slept with someone who wasn't you. For four years, it was only you, always you, but now that's gone. You're gone, and he's here and I'm lost, Ro. I'm lonely. What am I supposed to do?

I'm lonely. What am I supposed to do?

The words hit harder than they should. This was the first night she was with him. In my bed, no less. Is that why it was clean? Is that why there were sheets I'd never seen before on the bed?

Why would she pick my room to do it in?

No. I shake myself. It wasn't her fault. It was his. Fuck, he probably picked it just to spite me.

He manipulated her. Took advantage of her. She was fucking drunk, and he still slept with her. Used her.

He should've known better. He shouldn't have ever touched her. Should've never fucking looked at her.

I think he was drunk, too.

What the fuck?

Somehow, I know it was his idea to use my bed. To invade my space and take her. The one thing, the one person, that was solely mine, and he took her once, then he took again. In his fucked up head, he probably thought he won. He probably thought she chose him.

And maybe at first, she had. But we all knew who she really loved.

It wasn't a competition, it never has been. I've loved Eve from day one. Even when it was hard to string sentences together, even when I wanted to spend all my time alone in my room.

I loved her when she was just my annoying little stepsister.

I loved her when she was trying to force me from the darkness and into her light.

I loved her when she was just my friend, reading and laughing with me when no one else did.

I loved her when she suddenly became *more*.

I loved her so much that I walked away when I thought my love, *I*, wasn't good enough. When he said I wasn't good enough. But she loved me through my darkness, and now, I'll love her through hers.

I know how my girl feels about me; she knows how I feel about her. How I've always felt about her. Even in our years apart, I never stopped loving her. Never stopped needing her like I needed air.

Her words from the other day hit me in the chest. We fought over her like she was a toy, like she's a possession we could own. But she isn't that. She's so much more.

I look back at the messages, noticing this one is from the morning before they slept together.

Eve:

Today's the anniversary of the hardest day of my life. Mama's gone, you're gone, and I'm still here. Where are you?

She was alone. Every year on Jane's death, she was alone. I never even called her. Never checked in on her. I was selfish. I was hurting. But that isn't a good enough excuse.

I should've made sure she was okay.

Tears drip from my eyes as I continue reading messages that span nearly a year back.

Eve:

I want to hate you. I want to hate you so badly, but I can't because as much as I wish you didn't, you still own my heart.

You always have, and I think you always will.

Eve:

Today was the first time I went live. I was terrified. Surprisingly, I made a lot of money, and if I keep going, I can fill the map up really soon. I'm not great at it and I don't love showing myself to strangers, but it will all be worth it someday.

Eve:

I wish you were here.

Eve:

Oli made a Favorite Fans account for me today. I probably won't use it.

Eve:

I talked to Chase today and even though I told him not to bring you up, he did. He says you're good. I hope that's true. I've only ever wanted you to be happy.

She shared her entire life with me. Almost every day, she sent me a text, told me what was happening, how she was feeling. And every time, she got the same message back: *this number is no longer in service*. But she never stopped. She never gave up.

She never gave up on me.

A sob chokes me, and I bat the tears from my cheeks with my fingertips. I try to calm down, try to take a breath, but I

can't. Not when I have the last four years of her life in my hand.

Every message was a confession. It was her way of pouring her heart out in a safe place. A place she knew she couldn't be judged or scolded.

“Ro?” Her voice is thick with sleep. I feel her shift as she looks up at me, but I can't stop staring at the phone. “Roman? What's wrong?” She sits upright, her hand sliding onto my forearm.

“You've—all this time—and I never—I never knew.” I'm not making sense. I know I'm not. But I can barely fucking breathe. I can barely see straight.

Years.

She's been doing this for years.

“What are you talking about?” she murmurs, her fingers brushing my hair from my face. “Ro, look at me.” I slide my eyes to her worried ones. She moves onto her knees, pressing closer to me as she wraps her arms around my shoulders and pulls me to her.

Her hand rests on the side of my head as she tugs me closer, and I bury my face in her neck. Taking a deep, shuddering breath, I force myself to calm down. She doesn't need this.

“What's wrong?” she asks again, her voice low. Her fingers stroke my hair, combing the tangles out as gently as she can.

How can I tell her what's wrong? Where do I even begin?

But she patiently waits. She waits and holds me until I've calmed down enough to pull away. Her hand never leaves my back as she stares worriedly at me.

Eve's brows lift expectantly, and I take another deep breath. I need to tell her. I can't hide it from her.

I can do this.

"Your phone was vibrating," I mutter, looking down at my hands. The phone is lying on the bed between us, the screen still bright. "I checked to make sure it wasn't—" Her breath catches, but I breeze by it, not letting either of us dwell on it. On him. "But it was just Oli. She was sending you videos and—" I shake my head again. It doesn't matter. "I'm sorry."

"You were looking through my phone?" she whispers, her voice hoarse.

"I saw the messages, Goldie."

The words linger in the air for a few long moments. Then her arm falls back to her side, and I immediately miss her touch. "What messages?"

I stare at her. What messages? What is she talking about? She knows what messages.

"The ones to me." She looks pale. Scooting closer, I rest my hand on her knee. "I didn't mean to look. But I saw my name and—"

"You read them all?" she interrupts, looking away from me.

"Just a few."

Tension fills the room, thick and palpable. Finally, she takes a breath and looks back at me. Her shoulders straighten, and she tips her chin back.

“And?”

My brows crash together. “And?” I repeat. “What do you mean *and*?”

“What did you think?” She sounds scared to hear the answer, to know my thoughts. But I need to tell her anyway.

“It makes me sad,” I whisper, the honesty of my words has her eyes squeezing shut. “It kills me you didn’t have anyone else to confide in.” Her lids fly open, her mouth parting.

“That’s not why I sent them,” she says. I tilt my head to the side, confused. “At first, I texted you every day because I was hoping one of those texts would be the one you responded to. But then I got that service message, and I realized if I stop reaching out, it was like I was saying goodbye to you. And I wasn’t ready for that. I wasn’t ready to give you up.”

I never got any texts from her. I wouldn’t have because—

“I think it was how I stayed close to you all those years,” she admits. “Then, somewhere along the way, they stopped being about reaching out, and more about catharsis. It became my diary. I had Oli to confide in if I needed a sounding board. I wasn’t totally alone, but I didn’t have you, so I might as well have been.”

I suck in a sharp breath, my fingers tightening on her knee. I know what she means. I feel the same fucking way. I had

Chase, then eventually I had Kon, but I still didn't have her.

On any random night, I was surrounded by people. The loft was always full of Chase's friends. People came in and out of Deliverance at all hours. But I was still alone—I was still lonely.

Because she wasn't by my side.

That's how it is sometimes. You can be in a room full of people and still utterly alone if none of them see you, *really* see you.

Eve saw me. I needed her, just like she needed me.

I blink, realizing I've just been staring at her. "I missed you," I croak, the words thick as they leave my mouth. She barely tips her lips up in a smile.

"I missed you, too, Ro."

We stare at each other, the only light in the room from her phone and the faint moonlight seeping in from the window, but I see her clearly enough. Leaning in, her eyes flutter closed. I feel her breath ghost along my skin.

But I can't.

Not after I kissed her yesterday. When I was so ready to rip her leggings off her and fuck her until she forgot her name.

I could've taken advantage of her. And if I did, I'd be no better than my father.

Leaning away, I shake my head. Her eyes snap open, and she jerks back like she's been slapped. "What?"

“Nothing,” I breathe. “I just—I can’t.”

She glares at me and I feel her anger sear me to my core. Why is she mad? Doesn’t she see I’m doing this for her?

“Just kiss me,” she demands, but I shake my head again. Guilt whirls inside me. Is this what *she* really wants? Or is she doing it because she thinks it’s what *I* want?

She makes a frustrated sound and slides off the bed. Her hand moves to her mouth as she begins pacing, muttering things under her breath.

Hesitantly, I stand, slowly walking around the bed until I’m a few feet from her. “Eve?” I breathe, but she ignores me.

I take another step closer. My hands itch to reach out, to grab her and pull her into my arms. To settle her.

“Eve?” I say again, my voice louder and firmer. She whirls, and that’s when I finally see the angry tears in her shadowed eyes.

“Is it because of him? You think—you think there’s something wrong with me? That I’m *dirty*?” She chokes out the word, and it shatters me.

“God, no. Baby, no.” Shaking my head, I stumble forward another step, my heart lurching. “I’d never think that—”

“Then why won’t you touch me?” she cries. “Yesterday in the locker room was the closest to normal you’ve been since—since everything.”

“Because I wasn’t thinking,” I shoot back. “I shouldn’t have done that. You’re still healing—”

“That’s not for you to decide!”

I pause.

My lips part as I stare at her.

“You don’t get to tell me that I’m healing. You don’t get to decide that I’m too fragile to be kissed, or fucked, or loved. You don’t get to decide any of that, Roman. *I do*. It’s my body. I get to decide who I want inside it, when, and how.” She rests her hand on her chest, tears streaming freely down her cheeks. “It’s *my* body, Roman.”

“I know, Goldie.” My hands reach for her, but she bats them away.

“He took that from me,” she sobs, the words choked. They fucking destroy me. “He made me feel like I was worthless. Like my voice didn’t matter. But it does. I didn’t want that, but he didn’t care. I want you, and now—now *you* don’t care. I just—” She lets out another frustrated sound, her hands balling into tight fists. Her head tips back, her eyes shutting. “I just want to make my own damn decisions!”

Chest heaving, she turns to look at me. And it’s at this moment I realize the girl I met all those years ago is gone.

Little Evelyn Meyer is gone.

The world was unfair to her. It chewed her up and spit her out like she was nothing. But she *is* something. She’s someone. She didn’t deserve all that heartache at such a young

age. She didn't deserve to take hit after hit. She shouldn't have ever had to learn how to be strong, how to keep getting up when life knocked her down.

But she did.

And through it all, she kept a smile on her face. I should've known what happened a month ago in her bedroom wouldn't keep her down for long. I should've known that she'd get right back up, dust herself off, and keep going.

Keep living.

Keep dreaming.

But she's not the same, and I can't pretend like she is.

She has demons to fight, just like I do. It's why we always worked so well together. She's not broken or fragile. She's the strongest person I've ever known, and it's an insult to treat her differently.

I've always wanted to love her, to protect her, to make her my world. But everything just got so fucked up along the way. When we were kids and she was a toddler, she was perfect. And when she came to our home at ten, she was perfect. And when I left when she was sixteen...she was perfect.

And now, with every trial and tribulation she's been forced to experience, *she's still fucking perfect.*

In some ways, she's still the girl I fell in love with when I didn't understand what love meant. But she's different. She's grown. She's become a woman. She's endured things at the

hands of the Devil himself and has come out the other side like a fucking warrior.

I've never been prouder of her than I am right now. Because this is a far cry from the hollow shell she's been. She's fighting for what she wants, and what she wants is *me*.

With a deep breath, a step closer, invading her space. I'm still wary of touching her, of scaring her. I don't want her to retreat into memories of the past. I don't want her to think about the way it felt to have him touch her.

But I have to believe she's telling me the truth when she says she wants me to kiss her. Touch her.

Fuck her.

Slowly, my hand reaches up and my thumb trails along her jaw. I lightly grip her chin and tilt her head back. Her eyes are wide, but not with fear.

Just with lust.

With *need*.

I know they mirror my own as I lower my mouth to hers, skimming my lips across her soft ones. My hands are shaking, my heart is slamming against my ribs, my stomach is twisting with nerves. God, I want her so fucking badly.

She whimpers, and the sound goes straight to my cock.

"You want to make the decisions?" I murmur. I feel her throat bob as she swallows thickly.

“I want you to tell me what to do,” she breathes. My grin is slow as it spreads across my face. Shaking my head, I nip at her bottom lip.

“That’s not how it works, Goldie. You know what you have to do,” I rasp. “Tell me what you need, and I’ll give it to you. I’ll give you the damn moon on a string. All you have to do is say it.”

She inhales sharply at the words. But they’re true. I’d do anything for her. I’d lie, steal, and cheat for her. I’d burn, drown, or die for her.

If she told me to swim to the bottom of the ocean, I would. If she told me to climb the tallest mountain, I would. And if she told me to jump from a cliff and see if I could fly, knowing I wouldn’t survive, I’d still do it.

I’d do anything to get to her. To make her happy. To give her what she wants.

I’d raze the world to the fucking ground for her. I’d kill everyone to keep her safe.

And when I see the man who gave me life again, I *will* kill him. The day he dies, it’ll be by hand.

For her.

“Tell me what you need, baby.” My lips never fully press against hers, and I know it’s driving her as wild as it is me, but I like to tease, to play with her.

“I need to feel you stretching me,” she whispers. “I need your cock deep inside me. So deep I’ll still feel you days from

now.”

My eyes roll back at her words, and my grip on her chin tightens. She’d said something like that to me before and this, this is her way of reminding me she’s still the same girl. She’s still just as sweet, just as needy as ever.

“That’s what you want? You want me to fuck you until you can’t remember your own name? You want me to pump you full of my cum until you swell with my baby?”

Something that sounds like a mix of a whimper and moan leaves her as she grips my shirt in her small hands. “*Please.*”

“Is that what you want?” I ask again, trailing kisses along her jaw. Fuck, why does the thought of my girl pregnant with our baby make me rock fucking hard? *Mine*, my girl. “You want to feel my cum leaking out of your tight little cunt in the morning?”

“God,” she groans.

“God’s not here, baby. It’s just me.”

Her soft body grinds against mine, her breasts pressing against my chest. My free hand trails to her waist, up and down, up and down, teasing her until my fingers slip under the loose fabric of her t-shirt—*my* t-shirt.

“If I reach between your legs, what will I find?” She smells so fucking good, so sweet, as I bury my face in the crook of her neck. “Are you soaking your little panties for me?”

“Please,” she cries, sounding frustrated. “I told you what I need!”

“But you have to be patient,” I murmur. “You can do that for me, can’t you, pretty girl?” She whimpers, her hands trembling as she nods. “I know you can. Because you’re my good girl, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” she hisses. “I’m so good for you.”

I chuckle, then trail my tongue along her throat, up to her racing pulse. Lapping at it, I snake my hand higher up her soft stomach until I reach her full, heavy breast.

Her nipple is hard as I take it between my thumb and forefinger, rolling it between them. I pinch it lightly, and her breathing turns ragged, her head falling back, giving me more access to her delicate throat.

“Let me taste you,” I growl. She shakes her head, her body trembling.

“I just need you inside me,” she moans.

“After you come on my tongue.”

Gently, I walk her backward until her knees hit the bed, and she’s forced to sit. I stand above her, my fingers moving to her chin again. She stares up at me, her pupils blown wide in the dark room.

“You know I only want to make you feel good, don’t you, Goldie?” I murmur. She nods, her lips parting. Slowly, my thumb presses between them and her tongue eagerly wraps around it. I groan. “Such a perfect girl for me. Always so sweet. Tell me you want my mouth on your pussy. Tell me you want to feel my tongue inside you.”

Her breath catches and I slide my thumb free. “I want your mouth on my pussy, Ro,” she says breathlessly. “I want to feel your tongue inside me. I want to come all over your mouth, then lick it from your lips so I can taste myself while you fuck me into your bed.” She flashes me a grin as she slips her shirt off over her head, revealing her perfect tits. “I don’t want to be able to walk tomorrow. *Do your worst, Pyro.*”

Shit.

My tongue presses into my cheek as I smirk down at her. “Remember what you asked for, Goldie. I won’t stop until every person on the block is awake from how loud you’re screaming my name.”

Leaning back on her elbows, she spreads her legs for me. Her damp panties are plastered to her pussy, her long, thick thighs wide apart, showing me what I want.

“I think you’re all talk,” she taunts, and my smile broadens. We both know she’s lying. I’ve made my girl come, drip and squirt so many times in the very bed she’s sitting in, I’m surprised we were ever able to get it clean.

“Is that so?” I mutter, dropping to my knees before her.

Reaching up, I grip her panties and in one motion, the flimsy fabric effortlessly rips. Moving closer, I throw her legs over my shoulders as my fingers dig into her fleshy hips, dragging her to the edge of the bed.

Her hands move to my shoulders, and I pause, looking up at her through my brows. I wait for her to push me away, or to

tense up. Give me some sign that she's changed her mind. But she doesn't.

Instead, she relaxes and leans back on her elbows again, that same taunting grin gracing her beautiful face. I wink at her and turn my attention back to the treat in front of me.

Kissing along the inside of one thigh, then the other, I move closer to her pussy. She inhales sharply and readjusts her position on the bed, her legs widening slightly.

"Spread your lips apart for me," I mutter, my voice firm, leaving no room for argument.

"What?" she breathes, and I flick my eyes up.

"You heard me."

She blinks, the only sign of apprehension she'll show before reaching down and spreading her slick lower lips apart. Leaning in, my gaze still on hers, I slowly lick her from bottom to top.

"Like that?" I ask, and she nods, her lips parted as she breathes through her mouth. "Play with your pretty tits for me, baby. Let me see you make yourself feel good."

"Ro," she groans, but does as she's told, moving her hands to her lush tits. She gropes herself the way I've seen her do in her videos, her thumbs brushing lightly over her peaked nipples.

Soft.

Gentle.

“So good at following orders,” I murmur. “It’s because you like pleasing me, isn’t it? You want to make me happy?”

“Of course,” she breathes.

“Then don’t hold back. Fucking scream for me. Wake everyone up in this house.”

“I can’t—”

Her words are cut off by me sucking her clit into my mouth. She pinches her nipples tighter, her mouth opening wider.

“Oh fuck,” she cries. “Oh my God.”

Her pussy is soaked, her clit hard and throbbing. I know it won’t take much to send her over the edge.

Two fingers slip into her tight passage and curl, massaging her g-spot as I flick my tongue over her clit. Up and down, around, back and forth. Any way I can to make her scream. To make her soar.

I watch her come undone, her hips rising and falling as she grinds against my face, chasing her own pleasure. It’s so fucking hot watching her lose her inhibitions.

She forgets that she’s supposed to wear the perfect mask when she’s like this. She gets lost in the pleasure, and can only think about one thing—*coming*. And it’s beautiful. The way she doesn’t put on a show, but is genuinely enjoying herself.

Knowing I’m the reason she’s moaning and has that blissful look on her face makes me feel ten-feet-tall.

My fingers slide in and out of her tight pussy, her hands tightening until her flesh overflows between her fingers. Her thighs tremble, and she hooks her leg around my head, holding me in place.

“Right there,” she cries. “Please don’t fucking stop.”

I wouldn’t dream of it.

She clenches and flutters around my fingers and I know she’s seconds from coming, seconds from soaking my face. “You better have meant what you said, Goldie,” I murmur against her clit before biting down on it.

“Wh—” My tongue moves faster, my fingers fuck her harder, silencing her question, and she clenches around me. “Roman!” She screams my name as her back bows and she comes so fucking hard, it takes *my* breath away. Liquid coats my stubbled jaw, my lips, my fingers, and I groan, lapping up her cum.

She collapses back to the bed and stares up at the ceiling, breathing heavily. I roll her taste across my tongue as I make my way up her body until I get to her mouth.

Her eyes are still on the ceiling as I hover above her, and for a moment, I worry she’s gone. That she’s back in that room, but then her gaze shifts to mine and she smiles. Her cheeks are flushed and a fine sheen of sweat broke out along her forehead. She looks perfectly sated.

“That was incredible,” she pants.

My lip twitches as I gently squeeze her cheeks together, forcing her lips to part. My brow kicks up in a silent question and I pray with everything I have that I'm not taking this too far. That I know my girl the way I think I do.

Eve smiles around my fingers and opens her mouth, letting her tongue fall out. My cock throbs against her soaked pussy as I spit her release into her mouth and watch it slide down her throat. Her eyes flutter as she moans and I almost fucking come.

My lips collide with hers for a harsh, brutal kiss and I quickly lose myself in the taste of her. She's intoxicating. Though it kills me, I pull back, my grin wide and I huff a laugh, dropping my head forward.

"You're the incredible one," I mutter, kissing the center of her chest. Sighing, she runs her fingers through my hair, still smiling dreamily. I kiss her again, then pull away.

"Hey," she reaches for me, "where are you going?"

"You're tired," I say, running my hand lightly along her thigh. "Let's go to bed." She shakes her head, lifting up on her elbows again.

"That wasn't the deal."

"But that was before you were tired," I point out, and she laughs breathily.

"Knew you were all talk. If you can't back it up, just say that, Ro. No hard feelings."

“If I can’t...you’re such a brat,” I growl, and she grins up at me.

She scoots back on the bed, resting her head on my pillow. “So?” Her hands slide down her body, stroking her soft skin, teasing herself. My throat bobs as I swallow, watching her. “Are you going to fuck me?”

Fuck.

I don’t waste any more time as I tear my clothes off and climb on the bed. I settle between her legs, gripping my aching cock in my fist. Stroking myself, I stare down at her.

“Let me hear you beg,” I whisper. “Tell me how badly you need it, baby. Tell me how much you need my fucking cock.”

“God, Ro. I need it. *Please.*”

Rubbing my leaking head against her clit, I groan at the hot, wet feel of her. Sliding lower, I line up. Our eyes meet as I slowly press into her, feeling her stretch around me.

“Fucking shit,” I breathe. “You feel so goddamn good.”

“More,” she whimpers. Her legs spread wider, and I dip my head, watching where my cock is disappearing inside her. Holy fuck, that’s so sexy. Going in bare with her is unreal, unlike anything I’ve ever experienced.

“You’re taking my cock so well, Goldie,” I rasp.

Halfway, I pull out before slamming in. She cries out, her back arching up into me. My mouth lowers to her nipple and I

roughly suck it into my mouth, flicking my tongue over it. Her tits are perfect but her nipples were made for my mouth.

She meets me thrust for thrust, my headboard banging into the wall. I was mostly kidding about waking everyone up, but at this rate we will, and I don't feel bad about it.

I slide my hand between us, finding her swollen clit with my fingers. "Too much," she groans, but I ignore her, rubbing at her until her cunt tightens around me.

"You're going to come for me again," I grunt. "You're going to come with me."

"Fuck, fuck, fuck," she moans. My fingers move faster, my cock slamming into her.

It's embarrassing I won't last much longer, but she just feels so fucking good. My cock thickens, my lower abs tightening as I barrel toward my release.

"I need you to come for me, Goldie," I growl. "Come on my fucking cock." She rests her hands on the headboard above her, letting me fuck into her harder, keeping my promise from earlier. "*Fuck.*"

"Close!" she cries. "So close!"

A snarl rips from me, my hand bunching the sheets tightly in my fist by her head. "Fucking *come.*"

With a scream, she tosses her head back, her pussy pulsing around me as I slam into her, groaning through my release. My fingers stay pressed against her clit, lightly flicking it as we explode together.

Her body trembles as she comes down. I take a deep breath as I look back at her, finding her already staring up at me.

“Well?” I breathe, dipping down to kiss her. Her tongue slides into my mouth, a murmur of pleasure leaving her as she tastes herself. “Did I keep my promise?”

She smiles against my lips, her arms lazily wrapping around my neck, pulling me closer. My softening cock stays lodged inside her, my hips barely thrusting, my mind begging my body to come to life again just so I can fuck her all night long.

“You did,” she mutters. Pulling away, I smooth her wild curls away from her face.

“I love you, my golden girl.” Her jaw tenses, her smile wobbling. But I see her eyes gloss over with unshed tears. Kissing them away, she wraps herself tighter around me.

“I love you, Roman Payne.”

4.69 Eve

A smile is already on my face as my eyes open. There's a pleasant ache between my legs, a soreness I welcome. One I begged for. I stretch my arms above my head, a small groan leaving me.

I feel good.

Better than good.

I feel incredible. I feel on top of the world.

I have my man beside me, hopefully as happy and sated as I am.

And right now, my pain, the dull, empty ache I'd been feeling for weeks, is a distant memory. It might come back in an hour, or a day, or a few minutes. But right now, right this second, I'm okay.

The sunlight shines through the window, illuminating Roman's room, and I feel like I'm seeing it for the first time. Everything looks brighter, more colorful.

With the smile still plastered to my face, I roll over, ready to wake Roman up with my mouth around his cock. But when I face his side, my stomach sinks.

Where is he?

His side is empty.

Running my hand along the smooth sheets, they feel cold. How long ago did he leave?

Dread pools in my stomach as I stare at the spot he should be. He left. He's gone. He ran away after we shared something special, just like he did four years ago.

Our history, a cycle we can't seem to break, is repeating itself. Over and over, we find ourselves back here. Him, gone. Me, abandoned.

Never together. Not for long.

Something always tears us apart, always comes between us. What is it this time? Cold feet? Fear? Did he change his mind?

Dirty.

My throat tightens as I push myself out of bed, looking around to find my discarded shirt. Grabbing it, I slide it and a pair of panties on, then make my way out of the room, ready to confront him.

I don't know what time it is, or who all's out here. But I need to talk to him. To tell him this isn't okay. Him leaving me is not okay.

And if he continues doing it, then...

Then I'm leaving.

I'm done.

No, you're not, that stupid voice in my head sings, but I ignore it.

He can't keep leaving me. He can't keep running away when he feels anxious, or pressure, or...whatever he's feeling.

Annoyance and anger mix inside me as I stomp through the silent loft, looking for him. When I don't find him upstairs or in the living room, worry starts to seep in.

Where is he?

I make my way into the kitchen, finding him plating food, and I pause. How did I miss him when I first came out? I should've seen him. He's impossible to miss.

Yet, I did.

I breezed right past as I searched for him upstairs, thinking he'd retreated as far from me as he could get. But here he is, making breakfast.

My brows bunch together as I watch him meticulously arrange orange slices on the plate. He doesn't know I'm here, watching.

“Ro?”

He jolts, his spine snapping straight. His eyes are wide, but when realizes it's just me, he relaxes, a cocky grin spreading across his face.

“Good morning, beautiful,” he murmurs. “I was just bringing you breakfast in—”

“Why’d you leave?” The words come out harsher than I’d intended, but I can’t take them back. So I straighten my shoulders, my chin lifting.

His brows tighten as he flicks his eyes between mine.

“I didn’t leave,” he says slowly.

“You weren’t there when I woke up,” I whisper, hating how obvious my fear is. “You left.”

“I just came to make you breakfast.” He glances at the food, then back at me. “I’m here. I’m not going anywhere.”

Despite what he said, my apparent abandonment issues are in full swing this morning, so his words mean absolutely nothing to me. I fold my arms over my chest, glaring at him.

“I didn’t think you’d leave four years ago, and you did. How was I supposed to know you wouldn’t now?”

His head rears back like I slapped him, his mouth opening and closing.

“What are you talking about?” he asks, exasperated. “I didn’t leave.”

“Ro—”

“Four years ago, yeah, I did. But I didn’t have a choice. And you didn’t exactly come, either.”

“What?” My face scrunches in a mix of anger and confusion. “Yes, I did.”

“No,” he scoffs. “I waited all night for you, and you never came.”

“Ro.”

“No,” he says again, shaking his head. “We’re not doing this right now.”

“Yeah. I think we are.” I glare at him.

Years. It’s been years and we’ve avoided having this conversation. We’ve danced around it, behind it, ignored it. We’ve been angry and hurt, sad and devastated. It’s broken both of us. But we’ve never *talked* about it.

That night.

He scrubs his hands roughly over his face, letting out an annoyed breath before glowering back at me. “I waited and you never came. You can’t blame me for everything when you had a hand in it. You chose to stay, and I respected your choice.”

“*What?*” I ask again, my voice rising. “I never chose anything. *You* left. And when I chased you, you already had some girl warming your bed.”

He stares at me, his face blank. “What the fuck are you talking about?” he grits out. “A girl? You chased me?”

“In your dorm room,” I mutter, my heart squeezing at the memory. “I went there looking for you. When I knocked, a girl answered. She was wearing one of your varsity shirts, and that’s it. You moved on immediately.”

“I didn’t even go to college.”

It’s my turn to stare at him. “Yes, you did. You had a scholarship—”

“I dropped out before school even started,” he says, shaking his head and my stomach drops. “I never went. I never lived there. Whoever you saw, I didn’t fuck. I don’t even know who it was.”

“But—but it was Chase’s room—”

“So, it was probably a girl he was sleeping with?” His brows lift expectantly.

“But—” I shake my head again, my mind reeling. It doesn’t make any sense. He was supposed to be there, too. He said he was going to school early. “But he was your roommate.”

“No, he wasn’t.”

“She was wearing your shirt, though.” His lips twitch.

“We played on the same team, baby. He had the same shirts I did.”

It feels like everything was a lie. I’d been so hurt by the fact he’d moved on, but knowing he hadn’t...does it really change anything? He still left. And just because he didn’t move on with her, doesn’t mean he didn’t move on with someone else just as quickly.

“I didn’t know you went there looking for me,” he says softly, and I shrug, looking away with embarrassment. I was just a kid back then. I was sixteen and dumb. I was sad.

I was hurting.

“I know you told me to leave you alone, but I just missed you so—”

“What?” he interrupts. “I never told you that.”

“The text you sent me. You told me to leave you alone. You said you didn’t want anything to do with me.”

“I never said that, Eve.”

“I still have the text.” I throw my thumb over my shoulder. “I’ll show you.”

He shakes his head. “I never sent you a text. I left a note in your room asking you to run away with me. I said I’d wait for you at our spot by the tire swing. If you didn’t come, then I had my answer.”

My world spins out of control at his words.

“No.”

“Eve,” he breathes. “I wouldn’t lie about this.”

“But the text—”

“Isaac took my phone,” he mutters. “He told me to leave and took my phone, that he paid for it, so it was his. That’s why I left the note. I only had a backpack with a few things in it.”

Isaac...

“He took it?” I shake my head again, the information too much for me to process. But if Isaac took his phone, that means... “He saw everything. I sent you a million texts. All day every day for years. I’ve sent you—you saw them! Oh

God, Ro. Isaac saw them all. He knows everything I wanted to tell you. All my thoughts and confessions.”

“Shit.” He scrubs his hand over his mouth. “I’m sorry, baby. I’m so fucking sorry.” I shake my head, shock coursing through me.

Fuck.

Isaac saw it all.

Everything.

With a deep breath, I turn my attention back to Roman. We need to talk about this, get it all out in the open. No more lies or secrets. Just the truth.

“He told you to leave?” I whisper, and he nods.

“You don’t know any of this?” he asks, and when I just stare back at him, he lets out a humorless laugh. “Of course not. Why would he tell you?”

“I don’t know,” I breathe, smoothing my hand over my hair.

But I do know why. Because he’s a sociopath who only cares about himself. Because he always hated the relationship Roman and I had, so why would he let us be together?

But I have to hear it.

“What happened?”

Roman leads me to the living room and we sink onto the couch. He gathers my hands tightly in his lap, his eyes flicking between mine. Letting out a long breath, he drops his head forward.

“That night was the best night of my life, Eve,” he begins, his voice soft. “I think I fell in love with you the first moment I saw you, but that night, it was...” He trails off on a sigh. “It was special. You’d been so sad that day. And I didn’t know how to help. I didn’t know how to take care of you. I just wanted to take your pain away, so I did the only thing I knew how.”

Tears burn my eyes as I stare at him. Swallowing thickly, I nod, because what else can I do? What can I say? I feel the same way.

That night, I’d lost my virginity to him. I’d given him something sacred, and I’ve never regretted it. Even though I was left alone, I never regretted him. Never regretted my choice.

He doesn’t think he took care of me, but he did. He gave me a moment of pleasure on an otherwise painful day. A painful week. He made me forget, for just a second, what that loss felt like.

“You remember I got out of bed to get you some water?” He looks at me, his dark brows bunched. My chin dips in a nod, my eyes searching his. “Isaac caught me in the kitchen. I ignored him at first because he was being a dick like usual. I just wanted to get your water and get back to you. I wanted to hold you, but he stopped me.

“He told me he’d heard us, and it made me sick. I wanted to protect you, and he’d heard you in your most vulnerable

moments. I hated it. But I couldn't change it. What happened, happened. Then he threatened me."

"Threatened you?" I gasp. I scoot closer to him, tears lining my eyes. I wipe roughly at them, swallowing the lump in my throat. "How?"

"He said since I was eighteen and you were sixteen, I could get arrested for raping you. He said if I didn't leave, he'd go to the police. That he'd tell everyone what a monster I was, that I'd taken advantage of you when you'd just lost Jane. It would've been his word against mine. And who would've believed me? Everyone knew I was a troublemaker. Isaac was—" He shakes his head, a humorless laugh leaving him. "He's like God in that fucking town. They would've believed him, and I would've been taken away."

"Roman," I breathe. "Oh my God." My mind reels as pieces begin falling into place.

With a deep breath, he continues. "He took my phone, and when I went to talk to you, he grabbed me. He—" Roman looks at me again, his face haunted. "He said he'd hurt me if I tried anything. He said to leave and never come back. To forget about you and Divinity. But I wrote you a note and told you to meet me by the tire swing."

"Our spot," I whisper, and he smiles sadly.

"Yeah, baby. Our spot."

"That's what you meant that day."

You left.

You never came.

“I never saw your note,” I say frantically, tears streaming freely down my cheeks. “Ro, you have to believe me. If I would’ve seen it, I would’ve gone. I would’ve run away with you. I would’ve gone to Hell with you. Wherever you went, I would’ve gone, too. I’d—I’d do anything for you. I still will.”

“I know, Goldie,” he rasps. “I know that. But I was a stupid kid. I should’ve knocked on your window, or tried harder. I should’ve told him to fuck himself and take you with me. I should’ve contacted you sometime in the last four years. I should’ve done a lot of things. But I was hurt, and in my head, I made it into something it wasn’t. You were just a kid, baby. I was asking too much of you. It wasn’t fair.”

“But I would’ve gone,” I cry, trying to convince him. I would have. “If only I knew, I’d have run away with you. In a heartbeat, I would’ve gone to the ends of the Earth with you.” He cups the side of my face, his thumb gently brushing a tear away. “He took years from us, Ro. Years we could’ve had together. All this time—”

“I know,” he says again, sadder, his voice breaking.

“I never saw the note.” He nods, his fingers flexing. “You—or I thought it was you—texted me. You—” I make a frustrated sound. It wasn’t him. It was Isaac. “The message said to never contact you again. That you wanted nothing to do with me. That you’d gotten what you wanted, and you had to

leave, that you had to start your life and I couldn't hold you back anymore. You—you were going to school early. You told me to forget you.”

His eyes widen at the words, then his entire face shifts into something else. Something dark. Something full of fury. I inhale sharply, leaning slightly away.

“I would've never fucking said that,” he grits out, his hands tightening around mine. “I can't believe him. That fucking bastard. He has to pay for this—” Roman shoves to his feet, his hands balling into fists at his sides as he paces. “That *motherfucker*. I could handle him hurting me, turning me away. But *you*? Why the fuck would he do that to you?”

“Ro, it's okay—”

“It's not fucking okay!” he shouts, making me wince. “He made you believe I didn't want you. That I just used you and threw you away when I got what I wanted. He made you think I thought you were nothing.” He punches his fist into his hand. “It's not okay. I loved you, Eve. I didn't want to leave you, but I didn't know what to do. And when you didn't come to the swing, I thought you made your choice and I had to respect that. It fucking killed me, and I was so mad at you for so long because I thought you chose Divinity. That you chose *him*.”

“No,” I sob. “No. I chose you.” My knees shake as I get to my feet. Slowly, I approach him, my chest heaving. “I chose you then, and I choose you now.”

He sucks in a sharp breath, sounding like he's holding back a sob. Tears line his hazel eyes, his thick black lashes damp. His

hand wraps around the back of my neck and he tugs me closer.

Resting his forehead against mine, he breathes deeply. “I choose you, Evelyn Meyer. In this lifetime, and the next. I’ll always choose you.”

My eyelids flutter shut as I breathe him in, savoring his warmth and safe scent. This is Roman. My Roman. And knowing we had years taken from us, that we could’ve been together all this time...

“Why didn’t you come back?” I choke out. His body stiffens, his hand tightening on my neck. Not enough to hurt, but enough to ground me.

“Every time I got on my bike,” he begins, his voice hoarse, “I heard his voice in my head. I thought you were better off without me. He said I’d ruin you. That you were good and I was bad. That I’d drag you down to Hell with me.” He huffs a sarcastic laugh. “And how could he be wrong? You’ve always been sunshine and to him, I’m the Devil. To him, I’ve always been this—” he breaks off, gesturing to himself.

“You’ve always been *mine*.” He pauses, his jaw ticking. I palm his cheek. “*He* was Hell, Roman. With him, I’ve known true darkness. With him, I’ve known true Hell. I was in the pits of it and I withered and burned but here—” I press my hand to his chest. “Here in the face of his Devil, I flourish.”

“You—” He swallows thickly, his throat bobbing. “You can’t mean that. You don’t need me. Don’t need this.”

I shake my head as he speaks, my brows pinching together. “That’s not true. I’ve always needed you. I always will.”

“I’m sorry, Eve,” he murmurs. “I’m so fucking sorry for not coming back sooner. For not saving you. For not trying harder.”

“You were a kid, too, Ro. It’s not your fault.”

“It is,” he protests weakly.

“You can’t blame yourself. He gave you the bullets. I’ll never blame you for pulling the trigger.” His body goes limp and his eyes gloss over again. “It’s okay.” I know he doesn’t believe me, but it’s true. *It’s okay.*

“No,” he breathes. Reaching up, I cup his face with my hands and force him to look at me. He takes a deep breath, his chest brushing against mine.

“It’s okay because it has to be. Otherwise, we’ll dwell on the past forever,” I whisper. “It has to be okay, because if I let myself, I’ll spiral into a pit I’ll never get out of. I just...I want to move on.” His throat bobs as he swallows thickly. “Will you move on with me? Will you leave the past where it belongs? Can we start over?”

His face softens, and he presses his lips against mine, his thumb gently stroking my neck. “Of course, Goldie. No more ghosts. Just us and the future.”

4:70 Roman

Gripping the side of my head, I let out a low groan, then wince as the vibration rattles my aching skull. Roman chuckles beside me, and I slide my eyes to him, glaring.

“You okay, baby?” he coos, but his lips are still tipped up in a teasing grin.

“You know, just because you chose not to drink doesn’t mean you get to mock me and my hangover,” I tell him bitterly. “I need sympathy.”

“Oh, of course,” he laughs. “My bad. What do you need, baby girl? Some water? Maybe a few more margaritas?”

I gag at the word. *Never. Again.* I’m never having another margarita ever again. Not after I drank my weight in them last night at one of Chase’s stupid influencer parties.

Roman hadn’t wanted to go, but Oli and I did, so he sucked it up and went. He followed me around all night like a bodyguard, growling and snarling at random men who

approached. A part of me wonders if I should be scared of him and his possessiveness, if I should run the other way.

But then I decide I don't care. Because, honestly, it was hot as fuck watching him slam some guy against a wall for trying to touch me. Knowing I'm forever protected makes me feel... safe. It gives me the warm-fuzzies.

Or maybe it's the alcohol still coursing through my body.

"Want some food?" he asks, and I grunt my response.

Chuckling, he gets to his feet and kisses my forehead. But laying in bed only makes my world spin, so I stumble from his bedroom and follow the greasy scent of food through the loft to the kitchen.

Kon, who surprisingly went last night, sits at the kitchen island watching Roman put a burger on a plate. "It's the morning, why are you having a burger for breakfast?" I groan, resting against the wall.

"It's one in the afternoon," Kon mutters.

"I just woke up," I shoot back. "It's morning for me." He shakes his head, grumbling something in Russian under his breath. "I'm going to learn your language one day, big guy. And when I do, you can't talk about me anymore." He gives me a look over his shoulder, one that says he still will, and I roll my eyes.

"Sit," Roman says, pulling me away from my stare-off with Kon. He pushes the plate in front of a barstool, giving me a

pointed look as he does. “You need to eat. I’ll get you some water.”

“You sound like Chase,” I mutter, shuffling toward the stool. Dropping into it, I watch as he grabs a bottle from the fridge and opens it for me before putting it next to my plate.

“I want most of it gone,” he says sternly, giving me a look.

“I’m not a child, you know.” I pick the burger up and take a bite. But it’s because I wanted to do it, not because he told me to.

“I know,” he laughs. Rounding the island, he sits beside me, draping his arm across the back of my chair. “Just trying to take care of my girl.”

A stupid smile spreads across my heated face, and I slide my eyes to him. Oh, he knows those words drive me insane. He’s definitely getting a blowjob later.

He presses a kiss to my jaw like he knows what I’m thinking, a grin on his face. “Not until you’re feeling better, Goldie,” he murmurs.

“I feel great,” I lie as he kisses down my neck. God, that feels so good. Almost good enough to make me forget about my pounding hangover.

“So, you’ll be able to handle me throwing you over my shoulder and taking you to bed? Then fucking you until you lose your voice from screaming my name all day?”

“Jesus,” Kon breathes. I blink at his voice. How did I forget he was here?

“Ro,” I squeak, and he laughs again, pulling away.

“Eat up, baby. And if you’re a good girl, maybe you’ll get a reward.” My brows lift, and he grins. Leaning forward again, he whispers, “My face between those thick thighs.”

Fuck.

He’s killing me.

“But you don’t get that unless you eat your food and you start feeling better,” he says as he leans away. He taps my plate, lifting his brows expectantly.

Grumbling, I take another bite. I hate to admit how delicious it is, and it’s definitely helping my hangover. “Why didn’t you drink last night? Kon wasn’t. You didn’t have to be our DD.”

He shifts uncomfortably as he clears his throat. He glances at Kon, and the big guy nods before grabbing his stuff and leaving. That was weird. I open my mouth to ask him what that was about, but he speaks before I can.

“I’m sober,” he says.

I drop the burger to the plate and stare at him. “You’re sober? But you smoke.”

“Sober of alcohol,” he laughs. “Not nicotine. I need something to keep me sane.”

“Is it because of—because of *his* issues? You’re worried you’ll have them too?” I ask, and he sighs as he leans forward, resting his arms on the counter.

“After I left, I was in a bad place,” he mutters. “I was homeless—”

“What?” I blurt. “You were homeless? *Roman*.” He shrugs, his eyes on his hands.

“I didn’t have much of a choice. After I dropped out of school, I didn’t have anywhere to go. I couchsurfed for a bit, but my friends got tired of that. So, eventually, I ended up on the streets. It wasn’t for that long.”

Something about the tightness of his voice tells me that was a lie.

“I was drinking a lot, mostly to numb the pain. To help me forget what I’d lost. *Who* I’d lost.”

He glances at me, and I slide my hand onto his forearm. He rests his over mine, his thumb absently stroking back and forth.

“One night, it was raining and I’d just gotten into a fight with some random guy. I ended up in an alley, and some giant Russian fuck was standing over me.” His lips twitch, his face lightening at the memories. “He gave me a place to stay, taught me how to tattoo. If it wasn’t for him, I’d probably be dead.”

I just stare at him. I didn’t know any of this. How could I? I’d never asked. All this time, I’d thought he was living it up here in Mammoth with Chase. I thought he was happy.

I didn’t know he was struggling.

“Anyway, I had an issue with drinking. Kon’s sober, too. It’s why he doesn’t drink either. So he helped me. I didn’t go through a program or get those little coins or anything. I just stopped, and he made sure I never touched the stuff again.”

“You’ve never relapsed?” I ask gently, and he shakes his head.

“Nope. Once I realized I was addicted, it made me sick to know that I was so similar to my father. All my life I’d told myself I wasn’t. That I was better than him—”

“You are,” I growl. “You’re so much better than him.”

“Thanks, baby,” he murmurs, smiling softly. “But when I was in the thick of my addiction, I didn’t feel like I was. I felt like a lowlife. Like—like him. So, one day, I told Kon I was done. Anytime I felt the need to drink, I called him and he reminded me of all the reasons why I shouldn’t. Eventually, it got easier. And now,” he shrugs, “I don’t miss it. It’s just a part of who I used to be.”

I stare at him in awe. Other than Kon, he’d done that by himself. He got sober alone. He fought his addiction, one I didn’t know he even had, alone.

“I’m sorry,” I blurt, and he looks at me, his brows bunched in confusion. “I wouldn’t have drank if I knew about this. I won’t anymore.” His mouth tucks up at the corner and he tucks my hair gently behind my ear.

“My sweet girl,” he murmurs softly. “It doesn’t bother me. I’ve been around Chase and his friends for years. They don’t

stop drinking for me. I'm used to it."

"But I don't want to tempt you," I tell him and he shakes his head.

"You won't."

"But—"

"Goldie," he says firmly, and my mouth snaps shut. "If I start to have any issues with it, I'll let you know, okay? But I want you to have fun. I want you to live your life, baby. Don't hold yourself back for me. If you don't want to because it's your choice, I'll support it. But if you want to go to these stupid parties with Chase every other weekend, that's fine too. Just..." He strokes my cheeks softly with his thumb, and I lean into his warm touch. "If you start to think you're having any issues with it, please tell me. I'll help you."

My heart squeezes. He's the sweetest man I've ever met. How did I ever get so lucky to have him?

"I will," I whisper. "I promise."

His shoulders relax, and he leans over, pressing a kiss to my lips. His tongue slides against them, and I open, eagerly letting him in. His hand slides to the back of my head, holding me where he wants me as he ravages my mouth with his.

I whimper, and he swallows the sound, his body moving closer to mine. Gripping my chair, he pulls me closer, forcing me between his spread legs. My arms wrap around his neck, holding him just as tightly back.

Somewhere in the house, the familiar sound of my ringtone on my phone goes off and I groan.

“Ignore it,” he breathes, and I shake my head.

“Chase is expecting a phone call from some realtor in Vermont about a farm. He gave her my number in case she couldn’t reach him.” Roman rolls his eyes, but nods and lets me slide off the stool.

Hurrying through the loft, I grab my phone from the bedside table and answer. “Hello?”

“Hi, is this Mrs. Anderson?”

My brows push together. “This is her granddaughter,” I say slowly. “Is everything okay?”

“Oh, fine,” the man says. “We have your number on file. We’re closing our facility, so you’ll need to come pick up your stuff. If you leave it, then it’ll go to auction and you’ll likely never see it again.”

“What stuff? Who is this?” I run my hand over my hair, glancing at the doorway when Roman enters. He gives me a questioning look, but I wave him off.

“This is Legacy Storage Units,” the man tells me. “We’re closing in a month, so you’ll need to come get that stuff soon.”

“Right,” I breathe. “Of course. Thanks for calling.”

“No problem.”

Without another word, he hangs up and I stare down at my phone. “Who was it?” Roman asks, stepping toward me. I

glance at him, my lips tipping up in a smile.

Gran's stuff is a few hours away. Maybe this is exactly what we need right now. A fresh start. Something new. A change of scenery.

Turning toward him, he rests his palms on my hips and tugs me closer. I move my hands to his chest as I smile up at him. "How do you feel about a road trip?"

* * *

Three days later, we're standing in the center of Gran's storage unit. It's mostly empty, except for a stack of boxes in one corner and some old furniture scattered around the hot, dirty room.

"Oh my God!" I squeal, racing toward a box in the back. Sitting on top is my Raggedy Ann doll from when I was a kid. "I thought I lost her!"

"Fuck, that thing's creepy," Roman mutters under his breath. Whirling, I glare at him.

"No, she's not."

"Pretty sure they have a horror movie based on it." He points at the doll, shuddering exaggeratedly. Rolling my eyes, I gently set her on the stack of boxes beside the one I'd found her on.

"Oh, look!" I open the box with *Grant* scrawled across the top in Mama's familiar handwriting. "It's Daddy's stuff." Roman steps beside me, his arm wrapping tightly around my waist.

The overhead light is dim, but I can see everything inside clearly enough. It's dingy from years of sitting here, fading away. His Haven Baptist softball team t-shirt sits neatly folded on top, and a smile teases my lips.

"He was so bad," I choke out. "He never hit the ball, and Mama always told him he ran too slow." I wipe at my damp eyes as Roman's arm tightens. "He loved it, though. Loved all the people that came together and even if he was the butt of the joke, he loved that everyone was laughing. That they were happy." My voice breaks on the last word.

"You were too young to remember this," Roman mutters, his voice barely above a whisper. "But after my mom died and we came to stay with you for that year, your dad was—" He roughly clears his throat, his fingers gripping me tighter. "He was incredible to me. I'd never had anyone like him in my life before. And one day, he took me fishing."

I blink up at him, dropping the moth-eaten shirt back in the box. He continues to stare down at it as if he's staring directly at my father. A small smile curls his lips.

"Fishing?" I rasp, and he nods.

"I hated it," he laughs. "We got up early—"

"To get there before the fishes," I say, nodding, and his eyes slide to me.

"That's what he said." I grin, knowing Daddy's jokes like the back of my hand. "Anyway, so we were out there before the

asscrack of dawn, and I was so tired. So grumpy. I just wanted to go home and go back to bed, but he wouldn't let me."

"He took his fishing very seriously," I laugh, and Ro bobs his head in agreement.

"I caught a fish—it was fucking huge." He turns toward me, both arms wrapping around my waist. "Even your dad was impressed." Resting my hands on his chest, I smile wider. It didn't take much to impress Daddy, but I won't tell Ro that. "After we caught it, I asked what to do, and he gave me a choice. Skin, gut, and clean it. Or let it go."

"What'd you choose?"

His hand lifts, and he gently tucks the wayward curls behind my ear. "I let it go," he whispers. "It wasn't its fault it'd been caught, and it wasn't my place to keep it." My throat tightens, and I slide my hands up, locking my fingers behind his neck.

"You're a good person, Roman Payne."

He presses a light kiss to my forehead, letting his lips linger. "I didn't want to disappoint your dad," he mutters. "I tried to do the right thing for him." Tipping my head back, he brushes a fallen tear from my cheek before gently kissing me. "I made him a promise when he was sick."

My head rears back, my brows crashing together. "What? When?"

"When he was in the hospital for the last time," he breathes, running his hand through his hair. "Isaac and I—"

“You were there every day,” I finish, nodding. “I remember.”

Roman barely spoke the entire time. He got Mama and me drinks and snacks, ran to get the newspaper for her and coloring books for me. He did so much, but I hadn't appreciated him at the time. I was just sad my dad was dying. I didn't think about the sweet boy trying to make some of the pain go away.

“But you never went into his room,” I breathe.

“I did. Toward the end, I went in once.”

I stare at him. This is all news to me. I had no idea he'd ever...

“He looked so different,” he rasps. “So unlike the man who had taken me fishing.”

“I know,” I croak. “He was so small. So fragile. Daddy was such a big man. I remember looking down at him in that bed and wondering how he shrunk. How I was bigger than he was.”

“I know, baby,” he rasps, palming my cheek. “I sat with him for a bit. He was sleeping, so I just stared out the window. But then he talked to me.”

“What'd he say?” I ask, needing to know everything about my dad's final days. How had I never known this?

“He told me he liked who I was becoming,” he chokes out and I can't help but picture a small, sweet eleven year old version of the man before me. “Liked that I was looking after

you. Told me that's what a man does. That he takes care of the people he loves." My chin wobbles as a fresh set of tears flow from my eyes. That sounds exactly like something Daddy would say. "He asked me to always take care of you. To always keep an eye out, make sure you were happy."

"Ro," I breathe, searching his eyes.

"I failed him for a while," he admits, sounding ashamed as he drops his eyes from mine. "I was so angry at the world. And I was such an asshole to you, Goldie. I'm sorry. I should've been kinder—"

"It's okay," I whisper, smoothing the line between his brows. "You were just a kid, and I was invading your space."

"It doesn't matter," he grunts. "A man takes care of the people he loves, and I promised him I'd always take care of you."

"And you have," I reassure him, but he just shakes his head again.

"I left you alone with—with *him*. That's not taking care of you."

"Oh, Roman." I tug him closer, pressing my lips against his. "It was too much to ask of you. You were just a boy—"

"Doesn't matter," he says roughly. "Should've done better. Should've been better for you."

"You were perfect." He looks like he doesn't believe me, so I grip his face between my hands and force him to look at me. "You *are* perfect. You were then, and you are now."

“I won’t let you down again,” he whispers, and I press a kiss to his mouth.

“You’ve never let me down a day in your life.”

With a deep breath, he gives my hips a final squeeze before letting go. “Come on.” He roughly clears his throat as he jerks his chin at the boxes. “Let’s pack this stuff and go.”

For the next hour, we go back and forth from the storage unit to Kon’s truck. I don’t know what the hell we’re going to do with this stuff. Most of it’s junk, but I still can’t make myself get rid of it. Not yet. Not when there’s so much of Mama and Daddy in it.

Finally, only a few boxes in the back remain, and I dab the sweat from my forehead with the back of my hand. “Almost done,” Ro says, pressing a kiss to my head as he passes.

His muscles flex when he lifts a box effortlessly. He winks as he passes me, and I feel my entire body flush. How can he still have this effect on me? Shouldn’t it have worn off by now? He’s all consuming. Perfect.

But I can’t fuck him here, so I shake myself and move across the room to the last of the boxes. Crouching, I grip the edge, but pause.

Jane is written across the top. I really should just take it out to the truck and open it later, when we have time to fuck around. Now’s not the time to go down memory lane, but I can’t seem to help myself as I gently pull open the box.

My throat immediately clogs at the sight of her old leather-bound journal. What's it doing here?

“You ready—*Eve*?” Roman drops to a knee beside me, his hand landing on the small of my back. “What is it?”

But I don't say anything.

For years, I looked for it. For years, I begged God to let me find it. I needed to read it. I needed to feel close to her. Even if I knew it would hurt to know her innermost thoughts, I needed them. I needed her.

And all this time, it's been here.

Why?

His eyes follow my line of sight, and he sucks in a sharp breath. “Is that—”

“Her journal,” I rasp.

With shaky hands, Roman reaches for it. “What do you want to do?” he whispers, and I swallow thickly. Lifting my teary eyes to his, I nod.

“Read it.”

4:71 Jane

Grant,

Someone in my support group told me journaling might help me work through everything going on.

I was reluctant at first, but then,

Pastor Travis called and mentioned a money issue the church is having and I couldn't bring myself to talk to you about it. Not with how pale you looked this morning.

So, I'll tell the paper you instead.

I love you,
Jane

Grant,

Today was a hard day.

The chemo isn't working, and the cancer is spreading. I'm trying to stay strong for Evie, but it's so hard. She knows something's wrong, but I just can't make myself tell her the truth.

Not Yet.

I love you,
Jane

My Love,

You're in the hospital again, but this time feels different I want to believe in miracles, but it's impossible when I feel God calling you home. I keep praying, but they keep going unanswered.

Your Sunshine,
Jane

My Grant,

Isaac and Roman came to see you today.
Isaac's doing better than he was the urges.
He said he's been praying, and God's
been helping him.

Roman is still just as closed off as he's
always been. But he's sweet to Evie.

He helped her with her homework today,
even though she didn't really need it.

She still pretended like she didn't know
how to do a math problem so he could help.

Maybe it's a crush, or maybe she just
knew he needed to do something to help her.

xoxo
Jane

We pulled the plug on you today.
It's so damn hard to be alive when you're
not here anymore, Grant. I miss you,
and every breath feels like it'll be my
last.

Can you die from a broken heart?
I know you told me to stay strong for
Evie, but I don't think I can.
I feel myself cracking at the seams.

Your Forever Sunshine,
Jane

Grant,

Pastors Travis and Deacon came over today to let me know I can't stay here with Evie any longer. It's the Preacher's house, it belongs to the church.

It's only been a month

I don't understand how God-fearing people can turn their back on a widowed mother and her ten-year-old daughter after over a decade of servitude, of community, and love.

I feel so alone, so lost.

I miss you.

I love you.

Yours,
Jane

My sweet forever love,

Isaac asked me to marry him today, and I said yes.

It wasn't romantic. It wasn't because we love each other. It's because we both know I can't make it on my own as a single mother. I need help, and he's willing to take us in. How could I turn him down when he's been so sweet to us? He's helped us mourn your death, and has helped us find a new place to live. But he knows I can't be on my own, and he knows Evie needs a dad.

He can be that for us, even if the thought of being with anyone else besides you makes me sick. I have no choice.

I'm so, so sorry, my love.

Forever and only
yours.

Jane

Grant,

Isaac's a lot rougher than you ever were.

I'm not used to it. He likes me on my hands and knees, and sometimes, he takes my other entrance, even though I ask him not to. But he likes it, and it's my duty as his wife to keep him happy.

I still struggle with it because I don't truly love him. Not the way I loved you. But I don't have a choice. This is what I signed up for when I put his ring on my finger.

Sometimes, I wish I would've said no.

Jane

Peach Pie

Not this one

Ingredients:

~~For the Pie Crust:~~

- ~~2 1/2 cups all-purpose flour~~
- ~~1/2 teaspoon salt~~
- ~~1 cup unsalted butter, cold and cubed~~
- ~~6-8 tablespoons ice water~~

For the Peach Filling:

- ~~6-7 ripe peaches, peeled, pitted, and sliced~~
- ~~1 cup granulated sugar~~
- ~~1 1/4 cup all-purpose flour~~
- ~~1 1/4 teaspoon ground cinnamon~~
- ~~1 1/4 teaspoon ground nutmeg~~
- ~~1 tablespoon lemon juice~~
- ~~1 teaspoon vanilla extract~~

The Perfect Peach Pie!

Roman didn't like the other,
but loves this one.
It's a keeper!

Ingredients:

Pie Crust

- 1 1/4 cups all-purpose flour
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 1/2 cup (1 stick) unsalted butter, cold and cubed
- 3-4 tablespoons ice water

Peach Filling

- 5 cups fresh peaches, peeled, pitted, and sliced
- 1/2 cup granulated sugar
- 1/4 cup all-purpose flour
- 1/2 teaspoon ground cinnamon
- 1 teaspoon lemon juice
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract

Instructions:

- In a food processor, combine the flour and salt. Add the cold, cubed butter and pulse until the mixture resembles coarse crumbs.
- Gradually add the ice water, one tablespoon at a time, pulsing until the dough comes together.
- Turn the dough out onto a floured surface and shape it into a disc.
- Wrap it in plastic wrap and refrigerate for at least 30 minutes.
- In a large bowl, combine the sliced peaches, granulated sugar, flour, cinnamon, lemon juice, and vanilla extract. Toss gently to coat the peaches evenly.
- Roll out the Pie Crust.
- Preheat your oven to 425°F (220°C).
- On a lightly floured surface, roll out the pie crust to fit a 9-inch pie dish.
- Place the rolled-out crust into the pie dish.
- Pour the peach filling into the pie crust, spreading it out evenly.
- Place the pie on a baking sheet (to catch any potential drips) and bake in the preheated oven for 45-50 minutes, or until the crust is golden and the filling is bubbly.
- Cool and Serve

Grant,

Last night, Isaac and I got into another argument. He called me all sorts of terrible names, and when I finally had enough and called him a coward for berating me, then he hit me.

You would've never hit me, Grant.

I was so shocked I didn't know what to do. I couldn't speak. I couldn't think. I just stared at him, and he stared back. I think it shocked him just as much as it shocked me, and he begged for my forgiveness. But I couldn't give it to him. I prayed on it, just the way you taught me, but how can I ask the Lord to help me forget all of this when it still aches and burns inside my chest?

Today, he brought me some flowers. They're gorgeous, but they don't make up for the throbbing on my cheek. I miss you.

Jane

Grant,

Today was the church's annual Fourth of July barbecue. It's my favorite holiday. I love feeling the sun on my skin, and hearing all the kids laughing. Evie swears she loves it just as much, but I think it's because she can gorge herself on hotdogs and sweet tea while we watch the fireworks.

Roman even came out of his room for a bit when they started. He sat with us on my red, white, and blue quilt. He was content to stay in the background, but Evie wouldn't let that happen. She made him sit right next to her, and he surprised us all when he agreed.

He's not a bad kid like everyone thinks. I think he's lost. Can't everyone see how sweet he is inside? Maybe I can help him find his way.

Jane

Today was a hard day. The clasp on the locket you gave me broke and I thought I'd lost it forever. I was such a wreck while I searched the house for it.

But Roman found it, and I'd never been so grateful. He said he found it between the floorboards in the kitchen. I'll make him his favorite dinner tonight as a thank you.

Jane

P.S.

I miss you so damn much, Grant.

Sometimes, it's hard to breathe because of it.

Sometimes, it's hard to look at Eve because she reminds me so much of you.

I just miss you.

Isaac hit me again.

He did it because I asked about the money. I asked because we have none.

I went to the grocery store and the card he gave me was declined. Again. I didn't say anything about it the first time because Lana swore it was a system error and gave me my groceries for free. I'd been embarrassed, but I believed her.

How could I not?

We should have money.

Isaac gets paid from the congregation fund just the way you did, and Divinity Falls is bigger than Haven, the church is bigger. There should be money.

He told me it's not my place to ask questions and I told him our family is my place. That I have a right to know where the money from your life insurance policy is.

It should be there.

He didn't like me bringing you up. He never does.

I prayed for patience and understanding, but the words were lies as I spoke them. It was worse this time, and he didn't seem as sorry. I think he's getting used to the feel of his palm on my cheek.

Jane

Isaac brought me to Atlanta for the weekend. I didn't want to come, but I didn't have a choice. It's my wifely duty.

We went to an underground casino. You know how much I hate them after everything that happened with my dad. But he brought me there, and I was shocked that everyone seemed to know him.

I was shocked we had money to be there in the first place.

How can we when we can barely afford to put food on the table?

I'm starting to think the money is disappearing into places like Atlanta. He sure loves to gamble.

When we got back to the room, I could smell the alcohol on his breath and it made me sick. I asked him about it as gently as I could, but I guess the whiskey was too strong tonight.

He hit me again, and that time, I'd had enough.

But then he blocked me from leaving the bedroom.

He raped me.

I didn't want it. He ignored me when I begged him to stop.

But I just wanted it to end, so I laid there and let him finish, then watched as he put his clothes back on and left.

I don't know where he went.

Today I saw something that broke my heart and there's not a damn thing I can do about it.

I'd been cleaning the house while the kids were in their after school programs and Isaac at the church.

Roman was supposed to be at football practice but when I went into the kids bathroom to tidy up, he was there.

He didn't notice me at first, he was too busy washing his hair in the sink. I opened my mouth to ask him why he wasn't at practice, or maybe why he wasn't just taking a shower, but then I saw the scars.

Scars. Grant. Scars.

I must have made a noise from shock and my fingers had almost touched the long red lines across the middle of his spine when he heard me. He jumped up and hid his back, but it was too late.

I asked him what happened, but I already knew. Somehow, I knew.

For the first time ever, he got angry with me. He told me not to bring it up again, to leave him alone. But I saw the panic and fear in his eyes. I don't know much about scars, but I know what abuse looks like. I know what healing looks like. Joey was the same when my dad was around and we both know how that turned out. I don't know who's hurting him but after what Isaac did to me, after the side of himself he's shown me recently, I think I know.

We're not staying here. We can't.
I refuse to let that boy hurt or feel unsafe in his own home. No more.

I just have to figure out how to get us all out safely.

Evie, Roman and me.

Hopefully you'll be there in spirit wherever we end up, keeping us safe.

I love you,
Jane

It happens almost every night now. He never looks at me, never kisses me. He likes when he can take me from behind. You never did it like that. You said you loved seeing my face. That you loved kissing me too much.

I let it happen because I don't know what else to do. For a while, I was content to let this be my life. If he was just hurting me, I could handle it.

But after seeing what I did last week, it made something inside me shift. Those scars covering Roman's back.

I know it was Isaac who gave them to him.

I've been looking into Isaac and Roman's past. I don't know why I am. Maybe it's the Lord telling me to, but something is calling me to find out more information about my husband.

Do you remember Cami? Isaac's late wife and Roman's mother? She was such a big part of their story. And even though we never met her, I still felt connected to her the way mother's do.

Anyway, I found an article about her death, and something about it is off. The journalist who wrote it thinks the same thing, too.

I might contact him.

Jane

Haven Harold

BREAKING NEWS

Devastation in Haven. Or is it? Only the Lord knows.

In a tragic turn of events on Wednesday, March 17th, Haven Georgia witnessed a devastating accident. At around 1:04 PM, a Toyota Corolla, purportedly speeding well beyond the prescribed limit of 50 mph, careened into a tree while heading southbound on interstate 65. Among the occupants were Isaac Payne, 21, Camilla Padilla, 20, and their young son, 4-year-old Roman Payne. Heartbreakingly, Camilla Padilla, who was believed to be at the wheel, succumbed to the impact. Meanwhile, Isaac Payne emerged with only minor injuries. Remarkably, despite the absence of a proper car seat, little Roman Payne miraculously suffered only minor scratches.

Evidence has confirmed that Maria was under the influence of alcohol at the time of the accident and law enforcement initially dropped the case. However, a thorough examination of the evidence casts doubt on this assumption. New information may indicate that Isaac Payne, the surviving passenger, could have been behind the wheel during the tragic incident. This revelation challenges the initial narrative surrounding the accident, shedding light on the true sequence of events but due to lack of concrete evidence and investigators in our sleepy town, the investigation has gone cold.



IF YOU HAVE ANY
DETAILS PLEASE
CONTACT PAUL
TOLEDO AT HAVEN
HAROLD

A week ago, I emailed the journalist who wrote the article about Camilla's death and today, I finally heard back. He's no longer a journalist in Haven, but he remembered us. He said there weren't any skid marks on the ground like there should be in an accident when someone doesn't want to crash. That it can happen when someone falls asleep at the wheel or is too intoxicated to know what's happening. He told me about one investigator who questioned Cami's body, the marks from the seatbelt, the position of her injuries. They think Isaac was driving, Grant. They think he was drunk driving, and crashed the car before switching seats with Cami. He said that because Haven was so small at the time and our police force wasn't built to handle accidents like that, it just disappeared. He said no one would question a grieving father who just lost the love of his life. And why would they? We didn't. I'm scared, Grant. He's hit me, abused me, raped me, but I've never been as scared as I am now. I'm scared for our kids. I'm scared for our family. I have to get them out. Please, please look out for us, baby. Please keep us safe.

Grant,

I'm taking the kids and leaving. Knowing everything Isaac's done, the speculation about Cami, the way he's hurting me...

It's too much.

I've already bought our bus tickets, three of them. One for Evie, one for me, and one for Roman.

We're going to Oregon to stay with Great Aunt Charlie. I talked to her on the phone, and she sounds well. She misses you lots, too.

I see the light, Grant.

Finally. I see it.

Your Sunshine,

Jane

Packing List

All of us:

- Clothes
- Toiletries

Me:

- ID
- Charger
- Glasses
- My leather bag/camera
- Journals
- Grant's Bible
- Bus tickets

Eric:

- Camera
- Favorite sundress
- Box of Grant's things
- Map from Grant

Roman:

- Sketchbook
- Leather bracelet
- (usually on his nightstand when he has practice)
- The books by his bed
- Don't forget his favorite book!
- Snacks
- Art school application

Grant,

I'm shipping all the things we can't travel with to Mama today while Isaac's at the conference. She's keeping it in her storage unit for us. I'm sending this journal so it doesn't get lost. The moving company will ship everything back to us once we finally get settled in Oregon.

I'm so thankful for your great aunt Charlie. She's been incredible during this whole situation. She thinks she's found the cutest little three bedroom on the coast for us. It's not much, but there's a field of sunflowers she thinks Evie will love and it's near the art school for Roman.

We leave in three days. I'm really excited.

I think this will be our new start.

We'll talk again soon, Grant.

I miss you.

I love you.

Your Forever Sunshine,

Jane

JANE'S CLOUD

4.72 Roman

My shaky hands grip Eve's shoulders, probably too tight. I loosen my hold, not wanting to hurt her, but I can't let go. Can't stop touching her. Ever since we saw the login for Jane's cloud, I've been reeling.

Everything she wrote.

Everything she went through.

I had no idea she'd been hurt—*traumatized*—at the hands of my father. But I should've known.

He's a monster.

Eve hasn't said a word about it, about the similarities of her and her mother's stories. And I won't push. I won't make her talk about it before she's ready.

My eyes fill with tears as I watch Eve type, then retype the password for the cloud in. "It's okay," I murmur, sliding my hands down her arms. She doesn't say anything as she takes a deep breath and clicks *login*.

“We don’t have to do this,” I remind her, but she ignores me. The low murmur of voices seems too loud as we hold our breath, waiting for the site in this internet cafe to load.

We didn’t know where else to go, seeing as we’re in a strange town with nothing but a few days’ worth of clothes. We didn’t bring a laptop, just our phones, but we felt like we needed to see whatever this was on a bigger screen, and we couldn’t wait.

Suddenly, file after file fills the page. I can barely take it all in. It’s overwhelming seeing all the things she saved. All the things she thought were important.

The cursor hovers over each file as Eve scans them, softly reading the titles to herself.

Haven news.

Journalist contact info.

Oregon address.

Photos.

Videos.

Texts.

Emails.

“This is her phone,” I breathe. “Everything that was on it, is here.”

“How?” Eve whispers, still staring at the screen wide-eyed.

“She backed it all up. Saved it to the cloud. Jesus Christ.” I shove my hand through my hair. Was she *this* scared that she

felt the need to do this? To go to such lengths to make sure nothing was lost?

To make sure nothing was found?

“Maybe we shouldn’t look at this, Goldie,” I mutter, but she shakes her head. “It’s private—”

“Her journal was private too,” she snaps, and my brows lift. I know she’s overwhelmed and tired, that she’s emotionally exhausted. And right now, I just want to wrap her up. I want to protect her from the pain I know she’s about to unravel. All the years of mourning, of trying to heal from her mother’s sudden death is about to come back like a tsunami of emotions, and I can’t do a damn thing about it. “I have to know.”

Leaning forward, I press a kiss to the top of her head. “Alright, baby.” She takes a shuddering breath as she clicks the photos file. A broken sob leaves her, and she covers her mouth with her hand as we stare at the last photos Jane ever took.

One is of Eve by the lake, her hands on either side of her head as she sticks her tongue out. And there I am. Right in the background, a small smile on my face as I watch her. I can almost hear Jane reprimand her, telling her to not be so silly. To just take a pretty picture.

But all Eve’s pictures are pretty, I remember thinking to myself. Even the silly ones.

We skim them, laughing as we go down memory lane. Some from my football games, some of Eve at church, Isaac

preaching, days spent by the lake. She opens an old photo of her and Jane, their cheeks pressed together as Eve takes a selfie of them. She couldn't have been older than fourteen.

“Oh God,” she groans. “My braces!”

“You looked so cute,” I tease, and she shoots me a look over her shoulder.

“You had braces, too,” she reminds me, and I wink at her.

“Good thing I didn't have them when I kissed you under the dock, huh? They might've gotten stuck.” She snorts, shaking her head as she turns her attention back to the screen.

Exiting the photos, she hovers over the video one. Our smiles slowly disappear as she stares at it. “Should we?” She glances up at me again, and I hesitate.

Can we handle that? Seeing Jane move around, hear her voice? It would be like watching her live again, and I don't know if her heart can take it.

If mine can take it.

But I see the glimmer in Eve's eyes, the one that tells me she wants this. Roughly clearing my throat, I nod.

She needs this.

“Might as well.”

And even if it'll tear me apart to see the only mother I've ever known alive again, she clicks the file.

Similar to the file of photos, it's full of *us*. Of Eve and me over the years. Of our family. Of the church.

Of our life.

There's a video at the top, the most recent one, and my stomach drops. The still image is of the ceiling. Why would it be that?

Then I look at the date, and dread coils tightly inside me.

"Click on it," I mutter. The cursor shakes as Eve's hand drags up, double clicking on the video.

Sounds of Jane moving around fill the speakers, and Eve lets out another broken sob. "*Mama,*" she breathes, her voice so small, so fragile. She runs her fingers over the cool computer screen as Jane's face comes into view.

"Is this thing even on?" Jane mutters to herself, and my throat tightens at the sound of her voice. It's a voice I didn't think I'd ever hear again. A voice I thought was lost forever.

But here it is, pouring through the speakers as if she's standing right in front of us.

I see the worry and exhaustion in her weary eyes, like the weight of the whole world was on her thin shoulders. Living the life she had, dealing with Isaac, was a burden too heavy for her to carry alone.

Yet, she did.

She forced a smile on her face every day and made sure her daughter had one, too. She never made Eve want for anything, never made her live in the shadows. She always made sure Eve was front and center, her golden light shining bright. She never let anyone know of the turmoil, of the ugly, searing pain

slashing through her as she mourned for her late husband, and was abused by her current one.

I should've seen it.

I should've noticed the darkness in her that matched my own. It's a darkness only my father can build, one he births in those around him. It's one I might've come into this world with, but it's one that bloomed in Jane and Eve because of *him*.

As I stare at her, my own mother flashes through my mind, the same expression on her sunken face. Lines creased her too-young skin, her eyes were too heavy—she'd seen too much. Been through too much.

Did my father put her through the same things? Did she endure the same pain as Jane? As Eve?

A sob breaks through as I think about my mother, the one I never got to know because...

Because she was taken from me too soon.

Was it his fault, like Jane's journal theorized? Or was it really an accident?

Those moments have always been blurry, a mix of what I think happened and what Isaac's always told me. But what's the truth?

The air around us seems to crackle with our mixed pain. In this moment, we're connected by the loss of our mothers, by the pain of wanting to be held by them, just one more time.

Unlike Eve, I don't remember what my mother's arms felt like. I don't remember the way she smelled, or the way her laugh sounded.

But I remember her eyes, the same as my own.

I remember her smile.

And that's it.

That's all I have left.

"I have my stuff packed," Jane says, and I blink, refocusing on the screen, swallowing the onslaught of unwanted emotions. "I'm about to pack your clothes, Evie." Eve makes a choking sound, and my fingers flex on her shoulders.

Jane pans the camera across the bed, showing her suitcase, and a stack of things beside it. I scan everything, taking in Eve's bag, the bulge in it telling me Jane didn't forget the camera.

"I'll grab your map, too," Jane mutters, mostly to herself. I sniff hard at the words, at the way she was so observant, so caring that she remembered something as simple as Eve's map. The thing she's treasured her entire life.

Flashes of it shredded and discarded on the floor of her desecrated bedroom flit through my mind, and I squeeze my eyes shut, trying to breathe through it.

Fuck.

As she turns the camera back toward herself, a bright smile is on her face. Despite everything, her eyes sparkle with a

genuine happiness only she and her daughter could ever possess.

A mix of emotions swirl inside me at the sight. It's a testament to her resilience, the strength that coursed through her veins. It's the same strength that courses through her daughters, too.

And it's then I realize how much Eve is like her mother, and how fucking lucky I am to have known either of them.

"This is gonna be so good for us," she murmurs. "A fresh start."

She turns the camera back toward the bed, showing us a final view of everything. "Let's see," she breathes to herself. "Book. Camera. What am I missing? Oh!" She whirls, the screen a blur of her bedroom. "Bus tickets. Can't forget those."

My throat tightens until it's impossible to swallow. I know in the journal she said she was going to take me, too. But she didn't mean it. At this moment, with her packing and ready to flee, I know she just wanted to get away from Isaac. And I don't blame her for not bringing me along. She was protecting Eve, and that's good enough for me.

Eve came first. That's how it was always supposed to be. I come later, or not at all.

"Don't think I forgot about you, Ro," she murmurs, and my breath catches.

What?

“Here they are,” she breathes, lifting them. The tickets come into focus on the screen. *Jane Meyer* is clearly stamped on the paper in bold letters. She flips to the next one, my vision blurring as I read Eve’s full name. *Evelyn Meyer*. “Here’s yours, Evie.” She drops the ticket, and then...

And then, right there in black and white are two words.

Roman.

Payne.

She was going to take me.

She remembered me.

Someone chose me.

Someone...

Someone wanted me.

Time freezes as I stare at it, at the evidence that she wasn’t going to leave me behind. That she wasn’t going to abandon me. That she hadn’t forgotten about me.

It’s not just ink on paper. It’s a lifeline, a promise.

She remembered me.

It’s not just my name.

It’s proof that I was chosen.

That I was wanted.

That I was loved.

The realization washes over me in a brutal wave, a sob shoving its way out of my throat and into the still air around

me. Salty tears flow freely down my cheeks, dripping to my shirt and soaking through the fabric.

“I’ve got your book, too.” She turns the camera toward her dresser, and right there atop it is my worn-out copy of *The Brothers Karamazov*. “We need to get you a new copy. This one is so beat up.”

I choke on the emotions drowning me.

She remembered me.

She wasn’t going to leave me.

Someone remembered I existed.

“Y’all are gonna love Oregon,” she says brightly, turning the camera back to her smiling face. “Evie, wait until you see those beaches. I know you’ll spend all your time out there taking photos. And Ro.” I jolt at the sound of my name on her lips, and bat at my teary eyes. “I found an art school you’re gonna love. It’s the best in the state and only a few miles from our new home. And Evie, they have a photography program, so you can go to school together again in a few years.”

“She thought of everything,” Eve rasps, looking up at me, tears streaking her cheeks. “*Everything.*”

I know she means me. That her mother thought of *me*.

“There’s this little bookstore you could apply to work at, Ro,” Jane continues, her face softening. “You’ll be right at home there.”

She really did think of everything.

She noticed everything.

“Alright.” She takes a deep breath and slowly lets it out, as if she’s expelling the demons my father forced into her. “Y’all ready?”

I expect the video to end right then, but it doesn’t. Instead, every frame is shaky, like she thought she stopped recording but didn’t press the button.

A soft grunt spills from the speakers, and we watch as she grabs her suitcase before the screen goes black. The video is still on and we hear Jane’s muffled curses.

If you can call her saying, “Crap,” and “Damn it,” cursing.

I smile to myself, knowing for her, it was a big deal. The words sound wrong coming from her heavily accented voice.

Her footsteps are soft against the worn slats of that old Divinity house. My stomach coils with unknown dread. Why is it still going? What happens?

“Should we shut it off?” I breathe, but Eve shakes her head.

“Not yet.”

I don’t know why a bad feeling is creeping up my spine, like we’re seeing something we shouldn’t be. But I can’t look away. I need to know what happens next.

Then a voice so dark, so deep hits me through the speakers and I stumble a step back, my fingers still tight on Eve’s shoulders.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Isaac’s harsh voice slashes through me, and I shake my head.

No.

This isn’t...

It can’t be...

Jane gasps, her phone slipping from her fingertips and thudding on the ground beside her fallen suitcase. “Isaac,” she breathes. “What are you doing home? I thought you were at the conference.”

“Clearly,” he mutters. “I came home early.” There’s a shuffle, a barely there footstep that has my heart racing. “You didn’t answer my question.”

Another step, another shuffle.

The hem of Jane’s dress comes into view, and Eve whimpers, her body lurching as if she’s wondering the same thing I am.

“I—I can’t do this anymore,” Jane chokes out. “I’m taking the kids. We’re leaving.”

A dark laugh rumbles from my father, and I feel it down to my core. It’s one I’ve heard so many fucking times right before he beat the shit out of me.

“You’re not going anywhere.”

No.

No, no, no.

“Eve,” I rasp. “Turn it off.” But she ignores me, her body trembling as she watches the screen.

“I know what you did to Camilla,” Jane says, her voice strong.

“Mama,” Eve pleads, but her mother can’t hear her.

Tension seeps from the computer and wraps around us, squeezing all the air from my lungs.

No.

Please.

“If you know what I did to Cami, then why the fuck are you being this stupid?”

My stomach drops at the dip of his voice, the quiet anger lacing his words. I shake my head, my mouth opening and closing to beg Eve to shut it off, to stop watching before we see something we can never recover from.

There’s another soft footstep, the sound so at odds with the man it belongs to.

“I—Isaac,” Jane stammers. “The kids—” Her dress sways as she shuffles back another step. “They’ll be home any second.”

His shadow looms over the camera, and Eve whimpers. I want to rip the cord out of the fucking socket, but I can’t make myself move. It’s like watching a train wreck, I can’t look away.

“Just let us go,” Jane pleads.

“I can’t do that,” Isaac drawls.

Jane stumbles back another step, then another until she's out of view. A muffled thud echoes like a bomb, and I know she's backed against the wall.

No.

“There's nowhere for you to run, sweetheart.”

Eve chokes, jolting forward as if she can claw her way through the screen into the past and protect her mother.

“Please,” Jane begs, but it falls on deaf ears.

“Fuck,” my father groans, and acidic bile rises in my throat. “I've always loved the way you beg.”

Shoes scrape against wood, then she's running. My heart leaps as the sound of her feet hitting the stairs flits through the speakers.

Isaac's body shoots forward, and it's the first time I get a full view of my father on this video. A terror-filled scream rips out of her as her long blonde hair is wrapped around Isaac's fist and she's jerked back before colliding with the solid ground.

No.

No.

Please.

Isaac looms over her, the sight sending me spiraling into the basement when he looked down on me exactly like this. Goosebumps ripple across my tattooed arms, and I try to swallow the dryness in my mouth.

“Oh, God!” A broken sob leaves Jane. “I’m bleeding. Please, help me.”

But he doesn’t move to do anything.

He just stands above her, watching. I stare up at the face of the Devil as his dark eyes move the direction of the door. Once. Twice.

He kneels beside her, his face coming into clear view, and the broken sound of Jane thanking him slices through my heart.

I know how this ends.

Slowly, he reaches down, his face blank, emotionless. Just like it always was when he took me to the basement.

Then I look into his eyes, and—

And they’re black.

Soulless.

Jane groans as he lifts her in his arms, her bloody hair taking up most of the screen. Dread coils in my stomach and the room spins around me. My hands tighten on Eve’s shoulders as I shake my head.

“Eve,” I croak. “Turn—”

Isaac slams Jane onto the ground, and a *crack* reverberates through my fucking body.

“Mama!” Eve cries, her hand moving to the screen.

She jumps from the chair, her back ramrod straight as it collides with my hips. I grunt out a breath and she rushes past

me. As she leaves my line of sight, I see it.

I see him.

Kneeling above Jane's body, the smallest, barely there smirk graces his lips and it sends me over the edge.

Reaching down, I grip the cord and rip it from the fucking wall, ignoring everyone's stares and murmurs as they watch me storm from the building, chasing after my Goldie.

I get outside in time to see her bend over a trash can and empty all the contents of her stomach into it. Tears choke me as I make my way to her, gently gathering her golden locks in my hands.

She heaves and heaves until nothing else comes out. Staying bent over the bin, she shakes her head. "He—he—"

"I know."

She's trembling as I wrap my arms around her and lead her to the truck. Helping her in, I press a kiss to her temple before shutting her door and moving around it. Sliding into the driver's seat, I grip the steering wheel and dip my head, my eyes squeezing shut.

My fingers flex against the sun-warmed, cracked leather. I try to breathe through the emotions rolling inside me, but it's nearly fucking impossible.

He killed her.

He killed her.

He killed her.

I feel Eve shift in her seat, turning toward me. But when she speaks, it's the last words I ever expected to hear from her.

"I'm going to fucking kill him," she mutters, her voice a deadly promise. My brows pinch together as I shake my head. Those words, that voice, sound wrong coming from her.

Not right.

Not right.

Not right.

"Take me to Divinity," she demands, her voice just as solid as before.

Fear settles in my soul at the thought of her anywhere near him. I can barely breathe as I shake my head again, my hair swaying with the movement.

A breath chokes out of me as I slide my gaze to her. "*No.*"

4.73 Eve

N^o.
What does he mean, no?

My jaw drops, my mouth dry even as bile continues to pool in my throat.

All I hear is the sound of my mother's head hitting the same floors I walked on for years. The reverberation of her skull colliding with the harsh surface I've danced over. The way she begged on the same stairs where he, where I...

Crack.

I slap a hand to my mouth and breathe through the need to vomit again. Tears are streaming down my face and I think my head is shaking. I might be speaking, might be begging, just like Mama, but I can't think past the sound.

No.

No.

No.

I don't understand. We have to go back. We have to confront him. He can't get away with this. He can't. He can't. He—

Crack.

“Why?” I rasp, my hand falling limply onto my lap as I turn to him. His hands are flexing around the steering wheel, the leather creaking under his palms, but he doesn't look at me, doesn't answer me. He just keeps shaking his head. “Why won't you take me, Roman? He killed my mother.”

My mother.

He killed my mother.

Crack.

“Mine too,” he whispers, the words so low I barely hear them over the sound of my heart pounding in my ears and the echo of my mom's death. “He killed my mom.”

Crack.

I choke on my next breath as reality slowly starts to sink in around me. He killed our mothers. Both of them. Cami, then my mom. He abused her, raped her, kept her in Divinity when she wanted to leave.

And then...

And then...

And then he did the same thing to me.

I try to process through all the information Mama kept, but it's so hard. The letters to Daddy, the bus tickets, Auntie Charlie, the articles. There's so much, too much.

Crack.

Visions of Isaac's smiling face as he talks himself out of this entire fucked up situation fill me until it's all I can think about. He'll do it, I know he will. He already got away with killing two women, with abusing them, with rape.

What else has he done? What else has he thrown his charming smile at and gotten away with? His money, his clout, his reputation—it's all a mask and as the pieces click into place, it starts to crumble.

I need to see it turn to ash at his feet.

Crack.

"Why?" I shout, my hands slapping against my thighs as another choked sound spills from deep in my gut. The world is spinning, my reality shifting—everything I thought I knew is a lie. "I can't just sit here and let him get away with it. I can't. I need to hear him say it, Ro! I need to hear him admit to everything he's done!"

I turn to him then, finding his knuckles white as he clings to the wheel, his back hunched, his head shaking. He's whispering words I can't make out and I try, I really do, but the world keeps spinning and it won't stop, won't stop, won't...

"Roman!" I cry. "We have to go. If we leave now, we can make it to Divinity before traffic hits." My heart is beating so fast, I can hardly breathe now. I squeeze my eyes shut and

scrub at them and then scream when I see Mama's pretty golden hair covered in blood.

"Stop." I think I hear him say it, but...

Blood.

So much blood.

"Stop."

He didn't listen when she begged, didn't listen when she told him to stop, when she asked him to get help, to....

"Stop!"

My mouth snaps shut and I realize I'd been screaming this entire time. The world finally stops spinning and everything comes back into focus. The truck, the busy downtown street, the sun setting and...

Roman.

His entire body is shaking, his skin pale, his eyes clenched tightly as he pants one word again and again...

"Stop, stop, stop..."

And beneath that, my love, my brave, strong Roman, is choking as he struggles to find air. My heart thuds for a whole new reason and I reach out a shaky hand, needing to check on him, to remind him I'm here. I was lost for a minute, but I'm here. I'll always be here, with him.

My fingers gently land on his bowed back, and he sucks in a sharp breath as he jerks away. His wide eyes, darker than usual, land on me, red-rimmed and laced with anguish as his

spine collides with the door. His hands are up as though he was afraid I was going to, going to...

His eyes flit between mine, seeing, but not, as silent tears stream down his devastated face.

“Ro?”

He doesn't say anything.

“Roman. It's me.”

Still nothing.

I go to reach for him again, my own tears blurring my vision. I move slow, so fucking slow, but he still presses against the harsh metal behind him. A sound so broken, so heartbreaking, spills from his lips, reminding me of a wounded animal.

“Ro,” I choke out, feeling helpless. “Baby, it's me. It's Eve, your Goldie. It's me. I'm here. We're in the truck. I'm here.”

I just keep repeating the words, my voice soft and quiet, the same way he'd spoken to me when I was broken and in his bed all those weeks ago. When I didn't know what day it was, and could barely find the energy to breathe, to eat, to exist.

He was there then, and I'm here now.

“It's Eve,” I repeat, but he still says nothing, still looks at me like he's never seen me before, so I do the only thing I can think of—I do what he did for me.

I become the sunshine while he disappears into darkness.

“*Here comes the sun,*” I whisper, my voice raw. I can't sing, not like him, but I can try. I'll always try. “*Here comes the*

sun.” I swallow roughly and he blinks rapidly, clearing his vision. “*Little darlin’, it’s been a long, cold, lonely winter.*”

He shakes his head, his gaze finally meeting mine. “He smirked,” he breathes, and my heart stops. “His eyes—” He runs his hand over his face, but his tears don’t quit. “His eyes were the same—”

He’s muttering now, words that are a jumbled, nonsensical mess, and my brows furrow. I take a deep breath and lean forward. “What are you talking about, Ro?”

His entire body is trembling uncontrollably as he continues to whisper, and my hands ball into fists on my lap. I want to touch him, need to hold him, but I know he won’t want that, not right now.

“His eyes were black. That’s how they used to look in the basement.”

I stare at him, beyond confused. “What happened in the basement?”

Something in my question finally gets his attention and his eyes snap to mine, clearer than they’d been just seconds ago. His Adam’s apple bobs and he breathes slowly, deeply, as he settles into his seat, his shoulders dropping.

“Eve,” he whispers.

With a snuffle, my head bobs. “Yeah, Ro?”

His hand tentatively slides out in the space between us, and he offers me his pinky. My shaking finger wraps around his

and I lock onto it like the lifeline it is.

“I have to tell you a story, Goldie.” His voice is hollow now, like he’s already empty from the words that are about to be purged from somewhere deep inside his soul.

My lip lifts in the corner in an attempt to reassure him. I tighten my pinky around his and whisper, “I’ve always loved your stories.”

He gives me a sad look. “Not this one.”

I hear the truth in his voice and I brace myself. I turn my hand, threading my fingers with his. “That’s okay,” I promise. “I’ll listen anyway.”

His jaw ticks, and he looks down, his eyes locking on our threaded fingers. “I was five the first time my father hit me.” A choking sound builds in my throat, but I swallow it down and squeeze his hand tighter. “At the time, I didn’t know why it was happening. I just remember being at church one Sunday, we were still new in Divinity. It’d only been a few months since we moved out of your house in Haven and—” he breaks off, swallowing roughly and I let my thumb glide over his palm.

Roman shakes his head. “I remember being in church and all I wanted to do was read my new book. It was from your mom,” he rasps. “She always used to—”

“She used to let us read in church,” I whisper, and he nods.

“Anyway,” he breathes. “I was reading and everything was fine and then, we got home and he...he was so mad. I’ll never

forget what he said when he pushed me through the front door. I stumbled over my feet and landed on my knees and he said, *'Stay down there. Sinners belong on their knees so they can pray for forgiveness'.*”

He scoffs, running his fingers through his hair and I'm hit with the terrifying realization that the things Isaac said, the things he made me do, aren't all that different from what he did to Roman, to my mother.

“I didn't know what I'd done wrong or why I had to pray and when I asked, he simply said, *'You embarrassed me today'*. He was so fucking pissed off that I'd been reading and some old lady next to me had noticed I wasn't paying attention that he backhanded me. When my bloody nose dripped on the carpet, he made me clean it up. But no matter what I did, the stain wouldn't come out.”

He opens his free hand, staring at his palm like he's looking at a picture, and shakes his head again. “The stain will *never* come out.”

“Ro,” I murmur, my voice cracking. “I—”

He looks up at me and gives me a look so full of love and sadness that my lips fold between my teeth to keep in another sob. “It's okay,” he says, and I instantly feel horrible that he's trying to reassure me. “It's over now, but just let me say it. I need you to know. I need you to understand.”

I watch his tears continue to spill down his cheek and nod, silently promising to keep my mouth shut until he's done. To absorb his devastation, his broken pieces. To take them for

myself, to carry some of his burden. I'd take it all if I could. I'd take it all and then do everything in my power to make sure he never hurts again.

I'd do that and so much more.

I squeeze his hand, and he continues, his eyes never leaving mine.

“After that, he started bringing me down to the basement. He called them my *lessons*. He made me stay on my knees and pray until I learned to be better, to be obedient. To *repent*.” He spits the last word and my heart sinks as the vision fills my mind.

A tiny, innocent version of the sweet, kind man before me, in a cold, dirty basement, repenting for sins he didn't know existed before he was even old enough to understand what cruelty truly is.

“When I was around eight, he started using the rice.” A heavy silence hangs between as I work through the angry swirl of emotions ripping me apart.

Rice.

The rice.

The same rice I once was forced to kneel on. But it wasn't the same for me, not at all. Roman was...

“*You were a baby!*” I choke out, wrapping my hand around my mouth to keep my words, my reaction in, but it's no use. “You were innocent, Ro. It wasn't your fault.”

“I know,” he agrees. “It took me a long time to realize that, but I know it now. I didn’t deserve the punishments or lessons. That didn’t stop them from happening, though, and it didn’t save me from the scars.”

The scars.

Scars.

The word triggers another memory in my chaotic mind. One of my mom’s journal entries where she mentioned seeing scars on Ro when he was a teenager. I think back, trying to remember the date, the details, but it’s all so hazy, the words bleeding together with the rest of what we saw.

“Where?” I whisper. “How didn’t I know?”

His head tilts to the side, and he gives me a look like he’s pleading with me to fill in the gaps so he doesn’t have to.

My eyes flutter closed as I breathe through it all, sorting through our childhood, the years we spent together before everything fell apart.

But it was already broken.

He never came outside to swim with us. Never took his shirt off. Never left his bedroom or that damn window seat. He hid in plain sight and Isaac...Isaac got to live while Roman was forced to merely exist. He had to stay tucked away, pretending his world wasn’t a mess of ash and darkness while we, while *I*, got to dance in the sunlight.

And that night...the night we fell into each other for comfort, for escape, for love, I didn’t touch him. I didn’t get a

chance before he pinned my hands above my head as he made love to me. Now his back is covered in dark tattoos, obscuring everything beneath them.

Before I can say anything, he goes on.

He tells me about how the abuse accelerated. How Isaac used the cat-o-nine tails on him while he made him recite different prayers, asking God for forgiveness. He tells me how the abuse stopped for a short time when we moved in, but started up again when Roman began to act out.

He tells me he used to light fires. Nothing crazy, nothing big or too destructive, but just enough so he didn't constantly feel like he was burning up inside, waiting to disappear once and for all.

He tells me how when he felt that way and couldn't burn things, he asked me to read with him.

Every word, every admission, kills me a little more, until I feel like I'm the one ready to explode, to disappear.

“I'm so sor—”

He reaches up and presses a finger to my lips, silencing me. “I know,” he says again, choking on a quiet sob he never lets out. “I know you are, baby.”

My lungs are constricting, my heart breaking and my soul—my fucking *soul* is shattering for him.

“Isaac does this to people, Eve,” he rasps. “He breaks things. He cuts and hits and destroys. He forces others into a box, makes them become what he wants, what he needs, until they

break so hard, they can never be put back together. And then, he puts a bandaid on the hurt and calls it God.”

The power of those words hits me like a wrecking ball. The truth behind them, the reality of them. It’s just so hard to wrap my mind around it all, even now.

It’s like Isaac is two people. The one who held my hand while I broke over Mama’s death, who protected me from the world and loved me through my heartache. And the one who caused the tears. The one who broke my heart. The one who offered me a world of his creation, molded and shaped to his specifications, and then took it all away before I could even look around.

Roman must sense my confusion, the way my head is frantically trying to wrap around this new reality that’s been thrown at me, at us, because he brushes the new waves of tears off my cheeks and gives me a soft smile through his own sadness.

“But—” I bite my cheek, begging a God I don’t believe in to make all of this go away. To make it all some sort of sick dream. “But *why?*”

“He’s a narcissist, Goldie,” he whispers. “A sociopath and a narcissist. There’s no explaining or rationalizing his behavior. He uses people, he abuses people, he breaks people. There is no other way around it.”

“I should have seen it,” I try again, guilt consuming me. “I could have, should have—” I let him go, my hands flailing through the air. Mama was hurting, was being raped and

abused, and I didn't see it. Roman was being tortured, destroyed by the man I thought I loved, and I didn't stop it.

I didn't stop it.

I...

“*Oh my God!*” I cry, my body shaking so hard, my teeth start to clack together. I think I'm going to be sick again. I *slept* with him. “Roman!” I meet his eyes, so utterly disgusted with myself I can't even think straight. “You were *there!* You saw what I was doing. You knew I was *with* him after everything he did to you and you—”

“I'm so fucking sorry, Eve.” He breaks through my frantic spiral and his apology has my jaw snapping shut. Roman wipes his tears away. “I'm so sorry I didn't stop it. I swear on my life, I never would have left if I ever thought there was a chance he'd hurt you. He was always so fucking sweet to you, to Jane, to the entire goddamned town. It was always just me. Only me that he hated. I didn't think he'd hurt you or I would have forced you to leave with me.”

My throat bobs at his admission, but I'm already shaking my head. “Ro...” I start. That isn't what I meant. Not at all.

“No,” he cuts in again. “You have to know. As soon as I found out about the camming, I wanted to come home. I knew there had to be a reason you were doing it, but I just kept telling myself that you were an adult, that you were free to make your own choices. But that day I saw you in Savannah, I decided I didn't care anymore. You could keep making your own choices, but I was coming back to keep you safe. To

make sure you were the one who wanted it. To make sure—” He grits his teeth, his jaw ticking as he swallows down his tears. “To make sure you weren’t being forced.”

“You came back to keep me safe,” I whimper, the inside of the truck spinning. “And you had to listen as he and I did what we did. *God*, Roman, you had to *see* it. He hurt you, abused you, and you had to bear witness to it all. You stayed even though it had to have been killing you. I’m so fucking sorry.”

He stares at me for a long moment before finally, *finally*, his body deflates, and he lets himself break. Heaving sobs wrack his body and he folds in on himself, somehow looking just like the little boy who never even stood a chance.

Today, I heard my mom’s last words. I heard her plans for freedom, her excitement, and then, I heard as she begged Isaac to save her before watching her bleed out...watching her be *murdered*.

Seeing those things, hearing them, will always be one of the most painful things I’ll ever experience.

But this? It’s too much.

Hearing about the man that I am irrevocably in love with breaking this way, has something inside me splintering and I don’t think I’ll ever be able to fix it.

My hand slowly moves toward him, but I freeze, my fingers hovering in the space between us. “Can I touch you, baby?”

He blinks at me, his face still a mask of pure devastation, and chokes out, “*Goldie*.”

I swallow a sob and crawl into his lap, straddling him. Without pause, I pull his face into my chest, and there, in the middle of a town I don't know, while strangers pass us on the sidewalk outside of an internet cafe, the love of my life and I shatter.

I don't know how much time passes, but when we finally collect ourselves, I cover his sweet face in kisses, loving away his sadness the same way he did for me.

Roman turns his head, his lips finding mine in a slow, languid kiss meant to reassure, to remind us we're both alive, we're both still here.

“What do we do now?” I whisper, leaning my forehead against his.

His hands flex against my hips. “It's getting late. We go back to the hotel, you let me hold you and in the morning, we'll go to the police and show them everything we have.”

I pull away, looking at him while my heart thunders in my chest. “Roman,” I breathe. “If we do that, then he gets off easy. If we do that—”

“I said no, Goldie,” he interrupts, shaking his head. “You're not going anywhere near him. I don't trust him, never have and now, more than ever.” He bites his lip, breathing slowly. “It's not safe. We need to let the cops handle him. He's...” He swallows. “He's a killer.”

I want to argue, but I see what he's hiding behind the protests, the reasons—true, unshakable fear. He's terrified to

confront Isaac, to see him, to stand up to him.

With a deep breath, I nod my head and kiss his lips once more. Roman has always been my strength. He's always led me, carried me, held me.

This time...

This time I'll carry us both.

"Okay, baby," I agree. "Okay."

* * *

Hours later, I unwrap myself from his naked body and quietly climb from the bed in our small hotel room. I dress without a sound and leave him a note I know he'll hate me for. I kiss his forehead and silently promise to fix this. To fix it all.

For him.

For Roman.

The man who never got a chance to be a boy.

The child who never had a chance to know his mother—to know the love of a parent.

I'll fix it, then I'll make the sick fuck who broke us pay.

Persecution

**I will send them prophets and apostles, some of whom they will
kill and others they will persecute. - Luke 11:49**

4:74 Eve

Hands flexing around the worn leather of the steering wheel, I stare up at the dark house. I shift my fingers for the first time in hours, the joints cracking from disuse. My gaze flits to my phone lying on the seat beside me, and not for the first time, guilt swirls inside my chest.

I should turn it back on. I should let him know I'm okay.

But I can't.

Not yet.

Not until I do what I've come here to do.

The first rays of dawn are ready to kiss the sky, and the world around me holds its breath as if it knows what's about to happen.

It's early.

For hours, I drove, and I had only one thing on my mind—*Isaac*.

Killing him.

Hurting him the way he hurt my Roman.

Somewhere on the long drive, my tears dried and my shock, my aching sadness for the boy who never had a chance, shifted into something fiery. Something full of so much fury, I think I could raze the world to the ground.

No. I *know* I could.

And I'm about to.

For all the pain he endured. For all the whips, the blood, the tears, the scripture. For everything.

Isaac needs to pay for what he's done. And I'm willing to die, to lay my life at his feet if it means vengeance for Roman.

For Mama.

For Cami.

For myself.

Fallen leaves crunch under my feet as I stalk toward the house, up the rickety stairs of the porch, and to the splintered front door. I've done this so many times, walked this exact path for years, but today it feels different.

The last time I was here, I was violated so brutally I didn't think I'd ever recover. And I haven't. Not fully.

But I think this might be the first step.

The doorknob is cold under my hand as I twist it. Unlocked, just like it always is.

He's too trusting.

Too arrogant.

Too cocky.

He thinks he can get away with everything he's done and still live in an unlocked house. Still live a peaceful existence.

Too stupid.

Silence greets me as I step inside, the cool air brushing against my face. The soft click of the door shutting behind me is the only sound in the house.

Then I notice it all.

The destruction.

The mess.

The filth.

This is how he's living?

Good.

He doesn't deserve to live in a nice place, a safe place. He deserves to live in a shithole, a place where he's drowning in his lack of control.

Stepping forward, my gaze shifts and lands on the stairs that lead to his bedroom. He's asleep. He has no idea I'm here.

I could go up there and do whatever I wanted, whatever I needed to give Roman the peace he desperately deserves.

But I don't move. I can't.

My eyes stay glued to the spot where my mother died. Where she was murdered.

Emotion burns the back of my nose, but I sniff it away, refusing to let myself spiral. But then I glance at the bookshelf in front of the basement door and my heart sinks. Knowing what's behind it, what trauma that room holds, has my blood turning to ice.

No matter how hard I try, I can't tear my eyes away.

How could he do that? Roman was just a little boy. A baby.

And Isaac was a grown man.

Coward.

“Good morning, sweetheart.”

A scream flies from me and I whirl toward the dark kitchen, my hand pressed to the center of my chest. My heart thunders beneath, my eyes wide as I search for him.

“Holy shit,” I breathe, finding him sitting at the kitchen table. His profile is stark in the darkness, the faintest hint of the bruised sky spilling in from the kitchen window highlighting his features.

“Is that any way to greet your Lord?” he murmurs, his voice slurred. My mouth goes dry at his words, at his tone. “Finally crawling back home to me?”

Gripping a bottle by the neck, he tips his head back, his throat bobbing as he swallows mouthful after mouthful of dark liquid. He slams it back on the table, the sound reverberating throughout the house and making me jolt.

Suddenly, he shoves his chair back. It scrapes along the floor and goosebumps ripple across my arms. My mouth goes dry as he stumbles forward a step, and as he slowly approaches, a fleeting thought crosses my mind.

Maybe I should've listened to Roman.

“Where have you been, sweetheart?” he asks, his voice low as he closes the too-short distance between us. “Slumming it with my son?”

“Don’t bring him up,” I snarl, my lip curling back as I glare up at him. His brow lifts, and if I were a smarter person, maybe I’d back down. But I don’t.

Roman is my line.

I’ll kill for him.

I’ll die for him.

Isaac takes another step forward, crowding me, and I smell the alcohol wafting off his breath. Dark bags sit under his eyes, long stubble coats his jaw, and despite the early hours of the morning when most people are asleep, he’s still in his button down and pants. They’re wrinkled, like he’s been sitting at that exact spot for hours.

An unhinged gleam shines in his eye, and, swallowing thickly, I take a step back as fear courses through my body. But then my gaze shifts to the spot on the floor where my mother died. Then over to the bookshelf that hides the truth of the secrets this house holds, and all bets are off.

Tipping my head back, I glare up at my stepfather.

My lover.

My rapist.

Roman's abuser.

Mama's killer.

Shock fills his face for only a brief second, then it's washed away as his perfect mask slips back into place. My throat is scratchy as I swallow past the dryness, trying to breathe through my warring emotions.

I'm surprised my voice comes out firm and not shaky as I grit out, "I know what you did."

His lips twitch, his head tilting to the side animalistically. "And what's that?"

I don't want to say the words. I want to keep them buried. I want to keep the truth buried.

But I don't.

I can't.

"You killed my mother."

He blinks, the only surprise he'll show. "What happened to your mother was a horrible accident, sweetheart," he coos, his low voice holding a sweetness to it that reminds me of the old Isaac.

Of the Isaac *before*.

"You look tired," he murmurs. "You should get some rest. You're not thinking clearly."

He steps forward, and before I can react, his hand reaches out. His thumb slides along my cheek, and a shiver snakes down my spine. It's not from lust or desire like it once was. Now it's from revulsion. From hatred. From disgust.

I watch as his eyelids become hooded as he mistakes my reaction for something it's not, for something it'll never be again. He steps even closer, and the strong scent of his cologne mixes with the alcohol. I stifle a gag, hating the feel of him so close to me.

Without my permission, my body begins to tremble as his fingers glide down my neck, pausing at my pulse. "You need to come home," he says softly. "I miss you." His face lowers to mine, his nose tracing my jaw.

Bile rises in my throat as I rest my hands on his chest and shove him as hard as I can. He stumbles back, his jaw tensing and hands falling to his sides.

"The only thing you miss is me taking care of you and keeping your world together," I spit, letting him hear every ounce of disgust I hold for him.

Eyes narrowing, he scans me, his lips pressing into a thin line. "That's not true, and you know it."

"The only thing I know is that you're a liar, a manipulator. You're an abu—"

"I'd stop while you're ahead," he growls, interrupting me before I can call him what he truly is.

An abuser.

“Or what?” I taunt, my voice rising. “You’ll kill me like you killed my mother? Or Cami?” I move toward him, surprising myself at the lack of fear I feel. “You’ll rape me again?” I choke down the sob that threatens to spill over as I shove him as hard as I can. “Or maybe you’ll take me down to the basement and terrorize me the way you did your son? He was a child! You were supposed to protect him. You were supposed to be the one person he could turn to in this world, the one person who was always supposed to love him. And you hurt him, Isaac. You fucking hurt him!”

I see it in his eyes, the moment before his anger snaps and he loses control. I don’t see his hand, though.

It flies through the air and connects with my cheek, sending me backward. “I told you to shut your fucking mouth.”

Gasping, I grip my cheek, gently probing at it as I glare at him, letting him see every bit of loathing I feel for him. Blood pools in my mouth, and I run my tongue over the gash he caused on my lip.

“I’ll shut my mouth when you admit it. Admit what you did, Isaac. Admit you tried to break them, and failed. Admit you killed her.”

I take him in again, his disheveled appearance, the way he’s so clearly unraveling, and let out a humorless laugh. Letting my hands fall to my sides, I take a step toward him again and watch his throat bob as he swallows.

Pathetic.

This is the man I've feared the last few weeks? This is the man I allowed to hold so much power over me? Over my life?

He took a part of me I'll never get back. The brutal pain of him deep inside me will forever haunt me.

But this man is nothing more than a terrified, pathetic coward.

I would feel sorry for him, but I don't.

All I feel is an unyielding, burning hatred in the place where my love for him once was.

"But I know your secret," I mutter. "I know why you hurt people smaller and weaker than you. Why you go after women and children." My voice is soft, the same I used when we were in bed together. "You're a coward, Isaac Payne. Nothing but a fucking loser. A woman-beating, child-abusing, narcissistic socio—"

Before I can fully get the words out, his hands wrap around my throat. My body momentarily stills, shock overriding everything else. But then I look into his eyes—his blank eyes. There's nothing there, not a hint of the man I knew, of the man I loved.

Nothing.

There's just an empty, dark void where his soul should be.

Then he squeezes, and all my primal instincts come rushing back to me.

My hands fly up and my nails dig into the thick skin of his forearms. He hisses as I draw blood, but he doesn't stop squeezing, so I don't stop fighting.

I buck, and kick, and snarl, and spit. But he doesn't let up.

Instead, he turns us and backs me away from the wall and I know where he's leading me.

No.

I claw at his skin harder, tears leaking from my eyes as my air is cut off. I don't know what to do, how to overpower him. I can't stop this from happening.

Roman.

It's the only thing I can think about. His name, over and over, like a prayer giving me enough strength to bring my knee up. Isaac dodges the blow, and shoves me down to the floor, right where my mother laid for the last time.

His knees rest on either side of my body as he hovers above me. I inhale a gurgling breath as I watch his pupils dilate so much that all that's left is a blackness that coats his soul, his entire being.

As the sun rises, the light filters in through the windows, bathing the room in a soft glow. Maybe I would've found it beautiful, but I can't focus on that right now. All I can think about is trying to take my next breath.

Roman.

“You’re just like your mother,” Isaac snarls, his voice full of disgust. “Isn’t it funny how history has a way of repeating itself?”

His lips twist in a sick grin as I writhe beneath him, struggling to breathe under his unrelenting grip.

Roman.

“She was so quick to fall in line,” he continues, his voice soft. “So eager to please me, she’d do anything. But then she got mouthy, she got too curious. Just like you, sweetheart.”

His hands tighten, and I reach for his face, dragging my nails down his cheek. A sick amount of satisfaction fills me at the sight of the bright crimson beading on his skin.

“Fuck.” His grip around my throat barely loosens and I take the chance to inhale as much air as I can.

Roman.

“She knew her place until she didn’t,” he growls. “But she wouldn’t stop looking. She wouldn’t stop fighting. She was getting in the way. She was going to ruin everything.”

Lifting me, he slams back onto the wood, and I feel my skull crash into it just like hers. Black spots dance in my vision, and my muscles start to weaken.

“She pushed and pushed and *pushed*, until I had no other choice. Just like Cami. Just like Roman. And now, just like you.”

Distantly, I'm aware of him still speaking, but I've stopped caring about his words. My vision is nearly all black, and my body goes limp. I have no more fight left in me. Nothing.

Roman.

As I lose consciousness, I don't see the man above me. Instead, I see a pair of golden hazel eyes and all I know is peace.

4.75 Roman

I don't know why I wake up, but I do, my eyes snapping open to a pitchblack hotel room as my heart thunders in my chest. My arms are empty and I bolt upright in the bed. Somehow, before I even look around, I already know what I'll find—an empty bed, an empty room, and my Goldie nowhere to be seen.

I pat the sheets, saying a silent thank you to whoever's listening that they're still warm, but the thought dies almost immediately when I remember another time I woke up to a freshly abandoned bed only to find Eve a broken shell of herself.

“*Fuck!*” I shout, stumbling to my feet. I frantically search the room, the tiny ass bathroom tucked in the corner before throwing the door open. My eyes scan the hallway, but it's empty, too. “Eve?”

Nothing.

I slam the door shut, the sound of it crashing only accelerating my fear, my anger. How could she do this? How could she leave me? She promised.

She promised.

My fingers run through my hair and my gaze lands on the little alarm clock on the nightstand.

2:39 am

Then my eyes catch on a white piece of paper next to it, the end table drawer still open, a pen sitting on a pad. A foreboding sense of dread clings to me as I make my way toward it. I reach out to switch on the bedside lamp, its soft glow illuminating her beautiful handwriting.

I hesitate, my heart pounding in my chest like an ominous drumbeat. My fingers tremble as I pick it up, my mind racing with a million terrifying possibilities, each of them worse than the previous.

She went back. I know she did.

But why?

Ro,

I'm so sorry, but I couldn't let him get away with this. What happened to our moms is unforgivable, but you, Roman Payne, are my hard line, and he needs to repent for what he did to you. He needs to suffer.

I have always loved you.

I will always love you.

You are all of my beginnings and the only ending I've ever dared let myself dream of. If this short moment with you is all I'll ever have, just know that loving you was the best part of my existence.

Please don't hate me.

Your Goldie.

The words pierce through me like a knife, slicing through the numbness that had settled in my chest. My vision blurs as tears cascade down my cheeks, each drop carrying the weight of a thousand unspoken words.

"Baby," I rasp, wiping at my tears. Everything that happened yesterday, everything we found out, everything I shared—it's still so *heavy*, but this...my Eve heading back toward that monster, it's too much.

"Fuck, fuck, *fuck!*"

I scramble to get dressed, my fingers fumbling with buttons and zippers, as a frantic urgency pushes me forward. I need to find her, need to get to her before it's too late.

Before she gets to him.

Before *he* gets to *her*.

The room spins as I stand frozen, watching Eve hunch over the vanity. With trembling hands, she tries to smooth toothpaste along her toothbrush. It drips everywhere, down her hands to the porcelain counter below, and she whimpers again. I take her in, bile rising higher in my throat as I see the

smearred blood on her ass, on her thighs. The bruises in the shape of fingerprints on her hips.

She's naked. She's pale. She's shaking.

She's broken.

I snatch my cell phone off the nightstand and rush downstairs, the flashback pulling me down, down, *down...*

The second I shove through the lobby doors, I'm hailing a taxi and forcing myself to calm the fuck down. Before the car's even stopped moving, I'm diving into the backseat, my heart thundering against my ribcage. My voice shakes as I instruct the driver to take me back to Divinity Falls, back to the place where so much pain was born, the place that's haunted my every breath.

The man who's tried time and time again to destroy me.

The taxi driver raises an eyebrow at my desperation, offering me a sympathetic nod. "Four hours to Divinity Falls," he warns, "and it won't come cheap."

"I don't give a shit about the cost," I snap, pulling my wallet from my jeans. I flick through the thick stack of bills from clients I took this past week and pull them all out, shoving them into his shocked hands.

"This is too—"

My voice cracks when I speak again and I wish I had the energy to berate myself for it, but I don't. I can't.

“You can have it all,” I rasp, leaning into the seat, my fists clenching against the worn leather. “Just hurry. *Please.*”

He gives me a firm nod and shoves the cash back into my lap. “Hold on.”

I release a long, shaking exhale and pick up my phone, calling Eve. Her phone goes straight to voicemail and my stomach rolls. I rub my jaw and call her again.

And again.

And again.

And again.

I don't know why I expect anything different to happen, but with each call that goes unanswered, my gut sinks further and my mind grows darker.

If he's hurt her, I'll kill him. If he's laid even one finger on Eve, I'll destroy him. I'll make him wish he was never born.

I'm at the point that I no longer care what happens to me. There's nothing I wouldn't do for her. Eve says I'm her hard line, but she's my only line. Every other one doesn't matter and if they did, I'd cross them all just to get to her.

I'd kill and go to jail for murder, knowing in my gut that I did the right thing. I'd happily let his blood spill out beneath my fingers, feel the air drain from his lungs, watch him choke on his own pleas for forgiveness. I'd do it and so much more, all the while smiling as I forced him to *repent*.

I'll become the demon he always swore I was and force him back to the hell that created him. And if it comes to it, I'll die at his side and drag him there myself.

I lose track of how many times I call her, but as the sun starts to peek out over the horizon, I know it's no use. Instead, I call a different number. The sign for Divinity comes into focus as I bring my cell up to my ear with a trembling hand.

"What the fuck, man?" Chase grumbles, his voice heavy with sleep. "It's like—" He breaks off and I swallow around rocks, my eyes taking in the scenery without actually seeing it. "Like early as shit. Sun's not even out."

Silence stretches between us, my mouth opening and closing.

What do I even say?

She left me, again.

She went after him, again.

She walked into danger, again.

But that's not why she went, right? Not really. No. She went for me. Because I'm her line and my abuse is unforgivable.

She wants to defend me.

She loves me so much, she'd rather die than see me hurt.

The last few lines of her note flit through my mind and panic surges inside me so hard, so fast, I feel like I might pass out. I shoot upright in my seat, the car swimming around me. The

driver looks at me in the rearview mirror as he takes the turn down a familiar, long road, but I see nothing.

You are all of my beginnings and the only ending I've ever dared let myself dream of.

A sob gets caught in my throat and my eyes burn once more. I bring a fist up to my mouth to silence it, but it's too late. Chase is freaking out in my ear, yet I don't hear him either. Not as her words truly set in.

If this short moment with you is all I'll ever get, just know that loving you was the best part of my existence.

She was saying goodbye.

She was...

She was...

“Chase,” I pant, my chest caving in as I gasp for breath. “Chase, I need you.”

My hands shake harder with every mile that disappears between Eve and I. The conversation with Chase is a blur of broken words and heartfelt promises. By the time I'm done and he's swearing he'll take care of everything, I'm throwing myself from the taxi just as the house comes into view. I leave the stack of cash in the backseat and slam the door behind me.

The sound of water lapping at the dock immediately drags me back into a memory that I struggle to shove down, but it's no use.

Everything is too hard, too confusing, *too much*.

“Was it your first kiss?” I ask, looking at the most beautiful girl I’ve ever seen in my life as she treads in the lake water. My eyes drop to her lips the same way they have for months now. I can’t help it. She’s so pretty. “You know,” I whisper, my heart thudding against my chest. “Your first kiss is supposed to suck. It’s the second one that makes up for it.”

“Really?” she whispers. My head bobs, my face inching closer to hers. “Then I can’t wait for my second kiss.” My lips tip up in a small grin as an adorable blush spreads across her cheeks.

“I can help with that,” I rasp, my hand sliding into her wet hair. “If you want.”

Goldie. Goldie. Goldie.

“How?” My face gets closer and closer, until our breath dances between us.

“Just tell me yes or no,” I whisper. Her eyes flutter shut as my mouth slides over her cheek. “Tell me yes, Goldie.”

Please say yes.

“Yes.”

Anger and fear pulse through me until I know nothing else. Anger that this sick fuck stands in the way of Eve and me, of our happily ever after, of everything we've worked so hard for. We deserve this. We deserve it. And he—he keeps trying to fucking take it from us.

Fear that I'll be too late.

Fear that I won't get to spend my life loving her, being loved by her.

My feet pound against the grass as I pass the tire swing and I stumble, missing a step at the force of another memory.

Rain continues falling, and my knees buckle as I take my first step in hours. I stumble forward, my hand reluctant to let go of the tire swing. Of this place.

Of her.

But I do.

I let go.

Another breath, another memory.

Her lip is bleeding and the sight of her so sad, so hurt, makes me want to go back and kill that motherfucker.

But then, she starts to cry, and nothing else matters but her.

My Goldie.

“Talk to me,” I rasp, gently pulling the swing backward, then walking it forward. “Tell me what happened.”

Tell me how to fix it.

I hit the porch, taking all three steps at once.

“Would you burn for me, little sister?”

Her jaw goes slack and her breath catches. Fuck, she’s so beautiful like this, her golden hair glowing in the moonlight, her cheeks pink. Her hand lifts and wraps around my wrist. I feel my brow kick up as she tugs me closer and presses to her tiptoes, her eyes full of desire.

Fuck, I’m so mad, so hurt, so goddamned angry, but she’s still my girl, my Goldie.

I’d never hurt her.

Never.

“Anything,” she breathes and air gets caught in my lungs at her admission, her honesty.

I want to kiss her so fucking bad. Want to tell her I’m sorry, tell her I love her.

I wonder if she already knows?

The front door.

“Well,” I drawl, feigning a confidence, an arrogance, I don’t feel. How could she? Him. Out of all people, she chose him? She forgot about me and picked him. And him, Isaac, the man who’s spent my entire life figuring out ways to break me, is wrapped around the love of my life, my soul mate.

But I can’t show that, can’t let them see the hurt.

Not when I’m so fucking angry.

“Aren’t we cozy?”

I kick the fucking thing open, watching as the already shattered wood splinters even more. It bangs off the wall, but I ignore it, storming forward. My eyes scan the living room and land only briefly on the couch.

The couch.

“Don’t do that,” I whisper, staring down at the only girl I’ve ever loved. “I can’t stand to see you hurt.”

“Ro,” she breathes.

I slide my thumb between her lips, and her tongue flicks out, licking the pad. My cock throbs in my jeans, but I don’t know if I can do this. I don’t know if I can kiss her, can love her, without breaking.

But I don’t know how not to.

“Goldie.” My voice breaks.

I want her, need her, love her.

Love her.

Love her.

Love her.

I don't know who moves first, but then, my lips are on hers. Hard, demanding, as if we can't possibly hold ourselves back, but there's a softness beneath all that. Something filled with longing, with pleas we don't understand and promises we can't give.

This isn't why I came back here. Not to kiss her or love her, not to bully her or destroy her.

I came back to protect her and everything after that just got so messed up. I'm so angry, so hurt. How can I not be?

I love Evelyn Jean Meyer with every beat of my ugly, black heart and she...

She loves him.

"I can't do this," I choke out, regret and devastation filling me as I pull away from her. It nearly kills me and I almost dive back in, willing to burn for just a taste of her fire. But...

But, Isaac.

He'll win.

He always wins.

"I can't go down this road again. Not when I know I'll be the one to lose."

The stairs.

“Please,” Jane begs, but it falls on deaf ears.

“Fuck,” my father groans, and acidic bile rises in my throat.

“I’ve always loved the way you beg.”

She runs.

He grabs her.

She falls.

Isaac looms over her.

“Oh, God!” A broken sob leaves Jane. “I’m bleeding. Please, help me.”

But he doesn’t move to do anything.

He just stands above her, watching. He kneels beside her, his face coming into clear view, and the broken sound of Jane thanking him slices through my heart.

Slowly, he reaches down, his face blank, emotionless. Just like it always was when he took me to the basement.

Then I look into his eyes, and—

And they’re black.

Soulless.

Jane groans as he lifts her in his arms, her bloody hair taking up most of the screen.

Isaac slams Jane onto the ground, and a crack reverberates through my fucking body.

The stairs.

The stairs.

The stairs.

Everything around me goes black as a familiar fire fills my veins. I know nothing, see nothing, hear *nothing*, but *her*.

Isaac is on top of Eve, her head dangerously close to the bottom stair. Her skin is pale, tinged with blue and his hands... his hands are wrapped around her throat.

The last thought I have before losing myself is *he doesn't even see me coming for him*.

I'm vaguely aware of my fingers tangling in his shirt as I rip Isaac from her limp body, and then I'm on top of him, my fists colliding with his face, his chest, his head, his flesh.

Again and again, as words that've sat dormant, laid buried deep inside my soul, spill free. Every memory, every slap, every lash, every hurt and threat. I scream and rage as I force his body to repent when his lips refuse to.

"I hate you!" I bellow, my voice raw from the depth of my words. "I fucking hate you, you sick motherfucker! I hope you rot in Hell."

I keep going, keep hitting, keep shouting and I don't stop, can't stop, never stop...

"You're an embarrassment!"

Crack.

“No punishment seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.”

Eve’s bleeding, broken body.

“Again!”

“Leave, or I’ll tell them you raped her. Leave or I’ll make you wish you were never born.”

Crack.

“Again!”

“I love you, Roman.”

“Don’t worry, Ro. I didn’t forget you. I even packed your favorite book.”

Crack.

“No punishment seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.”

“No!” Distantly, I think I hear her voice, hear her begging, but I can’t tell if she’s real or not. My knuckles burn, my muscles ache, my throat is raw, but I just can’t stop. “Roman! Please, baby, please. I can’t lose you, too!”

Eve is sobbing and I’m shaking my head, my eyes unfocused as a blurry version of my father appears before me. He’s bloody and broken, just like Eve, just like Jane, just like my mother.

No. He deserves this.

“I know he does, Ro. I know.”

My brows furrow, and I suck in a sharp breath. I didn't know I said that out loud.

“Come back to me, baby. If you do this, if you kill him, you're no better than him. Don't do that to yourself. You deserve better. *We* deserve better.”

I freeze at her words, my heart slamming against my chest so hard, I think I might actually be dying. Eve releases a broken, wounded sound and grips my cheeks, forcing me to face her. Slowly, so fucking slowly, I come back to myself.

I can feel my father panting beneath me, his breaths ragged and weak. I can hear him wheezing, murmuring demands for help, threats that no longer hold any weight.

Not now.

Not with him so small, so fragile, under my fists.

Not with her here, holding me, tethering me to this life, this moment, this reality.

“You're alive,” I choke out.

Eve nods slowly, brushing away tears I didn't realize I was crying. “So are you,” she rasps with a small flinch.

It's then that I take in the bruises marring her throat, the small cut on her lip, the red spot on her cheek and rage fills me all over.

With a snarl, I move to pull away, to go back to Isaac, my fists already seeking his blood, his death, but Eve cries out in protest and throws herself at me, knocking me off my father. My ass hits the ground and I catch us both with my arm right as Eve collides with my chest.

“*No!*” she screams. “No more, Roman. No more. No more. No more.”

Her voice cracks, the sound so devastating that I find the strength inside myself to stop....not for me, not for him, but for her.

She wraps her arms around me and I cling to her, breaking harder than I’ve ever broken before. I bury my face in her throat, inhaling her sweet scent. Eve whimpers, wrapping her body around mine like she’s trying to keep me down, keep me from going back for more, keep me from really killing him.

Or maybe, maybe she’s just trying to keep me together.

Heaving sobs wrack my body, my demons, *his* demons, spilling from places inside me I never even knew existed. Darkness pours from me with every tear, with every choked sob, with every shaking breath and all the while, Eve, my love, my Goldie, rocks me like the child I never got to be.

With my face buried in her chest, my soul laid bare and my eyes closed, I never see it coming.

Not until it’s too late.

Eve screams and pushes me away so hard, my back hits the floor. She shoves to her feet and spins just as my gaze lands on

Isaac right behind her, a look of pure manic desperation in his black eyes.

“No!” she cries, her hands outstretched as if to protect me, as if to keep *me* safe when I’m the one who should be protecting her. “You’ll never fucking touch him again!”

And then, she’s shoving him backward with all her might as she releases a scream born from primal terror. Isaac’s eyes widen but he’s too slow, too dizzy and fucked up from my fists to stop her. He trips over the leg of a chair and falls backward, slamming his head on the corner of the kitchen table.

Eve freezes, her breaths sawing in and out of her. I watch, my eyes wide with shock, as I slowly climb to my feet, my body aching, my head swimming. I reach her just as her legs give out.

“Baby,” I whisper, pulling her into my chest. She’s trembling, her eyes locked on Isaac. On where he fell. On the blood slowly pooling around his body. I choke on my next breath and hold her tighter. “It’s okay. It’s okay. I promise it’ll be okay.”

I keep repeating the words, unsure what to do, unsure what to say.

Is he dead?

“Oh my God,” she pants, her head shaking rapidly. “Ro! Oh my God. What did I do? What *did I do?*”

Is he dead?

Finally dead?

I say nothing, watching, silently begging, fucking *praying*.

We shuffle closer a step, my arms refusing to release her, my body needing hers to stay upright just as much as she needs mine.

His eyes, once so bright, so happy and convincing, are open.

His eyes, once so dark, so empty and soulless, are staring blankly at the ceiling.

My gaze travels down his body, spotting the crimson now staining his too-white shirt, growing, spreading, like his darkness once spread through me.

I see his chest, his too-still chest, and I *wait*, clinging to Eve tighter than I ever have before.

One breath, just one breath, that's all I need to see—to know. But it never comes.

Never comes.

Never comes.

He's dead.

“Roman,” Eve chokes out, turning in my arms. She looks up at me with wide, pleading eyes, the blue so blue, I lose myself in them. “What have I done?”

One moment.

Just one moment and everything's changed.

I swallow roughly, my mouth dry. I brush a tear from her cheek, my hand shaking, my fingers already battered and bruised.

“You saved me, Goldie,” I rasp, my chest, my soul, my heart, shifting, swelling, with so much love for this girl, my knees buckle. “You *picked* me.”

A sob leaves her. “There was never a choice.” She shakes her head. “It was always you.”

Before I can do anything, say anything, a voice fills the quiet room, making me jump. I shove Eve behind me and turn to face the new threat.

“What the hell happened here?” Deputy Tanner asks, his face as white as a sheet. His eyes flit from me, to Eve, to Isaac and slowly, so fucking slowly, his hand slides to his gun.

Without thinking, without pausing, I step forward.

“I did it.” I look back, my eyes landing on Eve and I swallow thickly, taking her in, memorizing her, committing every inch of my perfect, sweet Goldie to memory. I trace her cheek, her jaw, her lips.

“I will love you,” I whisper, “until my heart stops beating.” My fingers slide down her body, finding her hand. My pinky tangles with hers. “And I never break my promises.”

“Wh—what?” She stumbles forward, but I ignore her, turning back to Paul just as sirens begin to fill the air. My finger never leaves hers and I hold it, keep it, use it to anchor myself.

“It was me.” I release a slow breath, knowing with certainty that this, this one last act of love, is the best one I’ll ever make. “I killed my father.”

Eve

TWO MONTHS LATER

A heavy silence fills the room, barely broken up by the sound of cardboard flaps folding as I close the last of the boxes. Everything I so meticulously wrapped in thick layers of newspaper and tucked tightly away in boxes feel like nothing but distant memories. Like these items weren't my own, like I'm a stranger in the home that housed me for nearly a decade.

Caged me.

The absence of my family feels palpable here, their ghosts lingering around me. Even if Daddy was buried in Haven, his spirit walked these halls. He was always here with us, and I like to think he was with Mama on her last day, too. I choose to believe he held her hand as she drifted away into the afterlife.

I want to believe she wasn't scared and alone. I want to believe Daddy was holding her, soothing her, telling her it wasn't so bad to die.

That's the only way I can cope with it.

A sick part of me likes to think that he was there with Isaac, too. But instead of bringing him any peace, any comfort, he made it worse. He forced him to hold onto life just a bit longer, just so he could suffer. And then, he walked with his soul to Hell and Daddy waved, smiling triumphantly, because in the end, good always wins.

Just like he always told me.

With a deep breath, I look around the kitchen a final time. The bare floors are bathed with golden light, the house looking so big without anything in it.

No more kitchen table marked from the embers of a cigarette.

No more leather chair rearranged to look out over the entire house.

No more couch with possum pee on it.

No more hallway with a cracked mirror.

No more peach pie.

No more sweet tea.

No more nights surrounded by a Schmorgus board of Divinity Falls' best restaurants.

No more...

Anything.

Nothing.

It's empty.

It's all gone.

Every memory we made over the years. Every drip of water we tracked in from the lake during hot summer afternoons. Every drop of forbidden alcohol I sipped. Every salacious act I did in my room.

It's all gone.

Over.

And I'm moving on.

I don't have a choice. I have to.

Despite Isaac being a disgraced preacher, the church let me take my time cleaning out the house, knowing it was difficult to be in here. Knowing everything that happened, how bad it was.

My gaze flits around the room, landing on the bookshelf still in front of the basement door and I shudder. No one wanted to touch it. We didn't want to move it. Kon nearly shattered the thing when he first saw it, but after Chase told him to leave it, he did. Kind of.

I still think he's plotting something to get rid of it, I just don't know what.

He'd been so angry after that day. Chase and Oli, too. I think everyone was. How could they not be? In his last moments, Isaac took something from all of us that we'll never get back,

not really. He used his hatred of the world, his deluded beliefs in what it should look like, and broke me. Broke us.

I'll hate him until my last breath for that.

My eyes fall closed as heaviness washes over me. He's taken everyone I ever loved away from me. He took Cami. He took Mama. In a way, he took Daddy, too. He took—

Arms wrap around me from behind, and a soft kiss is pressed to my cheek. Tilting my head to the side, Roman kisses along my jaw, and I sigh, my eyes fluttering shut.

“You have everything?” he murmurs softly, his lips ghosting along my skin.

“I think so,” I whisper, some of my sadness disappearing with his presence. God, I love this man. I wouldn't have gotten through the last few months without him.

Isaac took our mothers before trying to kill me. And then, I almost lost Roman. They almost took him from me, too, and if they had, it would have been Isaac's fault. If he'd really dragged Roman to Hell with him like he promised he would have, I'd have razed the world to get him back.

Luckily, Divinity Fall's law enforcement wasn't as remiss as Haven's had been nearly twenty years ago. They took in the scene, the bruises around my throat, my black eye and busted lip, as well as everything Mama had gathered including her murder, and we all walked away. Bruised, battered, exhausted, but thankful.

Hopeful.

It doesn't hurt that Deputy Tanner, who Chase, his cousin, had called per Roman's instructions, vouched for us.

"I saw it all," he'd said. "I know it was an accident. Y'all just got to him before I could. Otherwise, it would have been my gun that took his life instead of you."

Even crazier was what came after that. When word spread about Cami's murder, my mom's—her abuse and mine, someone else came forward that we never expected.

Mary.

She walked right into Divinity's precinct and confessed to covering for Isaac all those years ago. Instead of being at the conference Mama thought he'd been at, hours and states away, he was with Mary. Apparently, they'd been having an affair for years. When his time needed to be accounted for that night, she came forward and said they'd been at the church working on the bills.

No one even blinked twice at that.

Why would they? They trusted Isaac. We all did. She was sentenced to a year for obstructing evidence and as much as I want to hate her, to be mad at her, I can't. It was clear as day that she was another victim of his. He convinced her he loved her, that they'd be together someday. He used her. And then, he abused her.

Just like Cami. Just like Mama.

Just like me.

My body tightens and Ro mistakes my reaction for sadness.

“We’ll come back and visit,” he promises, and I nod. Despite hating what this town has come to represent, all the memories it’s dragged up, I’m still going to miss it. It’s been my home for ten years.

I can’t just leave it behind.

But I have to.

It’s time.

With the final box in his arms, Roman makes his way outside and across the yard to our van. I follow after him, my heart in my throat as I give our house of horrors a final look.

He sets the box inside and turns around, leaning his back against it. Holding his hand out, I slide mine into his and let him drag me close. He wraps his arms around me, and I sigh happily, snuggling deeper into the safety of his arms.

His lips linger on my cheek as we look out at Barry’s Lake, at the church beyond. At the giant oak with the tire swing.

My throat tightens at the sight.

Our spot.

If only I’d looked out my window that night and saw him standing there, maybe things would’ve been different.

If only I would’ve fought harder to get to him, maybe things would’ve been different.

If only...

“Think we have time for one more ride?” he whispers against my skin. I force a smile to my face as I nod.

“For you? Of course.” His smile is gentle as he tucks my hair behind my ear, his fingers brushing over my cheek.

I let him lead me to the swing, my heart hammering with every step closer. He grips the rope and lets me slide in before rounding me. It swings back and forth as he pushes me, letting the wind float through my hair.

My hands slide over the rope on either side as I hold on. The world soars past in a blur, the wind hitting my face as I go higher and higher and...

“Goldie,” he rasps, pulling the swing to a stop.

I swallow thickly as I glance over my shoulder at him. His head is bowed, his brows bunched. I can’t read his expression, and unease swirls inside me.

Slowly, he walks around me. My breath catches as I watch him drop to his knee.

“Goldie,” he says again, his voice just as strangled. His hand slides into his pocket, and a gasp leaves me as he pulls out a small velvet box. “My Goldie. My golden girl.”

“Ro,” I breathe, tears blurring my vision. “What—”

“You were just a baby when we first met,” he says. “I was too, but I felt so much older. Do you know what the first thing you said to me was?” I shake my head, my hand trembling as I lift it to brush the stray tears from my cheeks. “You told me to pray.”

My breath catches. “Ro—”

“You told me to pray, so I did. I prayed for light in a sea of darkness—I begged for it. And you know what happened?” he whispers, his hazel eyes lifting to mine.

“What?”

“Years later, you were there,” he tells me. “You knelt beside me with your arms wrapped around my shoulders and said—”

“I’ll be your light,” I finish, my voice barely audible.

“And you always have been.” He roughly clears his throat. “On my darkest days, on the days I felt like giving up, the days I felt like nothing was worth living for...I saw your light. I saw you, Evelyn. You saved me.”

“You saved me, too,” I cry, and he smiles weakly.

“Not as much as you did me.”

The box pops open and he holds it in his shaky hands, lifting it higher for me to see. A vintage emerald surrounded by diamonds glistens in the sunlight, and tears flow freely from my eyes.

“*Roman.*” I stare at it, unable to move, barely able to think. “It’s beautiful.”

“Not as beautiful as you,” he murmurs, and my eyes slide to him. “That was cheesy.” I laugh, shaking my head as he scrunches his nose. “But it’s true.”

I drop to my knees in front of him, moving closer until I rest my hands on his solid chest, feeling his heart hammering

beneath. My eyes stare into his, memorizing every freckle, every swirl of color.

“Evelyn Meyer,” he rasps, his hands trembling so much, I’m surprised the ring hasn’t fallen from the box. He pinches it between his fingers and holds it out. “Will you be my light until the day I die? Will you share my life and have adventures with me?” He sucks in a sharp breath and meets my eyes, his coated with tears. “Will you marry me, Goldie?”

“Yes,” I breathe. “Hell, yes.”

My left hand falls between us, and he slips the ring onto my finger. I always assumed it would be heavy, that the commitment would be almost suffocating.

But it’s not.

With Roman, it’s perfect.

I’ve wanted this for so long—for as long as I can remember. And now it’s here and I don’t know what to say, how to act.

“I love you,” is the only thing I can say. So, I say it over and over, until he silences me with a kiss deep enough to make me breathless.

His forehead rests against mine, our eyes shutting as he presses a final, softer kiss to my lips. “I love you, Evelyn Meyer. My golden girl. My sunshine. *My Goldie.*”



My ring glistens in the sunlight as I tilt it back and forth, waiting for Roman to return from the house. He said he had one more thing he had to do and he wanted to do it alone. I didn't question him or the time he needed.

This house was just as vital, just as *heavy* for him as it was for me. I run my fingers over the wooden paneling of our new little boho camper, something we bought together last month after Roman asked me to travel with him.

My lips lift as I remember that day, my heart squeezing.

"It's over," I breathe, letting my head fall back against the couch. We just got a call from our lawyer. Everything is done. Mary's in jail, the evidence was processed, the case is closed and Isaac—Isaac is gone forever. "We're free."

"Not yet," Roman murmurs, stepping into the room. My eyes crack open and I notice he has something behind his back. I look up and watch as a slow smile spreads across his face. "But we will be."

I lean forward, my brow cocking. "What does that mean?"

He chuckles and pulls the hidden object out from hiding. I laugh when I spot the brown cardboard tube. Ro dangles it in

front of my face and I slowly grab it before excitement has me tearing it open.

My eyes immediately cloud over with tears when I unroll the new map, my heart squeezing as I notice how similar it is to my old one. I look up, breathing deeply to control the force of my emotions.

Ro drops to a crouch in front of me and cups my cheek with one hand, brushing my tears away. He holds out his free hand in offering and I open my palm as a single red tack falls from his fingers.

“What do you say, Goldie?” He whispers. “Wanna go on an adventure with me?”

So here we are. He’ll take tattoo jobs as a guest artist and I’ll take pictures. We won’t make much, but for the first time, we’ll *live*.

Smiling, I watch the front door slowly open, then him stroll out. He flicks his lighter, open, closed. Open, closed.

Then smoke begins billowing from the door, from the kitchen window.

Panic rises in my chest, and I straighten in my seat. I reach for the door handle, but he jogs the rest of the way to me, sliding into the front seat of the van.

“Fire!” I cry, pointing at the house. He gives me a wicked smile and turns toward the long stretch of road in front of us.

“Where to first, Goldie?”

Reaching over, he grabs my hand and brings it to his lips, pressing a gentle kiss to the stone. My attention shifts to the house again, finding more smoke flowing from it.

“But—”

He winks, a smile brighter than any one I’ve ever seen gracing his beautiful face, as he pinches the dial between his fingers and turns the radio up. As the van begins to roll away from the smoking house, *Here Comes the Sun* flows from the speakers.

“Ready for an adventure, Goldie?”

The End

Subscribe

Join our newsletter and get a surprise to your inbox!

By joining the Divinity Falls newsletter, you'll get art (both NSFW & not), first dibs on special edition covers, signed paperbacks, merch, updates relating to Sin With Me and the world of Divinity Falls, and MORE.



A Word From The Authors

Thank you so much for reading *Sin With Me*! We hope you loved it!!

We know it was a wild ride—spicy at times, heartbreaking at others, but mostly downright sinful. *Sin With Me* dealt with a lot of heavy topics such as rape, child abuse, and domestic violence. When writing this book, we wanted to take readers on a journey. Eve goes through the peaks and valleys of an abusive relationship with a narcissist.

If you noticed, Isaac's chapters cut off at a certain point. We did this intentionally. The story was never supposed to be about Eve and Roman's abuser. It was about *them*, the survivors. The story leaves the reader wanting to rationalize Isaac's intentions, his faults, and reasons for finally breaking. There are unanswered questions where he's concerned. But at the end of the day, an abuser's reasons don't matter. While you can empathize with their trials and tribulations, they don't matter in the eyes of a victim. The victims' story matters. Eve and Roman's story matters.

A lot of times, those who are in a relationship like this don't realize it, often until it's too late. We wanted our readers to fall in and out of love with Eve, to hurt with her, to grow with her. This book's a mindfuck, just like her relationship with Isaac
cue hatred here

If you or anyone you know is suffering, please seek help. You are not alone.

Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline: 1-800-4-A-CHILD (1-800-422-4453).

Nationally, dial 988 for an emergency suicide and crisis situation or contact LifeLine.

National Domestic Violence Hotline

800-799-7233

National Sexual Assault Hotline

1-800-656-4673

More than 600,000 children are reported abused in the U.S each year.

1 out of every 6 American women has been the victim of an attempted or completed rape in her lifetime (14.8% completed, 2.8% attempted). About 3% of American men—or 1 in 33—have experienced an attempted or completed rape in their lifetime.

If you need an emotional support group after reading *Sin With Me*, join our Facebook group (Divinity Falls Emotional Support Group) where you can talk with other readers!

If you want access to Jane's cloud, scan this code and you'll get to experience everything with Roman and Eve.



About Bex Dawn

Hey there Smut Sluts! Welcome to my world.

My name is Bex, and I am a 30-something bibliophile from California. I love coffee, my five rescue animals, and the hundreds of books I collect like trophies. I have been writing since I could hold a pencil. My mom used to love to tell stories about the “books” I would write as a child. I would apparently scribble nonsense on paper and then proceed to “read” my books to everyone who would listen. Not much has changed since other than the fact that I’ve changed out the pencil and paper for a fancy laptop.

Writing and creative arts have always held a place close to my heart, but it wasn’t until an extremely dark time in my life recently that I really pushed myself to fulfill my lifelong dream of publishing.

In the darkest days of my life, books saved me. Other people’s written words dragged me out of my depression, kicking and screaming. And for that, I will forever be grateful.

My dream is that my words will have a similar impact on even one person out there.

So, here's to sexy, possessive, alpha holes and kinky fuckery!

Follow me on social media!

www.authorbexdawn.com

TikTok: @bexdawnwrites

Instagram: @bexdawnwrites

Amazon: Bex Dawn

Facebook Reader Group: Author Bex Dawn

Also By Get Dawn

The Los Diablos world encompasses these three series (for now!)

For full reading order, please visit my website.

They are all still growing, but these are the books you can read/preorder now!

Los Diablos Syndicate (Unfinished)

Crash(Prequel)

Burn

Evolve

Resurrect

Prevail

Reign (Coming Soon!)

The Trichotomy of New York(Unfinished)

Violet Craves.(Prequel)

Rough Love

Tough Love

Trust Love (Coming Soon!)

Sons Of Satan MC(Unfinished)

Brass-Part One

This series is a separate world. These are stand-alone, loosely interwoven, that take place in the town of Blue River, Colorado.

They each follow a different couple(or more) and their very specific kinks!

Carnal Expectations(Unfinished)

Cracked Foundation

Primal Urges

Santa's Baby.

Power Struggle

Dominate Me

Divinity Falls Co-Write World with Haley Tyler

Sin With Me (Coming October 31, 2023).

For The Love Of Villains Anthology(Coming Fall 2023).

(This book will include a special bonus scene for Rayvn and Wolfe from Primal Urges.

Salt: A Reverse Harem Dark College Rockstar Romance

This book is part of the shared world series-Groveton
College

Do you like Paranormal Romance or Omegaverse? Check
out my second pen name,
Phoenix Saint and my upcoming book,
Burning Wild!(Part One)

About Haley Tyler

Haley Tyler is a dark romance author who writes your favorite book boyfriends.

She lives in Texas with her boyfriend of seven years and their dog, Maverick.

When she's not writing, you can find her reading a romance novel, scrolling TikTok, listening to her obnoxiously long playlists, or obsessing over her next book.

www.haleytyler.com

Facebook Reader Group

Facebook

Instagram

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Amazon

BookBub

Goodreads

Also By Saley Tyler

The Salvatore Brotherhood MC Series

Killing Calm

Little Bear

Lost and Found

Safe House

Man Possessed

A Salvatore Brotherhood MC Short Story

At First Sight

Say I Do

Just One Night

Standalone

Queen of Demons

Secret Santa

The Reapers

Calling on the Reaper

Kindle Vella

Never Have I Ever

Divinity Falls

Sin With Me

Coming Soon

For the Love of Villains Anthology

The End....?

