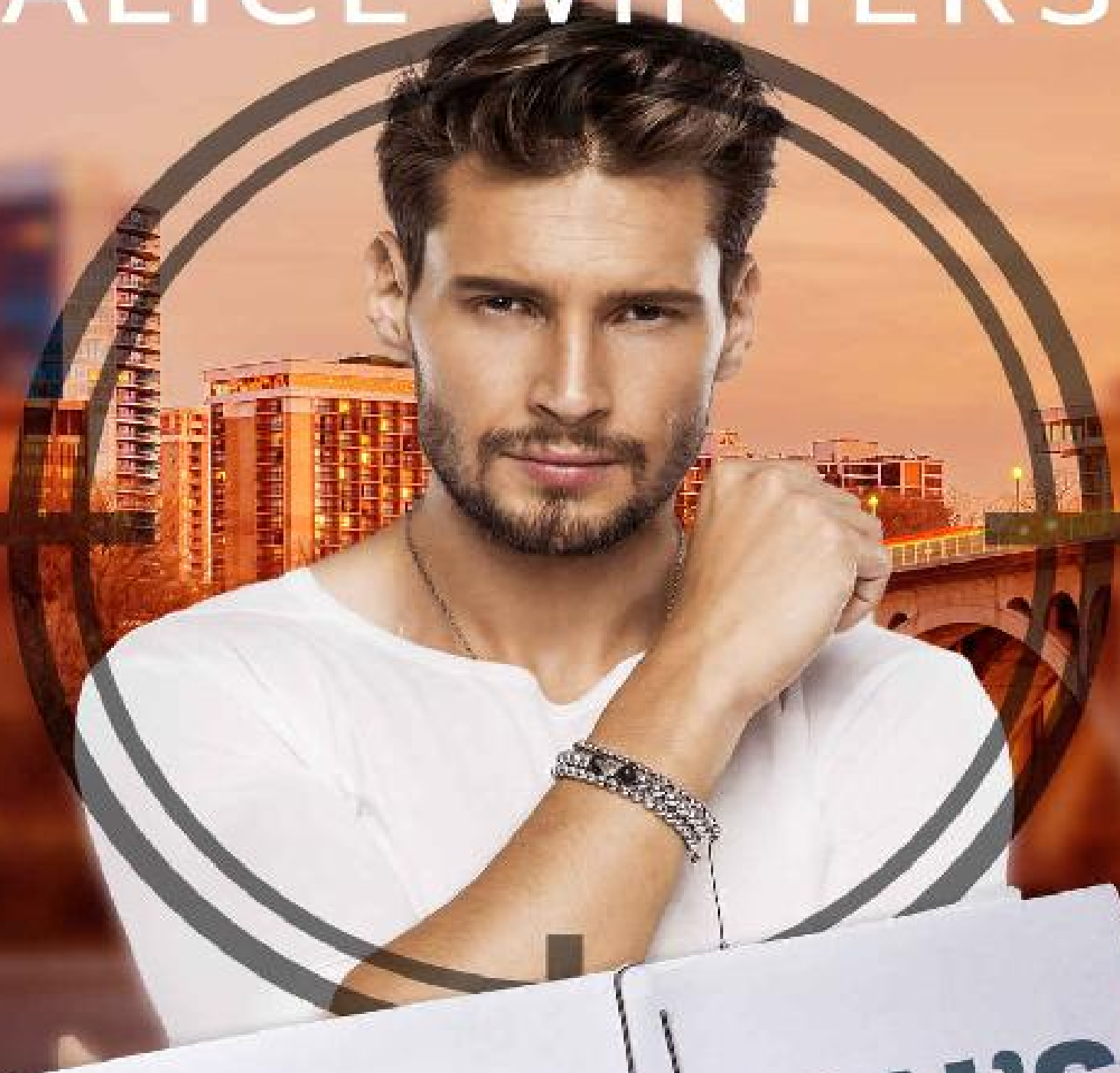


ALICE WINTERS



**THE HITMAN'S
GUIDE**

to codenames and ill-gotten gains

THE HITMAN'S GUIDE TO
CODENAMES AND ILL-
GOTTEN GAINS

THE HITMAN'S GUIDE, BOOK 5

ALICE WINTERS



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Edited by: Courtney Bassett

Proofed by: Lori Parks

Cover: Cate Ashwood Designs

Formatting: Leslie Copeland

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CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

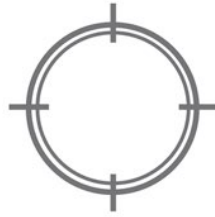
[Chapter 30](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Author's Note](#)

[Also by Alice Winters](#)

ONE



“I can’t decide if I want to pick up a pizza or make something for dinner. What do you think?” I ask the gunman who rudely seems rather preoccupied with robbing the cashier.

“Will you just shut the fuck up?” the gunman asks.

“I-I didn’t say anything,” the cashier stammers as she tries to quickly open the bag the man gave her to put the money into. She seems to be struggling a bit with it like she’s not quite sure how bags work.

“I wasn’t talking to you,” he growls. Clearly, he woke up on the wrong side of the bed.

“The issue is that you guys are making me late, so now I’m thinking that maybe I’ll just go to a drive-through and grab some burgers. What do you think?” I ask as I watch the other two robbers. The one manning the front door in case someone decides to come into the gas station seems young and nervous, jumping every time a car could possibly pull into the gas station. And the other is keeping an eye on the hostages—only three of us.

While I’d simply gone into the gas station because the pump chose that very moment not to work, I got distracted by the candy Jackson loves and wandered right into a group of petty robbers who wanted to make my day a bit more interesting. What they don’t know is that I absolutely love any chance for a dash of excitement, and I have a knack for making it *more* exciting.

“Hurry the fuck up,” the one staring down the cashier says.

While all three of them have guns, only the one at the cashier seems prepared to use it, seeing as the other two still have the safeties on. The one who is fixated on the window while looking for potential people coming in is getting more anxious by the moment. While the two closest to me are wearing masks, the one near the door seemed to think putting a canvas bag on his head and cutting out two eye holes was adequate. The other is fixated on me since I, for some reason, seem to be the most disruptive of the lot.

I can't fathom how he'd come to that conclusion.

"What the fuck is taking so long?" the man who's at the cashier says. "It can't possibly take this long."

"I know, man, my legs are starting to go numb!" I say, but he doesn't seem to care about my woes.

I'm kneeling on the ground with my gloved hands on my head, which really has resulted in my legs feeling a bit tingly. While it isn't overly cold out, the gloves had been in my pocket, and I felt pretty confident they could come in handy if I had to deal with these assholes so I could merrily bash their faces without leaving fingerprints behind. The gunman closest to me had gathered up all of the hostages and put us in the snack aisle where we are mostly tucked away from any wandering eyes.

What we need is someone to ignore the "We are closed for maintenance" sign one of the robbers stuck on the door.

Orrrrrr the phone that just went off. While the gunmen had forced us to give up our phones that are all on the other side of the room, it's the exact distraction I need.

Using my foot, I push against a row of boxed crackers, and since there's no back to the shelf, they push into whatever is stacked on the other side, causing something heavy to clatter to the ground in the other aisle.

"What the fuck was that?" the guy watching the cashier asks.

"I don't know but there's a car pulling in," the one at the door announces. "What if they come in here? What if they

ignore the sign? Can we lock the door? Is there a way to lock it?"

As he nervously rambles, the guy who's staring at the cashier barks, "Check it out," which causes the guy who is guarding the hostages to turn to look.

"Not you, you fucking idiot," he says, but it's too late now. The guy has stepped one foot past me, giving me his back like the foolish, foolish man he is.

I slide up behind him and grab the man in a headlock as I take his gun, switch the safety off, and shoot the man harassing the cashier in the leg.

He cries out and lifts his gun as I fling the man I'm holding at him before moving in and busting him in the nose so hard I hear it break.

"Ooh, that sounds like it hurt..." I say with a grimace.

I disarm him with one quick jerk of my hand and point the two guns at the guy at the door.

"Drop the gun and get on the ground."

He immediately turns into flight mode as he rushes for the door until I fire off a warning shot. Then he immediately drops to the ground right there, shaking and trying to pretend that he's one with the floor. If he had the option to melt into it, he would have done so at this point.

"That was such a good choice," I say as I look over at the hostages. "Help me tie these guys up."

Even though the male hostage looks like he could snap these men in half, the female is the only one who gets up and rushes over to help. She uses the strap from her purse to tie his wrists as I pick up my phone and give Jeremy a call since as a police officer, he might want to take over when I feel sure that my way of handling it wouldn't be *quite* as legal.

"What did you do now?" he asks.

"Jerebear, it's a pleasure to talk to you! How could you possibly think I did something? Maybe I was simply calling to see how you were doing," I say.

“Were you?”

“Maybe... definitely.”

“Okay, then I’m hanging up.”

“Fine, fine. There’s been a robbery at the gas station on Gibbs Street. While it looks like it’s been handled by some phenomenally charismatic and lovely badass motherfucker, I would still hurry on over. Maybe if you’re quick enough, you could get his autograph. Ask him to sign your pecs... wait, you don’t have any. Ask him to sign your flesh.”

“How the hell did you get caught up in something like this?” Jeremy asks, which is a pretty valid question.

“I think it’s luck,” I say.

“Bad luck.”

What the hell is he talking about? “No luck is ever bad when I get to shoot someone!” I announce.

“Oh my god, you *shot* them?”

“No, the other guy did,” I say as I unload the guns. “I wasn’t present at all. I heard all of this from a friend of a friend of my dog.”

“You just said you shot someone.”

“No, I said the bad guy shot the other bad guy,” I correct him as I set the guns on the counter and toss the ammo into a bucket of mop water. “Jeremy, your hearing concerns me. Do you think you should go to a doctor about that?”

“I should go to an exorcist and see if they can get rid of you,” he grumbles.

“Well, got to go!”

“Don’t you dare leave.”

“What? I can’t hear you... Jerebear... it’s breaking up... crinkle crackle... what was that? Did you say you have a crush on me?”

And with a delightful curse from Jeremy, I hang up.

“T-Thank you so much,” the cashier says. “I’m still shaking.”

“Of course!” I say as I make sure the guys aren’t going anywhere. The cashier returns with some duct tape that she helps me tape them up with. Then when I hear the sound of sirens, I slip out the door and hurry over to my car. I back it away from the pump and pull out onto the road and across the street to a different gas station so it wouldn’t look suspicious with me leaving after the police arrived.

There hadn’t been any cameras that I could see, so I should be a-okay to simply wander off once I get gas over here. I wait until the police are on the scene and I can see them head inside to capture the robbers before I drive off on my merry way, which becomes even merrier when my phone rings.

“Welllllll hello, husband!” I announce.

“You were caught up in an *armed robbery*?” Jackson asks.

“Wow, rumors sure spread fast.”

“Is it a rumor when you *called it in*?”

He seems rather... feisty on this fine day. “Jackson, my lovely, I’m fine. Totally fine. It was kind of fun.”

“You’re going to worry me into an early grave,” he whispers.

“Well, that’s not good. You need to live forever... become a vampire... suckle on me, those kinds of things.”

“I definitely think I’d live longer if you didn’t do risky stuff,” he decides, which is rather unfair when he’s right by my side doing risky stuff more often than not!

“What should I have done in this situation?” I ask. “I had clear control. They were amateurs. I knew everything would be fine.”

“If they were just taking money, I probably would have just let them take it.”

“And then they get a sense of euphoria that they were able to rob this place, so after that money runs out in a week, they

hit up a new place. This time the hostages aren't as well-behaved and one panics and makes a run for it, and in the robber's panic, they shoot him in the back and kill him. He was a beloved man who was well on his way to curing all ailments mankind has ever known, and with his death, the earth simply gives up life and implodes."

"All because of one hypothetical man," Jackson mutters. "You know... you had me going for that first half. I was like 'Huh, Leland really is right here. He potentially could have saved some lives and kept the robbers from repeating the same crime...' until you totally lost me with the rest."

"Or did I save you from the possible implosion of the world?" I ask. "We will *never* know because I saved the day. I shot that fucker and grabbed another while the third crumpled to the ground out of mere *fear*."

"Uh... huh. Did you give the police a statement?"

"Nope. I was gone like the wind. As long as Jeremy keeps his mouth shut, no one will know I was there. And if he doesn't keep his mouth shut... I might have to help Cassel make a new dating profile."

"I really hope I don't have to visit you in jail someday."

"I'd break out," I assure him.

"Okay, Houdini. You'd mentioned getting pizza. Do you want me to pick up something since I've finished up at work?"

"Nah, I got it handled," I assure him. "I'm just going to grab some burgers and I'll see you at home where you can eat it off my naked body."

"I'm just... trying to envision how that'll go. Like will I just set the burger on your chest and then start chewing?"

"Correct. Better yet, I'll eat it off *your* body."

"Okay... not practical and not really sexy but I'm willing to try," he teases.

"Perfect," I say. "Also pick out a movie in case eating our burgers off each other doesn't take very long."

He laughs. “I’m on it.”

“You would have totally found it sexy how I took those men down,” I say.

“I bet I would have.”

“First, they were like ‘Wow, you are one fine-looking man. I better not mess with you,’” I say as I give the robber a rather unique voice with a touch of Southern that somehow sounds a bit Scottish.

“Oh wow, and they still messed with you?” Jackson asks, like he’s in shock.

“I know, right? And I was like, ‘Well, guess I’m going to have to *fuck. You. Up.*’”

“And then you fucked them up?”

“I fucked them up so hard.”

“How hard?”

“Like *so* hard.”

“And then what happened?” he asks, like he’s mystified.

“Then I was like ‘Who’s next?’ And the remaining robber was like ‘Me, please!’ but I felt like he was a bit too thirsty, so I had to tell him I was married.”

“Oh, thank you. I was worried he was about to steal my husband,” Jackson says.

“Fret no more. You’re the only man for me. I’m pulling into the drive-through, but when I get home, I’ll tell you anything else you want to know about.”

“That’ll be magnificent. I’ll wait with bated breath.”

I can’t help but grin as I tell him I love him and hang up. He’s just so damn cute all the time, and it’s the best when he willingly goes along with my antics.



When I reach our house, our dogs Cayenne and Sarge are eagerly waiting at the door to greet me. Cayenne is a mutt who pretty much loves everyone and everything. I am convinced that the red mutt would merrily allow herself to get abducted by a stranger and love every moment of it if they simply cooed to her how cute she is. Sarge, on the other hand, is a stoic black and rust Doberman I acquired after deciding that Jackson needed around-the-clock protection after he'd gotten shot. That's when I made the—not mistake because I never make mistakes—decision to hire an army of dogs to do it. While that turned into absolute chaos, I fell in love with Sarge and the lady let me keep him after sending the others home.

He wiggles his tail when he sees me and dances a little, finally loosening up a bit after being with us for a while.

“Hey,” I say as I pet them both before heading into the living room to find Jackson deciding on a movie.

“Jeremy didn't harass you into giving him a statement?” Jackson asks.

“Nope. He said something about how even speaking to me would be too much for his little heart to handle, and that laying his eyes upon my manly physique was all he could take, so he sent me on my way!”

“Well, that's good at least. I'm glad you somehow got away with something else. You're weirdly lucky and unlucky at the same time,” he says as he sits on the couch. Cayenne immediately takes my spot, so I have to squeeze between her and Jackson before breaking into the fast food bag.

I hand him his cheeseburger and fries which he takes while finally settling on a movie. Once he does, I open mine and look at him expectantly. “I'm waiting.”

He glances over at me. “For?”

“Your naked torso so I can eat.”

That gets his eyebrows shooting for the sky. “Leland...”

“I... fiercely battled off multiple highly trained assassins ___”

“You said they were robbers *and* emphasized that they obviously didn’t know what they were doing.”

“I feared for my *life*.”

“You said that they didn’t even have the safeties off.”

“Through sweat, tears, and *their* blood, I saved the entire earth—hell, maybe even the galaxy.”

“You... are something, alright,” Jackson says as he gives me an amused look while shaking his head. It’s a rather handsome *yet skeptical* look. Yet there he is, pulling his shirt off before looking at me expectantly.

“What now?”

“Now, you have to lie back and relax,” I say as I push him back.

His expression clearly shows that he doesn’t know what to think about this. While on the other hand, I think I’m about to have the best meal of my life. “Okay?” he asks.

I take my cheeseburger out of the wrapper. “Okay. And close your eyes and give me your hands.”

“This is highly concerning,” he says, but like the absolutely perfect husband, he closes his eyes and holds his hands out. I put the cheeseburger into his hands, and he instantly opens his eyes, giving me a strange look of confusion.

“There, now I don’t have to use my own arms to feed myself,” I say as I open my mouth, like I’m expecting him to feed me.

“You can’t tell me you made me take my shirt off for this.”

“Can’t I?” I ask. “Or are you disappointed I’m not eating it off your chest?”

“Disappointed might not be the word I was planning on using,” Jackson says as he sets the cheeseburger down on his chest. “But I am having trouble holding it up for this long. My arms just aren’t that strong.”

“You want me to nibble it off you, don’t you?” I ask with a knowing look. “You’re into this idea of mine.”

“I was promised that I’d get to watch you try. I assume this is going to be sexy. No hands involved,” he says, telling me he’s deemed this plan a phenomenal one. He always acts like my ideas are foolish but then immediately loves them!

“It’ll be sexy alright,” I say as I get into position on my hands and knees, hands placed on each side of his waist as I glance up at him patiently waiting. I kind of feel like he’s also giving me a look of amusement.

I reward him with a good hair flick. “Did that get your juices flowing?”

“Please store that in the ‘Things I will never say to Jackson again’ box.”

I mime opening a box before shaking my head. “Sorry, studmuffin, the box is too full. Nothing more will fit,” I say as I give him a wink. “You ready for this?”

“I’m ready. Never been more ready in my life.”

“Oh yeah? Well, I’m here to please.” I lean in and try to get a bite of the cheeseburger, but without my hands, it’s quite awkward and it doesn’t help when Jackson starts laughing, making the cheeseburger a moving target.

“This is beyond ridiculous,” he decides.

“Stop laughing so I can feast!” I finally manage to get a bite but it’s all bun. “Yummm. This man-plate is making my cheeseburger taste even *better*.”

“Why does it sound so creepy, then?” he asks.

“There’s nothing creepy about my man-table. It’s a bit rickety though. Won’t stop moving. Maybe I need to look into a newer model.”

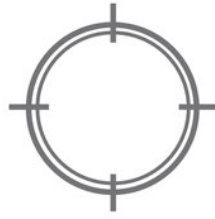
“You think any other model would lie here like this while their spouse unsexily tries mouthing a cheeseburger off their chest while talking about flowing juices?”

I eye him for a moment before sighing as I grab my cheeseburger like I'm devastated that I have to use my own hands. As I take a bite, I make sure he's well aware I'm still contemplating his question as he sits up and returns to his dinner. "See, *Jackson*, the problem I'm seeing here is that you're the strange one who puts up with it, telling me that you secretly enjoy it. Now would you like help eating your meal? I'm not sure if you know this, but I'm wonderful at helping."

"No, no. I want to save that for a special occasion," he teases.

"That's fair," I say as I toss a fry to each of the dogs.

TWO



“Hey!”

I glance over at a teenager of about fifteen or sixteen who is rushing toward me. There’s something vaguely familiar about him, but I can’t quite place it.

“You know him?” Jackson mutters as he stops turning the door handle to our private investigator office.

He’d started it years ago with his buddy, Mason, who he’d become friends with in the military. Mason had the money to get the PI business off the ground, but not the dedication Jackson had. And now that I’ve been tossed into the mix, they don’t need to worry about money and Jackson only has to worry about not letting me take on any jobs that are too dangerous.

Along the way, we’d also acquired Cassel, who’s like this cute and nerdy ex-hitman who was also raised by Lucas, the man who taught me all I know about guns and killing. While Cassel is quite skilled with a gun, his talent excels when it comes to computer work—an area that I admittedly lack the patience for.

“Yeah, so I wanted to ask you a question,” the teenager says.

“Hold, please.” I hesitate before pulling the folders out of my canvas bag and handing them to Jackson. They both seem rather confused until I reach over and put the bag on the teenager’s head. “Ah! I thought I recognized you! You were

holding up the gas station a couple of weeks ago! Why aren't you in jail?"

He tugs the bag off his head and rubs at his dark hair, like my bag might have messed it up. "I, uh... they'll probably just put me on community service because I was pressured into it. But that's not why I'm here."

"Are you here to recount how cool I looked?" I ask as I pat his shoulder before trying to put the bag back on his head. It really does suit him. I'd originally made fun of his lack of a cool ski mask but now that I see the bag, I tend to prefer it. It was a creative choice that he made that I could get behind.

He just barely manages to dodge it before I can force it back on. "I just... I've looked all over for you, and I kept asking around and then this police officer told me that it kind of sounded like you and that you ran a PI service and everything," he says, sounding rather excited.

Jackson doesn't seem too thrilled that this gas station robbing teenager is here and kind of steps between us with his arms crossed over his chest. It's such an obvious "Don't bring trouble" move that the teenager looks rather timid and stares at the ground.

"I-I was hoping I could hire you," he stammers.

"Oh?" I ask. "You're going to have to rob a bank to afford me."

"I... I'll do it!" he declares, far too determined for a kid who was the weakest link in an amateur robbery.

"Dear god, you're not robbing a bank," Jackson says. "If you have an issue, maybe it'd be best you speak with the police."

"The police *are* my issue," he says. "Well... kind of. Please. I'll do anything you want. I just want my brother back."

Jackson looks over at me. It's a very clear "What do you want to do?" look.

So I give him an "I dunno. What do you want to do?" look.

Which he returns with a “This seems fishy” look.

To which I give him an “A fish sandwich sounds really good for lunch” look.

“Jackson, you’re brilliant,” I inform him.

He seems oddly unsure why until I turn to the teenager. “Go get me three fish sandwiches, and we’ll hear you out,” I say.

“Right... right now?” He seems confused by this.

“Yeah, right now. It’s almost lunchtime. Hop to it. Do you need your bag to cover your face or do you think you’ll be able to order them like a normal person?”

He seems a bit embarrassed as he backs away from the bag I’m offering him. “I’ll get it...”

“You have to be fast. Like be back in ten minutes or I probably won’t bother to listen to your woes.”

He takes that to heart as he turns around and bolts off into the world. Maybe to never be seen again depending on how long the line is at a nearby place.

“What is even happening here?” Jackson asks.

“Some kid’s feeding us is what’s happening. Free food.”

“But... so he was one of the people robbing the gas station?”

“I guess,” I say as I head inside.

“And why did you say I was brilliant? Like how does your mind work?”

“You were eyeing me and telling me the situation seemed fishy, so bam... fish sandwich.”

“That’s...” He thinks about it for a moment. “I guess I can see how you got to that conclusion.”

“Right?”

Mason has the day off and Cassel is currently sleeping in his chair. I know he’s been up the past few nights looking into a cheating case which must be as boring as it sounds. When I

told him that he should offer the wife a special package which includes kidnapping the husband mid infidelity and tossing his naked ass into the river, Jackson shot it down. Cassel, on the other hand, clearly agreed with me.

I walk up behind Cassel and grab his chair, slowly rolling it back with the intention of rolling him out into the alley where we'll leave him, but he wakes before I get too far.

“Fuck... what is happening?” he asks. “Why am I moving?”

“Shhhh, the garbage truck will be here to take you away in an hour. Just go peacefully to your new trash haven.”

“Why are you so mean to me?” he cries. His fluffy red hair which makes him disgustingly cuter is stuck to his face, so he pushes it back while giving me a half-asleep look.

“Because you're cute, which annoys me,” I decide.

“Leland's conned a child into bringing us lunch,” Jackson announces like any part of this is an issue.

“Really? What are they bringing for lunch?” Cassel's asking all the right questions.

Jackson shakes his head as if he's disappointed in Cassel latching on to what he deems to be the wrong point.

“Fish sandwiches,” I answer.

Cassel's all for it, nodding approvingly and everything. “Ooh, that does sound good.”

“And you're encouraging him,” Jackson says with a sigh. Why he's surprised at this point in our lives, I'll never know. It's almost like he forgets how well he knows me.

I no more than get settled into my desk to start looking at emails when the door is flung open and a wheezing teenager barges in holding a bag.

“What's your name?” I ask, realizing I hadn't caught it before.

“Waylon.”

“Oh no, Waylon... you took ten minutes and four seconds,” I say.

He looks up at me in disbelief.

“You know what that means,” I tell Cassel.

“I’ll get the shovel,” he says.

“Do we still have the body bags in the back?” I ask.

The teenager hesitates as he stares at us with wide eyes, like he’s not quite sure what kind of hell he just waltzed into. He looks a little anxious now, and if he hadn’t thought robbing a gas station was a brilliant idea, I might have even felt a smidge bad for him.

“I-I was only... four seconds late,” he whispers through heavy breaths.

“I know. That’s why it’s really sad I have to do this,” I say. “Give me the sandwiches first.”

He quickly hands me the bag and then drops to his knees in front of me.

“Please, I need help and no one else will help me. No one will listen to me or take me seriously or even care.”

“Get off the floor,” Jackson urges, so he finally gets up to his feet.

“Fine, fine. We’ll hear you out,” I say as I pull out the three sandwiches and pass them around. Waylon quickly gets a chair and scoots it over right in front of me like his attention is one hundred percent fixated on me, even though the majority of customers we get prefer to deal with Jackson. I guess my gas station stunt made an impression on him. Clearly, this teenager is brilliant.

“I live with my brother... lived with him. Our parents weren’t very good parents, so he moved out several months ago and took me with him. But with his dad having passed away and our mom refusing to comply, he couldn’t get his ID, you know? Like he couldn’t find a legit job anywhere, so he started doing petty stuff for a group.”

“A gang or a group?” I ask as I use a plastic knife to cut out maybe an inch of my sandwich before sharing it with him.

Waylon holds the little inch-sized piece like he’s not sure what to do with it before quickly eating it. “A... gang.”

“Don’t leave things out,” I insist.

“But he wasn’t doing anything bad. He worked as a bouncer for one of the clubs. They paid him under the table, so he was able to do his job. He did it for a couple of months with no incident,” he says as I cut him off another tiny sliver of my sandwich, which he greedily eats.

“Not long after, his boss asked him to pick up a box from some address. That’s all I know. He just told me, ‘Hey, the boss needs me to pick up something for the club. Said he’d pay me overtime. I’ll be back in an hour.’ But he never came home that night. Next day, I heard he’d been arrested. When I went to the police, they told me that he had killed five people that night and was being held until his court date when they’d decide what to do with him. Of course they ruled him guilty and sentenced him to life in prison.

“My brother is the absolute nicest man ever. He’d never hurt anyone. He’d never do anything like that. They made him take the fall for something he didn’t even do,” he says, giving me a pleading look.

“So your brother, who joined a gang and has a younger brother who robs people with a gun, would never shoot anyone?” I ask.

He looks a bit embarrassed about that but shakes his head adamantly. “Of... of course not! I know we don’t sound like... ideal people, but he never hurt anyone!”

“Can you prove it?” Jackson asks.

“Well... no but... he just wouldn’t, okay?” Waylon says.

“That’s the issue, though, isn’t it? Right now, the police have enough proof to pin it on him. Without proof that he wasn’t involved, there’s not going to be anything anyone can do,” Jackson tells him.

“Family members always insist their loved ones couldn’t do something, but unless we have proof, we can’t ever say they didn’t do it,” I add.

“That’s what you guys do, right?” he asks, looking overly hopeful. I hand him another teeny piece of the fish. Since he’s now eaten close to half of it, I eat the rest myself while thinking this situation over.

“So your brother, the naïve and sweet man he was, went to do an innocent pickup for his boss which resulted in him getting caught with five bodies?” I ask.

Waylon slowly nods. “Yeah, but he’s never hurt anyone. I’ve never seen him shoot a gun.”

“It’s weird how those you love and care about immediately get a pass. ‘They’re someone I love, so they definitely can’t be involved.’ Yet the majority of murders are done by people who knew the victim. Doesn’t really add up, does it?” I ask.

“I just want someone to believe me for once,” he says, looking horribly frustrated.

“I didn’t say I didn’t believe you,” I respond. “But we’re not a charity, and you know... if I was willing to do a free job for someone, it’d be for someone who wasn’t just involved in an armed robbery.”

“I’ll... I’ll work it off. I’ll do anything, please?” he begs.

“Are you staying with someone?” Jackson asks.

“Yeah, my aunt. It’s fine. I’m almost sixteen.”

“Give us your number. I’m not guaranteeing anything, but we’ll look into it,” Jackson says.

“And you can pay us back by running errands for us. Be here after school,” I demand.

“Of course!”

“And if you think you’re going to rob *anyone*... I want you to remember what I did to your buddy’s knee.”

He looks a tad bit worried. Just the way he should be. “Right.”

“Now give me your brother’s name and go.”

“I’m going!” he says.

“Shouldn’t you be in school?” Jackson asks.

“I’m on lunch!” After jotting a quick note that has his brother’s name and his phone number, Waylon races out the door with multiple “thank yous.”

I glance over at Cassel who was busy tap-tapping away during the conversation. “So?”

“Bennett Adams was arrested when the police arrived on the scene because of an anonymous call stating that the caller heard what sounded like gunshots and screaming. Bennett was found standing among the five dead, holding the very gun that was involved in the shootings. After checking with the medical examiner who extracted the bullets, they were found to be exact matches to the gun he was holding.”

“Was it his gun?” I ask.

“It was.”

“Why was this innocent bouncer toting around a gun when all he did was ‘work as a bouncer’?” I ask.

“The gun wasn’t legal, but he said he’d bought it from a coworker a month prior. That he had it on hand because he didn’t live in a safe neighborhood, and there’d been some break-ins recently. That he never kept it on him, but he took it this time because he was going to a bad area,” Cassel says, summarizing the report.

“Okay. So what does he claim happened?” Jackson asks.

“He doesn’t remember. He fell unconscious and next thing he knew, everyone around him was dead and the police were coming after him.”

“Did he run?” I ask.

“No.”

“I wonder if we can get some information from someone who was first on the scene,” Jackson says.

“I know just who to visit.”

“We’re not even going to warn him we’re coming?” Jackson asks.

“He likes it best when we surprise him,” I assure him.

Jackson doesn’t seem overly certain about this, yet absolutely no one complains as we all pile into my car and head off to the police station.

“I’m honestly surprised you have a heart in there to help the kid,” Cassel says as he continues to clickety-clack away on his laptop.

“Trust me, it’s not a heart,” Jackson responds. “It’s an unmanageable desire to run headfirst into situations where he doesn’t belong.”

“I would never! If you two don’t stop harassing me, I’m going to start another rap battle.”

“Please don’t,” Cassel begs. “My ears haven’t repaired from your last rap. The doctor said I sustained permanent damage and if it happens again, I might lose all hearing. Then who would listen to your awful jokes?”

“Jackson, was my rapping that bad?” I ask as I glance over at the passenger seat where the man I thought was my loving husband sits.

He seems to have been frozen in place. Eyes trained on the road before him like if he doesn’t move, if he possibly doesn’t even *breathe*, I might not notice him and forget to insist on knowing the answer to this question.

“JACKSON!”

He feigns jumping. “Oh? What’s that? Sorry, I didn’t hear you.”

“Was it that you didn’t hear me or that you want to make me sad? Do you? Do you want to see me sad?”

“That would absolutely gut me to see you sad,” Jackson says as he reaches over and squeezes my leg.

I eye the suspicious man until he gives me a warm smile that makes me forget all of his past wrongs.

“You’re so perfect,” I decide.

Cassel grunts. “Thanks.”

“I wasn’t talking to you!”

“Yeah, you were. You literally said, ‘Cassel, you’re so perfect.’ I’m glad you finally see it. It makes me feel bubbly inside and makes my feelings for you ooze out into a copious pile of love just for you.”

“Jackson, Cassel is bullying me!”

“But you just said he was perfect,” Jackson says, of course taking *Cassel’s* side. This is what happens when you’re little and cute.

“When I die, I’m going to come back as a ghost and haunt both of you so badly that you’ll be left begging for forgiveness,” I decide.

“I’ll have an exorcist on speed dial,” Cassel assures me. “I’ve already considered calling them since I speculate that you’ve actually been possessed.”

I turn in my seat to glower at him while he tries to play it off like he has absolutely no idea what the issue is.

As I pull up to the police station, we’ve all come to the conclusion that if we die before the others, we will dedicate our lives to haunting Lucas.

The people at the station know me well enough by now that they just wave or smile when I come in. Not because they’ve had to arrest me—they only brought me in for questioning the one time I pretended I didn’t shoot a man while doing a sick leap off a bridge—but mostly because we stop by to see Henry, the chief of police, on a frequent basis. This is well known to be Henry’s favorite time.

While he’d been considering retiring from the position early, he hasn’t made the full commitment just yet, which means that he’s still here for us to pester.

I do our secret door knock to let him know I'm coming. Weirdly, the light in the room almost immediately goes out.

"Daddy Henry, I know you're in there," I say before pushing the door open and hurrying inside only to find the room completely empty. His computer lets out a soft glow and his chair is back from the desk, but there's no Henry to harass. Maybe the lights were on automatic timers or maybe...

I peek over the desk and look down into the hole where the chair slides in to find the man crammed in the small space like he could possibly be hiding from something.

"Oh, Henry, this is rather embarrassing," I say. "I feel embarrassed *for* you."

He slowly looks over at me, the look on his face a weird combination of defeat and disappointment. "I dropped my pen."

"Were you... were you hiding from us?" Jackson asks in disbelief.

"Not 'us,'" Henry grumbles.

That makes Cassel bust out laughing. He's laughing so hard that it takes him a moment to pull out a sassy, "Ha ha ha! He was hiding from you, Leland! How's it feel to know that a sophisticated man like Henry chose to hide under his desk to avoid seeing you?"

I come around the desk and before Henry can get up, I try to cram under the space with him. "Henry, we need to talk," I say as I take his hands in mine. He looks very displeased about his current situation, but... I mean why, when he's the one who willingly chose to have the meeting in his secret place.

"About?"

"Why you're avoiding Jackson. This isn't healthy."

"I'm not avoiding Jackson," he says as he crawls over me so he can get up before he tries cramming the chair back in, which just knocks it into me. It weirdly feels like he's trying to squish me! But how could he possibly ever want to squish me? "What do you three want? And if there are guns, assassins,

killers, weapons, or anything of the like involved, it's going to be a no."

"What about gangs?" Cassel asks.

"No."

"What about a gun-wielding assassin killer holding a damn fine weapon?" I ask.

"There is no part of that which would be a yes," he says.

"What if I told you that there was a kitten..."

"No because knowing you, the kitten is actually a gun-wielding murderer."

"While it originally wasn't, I'm thinking about the possibility. Its code name would be Meowder Mittens, you know, instead of Murder Mittens. No one would see it coming."

"Fine, instead of having to listen to this nonsense, let me know why you're actually here."

"See? My tactics are always effective," I say, rather proud of myself for making the man cave.

"We had a kid named Waylon Adams come in asking us to prove that his brother's arrest was wrong," Jackson says.

"Waylon? I know the kid. He's a good kid wound up in some bad shit, so I sat him down after he was involved in a robbery and had a talk with him. I assumed from the way he promised me he'd straighten up that he actually listened."

"I mean, is coming to us for help *not* listening?" I ask. "At least he's not running off trying to do it himself anymore. I have to assume that's why he joined the robbers, right? They were part of the gang, and he was trying to prove that he could be trusted in the hopes of getting some info on his brother."

"That's what we've determined, yeah. We were able to get it excused as him being coerced into the situation. He'll have to do some community service, but he shouldn't face any juvie time if we played our cards right," Henry says. "The brother's

case is over with homicide, though, and those guys aren't going to hand over the information you're wanting."

"Who's involved in the case?" I ask.

"Lady by the name of Divya Patel. She's not going to budge."

"Is she as mean as Jeremy?" I inquire.

"Jeremy isn't mean at all!" Cassel exclaims.

"Why are you talking about me?" Jeremy asks as he comes into the room before shutting the door. "And you better watch your ass because I can make that anonymous person who called the police about the gas station switch to you."

I wave at the man. "See? Evil!"

"I don't think it's best to get involved with the Adams brothers," Jeremy warns.

"I think it's questionable too, but I know that it doesn't matter what I say or do, you're going to do it anyway," Henry says, telling me that he really does know me.

"Do you guys think it was staged?" Jackson asks.

"Staged? Not really. Strange? Very," Henry says. "Talk to Detective Patel. Tell her I sent you her way. She can't tell you much, but maybe she'll have a few words of advice."

"Thanks," Jackson responds as the group of us trail out of the room. Jeremy gives us a wave to follow him and leads us to the other department.

When we reach the door, Jeremy turns to us. "Here's her room. Don't... be weird. She's a nosy woman with a keen eye. Last thing any of us need is her sniffing around any of us."

"We'll be good," I promise.

It's like my very promise makes Jeremy all the more skeptical as he narrows his eyes. "Maybe Leland should sit out in the car," he grumbles.

"Nah, I'm phenomenal at talking to women," I assure him.

“The only female you know how to talk to is your dog,” Jeremy mutters. “Good luck.”

“Thanks,” Cassel says as he gives Jeremy a sickly-sweet smile. The way Jeremy practically melts makes me side-eye Jackson who raises his eyebrow. Cassel narrows his eyes at us, fully believing we’re harassing him, which puts a grin on my face as I knock on the door.

“Come in,” a voice says, so we head into the office. While I was expecting some cranky woman who’s prepared to stick our heads on a pike, I’m greeted with a smiley woman who looks thrilled to see us, even though she probably doesn’t know who we are... hopefully.

“Hey, Chief asked me to bring these guys over to talk to you. They had a few questions about the Adams brothers,” Jeremy says.

“Of course, come in,” she says as she willingly lets us into her room, which is her first mistake.

Jackson immediately steps forward and shakes her hand. “Hi, I’m Jackson. This is Leland and Cassel.”

“I’ve met Cassel before at a work party. And seen you two around,” she says. “Please sit down. I only have two chairs, but—”

“It’s okay,” I say as I nudge Cassel to take a chair before I sit on his legs. I feel like it’ll make her drop her guard if she sees that I’m willing to torture even my own friends.

“Pls, right?” she asks.

“We are,” Jackson confirms. For some reason, he seems to think that people respond best when he speaks to them, as if I could make people *less* likely to trust us. “So we have a client who is hoping we’d look into Bennett Adams’s arrest.”

“His brother?” she guesses.

“Correct.”

“He’s been in here a few times. I think he’s tried convincing everyone in the department that his brother is innocent. It doesn’t matter how much proof we show him, we

have Bennett Adams at the scene, and we have documentation of him admitting to the crime.”

“Yeah, Detective Patel, but Bennett didn’t admit to it right away. He admitted to it after you guys had him for a while, telling me he could have been pressured or coerced into it during that time,” Cassel says, leaning around me so he can look at the detective.

She hesitates but gives him a smile. “Just call me Divya, and that is true, but do you think all criminals admit to the crime the first time you ask? If they did, my job would be a whole hell of a lot easier.”

“What I’m saying is during that time, who could have talked to him and convinced him to take the blame?” Cassel asks.

I nod, taking Cassel’s side. “I mean, a threat goes a long way, especially when he has an innocent brother on the outside who is trying to run with the gang in an attempt to get answers. People do some pretty drastic things when they feel like no one will listen to them and they’re the last hope for their loved one,” I say.

“So you think Bennett’s innocent?” she asks.

“Maybe if you talked over the case with us, I’d be able to tell you that,” I suggest, and then give her my best smile.

She smiles right back, apparently not a woman to be easily swayed. “Alright, of course I’d love to tell you everything about the case. I’ll even let you look at the interviews and the paperwork... after you get a degree and apply and work your way up to becoming a detective.”

“Ooh, I like you,” I decide. “What are your thoughts on bribery?”

“It’s illegal.”

“What about a striptease?”

“All three of you?” she asks.

“All three of us,” I assure her.

“Hmm... I don't think it'd be enough,” she says. She's obviously playing with me at this point, but two can play this game.

“The moment you see Jackson's impeccable nips, it'll be enough, trust me. Let me tell you about our first meeting and how a bare ass hanging off a fence sealed my fate—”

“He will not be telling you this story,” Jackson selfishly states.

“I'm going to be honest... I'm kind of curious now,” she says.

“It was a dark night... I was watching a house from the balcony when *pow* this sexy beast of a man came upon the largest hurdle he'd faced in his life yet... *The Fence*—”

Jackson lets out a noise like he could possibly be displeased by my retelling. “Let's say this is irrelevant to the case and return to what we were discussing,” he says, which is just selfish if you ask me. It makes me pity the poor woman who was deprived of this story.

“So at one point, you started to suspect that a man by the name of Jacob Reaver was behind the shootings; why did you switch gears?” Cassel asks.

Now *that* gets her attention.

“And who told you that?” she asks.

“Oh? A guy named Jacob Reaver... fascinating,” I say.

“Where did you get this information?” she demands as Cassel slowly sits up straight so he can hide behind my body. “Is someone in the department selling you information?”

“Don't be jealous you didn't take me up on the striptease. Thank you for making it clear we should look into this Jacob guy.”

That seems to be a touchy subject for her as the smile leaves her. “Do not look into Jacob Reaver. He is not a man you want to fuck with.”

“Is that why Bennett took the blame for him?” I ask.

“He did not take the blame for him.”

“So he had an alibi and a pretty firm one at that,” Cassel adds. “Which... I mean, you can’t refute that. But to write him off completely when he has pull within the gang is kind of an interesting take. Even if he was innocent, there’s the possibility he could have given someone more information.”

“Where are you hearing this from?”

“Who was his alibi?” I ask.

“Interestingly enough, it was a Miss Divya Patel,” Cassel says.

“Wait... hold on...” I pretend to think about it for a moment before looking at her. “Isn’t that your name?” I ask the woman.

Her eyes narrow. “Jacob was not involved. An anonymous tip is what sent police looking in his direction. It was later proven that it couldn’t hold up.”

“What are you up to?” I ask curiously.

“Nothing. It is common knowledge that I’ve known Jacob since we were children. Why am I even explaining this to either of you? Jacob was not involved. At the time, I’d run into him at a gun show that I was sent over to examine... you know, it doesn’t matter why I was sent there. Bennett confessed to the crime that he committed with the gun he owned.”

“There *was* gunshot residue on Bennett’s hand,” Cassel says.

“Were the height and angles all in line with his height?” I ask. “He’s a pretty tall man. It’d take some good work to fake it and get everything correct.”

“Yeah, angles and everything do make it seem like Bennett really did it. According to the data, it seemed like he got into a scuffle with them before shooting two who’d been on the ground, and the other three who’d been squatting behind cover,” Cassel says.

Divya just stares at us, clearly not thrilled that Cassel weaseled his way into their database to acquire the information.

“I know Jeremy isn’t privy to this case, so you couldn’t have gotten it from him. Who?” she asks, looking like she wants to go beat some sense into “whoever” spilled the information.

“So... I mean, it really could have been Bennett,” Jackson says.

“But I’m still going to look into it,” I decide. “I will join the gang and work my way to the top to get answers.”

“We are *not* joining a gang,” Jackson says, which I think is a pretty defeatist attitude.

“So... Divya, tell me about this Jacob person. How would I get him to accept me in the gang?”

“Why did you guys even come here if you already knew everything?” she asks while giving me quite the look. I can’t tell if she’s impressed or wants to throw us out on our asses.

“You mentioned he was at a gun show... so he must like guns.”

“I’m pretty sure you don’t need to be here if you know everything.”

“No, no. Don’t fret. You’re giving us some good information,” I assure her.

“Want my advice? Keep Waylon out of it. That kid’s going to get himself hurt or killed sticking his nose into these situations,” she says.

Which is something we finally agree on. “I have a feeling Waylon doesn’t have much of a home life. The only person he’s ever counted on or has cared for him is suddenly tossed in prison and torn out of his life *for life*,” I say. “You can’t blame a kid for doing what he can to bring that back. And maybe he really just needs all the proof he can get before he can finally accept what has happened.”

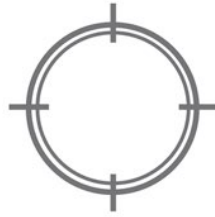
“His brother should have thought of that before he pulled that trigger,” she says. “If you’re able to find anything worth looking into... I’ll hear you out. This is common knowledge, but we’ve been keeping an eye on that gang—the Jinn group—for a while and they’re tricky. They know how to play by the rules while they bend them in ways that continually protect them. They don’t mind who they have to use to get away with it, so we’re left with a dead end every time we try. Just know that if you start playing with them, don’t be surprised if they play back. And don’t be shocked if you find yourself at the end of a gun.”

“Got it,” I say. “So my striptease will likely not work, but if Jackson strips...”

Divya stares at me, so I give her a grin before getting up off Cassel’s lap. Cassel cries about his abused legs, which, I mean... he shouldn’t be so little.

The three of us head out to the car and drive back to Wellstone Detective Agency where Waylon is sitting on the sidewalk, apparently waiting for us. The moment he sees us, he looks beyond relieved, and I can’t help but wonder if something happened.

THREE



JACKSON

“I was wondering where you guys were. I’ve been waiting here forever,” Waylon says as we walk over to him. He seems nervous and keeps picking at his shirt.

“You alright?” I ask in concern. Who knows if he actually listened to us—and the police—insisting that he stay out of things. I feel like if he had, he wouldn’t seem so anxious.

“Yeah... I just... I was thinking that I was being foolish, you know? The cop lady was right that there’s nothing I can do, and I just... decided it’d be best not to go through with looking into this.”

His words seem to jumble together as he rambles about it, and I can immediately tell that it wasn’t his idea to pull back on it. Could it be his aunt forcing him to stay out of this mess for his own safety? But if it were... would he be this nervous? Did someone from the gang find out he’d enlisted more help? If so, do we now have to worry about the Jinn group keeping an eye on us?

“If that’s what you want,” Leland says, which is highly suspicious. Leland never easily agrees to anything, yet here he is, giving the teenager a thumbs-up and a smile. No, no, that smile is too fake. It reads as clear as day, “What I’m saying and what I’m going to do are two completely different things.”

Waylon, not privy to Leland’s ways, gives him a strained smile. “Thanks... and thanks for listening and wanting to help... no one else really wanted to... so I appreciate it.”

And with that, he walks off like a dejected puppy, head down, shoulders slumped.

“Well, someone’s obviously bullying him into keeping his nose out of it,” Leland says.

“Right... but we don’t want to get the kid in trouble if someone is watching what he’s doing,” I remind him. “We also don’t want anyone thinking we’re in on it.”

Leland looks over at me, an eyebrow raised. “You... oh you sweet, silly man. You think I would let anyone know that I’m stalking them?”

I guess that was a foolish thing for me to say, wasn’t it? There’s no way Leland would be as good as he is by being easy to track or notice.

“So we’re going on a stakeout?” I guess.

“With steak.”

“We’re going to eat steak on a stakeout?”

“We sure are. Cassel, are you coming?”

“I can’t tonight, but I’ll email you all the information I’ve found. There’s definitely something sketchy going on, so hopefully you get some answers,” he says.



That is how I end up eating steak on a stakeout.

Leland ordered us some dinners to go before I drove over to where Waylon has been staying with his aunt. When we get close enough that we can watch him without being suspicious, I see that he’s in the driveway playing with a basketball. After about ten minutes, a neighbor kid joins him. But around thirty minutes after that, a car pulls up and the window goes down.

The neighbor kid doesn’t seem to want anything to do with whoever’s in the car and wanders off while Waylon walks over to the window of the car to talk.

“Can you see who it is?” I ask.

“It looks like this Jacob guy. What would a higher-up member want with some kid?” Leland asks. “And to be visiting him at his house seems a bit suspicious.”

“He might have been the one to find out about us. Maybe he’s wanting to make sure Waylon listened and told us to stop,” I suggest.

“Possibly. Either way... let’s follow him,” Leland says before whispering under his breath, “Car chase, car chase. Everyone loves a car chase.”

“This isn’t going to be a car chase,” I remind him as the car we’re following proceeds to obey all the traffic laws to the point where it’s a bit annoying going so slow.

“Isn’t this guy embarrassed to drive this speed?” Leland asks. “I feel embarrassed for you going this slow.”

“I... I feel like we look more suspicious than if we were following him at breakneck speeds.”

“Maybe you need to nudge him a bit, you know? Get up behind him and honk the horn. I really think that’ll help.”

“Do you?” I ask, not sure how it would but borderline willing to give it a try.

Once Jacob finally parks outside a house out in the country, I find a spot from a distance to watch. Leland is quite insistent that something interesting is going on behind the closed doors, but there’s nothing we can do to look into it while Jacob is inside unless we bust in through the front door eager for a gunfight... which... let’s be honest is probably what Leland was implying.

So here we are, tucked into some cluster of trees waiting for something exciting to happen when I’m positive Jacob is just stopping by to say hi to someone.

I’ve been around Leland long enough to know that he’s not going to be able to sit still and just watch for too long. Honestly, it’s impressive that he was able to do this by himself for so long, but I fully believe his mindset wasn’t the same when he was young. I also think that he dealt with situations like this quite differently. Here, he’s only trying to get

information; back then, he was off to kill whoever Lucas pointed a finger at and later did jobs he wanted to take.

When he makes it to about half an hour, I'm honestly impressed.

"Let's play a game," Leland decides.

"Yeah? What kind of game?"

"Let's see who can go in and get Jacob to talk first," he says with a grin.

"That's not even a contest. There's no way I'd ever get someone to talk before you," I assure him.

"I... I don't know why you saying that was stupidly romantic," he whispers. "Fuck, you're hot."

"Thanks."

"So... how would you do it?" he asks.

"Do? Oh, get him to talk?"

"Yeah!"

I think about it for a moment, fully aware that Leland doesn't want a real account of how I'd do it. "Well, I think I would start by taking my shirt off."

Leland's look of excitement tells me that I'm one hundred percent correct. "Oh yesssss. And then?"

"And then I'd strut right up to that door and beat on it with my fist."

"I like it when you beat on things."

"And when he opened the door, I'd grab him by the front of his shirt, but he wouldn't be able to grab on to my shirt because I'm not wearing one."

"Fuck, that's so hot."

"And then I'd slam him against the wall, pinning him there as I turn to ask you if you want to torture him."

"Oh baby... Torture time."

"Exactly."

Leland laughs, clearly pleased with the turn of events. It always makes me smile when he's so easily amused by the little ridiculous things.

"What about you?" I ask.

"I... I would only change one thing," he says. "I'd have you take your pants off too."

"Oh? So I'm just strutting in wearing my underwear?"

"Exactly! But I'd strap like five guns to you."

"So mostly naked and coated in guns, got it."

"I kind of don't know how I feel about him seeing your nips, though. Those are for me. So I think I'd have you wear like a knife over each nip."

"Oh, so when I move quickly, I stab myself with my bosom blades."

"That's the power of protecting the nips."

"You are ridiculous," I decide and leave it at that as we watch the house. It's a whole lot less interesting when we're not visualizing breaking into it.

"Are you sad we didn't bring your car so you could stroke it while we waited?" Leland asks, as if this is a serious issue.

"How did this switch around to harassing me again?" I complain.

"I have absolutely no idea! Like I can't even fathom *how* that would happen, you know? I almost feel bad for you!"

"You are so sassy."

"Well, I need to do something to get entertainment," he explains. "Ooh! Ooh!" He smacks me as he points at Jacob leaving the house. "He's on the move."

"Where? Where?" I ask as if I don't see the car moving off.

Leland gives me a look, eyebrow raised and everything. "Don't give me that sass. Now run him off the road. If this isn't going to be exciting, we'll *make* it exciting."

“Like do you want me to just bump the car to see if we can egg him into a race or what?”

“Oh, now you’re thinking,” he says with a grin. “Yeah, a little bump. See if he takes off.”

I grin back at him as I wait for the car to get far enough away to pull out behind him without causing suspicion. The car drives a bit before Jacob pulls up outside what looks like a golf course.

“I mean... if this is where he’s spending his free time, it might be a good opportunity to get to know him,” Leland says.

“That’s true.”

“We *did* learn all those golfing skills from the last time we went golfing; I bet I could show them off here.”

My mind flashes back to the group of us having absolutely no idea how to golf... to Leland driving the golf cart he renamed Leland’s Lickety-Split Luxurious Lift that then proceeded to run *over* the bad guy. Like full-on tiny tires climbing the man’s body. “Weirdly, our memories of the last golf course we went to vary drastically.”

“Alright. Let’s go in. It’s time for pro golfer Leland to come out of retirement and wow this Jacob guy.”

“What? In what world is that a good idea?” I ask.

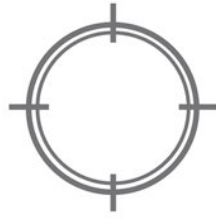
“We’ll disguise ourselves. I mean... best way to get answers from a gang is to join the gang,” Leland says as he gives me a grin.

I raise an eyebrow, positive that this is not the answer but also well aware that I have to trust Leland, since his skill at this kind of thing far outweighs mine. While Leland is easily amused, I also know that he’s quite good at what he does, so when he tells me he has an idea, I really have no reason to refute it.

“I’ll agree to this, but I want us disguised better than this. What if we come back tomorrow or whenever he comes again with a good disguise so if he is watching Waylon, he doesn’t recognize us if Waylon interacts with us again?”

“I can handle that.”

FOUR



JACKSON

With a fake beard that Cassel was shockingly good at applying over my scruff, I follow Leland into the building outside the golf course the following day. It's taking everything in my body to try not to grin when he looks back at me with his facial hair and glasses. It looks realistic enough that I don't think anyone would be able to tell without giving it a tug, but for someone who has never seen facial hair on Leland, it's quite the sight.

Noticing the attention, he waggles his eyebrows and pretends to smooth the mustache that he insisted on wearing. He'd also used a temporary dye on his hair that turned the brown to nearly black before slicking it back with some gel.

"Come, my handsome man," Leland says as he gives my beard a twirl before walking through the front door of the building in front of the golf course. Cassel had hacked into the building's security cameras to get a good idea when this Jacob guy frequented the golf course. It didn't take long to figure out that every evening around six, he'd arrive and always head to the same area. So there we are with equipment we borrowed from Henry in hand—with the strict guidelines that the clubs cannot be used to fight or maim anyone. Once we get inside, we wander off into this Jacob guy's path.

Leland, who knows nothing about golfing, walks toward the man and gives him a huge smile. He's not even trying to play it off like we belong here or that we "ran into him." Nah, Leland just waltzes right up to the guy.

“Hey! I think you dropped this,” he says as he holds out a golf ball.

Jacob looks down and checks his before shaking his head. “Nope. Got mine.”

“Oh... I swear I saw it fall out of your stuff. My buddy here loves golfing and has decided, again, to drag me off. I’ve told him again and again that a gun range is the place to be, but he’d rather hit his problems than shoot them, I guess,” Leland says as he reaches back to hand me the ball in a way that exposes his gun. The whole thing looks so accidental, but Jacob’s eyes are immediately trained on the gun.

I suddenly realize why we spent an hour deciding which gun to take. No matter how much a fellow gun lover doesn’t feel like conversing with Leland, the moment they see his fancy gun that probably performs magic tricks, he’s able to hook their attention.

“Oh... hello,” Jacob says as he examines the gun. “Impressive. Can I see it?”

“Of course,” Leland agrees, and you *know* he’s wanting to hook someone if he lets a random person touch one of his “babies.” He hands it over and the man holds it like it’s an infant.

“Wow, how the hell did you get this?” he inquires. “I’ve never in my life seen one of these out in the wild.”

“Yeah? You collect guns?” Leland asks.

“I... have a love for guns, but sadly I don’t have the opportunity to pull something like this into my stash,” he says. “My boss would shit a brick if he saw this. Are you selling?”

“Selling my baby?” Leland asks, horrified at the thought. “Ehhh... I don’t know... If he’s a collector, I have some other stuff I would consider selling for the right price, but... I don’t know about this one. I have quite the attachment to it.”

Jacob assesses him for a moment, but it’s apparent he wants to show off the gun to his boss. “You have a number? I know my boss would love to see what you have. And if you’re

interested in selling, all the better. He's got quite the collection. He probably has a handful for sale as well."

"Consider my interest piqued," Leland says as he gives him the number for one of his burner phones. "What's your number? I can send you a few pictures of what I have... well... depending on how... hard to find of a weapon your boss is looking for..." He hints at it, like he's trying to figure out if his boss is interested in illegal guns.

"He's interested in all types, don't worry about that," Jacob assures him.

"Perfect because I have a few that are a bit less... you know... for everyone," Leland says with a grin.

"He'd see them all," he tells Leland before handing the gun back. "I'll be in touch."

"Good," Leland says before turning to me. "Alright, let's go beat some balls!"

"I... don't think you're supposed to beat them," I reply.

"I'm not quite sure what you're supposed to do with them. Stroke them! Right? You stroke the balls?" Leland asks. "Or wait, stroke the shaft?"

"I think that's a porno, not golfing," I say.

"Dammit, I always get those two confused," he teases as we wander off. While we have absolutely no idea what we're doing, we find an open spot where Jacob can still see us but not to the point that he can realize that we have absolutely *no* idea what we're doing.

"My gun, *Jackson*," Leland whines. "He touched... my baby." Honestly, I'm more than shocked he allowed the man to touch the gun at all.

I pat him on the shoulder. "I know, I know. He put his grimy fingers all over it."

Leland looks defeated as he uses the golf club to keep himself standing, like the weight of his new trauma is enough to knock him to his knees. "He stroked my baby."

“He touched every inch of it,” I concur.

“His fingers had to have been greasy. He probably didn’t wash his hands after taking a piss, Jackson!”

“A tragedy, I say.” I make sure I sound absolutely devastated. “Like worst tragedy ever, probably.”

“Right? Do you think I’ll ever recover from this?” Leland asks, as if this is a legit concern.

“Hmm...” I examine him for a moment. “There might be a way. As soon as we’re done bashing our balls around like kids who don’t know what the fuck they’re doing, there’s a high possibility that I have an idea. Do you think you’ll make it until then?”

“M-Maybe. Maybe if I shoot at someone and watch them run, it’ll make me feel better.”

“I bet, but until then, let’s try my way,” I say. “Have faith in your husband, okay?”

Leland can’t make it much longer, and really, now that we have the guy’s interest, what’s the sense in staying? It definitely took us longer to put on our disguises than to talk to him, but there’s the possibility he could call us over tonight and we did pique his interest, so it wasn’t a waste of time.

As we leave the building, Leland stumbles and I quickly look over at him. “You alright?”

“I... I think the poison from him touching the gun has gotten to me. It’s seeping into... my heart.”

“Oh no... what a tragedy,” I say with an extra dash of sarcasm.

Leland lifts his arm like it’s weighed down by a pile of bricks. “I... I’m not... sure how long I’ll make it...”

And then he falls against me. “Oh no... what can I do to help?” I ask as I consider dragging him off to the car.

“M-Mouth to mouth might fix me,” he whispers.

“I guess if that’s what it takes,” I say as I quickly wrap my arm around him and proceed to drag him over to the car.

Anyone who happens to look our way likely thinks I'm abducting the man, yet he does look quite willing to be abducted. I put him into the passenger's seat and grab his face. "Leland... Leland, can you hear me?"

"God? Is that you? Oh, it must be my sexy guardian angel... I can barely hear you."

"It is me, Jackson."

"Jack... son? That name... that name alone causes blood to course through my veins."

"Yeah... well, do you think you'll make it?" I proceed to pat his face, which makes his eyes scrunch a bit.

"I... I don't know... Jack... son."

"What if I give you a kiss?"

"Letting your lips brush upon mine might allow some life to return to my lifeless body..."

"That seems pretty serious, then," I say as I press my lips against his. He promptly forgets his woes as he kisses me right back. Honestly, he's almost immediately reinvigorated. And when I pull back to look down at him, I see that life really has returned.

"True love's kiss healed me," he whispers.

"Oh wow, that's remarkable."

Leland grins at me. "Thank you."

"Hopefully, I can get you back to work before the ailment strikes again," I say as I pretend to hurry over to the driver's seat.

"The faster the car goes, the faster I'll be healed."

"Well, we must not wait, then!"

While I keep the car at a steady speed to not draw unwanted police attention, I make sure to floor it whenever I'm given the opportunity, which makes Leland quite pleased.

"We should rent out a racetrack and chase Cassel and Jeremy around while shooting at them," Leland says, like this

would be a normal date night activity we'd do with our friends. "I bet Cassel would be up for it."

"I bet because you two make questionable choices at best." When I glance over at him, he's hurriedly texting something. "What are you doing?"

"Texting Cassel. I wrote 'Hey, bruh. You. Me. Car chase and gunfight. You in?'"

"That text is so vague he's going to have absolutely no idea what's going on."

"He says that he's super in and when can we meet and are we using real guns."

"Of course he did," I say, glad when we reach our office so I can hopefully distract Leland from making the grave error of a death match double date. I'm so concerned about this that I whip out a really devastating blow to distract him. "Don't forget all of those fingerprints on your gun."

"Jackson, why the hell did you remind me?"

"Because it's important to face your fears, Leland. It's not healthy to stuff them to the back of your mind," I say as I pull up outside Wellstone, very pleased that I'd managed to distract him.

He rushes inside, past our desks, and upstairs where I know he keeps his cleaning kit. Seeing as it's after work hours, no one else is here. We'd stopped by so I could grab my laptop, but first, I follow him upstairs to where he's hastily getting his gun cleaning kit out.

"Hold on," I warn him, and he quickly looks over at me.

"What is it?"

"Let me see the gun," I say as he sets the clip to the side, checking to make sure there's nothing in the gun and that the safety is on. I make sure to check it again after taking it from him.

"You... you're going to fix it for me?" he asks.

"I sure am. First, let's get rid of these fingerprints."

I yank my shirt off in one fluid movement before holding the gun in front of me. With shirt in hand, I start gently dusting the metal while looking him in the eyes and doing my best to flex my muscles. “Look how clean it is as I stroke it.”

“Oh, fuck me,” he whispers. “Rub that barrel. Rub it harder... yesssss.”

“Yeah? You want me to stroke that barrel, don’t you? What if I do this?” I ask as I rub the gun on my chest like I’m working at a particularly stubborn splotch of fingerprints.

“Ohhh baby, you might be making that gun feel clean, but you’re making me feel dirty,” Leland says.

I have to do everything in my power to keep from laughing as I instead try to waggle my eyebrows. It’s never as sexy as when people do it in books or movies. I feel like I’m trying to do some kind of forehead itch, but Leland’s all in. Hell, he’s probably too fixated on the gun to even look at me.

“You like that?” I ask as I hold the gun down at my groin and run my fingers over it like I’m stroking my cock. “That makes you forget about that dirty man putting his greasy fingers all over your gun, doesn’t it?”

“It sure does.”

“OH MY GOD MY EYES!” Cassel screams.

I jump and nearly drop the gun but manage to stop myself before I do. The shirt, on the other hand, hits the floor, far, far away from my naked chest. Leland, who seems to have noticed Cassel enter the building but at no point decided to *tell me*, cackles. It’s quite clear he’s having the absolute time of his life watching me humiliate myself all to make him smile.

“Cassel, kick back and enjoy the show,” Leland says, like he thinks I’d actually continue all of this now that we have a witness.

“Do I have to?” Cassel whines, and it’s such a sad noise that I even pity him.

“Do you want to get paid this week?” Leland threatens.

Cassel sighs but sits down and looks at me, as if I would actually keep going. Instead, I hand Leland his gun and reach for my shirt, wanting to cover up this whole scene as soon as I can.

“Did you need something, Cassel?” I ask.

“For you to continue,” Leland says, trying to mimic Cassel’s voice, like I could somehow mistake it for him and hurry off to continue my striptease. How embarrassing.

“I just came to grab some photos a client left behind and when I heard you guys upstairs, I didn’t think this would be going on... whatever this is. My eyes hurt. Do I need to wash my desk every day? Do you guys do... things in here?”

“No, we don’t. And we weren’t going to,” I assure him. “I was simply trying to help Leland get over his tragedy while also causing myself to go through a tragedy that I’ll probably never recover from.”

“Oh wow, that sounds sad,” Cassel says with plenty of sass tossed in. “Sad that, you know... Jackson had to go through all of that to support you. Sometimes I wonder why he even puts up with you. There have to be normal men out in the world... it can’t be hard to be more normal than you.”

Leland slowly turns to look at Cassel, who’s got a fight-or-flight decision on his hands. The moment Leland sets his gun down, Cassel knows he’s done for and leaps up to run for the door. Leland is after him in a heartbeat and he just barely dodges the attack. Cassel turns quickly, but Leland is on him in a second, and they both go stumbling back as Jeremy looks in at us.

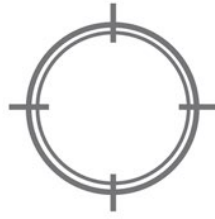
“Why are you half naked and they’re brawling? Wait... hold on... I don’t care,” Jeremy decides.

Cassel leaps onto Leland’s back and grabs him in a choke hold.

Jeremy assesses the situation before turning to me. “You want to get a beer?”

“Yeah, sure,” I say as I follow him out, leaving those two to their death match.

FIVE



When my phone wakes me up at two in the morning, I reach over and groggily grab it. Lifting it, I see that it's a number I don't recognize and drop it back down.

"Who is it?" Jackson asks as I snuggle into him, phone immediately forgotten.

"Dunno. Random number."

"Hmm..."

It's not even a minute later that my phone beeps, telling me I have a voicemail. Reluctantly, I roll over and grab the phone so I can listen to it.

"Hi, my name is Reuben Smith. Seeing as you're Lucas's emergency contact, I was hoping to speak with you. Please give me a call back as soon as you get this."

My blood runs cold and all drowsiness dissipates from inside me at the sound of Lucas's name. When I was thirteen, Lucas took me in, and while I thought he was offering me a home—possibly even a family—he was instead offering me a completely different lifestyle. One where he taught me everything he knew about how to hunt and kill. One I grew up following almost religiously until I began to question Lucas and myself. At that point in time, I finally did what I should have done years before and shot Lucas, but unbeknownst to me, the shot hadn't been fatal.

After years of believing that Lucas was dead, I found out that he'd been keeping an eye on me. And that's when I decided to end his torment once and for all. But in a foolish

attempt to show him that I was different, I'd allowed him to live, spending the rest of his life in prison instead, but I've regretted that decision more than once.

And now, I hear that instead of contacting any of the other people whose lives he fucked up, he chose me as his emergency contact?

“What’s wrong?” Jackson asks sleepily.

“Someone was calling, probably from the prison, about me being Lucas’s emergency contact and needs me to call them back.”

“If it’s this late, something pretty bad must have happened,” Jackson says.

“You think someone killed him?” I ask, sounding far too hopeful. It’s probably not very healthy to wish for someone’s death so much.

“I... don’t know. I guess it’s a possibility.”

“Make someone else do it. We have Cassel and that Micah guy Lucas also trained.”

“Have you heard from Micah since Cassel ran into him?” Jackson asks.

While Lucas had been bringing up Cassel, he’d also had another teenager in his clutches—a boy by the name of Micah. While Micah was talented and good at what he did, he also found a way out. He faked his own death to escape Lucas. Of course, fate found a way to draw him back into our lives when Cassel was trying to help Jeremy deal with some family-related issues.

I’m pretty sure Micah just stuck around to help us for the money, and once he got his share, he left and I haven’t seen him since. But couldn’t they call him... wherever he is... doing whatever he’s doing?

“Hell,” I grumble.

Jackson reaches over and runs his fingers down my arm until he finds my hand and gives it a squeeze. “Just... call them back and get it over with.”

“How did he even get my number?” I ask.

“I... don't know. You think Tucker gave it to him?”

Since my handler, Tucker, used to work with Lucas, he still knows how to contact him. But after Lucas faked his own death, Tucker never worked for him again. Instead, he continued working with me. Though I've now left behind the life of a hitman, we still keep in touch, and I do little jobs for him here and there. He's also who I enlist whenever I want someone to talk to Lucas... but would he give Lucas my number? I just really don't think he would. And my main cell number at that. “I think if he did, I'm going to make him regret life,” I decide.

“That's fair,” Jackson says. “I wonder if the prison did it. They probably require you to give them your information when you go in there, don't they?”

“Fuck, you're right. Assholes... but it at least makes me feel better that Lucas himself doesn't have it,” I realize.

“Do you want me to call them back?”

“No, I can do it,” I say as I take a deep breath and click the button to call back. I put it on speaker so I don't have to suffer alone. While the phone rings, I secretly hope no one will answer, but before I can get my wish granted, the same man who'd left the message answers with, “This is Reuben.”

“You just left a message needing to talk to me about Lucas?” I say.

“Ah, great. This is Leland Stein, correct?”

“It is...”

“Lucas has you down as his emergency contact.”

“Is he dead?” I ask, probably a bit too hopefully.

“Uh... no, he's not. But there's been an incident.”

“Okay, is there any way I can get changed from an emergency contact to ‘Only call me if he's dead’?” I ask. “Is there a list for that?”

The man hesitates, clearly unsure of what to say in this case. “Lucas has been severely injured and has just been taken by life-flight to an emergency center.”

“Oh joy. Let me know if he dies.”

Reuben seems unsure of how to deal with my replies, which is fine with me. “Leland, the medical staff would love for you to come in or be on call since Lucas is currently unresponsive.”

“Tell them that he’s a psychopathic serial killer who ruined every life he got a hold of and maybe they’ll slip a little during surgery and just end his miserable life so he can stop making others more miserable,” I suggest.

“I... understand. So you... were not willingly made his emergency contact?”

“No.”

“Okay.” He seems uncertain on how to proceed.

“Let me know if he dies,” I add.

“If I take you off the list, I can’t let you know if he dies.”

Well, that’s rather unfair. “What the hell? Can’t I be on a ‘Dead Asshole’ call list?”

“We don’t have those.”

“That’s stupid. Invest in them.”

“How about I leave you on for now, and then we’ll figure things out in the morning depending on how the night goes?”

“Sure. If he dies, just like toss his body in the river or something. I mean, I know he called cleaners to take care of the people he killed, but we really don’t want to waste anyone’s time or money.”

“Got it,” Reuben says, obviously not planning on listening to me even though I feel like it was the absolute best idea known to mankind.

And with our conversation apparently over, I hang up before gasping.

“What?” Jackson asks.

“I should have asked which hospital. I mean... I could snipe him through the window, right?”

“I would think that he’d be in an extremely secure and monitored room.”

“Wouldn’t be the first secure and monitored hospital room I killed someone in,” I grumble.

“I don’t... know that thinking about ways to kill him is healthy,” Jackson says gently.

“What do you mean? You know how people count sheep before going to sleep? I count all the ways he could die,” I inform him. “And let me say, I didn’t think this was going to be one of them. Let’s see if luck is on my side come morning.”

“Alright. We’ll see,” Jackson says as he reaches over and grabs on to me.

“While I love being pressed up against you, I really feel like this is a hug to comfort me and I do not want to be comforted. It makes me break out in hives.”

“You’re not going to break out in hives if I hug you,” he assures me as he locks his arms around me and squeezes me to him. While his hug generally washes away all unpleasant thoughts, I feel like I’m too tense to just lie here. I mean, it still feels reassuring but I also feel a bit boxed in... like a cornered animal with nowhere to run.

I need to get up and do something with all of this weird tension tearing through my body, but Jackson tries to keep me locked down. I resist the urge to run, enjoying his touch for as long as I can, but Lucas and his stupid fucking face keeps busting in, and I just can’t do it.

“I need some water,” I say as I squeeze out of his grasp and grab some shorts. I tug them on and hurry off for the kitchen.

Sarge follows me as I truly contemplate calling the man back and getting the location of the hospital. My nightmare could be dead before daybreak.

With probably unhealthy thoughts crashing around in my mind, I hurry to my gun shrine and grab my favorite rifle before escaping outside. I don't get far before Jackson comes rushing after me.

Even though spring is right around the corner, it's far too cool outside to only be in my shorts, but I stick on some shoes and wander out anyway, really not sure what I'm doing yet knowing that I need to do *something* before I'm pushed over the edge and I make a mistake that I can't undo.

"What are you doing?" Jackson asks.

"I don't know," I say.

He glances down at the gun in my hands. "You want to shoot something?"

"I do," I admit.

"Then.... Let's get some clothes on you and go shoot something."

"Lucas?" I ask hopefully.

Jackson gives me a soft smile as he squeezes my shoulder. "I'm sorry, Leland, but not Lucas."

He disappears into the house and now that he's gone, I find myself aching for his return. I know I was prepared to run off in my shorts alone with a gun, but the relief I felt when he showed up is enough to make me need him now that he's gone.

Thankfully, he doesn't take long and when he comes back out, he pulls a shirt over my head like I can't dress myself. He even puts my arms through the arm holes as I hold my gun, not wanting to put it down. And when he's done with that, he helps me into a pair of pants and forces a jacket on me. Seemingly pleased that my body won't feel an ounce of cold, Jackson leads me off into the darkness.

We walk for a bit before we reach a wooded area where I have some targets set up. Since it's dark, Jackson tells me to wait here and rushes off into the distance. I don't want to, but I patiently wait as the cool breeze tries to calm my racing

thoughts. I'm stuck there for about ten minutes before he comes back.

He waves in the direction he'd come from, binoculars he must have grabbed from the house around his neck. "Alright, see if you can find the targets."

"I have to find them?"

"You do, and you can't move from this spot."

"How many are there?"

"Five."

"Okay, okay," I say as I realize that he means business. I set up the gun using a fallen tree to stabilize it and utilize the light of the moon and the scope to start searching for the targets.

I find one without much trouble, but it's a good distance away, so I steady the gun and fire. Jackson, who was watching through the binoculars, gives me a huge grin. "Perfect hit."

"Thank you."

Jackson taps his lip with a finger. "Now see, I was actually afraid you'd gotten a bit rusty, so I made that one as easy as I could. Let's see some *real* talent here."

"Oh? You think I'm *rusty*?" I ask. "What do I get if I get a perfect shot on all five of them?"

"What do you want?"

I think about it for a moment before the best idea comes to mind. "I want to see you shoot them."

That makes Jackson amused. "You want to laugh at me? We are both well aware I'm not a sharpshooter."

"You're good with a gun!" I assure him.

"Not... like this." He waves at the targets that are only visible through the scope. "I'll try, though. I'll give it a valiant effort. Likely laughable effort but still."

"Deal," I say as I search for the next one. The dark shadows of the trees make it hard, but I find a second one

within a minute and pull the trigger.

“Do I even need to declare it was perfect?” Jackson asks.

“Of course you do! I want praise for every moment!”

“Right, right. WOW, LELAND! I never *fathomed* you’d get such a *spectacular* hit! I mean, you are the man who did sharpshooting while *inside* a tornado,” he says, sounding ridiculous. It makes me laugh and disrupts my concentration.

“Thank you, thank you, but I wasn’t *in* the tornado. I was riding the tornado.”

“Oh! Tornado Wrangler, I’m so sorry, I made a mistake!”

“Thank you. Now let’s keep it going, please.”

“Two down and three to go. Do we think he’ll do it? The clock is ticking.”

“Clock? No one said there was a clock!” I say as I quicken my hunt. “If I knew, I wouldn’t have spent so much time talking about tornados! How many minutes are on the clock?”

“Let’s see... two minutes left!”

“Two *minutes*? You hid them too good!”

“I can see one with ease.”

“With *ease*? God, is this like an Easter egg... oh my god, I want to do an Easter egg hunt. But instead of hunting the eggs, we shoot them, and we see who shoots the most! I’ll shoot so many more than Cassel. He’ll be left *begging* for me to bestow upon him a single one of my eggs.”

“Sure... add it to the list of ridiculous things we have to do. Better yet, add it to our date wheel.”

“No, this is happening. There is no option!”

“You now have one minute,” he says, viciously tearing me out of the daydream I have of shooting all the eggs while Cassel worships my skills.

“Fuck! I forgot! What happens if I don’t get them in one minute?” I ask before finally seeing one.

“We light the Sasquatch costume on fire.”

Now *that* shoves me into action. “Not the Sasquatch! Jackson, why are you so evil?” I cry as I find another and shoot. I ready the gun for the final shot.

“Ten... nine...”

“No!”

“Eight... seven... Leland, I have full faith in you... four...”

That’s the moment I see it. Of course it’s ridiculously far away, wedged between two branches that are so narrow I can’t even see the whole target—it makes me feel like this was planned in an attempt for Jackson to win—but I pull the trigger anyway.

Jackson and I both watch with bated breath, and the moment it hits the center of the target, I jump up and look over at him. “I DID IT! Sasquatch lives!”

“Yay....” Strangely, he doesn’t sound as excited as I am, but I’m all smiles as I hold the gun out to him. “Your turn!”

“Okay, here’s the thing. What if I miss the target and the bullet travels?”

“We have fields for miles, but just skip the ones that don’t have trees surrounding them that would stop it or slow it,” I say. “You’re going to hit the target, I promise.”

Jackson spends a ridiculously long time lining up the shot, which makes me wonder if I’m possibly wrong in this assessment.

“The target went and got their nails done, ran into a hot guy, got married, and murdered some more people all in the time you’ve lined up this shot,” I joke.

“Well, when I was giddily running around and putting these targets in hard places and then watching you shoot them all with ease, I didn’t take into account *how hard they were*. Okay. Are you ready?”

“No, no, the killer’s on her honeymoon. We don’t want to ruin that, do we?” I ask. “Wait... no... she’s brought her husband to England to push him off the Tower Bridge... oh,

you were too late. That one's gone, but she's set her sights on another! Maybe you'll save that one before he's geriatric!"

"Funny," he says before taking a steady breath—I mean, how hard does he have to concentrate?—and pulls the trigger.

I examine the target through my binoculars and see that he was quite right, and I was quite wrong. "Well... umm... good thing there were five trees in the way."

"This is an absolutely ridiculous shot, and I was fooled into thinking it was doable by how easy you made it look!" Jackson declares.

"Fine, fine. I won't torture you anymore. Not that I don't want to but mostly because I feel bad for the trees."

"Thank god. I need a neck rub after that tension," he says as he backs away from the gun.

"I bet if it was an opportunity to torch the fence at the end of that barrel, you'd have made the shot with perfection."

He stares at me. "Is that up for grabs?"

"It is not," I say as I smile at this lovely man who managed to draw me back from my toxic and spiraling thoughts with such ease.

I drape my arms over his shoulders.

"You feeling better?" Jackson asks.

"I think I'd feel even better if you reenacted that fateful night with The Fence," I mutter.

"Oh? I just... I don't want to take away that special night from you," he says with a very sincere look. It's almost enough to make me believe that's his reasoning, and not because he's secretly evil to deprive me of a beautiful reenactment.

He kisses me. "Want to keep shooting or go inside?"

"We can go inside," I say as I grab my gun. We walk hand in hand back to the house and it's so fascinating how much strength that hand can give me. How a gentle squeeze can pull me back to this moment where it's just him and me. Where

he's there by my side, refusing to ever let go no matter what life throws at him. Who ever knew I'd be so lucky?

Jackson locks up while I put my gun away and meet him in the bedroom. The dogs are eager to get back to bed as I undress and climb in next to him. I hadn't realized that I'd gotten a bit cold until I press my naked body against his warm one.

"Your fingers are cold," he says as he grabs them and tucks them under his arm to warm them up.

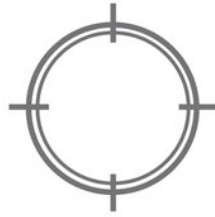
"Just one last try... you sure I can't shoot him in the hospital?"

"Positive."

"Hmm..." I tuck myself tightly against him as he kisses my forehead. It's such a gentle touch, but it's reassuring as I close my eyes and try to keep all of that darkness pushed away.

Now that I'm back in the quiet of the room, the dark thoughts try to creep back in, but Jackson's fingers which rub circles over my back manage to rub them away. Even though I'm sure he's tired, he continues stroking my back until sleep finally takes me.

SIX



Just as I'm wallowing on the couch disappointed in my lack of Lucas's death, there's a knock on the door. Since Jackson and I don't have any active cases besides Waylon's, we're home just taking a little time off. If you ask Jackson, he's "distracting me so I don't run off to shoot Lucas," but who is asking him?

The dogs bolt toward the door with Cayenne eager to love whoever is there—even if they're here to do us in—and Sarge ready to decide if they need to be eaten.

When I peek out the window and see that it's Henry, I turn to Jackson.

"Henry's here, hurry up and get on all fours so I can ride on your back to the door," I say, wanting to remind Jackson of a fun time in our past.

Jackson seems to be oddly disturbed by the idea, which is simply foolish, and instead hurries over to open the door, like if he waits any longer there's the possibility I'll manipulate him into dropping down on four hooves.

"Hey, Henry," Jackson says.

"I'm very glad you're on two feet," Henry replies, telling me he heard my suggestion... or maybe he was just reliving the beautiful memory.

"Come on, Henry, that's not what your wife told me. She said that after you saw Jackson and me play horsey, you wanted to play it with her."

Henry proceeds to try to shut the door, like he's just going to go back home without explaining why he was here.

"Henry, take me away, please," Jackson whispers.

"Blink quickly if this is a hostage situation," Henry instructs.

I stare at Jackson blinking erratically until he notices me watching him. Then he looks my way and gives me a huge smile. "I love you," he says.

"Uh-huh. SURE."

That just makes him laugh as he turns back to Henry. "Come in."

"Yeah, thanks... I think. I always feel worried about my day when I come in contact with you two," he says, but it's obvious he's here for a reason. While Henry is one hundred percent welcome to stop by anytime he'd like, it's pretty rare for him to do so without calling or needing something.

"Something happen?" I ask as his silence tells me that I'm quite right in my assessment.

"You want to have a seat?" he asks, looking a bit reluctant to talk about what he's come here to discuss.

"This about Lucas?" Of course it's about Lucas.

He looks at me in surprise. "You know?"

"I guess Lucas put me down as his emergency contact. They called last night. I told them to only call me back if he died... and since they didn't call back, I'm sad to realize that he's still alive."

"He is," Henry says. "Did they tell you what happened?"

"No."

"There was a fire in his wing, so as planned, they moved everyone into the safe area with no issues. There were seven inmates and three guards who were moved in that group. According to a guard outside the room, there was a ruckus, and by the time he entered, two of the guards were unconscious, one was dead, three of the inmates were dead,

and four severely wounded. One more ended up dying during transport, leaving three left alive and in intensive care. Of course the security system in that area went down, supposedly because of the smoke.”

“What the hell happened?” I ask, curiosity getting the best of me.

“One of the guards can’t remember anything. The other had a severe concussion. Of the three inmates, one is Lucas, one has not regained consciousness, and the third is Bennett Adams.”

“What?” I exclaim. “Of all the prisons in the world and wings in that damn prison, he was put in the same freaking wing as Lucas?”

“Yeah. Weird coincidence, isn’t it?” Henry asks.

Jackson looks concerned. “So what happened?”

“The only one capable of speaking right now is Lucas. And... he’s informed all officers and detectives interested in speaking to him that the only person he will speak to is—”

“Don’t fucking say it,” I whisper.

“You... Leland,” Henry finishes.

“*Goddammit!* Why does he have this huge fucking goal to make my life miserable? Why does he think he can still control me from inside there? Tell him no. And tell him I hope he dies.”

“I... will leave that part out, but I will inform the detectives that you are unable to speak with him,” Henry says.

“Fuck,” I hiss before glancing over at him. “Do you think I should?”

“I think... that it’s your choice. We can’t dismiss the possibility that one of the others has the answer and just isn’t able to tell us at this point. Clearly, Lucas is fucking with them because he knows that he has some weight being the only one coherent enough to give them information. And he’s using that to declare that he’ll only talk to you. It almost seems like he’s trying to get the detectives to question what’s so interesting

about you that would make him only interact with you. But men like this who get locked away and lose the tie to their obsessions from the outside like to do what they can to draw it back in. They want to make their victims miserable and remind them that they're there."

"Yeah, but he wants me to know that I could potentially help these families figure out what happened to their loved ones just so he can fuck with my head," I grumble.

"Then let him. We don't know that none of the others know what happened. We just know that at this moment, Lucas seems to be the only one cognizant enough to tell us what happened... but don't forget that he's refusing to do so for his own selfish reasons. Hell, the police might even get him to cave," Henry says.

The likelihood of Lucas caving if he doesn't want to is pretty slim. Lucas is not the type of man to give in for anything that doesn't benefit him in some way. And even then, if there's some way he can hold it over someone's head and cause them issues, he's going to hold it close while grinning like the psychopath he is.

Fuck, I hate him.

Before I can allow my rage to consume me, my burner phone rings.

"Put down the knife," Jackson says as he holds his hand out for the knife I've just unsheathed.

"I just want to stab something a little."

"I know you do, which is why it'd be best for you to put down the knife," he repeats as he holds his hand out.

I grudgingly give it to him before grabbing my untraceable phone and answering the call with it on speaker.

"Hello?"

"Hey, this is Jacob. I talked to you at the golf course."

"Oh yeah! You liked my gun," I say.

“I did! I was telling my boss about it, and he insists on meeting you. Says he has a few things he’d love you to check out and while he knows you’re unwilling to sell the gun you showed me, he’d still love to see it.”

“Of course... what kind of stuff does he have for sale?” I ask.

“I... don’t actually know. He’s a bit of a collector. He might have something you’d be interested in.”

“Yeah, of course. When and where?”

“He said he’s free tonight. Seven? I’ll text you the address.”

“Thanks,” I say before ending the call. “Well, we’ve got plans tonight.”

“Doing what?” Henry asks, eyes extra scrutinizing today.

“Doing... stuffs,” I say as I refuse to catch his eyes that are surely going to try their best to get me to confess what we’re up to.

“What kind of... ‘stuffs’?”

“Are you jealous you weren’t invited?” I ask.

His eyes lock on, like he’s going to get me to fold. “I’m wondering if I need to worry about your safety.”

“Of course not. I’m as safe as safe could ever safe,” I assure him.

Henry turns his attention to Jackson like my declaration was in any way suspicious. Oh no... that’s not why he was looking at Jackson, it’s because he knew he could get my sweet babe to confess.

My eyes snap onto Jackson in a “DON’T YOU DARE I thought you loved me” kind of way.

But his eyes immediately dodge mine, though it isn’t out of love for me. It isn’t out of respect for my wishes. It’s out of fear of Henry who has already snared him.

Fuck, that man is good.

“We got a guy from the gang Bennett was involved in to tell his boss about us by playing into his love for guns,” Jackson blurts out in a rush of words like a child caving to their parent.

“Jackson... you weren’t supposed to give it all away,” I whisper. “Right now, I’m his favorite child. I don’t want to ruin that. I mean, what if his other children met me and were so horrified by how much more he loves me? I would... kind of feel bad. Like a little bit but not enough to change my ways.”

“I... don’t know how that pertains to the situation,” Jackson says.

“It does because right now he thinks I’m the good kid, and you’re trying to give away my secrets.”

Jackson’s eyebrow goes up. “Does he?”

“Of course he does. Don’t you, Henry?”

Henry grunts. I’m positive that grunt says more than words ever could about his undying love for me and how he also feels a little bit bad that I’m his favorite child. “I’m leaving.”

“Awww, already? We were just having fun!” I say.

“Yes, already,” he retorts and with that, he hurries out the door.

I turn to Jackson and waggle my eyebrows at him. “Now let’s get hairy,” I say as I send Cassel a text.

Me: I need you to coat me and my hub in hairs.

Cassel: I think I’m busy today. I’m confused about what you’re asking, and it’s making me feel weird inside.

Me: Good. Now get ready to get hairy.

Cassel: The thing is... why? What? When? And how many hairs?

Me: All of them.

Cassel: Hold on... are you wanting me to put facial hair on you guys again? Why didn't you just say that? Why'd you make it so creepy? I feel like I need to take a shower now.

Me: That's probably from rubbing on Jeremy. I bet he can stank anyone up.

Cassel: Guess who's not coming over now? Me. It's me who is sure as fuck not coming over to help your ass.

Me: What has made you this way, Cassel? All I've ever done is shower you with my love. I covered you in it. You are my brother.

Cassel: Say something nice about Jeremy.

Me: You know I don't know how to be nice to people, Cassel.

Cassel: Do it or I won't help.

Me: Jeremy has... Jeremy is... Jeremy... hmm.

Cassel: I don't have all day.

Henry: Why the hell am I part of this conversation?

“What are you doing?” Jackson asks.

“Cassel is making me say something nice about Jeremy, and you know I can't be nice on command. Like I know he's not as bad of a guy as I once thought he was when he was being evil to you, but how do I *say* that? I physically can't but he's refusing to help us until we do.”

“Let me see,” Jackson says as he takes my phone and writes something. Then the phone dings. “He said he'll be right over.”

“Oh damn... what'd you write?” I ask as I take my phone back.

Me: Thank you for finally allowing me to get off my chest how much I like Jeremy. He's one of the greatest men who has walked this earth. If I didn't currently have Jackson, I'm not sure I could keep my eyes off him. He's like a ray of sunshine every time he enters the room. Heart. Heart. XOXO. Cassel, you have the best taste in men and I love you. Smooch smooch.

Cassel: Aww! I knew you had a heart! I'll be right over!

Me: NO! I don't have a heart! Jackson wrote that! Don't believe it.

Cassel: I already read it to Jeremy! I luv you too!

My phone beeps and I see it's a text from Jeremy.

Jeremy: Ew.

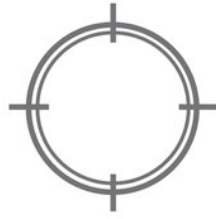
Me: NO! I didn't do it! Jackson did it!

I glance up at Jackson who is *gloating*. "H-H-How *dare* you do this to me? Jackson, I thought you *loved* me."

"I do," he says, evil smile right on his face.

"Your deceit makes me wonder," I grumble.

SEVEN



“Are you actually going to sell one of your guns?” Jackson asks as I swap out the license plate on his car. While driving the car I use for fun little... missions would be fine, I feel like if we pulled up in Jackson’s mistress—aka his car—we’d make it clear that we weren’t afraid to spend some money.

“No, I made Tucker run two states over to pick up a couple of guns that I can sell. They’re not as nice as mine, so I at least won’t cry when I hand them off. I’m trying not to get attached and have refused to even take them out of their cases so we don’t form an immediate connection,” I inform him. “Now how do I look?” I stand up and hold my arms out as I turn around so he can see all angles.

“Like you’re trying to seduce his wife instead of selling him a gun,” Jackson says.

I beam at him before smoothing my mustache with my thumb and index finger. “Perfect!”

“Is it? Is that what we’re going for? Do you know how to flirt with a woman?”

“I do! You look them in the eye and go, ‘My, what a beautiful creature you are.’ I had women falling all over me before I met you.”

“Ah... okay. Note to self, if I ever want a woman to look my way, all I need to do is call them a creature. Not sure they’ll happily look my way, but they’ll sure be looking,” Jackson says as he gets into the car. His dramatics amuse me.

“Exactly!”

He shakes his head, but it's evident he gets my skills.

The address we're given isn't too far away, only about a twenty-minute drive, during which we spend time running over our new personas. Acquiring a different name and backstory was something I was used to before I met Jackson. I was never "Leland," and often I had to pretend to be people... sometimes even people I'd never want to be. But now that I get to be someone else with Jackson by my side, I realize that I don't hate it like I used to. More often than not, I find taking on a new persona fun to see what other things we can get involved in.

When we pull up to the rather nice house, Jackson parks outside the front door. Jacob comes out to greet us as we're exiting the vehicle, a smile on his face.

Jackson pops the trunk so I can get two gun cases out. "Hey. I brought the goods, and I brought Nico to carry everything for me," I say as I hand the cases off to Jackson.

"Perfect," Jacob responds as he leads us inside the house that seems to be decked out in party gear. Since I'm sure it's not celebrating our arrival, I have to guess it's someone's twenty-first birthday from the twenty-ones scattered here and there. Before I can see any more, a man who is on the phone hurries over. "Yes, I'll see what I can do," he says to whoever he's talking to while giving us an apologetic look. "It'll be fine."

He issues a goodbye before hanging up and turning his attention to us. According to Cassel's data, his name is Vance Wilcox. His father had ties to the mafia, but supposedly, Vance decided that wasn't the life for him and opened a business that focused on supply transport. How that acquired him a gang, I'm not yet sure. My guess is that he isn't as detached from the mafia as he claims and uses the Jinn group and his transport business for the more illegal side of trading like drugs, humans, or weapons.

"Hi, I'm Vance," he says.

"It's a pleasure to meet you. I'm Colton and this is my buddy Nico," I reply as I point at Jackson.

“Oh, I can already see it from here,” he murmurs, one hundred percent ignoring everything else, eyes attached to the gun at my waist. And there I am again, having to let another disgusting human finger my gun. It makes me sick inside and determined to make Striptease Jackson clean it for me with his strokes and shirtless shimmying.

“This is a damn nice gun. And the *condition* it’s in is impeccable. You know there were only ten made? Norris was renowned for his craft, but he died before he could make any more of this model. And you literally have model number one. The one that brought his rise to fame.”

“I sure do,” I say with a grin, pleased by him worshipping my baby.

“How did you acquire this?” he asks.

Well... Lucas sent me off to the gunmaker’s home because making guns wasn’t the only thing he enjoyed doing. And when I shot him, I took what I wanted and kept it hidden so Lucas wouldn’t find out. Of course he still did because I was never as sly as I thought I was when Lucas was involved.

Obviously, I say none of that, and instead tell him, “A buddy of mine scouts the market. This gem was up for private sale because of the unfortunate tie to the gunsmith’s death.”

“I was wondering if you knew about that,” Vance says, intrigued.

I caused it. “I was warned when I bought the gun ten years ago that if I was to sell it in a public setting... I might draw some unwanted attention. But it’s not for sale, so I guess we don’t need to worry about that. It is a good conversation starter, though,” I lie since I didn’t buy the gun and I got it longer than ten years ago.

“How certain are you that it’s not for sale?” he asks.

“Very certain. But I did bring some other guns for you to look at.”

“Of course you tantalize me with the best first,” Vance says, looking devastated as he hands it back to me. “Come along. Do you want anything to drink?”

“Nah, I’m fine. Nico?”

“No, I’m good,” Jackson says as we follow Vance deeper into the house. He takes me over to a table where Jackson sets the cases down before stepping back. I flip one open and pull out the first of the two guns.

Vance whistles. “Oh, you’re killing me. Where have you been all my life? How did you find this one?”

“I can’t give away all my secrets now, can I?”

“You sure you can’t?” he jokes. “You mind if I look it over?”

“Of course not,” I say as I pass it to him. He quickly takes it and examines every inch of it, inside and out. It’s like a man looking at a work of art, the way guns should be treated.

“You collect guns too?” Jacob asks Jackson.

“I have a couple, but they’re pretty standard. Sometimes Colton will let me try one out. Very rarely, but it’s happened,” Jackson says.

“Hey, the fact that I even let you touch them makes you pretty special,” I remind him.

Jackson shrugs since we both know that if I weren’t trying to con this man, he wouldn’t be anywhere near my babies with his grimy fingers. “I know, I know.”

“You have another to show me too?” Vance asks as he eyes the other case.

“Saved the best for last,” I say as I flip it open.

“Oh, fuck me,” he breathes as he grabs it.

“It’s not as nice as this one, but since it seemed like you were interested in Norris’s guns, I thought a different model would pique your interest,” I say.

He immediately starts examining it to see if it’s authentic. He knows every spot to check, telling me that this man really knows his stuff, and if he wasn’t a slimy asshole who was running a gang, I might even appreciate it.

“You looking to trade or are you wanting cash?” he asks.

“I’d be up for either,” I answer, more than eager to see what he has. I really should get money back for what I paid for the guns, but a little trade with some cash on the side never hurt anyone.

He puts the gun back and locks the case before turning to lead us farther into the house. Jackson grabs both cases, then the two of us follow him into a room with a lock on the door.

I pause, making sure the other two go in first since I have no intention of getting locked in a room. Unless they’re planning on getting closed in with me, in which case it seems safe enough, so I follow them right into heaven.

“Oh damn,” I whisper as I look at the displays. I’ve obviously walked straight into utopia.

My eyes immediately lock on to an absolute beauty, and I hurry over. “It’s gorgeous,” I say reverently.

Vance beams, clearly proud of his collection while I’m over here hoping he’s a bad guy so I can dispose of him and take all his guns. Does that make me a horrible person? It sure does. Do I care? Not at all.

“Can I touch them?”

“Of course,” he says, and I pick the baby up with quivering fingers. The cool metal on my fingertips excites me as I examine every inch of it before moving on to the next.

Jackson snorts, like this amuses him when he should also be drooling. “You should have said no. We’ll be here for the next week at this rate.”

Vance laughs. “I don’t mind. I’m thrilled to see someone else who appreciates the arts.” Then he walks over to me and motions to the two guns that had immediately caught my eye when we walked in. “I’d trade those two for the one at your hip.”

“While that’s very tempting, I’m holding on to this one,” I say as I pat the one I brought.

“Pick a third and I’ll toss it into the deal.” He’s watching me closely, trying to gauge my interest to see if I can be pushed. And I have to admit, this man knows just how to talk to my greed, but no... I can’t part with that one.

“I’ll trade one or both of the other two but not this one,” I say.

“What would you need to consider it?” he asks, fixated on the one I refuse to sell.

“Sorry, nothing will make me sell it.”

“What if you think on it? I’ll trade these four guns here for it.”

Even though the gun I have is quite valuable, it’s not as valuable as all four of them. The greedy part of my mind loves the idea of toting these four babies home with me, but I don’t keep the gun at my side because of its value. No, I keep it because of what I went through to get it.

I’ve never shot anyone with it since the day I used it to kill its maker.

“Sorry,” I say with a smile.

“Just... think on it, alright? That’s all I’m asking. Use the weekend to think it over. If it’s still a no, I will fully respect your decision and we’ll make a deal on the others, alright?”

“Deal,” I agree since it gets us back here to make another deal and keep him interested in us.

His phone rings and he sighs when he sees it. “Take your time looking around. I need to take this call. My daughter’s twenty-first birthday party is tomorrow night and the dancers we hired quit on us. My wife just wants to find some new ones before we leave here in a couple of hours for our trip,” he says.

“What kind of dancers?” I ask.

“The... ones with minimal clothes,” he says before snorting, like he thinks it’s ridiculous.

“That’s too funny. Nico used to be a stripper at this fancy club, and his buddy does those like... aerial silks...

stripteases,” I say as I pat Jackson’s back. “How about we help you out?”

Jackson proceeds to choke when he remembers that he is Nico, but Vance sees an opportunity to not have to try any harder than he already is.

“You were a stripper too?” he asks me.

“Oh yes, can’t you see it?” I ask as I give him a very bland turn, which makes him shake his head. “But no, I owned the strip club they worked at.”

“Ah, makes more sense.”

“Hold up... you saying this fine mug of mine was not built for stripping? What about my ’stache?” I stroke the ’stache in case he happened to forget how magnificent it was.

“Ha ha! No... it’s just... with the car and money, either you’re the best damn stripper or you’re getting the money elsewhere.”

“Just don’t ask what happened to the rich old lady who married me,” I say with a grimace.

“Is that what all these guns are for?” he jokes.

I grin at him. “No, I totally owned the club. But let me tell you something. This fine man here does this move called The Fence and it makes the ladies go *wild*.”

“You know what? If you want the job, I’m not going to fight you on it. They’re going to be so drunk, there won’t be a damn person who cares how your dancing is.”

“Perfect!” I say as I give him a handshake before patting Jackson’s back. “We’ll be in touch tomorrow, then.”

“Splendid,” Vance responds as I escort Jackson out.

Weirdly, he won’t stop staring at me. He’s so fixated on staring at me that he bumps his hip into his precious car. “Leland,” he hisses.

I quickly get in the car before turning to look at him as he makes some noise that is surely excitement and *thrill*.

“Looks like Seymour Shhlong and Freddy Fallus are coming out of retirement,” I announce.

Jackson’s face twists into a concerning look, like he wants to use his facial expressions to explain how flabbergasted he is about this whole thing. “Oh, fuck no... Why? What have I done to deserve this?”

“Why what?” I give him my best “You know you love me no matter what I do” look. It seems rather ineffective today for some bizarre reason. How could he possibly not be thrilled by these events?

Jackson’s now waving his arms around a bit for extra emphasis. “What was the purpose of agreeing to this? We already had an in to come back later with the guns. In what world did you think, ‘You know what would be better than selling a gun I don’t need? Stripping and dancing for women while making an absolute fool of myself.’”

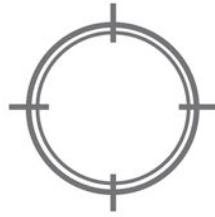
I pat his leg to reassure him. “It’s okay, baby. You’re simply going to woo the daughter, and while you are getting frisky, Cassel and I are going to scamper up the stairs to Vance’s office where Cassel’s going to make the computer submit to him like the thirsty bitch it is and get the details on what’s going on.”

“I hate every ounce of this plan,” he whispers. “Do you really think he’s going to have a diary on his computer that’s like ‘Today I had Bennett the bouncer go out in the middle of nowhere to stage him killing multiple people. Oh, and I had a strawberry lemonade that was delish.’”

I gasp. “I never thought of checking his diary!”

“You’re ridiculous,” Jackson decides as I grin, pleased by my own words. He shakes his head and starts to drive a roundabout way toward home. We never know who might be following us, so we always go the long way which puts us on a long stretch of road to tell if we’re being followed. It also gives me plenty of time to tell Jackson about how Freddy Fallus is going to make those ladies squirm.

EIGHT



“So who are these people interested in aerial stuff? Like are they fancy rich people?” Cassel asks. The innocent soul he is, he willingly climbed into the car with a smile on his foolish face.

“Must be. And yeah, definitely rich,” I agree as Jackson starts to drive toward the twenty-first birthday party that we are going to be the stars of.

“Oh cool. I’m a bit rusty but I’ll give it my best!” Cassel says. “I’m not sure the wig works as well, but there’s no way I was going to let you dye my hair!”

“You misunderstood,” I inform him. “I didn’t want to dye your hair, I wanted to shave it because I’m tired of how cute you are.”

Cassel looks at me in horror, like there’s some part of him that could still be innocent enough to believe I’m a decent human being. “Well, that’s not a very nice way to look at yourself. You’re not *that* ugly compared to me.”

Jackson snorts, and I quickly look at him in shock. “Jackson?!”

“You have to admit, you kind of deserve that after trying to coerce him into shaving his hair.”

“Maybe... but probably not! Cassel, have I ever *actually* been mean to you? You’re like my family. You’re like the brother I always wanted. I literally couldn’t have asked for a better man than you to call my brother.”

Cassel is all smiles, so innocent and disgustingly cute. “Thank you. You too!”

“See, Jackson? He loves me.”

“But yes, you *are* totally evil to me,” Cassel declares. “So hit me. What kind of people am I doing a routine for?”

“Let’s just say that Freddy Fallus and Seymour Shhlong are coming out of retirement.” I’m insanely proud of this and pretend that it wasn’t Cassel who came up with these names. There’s no way in hell he should be able to upstage me. “And for tonight only, Derrick Derriere is going to be joining them!” I’m pretty proud of that one too, but the look on Cassel’s face tells me he’s less proud. He actually looks... weirdly horrified for some reason. I’m not... quite sure how or why?

“Ew! No! I’m doing a porno with you two? Oh my god! Let me out! Let me out!” He starts beating against the window to the point that the driver in the car next to us looks alarmed as he stops next to our vehicle at a red light.

Cassel manages to get the window halfway down before I reach over and switch the child safety locks on because boy oh boy, we sure don’t want him to escape! “Please, I don’t wanna be in a porno!”

The other driver looks quite conflicted. Perhaps he wants to see said porno, so I roll my window down a little. “Do not fret! For the low price of \$69.69, you can get your copy today.”

“For fuck’s sake,” Jackson mutters as he takes off and something hits me.

“WE SHOULD HAVE ASKED HENRY!” I realize.

“Yes, let’s take the chief of police into a suspected gang location and ask him to strip for the gang leader’s daughter,” Jackson says with heavy sarcasm.

Cassel leans forward. “When you put it that way... it kind of sounds like a good time. Spices it up a bit.”

“Right?” I ask.

“So... are you two going to explain why you told me I was going to do aerial stuff before confessing that I was doing porn? Oh my god, is it porn in the air? I tried talking Jeremy into that once. In the middle of it, he fell onto me, and I nearly broke his penis, so we haven't brought it up since.”

“Pfft, he definitely looks like a guy with a weak rod,” I mutter.

“What does that even mean?” Cassel asks.

“I once killed a man with another man's rod,” I declare.

Jackson waves me off like he could possibly silence me! “Cassel, we're going in and distracting Vance's daughter with... some questionable entertainment.”

“She wants to watch us have sex?” Cassel asks.

Jackson looks weirdly horrified. “No! Get off the porn thing! She just wants male strippers.”

Cassel lets out a breath of relief. “Ohhhhh. Wow, I never thought that would sound like a good idea, but it weirdly does after what I'd been thinking was going to happen,” he admits.

I glance over at him. “Issue is, we'll need you to go up and see what you can get off his computer. Not... that I don't want to see my lovely man dance, but...” I try to think about a single time that Jackson has shown prowess on the dance floor, and instead, I just smile.

“No one wants to see me dance,” Jackson grumbles.

“How much will you pay me if I break into their security system and record Jackson's dancing?”

I freeze. My heart is beating out of my chest in anticipation. It's hard to breathe, I'm so excited. My head whips around to face Cassel.

“NO!” Jackson demands.

“All of it,” I whisper. “ALL.”

“Got it,” he says as he gives me a warm smile and a thumbs-up.

“Hee hee hee...”

“God, you’re so creepy but I’m still weirdly pleased... is that weird? Definitely weird,” Cassel decides.

“Cassel, it’s a no,” Jackson orders, sounding foolishly stern.

“Issue is I’m more scared of Leland than you,” he says as he looks at my manic expression.

“Can’t imagine why,” Jackson mutters as we reach the place. When we pull up, the driveway is littered with vehicles, all as fancy as they can be. A woman seems to have been waiting for us even though we were right on time. She guides us back before looking us up and down.

“Do you need a room to change or are you ready?” she asks.

“We need to change. I didn’t want someone mistaking me for a real police officer,” I say as I show her the booty shorts and badge I’d picked up at a costume store.

She waves us into a room before explaining where to go once we’re ready.

“I kind of feel like we should have rehearsed or something,” Cassel says as he looks around at the fancy house.

“I’m thinking I’ll ride Jackson into the room for the grand reveal,” I announce.

“I’m thinking that’s not going to happen,” Jackson says as he passes Cassel his outfit. Once we’re ready to go with snazzy tear-off clothes on top of our booty shorts and teeny spandex vests, I lead the way. Cassel comes willingly, but Jackson contemplates playing dead in the corner until a young woman rushes up to us, looking rather confused.

“You’re the strippers her dad got?” she asks, seeming rather disappointed. I mean... who the fuck could be disappointed when they look at Jackson? I guess he does have an expression on his face like he’d rather be doing *anything* else, but it’s still fucking sexy.

“We’re about to make some ladies moist!” I say, since I feel like that’s what ladies like.

The expression on her face tells me that my hypothesis might be extremely wrong. “Ew. No. Gross. Um... the strippers were supposed to be women. What a fucking mess. She’s going to be upset that her dad keeps pushing guys onto her again... he’s probably the one who canceled the last ones! Thanks, but... we don’t need you.”

“No, no, no. We can’t leave,” I protest.

“We’ll pay you anyway.”

“You misunderstand. All we need are lipstick and balloons, and we will be the most womanly women you’ve ever laid your eyes on,” I assure her before reaching over and grabbing one of the balloons. I force it into the spandex top I have on. “I will have titties for days.”

She hesitates, scrutinizing me for a long moment before smiling. “I mean... Emily does love a dash of humor. I love it!”

“Thank you!” I point at Jackson. “He is the beauty but I’m the brains.”

“What’s fifty-seven times ninety-three?” Cassel asks since he seemed to take some offense over me saying I’m the brains.

“Ew. No one wants a nerd,” I say as I head back into the room.

“J... Jeremy does... and it’s five thousand, three hundred and one... if anyone cares,” Cassel whispers.

“This is going horribly,” Jackson says as the woman returns and just dumps makeup, some bikini tops, and more balloons in front of us since my uniboob isn’t going to steal the show.

“I’m pretty sure there’s something else we could do—” Jackson is immediately cut off by Cassel applying lipstick to him as I grab some rubber bands and put his hair into pigtails before placing a bow in his fake beard.

“You’re really good at this,” the woman says, and looking at Jackson’s lopsided pigtails and his beard bow, I have to assume she’s talking to Cassel who’s just finished applying some eyeshadow.

“Thanks! I had to learn how to put makeup on when I was young for... stuff! Ha... ha?”

“He was an undercover FBI agent before he became a stripper,” I explain.

“Oh?” She seems uncertain, but no one is more uncertain than Jackson is when I hold up the bikini top.

“Jackson, the clothes are coming off.”

“Oh no.” It’s a pretty sad noise he makes.

“Oh yesssss,” I say as I tug his shirt off before fitting the swimsuit top on him as loosely as it can go since I have to stuff two bulbous balloons into the cups.

I step back and eye my prize. The makeup is the only thing well done—smoky eyes with a red lipstick—but boy does he look fine. His hair is sticking up in two lopsided pigtails. His eyes look like they’re devoid of life. His balloon breasts are barely contained by the top that’s stretching for all it’s worth. “Damn, I’d tap that,” I say admiringly.

“You tapped that while he was wearing a Sasquatch outfit... I feel like your standards are not very high,” Cassel says.

“Cassel, you’ll understand someday after Jeremy’s personality somehow gets fixed that when someone is this sexy, it doesn’t matter what they wear.”

“Sometimes, I wonder why you’re so evil... and then I remember who you were raised by, but then I remember that I was also raised by him and I’m nowhere near as evil as you... it’s just confusing and weird dealing with you,” Cassel complains.

“Thank you,” I say, since I feel like it’s a compliment, but the way he grabs my head and yanks it back to start applying

makeup to my face makes me question if maybe he didn't think it was.

"While I'm not an expert on makeup, I weirdly feel like it shouldn't be done with such force. Is it supposed to feel like your skin is being scraped off with each swipe?"

"No, no, I'm definitely doing it right," he assures me as he keeps at it.

"Wow! People who wear makeup sure are brave doing this to their face every day!" I say, *well aware* my face shouldn't be in pain.

"Is he okay?" the woman asks as she points at Jackson who looks like he wants to pretend that he's invisible.

"Probably not," I admit. "But he's cute and that's all that matters."

She shrugs but busies herself by putting a large bow in my hair. And then she reveals the stilettos. Sadly, Jackson can't fit in them—I should have brought him the ones I bought him for the undercover mission I'd tried getting him to go on—but Cassel and I manage to find some that fit ourselves: a flashy red pair for him and a black pair that fastens around the ankle for me. Once the three of us are decked out in our gorgeous attire, she parades us over to a large door. "Wait here. I'll introduce the three of you. What are your names?"

"I am Seymour Shhlong, this is Freddy Fallus, and Derrick Derriere... oh shit, those are our male stripper names... hmm. Hold on. Hold on, I can fix this, umm... just introduce us as the Helium Sisters," I say as I give my balloon boob a pat.

She slips through the door a moment before the volume of the music lowers so she can talk. "Emily, I am thrilled to introduce your evening entertainment. The... Helium Sisters."

"Oh no. My mom is calling me," Jackson says as he does the fakest phone call answer I've ever seen. I'm pretty sure a man transported from the Stone Age would answer the phone in a more realistic manner. "It's an emergency."

I ignore him as I strut in, dragging his unwilling body after me. My skills with the shoes aren't as good as Cassel's, but I

still manage to make it onto the main floor without stumbling. “Welcome, ladies and gentlemen, we are the Helium Sisters here for your lady pleasures. My name is Seyless Shhlong.” I grab Jackson, jerking him in close as I hold on to him like a pole and sink down, rubbing my “breasts” down his side as I squat. “And this rather shy lady is Freddy No Fallus. And then this disgustingly cute sister is Deryn Derriere.”

I turn to look at the birthday girl in question who is giving us a look of shock before she bursts out laughing. “These are the replacements? Oh my god... I’m dying.”

“Dying from sexiness, right?” I ask as I waggle my eyebrows.

“Yeah, yeah. Sure. Oh my god... when my father said he found someone... I never expected them to be this... this...”

“Tittylicious?” I ask as I smooch my balloon breasts together.

“Hell yeah,” Cassel says as he crowds Jackson’s other side before grabbing the balloon tie of Jackson’s right breast in his teeth and pulling. When he lets go, it snaps back with a very audible noise. “You like that, don’t you, Freddy Little Fallus?”

“What is happening?” Jackson whispers as Cassel uses him like a stripper pole while taking part of his own top off. Let me just say... Jeremy’s got to be quite pleased in the bedroom because my lack of stripping skills is made up by Cassel’s ability to make everyone look at him. He knows how to move his body in just the right way to look sexy and he even pulls off the ridiculous outfit without looking silly.

And then we have Jackson who has taken on the persona of a smoldering pole, which suits him quite well as I strut—if strutting is what you’d like to call my wobbly stiletto walk—up to the birthday girl.

“May I touch you this fine evening?” I ask.

“I’m going to be honest, I’d be disappointed if you didn’t,” Emily replies.

“Perfect,” I say as I pull her in close. Since she’s sitting, I have to squat a bit before drawing her into my voluptuous

breasts. “I hope you are ready for a randy, dandy night.”

“Oh, I’m ready for something, alright,” she says as I hear someone catcall us. I assume it’s for Jackson because he’s being the best pole a pole can be until my eyes land on the man.

Tavish?

What the fuck is Tavish doing here?

“Sexy wolf,” he calls before howling, causing my stabbing hand to get a bit twitchy. How *dare* that stupidly sexy Scottish man ruin my night? And again, what the hell is he doing here?

Tavish and I happened to get to know each other as we skillfully climbed twenty-seven floors in the ultimate battle to prove to Jackson who was the best mate—or... wait... I kind of think that maybe that wasn’t the actual reason, but I can’t seem to remember any other reason... ah well.

But why the hell is he *here*?

I try to ignore him and turn back to Emily. “I hope these luscious ladies get your body hot and bothered.”

“They’re certainly doing something to me,” she says. “Maybe I’m having a straight awakening...” Cassel tries to do a neat little flip into Jackson but because Jackson is horrified, he misses the cue. As Jackson goes to grab Cassel to help him from falling, he gets a full-on ball grab. “Oh wait... maybe not. Maybe I’m just a little parched.”

“I can take care of that for you. I’ll be right back,” I assure her as I leave Jackson and Cassel to it while I shimmy my way over to Tavish who happens to be wearing a tie. I grab him by it, jerking him up to his feet. “Come, scum.”

“Oh, I’ll come, alright. Your husband is doing things to me,” he says.

“Too bad the Grim Reaper is paying you a visit this very night,” I growl as I drag him back to the kitchen. Once there, I shove him into the counter so I can glower at him.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” I ask as I pull one of my balloon breasts out, skillfully untying it before making

Tavish hold it open.

“I was hired to work the party. Is that alright with you?” he asks.

“Obviously it’s not. I was hoping I’d never run into you ever again,” I admit. “I thought I sent you a plane ticket to hell?”

“Not when I’m going to take your husband to heaven and back.”

“Ew. You’re so weird. Just... go away.”

“Can’t,” he says as I start pouring beer into the balloon.

“So you were hired as a bodyguard. That’s it?”

He shrugs. “More or less.”

“What’s the less part? Or the more part?”

“Less part is how you’re a lesser weasel,” he says.

I pull out a knife and press it against his neck. “I will make you *bleed*.”

Tavish stares at it for a moment, and I assume he’s contemplating this threat but instead he arches an eyebrow. “Alright, now color me impressed... where the fuck did you pull that knife out of? You don’t even have enough clothes on to cover that knife, let alone *hide* it!”

“I have a gun too,” I whisper.

He examines my skimpy outfit. “Oh fuck, no. There’s no way! Let me see! I won’t believe it until I see it.”

“If you can’t even accomplish a feat as simple as this one, how do you ever expect you’ll attract my fine man?” I ask in a way that makes him well aware that I pity him.

“Maybe he doesn’t like things so tiny you can’t even see them. Maybe he likes it when they’re bulging in plain sight,” Tavish says as he pulls his coat back to reveal his gun.

“It’s a bit... lackluster, wouldn’t you say?”

He growls at me as I take my balloon back and tie it up.

“Now excuse me while I make all the ladies want my man,” I say as I tuck the balloon back into my bikini top before heading out in time to see Cassel on Jackson’s shoulders.

The weird thing is that Jackson’s face is buried in Cassel’s groin. It makes both Tavish and me stop and assess the situation for a moment.

I’m very unsure how he got there, but I’m not one to question things.

Tavish, on the other hand, seems incapable of just appreciating the act from afar. “Well damn, maybe we both need to be worried.”

I shove Tavish off and strut up to Emily as Cassel tries to smoothly descend Jackson who doesn’t seem to know where to put his hands. Emily and her friends are laughing, though, so I assume it’s a job well done.

“You said you were parched, my lady,” I say as I jiggle my beer breast.

“Oh yum,” she gets out between fits of laughter. I pull my knife out and poke a small hole in the balloon, hoping Cassel gets the cue to hurry off to see what he can find out while I distract them by spraying a bit of alcohol out. With a single taste from the birthday girl, her look of joy turns to horror.

“That is *toxic*,” she realizes.

“You don’t *love it*?” I ask.

All is going well until I see Tavish immediately turn to follow Cassel.

Not exactly how I foresaw that going.

“Sara, try it!” Emily says, and I have to assume she doesn’t like Sara much if it tastes that dreadful. The drunk women are all so focused on my beer boob that they don’t seem to mind when I push Jackson forward and replace his balloon with mine. “Keep them busy,” I whisper as I rush off. I slip through the door Tavish had just followed Cassel through and quickly look around for him.

Earlier in the day, Cassel had broken into the house's security system long enough to tell us that Vance's office was on the third floor, overlooking the large garden in the backyard, so I assume that's where he's gone to. But did Tavish follow him up?

The staircase is grand, leading partway up before it splits to wrap around as it continues up to the second floor. It's very showy but only allows me to see part of the stairs leading up to the second floor, which Cassel is no longer on, and Tavish is nowhere to be seen.

Quickly, I dart up the stairs, knowing that even though Tavish had proven before that he wasn't a complete asshole, it doesn't mean he wouldn't stab us in the back at a later date. The music and chaos in the next room is loud enough that I don't even have to hide my footsteps as I rush up them while trying to remember if Cassel has his phone on him.

Hairs stand up on the back of my neck a moment before I quickly slide to the left, a knife sailing right at me and popping my one breast.

"You popped my boob!" I cry.

"Whoops."

I turn to look at Tavish who is actually behind me... I was so transfixed by the idea of him getting to Cassel that I hadn't even noticed that he'd tucked himself into a room on the first floor... which makes me wonder if this was his goal all along. Did he want to draw me out? Is that why he made it so obvious he was following Cassel?

"What the fuck was that?" I ask.

"I was jealous about how pretty you looked," he says as he rushes toward me. I scramble back before almost immediately stumbling. The stupid stilettos are strapped around my ankle so I can't smoothly slide them off, and I'm instead left fumbling up the stairs to avoid Tavish as he rushes at me.

"Are we seriously going to have another stair fight?" I ask.

"I mean... looks like it," he responds with a grin as he swings his knife at me, but I block the hit with my own knife.

“You seem to be at a disadvantage with those shoes... definitely weren’t a good idea. I thought you were skilled at this shit.”

“I am skilled! I just felt pity for you, so I gave myself a bit of a disadvantage is all,” I explain as I avoid his next swing.

I’m anxious someone’s going to see what’s happening and decide that the adult entertainment might be involved in something other than dancing, so I quickly scamper up the steps as Tavish follows me. “Why the hell are you attacking *me*?”

“Because I was hired to kill you.” He says it so nonchalantly, like there’s no concern to this at all.

“WHY?” I ask. “Who the hell could possibly want to murder me? I mean... yeah, there might be a lot of people that I’ve murdered or pissed off, but I feel like it’s rather unfair to turn it around on me!”

The heel of the stiletto twists out from under me, and I stumble again as I realize that if Tavish *really* wants to kill me, I need to get these fucking shoes off. They’re making all my fighting stances awkward as hell.

“Why the hell would women ever wear these? They make them look so easy to fight with in the movies!”

“Must be your pure lack of skill,” Tavish says as his knife cuts through the spot I’d just been standing.

“Oh? Why don’t we put this fight on pause and have you try out the heels?”

He glances down. “My rather large feet wouldn’t fit in such shoes. You know what they say about men with large feet.” He winks at me, which makes me gag.

“I don’t, sorry.” I step up as the fucking teeny tip of the stiletto gets stuck on something, abruptly pulling me to a stop. I dodge a swing while I try to free the stupid heel as I realize my “disadvantage” is turning frustrating. I can’t quite read Tavish to tell if he’d straight-up kill me, but I am aware that he wouldn’t mind hurting me. And now I can’t move anywhere with this stupid shoe on. Do I duck and try to cut the strap

free? Do I just see if he'll turn this knife fight into a squat fight so I don't have to stand up in these stupid shoes?

He's relentless with his swings, refusing to give me a free moment, before there's a flash of movement from above. I look up right as Cassel leaps off the upper balcony and lands on Tavish's back. There's a split second where Cassel makes impact, causing Tavish to look confused.

"Feels like a fucking Pomeranian jumped on my—"

Before Tavish can even *think* about continuing to mock Cassel's small stature, I watch as Cassel hooks Tavish with a leg around his neck before throwing himself backward.

Tavish can't step back to gain his balance because he's on the steps. Instead, he's instantly flipped backward as Cassel puts his hands down like he's simply doing a backflip but in doing so, sends Tavish fucking *flying* down the steps... all while wearing stilettos.

"I know, I know. You had it handled," Cassel mutters as he stands up in front of me while my eyes are fixated on Tavish who is sprawled out on the main floor. The way he *skids* when he lands...

"Holy shit," I whisper.

"What?" Cassel asks. "Oh my god, were you guys actually just talking or something?"

"Holy shit. That was fucking impressive," I say.

Cassel looks up at me, eyes huge. "It was?"

I'm at a loss for words for a moment before a beautiful idea strikes me. "Tavish, get up here so I can watch Cassel do that again!"

"Fucking hell," Tavish groans from where he's lying all the way in the foyer, holding parts of himself like he's trying to keep them from falling out of his body.

"Did it really look that cool?" Cassel asks, looking thrilled.

"Tavish, get up here, I want to record it in slo-mo so I can show Jackson!"

“Fuck no! I might be dying,” he cries.

“Use that manly bear power to get back up here,” I urge. “That was fucking impressive, and I want to see it again.”

“Maybe we should keep working,” Cassel says as he helps me undo my shoe so I can finally get out of the wretched things.

“Tavish, how’s it feel to know someone who weighs a quarter of what you do just flung you through the fucking air like a rag doll?”

“A... quarter...? I kind of don’t know who you’re making fun of now,” Cassel says.

“Shhhh, definitely Tavish,” I assure him. He seems uncertain but I just reiterate how fun it was watching Tavish go flying, and Cassel seems pleased enough that he hurries on up the stairs, still in his stilettos.

While he’s off to do nefarious things, I hurry over to Tavish who is lying on the ground. I fear he’s going to become part of it if he lies there long enough.

“You okay, buddy?” I ask as I nudge him with my foot.

He groans as he rolls over. “Is your husband going to nurse me back to health?”

“Cassel! Come back! Tavish said he’s ready to be flipped again!”

“NO!” Tavish yells. “That little shit knocked the fucking air out of me...”

“Why were you supposed to kill us?” I ask.

“To be fair, I didn’t actually know it was *you* when I agreed to the job. He’s just like ‘These two guys are going to come tonight. Kill them and take his gun.’”

I scrutinize him over that. “My gun? That fucker was going to kill me to get my gun?” I ask with a raised eyebrow.

“When his buddy let slip what the gun was, I realized that maybe I’d kill this mystery man myself and sell it. I’d make way more than he was offering to kill you.”

“You... you’re evil.”

He shakes his head. “No, I’m half dead,” he groans.

“Deservedly.”

“And the way he made it sound, the person who had that gun deserved to die. Where’d you get such a gun and what are you doing here?” Tavish asks as he watches me from his spot on the floor. I kind of feel like I could get used to looking down at him like this.

“Don’t worry about the gun. What we’re going to worry about now is silencing you.”

“Nah, I am resigning from the position,” he decides. “I’m starting to think it’s not worth it.”

“That’s because you’re a weak man,” I assure him. “Definitely not good enough for my Jackson. Now do me a favor, yeah? Don’t tell Vance about me. Tell him that you didn’t get a good shot on me but you’re working on it.”

“What do I get in return?” he asks.

I smile at him. “To live.”

He seems to think about that for a long, *long* moment. “Can I—”

“No.”

“What if—”

“How much do you like your life?”

Tavish tsks. “Fuck. Fine. Deal.”

“That’s what I thought,” I say with a smirk.

“What do you want to know about Vance? Why are you here? You can’t tell me you’re into exotic dancing.”

“Why can’t I?” I ask. “Maybe it’s a new hobby of mine.”

He scrutinizes me for a long moment. “Nah, tell me.”

“I just don’t think you’re worthy of being told anything. But how long have you known Vance?”

“He’s a weapons dealer who’s been around. I’ve run into him a few times. He’s hired me a few times.”

“To do what?”

“Once was as a bodyguard, another was to take out some competition. People who were moving in on his stuff.”

“You know who Bennett Adams is?”

“The kid who shot up a bunch of people? I do. I knew one of the girls he killed. Real nice lady who didn’t deserve what she got. Unlike you.”

“Do you think he actually shot them?” I ask.

“I wasn’t there, and if I wasn’t there to witness it with my own eyes, anything could have happened. Like I wouldn’t believe anyone who said that teeny Pomeranian could... what the fuck did he do to me? It was so fast I don’t even know!”

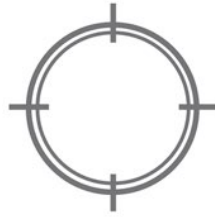
“Flipped you on your ass.”

He’s quiet for a moment, probably assessing his own uselessness. “Damn... that was kind of hot.”

I scowl at him. “He’s taken. And while I don’t love his significant other, he’s *leagues* better than you.”

“We’ll see about that.”

NINE



JACKSON

Leland had just *left* me here with all of these women, and I didn't know what the hell to do. I think they ended up *pitying* me because there they were, drawing me down on their laps and treating me like a prince—oh wait, I'm supposed to be a princess—who needed to be comforted and pampered.

And then, of course Leland ran off with that ridiculous Tavish guy. Why the hell is Tavish here and do I need to be concerned whether they're fighting again? I feel like I constantly need to be concerned, but Leland wanted me to stay here to distract the women, and as they proceed to drag me off to the pool where they take turns riding on my shoulders while playing volleyball, I start to feel like I'm just a steed for them to sit on to make better passes.

Leland finally comes out while I'm being forced to parade the winners around the pool. It's all very confusing and I don't even know what to say to them, so I think they've just come to the conclusion that I don't speak. Leland was right! He should have dragged Henry into this mess!

Relief washes through me that Leland and Cassel are finally back. Thankfully, our allotted time was up fifteen minutes ago, and after I give the last winner her victory lap, I'm free to escape.

Emily thanks us for the wonderful time—which has to be questionable at best—and sees us to the door, which is the best thing that's happened yet today.

“Did you get everything you needed?” I ask as I hurry out to the car.

“I did!” Leland says, absolutely thrilled as he whips out his phone and delivers it to me in a strikingly suspicious way. “Look! You have to watch it!”

I grab his phone, expecting it to be some kind of data or information about how Vance is into some sketchy shit and how we can catch him, and instead, I’m given a video of Cassel fucking *slamming* Tavish’s ass down the stairs.

It’s... oddly more impressive than I thought I was going to see.

“Well fuck,” I whisper.

“RIGHT?” Leland exclaims as he pats Cassel’s head. Of course Cassel loves it. “Cassel pulled it off the security tape before he erased the tape.”

Cassel is just all smiles, clearly pleased by Leland’s praise. And... while I know it hurts Leland on a deeper level to praise Cassel, I’m going to be honest and say that I’m not even surprised. This shit is impressive.

“I... I just pulled all the data off. Not just this. I probably look braggy or something,” Cassel says.

“Well *damn*,” I murmur, not caring why he pulled it off.

“Last time that man even *looks* at my man,” Leland says with a grin as he gets into the driver’s seat. “He ever looks at Jackson again, I’ll sic Cassel on him.”

“I can’t wait to show Jeremy!” Cassel enthuses, beaming with pride.

I watch it a couple more times, each time just as impressed. “Wow... that’s... I almost forgot what we were here for.”

“Right?” Leland asks. “Anyway, Cassel snagged everything on the computer, so hopefully there’ll be something juicy on it.”

“It’ll take me a bit to get through some of it. Quite a bit was password protected or encrypted in some way, but I’ll do all that at home.”

“Okay,” I say before watching the video one more time as Leland starts to drive.



My phone rings as we’re getting closer to Cassel’s place. When I see it’s my mom, I’m surprised and a bit anxious. It’s not exactly usual for them to call me around midnight like this.

“Hello?” I ask as the call comes over the car’s Bluetooth.

“Jackson, sorry to call so late. We just got back from the theater and your father realized he locked his keys in the house. You don’t happen to have a way to get in... you know, with your criminal husband and all,” Mom says.

Leland is not upset about this moniker in *any way*. “HI, AVA! Criminal husband here. And sure! I can bust a window or two down if you’d like!” he announces. “We’re actually like two minutes away, luckily enough!”

I glance at Leland decked out in makeup as he turns on the blinker like he’s planning on just *heading* to their house. I try to wave at him to continue toward home, but he seems oblivious. “It’ll be a few. We actually have to run home first... to get tools...” And take a shower.

“I have tools!” Cassel announces. “I didn’t know if Vance’s door would be locked or not when we broke in!”

“I don’t even care where you were breaking into. I’ll see you in a few,” Mom says before hanging up.

“We are not stopping there,” I protest as I wave at my face. While I no longer have the bikini top on, I’m still sporting the booty shorts and makeup and a spandex vest.

“You’re going to make your decrepit mother stand out in the blistering cold waiting for her long-lost son?”

“I cannot face my mother looking like this,” I cry, wishing I hadn’t let Leland drive. It’s too late now, he’s turning onto her road. I can *see* her house. “Park out at the road, and I’ll wait out here.” She’ll be annoyed that I sent Leland alone, but it’ll be better than strutting up to the house looking like a stripper.

“Okay!” Leland says as he pulls right up to the front of the house where my mom and dad look me *right* in the eyes. Like... fully lock on the moment I turn my head. There’s absolutely no way to avoid this now as my mom cocks her head like she’s taking it all in. The pigtails. The eyeliner. The red lipstick. Thankfully I’d lost the balloons, but even that doesn’t seem to be enough to save me. There’s no way to pretend that none of this has happened, so as Leland and Cassel bust out, the only thing I have left to do is get out myself.

“Hey, Ava. Criminal Husband is here to save the day,” Leland calls as I grudgingly face the people who brought me into this world.

Mom assesses me for a very long moment. She’s going to say something that irritates me. She’s going to judge me. Say something that will take all the bonding we’ve done recently and rip it to shreds before chucking it out the window.

“Your... makeup is quite well done,” she says.

“Thanks! I did it!” Cassel says as he hurries over to the door.

“Ava, you’d have been proud of your son,” Leland tells her as he drapes an arm over her shoulder while Cassel breaks out his lockpicking kit. “We were trying to figure out if this teenager’s brother was properly convicted of the crime he may or may not have committed, and we had the brilliant idea of taking the place of these strippers. So we go in, planning to distract them with a show, when a woman informs us that they weren’t wanting *male* strippers, they were wanting female strippers. So what do you do in that case?”

“Find some women?” Mom asks.

“NO! We embraced our feminine side. Let’s just say that they loved it. Your son was the absolute star of the show! He distracted every single one of those women as Cassel and I went to see what we could find about the people who’d been killed. Here, let me show you.”

Of course I assume Leland is showing him the video of Cassel, which even my mother will have to be impressed by, and maybe she’ll be so impressed she’ll forget all about this. But when I see the look on the faces of my mother and father, I realize that Cassel didn’t *just* save the recordings from him doing the KO on Tavish.

And then that’s the moment my mother bursts out laughing. I’ve seen my mother laugh, but she’s a pretty stoic person. Her general state of “I’m amused” is a sort of smile. But not this time. No, she is absolutely bent over laughing unlike I’ve ever seen her laugh before. Even my father is beyond shock and pointing like he’s unable to form words.

“LELAND!” I yell as I try to grab the phone, but my mother smacks my hand away as I’m left absolutely *gawking* at her.

Leland is as proud as a peacock that he’s finally gotten my mother to lose control like this. I don’t think he’s ever been so pleased when dealing with my mom.

“Jackson, what *is that?*” Mom asks.

I don’t know why I have to try to defend myself. “Just... I never said I was a dancer.”

“Can you even call that dancing?” Dad asks.

“I’ve seen strippers and they do not do any of what you just did,” Mom says.

“Hoooold on,” Leland interjects. “My, my, Ava. What kind of secret life do you have? Did you two naughties just come from the strip club instead of the ‘thee-a-ter’?” He says theater all weird like it’s some type of code word.

“I was a waitress in a strip club when I was in college,” Ava says, dropping this bomb like it’s nothing too important.

“That’s where I met her,” Dad says proudly.

“What? You guys told me you met at church!” I exclaim.

“Yeah, I saw her at some garage sale a church was putting on, and was like... don’t you work at the strip club?” Dad says.

My world view has shifted... no, it’s been tossed in a bottle and shaken all around.

“If you want to be accepted into this family, you will send me that video,” Mom says to Leland. “I must show my book club friends.”

I stare at her in horror. “Don’t you dare—”

“Already done!” Leland says, overly proud.

“And the door is unlocked!” Cassel announces. “Tell your book club that the Helium Sisters are more than happy to do private events.”

As she walks into the house watching the video on her phone, Leland looks over at me and gives me a big smile. I’m sure it has something to do with how proud he is of this absolute chaos that he’s brought into my life. “Jackson, I’m sorry... but your mother has been abducted by an alien.”

“Clearly,” I mutter as Dad issues his goodbye before leaving. I’m left staring after my mom while trying to figure out what has just happened. Even after the door is closed, Leland has to drag my body back to the vehicle.

“I think Freddy No Fallus needs to sleep off the shock of an otherworldly being having taken over his mother’s body,” he explains to Cassel.

“Yeah, but she seems much nicer than normal! I’m usually so scared of her!” Cassel says. “I like the alien version better!”

“Right? It’s a mystery. I think we’re all confused,” Leland says. “Jackson... Jackson, do you think you’re going to make it?”

“No...”

“I’m here for you.”

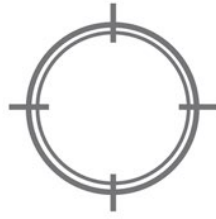
“As a traitor! You sent her the video!”

“She *liked* me, Jackson! For the first time in her life, she looked at me like I was a *human* instead of a leech attached to your mighty fine ass!”

“I don’t even know what’s happening,” I whisper.

“A good night’s sleep will help,” he assures me, but I’m quite positive it’ll take more than some sleep to survive this ordeal.

TEN



When I wake up in the morning, Jackson seems to have forgotten about his mother's reaction, so I feel an instant need to remind him.

"Gosh, your mother laughed so hard," I say with a huge smile as I roll into him. "SO HARD."

"Please stop," he groans as he grabs a pillow and places it over my head, like a mere pillow could silence me!

"I should have recorded her laughing. That would have been funny to set that as my ringtone for every time she calls." I pull the pillow off to beam at Jackson who doesn't seem to love my beam. I mean... how could he not love it first thing in the morning?

He grabs me, dragging me on top of him before putting me into a headlock. "You dare ridicule me!" Now that he has me in this position, he seems too tired to do more and it turns into a weird passive-aggressive cuddle.

"I do!" I say, far too gleeful. I might be a horrible person, but he chose to marry me, so ah well.

I decide to give him a love bite as a response to the hold he has me in.

He finally laughs and lets me go. Not that I'm really *ready* to get up; I was just ready to remind him about last night's fun.

"Jackson, you know what I want?" I ask.

"Ten Dobermans." This makes him shudder.

I grin at the memory. “Nah. I want you to carry me to the bathroom.”

“I suppose I can do that,” he says as he slowly gets out of bed before reaching down and picking me up. He carries me into the bathroom before setting me down in the tub and closing the curtain. “There we go.”

“Jackson! No! Jackson! Where did you go? Save me!”

“Oh, did you want me to turn the water on?”

“Don’t you dare!” I say as I quickly get out. He’s pleased with his evilness and because he looks so cute being evil, I have to love him all the more.

And that’s when my phone rings. “I bet that’s Ava wanting to know if I have more videos of you.”

“I bet it’s not,” Jackson says. “I bet she was high last night, which is why she acted like that... someone slipped her a weed brownie or something.”

“Uh-huh... sure,” I respond as I hurry back into the bedroom to scoop up my phone. It’s Henry so I quickly answer it, already excited to tell him about last night’s events and send him the videos that will surely amuse him.

“Hey, Leland...” he says, and his tone tells me it’s something I don’t want to hear.

“Henry... today I’m celebrating the fact that I made Ava laugh,” I explain. “I don’t have time or room for any... atrocities.”

“Detective Patel would like me to ask you if you’d sit down and talk with Lucas. He’s still refusing to talk to anyone but you. Families are extremely upset that they don’t know what happened to their loved one. And then we have Lucas over here claiming to know what happened but refusing to speak a word of it.”

“You know he’s not going to just blurt out what happened, right? There’s going to be some fucking catch... something he wants to piss me off about,” I snap before realizing I’m taking it out on the wrong person. “Sorry.”

“You don’t have to apologize,” Henry says, tone soft. “I know that he’s conniving, and I’ve made the others well aware that his goal will be to manipulate you in some way, but they are determined to see what he has to say on the off chance he’ll spill.”

When I look up, I see Jackson standing in the doorway. His expression is unreadable, and I find that I don’t know what to do. “Hennnnrrrrryyyy,” I whine.

“I know, I know. I’ll be with you the whole time. Jackson can be too.”

Jackson’s watching me closely. “Only do it if you want,” he says, clearly guessing what Henry’s calling for.

I close my eyes and try to steel myself for today to turn shitty. “Fine. Let’s get this over with so I can prove to you guys that he doesn’t know shit. He either wants something or wants to harass me.”

“Likely. But then we can prove we tried,” Henry says.

“Okay,” I mutter.

“I’ll pick you up in an hour.”

“Yeah...”

Well, there goes my day. It got tossed into a blender from hell then shot off a cliff. Jackson comes over and wraps me up in his arms. “Don’t forget how much stronger you are than him. You’re going to walk in there and prove again and again how much better your life is without him in it.”

I drop my head on his shoulder. “True.”

“How you bested him because you’re a badass motherfucker.”

I smile at that. “I *am* a badass motherfucker!”

“That you put him in jail where he gets to rot and be tormented by the idea of your freedom instead of getting the easy way out.”

“Ooh, I love it when you talk dirty to me.”

Jackson kisses my forehead, giving me the reassurance that I need to get through this.



Detective Patel ends up driving us, so we're restricted on what all we can talk about during the drive since it seems like most of the things we talk about shouldn't be shared with outsiders.

Even so, I still inform Henry all about Jackson's new side gig as a stripper. He laughs just as hard as Ava when I show him the video, while Jackson stares out the window like there might be something out there that will swallow him right up.

When we reach the prison, we're escorted through the metal detectors and taken back to an office area where a man is waiting. He smiles when he sees us and shakes everyone's hands.

"I'm Brady Davison," he says. "I'm the current detective in charge of this case. I've been in contact with Detective Patel and Chief Johnson and explained to them that I've spent multiple days trying to get Lucas to speak to me, but he's quite insistent that the only person he'll speak to is you, Leland. Says you're like a son to him and he's only comfortable around you."

"The last thing I am is his son," I respond, mood souring at the idea of him telling people this bullshit.

Brady gives me a smile. "I assumed as much. I understand that your stipulation for helping is having these two in the room with you. That'll be fine; I just ask that they stay seated and don't engage with Lucas. The more we keep things to a minimum, the better. If you feel uncomfortable at *any* point, simply look my way, wave at me, or do anything to let me know that you are done with the conversation, and we will promptly remove him from the room."

"Okay."

"Here are the questions we'd like to ask him," Detective Patel says as she gives me a paper. They're pretty

straightforward questions inquiring about what happened, but if she knew how Lucas works, she'd know none of these questions will do a damn thing when it comes to getting him to engage. Even so, I pretend that I'll use them.

"Okay," I repeat as I'm led down a long hallway that seems to smother me as I move. Jackson sets a hand on my back that gives me some comfort as I'm taken into a private room where I'm guided over to a seat. He sits on my right, so Henry takes the chair on my left. That leaves Detective Patel to the left of Henry and Detective Brady to the far right.

We wait a few minutes before two guards lead Lucas in, and those dreadful feelings that'd been welling up in my stomach surge to a whole new level. The moment he sees me, he's all smiles like any part of this situation could be fun.

"I would just love a hug," he says as he tries to hold his arms out, but his hands that are cuffed in front of him won't go out far enough.

"No, have a seat," one of the guards orders, which is a good thing since I feel like if Lucas's neck came anywhere close to me, I'd be tempted to just... squeeze it.

"Leland! It's so lovely to see you," Lucas says with a smile as he watches me closely, like I could actually have any interest in engaging with him.

I should have shot him.

I definitely should have shot him. *Why* did I decide in that very moment to have some weird... change of heart or whatever one wants to call it? Why did I make such a questionable mistake?

"Can't say the same about seeing you," I assure him.

That makes him laugh. "Tell me how you've been."

"Pretty sad that you didn't die," I admit. "When I got that call, I was just so hopeful."

"You're so funny," he says with a big ol' smile that is making me more irritated by the moment. Wait... no... I can't play into his games. I have to simply sit down and deal with

this shit. Prove that he doesn't actually have any good answers to give and get out of here. The sooner he talks, the sooner I can leave and breathe again.

"What happened on the night you were attacked?" I ask.

"You know what? I really thought we'd get to talk for a bit before diving right into such traumatic memories," he says, doing his best to sound like *any* part of it was traumatic for him. He probably stood back and watched the massacre—or caused it—with a smile on his face. Lucas is *not* beyond stabbing himself for a good time.

"Traumatic, my ass," I say, voice steady.

"And you brought your husband! How have you been, Jackson? Treating my special boy well, I assume."

"Don't you dare even speak to him," I growl.

"Lucas, you were asked to stay on track," Brady says, and the moment Lucas is reminded he's there, he turns sour.

"You told them you'd explain what happened if I was brought here to talk to you."

"I did, but I had no idea there'd be so many people and recording devices and cameras... it's making me feel a bit... nervous, you know?" Lucas whines... literally *whines*. Like he's not just loving every moment of this.

"Lucas, this was the deal. We'd bring Leland in—as you asked—and you would answer the questions," Brady says.

"Well... you kind of lied. You didn't tell me you'd bring half the station in too. These cops are making me nervous. I just... I feel like I could breathe a bit better if they weren't here."

"Why do you want to talk to Leland alone?" Patel asks.

"It stirs up my anxiety when I have to talk to so many people!" Lucas claims.

God, I want to kill him. Just... someone strike him down and let me watch him die.

“Fine, I’ll speak to you alone with just Jackson here,” I say.

Lucas smiles. “That’ll make me feel much better. Thank you, Leland. You were always so kind to me.”

Fucking hell. I hate this man.

“No, you’re going to talk to him with us here,” Brady says, standing his ground, which I can tell is pissing Lucas off. He doesn’t like to be told no.

Lucas pretends to think about that for a moment. “I don’t think I will.”

“Just go, I’m fine,” I say.

“We can’t just leave,” Brady protests.

Lucas shakes his head. “Oh... well, that’s a shame. How’s your day been, Leland?”

I glance over at them. “What if you two just stand back against the wall? The device is still recording. Maybe he’ll pull his head out of his ass enough at that point to give us something worth the time it took to drive here and listen to his bullshit.”

The detectives seem to consider it before agreeing and Henry backs off with them, even though I wouldn’t mind if he stayed. But I also don’t want Lucas to know *just* how much Henry knows about me.

Lucas seems pleased now that they’re gone. “It’s weird how much you care about these people you don’t even know. You care enough to come all the way here and talk to me about it... or is there another reason you came?”

“Their families deserve to know what happened.”

He’s smiling now, and it’s obviously not because he cares. “How... sweet of you.” Of course that’s what it is... he’s mocking me. He thinks I’ve become weak since I left him. He thinks that every time I show some semblance of human emotion that it simply highlights what’s wrong with me.

I stare at him, assuring him I'm not playing these tricks he seems determined to play.

When it becomes apparent I'm done with his bullshit, Lucas seems to give in. "Weirdly enough, the group I was in was made up of quite a few people from Vance Wilcox's gang. You recognize that name?"

"I do. There's a man named Bennett Adams who is part of his gang or Jinn group or whatever they want to call themselves."

"He is... kind of. They don't really act like he belongs, but yeah, he was there. There was also this guard, Summers, who I'm pretty sure has ties to the Jinn group as well. Almost seems like someone was targeting the gang by setting off a fire alarm *just* in our area and hurting the group of us, doesn't it?"

"Is that what happened?"

"Fuck if I know. You see, the two guards who made it out alive don't get along very well. We have my buddy Summers, who we all know is getting stuff in here illegally for the gang. He's slipped me a few... necessities every now and then to 'keep me quiet,' like if I wanted to talk, that would shut me up," he says. And while he claims the guy is his "buddy," it's clear he wants some control over him if he feels like blurting the guy's secrets out in front of a camera. "The other guard is called Everly, who I think you met the last time you were here. So Everly went to the warden about the illegal items being brought in, but because the warden's on Summers's side, the stunt nearly got Everly fired. It was a whole thing, but they're really not looking into any of that when it comes to what happened. Weird, right?" Lucas asks.

"And you care, why?" I respond.

"Because I pissed Summers off the other day. In turn, he pissed on my cell wall. Watched him do it. Hell, maybe the attack happened because Summers pissed off the wrong guy."

And was that wrong guy you? "What happened?"

"It's a lot to talk about, Leland. And... even thinking about it brings back some traumatic memories for me, you know?"

That... PTSD kind of stuff, you know?"

"Yeah," I say, well aware we're getting to the shit Lucas wants. He just needed to pretend like he was going to tell us something of interest first.

He leans in and smiles at me. "But I... here's the thing, Leland. This Jinn group? I actually know a few of the figures who are playing."

"So what?"

"Back, oh... over ten years ago, I wanted to take them out to a ballgame, you know?"

My eyes narrow because when Lucas says "ballgame," he generally means that he's looking to kill someone.

"I wanted to take them out, you know? They told me they knew the Sandman and... kindhearted me wanted to protect him, you know?"

He's toying with me, right? They don't know shit about me. Yeah, Vance hired Tavish to have me killed, but that's because he wants my gun. He has no idea who I am.

"Well, that was ten years ago. I don't give a shit what happened ten years ago."

"Remember that film? That one that you wound up being cast in?"

Jackson, who doesn't know what Lucas is getting at, gives me a curious look. Of course he's referring to something from my past, but *why*? I don't like not knowing what he wants or what he's going on about. Obviously, I know the fucking film he's talking about, but why is he talking about it? Especially when all of this is being recorded.

"Let's just say I have a copy of that."

"Of course you do. What does it have to do with this?"

"That's how I got to know the group of them, Leland. I'm explaining it to you."

"How the fuck are they tied?"

“They hired you to play that role. So the other day, when they saw you trotting around with the props, of course they knew who the main star was!”

That’s when I realize he’s trying to tell me that what happened in the prison was because he was “trying to protect me.” That he heard someone talking about the gun and assumed the person who had the gun was me...

But how did it get around here? And all in the span of what? Hours? I mean, we met Jacob at the golf club who must have then told Vance. So then Vance immediately called one of the men in the prison who then... talked about it loud enough Lucas heard it? Is there someone here who is possibly related to Vance? Why else would he call someone on the inside to chat about something he hadn’t even seen yet?

So Lucas is trying to tell me that the moment he heard them talk about me, he decided to kill multiple people to what? Send them a warning? To warn me? Why would he warn me? Lucas never warned me about shit growing up. He liked it when I was thrown right into trouble to see how I would handle it.

“I miss you and your brothers,” Lucas says. “You really should take them out to play baseball.”

So... he wants us to take down the Jinn group, but why? What do they know or have that he wants? It can’t be just because of me, but he wants me to be paranoid. Hell, the gang might not even fucking know about me. Lucas might be lying about the whole gun thing. He might be lying that they talked about me or that they knew about that “film.” But now I’m paranoid that for once in his damn life, he might be telling the truth. That they could be looking into my life. That they could find Jackson and my new family and kill them all.

Lucas shakes his head with a chuckle. “Oh right, you’re not here to talk about baseball. God, my brain. I had a concussion, you know? Causes much confusion. Oh, the attack. Yeah... so once there was an alert about the fire, I was escorted into this room where we were being held until we were either evacuated or it was deemed there was no real fire.

I remember this weird smell, and I was in the back of the line with Everly in front of me to my left and Summers to my right, you know? That Bennett guy was directly in front of me. The third guard, a guy I don't really know, was toward the front. So... let me think here."

He closes his eyes a moment like he's struggling to remember, but all I can think about is this fucking gang. *Did* they hire me to take out the gunsmith back when I was a teen? I always thought I was hired to kill him because of what he did... but could it have been for those fucking guns he made? Or more specifically, for the one I kept? The one I lied to Lucas about. The one he asked if I'd seen it or knew what happened to it after the event, even though he'd known from the beginning that I'd taken it.

"I'm wrong. Sorry, a guy named Trevor was in front of me and Bennett was in front of him. Bennett like... stumbled. It was just... weird, you know? He stumbled and went, 'What the fuck?' Like a distraught 'What the fuck,' you know? Like he was confused about what made him stumble.

"Next thing I knew was this weird feeling. My guess is it was some kind of chemical or gas. I vaguely think I smelled something—I don't know. My head's a bit foggy. But it fucked with my head, you know? Enough that I didn't see shit, I just remember wallowing on the ground, blood oozing out of my side."

"But no one smelled anything when they came into the room to see what happened?" I ask.

Lucas shrugs. "Honestly, don't ask me. I remember Trevor screaming. Everly was trying to compress the wound on his leg as Summers like... tripped over me. It fucking hurt, and I remember being insanely satisfied when his face smashed into the ground."

"What about Bennett?"

"I don't know about Bennett. That kid's got some questionable thoughts is all I know, but I don't think he did it. I think he's got the... let's say ideas, but not the ability to put it in motion."

“He shot and killed multiple people.”

That makes Lucas laugh. “That kid didn’t shoot shit.”

“What makes you so sure?”

“Let’s just say I’m good at reading people,” he says. And while I never want to admit that Lucas is good at *anything*, he does have a knack for reading people. He also has a knack for manipulation, though. He knows how to prey on someone and which parts to prey on. “My head’s starting to hurt. I think... I think I need to lie down for a bit. I’m sure I’ll be able to talk more later, but for now... I don’t think I can go on.”

“You’re such a dick,” I comment, which makes him grin at me.

“Thank you,” he says before turning to his guards. “Oh, my head... I need to lie down... my head.”

As Lucas is led away, he can’t stop smiling. For someone who is so concerned about his head, he seems quite pleased with himself. The detectives and Henry return to the table as soon as he’s gone.

“What was that first part about?” Brady asks.

“It’s...” I want to push him off, tell him I don’t want to talk about it, but I don’t want him getting nosy. By giving him an explanation, it leaves no room for him to come up with his own ideas on it. “When I was younger, this guy asked me to be in a... film. I... wasn’t exactly in the best spot as a child with negligent parents before being passed off to a foster family that wasn’t much better. I liked the attention the guy gave me and was too dumb to realize that he wasn’t just someone being friendly.

“The guy asked me to be in a film and dumbass me thought he was talking about like... a real movie. Lucas was the one who told me that what he was wanting wasn’t just some... ‘film.’ But I guess the guy had some connection to that gang... the one he’s saying Bennett and a couple of the other guys who got hurt or killed or whatever were involved in. I guess it just reminded him of it.”

“Did the guy who propositioned you ever get arrested?” Patel asks.

“Arrested? No. But I heard he disappeared,” I say. “Like the ‘he’s never hurting anyone again’ kind of disappeared. But that’s not surprising with the kind of business he conducted on the side.”

“What exactly was your relationship with Lucas?” she asks.

I shake my head. “Did you at least get something you can use? I’m sure he wants to drag this out as long as he can, so he’ll be back and ready to tease more just so he can make me visit him again.”

“This was definitely a start,” Brady says. “He didn’t tell us much that we didn’t already know, but it’ll at least get us going in the right direction. Thank you for your time. If we hear anything else, we’ll let you know.”

“Yeah,” I respond unenthusiastically as I head out the door with Henry and Jackson. We don’t talk until we get back to the car. We have to wait for Patel in order to leave anyway, so we have a little bit of time to talk alone.

“So?” Jackson asks.

“So, he’s in my fucking head,” I growl. “He wants me to think that Vance knows who I am. He wants me to get Cassel, and I’m guessing Micah, to wipe out the gang because who fucking knows why. I’m sure it’s to benefit him.”

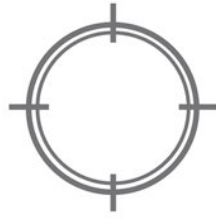
“You don’t have to do anything he wants you to do,” Jackson says.

“What if Vance really knows, though? What if, for once in Lucas’s goddamn life, he’s telling the truth and Vance is keeping an eye on me? What if it wasn’t just the gun he sent Tavish to kill me over but because Vance *knows* who I am?”

“Just don’t do anything rash,” Henry instructs. “Let’s see if we can find something on Vance to get him arrested before we do anything else.”

“Okay,” I say. But I know that’s easier said than done when I have my new life and family to protect.

ELEVEN



I can't sleep. I can't stop thinking about Vance and how much I want to make this asshole pay. I can't keep my hatred for Lucas from whirling around in my mind, and I find myself slipping out of bed and heading over to my gun shrine.

Walking right over to the gun Vance is so obsessed with, I place it in a holster which I attach to my waist. Then I grab another gun, one of my trusty ones that isn't just for show, before turning to the door where Jackson is standing.

“Ready?” he asks.

I hesitate as I watch the man who definitely shouldn't be letting me do this. Who should be telling me to go back to bed where he'll squeeze all the bad thoughts away or some other romance book nonsense.

“You can stay here.”

“There's no way I'm staying here when there's the possibility of a gunfight and the likelihood of you threatening someone.”

I smile at the delightful man. “Yeah?”

“Fuck yeah. Anyone who hires an assassin to kill you is going to regret it,” he assures me.

“Are you gonna be naked?” I ask.

“If... if that's what you need to feel better.” He doesn't seem overly sure about this, but he does seem to embrace it. “Ski mask on, balls out.”

That makes me laugh as we head out to Jackson's car. We'll make sure to park somewhere far enough away that if Vance has any cameras in the area, the car can't be traced back to us, especially since the wrong license plates are still on it and it's all Vance has seen us drive so far.

I call Cassel on the way over, and he tampers with the security system to Vance's rather extravagant house so I simply have to let him know when to shut it off and unlock the door. Upon arriving, it's as easy as walking in through the back door.

I head up the stairs, following Cassel's instructions to Vance's bedroom, which I find with ease. When I step inside, Jackson's right beside me. Quietly, I shut the door before flicking the bedroom light on.

"What the fuck..." Vance mutters as he stirs in his sleep. His wife tries burrowing her face in the covers, like she thinks she can avoid whatever is happening. That's when Vance opens his eyes and takes a good look at me and a "Fuck!" escapes him. He tries reaching for the bedside table, but I simply point the gun in my hand at his head.

"Keep your hands to yourself, Vance," I order.

He freezes, eyes wide as he watches me.

"What do you want?" the woman asks in terror. "I'll give you money."

"Ask your husband why I'm here," I say.

Vance pales considerably as his wife looks over at him. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh? But the man you hired to kill me sure does. Weird how you think it's okay to kill me to get this gun, but it's not okay for me to come into your bedroom? What kind of logic is that?"

"I didn't do that!" he protests, trying his hardest to save himself.

"I was literally attacked by the man you hired *to kill me* over a goddamn gun," I say.

The look on his face tells me that he's starting to think that the gun might not have been this important. But I grab a chair from a nearby desk and drag it over since I feel like this might take a while.

“No! I didn't! I didn't hire anyone!”

“Don't lie to me, Vance. I've decided from here on out, every time you lie, I'm going to shoot off one of your fingers. But I won't use the gun you like so much. Do you want to know why?”

He seems quite certain he doesn't.

“Because the last person I killed with this gun was the man who made it. You seem quite fascinated with good ol' Norris, but did you know who Norris was? I mean... you should know a man when you worship his work enough that you'd kill someone over it, right? Let me start from the beginning when I was about sixteen.”



The man looks weirdly normal.

I guess I've been at this long enough to know that looks don't tell everything. But often they have a feel about them, a look that most people don't seem to pick up... but I do. There's usually something about them that sets them apart as being different.

Or maybe I'd painted a different picture in my head about him after seeing the videos.

I'm standing on the street corner like I was told to when he starts by. He almost immediately notices me but pretends he doesn't by glancing away again. He wants it to look like I chose to snag his attention. So once he looks up again, I shift on my feet and give him a “Hey.”

He watches me with an expression of interest, immediately telling me he knows what I'm here for, and I can tell I've caught his attention. With a smile on his handsome face, he stops to talk. To feel me out.

“How are you? My god, you’re gorgeous.”

I give him a shy smile. “Thanks... You... have a hotel or place around here or something? I haven’t seen you around before.”

“I sure do,” he says as he gives me a nod. He takes me over to a car, and I slide into the front seat, but the moment I do, a woman gets into the back.

“Norris, you drive me home?” she asks.

“What happened to Danny?”

“Danny sucks. But I suck better,” she says with a drunk giggle.

“Sure, I’ll drop you off,” he agrees, making me uncomfortable that this woman has now seen me in the car with Norris. If he goes missing tomorrow, who’s to say she won’t remember exactly what I look like?

I know Lucas would tell me to kill her too, but with how drunk she is, she likely won’t even remember me. And what Lucas doesn’t know won’t hurt him.

“Who is this?” she asks, a long fake red nail reaching out to poke my cheek before she giggles again.

“A friend’s kid. Caught him in the bar and thought I’d take him home before he gets in trouble,” Norris says.

“Ah, what’s your name?” she asks.

“Curtis,” I answer.

“Curtis, you’re gonna be in big trouble if your parents catch you out and about. You know you shouldn’t be out drinking! What are you? Fifteen? Sixteen?”

“I wasn’t drinking. Just... friends talked me into it.”

“That’s peer pressure for you,” she says.

“Don’t mind her,” Norris says as he drives. I can tell we’re heading in the direction of his house, so does he still plan on dropping her off somewhere?

The client who hired Lucas wanted to see if I could get any of Norris's films off him after I killed him, so I can't kill him just yet. Honestly, I knew he wouldn't take me to a hotel. A hotel's too risky for recording unwilling participants, especially when his setup at home is ideal.

But when he drives right to his home without dropping her off anywhere, I start to question if I'm wrong about his evening plans. Maybe he really does just want sex. I mean... he wouldn't keep her in the house while filming, right? I would assume he wants noise...although he could have a soundproof room. Or... she could know what's going on.

She staggers after us into the house where there are multiple men waiting just inside.

"Deal with her," he says to one of the guys before turning to me and giving me a smile. "Come along."

"I... I didn't know there'd be more than one," I stammer, trying to play naïve, like I think he's going to bring all of them into bed with us.

"There's not. They're... my security," he says, but three of them follow along behind me. Lucas didn't tell me there'd be more than one person. While I can kill the guards, what about those who took the lady upstairs? If I make one wrong move, I'll draw all the attention to me. And Lucas would be absolutely pissed if I gave away my identity. If even one of them got away, if even one of them saw me and managed to escape, I'd be absolutely fucked.

"I'm... not sure about this," I say. "I thought we'd be alone."

"It's fine," he assures me. "We will be alone. You have to understand that the last time I hired a prostitute, the bitch robbed me. Robbed me! Can you believe it? I pay well too. I'd given her a two-hundred-dollar tip and she robbed me."

Norris smiles down at me, trying to give me a warm look to keep me from fretting over it.

I pretend to be interested now that he mentioned more money, so he leans in close. "That tip sounds good, doesn't it?"

Want me to give you a little up front?" he whispers into my ear.

"Uh... yeah... sure," I agree as he pulls out his wallet heaping with bills. He pulls three one-hundred-dollar bills out and slips them into my hand.

"Little tip just for being cute."

"Thank you," I say, pretending to be pleased by the money that I then guide into the pocket of my tight pants.

One of the security guards steps forward. "Norris, let us pat him down first."

"Of course, go ahead," Norris says.

"Why?" I ask as I try to back away. I don't want them taking my gun from me, but if I shoot them now, how many more are in the house? Do I have to kill all of them? What if they're not bad people? What if they don't know what Norris is doing?

Fuck. Fuck.

I know Lucas would say to shoot them all... but can I? Can I even be fast enough to do it? They all have guns on them, and if they're in security, they're probably well-versed in how to use them.

While I'm over here letting my mind run wild, one of the security guards comes over and jerks my coat up. When he sees the gun I have tucked in the back of my pants, he pulls it out and looks it over, like examining it would give him some information on why I'm carrying it.

"I-I've never used it... but... but the last guy beat me up and didn't pay, and I thought maybe this could keep it from happening again." I make sure to sound sheepish and innocent as I keep my head down and my eyes averted.

"I don't give a shit," Norris responds, but I do notice the guard keeps it. I also have a knife, but he doesn't find it, which I'm thankful for. I'm more than confident if I'm alone with Norris, I can kill him with a knife. Hell, it might even be easier

to keep the guards from hearing if I use the knife instead of the gun. Maybe I can get out of all of this without alerting anyone.

“Okay, right this way,” Norris says as he wraps an arm around me, pulling me toward him. “You good? Do you need anything?”

“No, I’m fine,” I say as he smiles down at me. I bet he puts on this act for all of the sex workers he brings down here, to make them think that sex is actually what he wants them for.

“Come on.”

He leads me to a doorway that reveals a staircase headed down, and I notice the guards still follow, watching my every move. Any time I toss a glance at them—like I feel would be a natural response for someone in this situation—Norris pushes my face forward. When we reach the bottom of the stairs, he looks over at me and smiles. “Right in here.”

Is it money that makes sex workers continue on at this point? Is it his good looks and clean appearance? How would anyone in this situation not run? How would they not know that he’s up to something? I’m well aware that when someone is pushed and pushed, they don’t always make the right decisions, but there are so many red flags.

I can’t let myself get anxious. I have to stay focused. I have to keep moving forward and not let any of my wandering thoughts get to me.

He guides me through a door, and what I see inside makes me halt.

Beyond a camera sits a teenage boy of about eighteen. He’s wearing pants but no shirt with his knees drawn up to a bruised chest.

The moment he sees us, he starts shaking his head and going, “No, no, no, no.” His voice sounds hoarse, like someone who’s been screaming and pleading for a while. I really didn’t expect there to be a boy in here, so it appropriately surprises me.

“What’s going on?” I ask as one of the guards blocks me, like he assumes I’m going to run at this point.

“It’s just a bit of fun. Don’t you like fun?” Norris asks as the guard who’d blocked me grabs on to me.

All I have to do is simply stab Norris or slit his throat. Make him hurt for this. And destroy his fucking guards who apparently think that whatever Norris is doing is fine. My hesitation about killing or hurting innocent people goes right out the window now that it’s clear they’re not so innocent after all.

The guard’s grip tightens when he catches my eyes, almost like he sees something in them he doesn’t like. But it reminds me that I’m supposed to be playing a scared teenager who just wanted to sell himself for enough money to get by.

He shoves me toward the other teenager who flinches back, like I might be coming for him. When I stumble forward, I realize the boy is holding a knife in his bloody hands, clutching it so tightly that his knuckles are white.

“No, please don’t make me do this,” he begs as he looks up with his tearstained face. “Please. I don’t want to kill again. Please don’t make me kill him.” He’s shaking all over, rocking a bit, coming close to hysterics.

Norris strokes my hair back, like he’s giving me an affectionate pet. “Do you want to live?”

I glance over at him. “Of course I do.”

“Then you’re going to help me make a fun little film. Here’s the catch, though. I want to see a little blood, you know? Just... a little bit. That’s not too hard to do, now is it?”

I see him take his gun out and am immediately drawn to it. It’s an absolutely gorgeous weapon. Lucas did say he was a gunsmith... but... I guess I didn’t realize what that meant. And suddenly, all I can think about is adding that gun to the small collection I’ve hidden from Lucas. They make me happy, and I know that this gun will make me even happier to add.

“And if you don’t, do you know what happens?” he asks.

“You shoot me with that gun,” I whisper.

“I sure do.”

“Is this the gun you use to shoot all of the people you film?” I ask.

“Oh? I guess you’re not as naïve as you look,” he says as he presses the gun against my head. I’m not afraid, though, because he’s not going to waste a perfectly good body before he has the camera rolling. No, he’s going to wait until I’m on camera. And even then, he wants to build up to it. He wants to slowly get to the point where the film is at its climax before he kills one of us.

Lucas made me watch a few of Norris’s “films.” The ones where he kills his victims on camera before posting them on the internet for sick fucks like him to enjoy. But I’ve never seen one with two people in it. And the way the other boy is acting, it makes me feel like he’s done this more than once. Like Norris has made them dice each other up a bit and draw some blood before he took his gun and shot them.

Shot the innocent person who was doing what they could to survive.

“Go on, now. I’ll warn you, if you don’t perform, I’ll shoot you in the head,” he says, voice still smooth and sweet.

“Well, that won’t be good,” I mutter as he gives me a shove toward the other boy. My life won’t really be threatened until that camera starts rolling, so as long as Norris is dead around that time, everything will be fine. “Can I have a knife?”

“You already have one. Go take it,” he says as he waves at the teenager who looks absolutely devastated to be involved. When he hears about the possibility of me taking his knife, he draws back, clutching it even harder.

Norris looks excited as he hurries over to the camera; the grin on his face tells me it’s rolling.

His guards keep me back with their hands on their weapons. My guess is they either scare us or hurt us until we take it out on the other. He wants to push us to the extreme. Push us until we fear death and attack the other out of a selfish desire to live.

I walk toward the kid, needing the second knife, but he's scared of me. He's scared I'm going to take his knife... take the only thing keeping him alive... and then kill him.

"I won't hurt you. Please, let me have the knife," I say as I hold my hand out. He swipes the knife through the air as he cries out, the blade catching my sleeve because I can tell he really doesn't want to hurt me, but I persist. With a sob, he brings the knife down, so I grab his wrist and yank it from his hand.

"No, no, please," he sobs, and I know that's what Norris wants. He wants them to cry and beg. What he doesn't want is someone like me.

Someone who now has two knives... and two guards to deal with.

Now that the teenager is defenseless, he seems unsure of what to do, but I turn to face Norris.

"I don't like this game very much," I tell Norris. "But you know what would make it more fun?"

With a flick of my wrists, I fling both of the knives at the same time, letting them imbed in the heads of the two guards.

"More bodies," I say. One of the guards drops immediately but the second screams as he falls. I bet he doesn't mind watching Norris's "stars" scream and beg and cry.

Norris jerks back, surprise on his face as the door flings open and a guard rushes in. He shoves Norris back through the doorway, out of harm's way as I dash forward and grab the gun Norris had set out for the final shot. I lift it up and shoot the man in the chest before hurrying toward the door that Norris had gone through.

"Please!" the teenager cries as he reaches for me. "Please don't leave me."

I watch him for a moment before grabbing him and shoving him against the wall as I press the gun against his head. His eyes go wide, and I can feel his body shaking beneath my grip.

No witnesses.

Lucas told me I can't have any witnesses.

The devastation on his face and the tears rolling down his cheeks make my senses come back, and I lower the gun. "Don't slow me down," I say as I turn to the door and find that he follows closely after me.

"I didn't mean to kill him. I didn't mean to kill him," he sobs.

I grab him, hauling him toward me. "You need to be silent, do you hear me? I don't want to see you or hear you or you'll get us both killed. Got it?"

"Sorry," he whispers, and as we continue up the stairs, he thankfully turns completely silent. At the door, I lean against it and listen. This seems to be the only way out, and by now, I'm sure Norris has informed the others of what happened. I'm sure they're waiting right outside that doorway.

I could wait for them to open the door and shoot them the moment they do, but by waiting, I could be giving them time to gather.

"I need you to open the door on the count of three and then get back," I order.

He hesitates before nodding, hand on the doorknob.

"One, two, three," I say, and he twists and pulls. Just as I assumed, someone's already waiting and gets a shot off. I'd ducked down, but the bullet still nicks my arm. I fire twice, hitting him in the chest and the stomach before drawing back. I have to assume the gun is empty at six shots, but I still check it to make sure it doesn't hold more than I was assuming.

I'm out, telling me he hadn't come in fully loaded, but at least this fancy gun uses standard ammunition.

Quickly, I move forward and grab the gun the man had been holding. There's some commotion toward the front door, making me fear that Norris is trying to make his escape.

When I move into the foyer of the grand house, I see that it's not Norris but the woman with a guard trying to escort her.

She looks at me in confusion until I lift the gun and shoot the man next to her.

Blood sprays out onto her face as I shift the gun toward her.

“Why didn’t you tell anyone what he was doing?” I ask, wanting to gauge how much she knows.

A whimper escapes her. “I’m sorry! I was scared!”

“You literally looked me in the eyes, talked to me, watched him lead me in here, and you were still fine coming into this house,” I say. “Fine asking me my name and knowing it was the last breath I was going to take.”

“I’m so sorry. Please, I’m sorry,” she cries as she drops down on her knees, begging for mercy. Like if she makes herself look small and defenseless, I’ll pity her. I doubt she’s ever pitied them.

“Or is this a ploy? Were you there to make them feel at ease? To keep them from running when they see an innocent woman involved. Especially once they come into a house packed full of guards.”

“I never hurt any of them!”

I shoot her too. I don’t think she expects it. I think she assumed I would take pity on her.

But fuck her. Fuck all these horrible goddamn people. I’m surrounded by horrible people. Disgusting people. Parasites feeding off others while pretending like they’re better than everyone else. People I want to destroy so that maybe someday, someone else can have a better fucking life than I got.

Unless there are more guards that I didn’t see, there’s only one left besides Norris. Drawing still, I listen carefully. The house has two exits. One through the front door, another through a back door. Of course there are windows, but Norris isn’t going to run. He’s not going to want me to get away. While he knows that the likelihood of someone believing a teenager like me—let alone someone he thought was a sex worker off the street—is slim, he doesn’t want there to be a

chance that I get out and open my mouth. But he doesn't have to worry.

I won't tell anyone.

The floor squeaks above me and I look over at the stairs. He's probably sending his final guard down, so I grab the boy's wrist and hurry over to the wall by the stairs, using it for cover. I crouch down and wait.

It doesn't take long for the guard to quietly make his way down the stairs. The boy is pressed against me, so I can feel his fear. There's a shake to his body and he's trying to calm his breathing, but when he's on the edge of a panic attack, it's making it hard for him to quiet down. When he sees the guard coming, the teenager tenses, grabbing for me.

His hand tightens on me, fear apparent just from that touch.

I used to feel fear like that until Lucas gave me the power to overcome it. The ability to control my fear and push it onto others. To make others regret ever wanting to make me feel little or weak.

The man moves past me, his footsteps quiet as he holds his gun tightly, finger hovering by the trigger. He makes the mistake of looking to the left first, pausing as he listens, but what he doesn't know is that he's now put himself in front of me, and right in the line of my gun. I pull the trigger and the teen jumps before I hear him gasp and then fight to quiet himself down. It doesn't matter, though, because the guard is dead.

I watch him fall forward, not even reaching out in an attempt to catch himself before he hits the ground with an audible thud. He must have acquired my gun at some point because I see it on his belt, so I grab it for safekeeping. I push away from the location I'd been tucked in and hurry up the stairs, the boy staying close behind me.

Walking slowly, I check each room, not wanting to take long enough that Norris can call in more help, but not wanting

to rush and miss anything. In the end it doesn't matter because Norris makes a mistake. One that costs him his life.

His phone rings, and while he'd been smart to put it on vibrate, the house is silent enough that I can hear it buzzing away.

It draws me right to the room Norris is in, so I push the boy back and lean against the wall before grabbing the doorknob. I shove it hard, flinging the door open as he starts shooting, assuming I'll be standing in the doorway. When I'm not, I hear him move.

"Fuck," he hisses, and I duck down before sliding in just enough to shoot him in the foot. It shifts him off balance as he jerks back, giving me time to move in. Sliding my arm up his, I direct the gun away from me and in doing so, it gives me the opportunity to secure his wrist and pull the gun out of his hand, sending it sliding across the floor before regaining my distance from him.

"What's wrong?" I ask as Norris stares at me in what kind of looks like fear.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" he demands, a catch to his voice, like he's literally upset.

"Wrong with me?" I ask. "Of the three of us in this room right now, you think there's something wrong with me? What about the man who gets off on cutting up innocent people? What about the man who records innocent people dying because it makes him feel something? The man who promises people who are just trying to survive more money than they've seen in weeks or months just to make them feel a sliver of happiness before he shoots them in the head? Are you sure we're on the same page here about who is fucking wrong?"

He laughs, but it's clearly a nervous response to what I'm saying. He seems to be in denial that he's done anything wrong. Now that he's in this position, it's hard for him to see himself as the same as those he's killed.

"Why did you do it?" I ask.

Norris clenches his jaw and then shakes his head wildly. "I don't need to answer your questions."

"Then I'll keep shooting until you do. Why did you do it?" I repeat.

"Fuck you," he says, so I shoot him in the other foot.

He drops down to his knees as he screams, and I can't help but think about how he wanted to make those men and women cry on camera.

"No, no, tell me," I encourage. "I want to hear. Or is the issue that the camera's not rolling?"

"You're too naïve to understand the art I make," he says.

Art? I don't see art. I see a sick man hurting others to make himself feel good. "Am I? You'd be surprised how much I know about the way the world works. You could find horrible people and kill them, but that wouldn't be as fun, would it? It's only fun when they're innocents."

"Those whores aren't innocent."

"But you think you are?" I ask. "Funny how that works."

I look over at the boy and realize he's holding a knife. Probably one of the ones I'd killed the men with. I take it from him and toss it over at Norris.

"You're right, though, Norris. I don't quite get it. I guess I'm a bit... naïve, so I want to see if I'll get it better if the roles are switched. Let's say that you're the star tonight, Norris. I want you to cut yourself once for each life you took creating your art," I say. "Every second you don't, I'm going to shoot a line straight up your body until you either bleed out or I shoot you in the head. Ready?"

"Fuck you."

I shoot him again. "That was one."

He realizes that I'm not joking and grabs the knife. He's shaking as he cuts himself, begging as he does so. It's weird how different it is when the roles are reversed. Around ten cuts, he tries to tell me he's done. I know he's not, but I also

know that I've spent more time at this than I should have, and I lift his precious gun.

"You used this gun to kill all of them. This same gun you've taken to shows and paraded around. Does it make you feel good that you know its history as people crowd around it? Well... it makes me happy to know it's the gun I'm going to kill you with," I say before pulling the trigger.

Before Norris even hits the ground, my phone rings, telling me that Lucas was watching and knew the minute I was finished. Of course he never tells me what jobs he watches, and as I've gotten older he hasn't kept such a tight leash on me, so I assumed with this one he wasn't present.

I take a deep breath and answer the phone.

"Good job. I like the added touch at the end. Very good," Lucas says, and I realize that when he praises me, it makes me feel weird. Like now that he's said it, it makes me feel like maybe what I did was morally wrong. I guess it wasn't exactly right either way... but it wasn't like the man didn't deserve it. "And Leland? Don't forget the one behind you."

My blood runs cold. "He's fine," I insist.

"That's not how that works, and you know it," he says.

"He's fine." I know repeating it won't get me anywhere, but I do it anyway.

"Since you did a good job, I'll kill him for you. Bring him out here."

For me? As if it's something I want. As if it's a reward for me. "No, I'd rather do it."

"Then get it done."

"Okay."

I hang up the phone and slide it into my pocket before tucking Norris's gun away and pulling mine out. Then I turn to the young man who was dragged down into hell and saved only to be dragged down again.

He's giving me an anxious look, likely because I'm staring at him now. "Please?" he whispers.

I turn around and start toward the door. When he rushes for the window, I glance back at him. "I wouldn't do that. My handler is watching the house and is prepared to kill you."

"I don't want to die. Please? I don't know who you are. I'll never tell anyone what you look like or what happened here. Please? Please let me go."

I head down the stairs and he hesitates before following me, apparently believing that even if I'm the one still holding the gun, I'm safer than whatever he'd face here.

"Please just let me go," he says, tears spilling from his eyes. "Please?"

"Sorry," I say as I lift my gun.

He runs for the door and gets through it as I walk after him. When he reaches the yard, I stand still on the porch and watch him flee before I pull the trigger.

He falls forward, hitting the ground right at the edge of the tree line.

Fucking Lucas...

TWELVE



“So you think you deserve this gun?” I ask Vance. “You think that after all the fucking shit I went through to get this gun that you deserve to take it? Do you know how many innocent lives this gun has taken?”

I didn't tell Vance the story about Norris because I wanted to brag about what I'd done or because I felt like he should know the history of the gun. I did it because what Lucas said is stuck in my mind, and I need to know if Vance really does know I'm the Sandman.

The look on his face tells me that he doesn't know, but he could be a good liar. He seemed rather appalled by what Norris was condemned for, but he could be doing everything he can to save his own ass.

“I-I didn't know,” he says, voice shaky. Maybe now that he knows how ruthless I am, he's rather afraid of what I'll do to him.

“But you did know that you'd kill me to get it,” I remind him. “You didn't have any issues with that, did you?”

“I was letting greed rule my actions. Do you know how much that gun's worth?”

“Of course I do. I was the very reason why it became such a collector's item. But what do you need the money for?” I ask as I look around his fancy home. “It sure seems like you have plenty of money.”

He hesitates, but his wife seems horrified after hearing how many of Norris's guards I'd killed to get where I was. She

probably didn't know her husband was resorting to killing people to get money—or maybe she does and only cares now that her life is on the line. “We're headed toward bankruptcy. We need the money. But I didn't know he was going to try to kill you over it,” she says. “Please, you have to believe me. I don't know anything about this.”

“Why do you need the money?” I ask.

“I got fucking screwed by that Bennett kid,” Vance says.

“Explain.”

“We had a large shipment set to go out and he burned it all to the ground. Of course, I didn't know this at the time, and he thought he'd be sly by continuing to work for us. Issue is that I was paid quite well by the man whose product was destroyed... if I don't have the product, I have to give him his money back, but the money's gone. It went into buying the product.”

“And you think this gun will fix it all?” I ask. “I mean, the gun's worth some good money, but it's not worth this much.”

“Fix it? No... hold us over for a bit until we find more product? Possibly.”

“So Bennett blew up your shit and you got him convicted of murder?” I ask.

“I didn't get him convicted of shit,” he says.

“Then how about you figure that out for us? And if you return with a good answer, I won't kill you. But if you don't, I will kill the people around you until I feel satisfied, got it? And *then* I'll kill you. If you even *consider* sending someone after me, I will kill your wife and your daughter. I have an entire network of people, so even if you *somehow* managed to find someone who could kill me, they would hunt each and every one of you down. So get me what I need and we'll go from there, alright?”

“Y-Yes,” Vance says. “Fuck.”

“Fuck is right. You, sir, made a stupid fucking mistake,” I assure him.

I guide Jackson out the door before shutting it and leaving the house. I'm careful, since I'm sure the desire to call for some bodyguard to take care of us on the way out is strong, but if he cares about his life or the lives of his family, he'll do as I ask, and when I visit him again, he'll have some answers for me.

Hell, maybe Vance will figure everything out for us if I put enough pressure on him.

When we reach the car, I get into the driver's seat and Jackson gets into the passenger seat of his car.

"Are you okay?" he asks, giving me a look filled with concern.

"Fine."

Jackson hesitates before setting a hand on my thigh. "Are you sure you're 'fine'? I know you don't love talking about that kind of stuff, especially with people like that."

No, I don't. I don't like sharing any of my past with anyone besides Jackson and maybe Cassel since he understands me. But I wanted to get a straight answer from Vance. "Yeah. I just wanted to see if Lucas was telling the truth when he said that family hired me to deal with Norris. Him implying that Vance knew I was the Sandman was getting in my head a bit, so I wanted to see what he had to say," I explain. "He didn't give away anything that tells me he knew... but who really knows."

"Right... it's hard to read people you don't truly know, but Vance did act rather greedy. Anyone who thinks that they should kill a person for a weapon instead of stealing it and pawning it is already quite questionable," Jackson says.

"Did it bother you that I killed them all?" I ask as I drive a roundabout way toward home in case we're being followed.

"No. I mean... can someone feel sympathy for such horrible people dying? They enjoyed the idea of death... it's not your fault their ideas didn't stretch to include themselves in their sick fantasies."

I see an opening in a wooded area that I pull into. It's likely for hikers or hunters, but at this time of night, there's no one around. Once parked, I turn to face Jackson who is giving me a curious look. "Why are you so kind?"

He raises an eyebrow. "Am I?"

"Why is it that I can be an absolutely horrible person, I can kill and torture and harass, and you're fine with it? You don't judge me over it?"

Jackson leans into me, his eyes fixed on mine. "Did he deserve it?"

With my lips close to his ear, I whisper, "He deserved much worse."

Then I pull back, throwing open the car door so I can get out. Jackson hurries after me, catching my arm before I can go far and drawing me in. He seems unsure of what to do until I shove him against the car, my lips finding his in a hurried kiss. There's no hesitation in his response, mouth parting, tongue tangling with mine as he makes pleasure spike inside of me. I love it when he makes me feel this way... when he pushes those negative thoughts of mine back and tells me that what I did is okay. That I'm not a terrible person. That these horrible people who get off on hurting and killing others deserve what I gave them.

Jackson breaks from the kiss, cupping my face. "You know what I *truly* think?"

"Hmm?" I ask as I reach around and grab his ass, pulling him close so our cocks are pressed together.

"I think..."—he kisses my throat— "watching you..."—his lips travel down as his hands travel up—"threaten Vance was the sexiest fucking thing."

I moan as he finds my lips again before parting them so his tongue can wrap around mine. His hips rock forward, his cock rubbing against mine. Gently, his hand slides over my chest and then down to my clothed ass, but this isn't what I want... no... I want so much more. "Fucking hell," I say as I hurriedly push him off me. Swiftly, I turn around and shove my pants

and underwear down so my bare ass is on display just for him before removing them and tossing them onto the roof of his car. “I want you to fuck me. Make me come.”

He slides up behind me as I hear him rip open the packet of lube he has for random moments like this. He nips my neck before sucking on it as his wet finger rubs against my hole. “Watching you put that asshole in his place made me want to fuck you so hard,” he whispers in my ear as he strokes his hard cock between my thighs.

I shiver at his words as adrenaline races through me.

Jackson’s finger presses inside me, hitting just the right spot, but I want him to get to the fucking part. I want him to fuck me against his car until I can’t even stand up. I want him to bend me over and drive himself inside me until I can’t take any more.

His lips brush my ear, making me shiver as he says, “What a joke that he thought he could even lay a finger on you. I’d never let him touch you.”

“Yeah? What would you do?” I ask as he adds another finger.

“I don’t know but I’m sure I’d have my shirt off doing it.”

I grin at that imagery. “You sure would,” I say as he draws his fingers out of me and knocks his foot against mine, making me spread my legs farther as he pushes my chest down so it’s lying against the trunk of his car as his cock rubs against me. He presses the head of his cock to my entrance, thrusting inside of me. He clearly got the memo that I don’t want him to make love to me, I want him to fuck me into the back of his car in the middle of nowhere as the high from harassing Vance rushes through me.

I stroke my hard cock as he moves into me, making pleasure ignite throughout me.

“As you destroy any hope of them gaining control over you, I love knowing that you’re mine and mine alone...” he says, voice husky.

“Oh fuck,” I whisper as he hits that sweet spot inside me. “Hmm... I’m only yours.”

Ecstasy ripples through me as I quicken the pace on my cock. It doesn’t matter how many times we have sex, this man knows exactly how to make it amazing every time. My body could never get tired of his touch, his kisses, his words...

It’s like I’m addicted to it, and as he makes me moan and my legs feel weak, all I can do is press against him as he holds me close.

Unable to take much more, I come as his cock rocks inside me. With a moan, he drives into me, his thick cock drawing the pleasure out of me as he buries himself deep inside me, moving until he comes. For a long moment, he holds me against him, cock buried inside me as he showers gentle kisses across my neck before pulling out of me.

“Oh no...” I say as I turn around to face him.

“What?”

“I came on your mistress’s trunk... are you jealous?” I give him a teasing grin and love the look on his face, as though he could possibly find me ridiculous.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” Jackson says with a grin.

“You’re jealous you didn’t get to come on your mistress first, aren’t you?” I gasp. “Unless you already did?”

“I’m leaving your ass out here. You and your bare ass.”

I reach into the car and grab a napkin. “It’s rude not to clean your mistress up when you’re done.”

“For fuck’s sake. I’m leaving you for real,” he decides.

I laugh as I grab my pants that are draped over the roof of the car. “No! Don’t leave me! Or are you planning on leaving me for the mistress?”

“You do know if I ever had to pick between you or the car, I’d pick you, right? Like there’s no hesitation there. But if *you* had to pick between me and The Fence?” Jackson asks.

I gasp as I pull my pants on. “Jackson, don’t do this to me!”

“See! Maybe I need to be worried about *that* affair,” he says as he grabs me and pulls me in while giving me a challenging look. “Eh?”

“NO! The last naked body part that beautiful fence has seen placed upon it is your—Jackson, why did you just lock the car door? Jackson, I’m outside the car. It’s funny that you think I’m inside it because I’m actually outside it, and... you’re backing away. Jackson, don’t do this to me! Don’t! You know I love you!”

When the car finally stops and he unlocks the door, I hurry to get in and look over at him. “It’s shocking how quickly you can go from ‘I’ll do anything for you, you are the sexiest badass motherfucker around’ to just leaving my ass!”

Jackson doesn’t appear to have *any* issues with this. “Is it? Is it shocking that I run every time you bring up this fence?”

“Crazy shocking! Like every time it happens, I never expect it,” I say with a grin as I buckle my seat belt.

“I hear ya,” he says as he drives toward home.

When we reach home, I see his eyes flickering over to The Fence. He flips The Fence off as he rolls the car into the garage.

That makes me grin, overly pleased with myself. Together, we head into the house where the dogs are eager to greet us, positive we’d been gone at least twenty-four hours instead of just a couple.

I take them out back to put them into the fenced-in area, but as they trot off, I notice Sarge goes right to sniffing. He sniffs all around the back porch area, making me step outside to see what he’s looking for. Cayenne, oblivious as usual, wanders off to do her business as Sarge fixates on an area toward the fence line that divides our property from the neighbor’s property. I don’t see anything off, so I head inside to check the cameras.

“What’s wrong?” Jackson asks as he sees me getting the laptop out.

“Sarge is just interested in something outside.”

“A squirrel? He literally planned squirrel assassination the other day while the squirrel chattered just out of reach. It taunted him all day as he stared at it with hatred in his eyes.”

“Oh, probably,” I say. “I want to check just in case.”

Thankfully, I only have two hours to go through, but in those two hours, nothing really happened in the exterior cameras. The neighbor came home looking a bit drunk, but I can’t fathom Sarge gives much of a shit about that unless they decided to come bounding over our fence.

“I told you. The evil squirrel was back,” Jackson says.

“Okay,” I agree as I hear Cayenne scratch at the door to be let back in. They both come in, so I lock the door and turn the security system on before heading back for bed with an odd feeling creeping through my mind.

“Leland, you know that every time you deal with Lucas, it makes you feel off for a bit.”

“True... that’s why we should just murder him.”

Jackson evilly shakes his head. “No. I’m not visiting my husband in prison.”

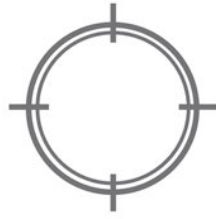
“Would you just sit here and cry every day missing me?” I ask. “Hold Blow-Up Randy while sitting in your Sasquatch gear?”

“First thing I’d do is burn that fence down. Then I’d cry. Maybe I’d even cry while burning it down... nah, the happy high would dry up the tears during that bit.”

“You’re so ridiculous and I love it.”

He grins at me as he pulls me off toward the bedroom.

THIRTEEN



JACKSON

“Ohhhhhhh?”

“What now?” I ask as I park outside our office. I know the moment Leland makes some strange noise, something sketchy is going to be in store for us. It’s been a few days since we visited Vance, and so far, we haven’t heard anything from him.

“Ohhhhhhhhhhh.”

And so it continues. “What could *possibly* be happening now?”

“Oh ho ho ho.”

I turn off the car and look over at him, not like that manic expression will quell my fears. “Can I just claim that I’m terrified?” The issue is that I shouldn’t have said this because Leland *loves* it when I’m afraid. He feasts off my fear, which just pushes him right into the idea that he should do strange things more often.

“Oh honey. Oh bunny. Oh sugar splash dash, never be terrified,” Leland assures me.

I slowly look around while wondering if there was something that he saw that set this off. There *is* a large van outside the office, but it’s the weekend and we’re not working, so it’s likely someone doing something that’s *not* sketchy who was in the need of a large kidnapper van. Hey, maybe they’re moving and needed someplace to park it. That’s allllll that is. It has absolutely *nothing* to do with us.

Maybe that's what's got him going? Maybe he wants to kidnap someone, and seeing the van is bringing out his inner desires?

He springs out of the car, and instead of going into the office to "grab some stuff he'd forgotten" like he'd told me, he nearly skips to the kidnapper van and climbs right inside.

"Oh no..." Who the hell are we kidnapping *and why*?

If I just stay in the car, it's not like he can force me out, right? Not like he can actually make me leave, right?

My phone beeps and I grudgingly look down at it.

Leland: Come into my van. You know you want to.

Me: Who are we kidnapping?

Leland: The only thing I've ever kidnapped is your heart.

Me: I can't get in until you tell me what's going on.

Leland: I'm naked.

Me: Why does that just concern me even more?

Leland: I don't know how you could ever get concerned by anything that involves me.

Me: I'm concerned by everything that involves you.

Henry: Why the fuck am I A PART OF THIS?

Yet there I am getting out of the car and telling myself that there's a very sane explanation on why he's rented—god, I hope he didn't buy it—such a weird vehicle. And for what? Now that's the real question.

I walk up to the passenger door and pull it open, having somehow convinced myself that when I open the door, there will be an extremely normal reason for it. But what I'm

greeted with when the door swings open is Leland wearing a ski mask while holding a roll of duct tape and multiple bags.

“Sorry, wrong vehicle,” I say as I try to back out.

“No! Jackson, get in! We’re going to be late if you keep dallying. Your ski mask and roll of tape are waiting on your seat.”

I glance down at the seat in apprehension. “So they are.”

“So. They. Are.” He cackles as I get into the vehicle, and when I refuse to put the mask on, he takes it from me and forces it over my head. Before I can just leap out of the moving vehicle and call it a day, he floors it down the road.

“You know what would be hilarious?” I ask.

“If I’d put my mustache on over the mask?” Leland responds.

“No, if you told me what was going on.”

He cackles, and when I try to look into the back of the van to see if there are any hints back there, he directs my head forward.

“Leland... I feel like I’d be better prepared if I was aware of the situation.”

“Okay, okay. I get it,” he says as he reaches back and tosses one of the fabric bags into my hands. “This will go over the vic... the person’s head.”

“You were about to say victim.”

He adamantly shakes his head while giving me a look coated in innocence. “I don’t think I was.”

“You *quite* clearly were saying victim.”

“Nah,” he says as he pulls into Cassel’s driveway. “Now, I want you to look at me. They might struggle but if they do, simply tape their arms and legs together.”

“Don’t tell me we’re abducting Jeremy and Cassel.”

“Okay!”

“Okay, we’re not?” I ask. “Or okay, you’re not going to tell me?”

“Okay!”

And out he hops.

When I don’t get out of the vehicle, he hurries around to my side. He opens the passenger door and takes my ski-masked face in his hands. It’s a little hard to see because when he did so, he accidentally moved the mask. “Husband?”

“Yes, husband?”

“When we took our vows, you took an oath to stand by me... even when things seemed... odd or strange.”

“I did...”

“And today, I need your help kidnapping our friends.”

“It just... it sounds a bit much, you know?”

“It’s never too much. They’re going to *love* it. I promise.”

And then he reaches into the back and grabs Blow-Up Rhonda. “Let’s fuck shit *up!*” he calls as he charges for the door, and because I love that man so much that I’ve lost all sense of reason, there I am right behind him with the bag and duct tape.

He tries the door, and when he sees it’s locked, he knocks on it. *WHY* either of them chooses to open the door, I have no idea.

“Hey, Leland,” Cassel says a moment before Leland smacks him with Rhonda. Cassel stumbles back in surprise more than anything as I yank the bag over his head and Leland starts the duct tape.

“Jeremy, I think I’m being abducted, but I’m not sure,” Cassel shouts.

Jeremy glances over at us from where he’s leaning against the counter, not too concerned about what’s happening. He barely even looks up from his phone, foolishly believing that whatever is happening is only going to happen to Cassel.

Nova, their dog, hurries over to greet us, tail wagging the whole way.

“Hey, Nova!” Leland says. “You’re such a cutie pie!”

“Jeremy, what’s happening?” Cassel’s muffled voice asks.

“What’s happening is that you refuse to cut off your dreadfully strange friends. What else is happening is that anytime I try to introduce you to normal people, you tell me how terribly boring they are. Oh no...” Jeremy says, getting a deer in the headlights look when he realizes that Leland is heading for him now that he’s left a restrained Cassel in the foyer.

“Jackson, get that one in the van. I got this one!” Leland announces, and if Leland wants to tackle that man alone, then he can have at it!

“Sure,” I say as I pick Cassel up. “Do you want to be carried like a bride or a sack of potatoes?”

“Potatoes! Definitely potatoes. I’ll save the bridal carry for the night I carry Jeremy into our honeymoon suite,” he decides.

“Oh...” I’m not quite sure how he’ll accomplish that with his rather... small stature, but I did just see him fling a man heavier than Jeremy down a flight of stairs, so I obviously shouldn’t be so damn judgy!

“What is this shit! Fucking hell!” Jeremy yells from where he’s being tortured behind me. I’m almost sad that I can’t see them from here and debate leaving Cassel to watch the debacle. “Nova, bite him! Nova, attack!” Nova seems to think it’s all a fun game as her butt wiggles while she prances after the screams.

Cassel is clearly as concerned as Nova is. “They’re having so much fun. I’m so glad Jeremy’s finally making friends and fitting in!” he says, while I question if those noises could actually be considered Jeremy “having fun,” but Leland’s happy, and to me, that’s all that matters. “Do you know what’s going on?”

Cassel's hilarious if he thinks Leland explained a single sliver of this plan to me. "Absolutely no idea," I admit as I carry him out. "I mean... since Leland said he's got Jeremy, I probably don't even need to help, right?"

"Right!" Cassel says as I help him into the back of the van.

And sure enough, within a few minutes, here comes Leland dragging a squirming and displeased Jeremy out to the van.

"Let me go, dammit!" Jeremy yells.

"I feel like I should have taped his mouth," Leland says as I come over to help grab Jeremy's legs and put him in the van next to Cassel. Leland beams down at his prizes as he shuts them inside and hurries to the front of the van.

"I hope someone calls the police on you," Jeremy grumbles as Leland gets into the driver's seat and I get into the passenger seat.

"Oh, Jerebear, my buddy, my pal, my forced friend. You act like your neighbors like you enough to call!" Then Leland cackles as the van takes off.

I'm *well* aware that Henry should run. I know that we're headed to his house next if past events are anything to go by, and if I was a good person with a pure soul and gentle heart, I would text him two simple words: RUN. LELAND. Hell, I might even be able to shorten that to just "Leland." He'd know what it meant, and honestly, nothing would be more effective at getting that man to flee. Yet here we are, pulling into the driveway in our murder van.

"You two sit tight," Leland says to Jeremy and Cassel—like they could actually move or go anywhere—as he hops out with Blow-Up Rhonda.

I pull out my phone.

Me: Henry. Run. Leland's coming.

Henry: Fuck.

Leland stills and I get worried he was somehow able to sense my text and will blame me for Henry's actions, but instead, he takes off for the back of the house. How the *hell* that man could tell something's off, I'll never know. All I do know is that once Leland gets close, I see Henry darting away from him, but Leland's fast. He slides in front of Henry, grabbing the man in a huge bear hug.

"Jackson, the bag! Disorient him with the bag!"

"Dammit, Leland, what the hell is happening?" Henry barks, like he possibly thinks words will appease Leland.

"Shhh, just submit. You will enjoy it. I know you will."

Henry's trying to break free, but he has to know that Leland is ruthless. "I won't enjoy anything at this rate! I was enjoying my coffee! I was enjoying the peace and quiet," Henry complains, but there I am popping a bag over his head.

"Sorry, Henry. I had no choice," I say, but he manages to look me right in the eyes as the bag goes on and I grimace a little.

"I'm positive you had a choice!" he says, but I don't know what could make him feel that way. There was no opportunity for me to get a choice when Leland played the "husband" card on me! He knows that's my weakness.

"Jackson, you're a better man than this," Henry tries to assure me.

Kind of him to think so. "I'm really not."

"You can say no."

"Not when he calls me 'husband,'" I inform him.

"That's right, husband." Leland leans forward so his mouth is close to Henry's ear. "My delectable husband will never cave to you. Don't pretend like you're not going to enjoy this. I'm gonna make you love it so hard."

And with that, Leland manages to get Henry's hands taped down and starts dragging him.

“Jackson, while I know you’re absolutely gorgeous even when you’re just standing and staring, I could use your help carrying this rather... unruly gentleman.”

“Gentleman, my ass!” Henry yells. “You think by tacking on halfway decent words to describe someone, you can get away with something like this! Jackson, don’t you dare help him!”

“I have to, Henry. He knows where I sleep at night,” I say as I grab Henry’s legs and help Leland carry him out to the van.

“I’m disowning you, Leland,” Henry determines.

“You’d never. You love me far too much,” Leland claims as we stuff Henry’s squirming body in next to Jeremy. “I made sure to tell your wife that I was stealing you and she told me, and I repeat, ‘Aw, Henry would love that!’ So, Henry, start loving it.”

“No.”

“Hey, Henry!” Cassel says, apparently the only one still enjoying this.

“Hey, Cassel,” Henry responds with a sigh. “You don’t happen to know what’s going on?”

“Not in the slightest but it sounds exciting!”

Henry grunts, not showing the same level of enthusiasm. Jeremy answers him with another grunt, like it’s their own special code for dealing with Leland.

And with them safely in the back of the van, we’re off... likely to our final destination and the very place that will make us all question what’s in store for us.

Leland makes a call and I can’t quite tell who he’s talking to as he says, “The hostages are in transit... I repeat. Hostages are a-comin’ hot and bothered. Over and out.” And then he hangs up. “You know what this calls for?”

“You better be taking us to an all you can eat seafood buffet,” Henry decides.

“Wrong! This calls for a rap. Are you ready?”

“No!” Henry yells while Jeremy lets out a, “Fuck no!”

The whine that escapes Cassel sounds almost pitiful. It sure would be enough to make me stop. “Please, my ears haven’t recovered. Leland, please don’t.”

“But I have a good one. Jackson, drop me a beat,” Leland says as Cassel starts struggling in the back of the murder van. It’s the first time he’s really decided that he wants *out*. It makes a *thump... thump* noise that Leland seems to determine is his new beat since I’m clearly not contributing anything.

“My name is Leland and I’ve got all my friends in tow. They might be squirming and screaming, but I ain’t their foe. I’m about to blow their minds once I remove their binds. They have no idea what I have in store, but the moment they see they’re gonna be... floored. Also, my husband is the best, he’s got such a nice chest. It makes me pity all the fools in the back since they didn’t get to see my man’s splendid crack.” He looks over at me. “You know... the day you were hanging from The Fence.”

“MY EARS,” Cassel cries.

“Do you want to hear another one?” Leland asks, like the anguish could actually be applause.

“NO!” everyone shouts.

“Hon, it won’t be as special if you do it too much,” I assure him.

“Aww, you’re right. Thank you, love,” Leland says, but the grin just visible through the mouth hole of the mask tells me that he’s extremely pleased by the physical pain he’s caused everyone. Leland’s having the time of his life, even if his friends aren’t sure they are.

“Can I at least have a pillow?” Henry asks.

“Jackson, let him use Blow-Up Rhonda’s bosom,” Leland says, so there I am at a stoplight positioning the blow-up doll under Henry’s head. Leland then hands me his phone like he

wants me to take a picture of his “friends” so he can reminisce about this for years to come.

Thankfully—for the poor folks in the back—the drive isn’t overly long. Leland pulls off the road and I soon realize who he’d been on the phone with when I see Mason’s car.

“Why’d Mason get to drive himself?” I ask.

“Because he helped me set it up! I saw him sleeping during work the other day and thought that if he was getting paid, he was going to do something worthwhile!”

“*Is this worthwhile?*” I ask suspiciously as Leland hops out and rushes around to the back to open the door and pull the bags off the men. “Welcome. My name is Special Agent Leland the Supreme and Magnificent Badass Motherfucker. And I’ve scouted out you fine gentlemen on this very day for a special operation. We have a hostage situation,” Leland announces as he pulls out his iPad and shows an image of Blow-Up Randy tied and gagged.

“We need to find and save the hostage. The issue is that one of us is a traitor—”

“It’s obviously Leland,” Jeremy mutters.

“At least two of us need to make it out alive or the traitor wins.”

I realize that Cassel looks absolutely *thrilled*. Henry’s interest is piqued, even though he’s trying to pretend like nothing could bore him more, and Jeremy’s just going along with it because Cassel is happy.

“The traitor is random,” Mason says as he has us each pick an envelope.

“There are bad ‘guys’ in the woods—aka targets. There are thirty of them and you don’t want to miss a single one, so we have to work together, understand?”

“It’s all quite vague,” I comment.

“Do you ever know all of the issues when going into a hostage situation?” Leland asks.

“True.” But the difference is that when Leland plans something, one absolutely has no idea what might happen.

“Now privately, where no one can see, open your envelopes and pick your ATV.”

“Oh?” Jeremy asks, suddenly intrigued.

“Ha ha, as long as you ride it better than that last one we rode,” Cassel says.

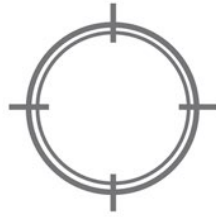
Jeremy shakes his head. “I was afraid of knocking you and Nova off! *Obviously.*”

“Uh-huh.” Cassel grins as he scurries off and tears open his envelope. I back away from the van and open mine to see what my fate will be. I pull the paper out and look at the very distinct:

Traitor.

Well, this is going to be interesting.

FOURTEEN



JACKSON

There's enough gear and ATVs set up for all six of us. So once we each get outfitted in paintball protection and glasses, we head over to the ATVs.

"What if we just assume Leland's the villain and shoot him?" Cassel asks as he straddles his ATV with a paintball gun in his hand, *slightly* aimed at Leland.

"I'm with that one," Henry says as they both aim their paintball guns at Leland who is giving them the most innocent of expressions.

"B-But I put together this fun adventure because I know you guys love thrills and stuff... I saw how stressed you all have been and wanted to give you a fun and relaxing way to let off some of that tension. And yet you'd still shoot me and deprive me of the fun?"

"You may live for now," Cassel grudgingly decides. "But I will figure out the villain. And I hope it's Leland."

"Okay, we have ten minutes to find the victim," Leland informs us as he faces the wooded area. There appear to be trails running through it made for the ATVs.

"Well, one of you have to know where it's at," Cassel says.

"Nope. We had someone else place it," Mason says. "Should we spread out?"

"If we spread out, we give the bad guy ample space to pick us off one by one." Cassel scrutinizes each of us, as if the

menacing glower on his cute face could get us to admit to being the one.

“Oh, I forgot to mention that the villain’s goal is to kidnap the hostage and bring them back to the kidnapper van,” Leland says.

“How about we stick together until we come to a path that splits, then maybe in groups of threes or twos?” I suggest. Teams might work best for me if I can pick my partner off and then cry wolf... but if none of the other teams split up, they’d know I was lying. Hmm...

“Let’s go,” Henry says, and off he goes, flying into the woods on his ATV instead of calling a taxi to take him home. He’s forgotten that he wanted no part of this as his ATV hits a bump and I see a grin on his face as he lands. Jeremy wastes no time flying after him, and I pull in behind Cassel.

“Why didn’t you tell me about this ridiculousness?” I ask Leland.

“Because I like it when my victims are confused,” Leland says with a grin as he follows after me. The trail immediately drops straight down. Henry’s flooring it, clearly pleased as the wind whips through his tight dark curls.

I slow down, not well-versed enough with an ATV to know that I’m not going to flip the thing, but once I start to get the hang of weaving between the trees and flying up and down the hills, I realize how fun it is. Every time Leland absolutely terrifies us with a group activity, he ends up whipping out something that none of us can resist.

Henry slows as he turns around a bend and stops before a split in the trail.

“Three and three?” Cassel says.

“There’s a third path a few feet down this one,” Jeremy notes.

“So two and two. I guess that’d be best anyway. The traitor wouldn’t be able to kill his partner off without it being pretty suspicious,” Cassel says. “I want to go with Mason. He seems safe.”

“You’re saying I’m not?” Jeremy asks.

“I think you should go with Leland,” Cassel suggests with a grin.

“I’ll go with Henry, then,” I say, hating my pick. I feel like shooting Henry in the back is nowhere near as fun as shooting Leland or Cassel. It might be too early to make my move anyway. Even so, when Henry picks a path, I fall in line behind him.

“Where does Leland come up with these situations?” Henry asks.

“I... honestly think that because he’s unable to go on as many dangerous cases, he needs something else to do,” I respond. “If I let him, I’m positive he’d be excited to do something like this with real bad guys. Round them all up and set them loose before telling them they have five minutes to escape. I can just see him cackling as he chases after them.”

“I’ve felt that way about a few people who got away as well,” Henry says, voice quiet over the sound of the ATV.

I can only imagine how frustrating that might be to not have enough proof or to get a case dismissed in court when you know deep down that the person is guilty.

That’s when I notice one of the targets, a round one that’s tucked in the trees. As the traitor... am I supposed to pay attention to them? Or maybe that’ll make me less suspicious if I do take at least one down.

“Target at two o’clock,” I call.

“Oh, good catch,” Henry says as I lift my paintball gun and hit the target that was tucked up between two branches. Without the leaves, it’s a little easier to see, but whoever placed it did a good job making it hard to find. It makes me wonder how many other ones we’ve already missed.

“Here’s another split,” Henry says. “Want to stick together or split off?”

“I... don’t know,” I admit.

“Fuck it. Let’s split up. Hopefully you’re still alive next time I see you.”

I grin. “Same here,” I say as I take the left path.

No longer having to pretend like I’m looking for targets, I get to take off, flying through the trees that will hopefully lead me to Blow-Up Randy. Then I can snatch him up and hurry back to the van with no one the wiser. Is there any place to hide him so if someone comes across me, they don’t immediately see me escorting the “victim” off to the kidnapper van? Not really unless I deflated him... which I don’t think is something I’m supposed to do. I guess I’ll just have to take out whoever I come across on the way.

The noise of another ATV hits me a moment before Jeremy comes onto the scene.

“Oh hey,” I say.

“Leland’s one hundred percent the traitor. He tried sending me down a fucking ravine. He was trying to off me in real life!” Jeremy decides.

I grin at that. “He likes you.”

“Ha. That’s a good joke, Jackson.”

“Thanks,” I say as I reach down to where I’d set my gun on my lap. Jeremy immediately takes the lead, giving me a good opening to his back. His ATV will block me from getting past, but will anyone notice if I drag his body off into the brush and take his ATV?

“You’re not going to shoot me in the back, now are you, Jackson?” Jeremy asks as he glances back at me.

“What would make you think that?”

“How quiet you got.”

“When Leland’s not around I sometimes forget to talk,” I say. “Oh, target.” I lift my gun and shoot another one to prove I’m one of the good guys. Why’s it feel like I’m definitely doing more to help them than help myself?

“What’s that?” Jeremy asks as he points to something in the distance.

“Might be Randy,” I say, knowing more than ever that I need to off Jeremy while I have the chance. That way I’ll be free to reach Randy alone. Lifting my paintball gun, I aim it at his back when I hear Cassel yell, “Found the hostage!”

Quickly, I lower my gun, trying to be nonchalant as I see Cassel waving to us, and I mentally tsk at having lost my opportunity. Will I now have to slaughter wildly to get my chance? Just machine gun style take them out? Issue is that Leland and Cassel are both much quicker than I am, so pulling that off might not go as planned.

I rush forward to at least see what’s going on. Cassel is busy staring at what looks like Cayenne’s old dog crate, completely padlocked down with Blow-Up Randy stuffed inside. He’s looking as ridiculous as usual but with a gag on.

While we’re busy staring at the crate that needs a key, the others catch up with us, making my job harder.

“Randy! We’re coming, buddy!” Leland cries.

“We need an explosive to get this open,” Cassel says as he jingles the lock.

“You’d pop the hostage,” Jeremy points out.

“Oh... booo...” Cassel seems rather disappointed at the lack of allowed violence.

“Well... there must be a key somewhere, right?” Henry asks.

“I could pop him and pull his flaccid body between the wires,” Cassel suggests.

“Cassel is obviously the villain. We must put him down,” Leland says as he aims his gun at Cassel.

“Fine, fine. There must be a key somewhere,” Cassel says dryly.

“Must be.” Leland examines the lock for a moment while we all stare at him, waiting for our hint. “How many of the

guards did you guys shoot down?”

“Two for me,” I answer. Henry, Jeremy, and Mason all had about the same while Cassel had nine and Leland had twelve.

“I wonder if it was on one of their ‘bodies,’” Leland says a moment before I hear a *ping* of paint hitting the tree right next to me.

“What the hell?” I mutter as I jerk back, narrowly avoiding another hit as I take cover behind my ATV.

“I bet *he* has the key,” Mason shouts.

“Who the hell is *he*?” Leland asks.

“Well, I thought it would be a bit boring with just one traitor, so I tossed in another,” Mason says, clearly proud of himself. “I got him one of those really cool paintball guns that shoot over a long distance... he seems quite good at it!”

“Who the fuck is it?” Leland asks.

“Your buddy!”

“My...” A growl escapes Leland. “Don’t tell me it’s Tavish.”

“I thought you two were bros?” Mason asks, like he’s unsure of the issue here.

“Ooh,” Cassel says. “Jeremy, I bet he’ll let me flip him to the ground again. This time you can watch!”

“It’s weird how all of you have now one hundred percent forgotten about the victim... and they’re gone,” Henry says as Cassel and Leland rush off after the man sniping at them. Henry looks back at Blow-Up Randy before shrugging. “If this were a real operation, I feel like someone would at least consider hanging behind to protect the victim... but do any of us *really* care if that blow-up doll gets shot?”

Leland would be devastated if Blow-Up Randy met his demise, but I’m also pretty sure that he’s fine stuffed in his crate where no one is *actually* trying to kill him.

Since no one else seems to care about the doll, I decide to hang around to be the last person and pick off whoever I can

get to while their attention is fixated on Tavish. Henry takes off after them, leaving behind Jeremy who seems to have gotten his ATV's tire wedged between two tree roots.

"Let me help," I offer.

"Thanks," he says as I help him push it away from the root before I shoot him right in the side. He looks over at me in surprise. "Of course it's you..."

It's a weirdly satisfying feeling taking down the first of the "good guys."

Then since he's now "dead" he sits down right there, but I can't have a body in the way—they'll see him the moment they return for Randy—so I grab him and start dragging him off into the bushes. Jeremy looks up at me as I realize that he really could just walk so I don't have to drag him.

"Cassel will avenge me," he warns me.

"Not if I get to him first," I assure him as I hurry to move Jeremy's ATV as well. I don't have to take it too far since the brush in this area is thick enough it hides it with ease. Once satisfied, I rush back, but when I return, I see that Leland's snooping around my ATV. He hasn't noticed me yet, so I stop walking and assess the situation. Did anyone come back with him? Can I pick him off before he notices? But he's so damn sneaky... I feel like I'd fuck up before I even got my gun out.

"Jackson?" he asks as he looks around, holding his gun steady. "Jackson? If someone got my Jackson, I'm going to make *them* the hostage. I'm gonna fold you up and cram you into that cage and leave you there all night."

Oh, my sweet Leland came back for me... and instead of thinking I was off hiding a body, he thinks I've been taken out.

A branch cracks under my foot, and before I can lift the gun to shoot him, he whirls on me, gun at the ready. "Jackson!"

"Hey, I was just taking a piss," I say as I start toward him. Seeing that it's me, he relaxes and lowers his gun.

“Oh thank god! I thought someone took my baby from me and I was going to have to go on the vendetta of a lifetime! No one was going to be safe!” Leland calls as he throws his arms wide and comes running toward me right as I hear a weak “H—el—p” coming from where I’d stashed my victim. I guess I did just shoot him in the side and didn’t really get a death kill in... but I assumed he was dead! I didn’t know the tricky fucker would come back to life!

Leland gasps and looks at me. “NO!”

“I’m sorry!” I say as I shoot him in the chest.

He gasps again as he dramatically stumbles back, wide eyes fixated on me as his hand touches the paint on his chest. “OH MY GOD. NO!” he whispers as he grabs his chest and staggers back. “But... our love? Did... did our love mean nothing to you? What about the way I caressed your head last night? The way I told you that you were a gift to all mankind? What about when I said that your tum-tum was so fine the gods would be blessed to suckle milk from your belly button?”

“I’m sorry,” I repeat as I ease his weakening body onto the ground where I shoot him again to make sure he’s truly dead and won’t come back to life like Jeremy did.

Clearly, it wasn’t enough because his eyes seek out mine. “J-Jackson... I will... always... love you...”

“Aww, that’s sweet. But I’m going to win this game,” I say as I start dragging him off to add to my pile.

He gasps, life surging back into him. “When... ever you... miss me... go into the gun shrine and give them a stroke... stroke them like you stroke me,” he begs.

“Honey, no... I have my car. I won’t need your guns.”

Leland’s eyes narrow. “That right there is nearly enough to revive this ass.”

I try to cover his mouth, but it makes it hard to drag him off. “No, no, shhhh. We want you to die peacefully,” I say as I drag him over to where I’d stashed Jeremy. Since laying him next to Jeremy seems rather... disrespectful, I decide to stack them by dragging Leland’s body *on top* of Jeremy.

And while I know Leland will prefer this position, it'll make Jeremy regret calling out for help. Which is exactly my plan.

"Get him off me," Jeremy growls.

"The dead don't talk. And don't forget... I had to shoot him because of you," I hiss. "J-J-J-Jack... son... don't forget me, the love of your life. The pineapple of your eye! Even if you remarry and love again, make sure they're well aware that you will never love them... as much as I love The Fence. You might as well make The Fence your new wife."

"I'll be sure to let them know that you were the best. Now just... go to sleep so I don't have to shoot you again."

Leland reaches out for me with quivering fingers. "J-Jackson... they say as you die your best moments replay... and they all involve you."

"Aww... that almost makes me feel bad." But not quite... because I'm going to win.

"I see visions of you... you dressed as Sasquatch... the day you became an old nag and I rode your ol' swayed back to the door... boobalicious you..."

I shoot him in the protective vest again in the hopes of ending this hell fest.

He falls quiet, eyes closed, and I breathe a sigh of relief that it's finally over until he gasps again, apparently coming back to life. "Y-You in a candy bikini, you and the flying squirrel."

I shoot him again, *certain* multiple shots *have* to be enough.

He flops back down on Jeremy, whose face tells me how displeased he is by this. Before Leland can revive *again*, I decide that I need to scurry off and put some good distance between us.

Glad that's done and I won't be forced to relive any more embarrassing days from my past, I hurry back, deciding that I'll forget hiding the other ATVs and hope it makes it look like

those two are off chasing each other through the woods, which I feel like would happen even if neither of them were the villain.

I hop on my ATV and rush off to dispose of the others. Hopefully, they're much less dramatic and submit to "dying" instead of this nonsense.

Heading in the direction Tavish's shots had come from, I notice an ATV not too far away. I drive over to it, unsure where the rider is until Cassel practically tackles me off my ATV a moment before I'd have gotten shot.

"Shh... Tavish is brutal," he says.

"I see that."

"Where's Leland?"

"He ran off ahead with you. I'm surprised he hasn't taken Tavish out yet."

"He said he was going to run back for you."

"I never saw him."

"He probably got lost. He seems pretty simple," Cassel says, whipping out some sass. "I can't wait to brag to him and tell him that I had to save your life. Now come on."

"Okay," I agree as I start to follow.

He pushes me forward, like he wants me to crouch and crawl along the ATV to avoid getting shot while he covers my back. Issue is that it puts him behind me so I can't shoot him. If I could just get around him in some way... or maybe swing my gun back to shoot him from under my armpit or something? That sounds like something only Leland would skillfully pull off.

The sound of Cassel following me stops and I turn to look at him, only to find a gun pointed at me. "How could you?" he whispers.

"How could I what?"

"Lie to me! You were the traitor all along, weren't you?"

What the hell? Can he read *minds*? “I was? No, I’m not! What makes you think that?” I ask.

He holds my sleeve up and I see that at *some point* Leland or Jeremy must have rubbed paint on me. What a bunch of tricky fuckers. My bet is Leland with all of his “revives.”

“Must have been from Tavish. I think I rubbed up against the ATV he shot.”

“It’s your color,” he states, quite matter-of-factly.

“Shit,” I say as I try to whip my gun out, but before I can, he’s already shot me. Then once more, like he wants to doubly make sure I’m dead. If only I had done that after shooting Jeremy, I wouldn’t be in this predicament.

Well... there goes my winning streak. But hey, getting two down is not all that bad.

I sink to the ground as I say, “You may have bested me, but I took Jeremy down first.”

His eyes get wide. “No! Not my Jerebear. You *monster*.”

Cassel shoots me again.

“I’m definitely dead!” I assure him.

“The dead don’t speak,” he says, eyes narrowed.

And that is how I proceed to lose the match. After taking me out, Cassel manages to take Tavish out who’d already downed Mason. Then Henry and Cassel manage to snatch the keys off Tavish’s “lifeless body” to save Blow-Up Randy, who Cassel thought we should blow up to celebrate.

At that point, Leland decides that we should leave Cassel here to walk home.

After that, we do a few battle royale style games and waste hours roaming around the woods on ATVs shooting each other.

Once we finally finish goofing around with the paintball guns it’s well into the afternoon, so we take everyone home. We actually let them get into the van without being tied up this time, which they seem to appreciate... even if there are no

seats for them to sit down on, which is how I end up giving Henry my seat.

After we drop the final person off, Leland looks over at me. “Why do they always act like they’re going to hate our adventure yet end up loving it? They’re so wishy-washy!”

“Maybe it’s the way you go about it?” I ask. “Like what if you sent them a text that was like ‘Hey, guys. I’ve got a fun game idea planned. You guys want to join?’”

The absolute look of disgust on Leland’s face tells me that I was a fool for suggesting such a thing. “Wow... imagine if I sounded that dreadfully boring,” Leland says. “Can you fathom that?”

“No! I definitely can’t! I mean... how disgusting!”

“RIGHT?”

We pull up outside the office and park the van in the same spot we’d taken it from, which makes me question where the van even *came* from.

“Whose van is this?” I ask as we gather up all of the kidnapping gear to put back in Leland’s car.

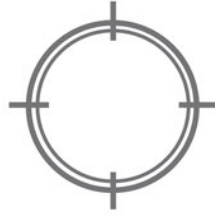
“Oh, Tucker rented it for me. He’ll get someone to pick it up. Now to head home and...” He hesitates as he notices something. I look over at what’s snagged his attention and see a sliver of something sticking out from under the door like someone tried to cram a note under it. Leland unlocks the door and pushes it open before stooping down to grab the paper.

His expression doesn’t change but the tension in his body does.

“What is it?” I ask as I hurry over to look at what he’s found.

Written in dark letters, the paper says: *Dallas is coming.*

FIFTEEN



LELAND

“What do you want to do?” Jackson asks as I pace the living room. Cayenne paces it with me so I give her a pat on the head, which pleases her greatly.

“I want to know who the fuck left this,” I say.

As soon as I’d gotten in the car, I watched the security cameras which showed a person all in black slipping it partway under the door. Of course I can’t tell shit from that, so I have absolutely no idea who did this or what’s happening.

“Well... clearly someone who knows who this Dallas person is,” Jackson says.

Quite a few people in the underworld know that Dallas is a hitman, but why would he come for me? Did Vance hire him? It wouldn’t be out of the realm of possibility, since he’s not exactly the hardest man to hire.

I decide that I’ll see what Lucas has to say about this. It takes me a bit, but when I finally get him on the phone, his joyous fucking attitude almost immediately makes me hang up on him.

“Leland! Twice in one week! How lovely getting to speak to you,” he says in his grating voice.

I’m assuming that we’re being recorded since they still seem to think this lying piece of shit actually knows something.

“Hey, Lucas. You been in contact with Dallas lately?”

“Dallas? Remind me who Dallas is.”

“You know who he is,” I growl.

“Ohhh, that Dallas. Nope. Can’t say that I have. Why’s that?”

“Someone left me a note that Dallas was planning on stopping by. You happen to know anything about that?”

“No, no. Weirdly, I can’t seem to think of anything. How are you getting along? I heard you paid Vance a visit. That was nice of you. Are you helping him out with something?”

“Nope. He told me that you lied to my face and here’s the thing, I can’t say I was even remotely surprised. Now unless you have something that is even the least fucking bit useful, I’m hanging up.”

“Oh! Leland, I did think of something.”

“What?”

“You really need to be careful who you help. You never know who is going to bite you in the ass. I know you think being kind to people is helping you become a better person or some bullshit, but you are just putting yourself in danger for them. What was the sense of letting Vance go?”

“Don’t worry about what I do.”

“Wow, Leland, you really are getting sloppy. I hope... I hope it doesn’t bite you in the ass. And if it does... I’m just devastated that I won’t be there to help protect you.”

I hang up, deciding that I’m done with his bullshit. “Fuck.”

“What?” Jackson asks as he looks at me in concern.

“I think I need to kill Vance.”

“Why?”

“Fuck... I don’t know. There are too many loose ends, Jackson. I’m... throwing myself out there, risking our lives to keep some fucking... weapons dealer alive who literally hired someone to kill me... why? I’m sure he doesn’t give a *fuck* what happens to the people he sells those weapons to, you know? He literally wanted to kill me, and I didn’t kill him, why?”

Jackson takes my face in his hands, watching me closely. “Leland, you are your own person. You are not a monster like you try to make yourself think you are. You are not Lucas’s killer or Lucas’s child... you have nothing to do with him. You make your own decisions. What does *Leland* think should happen?”

I watch him for a long moment before collecting my thoughts. Jackson’s right. I’m feeding into what Lucas wants for me. “I think we should figure out who hired Dallas.”

“Okay,” Jackson says, sounding encouraging.

“If it was Vance, I’m going to either kill him or get him arrested.”

“I think that’s reasonable, but how do we find Dallas?”

“I say we ask Tucker and Cassel. One of them will easily find him,” I decide. “Then I’m going to see if Waylon has anything else for us. Maybe take him up to talk to his brother. Let’s see if we can get an appointment to do that tomorrow.”

“Okay,” Jackson agrees. “How about I set up a time to talk to Waylon and Bennett. You work with Cassel and Tucker to find Dallas, and we go from there?”

“Perfect,” I say, honestly thrilled to have something to focus on. It keeps me motivated and moving forward without thinking about “what-ifs” like “What if I’d just smothered Lucas in his sleep,” or “What if I’d run over his nuts before I sent him off to prison.”

Jackson gives me a smile, which tells me he has absolutely no idea what’s going on in my mind right now. Then he sprinkles a few soft kisses on my face—like I’m not over here thinking about a smashed-nuts Lucas—and lets go of me so he can get started on his duty.

“Hey, Jackson?”

“Hmm?”

“Thank you,” I say.

He smiles at me. “You never need to thank me. I’m pretty sure we’re just here to take care of each other.”

“You da best,” I tell him.

I quickly call Tucker, but he doesn't answer, so I decide to send the issue over to Cassel. He'll see what he can get done, and with the way he seems to be able to get into just about anything he puts his mind to, I have a good feeling about it.

Since it doesn't hurt to have two people on it, I give Tucker another call, but he's probably off being annoying, as he's known to be. That is until I hear someone accept the call.

“L-Leland? Please?” a girl whispers.

“Dani?” I ask.

“There's someone here. He has my dad tied up. I'm scared he's going to kill him. Please.”

“I'm coming,” I say. “Where are you?”

“Hiding.”

“Okay. Hang up and text me if anything else is going on, okay? Can you do that? Make sure your phone is on silent. Not vibrate. Silent. If he finds you, you just do what he asks. I'll be there in minutes, okay?”

“Yes.”

I hang up and start yelling for Jackson who comes rushing out of the back room to see what's happened.

“What's wrong?”

“Tucker's been attacked and Dani's in the house,” I say.

“Fuck,” he hisses as he rushes after me. We jump into my car and throw it in reverse, pushing it as fast as it'll go.

“I need you to text her. Tell her he might be trying to get information out of Tucker. And if so, he's going to want to use her against him. If she doesn't think her position is safe, she should try to get on the roof and stay there. With it being this time on a Sunday, the bar is closed, so there won't be anyone downstairs to help.”

“Okay,” Jackson says as he takes my phone.

I jerk the car into the oncoming lane, zooming past multiple cars going the speed limit as I try to think about the best position for entering the building.

“And ask where her father is.”

“Okay... she hasn't answered the first message.”

“Fuck,” I hiss as I slow only enough to take the turn without risking our car. “Call Cassel.”

“I'm on it.”

“Do you think you can get up onto the second floor from the outside?” I ask.

Jackson hesitates. “I... don't know. Is there a good way up?”

“I'm trying to think. It's an old building that used to be two apartments. I think there's an old metal stairwell leading up, but I'm not positive. Can you try to get to the second floor? I'm not sure if they're on the first or second floor, but I'm going to guess they're down in the bar area if she heard my call and no one else did.”

“True. Please be careful.”

“You too,” I say as I pull over on a side road and quickly rush out of the vehicle. Jackson splits off from me, planning on going around to the back as I make my way for the employees-only door. But on my way to it, I see that the window to the employee bathroom is open, telling me that whoever let themselves in chose that path. I hoist myself up and easily slide through the window before dropping to my feet on the bathroom floor.

That's when I hear crying, telling me that the man found Dani.

I want to rush in before Jackson can get down here... before Jackson can get caught up in harm's way. But I have to trust him, and I know that Dani and Tucker living could easily be dependent on us working together. So, instead, I pull out my phone and quickly send him a text.

Me: Are you in position?

Jackson: The door and windows are locked.

Me: Break it. Make it loud enough he hears. But if I don't stop him in time, he might reach you, so please be careful.

Jackson: Got it.

With my gun in one hand and the doorknob in the other, I grip it tightly and wait for Jackson to draw the man's attention away, even if it's only for a split second.

"Now that your daughter's joined the party, you can't tell me you don't want to answer my questions," the man says, voice toying.

"Let her go... please. Let her go," Tucker begs.

That's the moment I hear the window shatter.

"Who the fuck was that? Did you call someone?" the man growls.

"No! No, I didn't!" Dani cries as I pull the door open, putting myself right in the bar where I see just the man I was looking for.

Dallas.

It takes me all of a few seconds to realize what's going on here.

"Well, look at that. I'm over here trying to figure out where you're at and you come to me. I guess I'm a rather lucky man this evening," Dallas says as he squeezes his arm around Dani's neck, like he wants to remind me that he's got a hostage.

"I heard you're looking for me," I say evenly.

"I am! Honestly, I didn't expect it'd be this easy to come find you. I thought I'd have to actually put in some work to seek out the legendary Sandman, but you must really care about your handler. How cute."

I look over at Tucker who is taped to a chair, head hanging as blood drips from his face. I can't tell his condition from this position, but judging from the blood coating his lap, Dallas has been at it a while—and Tucker still didn't give up anything about me? I wasn't aware he liked me that much.

“I heard you were hired to kill me,” I say.

That seems to pique Dallas's interest. Honestly, I just want to keep him preoccupied while I assess the situation. The longer we deal with him, the longer Cassel has to get here to help. If Dallas didn't have Dani in his hands, I wouldn't be too concerned, but while I don't know Dallas overly well, I do know he's the type of guy who will kill anyone he's hired to kill. He doesn't care if they're a horrible murderer or if they're an innocent teenage girl. Right now, the only reason she's alive is because she can provide some leverage on Tucker. And now on me.

This is where Lucas would tell me I've fucked up. That Dallas would already be dead if I was the old Leland, but would he? Was I ever as ruthless as Lucas thought I was? Even in my teenage years, I questioned every person I pointed that gun at. I tried to determine who I thought deserved to die and who I could possibly keep alive. And Lucas was right, it often got me into tight spots, but I'm still standing here today, and so are many of the people I'd kept alive.

And here I am doing it again. But despite Lucas's claim it makes me a bad killer, I believe it makes me better. It gives me time to analyze and end up with a better outcome.

One where Tucker and Dani both live and neither Jackson nor I get shot.

I need to push him toward the stairs. Use Jackson to help me and in doing so, separate him from Tucker, making one less hostage.

“Just drop the gun unless you want me to shoot her in the head,” Dallas says.

I make a show of hesitating because I know he's not expecting me to immediately drop it. If he shot her, he'd lose

this fight. My gun is on him, his is on her. In the time it would take for him to shift his gun off her and onto me, he'd already be dead. "How do I know you won't kill her anyway? Because here's the thing, Dallas, my gun is pointed at your head, your gun is pointed at her head. If you shoot her, you're dead. There's absolutely no benefit to me dropping the gun."

I take a step toward him and his eyes narrow. He gives me a cold laugh. "I know you have a buddy upstairs. I'm not dumb enough to waltz up them."

"Yeah, I do have a buddy upstairs, but Dallas, who would you rather deal with? Me or the guy upstairs?"

"No one wants to fucking deal with you," he says.

"Aww, thanks for the compliment. But then why'd you take the job to kill me?" I ask.

"Honestly? Because I wanted to end your miserable ass."

"That's fair," I say.

He grins at the idea. "I wanted to be the one who finally did in the Sandman."

"Are you regretting that now?"

"No," he says. "Can't say that I am."

I know he's going to try to put something between us and either leave so he can try to kill me later, or hope that with some cover, he can get a better handle on the situation. He starts backing toward the kitchen. There's a door leading out to the alley that he'll be able to take. It won't take much for him to slip through it, and he's clearly planning on taking Dani to ensure his survival.

But I won't let that happen. I'll stop him before he gets through the door. I'll—

The window breaks a moment before Dallas curses and his gun goes off. He falls back, away from Dani who's dropped to the ground. At first, I can't tell if she'd fallen because she got shot or if she was just dropping out of harm's way.

“Dani!” Tucker screams, and when I see Dani rush for him, I move between her and Dallas.

I can’t believe Cassel would take such a risky shot when Dallas obviously had a hostage in his hands. Dallas throws himself through the door, so I rush after him. He shoots at me, but I duck down, and the shots go above my head. I fire, hitting him in the shoulder before he drops behind a center island.

I hear the metallic sound of something a moment before I see a fire extinguisher being flung into the air. He shoots it and white shit puffs through the air in a large cloud, obscuring my vision for a few seconds as I try to determine if he’s using that time to flee for the door or come after me.

I hear the door fling open and my body flinches as I debate going for it to follow him out into the alley, but it’s riskier if I’m wrong. Out there, Dallas would have no cover and would be right in line for Cassel to shoot him the moment he comes out that door, telling me that he’s using the smoke cover to come for me instead.

Rushing to the right, I hear the light sound of a shoe on the linoleum, so I raise my gun and shoot into the smoke, then I dash in as it clears and shoot Dallas two more times before he goes down.

Keeping my gun trained on him, I kick his gun out of his hand, sending it skidding across the floor.

“Who hired you?” I ask, but his eyes are unfocused as blood bubbles out between his lips. Cassel’s shot definitely did a number on him; even if I hadn’t shot him, he probably wouldn’t have lived. “Who the fuck hired you?”

“Fuck... you,” he manages to get out, grinning as blood coats his teeth a moment before he falls still.

What an asshole.

I check that he’s really dead and not faking it in an attempt to trick me before rushing back to help Tucker and Dani.

When I reach the room, I see that Jackson is busy trying to help Tucker, and he has Dani backed near a door in case she

needs to run.

“He’s dead,” I inform them.

“Good,” Jackson says as he frees Tucker. “You okay, Leland?”

“Yeah. Cassel made a risky as hell shot,” I say, pulling out my phone to call him as I look over at Dani. “Are you okay?”

She nods as she tries to fight back tears. And when she rushes over to me, I’m not expecting her to grab me in a rib-crushing hug. Her entire body is shaking and her fingernails are desperately digging into my back. I really don’t know what to do with the hug, so I give her a few awkward pats before she pulls back to go to her father’s side.

Cassel answers the call almost immediately. “I heard the gunshot; are you alright?”

“Yeah, he’s dead. Don’t you think that shot was a bit risky with Dani in his hands?”

“What shot?” Cassel asks.

“The... shot you took on him,” I say. “Through the window.”

“I... didn’t take a shot. I was on the east side and got here in time to see you run him into the back room, which of course has no windows.”

I still as that sinks in. “Then who the fuck shot him?”

“Maybe Tucker’s got a guy?”

“Maybe,” I say as I look over at Tucker. “Tucker, did you call someone else on this?”

Tucker slowly looks up at me, one eye swollen shut, skin cracked open below it. “Fuck... didn’t have time... how the hell did you get here? How did you know Dallas was here?”

“Dani told us what was happening,” I respond, but my mind is fixated on whoever took the damn shot. Was someone following us? Who would have been able to take that shot? Tavish, possibly... Micah?

There's a knock on the door and an "It's me" from Cassel, so I hang up the phone and hurry over to let him in.

"I quickly scouted the area, but I didn't see anyone out there," Cassel says as he shuts the door behind himself. "Where'd the shot come from..." He wanders off as he sees the broken window which answers his question.

"Have you heard from Micah? Do you think it could have been him? There's a possibility that Lucas has been stringing him along like he has the rest of us," I speculate. "Lucas did say he wanted to get us together to take down Vance's gang."

"I think I can get in contact with him," Cassel says as I hurry over to Jackson and Tucker.

"Do you need to go to the hospital?" I ask Tucker. I know he *should* go to the hospital, but it doesn't mean he will.

"I think he should," Jackson says. "He probably has a concussion."

Dani is clinging to him while trying to hold back her anxiety. She's doing her best not to cry as she struggles to stay out of the way while still holding on to the back of his shirt.

"No, no. I'm fine," Tucker blusters as he tries to get up. I don't know if it's Dani hanging off him or his bleeding head that makes him sink back down. "I'm fine, my head's just swimming a bit."

"You're clearly not fine," Jackson says. "I'll get him to the hospital. Leland, are you staying here to get things... dealt with?" He eyes the kitchen where the dead man is.

"Yeah," I reply. "Dani, go with them. We'll catch up in a few."

Dani nods and helps her father up with Jackson's assistance, so I escort them out to the car in case our mystery gunman had actually been aiming for me or some unlucky bullshit. Once they're in the car and moving, I look in the direction the shot had come from. Walking quickly, I follow what would have been the line of sight to get that shot. Because of the buildings across the street, there seems to only be one area where the gunman could have stood, which is in

an alcove semi-hidden by the narrow alley. It's raised enough that he could have seen in through the window, but not too high to miss the shot.

Was someone watching Tucker?

Or was someone watching me?

In my rush to get here, I might not have noticed someone tailing us. Hell, I don't think I looked behind myself once unless it was to make sure I didn't sideswipe a car as I jumped lanes.

It would have been easy to follow me because of how distracted I was.

I look around, but the gunman must have collected any proof that he'd made the shot from here. Someone who could shoot that well obviously isn't an amateur, but I have the weird feeling like they want me to know they were here.

Because honestly... if it was Micah... why wouldn't he have just waltzed in after Dallas went down? While I'd only met him briefly when Cassel was dealing with some stuff from Jeremy's past, he seemed cocky and quite arrogant. I can't fathom he wouldn't want us *all* to know what he'd done.

I turn and when I do, I see something scratched into the wall.

A bullseye.

Apparently, he wanted me to know he was here... as if the bullet that went through Dallas wasn't enough.

I start to wander down the alley when I hear footsteps behind me and turn to look at Cassel as he jogs up.

"I called Micah, who assured me that he had nothing to do with saving anyone's life," Cassel says. "Which I'm assuming you already knew."

"Yeah, I'm not surprised."

"Who the hell is interested in you?"

"I'm guessing they're the ones who left me the note that Dallas had been hired. Which tells me that they either know

Dallas or know who hired him.”

“Which... I mean, we’d have to assume that’d be Vance, right? Or someone within that gang who knows that you’re not willing to play their tricks.”

“Yeah... I guess let’s go pay Vance a visit. Did you happen to call Tucker’s cleaner?”

“I did. They’ll be over within a few, so we’re good to go.”

“Okay. Are you following me or riding with me?”

“I’ll ride with you. We have to come back this way to get home anyway,” he says as he hurries over to my car.

“We don’t exactly have our wonderful facial hair to disguise ourselves,” I comment as I sit down and start the car.

Cassel glances into the back seat. “No, but we do have the ski masks you wore to harass us with. Hold on... what the hell was this for?” He picks up a taser and presses the button, making it snap uncomfortably close to me.

“That was just if any of you tried to struggle. Good thing you didn’t.”

“Oh ho. You zap me with this, and I would make you regret *life*.”

“I’m not afraid of you,” I say, pitying the fact that he could possibly think I would be.

Cassel arches an eyebrow.

“Fine, I’m a little afraid of you. But only if I actually knew you were coming to murder me. Instead, I’m positive you love me too much to even think about shocking me. You’re just too sweet and kind inside that small package.”

“Oh, I’ve thought about it. Doesn’t mean I don’t love you. But I’ve sure thought about it,” Cassel says as he listens to the taser crackle again. The look on his face tells me *all* about the times he’s thought about it.

“Do you think Lucas is playing us?” I ask.

Cassel lowers the taser and glances over at me. “Is he ever not? It’s constant mind games with him. My whole life was me being forced to guess what was right or what was wrong. I think what fucked me up is that even when I knew something was wrong, he would make me feel so fucking right for doing it, you know?”

I nod. “Yeah. Goddamn, I didn’t realize how much he was in my head, constantly. How much he made me lose myself and made me think that the bullshit he’s preaching was the thing to listen to. He tells me how he taught me everything I love. That fucks with my head...”

“So what if he was the one who taught you?” Cassel asks.

I look over at him.

“You think that someone can’t teach you something and still be a horrible person? Leland, you’re phenomenal with weapons. You’re the best fucking assassin I’ve ever met. It doesn’t matter who taught you; what matters is that you enjoy your guns and what *you* want to do. So if a gymnast makes it to the Olympics and their coach turns out to be some... serial killer, do we then assume the gymnast is also a horrible person?”

“That doesn’t even make sense. And it’s different.”

Cassel shakes his head as he fixes me with a look. “What’s different? The coach taught the gymnast a skill. Those skills have nothing to do with the coach at the end of the day. These skills you have are things *you’ve* learned. You’ve proven that you’re better than Lucas, so why would you even *think* that what you love and know is all wound up in the man you hate?”

I don’t know what to say, so I stubbornly don’t say anything at all.

“Leland, you know I’m talking to you.”

“Are you sure?” I mutter.

He thumps my shoulder with the back of his hand, like he wants to force me to pay attention. “Yes. I’m trying to show you how dumb you’re being by thinking the way you are!”

“You don’t feel that way?” I ask.

Cassel shakes his head, and I can tell he’s not lying, but hasn’t he always been the smarter one? “Fuck, Leland. I don’t even want to think about Lucas; I sure as hell don’t want to credit him for things I love. How do you know we wouldn’t have grown up to still enjoy these things? Realistically, we had to have some kind of inclination toward them or Lucas wouldn’t have picked us. He wasn’t going to go pick some kid who didn’t kind of already have some... tendencies. I mean, you can’t force someone to do what we did. It’d be like picking a kid who only liked to play chess and being like, ‘Here, bruh, have a gun.’”

“Hmm...” I mutter, refusing to agree.

Cassel fiddles with his seat belt. “Leland, we didn’t exactly have the best outlook on people growing up or we wouldn’t have been fine killing them. And I sure as fuck am not giving Lucas credit for reforming us or some shit. I’m fully aware I’d have turned out to be a little asshole if I’d have gone about life the way I was going, but being forced to kill people probably wasn’t the right answer either.”

“No, it probably wasn’t,” I say. “Yet here we are.”

“Yep. Here we are. We’re running a PI office, and while most of the time we get stuck watching people who may or may not be cheating, we do get to save and protect and help so many others because of the skills we have. We both have regrets about our past, that’s a given, but you can’t let those regrets haunt you.”

“Hmm...”

“Oh, don’t give me that ‘hmm’ because you’re afraid to admit that I’m making sense,” he says.

“I can hmm at you all I want.”

“No, sir. You can go ‘Wow, Cassel, you are absolutely brilliant! Astounding! Thought-provoking! You’re the smartest entity I’ve ever laid my eyes upon!’”

“I think Cassel is a bit full of himself,” I decide.

“Never! I’m full of nothing but good thoughts and wonderful ideas that you should listen to.”

“Hmm...”

“Stop your ‘hmming’! I’m telling the truth, but you’re struggling to see it because your brain is... I don’t know! Too packed with thoughts of your fence!”

“It *is* a good fence.”

“See!”

“Fine, I’m listening to you. And trying to believe you.”

“Well, as long as you try, it’ll be good enough... I guess,” Cassel says.

“You... *guess?*”

“I *guess*,” he repeats with a wicked look.

“Well, I guess I’ll take you along with me as I fuck this guy up,” I announce.

“Good thing because I’m already in the car and we’re already headed there.”

“I could have kindly cracked the window and left you out in the car while I dealt with the rest of this stuff.”

“I mean... I’m reading a really good book right now. I’m not sure I’d mind just chilling in the back seat and reading. *Much* better than the car racing movie Jeremy was forcing me to watch. I could just read and relax.”

“I’ve already permitted you to go with me, so it’d be too much work to take that permission back,” I say.

“Ah, makes sense, makes sense,” Cassel agrees. “But you know... I accidentally left my gun at home, so I need a gun to use.”

“What about the gun you had in your hand when you came running into Tucker’s bar?”

“I... didn’t have a gun.”

“What about the gun you just shoved between the car door and the seat?”

“There’s no gun. I am gunless, and a hitman without a gun is like a farmer with no flock, a stripper with too many clothes, a—”

I sigh. “Fine. Here.”

I hand him one of my babies and his face lights right up. He looks absolutely thrilled to be holding it as he flips it this way and that, examining every inch and caressing it lovingly.

Cassel beams at me. “You know... you may tell me you love me. You may say that I’m like a brother to you... but this right here is how I know I’m truly accepted in your heart.”

“Don’t be getting cocky now.”

“This is how I know you *luuuuv* me.”

I cringe at the words he’s spitting at me. “Just stop, I’m going to take it away!”

“This is how I know I’m the most specialist special person besides Jackson.”

“You’re making me break out in hives,” I complain as I rub my arms. “Why do you still have a heart in there?”

“I don’t know,” he says. “But it’s in there and it’s throbbing for you.”

“As long as it’s the only thing throbbing for me,” I mutter.

“Ew, gross. Why do you have to make everything so uncomfortable?”

“It’s what I do, Cassel!” I assure him.

“Well, do it a little less.”

“I can’t. It’s in my blood.”

“I wonder if they still practice bloodlettings.”

“I’ve practiced it a time or two... always on others, but it never really seemed to fix them. Wait, no... if you let enough blood out, it fixes everything.”

Cassel, who clearly shares my dark humor, laughs... but it’s a bit... loud. Almost like it’s being forced! How dare he force out a laugh at one of my spectacular jokes? “I’m going

to laugh at every joke you tell in the hopes of you letting me have a second gun.”

“What if I rap?”

“I will laugh so fucking hard. I will commend you for your skills. Break into the system at the Oscars and add your name.”

“Hmm...” I debate this. While I don’t love allowing anyone to touch my guns, the idea of having a constant laugh track following me around does sound rather lovely.

“Fine,” I say as I pass off a second gun. I still have two on me, so it’ll be plenty to handle Vance.

Cassel is all smiles as he holds one in each hand. “You must be sick. I feel like I should be concerned about you, but I also feel like I love these guns enough that I’m not going to care.”

“Good,” I say. “Now I don’t want to pull right up to the front door in my car, so I’m going to park here.”

“Got it.” Cassel stuffs a ski mask over my head after pulling his on. “I’m afraid he’s going to be able to tell your true identity by your mouth alone,” he informs me as he slaps tape over the mouth hole in the mask.

“You can’t silence these lips.”

“No, but the mumbling fills me with happy thoughts,” he says with a grin.

Together, we make our way toward the house as Cassel fiddles with his phone while we walk. When we reach the back door, Cassel looks over at me. “So because of your last... visit, they’ve redone their whole security system. Seems a bit more top notch, so I could break it or we could just go in and harass away.”

“Issue is setting off the security system,” I mumble through the tape as I reach out to check the door in case they left it unlocked since it’s the middle of the day.

The door handle turns and I swing it open. “Well... that’s not at all odd,” I say as I rip the tape off my mouth.

“Right?”

He takes over door duty so I can have my hands free for my gun as I enter the room. It’s quiet, which just adds to the eeriness of the situation.

“Don’t you kind of think they’d have hired a couple of guards?” I ask.

“I would have thought. Especially if they’re the ones who hired Dallas. He doesn’t work cheap. Maybe they wasted all of their money on him. Speaking of... how did Vance know you were the Sandman?” Cassel asks.

“I doubt he did. My guess is he showed Dallas some image of me and Dallas recognized me.”

“Oh, that makes sense. Maybe they’re not here?”

“Maybe,” I say as I head into the dining room where I see the table set for dinner, the plates filled with half-eaten food.

“Soooo what happened here?” Cassel asks as he examines the food.

“It’s obviously from last night’s dinner. Is this what happens when you cook? The food is so bad it clears out an entire household?”

“Ha. Ha. I’m not a bad chef... Squirrel Stew Jeremy, on the other hand...” Cassel shudders. “He’ll eat anything.”

“And he thinks I’m weird,” I say as I look around. “Did something make them run or did they get caught up in something?”

“I’ll look for signs of a struggle,” he offers as he parts from me. There are only two place settings, telling me their daughter Emily likely wasn’t with them.

As I walk into the main room, I check the front door, but it’s shut and locked. So why was the back door left unlocked?

Cassel peeks through the doorway at me. “Come here.”

I quickly follow him as he heads into the next room where a small table has been knocked over.

He motions to the edge of it. “Blood splatter here. I doubt it was a gun, so likely someone used physical force to knock Vance down. Probably smacked his head on the edge of this table, which flipped it.”

“So if there’s not any more blood and no bodies... then they either took them for some reason or killed them somewhere else.”

“But then if they’re planning on killing them elsewhere to avoid detection, why not clean this up?”

“Clearly they didn’t care,” I say. “Vance mentioned not having the shipment for a customer who bought it. So did they take him to put some pressure into getting their money back?”

“Very good possibility.”

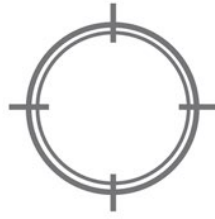
“It doesn’t really answer whether or not he hired Dallas. He could have hired Dallas before they were taken, but if you’re going to put that much money into one guy, why would you completely dismiss protecting yourself?”

“You wouldn’t,” Cassel says. “Unless you were so damn cocky that you thought Dallas would have no trouble handling it. Let me see if I can get into their new security system and figure out what happened to them. That might answer enough questions for us to get somewhere.”

“Perfect.”

While he tinkers with their security system, I wander through the house, checking all of the rooms in case there’s something we’ve missed.

SIXTEEN



“So a group of five people just bust in, Vance and his wife take off running. They grab the wife as Vance is pummeled into a table, and just like that, they’re dragged out and disappear,” Jackson says, recapping what he’d seen on the recording we’d brought back.

It didn’t take long for Cassel to break into the system and get me the information before he headed off for home, leaving me to show Jackson once he’d come home from dropping Tucker and Dani off at a hotel. We thought it’d be best if they stayed out of the equation for a few days.

Dallas, who’d once used Tucker for a few odd jobs, happened to know his tie to me, which is likely why he thought he’d go through Tucker.

Even though we’d watched the footage multiple times, none of us could discern any details about the abductors who had worn nothing that could give them away. They proceeded to enter the building with ease, made little noise, and were in and out of the house in a matter of minutes. They’d also seemed to have already known the code to unlock the security system, which got them in without setting it off and calling the police.

After we were done looking over that, I’d also told Jackson about the bullseye etched into the wall from where the gunman had taken that shot at Dallas.

“I’m just worried we have to stay on guard for others looking for you,” Jackson says as he comes up and wraps his

arms around me.

“Are you worried for them?” I ask. “Because you sure don’t need to worry about me.”

He grins at me. “Yes, I’m *so* worried about them. I can’t sleep at night thinking about these poor hitmen who take on the job of trying to kill my one true love. You know, the person I fret over more than anyone.”

“That’s just silly,” I say. “Silly talk coming out of you now.”

“So silly,” Jackson responds dryly. “Come on. I’m going to go take a shower. You want to hop in with me?”

“If you’re naked, do you even have to ask?”

He laughs. “True.”

“Then I know what will make you feel better after fretting over those foolish assassins.”

“Hmm?”

“Lying naked in my gun shrine.”

“Will that make me feel better or *you*? I mean... that’s definitely what I was thinking about,” he says, but sassily. Like he could actually *not* be thinking about it. Like he somehow couldn’t *love* the idea of wallowing around on my rug, surrounded by all of my beauties.

“Jackson, my man, you’re so hard to please. How about this. Let’s role-play; maybe that’ll make you feel better. So you’re a German plumber who doesn’t understand English, and I’m a burglar who decided to stop and take a shower while stealing things!”

“I don’t know German.”

I wave his ridiculous issues off and hurry into the bathroom, slamming the door shut in his face as I do so. I get into position so that when the door opens and Jackson comes in, he’s treated to me bent over the tub, my ass in the air.

I make a show of looking over my shoulder. “Oh, excuse me, handsome, I didn’t know there was anyone else in here.

I'm definitely not a thief who's here to plunder these drains."

"Uhh... something sexy and thought-provoking in German," Jackson says.

"Oh wow, a German man! Are you going to fold me up like one of your pretzels?"

"What?" he asks.

"Jackson, Germans like pretzels!"

"What?"

"You don't even have lederhosen on!"

"You think I *own some*?" Jackson asks.

"Fine, fine, since you're struggling with the German, you be the thief and I'll be a mime."

"Why wouldn't you be German, then?"

"Because I don't know German! Obviously!"

He sighs like this logic isn't solid as he picks up a bottle of cologne and stuffs it down his pants, clearly taking his duty as a thief to heart.

I take one look at him and mime being shocked. Then I make a show of scrutinizing him before I mime fanning myself over how goddamn sexy he is. He just keeps stealing shit while staring me in the eyes like he has absolutely zero emotions. His pants pockets are close to overflowing as I decide to pull out the big guns and mime unzipping my pants and pulling out my giant schlong. It's so giant that I mime slinging it up on the sink counter so I can get my pants off.

"What the hell is this, Leland?" Jackson asks as he starts laughing. "What is any of this? How is *any* of this sexy?"

I chuckle as I walk over—making sure to grab my invisible schlong on the way—and step up to him. "I never said we were going for sexy," I remind him as I wrap my arms around his neck. "But... oh... wow... you sure feel eager to see me." I cup the bottle of cologne through his pants. "Wow... so hard... and rectangular."

“Thanks. It’s all for you, and this”—he mimes hoisting up my giant invisible schlong—“is all for me.”

I begin laughing as he grabs me and sets me up on the sink counter before kissing me.

“I’m positive that I’ll never have a boring day when I’m with you,” he says.

“Good! I’m pretty sure that was also included in our vows. That I could never let you go a full twenty-four hours without laughing. So don’t worry about me, you hear? I’m doing a pretty decent job taking care of myself.”

“Pretty decent.”

“Well... I hooked the sexiest man alive, I forced Cassel to be my friend, I broke your mother down until she agreed to love me... I don’t know about you, but I’d say that’s a pretty decent job.”

“It is impressive that you’ve accomplished all that.”

“I even got you to play horsey and wear a Sasquatch costume.”

Jackson grabs the bottom of my shirt and pulls it up, sliding it over my head and tossing it in the hamper. Then he rubs his fingers up and down my back. “If you did a pretty decent job with all of that, then I happen to think I did a damn good job since I ended up with you.”

“Awww, you’re so cute and such a sucker. Definitely a sucker, but it’s cute so I love it.”

“Well... I’m glad I’m a sucker, then. But know what? You’re a sucker too.”

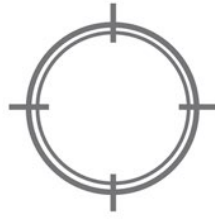
“Definitely,” I say.

Once we’re naked, he pulls me into the shower, his fingers trailing over my bare back as his lips run over my neck and jaw before reaching my mouth. He draws me into him, and I feel like he’s pulling all of the weight off my shoulders. He’s letting me sink into his touch and use him for support.

That was something I never dreamed of having. I always thought that standing on my own feet was best because to lean on another meant to lean into weakness. But as Jackson holds me against him and peppers soft kisses over me, I think about how much of a fool Lucas is because having someone to lean on doesn't make you weaker.

It makes you stronger.

SEVENTEEN



“Hey, kiddo. Wanna balloon?” I whisper as Waylon starts by me with some kids from school.

He and the two girls he’s with all jump and look at me in terror as I walk up with my balloon in the shape of a unicorn and tie it to Waylon’s wrist. I *wanted* to bring Blow-Up Rhonda, but Jackson said that I should find something more fitting for a teenage boy than a blow-up doll. I told him that he’s obviously confused if he thinks a teenage boy wouldn’t like looking at boobs—even of the blow-up variety.

“Aww, it’s so cute!” the one girl teases.

“Is it?” Waylon asks as he tries to escape the balloon, but I’ve knotted it enough that there’s no way he’s getting it off. It’s a massive unicorn that bounces around with each of his tugs.

“I’m going to steal Waylon here from you for a minute,” I say to the two girls. “I promise I’ll bring him back. He should be alive as long as he doesn’t struggle too much. Isn’t that right, Waylon?”

“Why are you so weird?” he asks me.

I stare at him. “Really? Do you want me to tell these lovely ladies where we met?”

The one gasps. “Waylon, what were you doing?”

“I bet it was a strip club,” the other says, and then they both giggle.

Waylon's face is all red as he tries to deny this, but I interrupt him before he can. "It was worse," I assure them.

That gets them going again. "Oh my god, Waylon, what were you doing?"

"I wasn't doing anything!"

"He made me cry," I say.

Waylon's eyes grow wide. "I did not!"

"Now get in the car unless you want me to tell them more."

He bolts for the car and that is how I successfully steal a teenager. He gets into the back seat, his blow-up unicorn galloping after him. It gets stuck in the door and Henry, who was waiting in the front seat, is treated to quite the spectacle as Waylon battles the unicorn.

I'm cackling as I get into the vehicle, pleased to see that half of the back seat is taken up by the helium-filled balloon. "Do you see why he's not cut out to be a villain?" I ask Henry who had been *weirdly* reluctant to come with me. Jackson had a job to do, and Henry had the day off, so it was a total no-brainer on who should go with me. What's concerning is why he agreed.

"Yet the more I'm around you, the more I question if you're the actual villain." He glances back at Waylon's battle. "How well did you tie that?" Henry asks.

"One time, I killed a man with a balloon. I learned some things."

"Like with the string?" Henry asks.

"Nope. The balloon."

"How?"

"I ballooned him."

"What does that mean?"

"What doesn't that mean?"

"No, like seriously, what does that mean?"

“I took the balloon... and then I took the man and then pow. Dead.”

“You literally missed the most interesting part!” Henry sighs, clearly exasperated, which is a pretty standard state when he’s around me.

“You okay there, buddy?” I ask Waylon who is trying to break the balloon string by pulling it apart. He’s not accomplishing much.

“Now they assume I did something weird,” Waylon says.

“You did. You donned a mask and robbed a gas station. Like if it was a bank, that’d be *cool*, but a gas station is just so... lackluster.”

“I’m honestly surprised you’re not the robber,” he mutters before looking at Henry, like he’s just now realized who he is. To his credit, he couldn’t actually *see* Henry beyond the balloon, just hear him. “Oh... hi?”

“Don’t mind Henry. You may know him as the chief of police, but I know him as Daddy,” I assure him.

“That’s more concerning. Isn’t Daddy like...” Waylon looks more than a little embarrassed and quickly shuts up.

“We are not in a relationship of any kind. The closest we can be considered is acquaintances,” Henry grumbles. “Reluctant acquaintances.”

“There’s nothing reluctant about what we are. We are the most unreluctant people ever in our search for each other.”

“What does that even mean?” Waylon asks.

“You’ll understand when you’re older,” I assure him.

Henry grunts. “Well, I’m older than both of you and I still don’t understand.”

“Waylon, we thought that you could possibly go in to talk to your brother. We have permission. But we thought he’d be more willing to speak with you.”

He looks excited because he’s not comprehending that this means he’ll be stuck with me for *hours*. “I can see him?”

“Yeah. You want to go?” I ask.

“YES! Right now? We’re going now?”

“Well, we need your aunt’s permission first,” Henry says. “So give her a call. I’ll talk to her, or you can give her my number. I know she has my card.”

“She’s not going to care,” Waylon says, waving it off. “Does anyone have a knife or something to cut this?”

“Nope,” I tell him as I pat my trusty knives.

“Please call your aunt. It could be late before we get back. You need to call and ask for permission.”

Waylon hesitates before nodding. “Fine.” He pulls out his phone and makes the call. Over the quiet of the car, I can kind of hear her when she answers.

“Didn’t I already give you money this week?” she asks without even greeting him.

“Uh, yeah. I don’t need any. Chief Johnson was going to take me up to see my brother. Do you mind if I go?”

“Why would I care?” she asks.

“They just wanted me to ask.”

“I see. Is that all?”

“Yeah, thanks. Bye,” he says before hanging up.

“She said she doesn’t care as long as I stay with you guys. And to text her when I’m headed back so she knows when to expect me,” he lies.

“Good,” Henry says, and I can’t tell if he was able to hear that she said nothing of the sort. If she’s giving him money, he likely isn’t even living with her. He’s probably staying at the house he lived in with his brother or maybe with a friend if the rent wasn’t being paid for it.

I start driving as I think about this, but Henry’s over there trying to be a good person by asking weird questions like “How was school?” and “Are you in any clubs or sports?”

“So who told you that you couldn’t hire us?” I ask.

“Jacob, Vance’s right-hand guy, told me to keep out of it.”

“And he did this maliciously or out of concern?”

“He said that with everything going on, I’d be best to just stay out of it because someone was watching me,” he says.

“Did he say who?” I ask.

“No... do you think they’re going to be pissed about you taking me to see my brother?”

“I think that group has other things to worry about than a teenager who wants to visit his brother,” I say.

Waylon fiddles with the balloon some more. “True.”

He seems a bit down or worried about that, so I decide to lighten the mood. “You have a girlfriend, Waylon?”

“No.”

“But you like those girls, don’t you? Especially the darker-haired one.”

He gets all embarrassed and starts working at the balloon harder. The unicorn prances all around, even smacking Henry in the head a few times. “No, I don’t.”

“Well, you’re in luck because Leland’s Love Locomotive is here to help you with all of your woes.”

“No,” Henry says, like he wants the kid to forever be sad and alone.

“Ignore Henry. He’s bitter because he’s forced to look at Jackson and me every day and see what true love looks like.”

“No,” Henry repeats.

“So what’s her name?”

“I’m not like... we’re just friends.”

“Even friends have names.”

“Sally.”

“Sally! Well, here’s what you do, Waylon. You take her over to a fence—”

“Don’t tell him that story!” Henry protests.

“Let me tell you how I found my husband. I teased him, then stalked him, licked his face, left him fun little notes, and when he got attacked, I dragged his unconscious body out to safety before leaving him in a car in front of an adult store, and it worked perfectly,” I assure him as I show off my wedding ring.

Waylon looks at Henry. “Are we in the car with a felon?”

“Yes,” Henry answers.

“Should I call the police?”

“I *am* the police. Sadly, he knows how to con even them. I mean... look at me sitting here,” Henry says.

“Ignore him. I only tied him up until he agreed to be my friend,” I assure Waylon.

“Is this balloon like some weird kind of tracking device?” he asks as he starts pulling harder at the ribbon.

“Waylon, don’t forget that you hired me,” I say.

Weirdly, Waylon seems to be regretting that. “Mr. Johnson... should I be afraid?”

“Yes,” Henry tells him.

My attention snaps to Henry the Horrid! “Henry, it’s not nice of you to scare the kid. He’s fragile, so be nice!”

“He’s not the one scaring me,” Waylon whispers.

“Oh no, Waylon, who’s scaring you? I’ll fuck them up,” I say as I reveal my knife.

“You said you didn’t have a knife! Cut this balloon off me,” he begs.

“I don’t have a knife,” I say as I make the knife disappear.

“What the heck. Are you a magician?”

“I am,” I answer.

“He’s not,” Henry disagrees.

“Henry, don’t try to take my magic away from me,” I say.

“I have to be in this car with you for how long?” Henry asks as he slumps against the door. I think he’s considering the consequences of leaping out.

“Waylon, trust me. You will know you have a true friend when they’re even willing to suffer to be with you,” I inform him.

“That seems questionable,” he says.

“Nothing is questionable when you have a BFF.” I use my hand to make half a heart and hold it toward Henry. When he doesn’t immediately complete the heart, I glower at him. “Henry, my heart.”

“Mine feels pretty good,” he says. “Full. Complete. Happy.”

Clearly... *very* clearly, today is Henry’s day to be sassy.

EIGHTEEN



As we pull up to the prison, I see someone who is on my radar to harass. Jumping out of the driver's seat without any explanation to the two others, I scurry across the parking lot just as the guard is getting out of his car.

“Yo,” I say, and the guard jumps as he takes note of me.

“Um... hello?”

“Everest, right? It's fun to see you again.”

“Everly, actually,” he says with a smile. “I'm... drawing a blank on how we've met? Are you a family member of one of the inmates?”

“We met when you were guarding Lucas Shitface.”

He hesitates for a moment like the name doesn't ring a bell before nodding. “Ah, right! Sorry, it's been a while. What can I do for you?”

“I want to hear about your side of what happened when Lucas and the rest of you got hurt,” I say. “I'm a PI who was hired by a family member of one of the victims and am trying to figure out what's going on.”

Everly frowns as he rubs his head. “Oh... I'm sorry that I haven't been able to give them more peace. I feel awful. It was my job, you know? To keep them safe... I... yeah, anything I can do to help because I feel awful about it. I'm not sure if you're able to read the police reports or what, so I'll tell you what I told them. I remember walking into the room a moment before something slammed into the back of my head.

“The thing is... there had to have been someone else in the room, but how did none of us notice and how did they take down so many of us without getting caught? I guess there’s speculation there was some type of gas, but I really can’t tell you because I remember so little.”

“But you and this Summers guy were at odds with each other?” I ask.

He snorts. “At odds is putting it lightly. That asshole has...” He glances up and the anxiety on his face gives me a pretty good idea of who’s walking toward us. “Please just leave me out of it, okay? I stupidly thought I was doing a good thing telling the warden what he was up to, and my life here has been hell ever since. I swear I can’t turn a corner without a guard or inmate harassing me.”

I glance over at the man I assume is Summers who seems to take notice of us almost immediately.

Everly is apparently done with our talk as he hurries toward the prison before I’m even done harassing him!

“Is there a problem out here?” Summers asks.

“Just the man I was looking for,” I say as I give him a smile. “Hopefully you’ll have a minute or two to talk.”

“You with the police?”

“I’m a PI.”

“Not going to happen, buddy. Get a badge and then maybe we’ll talk,” he says.

I pull out my phone and hit the microphone button. “Weirdly, the suspect doesn’t want to talk about the incident. Maybe he’s afraid he’ll spill something that he doesn’t want anyone else to know about. Or maybe he’s not a victim but the very man who orchestrated it with his tiny brain.”

“Turn that shit off,” he says as he grabs for my phone.

I smack his hand away. “Suspect is now getting enraged. I believe they call this little dick syndrome.”

“What the absolute fuck are you going on about?”

“Suspect is now confused. I have to assume he’s suffering from trauma from the incident or maybe he’s just not very smart... yep. I have confirmed. The man is suffering from his ego enveloping and eating his brain.”

Summers comes after me, rage painted across his face. “Give me the fucking phone.”

“He wants to fuck my phone. I repeat. He wants to fuck my phone.”

He darts after me, so I sidestep him and wrap an arm around his neck as I press the microphone end of the phone up to his mouth.

“Do you have any last words, Summers?”

“I will get you kicked so far off these grounds,” he growls.

“I see, I see. And what about the Jinn group? Tell me your role in the gang.”

“I’m not in the gang.”

“Wait... like they don’t want you? That’s even sadder.”

“Why the hell are you so irritating to talk to?”

“And what was your role in the abduction of Vance and his wife?”

He hesitates. “What?”

“So you were involved, then?” I ask.

“Involved? What the hell are you talking about? Did something happen to Emily?”

“If you want to know, you answer my questions,” I say.

He shoves me to the side and quickly reaches for his phone but unlike his weak attempts at grabbing mine, I snatch his. Helpfully, he’d already used his ugly mug to unlock it, so I scroll through the contacts and click on Emily’s name before putting it on speaker.

She answers with a growled, “What the fuck do *you* want?”

“Are you okay?” Summers asks as he tries getting the phone back, but I make sure to keep him away from it.

“No thanks to you. You were supposed to smooth things over with the buyers and now they’re after my parents. They took my parents.”

“What do they want in return?” he asks.

“I don’t know!” she says. “They contacted me once and basically told me to keep quiet and if I speak, they’ll hurt them. But someone else called it in. I think one of my parents’ employees. I don’t know what they’re going to do now. I don’t know what to do.”

I decide that since Summers is practically useless, I could be of some help. “Emily, you’re going to bring the phone they called you on to our PI office. We have a guy who might be able to get a location on that number and would know how to respond to them if they message again. Do you have a pen?”

“Who the hell is this?” she asks.

“It’s Seymour Shhlong,” I say.

“What?”

“If you want help finding your parents, you’ll need to deliver the phone there, got it? Hand it over to Derrick Derriere, and we’ll see what we can do.”

After giving her the address, I hang up and turn to look at Summers who seems to be at a loss for words—probably still processing these fantastic monikers that annoying Cassel definitely didn’t come up with.

“What the hell is happening?” he finally asks.

“What’s happening is you’re going to tell me why you would be the one smoothing things over with the buyers.”

“I... wasn’t involved in that shit! My family is... on friendly terms with them, so they thought I could do something about it, but I don’t know what the fuck they expect me to do. Now fuck off.”

He yanks his phone out of my hand and hurries off to his car like he could possibly think that'd be the last he'd hear from me. I mean... really? I don't stop pestering until I get what I want.

It's not hard to find Henry and Waylon, who are busy battling the mighty unicorn right outside the car.

"Get this thing off him," Henry grumbles. "I can't get it undone."

"Weak creatures," I say as I pull out a knife and cut the string before tossing the balloon back into the car.

"Put the knife in there too. You know you're not getting inside with it."

"Such a ridiculous rule," I whine as I put my knife and two guns into the car. When I come out, Waylon is staring at me with wide eyes like he's never seen anything so magical!

"Why do you have so many weapons? Is he really the bad guy?" Waylon whispers to Henry. I notice he also puts Henry between us, probably because he's afraid of getting too close to someone who is so magnificent.

"Sometimes you have to rely on the bad guys because they're good at what they do," Henry explains.

"I just really feel like that wasn't a compliment," I grumble as I follow them into the building. They're expecting us, so they take us right back and get us into a room with Bennett.

Waylon looks so excited when he sees his older brother.

"I didn't know you were coming!" Bennett says, looking just as happy. They probably haven't had many chances to see each other if their aunt has been unwilling to look after Waylon.

"I didn't either! These guys just came and picked me up or kidnapped me, I'm not quite sure!" Waylon says as he waves at us. Bennett just smiles, probably thinking it was some kind of joke.

"Yes, and we can leave you to walk home if you're not careful," I mutter.

Bennett chuckles as he turns to me. “I know Chief Johnson, but I don’t know you.”

“Leland. I’m a PI.”

“Oh?” he asks. “How are you involved?”

“I... maybe tried hiring him,” Waylon says, refusing to look at his brother. His confession tanks Bennett’s mood if his face is anything to go by.

“Waylon, what did I say about keeping your nose out of it?” Bennett asks, voice sharp.

Waylon looks so desperate as he balls his hands up into fists. “I know you’re innocent! Why can’t I help you?”

“Because these are clearly people we shouldn’t mess with,” Bennett says. He looks tired and worn down. But what I see most is a brother willing to do anything to keep his younger brother safe. It’s apparent he cares a lot for Waylon, but he’s showing him no level of care behind these bars.

“Why’d you do it, then?” I ask.

Bennett turns to me, giving me a scrutinizing look. “What? I didn’t kill them.”

“I didn’t say kill them. I asked why you did it. You’re a smart kid. We looked into you. You graduated high school with all straight As. You’re a hard worker. I mean... people make stupid mistakes all the time, so that’s fair. But generally, those people don’t have others relying on them or the brains and motivation behind them like you do. You knew you were all your brother had and you still picked your life of crime over him?” I ask.

Waylon looks upset at me and quickly shakes his head, trying to dispel any idea that his brother could have possibly done something wrong. “He was trying to keep food on the table for us! He didn’t have an ID so he had to find a job where he could get paid under the table! I told you this.”

“You did, but do you really think a gang is the only place to get paid under the table?” I ask. “He could have gotten a job doing farm work. Hell, he could have gotten a job doing a lot

of different shit. But what's funny to me, Bennett, is that you used your ID to purchase a car six months ago, yet you had to work with the gang because you didn't have any identification that would allow you to get a job? I mean, Bennett, this works on your brother, but does it really work on people who can look into you?"

Bennett stares at me for a moment, like he's not even sure what to say.

"What do you mean? No, he had to do it," Waylon says, sounding hurt that I would even try to imply something else.

"Waylon, don't listen to them," Bennett orders.

"Even if your mother supposedly refused to give you any of your identification, you don't think there are other ways to get it? I'm not trying to tear you away from your brother. I'm trying to figure out why someone who cares so much about his brother would put himself in a predicament like this. You have to be smart enough to at least guess that the outcome of doing so would be death or imprisonment. You also had to assume your brother would likely follow in your shoes. But was it actually some kind of vendetta bullshit? You get in, gain their trust, blow up their supplies and try to play it off like you weren't involved, but instead, before you could make your escape, you got wound up in some kind of shooting where the blame all fell on your shoulders?"

Bennett is just staring at me now, like he's not sure what to say to keep out of this equation. I watch him and wait, but he's not prepared to give up his secrets even if it means it could help him.

"Do you know why Vance and his wife went missing?"

"What?" he asks in surprise. His reaction seems genuine enough that I don't think he knew. But there's still something between them that he's not letting on. A reason he went in and did what he did and then either killed those people or was forced to take the fall for it. "What do you mean they went missing?"

"Just what I said. Do you know where they are?"

“I have no idea.”

“Do you think it was because of the product you destroyed?”

“Do you know what they’re involved in?” he counters.

“Yes, they’re trafficking weapons while pretending like they’re a legit organization,” I say.

“Yet the police do nothing about them.”

“Because they can’t connect anything to them. Weirdly, if you’d have taken this information to someone like me or Henry here, we could have taken the gang down. That tells me you weren’t doing it for some goodwill. You were doing it to hurt them. Why’d you want to hurt them?”

He grits his teeth.

I need him to cave, just tell me something I can work with. “Bennett, we’re not here as the police. We don’t give a shit what you did. My job is to get you out of here because your brother paid me a fish sandwich to do so.”

Bennett is still silent, so I decide to fling at him what I think will get him to help me the most.

“Your brother tried joining the gang, did you know that?”

Waylon looks horrified as his eyes snap over to Bennett who is looking at me in shock. “No! Waylon—”

“You know how we met? When he was robbing a gas station,” I say, just tossing on the layers of concern.

Waylon is trying to shrink down in his chair, his eyes glued to his lap, and I’m sure he’s internally cursing me for all he’s worth.

“He could have died doing that, but he doesn’t care to look at it like that because he’s so fixated on saving you that he will put his life in danger in the hopes of proving that you’re innocent,” I continue.

“Waylon, why would you do that?” Bennett asks.

Waylon is fighting against tears but looks embarrassed as he angrily wipes one away. “B-Because I don’t know what to do without you! Because Macy doesn’t want me. She said I’m a bad influence for her kids. And I don’t want to be alone.”

“Fuck,” Bennett says as he drops his head. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to put you through all of this. I fucked up.”

“Then tell us what happened so we can get this cleared up,” I encourage.

“As I’ve told the police again and again, I didn’t shoot those people, but they don’t believe me. I... I did blow up the shipment of weapons. I admit... I wanted to get back at him. So my dad, Waylon’s stepdad, was involved with the gang and ended up dying. They claim they don’t know how and that it happened because of something he was working on himself, but I know it had something to do with them. I just... wanted to dig deeper. And in doing so, I found out that our mom was also involved. She won’t speak to us, but I started to assume there was the possibility of something between her and Vance, though I’m not sure about that.”

“What was your mom involved in?” I ask.

“I don’t know.”

“Where’s Waylon’s father?”

“We never met him,” Bennett says.

So when he says “involved,” is he meaning that their mom and Vance had a bit of a fling? He’s remaining vague and I feel like it doesn’t help that Waylon is here, latching on to every word he says.

“So you thought by destroying some of his shit, it’d make him hurt?” I ask.

Bennett ducks his head. “I don’t know what I thought. I was a fucking idiot, I guess. I don’t know,” he says quietly. “I made a mistake. I got so wrapped up in this idea of making him hurt, I didn’t think about how much he could make the people I care about hurt in return.”

“So you blew up his product and then?”

“I thought I’d hang around long enough to make it seem like I wasn’t just fleeing, you know? But that’s when he asked me to pick up this package. And when I got there, something immediately knocked me out and next thing I knew, I was surrounded by all these people who’d been shot. The first person I saw down was this one lady who was always real nice to me, so I rushed over to help her and that’s when the police caught me.”

“Kind of sounds like what happened here,” I say, since both instances had moments where people didn’t remember anything... as long as they’re telling the truth, that is. And honestly... I don’t think Bennett is, but why?

Bennett nods. “Yeah, I told the guards that, but no one listened to me. The feeling and everything was the same damn kind of thing, but they said I suffered head trauma that caused short-term memory loss. I guess I did have a blow to the head that really could be the reason I don’t remember anything, but it just seems weird, you know?”

“You don’t remember smelling anything at either location?” I ask.

“No... but I will say that guns weren’t the only weapons Vance was interested in. I don’t know much, but there were rumors that he was working on some other... weapons or whatever you want to call them.”

“Bennett, don’t forget that we want you out of here,” Henry says. “To accomplish that, we just need proof that you weren’t involved.”

He nods. “Okay. If I think of anything or hear anything, I’ll let you know.”

Henry and I step back to let Bennett and Waylon have some time together. We leave them to it for about an hour or so as we talk over what our next step should be.

Waylon seems disinclined to head back, but it’s already getting late, so Henry goes to collect him. Together, we walk back to the car, but I can tell Waylon’s reluctant to leave.

“Do you really think you’ll be able to get my brother out of prison?” Waylon asks, so much hope in his expression.

“Depends how many more fish sandwiches you buy me,” I decide.

“I will buy you as many as I can!”

“Do you know how much I generally charge people for this service?” I ask.

Waylon shrugs. “I don’t know... but I think I should get a discount for you harassing me.”

“Harassing you? Have I ever harassed you a day in my life? Henry, do I harass people?”

“I’m pretty sure every moment of every day,” Henry grumbles. “I’m convinced you might die if you don’t hit your harassment quota for the day.”

“That’s a strong possibility,” I realize as we get into the car. “You know what else is a strong possibility?”

“What?” Henry asks.

“That you should be nicer.”

“That doesn’t even make sense!” he says.

“It does to me!” I lean into the back seat. “Hey, Waylon.”

“Hmm?” he asks, giving me a serious look like he’s prepared for whatever serious topic I’m going to throw his way.

“Can I see your hand?”

“Uh... sure?” he agrees as he naïvely holds out his hand. Swift as lightning, I double knot that unicorn back to his wrist, horribly pleased with myself.

“Kid... you had to have known better,” Henry says.

“But... I... he... dammit,” he mutters under his breath as I cackle. I’m still cackling as I drive out of the area. The drive home isn’t too far, and then I’ll have to decide what we should do with the kid. He really shouldn’t be staying home alone when we have no idea what’s going on, so maybe I could put

him in the closet like I did Mila. Ahhh, I'm going to be such a good father.

"Hey, Henry, I'm going to be as good of a father as you are. And I just wanted to let you know that your children have deemed me to be the best child," I tell him.

"Please don't tell me you've found my children," he says.

I grin at him. "Why? Because you're afraid they'll cry after seeing how much better your new child is?"

"Definitely," he grumbles as I turn onto the one-lane road. It's a winding road, but it cuts the time to get back home by a significant amount as long as I don't get stuck behind a tractor like the last time Jackson and I were here.

As I round the bend, I see a car on the side of the road that almost immediately sets off my alarms. There's something about it that draws my attention, but there's no one around it...

Which means...

I quickly look to the right just in time to see a man stepping into view. I slam on the brakes and crank the wheel, but I'm already going too fast. I hear the *ping* of the bullet striking the front of the car.

"There's another," Henry says as I reach for my gun when the second gunman fires.

"Get down," I shout at Waylon as one of the shots strikes something under the hood that makes the goddamn car stall. Is the gunman just that talented or is our luck especially shitty today?

The car starts coasting as I wave for Henry to take over the steering wheel.

He grabs it as I roll down the window a moment before a bullet strikes the headrest that I'd thankfully been leaning away from. I shoot the gunman in the head, dropping him to the ground.

I aim the car toward the ditch, hoping that if I tuck the front end into it, the ditch will give us some kind of protection.

As soon as the car comes to a stop, I grab the kid, dragging him up to the front seat and pushing him to the floor.

“Henry, watch Waylon.”

“I’ve got him,” he says a moment before a barrage of bullets strikes the car, telling me someone has an assault rifle.

“Get into the trees and just run. I can’t tell how many are here. Obviously, it’s more than just one,” I instruct.

Pushing the door open, I slip out of the car, using it as a barrier between me and the shooters. The moment I try to peek around the edge, the man with the assault rifle aims at me. I drop down, waiting for him to hesitate so I can shoot again.

When there’s a moment of hesitation, I lean forward and shoot the man who decided that today would be a good day to be a pain in my ass. He stumbles back, out of the range of the shot as I see two more cars pulling up, packed with people.

“Leland, the car is smoking. You need to get away from it!” Henry yells.

I glance back to make sure he’s going to be safe as he shepherds Waylon into the tree line. On this side of the field, there’s not much in the way of trees for them to hide behind, but putting something between the gunmen and Henry and Waylon should be enough to keep them safe.

One of them seems to notice Henry and shifts his attention off me, but that’s the first and last mistake he’s going to make in this fight. I lift my gun, shooting at the man who seemed to only care about those two, but it puts me into the line of sight of the others. I do a quick scan of my surroundings and realize there are about seven or so people that I can see and who knows how many that I can’t.

The smoke coming from the car is providing some cover as I move to the side and fire another shot, knocking one to his knees. When he tries to get back up, a perfectly aimed bullet takes two of them down as I hear a gunshot behind me and freeze.

Fuck... were there more? Was someone waiting in the tree line that I missed? Did I send Henry headfirst into danger?

Fuck, fuck.

Turning my back on five or so people goes against everything I've ever learned, especially since it puts me at a higher risk of getting shot, but I can't leave Henry to get in trouble.

Backing up, I draw into the trees, using the trunks for cover as I move in the direction Henry had gone. At least it forces them to cross the road in order to follow me. I hesitate and take that moment to shoot two of them down. When the others pull back to put some distance between us, I rush into the trees. I don't see Henry right away, but I have to get to him. I can't let something happen to him.

I'm being careless, I know I'm being careless. I'm leaving my back open, but I can't let something happen—

I hear a scream that sounds like it came from Waylon, but my attention is drawn to some movement to the right. I see Henry hit the ground on his back, being pinned down by a man trying to hit him in the face.

Henry grunts as he flips the man onto his side but doesn't let go of the man as they scrabble on the ground.

"Henry," I say so he knows I'm here. He moves his head back and I pull the trigger, shooting the man off him. Henry throws the man the rest of the way off and pushes himself up before wincing.

"Waylon," he gasps as I see him rub his side.

"Did you get shot?"

"No, fucker just whaled on my ribs. I'm fine. Get Waylon."

I nod and start moving in the direction I'd heard Waylon. Honestly, I should have gone for him first. I should have focused on him and relied on Henry to handle the issue himself, but my relationship with Henry made me go to him first. I can't fathom the idea of losing him, causing me to lose track of who should take top priority.

“Looks like we have more visitors. Take care of them, I’ll get to Waylon,” Henry urges.

“Okay,” I say as I split off from him and hurry toward the people making their way toward us. They didn’t realize how much of a mistake they made when they decided to fixate on us.

I pull out a second gun as I strut onto the scene. They turn to face me, but it’s as simple as one, two, three as they go down one after another. I’ve always been fascinated by people willing to run into a gunfight that have no idea how bad their skills with a gun are.

The man with the assault rifle starts shooting, but with the trees blocking most of his hits, his lack of accuracy causes him to leave himself open on the side. He seems to notice at the last minute, so my first shot nicks him, but my second puts him down. While I’d love to force them to tell me who they’re working for and why they want us dead, I know I need to worry about Henry and Waylon, so I take off at a run to find them.

I don’t have to go far before Henry comes rushing back without Waylon.

“Where is he?”

“They have him in a car. We need a vehicle.”

“Can I make the shot?” I ask.

“You’re damn good, Leland, but I don’t think you can make this shot. We need a car.”

“Got it,” I say as we hurry back for the road.

I run for the closest car, tearing the door open and searching the ignition, but there’s nothing. I’m really hoping I don’t have to check the men I’d downed, but Henry yells for me.

He’s in the driver’s seat of a red four-door and is backing out onto the road by the time I reach him. I climb into the passenger seat as a shot pings off the mirror like someone *really* has a death wish. Rolling the window down, I see them

in the mirror and wait for them to take a second shot before sticking my head out of the window and shooting the man who really should have just played dead.

“Did you get a good look at the vehicle?” I ask as Henry guns it.

“Navy-colored four-door car. I didn’t get the make, but there are no turns off this road for a bit, are there?”

“I can’t remember any.”

“Fuck, I’m sorry,” Henry says, his hands gripping tightly onto the wheel.

The catch in his voice surprises me. “For?”

“I was supposed to watch Waylon. I should have left him with you.”

I glance over at the man who really is far too hard on himself. “Henry, if you’d left him with me, he could have gotten shot. No one can predict what will happen. You can’t blame yourself for something like this,” I assure him.

“I should have seen them coming,” he says.

“Henry, unless you can predict the future and you never told me about it, I don’t think there’s much that could have gone differently, you know? If we want to get technical, it’s my fault for bringing him along.”

“It’s sure as shit not that.”

“But what it does tell us is that Bennett’s not being fully truthful. He’s over here telling us it’s all some vendetta for his father... which I mean, technically it might have been, but why would they want Waylon? Pretty odd, isn’t it?”

“That’s true.”

“They could have snatched up this kid at any point, but instead, they find out we’re here the night after Vance and his wife were abducted and decide *then* that they need him? It’s all quite strange.”

“You think that Waylon’s related to them?” Henry asks as he slows just enough to not flip the car around a corner.

“That’s my bet. I wonder if Vance had a bit of fun on the side with Waylon’s mother, if Bennett is telling the truth about their mom working with Vance. That would make Waylon related to him. I wonder if somehow the person who took Vance knows and wants to use Waylon against him,” I say.

“High possibility.”

“Oh shit, I think that’s the car. You know what this calls for?”

“Not the car chase song. Please, not the car chase song,” Henry begs.

“How much do you not want it to be the car chase song?” I ask. “Like... hearing me rap again not wanting it?”

“You act like your rapping is *any* better.”

“What are you talking about? I’m phenomenal. Fine, fine.”

“Oh thank god,” Henry says.

“For what? I’m about to sing. You ready for this?”

“Jesus take the wheel,” he mutters, which makes me laugh. I’m not even sure what it means. Is it because he wants to place all of his attention on me to not miss a single moment as I belt out the greatest song ever created, or is it because he wants to have his hands free to clap when I’m done?

“It’s so I can plug my ears,” he grumbles, like he can read my mind.

“Caaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaar chase! Dun dun... Car chase... dun dun... Gotta chase that car, dun dun... gotta maim that man, dun dun... gotta show Jackson... dun dun... how to a climb a fence—”

“I swear it gets worse every time I hear it. Like do you ever even try to make it make sense?” Henry takes a deep breath like my singing is sapping the life out of his body. Maybe I should sing for my enemies if it’s that effective.

“I’m going to be real honest... that wasn’t my best performance. Do you think the well has run dry on my creative

juices? Fuck. I fear you're right, Henry. My rapping is actually better. What about the murder song?"

"What about calling Jackson and telling him what's going on so if something happens, he knows where we're at?"

"Good idea." The phone rings and rings before it goes to voicemail. "Hey, Jackson, my stud, my bro, I have Emily stopping by to talk to you at some point if she hasn't already. Henry and I are singing the car chase song together. I love you and miss you!"

"Tell him about the fucking gunfight!" Henry yells.

"Oh yeah, some people tried murdering us, but we're fine! Waylon maybe, *might* have gotten abducted but we're on the trail and will have him back home safe... at some point. If you're sad and miss me, spoon Blow-Up Randy. You know I get jealous when you get too frisky, though. Like that time I caught you two under the covers giggling."

"What the fuck was he giggling about?" Henry asks as I make sure to stay on the line so Jackson can hear *all* of this in the voicemail.

"I think he got his dick stuck in the mouth hole," I say, thrilled Jackson's not here to claim that that definitely didn't happen.

"Fucking hell, I shouldn't have asked."

"He was crying and everything. 'Leland, help! He's eating my dick! Nom nom...' that kind of thing."

"You just said he was giggling."

"Maybe I was giggling and he was crying, we'll never know," I say. "Anyway, Jackson, I promise I'll never tell anyone *else* about what happened... you know... with Blow-Up Rhonda. Okay, love you, bye!"

"It's a wonder he even claims you as his husband," Henry says.

I laugh as I reload my guns. "He loves it," I assure him. "As do you, which is why you continually join me."

Henry just grunts, which is the best confirmation I've ever heard *in my life*.

I dive into the back seat and toss the seat down before scavenging around in the trunk. When I see a gun case, I pop it open and “oooh” when I see it. I take out the rifle and glance through the scope to scout out the road ahead of me. “I can see them,” I say as I follow the car with my eyes. “They’re taking the first right up here. Looks like they’re pulling into a truck repair shop. I wonder if they’re doing a switch or a drop off.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“Pull into this area here, I’ll go in on foot,” I instruct.

“You sure?”

“Yeah. I’ll use the vehicles as cover. My guess is it’s a place to hold him until someone else shows.”

“There’s a good chance,” he says as he pulls off to the side of the road. I hop out and Henry follows right after me instead of *staying* in the car like I planned for him.

“I’m fine, you can stay,” I assure him.

“You’re not going alone,” he says, sounding determined.

“No, I *am* going alone. What if you get hurt? What if you get attacked? What if you’re wounded or mauled?”

“Is there a fucking bear?”

“Who would I call Daddy, then?”

Henry just grunts and takes out his gun. He’s such an unreasonable man.

We quickly move along the side of the vehicles, keeping an eye on the car in the middle in case they take off. If they do, I’ll shoot the tires to keep them from going far since I can see Waylon—well, his balloon—in the back seat.

We quietly make our way toward the car, only stopping when we’re close enough to hear them talking. I put up a finger to have Henry wait a moment so I can listen to what they’re talking about.

“Where the fuck are they?” a familiar voice asks.

Of course good ol’ Summers is involved. It sure appears like despite being concerned about Emily and being surprised by Vance’s disappearance, he’s sticking his nose into other shit.

What a mess.

When we get close enough, I scout out the area to see what’s going on. Waylon’s in the back seat of the car looking absolutely terrified, along with his balloon. Summers is leaning against the side of the car in a heated discussion with some guys facing him. There are two more standing outside a different car, hands on their guns, like they’re ready to fuck shit up.

I glance over at Henry who looks at me.

I eye flick toward the guys with the guns to indicate “I’m going to take those two motherfuckers out like I took Jackson out last Friday night—wet and hard.”

Henry squints in a “What the fuck’s that mean, I haven’t gotten laid in *years*” kind of way.

I jerk my head toward the others in a “You sit your derriere down right there. I hope you like checkers because I’m going to get a checkmate” kind of way.

He narrows his eyes in an “I only play chess” kind of way.

Fuck, how was I supposed to know that? Have I really not known anything about Henry all along? Or wait... maybe he’s afraid of getting dirty but for fuck’s sake, he already rolled around on the ground once. His dark skin has a fine dusting of leaves and mud speckled about like some kind of wilderness fashion statement that he is *pulling off*.

I take my overshirt off and set it on the ground for his precious bum to keep it from getting dirty. Then I point down at it, which just makes Henry narrow his eyes further.

“No,” he mouths like the stubborn man he is!

“FINE,” I mouth back. Then I mime that I’ll take the guys with the guns, he’ll take Summers down.

He holds a finger out like he thinks such a simple movement can get me to sit tight while he wanders off. Confused, I watch him go. Once he's gone, I'll just take care of all of this myself before he can find himself in danger again. But just as I lift up the gun, I see the car he'd stolen chugging down the road.

Is he *leaving* me? Has he had enough of my superior eye flicks that he's decided that he's just going to fuck off and leave me here all alone? Does he not realize that I am a lonely man who thrives off torturing people with my hilarious—to me—humor?

And that's when the car leaps off the road and rushes right toward them. All eyes are on the vehicle as the men lift their guns, but before they can shoot, I take them down. Henry's car hits a pothole and jerks forward, nearly hitting Summers who dives to get out of the way. While all that's happening, I take down the rest of the men who weirdly seem to think this car is much more concerning than I am.

When Summers and Waylon are the only ones left, Henry gets out and I jog up to meet him.

"Just the way I planned it," I announce.

Henry's attention snaps over to me. "Excuse me? I'm pretty sure your eye seizures didn't foresee *any* of this."

"My eyes weren't having seizures! I was telling you what to do."

Henry scoffs like he could possibly not have realized that. That's when I see Summers trying to crawl away.

"Ohhhhh, *Suummmmersssss*," I purr, thrilled about the torture I'm about to inflict on this man. "Let's tie him to the trunk and drag him."

Summers's eyes get wide as this information settles in.

"Do you think he'll talk sooner than that last guy? You know, the one you ran over," Henry, the devilish man he is, says.

“Ohhhh, with my Lickety-Split Luxurious Lift?” I ask. “I guess one way to find out—”

Summers looks desperate now as he shakes his head. “No! You can’t do this. And aren’t you with the fucking police?” he asks Henry, sounding rather desperate.

“Am I?” Henry asks.

“Is he?” I wonder.

Summers is acting a bit dramatic now. “Of course he is!”

“That’s his twin brother Henry. This is Hunry. Like hungry without the G. It’s a tragic story about two beefy and fabulous men separated at birth. Then when their parents get married, they realized they’d been twins all along.”

“What?” the man asks like he could somehow be struggling to follow the epic tale of Hunry.

“Hunry, get the nut snippers out of the trunk... or wait... do we want to drag him by his nuts?”

“I’m afraid they’ll snap off before we get too far,” Henry says.

“Fuck, you’re right. He looks like he has weak nuts and the moment they pop off... that would probably be a bit gross.”

“I’ll fucking talk!” Summers says.

“Well, that’s no fun. Hunry, he caved too easily. I think we should punish him for caving too quickly.”

“So you’ll punish him if he doesn’t cave but also punish him if he does?” Henry asks.

“Right. A man like him should hold out at least until I remove a fingernail or two.”

“What the fuck, man?” Summers asks.

“Fine, fine, I’ll take pity on you because, clearly, I’m a sucker. Why are you taking Waylon?”

“I don’t fucking know. I was told to grab him.”

“By whom?”

“By Trenton, the buyer Vance was selling to. The guy gave Vance a few days to get him his supplies or his money back. I called Trenton up and told him I saw you guys at the prison asking about Vance. He told me to grab the boy, and if I did, he’d leave Emily alone.”

“Is Waylon Vance’s son?” I ask.

“Fuck if I know. Trenton just said if I want Emily to be left alone, to snatch up the boy. So we fucking snatched him and then you assholes came and—”

“You act like we were supposed to lie down when you guys were *shooting at us*, huh, Hunry?”

“Yeah.”

“See? You heard it here from Hunry,” I say.

Summers looks rather desperate, which is kind of pitiful, really. Not pitiful enough that I stop harassing him, but you know... I at least appreciate the emotional effort in trying to get me to cave.

Summers chokes out, “I didn’t know they were going to start shooting. My job was to wait here and hand the boy off.”

“They’re picking him up here?”

“Yes, we have a transporter coming.”

“Oh? Do these transporters know the people who were supposed to grab Waylon?”

“No. These guys were just fodder to them,” he says.

“Oh? Well then, I guess we better get ready for them. Summertime, clean up these bodies and snap to it unless you want your body to join the group.”

Summers leaps to his feet and scurries off.

“You’re going to go with them?” Henry asks.

“Well, I want to see what questions we can get answers to before we run off,” I say. “I mean... why not be invited right into the lion’s den, right? Easiest way to ask questions.”

“Maybe because that’s not *your job*. Your job is to find out why Bennett was involved in multiple people dying and get him out of prison *if* he’s innocent.”

“Ohhhhhhhhh.” I think about it for a moment before tossing out another long “Ohhhhhh. Shit, Hunry, I forgot. I’ll keep you two out of it.”

“All of our issues are because you’re so damn nosy. Let’s grab the kid and go.”

“Too late,” I say as a car pulls up and a beefy guy gets out. Summers has only accomplished dragging one of the men a few feet when our new guys arrive. As in, he’s literally still holding on to the guy he was dragging. The newcomer looks like he could crush my body with a squeeze of his hand and the other who’s just exited the car is a woman who appears like she’s just gotten out of bed, but I bet your ass she’s the more lethal one.

“What’s going on?” the man asks.

“These assholes attacked us. I think we took care of them though, right, Summertime?” I ask.

“R-Right! We were just... moving the bodies... away from the road. But we like... got Waylon like your boss wanted... and are ready.”

“We’ll take it from here,” the guy says as he heads toward Waylon.

That makes me laugh. “I don’t think so. I was hired to personally deliver Waylon to them. I don’t know any of you, and I don’t trust either of you.”

“I don’t recognize you,” the lady says.

“Just the way I like it. I am Trenton’s whisper in the night. His ghost in the shadows. His sneaky snail,” I say as I reach into the vehicle where Waylon is hugging his unicorn like it’ll save his life. I haul him out and drag him with me as I consider if I should shoot these two and run with Waylon or go with them.

The issue with running is that they obviously want him—and not to hurt him—and seem pretty ruthless. Will they just keep coming for Waylon until I stop them? So if I go in, and clear them out, Waylon will have nothing to fear.

“What’s with the unicorn?” the woman asks.

“It’s so I don’t lose track of him, obviously. Imagine trying to hide with a giant inflatable horned horse.” I give Waylon a pat on the back, then Henry a pat on the back and off we go, putting ourselves into the back of the bad guys’ vehicle.

“What are you doing?” the lady asks. “Summers, who the hell are they?”

“T-They’re good with guns and managed to take down these bodyguards the kid had on him, soooo...” Summers is looking at me like he wants some show of approval of his role-playing.

These people are just transporters or mercenary types, so they don’t seem to know shit and care even less seeing as they have the package in tow.

“Summers, come along,” I urge, and he unwillingly comes over to the car. Seeing as all seats are taken as the man and woman get in the front, he seems unsure of what to do. “Pop the trunk for him.”

“Okay!” the lady says and pops it without hesitation. The look of glee on her face as Summers slowly climbs into the trunk tells me that I have found a new friend.

“What is your name, you lovely lass?”

“Pia, yours?”

“This is Hunry and I’m Salsa Von Sauce,” I say.

“That’s what your mother named you?” Pia asks.

“The moment I popped out and she looked at my smooshed head and red face, she just knew the perfect name for me.”

“Wow, what a touching story,” she says.

“Right? You have kids, Pia?”

“No, no. Children give me hives.”

“Just like from looking at them?” I ask.

“Yeah.” She shudders.

“I had a child for a bit. She wasn’t actually mine, but I let her sleep in the closet at my work and taught her how to shiv people. It was a lot of fun, but I realize it’s not for everyone,” I say.

“Mr. Salsa—or is it Mr. Sauce?” Pia asks.

“Either is fine.”

“You are the most suspicious man I’ve ever met in my life, and yet if this was a video game, your charisma would be maxed out.”

“Oh my god, that’s the nicest thing anyone’s ever said to me. Daddy Hunry over here tells me that my voice is like the sound of banshees dying.”

“I’m going to admit that when I pulled up, I thought something sketchy might have been going on, but there’s absolutely no way two people who were trying to fit in would be this suspicious,” Pia says.

“Right?” I look over at Waylon who is holding on to his unicorn like it has a higher chance of saving him than any of us. “Summers, you’re awfully quiet back there. Is it comfy?”

His “Yes” is rather muffled, but I have to assume that’s because of how comfortable he is. Not at all because he’s dreadfully stuffed in the trunk of the car.

Pia looks back at us as I pluck the unicorn’s horn, making Waylon jump. “You’re married?” she asks as she notices my wedding ring.

I gasp. “Would you like to hear how I met my one true love?”

“For fuck’s sake,” Henry grumbles. “No one wants to hear this story.”

“Dark night! Stealthy assassin. PI scuttling toward a fence... Theeeeeee Fence.”

“Is this like some kind of obscure theater or something?” she asks.

“Oh, Pizza, you’re hilarious. I’m actually a licensed love therapist. Do you have any love woes you’d like to share with me?” I ask.

“It’s Pia, and nope. I am happily single.”

“I’m actually the reason Hunry and his wife have been together for so long. I saved their marriage,” I inform her.

“You did?” Henry asks. “When was it ever in peril?”

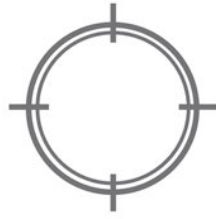
“I’ve saved his marriage, his life, his dignity, and his sanity. Basically, Daddy Hunry owes me his life and firstborn child.”

“My firstborn child was born before you were,” Henry says. “Are we there yet?”

The woman shakes her head. “Not yet.”

“Christ,” Henry groans. “I’m taking a nap. Salsa Alfredo or whatever your code name is today, just be good.” And with that, Henry closes his eyes.

NINETEEN



When we roll up to the fancy mansion, I can't help but wonder if Jackson would like this place once I dispose of the former owner. I'm pretty sure finders keepers works with mansions once the cleaners have come in to whisk away the bodies, right?

Instead of waking Henry up like normal, I kiss his cheek as loudly as I can. His eyes shoot open, then they narrow as he looks over at me.

“Are you two actually married?” she asks.

“We are!” I say.

“We are not!” Henry declares.

“He's the little spoon and I'm the big spoon.”

“This isn't happening,” he decides.

“Because he loves me so much, he told me he'd buy me the moon to express how deep his love goes. Isn't that sweet?”

“I've regretted it every day,” Henry says as he gets out of the car. I push Waylon out who is trying to convey something with his eyes.

I feel it's something like “This is so cool! It's like take your kid to work day,” but the way he's gripping that balloon is a bit more like “I'm pretty sure I'm going to die.”

I pat his head to reassure him that death is not on the menu, then give him a finger gun and a wink. His eyes get wider, almost like he's confused by my gentle showing of

kindness. Patting him on the head again also doesn't seem to do the trick, telling me that this kid is just easily terrified.

As Pia and the big man who I obviously never cared enough about to get his name lead the way, I lean toward Waylon. "If they were going to kill you, they wouldn't go to all of this work," I whisper.

He hesitates before nodding because he realizes that I'm actually quite brilliant. My guess is that inside these walls are Vance and his wife. Vance is actually Waylon's father, so Trenton is going to use Waylon against Vance to get something out of him. But... wouldn't he get better results from Emily? Eh, I guess I'm going to find out!

The five of us head into the home and past a few people who I assume are guards. As we walk and I blab about absolute nonsense to show them how bored I am, I'm calculating the positions and number of people in each room. I'm also identifying the exits and where the keys to the car are, which I easily snatch up by pretending to stumble into the big guy who had them hanging out of his back pocket.

When we reach the main room, I direct Waylon inside and find a dark-haired middle-aged man seated behind a desk talking to a few others. When he notices us, he looks elated and smiles, thrilled that we've brought Waylon to him.

"Waylon, it's lovely to finally meet you," Trenton says.

"W-Why do you want me?" Waylon stammers, sounding rather terrified.

"I'm sorry, did they scare you?" the man asks like he actually cares.

"They... someone *shot* at us, wrecked our car, chased me through the woods, threw me into a car, and you want to know if they scared me? Is this a fucking joke? Is this about what my brother did?"

"It's not a joke, Waylon. The thing is, your brother didn't want you near me, and do you want to know why?" Trenton asks with an annoying smile on his face.

"I don't give a shit," Waylon settles on.

Trenton doesn't stop smiling but it does look a bit more forced now. "You're my son, Waylon. Your brother has been doing everything he could to keep you away from me."

Waylon hesitates before shaking his head and I find that he doesn't look overly surprised. Did he already know this? "N-No, you're not... and even if you are, I just want my brother."

"Ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhh," I say.

Henry gives me a look.

"No, no, no, Hunry, this makes sense now!" I exclaim. "So Trenton tries to get in contact with Waylon, but Bennett stops him. Trenton then tells Bennett that he will stay out of Waylon's life if Bennett goes into Vance's group and blows up the supplies meant for Trenton."

"Why would he blow up his own supplies?" Henry asks.

"So he doesn't look guilty and still has an excuse for practically ruining Vance. And then to get rid of Bennett, he staged it to look like Bennett killed those people and voila, done!" I say, rather proud of myself.

No one else in the room seems overly proud of me, which is a bit rude if you ask me. I don't see them figuring out shit!

"Who the hell are you two?" Trenton asks.

"They said they worked for you," Pia says.

"They most definitely don't."

"I hired them," Waylon announces. "They're my bodyguards. So don't touch them."

"And why do you have a unicorn balloon?" Trenton asks.

"Fuck you. Did you set up my brother?" Waylon demands.

"I did not. Now I won't deny the rest of that rant, but I wasn't involved with your brother's arrest. He did what I asked so I told him I'd stay out of your life, but now that you're all alone, I can't fathom that's what you want to do, now is it, Waylon? I mean, look at this house. Look at all that I could give you."

Waylon hesitates before saying, “All I want is to get my brother out of prison. He didn’t kill those people. I know he didn’t!”

Trenton stares at him before looking at me and Henry. “Of course I’ll try to get him out.”

“You really think anyone your brother would go so far to keep you away from is a good guy?” I ask Waylon. “I mean, look at his smile. It’s creepy, right?”

Trenton’s smile falls to a grimace. “Who the fuck *are* you two? Someone escort them out.”

“Then we’re all going!” Waylon decides as he backs up until he bumps into me.

Trenton’s face sours as I try to figure out *why* he wants Waylon so badly. He could have sent any one of his guys over to Vance’s side to do what they did, but he specifically sent Bennett, like he wanted to get him out of the picture. And Bennett’s being obstinately untruthful. Is that to keep Waylon from knowing that Trenton is his father? But Waylon’s reaction wasn’t one of shock. And couldn’t Trenton have sent someone to Bennett’s house, scooped up Waylon and brought him here?

That’s when I realize the issue here.

I’m not a brain man. I’m a shoot at people until they talk kind of man. All that brain stuff can be Cassel’s to deal with.

“Well, it was nice knowing you, we shall be on our way! Don’t ever bother Waylon again or I will make you regret it,” I decide as I set a hand against Waylon’s back and turn him around. The moment I do, Pia and the three other men in the room all aim their guns at me.

“Pia, no! Your name really means pain in the ass, doesn’t it? It was in front of me all along!”

“Why would you not let Waylon go so he can have some time to comprehend the information you just told him?” Henry asks.

“No! Henry, don’t talk them out of a fight!” I whisper.

He glares at me, but I sigh, sadly seeing his side.

I suppose I'll give in, just this once. "Alright, fine, fine. We'll take Waylon home and you can be in touch. Maybe buy him something. Kids love presents and fathers who are actually not egotistical pieces of shit. So like a PlayStation, a car. Just not a unicorn since I already did."

"Waylon, these two have been filling your head with shit," Trenton says.

Waylon shakes his head. "No they haven't! They haven't filled my head with anything. I... I agree that I want to go home and think about what you told me. I... I'll call you, and then we can like... meet up or something," he says, trying to sound like he'd actually do any of this when it's quite clear he wants nothing more than to run home and never see this man again.

"I'm sorry, Waylon, but as your father, I don't like the idea of you running around like this with these sketchy people!"

"I take offense at that!" I say. "Only one of us is sketchy, and we all know which one!"

Henry looks over at me with a raised eyebrow. It's all the attention I need to convey to him with a single flick of my eyes that I'll need him to simply grab Waylon and do a backflip out of the room.

He sighs in an "I only do backflips for my wife, but I'll do the rest" kind of way.

"Kill those two, don't hurt Waylon," Trenton orders before I can even explain what I want. I mean, *come on*. Kill us? How the hell will you get shit out of your son with that... or is there some reason Waylon can't leave this house now that he knows Trenton's his father? Is he afraid of Bennett finding out what happened? Or is it something else?

I push Waylon toward Henry and lift my gun, shooting the guy closest to the door in the knee before he can even aim his gun at us. Henry shoves Waylon through the door, and before anyone can follow, Henry slams the door shut, closing me inside with the group of them.

“Salsa Von Sauce is prepared to tango. Would you like to kowtow to me now or would you prefer Velveeta and Sriracha to help?” I ask as I flash them my two guns.

“I’m pretty sure this guy is fucking nuts,” Pia says.

Apparently, the guy closest to me doesn’t understand threats and aims his gun *at* me. Without missing a beat, I shoot him in the leg and he bows quite well to me.

“Alright, Trenton, are you going to tell me exactly why you want Waylon so badly?”

Instead of answering, he glowers at me. “What the fuck are you limpdicks waiting for? Kill him and grab the kid!”

“But he’s so fast,” the big guy with Pia complains. “And I like my legs.”

“Finally, a sensible man,” I say.

“I sure don’t have a limp dick,” Pia says as she shoots at me. I kick a chair her way and as she steps to the side to avoid it, I shoot the side of her leg as a warning.

“Fuck,” she hisses before stepping behind her buddy, making him her very own shield.

“If any of you move again, the next hole you’ll have is in the head,” I warn them. “Trenton, why is Waylon so important to you? If you actually wanted him as your son, this surely wouldn’t be the way you’d go about it, right?” I ask as Pia peeks around the corner and tries shooting me again. She’s dumb enough that she thinks I can’t shoot her between the big guy’s legs.

The cry she gives tells me that she might regret sassing me.

Trenton quickly kicks his desk toward me and drops down, trying to use it for cover. There’s a door behind him, which I fully expect him to go for, but a gunshot outside the room makes me hesitate. I freeze as I think about the possible danger I’ve just put Henry in.

“*Fuuuck,*” I whine as Trenton gets away, forcing me to rush out the other door to catch up with Henry and Waylon. I

guess I'll get those two out and to safety and then worry about Trenton at a later time.

I haven't heard another gunshot but that doesn't exactly *mean* Henry got hurt. Henry could have been the one who fired, or he could have put some distance between them. Either way, my ultimate goal is getting to him.

A man comes around the corner with a gun, and my main thought is if someone's holding a gun they want to be shot, so I shoot him in a nonlethal spot, in case he's a halfway decent man. Another shoots at me from behind but the turn in the hallway keeps him from having the vantage point on me, and I reach the foyer. I don't see Henry or Waylon but through the window, I see that balloon galloping away.

Rushing through the front door, I notice a man running after them. I leap off the porch and onto his back, riding him like a bucking bronco as I shoot at the two guards racing after Henry and Waylon who've ducked behind the car for some cover.

"What the fuck are you doing?" the man yells. He tries to pull me off as I spur him in the sides.

He's definitely the worst horse I've ever ridden, and I've even forced Cassel to carry me before with his tiny and weak body!

Speaking of Cassel, I feel like he shouldn't get to do all the cool moves, and I decide that I am going to throw this man on his ass like Cassel did to Tavish.

Then I can brag about how fucking easy it is!

I hook the man with my legs just like Cassel did and throw myself backward. He teeters like Tavish did before promptly slamming down onto his back. Issue is that it wasn't clear at which moment I was supposed to do a fancy little flip and fling the man. No, I'm one hundred percent still attached as he slams me into the ground, knocking the air out of me as he collapses on top of me.

I've become a pancake.

This is my fate.

Bested by Cassel, I shall lie down and die beneath the body of a man who isn't my husband.

Fate can be so cruel!

Alas... maybe I deserve it!

Maybe if I hadn't been trying to one-up Cassel, I could have just shot him or choked him out like I normally would and wouldn't be lying here, limp and alone.

I only wish... I could have told... Jackson I loved him one last time...

Two hands grab on to me, dragging me out from under the man and across the driveway.

"Am I in heaven?" I whisper.

"What the absolute hell was that?" Henry asks. I'm crammed into the car as people come rushing out of the house.

Henry hits the push-button start for the car—it's a good thing I stole those keys!

"Henry," I whisper as he throws the car into reverse. "If you ever wanted to be the best pal ever, the best bud a bud could have... please don't tell Cassel about that."

"Is that what you were trying to do? Reenact Cassel's little stunt?"

"I have killed men with paper clips, a box of Kleenex, a laser cat toy, and some lip balm... but this... this was too much for me," I whisper. "For that, I'm ashamed."

"How about you shoot the assholes following us and forget all of that?"

The oppressive weight of failure lifts off me as his words hit me like I smacked him with Blow-Up Rhonda.

"THERE'S SOMEONE FOLLOWING US?" I ask, absolutely thrilled as I roll down the window.

"Why are you rolling down the window?" Waylon asks in alarm.

“Because it’s a CAR CHASE! Waylon, sing with me,” I say, shoving my head out the window as a car careens out of the driveway and onto the road. “*Car chase, car—*”

I steady my gun and shoot the driver as he speeds up. The shot is perfect and precise, right through the front windshield, hitting the man in the shoulder and causing the car to leap off the road and into the ditch.

“FUCK,” I hiss as I defeatedly sink back into my seat. “Henry?”

“What, Leland?”

“I shot him too quickly,” I whisper.

“That’s a good thing,” Henry says as he pats my head.

“Yeah, but I wanted an actual car chase.”

“I know, but I didn’t want to get shot, so good job! That was a phenomenal shot!”

“It was?” I ask, feeling a tiny bit of pride. Maybe not enough to wash away my former failures but enough to help me go on.

“Very good!”

“Thanks.” I feel a tiny bit better. “And you’re never going to tell Cassel, right?”

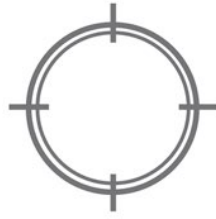
“Uh-huh,” he says, not sounding all that convincing.

“Henry, *right?*”

“Of course not.”

The smirk on his face tells me that Henry has become a liar.

TWENTY



JACKSON

I have half a mind to drive to meet up with Leland, but I keep feeling like it'll be resolved by the time I get there. If I'd have left back when he first started harassing people, I would have made it in time.

I just have to remember that he's with Henry and that everything is fine. Henry *has* to be the most sensible man in our group. There's no way Leland's broken him down enough to willingly join him in something that could be disastrous... right?

It's getting late but if I send this information off to the client tonight, then it'll be one less thing to deal with if whatever disaster Leland's gotten roped into escalates. He'll have to come back here anyway to get Henry's car, although the last I heard, Leland's car wasn't actually running.

Why it wasn't running, I'm not quite sure. It could be a dead battery or he could have driven it through a building while singing about a car chase.

The possibilities are endless.

Grabbing my stuff, I hurry over to the front door of Wellstone and push it open before walking inside. I set my bag next to my laptop before pushing the lid open, which is when I hear the squeak of something upstairs.

Hesitating, I look up and listen as an uncomfortable feeling ripples through me. One that tells me that I need to be wary of what made that noise. For a long moment, I stand there and

listen, trying to pinpoint if it was just the pipes or if something is wrong.

I don't hear anything else, but there's no damn way I'm sitting down. Pulling out my phone, I quickly text Cassel.

Me: Did the security system at our work pick up anything?

Cassel doesn't reply right away, and I'm not sure how long I want to foolishly stand here if it really was the pipes squeaking. With gun in hand, I slowly start to make my way up the stairs. We used to have our office upstairs while a bookstore was downstairs, but once we'd bought the building, we found it more convenient to relocate our office area into the space down below.

Once everything moved downstairs, upstairs basically became our storage area, so it's fairly open with some stuff crammed here and there. With my gun in hand, I reach the second floor, peeking around the corner in time to see that I'm not alone.

No, Vance is sitting in a chair, tape over his mouth and arms and legs bound to the chair. For the briefest of moments, I find myself questioning if this is the work of Leland or Cassel and they forgot to tell me or possibly forgot him up here.

But for the man who is obviously awake to be so damn quiet...

Quickly I turn and jump back as I come face-to-face with a gun fixed on me. Since we both have our guns pointed at each other, I find myself unsure of what to do. The man is dressed in dark colors, a mask over his head, gun in a steady hand.

Even though it'd really only taken me seconds to notice him, he could have shot me the moment I walked up here.

"This wasn't for you," he says.

"Who was it for?" I ask, not quite sure what game we're playing.

What does he even mean? Wasn't for me as in someone else hired him to grab Vance and he thought he'd deliver him here? I can't fathom Cassel or Leland hiring someone when they could do the deed themselves.

Or is he the man who shot Dallas through the window? If he is, our speculation that it could have been Micah flies right out that window; this masked man is around Leland's height of six feet, but he's not as tall or as built as Micah.

"Who are you?"

"You think you can take what I deserve?" he asks.

"What are you talking about?" And while I say this, I have a very bad feeling I know who this involves.

His voice has a dark tone to it, and it's so low and quiet it's almost like he's whispering to me. "You've made a fucking mistake."

"How?" I ask.

"You don't even know him."

"Trust me, I know him quite well. Why don't you leave?" While I really don't want to let this man out into the world to harass Leland, I'm not quite sure how I'm going to accomplish anything like this.

Not when there's a gun on me, a hostage in the chair, and a man I know very little about beyond what I'm starting to believe is a fascination for Leland.

"How sure are you that between the two of us, I should be the one to leave?" he asks as he steps toward me.

"Don't move."

"Or what? You'll shoot me? If you pull the trigger, I'll pull the trigger. It's not a hard concept. And really, what did I do wrong? I brought Leland what he wanted—the very man who tried to arrange his death multiple times. Yet what have you done? You're not even *with* him."

I grit my teeth, hating that this man is trying to feed into my insecurities revolving around protecting Leland. "He can

take care of himself,” I growl. “The thing he hates most is people smothering him.”

“Ah, is that right?” he mocks.

Who the hell does this guy think he is? Clearly, he’s someone who knows Leland and has developed some kind of obsession with him.

“Allow me to fix your mistakes,” he says as he pulls out a second gun and shoots Vance in the head. The hit knocks Vance back into the chair which teeters and then collapses to the ground. All the while, the man keeps the other gun trained on me, eyes watching for any moment where I’ll make a move. The moment where I’ll fuck up.

The glass shatters and the man cusses as I duck down behind the protection the walls around the stairs provide. I rush down the stairs, wanting to find good cover if he chooses to follow me. I press myself up against the desk and train my gun on the stairwell, but he didn’t appear to have followed me, telling me he must have escaped the second floor through the window.

There’s a knock on the door behind me.

“Open this shit up,” a voice demands.

It’s not Cassel, who I had guessed had taken the shot, but I suppose that makes sense. He doesn’t live close enough to get here and get into position in that time. Instead, the person I find outside the door is Micah, another of Lucas’s prodigies.

“Micah?” I say in surprise.

“You’re Leland’s fling, right?” he asks, and then pets me on the head like I’m a dog before heading toward the stairs.

“Did you shoot at him?” I ask.

“I sure did! I only managed to nick him, though; the position was awkward.”

“Mind me asking how you knew what was going on?”

“Oh totally. Cassel reached out asking if I was involved, and I said no but if he paid me enough, I would merrily join in.

He was all ‘I’m pretty sure you made out last time, how could you *possibly* need more money,’ and in response to that, I told him that he should just sit quietly and look cute.”

“I would assume that he’d be quite pissed after that,” I say.

“You’d assume right! Little fucker told me to come on down so he could ‘fix my face.’ Do you see anything wrong with my face?” He tilts his face this way and that, like there could actually be something wrong with it.

“Maybe not your face, but your brain is another question since I feel like we have *much* more concerning things going on than this conversation right now,” I remind him.

Micah raises an eyebrow. “Ah, right, right. So there I was rolling in when I see this mystery man dragging this dude into your place. I know you guys don’t do things quite... normal—I mean, look at the company you keep—but it still felt a little bit off to me.”

“You thought a masked man dragging a bound man into our office was just ‘a little bit off’?”

He points at me as we make our way upstairs to see what’s going on. “Correct.”

“Uh-huh... Okay...”

“So I decided to go and get a good look. That’s when you came in and went upstairs to deal with them.”

I take a deep breath in the hopes of gathering my thoughts. “You... you saw this happen and let me wander inside anyway?”

Micah laughs before patting my back. “The way you say it almost makes it sound like I’m a monster! Maybe if you were paying me, I would have been able to warn you in time. Oh, and that shot I took? That’s going to cost you.”

“What?” I ask in disbelief.

“My current rate is fifteen K per trigger pull.”

Who does this man think he is and why the hell is he the one who saved me?

“I’m not paying you,” I say, unable to comprehend why he thinks I should!

He pulls out his phone. “Nine... one... one...” He makes a show of dialing the emergency line but doesn’t press send as he goes, “I would like to report a murder, oh my!”

“You are a piece of work,” I growl.

Micah grins, finger hovering near the call button as I realize that I need Leland or Cassel to figure out this fucking mess and hopefully get rid of this guy... oh, and the dead guy. I mean... technically I did nothing wrong, but having a dead gang leader bound on the upper floor of—

I hear the front door open and then a “Hello?”

What the hell is it now?

“I’ll kill her for a second fifteen thousand,” Micah says as he mimes shooting a finger gun in the direction of the doorway.

“Just... don’t talk,” I decide as I hurry down the stairs to where I swear my heart stops for a moment as I lay my eyes on Emily... as in the daughter of Vance—who is super dead upstairs.

“You really are that stripper,” she says as she eyes me.

My disguise was apparently pretty shitty, but I give her a smile. “I was told you’d be stopping by. You said someone called you over the disappearance of your father?”

Micah, who’d followed me downstairs, gasps.

I quickly shoot a look at him as Emily looks over at him.

“Did something happen?” she asks.

He looks thoughtful as he asks, “Does your dad have like... short brown hair that’s graying a bit on top? Dorky oval glasses?”

“Yeah?” she says before her eyes get wide. “Have you seen him?”

Micah's quiet for a long moment as I try as hard as I can to convey with my eyes that we most definitely have not seen the man. "Nope, never seen him before." For fuck's sake, this man is going to get me sent to prison and he's going to *enjoy it*.

Emily deflates. "Oh. Okay. Here's my phone that they made the call to me on. I'll... I'll be using my girlfriend's phone until you can get it back to me, so I put a sticky note with her number on there. I'm really worried about my mom... she doesn't seem to know all of what my father gets into, and I'm afraid his... shit is going to get her hurt."

"I'm sure your father won't be hurting her," Micah says. "Call it a hunch."

Who the hell invited this guy here?

She nods as she rubs her eyes. "I really hope."

"Maybe she'll even find herself a new husband," Micah says. "I mean... another one, you know?"

Emily gives him a soft laugh and shakes her head. "Yeah, I doubt that, but who knows. Trust me, it'd be good for all of us if she did. I care about my dad but sometimes it's hard, you know? I don't even know half of what he gets into, but what I do know isn't good."

Micah opens his mouth again, so I shove him back and step up to Emily as I take the phone she's giving me. "I promise we'll do what we can. Please go somewhere safe. We don't know for sure that there's no one out there looking for you, okay?"

"Okay," she agrees. "My girlfriend's waiting for me in the car, so I'm at least not alone."

"Please be careful."

"I will!" she says before rushing off to the car.

I hurriedly close the door before Micah can say something else.

"Talk about awkward!" he comments.

"Who invited you?" I hiss.

“You act like you don’t want me, but I’m pretty sure I just kept you from dying or something like that,” he says.

Quickly, I call Leland, but the phone rings and rings. When I hang up, I almost immediately get a text from him.

Leland: Sorry I missed your call. Hunry and I just pulled in to grab some food, do you want me to call back or were you just checking in?

Who the hell is Hunry? Henry? Does he mean Henry?

I call Cassel next, but it’s evidently not needed when the door is jerked open, and he looks in on us with Jeremy right behind him.

“Huh, didn’t expect to see you, Micah. I thought you said you didn’t have anything to do with this,” Cassel says.

“Correct, but I’m also a nosy man and the group of you are clearly in need of my superior help. Hell, I just saved this man here,” Micah says as he pets me again. Leland would be spitting fire if he saw anyone pet me as much as this man has.

“I can’t believe the security system went down. We were at the movie theater, and I didn’t see the alert. Are you okay?” Cassel asks me.

“Yeah. But we have a problem upstairs,” I tell him as I point up to where the very dead problem waits for us. “Someone seemed to have brought Vance here for us.” I follow Cassel as he hurries upstairs to see what’s going on.

“Well, that’s not good,” he says as he eyes the dead body currently making a mess on the floor. I mean, Vance was definitely not a good guy, and honestly, he probably deserved to die after the number of weapons he’s trafficked and put into the hands of bad people, as well as whatever other horrible shit I don’t know about.

“Well, I say he brought Vance here for ‘us,’ but he was quite displeased when it was me who happened on the body and not Leland.”

“What?” Cassel asks, sounding confused. Hell, he can’t be as confused as I am.

Micah pushes up from where he'd been leaning against the wall. "Maybe it's like a cat, you know? Like how they bring their people birds and mice. Or is that more like a death threat? I'm not quite sure."

"I think we need to be more concerned with what this person wants by bringing Vance to Leland," I say.

"Maybe he's an admirer of Leland's work from his hitman days," Cassel suggests.

"Could have been from recently, not even just from his hitman days," Jeremy says as he looks at the mess. "Leland makes... an impression. Not a good impression but an impression wherever he goes. He could have snagged someone's attention. Not sure how, but it must be possible if Jackson married him."

I glower at him. "Okay. So he now has a secret admirer who is apparently stalking us and getting into our shit to the point that he knew when Tucker was attacked. Weirder yet, he knew that Leland would come back here after dropping Henry off."

Why isn't anything ever simple? Why isn't there like a puppy waiting for us or something equally fun and cute?

"I'll call the cleaners and get this dead dude dealt with, and then we'll figure out the rest," Cassel says as he makes a call.

TWENTY-ONE



“So that is how babies are made,” I explain to Waylon.

When I tilt the rearview mirror down to look at him in the back seat, I notice he’s currently trying his absolute hardest to hide behind his unicorn. It’s weird how much he claimed to hate it yet obviously loves it now.

We’d stopped for some food on the way home, which led to me switching seats with Henry who is now in the passenger seat pretending I don’t exist.

“Are we finally here? Can I go home?” Waylon asks. It’s such a pleading noise as I stop at a stop sign near Wellstone. Weirdly, there are a multitude of vehicles around the office.

When Jackson said that he had it handled, I didn’t realize how many people it was going to take for him to “handle it.”

“Sorry to burst your bubble, but you’re not going home alone, Waylon,” I say. “Trenton wants you, and you really think he can’t find your brother’s house?”

His tiny hopes and dreams are immediately dashed as he sinks down in defeat. The noise of despair he makes is almost loud enough to cover the strange *thuh thump* as the trunk pops open just as I’m taking off from the stop sign.

I glance in my rearview mirror in time to watch as Summers does a rather spectacular somersault out of the trunk.

“Huh,” I say as I slam on the brakes. It really doesn’t *help* the situation as Summers crashes onto the road.

“Did he...” Henry’s quiet for a long moment. “Did we seriously forget about the guy in the trunk?”

“I assumed he got out!” I say. “But thinking back... I never *did* see him again.”

I stick my head out the window. “Hey, buddy, you okay there?”

His eyes are huge as they lock on to me and he starts scrambling to his feet. I’m trying not to grin as I watch it, but forcing my face to *not* show my overwhelming glee is weirdly making him look more and more horrified.

“I think his legs are cramping up from being in the trunk so long,” Henry observes.

“Let me back up and see if he needs help,” I say as I toss the car in reverse and start backing toward him.

But boy does that man crab crawl!

“It’s impressive how fast he can scamper when I’m *obviously* trying to help him.”

“For fuck’s sake, don’t run him over with the car!” Henry exclaims.

“I bet he’s not running from the car, he’s running out of fear of having to listen to Leland talk more,” Waylon says.

I gasp and look back at him. “You little traitor!”

He uses his balloon to keep from looking at me like the little traitor he is.

Summers is up and running like his ass is on fire. I consider leaving the car in reverse and chasing after him, but after all the fuss Henry made over the last guy I ran over, I decide to leave him be. Especially when he races straight toward a seven-foot fence and fucking *scales it*.

I gasp.

“No,” Henry says.

“I should ask him if he’d give Jackson lessons! Did you see the way he climbed that?”

“We are like ten feet from the office... how about we just... go inside?”

I deflate a little as I grudgingly let Summers escape and park the car.

I hop out of the car and hurry over to the office to find that there's apparently a party going on that I hadn't been invited to. They're currently all standing in the doorway like what I'm doing out here could be anywhere close to as fun as what's going on inside.

Jackson gets a weird look on his face before stepping toward me. “Who the hell is that?”

“That was Summers... I forgot I put him in the trunk ohhhh, hours ago,” I explain.

“You forgot about a man in the trunk?” Cassel asks, as if he wouldn't do the same thing. I mean, come on, Henry forgot too, yet I'm the only one getting blamed! “Did you literally scare a man into being silent in a trunk for *hours*?”

“Enough about Summers... although, Jackson, did you see how well he climbed that fence? I thought maybe he could give you lessons!”

Jackson just grunts like there's some weird part of him that doesn't find me and my ideas *amazing*.

“Anyway, what the heck is going on? When you said ‘Can we talk’ I thought you just wanted to ask about what I was up to! Not that something happened,” I say.

Jackson gives me a reassuring smile before filling me in. Of course I leave him alone for a few hours and this is what happens. Although... I'm not sure I'm overly surprised after the man has been slinking around and leaving me notes. I have to agree that it's odd, but at least the man who seems to be following us appears to want to help.

“You sure that's helping?” Cassel asks as he points upstairs where the body had been before the cleaners had taken care of it. While that was happening, Cassel and Micah had scouted the area for signs that the man was still hanging around here, but any trace of him was gone.

“Well, he helped me when he shot Dallas and said he was fixing mistakes by killing Vance, so I don’t think he’s out to hurt us... but why is he obsessed with us?” I ask.

“We think it’s not an ‘us’ but a ‘you,’” Jackson says. “It’s pretty apparent that he wasn’t happy to see me. He obviously was here for you.”

“True. Clearly, he wants to meet me, so maybe he’ll stop fluttering around and just meet up with me. But why would he believe I want Vance dead?” I ask as I think about the situation.

“I kind of got the impression he thought he was protecting you... unlike me,” Jackson says, looking a little upset about that, as if he could *possibly* think I want him out there *protecting* me. Like what the hell? Jackson just needs to toss me that smolder and it’s enough for me.

“I didn’t want Vance dead, I wanted him to give me answers,” I grumble.

“I guess I need to find new cameras since the old ones are damaged and get them up and going,” Cassel says.

“Where are you going to find new cameras this time of night? And ones that will do the job we need them to do?” I ask.

“I don’t know... maybe by robbing a place?” he questions.

“We’re not robbing a place; it can wait until morning,” Jeremy says.

“I guess.”

“It’ll be fine,” I assure Cassel. “I doubt the person who destroyed our cameras is going to come waltzing back onto the scene right away.”

“True,” Cassel agrees. “I guess at the end of the day, all of us can just be happy that we weren’t dreadful enough that we caused a man to pretend to be dead in a trunk for hours.”

“That’s not all he did,” Henry says, and the absolute horror over the idea of Cassel learning about my failure hits me. I

press my finger against his lips with an obnoxious “Shhhhhhhh.”

Cassel’s head turns like one of those creepy dolls from the horror movies. There’s a grin on his face, an absolutely wicked look running wild. “Ohhhh? What haaaaappened?”

“NOTHING! We’re going home!” I declare.

“Good,” Henry says as he heads for his car.

“Henry, won’t you take pity on me and tell me what happened?” Cassel asks as he scurries after him.

How *dare* he use that cute face to try to con my Henry? “Henry, no, you’re *my* Daddy, not his. You promised.”

“Did I?” Henry makes a show of thinking hard about this. “Just remember that the next time you annoy me. Remember what I hold over your head.”

“Even his threats are smooth!” I cry as he gets into his car and drives away.

A whine escapes Waylon who has, for the most part, just stood there with his unicorn hoping we forgot about him. Maybe he had some weird dream that Henry was going to take him home.

“Jackson, Waylon’s coming home with us,” I announce.

“Grudgingly,” Waylon says. “I really feel like I’d be safer home alone... safer anywhere but with Leland.”

“That’s how everyone feels around Leland,” Cassel explains. “You’d think that feeling would go away the longer you know him, but it doesn’t.”

“There’s only one way to get it to go away,” Jeremy says.

“Kill him?” Cassel asks.

“I was thinking severing your friendship with him, but I’m interested in your theory,” Jeremy says.

“Unlike you two assholes, Waylon already loves me,” I decide as I lightly smack Waylon’s balloon, which causes it to hit him in the face.

Everyone—even Micah—turns to stare at me like I’m a monster.

“Please? Will someone else take me?” Waylon asks, turning to the others with the most pitiful expression on his face. They all give him a look filled with sympathy, like welcoming him into my home with my fence and my shrine and all my other amazing things wouldn’t be a dream come true. “Please? Anyone? You look normal.” He turns to Cassel whose eyes flicker to mine before he gives him an apologetic shrug.

I cackle and wrap an arm around Waylon’s shoulder as I parade him off to Jackson’s car. I’ll have someone else deal with the car I’d stolen as well as my car that’d been left dead on the side of the road once I have a free moment to text them.

“Waylon, I know it’s hard to believe, but Leland’s actually good with kids,” Jackson says.

I hesitate when I hear that. “Hard. To. Believe? Excuse me?”

“Sorry. I know it’s *impossible* to believe,” Jackson corrects himself.

“Impossible, my ass!”

I get into the car and Waylon grudgingly follows, but my mind is wound up in this person stalking me. At least he didn’t lay a finger on Jackson, but I still don’t love the idea that he could have—that he entered *my* safe space and pointed a gun at Jackson.

“You okay?” Jackson asks me.

I give him a big smile to assure him that everything is perfectly fine. “Yep! No issues here at all.”

“You sure?”

“Totally sure. Waylon, the last child we watched grew by leaps and bounds,” I inform him.

“But you also kept them in a closet?” he asks warily.

“Don’t worry about the minor things,” I say. As Jackson drives, I find someone to deal with both cars and text Cassel about looking into our security system to figure out how this guy knew that I would have to come back to drop Henry off, which means that he was either watching me or was using some kind of device to watch us. By the time I’ve gotten all of that tackled, Jackson’s pulling up to the house.

“Do you mind me asking about the balloon?” Jackson asks.

“I got that for him. It’s so I can remember which one is our child,” I say. “Like if we take him to a park or something, I won’t lose him since all of those gremlins look the same.”

Waylon’s staring at Jackson now, like he foolishly thinks Jackson might save him. It’s a sad assumption since I’m clearly the more fun parent.

The teen had a big day filled with not the best moments, so I usher him inside the house and cut off the balloon as Cayenne comes skidding around the corner to greet us. I pick up the medium-sized dog, pluck the balloon out of his hands and put Cayenne in them.

Anyone who’s having a bad day can forget all about it when they hold the wiggly canine who loves all equally.

Waylon seems startled but as Cayenne showers him with kisses, I do see the first smile on his face.

“See? I’ve already cured all of his woes,” I announce as Sarge sniffs him over to determine whether or not he is an acceptable human.

“What’s her name?” Waylon asks as he hefts the dog after us. It doesn’t matter that she’s obviously not a lap dog and that she has no idea who this human is, she loves him.

“That one’s Cayenne the Great Devourer of Children and the other is Childmuncher,” I inform him.

“Also known as Cayenne and Sarge,” Jackson says as the two of us lead him upstairs to one of the spare bedrooms.

“Two warnings come with this house,” I tell Waylon. “Number one, don’t go into this room without me.” I wave my arms around the door, trying to make it seem extremely magical. So magical he’ll ask what’s inside, and I’ll show him the absolute wonders of The Gun Shrine.

“Okay,” he agrees.

“Of course, if you *asked* what was inside, I’d totally show you. I mean, there’s nothing more magical, more splendid, more jaw-droppingly amazing—”

“No, that’s okay,” Waylon says, dismissing it completely.

I scoff, disgusted by the defective human being before me. “Aren’t you a little curious?”

“No. I do like your dog, though,” he says as he hugs her some more.

“FINE. And don’t go down into the basement,” I warn.

“Okay.”

“Also, don’t be worried about someone breaking in,” Jackson says. “The house has a top-notch security system and all of the windows have been replaced with bulletproof glass.”

“This also means if you try sneaking off, I will see you, I will *find* you, and I will handcuff you to me so you will never be free.” I whisper the last part to make it more menacing.

It works quite well because he nods, assuring us that he won’t go *anywhere*.

“There’s a bathroom here, and I’ll get you some sweats and a shirt,” Jackson says as he wanders off.

I take Waylon into the bedroom and wave to the bed that Mila had stayed in while we’d had her. This one doesn’t seem like he’ll be as easily manipulated into a fun little mini hitman, but maybe I can break him down like I did Jackson and Henry.

Waylon sinks onto the bed where Cayenne flips onto her back and wiggles around, tongue lolling out of her mouth. The whole time, Sarge is sitting in front of him, staring at him like he’s scrutinizing his every movement to make sure he’s

acceptable. “I don’t want Trenton to be my dad,” he whispers. “I just want my brother.”

He’s blinking rapidly as I realize with horror that he’s getting close to tears. And tears are one thing I cannot deal with.

I could run for Jackson, force him to deal with the kid, but a little voice in the back of my mind tells me that’s not the way to deal with people who are upset. And that I’ve grown in a good way to be able to actually help people. It may seem harder to deal with than a psychopath with a gun, but I can do it! Hell, if I can handle Ava, I can do this.

“So what?” I ask.

Waylon looks up at me, his eyes wet as he tries to quickly wipe the tears away like I won’t notice.

“What’s it matter who your dad is?” I ask. “My dad’s an absolute waste of space. A horrible man who is off in prison somewhere hopefully rotting away. I had absolutely no family until I met Jackson, and now, I have Henry and Cassel and Jackson’s mom, dad, and sister. I’m like drowning in family now. They’re all affectionate and all those feelings are icky, but I love them, and that’s all that matters.”

“But what happens if my brother doesn’t get out? And my aunt doesn’t want me?”

“I don’t know. There’s a shed out back that I think you could scurry around in. I’d probably remember to feed and water you at least once a week,” I say.

He tries his absolute hardest not to smile.

“Just... don’t worry about it. We’ll take it one day at a time and figure something out. Worst-case scenario, we’ll abduct a new father for you, then tie him up until he loves you like I did to Henry.”

“Why are you so strange?” he asks.

“Perfect, you mean?” I counter as Jackson comes in with some clean clothes.

Waylon doesn't seem so sure about that "perfect" word, but he takes the clothes from Jackson.

"You can sleep with Cayenne tonight," Jackson says. "And if you need anything, we're just down the hallway, alright?"

Waylon nods. "Yeah, thanks."

He heads off for the bathroom, so we shut Cayenne in his room before I walk in our own bathroom to get a shower. After a few minutes, Jackson steps in and leans against the counter.

"Wow, wow, wow, Leland showing feelings," he teases.

I jerk the shower curtain back enough to glower at him. "I showed no such thing! Ew! Jackson, don't even joke about something so heinous!"

"Sorry, sorry," he says with a grin before grabbing his toothbrush. "Once I'm done here, I'll go check on him again."

"Good. You're better with sad people," I decide. "Actually, people in general."

"You're not so bad yourself."

"I'm good with evil people. Good at shooting at them, chasing them, and harassing them."

"You harass everyone, good or bad. I'm going to go check on him."

By the time I make it to bed, Jackson's returning. "He said he was good and is ready to sleep. And Cayenne was curling up in bed with him."

"Good," I murmur as I climb into bed next to Jackson. "I'm going to bed with the idea that when I open my eyes, everything will be fixed."

"Hold on... I thought you loved fixing things and hated it when others fixed them first," Jackson says.

"I do! But the idea of someone aiming a gun at you makes me want to hop out of this bed, rage across the city until I find their unsuspecting body and bury them six feet under. NO, twenty feet under."

“That’s a lot of digging.”

“And I’ll do it to make sure they never flick their eyeballs onto my mighty man,” I say as I grab Jackson. I throw a leg over his and burrow up against him. He squeezes me to him, his fingers gently running over my back.

“That’s understandable, but I’m fine. I promise. You’re right in saying that the guy hasn’t actually done us any harm. That he might just be a fan of your work and is showing it in a rather... odd way.”

“Maybe. If not, I’ll get the shovel.”

“And I’ll grab the body,” he says, which is extremely romantic.

“Hell yeah, you would,” I respond as I push myself forward to kiss him. He squeezes me to him as we talk about our chaotic days and I tell him how disappointingly short my car chase was.

“So what was Henry referring to when he left for home?” he asks.

I gasp then sink into my pillow where I can pretend to be asleep.

“Leland, tell me,” he urges as he gently runs a finger over my cheek.

“Jackson, I’m trying to sleep, what are you doing?” I ask as I bat him off.

“Tell me.”

“Urgh, do I have to? You know how important my beauty sleep is. I have to look the best for The Fence. Imagine if I waltzed out there with bags under my eyes?”

He delivers sweet kisses to my cheeks because he knows I’m a weak, weak man and he’s captured my heart. “Tell me, sweetheart,” he says, voice cutting right through me.

“Fuck! Fine, but you better not laugh. So I... I thought I could do a cool little flip like Cassel did,” I whisper.

He bites his lip. It's the most blatant display of a man trying not to laugh that I've ever seen. "Ohhhh noooo..."

"RIGHT?"

"And... how did that go?" Jackson asks.

I dramatically flop onto his body. "He flattened me like a pancake."

Jackson starts laughing, so I pull a pillow over his face to muffle his glee.

"Jackson, stop, you promised you wouldn't laugh!"

"I'm sorry, but it's hilarious," he says. "He just like... fell on you?"

"Yes! He just smashed me to the ground, and I couldn't get up. Henry had to drag me out from under him! Jackson, you're the only man who can smash me to the ground!"

Jackson's laughing ridiculously hard now. "Please tell me you have a video of this."

"No! You will erase it from your memory, and if you ever tell Cassel that he's better than me at something I will have to get rid of him," I decide.

"Oh, well we can't have that," he says, grin still on his face. "I'm sorry for laughing, hon. That sounds traumatic."

"It was!"

"I'm so sorry!"

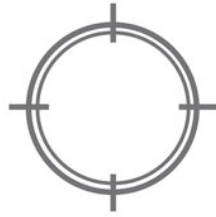
"GOOD! If you keep acting like that, I will sell your car."

"No! Leland, I swear you're the greatest man alive. I mean, honestly, you have to be the best friend around to willingly fail at something like that to make Cassel look better."

I let that sink in as I smile at my one true love. "You're sexily smart."

"Thank you," he says as he gives me a kiss. Weirdly, I still feel like he's amused by all of this, but I suppose I'll forgive him.

TWENTY-TWO



The moment I see Waylon's face, I beam at him. In return, he gives me a look of horror and tries running back to his room.

"Waylon, I have someone I want you to meet. Come now," I say as I drag him downstairs.

"What if I don't want to meet them? What if I was hoping you'd gone to work, and I only had the other guy to deal with?" Waylon asks. "What if I feel safer being hunted by Trenton's group than being around you?"

"Shhhhhh, that's nonsensical talk. Now shoe yourself!" I declare as I put my own shoes on. He seems uncertain but also puts his on a moment before I drag him outside and march him into the yard. "Waylon, I want you to ingrain this very moment into the deep recesses of your mind as the best day of your teeny life."

"I weirdly have my doubts," he says.

"You are about to meet the greatest of the world wonders. The most spectacular sight to behold."

"Can I please just not?" he asks, but his look of desperation isn't enough to cut it.

"Waylon, this is... dun dun dunnnnn.... The Fence," I say as I wave my arms to show him the elegant splendor! The grand spectacle! The mighty and magnificent structure!

He turns around and starts walking off, likely toward his brother's house.

“It was too much for you, wasn’t it?” I ask. “Do you need time to comprehend what you’ve seen?”

“I need time to find someone else to take care of me. Better yet, I’ll take care of myself.”

“No, no, no,” I say as I rush after him. “What if Trenton finds you, snatches you up, and doesn’t let you free? I mean, there was a reason he didn’t want you to leave that place.”

Waylon stops walking, and after a good minute or two, his shoulders slump and he returns to The Fence where he can take it *allllll* in. “It’s very... fencey.”

“Thank you.”

“I... like how it’s made of wood.”

“Only the best kind!”

“I don’t know what to do now. Do I like... pray in front of it or something?” he asks before clasping his hands together. “Dear... fence. Please call the police here to arrest this strange man and bring me someone else who is normal and will take care of me.”

“Want to see my gun shrine?” I ask eagerly.

He closes his eyes, clamping them shut while clearly wanting to pray even harder for salvation. “Please. Anyone... someone... save me. I will take just about anyone at this point.”

“Waylon... I’m sorry...” I say, and he quickly opens his eyes. “Does my amazingness make you feel bad inside?”

“It makes me feel something,” he mutters.

“Breakfast is ready,” Jackson shouts through the cracked door.

“Let’s go,” I say, and off I usher him into the house where Jackson has made pancakes.

“In remembrance of Leland’s flip yesterday,” he says with the biggest grin on his face.

That makes Waylon laugh while I stare at the man who was supposed to love me undyingly. The very man who has just deceived me. The man who was never in his life supposed to *make fun of me*.

“Excuse me?” I whisper.

“Just a bit of fun, like how you make fun of everyone,” Jackson says.

My eyes narrow as I scrutinize the monster my loving husband has become! “I’ve never made fun of you in my life, and you think it’s okay to make fun of me?”

“You make fun of me *constantly*,” Jackson decides. “I actually don’t think we have a notebook in this house with enough pages to jot down all of the times you’ve made fun of me.”

“Waylon, don’t listen to him. He woke up and chose the mood of sassy today,” I say as I sit down to eat. “Jackson, will you take Waylon to the store to get him some clothes? I don’t think he should visit his house until we’re sure no one is watching it.”

“No.”

“Why?”

“Because I know you well enough to know that you’re going to run off to deal with Trenton or this mystery stalker all alone,” Jackson says.

When did he get so good? “Nah, not alone.”

“What if, now hear me out, what if we use the whole group of us, and we deal with it all in record time?” Jackson asks.

“Well, that seems stupid,” I say.

“My mom will watch Waylon.”

I gasp. “You would do that to our new child? Jackson, no...”

He sighs. “My mom will be fine with him.”

“What’s that mean?” Waylon asks, looking nervous. “Is she worse than Leland?”

“She scares even me, Waylon,” I inform him, which causes his eyes to go wide. “The fear she inflicts upon me...” I make a show of shuddering now that he looks even more horrified.

“Can I just stay here alone? You said the house was safe,” he says.

“Nowhere is safe from her, I’m sorry to say,” I whisper.

Jackson gives Waylon a smile. “I promise she’s okay, alright?”

“Jackson, why can’t you look him in the eyes while saying that?” I ask.

“I did!”

Waylon’s eyes are huge. “No, you didn’t! You literally couldn’t look me in the eyes! She’s terrifying, isn’t she?”

“It was a pleasure knowing you,” I tell Waylon. “I-I’ll miss you.”

Jackson gives me a look. “You’re going to be the reason he tries to run away and someone from Trenton’s crew finds him and abducts him.”

“You’re right! I should arm him first. Waylon, do you know how to shiv someone?”

“Does it look like I do?” he asks.

“Well, you did rob a gas station,” I say as I hold up my butter knife. “Okay, you want to avoid bones, got it? Stab in and twist.” I poke Jackson in the side with the butter knife. Weirdly, he doesn’t seem impressed as I show off the twisting method. “I like to call it the stab, snap, and scoot. You stab, then snap your knee up with the intention of driving the testicles up into the body before scooting out of harm’s way.”

“O-Okay,” Waylon says, obviously uncertain, yet still one hundred percent into the lesson. There’s hope for him after all. Yesssss, yesss... another mini hitman.

“Waylon, we’ll call my mom here so the house will still be secured, Cayenne will be here, and everything will be fine, alright?” Jackson asks.

“Okay,” Waylon says, looking even more unsure.

Ava arrives not much later, but the moment she walks in, Waylon stares at her like we’ve accepted Lucifer into our home... just the way I like it. I’m over here trying my hardest not to grin.

“Ava, this is Waylon, but we’re considering changing his name,” I say.

“Why?” Waylon asks. “I’m not like a dog you got from the pound!”

“We have abduct... um... borrowed him,” I say.

Ava’s scrutinizing me now like I said something that bothered her. “You were going to say abducted.”

“Noooo. Although... At what age does it go from a kidnapping to an abduction? Is there an age limit on kidnapping? Waylon, how old are you?”

“Fifteen.”

“What do you think, Jackson?”

“I think Waylon is going to have a lot of fun with you, Mom,” Jackson says.

Ava goes, “Hmmm,” but in a menacing way, and Waylon’s eyes flicker over to mine. As he gives me a pleading look, I realize that this right here is our first moment of bonding. The moment where he wants *me* over someone else.

“Why isn’t he in school?” Ava asks.

“Because there are... issues,” Jackson says.

She “Hmms” once more and Waylon looks toward me again.

We’re bonding left and right, and all over Ava’s presence! I swear, in a different life, she’d be the final boss in a video game!

“Please don’t take him out of the house,” Jackson says. “Keep the doors locked and closed, and don’t let anyone in, and...”

“I left you a gun and a taser,” I interrupt as I hold the two weapons out. “Tase anyone and everyone. If they don’t piss their pants, you tase them again.”

“Got it,” she says, willingly taking the weapons from me as Jackson questions what I’ve done to his mother.

“Great. Now Waylon, be good, and I’ll... I’ll... Jackson, what do teenagers want? *Playboy*! I’ll get you a *Playboy* magazine.”

“No!” he cries.

“Play... *girl*?” I ask.

“No!” He’s embarrassed now and just scurries back over to Cayenne who he hugs for a bit.

“Good luck, Waylon. I hope to see you again.” Then I give him a wave, force Ava to hug me—not because I want her affection but because it makes her “Hmmm” again—and hurry out the door.

The rest know to meet us at Wellstone, so with Lucifer herself watching Waylon, we hurry over to the office.

When we get there, Cassel and Jeremy are already waiting, and Mason is pretending to work. Henry’s busy with “real” work, so we’ll just have to rely on this group, which is fine. *But* we did get a phone conference with Bennett scheduled for nine, which is in ten minutes.

Before I even get seated, the door opens, and Micah and Tavish come in.

“Who was the fool who invited these two?” I growl.

“Me,” Jackson says, making me hesitate.

“I mean, who was the brilliant and sexy man of my dreams who invited these two?” I say with a grimace.

Jackson raises an eyebrow, and I feel like somewhere in that eyebrow is a man going, “I know all about you failing that

flip.”

Fuck.

“So, I invited them because I feel like the more people we have on our side, the better. Simple enough, yeah?” Jackson asks.

“I guess,” I grumble. “How much are we paying them?”

“Not enough,” Micah mutters.

“You’re getting paid? I was told I’ll just get some tasteful nudes of Jackson,” Tavish says, which better be a joke.

I eye the man. “Do you want me to sic Cassel on you again?” I growl. Mostly because I want to see the move in action again so I can perfect it myself in secret and casually whip it out someday...

I rub my sore back.

Or maybe I’ll just let Cassel have that one.

“Oh, Bennett’s calling,” Cassel says as he hurries over to the office phone and accepts the call before putting it on speaker. After going through the prompt asking us to accept the call, Cassel does so and Bennett answers.

“Hey, Bennett,” I say. “Just wanted to share with you what happened yesterday.” I give him a quick rundown of Waylon getting taken and pulled into the mess with Trenton. He’s quiet the entire time and I assume that he’s just filled to the brim with anger about what’s happened.

Instead, he goes, “Lucas says he’s going to call you” and then hangs up.

“FUCKING LUCAS,” I growl.

Cassel immediately turns quiet and Micah growls out a few curse words.

“What the hell does Lucas know or have to do with any of this shit?” I ask.

Sure enough, within a few minutes, my phone begins to ring. I feel weirdly unsure about answering the call in front of

the onlookers. Cassel's staring at my phone like it's a serpent ready to strike and Micah looks ready to smite it.

"Fuck," I hiss again before storming upstairs. Thankfully, Jackson's the only one who follows. I answer the phone against all better judgment.

"Hello, Leland," he says, sounding so goddamn *happy*.

"What the fuck do you want?" I demand.

"That's a good question, isn't it?" Lucas asks. "Remember me telling you that your kindness for others will only hurt you in the long run?"

"According to you, everything I do anymore is wrong."

"Not everything. I see you gathered the crew just like I asked."

I hesitate because there's no fucking way he should know that. Unless the person who has been stalking me has been in contact with him. Is that what this is? A man who isn't obsessed with me but is being forced to watch me so he can inform Lucas of what is happening? It's not *his* obsession with me but Lucas's. Of course it is. Of course it's Lucas prying into every aspect of my life. He'd *hate* not knowing what I'm doing and what's happening with me, so it only makes sense for him to send someone to watch me.

"Leland, kindness will only slow you down. It'll hurt you. It's so strange how you're willing to step out there and protect others, but why? Here's something fascinating... your fun little PI shop? Is rigged to blow. I really, *really* hope you're not all in it at this moment."

I freeze as his words sink in.

"You're not, right, Leland? You're not there right now?" Lucas sounds almost smug, and I know he's trying to prove to me how I've fucked up, how I let this get out of hand by not killing everyone like he wanted, but is he right? If there really was a bomb here, wouldn't he have fucking started with that?

"Fuck," I hiss as I hang up on him. "GET OUT OF THE BUILDING. BOMB!"

He could be lying. He could be having his fucking minion standing there *laughing* at us as I usher everyone out, but if he's not...

“What’s wrong?” Jackson asks, not having been able to hear the conversation. Thankfully, Cassel knows when my tone is serious because I can hear chairs moving as people get to their feet.

I start for the stairs, pushing Jackson in front of me, knowing I need to get him out of here. “The building might have a bomb in it. Everyone, you need to—”

And that’s the moment it goes off. Jackson and I are thrown back as debris and chunks of drywall pelt us. Dust is rising around us, and I have no way to know if that was the only bomb set to go off or if there’s more.

“Jackson!” I yell, trying to reach out for him as I hear the floor groan beneath my weight a second before it drops out beneath me. I hit the ground on my back, knocking the wind out of me as pain spikes into my side. It takes me a bit to catch my breath as I roll onto my side.

“Jackson!”

Panic eats at me as I push myself to my feet, unable to see shit with all of the smoke, but I can hear the crackle of fire. Anxiety and adrenaline flood me as I turn to rush back up the stairs to find Jackson, but the stairs have completely caved in.

“Jackson!” I shout frantically as I jump up, just managing to grab on to a level of overhang that I can reach. It makes my side ache, but I reach out, searching for something to cling onto a moment before someone shoves me. I look down to see Jeremy who is trying to cover his face while giving me the push I need to reach the second floor. Scrambling onto my hands and knees, I climb up onto the devastated second floor where I see Jackson lying on his back.

“Jackson!” I yell as I rush for him, panic attacking me because he’s not moving. Desperately, I grab on to him, and he groans, filling me with relief. “Jackson, get up.”

When he doesn't make a move, I give his face a smack in the hopes of jarring him awake.

"L-Leland?" he mutters as he lifts his head.

"Come on," I urge as I try to tug him to his feet a moment before debris from the room begins to rain down on us.

Grabbing Jackson under the armpits, I jerk him back as the supporting wall on the second floor caves, and with it, the roof. I drag him over to the window that'd been broken at some point during the impact. I shove it up anyway in the hopes of keeping us from being caught on the broken glass and guide him closer. I push him against it, and he staggers but manages to pull himself through it. He hesitates as he looks at the drop, but there's a dumpster in the alley below that should negate some of the impact, so I give him a push and he jumps.

Quickly, I squeeze myself through and hit the dumpster, the lid breaking under the impact, causing both Jackson and me to fall in.

"Fuck," I hiss as I grab for the edge, and a hand reaches in to help me. I take it, but as I'm pulled out, I don't expect a hooded man who slams me against the side of the wall.

"You're being too careless," he growls. "Do you want to die?"

"Get off me, I need to get Jackson away," I demand as I try to shove him back, but he presses me harder, hand tightening on my throat. It makes me hesitate and my eyes lock on to his.

"Do you really want to do that?" I ask.

"Do you want to threaten me? If it weren't for me, you'd be dead along with your precious friends and 'precious' husband."

"So you're another of Lucas's fun little prodigies. So lovely of you to join the crew. Issue is, the rest of us hate Lucas."

"Who ever said I didn't?" he asks. "I can hate and use someone quite easily. You should know that."

"Let me go," I growl as my eyes fixate on his.

He shoves me toward Jackson and starts to walk away.

“Hey, Everly,” I call, and I have to give the man some credit, there isn’t even a split second of hesitation. “How about instead of stalking around, you tell me what you want?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he says as he continues down the alley and disappears a moment before Cassel comes running around the corner.

“Fucking hell,” Cassel gasps as he grabs his chest. “You okay?”

“Yeah,” I say as I rush over to help Jackson out of the dumpster.

“Everly?” Jackson asks. “The prison guard?”

“Yeah,” I repeat.

“Are you sure?”

“I’m positive. I remember a while ago when I visited Lucas to see what he could tell me about that girl who was missing, he told me how easy it was to manipulate people in the prison... I thought he was talking about the inmates... not the guard,” I say before turning to Cassel. “Is everyone okay?”

He nods. “Yeah, a bit... shaken up but okay. It’s a good fucking thing you yelled to us... I’m not sure who’d have made it out if you hadn’t. You know who is not going to be okay? The assholes who set up the fucking bomb. I should have gotten the cameras back up and working last night. I’m so sorry.”

“Cassel, it’s fine. You’re not a magician. Like you said, we would have needed new cameras, and who would have magicked them into existence that late at night and gotten them installed?”

“I guess...” he mutters.

“Leland, you’re bleeding. Are you okay?” Jackson asks as he reaches for my shirt.

“It’s just a scratch but we need to get home. If they know where we work, they know where we live,” I say.

“Oh fuck,” Jackson groans as he hobbles for the car.

“We’re coming,” Cassel calls as he runs over to catch up with the others. “The police are headed here, so Mason can stay here and deal with them. I’ll help him, and then I’m going to do a quick search of the area in case someone was hanging behind to pick off those the bomb didn’t kill. Jeremy, Micah, and Tavish, go with Leland and Jackson. We’ll catch up.”

Jeremy seems reluctant to let Cassel go without him but gives him a determined nod.

Looking like we crawled out of a pile of ash, we climb into the car, but when I go for the driver’s seat, Jeremy shoves me into the back next to Jackson.

“What?” I ask.

“I’m driving,” he says as the car takes off.

Jackson’s so startled by the sudden acceleration, he drops his phone that he’d been using to call his mom. Honestly, I’m not sure he even needs to worry about calling her since the way Jeremy’s driving we’ll reach her before she even picks up.

“Holy fuck!” Tavish yells as he grabs on to the seat in front of him.

“I do love a man who can drive!” Micah announces from the passenger seat.

“No,” Jeremy growls.

I’m almost mesmerized by the strategic turns he makes as he veers around a car. “Jeremy, my heart is hammering its way out of my chest. You **MUST** be the driver for my next car chase,” I whisper.

“No,” Jeremy decides. Clearly, that’s his favorite word.

“Now, don’t be rash,” I say. “How could you deprive me of the getaway driver of my dreams? You driving, me shooting. It’s a match made in heaven.”

“No,” he growls louder, like he thinks the volume of the word was the issue.

“Leland, worry about your side. How hurt are you?” Jackson asks as he tries to check me over.

“You’re the one who was taking a nap!” I say. “How are you? Did you hit your head?”

“Nah, I was just wanting you to save me,” he lies.

“You were giving me a heart attack instead.”

Jackson reaches over and squeezes my hand. I squeeze it back, appreciating the comfort it gives me. “I’m sorry,” he says.

“You don’t need to apologize. These assholes who I’m going to kill are going to be the apologetic ones as I murder them.”

“I’m sure they will be.” Jackson turns his attention to his phone as his mom answers, but he doesn’t let go of my hand. “Hey, Mom, we’ve run into some... issues. I need you to take Waylon and go into Leland’s gun room and lock the door. We’ll be there in ten minutes.”

“Two minutes with Jeremy’s driving!” I say. “Jeremy, I never thought you’d be this useful!”

“Thanks,” he says sarcastically.

I’m not sure why he’d be sarcastic, when it’s apparent I’m being quite honest.

“So how did you know about the bomb?” Micah asks.

“Lucas made it seem like someone told him. I was assuming that someone was my stalker, but why wouldn’t Everly have told me instead of going through Lucas?” I ask.

“Do you think Lucas did it?” Micah asks.

“He...” I think back on our conversation. “He was happy that I’d finally gotten us all together. I can’t fathom he’d then *blow us up*.”

“There’s no fucking way,” Jackson says. “He’s too obsessed with Leland. I can’t imagine that he’d risk Leland’s life like that.”

“Then why not start off the goddamn conversation with ‘Hey, there’s a bomb. Get out?’” I ask.

“Because it’s Lucas,” Micah says, which is a phenomenal reason.

“So we have the possibility that Everly told Lucas, right? But then did he see them setting up the bomb?” I ask.

“Possibly,” Micah answers.

“I can’t help but assume from what Lucas told me during the winter that Everly is someone he started manipulating once he ended up in the prison,” I grumble. “Fucking hell, the man had too much time on his hands to ruin as many lives as he could.”

“We’re already aware there are people from Trenton’s gang involved, and we also know that Summers is involved in Trenton’s gang as well as Vance’s. So Summers could also be informing Lucas,” Jackson says.

“True.”

“And... I mean, if Lucas found out about this, are you really surprised he waited until we nearly died to tell us?” Micah asks. “He always wanted to punish us for things we’d done wrong. I don’t know about you, but he often tossed me off into life-or-death situations when I fucked up to make me prove whether I was worthy. And how much more of a fuck-up is there than all of us leaving him and you tossing him in prison?”

“Very true,” I say. “It is rather fitting. But now we have to figure out for sure who is feeding him this information.”

And isn’t that a good question?

We arrive within minutes, and while Jackson and I go inside, Tavish, Jeremy, and Micah check the area. Jackson and I hurry upstairs where I type the code into the lock on the door of the gun shrine before heading inside.

“Ava, I’m so happy to see that you didn’t torture Waylon while we were gone!” I say.

“Why are there so many guns?” Waylon whispers.

“What the hell happened?” Ava asks in some kind of pterodactyl-like screech as she comes rushing over. She grabs Jackson’s face and starts inspecting his head after noticing a spot where his hair was clumped together because of some blood. She shifts her eyes onto me like I’m going to get blamed for it when she sees the blood on my shirt. She grabs me into some kind of death hold that I assume is her attempt to get rid of me, so that’s why it startles me when she starts checking me over.

“You two are going to be the death of me!”

You... two? As in... she’s *not* trying to help them finish me off?

“We’re fine, Mom,” Jackson promises her, but I doubt it’ll appease her with the way she’s clenching so tightly to my neck.

I slip out of her death grip so she can proceed to choke someone else and walk over to Waylon. His eyes are wide. “I-Is that because... I mean... like... d-did Trenton do that?”

I grab Waylon’s shoulders. “Why do they want you?”

“W-What?” he stammers.

“Waylon, why is your brother trying to protect you from them? Why do they want you?”

“They don’t! If they wanted me, like you said yesterday, they’d have just taken me out of my brother’s house.”

“No, there’s a reason. Your brother tried protecting you. I know it. I know he shot those people. And at first, I wasn’t sure why or if he actually did it until I realized that he’s trying to keep you safe, but he fucked up and got caught.”

He desperately shakes his head. “No! He wouldn’t kill them.”

“Waylon, you *know* something happened. *I* know something happened...” I hesitate, realizing that I’m not going to get anything out of him this way. “Waylon, when I was your age, I killed people because a guy would tell me to.”

He stares at me in shock as I continue. “I didn’t really get paid for it, but I’m sure he did. He considered it my ‘training.’ He’d give me a profile on a person, a gun, and then shove me out the door. If I came back alive, yay, if I didn’t, he’d find a different kid to ‘train.’ I was good at it. I was so good at it—”

“Leland,” Jackson says in a warning tone. I think he’s afraid this kid will take this information and tell it to someone he shouldn’t, but I don’t think he will. Actually, I *know* he won’t. And even if he did, who would believe him over me?

“As the years went on, I became one of the best hired hitmen. All because I killed people when that man asked me to as a teenager.”

Waylon’s eyes are huge as he watches me closely before shaking his head. “I didn’t know it had the possibility of killing people.”

“What did?”

He looks distraught, but I’m glad he’s willing to talk to me. “The gas... that knocked them out. I didn’t know that it was going to be produced to kill people,” he says.

“I’m guessing you got anxious about Bennett going to collect this ‘box,’ so you followed him and when you showed up...?”

“Bennett’s dad, Harvey, worked with the gang. He was... one of Vance’s cooks. Mostly meth. But he was really smart. And he was sick of just being a cook, so he was working on something that would make him stand out, and he made me help him. He said I was really good at chemistry, so my payment for him taking care of a kid that wasn’t even his was to help out with his job. I mean, he did all the work, but he wanted someone to help him that he said ‘wouldn’t talk.’ So I did... and he... he made this gas that when inhaled would knock out an entire room immediately. The goal was to contain it inside ammunition. And to get it so it wouldn’t activate when the firearm went off but when it hit its target.

“I don’t fucking know... I just know that he screwed up. He made it too strong, and it killed him... because too much of

it doesn't just knock you out, it immediately kills you. But he and Vance sold Trenton this idea. According to Bennett, Vance claimed to have the product already ready, and Trenton gave him a huge sum of money to acquire some of it. When Harvey died, Vance began to panic, but he knew that Harvey didn't work on the gas alone... instead, he assumed Bennett was the one who helped him make it.

“Around that time, Trenton learned the truth about it being me, not my brother that knew the recipe to the gas. So Trenton cut Bennett a deal. Trenton would take care of Vance if Bennett went in and ruined some products of Vance's and brought him the prototype Harvey had made. I think that Trenton understood that while I helped, I didn't actually *make* the gas.”

Waylon sniffs and continues. “Even so, Trenton never was going to actually just ‘forget about me.’ Trenton wanted Bennett to do the dirty work and then bury him with it. So after Bennett blew up the supplies and got him the prototype, he wanted to lay low before pulling out, which would be his side of the bargain with Trenton. Issue is that Bennett was close friends with Jacob, who is Vance's right-hand man.

“In order to get rid of Bennett, Trenton let it leak to Vance that Bennett blew up the supplies and that Bennett didn't actually know anything about the gas. Jacob heard about it and realized that Vance was setting Bennett up so they could confirm that he didn't know about the gas... and probably kill him. Jacob, who'd wanted to warn my brother, called me saying that he'd been unable to get ahold of Bennett.

“So I grabbed some of the gas Harvey had kept for himself... and when I followed Bennett... I messed up. The people Vance had sent to get rid of Bennett found me before I found him. They grabbed me and dragged me over to him, using me for a hostage because of my fuck-up. And I... I tried to get away, but there were too many of them. I ended up throwing the bottle the gas was in. I held my breath and ran, but I still must have gotten enough that it knocked me out because, next thing I knew, I woke up and the police were driving away with my brother and I was all alone,” he says.

I nod slowly as I think about it. “So is Trenton really your father?”

“Yeah... my mom told me years ago.”

“So he never cared about you before but cares now because you know how to recreate this gas?” I ask.

“I guess.”

“But then why not take you the moment Bennett went to jail?”

“He was trying to recreate it himself since Bennett assured him I was just there to help and that I didn’t actually know anything about making it.”

“So we’re going to assume that Trenton’s chemists have failed to produce results, turning you into his last chance to recreate this?”

“I guess... I don’t know.”

“Why hire us?” I ask.

“Because my brother’s not a bad person. I just wanted someone to prove he’s innocent,” he says pleadingly.

“Okay. We’re going to have Henry come and take you somewhere safe and we’ll deal with Trenton, and then we’ll see what we can find out about Bennett. Did he ever tell you about what happened at the prison, you know, when the group of them were attacked?”

“No.”

“Okay,” I say and give him a reassuring smile. I turn away and set a hand on Jackson’s back, ushering him out of the room to where Tavish and Micah are standing.

“We don’t see anyone out and about,” Tavish informs us. “I did make the mistake of wandering down into the basement, which I will regret for the rest of my life.”

“The way he was screaming, I assumed he found a bomb, so I hurried on down and lo and behold all of these magical wonders!” Micah says, laughing away. It’s clear he enjoyed it even if Tavish didn’t.

“Right?” I ask.

Micah pats me on the back in a “job well done” kind of way. “I didn’t think you two were actually that fun!”

I glower at him since we are soaked in fun. “Micah, you better watch your ass. I’m so fucking fun, I’m like drowning in it. I fun all over Jackson all the time.”

“I pity the poor man,” Tavish says, which results in me stepping away from him so he can’t be included in this conversation.

“Maybe we can get back on task?” Jackson asks.

“Maybe,” I agree, since it really is for the best.

“So basically, the gas that Waylon used was strong enough that it killed the people sent out to deal with Bennett, didn’t it? Bennett, realizing this, shot them so Waylon wouldn’t have to live with the realization that he killed all of those people,” Jackson says.

I nod, having come to the same conclusion while listening to Waylon’s tale. “Yep. It would explain why they’d all died sitting on the ground. We mistakenly thought it was from taking cover, but no, it’s because the gas dropped them to the ground where Bennett then shot them. They might not have even been fully dead yet, but Bennett has been around the gas enough to know it was going to kill them.

“Honestly, Bennett’s a foolish fucking kid. He could have written it off that he didn’t know what killed them or some drug killed them. Instead, he’s going to face life in prison all so Waylon doesn’t realize he killed them.” I can’t tell if he’s the stupidest brother or trying to be the best brother.

“Neither option would have been a good one, but let’s see what we can do to help,” Jackson says.

“Right, but that’s for later. Let’s take down Trenton and go from there,” I suggest.

“Now you’re talking,” Micah says. “I charge fifteen thousand per shot.”

I shift my narrowed eyes onto him. “I... don’t think you’re needed. Thanks.”

Micah hesitates. “Wait... what? No, I’m pretty sure I’m needed, I drove the whole way here because you guys needed me so much!”

I pull out my wallet and hand him a fifty. “For gas.”

He takes it before staring at me like I’m kind of disgusting him. “Leland, you’re seriously going to deprive me of fucking up some motherfuckers just over a little cash?”

“Alright, fine. I’ll split what I’m getting paid,” I say.

That gets his attention. “Oh?”

“Even split for all of us,” I declare.

“Even?” Tavish asks. “I’m listening.”

“HEY, WAYLON!” I shout.

The door opens and Waylon peeks out. “Yeah?”

“Tell these lovely gentlemen what you’re paying me. They’re hoping we can all split it.”

Waylon looks a bit embarrassed as he goes, “A... fish sandwich” and disappears back in the room he was hiding in, like he’s too embarrassed to face the consequences of that.

There’s a full minute of silence before Tavish tsks and says, “You’ve gone soft.”

“No, I’m hard. Very hard. Just ask Jackson.”

“Please don’t ask me,” Jackson pleads. “Here’s the thing. Trenton has a very nice mansion. I mean... who’s going to notice if things inside his mansion disappear somewhere along the way?”

“I’m listening,” Tavish says.

“I suppose I have nothing better to do,” Micah grumbles. “But you lot will still owe me. Someday, somewhere, I’ll come to you all with a request and you better... why are you guys walking away? Are you even *listening*?”

TWENTY-THREE



JACKSON

“So I’ll just take the two of them to the station with me. We’ll... come up with some excuse why they’re visiting and why Waylon’s hiding out with your mother,” Henry says. “Just... be careful, alright? Cover up your tracks, don’t use anything traceable, and clean up your mess.”

“We will,” I assure him. We’re outside his car waiting for Leland to get Ava and Waylon for Henry to take. We’d gotten cleaned up and our wounds bandaged before Henry got here.

Cassel returned not too long ago and went into the house with Leland. Micah and Tavish are in the car waiting and Jeremy is standing to the side with us when I start hearing something that sounds like bass thundering through the air.

The front door of our house busts open as music like something out of a boss fight in a superhero film kicks on and Leland and Cassel step out. Leland’s got a chest holster, side holsters, a gun on his back and two rifles—one in each hand. Cassel’s armory has to weigh more than his tiny body as he comes out wearing just as much, looking more than a little encumbered but happy as can be with a gun in each hand.

Leland tips up his chin at me, sunglasses on the top of his head, a fishnet shirt covering less skin than his holsters are as I watch the whole spectacle. Like... where did he even *get* that shirt?

“Why are they walking so slowly?” Henry asks.

I watch them in disbelief. “I believe they think they’re in a slo-mo scene in a movie. They even have their own boss

music playing,” I say while trying my hardest to not be skeptical of whatever is happening.

Leland does a slo-mo head flick, and his sunglasses snap down into place. I’m a little embarrassed to admit that it’s kind of sexy.

“I don’t have all goddamn night, Leland, come on!” Henry yells, but even my mom tsking and ushering Waylon past them isn’t enough to speed them up. And if *Ava’s* glower isn’t enough to get Leland moving, I’m not sure what Henry expects he’ll be able to do.

“Will someone else please take me home?” Waylon asks as he looks pleadingly at the crowd who ignore the question. He sighs as Ava ushers him into Henry’s vehicle along with Sarge. Cayenne is too busy trying to figure out what ridiculous thing her father is up to and why he’s walking so slowly. She decides that she will solve this mystery by stopping in front of him, causing him to snap out of slo-mo and stumble in hyper speed in an attempt to catch himself.

“Ah fucksticks,” he shouts as he slams into Cassel who trips off the sidewalk and slams into The Fence where a gun goes off.

Everyone’s attention snaps to Cassel as he slowly leans back and looks down at the gun that’d just fired. “Oh my god,” he whispers.

“What the fuck, Cassel! You’re a trained *hitman*. How did you have your finger on the trigger?” Leland asks.

“I didn’t! It must have snagged on something when I fell, but why wasn’t the safety on?”

“Why didn’t you check?”

“You were handing me so many guns! There were just so many, and I just didn’t know what to do with them all and there were just so many, Leland! OH MY GOD.” He jumps up, hesitating for a split second before slamming his back against The Fence.

Leland freezes, eyes fixated on Cassel. “Cassel... Cassel, what’s wrong? What did you just ‘oh my god’ about? Cassel?”

CASSEL?”

Leland rushes toward Cassel who is currently starfishing against The Fence as I realize what happened.

Cassel...

Cassel.

Shot.

The Fence.

Cassel shot The Fence!

I can't stop the laughter that escapes me at the idea of Cassel doing what I'd dreamed about doing to that stupid chunk of wood for *yearsssss*.

“C-C-C-Cassel,” Leland whispers as he grabs Cassel's arm and tries dragging him off.

“NO! Stop! Leland! What are you doing? Let's go, we have to like car chase and murder people, and I think you were going to rap for us. PLEASE RAP. I miss your raps. Ha ha ha ha ha. Please bestow upon my ears your wonderous singing voice. Ha ha ha ha ha.” Cassel is hanging on for all he's worth but Leland's like one of those parents that gain extra strength when their child is in danger.

He *peeeeeeeels* Cassel off and gasps. “Ohhhhh nooooooo.”

“Oh fuck,” Cassel cries as his eyes catch mine. “JACKSON, STOP LAUGHING.”

“I can't!” I say. Delight has consumed my body. I don't know if it's the evil inside me or what, but the scene before me delights me to no end.

“You... you shot my *baby*. There is... there's a *hole* in my baby!” Leland drops to his knees before the stupid fence trying to... comfort it or whatever the hell he's trying to do. Leland's head snaps over to Cassel who is *running* for all he's worth.

“Jackson, please save me. I didn't mean to shoot The Fence, let's just get in and go.” And with that, he hops into the driver's seat of the car Micah and Tavish are in and just *leaves*.

Just straight up leaves the street, hell, he probably even leaves the state.

“Hon, we should probably go. You know... saving people and all that jazz,” I say. Leland is staring at the hole in The Fence as I walk over, trying my absolute hardest to stop grinning. “Babe? We all have battle scars and blemishes. Did you love me less when I got shot?”

“No... but I hunted down the motherfucker who did it,” he growls.

Shit. “Um... sometimes... you just need to forgive. You’ll have an hour to do it while we drive,” I assure him.

“Hmmm...” It comes out more like a growl than anything as I get Leland to join us at the car. “This is what happens when you trust cute things. They fool you into thinking they’re innocent and then they shoot your best friend.”

“I would... weirdly think Cassel’s your best friend and you should be happy *he* didn’t get hurt.”

“Why the hell didn’t he check the safety? And how did he hit the trigger like that! Is it his first day?”

“I think maybe he was just so excited that you finally let him play with your guns that it overwhelmed him to the point that he made a very dangerous mistake. But your brave fence leapt into the way to make sure no one got hurt.”

“He sure did! Just like he leapt into the way of your panties when you were climbing over him,” Leland says, pleased by this turn of events.

I look over at Jeremy who is standing in the middle of the road, horrified that he’ll get stuck in our car for the next hour. Leland, on the other hand, looks thrilled to have a victim. He does go over to Henry’s car first and puts Cayenne inside with Sarge before patting Waylon on the head.

“Be a good boy and I’ll get you a new balloon!”

“Umm... thanks?”

“Of course! I’m the cool dad,” Leland says as he pats him some more then pats him right on the face. Even though

Waylon looks disgruntled and disgusted about it, he still ends up smiling a little. I doubt he'd ever admit to that, though.



What Cassel doesn't realize is that his error caused Jeremy immense mental and physical pain.

I think he even played dead for a bit when Leland tried getting him to sing with him.

"Jeremy, I used to think you were a bit stuck up, but look at us now! Best of buds!" Leland declares.

Jeremy grunts, which is all the acknowledgment that Leland needs to confirm this is true.

We reach the location that Cassel had set for us to meet about ten minutes after them since we'd followed Henry back to the station to make sure everything went smoothly. Meanwhile, the others went ahead to scout out the area surrounding Trenton's mansion.

When we get out of the car and head over to the others, I notice Cassel staring at Leland. "I know you could never forgive me—"

"I forgive you," Leland says almost immediately.

Everyone's attention snaps to Leland like they're struggling to comprehend what he's just said.

"You... do?" Cassel asks quietly.

"Yeah, I do," Leland says with a huge smile.

"O-Okay."

"On the drive over here, I had a long time to think about how much I value you, Cassel. How wonderful of a person you really are."

"He's going to toss me in the ocean, isn't he?" Cassel whines.

"I'm also confused," I admit.

But Leland just keeps smiling and I realize that of all the things he could have said, nothing would have freaked Cassel out more than this, and that is one hundred percent why he did it.

Cassel warily looks at Jeremy. “A-Are you okay? Did he hurt you? Is that what happened?”

Leland simply keeps smiling. It’s getting creepier by the minute.

“Depends what you consider okay,” Jeremy says.

Cassel quickly grabs Jeremy, tugging his head down until it’s tucked against his chest while Leland continues smiling.

“Y-You could go so low?” he asks.

“I could go even lower,” Leland murmurs.

“Dear god, no,” Cassel whispers. “Please, no.” Then he squeezes Jeremy who really seems to just be along for the ride. “It’s okay, baby. I’m so sorry you were locked in such a horrific space with that horrible man. Oh, baby.”

“I should survive,” Jeremy says dryly. “But I would thrive if you found a new friend.”

Cassel hesitates before looking over at Leland.

“You’d never leave me,” Leland says, but it sounds like a threat. Especially with that smile.

Cassel still seems determined, for some reason. “Jeremy, he’s weird and creepy, but he’s my first real friend.”

“Aww, thank you,” Leland gushes as he comes in and hugs Cassel and Jeremy. I’m pretty sure it’s just a way to torture Jeremy some more, but it got Leland to stop looking manic, so we’ll take it. “Okay, what have you guys figured out?”

“I figured out that I’d like you to stop hugging me,” Jeremy says, but Leland’s refusing.

“I’ll consider it,” Leland replies before giving them another squeeze of torture.

Cassel slips out of Leland's hold so now it's just Leland hugging Jeremy, which he seems even happier about. I'm pretty sure he's sapping the life out of Jeremy while doing this. "Okay, so according to the security cameras, they have a whole shit ton of people waiting for us and this Trenton guy isn't even there."

"So they know they failed to kill us and now plan to draw us to them to finish us off?" I ask as Jeremy fights to get free of Leland. He's pressing his hand against Leland's face in an attempt to scrape him off.

"Looks like it. When I searched the footage of the house, I saw that Trenton wasn't even inside it. From what he was talking about before he left, he took his yacht out," Cassel says.

"We just going to wait at the shore for him to come back?" I ask as Jeremy finally breaks free.

"That's a defeatist attitude. Cassel will find it," Leland says as he turns his attention to Cassel.

"Yeah... I probably can if that's the route we're going. I mean... we don't like have a boat or know how to drive a boat or anything."

"What are you talking about? I once killed a man with a boat," Leland says.

"Of course you did," I mutter.

"I know how to drive," Micah offers. "I used to drive for my ex-boss whenever he needed me to."

"Alright. Yeah. I know the dock he owns is about forty minutes from here, so I should be able to figure it out in that time. Ready?" Cassel asks.

Leland's staring off in the direction of Trenton's mansion. "What if... we blow up his mansion first?"

"Okay!" Cassel says, thrilled by the idea like he thinks Leland's going to whip out a grenade launcher and just—

"Leland, what is that?" I ask as Leland reaches into the back of his car and pulls out a massive weapon case.

“Nothing, honey. It’s Cassel’s. Shhh. Close your eyes and look away. It’ll be okay. That’s a good boy. You’re a good boy. Shhhhh. I just need to take a piss.”

“Then why’s Cassel going with you?” I ask.

“In case I need help... peeing. Friends who pee together stay together. You know that.”

“Do I?”

And there I stand as Cassel and Leland scuttle off into the trees toward the mansion, toting the largest weapon case I’ve ever seen as I question 1) Where the fuck he got it, 2) Is he really going to blow up the mansion, and 3) Where the fuck *did he get it?*

“That’s not really a grenade launcher, is it?” Jeremy asks.

“No, it’s probably a rifle or something,” I say a moment before I hear a large explosion and the ground shakes. “Told you. Just a rifle.”

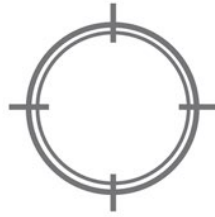
“Sounded like a grenade going off,” Tavish says.

“I... I don’t think so. I mean, if Leland had a weapon like that, I would have used it on The Fence. Ha ha ha...”

And then Cassel and Leland return and slip the case back into the trunk of the car like nothing happened. Like Leland didn’t just blow up some guy’s mansion.

“Sorry for the delay, there was some poison ivy I didn’t want to pee on. Boy, would that not be fun! Let’s go!” And he shoves Jeremy in the driver’s seat and climbs into the back with Cassel. I look between the two cars and quickly get in the one with Tavish and Micah, feeling like it’s probably the better choice.

TWENTY-FOUR



“Did you see the way that place fucking *exploded*?” Cassel asks, eyes wide.

“I never used that one before, but I’m now pretty sure he’s one of my favorite weapons. Can you imagine how easily it would have ended basically every altercation I’ve been in? Like ‘Oh, Lucas, you’re here?’ Bam, dead. ‘Oh, asshole who shot Jackson?’ Bam, dead. I could stop everyone in an instant.”

“We probably won’t even have to leave the boat. We can just shoot the yacht and watch it sink,” Cassel says, clearly excited about this aspect.

I fall silent as he speaks. I understand what he’s saying and feel like it’s a stupidly good idea...

“Nah, that’ll be boring,” I declare.

“*Will* it? We can still snipe them as they’re trying to flee.”

“Nah, old-school guns blazing is the way to go,” I say.

“You... you didn’t bring more ammo for the grenade launcher, did you?” Cassel asks.

I look away, absolutely fucking *refusing* to admit that I wasted our one good shot on a mansion we didn’t even need to go into. I mean... the guy’s going to probably be dead when we’re done with him anyway; he won’t even *know* we blew up his mansion. “No, dammit, Cassel, stop judging me! Aren’t you supposed to be tracking down someone? I’ll get a boat rental started while you do that.”

While Jeremy drives, Cassel and I figure out our plans so that when we arrive, a boat is already ready for us. Micah, true to his word, has a boating license under a fake name. Even so, there aren't many places that are willing to hand over a boat with next to no notice.

Getting on the boat will be the easy part; finding Trenton out there will be the harder part, but hopefully, he has no idea we're coming and we can sneak up on him. Thankfully, we have Cassel with us who is working his magic to track the yacht using his handy laptop.

"My baby can't go on the boat. What if he gets hurt or wet?" Cassel whines as he hugs his laptop to his chest.

"It's fine," I assure him. "If the boat sinks and you're floating on a wooden door, we'll just make sure Jeremy knows there's only room for you and your laptop."

"We all know the first person we'd toss off," Tavish says as he looks at me.

"Excuse me? I am the backbone of this group. I make you guys hard."

"You do what?" Cassel asks.

"He makes us hard," Micah clarifies.

"I know what I said."

"The only thing that's hard on me when I look at Leland is my heart," Tavish says. "Like... I *hardly* care about him."

"Yeah? I'm going to *hardly* look back when I push you off the boat."

"Um... please... please don't push anyone off the boat," the girl, who looks about eighteen and is trying to explain aspects of the boat to us, says.

"It wasn't in the contract," I respond.

"It's one of those things, you know... where it's not in the contract because it's common knowledge," she says.

I shrug because I feel like our "common knowledge" is wildly different, but eh, if she wants to pretend, then she can

pretend. I hoist my multitude of weapons onto the boat as she gives Micah her final words before sending us on our way. She looks worried and I can't help but wonder if she only gets paid if all of us come back... she didn't specify that we all need to come back *on* the boat.

Micah starts slowly heading out into the water as I find a nice place to sit and prepare my weapons. Once out of the docking area, I assume Micah will really let it go, but we continue to putter along with no speed boost in sight.

"Hey, Leland," Micah says. "When you booked this boat... did you look at how fast it goes?"

"I could swim faster than this," Cassel complains.

"I bet it's the weight of all of Leland's guns slowing us down," Jackson the Traitor suggests.

I hug my precious babies to me, refusing to let them take the blame. "Maybe it's the driver."

"They're going to see us coming a literal mile away. We will never catch them," Tavish says.

"Issue is that the wind is picking up, as are the waves, and this half-dead thing is struggling to keep up with them," Micah comments. "Is it supposed to storm?"

"Looks like it's just going to be windy," Cassel says, even though the sky tells a different tale.

"You guys are so freaking picky. Stop being so picky! It was the only one available without a moment's notice *and* while using some sketchy fake boating license!" I retort.

Cassel blatantly looks over at a seagull that swims past us as our boat fights against the waves. "Maybe he'll give us a lift so we get there before I grow old like you guys."

"You sassy little shit," I hiss. "Wait, wait, wait!"

I see what looks like two guys in their early twenties flying past us on a speedboat and start waving. "Heyyyyyy! Help us!"

They do a circle around us before coming to a stop. It's like midafternoon and they're already drunk, so jumping off my boat onto theirs and grabbing one in a headlock is thrillingly easy! And kind of fun!

They're all like "Oh no! Who's this handsome man come to toss me onto this rickety piece of shit?" and the other is like "Yo, bro. Don't spill my beer." Really, it's almost embarrassing how quickly I toss the two onto the shit boat, hand them fifty dollars—which I feel like is a very good exchange—and commandeer their speedboat.

And off we go!

"This boat even has beer!" Tavish says, popping one open as we pretend not to hear the cries of the guys we'd left behind. It's kind of like ambient noise at this point.

"Did we just steal a boat from those two?" Jackson asks, like he hadn't willingly crawled over into the speedboat to join me.

"No, we rented it for fifty, didn't you see that?" I answer. "They'll be fine. They'll drive it back and cry to their daddies about it."

Micah looks back at us as we fucking *sail* through the water. "Was... was I supposed to leave them the keys?"

"You took the keys?" Jackson asks in disbelief.

"Well... yeah, I thought it'd be bad if they went to the authorities!"

"Hell... we can't forget to go get them," Jackson says.

"I would never forget someone like that," I claim.

"What about the time you forgot Tucker for a week? Eh?" Jackson asks.

"I'd never forget *someone else*."

"What about when you forgot that guy in your trunk... just yesterday?" Cassel asks.

I pick his weak body up with the plan of chucking him as he cries, and if I didn't need him to find this yacht, he'd have

gone swimming. So there I am grudgingly trying to stuff him in the beer cooler since I can't toss him overboard.

With Micah's driving, Cassel's navigation, and my skill at finding us a fast boat, we track down Trenton's yacht in no time at all. The rough waves are nothing to us as Micah sails right through them with absolute ease. When we're close enough that we can see them with binoculars and scopes but not close enough for them to notice us, we stop and assess the situation for a moment.

"There's no real way to sneak on," Jackson says. "Are we faster than them, at least?"

"I would think. That yacht is massive," Micah states.

"So if we pick off as many as we can before we even reach them, we'd have the upper hand," Jackson says.

"Cassel and I will do what we can to narrow them down until there are only a few left before we move in. The issue we have is that the speedboat has no protection..." I mutter. "Wait, wait, wait. New idea. I have a gun case that's waterproof. What if I swim up as you guys distract them? Cassel can snipe them from here and you guys can hide in this crevice."

"I'm going to be real honest... I'm not worth much with a long-ranged weapon," Tavish admits.

"Leland, you and Cassel are definitely better at sniping, so the group of us will go ahead while you two cover us," Jackson says.

"What? No, I don't want you guys to go ahead—what if you get shot?" I ask, hating this idea.

"But it was okay for you to go ahead?" Jackson counters.

"Yeah! I'm bulletproof!"

"You are not! Leland, I trust that you two will cover us better than any of us can cover you two, okay?" Jackson asks. "Once we reach the boat, we can then distract them while you two come aboard."

"Fine," I whisper.

“I noticed there’s an inflatable dingy with a motor. I’ll get that up and going,” Micah offers as he starts working on it.

“I brought these,” Cassel says as he holds out little leather bands. “They’re GPS trackers. Put them around your ankle. I don’t foresee anything... happening, but just in case we get separated on the water or something.”

“Tavish doesn’t need one. We can only hope we get separated from him,” I grumble. “We’ll put his on Jackson so Jackson gets two. Actually, let’s put all of them on Jackson.” I try to snatch them up before others can take them, but Cassel smacks my hand away.

I grudgingly take just one and hook it around my ankle before grabbing Jackson’s face in my hands. “You’re going to be good?”

“So good.”

“And careful?”

“The most careful.”

“Don’t fall off and don’t even start making your way over until we draw their attention to us.”

“Got it.”

“We’ll put some good distance between us before we head in. There’s a ladder that I’ll aim for, so try to draw their attention away from it,” Micah says. “Oh, and I put the anchor down.”

I find a nice place of cover that’ll leave enough room for Cassel to be beside me as I scout out the yacht which has a good sprinkling of guards keeping watch. Trenton clearly is a paranoid man... I guess when he blew up our PI office and failed to kill us, he had an idea that we wouldn’t be easy to deal with.

I glance over at Jackson as he climbs onto the inflatable boat.

“They’ll be fine. They have life vests on,” Cassel assures me.

“I should have put on his safety suit,” I say.

“Didn’t you say he sank the last time you put that on him? And that was in a pool.”

“Maybe... but I’d also surround him in life vests so he can’t sink.”

“You know what, Leland? I’m not worried at all about Jeremy being out there because I know you’re going to be covering them, and you’re the best damn shot I know,” Cassel tells me.

“But I can make mistakes and Lucas is right that I’ve gotten lax... that I’m not as good as I used to be.”

“Lucas is just pissed you’re better than him. Now get your head out of your ass and take the shot. Jeremy texted and said they’re in position.”

Cassel puts his phone away and slips it into his pocket as I think about what he’s saying.

“Lucas was always wrong about you,” I say as I pinpoint a man on the top of the yacht. “You were better than me. You were far stronger than he ever gave you credit for. You didn’t let him stomp you down like he did to me.”

With the rough waters, the boat is rocking, making sniping a whole new experience, but I keep the gun steady and try to anticipate the rock with each wave that hits us.

“Hmm... I’m not sure about that. Hell, I can’t even hear his voice without having a panic attack. I’m going to take the guy on the upper left. You got the one on the right?”

“Got him.”

“Ready? These damn waves are making it ridiculous... I’m going to try to count in anticipation of the waves. So... three... two... one.”

During the split second that the boat steadies before the rock of the wave lifts it back up, I pull the trigger and both men on the topmost area go down.

We shift our attention to the next row. There are four down here, so no matter what we do, we're going to draw attention with these shots, but we still steady our guns. "I'm left and center, you have the right two," he says.

"On it."

And they're down, but we've snagged their attention now. The ones who were guarding the deck hurry inside the gigantic yacht, seeking cover that they won't find while out and exposed.

"You know what I didn't think about during all of this?" I ask as I search for someone who might make a mistake by revealing themselves to me.

"Huh?" Cassel asks.

"I have no idea how to drive this boat to get us up to the yacht."

"Ohhhhhh. Shit. Well, it can't be that hard, right? You keep on them, I'll move it."

"Okay, I can do that," I say as I keep an eye out for anyone who might be sticking their head out so I can shoot it.

"Hey, how do you get the anchor up?" Cassel asks.

"Hell if I know."

"I think he did something over here, but it won't go up."

"Maybe it got wedged on something and we need to release the tension of the chain?"

"Maybe... is it like a car where you need to back it up a bit?" he asks.

"Fuck if I know," I say as I see a man stick his head out. He's got a shiny long-barreled gun, but he obviously doesn't know how to use it with these waves. He fires a shot and I watch as a seagull drops from the sky and lands right in front of Cassel's feet.

"What the fuck? Did that dude just drop a fucking seagull on me?" He looks down at it in horror before staring at me.

“I... I’m not sure whether to be impressed or disappointed that it didn’t hit you,” I say thoughtfully. “Avian warfare.”

“It’s not... ew, get it off. I don’t want to see the thing! That’s so sad!”

“I’m not touching it!” I protest as I shoot the guy in case he starts dropping more birds on us.

“You’ll touch a dead guy; why won’t you touch a bird?”

“Yeah, but people suck. This little bird was just enjoying his feathered life!” I say. “We’ll make Jeremy move it when he returns.”

“Until he takes the damn thing back to Fred and eats it.”

“Is this about Jeremy eating squirrel?” I ask.

“We’re not talking about this,” Cassel says as the boat lurches forward and hits that anchor so hard that I’m sent *flying* forward and crashing onto my face. “Do... do you think I got the anchor unwedged?”

I look up at him from where I’m lying.

Cassel grimaces as he eyes me. “Man... a foot over and you’d have used that seagull as a pillow. Ew.”

“You are... the worst,” I decide.

“Then you fucking take over the boat!”

“I *will*. You shoot.”

“Okay, okay.”

He takes over my position and I hurry over to the anchor which actually goes up.

“See? I got it unwedged,” Cassel says proudly, like he actually knew what he was doing. It’s highly unlikely, but hey, at least it’s up.

I rush over to the controls and start to accelerate as I aim it for the yacht and quickly, *very* quickly realize that this is absolutely nothing like driving a car. I want it to go straight but the waves are pushing me to the left. I crank the wheel in

an attempt to straighten ourselves out as the ass of the boat lifts and the nose dives into a wave.

The pure velocity with which I'm thrown forward and then backward is *fascinating*.

“What the absolute hell was that? OH MY GOD MY LAPTOP!” Cassel runs for the computer as we hit another wave, and he and that poor dead bird go flying across the boat. He manages to catch the laptop as he grabs for one of my waterproof gun cases and tries pulling my babies out!

“How dare you touch Francesca like that?” I hiss.

“Francesca can share!” he decides. “Worry about not killing us!”

“I'm trying but Micah made this look stupidly easy!” I complain as I try to crank the wheel the other way. What I conclude as we are first flung to the left and then the right while the wave crashes down on us, soaking us both, is that we are now going in a circle.

“MY BABIES,” I cry as I quickly try to get them in their safe little cases before they get wet.

“Don't just leave the steering wheel!” Cassel says as he rushes over to help.

He helps, alright. He helps by nearly capsizing us.



JACKSON

“What... the fuck are they doing?” Tavish asks as the four of us sit on the small motorized boat and watch the speedboat whip around in a circle.

“Neither of them knows how to drive a boat,” I realize.

“Ohhhhhhhh,” Micah says. “How sad. I feel like maybe I should have stayed behind but it's surely too late to go back now.” The boat is flung this way and that while I watch Leland and Cassel run around and... is that a dead bird?

“This is ridiculous,” Jeremy says with a sigh.

“I guess on the upside, it’d be really hard to shoot them,” I comment as we watch their boat leap through a wave that definitely wins that battle.

Tavish looks over at me and smiles. “If he gets lost at sea, I’ll comfort you.”

“Uh... thanks, but no?”

“You guys ready? We’re getting close,” Micah says as he skillfully drives the small boat through the large waves and right up to the bouncing yacht.

“Should we send Micah to get them?” I ask.

“Looky there! We won’t have to worry about it now,” Tavish says as he points. “They’re sinking.”

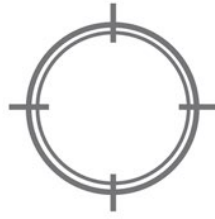
“NO... no, they’re...” I watch the two sharpshooters trying to bail water off the boat. Leland has the beer cooler and Cassel is just holding a case over his head that I assume his laptop is in while trying to push water off with the lid of the cooler.

“You guys get off, I’ll go get them,” Micah says. “This is horribly embarrassing. I’m definitely not getting paid enough for this.”

“That’s understandable,” I agree as I grab on to a ladder on the side of the yacht and use it to clamber up.

I was afraid of Leland dealing with the gunman... but what I really had to fear was his skills at driving a boat... wait, scratch that... sinking a boat.

TWENTY-FIVE



“I think we’re sinking,” Cassel announces.

“That’s a defeatist attitude,” I decide.

“Hey, Siri, play ‘My Heart Will Go On,’” Cassel says. So there we are, Celine Dion singing to us like we’re on the Titanic as the water reaches up to my ankles.

“Help me instead of listening to music and saving your laptop!”

“With what, Leland? Do you really think we’re going to scoop out a boat’s worth of water? This is the mighty boat’s end. Come! Hold me at the bow as we go down with this ship!”

“You’re so dramatic! I’m not holding you! You hold my babies, Cassel! You protect them with your life!” I order, and instead of doing *any* of that, he starts singing along with Celine.

“Fucking hell,” I grumble as I throw a life jacket at him since all he seems to be able to do is hold his laptop like Rafiki holds Simba while singing Celine Dion. When he starts putting it on himself, I look at him in disbelief. “No, Cassel, it’s for my guns!”

“What the fuck! I’m not putting life jackets on your guns! But I will put one on my laptop,” he says as he snugs it around the case with his laptop in it. “It’ll be okay, baby! You’ll be okay! Float to freedom, my love. If your papa goes under, you need to live on. You need to carry on my legacy. Just remember how much your daddy loved you.”

“That box is *not* going under,” I inform him.

“Aw, you care... wait, it’s because one of your guns is in it, isn’t it?”

“One hundred percent,” I say as I come sloshing over to him as we’re thrown all the fuck around now.

With all the life jackets in tow, I stuff one on Cassel. “We’ll make it home, Cassel. We have to... for The Fence,” I say as Celine gets to that crescendo, and with my cases slung across my back, I grab on to him. With nothing left to do but to wait for the ship to sink, I start to sing. “*And I knooooowwww that The Fence will live onnnnnn.*”

Cassel holds his laptop high above his head. “*Youuuu’ll sttaaaaayy drrrryyyyy this way.*”

“*You are saaaaaafe in my case and my case will go onnnnnn.*”

“What the fuck is happening?”

Cassel and I snap our attention to Micah who had, at some point, driven up on his little boat while we’d submitted to our fates.

“Oh, I guess we’re saved,” Cassel says as I quickly ditch the boat and rush over to Micah.

“How the hell did you sink this boat so fast?” he asks. “We were gone literally *two minutes.*”

“The boat couldn’t handle our heat,” I decide.

“*TWO MINUTES.*”

“It did it itself.”

“Do you... do you think that’s the case?” he asks, strangely skeptical as I make sure I have all of my babies aboard.

“And where’d the fucking seagull come from?” Micah wonders.

“Micah, I feel like you’re being awfully sassy,” I say as he skillfully drives the wee little boat right up to the yacht with

absolutely no issues. It's weirdly smooth and I find that I don't fear for the lives of my guns at all.

"I think that other boat was broken," Cassel mutters.

"I think Micah's trying to be a showoff," I add.

"*Two minutes*," he repeats.

"I told you, Micah, it couldn't handle our heat."

"Uh-huh... okay... sure... we'll pretend that's what happened," he says as he ties the boat to the yacht. "Why are you carrying all of those cases?"

"Well, I can't leave my guns on this boat. What if it sinks?"

"It's not going to sink because you're not going to be driving it!"

"Fair enough," I say as I leave a couple of cases behind but only once I'm sure the life jackets are nice and snug on them. Then I grab the guns I need before scrambling up the ladder.

Up there, Tavish, Jeremy, and Jackson are keeping someone back as Cassel and I rush onto the scene. We might not know how to drive a boat. We might sink one in record time, but we do know how to use a gun.

I take two guys down that Tavish was clearly having some issues getting to before Cassel gives me a nod and splits to the side to flush the men out. Now this is much more like it!



JACKSON

"Did they sink the boat?" Jeremy asks.

"One hundred percent," Micah confirms. "There was no saving it."

"How the hell are we getting back?"

"The small boat will work. We're not horribly far offshore. I guess we can catch up to our other boat and... not explain

what happened to their speedboat,” Micah says. “You know what? I was skeptical about coming along, but you guys are fucking entertaining! A blast, really! Hilarious.”

“I feel useless,” Tavish says as he looks over at Cassel and Leland shooting down everything that moves. Cassel even one-arm flips a man over the railing and off into the ocean.

“That was kind of hot,” Tavish realizes.

Jeremy’s head snaps around to look at him. “He’s taken.”

Tavish sizes him up for a moment and says, “Oh... by you?” like he didn’t already know.

“Leland will help you throw him off the boat if you want,” I tell Jeremy.

“You mean Leland and I finally agree on something?” he asks.

Tavish laughs like he thinks they really wouldn’t get rid of him, and I hurry along to join the others.

When we reach the far end, we don’t even need to do anything because Cassel and Leland have already taken care of it.

Hurrying up to Leland, I nod toward the stairs leading to the next floor up. “I think I saw Trenton rush inside. I’m sure the place is locked down tight; do we flush the guards out?”

“We could. How about you and I go around back and see if we can draw a couple out?”

“Got it,” I say as I hurry after him.

I love watching this man work. He’s so determined and precise with his actions, moving with such practiced ease. When we reach the edge of the boat, he shoots a large window, so I use my gun to knock some of the glass out of the window that leads into a hallway. Leland moves toward it a moment before a man steps out of a room and into the hallway we were about to enter. Without hesitating, I shoot him, making Leland gasp.

“Oh damn, that was sexy.”

“Yeah?”

“Oh yeah,” he says as he waggles his eyebrows at me before climbing through. I join him, and as the guards near us enter, they begin heading our way. What they don’t realize is that Cassel and the others have come in from that direction and are now picking them off. Just as we start past a room, the door busts open and a man rushes out holding a baton that he swings through the air with a vengeance. It’s evident he’d love for this baton to meet our faces.

Leland dodges it, but the man slams into him, driving him back toward the stairwell which he stumbles into. I lift my hand to help him, but I see someone in my peripheral vision slipping onto the scene, causing me to duck back.

I shoot at him, but he draws back into the room to keep me from hitting him. I’m forced to fixate on him as I use the wall for cover. The gunman doesn’t seem to mind as he tries shooting me *through* the wall. I jerk back, narrowly avoiding being shot as I duck down and rush forward. I use the door he’d dodged behind for cover and drive it into him. As he stumbles back, I shoot him in the leg and side, sending him down to the ground before turning to see if Leland needs help.

He’s nowhere to be seen, but I can hear a scuffle downstairs and realize that everyone must have taken the fight down there.

Rushing after him, I reach the lower floor where the others have also ended up. Since I’d been keeping an eye on my back, I notice that the door moves. I turn toward it, expecting someone to come after us, when the door slams shut.

“Someone’s going to lock us...” Leland freezes. “GET OUT.”

Immediately expecting it’ll be another bomb, I try to charge back up the stairs to get the door open for the others.

“Everyone, cover your nose and mouth,” Leland calls as he stands over two unconscious men who shouldn’t have fucked with this group.

“What?” I ask before realizing what he’s saying. He thinks they’re going to use the gas that Waylon and his stepfather created to kill us. “Fuck.”

With my mouth and nose covered, I run for the door and start beating against it as Micah rushes to help me. Clearly someone has moved something in front of it, which means that there’s no damn way we’re getting out this way.

I step away from the door as I quickly look around for another exit, but we’re *inside* the boat. There are no windows and each door I try is locked. Once they realized we were here, they guided us downstairs into this hallway. I can’t smell anything, but isn’t that what Waylon said? That you couldn’t smell it?

“Henry, I need to speak to Waylon,” Leland says.

I glance over at him as I realize he has his phone out.

“What’s wrong?” Henry asks through the speaker.

“NOW.”

I start slamming against doors with my shoulder, trying to bust one down as Leland checks all the doors in the narrow hallway, shirt over his nose and mouth.

“Hello?”

“Waylon, if that gas you made with your stepdad was released in a small room, what would you do about it?”

“It... if it’s enough, it’ll kill someone, especially in a small space that doesn’t have outside air coming in. Why?”

“Waylon, we’re locked in a room, and I have reason to believe they released the gas in it.”

“W-What? NO! You have to get out, it’ll—”

“Waylon, stop,” Leland says, perfectly calm. “You’re a smart kid who has worked with this a lot. Tell me what you’d do.”

“Okay, okay. Umm... don’t panic. If you panic, you breathe it in more. The gas is a lighter gas, so it’ll rise, but it’ll be distributed in the air quickly, so try to find an area before it

does. Once it's distributed, it doesn't take long to dip out of toxic levels. Maybe five or six minutes. But if it's strong enough, it doesn't need much time to lose its toxicity. Are there any air vents? It's not powerful enough to target beyond its specified area. If you can get out of its radius for at least ten minutes, you'll be okay. Even just trying to hold your breath for as long as possible could help."

"Got it," Leland says as he tells everyone to drop to the ground. Micah motions to me and I crawl over to him as he points at a door.

I do my best to hold my breath as I drop down on my ass and kick the door with Micah as hard as I can. The door groans against the pressure as Cassel drops in front of a different door and tries to pick the lock. He gets his tools ready a moment before slumping forward, hand struggling to reach the door.

Jeremy quickly grabs him, pulling him in close and drawing his shirt over Cassel's face.

Tavish and Leland rush over to help us, and as all four of us lay into the door, it finally breaks open. Jeremy quickly drags Cassel inside as Tavish staggers and drops to one knee. I shove him into the room so Leland can slam the door shut, hopefully keeping more of the toxic gas from entering the room freely. The room's not large, but I see a thermostat on the wall and hit it. The moment the air kicks on, I hurry the others over to the wall where the vent is, but we don't make it halfway there before Tavish collapses. Leland grabs him, dragging him after us and over to the wall where the fresh air is coming into the room.

I draw in another fresh breath before holding it as I press in close to Leland.

I don't know if either of us have ever gone up against a battle that we couldn't physically fight—one that completely knocked all of us down, making us defenseless and relying on even just a quick breath of fresh air.

I hear someone in the hallway banging on something, telling me one of the men who'd attacked us has woken up. He

starts screaming, begging for help a moment before he turns silent.

Looking up, I catch Leland's eyes, and what I can see of his expression is uneasy. Desperately, he reaches out and I catch his hand, squeezing it tightly as I turn to my watch and stare at the minutes ticking on by.

It's the longest ten minutes of my life, my eyes fixated on the group in front of me as the cold air hits our faces. I'd gotten a bit lightheaded, but I must have protected myself soon enough that it didn't affect me any more than that.

Even so, we wait five more minutes than Waylon recommended. We wait until I hear noise outside the room, telling me that they've come down to see how dead we are.

As Leland rises, I can *see* the anger dripping off him. "Jackson, get Tavish and Cassel back to the boat. I'll handle this."

And then he disappears from sight as the sound of gunfire explodes around me. It doesn't take long before the last shot goes off and I hear Leland ascending the stairs. He's pissed.

And Trenton's going to pay for it.

"Come on," I urge. Micah stands up and stumbles, using the wall to catch himself.

"Wow, that shit fucks you up," he comments as he rubs at his head. "What was that? It had no smell; it was just like I was lightheaded all of a sudden."

"No, it didn't," I say as he helps me pull Tavish through the door. Tavish is completely unresponsive, but he's alive.

Cassel can't seem to get his feet under him, but Jeremy's holding him close. "Come on, Cassel. You with me?"

"Are we on the Titanic?" he mumbles.

"What? No."

"Hmmm... I had this fever dream that I was singing Celine Dion with Leland, but it was about *The Fence*. That's fucking weird, isn't it? *I will go down with this fence...* Wait, no..."

that's a different ship song. Or wait... was that about romance... hmmm. I romanced you good, Lighty Mighty Sword. Man, what the fuck is going on, my bruh?"

"Is he... okay?" Jeremy asks.

"I think so. The people from the prison where we believe the gas was also leaked recovered just fine. They seemed confused and disoriented for a while," I assure him as I start to wonder if I'm going to have to help Micah walk. I really want to ditch them both and rush over to help Leland, but I have to trust him, and if he needs me to protect our friends, then that's what I'll do. I can't rely on Jeremy to protect them alone.

Thankfully, we reach the ladder leading down to the small boat without anyone stopping us. It seems like we've taken care of the majority on the yacht, and those we hadn't, Leland seems to be tackling. Cassel's easy enough to lower down with Jeremy cradling him, but Micah and Tavish are both much bigger than him.

"The waves seem to have calmed down a bit," Jeremy says.

I nod. "Thank god because I'm not quite sure how we're getting this teeny boat back. I really don't think we should take the yacht."

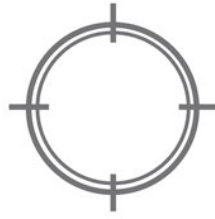
"Yacht rhymes with butt. Ha ha ha," Cassel mutters, which... I'm positive it doesn't, but he seems to enjoy it, so I let him have it.

Once he's down, a disoriented but still strong Micah helps me lower Tavish to Jeremy. And after I make sure Micah doesn't fall on his face, I look back toward where Leland disappeared to.

"Can you watch them? I'll help Leland."

"Of course," Jeremy says, and I rush back for Leland. As I turn the corner, I nearly slam into someone I hadn't seen. And as my body tenses, they grab me, pressing a gun against my head.

TWENTY-SIX



“You honestly thought that I would take this lying down?” I ask Trenton who is kneeling before me, all alone. None of his guards could even fathom stopping me. No, they couldn’t do anything.

“Fuck you,” Trenton says because he really doesn’t seem to have anything worth saying. “That kid isn’t yours.”

“He sure as fuck isn’t yours. I don’t give a damn that you took a part in making him. He’s not yours. You would have destroyed him for your gain. You only ever thought about caring about him when you realized what he could do for you. But the moment he came to us is the moment your fate was sealed. Now tell me, has this gas been released anywhere else?”

“Why would I tell you? Are you going to spare me if I do?” He gives me a toothy grin; it’s all quite sarcastic. I can tell his brain is working hard, trying to think of a way to get him out of this situation.

“No, I’m going to kill you. The difference is whether I kill you slowly or kill you fast. So start talking.”

“We had two doses. One I used on you. The other was being used to research, but it killed the fucking cook,” he says. “No one’s touched it since.”

“And Vance and his wife?”

“I assumed it was you who let them go.”

Does he not know Vance is dead? I guess that makes sense if Everly plucked him out of Trenton's hold. But then where's the wife? Is she free and hiding while this blows over or did Everly kill her? And why?

"People know Waylon knows how to make this. It's going to bite you in the ass taking care of him, you hear me? That's why he'd have been better with me all along."

"No, he'd have been better with his brother, but you ruined that for him. *You* made him turn on Vance and caused those people to die, didn't you, Trenton?"

"Now, now, don't give me so much credit. Yes, I made him betray Vance. He was willing to do anything to keep me away from his brother, so why let that go to waste? He could tackle the dirty work."

"And then you thought you'd dispose of him?"

"Of course I would. He wouldn't be able to pester me once he was dead."

"Right," I say. "Because men like you only ever care about your own gain and you knew if he was still alive, you'd have to fight him over Waylon. So you set the bomb in the office?"

"Yeah, it was pretty convenient that you led Summers right to your office."

So did Summers then tell Lucas about the bomb? Who told Lucas? Or was Everly watching and saw them do it?

"Why didn't you take Waylon right away, then?" I ask.

"Because I really don't think that kid knows. I think Harvey used him to run errands, but at this point, he's the only choice I have."

"Were you the one who released the poison in the prison that targeted Vance's men?"

"No, but Vance sure thought I was. Clearly, someone was wanting to watch Vance and me destroy each other. If it weren't for you, I'd have done a perfectly fine job burying him."

“Why’d you kidnap Vance, then?” I ask.

“To make him pay for this bullshit. He *knew* he didn’t have the gas when he sold it to me. He was hellbent on screwing me over, so I simply was going to make him regret it. I wasn’t going to kill him; I was going to make him watch this empire he built fall and then I was going to absorb it all into my group.”

Trenton sneers as he continues. “You know what? I thought it was hilarious when Vance’s attention shifted off me and onto you. I even heard he was hiring people to kill you and it left him completely vulnerable for my men to swoop in and take him... I never guessed you’d be such a damn problem. But that damn kid got in the way. You know you’re not going to be able to protect him from those who want it.”

“I sure as fuck won’t ever let anyone touch him,” I say before I shoot him.

Now I don’t have to worry about him *or* Vance ever again. There are still some things I’m confused about and other things that I just have to realize was some petty feud between two men who wanted to screw each other over.

I’m not sure if I want to sink the yacht or send Tucker’s cleaners out to make it just disappear. Then I’ll use this to frame Trenton for those who died by Waylon’s gas and possibly get Bennett out.

I debate that as I make my way back to the mini boat and look down at the others.

“Did you bang him?” Cassel asks. “Wait... no... bang *bang*. Ha ha ha ha ha...”

“Where’s Jackson?” I ask.

“He ran off to help you,” Jeremy says. “He left like ten minutes ago.”

“What?” I never saw him, so where did he go?

I pull out my phone and call him as I look around, anxious that I might have missed someone who got to Jackson.

“Hello, Leland,” a voice that definitely isn’t Jackson says.

“E-Everyly? What the fuck are you doing with Jackson’s phone? Where’s Jackson?”

“I have him,” he says. “He’s fine.”

“What do you want?”

He’s quiet for a moment as my heart beats wildly. “That’s a good question.”

And with that, he hangs up.

I rush back over to the edge of the yacht. “Cassel, I need you to track Jackson’s GPS. Is he still on the boat?”

“Uhhh... huh...”

“Cassel, please?” I beg.

Jeremy quickly gets Cassel’s laptop out and puts it in front of him. Cassel seems to be struggling and groggy from the gas but with help from Jeremy, the two of them seem to figure out how to get to it.

“Looks like he’s not here anymore,” Jeremy informs me.

“I... I saw a Jet Ski on the back of the yacht. Jeremy, get them to a hospital. I’ll get Jackson,” I say.

“You shouldn’t go alone,” Jeremy protests.

“Is there a way I can see Jackson’s location on Cassel’s phone or something?”

“Let me see,” Jeremy says as he tries tinkering with Cassel’s phone. Cassel’s disoriented but seems to help enough that when Jeremy climbs up the ladder to hand me the phone, the GPS is up. “You shouldn’t go alone.”

“They need medical attention. Micah’s a little affected, though he should be able to drive. But you’re the only one clearheaded. You can’t leave them.”

“Fuck... okay. Leland,” Jeremy starts before hesitating. “Don’t... don’t get hurt, you hear me?”

“Yeah. I won’t,” I say as I rush for the back of the boat to where the Jet Ski is suspended. I tinker with it until I get it to drop. Then I jump off the yacht and onto it, thrilled the waves

have settled down some. I've never driven one of these things before, but it'll be fine, right? It has to be fine.

I get a good look at the GPS and start the Jet Ski. I immediately hit a wave that leaves me airborne for a second before it slams back down. Slowing down a little, I get a feel for it before I push it faster. Working with the waves instead of against them keeps me from being jostled around.

Pushing the Jet Ski faster and faster, I manage to reach the shore where I see a small boat drifting. I run the Jet Ski up onto the sand before jumping off and running. I'm getting closer to the marker, telling me that he's not getting anywhere fast. I bet he didn't account for me having the GPS on Jackson. I'm sure he chucked Jackson's phone somewhere so we couldn't track it and assumed he'd be safe from there.

Anxiety eats at me as I run, twisting my stomach into a painful knot. The sand makes it hard to get good traction as my legs burn the harder I run, but I see a small abandoned lifeguard station ahead that looks like it hasn't seen attention in twenty years, and it's where the dot has stopped moving.

I shove Cassel's phone into my pocket so I have the use of both of my arms. The building is on stilts, raised high in the air, so I reach the stairs and rush up them, panic flooding me that something could happen to Jackson.

When I reach the door, I realize that I'm being sloppy, but there's really nowhere he could be hiding with all of this open space, which means either Everly's inside or he's using the building to hide from me. Stepping forward, I hug the wall, hoping to look into the window. A quick glance shows me Jackson on the ground, but I can't tell if he's unconscious because his back is to me. The room is so dark from the half-covered windows that I can't see if Everly is inside or not.

Why does Lucas *insist* on ruining my life? Why can't he just leave me alone? It's like even in prison, he pulls his little marionette strings, drawing Everly out and after me. Will he ever just pull back? Just loosen his suffocating grip on me?

All because I made a mistake and didn't kill the man who truly deserved to die, I am now suffering for it.

A noise behind me makes me turn as Everly lunges at me. I duck away from the metal pipe he swings at me, and it smashes into the window, making glass shards rain down on me. I try to get my gun up, but he's relentless, rushing into me as he swings and drives me back, not giving me even a second of time to get my gun up.

"You really thought you could get away with taking him from me?" I ask.

"But it was okay taking everything from me?" he growls as he slams into me.

The wooden railing groans beneath my weight and I hear it cracking, but he's pressing into me too hard. Shoving against him, I hook his leg with mine as he twists to get free, crashing into the railing that gives and we both fall.

I slam down on the sand, the fall enough to briefly knock the wind out of me as he leaps onto me and grabs my gun, flinging it before punching me in the face. I hook his leg and shove up with my hips, throwing him off me and climbing up on top of him. He's quick, throwing sand into my face that I jerk back from, which gives him the opportunity to ram his elbow into my face.

Everly gets me down on my back again and I want to grab one of my other guns, but I'm stuck doing all that I can to protect my face.

"You fucking asshole. You're a fucking monster, you know that? You're no fucking guardian angel. You're not out to help anyone but yourself. You're a monster. You were supposed to save me. You were supposed to look at me. You were..."

I hesitate as I stare at this man that is rattling on about pure nonsense.

"Is that what Lucas told you?" I ask. "You should know that you can't trust Lucas."

"I don't give a fuck about Lucas," Everly says. "This isn't about Lucas, this is about *you* and me."

I realize that at some point in my hesitation, he'd grabbed a knife.

“I should have fucking cut you that day so I didn’t have to live my life knowing that I can’t trust anyone... So instead, I’m going to do it now. I couldn’t let anyone else kill you before I got to do it myself. Before I made you understand what you did to me.”

As Everly holds the knife above me, I get a strange feeling that I remember something like this before. A young and terrified man hiding in the corner holding a knife that was the only thing that could save his life... a thing I took from him... before I shot him in the back...

All because Lucas told me to.

“You were the boy Norris was using in his snuff films...”

“I hate you... I hate you for saving me. I hate you for making me think that I was finally saved...”

“Before I shot you in the back...”

My arms drop away from protecting myself as this sinks in.

He grabs my shirt in one hand, fingers digging into my chest. “I swore I’d make you pay... I’m going to make you pay... I couldn’t let the others get to you first.”

“I’m so sorry... you’re right... you deserve that much,” I say. “I... I can’t fathom what it’d feel like... to have someone save you... only to turn around and shoot you. I didn’t want to. I didn’t...” But I still did it. I didn’t want to but I did. I fucking shot him. I... I moved the gun so it wasn’t an immediately lethal hit... like a part of me wanted to save him... but did I? Or was I so afraid of Lucas that I thought it’d give me some satisfaction to feel like there was a *possibility* he’d live?

“He made me kill people for his fucking films. And I was so scared. I didn’t want to kill them, but they all attacked me first. They were going to kill me, and I didn’t want to die. And then you came, and you were going to save me.”

“And I didn’t...” I whisper.

“Fuck,” Everly yells before dropping his head on my chest.
“FUCK.”

All these stupid fucking emotions come welling up inside me. All the people I didn’t want to kill. All the people I destroyed and ruined, and all for that sick fucking man. And what about those I left behind? Those I destroyed?

“I’m so sorry. I...” What do I even say to that?

“Fuck,” he repeats before shoving off me and throwing the knife. “Just... fucking take him and go! I’ve... I’ve been fucking unable to kill you this whole time; why did I think I could now? Why the hell did I just... follow you around... *help* you... and now I can’t even do this...”

“Everly, wait,” I plead as I sit up. “I’m so sorry. I wanted to save you. I really fucking wanted to save you. I knew Lucas wouldn’t let me, but I wanted to. I knew if I didn’t shoot you, he would... I know that’s not an excuse. I know it doesn’t matter...”

“I wanted to save those I killed for Norris too. That’s the funny thing, isn’t it? I’m not better than you. But the idea of making you hurt for what you did to me pushed me to survive. I had nothing left. Before Norris found me, what was I? Just... selling myself until there was nothing left, but... after I met you, I fought. I fucking fought and trained for this—for the moment I was going to make you run and shoot you in the fucking back...”

“I was going to make you pay for that feeling... for when I was drowning. Hell, I was fucking drowning for *years* and someone finally reached in to pull me out, but you just tossed me back in. I was going to make you pay for taking that small moment of happiness away from me, but when I met you again... I got confused. I became... obsessed with you, but when you came into that prison to visit Lucas, and I realized how close you were... I tried getting more out of Lucas about you and he fucking fed me lies, immediately doing what he could to try to manipulate me, and that’s... that’s when I realized that maybe I wasn’t the only one drowning. But I

couldn't stop because if I did, what would I have to keep me moving?"

"You don't just automatically start drowning again," I say. "I know... I know I've thought I might too. But you just find things in life to care for. To live for..."

"Yeah..." He slowly starts backing away.

"Everly, you need to stay away from Lucas; he feeds into toxic shit. He ruins people," I warn.

"He's not going to ruin me," he scoffs. "I was ruined a long time ago. And I was only using him for information on you. Only letting him think he had any say over what I did."

Everly turns around and starts to walk as I'm left there, feeling weird and anxious and more and more hatred for Lucas. Sometimes, I don't think I can hate him any more than I already do and then I find a new way to hate him. It's like every time I feel like I'm becoming a better person, I'm forced to face all of the awful things he made me do.

About fifteen feet from me, Everly stops and looks back, meeting my eyes. "I guess... I should have just walked up to you... and said thank you for saving my life... and left it at that."

"You forgiving me says far more than a thanks ever could," I tell him.

He gives me a curt nod before walking away.

I sit there for a long time.

Long enough that I can't even see him anymore before I stagger up the stairs and into the room where Jackson is struggling with his binds. Relief washes over his face as I walk over to him and use the knife Everly had left behind to cut him free.

"Leland, are you okay?" Jackson asks as I drop to my knees in front of him and begin to sob.

He hesitates before reaching out to me. "Leland? Leland, what happened?"

“Nothing,” I whisper as I grab on to him while all of the emotions... all of the bullshit Lucas has put me through floods through me.

I don't regret the horrible men and women I've killed. But how can I ever forget the ones like Everly who never should have been hurt?

My fingers dig into Jackson's shirt as I cry, emotions that I don't even know how to comprehend tearing out of me. Jackson's hands tightly wrap around me, pulling me close as I think how thankful I am that I have Jackson to live for... I have someone I can rely on. Someone who can hold me and love me and whisper words about how it'll be alright even though he has no idea what's wrong.

And I hope Everly will find someone like that someday to help wash away all that shit that darkens our pasts.

“Leland, do you want to tell me what happened?” Jackson asks, voice soft. “Did Everly hurt you? Did you kill him?”

“No... but he had every right to kill me,” I whisper. “He should have killed me for what I did to him. He was that boy I shot that day... the day I killed Norris.”

Jackson falls quiet but I know he hears me from the way his arms tighten around me, like he wants to protect me from my darkest thoughts. Like he doesn't blame me the way he should.

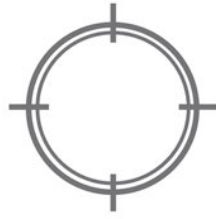
“Whether you planned to or not, I firmly believe that shot you made that day wasn't meant to kill him. You never miss a target you want to hit. If you'd planned to kill that boy, he'd be dead. Whether consciously or subconsciously, you chose for him to live. He might not see that, but you're not a bad person, Leland,” he says as he kisses my forehead since my head is tucked into his shoulder.

And I want to believe him.

I want to believe I'm good.

That I can make a difference... and maybe I can't rewrite the wrongs I did, but maybe, someday, I can make up for at least some of them.

TWENTY-SEVEN



LELAND

“Well, what a lovely surprise,” Lucas says with a beaming face as I walk into the room. Since Cassel and the others had recovered quickly, I’d left them back home to pay Lucas a visit.

Hopefully the last visit I ever make, but I also know my luck is absolutely shitty and the likelihood of that is slim.

“I was thrilled to hear that you met up with both Vance *and* Trenton for me. How wonderful.”

“It wasn’t for you.”

“Wasn’t it?” Lucas asks with the biggest grin on his face. “I mean... come on, Leland, you’re so easy to read! Those two groups have caused quite the issue for me in the past. They’re rather pesky and wanted to expose a few of our past dealings. I mean... really, what more can be done to me? I’m in prison for life, but the idea of them trying to hold that over my head just irritated me. No one, and I mean *no one*, controls me. So I realized that I needed to dispose of those two, and what better way to accomplish that than to have my lovely boys do it?”

“The moment Bennett here told me a sad little story about his sad little brother getting caught up with them, I knew exactly what I needed to do. Everly had a weird fascination with you... still don’t really get what that’s all about, but I told him I’d tell him more about you if he gave Bennett’s sweet little brother your address and boy, did that set the ball rolling! It’s funny how your weakness to now *help* people is all I needed to get you to take care of my dirty laundry for me.

Then we have Summers who was just so fucking simple and easy to manipulate.”

I was wrong. Everly wasn't a puppet being pulled along by Lucas's strings. We were the marionettes all along. Every step of the way. “The gas that made its way in here?”

“Oh yes, that was me. Funny, huh? Bennett told me all about that in some woe-is-me kind of thing. So I used Summers to bring the gas in since he was so busy working both sides. He dreamed of making it big or some bullshit—he was tired of being the little guy constantly ordered around. I told him about how far I could help him go, and at that point, he'd have done anything for me.

“The plan was that he'd turn off the cameras to the block and we'd use the gas to knock two of Vance's men out, but I'd rigged it a bit differently. He didn't know what I was going to do once the others were unconscious. It was simple enough to convince the guards to convey to you that my wounds were much graver than they were. And I was able to keep the gas from affecting me with a mask I easily acquired. While no one here caught on to it, Vance knew that the only other person *with* that poisonous gas was Trenton. To Vance, it seemed like a warning that Trenton was onto him... but Trenton never even knew about it. So once they started picking on each other and you guys came in, I got the last laugh as you destroyed them all just for me. Fun, eh?” Lucas laughs, like this really was all just a big joke.

“Hilarious,” I deadpan.

“Leland. I know you try so fucking hard to be different or better, but at the end of the day, what *has* it done for you? You still run right back to me and do everything I ask of you.”

“It kept me from turning out like you. It made it so someone was able to forgive me for an awful thing you made me do in the past. And it reminded me that I'm out there stopping Vance and Trenton from killing hundreds or thousands of people with their little... invention. Did you *really* care about what those two were holding over your head?” I ask.

“Not in the fucking slightest, but I was bored, Leland. It gets so boring in here.”

“Yeah. That’s what I thought. But I’m done with you. You are in here. And what I know about you, Lucas, is that you thrive on manipulation and destruction. So have fun rotting in here. Have fun wishing you had someone to destroy. And enjoy knowing that I’m out there loving my life.”

Lucas just keeps smiling at me. “Only because I gave you that life.”

“Sure,” I say. “Feel free to believe that.”

And without another word, I leave the room.

Lucas might be right. I might not have “won” this game he was playing. He might have used me every step of the way. Hell, I’m not even sure if Vance and Trenton really were fucking with Lucas... or was Lucas just fucking with me?

But at the end of the day, that gas didn’t need to be exposed to the public, and the two men willing to do so didn’t need to live.

Vance’s wife turned up a few days after Trenton died and went straight to the authorities. She told them that she’d been hiding for a few days but was too scared to go to the police after the threats she’d received but with Trenton dead, she admitted it was he who’d held her.

Summers was found trying to flee the state, but Cassel managed to find him on a camera and got the authorities called on him, so he’ll have to deal with blowing up our office. Hopefully, it won’t take long to rebuild it.

When I was on the boat asking Trenton for details, he had no idea that I had my phone in my pocket recording everything he was saying. So once Cassel was back to normal, I handed it off to him with the hopes of using what he’d said about Bennett to get Bennett’s sentence reduced.

Cassel did some work to hide my voice and to keep them from ever tracking where the tip came from, but with it, we fabricated some other things that will hopefully result in Bennett being judged not guilty or reducing his sentence.

They'll have to look into his case and review it, which could take a while, maybe even months, but for now we're able to quietly keep track of where they're leaning.

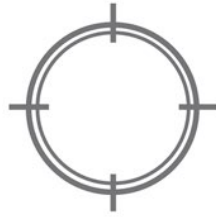
As I walk out of the building, Everly is coming in. His eyes flick over to mine for just a moment and there's the smallest head tilt, but that's all I get as he disappears inside.

I really wish he'd quit this job and stay clear of Lucas, but maybe he's stronger than me. Maybe he will keep Lucas from eating away at him. Hell, it doesn't even seem like Lucas knows who he is or what role he played in my life. He simply knows him as a guard who was interested in me and saw him as a steppingstone, having no idea it was Everly using him.

Even so, I had Cassel transfer a chunk of funds to Everly in the hopes it'd be enough money for him to step away and start a new life where his past isn't his main focus.

At least the option's there if he ever wants to take it.

TWENTY-EIGHT



“Papa Leland is hooooommmme!” I announce as I come busting in through the front door. Waylon jumps, as if he could possibly be surprised by my entrance, like he wasn’t looking forward to me coming home.

“I... I see,” he says, giving me a very peculiar look like the peculiar boy he is. “How did... stuff go?”

Jackson’s right behind me, so he waves Waylon over to the table. Waylon looks anxious as he sits down and stares at us with wide eyes.

“D-Do you think they’ll switch him to innocent? Can he come home?”

He’s so hopeful that I feel bad delivering the news, but I think he’ll realize that it’s not all bad. While everything will take a while to go through court, I was able to snag a bit of early information and though it’s not set in stone, it seems likely that this is the way it’ll go.

“He’s not going to come home right away, Waylon,” I say. “While we did work some magic, and let me say it was good magic—I say we, but it was totally Cassel—we couldn’t get him off scot-free. It’s highly likely they’re going to drop the five counts of first-degree murder, but they’re going to hang on to his possession of an illegal firearm and possession of illegal substances. We’re guessing that he’ll serve about seven years but will likely be out on parole in five.”

Waylon hesitates. “But... if Cassel could do stuff, why couldn’t he get him out?”

Jackson gives him a soft smile. “Waylon, you have to understand that we can’t erase memories. We can fabricate some made-up proof that he didn’t shoot them because there was no one there to prove us wrong. But we can’t remove the fact that he was involved in the gang, which there’s proof of, or that he was dealing with drugs and owned an illegal firearm.”

Waylon’s rocking a little in his chair, and I can tell he’s close to tears again. I mean, it’s looking like we’ll have his sentence dropped from life to a likely five years. It’s better than Bennett ever would have gotten without us. But then I remember that he’s a kid, and when I was his age, I grew up having no one.

What would it have been like to have someone to rely on, to love, to care for, and then have that single person ripped away?

To have no one and be forced to live your life like that?

“Hold on,” I say as I grab Jackson’s hand and draw him away.

“What are you doing? He’s clearly upset,” Jackson whispers.

“I know, I know. But I thought we should be like a real couple who talk about things before I stick him in the closet and teach him kung fu,” I whisper back as I shut the door so Waylon can’t hear us. “His aunt doesn’t want him and neither does his mom. He has no one, and he’ll go into foster care where he’ll age out. I fucking hated foster care. I know not all foster homes are bad and probably ninety-five percent of them are amazing, but there’s always the possibility that it won’t be good for him. And then before Trenton died, he made the comment that others might know what Waylon can do, so will he ever really be safe with a regular couple?”

“Leland, do you even have to ask?”

My eyes get wide. “So I can keep him?”

Jackson snorts. “He’s not a dog.”

“You’re the best! I’m going to teach him so many tricks,” I enthuse as I give Jackson a hug.

“It’s only if he wants to stay, you know? He seems to be quite wary of you. And for good reason,” Jackson says. “And like... this isn’t like a normal family committing to having kids. You know how much shit you get into? How many bad guys you run off to attack?”

“Right, right. I forgot about that.”

“We would have to be extremely careful, and there’d have to be extra steps to keep him safe.”

“True. But we’d also be able to keep him safe from people who might want him. We have no idea what they might know about him.”

“Very true. But this will have to be his choice.”

“Right.”

“Don’t get too excited. If he knew what was good for him, he’d say no.”

“Nah, I’m rich. He’ll say yes,” I say as I grab Jackson’s hand and drag him back out to the table where Waylon is doing his absolute best to look like nothing matters. That everything is perfectly fine, and he can’t fathom an instance where it wouldn’t be.

“So... my brother was renting, but if I get a job, I think I can pay for the rent... my aunt won’t care or notice, so that’ll be fine, right?” Waylon asks.

“Waylon, you could stay here,” I say, trying to play it cool so I don’t spook him.

He stares at me for a long moment.

“If you want,” Jackson adds. “We would... tweak a few things and have Cassel handle the necessary paperwork. But our household comes with a lot of... issues.”

“The first is that we have The Fence worship hour every Saturday from noon to one.”

“I... I can do that,” Waylon says, looking hopeful.

“We don’t,” Jackson interjects. “You don’t have to do that because it’s not a thing we do.”

“Ignore Jackson,” I say. “Although... I guess he’s right. You’ve dealt with your brother and the gang and poorly robbing gas stations. You know that others might know what you can do and could come for you in the future. You’ve seen some of what the dark side of life has to offer, but I can’t promise that’s all you’ll see staying with us. I’ve told you about my past. You know what I can do, but I seem to attract fun—for me—attention. So... with that comes risk. I will try to make sure no one ever hurts you... but I’m not a superhero. I can’t keep everyone I love from ever getting hurt, no matter how much I try.”

“My stepdad had me make gas intended to kill people... I think I know a thing or two about shit,” Waylon responds. “If you’re sure... I mean... are you just doing this because you feel bad for me or something? Because you don’t have to; I can take care of myself.”

“Of course we wouldn’t do this if we didn’t want to,” Jackson says.

I beam at him. “You know I thrive off torturing people, and this means I’ll now have *two* people in the house to torture.”

“Yay?” Waylon says, looking rather uncertain. “Maybe... I want to live alone after all.”

“NO! We’re going to have so much fun together!” I say. “I’ll help you study! Ooh! I have a paintball gun and I could shoot at you every time you spell a word on your next spelling test wrong!”

For some reason, Waylon is staring at Jackson. Even though it very much looks like a “please help me” expression, I’m positive it’s his excited face.

“No getting into bad stuff, though,” Jackson warns.

“Right, if you join a gang, I will make you write ‘I will not join a gang’ a thousand times while I’m forced to take the whole gang down,” I inform him.

“I... I won’t join a gang!” He sounds very determined.

“And you’ll carry a balloon when we go out in public so I can always tell which one is you,” I add.

“I... would think you could just look at my face,” he says.

“That’s silly talk.”

Waylon stares at us for a long moment. “Are you guys sure you even want me? I just... I mean... not even my own mother wants me. I don’t even know you guys and you don’t even know me. I’m sure you’ll realize that this was a stupid idea.”

“This is payment for hiring me,” I decide.

“W-What is? Taking care of me?”

“Yep.”

“But... shouldn’t you get something good out of it?”

“I am,” I say before I grab him in a headlock. “Now let me show you my mace collection!”

“You have maces?”

“I do! Do you want your own mace?”

“Do not give the kid a mace,” Jackson says.

“He’s grumpy. You’ll have to get used to him as the grumpy papa and me as the badass motherfucker one.”

Jackson sighs. “Don’t cuss in front of the kid.”

“My god! I didn’t know kids came with so many rules!” I say. “Fine, fine. How about you figure out what all you need, and we’ll go shopping tomorrow? Okay? Go tell Bennett that the super-cool one is going to make sure that you have a lovely home. He said he’d call around four.”

“Oh... okay!”

Waylon stares at us, like he thinks we might start laughing and tell him it was all a joke. I know what it’s like to have parents who don’t want you... it makes it hard to believe that others do.

“Could... Could I borrow your phone to text Sally?” he asks, looking uncertain.

“Sure,” Jackson says as he passes off his phone, which is probably for the best so he doesn’t see my camera roll filled up with pictures of The Fence, my babies, and nude Jackson. “We’ll get you a phone tomorrow.”

“You will?” he asks with wide eyes.

“Of course.”

“Okay. Thanks,” he says as he hurries off.

I turn to Jackson who’s giving me a look.

“What?”

“Just wondering how long it’ll be before you teach him to shiv someone.”

I show him the rubber knife I already had in my hand. “As soon as he gets off the phone!”

“Maybe we shouldn’t?”

“He should know how to protect himself!”

“What if we start with some self-defense first?”

“Shivving someone *is* self-defense.”

“I’m thinking like... some ways to get out of holds and how to punch someone.”

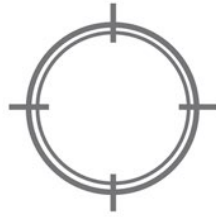
“Ew, who punches people when you can...” I grab him in a choke hold, then pretend to stab him twice before I kiss him.

“I’m a little worried now... do you always kiss them after you stab them?”

“That’s my special move just for you.”

“Good.” Jackson grins before he kisses me again.

TWENTY-NINE



JACKSON

My phone beeps, making me warily look down at it. Warily because Leland had sent me a message earlier. A message that had simply said: “You better watch out. I’m coming for you.”

There are so many things that could mean. It could be fun, sexy, or downright horrifying. Hell, it could be a threat to our lives, for all I know. He could have already started off on a new adventure. So when my phone beeps this time, I steel myself before looking down at it.

Leland: What’s taking you so long?

Me: I’m leaving my mom’s at five like I told you I would be. It’s actually 4:55.

Leland: Don’t you love me anymore?

Me: I’m positive that me being five minutes early is actually me loving you more. Go play with your new child.

Leland: He’s staying at a friend’s tonight. I can’t tell if that was by choice or if me jumping out from behind The Fence before I took him to school was the culprit. You should have heard him SCREAM. That high-pitched screech will please me for years to come.

Me: Is he regretting moving in with us?

Leland: NEVER! He already thinks we’re amazing, I assure you. Now trot on home.

I put the phone down and hurry over to my car, unsure if I should be worried or not. Leland's been on his best—for him—behavior around Waylon who doesn't seem to fall for Leland's antics like Mila did.

Even so, Waylon seems to be enjoying himself.

When I pull into the driveway, I park the car before heading inside, preparing myself for anything that could happen. The dogs don't come to the door to greet me, and at first, I'm confused why. Did he take them outside or maybe he locked them up... somewhere.

And that's when I see some weird square-looking thing on the floor. Reaching down, I pick it up and realize that it's... a sugar cube? Why the hell is there a sugar cube on the floor?

And... there's another one?

Feeling baffled, I follow the trail that brings me right to the door leading down into the basement.

It's... confusing, but isn't everything down in that room confusing?

Even so, there I am swinging the door open and starting down the stairs.

And that's when I hear something smack.

I reach the last step and look over at Leland who is dressed in a pair of tight breeches, black boots, metal spurs, and a button-up top, like he's planning on jumping some horses. He has a crop in one hand which he smacks against his other hand as he watches me closely, saying nothing but likely feasting off my look of uncertainty. He slides the crop up his leg, over his cock before he slides the crop into his belt loop, picks up a lasso, and starts swinging it.

Just like that.

Just like any part of what just happened is normal.

“What the hell is happening?”

“Like I told that lady at the racetrack a while back... I'm going to break my stallion to harness,” he says. “The woman

at the tack store was all kinds of confused. She said I was mixing disciplines, and that hunter jumpers or whatever they call it don't usually lasso off their horse since their saddle doesn't have a horn or something, and when I told her I was breaking you to harness, she was even more confused. And she kept telling me that these spurs don't go with these boots. But clearly, she didn't know what I was talking about because the man at the adult store sure did." He flings the lasso around and when it actually loops around my upper body, I'm thoroughly impressed. "I've been practicing."

"It's kind of sexy," I realize as he snubs it tight, locking my arms against my body. "This is it, right? This is how we're having sex? Just tied up with one simple rope is alllll the weirdness we're doing, right?"

"I gotta break you first," he says as he ties the rope off before coming toward me, whip back in hand.

"This is worrisome," I decide as he smacks my ass lightly with it.

"The only thing you should worry about is how many clothes you currently have on. Didn't you see my text to come down naked? Are you being *defiant*?"

I actually didn't. It was probably around the time that I was confused by all the sugar cubes, which now... weirdly make sense. "Horses can't read."

"Oh fuck, we have a sassy steed," Leland says as he wraps another rope around me and ties it off in the other direction so I'm pinned in the middle unable to go anywhere as he comes up behind me and shoves his groin against my ass, his arms draped over my neck as I feel his breath on me. "If you're good, I'll feed you a carrot," he whispers in my ear.

"Oh?"

He reaches around in front of me and unbuttons my pants and yanks them and my underwear down. Then he steps back and smacks my ass with that crop again. There's not much more than a light sting, but in a weirdly good way. "You going to stand hobbled all night or kick those pants off?"

I do as I'm told before looking back at him. "Maybe we should put you in a harness first?" I ask as he comes around to my front and uses the tip of his crop to lift my cock up.

"I'm going to be riding *you*, though," he says, grin taking over his handsome face as he steps up to me. His mouth hovers next to mine, lips so close that they *just* brush against mine.

I try to lean in for a kiss, but he dodges it at the last moment because he wants to be tantalizing and make me work for it. "Not yet," he tells me as he grabs my shirt and works it out from under the ropes before drawing it off me. Once it hits the ground, he turns and walks over to a bag but as he does, I get a nice view of his ass stuffed into the tightest pair of breeches. He looks so damn *good* in them.

Leland pulls some leather contraption with straps out before walking up to me. He loops it around my neck and buckles it before loosening the ropes he has on me, letting me free.

"Am I a wild horse? Because I'm pretty sure at this point a wild horse would run," I tease.

"All I have to do is show you my ass and you'll stay right here," he says as he turns around and smacks his own ass with that crop.

"Oh, that sure is right," I realize.

"On your knees," he orders, and I drop down in front of him as he walks up to me. I hook his waist with my arm and draw him in, mouthing his cock through his tight pants. His fingers slide through my hair, tugging it gently before he pulls back from me.

And then he smacks me with his damn crop! "I didn't say you were done getting harnessed, my sexy steed," he chides as he pulls the leather straps to my sides. The main ones go between my legs before he grabs my arms and pulls them in front of me. The straps go around my wrists, snugging them to my lower stomach with leathers that wrap around my waist so I can't move either arm once he's done strapping them down.

“Are you having fun?”

“I sure am,” Leland says as he looks at me all strapped down, unable to move much in this position. “Let’s give the good nag a treat now,” he adds as he presses a sugar cube against my lips.

“This is just going to be an overwhelming blast of sugar, isn’t it?”

“It sure is,” he says with a grin but there I am, opening my mouth, and when he sticks it in, I wrap my tongue around his finger, sucking on it as the sweet sugar fills my mouth.

He draws his finger out as he watches me closely before coming behind me and running his whip down my back. It makes me shiver for some reason. “On your hands and knees,” he orders, voice husky.

“Hands and... you strapped my hands up!”

Leland doesn’t seem to care; he presses a hand between my shoulder blades, pushing me down. Since my hands are strapped down, I end up with my chest on the floor and ass in the air. Then he tugs on the straps, one of which goes up my ass crack.

“Where the hell is that going?”

“To the great unknown!” he says before he stuffs Blow-Up Randy on my back. “Now that’s a good pony.”

“Why is this thing on my back?” I ask.

“Would you rather *I* be on your back?”

“I would!”

He pulls Randy off and simply hits me with his thigh, which pushes me off balance, before sliding me onto my back. Leland straddles me while standing over me and looking down, then lifts his boot and steps down on my chest lightly. “You don’t listen very well, do you?” he muses before taking his boot and rubbing one of his spurs over my nipple.

“Maybe because I know that if I don’t, I get to see more sides of you,” I say as I watch him start to unbutton his shirt.

He's still looking down at me, the sexiest fucking expression on his face as all his attention is on me.

And then he pulls his shirt off and tosses it onto my face, depriving me of the view. I can't grab it with my bound arms so I'm left shaking it off, eager to watch the rest of the spectacle.

Leland unzips his pants and pulls his cock out as he grins at me.

"You want to fuck me?"

"I sure do," I whisper as I watch him stroke his thick cock.

Why the fuck is this so hot?

He sits down on me, tilting his hips forward as his cock brushes against my arm. "Make me want to come."

I rock my hips up, shoving him forward since I can't grab him. He catches himself in time to prevent falling onto my face, but I only have to scoot back a little to reach his cock, my tongue catching the edge of it before pulling it into my mouth.

I hear the lube snap open as I suck his cock while he hovers over me. He shifts forward and I manage to take him in deeper, wishing I could see him finger himself, but I can't do anything with my arms that are fastened against me.

"I want to ride you into the sunset," he says as he draws his cock out of my mouth.

"I'm... not sure I can go that long but I'll give it a valiant effort," I say, which makes him grin.

"I'll take it." Leland rocks back, hand reaching out and wrapping around my cock. The lube runs down my cock, his fingers dancing over me as he gives me a mischievous grin.

"I'm already afraid of what that look means."

"Don't be afraid. Just... your harness came with a fun little attachment," he informs me as he dangles something on a chain in front of me while his other hand continues to stroke me.

“What... is it? I’m afraid to even ask,” I say as he slides back, causing my cock to rub along his ass and over his balls before he settles on my thighs. As he rocks forward, he wiggles a clip in front of me.

“Zooooommm goes the chomper,” he announces before placing it on my nipple.

“What the hell is this?” I ask.

“They’re hungry little clips, I can’t stop them!” he says as he attaches the second one to my other nipple.

“You really couldn’t stop them?”

“Jackson, they were hungry! And so are you,” Leland states as he grabs another sugar cube which he aims for my mouth.

“This horse is sugar-free,” I say.

“Don’t sass me.” He gives the chain on the nipple clamps a little tug and I don’t know if it’s the clamps, the grin on his face, or the way my cock rubs against his as he shifts his hips, but pleasure rushes through me.

“Open,” he demands as he gives me another smack with the crop.

I open my mouth, not even caring about how damn sugary it is because the look on Leland’s face makes it all worth it. He slides up until I feel my cock against his ass. His fingers wrap around it before lowering himself down until the tip is pressed against him.

“You deserve this treat?” he asks.

“Has to be better than the sugar cubes,” I say, which makes him laugh. He sinks down on me, pleasure consuming his expression. His hot body wrapped around my cock makes me groan. He grins at me as he rocks up just a little before pressing back down.

“You like it when I ride you, don’t you?” he asks.

“I like pretty much everything you do to me.”

His eyebrow lifts. “Now *that* sounds suspicious. I swear you cry about half of the stuff I do to you.” He apparently wants to show this by tugging the chain on the nipple clamps. I rock my hips up into him, deciding that if I can’t use my hands, I can still use my hips.

Leland moans at the sudden thrust before smacking my thigh with the crop. “Stop bucking.”

“I’m not a horse!”

He just laughs in response until I thrust into him again, which makes him grab on to me. He sinks down, rocking on me as he picks up speed. My eyes run down his sexy body, taking him in as he moves over me. He knows just how to move, how to rock his hips, how to draw me in and cause pleasure to build and build until I can’t take much more. He tugs at the nipple clamps as he sinks down until my cock is deep inside him, making me groan.

Leland reaches down and strokes his cock, moaning as he comes onto my chest. He drives down onto me, clenching tightly around my cock until I can’t take any more, coming inside him. Bliss washes over me as he rocks his hips gently before pulling off my cock. He leans forward, kissing me.

“You’re a good steed,” he says with a grin.

“Thanks,” I respond as I urge him into another kiss, loving every minute. “Man, I feel like I made it out of this quite unscathed. Usually, my life is in danger when you bring something new home.”

“Eh... I just wanted to touch you... I’ve... I’ve had enough excitement recently,” he says quietly, and I know he doesn’t mean gunslinging action, but what happened with Lucas and Everly.

Leland’s fingers work on the binds around my wrists, letting me free before tossing that and the nipple clamps to the side. I wrap my arms around him, pulling him into a hug. He’s quiet as he sinks down on me, which is a rare instance. So I just hug him and kiss his forehead.

“Are you doing okay?”

“I am.”

“You can’t let Everly or Lucas get to you. Everly forgave you.”

“Yeah, I know. And I refuse to let Lucas fuck with my life because fuck him.”

“Yep, fuck him.”

He squeezes me tightly. “I’m okay, honestly. And you know why? Because I have you. Because you’re the absolute biggest support I could ever ask for. You make everything better. You make me feel human.”

“You were always human, Leland. You just finally have someone to lean on and care for you and help you. You have a lot of someones.”

“Some are better than others,” he teases before squeezing me again and pressing a kiss to my neck.

THIRTY



“Sooooo, I’m confused,” Waylon says.

“Waylon, that’s just the state to be in when you live with me,” I assure him.

“Makes sense. But I have trouble understanding why.”

“Because I am phenomenal. Now here he comes!” I say as I watch Jackson warily walk into the building. “Start blowing!”

Waylon sighs but lifts the party blower to his lips and starts blowing so it makes the most obnoxious noise. Jackson immediately freezes, like any part of this could startle or confuse him.

“Look at him, he’s so scared he’s thinking about running,” Waylon says even though I didn’t tell him he could slack off on the blower. “I think maybe I should have run too.”

I grab Waylon around the shoulder and pull him in close so he’s smashed against me. “You just keep blowing if you want ice cream.”

“I DO want ice cream.”

“Then blow, boy, blow!”

He blows that party blower for all he’s worth. Clearly, he wants that ice cream!

“What... is happening?” Jackson asks warily, for some *weird* reason.

“This must be the party boy!” the lady calls as she waves wildly at Jackson.

“It’s... not my birthday,” he says.

“I never said it was! We can have parties anytime of the year,” I reply.

“Do you ever get worried he’ll be tired enough of your harassment that he finds a different husband?” Waylon asks.

“That’s a defeatist attitude,” I assure him as I let go of him to hurry up to Jackson.

“Are we at a... parkour place?” Jackson looks around at the equipment set up that includes walls, jumps, and railings, among other things.

“We sure are!”

“Oh god, are we going to shoot at each other here?” he asks as he turns his head, like he’s expecting the others to be here.

“It’s just the three of us. And we’re not here for the course. We’re only here for one single thing... Brittney, take it away,” I say as I beam at everyone.

I made sure that when I requested a teacher, I asked for the bubbliest one possible, preferably one that worked with children. And the moment that woman blasted me with her smile, I knew it had to be her.

“Welcome, party boy! We have a special-wecial day lined up just for YOU! I’ve heard that this big boy has a little trouble climbing fences, so I am here to teach you how!” she cheers as I try my absolute hardest not to appear manic as Jackson *slowly* looks over at me. There’s disbelief on his face, like he couldn’t possibly imagine how I could do something like this to him.

“Um... I’m okay, thank you,” Jackson says.

“That’s a defeatist attitude! And do you know what we do to defeatists? We make them climb the wall of hell,” she informs him as she points to a curved ramp wall that goes

straight up. Jackson eyes that, then looks over at the fence, then looks at me.

“Leland, please,” Jackson says.

“He’s literally begging, and you’re still going to make him do it?” Waylon asks in disbelief.

“Waylon, oh, Waylon,” I croon as I pull him in close since this is a valuable lesson for him to learn. “Don’t *ever* settle for anyone until they’re willing to even take a fence-climbing class just because you smile. Watch this.” I turn to Jackson and give him my biggest smile. “I really thought it’d be fun! And I thought you’d enjoy it... do you not like it? I mean... I even rented the whole building out because I thought it’d be something fun for you.”

Jackson just fucking *caves* before letting out the biggest sigh and turning to the woman, ready to learn.

“You are so proud of that,” Waylon realizes.

“I am!”

Waylon watches me closely. “Is this what’s called... manipulation?”

“Oh my god, I would never! Waylon, look at him! He’s having so much fun,” I say. “Jackson, if you can clear the fence in *one* go, we can do other stuff!”

Refusing to put it off like the brave man he is, Jackson charges the fence, grabs on to it, and immediately loses his footing, slamming into it and flipping over the top.

The instructor promptly begins clapping like Jackson has just won gold at the Olympics. “Such a good try! You... your effort gets an A plus plus!” Brittnay calls, which I’m pretty sure just adds to the pain.

“Wow...” Waylon says.

I nod knowingly. “Right? Imagine if there was a little old lady on the other side of that fence? He would have splatted her like a pancake.”

“Kind of like that guy splatted you?” he asks.

I gasp and turn to look at him. “You are my *child* now. You’re supposed to think I’m awesome and amazing!”

“No.”

“Waylon, why?” I whine. “If you want your ice cream, you gotta climb that fence!”

The instructor looks at us. “You want to go next?” she asks.

“This is so weird,” Waylon says while eyeing the fence, like he really wants to try it.

“You can do it, you can do it!” I chant. “Just think of it this way, no matter how poorly you do, it’ll be better than your Papa Jackson!”

“I failed like that to make you feel like you can achieve anything,” Jackson says dryly.

“This is ridiculous,” Waylon grumbles. “But if it gets me away from Leland, then I’ll climb anything.”

“Go!” I say as I give him a push and after a brief hesitation, he runs toward and scrambles up it as Jackson comes over to stand beside me.

“He’s having fun,” Jackson says.

“Are you?”

“I’m always having fun when you two are having fun.”

I grin at him. “Even if you still can’t climb a fence?”

“My pants didn’t get stuck and I didn’t moon anyone. I’ll call that a win.”

Waylon reaches the top and looks over at us, absolutely beaming. “I did it!”

“But can you climb the wall of hell?” I ask as his eyes shift over to it.

He jumps off the fence and comes around to face me. “I bet I can climb it better than you can!”

“You’re on,” I say with a grin as I chase after him. “Because next time we do this, it’s going to be with paintball

guns!”

“That sounds painful!” Waylon gives me some wide eyes.

“Then you better get good!”

The three of us rush over to the wall of hell as the instructor continues to praise us for every little thing we do, no matter how poorly we do it.

I know that what I did in the past can't always be erased. I know that there are people living their lives affected by what I've done, but I like to believe that I've done more good than bad—that I've done enough good to deserve a family like this. A husband who loves me and who stands by my side as we try to help keep one kid from ending up on the wrong path like I did.

We might not be perfect, but we don't have to be. We just need perfect moments like this one to keep moving forward.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Leland: What's this?

Jackson: A list of people we're supposed to thank. Looks like Courtney, Savannah, Sam, Alice's mom, Meredith, Kat, and Lori.

Leland: I shall name my guns after them. There is no better acknowledgement than that.

Jackson: DO NOT name your guns after them. Okay, let's start with Courtney—

Leland: I want to thank The Fence.

Jackson: Without Courtney, The Fence would probably be spelled wrong. And without Lori and her proofreading, we would be working at Stonewell instead of Wellstone.

Leland: Alright, fine, fine. I would like to thank the gun shrine.

Jackson: Well without the betas and alphas, like Savannah, Sam, Meredith, and Kat, I would be waving my hands around grabbing here and grabbing there after you tied me up in the sex dungeon.

Leland: That's because you're a magician! Don't let them take your magic, Jackson!

Jackson: No, we like it when the betas find issues so it doesn't turn into a Facebook post. Rumor has it... she once wrote about a vampire having a sandwich.

Leland: I do like sandwiches.

Jackson: I almost forgot Tyler's help naming the book!

Leland: I could have named it without his help.
The Hitman's Guide to Being a Badass
Motherfucker.

Jackson: I... I don't think Amazon would
appreciate that name. Thank you, Tyler... thank
you so much for a normal name.

Leland: The Hitman's Guide to Sassy Sasquatch
and Bootylicious Blow-Up Randy.

Jackson: No. Just... No.

Leland: Alright. And what does Alice's mom do
then?

Jackson: I think she just torments her.

Leland: I like the sound of that.

From Alice (and the Hitman crew) a huge thank you to my
wonderful team. You guys do so much for me (and my chaotic
crew).

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Do you want to read a short story from Cassel and Jeremy's POV? Check it out for free just by joining my reader group or my newsletter:

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Thank you so much for taking the time to read, and I hope you enjoyed! If you have a moment, please consider writing a review. Reviews greatly help books find more readers!

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